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Introduction

Astrovirus infections have been associated with acute gastroenteritis in a variety of birds, including chickens, turkeys and guinea fowl, and with hepatitis in ducks and a nephritis in chickens.

Better diagnostic techniques coupled to better surveillance has resulted in increased reports of avian astroviruses in recent years.

The virus

To date, at least six different astroviruses have been identified in poultry including two each from chickens, ducks and turkeys.

Astroviruses are one of the most frequently found virus types in poult enteritis complex, poult enteritis and mortality syndrome in turkeys and runting and stunting syndrome in broilers.

However, it should be noted that astroviruses can be isolated from apparently healthy birds, which begs some questions regarding the role of certain strains in disease.

Distribution of astroviruses is global and they are one of the most common causes of enteric diseases in turkeys under five weeks of age.

The disease

Astroviruses are commonly seen in turkeys under five weeks of age as a cause of diarrhoea. This typically develops between one and three weeks of age and can last for up to a fortnight. Clinical signs include diarrhoea, listlessness, litter eating and nervousness.

Upon post mortem examination one sees dilated caeca with yellowish, watery contents and gaseous distension. Sometimes histopathological lesions (crypt hyperplasia) are seen in the proximal jejunum. Diagnosis is complicated in that field cases can contain a variety of strains of astrovirus making it difficult to decide which is doing what!

Immunity

The immune response to astroviruses is poorly understood.

Treatment and control

There is no specific treatment. Control involves supportive therapies, improved biosecurity and thorough cleaning of houses at the end of the cycle although this is hampered by its environmental stability and resistance to many disinfectants.