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# Impact of colistin and colistin-loaded on alginate nanoparticles on pigs infected with a colistin-resistant enterotoxigenic *Escherichia coli* strain

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## ► To cite this version:

Djamel Drider, Rabah Boukherroub, Laetitia Le Devendec, Yanath Belguesmia, Noura Hazime, et al.. Impact of colistin and colistin-loaded on alginate nanoparticles on pigs infected with a colistin-resistant enterotoxigenic *Escherichia coli* strain. *Veterinary Microbiology*, 2022, 266, pp.109359. 10.1016/j.vetmic.2022.109359 . hal-03561670

**HAL Id: hal-03561670**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03561670v1>**

Submitted on 2 Jun 2022

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1     **Impact of colistin and colistin-loaded on alginate nanoparticles on pigs infected with a**  
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4     **colistin-resistant Enterotoxigenic *Escherichia coli* strain**

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2 23 **Abstract:** Colistin is frequently used for the control of post-weaning diarrhoea in pigs. Colistin  
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4 24 resistance caused by plasmidic genes is a public health issue. We evaluated, in experimental  
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6 25 animal facilities, whether free colistin or colistin-loaded on alginate nanoparticles (colistin/Alg  
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9 26 NPs) could select a colistin-resistant Enterotoxigenic *Escherichia coli*. The Alg NPs were  
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11 27 produced by a simple top-down approach through ball milling of sodium alginate polymer  
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13 28 precursor, and colistin loading was achieved through physical adsorption. Colistin loading on  
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16 29 Alg NPs was confirmed using various tools such Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy and  
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19 30 dynamic light scattering measurements. Thirty-four piglets were orally inoculated or not with  
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21 31 a *mcr-1*-positive, rifampicin-resistant enterotoxigenic *E. coli* strain, and the inoculated pigs  
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23 32 were either treated or not during five days with commercial colistin (100,000 IU/kg) or  
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26 33 colistin/Alg NPs (40,415 IU/kg). Clinical signs were recorded. Fecal and post-mortem samples  
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29 34 were analyzed by culture. The result clearly indicated that colistin/Alg NPs had a slightly better  
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31 35 therapeutic effect. Both treatments led to a transitory decrease of the total *E. coli* fecal  
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33 36 population with a majority of colistin-resistant *E. coli* isolates during treatment, but the  
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36 37 dominant *E. coli* population was found susceptible at the end of the trial. Further studies are  
37  
38 38 needed to evaluate, in diverse experimental or field conditions, the therapeutic efficacy of  
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40  
41 39 colistin/Alg NPs for post-weaning diarrhoea.

42  
43 40 **Keywords:** Post-weaning diarrhea; pig; colistin; Enterotoxigenic *Escherichia coli*; alginate;  
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45 41 nanoparticles  
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## 1. Introduction

Post-weaning diarrhea (PWD) is one of the most frequent diseases encountered in pig production, leading to important economic losses. PWD is caused by Enterotoxigenic *Escherichia coli* (ETEC) strains, belonging to different serogroups (e.g. O138, O139, and O141), and possessing various adhesive factors (e.g. F4 (K88), F8, AIDA, and Eae) and virulence genes (e.g. enterotoxins LT, STa, STb, and EAST). The control of PWD must first rely on improvement of breeding management of the weaning piglets in order to avoid stressful growth conditions. Other prevention strategies including immunization, feed additives, breeding of resistant pigs, probiotics, phages... are also suggested or under development (Rhouma et al., 2017). However, when prevention measures result to be ineffective, then antibiotics may be used (Luppi, 2017). Although in 2012-2013, 70% of the French herds did not report any use of antimicrobials for their fattening pigs, a high antimicrobial treatment incidence of 320.1 per 1,000 pig/day was observed for weaned piglets in France (Anses, 2020b). The use of these antimicrobials enabled selection of antimicrobial resistant *E. coli* strains. Thus, according to the 2019 results published by the Resapath network, only 26.4% of *E. coli* from diseased pigs are susceptible to all of the following antimicrobials, tetracycline, trimethoprim-sulfonamide, gentamicin, ceftiofur, enrofloxacin and marbofloxacin (Anses, 2020a). Resistance to colistin, a critically important antimicrobial for human health (WHO, 2019) is also encountered for about 10% of *E. coli* from diseased piglets in 2019 (Anses, 2020a).

In line with national recommendations (<https://agriculture.gouv.fr/le-plan-ecoantibio-2-2017-2021>) as well as international agencies advice (EMA/CVMP/CHMP, 2016), a reduction of the antimicrobial use, and that of colistin, in particular, in animals is urgently needed. In France, the target objective was a reduction of 50% in 5 years (2017-2021) of cattle, pig and poultry exposure to colistin.

1  
2 67 Nanotechnology, developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, is considered as an emerging science  
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4 68 offering possibilities of diverse applications. This approach is based on the use of ultrafine  
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6 69 particles of materials, with a size ranging from 1 to 100 nm. Nanoparticles exhibit a high  
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9 70 surface-to-volume ratio and a small size, which are favorable for adsorption of diverse  
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11 71 biological molecules. Furthermore, nanoparticles are considered as efficient drug and antibody  
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14 72 carriers, allowing better accumulation and biodisponibility in the sites of infection (Kreuter,  
15  
16 73 1996).

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18 74 Different nanoparticles-based materials can be used with the aim to provide new means for drug  
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21 75 delivery, antibiotics rationale and overcome major problems related to infections encountered  
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23 76 in animal health. In light of this, Liu et al. (Liu et al., 2021) reported beneficial and controversial  
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26 77 effects of zinc nanoparticles (Cnz) when used as feed additive. Indeed, these authors showed  
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28 78 that Cnz can permit enhancement of antimicrobial activity, in a swine model, but in meanwhile  
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31 79 these nanoparticles led to alterations of the intestinal microbiota. Another study underpinned  
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33 80 the positive effects of zinc phosphate nanoparticles (ZnA NPs) on the piglet growth  
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36 81 performance (Kociova et al., 2020).

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38 82 Related to that, we conducted an experiment to evaluate the potential efficacy of an innovative  
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41 83 formulation of colistin, based on alginate nanoparticles (Alg NPs), in comparison with free  
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43 84 colistin. The alginate nanoparticles investigated in this work were produced by a simple top-  
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46 85 down approach through ball milling of sodium alginate polymer precursor (Belguesmia et al.,  
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48 86 2020). Colistin loading was achieved through physical adsorption. The benefits of this approach  
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51 87 include the possibility of loading several active molecules on the same nanoparticle and the low  
52  
53 88 cost associated with the nanoparticles' production (Zgheib et al., 2021). In this context, we  
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55 89 compared the impact on the *E. coli* fecal population and the efficacy of free colistin and colistin-  
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58 90 loaded on alginate nanoparticles on pigs infected with a colistin-resistant ETEC using a  
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60 91 previously developed PWD model (Le Devendec et al., 2018).  
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## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Preparation of strains, media and inocula

The previously described *E. coli* strain 12-269M (Le Devendec et al., 2018) was used. Briefly, this *mcr-1*-positive *E. coli* strain has been isolated from PWD-suffering piglets. It was made resistant to rifampicin. It is hemolytic, belongs to the phylogenetic group A, and contains the virulence markers O149-F4, *astA*, *capU*, *gad*, *hlyA*, *iha*, *ltcA*, *staI*, *stb*, *terE*, and *ureD*. It is resistant to colistin, with a colistin MIC of 16 mg/L, and to sulfamethoxazole, trimethoprim, tetracycline, ampicillin, gentamicin, chloramphenicol, and rifampicin. In addition to the *mcr-1* gene, and mutations in the PhoP and PhoQ genes of unknown impact on colistin resistance, we could detect the following resistance genes: *sul1*, *sul2*, *sul3*, *dfrA1*, *tetA*, *cat*, *cmlA1*, *bla*<sub>TEM-1a</sub>, *aac(3)-IIa*, *aac(3)-IVa*, *aadA1*, *aadA3*, *aph(3')-Ia*, *aph(4)-Ia*, *strA*, and *strB*.

The inoculum was prepared by culture in Mueller Hinton (MH) broth containing colistin (2 mg/L) for 18 h at 37°C, under gentle agitation. The bacterial pellet obtained after centrifugation (5,180 g, 5 min) was re-suspended in peptone buffered solution in order to obtain a titer of approximately 10<sup>8</sup> colony-forming units (CFU)/mL. The titer of the suspension was checked by plating serial dilutions on MH media.

### 2.2. Preparation and characterization of colistin-loaded on alginate nanoparticles

The alginate nanoparticles (Alg NPs) were obtained using a top-down process with the BALL MILL RETSCH (PM100S10, Eragny, France). To this end, 2 g of sodium alginate powder (Sigma Aldrich, St Louis, MA USA) and 112 g of zirconium oxide beads were placed in a grinding pot of 1.050 kg, for 10 h with a stirring at 440 rpm, and a pause every 5 min, followed by a reverse rotation every 10 min. The Alg NPs were collected and dispersed in Milli-Q water (500 µg/mL) under ultrasonication (BRANSON 2800, frequency: 40 KHz) for 1 h at 25°C.

Then, a solution containing colistin (60 µg) was adjusted at pH 6.5 with 1 M sodium hydroxide prior to addition of 500 µg/mL of Alg NPs. The solution was introduced in an ultrasound bath

1  
2 117 (FS100B, Decon Laboratories Ltd, Hove, UK) for 45 min at 50/60 Hz. The temperature of the  
3  
4 118 bath was maintained below 30°C, in order to limit the aggregation of Alg NPs.

5  
6 119 The amount of colistin adsorbed on the surface of the Alg NPs was determined by HPLC. To  
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8  
9 120 this end, a solution of colistin loaded onto Alg NPs was previously dialyzed on an 8 kDa  
10  
11 121 membrane in order to remove non-associated colistin with the nanoparticles. The sample was  
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13  
14 122 filtered through a 0.45 µm regenerated cellulose membrane before loading the column (injected  
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16 123 volume 40 µL). Equipment used during this experiment was the Shimadzu LC2010-HT  
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19 124 (Shimadzu, Tokyo, Japan) with a column C4 of 5 µm QS Uptisphere® 300 Å, 250 × 4.6 mm  
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21 125 (Interchim, Montluçon, France). The eluent composition was a mixture of two solvents A and  
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23  
24 126 B (A: 0.1% trifluoroacetic acid in deionized water, and for B: 0.1% trifluoroacetic acid in  
25  
26 127 acetonitrile) with a flow rate of 1 mL/min. The column was heated to 40°C, and the elution of  
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28  
29 128 the compounds was carried out by a linear gradient of 0 to 80% during 30 min. Samples  
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31 129 detection was performed at 215 and 254 nm. The concentration of colistin was determined using  
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34 130 quantification of obtained peaks area comparatively to samples of colistin with known  
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36 131 concentrations analyzed under the same conditions. The amount of colistin loaded on Alg NPs  
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38 132 was calculated as the difference between the initial amount of colistin used for the formulation  
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41 133 and the amount of colistin remaining in the supernatant. The percent of loading efficiency was  
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43 134 calculated by the following formula:

$$44$$
$$45$$
$$46 135 \quad \% \text{ Entrapment efficiency} = \frac{\text{Total amount of added colistin} - \text{unbound colistin}}{\text{Total amount of colistin}} \times 100$$
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$$48$$

49 136  
50  
51 137 Particles size and zeta potential were determined by dynamic light scattering (DLS)  
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54 138 measurements using a Malvern Zeta sizer Nano ZS instrument (Malvern Instruments Inc.,  
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56 139 Worcestershire, UK), equipped with a 4 mV He-Ne laser emitting at 633 nm. The capillary cell  
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2 140 was pre-rinsed with ethanol and purified water prior to loading samples. Samples were  
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4 141 dissolved in Milli-Q water at a concentration of 500 µg/mL.

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6 142 FTIR analysis was performed on a Thermo Fisher Scientific, Nicolet 380 (Waltham, MA, USA).

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9 143 The colistin, Alg NPs and colistin/Alg NPs were analyzed, separately, in a pellet form, which

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11 144 is made by mixing 1 mg of the sample with 175 mg of potassium bromide (KBr). After that,

12  
13 145 the mixture was grounded properly to ensure uniform distribution in the KBr base. Finally, the

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16 146 grounded mixture was pressed in a hydraulic press by applying a pressure of ~7 to 9 tons.

### 17 18 19 147 **2.3. Animal experimental design**

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21 148 The experiment was performed in accordance with French animal welfare regulations and the

22  
23 149 protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee authorization (APAFiS no.

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25  
26 150 2019010215289917). The experiment was conducted in the ANSES Ploufragan animal

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28 151 facilities (ANSES registration No. C-22-754-1). Strict biosecurity measures were implemented

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30 152 to avoid contamination of the pigs, including the use of an air filtration system and airlocks for

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32 153 each unit, unit-specific clothes, and compulsory showering after visiting the pigs. The trial was

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34 154 conducted with 34 specific-pathogen-free (SPF) Large White piglets, males and females,

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36 155 selected after genotyping the SPF available piglets for the polymorphism linked to the intestinal

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38 156 receptors of *E. coli* F4 (Le Devendec et al., 2018). Then, at six weeks of age, the piglets were

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40 157 randomized, on sex and weight, into four experimental groups, the F4-susceptible piglets being

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42 158 in priority placed into the inoculated groups (Table 1). The experimental groups were as follows:

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44 159 NINT (non-infected, non-treated group), INT (infected, non-treated group), ICC (infected,

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46 160 commercial colistin group), and ICNP (infected, colistin/Alg NPs). The animals did not receive

47  
48 161 any antibiotic treatment prior to the trial and were given the same non-supplemented feed. Each

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50 162 group was housed in a separate room, containing two pens of four or five animals.

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52 163 On the morning of Day 0, the ten NINT piglets were orally inoculated with 10 mL of sterile

53  
54 164 broth. On the same day, the 24 piglets of the infected groups were orally inoculated with 10 mL

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2 165 of the inoculum. For all treated groups, treatment began on the evening of Day 0 and ended on  
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4 166 the morning of Day 5. Pigs from the ICC group received colistin (Colivet solution, 2 000 000  
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6 167 IU/mL, CEVA, Libourne, France) by oral gavage at the recommended dosage (50 000 IU/kg  
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8  
9 168 of body weight twice a day). Pigs from groups ICNP were also treated twice a day by oral  
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11 169 gavage (40,415 IU/kg per day, 50 mL per pig each time).

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14 170 The weight of each animal was recorded once a week. During the week, daily clinical  
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16 171 examinations consisted of looking for general clinical signs and taking rectal temperatures.  
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18 172 Individual fecal samples were collected from pigs on Days -3, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 14 and 17.  
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21 173 The pigs were sacrificed on Day 21 (groups ICC and ICNP), Day 22 (two pigs from group INT),  
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23 174 Day 23 (group NINT) or Day 24 (six pigs from group INT). The sacrificed animals were  
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25  
26 175 autopsied and samples of the jejunum, ileum, cecum, colon, and rectum were collected. The  
27  
28 176 samples collected post-mortem (PM) contained both fecal material and scraped mucosa.

#### 30 31 177 **2.4. Analysis of fecal and PM samples**

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33 178 For culture analysis, all the samples were diluted 1/10 in peptone buffered solution containing  
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35 179 20% glycerol. The 1/10 diluted aliquots were stored at -70°C. After thawing, decimal dilutions  
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38 180 were prepared. One hundred microliters of decimal dilutions was inoculated using EasySpiral®  
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40 181 Dilute (Interscience, Saint-Nom-la-Bretèche, France) onto MacConkey media (MC) to  
41  
42 182 determine the titers of the total *E. coli* population and onto MC supplemented with rifampicin  
43  
44 183 (250 mg/L)(MCRif) to assess the titers of the inoculated strain. The plates were incubated  
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46 184 overnight at 37°C. Moreover, for samples negative on MCRif, one mL of the 1/10 thawed  
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48 185 dilutions was enriched overnight in 9 mL of colistin-supplemented Brain Heart Infusion broth  
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50  
51 186 (colistin 2 mg/L) before plating 100 µL on MCRif plates. The limit of detection was 10 CFU/g.  
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54 187 Whenever possible, one colony obtained on MCRif per sample was stored. PCR was used to  
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56 188 confirm that it belonged to the *E. coli* species (Bej et al., 1991), to detect the presence of the  
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59 189 *mcr-1* gene (Liu et al., 2016), to check that a positive result was obtained with a F4 antiserum  
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190 (Labocea, Ploufragan, France). For isolates that did not exhibit the expected results (presence  
191 of *mcr-I*, and positive F4 agglutination test), we determined the phylogenetic group (Clermont  
192 et al., 2013), and studied ERIC-PCR profiles (Rivera et al., 1995). The susceptibility of some  
193 of these isolates was compared to the susceptibility of the inoculated strain by determining the  
194 MIC of colistin using a broth microdilution method on EUVSEC plates (Sensititre,  
195 ThermoFisher Scientific, Dardilly, France).

196 In addition, fecal samples collected on Days 4, 10 and 17 were inoculated, after thawing, onto  
197 the Chromagar Orientation™ agar medium (i2a, Montpellier, France) supplemented with  
198 colistin (8 mg/L) and vancomycin (8 mg/L) (CAO-CV) (Mourand et al., 2018). When *E. coli*  
199 colonies developed, two colonies per sample were stored and further analyzed. Their identity  
200 and the presence of the *mcr-I* gene were checked by PCR, their resistance to rifampicin was  
201 tested by culture on rifampicin-supplemented MH media (250 mg/L) and they were tested by  
202 agglutination with the F4 antiserum.

### 203 **2.5. Statistical analysis**

204 The Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test was used to compare weight gains or titers. The  
205 distributions of pigs or isolates were analyzed using the Chi2-test or the Fisher exact test.  
206 Analyses of variance were performed to evaluate the impact of the treatments on the bacterial  
207 titers in fecal and PM samples.

## 209 **3. Results and Discussion**

### 210 **3.1. SEM and Dynamic Light Scattering of alginate nanoparticles and colistin-loaded on 211 alginate nanoparticles (colistin/Alg NPs)**

212 Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) imaging revealed nanostructures of different shapes with  
213 an average size of 87 nm (Figure S1). Dynamic light scattering (DLS) permitted to determine  
214 the hydrodynamic size of the Alg NPs before and after colistin loading acquired at pH 6.5. The

1 prepared Alg NPs (500  $\mu\text{g/mL}$ ) displayed a hydrodynamic size of 111 nm . The difference  
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4 216 observed in size of Alg NPs using the two techniques was ascribed to the presence a hydration  
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6 217 shell in the liquid phase (DLS), as compared to SEM recorded in a dry state. After loading of  
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9 218 colistin (60  $\mu\text{g/mL}$ ) on Alg NPs (500  $\mu\text{g/mL}$ ), the hydrodynamic size remained almost  
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11 219 unchanged (112 nm) while the zeta potential value changed from negative (-32.0 mV) for the  
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13 220 naked nanoparticles to slightly positive (+0.7 mV). With a pKa of  $\sim 10$ , colistin behaves as a  
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15 221 polycation under our experimental conditions. Therefore, loading of colistin on Alg NPs  
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17 222 neutralizes the negative charge and turns the surface charge to slightly positive. The result  
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19 223 clearly indicates the successful adsorption of colistin on the Alg NPs surface through  
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21 224 electrostatic interactions. However, other types of interactions such as hydrogen bonding and  
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23 225 dipole interactions, owing to the presence of many polar groups in colistin and Alg NPs cannot  
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28 226 be discarded.

29  
30 227 The amount of colistin loaded on Alg NPs was about 60  $\mu\text{g}$ , as determined using HPLC  
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32 228 analyses. Finally, the successful loading of colistin on the surface of Alg NPs was confirmed  
33  
34 229 by Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy (Figure S2). The FTIR spectrum of Alg NPs  
35  
36 230 comprises a broad band at around  $3413\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ascribed to surface stretching vibrations of -OH  
37  
38 231 and adsorbed water along with bands at  $2921\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $\text{CH}_2$  stretching),  $1617\text{ cm}^{-1}$  (asymmetric  
39  
40 232 stretching vibration of COO groups),  $1414\text{ cm}^{-1}$  (symmetric stretching vibration of COO  
41  
42 233 groups), and  $1032\text{ cm}^{-1}$  (elongation of C-O groups). The FTIR spectrum of pure colistin is  
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44 234 displayed in Figure S2 and consists of a broad stretching vibration band at  $\sim 3387\text{ cm}^{-1}$  assigned  
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46 235 to -OH and -NH stretching vibrations, and the characteristic amide I and II bands at respectively  
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48 236  $1655$  and  $1533\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . The band at  $\sim 1114\text{ cm}^{-1}$  is attributed to antisymmetric stretching of the  
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50 237 sulphate counter ion. The results are in full agreement with the literature data (Freudenthal et  
51  
52 238 al., 2016). After colistin loading on Alg NPs, the overlap between the stretching vibrations of  
53  
54 239 both components makes it difficult to discriminate the peaks due to colistin (Figure S2).  
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1  
2 240 However, the shift of the main peak of Alg NPs from 1617 to 1612  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  suggests strong  
3  
4 241 interactions between colistin and the nanoparticles' surface.

### 6 242 **3.2. Inoculum titer, pathology and bodyweight gains**

8  
9 243 The aim of this experimental study was to evaluate the impact of colistin, either its classical  
10  
11 244 formulation (free form) or loaded on Alg NPs, on the *E. coli* fecal population, and the efficacy  
12  
13 245 on PWD. The experimental model was based on the results previously obtained with the 12-  
14  
15 246 269M strain (Le Devendec et al., 2018). The inoculum titer was  $1.68 \times 10^8$  CFU/mL, thus  
16  
17 247  $1.68 \times 10^9$  CFU per pig instead of  $7.68 \times 10^7$  CFU, in an attempt to obtain a more severe model.  
18  
19 248 No clinical signs were observed in the NINT group. Diarrhea and signs of discomfort were  
20  
21 249 detected in the other groups a few hours after inoculation, and were present on four out of eight  
22  
23 250 different pigs in the INT group ( $p=0.02$ ). The distributions of affected/non affected pigs in the  
24  
25 251 two other groups (3/8 affected pigs in the ICC group and 0/8 affected pigs in the ICNP group)  
26  
27 252 were not significantly different between them and in comparison with the NINT and INT groups  
28  
29 253 ( $p>0.05$ ). The numbers of individual diarrheic samples collected during the twelve days  
30  
31 254 following inoculation varied from 0 out of 120 in the NINT, and 0 out of 96 in the ICNP group,  
32  
33 255 to 3 out of 96 in the ICC group and 9 out of 96 in the INT group. Thus the numbers of diarrheic  
34  
35 256 samples were significantly higher in the INT group compared to the NINT ( $p=0.0005$ ), and  
36  
37 257 ICNP groups ( $p=0.003$ ).

38  
39 258 The mean bodyweight gains for the different periods (Day -3 to Day 4, Day 11 or Day 18) are  
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41 259 shown in Table S1. The mean body weight gains of the treated groups were lower, but there  
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43 260 was no significant difference between groups.

44  
45 261 Thus, as previously reported, severe diarrhea was observed during the week after inoculation.  
46  
47 262 Similarly, Rhouma et al. (Rhouma et al., 2016) inoculated four-week-old piglets, previously  
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49 263 selected on the presence of the F4 receptor gene, with a colistin-susceptible ETEC:F4 strain,  
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51 264 and observed severe diarrhea scores, hypothermia and occasional deaths. The apparent higher  
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2 265 severity of their model may be linked to the lower age of the animals at inoculation, or to other  
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4 266 experimental conditions. Concerning the clinical efficacy of the treatments, according to our  
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6 267 results, pigs of the ICNP group had a lower number of diarrheic samples, the other criteria  
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9 268 (number of affected pigs and weight gains) being not significantly different. In the experiment  
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11 269 described by Rhouma et al. (Rhouma et al., 2016) on ETEC:F4 challenged piglets,  
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14 270 administration of colistin, at the doses of 100 000 or 50 000 IU/kg, resulted in lower diarrhea  
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16 271 scores in challenged treated pigs compared to challenged untreated ones, but only during the  
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19 272 treatment period, and colistin administration did not affect the decreased body growth rate,  
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21 273 resulting from the ETEC:F4 strain inoculation

### 22 23 274 ***3.3. Evolution of the titers of the dominant E. coli population and of the inoculated strain***

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26 275 Mean *E. coli* titers obtained on MC for fecal samples were globally stable, with a mean of 7.0  
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28 276 and ranging from 5.8 to 7.9 (Table 2). In comparison with the INT group, the titer of the ICC  
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31 277 group was significantly lower on Days 2, 4 and 5 but higher on Day 10, the titer of the ICNP  
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33 278 was significantly lower on Day 2 and higher on Day 17.

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36 279 The total numbers of samples positive on MCRif without enrichment ranged from 62 out of 72  
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38 280 (INT group) to 66 out of 72 (ICNP group) ( $p>0.05$ ), whereas after enrichment, positive samples  
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41 281 were observed in 67 out of 72 (INT group) to 69 out of 72 (ICC group) ( $p>0.05$ ) (Table 3). No  
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43 282 statistically significant difference between the fecal sample titers of the groups on each  
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45 283 sampling day was observed.

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48 284 The colistin minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) of 186 isolates obtained on MC and  
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50 285 MCRif media from thawed fecal samples collected just at the end of the treatment period (Day  
51  
52 286 5) and at the end of the trial (Day 17), from INT, ICC and ICNP pigs were determined (Table  
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54  
55 287 4). All isolates positive for the *mcr-I* gene had a MIC of 8 or 16 mg/L, as the inoculated strain,  
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57  
58 288 whereas those negative for the *mcr-I* gene were susceptible, with a MIC of 0.5-2 mg/L. Just at  
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60 289 the end of the treatment, many isolates obtained on non-supplemented media from colistin-

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2 290 treated pigs, either ICC or ICNP, were resistant to colistin, contrary to isolates from the INT  
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4 291 group ( $p < 0.001$  for each comparison). On the final sampling, all isolates obtained on non-  
5  
6 292 supplemented media, thus belonging to the dominant *E. coli* population were *mcr*-negative.  
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9 293 Most isolates obtained on MCRif contained the *mcr-1* gene and were resistant to colistin, except  
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11 294 for the ICNP group on Day 17, but only five isolates were available.

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14 295 The mean titers of PM samples obtained on MC are shown in Table S2. The lowest titers were  
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16 296 observed for the jejunum. No significant difference between groups was observed between the  
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18 297 titers of the different organs.

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21 298 The titers obtained on MCRif and the numbers of positive PM samples are summarized in Table  
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23 299 5. Concerning jejunum samples, only two jejunum samples, one from the ICC and one from the  
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25 300 ICNP groups were found positive on MCRif. The numbers of positive pigs did not differ  
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27 301 significantly. There was no significant differences between the mean titers of the different  
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29 302 organs of the groups.

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33 303 These different results concerning the impact of the colistin treatments on the *E. coli* population  
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35 304 can be compared to those of previous trials of our group or others. We previously studied the  
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37 305 impact of a colistin treatment on the fecal *E. coli* population of non-inoculated pigs (Fleury et  
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39 306 al., 2016). We noticed a significant but transitory decrease in the total *E. coli* population during  
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41 307 treatment, but all the *E. coli* isolates remained susceptible to colistin. In the study of Viel et al.  
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43 308 (Viel et al., 2018), the pigs were orally inoculated with a non-pathogenic *mcr-1*-positive *E. coli*,  
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45 309 with a MIC of 8 mg/L. The colistin treatment given at the recommended dose (100 000  
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47 310 IU/kg/day for five days) led to a non-significant decrease of the *E. coli* population, which  
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49 311 returned to its initial level within a few days after the last colistin administration. The *mcr-1*-  
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51 312 positive *E. coli* population remained relatively constant, at a low level during and after the  
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53 313 treatment, and no selection of this resistant population was observed. According to Rhouma et  
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55 314 al. (Rhouma et al., 2016) on ETEC:F4 challenged piglets, administered or not colistin at the  
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2 315 doses of 100 000 or 50 000 IU/kg, both doses significantly reduced the fecal *E. coli* total  
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4 316 population and also, contrary to our results, the excretion of the inoculated ETEC:F4 during the  
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6 317 treatment period. In our conditions, using a limited number of animals placed in strict  
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8 318 biosecurity conditions, and with individual administration of the medications, we observed a  
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10 319 non-significant impact of colistin at the 100,000 IU /kg on the excretion of the 12-269M strain.  
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12 320 This result is probably in relation with its colistin resistance (MIC of 16 mg/L), whereas the  
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14 321 strain used by Rhouma et al. had a colistin MIC of <0.06 mg/L. We could also observe that the  
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16 322 dominant *E. coli* population on Day 5 had a colistin wild-type phenotype in INT pigs, whereas  
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18 323 a non-wild-type phenotype, with *mcr-1* positive results, was obtained for the dominant *E. coli*  
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20 324 population excreted by ICC pigs, and to a lower extent by ICNP ones. Nevertheless, on Day 17,  
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22 325 the dominant *E. coli* population was of the wild-type phenotype, and *mcr-1* negative in all  
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24 326 groups, suggesting once again that the modifications of the *E. coli* populations caused by  
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26 327 colistin are transitory.

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31 328 To overcome colistin resistance, many authors have studied *in vitro* synergistic effect of com-  
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33 329 bination of colistin with other antibiotics (MacNair et al., 2018; Yahav et al., 2012) or antimi-  
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35 330 crobials (Cannatelli et al., 2018; Naghmouchi et al., 2013, Madi-Moussa et al. 2022), but *in*  
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37 331 *vivo* studies are still rare. In Europe, the marketing authorizations for veterinary oral products  
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39 332 containing colistin in combination with other antimicrobial substances was withdrawn  
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41 333 (EMA/CVMP/CHMP, 2016). Thus, other strategies to enhance the antimicrobial activity of  
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43 334 colistin or other compounds are needed. An option is to optimize the delivery of the drug and  
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45 335 increase its *in vivo* half-life by using nanoparticles. Thus, colistin-loaded lipid nanoparticles  
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47 336 were found to be much more efficient for eradication of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* biofilms  
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49 337 compared to free colistin, although they had the same activity against planktonic bacteria (Sans-  
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51 338 Serramitjana et al., 2016). Similarly, colistin nanoparticles prepared via coacervate complexa-  
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53 339 tion had equal or better *in vitro* antimicrobial activity compared to free colistin and could be  
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2 340 used in animal models of bacteremia or pneumoniae: the results revealed that they had lower  
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4 341 liver toxicity and their antimicrobial efficacy was comparable to free colistin (Liu et al., 2018).  
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6 342 Our results showed that the use of colistin/Alg NPs yielded globally similar clinical and bio-  
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9 343 logical results as the commercial colistin formulation. The two detected differences were a sig-  
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11 344 nificantly lower number of diarrheic samples compared to INT pigs, which was not observed  
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14 345 in the ICC group, and the reduction of the total *E. coli* population was observed only on Day 2,  
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16 346 whereas it was observed on three sampling times in the ICC group. The efficacy of colistin/Alg  
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19 347 NPs should now be studied in various experimental and field conditions, including infections  
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21 348 caused by *E. coli* strains with a large range of antimicrobial susceptibility, as it could decrease  
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24 349 the total amount of colistin that is used, in line with the national (EcoAntibio plans) and inter-  
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26 350 national recommendations (EMA/CVMP/CHMP, 2016). The decrease of the use of colistin in  
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29 351 animals would lead to a decrease of the amount of colistin spread *via* manures in the environ-  
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31 352 ment, as colistin is not or only poorly absorbed in the intestinal tract (Rhouma et al., 2016).

### 33 353 **3.4. Loss and transfer of colistin resistance**

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36 354 Our experiment was also an opportunity to evaluate the loss of colistin resistance between *E.*  
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38 355 *coli* strains. Analysis of 196 fecal isolates obtained on MCRif without enrichment showed that  
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41 356 190 (97%) shared the characteristics of the inoculated strain 12-269M (presence of the *mcr-1*  
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43 357 gene and positive reaction with the F4 antiserum). Four isolates, one from the INT group, one  
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45 358 from the ICC group and two from the ICNP group) were F4-positive and *mcr-1*- negative. They  
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48 359 belonged to the phylogenetic group A like the inoculated strain, and shared the same ERIC-  
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51 360 PCR profile, one band excepted; the colistin MICs of these isolates were 0.25 or 0.5 mg/L. Two  
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53 361 isolates were F4-negative, and *mcr-1*- negative; one of these shared the phylogenetic group and  
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55 362 the ERIC-PCR profile of the inoculated strain, one band excepted, but the other one had another  
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58 363 ERIC-PCR profile.

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2 364 Among the 75 studied PM isolates obtained on MCRif without enrichment, 56 were *mcr-I*-  
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4 365 positive and F4- positive, 17 were *mcr-I*- negative, and F4-positive and 2 were *mcr-I*- negative  
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6 366 and F4-negative. Thus the ratio of *mcr*-negative isolates was higher for PM samples (19 out of  
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8 367 75) compared to fecal ones (4 out of 196,  $p < 0.001$ ). These 19 *mcr-I*-negative isolates were  
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10 368 obtained from pigs from the three inoculated groups; they had a colistin MIC of 0.25 or 0.5  
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12 369 mg/L and shared an ERIC profile similar, one band excepted, to the one of the inoculated strain.  
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14 370 The detection of isolates rifampicin-resistant, *mcr-I* negative, F4-positive, with an ERIC-PCR  
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16 371 profile similar to *E. coli* 12-269M, and with a colistin MIC of 0.25-0.5 mg/L suggested that the  
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18 372 loss of the *mcr-I* gene from the strain 12-269M occurred on several occasions, as it was  
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20 373 observed for isolates from the three inoculated groups. In comparison with the MIC determined  
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22 374 for the 12-269M strain, the *mcr-I*-negative isolates had decreased MICs, which are comparable  
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24 375 to those of wild-type *E. coli* strains (<https://mic.eucast.org/search>), suggesting that the colistin  
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26 376 resistance in *E. coli* 12-269M was associated only with the *mcr-I* gene and not with the  
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28 377 mutations in the PhoP and PhoQ genes. This resistance gene loss had already been observed  
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30 378 during our previous experiments (Le Devendec et al., 2018), and we did not further analyse the  
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32 379 *mcr-I*-negative isolates. The ratio of isolates missing the *mcr-I* gene was higher for PM samples  
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34 380 compared to fecal samples; this difference may be due to a later sampling time for PM samples,  
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36 381 or to the differences between fecal and PM samples which were collected at different levels of  
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38 382 the digestive tract, and contained both digesta and scrapped mucosa. Further trials with sacrifice  
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40 383 of animals at different times and separate analysis of feces, digesta and mucosa could help us  
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42 384 to understand this phenomenon. As up to a quarter of PM 12-269M isolates had lost the *mcr-I*  
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44 385 gene after three weeks, it would be interesting to evaluate whether this ratio would further  
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46 386 increase with an extended observation period. This would indicate that, *in vivo*, for this studied  
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48 387 strain, the *mcr-I* resistance, or the plasmid bearing this gene, is associated with a substantial  
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50 388 biological cost (Choi et al., 2020).  
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2 389 All fecal samples collected on Day 4, except one sample from the ICC group, gave *E. coli*  
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4 390 colonies on Chromagar Orientation™ agar medium; supplemented with colistin and  
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6 391 vancomycin (CAO-CV), presenting the characteristics of the inoculated strain (presence of  
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9 392 *mcr-1*, F4 agglutination and resistance to rifampicin). This result confirms our previous *in vitro*  
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11 393 and *in vivo* observations of the non-transferability of the *mcr-1* gene of *E. coli* 12-269M (Le  
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13 394 Devendec et al., 2018). None of the samples collected on Days 10 and 17 enabled the detection  
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16 395 of the inoculated strain, nor of *mcr-1*-positive *E. coli*.

#### 18 396 **4. Conclusion**

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21 397 In conclusion, our study revealed that, under our experimental conditions, colistin/Alg NPs had  
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23 398 a slightly better therapeutic effect than free colistin, on the diarrhea induced by the colistin-  
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26 399 resistant ETEC 12-269M. Both treatments led to a transitory decrease of the total *E. coli* fecal  
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28 400 population, with a majority of resistant *E. coli* isolates during treatment, but the dominant *E.*  
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30 401 *coli* population was found susceptible at the end of the trial. The loss of the *mcr-1* gene of the  
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32 402 inoculated strain was detected more often in PM samples, and may indicate an *in vivo* biological  
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35 403 cost of this resistance for this strain. Further studies are needed to evaluate, in experimental or  
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38 404 field conditions, the therapeutic efficacy of colistin/Alg NPs against infections caused by vari-  
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40 405 ous *E. coli* strains, as such an approach could lead to a decrease of colistin use.

#### 42 406 **Supporting information**

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45 407 Figure S1: Characterization of alginate nanoparticles by scanning electron microscopy (SEM)

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48 408 Figure S2: FTIR spectra of (a) alginate nanoparticles, (b) colistin, (c) alginate nanoparticles  
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50 409 loaded with colistin (colistin/Alg NPs).

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53 410 Table S1: Growth: mean bodyweight gains (kg) in the different groups

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55 411 Table S2. Titers obtained on MacConkey media from the post-mortem samples

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3 414 ***Conflict of interest***

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5 415 The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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8 416 ***Acknowledgments***

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10 417 The authors thank Jean-Marie GUIONNET (ANSES) for technical assistance.

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12  
13 418 ***Funding***

14  
15 419 This work was funded by from the French National Research Agency (ANR) Sincolistin-15-  
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17  
18 420 CE21-0015. The funders had no role in the design of the study, in the collection, analyses, or  
19  
20 421 interpretation of data, in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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4 526 **Table 1. Experimental design**

Group (n)	Room	<i>E. coli</i>	12-	Treatment	F4 status
		<b>269M</b>		<b>Day 0-Day 4</b>	
		<b>inoculation on</b>			
		<b>Day 0</b>			
NINT (10*)	C2	No		No	7 resistant, 3 susceptible up to Day 14, then 5 resistant and 3 susceptible
INT (8)	C3	Yes		No	8 susceptible
ICC (8)	B1	Yes		Colistin (Colivet 100 000 IU/ kg)	8 susceptible
ICNP (8)	B2	Yes		Colistin-loaded Alg NP (40,415 IU/kg)	8 susceptible

527 \*The NINT group contained ten piglets up to Day 14, then two piglets were removed from this  
528 group, to be included into another assay. NINT: non-infected, non-treated group; INT: infected,  
529 non-treated group; ICC: infected, treated with commercial colistin; ICNP: infected, treated with  
530 Colistin-loaded Alg NP

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**Table 2.** Mean *E. coli* titers obtained on MacConkey media

Group (n)	Days									
	D-3	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D7	D10	D14	D17
NINT (10)*	6.43±0.61 <sup>a</sup>	6.77±0.77 <sup>b</sup>	6.79±0.76 <sup>ab</sup>	6.79±0.88 <sup>a</sup>	6.66±0.66 <sup>ab</sup>	6.83±0.46 <sup>a</sup>	6.38±0.42 <sup>bc</sup>	6.37±0.59 <sup>b</sup>	6.45±0.33 <sup>b</sup>	6.48±0.38 <sup>b</sup>
INT (8)	7.25±0.66 <sup>a</sup>	7.94±1.06 <sup>a</sup>	7.67±0.90 <sup>a</sup>	7.66±1.13 <sup>a</sup>	7.75±1.24 <sup>a</sup>	7.06±0.82 <sup>a</sup>	6.71±0.52 <sup>abc</sup>	6.90±0.39 <sup>b</sup>	6.94±0.57 <sup>ab</sup>	6.57±0.28 <sup>b</sup>
ICC (8)	6.99±0.73 <sup>a</sup>	7.41±0.45 <sup>ab</sup>	6.06±1.09 <sup>b</sup>	6.56±0.89 <sup>a</sup>	6.11±1.40 <sup>b</sup>	5.77±1.07 <sup>b</sup>	6.20±0.58 <sup>c</sup>	7.73±0.55 <sup>a</sup>	7.03±0.51 <sup>ab</sup>	6.99±0.41 <sup>ab</sup>
ICNP (8)	6.44±0.35 <sup>a</sup>	7.36±0.49 <sup>ab</sup>	6.45±0.85 <sup>b</sup>	7.20±0.75 <sup>a</sup>	7.40±0.66 <sup>ab</sup>	6.43±0.62 <sup>ab</sup>	6.63±0.51 <sup>abc</sup>	6.66±0.26 <sup>b</sup>	7.60±0.91 <sup>a</sup>	7.40.37± <sup>a</sup>

\*The NINT group contained ten piglets up to Day 14, and then two piglets were removed from this group, to be included into another assay For each day, titers sharing a common superscript are not significantly different. NINT: non-infected, non-treated group; INT: infected, non-treated group; ICC: infected, treated with commercial colistin; ICNP: infected, treated with colistin-loaded alginate nanoparticles

**Table 3.** Culture on MCRif: numbers of positive samples and mean *E. coli* titers

Group	Days										
	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D7	D10	D14	D17	Total	
INT	PS-WO-E <sup>a</sup>	7	8	8	8	8	8	5	5	5	62 <sup>d</sup>
	PS-W-E <sup>b</sup>	7	8	8	8	8	8	7	6	7	67 <sup>e</sup>
	Mean <sup>c</sup>	4.74±2.51	5.56±1.87	6.62±2.00	6.90±1.84	5.40±1.67	3.04±0.84	1.99±1.25	1.68±1.19	1.91±1.12	
ICC	PS-WO-E	6	8	8	8	8	8	7	6	6	65
	PS-W-E	6	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	7	69
	Mean	3.89±2.51	4.86±1.32	5.76±1.38	6.00±1.42	5.56±1.33	3.62±0.93	3.21±1.17	2.30±0.94	1.85±0.90	
ICNP	PS-WO-E	8	8	8	8	8	8	6	7	5	66
	PS-W-E	8	8	8	8	8	8	7	8	5	68
	Mean	5.94±1.25	5.52±1.35	6.61±1.57	7.18±1.02	5.88±0.98	4.02±0.63	2.48±1.36	2.90±1.17	1.74±1.50	

<sup>a</sup>Number of samples positive without enrichment out of eight analyzed samples; <sup>b</sup>Number of samples positive with or without enrichment out of eight analyzed samples; <sup>c</sup>Mean titer on MCRif; <sup>d</sup>Total number of positive samples without enrichment out of 72 tested samples; <sup>e</sup>Total number of positive samples with or without enrichment out of 72 tested samples; NINT: non-infected, non-treated group; INT: infected, non-treated group; ICC: infected, treated with commercial colistin; ICNP: infected, treated with colistin-loaded alginate nanoparticles; MCRif: MacConkey media

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supplemented with rifampicin. All fecal samples from the NINT group were negative on MCRif, as well as those obtained on Day -3 from the other groups. For each day, mean titers are not significantly different.

**Table 4.** Colistin susceptibility of *E. coli* isolates obtained on MC and MCRif media

Day	Group	Isolates obtained on MC		Isolates obtained on MCRif	
		<i>mcr-1</i> -negative and MIC of 0.5- 2 mg/L	<i>mcr-1</i> -positive and MIC of 8- 16 mg/L	<i>mcr-1</i> -negative and MIC of 0.5- 2 mg/L	<i>mcr-1</i> -positive and MIC of 8- 16 mg/L
Day	INT	21	3	1	7
5	ICC	2	22	0	8
	ICNP	8	16	0	8
Day	INT	24	0	0	7
17	ICC	24	0	0	6
	ICNP	24	0	3	2

NINT: non-infected, non-treated group; INT: infected, non-treated group; ICC: infected, treated with commercial colistin; ICNP: infected, treated with colistin-loaded alginate nanoparticles; MC: MacConkey media; MCRif: MC supplemented with rifampicin.

**Table 5.** Titers and numbers of positive results obtained on MCRif media from post-mortem samples

Groups	Jejunum	Ileon	Caecum	Colon	Rectum	Total of positive organs <sup>c</sup>	Total of positive pigs <sup>d</sup>
INT	$0 \pm 0.00^a$	$0.75 \pm 0.71$	$2.32 \pm 0.67$	$2.58 \pm 0.47$	$2.36 \pm 0.72$		
	0 <sup>b</sup>	5	8	8	8	29	8
ICC	$0.25 \pm 0.71$	$1.76 \pm 1.00$	$2.13 \pm 1.11$	$1.96 \pm 1.31$	$1.45 \pm 1.01$		
	1	7	7	6	7	28	8
ICNP	$0.125 \pm 0.35$	$1.69 \pm 1.42$	$1.81 \pm 1.31$	$1.34 \pm 1.37$	$1.24 \pm 1.38$		
	1	6	6	5	4	22	6

<sup>a</sup>Mean of eight samples for each group and each organ; <sup>b</sup>Number of positive samples out of eight analyzed samples; <sup>c</sup>Total of positive samples out of 40 analyzed samples for each group; <sup>d</sup>Total of pigs positive for at least one organ, out of eight analyzed pigs. NINT: non-infected, non-treated group; INT: infected, non-treated group; ICC: infected, treated with commercial colistin; ICNP: infected, treated with colistin-loaded alginate nanoparticles; MCRif: MacConkey media supplemented with rifampicin; all the samples from the NINT group were negative on MCRif