Detection of Enterotoxigenic *Escherichia coli* in food by Real Time PCR amplification of the *lt*, *sth*, and *stp* genes, encoding the heat-labile and heat-stable enterotoxins

1. Aim and field of application

Enterotoxigenic *Escherichia coli* (ETEC) represent a group of diarrheagenic *E. coli* that is a common cause of infantile and traveller diarrhea in developing countries. However, ETEC are increasingly recognized as an important cause of foodborne illness in industrialized countries, and their prevalence could be underestimated, because they are not detected by standard stool culture methods and need specific assays to be distinguished from the other *E. coli* strains usually present in fecal samples. Moreover, the symptoms of ETEC infection are relatively nonspecific, and ETEC outbreaks may be incorrectly attributed to a viral etiology. In industrialized countries, foodborne outbreaks have been associated with salads, fresh basil used for preparation of pesto sauce, tuna paste. It is therefore important that the procedures allowing the detection of ETEC in foodstuffs are available in public health laboratories.

ETEC strains cause diarrhea through the action of enterotoxins: the heat-labile (LT) and heat-stable (ST) enterotoxins. Some strains may express an LT only, an ST only, or both an LT and an ST. Two variants of ST can be produced by strains isolated from human cases of diarrhea: the human variant (STh) and the porcine variant (STp). Therefore the genes encoding these toxins (*lt*, *sth* and *stp*) represent targets for ETEC identification and detection.

The present procedure describes a molecular methodology to screen food samples for the presence of ETEC by the detection of targets designed on the *lt*, *sth*, and *stp* genes. The same genetic markers are currently used for the detection of ETEC in the feces of patients with diarrhea.
2. Screening of food samples

Enrichment cultures are obtained by adding 25 gr test portions of the food specimen (or 25 ml of liquid) to 225 ml of Buffered Peptone Water (BPW), homogenizing in a peristaltic blender, and incubating at 37 ±1 °C for 18-24 h.

One ml of the enrichment culture is used for DNA extraction. This step is accomplished by any method in use in the laboratory for the extraction and purification of DNA from food enrichment cultures.

The Real Time PCR targeting the \(lt\), \(sth\), and \(stp\) genes is performed with the primers and probes reported below.

Enrichment cultures positive for the presence of at least one of the \(lt\), \(sth\), or \(stp\) genes are streaked onto suitable solid media (MacConkey agar plates or other media suitable for \(E.\ coli\) isolation, such as TBX) for attempting the isolation. This step is accomplished as follows:

- Pick up to 50 colonies with \(E.\ coli\) morphology.
- Point-inoculate on Nutrient Agar (NA) (single colonies).
- Test the isolated colonies or pools of 10 colonies by real time PCR for the presence of the gene(s) detected in the screening step.
- Subculture the positive colonies for further isolation and characterization.

3. Real Time PCR amplification of the enterotoxin genes

This paragraph illustrates the primers and probes sequences and the Real Time PCR conditions for the amplification of the genetic markers of typical ETEC: the plasmid-located genes \(lt\), coding for the heat-labile enterotoxin (LT), and \(st\), coding for the heat-stable (ST) enterotoxin. The present procedure includes primers and probes targeting both \(STh\) and \(STp\) coding genes.
The protocol is based on the 5’-nuclease PCR assay. The primers and probes targeting the \( lt \) and \( st \) genes have been described by Liu et al. (2013) and their sequences are reported in Table 1.

The nature of the Reporter and Quencher is not indicated, as it may depend on the Real Time PCR apparatus available in the laboratory.

**Table 1. DNA sequence and characteristics of the primers and probes used for the detection of ETEC.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target gene</th>
<th>Primer/Probe name</th>
<th>Forward Primer, Reverse Primer and Probe sequences (5’-3’)</th>
<th>Amplicon size (bp)</th>
<th>Location within sequence</th>
<th>Sequence accession number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( lt )</td>
<td>LT F</td>
<td>TTCCCACCGGATCACCAA</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17201-17218</td>
<td>CP000795.1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LT R</td>
<td>CAACCTTGTGGTGATGTA</td>
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<td>17242-17262</td>
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<td></td>
<td>LT probe</td>
<td>CTTGGAGAGAAGAACCCT</td>
<td></td>
<td>17220-17237</td>
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<tr>
<td>( st )</td>
<td>ST Fh</td>
<td>GCTAAACCAGYAGRGTCTTCAAAA</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>94199-94222</td>
<td>FN822745.1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ST Rh</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ST Probh</td>
<td>TGGTCCCTGAAGCATGAA</td>
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<td>94279-94296</td>
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<tr>
<td>( st )</td>
<td>ST Fp</td>
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<td>136</td>
<td>57204-57183</td>
<td>FN649417.1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ST Rp</td>
<td>GGCAGGATACAAACAGTT</td>
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<td>57069-57088</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ST Probep</td>
<td>TGGACACACATTTTACTGCT</td>
<td></td>
<td>57112-57092</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

An internal amplification control (IAC) must be run simultaneously to identify possible inhibition of the test samples.

The amplification conditions will depend on the system used and will refer to the instructions supplied with the instrument and the kit of choice, and should be set up in each laboratory. However, standard reaction conditions together with a two-steps thermal profile applied at EU-RL VTEC are detailed below.

**3.1. Real Time PCR conditions:**

Master Mix 2X to 1X (usually containing MgCl\(_2\) to final concentration of 3mM)
Primer Fwd 500 nM
Primer Rev 500 nM
Probe 200nM
DNA X (2 µl of DNA purified from 1 ml of culture can be sufficient)
Water to final volume

The primers and probes have been evaluated at the EU-RL VTEC with a Corbett Rotorgene, by using the following basic two steps thermal profile:

95°C 10 minutes
35-40 cycles of:
- 95°C 15 seconds
- 58°C 60 seconds

4. References

- Pakalniskiene J, Falkenhorst G, Lisby M, Madsen SB, Olsen KE, Nielsen EM, Mygh A, Boel J, Mølbak K. A foodborne outbreak of enterotoxigenic *E. coli* and *Salmonella*...
Anatum infection after a high-school dinner in Denmark, November 2006. Epidemiol Infect. 2009; 137:396-401.