Propolis supplementation affects performance, intestinal morphology, and bacterial population of broiler chickens

S. Sadarman¹,9, E. Erwan¹, A. Irawan²,8, M.M. Sholikin³,9, R. Solfaine⁴, R.P. Harahap⁵,8, A.C. Irawan³, A. Sofyan⁷,9, N. Nahrowi⁸,9 & A. Jayanegara⁹,9,#

¹Department of Animal Science, Sultan Syarif Kasim State Islamic University, Pekanbaru 28293, Indonesia
²Vocational Program of Animal Husbandry, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta 57126, Indonesia
³Graduate School of Nutrition and Feed Science, Faculty of Animal Science, IPB University, Bogor 16680, Indonesia
⁴Department of Pathology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Universitas Wijaya Kusuma, Surabaya 60225, Indonesia
⁵Animal Science Study Program, Faculty of Agriculture, Tanjungpura University, Pontianak 78124, Indonesia
⁶Animal Science Study Program, Faculty of Agriculture, Kediri Islamic University, Kediri 64128, Indonesia
⁷Research Division for Natural Product Technology, Indonesian Institute of Sciences, Yogyakarta 55861, Indonesia
⁸Department of Nutrition and Feed Technology, Faculty of Animal Science, IPB University, Bogor 16680, Indonesia
⁹Animal Feed and Nutrition Modelling (AFENUE) Research Group, Department of Nutrition and Feed Technology, Faculty of Animal Science, IPB University, Bogor 16680, Indonesia

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Abstract
A meta-analysis was conducted to examine the effect of supplementing the diet of broiler chickens with propolis on growth, bacterial population of the intestine, antiviral serum concentration, intestinal morphology, and digestive enzyme activities in broiler chickens. Forty peer-reviewed articles that had been published between 2003 and 2019 were identified using the PRISMA protocol and included in the study. Data were analysed with mixed model methodology, in which the studies were considered random effects, whereas the level of supplemental propolis was considered a fixed effect. Responses to propolis supplementation in bodyweight (BW) and average daily gain (ADG) were quadratic, but average daily feed intake (ADF) was not affected. Propolis supplementation improved feed conversion ratio (FCR) significantly as a linear function of the level of supplement. The optimum level of supplementation was between 256 and 262 mg/kg feed and produced maximum ADG and final BW. There was a tendency for mortality to decrease because of propolis supplementation. Propolis had no detectable effect on serum antiviral concentration, intestinal bacterial population or intestinal morphology. Among digestive enzymes, only sucrase increased linearly as propolis was increased. Thus, supplementation with propolis increased the growth performance of broiler chickens positively and the effect was dose dependent. This may have been partly because of an improvement in sucrase activity and other factors related to the nutritional content of propolis. Future study to evaluate specific bioactive compounds of propolis is therefore warranted.

Keywords: bee glue, digestive enzymes, growth, meta-analysis
#Corresponding author: anuraga.jayanegara@gmail.com

Introduction
Successful broiler production is determined largely by rearing management, including disease prevention and proper use of medication. Antibiotics are commonly used as therapeutic agents to control diseases, and used to be a popular growth-promoting feed additive (AGP). Antibiotic metabolites, which can inhibit the growth of microorganisms in low doses, are produced by fungi and algae and are manufactured chemically (Nir & Ve-Senkyolü, 2000). Their use as AGPs was aimed at improving feed efficiency, but raised problems because bacteria acquired resistance to antibiotics from uncontrolled use (Bronzwaer et al., 2002; FAO & IFIF, 2010; Attia et al., 2019a, b). Thus, the use of antibiotics as AGPs is no longer allowed worldwide. Consequently, there has been growing interest in replacing AGPs with natural products that are readily available and safe for poultry, including spices, herbs, plant extracts, antioxidants, enzymes, probiotics, and prebiotics (Khattak et al., 2006; Toghyani et al., 2011; Abdel-Kareem & El-Sheikh, 2015;
Omar et al., 2016; Cimrin et al., 2020; Attia et al., 2016). Among these natural resources, propolis has shown potential as an AGP (Attia et al., 2014; Abou-Zeid et al., 2015; Klarić et al., 2018).

Propolis or ‘bee glue’ is a resinous substance that is collected by honeybees from flowers and shoots of trees such as willow, poplar and wild chestnut. Its bioactive components consist of polyphenols, phenol aldehydes, aromatic compounds, steroids, fatty acids, enzymes, essential minerals and vitamins, levels of which vary according to plant species, location and time of collection (Lotfy, 2006; Krocko et al., 2012; Klarić et al., 2018). In practice, propolis has been used among others as an antioxidant, antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, antiradiation, and hepatoprotective substance in animals and humans (Bankova, 2005; Yamaguchi et al., 2006; Pascoal et al., 2014). Studies reported effective use of propolis as a therapeutic agent against many human diseases, including heart disease, cancer, diabetes mellitus and inflammation (Mishima et al., 2005). In several animal species, propolis has been reported to promote animal growth, improve the quality and safety of animal products, increase immune response, and regulate the intestinal tract (Liu et al., 2010). In broiler chickens, propolis reportedly enhanced performance and health status (Attia et al., 2014; Abou-Zeid et al., 2015; Rabie et al., 2018). In rabbits, propolis was effective in replacing zinc bacitracin (antibiotic) with positive improvements in growth performance, economic benefit, immune status, and reproduction (Attia et al., 2015, 2019a, 2019b).

The beneficial effects of propolis on growth performance can be explained by several mechanisms. Klarić et al. (2018) revealed a positive effect on the health status of chickens as shown by haematological parameters when they consumed a diet supplemented with propolis. Its efficacy as an immunomodulator was demonstrated by improvement in blood globulin levels and a positive response in humoral immunity (Hassan et al., 2018; Attia et al., 2016). In addition, propolis and bee pollen had beneficial effects on intestinal morphology, increasing the surface area for nutrient absorption in broilers (Chegini et al., 2018; Prakatur et al., 2019; Attia et al., 2019a, b). Therefore propolis was suggested as an effective alternative additive for use in intensive animal production (Attia et al., 2019a).

Although a number of studies have discussed the effects of propolis on broiler production, none has attempted to summarize the findings and to provide robust conclusions for propolis use. The present study therefore aimed to evaluate the effects of dietary propolis supplementation on growth performance, bacterial count in the intestinal tract, immune response, morphology of the small intestine, and activity of digestive enzymes in broilers. The study was performed using data from the literature and employing a meta-analysis approach based on a mixed-model methodology to analyse them quantitatively.

Materials and Methods

A systematic literature search following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) protocol (Page et al., 2021) was conducted to identify studies reporting immune and enzymatic responses and intestinal morphology of broiler chickens fed a diet containing propolis. A combination of search terms that included ‘propolis’, ‘broiler’, ‘bacterial population’, and ‘intestinal morphology’, was applied to databases of Science Direct (2021), PubMed (2021), and Scopus (2021). Only articles published in international peer-reviewed journals were retained in the screening process. A total of 75 articles were identified from title and abstract evaluation. These were further screened on a full-text basis according to pre-determined criteria, namely i) the article must report the use of propolis in the diet; ii) the form of propolis should be explained, that is, whether crude or extracted; iii) inclusion level must be reported; and iv) the effects on growth performance, number of bacteria, immune response, and antioxidant activity must be recorded. A total of 39 articles met these criteria (Table 1).

The database contained the authors and year of publication, strain of broiler chicken, sex, form of propolis, rearing phase (starter or finisher), levels of propolis inclusion, and response variables reported in the articles, which included BW, ADG, daily feed intake, FCR ratio, mortality, intestinal bacteria population (Bacteroidaceae, Bifidobacterium spp., Clostridiaceae), anti-viral response (anti-Newcastle disease serum titer), intestinal morphology (height and width of villi in the duodenum, jejunum and ileum), and activity of the digestive enzymes sucrase, maltase, amylase, chymotrypsin, lipase and trypsin.
Table 1 Literature that provided data for a meta-analysis on the effects of propolis (mg/kg of feed) on broilers

| Reference                  | Level, mg/kg diet | Broiler strain | Sex | Rearing period, d |
|----------------------------|-------------------|---------------|-----|-------------------|
|                            |                   |               |     | Starter | Finisher | Total  |
| Biavatti et al., 2003      | 0 - 570           | Ross 308      | Male| 1 - 21  | 22 - 28  | 1 - 28 |
| Açıkgoz et al., 2005       | 0 - 2000          | Ross 308      | Male| 1 - 28  | 29 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Taheri et al., 2005        | 0 - 1000          | Ross 308      | Mixed| 1 - 21 | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Ziaran et al., 2005        | 0 - 1000          | Ross 308      | –    | 1 - 21  | 22 - 47  | 1 - 47 |
| Shalmani & Shivasad, 2006  | 0 - 250           | Ross 308      | –    | 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Seven & Seven, 2008        | 0 - 1500          | Ross 308      | Male| 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Seven et al., 2008         | 0 - 5000          | Ross 308      | –    | –      | –       | –     |
| Seven et al., 2008         | 0 - 3000          | Ross 308      | Mixed| 3 - 21 | 22 - 41  | 3 - 41 |
| Khodanazary et al., 2011   | 0 - 1000          | Ross 308      | –    | 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Tekeli et al., 2011        | 0 - 3000          | Ross 308      | –    | –      | –       | 8 - 42 |
| Daneshmand et al., 2012    | 0 - 200            | Ross 308      | Male| 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Seven et al., 2012         | 0 - 1000          | Ross 308      | –    | 3 - 21  | 22 - 41  | 3 - 41 |
| Eyn et al., 2013           | 0 - 500           | Cobb 500      | Male| 1 - 21  | –       | –     |
| Mahmoud et al., 2013       | 0 - 750           | Ross 308      | Male| 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Abbas, 2014                | 0 - 2500          | Ross 308      | Male| –      | –       | 1 - 28 |
| Attia et al., 2014         | 0 - 300           | Arbor Acres   | Mixed| 1 - 21 | 22 - 35  | 1 - 35 |
| Duarte et al., 2014        | 0 - 500           | Cobb 500      | Male| 1 - 21  | –       | 1 - 42 |
| Eyn et al., 2014           | 0 - 5000          | Cobb 500      | Male| 1 - 21  | –       | 1 - 42 |
| Abou-Zend et al., 2015     | 0 - 500           | Cobb 500      | Mixed| –    | –       | 1 - 42 |
| Daneshmand et al., 2015    | 0 - 200           | Ross 308      | Male| 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Eyn et al., 2015           | 0 - 4000          | Cobb 500      | Male| –      | –       | 1 - 21 |
| Torki et al., 2015         | 0 - 200           | Ross 308      | –    | 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Haščík et al., 2016        | 0 - 400           | Ross 308      | Mixed| 1 - 21 | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Hosseini et al., 2016      | 0 - 3000          | Ross 308      | Male| 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Eyn et al., 2017           | 0 - 5000          | Cobb 500      | Male| 1 - 21  | –       | 1 - 21 |
| Gheisari et al., 2017      | 0 - 300           | Ross 308      | Male| 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Mahmoud et al., 2017       | 0 - 3000          | Ross 708      | Male| –      | –       | 1 - 42 |
| Sahin & Ozurk, 2017        | 0 - 400           | Ross 308      | Female| –   | –      | 16 - 20 |
| Shaddel-Tiili et al., 2017 | 0 - 2000          | Ross 308      | Male| 1 - 24  | 25 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Chegini et al., 2018       | 0 - 5000          | Ross 308      | Male| 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Kinash et al., 2018        | 0 - 1000          | Ross 308      | Mixed| 1 - 21 | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Klaric et al., 2018        | 0 - 1000          | Cobb 500      | –    | 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Rabie et al., 2018         | 0 - 500           | Iraqi rooster | Male| –      | –       | –     |
| Hassan et al., 2018        | 0 - 400           | Ross 308      | Mixed| 1 - 21 | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Al-Sultan et al., 2019     | 0 - 3000          | Ross 308      | –    | 1 - 21  | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Abdelsalam et al., 2019    | 0 - 400           | Cobb 500      | Mixed| 1 - 21 | 22 - 49  | 1 - 49 |
| Alani et al., 2019         | 0 - 800           | Cobb 500      | Mixed| –    | –       | –     |
| Haščik et al., 2019        | 0 - 1000          | Ross 308      | Mixed| 1 - 21 | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |
| Khafaji et al., 2019       | 0 - 000           | Ross 308      | Mixed| 1 - 21 | 22 - 42  | 1 - 42 |

Statistical analysis was conducted using a mixed-model methodology following the examples of St-Pierre (2001) and Sauvant et al. (2008), in which the studies were considered random effects and the level of propolis inclusion was a fixed effect. The mathematical models used in this study were as follows:
The meta-analysis confirmed the results of numerous individual studies that reported promising effects of propolis supplementation on the performance of animals (Attia et al., 2014; 2016; 2019a,b). For instance, Rabie et al. (2018) reported that broilers fed diets containing propolis (400 mg/kg diet) had higher BW as a result of higher ADG. Similarly, Attia et al. (2014) reported that supplementation of 300 mg/kg propolis to broiler diets increased BW significantly by 12%. Results from other studies in which propolis at various levels of inclusion and in either crude or extracted forms showed increased BW gain of broilers (Seven, 2008; Seven et al., 2008; Klarić et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2018). The current study showed little effect of propolis
on bacterial population in the digestive tract of broiler chickens, although other studies revealed positive modulation effects of propolis on gut microbiota (Klarić, 2014; Eyng et al., 2017). The results of the current study are supported by the finding that the addition of ethanolic extract of propolis at various levels in broiler chicken feed did not affect intestinal microbiota (Eyng et al., 2017). Propolis possibly promoted growth performance in broilers because of the increase of certain enzyme activities, primarily sucrase, as shown in this study. Other plausible reasons are related to the nutritional and bioactive contents of propolis, such as vitamins, flavonoids, minerals, and essential oils (Figure 1) (Awadalla & Kamel, 2000; Gardana et al., 2007; Easton-Calabria et al., 2019).

Figure 1 Raw propolis composition and its main functions (adapted from Easton-Calabria et al., 2019) trans-methyl

Propolis had no effect on some species of intestinal bacteria population, although this has to be interpreted cautiously because of limited data (Table 3). There was no effect ($P > 0.05$) on Newcastle disease antibody titer.

Table 3 Linear regression analysis of the size of intestinal bacteria populations and Newcastle disease antibody titers on the level of propolis supplementation in the diet (mg/kg feed)

| Response variable    | N  | Intercept | Slope     | P-value | RMSE | AIC |
|----------------------|----|-----------|-----------|---------|------|-----|
| Bacterial composition|    |           |           |         |      |     |
| Bacteroidaceae, $\log_{10}$ cfu/g | 12 | 4.36 ± 0.33 | 0.195 ± 1.51 | 0.900 | 1.22 | 36.4 |
| Clostridiaceae, $\log_{10}$ cfu/g | 12 | 4.51 ± 0.67 | -3.63 ± 3.12 | 0.274 | 1.25 | 53.8 |
| Enterobacteriaceae, $\log_{10}$ cfu/g | 18 | 3.64 ± 1.15 | -0.178 ± 1.34 | 0.896 | 1.30 | 54.1 |
| Newcastle disease antibody titers | | | | | | |
| Starter phase | 20 | 1547 ± 426 | -2816 ± 2194 | 0.218 | 1.13 | 303 |
| Finisher phase | 33 | 1258 ± 293 | -925 ± 935 | 0.331 | 1.33 | 513 |

AIC: Akaike information criterion, N: number of observations, RMSE: root mean square error

The addition of propolis did not affect ($P > 0.05$) villus height, crypt depth of the duodenum or the ratio of villus height to crypt depth in the duodenum, jejunum, and ileum. There were significant linear increases ($P < 0.05$) of the sucrase enzyme in the duodenum and jejunum. However, amylase, chymotrypsin, maltase...
Table 4 presents the intestinal morphology and enzyme activity of broiler chickens as influenced by levels of propolis.

**Table 4** Linear regression analysis of intestinal morphology and enzyme activity of broilers on the level of propolis supplementation in the diet (mg/kg feed)

| Response variable | N  | Intercept    | Slope         | P-value | RMSE | AIC |
|-------------------|----|--------------|---------------|---------|------|-----|
| **Duodenum**      |    |              |               |         |      |     |
| Villus height, µm | 25 | 1,609 ± 251  | -45.6 ± 148.5 | 0.762   | 1.3  | 324 |
| Crypt depth, µm   | 25 | 206 ± 54     | 21.8 ± 26.0   | 0.412   | 1.43 | 239 |
| VH/CD             | 25 | 8.89 ± 1.03  | -0.494 ± 2.12 | 0.818   | 1.5  | 100 |
| Sucrase, U/mg     | 12 | 4.07 ± 0.48  | 8.64 ± 2.24   | 0.004   | 1.33 | 45.9|
| Maltase, UI/mg    | 12 | 24.4 ± 1.81  | 13.4 ± 8.41   | 0.146   | 1.14 | 77.6|
| **Jejunum**       |    |              |               |         |      |     |
| Villus height, µm | 21 | 901 ± 86     | -53.8 ± 85.1  | 0.536   | 1.2  | 249 |
| Crypt depth, µm   | 21 | 159 ± 19     | -10.1 ± 9.7   | 0.313   | 1.13 | 163 |
| VH/CD             | 21 | 5.9 ± 0.65   | -0.106 ± 0.45 | 0.813   | 1.41 | 31.0|
| Sucrase, U/mg     | 12 | 5.26 ± 0.85  | 10.4 ± 3.80   | 0.023   | 1.04 | 57.9|
| Maltase, UI/mg    | 12 | 27.1 ± 1.92  | 10.5 ± 8.93   | 0.269   | 1.08 | 79.0|
| **Ileum**         |    |              |               |         |      |     |
| Villus height, µm | 15 | 638 ± 89     | 52.9 ± 60.8   | 0.403   | 1    | 165 |
| Crypt depth, µm   | 15 | 126 ± 16     | 10.2 ± 14.6   | 0.498   | 1.06 | 120 |
| VH/CD             | 15 | 5.09 ± 0.20  | 0.04 ± 0.35   | 0.918   | 1.22 | 4.47|
| Sucrase, U/mg     | 12 | 6.3 ± 0.66   | 2.77 ± 1.85   | 0.168   | 1.19 | 39.1|
| Maltase, UI/mg    | 12 | 31.1 ± 2.75  | 1.98 ± 9.79   | 0.844   | 1.16 | 79  |
| Amylase, nmol/mg  | 12 | 4.55 ± 0.44  | -0.146 ± 2.02 | 0.944   | 1.19 | 43.4|
| Chymotrypsin, nmol/mg | 12 | 4.86 ± 0.27 | -0.703 ± 1.25 | 0.587   | 1.34 | 31.9|
| Lipase, UI/mg     | 12 | 16.5 ± 3.15  | 0.71 ± 7.69   | 0.928   | 1.08 | 73.5|
| Trypsin, nmol/mg  | 12 | 26.3 ± 6.35  | -1.28 ± 10.5  | 0.906   | 1.12 | 82.3|

AIC: Akaike information criterion, N: number of observations, RMSE: Root mean square error; VH/CD: ratio of villus height to crypt depth.

The present meta-analysis failed to show an effect of propolis supplementation on the immune function of broilers, possibly because studies that evaluate the immune-modulatory effects of propolis on broiler chickens are few, with large variation among them making it difficult to generalize. A number of studies reported a positive effect in increasing immunoglobulins IgA, IgM, and IgY (Seven et al., 2010), and on the formation of the viral antibody (Seven et al., 2012; Eyng et al., 2013a; Eyng et al., 2013b), but they should be interpreted cautiously. The present study also failed to provide evidence on the modulating effect of propolis on intestinal bacterial population. Eyng et al. (2015) reported increases in macrophage phagocytes and in red blood cells in broilers that received a diet containing 500 mg/kg propolis, which indicated that propolis increased cellular response through macrophage cell activation pathways. This was effective in increasing the immune response of broilers and could increase the number of monocytes, but had no effect on the number of basophil cells or nitric oxide enzymes (Khan, 2017). In addition, propolis inclusion could reduce significantly the number of heterophile cells and lymphocytes in broilers that are...
induced by phytohemagglutinin, which indicated that propolis inhibited tissue damage from pathogens and viruses by increasing white blood cells (Abdelsalam et al., 2019).

Propolis could play a role in counteracting free radicals by increasing the activity of superoxide dismutase, catalase and glutathione peroxidase and significantly reducing the activity of malondialdehyde. This mechanism indicated that propolis exhibited immunomodulation and inhibition of tissue damage caused by free radicals by activating antioxidant enzymes in broiler chickens (Abou-Zeid et al., 2015). An interconnected factor could explain the beneficial effects of propolis on immune response and intestinal characteristics and ecology (Figure 2). Propolis improved productive and reproductive performance in rabbits, as shown by higher litter size, survival, and growth rates of kits (Attia et al., 2015, 2019a). A subsequent study indicated that supplementation with propolis produced increased white blood cell and lymphocyte counts, greater phagocytic activity, and increased levels of serum β-globulin, indicative of higher antibody response (Attia et al., 2019b). Many authors reported positive effects on intestinal morphology (Eyng et al., 2016; Klarić et al., 2018; Prakatur et al., 2019) and on immune response and enzyme activity (Wang et al., 2007; Abdel-Mohsein et al., 2014; Attia et al., 2019b). However, no positive effects on the morphology of broiler small intestines were observed in the present study, which provided further evidence of inconsistent responses to propolis supplementation. This variability in response to propolis supplementation might be influenced by its complex composition.

![Figure 2 Mode of action of propolis as growth-promoting additive in broiler chickens](image)

There is a correlation between intestinal microbiota and morphology (Hanhineva et al., 2010; Abdel-Mohsein et al., 2014). Active compounds of propolis can produce aromatic metabolites when metabolized by intestinal bacteria, which may interact with bacterial cells and inhibit their growth (Biavatti et al., 2003; Açıkgoz et al., 2005). Consequently, intestinal morphology may be improved, and this may promote enzyme production and nutrient absorption (Abdel-Mohsein et al., 2014; Prakatur et al., 2019). Interestingly, in the present study an increase was observed in sucrase activity, particularly in the duodenum and jejunum. Phenolic compounds of propolis could contribute to glucose metabolism because they were reported to stimulate insulin secretion (Taheri et al., 2005; Shalmany & Shivazad, 2006).

**Conclusion**

Propolis supplementation has an apparent dose-dependent growth-promoting effect on broiler chickens. Its addition to the diet at 256 - 262 mg/kg was predicted to produce maximum ADG and final BW. However, it affected only the digestive enzyme sucrase, which increased linearly with the amount provided. Further study would be indicated to investigate how the specific components of propolis affect the performance and health of broiler chickens.

**Authors’ Contributions**

S, EW, AI, and RS conceptualized the research design and conducted the literature selection. MMS, RPS, and ACI performed database development and formal analysis. S and AI wrote the original draft of manuscript, AS, N, and AJ checked the database, supervised the research, and revised the manuscript.

**Conflict of Interest Declaration**

All authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.
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