EFFECTS OF SUPPLEMENTAL DIETARY COPPER ON GROWTH, REPRODUCTIVE PERFORMANCE AND KIT SURVIVAL OF STANDARD DARK MINK AND THE ACUTE TOXICITY OF COPPER TO MINK

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Summary
Natural dark mink kits were fed a diet supplemented with 0, 25, 50, 100 or 200 ppm Cu from CuSO₄·5H₂O for 153 or 357 d. The shorter term Cu supplementation had no significant beneficial or adverse effects on mink body weight gains or hemoglobin or hematocrit concentrations, although plasma Cu concentrations were slightly elevated in the mink fed added Cu. Liver Cu concentrations were significantly increased only in the mink fed 200 ppm Cu. Liver Zn and Fe concentrations were not affected by the added Cu. Darker fur was observed in pelted males fed the higher levels of Cu. The reproductive performance of mink on the longer term Cu supplementation was not adversely affected, although greater kit mortality and reduced "litter mass" were a result of the higher Cu concentrations. The acute (21-d) LD₅₀ concentrations of Cu sulfate and Cu acetate in adult mink were 7.5 and 5.0 mg/kg, respectively.

(Key Words: Mink, Supplemental Copper, Reproductive Performance, Zinc, Mortality.)

Introduction
In recent years early kit losses have become prevalent in certain strains of natural dark mink. Kits from the affected strains are generally smaller, with considerable losses occurring when the kits are handled, such as during vaccination or when litters are "broken down" and separated. Under these circumstances, death appears to be associated with anemia and a stress-induced type of shock. Dietary Fe supplementation has not alleviated the problem, and recent interest has focused on the possible role of Cu in this disorder.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of supplemental dietary Cu in excess of the requirement on growth rate in swine (Hawbaker et al., 1961; Barber et al., 1962; Braude, 1965; Castell and Bowland, 1968; Drouliscos et al., 1970), poultry (Smith, 1969; Jenkins et al., 1970; King, 1972) and rabbits (King, 1973). According to Castell and Bowland (1968), Drouliscos et al. (1970) and Jenkins et al. (1970), there is a greater growth response to supplemental Cu in animals fed diets high in fish meal, as opposed to soybean meal diets, because the minerals in fish meals tend to bind Cu. Because typical mink diets usually contain considerable quantities of fish meals, supplemental dietary Cu may prove beneficial.

In a preliminary feeding trial in which 0, 25 or 50 ppm supplemental Cu from CuSO₄·5H₂O was fed to dark mink kits from July 22 through pelting (December 8), there was a greater (P<.01) growth response in male mink fed the higher level of supplemental Cu and a greater (although not significantly different from the control) increase in the weight gains of the males fed 25 ppm Cu and in the females that received the two diets that contained supplemental Cu (Aulerich and Ringer, 1976).

Based on the involvement of Cu in certain types of anemia and the apparent stimulatory effect of supplemental Cu on growth, this study was conducted to investigate further the role of Cu in the physiology and nutrition of mink. Because Cu toxicity data on mink are lacking in the literature, trials were also conducted to determine an LD₅₀ for Cu sulfate and Cu acetate.
Experimental Procedure

Feeding Study. The experiment was started July 6, 1979. One hundred twenty standard
dark mink kits were assigned to five groups
(each containing 12 males and 12 females) and
placed on the following dietary treatments: (1)
basal diet, no supplemental Cu (control); (2)
basal diet plus 25 ppm Cu from Cu sulfate; (3)
basal diet plus 50 ppm Cu from Cu sulfate; (4)
basal diet plus 100 ppm Cu from Cu sulfate; (5)
basal diet plus 200 ppm Cu from Cu sulfate.

Littermates were divided among the various
groups in an effort to minimize genetic influence
on reproduction and response to the dietary
treatments. From the start of the study through

December 1979, the animals were housed
individually in open-sided sheds in mink growing
cages (61 cm long x 30.5 cm wide x 38 cm
high) with additional attached nest boxes (20
cm long x 16.5 cm wide x 29 cm high). During
the remainder of the study, the mink were kept
in breeder cages (76.2 cm long x 61 cm wide x
45.7 cm high) with attached nest boxes (38.1
cm long x 29.2 cm wide x 26.7 cm high). They
were cared for according to routine commercial
ranch procedures. Feed and water were provided
ad libitum. The animals were weighed biweekly
from July 6 through August 31, and monthly
thereafter.

Eight males from each group were killed on
December 6, 1979. The remaining 12 females
and four males in each group were retained on
their respective diets through July 1980 for an
evaluation of the effects of the supplemental
Cu on reproduction and early kit growth and
survival.

Before being killed, the eight males in each
group were weighed, and blood samples were
taken by heart puncture for plasma Cu analysis
and by toe clip for hemoglobin and hematocrit
determinations. During necropsy, the livers
were weighed and samples taken for analysis and
histologic examination.

Triplicate liver samples (~1.0 g) were digested
in concentrated nitric acid-70% perchloric acid
(2:1) and the Cu, Zn and Fe concentrations

*Experimental results summarize difference within groups in the

1 The basal diet consisted of 25% mink cereal, 20% ocean fish scrap, 20% whole chicken, 15% beef trimmings, 7.5% beef lungs, 7.5% beef trimmings and 5% beef liver; "as fed" contained 35.13% dry matter.
3 Seven from the control group. One control male died as result of a diaphragmatic hernia (MSU Pathology Report No. 202919).
4 Determined by spectrophotometric method (Tien, 1976).
5 Determined by cyanmethemoglobin method with a hemoglobinometer, Coulter Electronics Inc., Hialeah, FL.

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<td>709</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>625</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>SE</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
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TABLE 2. MEAN HEMOGLOBIN, HEMATOCRIT AND PLASMA COPPER LEVELS IN MINK FED A CONTROL DIET OR SUPPLEMENTAL COPPER

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Dietary treatment</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Hemoglobin, g/dl</th>
<th>Hematocrit, %</th>
<th>Plasma Cu, μg/dl</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Hemoglobin, g/dl</th>
<th>Hematocrit, %</th>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>51.7</td>
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<td>25 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>49.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>50 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>54.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
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<td>.8</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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*Different (P < .05) from control value for same sex.
were measured with an atomic absorption spectrophotometer. The liver samples taken for histology were fixed in neutral buffered formalin and embedded, sectioned and stained according to Uzman's (1956) method for Cu detection.

In an effort to evaluate the effects of Cu supplementation on fur quality, we arranged the pelts from the male mink according to color (darkest to lightest) and assigned numerical scores of 1 to 5 as follows: darkest 20%, 5; the next darkest 20%, 4; etcetera.

The females were mated with males within their respective dietary groups between March 1 and 20, 1980. All matings were confirmed by the presence of motile sperm in vaginal smears taken immediately after mating. During the whelping period (April 15 to May 15, 1980), the mated females were checked daily for evidence of whelping. The kits were counted and weighed on the day of birth and at 4 wk of age.

At the end of the feeding trial (June 27, 1980), blood samples were collected from the remaining animals by toe clip for hemoglobin and hematocrit determination. Body weight comparisons were made with initial body weight as a covariate. Differences between means were determined using Dunnett's test on the adjusted treatment means.

Acute Toxicity. During November, 1979, an attempt was made to determine oral LD$_{50}$ values for Cu sulfate ($\text{CuSO}_4\cdot5\text{H}_2\text{O}$) and Cu acetate ($\text{CuC}_2\text{H}_3\text{O}_2\cdot\text{H}_2\text{O}$) in mink. Oral dosing (by gavage) of mink with either compound, however, was not feasible because the animals consistently vomited immediately after dosing. Thus, an alternate method of dosing consisting of ip injection of the Cu compounds was selected for the LD$_{50}$ trials.

Forty-four previously untreated, standard, 6-mo-old mink were used in the test. The compounds to be administered were dissolved in distilled water to provide concentrations for injection into the peritoneum of the mink of not more than 1 ml in volume. Intraperitoneal injections of distilled water or sodium sulfate were administered to mink as a control.

Results and Discussion

Feeding Trial. Atomic absorption spectrophotometric analysis revealed that the control diet contained 60.5, 329.7 and 327.7 ppm (dry weight basis) of Cu, Zn and Fe, respectively. No Cu or Zn was detected in the drinking water, although it contained 5 ppm Fe. A Cu requirement for mink has not been established, but according to H. Gleim Hansen (personal communication), 4.5 to 6 mg Cu/kg dry feed is considered adequate.

Supplemental dietary Cu at levels up to 200 ppm did not stimulate mink body weight gain during the postweaning growth period (table 1), as had previously been observed with male mink, as well as other species. However, the Cu-supplemented diets did not have any observed toxic effects on the adult animals either.

TABLE 3. MEAN LIVER WEIGHT AND MEAN LIVER COPPER, ZINC AND IRON CONCENTRATIONS IN MALE MINK FED VARIOUS LEVELS OF SUPPLEMENTAL COPPER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dietary treatment</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Liver weight, g $^b$</th>
<th>Liver concentration (ppm, dry weight)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>411</td>
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<tr>
<td>100 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>364</td>
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<tr>
<td>200 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>479 $^c$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Se</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>35</td>
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$^a$Fed from July 6 to December 6, 1979.

$^b$Expressed as a percentage of body weight.

$^c$Different (P<.05) from control value.
EFFECTS OF SUPPLEMENTAL COPPER ON MINK

TABLE 4. AVERAGE PELT COLOR SCORES FOR MALE MINK FED VARIOUS LEVELS OF SUPPLEMENTAL COPPER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dietary treatment</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Avg pelt color score</th>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.2</td>
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<td>50 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
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<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
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<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200 ppm supplemental Cu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fed from July 6 to December 6, 1979.
Mink pelts were graded on a scale of 1 (lightest) to 5 (darkest). The darkest 20% were assigned a score of 5; the next darkest 20% a score of 4... etcetera.

which suggests that mink may be among the more Cu-tolerant species. Rats and swine have been reported to tolerate up to 250 ppm dietary Cu, but other species, especially ruminants, are considerably less tolerant of Cu (Buck et al., 1976).

The Cu supplementation of the diets had no influence on the hematocrit or hemoglobin values of the pelting males, although slightly elevated plasma Cu concentrations were detected in the treated mink (table 2). These plasma Cu concentrations were, however, within the normal range (.5 to 1.5 µg/ml) for most species (Bull, 1980).

The liver weights of the pelting males were not affected by supplemental dietary Cu (table 3). Although microscopic examination of liver sections stained with Usman's stain failed to reveal any significant deposition of Cu in the treated males, atomic absorption spectrophotometry showed that the Cu concentrations in the liver (table 3) were considerably greater than normal for most adult nonruminant animals (10 to 30 ppm Cu, dry basis; Bull, 1980), but were within the broad range reported by Fisher (1975). Because the liver is one of the main organs involved in the storage and metabolism of Cu, liver Cu concentration might be considered indicative of an animal's Cu status. Although only the liver Cu levels of the mink fed 200 ppm Cu were greater (P<.05) than those of the controls, there was a positive correlation of .76 between the dietary Cu level and liver Cu levels. These data suggest that mink may be similar to sheep and swine in that liver Cu stores increase in proportion to dietary Cu...
intake (Surtle and Mills, 1966). Rats on the other hand, are reported to maintain normal liver Cu levels until a high (1,000 ppm) dietary level is reached (Milne and Weswig, 1968). Although no differences in liver Zn or Fe levels were found among the mink fed the various levels of Cu, Surtle and Mills (1966) noted that Cu supplementation increased liver Zn concentrations in swine. These researchers, and others (Bunch et al., 1963; DeGoey et al., 1971), have also observed that low dietary Zn and Fe levels tend to accentuate Cu toxicity. Thus, the observed tolerance of mink for dietary Cu may be influenced by complicated interactions between Cu and other elements, such as Mo, Zn, Fe and S.

Although the average fur color scores of those males pelleted (table 4), suggest that "high" levels of supplemental Cu may have a beneficial effect on intensifying hair color of dark mink, these results are based on a limited number of observations and additional experiments are being conducted to verify this finding.

The reproductive performance of the female mink fed the Cu-supplemented diets is summarized in table 5. In general, the overall performance of the control mink was superior to that of mink fed supplemental Cu. However, except for the trend toward greater kit mortality between birth and 4 wk of age and the reduced litter mass at weaning with increased Cu supplementation, the characteristics measured were, for the most part, within the normal range for mink. Gestation length and kit weight at birth were not adversely affected by the dietary treatments. The greater kit mortality during the nursing period and the reduced litter mass at weaning, however, suggest that the higher levels of supplemental Cu may have had an adverse affect on lactation.

Acute Toxicity. Levels of the compounds administered, mortality rates and length of survival of the mink that died during the 21-d posttreatment period are shown in table 6. Within 2 min after dosing, almost all of the Cu-treated mink attempted to vomit. They salivated profusely and became lethargic, lying on either their sides or backs and moving only if forced to do so. The Cu-treated mink that survived were usually "off feed" for 3 to 4 days and full recovery was slow, as indicated by a decrease in body weights during the posttreatment period. Although the sodium sulfate injections administered for control purposes were not lethal, the animals did show a loss in body weight during the 21-d posttreatment observation period. All mink that died from Cu poisoning showed profuse hemorrhaging throughout the body when necropsied.

### TABLE 6. ACUTE TOXICITY OF COPPER SULFATE AND COPPER ACETATE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>Dose* mg/kg</th>
<th>No. died/</th>
<th>Mortalityb,</th>
<th>Mean length of survival of animals that died, d</th>
<th>Mean body weight gain (or loss) of mink that survived to 21-d posttreatment, g</th>
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<tr>
<td>Copper sulfate</td>
<td></td>
<td>no. treated</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>(− 54.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(− 61.3)</td>
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<td>6.2</td>
<td>2/6</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>(− 122.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>4/6</td>
<td>66.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6/6</td>
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<td>&lt;1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sodium sulfate</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>0/2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(− 90)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1/2</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>(− 30)</td>
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<td>2/2</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>2/2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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*intraperitoneal.

b Up to 21 d posttreatment.

c 3 ml distilled water injected ip.
The acute (21-d) ip LD50 for Cu sulfate, as
determined by the method of Linchfield and
Williams (1949), was 7.5 mg/kg, with a 95%-
confidence interval of 5.2 to 10.9 mg/kg. The
equation for the slope of the regression line was
Y = -33.36 + 10.67 X, where Y = percentage
mortality and X = dosage in mg/kg body
weight. The LD50 for the Cu acetate was 5.0
mg/kg, with a 95% confidence interval of 2.1 to
12.0 mg/kg. The regression equation for the
slope of the line was Y = 25.00 + 5.00 X.

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