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1 **Development of an indirect ELISA method based on the VP3 protein of duck**
2 **hepatitis A virus type 1 (DHAV-1) for dual detection of DHAV-1 and DHAV-3**
3 **antibodies**

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24

25 **Summary**

26 An indirect enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (I-ELISA) based on the
27 recombinant VP3 protein of duck hepatitis A virus type 1 (DHAV-1) was developed
28 and evaluated in this study. The optimal antigen, serum and enzyme-labeled antibody
29 dilutions were 1:160 (0.94 μ g), 1:160 and 1:2000, respectively. The optimal blocking
30 buffer was 1% gelatin. The cutoff value was determined to be 0.332, and the
31 analytical sensitivity was 1:1280 ($OD_{450-630} = 0.37$). The results of the specificity
32 evaluation showed that no cross-reactivity existed between DHAV-1 antiserum and
33 other common duck-sensitive pathogens, except for duck hepatitis A virus type 3
34 (DHAV-3), suggesting that this could be a common approach for the simultaneous
35 detection of DHAV-1 and DHAV-3 antibodies. The coefficients of variation (CVs) for
36 all of the tested samples were lower than 10%. The concordance between the I-ELISA
37 based on the VP3 subunit of DHAV-1 and that based on the whole DHAV-1 virus
38 particle was 96%. These results indicate that the VP3-based I-ELISA method has high
39 sensitivity, specificity, and repeatability and is as effective as the DHAV-1-based
40 I-ELISA method for sero-surveillance. Thus, it may be a convenient and novel
41 method for DHAV antibody detection and epidemiological surveillance of
42 DHAV prevalence.

43

44 **Keywords**

45 Duck hepatitis A virus type 1 (DHAV-1); VP3 protein; Indirect ELISA (I-ELISA);
46 Antibody detection.

47

48 **Highlights:**

- 49 1. This is the first report of development of a VP3 based I-ELISA for detecting
50 antibodies against DHAV-1.
- 51
- 52 2. The I-ELISA method are capable of detecting DHAV-1 and DHAV-3 antibodies
53 simultaneously.
- 54
- 55 3. The I-ELISA method had a coincidence rate of 96% with the I-ELISA method
56 based on DHAV-1 whole viruses.
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59 **1. Introduction**

60 Duck viral hepatitis (DVH) is a highly fatal and rapidly spreading contagious
61 disease of ducklings that is mainly caused by duck hepatitis A virus (DHAV). It
62 belongs to the genus *Avihepatovirus* of the family *Picornaviridae* (Knowles et al.,
63 2012). It is an OIE notifiable disease infecting almost all ducklings less than 4 weeks
64 of age, with a mortality rate as high as 50%-95% (Woolcock and Tsai, 2013). Thus,
65 the timely and accurate detection of infection is vital for disease control. The
66 neutralization test is the most classical method among the currently approved methods
67 (Hwang, 1969; Kim et al., 2006), but it is laborious and skill dependent. Other assays,
68 such as immunofluorescence technology and the immune colloidal gold technique,
69 have much higher sensitivity and specificity but are costly. With increasing
70 knowledge of molecular biology and following publication of the whole DHAV
71 genome (Tseng et al., 2007), techniques based on PCR, such as RT-PCR and real-time

72 TaqMan RT-PCR, have become available (Cheng et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2008).
73 Although they are efficient, accurate and rapid, they rely on equipment that is not
74 available in all settings, and they are far less convenient than detecting a virus-specific
75 antibody in the serum (Liu et al., 2010). The indirect enzyme-linked immunosorbent
76 assay (I-ELISA) is a good alternative to these techniques, and utilizing recombinant
77 protein produced by molecular biological assays to establish an ELISA method is
78 becoming a new trend for the efficient diagnosis and epidemiological surveillance of
79 DHAV.

80 DHAV has three genotypes: DHAV-1, DHAV-2 and DHAV-3. Only DHAV-1
81 and DHAV-3 are prevalent in mainland China, and DHAV-1 is the most prevalent
82 genotype worldwide (Soliman et al., 2015; Erfan et al., 2015). The DHAV genome
83 consists of only one single open reading frame (ORF) flanked by 5' and 3'
84 untranslated regions (UTRs), and it is translated into three mature structural proteins,
85 VP0, VP3 and VP1 (Kim et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2006; Tseng et al., 2007). Among
86 them, VP1 is the most external and important immunogenic protein and is thus the
87 most widely studied. However, VP3 is also a main capsid protein with numerous
88 antigenic sites that can potentially trigger host immune responses. Moreover, VP3 has
89 a more conserved genome sequence than VP1 (Kim et al., 2006; Tseng et al., 2007;
90 Tseng and Tsai, 2007), which may enable the development of novel diagnostic agents.

91 In this study, an I-ELISA method based on the recombinant VP3 protein of
92 DHAV-1 (VP3-DHAV I-ELISA) was established. The parameters were optimized, and
93 the sensitivity, specificity and repeatability were evaluated. Furthermore, I-ELISA

94 based on DHAV-1 whole virus particles (DHAV I-ELISA) was compared with the
95 novel VP3-DHAV I-ELISA method. The newly established method may be a
96 supplement to or even a substitution for the DHAV I-ELISA method for DHAV
97 antibody detection and the monitoring of DHAV prevalence.

98 **2. Materials and methods**

99 *2.1. Viral strain and serum samples*

100 DHAV-1 strain H was kept in our lab, and its complete genome is available in
101 GenBank (JQ301467.1). Positive serum samples were collected from ducks that were
102 artificially infected with DHAV-1, and the samples were stored at -80°C until use.
103 Negative serum samples were collected from DHAV-free healthy ducks, and their
104 negative statuses were confirmed by RT-PCR. Confirmed antisera against several
105 common duck-sensitive antigens were stored in our lab. Serum samples were obtained
106 from naïve, DHAV-1-vaccinated and DHAV-1-infected ducks from different farms in
107 Sichuan province, China, and they were used to compare VP3-DHAV I-ELISA with
108 DHAV I-ELISA.

109 *2.2. Antigen preparation*

110 Recombinant VP3 protein of DHAV-1 was expressed using a pGEX-4T-1 vector
111 in a prokaryotic expression host, BL21 (DE3), and purified by SDS-PAGE gel
112 extraction by the author (results to be published). DHAV-1 particles were propagated
113 in 11-day-old duck embryos (Liu et al., 2010) and purified by approaches described in
114 a previous paper published by our lab (Jiang et al., 1989). The concentrations of both
115 antigens were analyzed with a spectrophotometer (SmartSpec™ 3000, Bio-Rad).

116 *2.3. Establishment and optimization of VP3-DHAV I-ELISA*

117 High-titer serum samples from artificially infected ducks and confirmed serum
118 samples from DHAV-free healthy ducks were used as positive and negative working
119 standards, respectively. The optimum dilutions of coating antigen and serum were
120 determined by checkerboard titration in a 96-well microplate, according to an
121 essentially classical indirect ELISA protocol (Crowther, 2009). The purified VP3
122 protein was serially diluted by two-fold (from 1:20 to 1:2560). The positive and
123 negative serum samples were diluted from 1:40 to 1:1280 in the same manner in a
124 separate plate. An HRP-labeled rabbit anti-duck IgG conjugate (1:5000 to 1:10000
125 recommended, Beijing Kangbiquan BioScience) was optimized by preparing two-fold
126 serial dilutions (from 1:500 to 1:4000). The optimal blocking buffer (dissolved in PBS
127 containing 0.05% Tween-20) was chosen from 1% BSA, 5% BSA, 1% gelatin, 5%
128 gelatin and 5% skim milk. All of the samples were tested in triplicate and measured
129 with a microplate spectrophotometer (Model680, Bio-Rad) at two wavelengths (OD₄₅₀
130 and OD₆₃₀). A reaction with a corresponding positive value (P) of approximately 1.0, a
131 negative value (N) of below 0.4, and the highest P/N value that was no less than 2.1,
132 was considered optimal.

133 *2.4. Validation of the method parameters*

134 The cutoff value for the VP3-DHAV I-ELISA was determined using a panel of 40
135 negative serum samples under optimal conditions. The result was described as the
136 mean of the total negative serum OD values plus three standard deviations (SDs) (Jia
137 et al., 2009; Upadhyay et al., 2009). An OD value of above the cutoff value was

138 considered positive for the serum sample.

139 A positive serum sample was used to evaluate the lower detection limit by
140 performing end-point titration from 1:80 to 1:10240 (Mahajan et al., 2015). Each
141 dilution was tested three times. Positive and negative serum samples for DHAV-1
142 served as controls. The maximum dilution with the mean OD value that was above the
143 cutoff value was considered to indicate the analytical sensitivity of the method. The
144 analytical sensitivity of DHAV I-ELISA (mentioned below in section 2.5) was
145 evaluated in the same manner.

146 The specificity of VP3-DHAV I-ELISA was evaluated by an antigenic
147 cross-reactivity test (Liu et al., 2014) and blocking test. Confirmed antisera to
148 DHAV-1, DHAV-3, duck plague virus (DPV), avian influenza virus (AIV), duck
149 swollen head septicemia virus (DSHSV), *Riemerella anatipestifer* (R.A), *Salmonella*
150 *enterica* (S.E) and *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) were used to evaluate antigenic
151 cross-reactivity. Each antiserum was tested three times, and DHAV-1-negative serum
152 served as a control. A blocking test was conducted to further evaluate the specificity.
153 Briefly, antiserum to DHAV-1 was mixed with DPV and DHAV-1 antigen separately
154 at 10:1 (V/V), neutralized at 37°C for 1 hr, and then diluted to the optimal
155 concentration and incubated as a primary antibody. Each serum sample was tested
156 three times, and DHAV-1-positive serum that was not mixed with antigen served as a
157 control. DHAV-3 antiserum was mixed with DHAV-1 antigen and neutralized in the
158 same manner. The blocking rate was calculated as the evaluation index.

159 The repeatability evaluation was conducted as follows. Antigens from

160 the same and different batches were used to test the same panel of positive (n = 3) and
161 negative (n = 3) serum samples for DHAV-1. The intra-assay and inter-assay
162 coefficients of variation (CVs) were calculated. Each serum sample was tested four
163 times.

164 *2.5. Comparison of VP3-DHAV I-ELISA and DHAV I-ELISA for antibody detection of* 165 *DHAV-1 in clinical specimens*

166 DHAV I-ELISA was conducted as previously described (Zhao et al., 1991) with
167 some modifications. First, we prepared antigens as described in section 2.2. Second,
168 we blocked an ELISA plate with 5% skim milk (dissolved in PBS containing 0.05%
169 Tween-20) for 1.5 hr at 37°C before adding diluted serum. Next, we adjusted the
170 incubation time of the serum with an HRP-labeled rabbit anti-duck IgG conjugate to
171 45 min at 37°C. Finally, we used a commercial TMB substrate and performed
172 measurements at two wavelengths (OD₄₅₀ and OD₆₃₀).

173 Serum samples from different sources were tested by VP3-DHAV I-ELISA and
174 DHAV I-ELISA separately to evaluate the similarities between the two assays to gain
175 insights into the clinical applicability of the established VP3-DHAV I-ELISA. The
176 sensitivity and specificity of the new method were determined. The similarity rate was
177 calculated as follows: the sum of the true positive and true negative serum samples
178 divided by the total number of samples.

179 **3. Results**

180 *3.1. Standardization of the VP3-DHAV I-ELISA procedure*

181 Purified recombinant VP3 protein was prepared and identified to satisfy the

182 experimental requirements (data not shown). The optimal concentrations of VP3
183 protein, serum and rabbit anti-duck IgG conjugate were 1:160 (0.94 μ g), 1:160 (Table
184 1) and 1:2000 (Table 2) , respectively. The optimal blocking buffer was 1% gelatin
185 (data not shown). Low background, as well as significant differences, were found to
186 exist between the positive and negative serum samples.

187 3.2. Validation of the method parameters

188 A panel of DHAV-1 antibody-negative serum samples was tested under the
189 determined optimal conditions. The OD values ranged from 0.035 to 0.267, with a
190 mean OD value of 0.122 and an SD of 0.070. The cutoff value was calculated using
191 the following formula: $0.122 + 3 \times 0.07 = 0.332$.

192 The lower detection limit, also called the analytical sensitivity of the method,
193 was evaluated by end-point titration and was determined to be 1:1280 ($OD_{450-630} =$
194 0.37) (Fig. 1). The analytical sensitivity was 1:2560 ($OD_{450-630} = 0.42$) for the DHAV
195 I-ELISA (data not shown).

196 The results for the specificity evaluation showed that all of the serum samples,
197 except for the DHAV-1- and DHAV-3-positive samples, were below the cutoff value
198 (Fig. 2). The OD value of the DHAV-1-negative samples was 0.258 ± 0.010 . The
199 DPV- positive serum samples had the highest OD value (0.246 ± 0.023) among the
200 tested samples, except for the DHAV-1- and DHAV-3-positive serum samples. A
201 significant difference in OD values was detected between the seronegative and
202 seropositive samples. For the blocking tests (data not shown), the OD values of the
203 sera mixed with DHAV-1 and DPV particles were 0.230 ± 0.003 and 1.210 ± 0.003 ,

204 respectively, while that of the control was 1.246 ± 0.038 . The calculated blocking rate
205 for DHAV-1 antiserum was 82%, indicating that the DHAV-1-positive serum reacted
206 specifically with DHAV-1 rather than with DPV. The blocking rate for DHAV-3
207 antiserum was 56%, indicating that it cross-reacted with DHAV-1.

208 The repeatability of the assay was evaluated by determining the average
209 intra-assay and inter-assay CVs. Serum samples with different OD values were tested
210 (Fig. 3). The intra-assay CV ranged from 0.73% to 8.64%, with a mean of 5.36%,
211 while the inter-assay CV ranged from 3.35% to 7.68%, with a mean of 5.53%. None
212 of the tested serum samples had a CV of over 10%, indicating the stability and
213 repeatability of the method.

214 *3.3. Comparison of efficacies of VP3-DHAV I-ELISA and DHAV I-ELISA for detecting* 215 *DHAV-1 antibody*

216 Serum samples of different origins were tested simultaneously using the
217 VP3-DHAV and DHAV-based I-ELISA for comparison. The cutoff value of the
218 DHAV I-ELISA determined in this study was 0.313 (data not shown). The results
219 (data not shown) showed that the positive rates for the VP3-DHAV and DHAV-based
220 I-ELISAs were 50% (50/100) and 52% (52/100), respectively. However, one sample
221 that tested negative using DHAV I-ELISA was found to be positive by VP3-DHAV
222 I-ELISA. In contrast, 3 samples that tested negative by VP3-DHAV I-ELISA were
223 found to be positive by DHAV I-ELISA. The diagnostic sensitivity and specificity of
224 the new method were 94.2% (49/52) and 97.9% (47/48), respectively. The
225 concordance between the two methods was 96% [(49+47)/100], indicating that the

226 efficacy of VP3-DHAV I-ELISA for antibody detection was almost equal to that of
227 DHAV I-ELISA.

228 **4. Discussion**

229 The pathogenic characteristics of DVH make it an intractable disease that must
230 be identified and prevented during the early stages. I-ELISA can be performed to test
231 sera from duck flocks with suspected DHAV infections to efficiently monitor the
232 antibody levels in ducks, and it can provide a guide for preventive measures for timely
233 control of the disease. ELISA is commonly used for the detection of numerous
234 picornaviruses (Liu et al., 2010; Ma et al., 2008; Mahajan et al., 2013; Mahajan et al.,
235 2015; Mohapatra et al., 2014; Yu et al., 2012) and not merely for identification of
236 DHAV.

237 In theory, using a whole virus as a coating antigen in indirect ELISA is more
238 advantageous than using its subunits because whole viruses have more comprehensive
239 antigenicity. This advantage may account for the higher detection limit (1:2560) of
240 DHAV I-ELISA than that of VP3-DHAV I-ELISA (1:1280). Nevertheless, purification
241 of DHAV particles is costly and difficult (Liu et al., 2010); thus, it is urgent to identify
242 a substitution for this antigen. Recombinant protein is a reasonable choice because it
243 is readily available, easy to purify to any required concentration, and capable of
244 immunoreactivity. Moreover, ELISAs based on recombinant proteins have been
245 widely used (Ma et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2015). To our knowledge, however, no
246 VP3-DHAV I-ELISA method for DHAV detection has been reported.

247 In this study, an indirect ELISA method based on the recombinant VP3 protein

248 was developed. A panel of DHAV-negative serum samples collected from healthy
249 ducklings was confirmed by RT-PCR (Cheng et al., 2009). Although the samples had
250 been filtered, the OD values varied greatly among them, possibly due to hemolysis or
251 complex components present in the serum. The analytical sensitivity of the method
252 was 1:1280 ($OD_{450-630} = 0.37$). The results of antigenic cross-reactivity testing
253 indicated that the VP3-DHAV I-ELISA method failed to detect antisera to other
254 duck-sensitive antigens but was capable of detecting antisera to both DHAV-1 and
255 DHAV-3. This finding may be used to aid in the monitoring of DHAV antibodies, but
256 it fails to differentiate whether DHAV-1 or DHAV-3 is the pathogen, and it also
257 indicates the existence of cross-reactivity between the two genotypes. VP3 is
258 relatively conserved, and sequence BLAST analysis showed that the VP3 proteins of
259 DHAV-1 and DHAV-3 share 79%-80% identity, which is higher than that of the VP1
260 proteins (70.51%-72.81%). However, a published VP1-based I-ELISA method has
261 been demonstrated to be able to detect antisera to DHAV-1 and DHAV-3
262 simultaneously (Yang et al., 2014). The repeatability of the method was proven to be
263 good because both the intra-assay and inter-assay CVs were lower than 10%. Taken
264 together, these results indicate that the VP3-DHAV I-ELISA method is sensitive,
265 specific and stable and that it can be used as a common approach to detect DHAV-1
266 and DHAV-3 antibodies.

267 To evaluate the efficacy of the novel I-ELISA method, it's critical and necessary
268 to compare it with the standard method (Liu et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2014; Zhang et
269 al., 2015). The neutralization test is not suitable for massive serological detection of

270 the virus strain used in this study, which has not adapted to cell culture to date;
271 moreover, no approved commercial ELISA kits for DHAV are available for clinical
272 use. Even so, DHAV whole particle-based I-ELISA has been demonstrated to have
273 good consistency according to the neutralization test (Zhao et al., 1991; Sun et al.,
274 1997); therefore, a published DHAV I-ELISA method was modified and improved for
275 use as a standard to evaluate the newly established VP3-DHAV I-ELISA method. To
276 imitate field conditions, serum samples were collected from ducks naturally infected
277 with DHAV, and they were also obtained from vaccinated and naïve ducks were at the
278 clinic. The results revealed strong similarities between the efficacies of the two assays
279 (96%), suggesting that the immunoreactivity of the VP3 subunit is comparable to that
280 of the whole DHAV-1 virus particle. It demonstrates that the VP3 subunit, in addition
281 to VP1 (Oberste et al., 1999; Zhang et al., 2014), can also act as an indicator of
282 DHAV-1 infection. Compared with the published VP1-based ELISA method
283 developed by Liu et al. (2010), this new assay has lower sensitivity but higher
284 specificity. This difference may be related to the increased sequence conservation of
285 VP3 compared with VP1. It is difficult to accurately compare our results with those of
286 Liu et al. because their diagnostic specificity and sensitivity were based on the
287 neutralization test, while ours were based on the DHAV whole particle I-ELISA.
288 Taken together, these results demonstrate that the VP3-DHAV I-ELISA is capable of
289 serological detection.

290 This study is far from perfect, and we still need to evaluate a larger number of
291 samples and to quantify antibodies. Even so, this method shows potential for the

292 serological detection of DHAV antibodies.

293 In conclusion, we have developed a novel indirect ELISA method for detecting
294 DHAV-1 and DHAV-3 antibodies cheaply, rapidly and accurately. The VP3-DHAV
295 I-ELISA method has been demonstrated to be highly sensitive, specific, and equally
296 capable of sero-surveillance compared with the DHAV I-ELISA method. It is a useful
297 supplement for the monitoring of both vaccinated and non-vaccinated infected flocks.

298

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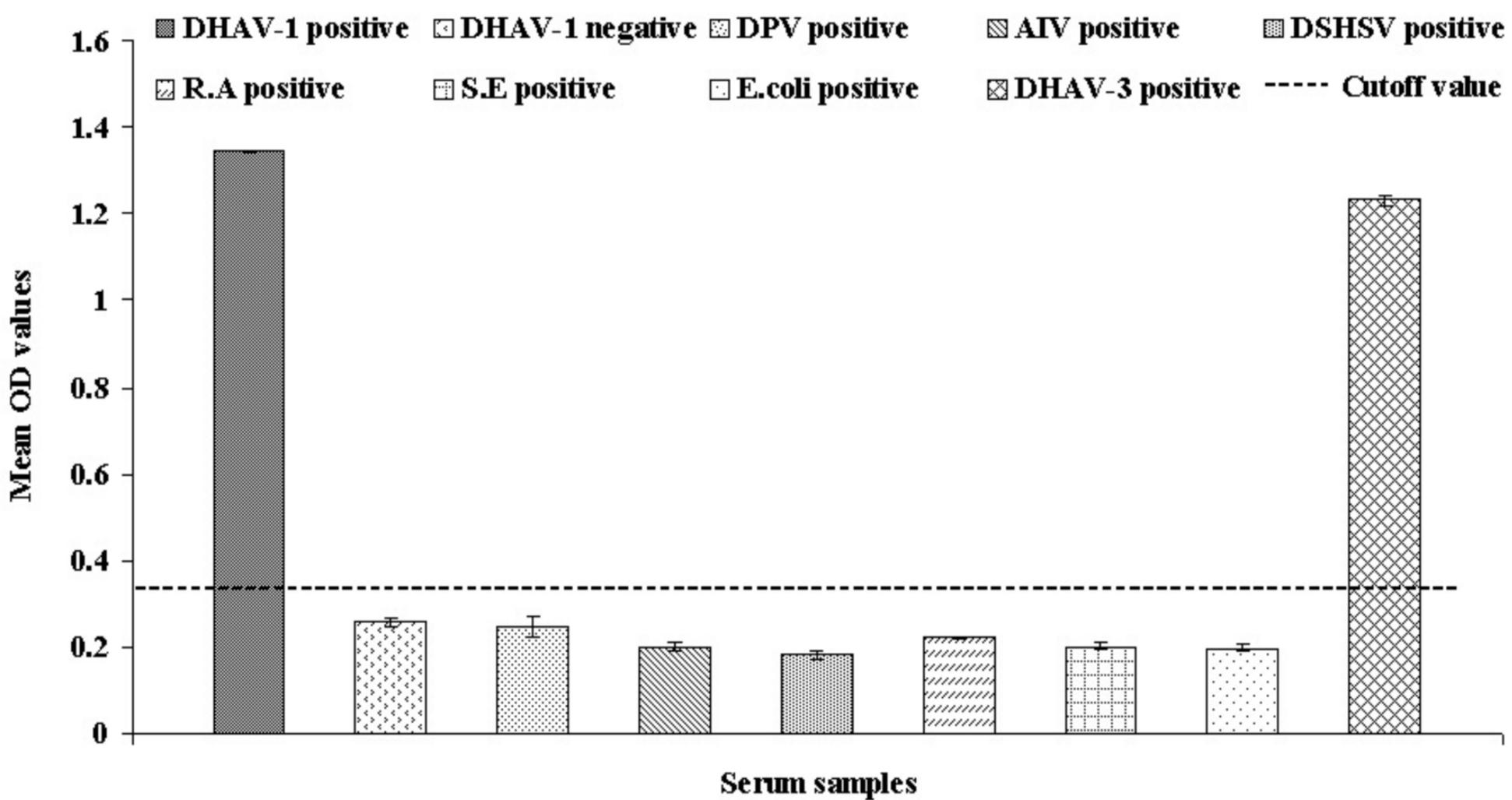
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—▲— DHAV-1 positive serum

..... Cutoff value

