Effects of *Lactobacillus acidophilus DSM13241* as a probiotic in healthy adult cats

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**Objective**—To evaluate the effect of dietary supplementation with the probiotic strain *Lactobacillus acidophilus DSM13241* in healthy adult cats.

**Animals**—15 adult cats.

**Procedures**—Cats were fed a nutritionally complete dry food for 5 weeks. Fecal character was assessed daily, and a single fecal sample and 3-mL blood sample were collected for bacterial enumeration and hematologic analysis, respectively. Cats were then fed the same diet supplemented with *L. acidophilus DSM13241* (2 X 10⁸ CFU/d) for 4.5 weeks. Repeat fecal and hematologic measurements were taken prior to the return to control diet for a 4-week period.

**Results**—The probiotic species was recovered from feces, demonstrating survival through the feline gastrointestinal tract. Probiotic supplementation was associated with increased numbers of beneficial *Lactobacillus* and *L. acidophilus* groups in feces and decreased numbers of *Clostridium* spp and *Enterococcus faecalis*, indicating an altered bacterial balance in the gastrointestinal tract microflora. Fecal pH was also decreased suggesting a colonic environment selective for the beneficial lactic acid bacterial population. Systemic and immunomodulatory effects were associated with administration of *L. acidophilus DSM13241* including altered cell numbers within WBC subsets and enhanced phagocytic capacity in the peripheral granulocyte population. In addition, plasma endotoxin concentrations were decreased during probiotic feeding, and RBCs had a decreased osmotic pressure.

**Conclusions and Clinical Relevance**—Probiotic strain *L. acidophilus DSM13241* fed at 2 X 10⁸ CFU/d can alter the balance of gastrointestinal microflora in healthy cats. Furthermore, administration of this probiotic results in beneficial systemic and immunomodulatory effects in cats. (Am J Vet Res 2006;67:1005–1012)

Commensal gastrointestinal tract microflora are vital to gastrointestinal health, aiding the host in digestion, nutrient metabolism, and vitamin production and in restricting colonization by pathogenic bacteria.12 Microbial populations in the gastrointestinal tract, however, are susceptible to change induced by factors such as poor nutrition, stress, gastrointestinal infections, antibiotic administration, predisposing illness, and immunosuppression. These fluctuations may impact the health of the host; therefore, enhancement of the colonic microflora by dietary interventions such as probiotics may be used to maintain gastrointestinal health.

**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FISH</td>
<td>Fluorescence in situ hybridization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRS</td>
<td>De Man, Rogosa, and Sharpe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rRNA</td>
<td>Ribosomal RNA</td>
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Probiotics are defined as live microbial feed supplements, which beneficially affect the host animal by improving its gastrointestinal microbial balance. The bacterial species most often used as health-promoting probiotics are *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* spp, although probiotic yeasts and *Enterococcus* spp are also used to promote weight gain in production animals.3–5 Probiotics are increasingly used therapeutically for the treatment of gastrointestinal complaints, including antimicrobial and stress-associated diarrhea, as well as bacterial and viral diarrheal diseases.6,7 Dietary supplementation with probiotics has also been reported to alleviate inflammatory bowel disease and reduce the occurrence of colonic carcinomas.8,9

These microorganisms may exert positive effects on the host by various means. Firstly, they increase numbers of beneficial bacteria such as lactobacilli and bifidobacteria, compared with putrefying or potentially detrimental bacteria.10,11 This improved microbial balance may occur through inhibition of detrimental species by competition for nutrients and gastrointestinal binding sites. However, the production of metabolites such as lactic acid, which reduce the pH of the colon favoring growth of other lactic acid bacteria, and secretion of antimicrobial peptides that directly target bacterial pathogens may also be involved.12,13 Secondly, probiotics may regulate host immune function. Although the exact mechanisms underlying immune effects are currently unclear, lactobacilli and bifidobacteria are known to modulate the expression of immunoregulatory cytokines by dendritic cells and macrophages.15,17

Probiotics are commonly used in production animals, and more recently, interest in their usage for promotion of companion animal health has increased. Although several studies have investigated probiotic usage in dogs, few have shown beneficial effects.14,15 Administration of *Lactobacillus acidophilus DSM13241* has been shown to improve the gastrointestinal microbial balance and induce immunostimulatory effects in adult dogs,16 whereas dietary supplementation with another *L. acidophilus* strain was observed to stimulate appetite and growth in puppies to 19 weeks of age.17 The probiotic *Enterococcus faecium* (SF68/NCIMB 10415) was reported to stimulate immune function in young dogs,18 with a second study19 on the same *E. faecium* probiotic reporting modification of the canine fecal microflora. In that study,19 however, the beneficial
effect of the probiotic remained questionable with fecal *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* spp higher in most dogs following probiotic supplementation.

Studies on probiotic usage in cats have not been reported to date to our knowledge, and because of differences in host physiologic characteristics and diet, probiotic efficacy in cats cannot be extrapolated from studies in dogs. In addition, differences exist in the resident colonic microflora, which, in cats, is thought to comprise high numbers of *Clostridium* bacteria similar to those representing bacterial overgrowth in the small intestine of humans and dogs.²¹

The purpose of the study reported here was to determine whether dietary supplementation with the probiotic strain *L. acidophilus* DSM13241 would induce health-related effects in adult cats. The probiotic was incorporated into dry cat food at a concentration delivering > 10⁹ CFU/d.

### Materials and Methods

#### Study design

Fifteen domestic shorthair cats were involved in a 3-phase longitudinal study to assess the effects of supplementation with the probiotic strain *L. acidophilus* DSM13241.²² A within-subject study design was used to remove an important source of between-subject variation, with each cat representing its own control. Cats were fed a nutritionally complete commercial dry diet for a period of 5 weeks (baseline phase) before switching to the same diet supplemented with the probiotic strain for 4.5 weeks (probiotic phase). Following probiotic supplementation, cats returned to the base diet without probiotics for a period of 4 weeks (postprobiotic phase). Fecal samples were collected in the final 2 weeks of each phase for the assessment of gastrointestinal health status. Small-volume blood samples were collected 5 days prior to the end of each study phase for assessment of systemic effects and immune status. Comparisons between the data collected during each phase allowed assessment of the effects of supplementation with *L. acidophilus* DSM13241 in cats.

#### Kibble preparations, packaging, and validation of probiotic inclusion

The probiotic strain was incorporated into the supplemented diet to a concentration of 1 × 10⁹ CFU/kg of foodstuff at the start of the study, decreasing to 3.2 × 10⁸ CFU/kg by the end of the study.

#### Animals and husbandry considerations

Cats involved in the study were between 4 and 5.5 years old (mean ± SD, 4.5 ± 0.4 years), weighing between 3.6 and 7.3 kg (3.6 ± 1.1 kg). For ease of feeding and feces measurements, cats were housed individually in 2-room, environmentally enriched lodges as described by Loveridge.²³ Full animal welfare considerations were in place. The study was approved by the Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition Ethical Review Committee, in accordance with the UK Home Office Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act of 1986. Cats were socialized daily, and fresh water was available at all times.

Cats were fed once daily at energy levels required to maintain body weight (food offered, 58.73 ± 10.24 g). Probiotic administration equated to a daily intake of between 1.2 × 10⁹ CFU and 2.8 × 10⁸ CFU dependent on the individual requirements. Feeding occurred over a 2-hour period to minimize exposure of the probiotic to air and humidity. Food offered and refused was recorded for each cat daily, and body weight was measured weekly. Prior to the start of the study and during each study phase, cats received a physical examination and health assessment. All cats were healthy and had no record of chronic illness.

### Samples and measurements

Fecal quality was assessed daily by use of a feces scoring system as described by Rolle et al.²¹ Trained assessors graded feces on a scale of 1 to 5, in which grade 1 represented dry crumbly feces and grade 5 represented diarrhea. Each major sector (1 through 5) was subdivided into 4 subsectors to allow accurate scoring of fecal form. Mean fecal score was calculated for each cat during each phase of the study. During the final 2 weeks of each phase, fecal samples were collected within 30 minutes of production for assessment of bacterial populations, pH, and ammonia and hydrogen sulfide contents.

Fecal bacterial populations were enumerated by use of selective bacterial culture and FISH. For selective culture, fecal material was prepared by 10% (wt/vol) dilution in 50% (vol/vol) maximum recovery diluent.²⁴ Anaerobic culture of total anaerobes, lactobacilli, and *Clostridium* was supported by the addition of 0.025% (wt/vol) cysteine hydrochloride and prior reduction of reagents in anaerobic conditions. Duplicate serial dilutions of the fecal solution were prepared to a dilution of 10⁻⁶, and 50-µL aliquots were spread plated onto the appropriate media.²⁴ Total anaerobes were selected on fastidious anaerobe agar; lactobacilli were selected on MRS agar acidified to pH 5, and clostridia were selected by use of a *Clostridium perfringens* agar base containing tryptose-sulfite-cycloserine selective supplement. Inoculated agar plates were incubated at 38°C under anaerobic conditions (10% H₂, 10% CO₂, and 80% N₂) for 18 to 48 hours depending on bacterial growth characteristics. Aerobic culture of enterococci and coliforms was supported by selection on K-F Streptococcus agar and MacConkey No. 3 agar, respectively; these cultures were incubated under aerobic conditions at 38°C for 18 to 48 hours.

Putative lactobacilli selected on acidified MRS medium were retained for characterization by biochemical profiling,²⁴ through which taxonomic classification is determined by the characteristic ability of an isolate to ferment 49 carbohydrate substrates. Isolates that had fermentation patterns characteristic of the probiotic strain were characterized by DNA fingerprinting of the 16S rRNA gene.²⁵ An automated ribotyping system was used in which genomic DNA was extracted and digested with restriction endonucleases; the resulting fragments were separated by gel electrophoresis. Hybridization with fluorescein-labeled probes designed against the 16S rRNA gene allowed observation of the DNA banding pattern, which was analyzed by use of proprietary software.

Because growing evidence suggests that selective culture for assessment of microbial ecology is inadequate,²⁶ measurement of bacterial populations by the molecular FISH method was used to further enumerate fecal bacteria. A series of 5 cyanine-3-labeled DNA probes targeted against the 16S rRNA gene allowed observation of the DNA banding pattern, which was analyzed by use of proprietary software.

Briefly, 3 g of feces was diluted 10% (wt/vol) in PBS solution, and particulate material was removed by centrifugation at 1,000 × g for 2 minutes. The supernatant was diluted 1:4 in 4% paraformaldehyde. Bacterial cells were harvested from the supernatant by centrifugation at 12,500 × g for 5 minutes. The harvested cells were washed in PBS solution and suspended in a 900-µL volume of 50% (vol/vol) ethanol-PBS solution. Cellular material was then hybridized overnight at 45°C with 1 µg of a cyanine-3-labeled DNA probe and with the total bacterial stain, 4,6-diamidino-2-phenylindole. Fluorescent-labeled and stained cells were counted by use of fluorescence microscopy.

Fecal pH was measured in triplicate in fecal water extracted by centrifugation of 10 g of fresh feces at 40,000 × g for 2 hours. Fecal ammonia was measured in feces that was diluted 5% (wt/vol) in sterile distilled water containing 20%
(vol/vol) ammonia pH adjusting solution by use of an ammonia electrode. Total sulfide (H₂S and HS⁻) production in feces was measured by use of the methylene blue method. Briefly, 0.3 g of feces was diluted 1:10 in preduced sodium phosphate buffer (pH, 7.4) and agitated to mix. The resulting slurry was used as an inoculum diluted 10% (vol/vol) in anaerobe basal broth, and the culture was incubated at 38°C under anaerobic conditions for 24 hours. Cultures were diluted 1:4 in sterile distilled water, and particulate material was removed by centrifugation at 13,800 × g for 15 minutes. Total sulfides were detected by use of the hydrogen sulfide reagent and colorimetric detection by spectrophotometry at a wavelength of 670 nm. Sulfides were measured in parts per million against an Na₂S standard curve.

A 3-mL blood sample was collected by venipuncture of the cephalic vein during the final week of each study phase. Sample analyses included measurement of acellular immune factors and hemogram, which included a differential WBC count. Serum biochemical analysis included serum concentrations of total protein, albumin, urea, creatinine, cholesterol, calcium, and inorganic phosphorus; serum activities of alanine aminotransferase, alkaline phosphatase, and aspartate aminotransferase were also analyzed. Serum immunoglobulin concentrations (IgG, IgA, and IgM) were determined via commercially available radial immunodiffusion assays, and concentrations of the serum acute-phase reactants haptoglobin and C-reactive protein were measured via commercially available immunoassays. Total serum nitric oxide concentrations were determined by enzymatic conversion of nitrate to nitrite followed by colorimetric detection of diazotation products of the Griess reaction by spectrophotometry at a wavelength of 550 nm.

Assessment of RBC susceptibility to osmotic pressure was performed on whole-blood samples collected in EDTA. Blood samples (20 µL) were diluted to 1% (vol/vol) in sodium chloride solution of various concentrations (0.25%, 0.6%, 0.65%, 0.7%, and 0.9% [wt/vol]), and samples were incubated for 20 minutes at 22°C. Cellular material was removed by centrifugation at 500 × g, and the optical density of the supernatant was determined by spectrophotometry at a wavelength of 540 nm. Exposure to 0.65% (wt/vol) sodium chloride resulted in hemolysis of >0% and <100% for all samples and was therefore used for data analysis purposes.

Endotoxin (bacterial lipopolysaccharide) concentrations in serum from 1-ml whole-blood samples collected in pyrogen-free vessels were determined at external laboratories by use of the Limulus amebocyte lysate test after removal of endotoxin inhibitors by heating at 75°C for 30 minutes. Leukocyte phagocytic activity was investigated in vitro by use of a commercially available assay and flow cytometry. Heparinized whole blood was challenged with opsonized fluorescein isothiocyanate–labeled Escherichia coli and incubated at 37°C to support phagocytosis. Following quenching of extracellular bacteria, RBCs were lysed and fixed and WBC DNA was stained by use of propidium iodide solution. Phagocytic activity of granulocyte and monocyte populations was measured by flow cytometry by use of the blue-green excitation light (488 nm). In addition to analysis of phagocytic activity of the individual phagocyte populations, the median fluorescence intensity was measured for comparison of mean number of bacteria phagocytosed per WBC.

Statistical analysis—Data from the 3 phases were analyzed by use of a 2-factor general linear model to take into account the observation of the same cat in each of the following phases: baseline, probiotic treatment, and after probiotic treatment. Where measurements were taken over 2 study phases, data were analyzed by use of a paired Student t test. In the case of bacterial populations and species counts, data were logorithmically transformed prior to analysis, and fecal scores and body weights were averaged over each phase for each cat prior to analysis. Treatment effects found to be significant at the 5% significance level were followed up by use of the Student-Newman-Keuls multiple range test. Data were stored electronically and analyzed by use of the multifactor ANOVA procedure with proprietary analysis software. Results are expressed as mean ± SD values.

### Results

#### Health status—Probiotic supplementation was not associated with changes in the health status of cats, as demonstrated by findings on physical examination, CBC determination, and serum biochemical analysis. Food intake was consistent throughout the study (baseline, 47.2 ± 11 g; probiotic, 47.6 ± 10.8 g; after probiotic, 47.8 ± 9.2 g; P = 0.002), and body weight was not significantly (P = 0.178) altered by probiotic feeding (baseline, 5.27 ± 1.06 kg; probiotic, 5.22 ± 1.09 kg; after probiotic, 5.21 ± 1.12 kg).

#### Fecal measurements—Fecal quality was excellent, and fecal scores remained unchanged throughout the study (baseline, 2.03 ± 0.14; probiotic, 2.02 ± 0.16; after probiotic 2.06 ± 0.12; P = 0.388). Hydrogen sulfide (baseline, 34.21 ± 10.04 µg/g; probiotic, 31.18 ± 10.86 µg/g; after probiotic, 36.57 ± 10.52 µg/g; P = 0.394) and ammonia (baseline, 11.48 ± 4.89 mM; probiotic, 10.40 ± 6.03 mM; after probiotic, 9.13 ± 4.32 mM; P = 0.239) concentrations were also constant among fecal samples throughout the study. Fecal pH had a slight but significant (P = 0.017) decrease across the course of the study (baseline, 6.73 ± 0.34; probiotic, 6.57 ± 0.45; after probiotic, 6.48 ± 0.41).

Assessment of fecal bacterial populations by selective culture (Table 1) revealed that clostridium numbers were significantly reduced during the probiotic-feeding phase and increased following the cessation of probiotic supplementation, whereas coliform and Enterococcus populations decreased during the course of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bacterial population</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Probiotic</th>
<th>After probiotic</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lactobacilli</td>
<td>6.83 ± 0.68</td>
<td>6.78 ± 0.61</td>
<td>6.03 ± 1.10</td>
<td>0.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total anaerobes</td>
<td>10.04 ± 0.86</td>
<td>9.86 ± 0.61</td>
<td>9.73 ± 0.56</td>
<td>0.531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clostridia</td>
<td>6.92 ± 0.57</td>
<td>8.34 ± 0.83</td>
<td>6.63 ± 0.89b</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coliforms</td>
<td>5.52 ± 1.00a</td>
<td>4.83 ± 1.34a</td>
<td>4.23 ± 1.38p</td>
<td>0.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterococci</td>
<td>2.70 ± 1.44a</td>
<td>2.06 ± 1.61d</td>
<td>0.55 ± 1.17p</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values represent data from 15 cats. bSignificant (P < 0.05) difference among phases.
No significant changes in numbers of culturable lactobacilli and total anaerobes were observed by selective culture.

Biochemical profiling was used to assess the carbohydrate fermentation pattern of randomly selected isolates cultured on MRS agar from each cat. During the baseline, phase isolates were predominantly identified as Lactobacillus plantarum, Lactobacillus brevis, and Pediococcus pentosaceus, while isolates with profiles characteristic of the probiotic strain were not identified. During the probiotic feeding phase, however, 11 of the 28 isolates tested had fermentation profiles characteristic of the probiotic strain. Molecular fingerprinting of the 16S rRNA gene revealed that these isolates were identical to the probiotic strain (Figure 1). On returning to the base diet, biochemical profiling suggested a return to Lactobacillus populations characteristic of the baseline period.

Molecular methods for bacterial enumeration had several differences in bacterial populations, compared with bacterial culture. Numbers of lactobacilli as observed by FISH increased significantly during probiotic-feeding in actual numbers and as a percentage of the total bacterial population (Table 2). Similarly, numbers of the L. acidophilus group (also including Lactobacillus crispatus, Lactobacillus gallinarum, and Lactobacillus helveticus) increased significantly during probiotic feeding as measured by FISH. Numbers of lactobacilli and percentage populations characterizing the opportunistic pathogen culture, FISH analysis revealed a reduction of the 16S rRNA gene revealed that these isolates were identical to the probiotic strain (Figure 1). On returning to the base diet, biochemical profiling suggested a return to Lactobacillus populations characteristic of the baseline period.

Blood parameters—Results of blood biochemical analysis and CBC determination were within reference ranges and revealed no significant changes associated with probiotic supplementation. Significant changes were observed in the lymphocyte population with a reduction in cell numbers across the course of the study and a similar increase in numbers of eosinophils (Table 3). The proportion of the monocyte and granulocyte populations having phagocytic activity in vitro remained unchanged, compared with baseline numbers during probiotic feeding (Table 4). During the postprobiotic phase, however, the percentage of cells from both populations that were active in phagocytosis was slightly, yet significantly, reduced, compared with baseline. The mean fluorescent intensity, which correlates to the mean number of bacteria phagocytosed per WBC, was unchanged in the monocyte population throughout the study. However, mean numbers of bacteria ingested by the granulocyte population increased significantly in response to probiotic administration and again following the cessation of probiotic feeding. The acellular immune factors IgG, IgM, and acute-phase reactants serum amyloid A, and haptoglobin remained constant throughout the study, with serum cortisol concentrations also unchanged by administration of the probiotic supplement.

The susceptibility of RBCs to hemolysis on exposure to 0.65% (wt/vol) NaCl solution was reduced significantly (P = 0.028) throughout the course of the study (baseline, 17.14 ± 11.32%; probiotic, 14.18 ±

![Figure 1](image-url)

Table 2—Mean ± SD number of fecal bacterial populations as determined by use of FISH expressed in actual numbers and as a percentage of total population during baseline, probiotic supplementation, and after probiotic treatment phases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bacterial spp</th>
<th>Absolute numbers (log_{10}/g)</th>
<th>Total population (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>Probiotic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lactobacillus spp</td>
<td>8.21 ± 0.32</td>
<td>8.57 ± 0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. acidophilus</td>
<td>0.47 ± 1.88</td>
<td>7.25 ± 0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bifidobacterium spp</td>
<td>7.34 ± 0.26</td>
<td>7.24 ± 0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterococcus faecalis</td>
<td>8.60 ± 2.05</td>
<td>4.10 ± 2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clostridium spp</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>8.13 ± 0.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ND = Not determined.
See Table 1 for remainder of key.
Discussion

Dietary supplementation with *L. acidophilus DSM13241* resulted in various health-related effects that may be considered beneficial to the host. A variety of changes were observed in the commensal gastrointestinal tract flora and health or immune status of cats in response to probiotic administration. The probiotic was recovered from feces of cats demonstrating survival through the feline gastrointestinal tract. Persistence of the probiotic, however, appeared to cease following the withdrawal of supplementation.

Changes associated with the probiotic feeding phase alone and persisting following withdrawal of the probiotic were observed in association with the probiotic *L. acidophilus DSM13241*. Persistence for the period following withdrawal of the probiotic was largely observed for immunomodulatory factors altered during the study. This suggests a mechanism not requiring direct action of the probiotic or facilitated by colonization at numbers below the detectable limit. The exception to this was blood endotoxin concentrations, which were reduced only in the probiotic-feeding phase, consistent with a direct mode of action such as enhanced gastrointestinal barrier function or reduced lumenal bacterial endotoxin. Conversely, changes in gastrointestinal bacterial populations were largely associated with the supplementation phase, with fewer measurements or those of lower magnitude providing evidence of a continued effect on the gastrointestinal tract.
Confounding effects as a result of adaptation to environmental factors or diet, although not impossible, are considered unlikely. All cats were maintained in the same environmentally enriched housing as that used during the study and had previously been fed nutritionally complete commercial dry pet food of similar composition to the base diet. The additional adaptation to base diet for 3 to 5 weeks prior to collection of feces and 5 weeks prior to obtaining hematologic measurements makes this increasingly unlikely.

A combination of culture-based and molecular identification methods were used in assessment of the gastrointestinal microflora to counteract inaccuracies inherent in the use of selective culture alone to investigate the microflora of companion animals. Some evidence of this inaccuracy was observed in our study where numbers of lactobacilli remained unchanged as measured by bacterial culture while FISH revealed increased numbers of lactobacilli and L. acidophilus during probiotic supplementation. Selective bacterial culture is reliant on the provision of optimal growth conditions (which include temperature and nutrient and atmospheric factors) for target bacterial populations within the complex gastrointestinal microflora. Furthermore, culture media are largely developed for the selection of human isolates adding to these inadequacies. Because FISH uses specific DNA probes that hybridize the 16S rRNA, the technique can be used to detect viable, yet nonculturable, bacteria on the basis of 16S rRNA nucleotide sequence.

Enumeration of enterococci, E. faecalis, and Clostridium spp by FISH and selective culture revealed the techniques to be largely similar in describing the effect of probiotic feeding on these populations. Bacterial groups enumerated were selected as markers of microflora health with Clostridium and Enterococcus spp representing detrimental bacterial markers and lactobacilli and Bifidobacterium spp representing beneficial species. In contrast to the health-promoting short-chain fatty acids produced by lactic acid bacteria, the proteolytic nature of Clostridium spp results in the production of putrefying metabolites. Clostridium perfringens, C. difficile, and E. faecalis are also considered opportunistic pathogens, the former 2 being associated with gastrointestinal infection and diarrheal disease and the latter with wound and systemic infections in companion animals. The observed reductions in the clostridia and E. faecalis populations, combined with increased numbers of lactobacilli and L. acidophilus observed by FISH, are highly suggestive of a healthier balance of the gastrointestinal microflora occurring during probiotic supplementation. The reduction in Bifidobacteria as a percentage of the total population is not considered to counteract the suggestion of a healthier balance. The magnitude of change in this beneficial population was low, and the population was comparatively lower in number than the Lactobacillus population, suggesting a bias towards the latter in the healthy feline gastrointestinal tract.

The FISH-mediated detection of the probiotic species involved the use of a probe specific for a subgroup of lactobacilli comprising L. acidophilus, L. crispatus, L. gillanum, and L. helveticus. Low numbers of these species observed in the baseline period, compared with the probiotic phase, indicate that an increase in the probiotic strain occurred. However, stimulation of L. crispatus, L. gillanum, and L. helveticus populations during probiotic feeding cannot be discounted. The increased numbers of lactobacilli observed during probiotic feeding exceed those detected by the general Lactobacillus probe. It is therefore possible that feeding of the probiotic strain stimulated numbers of the inherent Lactobacillus populations.

The reduction in fecal pH likely reflects the observed changes in the microflora, such as increased numbers of lactic acid bacteria. The mechanism of persistence in fecal pH reduction is unclear; however, decreased colonic pH is considered a key factor in the effect of probiotic bacteria. This observation may therefore suggest an environment favoring the growth of beneficial species and inhibiting detrimental gastrointestinal tract species.

Probiotic bacteria, particularly Lactobacillus spp, have previously been shown to modulate nonspecific immune reactions in humans and other animals. The immunomodulatory effect of L. acidophilus DSM13241 in cats was apparent in several parameters measured in the current study. All systemic changes in this healthy population, however, were relatively small in magnitude, and measured values were within reference range.

Immunomodulation was suggested by altered lymphocyte and eosinophil populations with reduced and increased numbers, respectively, throughout the study and by increased activity of peripheral blood phagocytes. Small changes in the phagocytically active proportion of granulocytes and monocytes occurred across the course of the study. The granulocyte population, however, had substantially increased numbers of fluorescent-labeled E. coli phagocytosed per cell when challenged in vitro. Furthermore, this increase was observed in a background of stable granulocyte (neutrophil) numbers. These data suggest that L. acidophilus administration in cats may enhance the phagocytic capacity of circulating granulocytes and that the effect is maintained at least 4 weeks after the cessation of probiotic feeding. Because granulocytes account for approximately 50% of the WBC population in healthy adult cats, the phagocytic capacity of peripheral blood is almost entirely the result of the stimulated population. The nonspecific immune stimulation observed in the postprobiotic period, therefore, involves newly developed or maturing cells not directly influenced by probiotic feeding. It is not known whether the prolonged nature of this effect is the result of the nature of the immunomodulatory mechanism or because of continued presence of the probiotic in the gastrointestinal tract at levels below the detection limit. Different Lactobacillus doses are known to be required for immune stimulation, compared with fecal colonization, with the former occurring at comparatively lower doses in human studies.

Effects on general health were observed in cats in response to probiotic feeding, with blood endotoxin concentrations reduced during probiotic feeding and improved resistance to osmotic lysis in RBCs over the
course of the study. The lowered endotoxin concentrations may be consistent with an enhanced gastrointestinal barrier or with decreased amounts of luminal endotoxin and, hence, lowered translocation through the gastrointestinal wall. Reduced concentrations of circulating toxins have previously been reported to improve the osmotic resistance of RBCs possibly as a result of decreases in membrane damage caused by oxidants and blood toxins including endotoxin. The increased robustness of RBCs in the probiotic and postprobiotic phases may therefore be linked to altered plasma endotoxin concentrations. A direct correlation, however, would not explain the continued increase in osmotic resistance following the return to base diet. Unidentified longer-term mechanisms are implicated in causing or assisting the observed effect.

In summary, the administration of L acidophilus DSM13241 at a daily dose of 2 × 10^8 CFU in healthy adult cats resulted in a beneficial balance of the gastrointestinal microflora with concurrent beneficial health and immunomodulatory effects. Probiotic supplementation with L acidophilus DSM13241 may therefore promote feline health and improve resistance to disease.

References


