

Validation of an activity monitoring system for detecting early behavioral markers of respiratory disease development in young dairy calves

Maria E. Prado¹, *MV, PhD*; **John Wilkerson**², *MS, PhD*; **Sheila McGuirk**³, *DVM, PhD*;
Peter D. Krawczel¹, *MS, PhD*

¹*Department of Animal Science, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996*

²*Department of Biosystems Engineering, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996*

³*College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706*

Introduction

Dairy calf pneumonia (DCP) is a highly prevalent and economically significant problem of dairy calves. DCP commonly affects calves during the pre-weaning and/or post-weaning periods, and is one of the most diagnosed conditions postmortem in calves less than 5 months of age (Hill et al, 2009; Virtala et al, 1996). Aside from the deleterious effects that DCP has on the calf (i.e. decreased performance), the negative impact extends well into adulthood affecting its subsequent productivity and lifespan within the herd (Bach, 2011; Waltner-Toews et al, 1986; Warnick et al, 1997). The ability to identify calves during the initial stages of respiratory disease development is difficult and relies on subjective observations made by farm personnel. However, some behavioral changes in sick calves might be more associated with early disease stages, such as spending more time in the bucket and remaining standing for longer periods after feeding when compared to healthy calves (McGuirk, personal communication). Thus, objective monitoring of activity and feeding behavior may allow for earlier disease detection and intervention, potentially decreasing the consequences of DCP later in the calf's life. Recent studies demonstrated that group housing or daily increased provision of milk decreased the incidence of disease and increased the daily gain. These findings suggest the potential for a positive effect of the social interactions stemming from group housing. The objective of this study was to identify early behavioral markers of respiratory disease using an activity monitoring device in young dairy calves subjected to standard or high-milk feeding levels (standard or high) and housing (individual or group) on the incidence of respiratory disease in young dairy heifers.

Materials and Methods

Animals. Holstein calves from 3 different commercial dairy farms were enrolled in the study.

Experimental Design. Treatments consist of 3 farms with 1 of 3 different management systems (standard milk/individual housing, high milk/individual housing, and standard milk/group housing) with 3 replicates of 40 calves each/farm. Briefly, groups of 40 calves per farm were fitted with an animal activity-monitoring collar developed

at the University of Tennessee to measure social interaction/activity levels and feeding behavior. We collected and analyzed the activity data to identify behavior changes in social interaction and/or feeding associated with the development of respiratory disease. Serum samples were collected to determine passive transfer at 48 hours after birth. Calves were screened daily for clinical signs of disease. Deep pharyngeal swabs were obtained from sick calves for detecting pathogens associated with respiratory disease by PCR, and serum samples were collected for serology.

Results

The automated sensor system successfully recorded activity levels of calves in the different treatment groups. Total activity levels were correlated with milk consumption, showing significant increases during the time preceding the feedings. In addition, we established a unique time series signature from the acceleration data (activity levels) that corresponds with normal specific behaviors such as sleeping, standing, walking and/or bottle feeding. We used these data to identify any deviations from the norm. Overall respiratory disease incidence was approximately 20% in the first replicate of calves analyzed. In this group, calves that developed respiratory disease maintained a minimum level of activity when compared to the healthy cohorts. Behavioral data for the sick calves did not show the bursts of activity observed in the healthy calves, particularly when feeding. In addition, no prolonged periods of rest were detected in the sick calves when compared to the healthy ones. These data would appear to suggest that sick calves were always active, but could not reach the level of activity observed in the healthy calves.

Significance

This preliminary work demonstrates the growing potential of alternative management strategies for lowering incidence of disease and increasing performance of dairy calves as well as the use of behavioral changes to identify calves in the early stages of disease. Future work will focus on improving the prototype for the activity monitoring system and further analysis of behavioral data obtained from all farms.