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Evaluation of Techniques That Measure Hydrogen and Methane Levels in Breaths of Horses with Gastrointestinal Diseases

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Techniques for measuring hydrogen (H₂) and methane (CH₄) levels in breaths were assessed in horses with gastrointestinal (GI) diseases. A total of 31 horses were studied: 11 healthy horses (Group A), 10 horses with GI diseases (Group B), and 10 horses with diseases without GI involvement (Group C). Expired gases were measured using gas chromatography. CH₄ levels in Group A were significantly lower than those in Group B. In Group B, CH₄ levels were significantly higher after treatment. Fluctuations in H₂ and CH₄ levels in breath were associated with changes in GI function.

Key words: equine, hydrogen, methane

J. Equine Sci.
Vol. 17, No. 2
pp. 39–43, 2006

In horses, gastrointestinal (GI) diseases such as colic occur frequently and are often life-threatening. Various GI diseases accompany GI dysfunction, which leads to bacterial abnormality in the GI tract [2]. Bacterial overgrowth accompanying acute abdominal conditions, especially ileus, has been previously reported [2]. Currently, GI diseases in horses are primarily diagnosed by external observation, auscultation, rectal palpation, endoscopy, and ultrasound. However, objective diagnostic techniques have not been adequately developed, since horses have enormous GI tracts. Although the evaluation of changes in bacterial flora appears to be an effective and objective diagnostic strategy for GI diseases, as a practical matter, it is difficult to culture and identify numerous enteric bacteria. In humans, hydrogen (H₂) and methane (CH₄) produced by enteric bacteria are absorbed into the GI tract, delivered into circulation, and eventually, expired by the lungs following gas exchange [12, 13]. This flow is utilized clinically for testing carbohydrate malabsorption [1, 3, 14] and

testing H₂ and CH₄ levels in the breath to measure their transit time in the GI tract [8, 16]. Results from these tests have indicated high concentrations of H₂ and CH₄ in the breath of humans with GI diseases [14]. A report has also been made on a similar technique applied to horses, which demonstrated the ease of use and reproducibility of measuring H₂ and CH₄ levels in the breath [18]. This breath technique revealed a decrease in H₂ production following administration of antimicrobial agents, which resulted in changes in bacterial flora and diarrhea [19]. Thus, we hypothesized that intestinal fermentation associated with bacterial overgrowth and GI diseases, such as digestion and absorption disorder and GI motility disorder, may be diagnosed by assessing changes in gas production in the GI tract. In this study, we measured H₂ and CH₄ levels in the breath of horses with various GI diseases. We then determined from the results whether this technique can be used as an objective diagnosis for equine GI diseases.

A total of 31 horses allocated to three groups were studied. Group A consisted of 11 healthy thoroughbred horses (1 male, 1 female, 8 castrated males, mean age: 11.0 ± 3.8 years [mean ± SD]), Group B consisted of 10 thoroughbred horses that visited the

Table 1. Comparison of H₂ and CH₄ levels in breath of Group A horses

No	sex	age	disease	H ₂ (ppm)	CH ₄ (ppm)
1	gelding	7	healthy	3.6	319.5
2	gelding	7	healthy	1.8	200.8
3	gelding	15	healthy	1.9	249.1
4	gelding	12	healthy	2.6	225.4
5	gelding	13	healthy	12.5	406.1
6	gelding	16	healthy	1.7	169.3
7	gelding	8	healthy	3.0	94.2
8	mare	12	healthy	2.9	202.6
9	gelding	16	healthy	2.9	134.8
10	gelding	9	healthy	0.8	177.8
11	stallion	6	healthy	1.9	133.6
mean ± SD		11 ± 3.8		3.2 ± 3.2	210.3 ± 89.4

Table 2. Comparison of H₂ and CH₄ levels in breath of Group B horses

No	sex	age	disease	H ₂ (ppm)	CH ₄ (ppm)
1	stallion	0	colic	8.3	34.4
2	mare	12	large colon volvulus	5.6	47.5
3	mare	13	large colon volvulus	6.5	89.9
4	mare	6	large colon volvulus	4.6	105.9
5	stallion	2	impaction	0	59.6
6	mare	6	large colon volvulus	20.1	69.7
7	mare	12	impaction	1.0	93.7
8	stallion	0	colic	35.8	97.5
9	mare	3	impaction	0	90.6
10	stallion	0	umbilical hernia	6.0	49.4
mean ± SD		5.4 ± 5.3		8.8 ± 11.1	73.8 ± 24.9

Table 3. Comparison of H₂ and CH₄ levels in breath of Group C horses

No	sex	age	disease	H ₂ (ppm)	CH ₄ (ppm)
1	mare	1	fracture	2.0	139.8
2	stallion	0	fracture	7.6	68.5
3	mare	2	fracture	2.4	90.2
4	stallion	2	fracture	41.4	138.3
5	stallion	3	fracture	5.3	207.8
6	stallion	1	limb deformities	13.3	276.9
7	stallion	1	osteochondrosis	0.6	77.8
8	stallion	1	osteochondrosis	6.2	153.8
9	mare	6	corneal ulcer	3.3	43
10	stallion	1	osteochondrosis	0.1	39.3
mean ± SD		1.8 ± 1.7		8.2 ± 11.7	123.5 ± 72.0

Animal Medical Center, Hidaka Agricultural Cooperative Association with GI diseases (4 male, 6 female, mean age: 5.4 ± 5.3 years), and Group C

consisted of 10 thoroughbred horses that visited the Animal Medical Center with non-GI diseases (7 male, 3 female, mean age: 1.8 ± 1.7 years).

Tables 1, 2, and 3 show the health conditions of horses in Groups A, B, and C, respectively. Horses in Group B received laparotomy for colonic volvulus, colic, or umbilical hernia. Xylazine (1.0 mg/kg), ketamin (2.5 mg/kg), and midazolam (0.05 mg/kg) were administered intravenously and the horses were laid on their sides. Anesthesia was maintained by isoflurane in oxygen for 134.0 ± 10.8 min (n=5, mean ± SD). In Group C, horses that underwent surgery for bone fracture, ridgling, or osteochondropathy received the same anesthetic procedure as in Group B, and the duration of anesthesia was 91.7 ± 51.3 min (n=6, mean ± SD). Those that underwent operation for umbilical hernia, crabfoot, elbow tumor, or keratitis received xylazine (1.0 mg/kg), ketamin (2.5 mg/kg), and midazolam (0.05 mg/kg) and were laid on their sides. Their anesthesia was maintained by triple-drip infusion (500 ml of 5% glucose solution containing 250 mg xylazine, 1,000 mg ketamine, and 25 g guaifenesin).

Breath samples were collected using the closed circuit rebreathing technique under consciousness. Horses wore an air-tight face mask for 30 sec. Expired breaths were collected into an aluminum bag containing 10 l of pure oxygen (AA-10, GL Sciences, Tokyo).

Following the collection of expired breaths 2 ml of the air from the bag was analyzed by portable gas chromatography (H₂-CO-CH₄ Analyzer HCMA-T1, Abilit, Japan) in order to measure expired H₂ and CH₄ concentration levels. This procedure was repeated twice, and the mean values were used for analysis.

H₂ and CH₄ levels in breaths were compared between Groups A (n=11) and B (n=10). For Group B, H₂ and CH₄ levels in breaths before the treatment were compared with those after the treatment in which the symptom was improved. Additionally, for the 4 horses with colonic volvulus that underwent laparotomy and the pelvic flexure incision, H₂ and CH₄ levels were measured preoperatively, 15 hr postoperatively, and 10 days postoperatively. For Group C (n=10), H₂ and CH₄ levels obtained before using systemic anesthesia and immediately after recovery from anesthesia were compared.

All results from the tests were expressed as mean ± SD. To evaluate the significance in H₂ and CH₄ levels between Groups A and B, the Mann-Whitney U test and Welch's *t*-test were used, respectively. The Wilcoxon

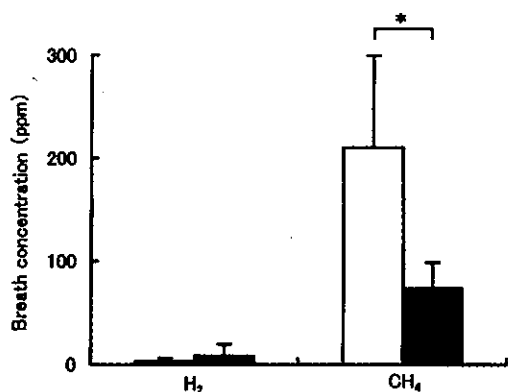


Fig. 1. Comparison of H₂ and CH₄ levels in breath of healthy horses and horses with GI diseases. □: Group A (healthy horses, n=11), ■: Group B (horses with GI diseases, n=10). Values are mean ± SD. **: p<0.01.

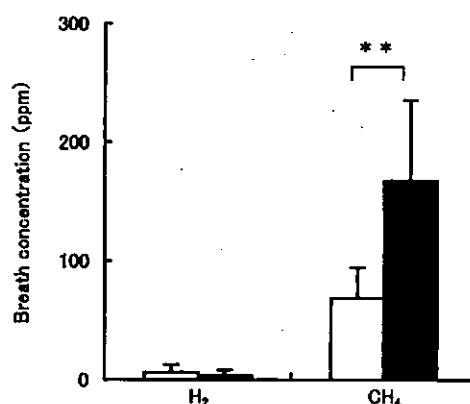


Fig. 2. Changes in H₂ and CH₄ levels in breath before and after treatment in horses with GI diseases. □: Before treatment (n=8), ■: After treatment (n=8). Values are mean ± SD. **: p<0.01.

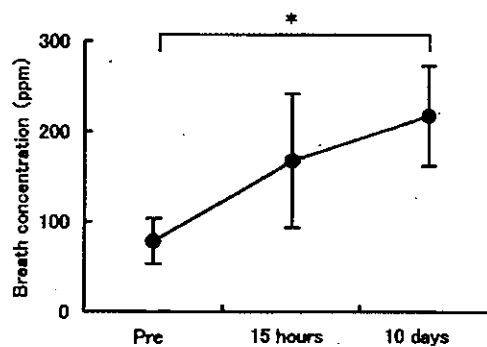
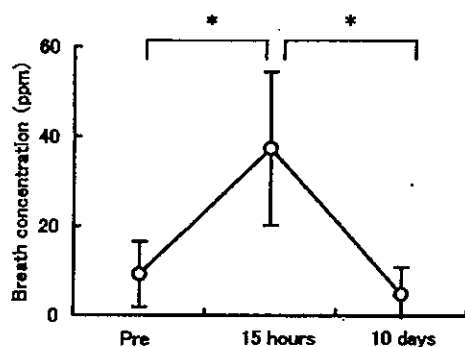


Fig. 3. Changes in gas levels in breath of horses with colonic volvulus. (a) H₂ levels in breath, (b) CH₄ levels in breath. ○: H₂ levels in breath (n=4), ●: CH₄ levels in breaths (n=4). Values are mean ± SD. *: p<0.05.

test was used for H₂ levels measured before and after treatment in Group B and before and after anesthesia in Group C, and the paired *t*-test was used for CH₄ levels. For fluctuations of gas levels in breaths of horses with colonic volvulus, overall significance was analyzed using one-way ANOVA. If significance was found, a multiple comparison test (Scheffe's F-test) was used to verify the significance. Statistical significance was determined by a *p* value less than 0.05.

Figure 1 shows H₂ and CH₄ levels in breaths for Groups A and B. CH₄ levels in Group B (73.8 ± 24.9 ppm) were significantly lower than those in Group A (210.3 ± 89.4 ppm) (*p*<0.01). H₂ levels in Group B (8.8 ± 11.1 ppm) tended to be higher than those in Group A (3.2 ± 3.2 ppm), but no significant difference was

found. Changes of H₂ and CH₄ levels before and after treatment in Group B are shown in Fig. 2. Compared to the level before treatment, the CH₄ level was significantly increased after treatment (167.6 ± 67.9 ppm, *p*<0.01). The H₂ level decreased with a minor extent after treatment (*p*>0.05). Changes in H₂ and CH₄ levels in breaths of Group B horses with colonic volvulus are shown in Fig. 3. At 15 hr after operation, H₂ levels (37.3 ± 17.1 ppm) had significantly increased compared to preoperative levels (*p*<0.05). At 10 days following surgery, H₂ levels (4.8 ± 6.1 ppm) had significantly decreased compared to the levels at 15 hr post operation (*p*<0.05), indicating that the concentration had returned to the normal range (Fig. 3a). CH₄ levels measured at 15 hr postoperatively

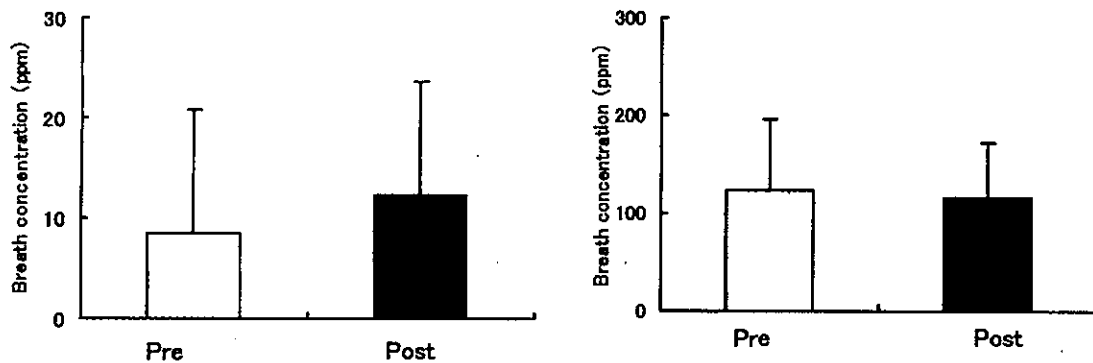


Fig. 4. Changes in gas levels in breath of horses without GI diseases before and after anesthesia. (a) H₂ levels in breath (n=9), (b) CH₄ levels in breath (n=10). □: Before anesthesia, ■: After anesthesia. Values are mean ± SD.

(167.4 ± 74.3 ppm) tended to be greater than those measured preoperatively (78.3 ± 25.3 ppm). CH₄ levels were significantly increased at 10 days post-operation (217.2 ± 55.6 ppm, $p < 0.05$) (Fig. 3b). Figure 4 shows changes of H₂ and CH₄ levels in Group C breaths before and after systemic anesthesia. Compared to the levels before anesthesia (8.4 ± 13.0 ppm), H₂ levels were slightly increased after anesthesia (12.3 ± 12.1 ppm), but significance was not found. CH₄ levels were barely changed before and after anesthesia.

The present study demonstrates that GI diseases in horses are associated with a significant decrease in CH₄ levels in the breath. Since H₂ and CH₄ produced by enteric bacteria are absorbed by the GI tract, delivered into circulation, and expired by the lungs following gas exchange [12, 13], the decrease in CH₄ in the breath is thought to be associated with a decrease in gas production or malabsorption by the GI mucus. Acute abdominal conditions, including ileus, accompany bacterial overgrowth due to abnormal GI motility [2], and as a result, gases, such as H₂ and CH₄, increase. In humans, an increase in H₂ and CH₄ levels in the breath has been reported in association with various GI diseases [15]. These reports suggest that gases produced by enteric bacteria increase in the diseased horse GI tract, rather than decrease. The amount of gas that can dissolve into circulation from the GI tract is limited [17]. Thus, GI tract disorders, such as ileus, can cause stagnation of gases and contents as well as dilation of the GI tract. The resulting increase in pressure in the GI tract may impair circulation and cause ischemia in the GI tract [5, 9]. Therefore, the decrease in gas levels in breaths that was observed in horses with GI diseases in this study may have been due

to impairment of circulation.

In general, blood H₂ levels in humans are known to increase during sleep and H₂ levels in breaths increase upon awakening, because the respiration rate is decreased during sleep [10]. However, in our study, no significant changes were observed in H₂ and CH₄ levels in breaths before and after anesthesia. Respiration was controlled appropriately under anesthesia, and this was probably why H₂ and CH₄ levels in breaths were only negligibly affected.

In horses with colonic volvulus, increases in H₂ and CH₄ levels were observed 15 hr after operation. Since H₂ and CH₄ levels were barely affected by anesthesia, the changes in H₂ and CH₄ levels observed post-operatively was thought to have been associated with the surgical procedures. Circulatory impairment in the GI tract is usually accompanied by colonic volvulus [4, 6, 7, 11, 15]. Thus, it was inferred that the increase in CH₄ which had levels in the breath observed 15 hr post-operation and the transient increase in H₂ levels in breaths were caused by H₂ and CH₄ stagnated in the GI tract, and gradually exited into breath as the circulation improved following surgery. At 10 days following surgery, H₂ levels in the breath had decreased again, while CH₄ levels had increased and reached the normal range. These changes were thought to be associated with an increase in CH₄ levels in breath following improvement in circulation in the GI tract and the consumption of H₂ by methane-producing bacteria in the GI tract [12].

Our study shows that H₂ and CH₄ levels in the breath fluctuate due to GI tract dysfunction. It also demonstrates that decreases in H₂ and CH₄ levels in the breath could be an effective diagnostic indicator of GI

tract function and circulation. Accordingly, testing of H₂ and CH₄ levels in the breath is a promising diagnostic technique for evaluating GI health in horses.

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