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► To cite this version:

Moufida Rira, Carine Marie-Magdeleine, Harry Archimède, Diego Morgavi, Michel M. Doreau. Effect of condensed tannins on methane emission and ruminal microbial populations. 4. International Symposium on Energy and Protein Metabolism and Nutrition (ISEP), Sep 2013, Sacramento, United States. 2 p., 10.3920/978-90-8686-781-3_186 . hal-02749298

HAL Id: hal-02749298

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02749298>

Submitted on 3 Jun 2020

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Effect of condensed tannins on methane emission and ruminal microbial populations

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Introduction

Enteric methane (CH₄) produced by domestic ruminants represents approximately 15% of the global emissions of this potent greenhouse gas. For reducing rumen CH₄ emission various compounds have been tested as feed additives. Among these compounds, tannins are considered a promising group of natural additives. A meta-analysis by Jayanegara *et al.* (2012) showed that condensed and hydrolysable tannins might reduce CH₄ production. However, it is still unclear (1) whether tannin supplementation reduces rumen CH₄ in every situation and (2) to which extent this is associated with adverse effects on digestibility and their potential toxicity to some rumen micro-organisms (Goel *et al.*, 2005). In this experiment we investigated the effect of tanniniferous tropical plants on enteric CH₄ production and on numbers of methanogens, protozoa, and total and main cellulolytic bacteria.

Material and methods

Two sheep breeds were used, Texel (T, n=4) of temperate origin and Blackbelly (B, n=4) of tropical origin in two 4×4 Latin square designs. Diets, given ad libitum twice daily, consisted in tropical natural grassland based on *Dichanthium spp.* fed alone (C) or in association with 3 different tanniniferous forages given as pellets at 44% of the daily ration on average. The tanniniferous forages were leaves of *Leucaena leucocephala* (L), *Glyricidia sepium* (G) or *Manihot esculenta* (M). Total contents in condensed tannins measured by the vanillin-H₂SO₄ method were 75, 39 and 92 g/kg dry matter (DM) for L, G and M, respectively. Intake, total tract digestibility and CH₄ production using the SF₆ method were determined. For microbial parameters, rumen contents were sampled before the morning feeding. Microbial groups (total bacteria, *Fibrobacter succinogenes*, *Ruminococcus albus*, *Ruminococcus flavefaciens* and total methanogens) were enumerated by quantitative PCR (qPCR) using group-specific primers targeting the *rrs* gene for bacteria and the *mcrA* gene for methanogens. Protozoa were counted by microscopy. Statistical analyses were performed using the mixed procedure of SAS with period, diet, breed, and the diet x breed interaction as fixed effects and animal as random effect. Statistical differences were declared significant at P≤0.05. Orthogonal contrasts between control diet and all tanniniferous forages were also determined.

Results and discussion

The addition of tannin-rich plants given as pellets increased DM intake probably due to the physical presentation (Table 1). Within tannin-rich plants, it was higher for M than for G diet. Intake per kg body weight was higher for Blackbelly than for Texel. Organic matter digestibility did not differ among diets and breeds, although contrast analysis showed a higher digestibility for C than for other diets. Daily CH₄ production did not vary among diets and breeds, but CH₄ production per kg DM intake was higher with C diet compared with tannin-rich diets. Within these latter diets, CH₄ production was higher for G than for M and L diets. Concentration of total bacteria and *R. flavefaciens* was higher for C and L diets than for G and M diets; concentration of *R. albus* was lowest for C diet. The methanogens population was higher for Texel than for Blackbelly. In contrast the addition of condensed tannins did not influence the population of protozoa and *F. succinogenes*.

Table 1. Intake, digestibility, methane emission and ruminal microbial populations in sheep fed tropical grassland hay (C) alone or associated with tannins-containing plants *Leucaena leucocephala* (L), *Glyricidia sepium* (G) and *Manihot esculenta* (M).

Breed	Texel				Blackbelly				SEM	P value ¹
Diet	C	L	G	M	C	L	G	M		
DM intake, g/kg body weight/d	16.28	24.45	20.72	27.68	16.62	25.96	24.49	31.54	1.877	B 0.04 D<0.01
Organic matter digestibility, %	69.66	64.94	62.69	62.36	70.12	65.74	62.78	66.97	3.639	NS
CH ₄ , g/kg DM intake	32.06	24.23	28.83	24.28	29.98	15.89	24.98	15.26	2.147	B 0.03 D<0.01
Protozoa, log ₁₀ cells/ml	4.97	5.01	5.04	5.03	4.96	5.01	4.97	5.06	0.046	NS
Total bacteria ²	11.91	11.90	11.80	11.84	11.89	11.96	11.85	11.81	0.041	D 0.04
<i>F. succinogenes</i> ²	9.71	9.79	9.61	9.72	9.67	9.85	9.64	9.68	0.079	NS
<i>R. Albus</i> ²	8.00	8.79	8.33	8.49	7.60	8.42	8.34	8.16	0.261	D 0.04
<i>R. flavefaciens</i> ²	8.96	8.71	8.53	8.65	8.94	9.03	8.67	8.85	0.154	D 0.05
Methanogens ³	10.00	9.85	9.72	9.84	9.76	9.71	9.70	9.74	0.082	B 0.04

¹ B = breed; D = diet. Breed × diet interaction was never significant.

² *rrs* copy number /g DM (log₁₀)

³ *mcrA* copy number /g DM (log₁₀)

Our results confirm that tannin-rich plants can limit CH₄ production per kg DM intake. The low effect of *Glyricidia sepium* on reduction of CH₄ production could be explained by a low tannin concentration or by the intrinsic characteristics of *Glyricidia sepium* tannins. The presentation of tannin-rich plants as pellets probably decreased ruminal DM retention time which resulted in an increase in DM intake and can partially explain the reduction in CH₄ production. As methanogens and protozoal numbers were not changed, further research is necessary to elucidate the relations between methane production and microbial activity in tannin-rich diets.

Acknowledgements

This research is a part of the AnimalChange project funded by the European Community's FP7 Programme. It was also funded by other EU funds (FEDER, FEADER) and by the Guadeloupe region. The first author received a fellowship from the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Research.

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Energy and protein metabolism and nutrition in sustainable animal production

4th International Symposium on Energy and Protein Metabolism and Nutrition

Sacramento, California, USA

9-12 September 2013

EAAP publication No. 134

edited by:

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P u b l i s h e r s*