Preliminary Characterization of the Probiotic Properties of a Bacterial Strain for Used in Monogastric Nutrition

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Abstract
This study aimed to evaluate some probiotic properties of Bacillus subtilis ATCC 6051a. The phenotypic profile, resistance to pH by simulated gastric juice (pH 2 and 3), bile salts by simulated intestinal fluid, survivability (%), heat and antibiotics tolerance were investigated. The strain is a Gram-positive, rod-shaped bacteria, arranged in short chains or in small irregular pairs with the ability to produce spores. Good viability at pH 2 and 3, with a survival of more than ≥80%, was found. In the presence of bile salts 0.3%, over 4 h, the strain exhibited a survival ≥85%. At 80°C, for 120 min., the strain showed good growth (9.04 log CFU/ml). Results were sensitive to most antibiotics, with a highly susceptible (between 16 – 25 mm) to erythromycin, clindamycin, amoxicillin, chloramphenicol, ciprofloxacin, amikacin and kanamycin. The strain was found to be sensitive to vancomycin, gentamicin, and tetracycline. The present research demonstrated that Bacillus subtilis ATCC 6051a can survive under gastrointestinal conditions, which involves them to future in vitro and in vivo probiotic studies.

Keywords: animal nutrition, Bacillus spp., probiotic properties

Introduction
Probiotics are defined as „live microorganisms which when administered in adequate amounts confer a health benefit on the host” (FAO, 2016). Probiotics can be an alternative to antibiotics in animal nutrition (Nithya and Halami, 2013).

Many strains of some Bacillus spp. are currently used as probiotic dietary supplements in animal feed (Bernardeau et al., 2017). The ability of Bacillus species to form spores (Dinu et al., 2019) is beneficial and allows for long-time storage without to lose its viability, both at room temperature and under refrigeration conditions (Ritter et al., 2018). The spores production can influence the small intestine to exert their probiotic efficiency providing benefits to the host (Dumitr et al., 2019).

In animal production, probiotics based on Bacillus spp. were used as growth-promoting (Cartman et al., 2007). The requirements of a bacteria that could be identified as an effective probiotic include non-pathogenic (Hosseini et al., 2019), resistance through the digestive system (gastric acidity and bile salts, Maruo et al., 2006),
facilitative for the digestion and absorption of nutrients (Gaggia et al., 2010), production of antimicrobial substances, adherence to intestinal epithelium cells (Schillinger et al., 2005), sensistiveness to antibiotics (FAO/WHO, 2006), and co-aggregation to form a barrier for prevents the colonization with pathogens (Nithya and Halami, 2013) such as Salmonella spp. (Hosseini et al., 2019). The bacteria can remain stable in the animal gastrointestinal tract (GIT) and have probiotic beneficial effects (Nicholson, 2002).

As many probiotics, Bacillus spp. selection depends on the bacterial capacity to resist acids and bile salts, through the GIT (AlGburi et al., 2016; Ionescu et al., 2013). According to Merchant et al. (2011), the mean gastric pH of pigs was between 2.9-4.4, while in the small intestinal was found in the range of 6.1–6.7. Also, in the digestive tract of pigs a lower pH was registered in the caecum (6.0–6.4), which is similar to human, and colon content (6.1–6.6, Fallingborg et al., 1989).

To reflect the survival percentage of strain multiple tests were done. Therefore, the potential of Bacillus subtilis ATCC 6051a was evaluated in vitro for some probiotic properties in order to use in monogastric nutrition.

Materials and methods
Bacterial strain and culture conditions
Bacillus subtilis ATCC 6051a (BS) strain previously characterized culturally, morphologically and biochemically by catalase test and API 50 CHB Biomerieux strips (Dumitru et al., 2018) was used in this study. The strain was maintained in 20% glycerol (v/v) and stored at -80°C. The bacterial culture can be found in the Collection of National Research Development Institute for Biology and Animal Nutrition Balotești – Romania (INCDBNA), under the code IBNA 74.

Preservation of bacterial strain
The medium preservation (months) was done by culture on nutrient agar medium (Merck). The viability was evaluated from 3 to 3 months (4°C and room temperature) according to Sorescu et al., (2019). Long-time preservation (years) was done at -80°C, with addition of glycerol 20%. Bacterial viability will be assessed every 2 years (Sorescu et al., 2019).

Acid tolerance test
The acid resistance of BS strain was investigated under simulated gastric juice (SGJ) by following the Lee et al., (2012) method, which was modified by Dumitru et al. (2019): 1 ml of culture grown in nutritive broth for 24h at 37°C, 120 rpm, representing about 10^10 colony forming units (CFU/ml), was transferred to 9 ml of SGJ [0.5% NaCl, 0.3% pepsin (from gastric mucosa, Sigma), 0.1% peptone (BD Science)], whose pH was adjusted to 2 and 3 with a Portable meter (Waterproof, pH 7.0+DHS) using HCl 1 N, then incubated for 0, 30, 60, 90 and 120 minutes at 37°C, 120 rpm. Viable cells of the culture were enumerated by plating 10-fold dilutions [1:10, in the phosphate-saline buffer (PBS at pH 7.2)] on nutrient agar and plates incubating at 37°C, 24 h.

The survival rate was calculated using the formula presented by Ritter et al., (2018) and Nithya and Halami (2013):

\[
\text{Survival} \% = \frac{\text{Log number of cells survived (CFU/ml) x 100}}{\text{Log number of initial cells inoculated (CFU/ml)}} \times \frac{\text{Log number of initial cells inoculated (CFU/ml)}}{100}
\]

**Bile tolerance test**
Resistance of bacteria to bile salts was measured according to Lee et al. (2012), respectively by following the Dumitru et al. (2019) modifications: 10 mL of culture strain (about 10^10 CFU/ml) grown in nutritive broth (pH 7.0) for 24h at 37°C on a rotary shaker (120 rpm), was centrifuged at 5.000 rpm, 20 min, at 4°C. Cell pellets were washed with PBS, collected by centrifugation (5.000 rpm, 20 min, at 4°C), and resuspended in nutrient broth (pH 7.0) containing 0.3% bile salts (w/v, Oxoid). The bacterial growth was monitored 0, 1, 2, 3, and 4h at 37°C on a rotary shaker at 120 rpm. Viable cells were counted by plating 10-fold dilutions in the PBS (1:10, in the PBS at pH 7.2), on nutrient agar at 37°C, 24h. The survivability was calculated as well.

**The spores resistance to heat**
Strain’s ability to resist a high temperature was carried out at 80°C, a specific temperature used for the pelleting process in the animal feed industry (Chaiyawan et al., 2010). The suspension of vegetative cells or spores was heated up on a water bath at 80°C for 120 min. Viable cells were determined at 0, 30, 60, 90 and 120 min. 10-fold dilutions of the culture in the PBS (pH 7.2), on nutrient agar medium at 37°C, for 24h were done.
Antibiotic susceptibility test

Antibiotic susceptibility of BS was analyzed using the disc diffusion method described by European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing (EUCAST 2011). Types of antibiotics disk (Oxoid) tested are presented in Table 4. Cells from 24±2 h-old culture by using a sterile swab, were suspended in a tube containing 2 ml of sterile distilled water (heavy suspension - S). In another tube with 5 ml of sterile distilled water, were transferred drops from suspension S, until the turbidity becomes equivalent to 0.5 McFarland standard. Antibiotic-impregnated discs were situated on seeded plates within 15 min of swabbing from 5 ml tube, following by incubation at 37°C, 24 h. The results were reading as sensitive (S) and resistance (R) based on the diameter of the inhibition zone (mm).

Data analysis

The analytical data were compared using variance analysis „ANOVA“ with STATVIEW for Windows (SAS, version 6.0). The results were expressed as mean values and standard error of the mean (SEM), the differences between means considered statistically significant at P <0.05, using Fisher’s PLSD test for the unitled compact variable.

Results and discussions

Bacterial strain and culture conditions

The phenotypical characterization of BS was performed in another study (Dumitru et al., 2018), where the cultural, morphological, biochemical examination, hemolysis, and catalase test were presented. The sporulation capacity of Bacillus spp., involves stability and resistance for surviving and development during in vitro simulated conditions.

Preservation of bacterial strain

The results of BS viability preserved at 4°C and at room temperature are shown in Table 1. To reveal the long time preservation, every 3 months, the BS strain was verified, until the bacterial growth will stop. The number of passages are recorded in a register to confirm the long time preservation. According to Sorescu et al. (2019), the strains resistance at 4°C and room temperature is a relevant technical character. To prepare a bacterial probiotic product is very significant to identify the long storage viability, to know how often it needs to be revitalized.

The strains cultivation on agar nutrient medium, at low temperature (3-5°C), according to Doneva and Donev (2004), represent the base of...
Preliminary Characterization of the Probiotic Properties of a Bacterial Strain for Used in Monogastric Nutrition

further preservation by keeping the taxonomical, morphological and biochemical properties. Furthermore, increasing the temperature over 5°C leads to a quick loss of cell viability (Doneva and Donev, 2004).

**Acid tolerance test**

*Bacillus subtilis* ATCC 6051a conserved on nutrient agar tubes at 4°C and room temperature (12 months), was tested for resistance to simulated gastric juice (pH 2 and 3), under constant agitation (37°C, 24 h, 120 rpm, Table 2). In Table 2, can be observed the strain resistance when was exposed at low pH value. At 4°C, pH 2, *BS* presented significative different between all times of incubation according to Lee *et al.*, (2012).

According to Nithya and Halami (2013), before to use a probiotic strain in animal nutrition, it is very important to know their ability to remain alive during the ingestion process and the environment conditions of GIT (low pH values and bile salts resistance).

The survivability of *BS* at low pH (Figure 1), showed their ability to resist ≥80%, for 2 h of incubation, both at room temperature and 4°C conserved. The pH value of culture medium is an important parameter that influence the bacterial growth; generally in a medium with a low pH, the bacterial evolution is slow or absent (Doneva and Donev, 2004).

**Bile tolerance test**

Resistance to bile salts is a great status for survival and growth of bacteria in the GIT. Barbosa *et al.*, (2005) reported that the presence of *Bacillus* spores as resistance form can be criteria for the selection of an ideal *Bacillus* probiotic. Also, the microorganism with probiotic properties, must not lose their viability after exposure to low pH and bile salts. In our study, the strain was resistant in the presence of oxgall bile salts (Table 3). The results obtained from our study are higher than the scientific data of Lee *et al.* (2012), even after 4 h exposure.

The rata of survival of *BS* was more that >85% at the addition of 0.3% ox gall (Figure 2). It was observed that the strain conserved at room temperature, respectively at 4°C during 4 h, tolerated the bile salts (0.3%) addition; also, at 4°C, the strain exhibited a higher survival rate (92.38%) vs. room temperature (89.07%). Balasingham *et al.*, (2017), affirmed that an efficient probiotic is necessary to be capable of growing in an acidic environment and at high concentration of bile

**Table 3.** The effect of ox gall bile salts on *Bacillus subtilis* ATCC 6051a strain viability for 4 h exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preserved conditions</th>
<th>Viable count (log_{10} CFU/ml) of <em>Bacillus subtilis</em> ATCC 6051a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4°C</td>
<td>9.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room temperature</td>
<td>9.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Viable counts (log_{10} CFU/ml) of strain at 1, 2, 3 and 4 h was compared with counts at 0 h. Results represent the mean of three experiments (n=3). a,b,c,d Means in the same row differ significantly at P <0.05.
salts. Vasquez (2016) reported the capacity of Bacillus spp. to survive within the GIT, determine the sporulation process, making them commensal bacteria for animals that ingest them.

These results are in agreement with those observed by Zaid (2018), Nithya and Halami (2013), which affirmed that a bacterial strain to be used as a probiotic must to resist under gastrointestinal conditions.

The spores resistance to heat
The temperature resistance is another condition of probiotic until used in animal nutrition. The results obtained confirm the strain viability at 80°C during 120 min. Table 4 shows the resistance of BS at high temperature. After 120 min, the BS registered good viability. The values obtained differ significantly (P≤0.05) between all incubation times.

Table 4. The spores resistance of Bacillus subtilis ATCC 6051a at 80°C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tulpina</th>
<th>0 min</th>
<th>30 min</th>
<th>90 min</th>
<th>120 min</th>
<th>SEM</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BS</td>
<td>12.72&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;b</td>
<td>12.26&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>11.48&lt;sub&gt;bcd&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>9.04&lt;sub&gt;cd&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>0.437</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results represent the mean of three experiments (n=3). a, b, c, d Means in the same row differ significantly at P<0.05.

Table 5. Antibiotic susceptibility of the Bacillus subtilis ATCC 6051a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antibiotic</th>
<th>Bacillus subtilis ATCC 6051a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vancomycin 30 μg</td>
<td>S'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erythromycin 15 μg</td>
<td>S''</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clindamycin 2 μg</td>
<td>S''</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentamicin 10 μg</td>
<td>S'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amoxicillin 25 μg</td>
<td>S''</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloramphenicol 30 μg</td>
<td>S''</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciprofloxacin 5 μg</td>
<td>S''</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amikacin 25 μg</td>
<td>S''</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tetracycline 30 μg</td>
<td>S'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanamycin 30 μg</td>
<td>S''</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Resistance (R): 0–5 mm; Sensitive (S+): 6–15 mm; Susceptible (S++): 16–25 mm; More susceptible (S+++): 26–35 mm.
The results are consistent with those in the literature (Chaiyawan et al., 2010), which reported the exposure of the Bacillus at 80°C by incubation in a water bath; it confirms the resistance of the vegetative cells due to the presence of the spores. The thermostability to high temperatures is a major advantage of Bacillus spp., the spores can survive at 113°C (Vazquez, 2016); this property permits the spores incorporation in animal nutrition during the processes of grinding and pelleting of the feed.

**Antibiotic resistance assay**

Bacillus subtilis ATCC 6051a strain was evaluated for antibiotic resistance by using discs impregnated with vancomycin (30 μg), erythromycin (15 μg), clindamycin (2 μg), gentamicin (10 μg), amoxicillin (25 μg), chloramphenicol (30 μg), ciprofloxacin (5 μg), amikacin (25 μg), tetracycline (30 μg) and kanamycin (30 μg). The results of antibiotic sensitivity test of bacterial strain are shown in Table 5. BS was highly susceptible (between 16 – 25 mm of zone of inhibition) to antibiotics as erythromycin, clindamycin, amoxicillin, chloramphenicol, ciprofloxacin, amikacin and kanamycin. The strain was found to be sensitive to vancomycin, gentamicin, and tetracycline.

The antibiotics utilization can improve the zootechnical parameters, their administration can be given as a protection for animals’ health, controlling as well, the gastrointestinal infections and microbiota modification (Mehdi et al., 2018). Given that, the European Union has banned the use of antibiotics in food-production (European Union, 2006; Dumitru et al., 2019) and an alternative of these can be occurred by probiotics (Chiang et al., 2015; Dumitru et al., 2018).

**Conclusion**

Our results indicate the resistance of Bacillus subtilis ATCC 6051a in the presence of bile salts and low pH values, with high survivability (%). These probiotic properties will help the strain to reach the harsh gastrointestinal tract conditions and to contribute in the balance of intestinal microbiota. Besides, the bacterial culture was sensitive to the antibiotics, more of these with applications in animal nutrition, which are used only to treat clinical disease. Based on our in vitro results, Bacillus subtilis ATCC 6051a presented notable probiotic criteria and can be selected as a possible candidate for further investigations.

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