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Thermal regimes effects over stress indicators in rattlesnakes, *Crotalus durissus* (Serpentes: Viperidae)

AILTON FABRÍCIO NETO

Dissertação apresentada ao Instituto de Biociências do Câmpus de Rio Claro, Universidade Estadual Paulista, como parte dos requisitos para obtenção do título de Mestre em Ciências Biológicas (Zooologia).

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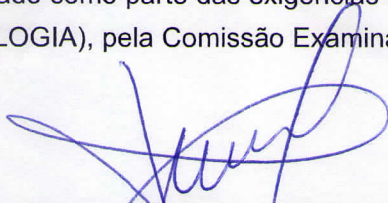
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TÍTULO DA DISSERTAÇÃO: Thermal regimes effects over stress indicators in rattlesnakes, *Crotalus durissus* (Serpentes: Viperidae)

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ABSTRACT

Ectothermic animals have their physiological functions closely related to temperature. For example, metabolic and growth rates of these animals may be affected by body temperature. Studies focusing on the measurement of metabolic rates in snakes, for example, are usually performed by subjecting animals to constant temperature regimes. However, ectotherms (snakes included) are known to exhibit wide variations in their body temperature throughout the circadian cycle. This disagreement between thermal biology and experimental conditions could act as a potential stressor agent for ectotherms. The present study tested the effects of different thermal regimes, constant and fluctuating, throughout the circadian cycle on stress indicators in rattlesnakes (*Crotalus durissus*). A group of animals was exposed to the constant-to-fluctuating treatment, composed by a constant temperature regime (30°C) followed by a fluctuating regime (25°C, 1800 to 0600h, 35°C, 0600h to 1800h, mean 30°C); the second group was subjected to the fluctuating-to-constant treatment, composed of a fluctuating regime and, after, the constant. The animals were exposed to the treatments for a period of 24 days, and on the 12th day the change of thermal regime occurred. We collected blood samples on days 2, 10, 14 and 22 to measure heterophil:lymphocyte ratio (H:L), plasma bacteria killing ability (BKA) and corticosterone plasmatic levels (CORT). The shift between constant and fluctuating thermal regime acted as an acute stressor for snakes, promoting an increase in plasma CORT levels. Exposure to a fluctuating thermal regime at the onset of the experiment induced a decrease in the BKA of rattlesnakes that persists for the whole experiment, and males also present higher levels of BKA than females. H:L was not affected by any of the treatments, therefore it is possible to postulate that the shift between constant and fluctuating thermal regimes acted as a low intensity stressor. Our results highlight that acute shifts in thermal regimes can promote a stress response in snakes, even after long times of maintenance in captivity.

Keywords: Snakes. Ectothermic. Circadian cycle. Corticosterone. Innate Immunity.

RESUMO

Animais ectotérmicos têm suas funções fisiológicas fortemente influenciadas pela temperatura. Por exemplo, taxas metabólicas e de crescimento destes animais podem ser afetadas pela temperatura corpórea. Estudos com foco na medição de taxas metabólicas em serpentes, por exemplo, geralmente são realizados através da submissão dos animais a regimes constantes de temperatura. No entanto, ectotérmicos (serpentes inclusas) são conhecidos por apresentarem variações amplas de sua temperatura corpórea ao longo do ciclo circadiano. Esta discordância entre biologia termal e condições experimentais poderia funcionar como um potencial agente estressor para os ectotérmicos, o que poderia comprometer os resultados e interpretações de estudos, pois um aumento nos níveis de glucocorticóides pode afetar diversos atributos de vertebrados, como taxas metabólicas e resposta imune. O presente estudo testou os efeitos de diferentes regimes térmicos, constante e flutuante, ao longo do ciclo circadiano sobre indicadores de estresse em cascavéis (*Crotalus durissus*). Para tanto, um grupo de animais foi exposto ao tratamento constante-flutuante, composto por um regime constante de temperatura (30°C) seguido por um flutuante (25°C, 1800 às 0600h; 35°C, 0600h às 1800h, média de 30°C); o segundo grupo foi submetido ao tratamento flutuante-constante, composto por um regime flutuante e, após, o constante. Os animais foram expostos aos tratamentos por um período de 24 dias, sendo que no 12º dia ocorreu a mudança de regime termal. Efetuamos coletas de sangue nos dias 2, 10, 14 e 22 para medição da taxa heterófilo:linfócito (H:L), capacidade bactericida do plasma (CBP) e níveis plasmáticos de corticosterona (CORT). A mudança entre o regime termal constante e o flutuante agiu como um agente estressor para as serpentes, causando um aumento nos níveis plasmáticos de CORT. A exposição a um regime flutuante no início do experimento causou uma diminuição na CBP das cascavéis que persistiu por todo o experimento, e machos também apresentaram maior CBP do que fêmeas. H:L não foi afetada por nenhuma das variáveis independentes, portanto é possível que a mudança entre regimes termais agiu como um estressor de baixa intensidade. Nossos resultados demonstram que mudanças agudas em regimes termais podem causar uma resposta ao estresse em serpentes, mesmo após longos tempos de manutenção em cativeiro.

Palavras-chave: Serpentes. Ectotérmicos. Ciclo Circadiano. Corticosterona. Imunidade Inata.

INTRODUCTION

The environmental temperature is an important abiotic factor influencing living organisms, as it broadly affects behavioral and physiological aspects (Huey and Stevenson, 1979; Kingsolver and Woods, 1997; Angilletta et al., 2002). The relation between environmental temperature and behavioral or physiological attributes is particularly relevant for ectothermic animals, since their body temperatures generally are correlated with the environmental temperature and its fluctuations (Angilletta et al., 2002; Andrade, 2016). Thus, the effects of temperature on a wide variety of functions and physiological processes, such as metabolic (Dorcas et al., 2004) and growth (Niehaus et al., 2012) rates, for example, have been studied in ectothermic animals (Angilletta et al., 2002).

The influence of temperature on different physiological parameters in ectothermic animals is usually tested by submitting the animals to constant temperature regimes throughout the study, often for several consecutive days (Secor, 2009; Saxon et al., 2018). However, under natural conditions, the body temperature of ectotherms generally exhibits circadian variation (Niehaus et al., 2012; Kingsolver et al., 2015; Colinet et al., 2015), snakes included (Tozetti and Martins, 2008; Gomes and Almeida-Santos, 2012; Andrade, 2016; Brischoux et al., 2016). Thus, the maintenance of ectothermic animals under constant temperature regime during experimentation can be quite different from what is experienced under natural conditions. This discrepancy, we suspect, may lead to bias in data acquisition and mislead interpretations. Indeed, differences in thermal regime are known to affect metabolic (Gavira and Andrade, 2013; Stahlschmidt et al., 2015), growth rates (Niehaus et al., 2012; Kingsolver et al., 2015) and thermal tolerance (Zatsepina et al., 2000; Manenti et al., 2018) of ectothermic animals. Therefore, it is possible that the absence of temperature fluctuations by denying a thermally changing environment or the possibility for thermoregulation could be perceived as a stressor by these animals (Andrade, 2016).

The exposure of different vertebrates to stressful situations triggers the activation of the hypothalamic-hypophysis-adrenal axis (HHA), resulting in secretion of glucocorticoids (GC) into the bloodstream (Wingfield et al., 1998; Wingfield, 2013). The effects of this increase in GC levels can be adaptive or deleterious (Dickens et al., 2010; Lucas and French, 2012) depending on its temporal pattern (Martin, 2009;

Dickens et al., 2010). A short-term increase in GC may improve the immune response during the post-stress recovery (Dhabhar and McEwen, 1999; Sapolsky et al., 2000; Moore and Jessop, 2003) and may also increase energy recruitment through an enhancement of the intermediary metabolism (Durant et al., 2008; Preest and Cree, 2008). However, long-term exposure to stressors can lead to a chronic elevation of GC levels in the bloodstream, resulting in deleterious effects on reproduction, growth rates, and the immune system (Guillette et al., 1995; Sapolsky et al. 2000; French et al., 2007; Dickens et al., 2010). In reptiles, changes in environmental temperature may also be associated with changes in GC levels (Dupoué et al., 2013; Jessop et al., 2016), which can in turn affect diverse physiological attributes, as metabolism (DuRant et al., 2008; Preest and Cree, 2008), digestive performance (Bonnet et al., 2013), reproductive behavior (Brischoux et al., 2016) and immune response (Graham et al., 2012). Therefore, the experimental exposure of ectotherms to constant thermal regime might represent a stressor factor, and this would potentially influence physiological parameters, but this possibility remains unverified.

The magnitude of the stress response in reptiles generally has a positive correlation with plasma levels of corticosterone (CORT), the main GC in these animals (Romero, 2004; Lind et al., 2018). Handling and restraint (Kreger and Mench, 1993; Schuett et al., 2004; Sykes and Klukowski, 2009), translocation (Heiken et al., 2016), water deprivation (Dupoué et al., 2014) and acute temperature changes (Dupoué et al., 2013) are considered stressors for snakes, by increasing CORT plasma levels, which can affect the immune response in a complex manner (Martin, 2009). For example, the maintenance of chronically elevated GC levels can lead to a decrease of plasma bacteria killing ability (BKA) (Neuman-Lee et al., 2015). Additionally, the release of CORT leads to an increase in the ratio between circulating heterophils to lymphocytes (H:L rate; Davis and Maerz, 2008; Davis et al., 2008). Given that changes in GC and leukocyte profile in the bloodstream show a different temporal dynamic in response to a stressor (Seddon and Klukowski, 2012; Sparkman et al., 2014), increase in H:L usually requires longer exposure to an stressor agent, and may also be associated to stressor agents with higher levels of intensity (Assis et al., 2015). Therefore, the determination of H:L ratio, plasma CORT levels, and BKA may help to evaluate the potential stress caused by exposure of ectotherms to constant temperature regimes.

Different thermal regimes can affect physiological attributes in ectothermic animals in divergent ways (Niehaus et al., 2012; Kingsolver et al., 2015; Saxon et al., 2018), including stress and immune response (Jessop et al., 2016; Stahlschmidt et al., 2017). More specifically, in snakes, metabolic rates (*Bothrops alternatus*, Gavira and Andrade, 2013; *Pantherophis guttatus*, Stahlschmidt et al., 2015; *Crotalus durissus*, Fabrício-Neto et al., unpublished data) and innate immunity (*P. guttatus*, Stahlschmidt et al., 2017) may present differences according to the exposure to a constant or fluctuating thermal regime. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate how different thermal regimes affected stress indicators and parameters of the immune system in the South American rattlesnake (*C. durissus*). These indicators included the determination of plasma CORT levels, H:L ratio and also an indicator of innate immunity (BKA). The rattlesnakes (*C. durissus*) is relevant to this study since it presents a circadian variation of body temperature, of up to 10°C (Tozetti and Martins, 2008; Andrade, 2016), which can even affect the selection of microhabitats for this species (Tozetti and Martins, 2008; Gomes and Almeida-Santos, 2012). Our hypothesis is that the exposure of rattlesnakes to constant thermal regime will act as a stressor, promoting changes associated with acute and chronic effects on the immune response. To test our hypothesis, we divided the experimental animals into two groups: 1) Constant-to-fluctuating, in which snakes were exposed to a constant thermal regime (30°C), followed by a fluctuating thermal regime (25-35°C, in a 12:12h cycle). 2) Fluctuating-to-constant, in which the snakes were exposed to a fluctuating thermal regime, followed by a constant thermal regime. In both cases, treatments lasted for 24 days, with the change in thermal regimes happening at day 12. This experimental design was done to allow the assessment of a previous acclimation, to either constant or fluctuating conditions, over the exposure to a new thermal regime. We forecast that: 1) CORT and BKA will increase in the short term under the constant regime both at constant-to-fluctuating and fluctuating-to-constant treatments. 2) CORT and H:L will increase in the long term in the constant thermal regime at both treatments, and BKA will decrease. 3) CORT levels, BKA and H:L ratio will not change during the exposure to the fluctuating regime of the fluctuating-to-constant treatment and CORT and H:L will decrease in the constant-to-fluctuating treatment, whereas BKA will increase.

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