

## COMPARISON OF hCG VS GnRH EFFECTS IN DOUBLE OVSYNCH ON FIRST-SERVICE CONCEPTION RATES IN ANESTRUS DAIRY COWS

Gundars Naglis<sup>1\*</sup>, Ivan Fasulkov<sup>1</sup>, Manol Karadaev<sup>1</sup>, Radina Vasileva<sup>2</sup>,  
Georgios Petrovas<sup>3</sup>, Nasko Vasilev<sup>1</sup>

1. Department of Obstetrics, Reproduction and Reproduction Disorders, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Trakia University, 6000, Stara Zagora, Bulgaria
2. Five-year veterinary medicine student, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Trakia University, 6000, Stara Zagora, Bulgaria
3. Department of Reproduction and Artificial Insemination, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Istanbul University, Istanbul, Turkey

## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to compare first-service conception rates after inclusion of either hCG or GnRH in Double Ovsynch to anestrous dairy cows. The animals with follicle size  $\geq 10$  mm and no corpus luteum in ovaries were allotted into 2 groups. At the start of the programme, follicle sizes were  $13.7 \pm 1.5$  mm and  $13.9 \pm 1.2$  mm respectively ( $p=0.5$ ). Higher percentage of ovulations (72.7%) were established in cows treated with hCG vs those treated with GnRH (64.4%,  $p<0.2094$ ). Follicle sizes at the time of AI were  $15.9 \pm 0.5$  mm and  $16.2 \pm 0.4$  mm ( $p=0.5$ ). Pregnancy was detected in 38.6% of cows treated with hCG and 42.2% of cows treated with GnRH ( $p<0.3501$ ).

**Key words:** anestrus, dairy cows, double Ovsynch

## INTRODUCTION

The synchronisation of estrus and ovulation is an essential tool for reproduction management in dairy cows and improvement of reproductive performance in the herd. The application of estrus synchronisation programmes increase conception rates, reduce the average number of days in lactation, calving-to-first-service interval and intercalving intervals (Wiltbank and Pursley, 2014).

Numerous protocols for synchronisation of the estrus and ovulation are developed. In fact, there are so many that sometimes, the decision-making is the most difficult part of the entire process (Pursley et al., 1995).

Ovsynch protocol is the first synchronisation programme developed for timed artificial insemination (TAI). The protocol has two main advantages: does not require detection of the estrus and guarantees insemination of all cows. It saves costs for detection of cows in estrus and increases the overall number of animals, that would probably be pregnant (Pursley et al., 1997).

It has been established that cows respond better to programmes for estrus synchronisation, when they are preliminarily synchronised (Presynch). Most commonly, two applications of prostaglandin from the F2 $\alpha$  group (PGF2 $\alpha$ ) at 14-day intervals, followed by the Ovsynch protocol 12 days later have been used to this end, resulting in increased conception rates in cycling but not in non-cycling cows (Moreira et al., 2001; El-Zarkouny et al., 2004; Navanukraw et al., 2004; Chebel and Santos, 2010). The second presynchronisation protocol is known as GnRH-PGF-GnRH. It includes treatment with gonadotropins (GnRH) at day 0, prostaglandin (PGF2 $\alpha$ ) at day 7 and gonadotropin (GnRH) on day 10, followed by Ovsynch protocol after 7 days (double Ovsynch). The first protocol is termed synchronising, and the second – breeding.

Presynchronisation is used only for the first artificial insemination after calving and it guarantees that all cows would be inseminated thus reducing the days in lactation to first-service (Bisinotto and Santos, 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2012b; Souza et al., 2008). The aim of the present research was to compare first-service conception rates after application of either human

choriongonadotropin hCG or GnRH in the synchronisation part of a double Ovsynch protocol to anestrus dairy cows.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted between May 2015 – May 2016 in a cattle farm in southeastern Bulgaria with capacity 320 Holstein-Friesian dairy cows. All animals were reared in free stalls, and machine milked three times per day, with Heat-time system for estrus detection implemented, permanent access to water and total mixed ration. The average 305-day lactation milk yield of the flock was 9180 L. The experiment included 96 cows without signs of estrus until the 45<sup>th</sup> day at postpartum, from which 7 animals were excluded due to diseases. The cows were divided into 2 groups. The first group of cows (n=44) was treated with standard double Ovsynch, e.g. 0.01 mg GnRH (Veterelin, Laboratorios Calier, Spain) at day 0, prostaglandin (Indupart, Vetpharma Animal Health, Spain) at day 7; 0.01 mg GnRH (Veterelin, Laboratorios Calier, Spain) at day 10 and 7 days apart, Ovsynch (GnRH-PGF-GnRH). In the second group (n=45) the programme started with 1 500 UI hCG (Chorulon, Intervet, Holland), prostaglandin (Indupart) at day 7, 0.01 mg GnRH (Veterilin) at day 10 and 7 days apart, Ovsynch (GnRH-PGF-GnRH).

Ultrasonographic studies were done with SonoScape A5 Vet (SonoScape, China) ultrasound equipped with linear multifrequency probe (5.0-12.0 MHz) for detection of ovarian findings and the cause of anestrus. The cows with follicle  $\geq 10$  mm and lack of corpus luteum in ovaries were included in the study (**Fig. 1**). Ultrasound investigations of ovaries were performed at the time of the first treatment with GnRH or hCG for measurement of available follicles and by the 7<sup>th</sup> day for detection of ovulation. The presence of ovulation after the first treatment with GnRH or hCG was assessed by the presence of corpus luteum in ovaries (**Fig. 2**).

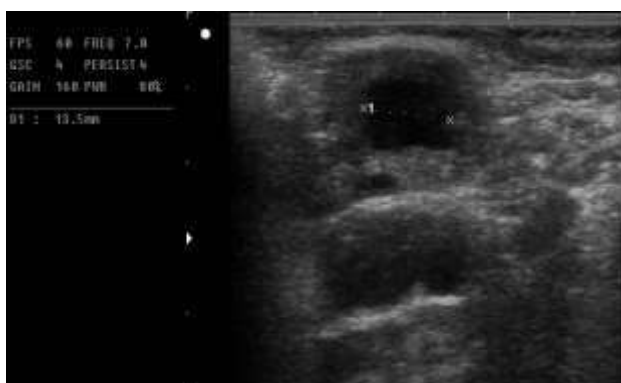


Fig. 1. Ultrasonogram of a follicle over 10 mm in size



Fig. 2. Ultrasonogram of a dominant follicle at the day of insemination



Fig. 3. Ultrasonogram of a corpus luteum by the 7th post insemination day

By the 17<sup>th</sup> day of the breeding protocol beginning of the double Ovsynch, echography was performed for detection of ovarian findings after the second GnRH application at the 10<sup>th</sup> day. On the 24<sup>th</sup> day, echography was done to document ovarian findings after the third treatment with GnRH. The presence of ovulation after GnRH treatments was determined by the presence of corpus luteum in ovaries. The measurement of the maximum follicle diameter and timed artificial insemination were conducted on the 27<sup>th</sup> day (**Fig. 3**). Seven days after TAI, ultrasonography was done to detect ovulation by the presence of a new corpus luteum. Pregnancy was diagnosed through ultrasound by the 32<sup>nd</sup> and the 60<sup>th</sup> day after TAI. Conception rates were calculated as ratio of pregnant cows and cows submitted to TAI. Blood samples for analysis of progesterone concentrations were collected on the same days. Progesterone determination was done by ELISA progesterone kit (Accu-Bind, Monobind Inc., USA).

The results were statistically analysed by Stat Soft (Statistica 7, Microsoft Corp. 1984-2000 Inc.) and presented as mean, SD, relative proportion (%) and levels of significant. Differences were interpreted as statistically significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ .

## RESULTS

The average number of lactations in both groups was 2.4 and 2.5 respectively, average daily milk yields:  $38.6 \pm 2.3$  kg and  $39.2 \pm 2.7$  kg, days in lactation:  $56.8 \pm 3.4$  and  $57.6 \pm 4.7$  without significant differences.

The follicle size at the start of the protocol, follicle size at TAI, ovulation percentage and conception rates are shown in **Table 1**. At the programme start, follicle size in both groups was almost equal -  $13.7 \pm 1.5$  mm and  $13.9 \pm 1.2$  mm ( $p=0.5$ ). Higher percentage of ovulations (72.7%) was registered in the group treated initially with hCG vs the group treated with GnRH (64.4%) ( $p < 0.2094$ ). The average follicle size during the artificial insemination was  $15.9 \pm 0.5$  mm in the first and  $16.2 \pm 0.4$  mm in the second group without statistically significant difference ( $p=0.5$ ). By the 32<sup>nd</sup> day, pregnancy was detected in 38.6% of animals treated initially with hCG and in 42.2% of cows treated with GnRH ( $p < 0.3501$ ).

**Table 1. Follicle size at the start of the programme, ovulation percentage, follicle size at insemination and conception rates**

Parameter	hCG group (n=44)	GnRH group (n=45)
Follicle size at first treatment, mm	<b>13.7±1.5</b>	<b>13.9±1.2</b>
Blood progesterone concentrations, ng/ml	<b>0.36±0.12</b>	<b>0.39±0.14</b>
Ovulations, % (number)	<b>72.7 (32/44)</b>	<b>64.4 (29/45)</b>
Synchronisation, % (number)	<b>88.6 (39/44)</b>	<b>86.7 (39/45)</b>
Follicle size at the time of insemination, mm	<b>15.9±0.5</b>	<b>16.2±0.4</b>
Conception rate, % (pregnant/inseminated)	<b>38.6 (17/44)</b>	<b>42.2 (19/45)</b>

## DISCUSSION

Our study compared the ovulations percentage in response to treatment with either GnRH or hCG and investigated how conception rates were influenced, The ovulation response is an exceptionally important criterion for the successful synchronisation of ovulations in dairy cows. The Ovsynch protocol has several limitations as to the possibility for synchronisation of follicle growth, because the ovulations after the first GnRH is usually 45% - 60% because it was applied at several stages of the estrus (Gumen et al., 2003). After presynchronisation and subsequent Ovsynch application, ovulation rates attained up to 70% (Bisinotto and Santos, 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2012a). Presynchronisation of cows with two successive Ovsynch protocols (a.k.a. Double-Ovsynch)

resulted in ovulation rates <72% after the first GnRH of the second Ovsynch (Souza et al, 2008; Giordano et al, 2013).

The main limitation of presynchronisation programmes with two-fold PgF2 $\alpha$  application is the lack of possibility for improvement of conception rates in anestrus dairy cows, which comprise up to 41% of all cows until the end of the service period (Walsh et al., 2007; Santos et al., 2009). Better results in this group of cows could be obtained by inclusion of GnRH at the time of presynchronisation. The combination of GnRH and PgF2 $\alpha$  has resulted in higher conception rates (Bisinotto and Santos, 2012). In fact, estrus presynchronisation with PgF2 $\alpha$  and GnRH represents the so-called G6G protocol (Bello et al., 2006), that increases conception rates in cows submitted to TAI including with additional treatment with progesterone through CIDR (Ribeiro et al., 2012a). The double Ovsynch is a more efficient method for estrus presynchronisation in dairy cows and for induction of cycling in anovulatory cows (Ayres et al., 2013; Souza et al., 2008).

In our study, GnRH was replaced with hCG in the beginning of the double Ovsynch. The result was statistically significantly increased conception rate in this group up to 72.2%, vs 64.4% in the group treated with GnRH ( $p < 0.2094$ ). In a previous study, Gumen et al. (2005) have utilised GnRH in a Presynch protocol (7 days before the last prostaglandin application) and registered 80% induction of ovulation in anestrus cows and 31% spontaneous ovulation in control animals.

According to our results, primiparous cows exhibited higher conception rates of 43.18%, vs 37.78% in multiparous ( $p < 0.2817$ ). Increased conception rates after application of Double-Ovsynch regardless of the parity number was probably due to the better results in primiparous heifers. It is generally acknowledged that these cows are more commonly anestrus than multiparous animals (El-Zarkouny et al., 2004; Chebel et al., 2006; Silva et al., 2007). Therefore, the differences in conception rates of the double Ovsynch depend on the parity, hence this protocol is more useful in primiparous cows.

In addition to the treatment of anestrus cows, it seems very probably that the start of the double Ovsynch was associated to better synchronisation of estrus stage in comparison to Presynch. The ovulation after the first administration of GnRH within the framework of Ovsynch and conception rates depended on the stage of the sexual cycle at Ovsynch start (Vasconcelos et al., 1999). Further, cows ovulating after the first GnRH of the Ovsynch protocol exhibited higher conception rates than non-ovulated cows (Bello et al., 2006; Chebel et al., 2006).

Another factor influencing the Ovsynch performance, was the follicle size at the time of the second GnRH treatment or at the time of artificial insemination. In our research, cows in the group treated with hCG tended to produce follicles of relatively smaller size at the time of TAI than animals treated with GnRH (15.9 $\pm$ 0.5 mm and 16.2 $\pm$ 0.4 mm respectively). Lopes et al. (2007) reported that conception rates increased when follicle size was greater. On the other hand, Vasconcellos et al. (1999), Ozturk et al., (2010) established that smaller follicles resulted in higher conception rates in dairy cows. In our study, although the size of follicles was smaller in the hCG-PGF-GnRH (15.9 $\pm$ 0.5 mm) than in the GnRH-PGF-GnRH group (16.2 $\pm$ 0.4 mm), conception rate was lower in the former than in the latter group (38.6% vs 42.2%,  $P < 0.3501$ ). Other reports demonstrating higher conception rates after ovulation with follicles > 16 mm (Perry et al., 2005; Bello et al., 2007) in line with our data.

High blood circulating progesterone concentrations and higher proportion of cows with high progesterone (3 ng/ml) at the time of treatment corresponded to the better synchronisation of cows at the start of Ovsynch protocol and/or the higher percentage of ovulations due to the first GnRH application. Increased percentage of ovulations after the first gonadotropin treatment could produce a dominating follicle after the second treatment, as its size is less variable and closer to the ideal follicle size (Bello et al., 2006; Souza et al., 2007). The higher percentage of synchronisation at the time of Ovsynch could reduce the number of cows ovulating at an inappropriate moment

(Vasconcelos et al., 1999), and thus, increase conception rates (Bello et al., 2006; Chebel et al., 2006).

The conception rates in this study (38.6% hCG vs 42.2% GnRH) was within the range reported by other researchers (Bello et al., 2006; Keskin et al., 2010). For example, Chebel et al., (2007) found out higher conception rate (~40% vs ~10%) in cows with corpus luteum at the day of treatment with prostaglandin during Ovsynch, as compared to cows without corpus luteum. Cows without corpus luteum during the first GnRH treatment of the protocol with TAI, anestrus or cycling, but treated during proestrus, estrus or metestrus, had lower progesterone concentrations than cows with corpus luteum at the start of the synchronisation protocol (0.5 ng/ml vs 3.4 ng/ml). This group comprises nearly 30% of all cows submitted to protocols with TAI at dairy farms. The lack of corpus luteum at the start of protocols was the main limitation for achievement of high conception rates (Bisinotto et al., 2010a).

Before synchronisation of ovulations for TAI, the percentage of cows in the beginning of diestrus at Ovsynch start, as well as the percentage of ovulating cows after the first GnRH treatment should be increased in order to attain higher blood progesterone concentrations during the Ovsynch. The Double-Ovsynch protocol offers a possibility for improvement of these variables at the time of Ovsynch in order to increased TAI conception rates.

In conclusion, according to the results of our study, the substitution of GnRH with hCG at the start of double Ovsynch protocol in anestrus dairy cows increased ovulation and synchronisation percentages, but did not improve conception rates.

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