Tropical Grasslands – Forrajes Tropicales (2014) Volume 2, 63−65

Detection of toxicity in ruminants consuming leucaena (*Leucaena leucocephala*) using a urine colorimetric test

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Keywords: Leucaena toxicity, mimosine, DHP.

Introduction

Leucaena *(Leucaena leucocephala)*, a productive leguminous shrub for feeding ruminant livestock, contains the toxic amino acid, mimosine, which post ingestion is converted to 3,4-DHP and 2,3-DHP, isomers of dihydroxy-pyridone. While DHP generally does not produce acute toxic symptoms in animals, it has been suggested that it is an appetite suppressant that reduces liveweight gain (Jones 1994). With no observable symptoms, subclinical toxicity is difficult to detect (Phaikaew et al. 2012). In 1982, the DHP-degrading rumen bacterium named *Synergistes jonesii* was introduced into Australia as a potential solution to DHP toxicity, as it spreads easily throughout cattle herds grazing leucaena (Jones 1994). However, toxicity events reported since the 2003 drought suggest that the toxicity status of herds, previously understood as being protected, may have changed. This may be the result of loss of effective *S. jonesii* bacteria from the rumen. Widespread subclinical leucaena toxicity has since been confirmed, representing a significant economic threat to the beef industry (Dalzell et al. 2012).

At present, testing for toxicity requires a sophisticated chemical analysis of urine samples using high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). Producers, however, require a robust and reliable means to routinely test for toxicity in their herds. A colorimetric urine test protocol is available, based on the color reaction of mimosine and DHP with $FeCl_3$ solution (Jones 1997). When this simpler colorimetric test was used under a wide range of conditions, false negatives were obtained. The aim of this study was to improve the reliability of the $FeCl_3$ urine color test.

Materials and Methods

Urine samples collected from 5 herds grazing leucaena pastures in central Queensland were preserved (19 mL urine + 1 mL 10 N HCl). An acid titration was used to determine urine alkalinity. Urine hydrolysis and clean-up methods (filtering & chromatography) were optimized to reduce interference of background compounds. Color reaction matrix conditions were optimized for the detection of mimosine and 2,3-DHP by adjusting $FeCl_3$ concentration (Figure 1) and acid (HCl) strength (Figure 2). Final ratios of urine:$FeCl_3$ reagent were studied to optimize sensitivity of the test. HPLC analysis (Dalzell et al. 2012) was performed on urine samples to determine toxin concentrations and validate the color responses of the test kit.

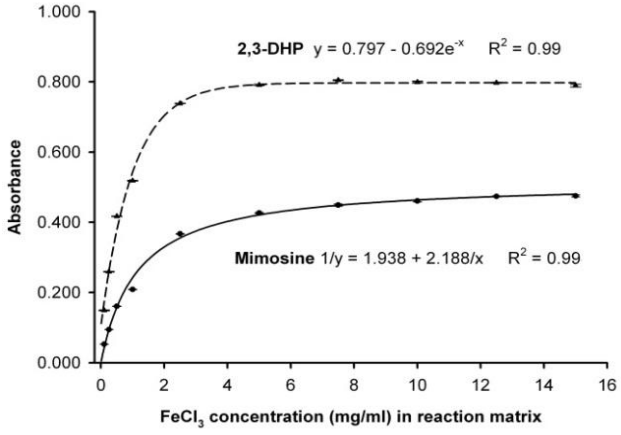

Figure 1. Color development (absorbance) for 200 µg/mL mimosine (λ = 535 nm) and 2,3-DHP (λ = 590 nm) at different $FeCl_3$ concentrations in 0.35 N HCl.

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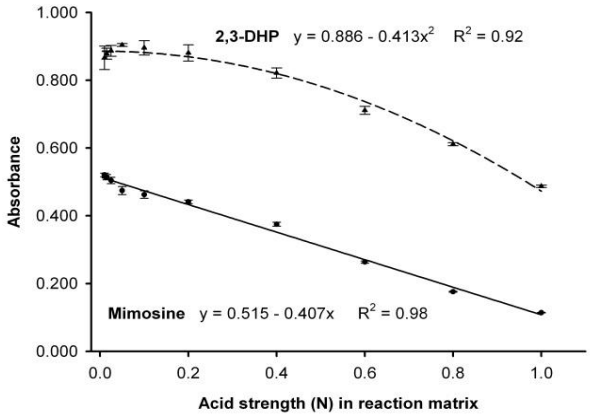

Figure 2. Color development (absorbance) for 200 µg/mL mimosine (λ = 535 nm) and 2,3-DHP (λ = 590 nm) at different acid strengths (HCl) with 10 mg/mL $FeCl_3 \cdot 6H_2O$.

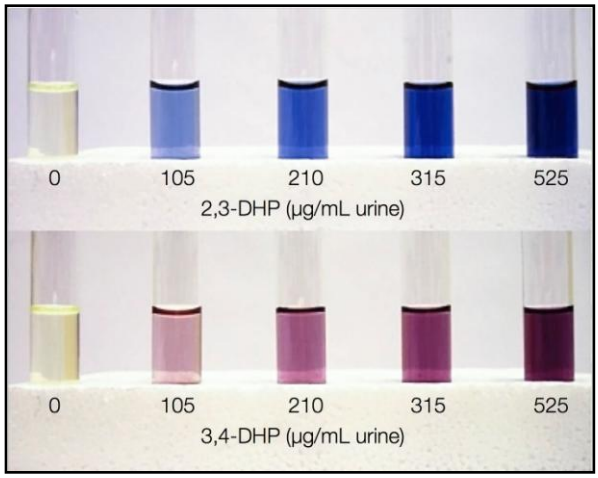

Plate 1. Test response to a range of standards equivalent to µg/mL toxin in urine (1:2 reagent reaction ratio).

Results and Discussion

The urine of cattle grazing leucaena was found to be very alkaline (pH=9). Preserving 9.5 mL urine by adding 0.5 mL 10 N HCl gave a residual acid strength of 0.35 N. Hydrolysis of the preserved urine by heating in boiling water for 1 h was required to release toxins that are typically conjugated to sugars prior to colorimetric analysis. Hydrolyzed samples were then cleaned prior to testing by filtering (0.45 µm) and chromatography (Maxi-Clean 300 mg C-18 columns) to remove background color. Optimal color development for both isomers of DHP occurred at $FeCl_3 \cdot 6H_2O$ concentrations >5 mg/mL and were most consistent at acid strengths of 0.2−0.4 N (Figures 1 and 2). Color development for 3,4-DHP was the same as for mimosine (G. Kerven, unpublished data). A reaction ratio of 1 urine:2 $FeCl_3$ reagent developed good color without being too sensitive. Samples from commercial cattle herds tested using this procedure developed pink/red color for mimosine/3,4-DHP and blue for 2,3-DHP (Plate 1). These results were confirmed by HPLC analysis. The color test proved to be robust with replicated sample results having a coefficient of variation <15%.

When Graham et al. (2013) applied this test in the field they found a high level of variability in urinary toxin concentrations among animals within a herd grazing the same leucaena pasture. They recommended that for herds consuming high dietary percentages of leucaena, urine samples from at least 10 cattle would be required to reliably assess herd protection status.

The recommended test protocol is: dilute urine samples 19:1 with 10 N HCl; hydrolyze for 1 h in boiling water; filter (0.45 µm) and pass through a C-18 column; dilute treated urine samples 1:2 with 10 mg/mL $FeCl_3 \cdot 6H_2O$ in 0.35 N HCl and then compare with standard toxin solutions. If mean herd urinary DHP concentrations >100 µg/mL are detected, the herd may be suffering from leucaena toxicity (Dalzell et al. 2012).

Conclusions

This semi-quantitative test kit will enable routine testing of herds for presence of toxins to determine their protection status at relatively low cost. While the urine samples can be collected by farmers, it is likely that the test will be carried out by appropriately trained service providers.

Acknowledgments

Dr. Olena Kravchuk provided statistical advice. The participation of graziers in the study is greatly appreciated.

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Graham SR; Dalzell SA; Kerven GL; Shelton HM. 2014. Detection of toxicity in ruminants consuming leucaena (*Leucaena leucocephala*) using a urine colorimetric test. Tropical Grasslands – Forrajes Tropicales 2:63–65.
DOI: 10.17138/TGFT(2)63-65

This paper was presented at the 22nd International Grassland Congress, Sydney, Australia, 15−19 September 2013. Its publication in *Tropical Grasslands – Forrajes Tropicales* is the result of a co-publication agreement with the IGC Continuing Committee. Except for adjustments to the journal's style and format, the text is essentially the same as that published in: **Michalk LD; Millar GD; Badgery WB; Broadfoot KM, eds. 2013. Revitalising Grasslands to Sustain our Communities. Proceedings of the 22nd International Grassland Congress, Sydney, Australia, 2013. New South Wales Department of Primary Industries, Orange, NSW, Australia. p. 1200–1201.**