

UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE TLAXCALA

MAESTRÍA EN CIENCIAS BIOLÓGICAS

TERMORREGULACIÓN CONDUCTUAL DENTRO DEL AGRUPAMIENTO DE LA CAMADA EN EL CONEJO NEONATO: DIFERENCIAS Y SEMEJANZAS ENTRE COMPAÑEROS DE CAMADA

TESIS

QUE PARA OBTENER EL GRADO DE: MAESTRA EN CIENCIAS

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TLAXCALA, TLAX.

AGOSTO 2008

COORDINACIÓN DE LA MAESTRÍA CENTRO TLAXCALA DE BIOLOGÍA DE LA CONDUCTA UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE TLAXCALA P R E S E N T E

Los abajo firmantes, miembros del jurado evaluador del proyecto de tesis que la Biól. Esmeralda García Torres realiza para la obtención del grado de Maestra en Ciencias Biológicas, expresamos que, habiendo revisado la versión final del documento de tesis, damos la aprobación para que ésta sea impresa y defendida en el examen correspondiente. El título que llevará es: "Termorregulación Conductual dentro del Agrupamiento de la Camada en el Conejo Neonato: Diferencias y Semejanzas entre Compañeros de Camada."

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El trabajo se desarrolló en las instalaciones del Centro Tlaxcala de Biología de la Conducta (CTBC) de la Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala – Unidad Periférica Tlaxcala del Instituto de Investigaciones Biomédicas de la UNAM.

Contribuyeron al desarrollo del proyecto fondos del CONACYT (25889-N; 198762-EG y Beca Mixta) y PAPIIT (IN229907).

SUN ALAN

RESUMEN

La termorregulación es la capacidad de los organismos para regular su temperatura corporal. En las crías del conejo la capacidad termorregulatoria durante los primeros días de vida postnatal es limitada por su condición de altricialidad. Para ello, utilizan estrategias conductuales como el agrupamiento y de esta manera pueden evitar la pérdida de calor e incrementar su aislamiento al permanecer en contacto con sus hermanos. En el presente estudio sobre termorregulación en crías de conejos, nos enfocamos en los individuos de peso corporal ligero, intermedio y pesado de cada camada y exploramos las diferencias y semejanzas de la conducta de agrupamiento en relación al peso corporal de las crías durante sus primeros siete días postnatales.

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El objetivo de este trabajo fue describir las diferencias y semejanzas en la termorregulación conductual entre miembros de la misma camada en el conejo doméstico e implementar un nuevo método (en relación al de Bautista et al. 2008) para estimar el índice de agrupamiento (posiciones térmicamente ventajosas igual a índices altos de agrupamiento). Se hizo un registro focal de la cría más pesada, intermedia y más ligera de cada camada para analizar su conducta en filmaciones de ocho camadas a las 10:00 h, 12:00 h, 14:00 h, 16:00 h y 18:00 h del día postnatal 1 al 7. Se obtuvieron datos de frecuencia y duración de las conductas de desplazamiento y se compararon los valores de las crías pesadas, intermedias y ligeras. Para estimar el índice de agrupamiento se obtuvo una fotografía al inicio de cada video y se consideró el número de hermanos en contacto con la cría focal.

Las crías más pesadas tuvieron un índice de agrupamiento significativamente mayor que sus hermanas intermedias y ligeras. También se encontraron diferencias significativas en la temperatura corporal, ingesta de leche, índice de conversión de leche a biomasa, siendo las crías pesadas quienes tuvieron los valores más altos. Respecto a las conductas de desplazamiento las crías intermedias y ligeras se desplazaron por más tiempo que las crías pesadas. Correlaciones con el índice de conversión de leche a biomasa mostraron una relación negativa con las conductas de desplazamiento, una relación positiva con el índice de agrupamiento y con la temperatura corporal. Concluimos que las crías más pesadas en camadas del conejo doméstico son más eficientes al competir por posiciones térmicamente ventajosas.

De este estudio surgen algunas preguntas para futura investigación, algunas de ellas son:

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¿Cómo es ésta dinámica en camadas de diferente tamaño?

¿Cuáles serán las consecuencias fisiológicas y conductuales a largo plazo de estas diferencias tempranas en la conducta termorregulatoria entre crías pesadas y ligeras? ¿Existen diferencias anatómicas y funcionales a nivel cerebral-hipotalámico entre crías pesadas y ligeras asociadas a sus estrategias conductuales?

¿En qué grado estos hallazgos corresponden con la dinámica del agrupamiento de las crías del conejo en la naturaleza?

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- III. Heiko G. Rödel, Amando Bautista, Esmeralda García-Torres, Margarita Martínez-Gómez, Robyn Hudson (En prensa) Why do heavy littermates grow better than lighter ones? A study in wild and domestic European rabbits. doi:10.1016/j.physbeh.2008.07.011.

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INTRODUCCIÓN

El agrupamiento es una interacción social entre los individuos, el cual, implica beneficios y costos para cada participante (Lee 1994). Al agruparse, los individuos obtienen beneficios como la protección contra depredadores, defensa de recursos contra conespecíficos o especies competidoras (Drickamer y Vessey 1982), incremento en la eficiencia de forrajeo, conservación de la energía e intercambio de información (Lee 1994). Así como hay beneficios también existen costos como resultado de tales interacciones. Dentro de éstos, están los surgidos de la competencia por acceso al alimento y por los sitios más cálidos dentro del agrupamiento (Calf et al. 2002).

Termorregulación social

Uno de los principales beneficios que obtienen la mayoría de los grupos de vertebrados al agruparse es una termorregulación eficiente. En reptiles, concurren muchas interacciones sociales complejas dentro de las cuales, se ha encontrado que algunas especies de serpientes se agregan debajo de rocas para compartir condiciones termorregulatorias favorables como en el caso de los géneros *Nerodia*, *Storeria* y *Thamnophis* (Gregory 2003).

En aves, el pingüino emperador (*Aptenodytes forsteri*) se agrupa durante el invierno para conservar el calor e incubar sus huevos. Los pingüinos que están en el exterior se mueven hacia el centro para reentrar al grupo y evitar la pérdida de calor (Gilbert et al. 2006).

En algunas situaciones, la jerarquía de dominancia implica diferencias en los beneficios de la termorregulación social. Por ejemplo, las aves de tamaño pequeño (cuya área de superficie corporal es mayor en relación a su volumen de biomasa) pueden tener dificultades para mantener una temperatura corporal constante en condiciones de frío. Para solucionar las demandas energéticas y mantener su temperatura corporal constante, se agrupan en bandadas, reduciendo de esta forma los costos energéticos. La temperatura ambiental dentro del agrupamiento se incrementa debido al aislamiento. Los individuos en el centro del agrupamiento tienen un área de superficie corporal expuesta al ambiente más pequeña y pierden menos calor que las aves localizadas en la periferia del agrupamiento. Hay evidencias en la literatura de que los individuos dominantes en las bandadas ganan tales posiciones centrales dentro del agrupamiento (Calf et al. 2002). Este es el caso de maniquí de bronce

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(Lonchura cucullata) que se agrupa en bandadas con el fin de obtener un beneficio termorregulatorio, particularmente durante el invierno donde los individuos dominantes obtienen las posiciones centrales (sitios mejor aislados) dentro del agrupamiento y de esta manera reducen el gasto energético (Calf et al. 2002).

Respecto a los mamíferos, estudios realizados en lemures (*Eulemur fulvus rufus*) han revelado que estos animales responden a temperaturas ambientales frías mediante la inactividad y formando agrupaciones (Ostner 2002). Durante la hibernación las marmotas alpinas (*Marmota marmota*) se benefician termorregulatoriamente al agruparse con otros individuos (Arnold 1988). En la ardilla (*Sciurus aberti*) la proporción de individuos que participan en el agrupamiento comunal incrementa cuando desciende la temperatura ambiental como un mecanismo para reducir los costos termorregulatorios durante condiciones frías (Edelman y Koprowski 2007). En el vampiro común (*Desmodus rotundus*) y en el murciélago (*Diphylla ecaudata*) los machos no residentes de un grupo son aceptados en la colonia principal cuando las temperaturas ambientales son más bajas. Esta conducta sugiere una termorregulación social (Delpietro y Russo 2002).

En el caso de las crías, particularmente de especies de mamíferos altriciales, el agrupamiento dentro del nido es una de las primeras formas de interacción social (Alberts 1978a), conducta social que les provee una termorregulación más eficiente durante sus primeros días de vida postnatal.

Termorregulación social en mamíferos neonatos

El agrupamiento dentro del nido es una de las primeras manifestaciones de la conducta social en las crías de rata y otros roedores como el hamster y el gerbo (Gebczynski 1975; Leonard 1982; Schneider et al. 1995) y cumple con diferentes funciones, una de ellas, optimizar el amamantamiento por parte de la madre. Así, cuando las crías se encuentran en un mismo espacio, al llegar la hora del amamantamiento permiten a la madre localizarlas con rapidez (Alberts 1978a). Otra función importante es aumentar significativamente la capacidad termorregulatoria reduciendo el gasto de energía metabólica (Alberts 1978b).

Estudios en ratas neonatas (*Rattus norvegicus*) han mostrado que el agrupamiento está controlado por señales multisensoriales; dentro de él, los neonatos presentan una persistente conducta de contacto hacia otros individuos, por lo que las señales táctiles denominadas

"contacto confortable" se consideran como un reforzador innato (Alberts 1978a). En asociación con el contacto confortable, la conducta de meterse unos debajo de otros sugiere que una respuesta fótica negativa por parte de las crías de rata está relacionada con el agrupamiento. Es importante mencionar que cada uno de los estímulos considerados individualmente no son suficientes para inducir y mantener el agrupamiento (Alberts 1978a). También se ha mostrado que el ahorro metabólico (en términos de consumo de oxígeno) al agruparse es significativo (Alberts 1978b). La magnitud de ese ahorro metabólico se relacionó con el tamaño del agrupamiento (en términos del área de superficie expuesta de las crías). Así, el máximo consumo de oxígeno se cuantificó en crías que permanecieron solas, mientras que el más bajo se asoció con el agrupamiento en función del número de crías por grupo (Alberts 1978b).

Respecto a la dinámica del agrupamiento en crías de rata se ha observado que éstas circulan activamente en el agrupamiento y cuando se encuentran en la periferia penetran hacia el centro del grupo desplazando a las crías vecinas. Estas últimas permanecen por un tiempo "flotando" sobre el agrupamiento para posteriormente volver a entrar en él (Alberts 1978a; Alberts y Cramer 1988). Estas interacciones entre las crías sirven como una forma de regulación conductual grupal modificando el área de superficie expuesta de las crías participantes en el agrupamiento conforme a las condiciones de temperatura ambiental. Esto no sólo les ayuda a regular su temperatura corporal, también reduce su gasto energético individual cuyo ahorro pueden entonces destinar a crecimiento y maduración (Alberts 1978b; Alberts y Cramer 1988).

Aunque se ha descrito de manera general la dinámica del agrupamiento en las crías de rata, falta detallar y comparar las estrategias individuales de desplazamiento dentro del agrupamiento, así como determinar los efectos fisiológicos a corto plazo de dichas estrategias por ejemplo, diferencias en temperatura corporal y en la conversión de leche a biomasa.

Investigar esto en crías de rata, y en la mayoría de los mamíferos es dificil, particularmente por la constante presencia de la madre. Sin embargo, el conejo doméstico ofrece un modelo adecuado para dicha investigación, particularmente porque la madre sólo visita a las crías una vez al día durante el amamantamiento, por un breve periodo de tres a cuatro minutos, y el resto del tiempo permanece ausente. Esto nos permite observar y manipular a las crías sin alterar la relación natural madre-cría. Además es muy fácil separar el

efecto que la madre tiene sobre el desarrollo de las crías, del efecto de la presencia de los hermanos.

ANTECEDENTES

Termorregulación en las crías del conejo

En las crías del conejo, la capacidad termorregulatoria durante los primeros días de vida postnatal es limitada (Hull y Segal 1965) ya que, al igual que otras crías de mamíferos altriciales, tienen un área de superficie grande en relación a su peso corporal. Además, aunque al nacer no están totalmente desnudas, su pelo es muy fino por lo que tienen un aislamiento térmico escaso. Dentro de las estrategias que las crías del conejo utilizan para termorregular existen mecanismos fisiológicos y conductuales.

Mecanismos fisiológicos

Los mecanismos implicados en la producción de calor abarcan el calor resultante de la contracción muscular (termogénesis por temblor) y el calor producido por la actividad metabólica de los órganos del cuerpo (termogénesis por actividad metabólica) (Leon 1986). En los conejos recién nacidos la producción de calor como respuesta a la exposición al frío ocurre principalmente en el tejido adiposo pardo (TAP). El TAP está situado principalmente alrededor del cuello, entre las escápulas (Fig.1). Pequeños depósitos pueden encontrarse también en la axila, en el pecho y alrededor de los riñones (Hull y Segal 1965).

La activación de TAP es mediada por la transmisión noradrenérgica a través del sistema nervioso simpático que inerva ese tejido. La producción de calor es un subproducto de la oxidación de los ácidos grasos contenidos en los adipositos del TAP. El flujo sanguíneo hacia el TAP se incrementa drásticamente cuando las temperaturas ambientales son bajas, llevando el calor hacia el resto del cuerpo (Leon 1986).

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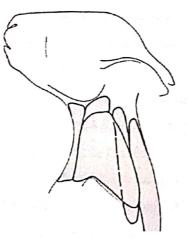


Figura 1. Distribución del tejido adiposo pardo (área en color gris) en el conejo neonato (Hull y Segall 1965).

Mecanismos conductuales

Las crías del conejo se desarrollan en un nido aislado dentro de la madriguera de crianza, el cual las protege de las bajas temperaturas ambientales (González-Mariscal y Rosenblat 1996) así, la mayor parte del tiempo las crías permanecen quietas y agrupadas bajo una cubierta aislante provista por pasto seco y pelo de la madre (Hudson y Distel 1982). Durante el tiempo que transcurre entre un amamantamiento y otro, las crías permanecen juntas. Agruparse después del amamantamiento les toma unos 30 minutos aproximadamente. Durante el día, las crías se mantienen bien cubiertas con el material del nido y no están activas. También se ha observado que las crías se agrupan en la región más caliente del nido (Hudson y Distel 1982). Si se considera a la camada como una unidad termorregulatoria, los individuos que se agrupan y crecen en camadas pueden evitar la pérdida de calor e incrementar su aislamiento respecto a la proporción de sus cuerpos en contacto con hermanos (Leon 1986).

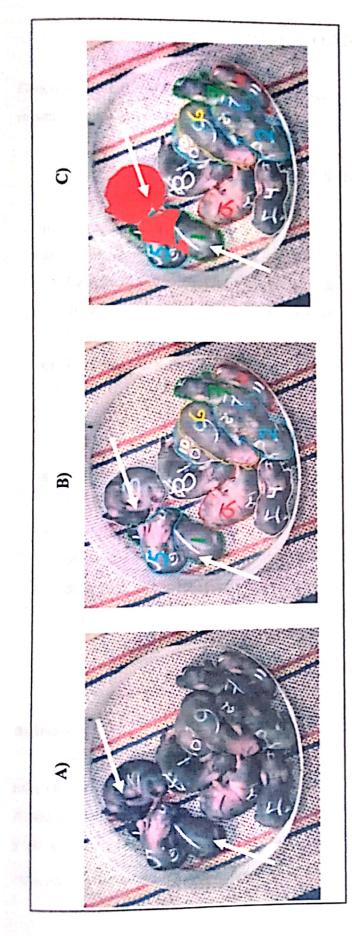
En un estudio en el que se investigó la conducta de termotaxis en las crías del conejo colocándolos sobre dos gradientes térmicos (linear y concéntrico), se observó que en ambos gradientes las crías localizaron el calor y demostraron su habilidad para orientarse apropiadamente usando sólo señales térmicas (Pacheco-Cobos et al. 2003).

Además, en un estudio reciente se observó que cuando la temperatura del suelo es más fría los beneficios termorregulatorios de tener un mayor número de hermanos de camada superan las consecuencias negativas de la competencia por la leche (Rödel et al. 2008). De

esta manera, el tamaño óptimo de la camada es dependiente del ambiente y varía de tal forma que favorezca el crecimiento de las crías en esta especie (Rödel et al. 2008).

En nuestro laboratorio, en un experimento en el que se observó a lo largo del día la conducta de las crías bajo temperaturas ambientales debajo de su zona termoneutral, se encontró que éstas permanecen agrupadas casi todo el tiempo. Además, se identificaron las conductas más conspicuas para reagruparse: la conducta de trepar (cuando las crías suben encima de sus hermanas y se desplazan sobre ellas) y la conducta de rooting (cuando las crías se desplazan por debajo o entre sus hermanas adyacentes). Al ejecutar cualquiera de estas dos conductas, las crías obtuvieron una mejor posición dentro del agrupamiento. Tanto un evento de rooting como de trepar usualmente resultaron en una mejora del "índice del agrupamiento", el cual es una estimación del grado de aislamiento de una cría en un momento dado (Fig. 2). Por el contrario, permanecer inmóvil resultó en un marcado decremento de este índice. Con ello, se concluyó que el agrupamiento de la camada y una posición bien aislada dentro de éste, representa un recurso importante para los conejos recién nacidos (Bautista et al. 2008). Sin embargo, aunque las crías trabajan para obtener posiciones mejor aisladas dentro del agrupamiento no encontramos apoyo a la predicción de que las crías compiten por tales posiciones durante los primeros cinco días de vida postnatal y que las crías con los pesos más altos al nacimiento son las que tienen ventaja.

El presente trabajo es una ampliación del estudio anterior y en este caso nos enfocámos solamente en los individuos que ocuparon los extremos de la jerarquía de peso intracamada y la posición intermedia (en el estudio previo se analizó la conducta de todas las crías de las camadas muestreadas). Además, exploramos las diferencias y semejanzas de la conducta de agrupamiento en relación al peso corporal de las crías durante sus primeros siete días postnatales. También, se utilizó un índice de agrupamiento (ver adelante métodos) diferente al utilizado en Bautista et al. 2008 para determinar las posiciones relativas de los individuos de la camada. El nuevo método es más eficiente en términos de tiempo, ya que para analizar una foto con el método de Bautista et al. 2008 el tiempo utilizado es aproximadamente de 20 minutos, mientras que con el método que proponemos en este trabajo la misma fotografía se analiza en dos minutos. De esta manera es más factible analizar más camadas en menos tiempo.



área cubriendo a otra cría (Z). En la Figura C se muestra el área de superficie de la cría 3 pintada en rojo la cual representa el 100% del área de su superficie corporal visible desde arriba. De la cría 1 solo está pintada su área de superficie corporal que está siendo cubierta por la cría 5. En este Figura 2. Procedimiento para calcular el "índice de agrupamiento" A) Foto digital inicial archivada en la PC. B) Posteriormente con el programa Photo Paint a cada cría se le delineó su periferia. C) Luego en el programa Sigma Scan Pro (4.01) se midió a cada cría la longitud total de su periferia y la longitud de su periferia en contacto con otra(s) cría(s). Con estas dos medidas se obtuvo el porcentaje de periferia no expuesta (X). cubierta por otra cría(s) y finalmente el área de esa superficie corporal cubriendo a otra cría(s). Con estas mediciones se calculó el porcentaje de área cubierta por otra cría (2Y) (este porcentaje se multiplicó por dos porque el gazapo está cobijado por abajo y por arriba) y el porcentaje del ambién se midió el área total observable sobre el plano de la imagen de la superficie corporal de la cría, luego el área de esa superficie corporal caso particular, la cría 3 tuvo un índice de agrupamiento menor que la cría 1 (Bautista et al. 2005; Bautista et al. 2008)

OBJETIVO GENERAL

Describir diferencias y semejanzas en la termorregulación conductual entre miembros de la misma camada en el conejo doméstico.

OBJETIVOS ESPECÍFICOS

Investigar:

- a) La relación del peso corporal inicial de las crías y su incremento de peso.
- b) La relación del peso corporal de las crías con su índice de agrupamiento, conducta
- de desplazamiento, temperatura corporal, ingesta de leche e índice de conversión de leche a biomasa durante los primeros siete días postnatales.
 - c) Implementar un nuevo método para estimar el índice de agrupamiento.

PREDICCIONES

- a) Las crías pesadas al nacimiento incrementarán proporcionalmente su peso más que las crías ligeras.
- b) Las crías pesadas tendrán un índice de agrupamiento mayor, realizarán un menor número de eventos de desplazamiento, tendrán una temperatura corporal más alta, ingerirán una mayor cantidad de leche y convertirán más eficientemente la leche que ingieren a biomasa que las crías ligeras.

MATERIAL Y MÉTODO

Animales

Se utilizaron ocho camadas (≥ ocho crías vivas) que se obtuvieron de conejas de la raza chinchilla del bioterio del Centro Tlaxcala de Biología de la Conducta, Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala. Las conejas fueron mantenidas en jaulas de acero inoxidable de 90 x 60 x 40 cm, bajo un ciclo luz/oscuridad 16:8 h correspondiente a las condiciones de la estación reproductora de esta especie en Europa. Se les proporcionó alimento (Purina[®]) y

agua *ad libitum*. Para el apareamiento, las hembras fueron introducidas en una arena de malla metálica de 1m de diámetro con un macho semental de la raza chinchilla del mismo bioterio. Tres días antes del parto se introdujo a la jaula de la madre una caja nido de madera de $40 \times 35 \times 15$ cm con paja en su interior para que la coneja construyera su nido.

Procedimiento

<u>DIA 0</u>: Se refiere al día del parto. En este día, después del nacimiento se sacó la caja nido de la jaula de la madre y a cada cría se le marcó un número en el vientre con un marcador indeleble para su identificación individual. Además se tomó su temperatura corporal (cuello e ingle) con un termómetro de mercurio de lectura rápida (Schultheis tipo cloacal, Miller & Weber[®] T-6000). De cada cría se registró su peso corporal con una balanza analítica (Ohaus[®] modelo Scout ProSP2001), para ello los animales fueron sacados de la caja nido en orden arbitrario. Al término de este procedimiento se regresaron a la caja nido la cual se introdujo nuevamente a la jaula de la madre en donde permaneció hasta el día siguiente.

<u>DIA 1</u>: A las 9:00 h la caja nido con las crías se sacó de la jaula de la madre y se llevó al cuarto cuya temperatura estaba ajustada a 25° C. Esta temperatura, por debajo de la zona termoneutral de las crías del conejo (rango de temperatura ambiental en la cual la tasa metabólica de los organismos es mínima y teóricamente igual a la tasa metabólica basal; Hull y Segal 1965; Gordon 1993), se escogió para inducir su agrupamiento. Dado que las crías rápidamente ganan aislamiento térmico al incrementar su masa corporal y pelo (Bautista et al. 2003), para evitar que dejaran de agruparse la temperatura ambiental del cuarto frío se fue bajando un grado centígrado diariamente hasta llegar a 19°C en el último día de observación (Día postnatal 7).

Cada cría fue tomada de la caja nido aleatoriamente para registrar su peso corporal, se le midió la temperatura corporal en cuello e ingle y el número que se le había pintado un día anterior fue marcado en la parte dorsal y lateral de su cuerpo para facilitar su visualización al analizar los videos; después se regresó a la caja nido. Una vez concluida tal acción la camada completa se pasó de la caja nido a una caja experimental del mismo tamaño cuyo piso estaba cubierto de jerga. Para mantener a las crías en el centro de la caja y evitar que ganaran aislamiento térmico de las paredes de la caja por acurrucarse en las

esquinas de ella, se colocó un cilindro metálico de alambre cuyo perímetro fue inicialmente de 90 cm y que se agrandó 5 cm más en el día postnatal 5 (Fig. 3). Finalmente, la caja experimental se colocó sobre una mesa y debajo de una cámara digital (Sony[®] modelo CR-TRV) montada en un trípode de tal manera que se pudiera enfocar la caja experimental para tener filmaciones regulares diarias de la camada.

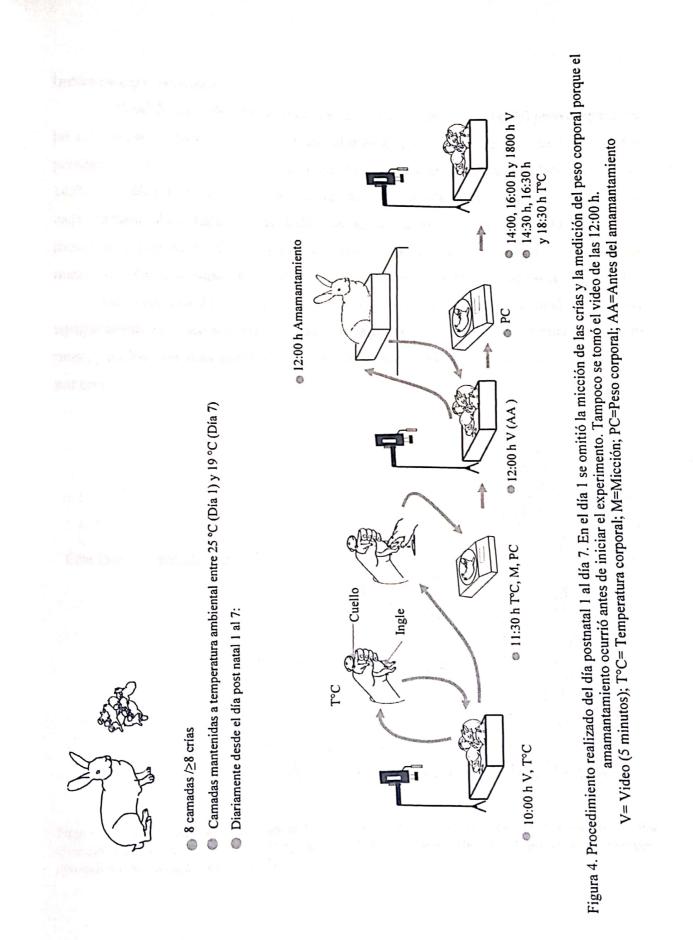


Figura 3. Caja nido experimental con piso forrado de jerga y el cilindro que contuvo a las camadas.

A las 10:00 h se registró la temperatura ambiental, se filmó la camada por 5 min y se midió temperatura en cuello e ingle. A partir de aquí se registró la temperatura ambiental y se grabaron los videos cada dos horas hasta las 18:00 hr. A las 14:30 h, 16:30 h y 18:30 h también se midió la temperatura corporal (cuello e ingle) de cada cría.

<u>DÍA 2 al DÍA 7</u>: A las 10:00 h se filmó por 5 min, luego se midió la temperatura corporal (cuello e ingle) y se registró la temperatura ambiental. A las 11:30 h a cada cría se les midió la temperatura corporal (en cuello e ingle) y se le indujo la micción (para cuantificar de manera más exacta la cantidad de leche ingerida puesto que las crías orinan durante el amamantamiento) mediante estimulación de la región perigenital con papel sanitario; después se pesaron y se regresaron a la caja experimental.

A las 12:00 h antes del amamantamiento se grabó el video y posteriormente se quitó el cilindro metálico sin perturbar a la camada. Se trajo a la coneja al cuarto frío y se colocó sobre la mesa de experimentación frente a la caja experimental para que entrara dentro de ésta e iniciara el amamantamiento. Cuando la coneja salió de la caja experimental se le regresó a su jaula en el bioterio y posteriormente se registró el peso de las crías otra vez y se colocaron en la caja experimental. A las 14:30 h, 16:30 h y 18:30 h se midió la temperatura corporal (Fig. 4).



Scanné avec CamScanne

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Índice de agrupamiento

Cría focal

Al final de los siete días de experimento se obtuvo un promedio del peso corporal de las crías sobrevivientes para elegir a las crías focales (cría más ligera, intermedia y más pesada). De los videos obtenidos, al inicio de cada sesión de filmación (10:00h, 12:00h, 14:00h 16:00h y 18:00h) se estimó el índice de agrupamiento de las crías seleccionadas de cada camada. Para estimar este índice se modificó el índice de agrupamiento antes mencionado (ver Antecedentes) y sólo se consideró el número de hermanos en contacto (al menos un 10% de su superficie corporal) con la cría focal al inicio de cada sesión (Fig. 5).

Para cada cría de cada categoría (pesada, intermedia y ligera) se estimó el índice de agrupamiento en cinco sesiones por día (en las horas mencionadas anteriormente). Por lo tanto, para los siete días analizados tuvimos un total de 35 datos de índice de agrupamiento por cría.



Figura 5. Foto digital archivada en la PC utilizada para estimar el índice de agrupamiento. Por ejemplo, para la cría 5, el índice de agrupamiento es de uno (considerando que el único hermano con quien tiene contacto es la cría 1).

Leche ingerida e índice de conversión de leche a biomasa

El peso en gramos de la leche ingerida diariamente fue calculada sustrayendo el peso corporal de cada cría preamamantamiento de su peso postamamantamiento. Dado que el tamaño de las crías y el volumen de su estómago influyen en la cantidad de leche que una cría ingiere, y por lo tanto, en la tasa de crecimiento, la leche ingerida durante los días del experimento fue expresada como un porcentaje del peso de cada cría en el día postnatal 1. La eficiencia de las crías para convertir la leche a biomasa fue estimada usando un índice de eficiencia de conversión de leche (IC) para la leche ingerida durante t días: C_t = (aumento en peso (preamamantamiento) durante t + 1 días) / (peso de la leche ingerida durante t días) (Drummond et al. 2000; Bautista et al. 2003, 2005; 2008).

Análisis conductual del agrupamiento

Los videos obtenidos fueron capturados en una computadora con ayuda del programa Windows[®] Movie Maker de Microsoft[®] (versión 2.1.4026.0). La conducta de cada animal focal fue seguida durante los cinco minutos de la filmación para obtener la frecuencia y duración de las conductas analizadas (ver más adelante) en los días post natales 1 al 7. Las conductas relacionadas con el desplazamiento de las crías dentro del agrupamiento (ver Antecedentes), fueron las siguientes:

Trepar: La cría sube su cabeza y extremidades anteriores sobre una u otras crías mientras se empuja con sus extremidades posteriores. Puede tener una parte o todo el cuerpo sobre sus hermanas y puede o no desplazarse sobre éstas (Fig. 6).

"Rooting": La cría empuja su cabeza al mismo tiempo que se desplaza entre dos hermanas o por debajo de ellas, moviendo vigorosamente sus extremidades anteriores y posteriores y empujándose hacia enfrente con ellas (Fig. 7).

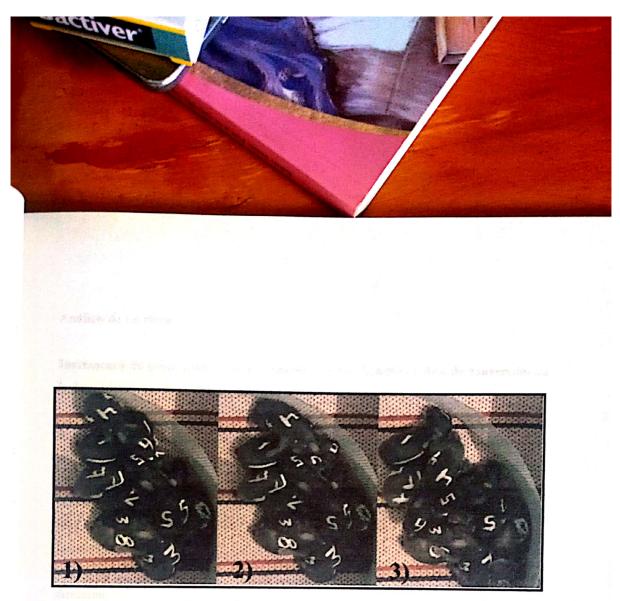


Figura 6. Secuencia de imágenes en donde se muestra la conducta de trepar. El individuo focal es la cría 4.

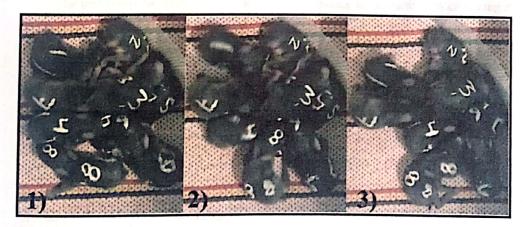


Figura7. Ejemplo de la conducta de rooting. El individuo focal es la cría 4.

Análisis de los datos

Incremento de peso, temperatura corporal, ingesta de leche, índice de conversión de leche a biomasa y duración de la conducta de desplazamiento

Se utilizaron un total de 24 crías de las cuales se obtuvo el incremento de peso, el promedio de su temperatura corporal, de la cantidad de leche ingerida, de su índice de conversión de leche a biomasa y de la duración total de la conducta de desplazamiento del día postnatal 1 al 7. Además, se calculó el porcentaje de duración de las conductas de desplazamiento (para trepar y rooting). Para el análisis de estos datos paramétricos (excepto para el índice de conversión de leche a biomasa) dependientes (ya que las tres crías, ligera, intermedia y pesada fueron hermanas de la misma camada) se utilizó una ANOVA de medidas repetidas de una cola a un α =0.05 dado que las hipótesis planteadas tienen dirección.

Índice de agrupamiento y frecuencia de la conducta de desplazamiento

Se obtuvieron las medianas del número de hermanos en contacto para comparar el índice de agrupamiento entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas. Para el análisis de la frecuencia de las conductas de desplazamiento (trepar y rooting) se calculó el porcentaje de eventos. Al ser estos datos no paramétricos se hizo un análisis de Friedman de una cola a un α =0.05.

Correlaciones

Para las correlaciones entre el índice de agrupamiento—temperatura corporal e índice de conversión de leche a biomasa—índice de agrupamiento, se utilizó una correlación de Spearman. Las correlaciones entre índice de conversión de leche a biomasa duración de la conducta de desplazamiento e índice de conversión de leche a biomasa temperatura corporal se analizaron con una correlación de Pearson. Ambas correlaciones fueron de una cola a un α =0.05.

RESULTADOS

Mortalidad

Un total de 21 crías murieron a lo largo del experimento (Tabla 1). El 60% fueron hembras y 40% machos (n= 20 sexos identificados). El 81% de estas crías murieron antes del día postnatal 6.

Camada	Sexo m=macho, b=hembra	Día del deceso
1	h,h	4,4
2	m,h,h	4,4,6
3	h,m,m,h,h	3,4,5,5,6
4	m,h,h,m	5,5,5,7
5	h,h	3,3
6	m,m,h	3,4,4
7	•	1
8	m	6

Tabla 1. Número de crías muertas por camada y día de deceso. En la camada 7 no se identificó el sexo de la cría que murió (*).

Para el análisis de mortalidad se utilizaron las 21 crías muertas cuyos datos de su peso corporal inicial, peso corporal antes de morir y valores del promedio de su temperatura corporal 24 h antes, se compararon con los datos de uno de sus hermanos sobrevivientes seleccionados al azar. El análisis mostró que el peso corporal inicial de las crías que murieron fue significativamente menor que el peso corporal de sus hermanas sobrevivientes (t-pareada=5.61, g.1=20, p<0.0001; Fig. 8).

De la misma manera, la mortalidad estuvo asociada con el peso corporal de las crías antes de su muerte. Las crías sobrevivientes tuvieron un peso corporal (24h antes del deceso) significativamente mayor que las crías muertas (t-pareada=5.95, g.l=20, p<0.0001; Fig. 9). Respecto a la temperatura corporal las crías muertas tuvieron valores significativamente más bajos que las crías sobrevivientes (t-pareada=7.78, g.l= 19, p<0.0001; Fig.10). Para el análisis de la temperatura sólo se utilizaron los datos de 20 crías

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muertas puesto que una cría murió el día postnatal 1 y no se tenían datos de su temperatura corporal 24 h antes.

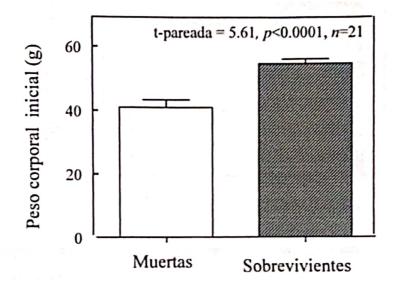


Figura 8. Comparación del promedio del peso corporal inicial (± EE) entre las crías muertas y sobrevivientes.

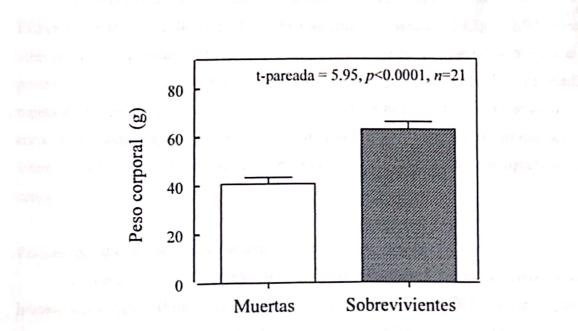


Figura 9. Comparación del promedio del peso corporal 24 h antes del deceso (± EE) entre las crías muertas y sobrevivientes.

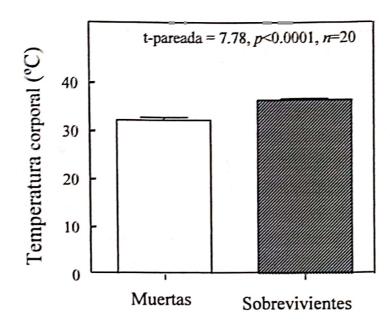


Figura 10. Comparación del promedio de la temperatura corporal 24 h antes (± EE) entre las crías muertas y sobrevivientes.

Peso corporal inicial e incremento de peso

El promedio del peso corporal de las crías en el día postnatal 1 fue de 43.5 g (\pm 2.4 EE) en las crías ligeras, 48.9 g (\pm 2.8 EE) en las crías intermedias y 59.5g (\pm 2.0 EE) en las crías pesadas. Encontramos claras diferencias en el incremento de peso corporal entre el día postnatal 1 y 7 entre las crías pesadas, intermedias y ligeras (ANOVA de medidas repetidas, F_{2,14}=24.32, p<0.001). Las crías más pesadas mostraron un incremento de peso corporal absoluto mayor que las crías intermedias y ligeras. Del mismo modo, las crías intermedias tuvieron un incremento de peso corporal mayor que las crías ligeras de cada camada (Fig. 11).

Peso corporal e índice de agrupamiento

El índice de agrupamiento difirió significativamente entre las crías pesadas, intermedias y ligeras (Prueba de rangos de Friedman, Fr=7.8, p=0.017). Las crías pesadas tuvieron un índice de agrupamiento, determinado por el número de hermanos en contacto, mayor en comparación con las crías intermedias y ligeras. No se encontraron diferencias significativas entre las crías intermedias y ligeras (Fig. 12).

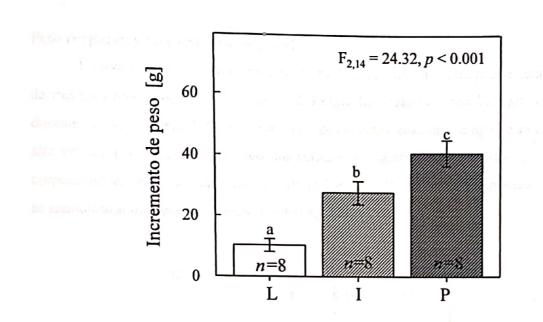


Figura 11. Comparación del promedio del incremento de peso postnatal (\pm EE), obtenido como el cambio en el peso corporal entre el día postnatal 1 y 7 entre las crías ligeras (L), intermedias (I) y pesadas (P). Las diferencias significativas entre las tres categorías de las crías (Post hoc t-pareada para ANOVA de medidas repetidas) son dadas con diferentes letras.

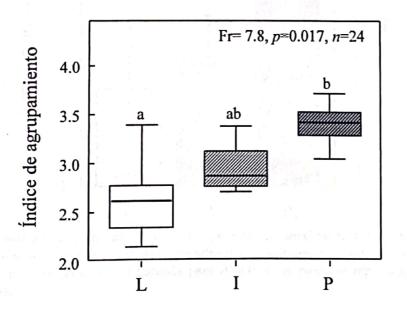


Figura 12. Comparación del índice de agrupamiento del día postnatal 1 al 7 entre las crías ligeras (L), intermedias (I) y pesadas (P). Las líneas centrales de la caja representan la mediana, los límites horizontales son los percentiles 25 y 75, los bigotes son los valores mínimo y máximo. Las diferencias significativas entre las tres categorías de las crías (Post-hoc comparación múltiple de Dunn) son dadas con diferentes letras.

Peso corporal y temperatura corporal

La temperatura corporal (medida sobre la piel) difirió significativamente (ANOVA de medidas repetidas, $F_{2,14}=5.15$, p=0.021) entre las crías de acuerdo a su peso corporal durante los días postnatales 1 al 7. Las crías pesadas tuvieron una temperatura corporal más alta en comparación con las crías intermedias y ligeras. En promedio, la temperatura corporal de las crías pesadas y ligeras difiere 1.4 °C. Entre las crías intermedias y ligeras no se encontraron diferencias significativas (Fig. 13).

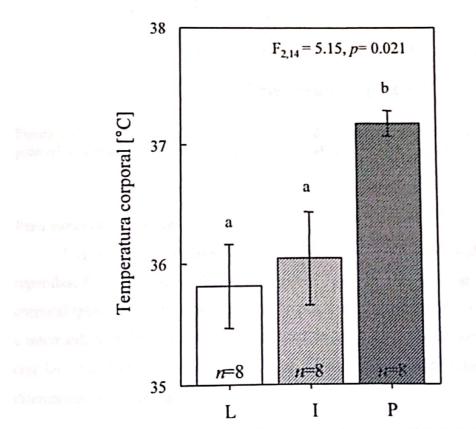
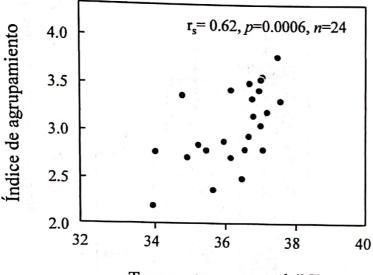


Figura 13. Comparación del promedio de la temperatura corporal (\pm EE) del día postnatal 1 al 7 entre las crías ligeras (L), intermedias (I) y pesadas (P). Las diferencias significativas entre las tres categorías de las crías (Post-hoc t-pareada para ANOVA de medidas repetidas) son dadas con diferentes letras.

Relación entre índice de agrupamiento y temperatura corporal

La mediana del número de hermanos en contacto y el promedio de la temperatura corporal de las crías individuales se correlacionaron positivamente (correlación de Spearman $r_s=0.62$, p=0.0006, n=24; Fig. 14).



Temperatura corporal (°C)

Figura 14. Correlación de Spearman entre el índice de agrupamiento y la temperatura corporal promedio (medida diariamente del día postnatal 1 al 7) de las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas.

Peso corporal e ingesta de leche

Los resultados obtenidos muestran diferencias significativas (ANOVA de medidas repetidas, $F_{2,14}$ =11.780, p<0.001) en la ingesta de leche entre las crías de acuerdo a su peso corporal (pesadas, intermedias, ligeras) durante los días postnatales 2 al 7. Las crías pesadas e intermedias ingirieron una mayor cantidad de leche durante este periodo en comparación con las crías ligeras (Fig. 15). Entre las crías pesadas e intermedias no se observaron diferencias significativas.

Peso corporal e índice de conversión de leche a biomasa

El índice de conversión de leche a biomasa difiere significativamente entre las crías pesadas, intermedias y ligeras de las ocho camadas analizadas (ANOVA de medidas repetidas, $F_{2,14}$ =4.66, p=0.028): las crías pesadas mostraron un índice mayor comparado con sus compañeras de camada intermedias y ligeras (Fig. 16). Las crías intermedias y ligeras no mostraron diferencias en su índice de conversión de leche a biomasa.

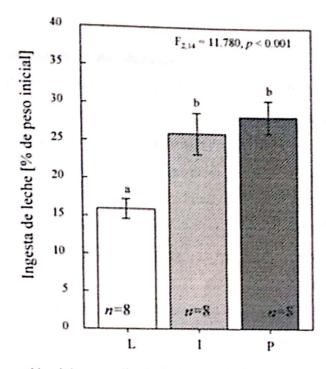


Figura 15. Comparación del promedio de la ingesta de leche como porcentaje del peso inicial (\pm EE) del día postnatal 2 al 7 entre las crías ligeras (L), intermedias (l) y pesadas (P). Las diferencias significativas entre las tres categorías de las crías (Post hoc t-pareada para ANOVA de medidas repetidas) son dadas con diferentes letras.

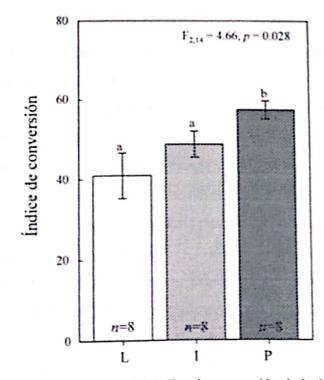


Figura 16. Comparación del promedio del índice de conversión de leche a biomasa (± EE) entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas. Las diferencias significativas entre las diferentes categorías de las crías (Post hoc t-pareada para ANOVA de medidas repetidas) son dadas con las diferentes letras.

Peso corporal y conducta de desplazamiento

Se encontraron diferencias significativas en la frecuencia y duración de las conductas de desplazamiento entre crías de diferente peso corporal. Las crías ligeras e intermedias realizaron con más frecuencia (Prueba de rangos de Friedman, Fr=9.25, p=0.008) la conducta de rooting que las crías pesadas (Fig.17A). En relación con la conducta de trepar, tanto crías intermedias como ligeras la realizan significativamente con menos frecuencia (Prueba de rangos de Friedman, Fr=9.25, p=0.008) que las crías pesadas (Fig.17B). Las crías intermedias mostraron una frecuencia de rooting y de trepar similar a la de las crías ligeras.

Respecto a la duración de la conducta de rooting, las crías ligeras realizan por más tiempo esta conducta que las crías pesadas (ANOVA de medidas repetidas, $F_{2,14}=9.40$, p=0.003) (Fig.18A). Para la duración de la conducta de trepar se encontraron diferencias significativas entre las crías ligeras y pesadas (ANOVA de medidas repetidas, $F_{2,14}=9.40$, p=0.003). Las crías pesadas se desplazan por más tiempo mediante esta conducta que las crías ligeras (Fig.18B). Las crías intermedias no difieren en la duración de ambas conductas con las crías ligeras y pesadas.

La duración promedio total de las conductas de desplazamiento (rooting y trepar) en el agrupamiento de la camada fue significativamente diferente entre las crías pesadas, intermedias y ligeras en los días postnatales 1 al 7 (ANOVA de medidas repetidas, $F_{2,14}=10.10$, p=0.002): las crías pesadas se desplazaron menos tiempo comparado con el tiempo de desplazamiento de sus hermanas intermedias y ligeras (Fig. 19). Entre crías intermedias y ligeras no se encontraron diferencia significativas.

El análisis diario de las conductas de desplazamiento de las crías mostró diferencias significativas en el día postnatal 2 únicamente para la frecuencia de tales conductas (Prueba de rangos de Friedman, Fr=6.250, p=0.0469). Las crías pesadas y ligeras ejecutan un menor número de eventos de desplazamiento que las crías intermedias (ver anexo). En el días postnatal 5 se encontraron diferencias significativas en la duración (ANOVA de medidas repetidas, $F_{2,14}$ =7.22, p=0.007). Las crías ligeras invierten más tiempo desplazándose que las crías pesadas (ver anexo). A pesar de que no se encontraron diferencias significativas en los días postnatales 1, 3, 4, 6 y 7, las tendencias fueron las mismas que las observadas en los días postnatales 2 y 5.

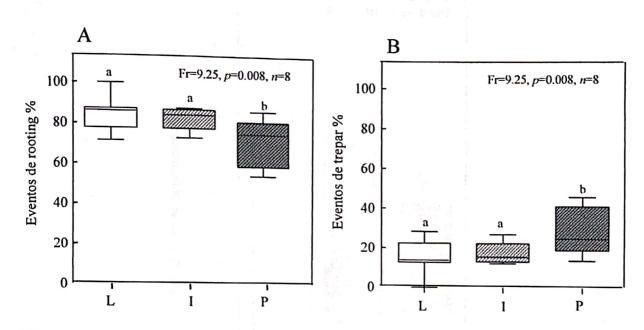


Figura 17. Comparación del porcentaje de frecuencia de la conducta de rooting (A) y de trepar (B) entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas en los días postnatales 1 al 7. El 100% representa el total de eventos de rooting más los eventos de trepar. Las diferencias significativas entre las diferentes categorías de las crías (Post hoc comparación múltiple de Dunn) son dadas con las diferentes letras. La explicación de las cajas y bigotes es la misma que en la Figura 12.

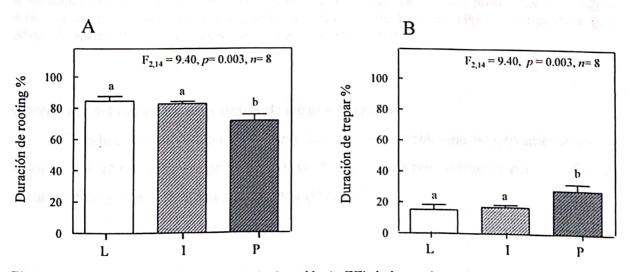


Figura 18. Comparación del porcentaje de duración (\pm EE) de la conducta de rooting (A) y de trepar (B) entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas en los días postnatales 1 al 7. El 100% representa la duración total de eventos de rooting más la duración de los eventos de trepar. Las diferencias significativas entre las diferentes categorías de las crías (Post hoc t-pareada para ANOVA de medidas repetidas) son dadas con las diferentes letras.

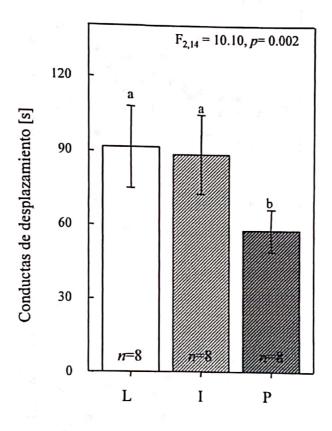


Figura 19. Comparación del promedio total (± EE) de la duración de las conductas de desplazamiento entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas en los días postnatales 1 al 7. Las diferencias significativas entre las diferentes categorías de las crías (Post hoc t-pareada para ANOVA de medidas repetidas) son dadas con las diferentes letras.

Correlatos del índice de conversión de leche a biomasa

El índice de conversión de leche a biomasa se correlacionó negativamente con el tiempo invertido en las conductas de desplazamiento, pero positivamente con el índice de agrupamiento y con la temperatura corporal (Fig. 20).

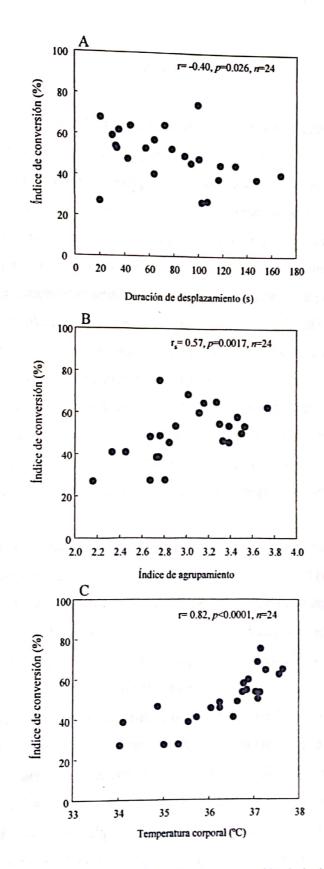


Figura 20. Correlaciones entre el promedio del índice de conversión de leche a biomasa de las crías ligeras (L), intermedias (I) y pesadas (P), y el promedio de la duración de las conductas de desplazamiento (A), la mediana del índice de agrupamiento (B) y el promedio de la temperatura corporal (C) de las crías (medida diariamente del día postnatal 1 al 7).

DISCUSIÓN

En su conjunto los resultados de este trabajo muestran evidencia de que las crías del conejo doméstico compiten por sitios térmicamente ventajosos dentro del agrupamiento en el nido, que esos sitios confieren ventajas en términos de crecimiento y que las crías más pesadas de las camadas son las más exitosas al competir por ellos. Las crías pesadas, en comparación con las intermedias y las ligeras, tuvieron un mayor índice de agrupamiento y eso estuvo asociado con una mayor temperatura corporal, con una mayor cantidad de leche ingerida durante el amamantamiento y con una mejor ganancia de peso corporal. Respecto a la conducta de desplazamiento, las crías pesadas fueron más eficientes para reentrar al agrupamiento ya que invirtieron menos tiempo para desplazarse que las crías ligeras.

Las crías pesadas al ser más exitosas para mantener un índice de agrupamiento alto, una mejor posición térmica dentro del grupo, también tuvieron una temperatura corporal en promedio más alta durante los primeros siete días postnatales. Esto también explicaría su mejor eficiencia de conversión de leche a biomasa, sitios térmicamente ventajosos les proveerían un ahorro a las crías en términos de energía que entonces canalizarían a crecimiento.

Una mayor temperatura corporal en el momento del competitivo evento de succión sería una ventaja en términos de desempeño motriz porque permitiría a las crías desplazarse hacia los pezones de una manera más rápida, mientras que crías más frías probablemente estarían en desventaja. Esta es una posible explicación del porqué las crías más pesadas obtuvieron una mayor cantidad de leche aunque en este estudio no se evaluó de manera directa la conducta de las crías durante el amamantamiento.

En la naturaleza, el mantenimiento de una posición bien resguardada del frío debe tener un significado mayor en términos de crecimiento y sobrevivencia ya que las condiciones ambientales son más extremas que las manipuladas en el laboratorio (Rödel et al. 2008). Dentro del agrupamiento, los sitios confortables térmicamente son importantes para la conservación de la energía que pueden destinar a crecimiento y maduración (Alberts 1978b; Alberts y Cramer 1988). El acceso y mantenimiento a estos lugares implica un proceso competitivo en la habilidad de las crías al empujar y desplazar hermanos, en el que las crías pesadas son más exitosas que sus compañeras de camada ligeras (Bautista 2005)

porque a pesar de realizar conductas de desplazamiento (trepar y rooting) por menos tiempo son más eficientes cuando las ejecutan permaneciendo en tales sitios confortables térmicamente.

El éxito de las crías pesadas en los distintos aspectos anteriormente mencionados de cierta manera está relacionado con su peso corporal al nacimiento. El peso corporal viene determinado por la posición intrauterina de las crías. De acuerdo con Rosahn y Greene (1936) fetos cuya posición es más cercana al ovario son más pesados y existe una correlación positiva entre el peso corporal de los fetos y su placenta. Además, las diferencias en la masa de la placenta por un diferencial en la vascularidad y eficiencia nutritiva del útero en las distintas localizaciones son factores importantes en las diferencias de peso corporal en las crías al nacimiento (Argente et al. 2003). De esta manera, las crías que al nacer son pesadas tienen más ventajas que las ligeras e intermedias.

Desde otro punto de vista, es posible que así como existen ventajas para las crías pesadas, también las haya para las crías ligeras. Por ejemplo, en condiciones de escasez de alimento, los individuos ligeros (que son "más económicos") estarían mejor adaptados ante estas situaciones puesto que consumen una menor cantidad de alimento que individuos pesados. Además, tendrían un menor riesgo de depredación porque al requerir menos actividad de forrajeo que las crías pesadas reducirían su exposición a los depredadores (Metcalfe y Monaghan 2001). Respecto a las crías de peso corporal intermedio, es posible que se comporten como crías ligeras o pesadas dependiendo de las circunstancias y así puedan sobrevivir a los distintos retos ambientales.

Enfocándonos ahora en las semejanzas intracamada, de manera general podemos decir que las crías ligeras e intermedias muestran un patrón similar en su desarrollo, de acuerdo con los hallazgos encontrados en su índice de agrupamiento, su temperatura corporal, su índice de conversión de leche a biomasa y en sus conductas de desplazamiento. Tanto crías pesadas, intermedias y ligeras utilizan las conductas de rooting y de trepar para reagruparse, pero muestran diferencias en su frecuencia y duración como ya se mencionó anteriormente.

Los datos encontrados en este trabajo apoyan nuestras predicciones acerca de la relación del peso corporal con el incremento de peso, ingesta de leche, índice de agrupamiento y temperatura corporal. También afirman una relación negativa entre el

índice de conversión de leche a biomasa y la conducta de desplazamiento, y positiva con el índice de agrupamiento y la temperatura corporal.

De acuerdo con los resultados obtenidos el patrón de termorregulación conductual en el conejo neonato es que las crías sí compiten por las posiciones mejor resguardadas dentro del agrupamiento durante los primeros siete días de vida postnatal, siendo las crías pesadas quienes tienen más ventaja porque al ahorrar energía pueden destinarla a crecimiento y mantenimiento de su temperatura corporal.

A pesar de que la muestra fue relativamente pequeña (n=8 camadas), los resultados son consistentes entre ellos y muestran un patrón coherente en su conjunto. Por ejemplo, las diferencias encontradas en las crías según su peso corporal son evidentes en distintos aspectos comparados: temperatura corporal, conductas de desplazamiento e índice de agrupamiento, que a su vez se correlacionan con el índice de conversión de leche a biomasa. Los hallazgos de este trabajo además son consistentes con resultados previos en crías de conejo, tales como las conductas de desplazamiento (anteriormente reportadas por Bautista et al. 2008) tienen diferente frecuencia y duración en crías ligeras y pesadas. De la misma manera existen claras diferencias, relacionadas con el peso corporal, en parámetros como la temperatura corporal y la ingesta de leche durante los primeros cinco días postnatales.

Acerca del nuevo método para estimar el índice de agrupamiento, éste nos proporciona información sobre la posición de las crías dentro del agrupamiento y es más fácil estimar el grado de resguardo de las crías mediante el número de hermanos en contacto que el propuesto por Bautista et al. 2008, ya que se requiere de una inversión de tiempo menor, de esta manera analizamos una fotografía en un tiempo aproximado de dos minutos, mientras que con el método anterior una fotografía era analizada en 20 minutos.

Una posible debilidad del diseño fue la forma en que se midió la temperatura corporal porque al manipular a las crías se modifica ésta y a pesar de que se tomaban aleatoriamente, al cambiar de una cría a otra se perturba el agrupamiento en su conjunto y las crías pueden cambiar su posición y en consecuencia, su temperatura. Una solución para futuros trabajos sería usar un equipo de telemetría que permite obtener un registro continuo y exacto de la temperatura corporal de las crías sin manipularlas.

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En el presente estudio sólo se trabajó con camadas con un número mayor o igual a ocho crías, desconocemos cómo sería la dinámica del agrupamiento en camadas de diferente tamaño y en condiciones naturales. En laboratorio, ya se ha comprobado que la presencia de los hermanos contribuye en la eficiencia termorregulatoria, crecimiento y sobrevivencia en diferente grado de acuerdo al tamaño del grupo y a la temperatura ambiental (Bautista et al. 2003). Las crías que permanecen aisladas de sus hermanos y en un ambiente frío mueren y son menos eficientes para convertir la leche que ingieren a biomasa que las crías que se mantuvieron en grupos de cuatro o seis a una temperatura ambiental confortable (Bautista et al. 2003). En la naturaleza, se ha reportado que cuando la temperatura del suelo es fría (< 10°C) la tasa de crecimiento en camadas pequeñas (tres crías) es más baja que en camadas más grandes. Ante tales condiciones ambientales, la presencia de un gran número de hermanos aún supera las consecuencias negativas de la competencia por la leche obteniendo un beneficio termorregulatorio mediante el agrupamiento de las crías (Rödel et al. 2008).

CONCLUSIONES

- En camadas del conejo doméstico existen diferencias en el crecimiento postnatal temprano lo cual es debido en parte a diferencias entre compañeros de camada en la habilidad para regular conductualmente su temperatura corporal.
- Para las crías recién nacidas del conejo un factor importante de la termorregulación conductual consiste en obtener una posición térmicamente ventajosa dentro del agrupamiento de la camada. Estas posiciones son obtenidas de manera más eficiente por las crías más pesadas, ya que éstas ejecutan conductas energéticamente menos costosas que sus compañeras ligeras de la camada.
- Los esfuerzos para obtener posiciones térmicamente ventajosas, las conductas empleadas para conseguirlas y las consecuencias sobre el crecimiento, son cualitativamente similares entre compañeros de camada y forman un continuo de crías más ligeras a más pesadas.
- El nuevo método para estimar el grado de aislamiento de las crías fue más eficiente en términos del tiempo invertido en el análisis de las fotografías que el método anterior.

PERSPECTIVAS

De esta investigación surgen diversos aspectos de interés para futuras áreas de investigación (Fig. 21):

- La necesidad de obtener medidas fisiológicas de posibles diferencias individuales entre compañeros de camada, por ejemplo, medidas metabólicas u hormonales.
- Dada la importancia del peso al nacimiento como determinante del crecimiento y desempeño conductual medido aquí, surge la necesidad de investigar sus determinantes prenatales, tales como la posición intrauterina.
- Investigar el posible papel de factores genéticos formando experimentalmente camadas artificiales en donde se invierta el tamaño relativo de los individuos, de tal manera que las crías pesadas sean las más ligeras y viceversa, y entonces evaluar su desarrollo.
- Investigar las posibles consecuencias a largo plazo, particularmente fisiológicas (endócrinas, metabólicas, incluyendo eficiencia de conversión de alimento) de las diferencias en crecimiento y desempeño conductual intracamada observadas en este trabajo.
- Explorar las diferencias anatómicas y funcionales a nivel cerebral hipotalámico entre crías pesadas y ligeras asociadas con sus estrategias conductuales.

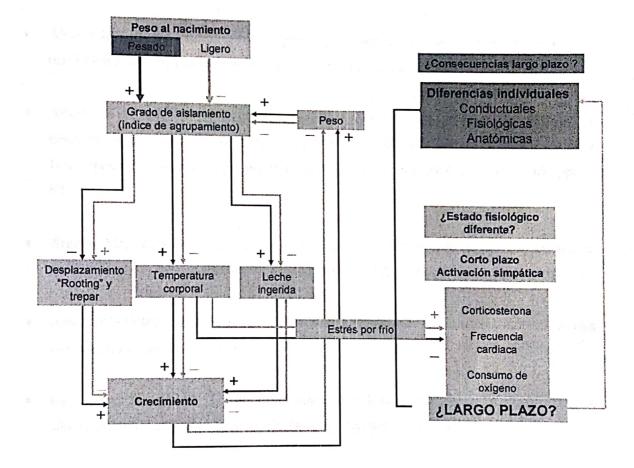


Figura 21. El diagrama muestra la relación entre el peso de las crías al nacer y su grado de aislamiento, así como también los factores que pueden influir en su crecimiento (conductas de desplazamiento, temperatura corporal y leche ingerida). Ante una situación de estrés por frío, las crías podrían mostrar diferencias a corto plazo en su estado fisiológico (hormonas, frecuencia cardiaca y consumo de oxígeno) y a largo plazo en aspectos conductuales, fisiológicos y anatómicos.

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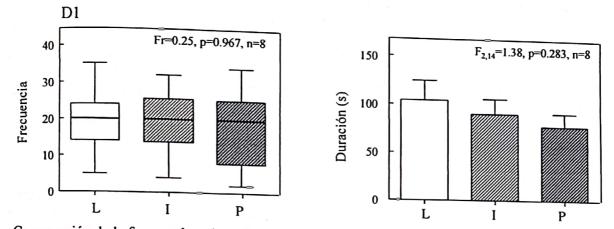
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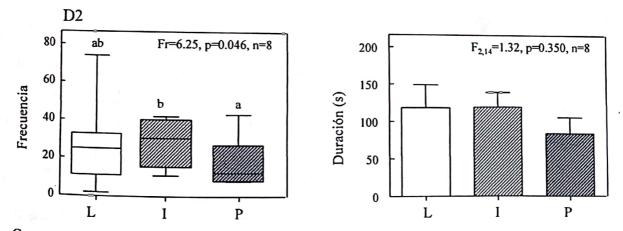
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ANEXOS

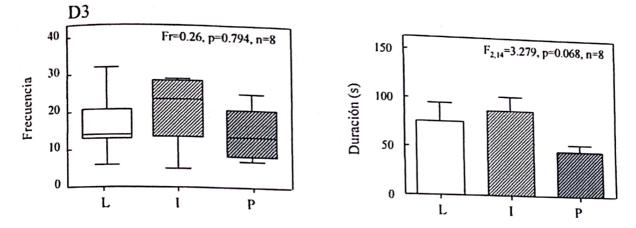
I. Comparaciones de las conductas por día entre las tres categorías de peso corporal de las crías.



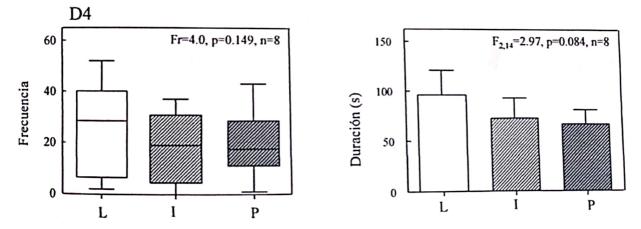
Comparación de la frecuencia y duración de las conductas de desplazamiento entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas de cada camada en el día postnatal 1 (Friedman (para frecuencia), ANOVA de medidas repetidas (para duración); n=8).



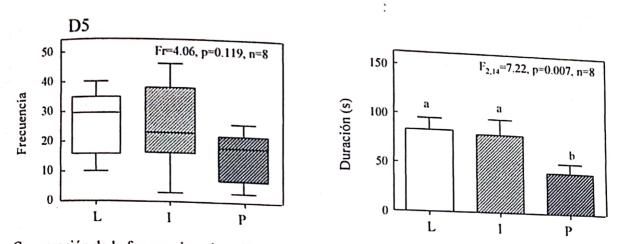
Comparación de la frecuencia y duración de las conductas de desplazamiento entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas de cada camada en el día postnatal 2 (Friedman (para frecuencia), ANOVA de medidas repetidas (para duración); n=8). Las diferencias significativas entre las diferentes categorías de las crías son dadas con las diferentes letras.



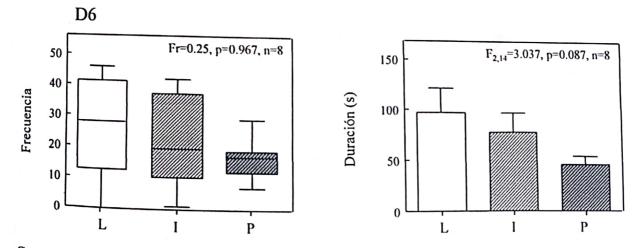
Comparación de la frecuencia y duración de las conductas de desplazamiento entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas de cada camada en el día postnatal 3 (Friedman (para frecuencia), ANOVA de medidas repetidas (para duración); n=8).



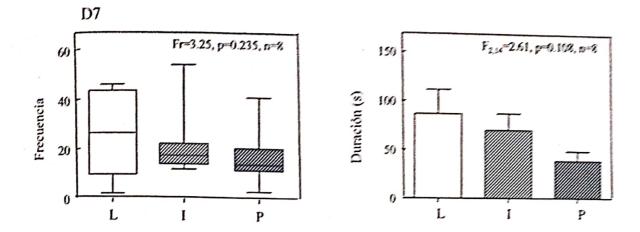
Comparación de la frecuencia y duración de las conductas de desplazamiento entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas de cada camada en el día postnatal 4 (Friedman (para frecuencia), ANOVA de medidas repetidas (para duración); n=8).



Comparación de la frecuencia y duración de las conductas de desplazamiento entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas de cada camada en el día postnatal 5 (Friedman (para frecuencia), ANOVA de medidas repetidas (para duración); n=8). Las diferencias significativas entre las diferentes categorías de las crías son dadas con las diferentes letras.



Comparación de la frecuencia y duración de las conductas de desplazamiento entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas de cada camada en el día postnatal 6 (Friedman (para frecuencia), ANOVA de medidas repetidas (para duración); n=8).



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Comparación de la frecuencia y duración de las conductas de desplazamiento entre las crías ligeras, intermedias y pesadas de cada camada en el día postnatal 7 (Friedman (para frecuencia), ANOVA de medidas repetidas (para duración); n=8).

ORIGINAL PAPER

Do newborn domestic rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus* compete for thermally advantageous positions in the litter huddle?

Amando Bautista · Esmeralda García-Torres · Margarita Martínez-Gómez · Robyn Hudson

Received: 23 April 2006 / Revised: 10 March 2007 / Accepted: 26 April 2007 / Published online: 12 June 2007 © Springer-Verlag 2007

Abstract Competition among mammalian siblings for scarce resources can be severe. Whereas research to date has focused on competition for the mother's milk, the young of many (particularly altricial) species might also be expected to compete for thermally favorable positions within the nest, den, or litter huddle. We investigated this in newborn pups of the European rabbit Oryctolagus cuniculus, a species in which the altricial young are not brooded by the mother, and in which competition for milk is severe. In eight unculled litters (N=86 pups) of a domestic chinchilla strain, we calculated huddling indexes for individual pups on postnatal days 2-5 as a measure of the degree of insulation they received from littermates. Pups maintained almost constant physical contact with the litter huddle. They performed brief but frequent rooting and climbing behaviors, which usually improved their huddling

Communicated by A. Schulte-Hostedde

This contribution is part of the special issue "Sibling competition and cooperation in mammals" (guest editors: Robyn Hudson and Fritz Trillmich).

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R. Hudson (⊠) Instituto de Investigaciones Biomédicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, DF, Mexico e-mail: rhudson@biomedicas.unam.mx index, interspersed with longer periods of quiescence during which their huddling index declined. As expected, we found a significant positive relation between pups' mean huddling index and body temperature. Unexpectedly, however, we did not find a relation between huddling index and pups' birth weight, survival, milk intake, or efficiency of converting milk to body mass. We conclude that rather than competing for thermally advantageous positions within the huddle newborn rabbits share out thermally advantageous positions as they move in a continual dynamic flow through it. Thus, in newborn rabbits, competition for the mother's milk exists alongside mutual "cooperative" benefits of littermate presence.

Keywords Sibling relations · Mammals · Competition · Cooperation · Individual differences

Introduction

Interest in sibling relations and the influence of these on individual growth, survival, and in shaping behavioral phenotypes is growing among behavioral ecologists and developmental psychologists (Sulloway 1996, 2001; Mock and Parker 1997; Mock et al. 1998; Stockley and Parker 2002; Forbes 2005; Drummond 2006). Emphasis has been on competition among siblings for limited resources, particularly food, and has been most often studied in birds (Mock and Parker 1997; Drummond 2001, 2006; Forbes 2005; Hudson and Trillmich 2007). Although less is known about sibling relations in mammals, there is increasing evidence from a range of species that competition, particularly for the mother's milk, can be severe (Bautista et al. 2005; Drake et al. 2007; Hofer and East 2007; White 2007; Trillmich and Wolf 2007). Milk, however, is only one resource for which newborn mammals may compete. Another, particularly among altricial young, is a thermally favorable position within the nest, den, or litter huddle.

Most altricial mammals cannot maintain homeostasis if kept alone, and depend on parental brooding or on the insulating presence of littermates for normal growth and survival (Rheingold 1963; Alberts 1978a, b; Harri et al. 1991; Schank and Alberts 1997; Rouvinen-Watt and Harri 2001; Sokoloff and Blumberg 2001; Bautista et al. 2003). Although mechanisms of behavioral thermoregulation have been studied in the altricial young of several mammalian species (Ogilvie and Stinson 1966; Leonard 1974, 1982; Satinoff et al. 1976; Alberts 1978a, b; Freeman and Rosenblatt 1978; Hull and Hull 1982; Schneider et al. 1995; Blumberg and Sokoloff 1998; Sokoloff and Blumberg 2001; Bautista et al. 2003; Pacheco-Cobos et al. 2003) there has been no study of differences among littermates in occupancy of thermally advantageous positions within the litter huddle, and possible effects on individual growth and survival are unknown.

Due to its unusual pattern of maternal care, the European rabbit Oryctolagus cuniculus provides a particularly good opportunity to investigate this. In the wild, rabbits give birth in an underground nest, leave the young almost immediately, and both in nature and the laboratory only return to nurse for 3 to 4 min once every 24 h (Deutsch 1957; Zarrow et al. 1965; Hudson and Distel 1982, 1989; Hudson et al. 1999; Jilge and Hudson 2001). Despite the altricial state of the young, this is the only maternal care they receive other than the provision of a specially constructed nest (reviewed in González-Mariscal and Rosenblatt 1996). This limited maternal presence makes it possible to observe and manipulate the pups without interfering with the mother-young relationship, and to separate the influence of the mother on pups' development from that of their siblings to an extent not possible in most other mammals (Denenberg et al. 1973; Hudson and Distel 1986; Drummond et al. 2000; Bautista et al. 2003, 2005). However, it also confronts the pups with a number of challenges, including maintenance of an adequate body temperature. Rabbits are born without fur and with a large surface area relative to body mass. To maintain an adequate body temperature, they depend on the insulating properties of the fur-lined nest and on the presence of littermates. If they are separated from these, growth is retarded, and the probability of survival markedly reduced (Ross et al. 1956; Zarrow et al. 1963; Bernard and Hull 1964; Canali et al. 1991; Bautista et al. 2003).

Previously, we showed that rabbit pups can orient adaptively on thermal gradients from birth (Pacheco-Cobos et al. 2003) and that sibling presence contributes to thermoregulatory efficiency, growth, and survival (Bautista et al. 2003). In this paper, we ask whether siblings compete for thermally advantageous positions within the litter huddle, that is, if there are individual differences in relative position within the huddle, if these are associated with differences in body mass and body temperature, suckling success, growth and survival, and with differences in displacement behavior within the huddle. We limited the study to postnatal days 1–5 as this is the period of highest pup mortality (Coureaud et al. 2000a, b; Drummond et al. 2000), and the period when pups are most dependent on the presence of littermates to meet their thermal needs (Bautista et al. 2003).

Based on previous findings that heavier pups have a competitive advantage during nursing, grow faster and are more likely to survive (Coureaud et al. 2000; Drummond et al. 2000; Bautista et al. 2005), we expected that they would occupy better insulated positions in the litter huddle and that they would be more efficient in attaining these than their lighter sibs.

Materials and methods

Animals

We collected data between January 2004 and July 2005 from chinchilla-strain domestic rabbits bred and maintained at the Centro Tlaxcala de Biología de la Conducta, Tlaxcala, Mexico. Mothers weighed between 3.0 and 3.5 kg and had four pairs of nipples. We used eight unculled litters of 10-12 pups (N=86; mean litter size 10.8±0.7) from eight different multiparous females (one or two previous litters) mated with eight different males. Large litters, not unusual in this breed, were used to maximize differences in position within the huddle. The females were kept in individual stainless steel cages 90×60×40-cm high, under fluorescent lights and on a 16:8 h light/dark cycle to approximate conditions at the height of the summer breeding season for rabbits in Europe (Hudson and Distel 1990). Ambient temperature was maintained between 18 and 20°C, and water and food (Purina rabbit chow) were always available. For nest building, straw and an open-top wooden box 40×35×15cm high and lined with wood shavings were placed in the females' cages 3 days before term.

Experimental procedure

On the day of birth (day 0) we left pups with their mother so they could be nursed at least once without human disturbance.

Day 1 At 0900 hours, we removed the nest box containing the young from the mother's cage and took it to a cold room with the temperature set at 25°C (Oregon Scientific electronic thermometer, EMR963HG). This temperature, below the approximately 35°C thermal neutral zone for newborn rabbits (Bernard and Hull 1964; Hull 1965; Sokal

and Sinclair 1976; Pacheco-Cobos et al. 2003), induces them to huddle but without compromising pup survival (Bautista et al. 2003). In nature, ambient temperatures in the nest chamber can drop below pups' thermal neutral range and well below the temperatures maintained here (H. Rödel for burrows in Bayreuth, Germany, personal communication).

The pups (dark gray in color) were weighed individually using an electronic balance (Ohaus, Navigator), numbered on the ventrum, back and flanks with white correcting fluid (Nukote, Pelikan) for individual identification in video recordings, and placed in a cloth-lined box the same as the nest box but without nest material so as to allow behavioral observation (Fig. 1). To keep the pups in the center of the box and prevent them becoming trapped in the corners, we placed them inside a 28 cm-diameter wire mesh hoop, which we enlarged to diameter 30 cm on day 5 to accommodate pup growth. A video camera (Sony CR-TRV) was mounted above the box to record pups' behavior.

At 1000 hours, we filmed the litter for 5 min and then measured each pup's temperature at the throat and groin (representing high and low temperatures on the body surface, respectively; Bautista et al. 2003) with a quick-reading mercury thermometer (cloacal Schultheis type, Miller and Weber, T-600), and used the mean of these two measures for all further calculations. Although this cannot be considered an accurate measure of core temperature (reviewed in Blumberg and Sokoloff 1998) it gives consistent readings of relative differences in body temperature among pups (Bautista et al. 2003), which was the main interest in the present study. The litter was filmed again for 5 min every hour until 1800 h (a total of nine recordings), and body temperature measured again at 1130, 1430, 1630 and 1830 hours (a total of five recordings), determining the order in which pups were removed from the box using a random numbers table. Measuring temperature took about 2 min per pup, after which pups were returned to the box to minimize cooling of the other littermates.

Days 2 to 5 At 1000 hours we followed the same procedure as on day 1 except that after measuring pups' temperature at 1130 hours, we induced them to urinate by lightly brushing their genital area with an index finger, weighed them, and returned them to the observation box. Urination was induced to enable accurate measurement of milk intake after nursing 30 min later. After filming at 1200 hours, we removed the mesh hoop without disturbing the huddle, and took the mother from her cage and placed her beside the box so that she could jump in for the approximately 3 min nursing (Hudson and Distel 1983; Bautista et al. 2005). We weighed the pups individually immediately after the mother jumped out of the box at the end of nursing, and took the difference between their pre- and postnursing weight as a measure of milk intake. To ensure the continued thermal importance of the litter huddle despite pups' increase in body volume and growth of fur (Bautista et al. 2003; cf. Sokal and Sinclair 1976), the temperature of the cold room was decreased by 1°C at 1000 hours each day (cf. Alberts 1978b). Although information is lacking on the relationship between ambient temperature, pup size and body temperature, and the relationship between these variables is unlikely to be linear, here we were principally interested in relative differences among littermates rather than in changes in absolute values with age.

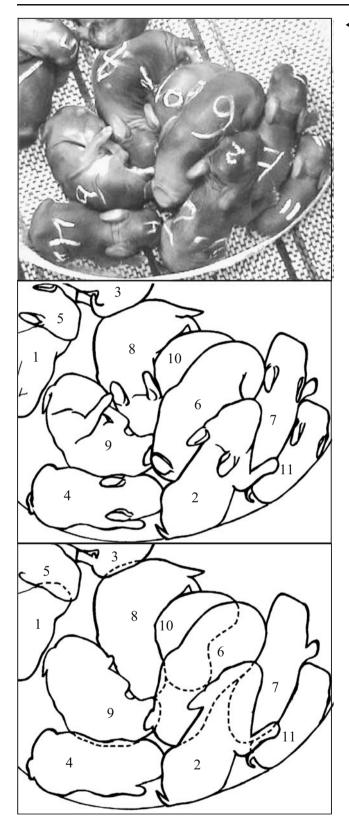
At the end of the study, we returned the litters to their mothers until weaning on postnatal day 25. Sex of pups, difficult to determine at birth, was established by genital inspection at weaning or by dissection if pups died earlier.

Behavioral measures

In addition to daily measures of pups' weight, body temperature, milk intake, and efficiency of converting milk to body mass (C_t =increase in prenursing body weight over *t*+1 days/weight of milk ingested over *t* days; Drummond et al. 2000; Bautista et al. 2003) we collected three sets of behavioral data.

Position within the huddle We used the first frame of each of the nine daily video recordings to calculate a huddling index (HI) for each pup representing the area of its body in physical contact with littermates (36 measures/pup; Fig. 1). Using the image analysis programs PhotoPaint 11 and SigmaScanPro 4.01 for Windows (Jandel Scientific), we applied the formula HI = X+2Y+Z, where X is the percent of a pup's dorsally viewed body outline in contact with another pup(s), Y is the percent of a pup's dorsally viewed by another pup(s) multiplied by 2 because of the greater insulation gained from being covered rather than covering another pup, and Z is the percent of a pup's dorsally viewed body surface covering another pup(s; Fig. 1). We then used these 36 values to calculate a mean huddling index for each pup.

Displacement within the huddle We transferred the video recordings to a computer using the Microsoft program Movie Maker 2.1.4026.0 for Windows, and for days 2–5, we used four of the 5-min video recordings—at 1000 and 1200 hours (before nursing), and at 1600 and 1800 hours (after nursing)—to score the following behaviors shown by pups in relation to the litter huddle: the frequency and duration of *rooting*, defined as a pup pushing its head between or beneath other pups while vigorously scrabbling with its forelegs and thrusting with its hind legs (Fig. 1, pup 8); the frequency and duration of *climbing*, defined as a pup



placing its forequarters over another pup(s) while thrusting with its hind legs whether or not this resulted in displacement across the top of the huddle (Fig. 1, pup 2); the frequency and duration of *staggering*, defined as a pup

Fig. 1 Upper panel, huddle of pups in the observation box on postnatal day 1 recorded by video camera from above and used to determine pups' huddle indexes. Pups have been numbered with white correcting fluid for individual identification; part of the mesh hoop enclosing the litter can be seen across the bottom. *Middle panel*, outline of pups in the huddle above. *Bottom panel*, outline of pups overlaid with the computer-generated contours used to measure the percent of an individual's body surface in physical contact with other pups; *broken lines* indicate the estimated non-visible parts covered by neighboring pups. Note the large difference in size among pups (for example, light pups 11=26.9 g and 4=52.6 g compared to heavy pups 6=63.4 g and 8=70.1 g)

lurching from side to side when locomoting but without overbalancing; the frequency and duration of *overbalancing*, defined as a pup performing a half (180°) or a full (360°) body roll; and the duration of remaining *immobile* while in contact with the huddle, defined as absence of the behaviors described above (Fig. 1, pup 9). The frequency and duration of pups loosing physical contact with littermates was also recorded. Because of the time-consuming nature of this analysis (16 recordings, 80 min total/pup), only the behavior of the lightest and heaviest surviving pup in each litter, defined by mean body weight across the 5 days of the study, was scored (256 evaluations, 21.3 h total observation time).

Effectiveness of displacement behaviors We estimated this by comparing the huddling indexes of the lightest and heaviest pups as defined above at the start and finish of rooting and climbing episodes, considering the end of episodes as ≥ 1 s without further displacement or clearly attempted displacement. We also evaluated the consequence for the pups of remaining immobile within the huddle by comparing their indexes at the start and finish of bouts of immobility of ≥ 1 s.

Data analysis

Except for factors influencing early pup survival, analysis was based on data from animals surviving to the end of the study, and mainly on data from days 2–5 after pups had some time to adjust to the experimental situation. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 14.0 for Windows. We examined the influence of huddling on pup survival and growth using general linear model analysis (GLM), first by taking survival as the dependent variable, litter as a random factor, and mean huddling index, mean body temperature, birth weight, and total milk intake as covariates; second, by taking mean milk conversion as the dependent variable, litter as a random factor, and mean body weight, and total milk intake as covariates; second, by taking mean milk conversion as the dependent variable, litter as a random factor, and mean body temperature, mean body temperature as the dependent variable, litter as a random factor, and mean body temperature as the dependent variable, litter as a random factor, and mean body temperature as the dependent variable, litter as a random factor, and mean body temperature as the dependent variable, litter as a random factor, and mean body temperature as the dependent variable, litter as a random factor, and mean body temperature as the dependent variable, litter as a random factor, and mean

huddling index, mean weight and total milk intake as covariates. Using partial correlations, we then examined first the relation between huddling index and body temperature with body weight and milk intake as the controlled variables; second, the relation between huddling index and milk intake with body temperature and body weight as controlled variables; and third, the relation between huddling index and birth weight, with body temperature, and milk intake as controlled variables. Descriptive statistics are given as means \pm SD, and as medians and ranges for frequencies of behavioral measures. An alpha value of 0.05 was taken as the level of significance throughout.

Since in this and previous studies (Drummond et al. 2000; Bautista et al. 2003, 2005; Martínez-Gómez et al. 2004) no differences on any parameter were found between males and females, we have combined their scores.

Results

Growth and survival

Despite the experimental conditions under which litters were raised, total milk intake (40.74 g \pm 13.94) and final mean body weight of surviving pups on day 5 (60.84 g \pm 12.73) were within the normal range for this breed (Hudson et al. 1996; Martínez-Gómez et al. 2004; Bautista et al.

2005), and even considering that in contrast to the previous studies, these were relatively large, unculled litters.

Fourteen pups (16.3%) died in six of the eight litters apparently from starvation; they had no milk in their stomachs and weighed mean 29.2%±15.2 less than their respective littermates on the day of death (for example, pup 11 in Fig. 1). This mortality was also within the range for normally raised, unculled litters of this breed (Drummond et al. 2000) and so did not seem to be due to the particular experimental conditions of the study. Comparing the values for the 14 victims with values for 14 randomly chosen littermates at the time of death of their respective siblings showed that the victims had significantly lower mean birth weights (39.1 g±9.61 versus 48.59 g±9.51; paired t test: $t_{13}=3.46$, P=0.004), that they obtained on average significantly less milk (1.9 g±3.4 versus 9.5 g±3.5; t_{13} =7.65, P= 0.002), had significantly lower mean body temperatures $(33.8^{\circ}C \pm 1.34 \text{ versus } 36.1^{\circ}C \pm 0.75; t_{13} = 6.77, P < 0.0001),$ and that they had significantly lower mean huddle indexes $(77.7\pm25.3 \text{ versus } 100.1\pm9.7; t_{13}=3.07, P=0.009).$

Behavior within the huddle

Although the litters usually formed a single huddle, they sometime broke up into two physically separate subhuddles (Fig. 1). In either case, the pups remained in almost constant contact with littermates. The individuals became separated from a huddle on only 19 occasions, and then for

Table 1 Comparison of motorbehavior of lightest andheaviest pups from postnataldays 2 to 5

Minimum–maximum values are given in brackets. *P* values are given only for significant differences.

51.9 (8.3–158) 48.8 (7.5–122) 5.4 (0–21.8) 5.0 (0–18.0) 5.6 (0–21.0) 133 (34–310)	39.0 (6.8–73.5) 20.6 (8–3–66.8) 12.4 (0.8–46.5) 2.6 (0–6.0) 0 (0–11.3)	0.02 0.02
48.8 (7.5–122) 6.4 (0–21.8) 6.0 (0–18.0) 5.6 (0–21.0)	20.6 (8–3–66.8) 12.4 (0.8–46.5) 2.6 (0–6.0) 0 (0–11.3)	
5.4 (0–21.8) 5.0 (0–18.0) 5.6 (0–21.0)	12.4 (0.8–46.5) 2.6 (0–6.0) 0 (0–11.3)	0.02
5.0 (0–18.0) 5.6 (0–21.0)	2.6 (0–6.0) 0 (0–11.3)	
5.6 (0-21.0)	0 (0-11.3)	
· /		
133 (34–310)		
	76 (25–189)	0.01
3.9 s (2.8–4.5)	3.6 s (3.0–4.3)	
1.3 s (1.2–1.5)	1.2 s (1.0–1.3)	
3.1 s (2.0–6.8)	3.1 s (2.7–4.0)	
1.2 s (1.0–1.7)	1.0 s (1.0–2.3)	
3.4 s (2.0–9.7)	4.1 s (2.5–5.8)	
e		
5.0% (0.8–9.3)	3.2% (0.4–5.5)	
1.4% (0.2–3.3)	0.5% (0.2–1.5)	
0.6% (0-1.4)	0.9% (0.1–2.6)	
0.2% (0-0.6)	0.1% (0-0.1)	
0.4% (0-2.0)	0% (0–0.6)	
e immobile		
91.9% (85–98)	95.7% (91–99)	0.01
	1.3 s (1.2–1.5) 3.1 s (2.0–6.8) 1.2 s (1.0–1.7) 3.4 s (2.0–9.7) e 5.0% (0.8–9.3) 1.4% (0.2–3.3) 0.6% (0–1.4) 0.2% (0–0.6) 0.4% (0–2.0) e immobile	1.3 s $(1.2-1.5)$ 1.2 s $(1.0-1.3)$ 3.1 s $(2.0-6.8)$ 3.1 s $(2.7-4.0)$ 1.2 s $(1.0-1.7)$ 1.0 s $(1.0-2.3)$ 3.4 s $(2.0-9.7)$ 4.1 s $(2.5-5.8)$ e $5.0\% (0.8-9.3)$ 3.2% $(0.4-5.5)$ 1.4% $(0.2-3.3)$ 0.5% $(0.2-1.5)$ 0.6% $(0-1.4)$ 0.9% $(0.1-2.6)$ 0.2% $(0-0.6)$ 0.1% $(0-0.1)$ 0.4% $(0-2.0)$ 0% $(0-0.6)$

only 1-2 s comprising less than 0.5% of the total observation time. Of the motor behaviors recorded rooting was the most frequent (median 45 events/pup/h) followed by staggering (median 31 events/pup/h), climbing (9.4 events/ pup/h), overbalancing (4.5 events/pup/h), and loosing contact (0.4 events/pup/h). All these behaviors were brief (median duration 1-4 s) and together constituted a median of only 5.8% of the total observation time, meaning that pups spent 94.2% of the time immobile. However, a notable feature of huddling behavior was the wide range in the scores of any individual pup. Thus, across the 36 recordings used to assess huddling during the study, for each pup high index scores (140–300) as well as low index scores (0–50) were recorded, although with different frequencies. Consequently, although the mean indexes of individual pups ranged from 55.7 ± 40.3 to 132 ± 50.7 , with an overall mean score of 98.1±46.9, variance was very large.

As shown in the upper panel of Table 1, light pups were more active than their heavier sibs. We found significant differences between them and heavier pups in the total frequency of behavioral events (Wilcoxon signed ranks test: T=35, N=8, P<0.01), and particularly in the frequency of rooting (T=34, N=8, P=0.02) and staggering (T=34, N=8, P=0.02). Although we did not find a difference in the duration of behavioral events between light and heavy pups (Table 1, second panel), as a consequence of greater frequencies lighter pups spent significantly less time immobile than their heavier sibs (median times of 91.9 and 95.7%, respectively; T=35, N=8, P<0.01; Table 1, bottom panels).

Effectiveness of displacement behaviors Figure 2 shows the change in huddling indexes of lightest and heaviest pups after rooting and climbing (the two behaviors most obviously directed towards achieving a better insulated position in the huddle), and after remaining immobile. Although as reported above (Table 1) rooting and climbing episodes only lasted a few seconds, in most cases, they resulted in pups improving their huddling index, and as shown in Fig. 2, this was equally the case for lightest and heaviest pups. In contrast, when pups remained immobile their huddling scores declined markedly, but again, as shown in Fig. 2, to a similar extent for lightest and heaviest pups.

Influence of huddling on survival, growth and body temperature

We expected a positive relationship between huddling indexes and three main functional outcomes for the pups; greater probability of survival, enhanced growth as measured by efficiency of converting milk to body mass, and higher body temperature.

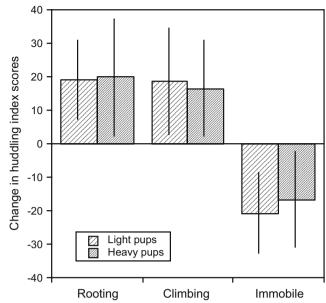


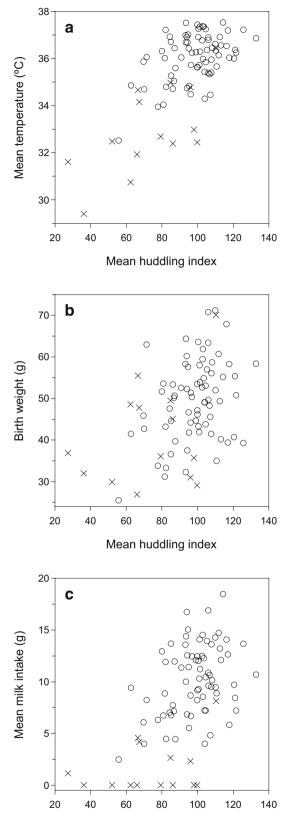
Fig. 2 Change in huddling index for the lightest and heaviest pup from each of eight litters following episodes of rooting, climbing, or remaining immobile. Means \pm SD are given (*N*=8 pups/group) calculated from a total of 16 sessions recorded on postnatal days 2–5. Whereas rooting and climbing resulted in improved huddling indexes, remaining immobile resulted in a decline, and to a similar degree for lightest and heaviest pups

Survival Taking into account all 86 pups born, GLM analysis reported a significant influence on pup survival of birth weight ($F_{1,74}$ =4.65, P=0.034), of milk intake ($F_{1,74}$ =11.2, P<0.001), and of body temperature ($F_{1,74}$ =6.36, P=0.014) but not of huddling index ($F_{1,74}$ =1.56, P=0.22) or litter ($F_{7,74}$ =2.01, P=0.07; illustrated in Fig. 3).

Milk conversion For the 72 pups, surviving to the end of the study GLM analysis reported a significant influence on mean efficiency of converting milk to body mass for the three time points for which these data were collected (days 2–3, 3–4, 4–5) of milk intake ($F_{1,59}$ =13.1, P=0.001) but not of huddling index ($F_{1,59}$ =2.3, P=0.14), body temperature ($F_{1,59}$ =2.01, P=0.16), birth weight ($F_{1,59}$ =3.9, P= 0.053) or litter ($F_{7,59}$ =1.4, P=0.22).

Body temperature For the 72 surviving pups, GLM analysis reported a significant influence on body temperature of huddling index ($F_{1,59}$ =18.0, P<0.001), birth weight ($F_{1,59}$ =4.51, P=0.038), milk intake ($F_{1,59}$ =14.3, P<0.001), and litter ($F_{7,59}$ =14.4, P<0.001).

The partial correlation examining the relation between huddling index and body temperature with birth weight and milk intake as controlled variables reported this to be significant (F=68, r=0.27, N=72, P=0.024; Fig. 3a). The partial correlation examining the relation between huddling index and milk intake with birth weight and body temperature as controlled variables reported nonsignificance (F=68, r=0.01, N=72, P=0.92; Fig. 3b). And the



Mean huddling index

Fig. 3 Relation between mean huddling indexes of pups surviving to the end of the study on postnatal day 5 (*circles*, N=72) and of pups that died before (crosses, N=14) and **a** mean body temperature, **b** birth weight, and **c** mean milk intake

partial correlation examining the relation between huddling index and birth weight with body temperature and milk intake as controlled variables also reported nonsignificance (F=68, r=0.10, N=72, P=0.41; Fig. 3c).

Discussion

Survival and growth of pups in the present study corresponded to previous reports for this breed raised in more natural (laboratory) nests (Hudson et al. 1996; Drummond et al. 2000; Martínez-Gómez et al. 2004; Bautista et al. 2005). Thus, the present findings on the behavior of pups in relation to the litter huddle should be generally valid, at least for domestic rabbits raised under similar conditions. The situation in the wild, however, remains to be investigated.

A first result, consistent with previous findings in the rabbit and other newborn altricial mammals (Bernard and Hull 1964; Alberts 1978a, b; Schneider et al. 1995; Schank and Alberts 1997: Harri et al. 1991: Rouvinen-Watt and Harri 2001; Sokoloff and Blumberg 2001; Bautista et al. 2003) was the evident importance of the huddle. Pups remained in almost constant physical contact with littermates, and the few occasions on which they became separated only lasted a few seconds (Table 1). Pups also worked repeatedly and effectively to obtain a better insulated position within the huddle as measured by their index scores. Most pups performed presumably energetically costly rooting and climbing behaviors many times an hour, and although each of these events only lasted a few seconds, they usually resulted in an improvement in pups' huddling indexes. In contrast, remaining immobile and failing to perform such behaviors resulted in a marked decline in huddling indexes (Table 1; Fig. 2). As predicted, GLM and partial correlation analyses reported a significant positive relation between huddling index and body temperature (Fig. 3a). Thus, we may conclude, in accord with other studies of newborn altricial mammals cited above. that the litter huddle and a well-insulated position within it represents an important resource for newborn rabbits.

Nevertheless, we failed to find support for the predictions that pups with higher birth weights would have higher huddling indexes or that pups with higher huddling indexes would be more likely to survive, would obtain more milk, and would be more efficient in converting milk to body mass. Thus, although pups worked to obtain better insulated positions within the huddle (rooting and climbing behaviors resulted in higher huddling indexes and huddling indexes were positively correlated with body temperature), we found no support for the prediction that pups compete for such positions with the advantage going to the heaviest members of the litter as is the case during nursing (Drummond et al. 2000; Bautista et al. 2005; but see Fey and Trillmich 2007). Rather, the findings suggest that the huddle is of mutual benefit and provides thermoregulatory advantages to all.

With regard to pup survival (remembering that more than 16% of pups died)—as in previous reports (Coureaud et al. 2000a, b; Drummond et al. 2000)-most deaths occurred early, and victims usually had the lowest birth weights and obtained little or no milk during the highly competitive once-daily nursing events. Thus, although the huddling indexes of victims and surviving pups overlapped to a considerable degree (Fig. 3), any thermoregulatory benefits conferred were not sufficient to offset the inability of lighter pups to gain sufficient milk or the presumably high energetic costs of achieving and maintaining wellinsulated positions within the huddle (cf. Table 1 and Fig. 3). As in other species (Drake et al. 2007), the importance of birth weight as a predictor of postnatal survival and growth suggests that prenatal factors such as uterine position need to be considered in future studies of individual developmental trajectories in the rabbit. Relevant here is the finding by Roshan and Greene (1936) based on the examination of the uterine horns in a large sample of 71 pregnant rabbits close to term of a significant decrease in fetal and placental weights from the ovarian to the vaginal extremities.

Considering surviving pups, an unexpected finding was again the large overlap in huddling indexes (Fig. 3). In fact, during the study, for most individuals, we recorded huddling indexes across the whole or most of the possible range, albeit to different degrees. This might be understood as follows. Individuals occupying at any moment better insulated positions in the huddle were warm enough, possibly even too warm (we sometimes recorded body temperatures of 38°C or more; cf. Alberts 1978b) not to need to take behavioral action to maintain their position and so "drifted" to less well-insulated positions as a result of the behavior of more peripheral, cooler, and thus more active littermates. These, in turn, gained better insulated positions in the huddle, thereby becoming warmer and less active until they too drifted or were pushed out to more poorly insulated positions. The picture here is of a continual circulation of pups through the huddle in which all benefit to a somewhat similar degree from the presence of their littermates. This corresponds well with reports of huddle dynamics in rat pups (Alberts 1978b; Schank and Alberts 1997; Sokoloff and Blumberg 2001) and suggests the need for a more complex view of sibling relations in the rabbit. On the one hand, competition for milk is often severe (Drummond et al. 2000; Bautista et al. 2005), while on the other, the presence of littermates is important, at times vital, for thermoregulation (Bernard and Hull 1964; Bautista et al.

2003), and via the continual circulation of individuals through the huddle represents the sharing of a communally produced resource rather than competition (see Sokoloff and Blumberg 2001 for rats). To better understand this process, we now need a finer analysis of the conditions such as ambient temperature and age at which pups are motivated to try to penetrate the huddle or rather to remain quiescent.

In conclusion, the present findings draw attention to the fact that while newborn rabbits compete vigorously for resources such as the mother's milk, they also benefit from one another's presence in a mutual, and at least under the relatively mild ambient temperatures imposed here, seemingly nonconflictive way. Thus, a consideration of the possible benefits as well as costs for altricial mammals of having siblings, in what number and under what environmental circumstances is an exciting area for future research (Hudson and Trillmich 2007).

Acknowledgment This work was supported by grants from CON-ACyT (25889-N; 124936; 153843), PAPIIT (IN 217100), and PROMEP (UATlax 149; 103.5/04/2849/UATLAXCA-26). We thank Carolina Rojas, Laura García, and Cecilia Cuatianquiz for excellent technical assistance, Hans Distel for help with data analysis, Gerhard Dierlich and Arturo Estrada-Torres for statistical advice, Fritz Trillmich for valuable comments on the manuscript, and Hugh Drummond, Constantino Macías García, and other members of Los Lunáticos for valuable discussion. Throughout the study, animals were kept and treated according to the guidelines for the treatment of animals in research of the Instituto de Investigaciones Biomédicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and according to the current laws of Mexico.

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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect





Physiology & Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/phb

Why do heavy littermates grow better than lighter ones? A study in wild and domestic European rabbits

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history: Received 22 April 2008 Received in revised form 23 June 2008 Accepted 7 July 2008

Keywords: Body mass Early development Individual differences Oryctolagus cuniculus Sibling competition Thermoregulation

ABSTRACT

Birth mass can vary considerably among mammalian littermates. Heavier pups often show higher growth rates than their lighter siblings, which might positively affect fitness-relevant parameters during later life. Such a correlation between birth mass and pre-weaning growth within litters was confirmed by our study of wild-type and domestic European rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) living in a semi-natural environment and under laboratory housing conditions, respectively. Our study indicates that at least two main mechanisms account for this relationship in our study species: heavier pups had a higher milk intake and also showed a more efficient conversion of milk into body mass. Furthermore, our study suggests that the better milk conversion by heavy pups was driven by three synergistic mechanisms: heavier pups had comparatively more huddling partners in the nest, they did not need to perform large amounts of proactive behavior in order to reach and remain in a central position within the litter huddle, and they could maintain a comparatively higher body temperature most probably due to their more favorable surface area to volume ratio. In conclusion, our study of European rabbits provides strong evidence that both under natural conditions and in the laboratory, within-litter differences in birth mass are maintained and may even increase during pups' early postnatal development.

1. Introduction

An animal's early growth is an important trait of its life history [1,9,61]; there is considerable evidence that high growth during early life positively affects different fitness-related traits such as survival [37,39,40,44,50,63], competitive strength [57] and reproduction [20,26]. In mammals, the growth of pre-weaning offspring can be affected by several factors including the lactational performance of the mother, and environmental factors such as energetic demands placed on the young by the thermal environment [4,34,52,56]. Also, the presence of littermates may restrict the share of milk received by individual young, reducing growth and survival in offspring of larger litters [14,16,21,25,42,53,54].

Pre-weaning growth can also vary notably within litters [16]. Generally, the occurrence of such variation is an indication of sibling competition, where competitive interactions among littermates can be expected to increase with increasing litter size [33,43]. Examples of strong contest competition among litter siblings are domestic pigs (Sus scrofa) [15,23] and spotted hyenas (Crocuta crocuta) [27,64], where the young with a greater birth mass usually manage to occupy the more productive teats, leading to a greater increase in body mass in these individuals. Only little is known about the advantages of having a higher birth mass in species where the young compete mainly by scramble competition (probably most of the lagomorphs and rodents) [5.21]. although there is evidence for notable within-litter variation in offspring growth here also [16,38]. Thus, even in these species a heavy birth mass might be advantageous [5,12,16]. Heavy pups may have better motor abilities which may enable them to reach the mother's teats more rapidly than their lighter siblings [5]. Furthermore, most altricial mammals only have a limited ability to regulate their temperature physiologically during the first postnatal days [8]. Thermoregulatory benefits due to huddling are known to decrease energy expenditure in small mammals [58] and often lead to better offspring development [59]. Better motor abilities may therefore be advantageous in enabling pups to reach a central position in the litter huddle, which may lower the costs of thermoregulation and thus facilitate the conversion of milk into body mass [6,8,24]. The more favorable surface area to volume ratio of heavier pups might additionally lower the allocation of energy for thermoregulation.

We studied within-litter differences in pre-weaning growth in wild-type and domestic European rabbits (*O. cuniculus*). The rabbit is particularly useful for such studies as it generally has large litters (up

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^{0031-9384/\$ -} see front matter © 2008 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. doi:10.1016/j.physbeh.2008.07.011

to 9 pups in wild rabbits and up to 14 pups, occasionally more, in domestic breeds [48,62]) of altricial young which are born blind and hairless. In addition, the mother leaves the pups immediately after giving birth [32,65], and both in the wild and laboratory only returns for a few minutes once every 24 h to nurse them [10,28,35,65]. The pups can thus be observed and manipulated for long periods without disturbing the normal mother–young relationship.

The first aim of our study was to test in wild-type rabbits under natural conditions whether pre-weaning growth of the pups is positively related to their birth mass. This part of the study was principally carried out with wild-type rabbit pups born and raised in subterranean burrows in a field enclosure. Exploring the underlying causes and mechanisms of the purported higher growth in heavier born offspring was the second aim of our study. Therefore, we investigated different variables possibly linking a higher birth mass to greater postnatal growth. This second part of our study was carried out with domestic rabbit pups raised under standardized laboratory conditions. Consistent with previous studies [5,11,16] we predicted that the milk intake of heavy pups would be greater than for their lower birth mass littermates, and that heavy pups would convert milk into body mass more efficiently. In addition, we investigated the interaction between pups' body temperature and their behavior in the litter huddle, and tested how these factors affected pups' efficiency of milk conversion.

2. Methods

2.1. Wild-type European rabbits

2.1.1. Study population

Data were collected from animals of a fenced population living in a 20,000-m² enclosure situated in Franconia, Germany (49.55 N, 11.36 E, elevation 359 masl) under semi-natural conditions. Vegetation consisted of homogeneous grassland interspersed with groups of trees and bushes, which represents an adequate habitat structure for the European rabbit [13]. In addition to the burrows and breeding stops dug by the rabbits (around 40 to 50), the area contained 16 artificial concrete warrens with interconnected chambers and removable tops. These were used by the rabbits as the main warrens of their group territories and also for breeding. Similar to the natural burrow systems, the nests in the artificial burrows were also around 20 to 50 cm below ground. The whole study site could be observed from two towers, and all animals could be identified by their individual ear-tags.

The population consisted of descendents of animals (subspecies: *O. c. cuniculus*) that had been caught in the wild (Upper Palatinate, Germany) in 1983. During the study period (breeding seasons 2001 and 2007), the density ranged between 37 and 77 adults per hectare. During our study we found no signs of inbreeding such as changes in body mass, juvenile survival, or reduced fecundity of females (further details in [52,62]).

2.1.2. Data collection

Every morning during the breeding season (February to October [52]) we checked for newborn litters. To do this we prepared all natural warrens and breeding stops dug by the animals with artificial vertical openings to the nest chambers, which we covered with concrete flagstones. By checking the nests daily we could record the birth of all litters to within 24 h and considered this postnatal day 0. We sexed the pups by external genital inspection, marked them for individual identification with a red waterproof felt pen (Edding, Germany) on the paws and on the ears, and weighed them individually on an electronic balance to an accuracy of 1 g. We re-colored the individual pups every 2 to 3 days. On postnatal day 11 all animals were weighed again and were marked individually with a colored and numbered plastic tag (Dalton Rototag, $20 \times 5 \times 1$ mm, 0.25 g; Dalton Continental GmbH, Germany) in

both ears. In 2007, we additionally weighed pups on postnatal day 16. Mothers appeared undisturbed by these procedures and none abandoned their young.

During 2001 we collected data from 34 litters and during 2007 from 37 litters. Litter size ranged from three to seven pups. Litters of one or two pups were not considered since we aimed to compare three categories of pups – light, intermediate and heavy – per litter. We excluded litters containing pups with developmental abnormities such as adherence of fetal membranes (see [51] for a detailed description of this phenomenon), although this only occurred in few cases. For analysis we used data from 327 pups of 71 litters from 44 different females. Of these litters, 40 were born in natural breeding burrows dug by the rabbits and 31 were born in artificial burrow systems.

For all litters (n=71; 2001 and 2007) we measured pups' growth (body mass gain in grams) from day 0 to day 11, which is just before the age at which they start to eat the nest material [31]. For the litters born during the breeding season 2007 (n=30), we also measured growth from day 0 to day 16, which is about three days before pups leave the breeding burrow [36,45].

2.2. Domestic rabbits

2.2.1. Study animals and housing conditions

Data were collected from chinchilla-strain rabbits bred and maintained at the Centro Tlaxcala de Biología de la Conducta, Tlaxcala, México. We used eight unculled litters of 10 to 12 pups (n=86 from eight different multiparous females) mated with eight different males. Females were kept in individual stainless steel cages $90 \times 60 \times 40$ cm high, under fluorescent lights and on a 16:8 h light:dark cycle to approximate conditions at the height of the summer breeding season for rabbits in Europe [30]. Ambient temperature was maintained between 18 and 20 °C, and water and food (Purina rabbit chow) were available continuously. For nest building, straw and an open-top wooden box $40 \times 35 \times 15$ cm high and lined with wood shavings were placed in the females' cages three days before term.

2.2.2. Experimental procedure

On the day of birth (day 0), we left the pups with their mother so they could be nursed at least once without human disturbance to reduce stress.

2.2.2.1. Day 1. At 09:00 h we took the nest box containing the young from the mother's cage to a room with the temperature set at 25 °C. This temperature, below the approximately 35 °C thermal neutral zone for newborn rabbits [7,34,47,60], induces them to huddle but without compromising pup survival [4]. Temperatures of the soil surrounding subterranean breeding burrows in nature, particularly in early spring at the start of the breeding season [52], are frequently well below pups' thermal neutral range.

The pups (dark gray in color) were weighed individually on an electronic balance, numbered on the ventrum, back and flanks with white correcting fluid (Nukote, Pelikan, Germany) for individual identification in video recordings, and placed in a cloth-lined box the same as the nest box but without nest material so as to allow behavioral observation. To keep the pups in the centre of the box and prevent them becoming trapped in the corners we placed them inside a 28 cm-diameter wire mesh hoop, which was enlarged to diameter 30 cm on day 5 to accommodate pup growth [6]. A video camera was mounted above the box to record pups' behavior.

At 10:00 h we filmed the litter for 5 min and then measured each pup's temperature at the throat and groin (representing high and low temperatures on the body surface, respectively; [4,6]) using a quick-reading mercury thermometer (cloacal Schultheis type, Miller and Weber, T-600). Although this cannot be considered an accurate measure of core temperature [8], we have found that it gives consistent readings of relative differences in body temperature among pups [4],

which is the main interest here. The litter was filmed again at 12:00, 14:00, 16:00 and 18:00 h for 5 min, and body temperature measured again at 11:30, 14:30, 16:30 and 18:30 h, determining the order in which pups were removed from the box using a random numbers table.

2.2.2.2 Days 2 to 7. Starting at 10:00 h we followed the same procedure as on day 1 except that after measuring pups' temperature at 11:30 h, we induced them to urinate by lightly brushing their genital area with a finger, weighed them, and returned them to the observation box. Urination was induced to enable accurate measurement of milk intake after nursing, which occurred 30 min later. At 12:00 h we removed the mesh hoop without disturbing the huddle, and took the mother from her cage and placed her beside the box so that she could jump in for the approximately 3 min daily nursing [5,29]. We weighed the pups individually immediately after the mother jumped out of the box at the end of nursing, and took the difference between their pre- and post-nursing weight as a measure of milk intake.

To ensure the continued thermal importance of the litter huddle despite pups' increase in body volume and growth of fur [4], the temperature of the cold room was decreased by 1 °C per day. At the end of the study we returned the litters to their mothers until weaning on postnatal day 25. Sex of pups was established by genital inspection at weaning.

2.2.3. Behavioral measures

In addition to daily measures of pups' weight, body temperature (five times a day), milk intake, and efficiency of converting milk to body mass (C_t =increase in pre-nursing body weight over t+1 days/ weight of milk ingested over t days; [4,16]), we recorded their number of huddling partners, and proactive behaviors associated with displacement within the litter huddle (see below). Because of the time-consuming nature of the behavioral analysis, we limited this to three focal pups which survived to the end of the study in each litter; the pup with the lowest body mass on day 0, the pup with the highest body mass on day 0, and a randomly chosen pup with a body mass on day 0 intermediate between these two extremes.

2.2.3.1. Number of huddling partners. Using the first frame of each of the five daily video recordings, for each focal pup we counted the number of littermates contacting it with more than 10% of their body surface.

2.2.3.2. Proactive displacement within the huddle. We transferred the video recordings to a computer using the Microsoft program Movie Maker 2.1.4026.0 for Windows, and for each 5-min recording scored the time each focal pup spent pushing its head between or beneath other pups while vigorously scrabbling with its forelegs and thrusting with its hind legs, as well as the time it spent with its forequarters over another pup(s) while thrusting with its hind legs [6].

2.3. Data analysis

All statistical analyses were done with R version 2.6.0 [49]. We ensured that the residuals of all parametric models approximated a normal distribution by visually checking normal probability plots and by using the Shapiro–Wilk test.

Differences in growth between light, intermediate and heavy wildtype pups (Fig. 1) were tested using a multivariate linear mixed-effects model for repeated measures (LMM). This was done using the lme4 package [3]. *P*-values of LMMs were extracted by likelihood ratio tests [18,19]. We included litter identity, year (in the case of growth from day 0 to day 11), and mother's identity as random factors. We also included litter size as a covariate, since it is known that pup growth in European rabbits is strongly (negatively) correlated with this variable [16,53]. An interaction between litter size and birth-mass category was considered in order to test whether the purported differences in growth among light, intermediate and heavy pups were modified by litter size.

In the domestic rabbits we also used a multivariate LMM for the analysis of the relation between the covariates: body temperature, pups' proactive behavior and the average number of littermates with which they were in huddling contact. Pup identity was included as a random factor, and we considered all two-way covariate interactions. We then eliminated stepwise the non-significant covariate interactions from the model [17], and by calculating Nagelkerke's Pseudo R^2 , we assessed the explained variation of the final model [46]. As mentioned above, for the analyses of the behavior of domestic pups in the

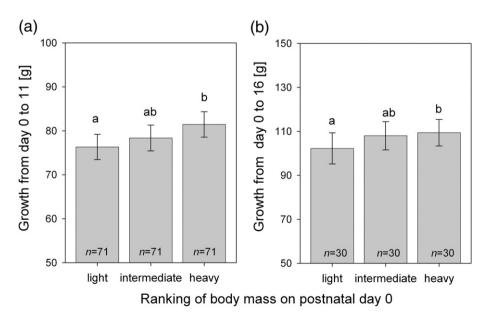


Fig. 1. Relation in wild-type European rabbits between body mass at birth and growth as measured by increase in body mass (a) in 71 litters weighed shortly after birth and on postnatal day 11 during the 2001 and 2007 breeding seasons, and (b) in the 30 litters from the 2007 breeding season that were also weighed on postnatal day 16. Columns represent mean values (±SE) for pups with the lowest, intermediate, or highest within-litter body mass shortly after birth. Values of all pups with intermediate body mass were averaged per litter. Note difference in the scales for growth. Significant differences between the three categories of pups are indicated by different letters (Bonferroni-corrected paired *t*-tests posthoc to a linear mixed model including litter identity, mother's identity, and year as random factors; *P*<0.017; see text for details of statistics).

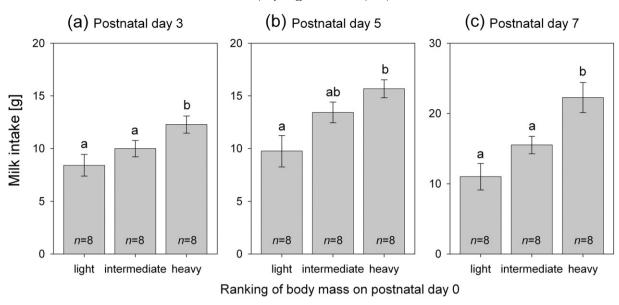


Fig. 2. Comparison of the mean amount of milk ingested during nursing (±SE) on postnatal days 3 (a), 5 (b), and 7 (c) by domestic rabbit pups with the lowest, intermediate, or highest within-litter body mass shortly after birth. Values of all pups with intermediate body mass were averaged per litter; *n*=eight litters. Significant differences between the three categories of pups are indicated by different letters (post-hoc: Bonferroni-corrected paired *t*-tests; see text for details of statistics).

litter huddle we only used data from the three focal pups with the lowest, intermediate, and highest body mass on postnatal day 0. For all other analyses (relation between body mass, milk intake and efficiency of converting milk into body mass), we used the data from all pups.

3. Results

3.1. Higher growth in pups which were heavier at birth

The average body mass of wild-type rabbits on postnatal day 0 was 41.7 g (±0.8 SE) for the lightest pup, 45.6 g (±0.7 SE) for the intermediate pups, and 49.4 g (±0.8 SE) for the heaviest pup per litter. On average, the lightest pup was 16.5% (±1.1 SE) lighter than the heaviest pup per litter; the range was 3.8% to 44.1%. We did not find significant differences in growth between males and females, either in the increase in body mass of litters monitored from postnatal day 0 to 11 (paired sample *t*-test: t_{60} =0.66, *P*=0.51; males: 78.6 g±3.2 SE, females: 77.8 g±3.0 SE), nor in the litters monitored from day 0 to 16 (t_{26} =0.67, *P*=0.50; males: 106.3.6 g±6.8 SE, females: 104.4 g±6.7 SE).

Postnatal growth in the wild-type rabbits measured between day 0 and 11 differed significantly among pups which had heavy, intermediate and light body masses shortly after birth (χ^2 =13.95, P<0.001; Fig. 1a. We also found a significant effect of litter size on pup growth (χ^2 =24.43, P<0.001), where pup growth decreased with increasing litter size. Although within-litter differences in birth mass (i.e. the difference between the heaviest and lightest pup per litter) increased with increasing litter size (r=0.436, n=71, P<0.001), we did not find a significant interaction among the pups' categorized birth mass and litter size (χ^2 =2.05, *P*=0.36), suggesting that the body mass-related differences in growth were independent of litter size. There were no significant differences in growth between litters born in natural or artificial breeding burrows (χ^2 =0.77, P=0.38). The categorization of birth mass into only three groups (light, intermediate and heavy) might have reduced the power of the analysis, which might have caused the negative finding concerning the interaction of birth mass and litter size. Therefore, we repeated the analysis using ranked data of the birth mass of all pups per litter (as a covariate) and obtained the same results. Post-hoc comparisons revealed a significant increase in growth from the lightest to the heaviest pups (statistics in Fig. 1a).

Consistent with this, we found significant differences in postnatal growth among the three categories of pups in the litters weighed on postnatal days 0 and 16 (χ^2 =7.75, *P*=0.021; Fig. 1b). We also found a significant decrease in pup growth with increasing litter size (χ^2 =8.82, *P*=0.003), but not a significant interaction between litter size and the pups' birth mass category on day 0 (χ^2 =4.35, *P*=0.11), i.e. the differences in growth among heavy, intermediate and light pups were independent of litter size. Again, there were no significant differences in growth between litters born in natural or artificial breeding burrows (χ^2 =0.03, *P*=0.86). Also here, post-hoc comparisons revealed a significant increase in growth from the lightest to the heaviest pups (statistics in Fig. 1b).

In addition, we found the same result when comparing the growth until postnatal day 7 among domestic rabbit pups of the different body mass categories (n=8 litters; $F_{2:14}$ =9.33, P=0.003), where the growth of the heaviest pups was significantly greater than the growth of the intermediate and of the lightest pups (Bonferroni-corrected paired *t*-test: P<0.017).

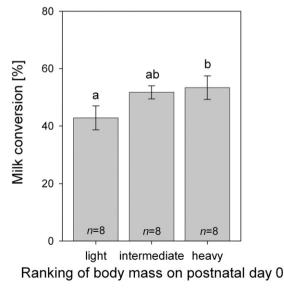


Fig. 3. Comparison of mean conversion of milk into body mass (\pm SE) by domestic rabbit pups which had the lowest, intermediate, or highest within-litter body mass shortly after birth. Values of all pups with intermediate body mass were averaged per litter; n = eight litters; see text for method of calculating milk conversion. Significant differences between the three categories of pups are indicated by different letters (post-hoc: Bonferroni-corrected paired *t*-tests; see text for details of statistics).

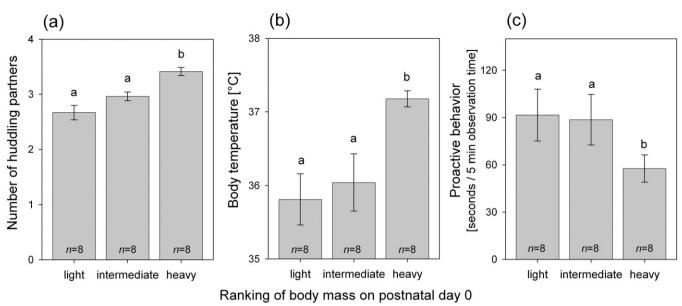


Fig. 4. Comparison of (a) the average recorded number of huddling partners, (b) pups' average body temperature, and (c) the mean duration of proactive behaviors in order to reach the centre of the litter huddle (daily measurements from postnatal day 1 to day 7) for domestic rabbit pups which had the lowest, intermediate, or highest within-litter body mass shortly after birth. Values of all pups with intermediate body mass were averaged per litter; *n*=eight litters. Data are given as means±SE. Significant differences between the three categories of pups are indicated by different letters (post-hoc: Bonferroni-corrected paired *t*-tests; see text for details of statistics).

3.2. Positive relation between birth mass and milk intake

Domestic rabbit pups which had a higher body mass on postnatal day 0 showed a higher body mass gain directly after nursing (χ^2 =29.67, *P*<0.001). These effects were consistently apparent from postnatal days 2 to 7, as revealed by the non-significant interaction

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between the pups' age and body mass category (χ^2 = 10.81, *P*=0.37). In all age classes tested, body mass gain after nursing was significantly higher in pups with the greatest birth mass than in those with the lowest (revealed by post-hoc comparisons, *P*<0.05). The data on milk intake on postnatal days 3, 5 and 7 are exemplarily shown in Fig. 2a,b,c.

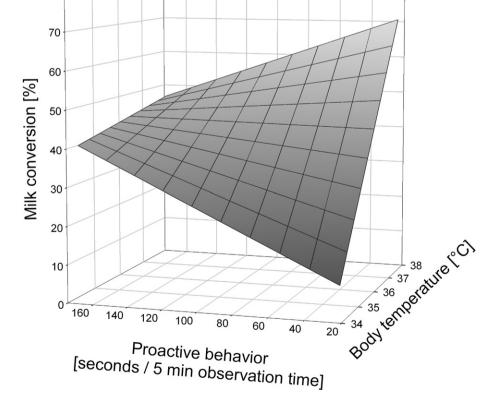


Fig. 5. Model graph for the effects of body temperature and level of proactive behavior (including the interaction of the two variables) on milk conversion in domestic rabbit pups. Data were from 28 pups from eight litters monitored from postnatal days 2 to 7 (see text for details of methods). Variation explained by the model was 76% (see text for details of statistics).

3.3. Positive relation between birth mass and efficiency in milk conversion

Efficiency in milk conversion differed significantly between heavy, intermediate and light pups (as measured on postnatal day 0) of the eight litters of domestic rabbits ($F_{2,14}$ =4.32, P=0.034); heavy pups showed a significantly greater efficiency compared to their lighter littermates (Fig. 3).

3.4. Possible mechanisms: further correlates of body mass

3.4.1. Number of huddling partners and body temperature

The averaged number of huddling partners ($F_{2,14}$ =13.14, P<0.001) and average body temperature (measured on the skin) from postnatal days 0 to 7 differed significantly between the three categories of pups ($F_{2,14}$ =5.15, P=0.021). Heaviest pups at birth subsequently had the greatest number of huddling partners (Fig. 4a) and the highest mean body temperatures (Fig. 4b). On average, the body temperature of heavy and light pups differed by 1.4 °C (±0.3 SE).

3.4.2. Proactive displacement within the huddle

The duration of proactive behaviors was significantly different between pups with different body masses ($F_{2,14}$ = 10.10, P = 0.002). Heavy pups engaged significantly less in these behaviors than their lighter littermates (Fig. 4c).

3.5. Correlations between number of huddling partners, body temperature, and pups' behavior

We found a positive correlation between pups' average number of huddling partners and body temperature (r=0.598, n=24, P=0.002), and a negative, although weaker correlation between pups' body temperature and their level of proactive behavior, i.e. the time they spent actively approaching the centre of the litter huddle (r=-0.489, n=24, P=0.015). There was not a significant correlation between the number of huddling partners and the level of proactive behavior displayed by the pups (r=-0.350, n=24, P=0.094).

3.6. Predictors of efficiency in milk conversion

The efficiency in milk conversion was positively correlated with pups' body temperature (χ^2 =23.16, *P*<0.001), but not with their amount of proactive behavior (χ^2 =0.002, *P*=0.96). There was, how-

ever, a significant interaction between body temperature and the amount of proactive behavior (χ^2 =7.07, *P*=0.008). This interaction predicted a positive effect of pups' proactive behavior when their body temperature was lower but a negative effect when their body temperature was higher (Fig. 5). Overall, variation in the efficiency in milk conversion was explained by this model by $R^2_{\text{Nagelkerke}}$ =76.2%.

The number of huddling partners did not contribute significantly to explaining variation in the efficiency in milk conversion. Furthermore, none of the other 2-way interactions among the three tested independent variables (proactive behavior, number of huddling partners, and body temperature) was significant (P>0.10).

4. Discussion

We found that in wild-type rabbits, as in domestic breeds, withinlitter differences in pre-weaning growth of pups were largely explained by differences in their birth mass, and that this effect was independent of litter size (see [16] for domestic rabbits). This suggests that findings of differential growth within litters of domestic rabbits, which generally have somewhat larger litters than wild rabbits and therefore pups with lower birth mass [48,62], might be considered valid for the species as a whole, i.e. are not an artifact of domestication but play a significant role in the species' life history. Regarding the second aim of our study, we could confirm and extend the findings of previous reports [5,6,11,12,16] of a positive correlation between birth mass and milk intake, number of huddling partners, body temperature and efficiency of converting milk into body mass, and a negative correlation between birth mass and proactive displacement within the litter huddle. Thus, based on our findings in wild-type and domestic pups, we propose a model explaining the relationship between rabbit pups' birth mass and their pre-weaning growth as summarized in Fig. 6.

First is the superior suckling performance of heavier pups during the brief, once-daily nursing visits of the mother (lower pathway in Fig. 6). Pups with greater birth mass have better postural control, attach to nipples sooner, remain attached longer, and consequently obtain more milk than their lighter littermates [5,6]. And second, heavier pups are more efficient in converting the milk obtained into body mass (central pathway in Fig. 6; [4,5,16]). Several, not mutually exclusive, mechanisms account for this.

One of the most important reasons for the more efficient milk conversion by heavier pups is probably their greater ability to maintain

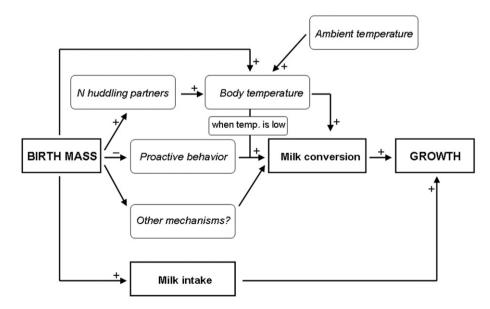


Fig. 6. Schema of possible mechanisms for how high birth mass in rabbit pups (relative to littermates) translates into more efficient conversion of milk into body mass, leading to a higher increase in body mass (growth). Positive relationships are indicated by (+) and negative relationships are indicated by (-).

an adequate body temperature. Pups with greater body mass at birth have a smaller body volume to surface ratio, and so experience less heat loss than smaller pups with a less favorable ratio (upper pathway in Fig. 6; [4,34]). They are also better insulated against heat loss by being in direct body contact with more littermates than lighter pups. They either attract other pups because of their higher body temperature, or they are better able to reach and maintain a central position in the litter huddle, or both. Associated with this, they invest less energy in proactive behaviors directed to obtaining a thermally favorable position within the huddle (upper central pathway in Fig. 6; [6]). However, effort invested in the performance of proactive behaviors also has a positive pay-off by way of more efficient milk conversion, at least for pups with lower body temperatures. Although it might be speculated that in addition, heavier pups obtain better nipples in terms of milk quality, this seems unlikely to contribute importantly to differential growth among littermates of the European rabbit, at least during the early postnatal period studied here. In the brief daily scramble for nipples, rabbit pups show no evidence of a teat order - they rapidly attach to nipples in a seemingly random manner and may even switch nipples several times during the same nursing event [5,29].

Certainly, the relative contribution of these mechanisms to explaining heavy pups' better growth also depends on extrinsic environmental factors, one of the most important of which is ambient temperature (upper right box in Fig. 6). Recent studies in both wild and domestic European rabbits have shown that when ambient temperatures are low, the thermal advantages enjoyed by heavy pups compared to their lighter littermates will be greater than when temperatures are milder [4,24,52]. However, as pups develop fur and an increasingly favorable body volume to surface ratio, the relative advantage enjoyed by heavy littermates can be expected to diminish in the course of the nest period [4,24].

These mechanisms form a series of either positive (heavy pups) or negative (light pups) feedback loops. The greater the growth of pups relative to their littermates the greater will be their share of the milk, the higher will be their body temperature, the more efficient they will be in converting milk into body mass, and so on.

Given the importance of pups' body mass on postnatal day 0 as a predictor of their subsequent growth — what then explains such differences in birth mass, which among littermates of both wild and domestic rabbits can differ by as much as 40–50% [4–6,16,41]? While genetic factors may well play a role, the presumably chance factor of pups' position in the uterus is probably also an important contributing factor; in the domestic rabbit anterior fetuses and placentas are significantly heavier than central or posterior fetuses ([2,55], own observations). In addition, the results of studies in domestic pigs indicate that the relative undernutrition of the smallest (posterior) fetuses in the uterus may even induce some form of intrauterine, non-genetic programming leading to a generally lower postnatal growth potential in these individuals [22].

Returning to the outline in Fig. 6, the question arises to what extent differences among littermates in relation to these various preweaning pathways have longer-term effects on survival, physiology and behavior and so contribute to the emergence of individual differences in otherwise similar organisms. Generally, such information would not only be important for increasing our knowledge of mammalian species' life histories, but also for biomedical research based on the belief that it is possible to produce and work with (genetically) identical laboratory animals. Thus, it should be important in future to consider more closely individuals' distinctive developmental trajectories, contributing factors to which are the presence of and interaction with siblings.

Acknowledgements

We thank Thomas Lux, Anett Starkloff, Martin Seltmann and Geraldine Prager who helped with data collection, Carolina Rojas, Laura García, and Cecilia Cuantianquiz for excellent technical assistance, and we are indebted to Dietrich von Holst, Raquel Monclús and Carsten Schradin for their helpful comments on the manuscript. We are much obliged to Rainer Kolb for the generous delivery of vaccines for our rabbit population in Germany. Permission for population biology studies on European rabbits in Germany was granted by the government of Middle Franconia (211– 3894a). Procedures conformed to the ethical and animal care guidelines of Germany, and were approved by the local authority for laboratory animal care and use. The domestic rabbits from the Mexican colony were kept and treated according to the guidelines for the treatment of animals in research of the Instituto de Investigaciones Biomédicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and according to the current laws of Mexico. This study was financially supported by the German Research Foundation DFG (Ro 2431/3-1) and the Mexican granting agencies CONACYT (25889-N; 153843) and PAPIIT (IN229907).

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