Seroprevalence of equine influenza virus in north-east and southern Mexico


Equine influenza A virus (EIV) is a highly infectious respiratory pathogen of horses (Hannant and Mumbord 1996, Palese and Shaw 2007). The illness is characterised by an abrupt onset of fever, depression, coughing and nasal discharge, and is often complicated by secondary bacterial infections that can lead to pneumonia and death. Two subtypes of EIV, H3N8 and H7N7, have been isolated. The H7N7 subtype was first isolated from a horse in Czechoslovakia in 1956 (Prague/56), and the H3N8 subtype was first isolated from a horse in Miami in 1963 (Sovinova and others 1958, Waddell and others 1963). The last confirmed outbreak of H7N7 occurred in 1979, and this subtype is now considered to be either extinct or circulating at low levels in a few geographical areas (Ismael and others 1990, Webster 1993, Singh 1994, Madic and others 1996, van Maanen and Cullivan 2002). The H3N8 subtype is a common cause of disease in horses worldwide, particularly in areas where vaccination is not routinely performed (Paillot and others 2006).

Phylogenetically, the H3N8 subtype can be separated into five distinct clades, denoted as predivergence, Eurasian, American (Kentucky), Florida clade 1 and Florida clade 2 (Bryant and others 2009). The predivergence clade is composed of isolates from the 1960s to 1980s that are now extinct in nature. The Eurasian and American lineages emerged in the 1980s and continue to circulate (Daly and others 1996). These lineages were initially named on the basis of the geographical locations from which they were isolated, although strains in the American lineage have since been isolated in Europe. Evolution of the American lineage has resulted in the emergence of American (Kentucky), Florida clade 1 and Florida clade 2 (Bryant and others 2009).

There is little information on the seroprevalence and geographical distribution of EIV in Mexico. Previous studies of the prevalence and clinical manifestations associated with influenza virus infections in Mexico have generally focused on human beings and birds (Ayora-Talavera and others 2005, Caballo and others 2006, Kurt-Morales and others 2006, Villarreal 2006, Senne 2007). The overall aim of the present study was to estimate the seroprevalence of EIV in two geographically distinct areas of Mexico, Nuevo Leon State in north-east Mexico and Guerrero State in the south of the country.

A total of 242 horses at 10 study sites (114 horses from three sites in Nuevo Leon State and 128 horses from seven sites in Guerrero State) were sampled between September 2007 and May 2008 (Table 1). All of the study sites were on privately owned ranches or farms. According to the owners, none of the horses had a history of travel and none had been vaccinated against EIV. All the horses appeared healthy at the time of sampling.

Serum samples were tested for antibodies to EIV by epitope-blocking ELISA (bELISA) (Sullivan and others 2009). This assay utilises the influenza A virus nucleoprotein-specific monoclonal antibody clone A1 (Millipore) and recombinant influenza A virus nucleoprotein (Imgenex). The influenza A virus nucleoprotein is well conserved (Gorman and others 1990), and because of this the bELISA can detect antibodies to all influenza A virus subtypes including H5N1 and H7N7. A subset of bELISA-positive sera was further analysed by haemagglutination inhibition (HI) and neuraminidase inhibition (NI) tests, which were initially performed at the National Veterinary Service Laboratories (NVSL) in Ames, Iowa, USA. The HI tests were done using the influenza A/equine/Kentucky/1/81 (H3N8), A/equine/Miami/1/63 (H3N8), and A/equine/Prague/1/56 (H7N7) reference strains. The NI tests were done using standard N1-N7 and N9 reference reagents, and N8 equine/Miami/63 reference reagent. Additional HI testing was then performed at the Gluck Equine Research Center (GERC) at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, Kentucky, USA. This analysis was done using eight strains of H3N8 that represent all five clades (Table 2), to provide information on the lineage and origin of the EIV strain(s) circulating in Mexico.

Overall, 94 (39 per cent) horses had antibodies to EIV by bELISA (Table 1). The seroprevalence for EIV in the horses in Guerrero State was 22 per cent, and among the horses in Nuevo Leon State it was 58 per cent. Sera from 10 horses (five in Nuevo Leon State and five in Guerrero State) that were positive by bELISA were further examined by HI and NI tests at the NVSL. All 10 samples had antibodies to the H3N8 subtype, and none had antibodies to the H7N7 subtype. The same 10 samples were then submitted to the GERC and analysed by the HI test using a broad panel of H3N8 strains. For each sample, the HI titre was highest when A/equine/Kentucky/1/97 (H3N8), which belongs to the American (Kentucky) clade, was used (Table 2); the HI titres ranged from 40 to 640. In seven samples, the HI titres were equally high when A/equine/Ohio/1/2005 (H3N8) was used. This strain belongs to Florida clade 1. Interestingly, on two occasions, the HI titres were equally high when A/equine/Aboyne/1/05 (H3N8), a recent member of the Eurasian clade, was used.

Table 1: Seroprevalence of equine influenza virus in horses sampled at 10 study sites in north-east and southern Mexico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study site</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of horses sampled</th>
<th>Number (%) seropositive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cadereyta Lienzo Chorro</td>
<td>Nuevo Leon</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>33 (58.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Estanzuela</td>
<td>Nuevo Leon</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12 (66.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Bernabe</td>
<td>Nuevo Leon</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21 (52.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Guerrero</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1 (3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chihuaco La Puerta</td>
<td>Guerrero</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1 (2.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Tamarindo</td>
<td>Guerrero</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Iguanas</td>
<td>Guerrero</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2 (9.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playa Linda</td>
<td>Guerrero</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 (20.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jose Itzapa</td>
<td>Guerrero</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4 (50.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santiago</td>
<td>Guerrero</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19 (76.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>242</td>
<td>94 (38.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the study sites at which over 20 horses were sampled, the rate of seropositivity for EIV ranged from approximately 52 to 59 per cent in Nuevo Leon State, and 3 to 76 per cent in Guerrero State (Table 1). The youngest seropositive horse in Nuevo Leon State was a 12-month-old stallion sampled in September 2007, suggesting that the most recent EIV infection in this region had occurred during or after 2006. Another three seropositive horses in Nuevo Leon State were two years old or younger. In Guerrero State, the youngest seropositive horse was a three-year-old stallion sampled in September 2007, suggesting that the most recent EIV infection in this region had occurred during or after 2004.

In summary, a moderate seroprevalence for EIV was detected in horses in southern Mexico, and a high seroprevalence was detected in horses in the north-east of the country. The high HI antibody titres to Kentucky/97 (Florida clade 1) and Ohio/03 (American [Kentucky]) and low titres to Richmond/07 (Florida clade 2) suggest that the predominant EIV strains in Mexico belong to Florida clade 1 and/or the Florida clade 2. Recent work by the authors’ laboratory has also shown that there is a moderately high seroprevalence (25 per cent) for EIV in unvaccinated horses in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico (Loroño-Pino and others 2010). Taken together, these findings indicate that EIV is a common cause of infection in horses in Mexico, and that continued surveillance for EIV in Mexico is warranted.

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References


