An evaluation of the usefulness of invasive and non-invasive methods used to diagnose Helicobacter spp. infections in dogs

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to assess the suitability of invasive and non-invasive methods used to diagnose Helicobacter spp. in the stomachs of dogs. The study was carried out on 30 dogs of both sexes and different breeds, between one and 15 years old. A histopathologic examination, a microbiological culture, a rapid urease test, a direct bacteriological preparation and a nested PCR assay were carried out. Gastric Helicobacter spp. was identified in gastric biopsy specimens from 16 (53.3%) dogs using direct bacteriological preparation, in four (13.3%) dogs based on a culture, in 23 (76.6%) dogs using the rapid urease test and in 21 (70.0%) dogs based on a histopathological assessment of the biopsy specimens. The nested PCR of the gastric biopsy specimens revealed gastric Helicobacter spp. in all the dogs (100%). A saliva PCR assay revealed gastric Helicobacter spp. in 23 (76.6%) dogs, while stool PCR revealed the bacterium in seven (23.3%) dogs.

We found that invasive methods were more accurate than non-invasive methods in detecting a Helicobacter spp. infection in dogs. In addition, the nested PCR method used to evaluate the gastric mucosal biopsy specimens was the most accurate test for detecting Helicobacter spp. It was further found that the PCR-based saliva assay was the best non-invasive method for detecting Helicobacter spp. However, taking into consideration that most of the diagnostic methods used to detect this bacterium have drawbacks, at least two diagnostic methods should be used to detect Helicobacter spp. as is done in human medicine.

Key words: Helicobacter spp., invasive and non-invasive methods, dog

Introduction

Diagnostic methods used to detect *Helicobacter* spp. can be divided into two types: invasive and non-invasive. Invasive tests require a gastroscopy and a biopsy of the gastric mucosa. They include histopathological examination, a microbiological culture, a direct bacteriological analysis, the rapid urease test and molecular methods. Non-invasive methods do not require an endoscopy or biopsy. They require saliva, exhaled air, stool or blood. These methods include the urea breath test, serological blood tests, stool antigen tests and molecular methods (Tu et al. 1999, Neiger and Simpson 2000, Yanez et al. 2000, Al-Ali et al. 2010).

Despite the development of numerous techniques to diagnose a *Helicobacter* spp. infection, there is no gold-standard test. Each method has advantages and disadvantages and none offers both high sensitivity and specificity. Hence, it is currently recommended to identify *Helicobacter* spp. infections based on at least two diagnostic methods (Yanez et al. 2000, Ramis et al. 2012, Pourakbari et al. 2013).

There are few reports in veterinary literature assessing invasive and non-invasive methods to detect *Helicobacter* spp. infections. Therefore, the aim of this study was to assess the effectiveness of invasive and non-invasive methods in the detection of *Helicobacter* spp. in the stomachs of dogs.

### Materials and Methods

The study was carried out on 30 dogs of both sexes (17 males and 13 females) and different breeds (Table 1) from one to 15 years old (mean 5.8 ± 4 years). The study group consisted of animals diagnosed with gastritis based on the clinical symptoms (vomiting, loss or lack of appetite, loss of body mass, *fetor ex ore*, abdominal pain) and the results of the gastroscopy and the histopathologic assessment of sections of the gastric mucosa collected during an endoscopy. These animals were not treated with antibiotics or drugs affecting the gastric acid secretion. Six sections of the gastric mucosa were collected from the body and the pylorus. The samples were collected for histological examination, culture, direct bacteriological analysis, a rapid urease test and a polymerase chain reaction (PCR). In addition, saliva samples were collected for assessment using PCR and stool samples were collected for the detection of *Helicobacter pylori* antigen and assessment using PCR in each dog.

### Histopathological examination

The gastric mucosa sections were fixed in 4-10% buffered formalin and embedded in paraffin blocks. The paraffin blocks were cut with a microtome into 5 μm sections, which were then deparaffined and mounted onto Super Frost glass slides. The specimens were then stained with hematoxylin and eosin as well as Giemsa. They were then viewed with a light microscope using a 200x or 400 x magnification. The presence of spiral bacteria indicated a positive test result (Rzeszutko et al. 2006).

### Microbiological Culture

Several sections of the gastric body mucosa and the pyloric mucosa were pulverized using a tissue homogeniser and placed on plates containing the following media: Difco Columbia blood agar with 10%
haemolysed horse blood, Oxoid selective Columbia
agar with 7% haemolysed horse blood and selective
supplements containing 10 mg/l of vancomycin 10
mg/l trimethoprim, 5 mg/l cefsulodin and 5 mg/l am-
photericin B. Brucella agar (BA) with 5% horse blood
containing a 1% Becton Dickinson IsoVitalex solution
and a 1% Sigma hemin solution as well as bioMerieux
Campylobacter agar. The test was positive if Helio-
cobacter spp. colonies grew on the plates (Megraud
and Lehours 2007).

**Direct bacteriological preparation**

Several sections of the gastric body mucosa and
the pyloric mucosa were pulverized using a tissue
homogeniser. The tissue sample was placed on a glass
slide, and a drop of saline solution was added. The
slide was then dried at room temperature and fixed by
passing it through a flame. The fixed sample was then
stained using Giem’s method. The slide was then
viewed with a light microscope using a 1000x magnifi-
cation. The test was positive if spiral-shaped pink bac-
teria were present (Montgomery et al. 1988).

**Rapid urease test**

A biopsy specimen of the gastric body and a speci-
men of the gastric pylorus were placed on the indi-
cator disk developed by the National Food and Nutri-
tion Institute (catalogue no. TU 101). Two drops of
saline solution were then added. The results were col-
clected after 15, 30 and 60 minutes. The test was posi-
tive if the indicator disc changed colour from yellow
to red (Kubiak 2006).

**The detection of H. pylori antigen in stool**

The H. pylori antigen was detected in stool samples using an enzyme immunoassay (EIA) with the Oxoid Amplified IDEIA™ Hp StAR™ test. Stool samples were frozen immediately after collection at – 20°C and stored until needed but no longer than seven days. The stool pellet, which had a diameter of approximately 5-6 mm, was suspended in a 500 μl sol-
ution. 50 μl of the faecal suspension and peroxidase conjugated monoclonal antibodies specific for H. pylori were added. In addition, positive and negative control solutions provided by the manufacturer were placed in two wells. The plate was incubated with shaking for 60 min at 18-27°C. The plate was then rinsed five times with a pH 7.4 washing buffer. Subse-
quently, 100 μl of the substrate was added to each
well. The reaction was stopped after 10 minutes by
adding 100 μl of an H2SO4 solution. The optical den-
sity (OD) was measured using a Dynatech MR500
spectrophotometer at 450 nm. According to the
manufacturer’s instructions, an OD ≥ 0.190 indicated
a positive result and an OD ≤ 0.190 indicated a nega-
tive result.

**Detection of Helicobacter spp. DNA in saliva, stool
and gastric mucosa biopsy specimens**

Saliva samples were collected using a sterile swab,
which was placed in a sterile tube and frozen at -20°C.
Rectal swabs were performed in order to obtain a stool sample. The stool was placed in a stool collec-
tion container and frozen at -20°C. Gastric mucosa
was collected using biopsy forceps. It was placed in
special containers and frozen at -20°C.

The nested PCR method was used to detect Helio-
cobacter and to determine the Helicobacter species.
This procedure involves performing two consecutive
PCR assays. In the first assay, DNA isolated from the
sample is used as the matrix, and F and R outer
primers are applied. The product of the first reaction
forms the matrix of the second reaction, which is ac-
tivated by adding polymerase and WF and WR outer
primers.

Thermo Scientific™ DreamTaq DNA Polymerase
(catalogue no. EP0703) was used for the DNA syn-
thesis.

A detailed methodology of the DNA isolation
from the biopsy specimens, saliva and stool, the
primer sequence and PCR template as well as the
conditions of DNA amplification of the chosen spe-
cies of Helicobacter are presented in the following ar-
ticles: Detection of Helicobacter spp. in the saliva of
dogs with gastritis (Jankowski et al. 2016a) and The
detection of gastric Helicobacter spp. in stool samples
of dogs with gastritis (Jankowski et al. 2016b).

A test of two proportions based on the chi-square
test was used to assess the statistical significance in
the proportions of positive results of a Helicobacter
spp. using different diagnostic techniques between the
groups. The statistical significance was set at a 5%
level using PQStat Software (version 1.6.2.252). In the
tables provided, the presence of the same letter in the
columns showing the proportion of positive and nega-
tive results for the different methods used to diagnose
a Helicobacter spp. infection indicates a statistically
significant difference in the proportion using these
methods.
Table 2. Identification of the species of *Helicobacter* and their incidence in gastric mucosa biopsy samples, saliva and stool samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Sections of the gastric mucosa</th>
<th>Saliva</th>
<th>Stool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>H. heilmannii</em></td>
<td>29 (96.7%) cases</td>
<td>22 (73.3%) cases</td>
<td>5 (16.6%) cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>H. pylori</em></td>
<td>2 (6.6%) cases</td>
<td>2 (6.6%) cases</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>H. felis</em></td>
<td>4 (13.3%) cases</td>
<td>1 (3.3%) cases</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>H. salomonis</em></td>
<td>11 (36.7%) cases</td>
<td>4 (13.3%) cases</td>
<td>2 (6.6%) cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>H. bizzozeronii</em></td>
<td>12 (40.0%) cases</td>
<td>3 (10.0%) cases</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

**Invasive methods used to detect a *Helicobacter* spp. infection**

*Helicobacter* spp. was identified in 16 dogs (53.3%) using a direct bacteriological preparation. Only four dogs (13.3%) were found to be infected with *Helicobacter* spp. based on a microbiological culture. *Helicobacter* was detected in 76.6% (23 dogs) of the animals using the rapid urease test and in 70.0% (21 dogs) based on the histopathological examination. Nested-PCR proved to be the most effective invasive method to detect gastric *Helicobacter* spp. as it showed that all the studied dogs (100%) were infected with this bacterium. Three dogs (10%) had positive results in all of the five invasive tests. Four positive results were obtained in 12 dogs (40.0%). Three positive tests were recorded in five (16.6%) dogs. Eight dogs (26.6%) had two positive tests, and all the dogs had one positive test result (100%). The mean detection frequency of a *Helicobacter* spp. infection using invasive diagnostic methods was 62.64% (± 32.27%).

**Diagnosis of gastric *Helicobacter* spp. using non-invasive methods**

The nested-PCR saliva test showed gastric *Helicobacter* spp. DNA in 23 (76.6%) dogs, while the nested-PCR stool test showed that gastric *Helicobacter* spp. DNA was present in seven (23.3%) dogs. All dogs had a negative result in the stool test using peroxidase conjugated monoclonal antibodies specific for *H. Pylori*. None of the dogs obtained a positive result in all three non-invasive tests. Seven dogs (23.3%) had a positive test result in two tests, while 23 dogs had a single positive result (76.6%). The mean detection frequency of a *Helicobacter* spp. infection using non-invasive methods was 33.3% (± 39.27%).

DNA of five *Helicobacter* species was found in the nested-PCR assay of the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa, saliva and stool. The *Helicobacter* species and their incidence in each sample are shown in Table 2.

**A comparison of the detection of a gastric *Helicobacter* spp. infection using invasive and non-invasive methods**

There were no statistically significant differences in the detection rate of *Helicobacter* spp. in the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa using the direct bacteriological preparation and the rapid urease test (p=0.104). Similarly, there were no statistically significant differences (p=0.288) in the detection of *Helicobacter* spp. in the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa using the direct bacteriological preparation and the histopathological analysis. There was a statistically significant difference (p=0.003) in the detection rate of *Helicobacter* spp. in the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa when the specimens were directly analysed bacteriologically, and when a microbiological culture was carried out. There was also a statistically significant difference (p<0.001) in the detection rate of *Helicobacter* spp. in the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa when analysed bacteriologically and when analysed using a PCR assay. A statistically significant difference (p<0.001) in the detection of *Helicobacter* spp. in the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa was obtained when using a microbiological culture vs the rapid urease test, and when using the histopathological analysis vs a PCR assay. There was no statistically significant difference (p=0.770) in the detection of *Helicobacter* spp. in the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa between the rapid urease test and the histopathological examination. There was a statistically significant difference (p=0.016) in the detection of *Helicobacter* spp. in the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa between the PCR assay and the rapid urease test (p=0.016). Similarly, there was a statistically significant difference (p=0.003) when *Helicobacter* spp. was detected using PCR and when the detection was based on the histopathological-
Fig. 1. A comparison of the invasive methods used to detect a *Helicobacter* spp. infection in the gastric mucosa in the studied dogs. The letters a, b, c, d, e, f and g indicate statistically significant differences.

![Fig. 1](image1.png)

Fig. 2. A comparison of the detection rate of the *Helicobacter* spp. infection using PCR of the gastric biopsy specimen, saliva PCR and stool PCR in the studied dogs. The letters a to c indicate statistically significant differences.

![Fig. 2](image2.png)

cal examination (Fig. 1). There was a statistically significant difference (p=0.016) between the detection of *Helicobacter* spp. in the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa using a PCR assay and in PCR-based saliva assay. Furthermore, there was a statistically significant difference (p<0.001) between the detection of *Helicobacter* spp. in the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa using a PCR assay and in the PCR-based stool test. Likewise, there was a statistically significant difference (p<0.001) between the detection of *Helicobacter* spp. in saliva and stool using PCR assays (Fig. 2). Overall, there was a statistically significant difference in the detection of *Helicobacter* spp. using invasive and non-invasive methods (p<0.001) (Fig. 3).

### Discussion

Currently, a wide array of invasive diagnostic tests (rapid urease test, a histopathological examination,
a direct bacteriological analysis, a microbiological culture, a PCR assay and non-invasive tests (the urea breath test, a serological test, stool H. pylori antigen tests, a PCR assay of the saliva and stool) are used to detect Helicobacter in humans and animals (Tu et al. 1999, Neiger and Simpson 2000, Leib and Duncan 2005, Simpson 2005, Patel et al. 2014). Each of the described techniques differs in terms of indications for use, efficacy and cost. Hence, there is no “gold-standard” for the detection of a Helicobacter spp. infection, and it is recommended that at least two tests should be performed to confirm the presence of Helicobacter spp. (Al-Ali et al. 2010, Ramis et al. 2012, Patel et al. 2014). Our findings support this approach since the detection rate of a Helicobacter spp. infection in five invasive tests and three non-invasive tests ranged from 0% to 100%.

In our study, the mean efficacy of the detection of a Helicobacter spp. infection using invasive techniques was significantly higher than the mean detection efficacy using non-invasive methods. This suggests the dominance of invasive methods over non-invasive ones. Some authors had similar findings (Tu et al. 1999, Ramis et al. 2012), while others believe that the effectiveness of the invasive and non-invasive diagnostic methods does not vary (Lin et al. 1992, Cutler et al. 1995). Non-invasive methods may be less useful compared to invasive methods in detecting Helicobacter spp. infections in dogs based on the fact that: 1) Helicobacter spp. constitutes the normal microbial flora of the saliva and stool and may be present in them in low concentrations, 2) there are PCR inhibitors in the stool that may affect PCR assays and 3) the available commercial H. pylori antigen tests contain monoclonal antibodies, which do not detect other species of gastric Helicobacter occurring much more commonly in dogs than H. pylori.

It is currently believed that a microbiological culture is the “gold standard” in the detection of any microorganism. However, this does not seem true in the case of a Helicobacter spp. infection. Based on studies in humans, it has been shown that this method is highly specific (94-100%), but has a much lower sensitivity, ranging from 36.4% to 78% (Ogata et al. 2001, Ramis et al. 2012, Patel et al. 2014). In our study, the microbiological culture was the least useful invasive method of detecting a Helicobacter spp. infection since the detection rate was less than 14%. These findings are supported by the study of Kubiak (2006), who detected Helicobacter spp. on the basis of a microbiological culture in 30% of healthy dogs and 15.3% of dogs with a gastric disease. Similar findings were obtained by Cattoli et al. (1999) and Neiger et al. (1999), who obtained a positive Helicobacter spp. culture in 20% and 9.3% of dogs, respectively. Happonen et al. (1996) reported a slightly higher detection rate of the microbiological culture, which amounted to 37.5%. However, their study was carried out on eight dogs only. Obtaining a Helicobacter microbial culture may be challenging due to a number of factors. Firstly, it is difficult to obtain a culture of Helicobacter species that occur in dogs. Secondly, no bacteria or low levels of bacteria are present in the biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa. Thirdly, the administration of antibiotics or other drugs that reduce gastric secretion impede culture growth. In addi-
tion, the presence of coccoid forms or dead bacteria, contamination by other bacteria that inhibit Helicobacter spp. growth and inappropriate transport of the collected material to the laboratory all affect the final result of the culture. Therefore, this method is not widely used to detect Helicobacter spp. in veterinary medicine. In humans, it is used in cases of failed eradication and to assess the antibiotic susceptibility of the bacteria (Ramis et al. 2012, Patel et al. 2014).

The oldest technique used to detect Helicobacter spp. is a histopathological examination. This technique enables the visualisation of the bacteria and the assessment of the lesions in the gastric mucosa (Simison 2005, Rzeszutko et al. 2006, Ramis et al. 2012, Patel et al. 2014). In human medicine, the sensitivity and specificity of the histopathological examination used to detect H. pylori infections ranges from 53 to 100%. In our study, a Helicobacter spp. infection was diagnosed in 70% of the dogs using this method. Rzeszutko et al. (2006) reported a similar detection rate (63.5%) of a Helicobacter spp. infection in a group of 52 animals (42 dogs and 10 cats). On the other hand, Krstić et al. (2006) reported a lower detection rate of the histopathological examination in a group of 50 dogs, diagnosing a Helicobacter spp. infection in 54% of the studied animals. In contrast, Hermanns et al. (1995) and Simpson et al. (1999) detected a Helicobacter spp. infection in 80% and 82% of the studied animals, respectively. Such a discrepancy in the results of various authors may be caused by an unevenly distributed colonization of the mucous membrane by the bacteria. The location, number and size of the collected biopsy specimens, the use of antibiotics and drugs reducing gastric secretion, the presence of bacteria morphologically similar to Helicobacter and human error on the part of less experienced histopathologists may also affect the results of this technique (Simison 2005, Rzeszutko et al. 2006, Ramis et al. 2012, Patel et al. 2014). The rapid urease test is another test enabling the detection of a Helicobacter spp. infection. This method is based on the detection of urease produced by the gastric Helicobacter spp. Due to the fact that this method indirectly detects the Helicobacter bacteria, it is used in human medicine as a screening test. Its sensitivity is reported to be between 75 and 100%, while the specificity ranges from 84% to 100% (Ogata et al. 2001, Ricci et al. 2007, Pourakbari et al. 2013, Patel et al. 2014). In our study, the rapid urease test proved to be highly useful in detecting a Helicobacter spp. infection. The results of the test indicated that more than 76% of the studied dogs were infected with the bacteria. A similar result was obtained by Kubiak (2006), who used the rapid urease test to diagnose Helicobacter in 75% of dogs with dyspepsia. Mirzaeian et al. (2013) reported a higher detection rate since they found Helicobacter in 100% of the studied dogs. This discrepancy may be caused by an uneven distribution of the bacteria on the mucous membrane, haemorrhage from the gastrointestinal tract, the presence of intestinal metaplasia, the administration of antibiotics, proton pump inhibitors and H2 antagonists that give false negative results, and the presence of other urease producing bacteria, such as Proteus spp., which give false positive results (Tu et al. 1999, Neiger and Simpson 2000, Ogata et al. 2001, Leib and Duncan 2005, Ramis et al. 2012).

The direct bacteriological preparation is a relatively quick and easy diagnostic method that enables the diagnosis of a gastric Helicobacter spp. infection. Using this technique, we detected an infection in more than 53% of the animals. A similar percentage of positive results using this method was obtained in studies on humans carried out by Tzeng et al. (2005) and Al-Ali et al. (2010), who reported Helicobacter spp. in 56.75% and 55.2% of the subjects, respectively. A higher detection rate in dogs was reported in the studies carried out by Happonen et al. (1996), Cattoli et al. (1999) and Kubiak (2006). We did not find a statistically significant difference in the detection of Helicobacter spp. between the direct bacteriological preparation, a histopathological examination and a rapid urease test. Happonen et al. (1996) reported that the direct bacteriological preparation is more accurate than the histopathological analysis and the rapid urease test. The difference in the detection of Helicobacter spp. reported in the cited studies may be caused by an uneven distribution of the bacteria on the gastric mucosa (Tzeng et. al. 2005).

The PCR assay is one of the most modern techniques used to detect a Helicobacter spp. infection. The assay may be performed on a biopsy tissue specimen (invasive method) or on saliva or stool (non-invasive method). In human medicine, the sensitivity and specificity of the PCR assay using biopsy tissue specimens ranged from 75% to 100% and from 84% to 100%, respectively (Ricci et al. 2007, Ramis et al. 2012, Patel et al. 2014). These values were lower when saliva (sensitivity 75-98% and specificity 70%-100%) and stool (sensitivity 58%-96% and specificity 67%-100%) were used (Kabir 2001, Aguloelu et al. 2006, Cellini et al. 2010, Smith et al. 2012). We found that the PCR assay of the biopsy tissue specimens was the most accurate technique of all the invasive and non-invasive methods to diagnose a Helicobacter spp. infection. Our findings are supported by the results of Neiger et al. (1999) and Kubiak (2006), who diagnosed Helicobacter spp. infections using a PCR assay in 100% and 89% of healthy dogs, respectively, and in 89% and 97.1% of sick dogs, respectively. The find-
ings of Hwang et al. (2002) and Mirzaeian et al. (2013) also support our results. They detected a Helicobacter spp. infection in all of the dogs in their study using a PCR assay. Van den Bulck et al. (2005) reported a lower detection rate of this method as they detected Helicobacter spp. in 71.8% of the studied dogs. We found Helicobacter bacteria in the saliva of more than 76% of the dogs using a PCR assay (Jankowski et al. 2010a). A similar result was obtained by Recordati et al. (2007), who reported this bacterium in 71.1% of dogs based on PCR-based testing of saliva, while Ekman et. al. (2013) found the bacterium in 100% of the studied canine population. We found Helicobacter in 23% of the studied stool samples using a PCR test (Jankowski et al. 2010b). Hong et al. (2015) reported a higher detection rate, amounting to 62.5%. On the other hand, Ekman et. al. (2013) did not find gastric Helicobacter spp. in any of the studied stool samples. These differences may be attributed to different living environments of the dogs and different study material. Some studies used panels of dogs kept in one environment, with a high likelihood of cross-infection between dogs, while others used dogs kept indoors. The main advantage of PCR is that it offers a precise diagnosis and enables differentiation between various species of Helicobacter. However, the results of this test do not indicate whether the infection is active or not (Farrugia et al. 2010, Sjodin et al. 2011).

Based on our results, we found that invasive methods are more useful in defining a Helicobacter spp. infection in dogs than non-invasive methods. Of all the studied methods, the PCR assay of biopsy specimens of the gastric mucosa is the most effective method of diagnosing a Helicobacter spp. infection. PCR-based testing of saliva was the most useful non-invasive method. However, taking into consideration the disadvantages of each method studied, the diagnosis of a Helicobacter infection should be based on the results of at least two tests.

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