IDENTIFICATION OF ENTEROTOXIN GENES IN *Staphylococcus* spp. ISOLATES FROM BULK GOAT MILK.

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Staphylococcus aureus has been pointed out as the main *Staphylococcus* species causing human food poisoning. However, recent findings have shown that coagulase-negative *Staphylococcus* could also harbor many enterotoxin-encoding genes. These organisms are often present in goat milk and are the most important mastitis-causing agents in this species. This study aimed to investigate the occurrence of enterotoxin encoding genes among coagulase positive and negative staphylococci isolated from raw goat milk produced in the semi-arid region of Paraiba, the most important region for goat milk production in Brazil. Bulk milk samples (n=55) were obtained from smallholders and enterotoxin-encoding genes were screened in 74 staphylococci isolates by PCR targeting the genes *sea, seb, sec, sed, see, seg, seh* and *sei*. Enterotoxin-encoding genes were found in 9 (12.2%) isolates and four different genes (*sea, sec*, *seg* and *sei*) were identified amongst the positive isolates. The most frequent genes observed amongst the positive isolates were *seg* and *sei* (55.5% each) and were normally found simultaneously. The gene *sea* was found in only one isolate and *sec* was the most frequent gene (44.4%) amongst the classical genes. All coagulase positive isolates harboring enterotoxigenic genes (n=7) were identified as *S. aureus*. The two coagulase negative isolates, *S. haemolyticus* and *S. hominis*, harbored *sei* and *sec*, respectively. A higher frequency (p<0.05) of enterotoxin-encoding genes in coagulase positive (23.3%) than coagulase negative staphylococci (4.5%) was observed. This finding suggests that *S. aureus* is the most hazardous species for staphylococcal foodborne poisoning associated to goat milk in the investigated region.