Dairy-Derived and Bacteriocin-Producing Strain *Lactiplantibacillus plantarum* LP17L/1: An Assessment of Its Safety and Effect Using Broiler Rabbits

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Academic Editor: Baohong Zhang

Submitted: 26 February 2024 Revised: 26 March 2024 Accepted: 16 April 2024 Published: 5 July 2024

Abstract

**Background:** Using bacterial (probiotic) strains can influence beneficial health statuses, e.g., through dairy products; however, they must be assessed as safe before consumption; broiler rabbits represent a suitable model for this purpose. This study evaluated the safety and effect (functionality) of the dairy-derived, bacteriocin-producing strain *Lactiplantibacillus plantarum* LP17L/1 using broiler rabbits. The following parameters were assessed to evaluate safety and functionality: microbiota, phagocytic activity (non-specific immunity parameter), blood serum biochemistry, oxidative stress enzyme, growth performance, cecal hydrolytic activity, and jejunal morphometry.

**Methods:** Previously validated methods were used for the analyses. The appropriate administrations approved the experiments. **Results:** Although only up to 1.0 colony forming unit (CFU)/g (log10) LP17L/1 reached the gastrointestinal tract of the rabbits, the total lactic acid bacteria and amylolytic streptococci were significantly increased (*p* < 0.001). The other microbiota were not influenced, meaning there was no negative influence on phagocytic activity, growth parameters, and biochemistry in the analyzed blood serum. Conversely, lower GPx values were measured in the experimental group than in the control group, meaning LP17L/1 did not induce oxidative stress. LP17L/1 caused an increase in villi length to crypt depth ratio, while hydrolytic activity was also significantly increased (*p* < 0.001). **Conclusions:** *L. plantarum* LP17L/1 was confirmed as safe. Regarding the functionality, no negative influence on the microbiota was noted, and the tested parameters were not negatively influenced. Demonstrating that the LP17L/1 strain is safe provides further chances for its industrial application. Additional studies are being conducted.

**Keywords:** probiotic strain; safety; model; food-derived animal

1. Introduction

Ewes milk and its products, such as milk lump cheeses, have a high nutritional value in the human diet [1]. Since sheep breeding is a tradition in Slovakia, ewe milk products are popular among consumers and frequently consumed [2,3]. Moreover, ewes milk lump cheese has received a traditional specialty guaranteed label (TSG) [4]. Similarly, stored ewes milk lump cheese also belongs to the popular products. These products possess naturally beneficial autochthonous microbiota, especially lactic acid bacteria (LAB) from the phylum Firmicutes [5]. Some bacterial strains can be isolated from this source and studied for their useful properties, leading to their potential application in dairy as a functional food [3]. However, primary strains and/or strain safety and functionality should be checked following the EFSA rules [6] to ensure their/its application in the future. *Lactiplantibacillus plantarum* LP17L/1 strain was isolated from stored ewes cheese [7]. It represents a non-hemolytic (x-hemolysis) strain that is susceptible to antibiotics. The LP17L/1 strain is deoxyribonuclease-negative and a non-biofilm-forming strain that sufficiently tolerates lower pH and oxgall–bile [3]. The production of the useful enzyme, β-galactosidase (an enzyme used in non-lactose milk processing for lactose intolerant individuals), was reported in the LP17L/1 strain alongside bacteriocin (postbiotic) anti-staphylococcal and anti-listerial activity [3,7]. Sequencing methods confirmed the taxonomy of this strain, and the strain has been deposited in GenBank under accession number (AN) ON114094 [7]. Moreover, it has also been deposited in the Czech Culture Collection (CCM, Brno, Czech Republic) as CCM 9208 [7]. The species *Lactiplantibacillus plantarum* belongs to the genus *Lactiplantibacillus*, family Lactobacillaceae, order Lactobacillales, class Bacilli, and phylum Firmicutes [8]. As has al-
ready been noted, the LP17L/1 strain should be safe, meaning it does not threaten the health status of the host. Experimental application using the pathogen-free male BALB/c mouse model confirmed the safety of the LP17L/1 strain. Furthermore, after one month of application in mice, a reduced count of coliforms was reported in the jejunum. Additionally, inflammation and normalized intestine were reduced after the experimental application of the LP17L/1 strain. They also represent food-derived animals serving as confirmation models, e.g., in the safety aspect. In addition, the L. plantarum - Biocenol™ LP96 and flax-seed oil have been applied to decrease E. coli O8:K88ab:H9 infection in the gut of germ-free pigs. Another strain, L. plantarum CLFP238, decreased lactococcosis in rainbow trout from 87% to 54% after 30 days of application. Inflammation and normalized intestine were reduced after the experimental application of L. plantarum 299v (using a mouse model), thereby treating irritable bowel syndrome more effectively. El-Shafei et al. tested the L. plantarum strain for 8 weeks in four-week-old male New Zealand White rabbits and showed the appearance of goblet cells in the duodenum and caecum epithelia, thus suggesting an improvement in mucus production compared with control rabbits. The safe strain L. plantarum AD73 from goat milk showed sufficient counts in “chevre” cheese to warrant it being labeled probiotic cheese. There are plans for this strain to be involved in a patent regarding dairy drinks, meaning its safety has to be assessed. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to use rabbits as an animal model to confirm the safety and functionality of the dairy-derived LP17L/1 strain by analyzing its colonization in the gastrointestinal tract to control microbiota, phagocytic activity, glutathione–peroxidase activity, enzymatic activity, growth performance, and jejunal morphometry, which are parameters that support the main objective. The original (noncommercial) plantaricin-producing strain was tested in this study, and it can be utilized in functional dairy food products, as formerly mentioned. Moreover, various additional potential applications of the LP17L/1 strain are indicated.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Animal Model and Experimental Design

A total of 24 rabbits (meat lines M91 and P91) were weaned on day 35, including both sexes (equal male-to-female ratio per treatment), were divided into the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG), 12 animals in each. The average body weight of rabbits at the beginning of the experiment was 1472 g. The experiment was conducted alongside colleagues in Nitra-Lužianky from the National Agricultural and Food Centre (NAFC). The guidelines in the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals approved by the Slovak Veterinary and Food Administration and Ethical Commissions of both institutions were adhered to. The animals were fed a commercial diet for growing rabbits (total energy value 10.99 MJ/Kg) using the following values: Dry matter content 895.38 g/kg, crude fiber 152.43 g/kg, fat 35.77 g/kg, N-free extract 153.64 g/kg, organic matter 834.97 g/kg, ash 60.41 g/kg, starch 139.78 g/kg, calcium 11.74 g/kg, phosphorus 5.89 g/kg, magnesium 2.56 g/kg, sodium 1.80 g/kg, potassium 10.17 g/kg, iron 260.39 mg/kg, and zinc 122.90 mg/kg. Rabbits were maintained in standard cages (type D-KV-72; 0.61 m × 0.34 cm × 0.33 m; Krovvel company Domažlice, Czech Republic), with two animals per cage. A cycle of 16 h light and 8 h dark was applied throughout the experiment. The temperature and humidity in the menagerie were recorded continuously by a digital thermograph positioned at the same level as the cages. The heating and ventilation systems allowed the menagerie air temperature to be maintained throughout the experiment at 16 ± 4 °C, with the relative humidity at about 70 ± 5%.

The strain was applied to the drinking water of the experimental rabbits at a dose of 500 µL per day per rabbit for 30 days. Feces for bacterial background control were sampled on day 0/1. Blood was also sampled for the appropriate analyses. Rabbits (n = 4) were culled on day 30, and four rabbits from each group (one rabbit/one replicate) were selected based on daily weight measurements to ensure similar animal weights. Animals were sacrificed electro-stunning (50 Hz, 0.3 A/rabbit/4 s) in an experimental slaughterhouse by dissecting the carotid and jugular veins, as previously described by Pogány Simonová et al. [9]. The caecum and appendix were removed and treated for microbiota enumeration, as described in Section 2.2. Cecal samples were also taken to analyze hydrolytic activities. Musculus longissimus thoracis et lumborum (MLTL) was separated by removing the skin, fat, and connective tissue before being chilled and stored at 4 °C for 24 h until analysis.

2.2 Preparation of Strain LP17L/1 for Application

As previously introduced [3,7], the strain Lactiplantibacillus plantarum LP17L/1 was isolated from stored ewes cheese. LP17L/1 was marked by rifampicin to differentiate it from the total lactic acid bacteria count. To prepare its rifampicin variant for application, the same protocol was used as previously reported for the strain Enterococcus fae-
cium EK13 by Strompfová et al. [16]. Briefly, LP17L/1 was grown overnight in MRS broth (De Man Rogosa–Sharpe broth, pH, 6.0 ± 0.2, Merck, Darmstadt, Germany) to reach A660 = 1.00. Then, it was centrifuged at 10,000 ×g for 30 minutes. The supernatant was removed, and the obtained cells were re-suspended in Ringer solution (pH 7.0, Merck) to the requested cell concentration of 10⁶ colony forming units (CFUs)/mL. The strain count was checked after cell dilutions in Ringer solution, and their spreading on MRS agar (Merck, Darmstadt, Germany) was enriched.
2.3 Microbiota Evaluation Using Standard Microbial Analysis

Fecal samples (1 g, n = 6) from EG and CG were diluted in Ringer solution (pH 7.0, Darmstadt, Merck, Germany) using the standard microbiological dilution method (1:9 ratio [17]). The appropriate dilutions (10^{-1}–10^{-6}) were spread on the selective media according to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). The LP17L/1 strain colonies on MRS agar enriched with rifampicin (100 µg/L, De Man–Rogosa–Sharpe agar, Merck, Darmstadt, Germany) were counted. The total LAB was enumerated using MRS agar (SO 15, 214, Merck, Darmstadt, Germany). Enterococci on M-Enterococcus medium (Difco Laboratories, Detroit, MI, USA) (ISO NF-V04503) were counted. M17 agar (Difco, Detroit, MI, USA) was enriched with starch (30 g per L) to enumerate amylolytic streptococci. Mannitol Salt agar (MSA, ISO 688, Difco, MI, USA) was applied to count coagulase-negative staphylococci (CoNS), and Baird-Parker agar supplemented with tellurite and yolk egg was used to enumerate coagulase-positive staphylococci (CoPS, Detroit, MI, USA). Colon forms were counted on MacConkey agar (Difco, Detroit, MI, USA). Cecal and appendix samples were treated as was formerly described for feces and plated using the same cultivation media. The bacterial counts were expressed in colony-forming units per gram (CFUs/g) ± SD (standard deviation, log10).

2.4 Phagocytic Activity in Blood and Glutathione–Peroxidase Activity

Blood (n = 8) from the marginal ear vein (vena auricularis) was sampled from rabbits into Eppendorf tubes with micro-spheric hydrophilic (MSH) particles and heparin to test phagocytic activity (PA), as previously described by Pogány Simonová et al. [9]. Sampling was performed on day 30 (end of the strain application). The 50 µL of MSH particle suspension (ARTIM, Prague, Czech Republic) was mixed with 100 µL of blood in Eppendorf tubes and incubated at 37 °C for 1 h. Blood smears were prepared and stained using May–Gruenwald and Giemsa–Romanowski. To validate PA, the direct microscopic counting procedure was performed to calculate the number of white cells containing at least three engulfed particles per 100 white cells (monocytes/granulocytes). PA was expressed as a percentage (%). Moreover, an index of phagocytic activity was included in the analysis (IFA).

Glutathione–peroxidase (GPx (n = 8)) was determined by the colorimetric method (Spectrophotometer UV-2550, Shimadzu, Tokyo, Japan) using the commercial kit Randox RS504 (Randox Laboratory, Hong Kong, China) after blood sampling with heparin.

2.5 Faecal Hydrolytic Activity Measurements, Biochemical Evaluation of Blood Serum, and Growth Performance

Hydrolytic activities of amylolytic, cellulolytic, xylanolytic, pectinolytic, and inulolytic (expressed in µmol/g/DM/min, meaning in micromol per gram of dry matter per minute) were processed as previously described by Lauková et al. [18]. These enzymes were extracted using the procedure described by Hultenan and Khalili [19] and measured according to the method by Miltko et al. [20].
Blood samples were transferred into Eppendorf tubes, centrifuged (3000 × g, 30 minutes), and delivered to Slovak-Laboratory (SK-Lab) company Lučenec (Slovakia) for analysis using previously validated methods. To assess the nitrogen profile, the total protein (TP in g/L), albumin (g/L), and creatinine (μmol/L) levels were tested. Regarding the enzymatic–hepatic profile, the following parameters were tested: alanine aminotransferase (ALT in µkat/L), aspartate transferase (AST in µkat/L), and alkaline phosphatase (ALP in µkat/L). To test the energy profile, glucose (mmol/L), cholesterol (mmol/L), and triglycerides (mmol/L) were evaluated. The following minerals were involved in mineral profile testing: sodium (Na), kalium (K), chlorides (CL), calcium (Ca), phosphorus (P), and magnesium (Mg), measured in mmol/L. The reference values for the rabbits are summarized in Table 1.

Body weight (BW) was measured every week during the experiment.

2.6 Fatty Acid Content in Musculus Longissimus Thoracis and Lumborum (MLTL), Jejunal Morphometry Testing, and Statistical Analysis

Animals were sacrificed, as it is indicated in Section 2.1. Musculus longissimus thoracis et lumborum (MLTL) was removed from each rabbit and processed by removing the skin, fat, and connective tissue, chilled, and stored at 4 °C for 24 h until analysis. The FA composition in the MLTL samples was determined using the previously described method by Ouhayoun [21], using gas chromatography of fatty acid methyl ester (FAME) on GC 6890 N (Agilent technologies, Swiss, AG Basel). Results are expressed as a percentage of total FA content. Morphometry testing was performed as previously described by Žitňan et al. [22].

Table 2. Fecal bacteria and LP17L/1 strain counts on day 0/1 and day 30 (CFUs/g, log10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Day 0/1, n = 10; day 30, n = 6</th>
<th>Day 0/1</th>
<th>Day 30 (CG)</th>
<th>Day 30 (EG)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LAB</td>
<td>nt</td>
<td>3.61 ± 0.20***</td>
<td>3.84 ± 0.37***</td>
<td>3.93 ± 1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterococci</td>
<td>2.18 ± 0.58***</td>
<td>3.58 ± 0.31***</td>
<td>3.89 ± 0.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoNS</td>
<td>3.12 ± 0.27**</td>
<td>3.84 ± 0.37***</td>
<td>3.93 ± 1.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoPS</td>
<td>2.44 ± 0.45**</td>
<td>4.17 ± 0.04**</td>
<td>3.86 ± 1.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amylolytic streptococci</td>
<td>5.82 ± 0.37***</td>
<td>7.08 ± 0.04***</td>
<td>7.10 ± 0.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coliforms</td>
<td>1.27 ± 0.72***</td>
<td>4.02 ± 0.47***</td>
<td>4.61 ± 1.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CFUs, colony forming units; LAB, lactic acid bacteria: day 0/1 vs. EG30, ***p < 0.001; day 0/1 vs. CG30, ***p < 0.001; EG30 vs. CG30 = NS; Enterococci: day 0/1 vs. EG30, ***p < 0.001; day 0/1 vs. CG, ***p < 0.001, EG30 vs. CG30 = NS; coagulase-negative staphylococci; CoNS = NS; coagulase-positive staphylococci; CoPS, day 0/1 vs. EG30, **p < 0.01; day 0/1 vs. CG30, ***p < 0.001; CG30 vs. EG30 = NS; Amylolytic streptococci: day 0/1 vs. EG30, ***p < 0.001, day 0/1 vs. CG30, ***p < 0.001, EG30 vs. CG30 = NS; Coliforms: day 0/1 vs. EG30, ***p < 0.001; day 0/1 vs. CG30, ***p < 0.001, EG30 vs. CG30 = NS; CG, the control group of rabbits; EG, the experimental group of rabbits; nt, not tested; NS, not significant; SD, standard deviation; vs., versus/comparing.

The treatment effect regarding the tested parameters was statistically analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Tukey’s posthoc test (unpaired). Data are expressed as the mean and standard deviation SD of the mean. Different superscript letters indicate a significant difference (p < 0.05). Statistical analyses were performed using GraphPad Prism version 6.0 (Inc., San Diego, CA, USA).

3. Results

3.1 Microbiota Assessment

On day 30, the LP17L/1 strain showed low colonization in feces, reaching up to 1.0 CFU/g (log10) (Table 2). However, the total LAB count in the EG increased significantly (p < 0.001) compared to the LAB count on day 0/1. The total LAB count was also significantly increased in the EG (p < 0.001) compared to CG (Table 1). On day 30, an increase in LAB was also noted in the CG (p < 0.001) compared to day 0/1 (Table 2). The enterococci counts increased significantly (p < 0.001) in both groups compared to day 0/1. The CoNS counts were not influenced. Enterococci and CoNS were well-balanced in both groups on day 30. Similarly, the total counts of amylolytic streptococci were well-balanced in both groups, and high counts were detected in both groups (Table 1). On day 30, amylolytic streptococci were significantly increased in the feces (p < 0.001) of both groups compared to day 0/1. Regarding the CoPS, a mathematical decrease (0.31 log cycle) was noted on day 30 between the CG and the EG. However, a significant increase in CoPS was noted (p < 0.01) in the EG compared to the CG. Coliforms were not influenced/reduced.
were found at almost the same level in both groups and the streptococci were decreased in the caecum of the EG (counts were even similar to those in the feces. Amylolytic balanced in both groups on day 30, and CoNS and CoPS than in the feces. LAB, enterococci, and CoPS were well-

Table 3. Cecal bacteria and LP17L/1 strain counts on day 30 (in CFUs/g log10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>n = 4</th>
<th></th>
<th>CG</th>
<th>EG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LP 17L/1</td>
<td>nt</td>
<td>0.9 ± 0.0</td>
<td>0.9 ± 1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAB</td>
<td>2.49 ± 0.37</td>
<td>2.72 ± 0.51</td>
<td>2.38 ± 0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterococci</td>
<td>1.7 ± 0.27</td>
<td>1.00 ± 0.2</td>
<td>1.02 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoNS</td>
<td>3.12 ± 0.80</td>
<td>4.07 ± 0.35</td>
<td>3.56 ± 0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoPS</td>
<td>3.56 ± 0.59</td>
<td>3.89 ± 0.176</td>
<td>3.36 ± 0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amylolytic streptococci</td>
<td>5.82 ± 0.57**</td>
<td>4.46 ± 0.69**</td>
<td>5.69 ± 0.76**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coliforms</td>
<td>2.47 ± 0.19</td>
<td>2.45 ± 0.35</td>
<td>2.38 ± 0.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. The bacteria and LP17L/1 strain counts on day 30 are in the appendix (CFUs/g log10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>n = 4</th>
<th></th>
<th>CG</th>
<th>EG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LP 17L/1</td>
<td>nt</td>
<td>0.9 ± 0.0</td>
<td>0.9 ± 1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAB</td>
<td>2.23 ± 0.14</td>
<td>2.03 ± 0.70</td>
<td>2.34 ± 0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterococci</td>
<td>0.95 ± 0.06</td>
<td>0.98 ± 0.05</td>
<td>0.97 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoNS</td>
<td>3.71 ± 0.63</td>
<td>3.45 ± 0.66</td>
<td>3.56 ± 0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoPS</td>
<td>3.23 ± 0.76</td>
<td>3.29 ± 0.60</td>
<td>3.34 ± 0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amylolytic streptococci</td>
<td>5.01 ± 2.23</td>
<td>4.83 ± 0.19</td>
<td>4.96 ± 0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coliforms</td>
<td>1.59 ± 0.97</td>
<td>3.21 ± 1.22</td>
<td>3.38 ± 1.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LAB, lactic acid bacteria; Enterococci; coagulase-negative staphylococci (CoNS); coagulase-positive staphylococci (CoPS); Amylolytic streptococci, EG30 vs. CG30, **p < 0.01; the counts of other tested bacteria on day 30 in the EG and CG were not significant (NS). nt, not tested; CG, the control group of rabbits; EG, the experimental group of rabbits; SD, standard deviation; vs., versus/comparing.

The GPx value was significantly lower in the EG (231.0 ± 35.09 U/gHb) compared to the GPx value in the CG (298.0 ± 58.18 U/gHb, p < 0.05) (Table 5, Fig. 1). This result confirms that applying the LP17L/1 strain over 30 days did not affect the health of the rabbits and did not promote oxidative stress.

Fig. 1. Glutathione-peroxidase (GPx) activity, *p < 0.05 (CG:EG).

Regarding the biochemistry of the blood serum samples (see Table 1), the total protein value was measured at the lower level of the reference range (RR) (55.16 ± 1.76 g/L). In the EG, a slightly higher total protein value was noted (56.25 ± 3.49 g/L). The albumin, glucose, AST, and ALP values were not influenced. Albumin values were nearer the upper limit of the reference range (Table 1). The glucose value was at the top of the reference range. AST values were in the lower limit of the reference value (RV), and ALP values were well-balanced in both groups but higher than the upper limit of the reference value. The ALT values were also balanced; slightly higher in the EG (2.65 ± 0.39 µkat/L) than in the CG (2.95 ± 0.74 µkat/L) and in the lower level of RR. Triglycerides were measured in the physiological range up to the reference limit, whereas a lower value was measured in the EG compared to the CG (Table 6). Creatinine values were nearer the lower limit of the reference range, although slightly higher in the EG than in the CG (p < 0.05). Cholesterol values were in the physiological range, nearer the upper limit. However, a lower value was measured in the EG (1.12 ± 0.16 mmol/L) than in the CG (1.61 ± 0.30 mmol/L, p < 0.001). Regarding the mineral profile, chlorides were within the physiological range with a slightly lower value in the EG (95.68 ± 3.24 mmol/L) compared to CG (98.81 ± 3.65 mmol/L). K, Ca, P, and Mg values were not influenced; they were balanced in both groups, with slightly higher values in the EG than

3.2 Phagocytic Activity, GPx, Biochemical, Growth Performance, and Cecal Hydrolytic Activity

On day 30, the phagocytic activity (PA) values were nearly identical in both groups (CG: 70.00 ± 1.41%; EG: 70.67 ± 1.75%) (Table 5). This means that applying the LP17L/1 strain did not stimulate PA but also did not negatively influence it. The same situation was noted for IPA (Table 5).

The bacteria and LP17L/1 strain counts on day 30 are in the appendix (CFUs/g log10).
Table 5. Phagocytic activity (%) and glutathione–peroxidase results (U/gHb) ± SD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n = 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control group (CG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phagocytic activity (PA) on day 30</td>
<td>70.00 ± 1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of phagocytic activity (IPA)</td>
<td>3.53 ± 0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPX</td>
<td>298.0 ± 58.18*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The PA and IPA values were not significant (NS). GPx, CG vs. EG, *p < 0.05. CG, the control group of rabbits; EG, the experimental group of rabbits; SD, standard deviation; NS, not significant; vs., versus/comparing.

Table 6. Hydrolytic activity on day 30.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hydrolytic activity</th>
<th>n = 4</th>
<th>CG</th>
<th>EG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amylolytic activity</td>
<td>20.30</td>
<td>6.91***</td>
<td>46.72 ± 9.99***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xylanolytic activity</td>
<td>22.84</td>
<td>6.79***</td>
<td>37.17 ± 8.81***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellulolytic activity</td>
<td>7.21</td>
<td>1.60***</td>
<td>17.11 ± 2.02***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pectinolytic activity</td>
<td>7.11</td>
<td>1.28***</td>
<td>24.11 ± 3.91***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inulolytic activity</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>± 0.86</td>
<td>3.86 ± 1.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hydrolytic activity in µmol of released product/g DM of caecum/min ± SD; EG, the experimental group of rabbits; CG, the control group of rabbits; amylo, xylan, cellul, pectin, inulo, activity; ***p < 0.001; inulo, activity.

Table 7. Jejunal morphometry on day 30.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jejunal morphometry</th>
<th>n = 4</th>
<th>CG</th>
<th>EG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Villus circumference µm</td>
<td>1580.0 ± 39.74</td>
<td>1584.0 ± 39.79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villus cut surface µm²</td>
<td>81546.0 ± 285.56</td>
<td>81705.0 ± 258.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villus height µm</td>
<td>684.0 ± 26.15</td>
<td>686.0 ± 26.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crypt depth µm</td>
<td>179.0 ± 13.37</td>
<td>175.0 ± 13.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villus height vs. crypt depth</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CG, the control group of rabbits; EG, the experimental group of rabbits; SD, standard deviation. The values are not significantly influenced; vs., versus/comparing.

in the CG. A similar result was found for Na; however, a marginally lower value was measured in the EG than in the CG (Table 1).

Regarding the hydrolytic activity in the caecum on day 30 (Table 6), the EG exhibited increased activity compared to the CG. Amylolytic activity reached the highest value (p < 0.001) in the EG compared to the CG. Higher amylo, xylan, cellul, pectin, inulo, activity values are associated with higher amylo, strep-tococci values. The xylanolytic activity was also higher in the EG (p < 0.001) compared to the CG. Likewise, pectinolytic activity was higher in the EG (p < 0.001) than in the CG (Table 7). A higher cellulolytic activity was found in the EG (p < 0.001) than in the CG. The inulolytic activity was not influenced (Table 6).

On day 30, the live body weight of rabbits reached an average of 2791.8 g ± 44.67 in the EG and an average of 2469.16 ± 49.69 g in the CG. Thus, a higher body weight was noted in the EG (322.6 g higher), meaning that the LP17L/1 strain probably stimulated increased taste and hunger in the EG rabbits.

3.3 Fatty Acids Content in Musculus Longissimus Thoracis and Lumbarum (MLTL) and Jejunal Morphometry

The total saturated fatty acids (SFAs) value reached 34.890 ± 2.149% from the total FAs in the EG on day 30. In the CG, the SFA value was 33.580 ± 0.849%. In the total monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFAs), the value for the EG measured 49.448 ± 0.975%, while 47.443 ± 1.731% was calculated for the CG. The total essential fatty acids (EFAs) value in the EG reached 8.808 ± 1.264%, while 9.200 ± 0.946% was measured in the CG. For the total polyunsatu-rated fatty acids (PUFAs), 10.858 ± 0.747% was measured in the EG, while 12.368 ± 1.106% was found in the CG.

Thus, the strain LP17L/1 beneficially influenced all tested morphometry parameters. Only in crypt depth was a slight difference found in the CG. However, the final villus height to crypt depth ratio was slightly higher in the EG than in the CG (3.92 vs. 3.83, Table 7), although it was not significantly different.

4. Discussion

Confirming the safety and functionality of bacterial strains, which could be industrially applied for health benefits, is paramount. Lactobacilli do not represent the predominant bacteria in the digestive tract of rabbits after weaning; however, they are part of the gastrointestinal tract (GIT) microbiota. This study confirms that although the LP17L/1 strain was not high, the GIT and lactic acid bacteria (LAB) levels increased in the tested rabbits. The highest amylo, activity in the caecum of the EG rabbits is associated with detecting high amylo, activity. Following our aim to evaluate the safety of the strain, it is beneficial to know that microbiota were not negatively influenced. Regarding the antimicrobial activity evaluation after beneficial strain application in rabbits, the influence on the microbiota using probiotics and bacteriocin-producing enterococci as bacteria belonging to the lactic acid bacteria group has been previously reported [9,10]. After applying E. faecium AL41, antimicrobial activity was noted against pseudomonads in feces and caecum, and a significant decrease in coliforms was noted (p < 0.05) [10]. Repeatedly, coliforms, clostridia, and staphylococci were decreased following E. faecium EF2019 = CCM7420 application [9].
Based on our previous results, phagocytic activity (PA) tended to increase after beneficial strain application, e.g., after the application of beneficial strain *Enterococcus faecium* EF9A (isolated from the Hungarian Pannon White rabbit). A significantly higher PA value was noted in the EG ($p < 0.001$) than in the CG [23]. Following the aim of the present study, controlling LP17L/1 strain safety, its application did not have negative/side effects on PA, thus indicating the possibility of its further incorporation in dairy products with no side effects and/or negative impacts on immunity. Moreover, LP17L/1 strain application did not promote oxidative stress. On day 30, the GPx value in the EG was significantly lower ($p < 0.05$) than in the CG, which also confirms the safety of the LP17L/1 strain.

The beneficial effect on jejunal morphometry also supports the safety and beneficial properties of the applied strain [24]. Lee et al. [24] reported that two peptides, the expression of which requires cyclinJ, mediated the recovery phase during which enterocytes (after their damage) regain their original shape and volume. This study noted a tendency to improve the villus height to crypt depth ratio in the EG compared to the CG, indicating a beneficial effect after LP17L/1 strain application on enterocyte repair (jejunal morphometry). When the morphometry was improved, it showed better intestinal functionality and nutrient absorption, leading to better health status and meat quality in rabbits/animals [24]. In general, intestinal health (intestinal morphology, microbial balance) belongs to the parameters that confirm host health status. In our previous studies, following the beneficial application of probiotic and bacteriocin (postbiotic) active strains with beneficial properties, usually, jejunal morphology was beneficially influenced as the villus height to crypt depth ratio increased [9,10]. When *E. faecium* AL41 = CCM8558-producing Enterocin M was applied in rabbits, a significant increase in PA ($p < 0.01$) was noted on day 21 (3 weeks application) and day 42 (3 weeks after cessation, indicating a prolonged effect), compared to the CG. Similarly, PA was significantly increased after applying the autochthonous strain *E. faecium* 2019 (CCM 7420). As formerly mentioned, El-Shafei et al. [14] reported that probiotic strains could increase villus length/height and decrease crypt depth in the small intestine. These effects are beneficial for the digestion and absorption of nutrients, thus directly affecting mucosal morphology, digestive enzyme activity, and, consequently, growth performance. In previous studies by Pogány Simonová et al. [9] and Lauková et al. [10], the average weight gain was 11.2%. Similarly, body weight was increased after applying the LP17L/1 strain. Probiotic strains also increased hydrolytic activity, as shown in our previous study [10]. The stimulating effect of the strain LP17L/1 on metabolism in broiler rabbits was also noted in this study. These results confirmed and contributed to maintaining health status. In the case of the enhanced mucus layer covering the epithelial lining of the gut, it can serve as an antibacterial shield that prevents the binding of enteric pathogens, while goblet cells also have a role in the defense of the intestinal mucosa. Cukrowska et al. [25] even reported on using lactobacilli, whereby an *in vivo* experiment in mice showed (on the cellular level) that they can shift the cytokine balance in favor of an anti-allergic immune response.

The intramuscular fat was characterized by the highest percentage of MUFAs (47.443% in the CG vs. 49.448% in the EG) and a lower % of PUFAs (CG: 12.368%; EG: 10.858%). Almost identical values of PUFAs were reported in the control rabbits by Pogány Simonová et al. [26]. Similarly, the control value of PUFAs was nearly the same at 12.480% in this study (12.368%). In this study, the total saturated fatty acids were the highest in the EG (LP17L/1 strain). A similar result was reported by Pogány Simonová et al. [27] in rabbits following the administration of the postbiotic—Enterocin M.

Serum biochemistry was not negatively influenced in rabbits, indicating the safety of the LP17L/1 strain. However, a higher glucose value could be associated with higher energy diet intake. Beneficial strains were previously reported to influence the biochemical parameters [28].

The strain *L. plantarum* LP17L/1 is a safe and functioning strain previously applied in yogurts for its potential as a functional food [7]. Its count in yogurt made from cow milk is not high, yet it remained stable during all experimental evaluations with no negative impact on the pH of the yogurt [7]. Functional food can beneficially influence body functions, boosting health by reducing the risk of diseases and/or by improving a specific physiological response [5]. Moreover, Dvorozňáková et al. [29] reported that the LP17L/1 strain showed high immune-modulatory potential on CD4+ and CD8+ T lymphocytes in trichinellosis. This means that the modulation of gut lymphocyte immunity following *T. spiralis* infection with LP17L/1 strain showed a beneficial effect on the host’s anti-parasitic defenses. The anti-parasitic defenses (damage and killing of newborn larvae with reactive oxygen species from macrophages) of the host were stimulated by increased macrophage metabolic activity induced by the probiotic strain LP17L/1 treatment [30]. Evidence also shows the benefits and perspectives of administering the safe and functional *L. plantarum* LP17L/1 strain.

5. Conclusions

Although the LP17L/1 strain was found in lower counts in the GIT of rabbits, the total LAB and amylolytic streptococci were increased with no negative influence on other microflora, growth parameters, biochemistry, and/or jejunal morphometry; however, it promoted a beneficial impact on the cecal hydrolytic activity. Phagocytic activity was not negatively influenced. Moreover, the LP17L/1 strain did not promote oxidative stress, which provides further evidence of its safety. Assessing the safety of *Lac-
Available for its future industrial application, although additional studies are still required.

Availability of Data and Materials

Data are a part of the manuscript submitted. And/or they can be asked from the corresponding author.

Author Contributions

AL designed the research study. AL, IČH, IP, VF, NZ, MPS, IG, RŽ, GB, and RM performed the research. IČH and ZF provided help and advice on animals. EB and JS provided help with microbiological samples treatment. AL, MPS, RM, IP, and IG analyzed the data. AL wrote the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. All authors have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to its accuracy or integrity. All authors contributed to editorial changes in the manuscript.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The guidelines stated in the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals approved by the Slovak Veterinary and Food Administration and Ethical Commissions of both institutions (permission code: SK CH 17016 and SK U 18016) were accepted for care and experimental procedures involving animals.

Acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge our colleagues from Nitra-Lužianky, Dr. Lubomir Ondruška, Dr. Rastislav Jurčík, and Ing. Pecho for their help with animals bleeding and slaughtering. We also thank our laboratory assistant Mrs. Dana Melišová for laboratory skills. We also thank to our colleague in Dairy Research Institute in Žilina for giving us LP17L/1 strain as isolate for study.

Funding

This research was funded by the Slovak Research and Development Agency, the projects APVV-02-204 and APVV-17-0028.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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