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EXPERIMENTAL MEDICINE

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2019: THE YEAR IN EXPERIMENTAL MEDICINE

At the beginning of 2020, the start of a new decade, the *Journal of Experimental Medicine* (*JEM*) is proud to present our annual Year in Experimental Medicine collection to highlight some of the articles that were of greatest interest to our readers last year. The top 10 papers are selected by the editorial team and are based, in part, on the number of requests for PDF and full-text HTML versions of an article in the first three months after publication. These studies highlight the full breadth of *JEM*'s scope and our long-standing interest in original findings in disease pathogenesis.

We would like to thank our authors for contributing to *JEM*. It is our privilege to publish groundbreaking studies that broaden knowledge in immunology, host-pathogen interaction, cancer biology, cardiovascular biology, neuroscience, and other areas relevant to disease pathogenesis. In 2019, we celebrated the recipients of the Albert Lasker Basic Medical Research Award with a collection of *JEM* studies from Max D. Cooper (Emory University) and Jacques Miller (Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research) that revolutionized our understanding of the adaptive immune system. Find this collection and many others at <https://rupress.org/JEM/collections>.

We are also grateful to our reviewers. See page 15 for a full list of those who contributed their time and expertise to ensure the publication of quality science in *JEM* in 2019.

Last but not least, we would like to thank our readers for their interest and continued support for *JEM*. We hope you will enjoy reading this collection.

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On the cover Anti-tumor immune response. T cells attacking a cancer cell.

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CD4⁺ RESIDENT MEMORY T CELLS MEDIATE LOCAL IMMUNE RESPONSE

Study reveals that CD4 T_{RM} cells play a major role in immunosurveillance and local responses to reinfection

Naïve T cells largely patrol the body by circulating through secondary lymphoid organs. In contrast, CD8⁺ memory T cells that have previously been exposed to their cognate antigen are abundant enough to permanently station themselves in various nonlymphoid tissues, becoming resident memory T cells (T_{RM}) that can mediate local immunosurveillance and detect any reinfections.

"The extent to which residence contributes to global memory CD4⁺ T cell surveillance is less clear," explains David Masopust of the University of Minnesota. "There have been fewer studies on the surveillance patterns of CD4⁺ T cells, and they have produced varied conclusions or indicated a more complex situation."

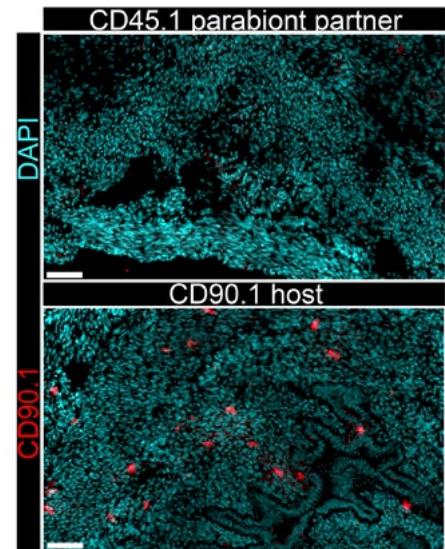
Masopust and colleagues, including first author Lalit Beura, performed a comprehensive analysis of the CD4⁺ memory T cells formed in mice exposed to lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV). CD4⁺ memory T cells recognizing this virus were broadly distributed in both lymphoid and nonlymphoid tissues, as well as in the blood. In the case of nonlymphoid tissues, most CD4⁺ memory T cells appeared to be resident cells conducting local immunosurveillance. These CD4⁺ T_{RM} cells were reactivated upon exposure to further LCMV antigen, triggering a rapid, local immune response by components of

both the innate and adaptive immune systems. The researchers saw a similarly prominent role for CD4⁺ T_{RM} cells in mice exposed to an array of natural pathogens.

Beura et al. found that CD4⁺ T_{RM} cells share many phenotypic characteristics with CD8⁺ T_{RM} cells residing in the same tissue. Transcriptional profiling revealed that, though CD4⁺ T_{RM} cells from different tissues have distinct gene expression patterns, they share a common transcriptional signature that distinguishes them from circulating CD4⁺ T cells. Remarkably, a similar residence signature can also be found in CD8⁺ T_{RM} cells residing in diverse tissues.

"Taken together, these results reveal a shared gene signature of tissue residence that transcends anatomical location and T cell lineage," says Beura. "We propose at least three axes of differentiation for memory T cells: one driven by the specific tissue microenvironment, one driven by lineage (CD4⁺ vs. CD8⁺), and one coupled to whether the cells are tissue resident or recirculating."

"Our paper highlights the dominance of resident-mediated CD4⁺ T cell immunosurveillance, and indicates that further studies of CD4⁺ T_{RM} biology will be important to our understanding of immune responses throughout the body," Masopust says.



Staining of mucosal tissue from two mice parabiotically connected for several weeks after LCMV infection shows that CD4⁺ memory T cells (red) remain in their original host and do not spread to the other animal, indicating that they are tissue-resident rather than circulating cells.

Credit: Beura et al., 2019

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ORIGINAL PAPER

Beura, L.K., N.J. Fares-Frederickson, E.M. Steinert, M.C. Scott, E.A. Thompson, K.A. Fraser, J.M. Schenkel, V. Vezys, and D. Masopust. 2019. CD4⁺ resident memory T cells dominate immunosurveillance and orchestrate local recall responses. *J. Exp. Med.* 216:1214–1229.

<https://doi.org/10.1084/jem.20181365>

A NOVEL T CELL SUBSET CONTROLS IgE RESPONSES IN HUMANS

A population of regulatory T cells in the follicles of human tonsils may prevent allergies by reducing IgE production

Antibody responses must be carefully calibrated to ensure maximal protection against pathogens while avoiding excessive inflammation, autoimmune reactions, or, in the case of IgE-mediated antibody responses, allergic reactions and anaphylaxis. In the follicles of secondary lymphoid organs, the differentiation of antibody-producing B cells is facilitated by follicular helper T (T_{FH}) cells. At least in mice, this activity is counteracted by follicular regulatory T (T_{FR}) cells that can reduce antibody production by suppressing both T_{FH} and B cell function. But whether a similar population of repressive cells exists in humans is unclear.

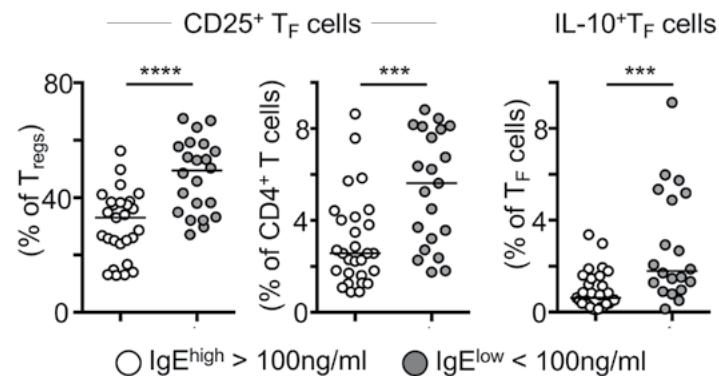
"In an effort to identify the human equivalent of mouse T_{FR} cells, we examined cells in the most accessible human secondary lymphoid tissue: the tonsils," says Carola Vinuesa, a professor at The Australian National University in Canberra.

Vinuesa and colleagues, including first author Pablo Cañete, identified a population of CD25⁺ follicular T (T_F) cells in human tonsils that secrete abundant amounts of IL-10, a cytokine expressed by mouse T_{FR} cells. Unlike mouse T_{FR} cells, however, these human CD25⁺ T_F cells did not express the transcription factor FOXP3, which is generally considered to be a master regulator of regulatory T cell function.

Yet the cells expressed other crucial markers of regulatory T cells and were able to suppress T cell proliferation, suggesting they could perform a regulatory function. Moreover, RNA sequencing revealed that, aside from FOXP3 expression, human CD25⁺ T_F cells had a similar transcriptional profile to mouse T_{FR} cells.

The researchers determined that CD25⁺ T_F cells can suppress T_{FH} function in vitro. And, though they moderately promote the proliferation and differentiation of B cells, CD25⁺ T_F cells repress class switching to IgE in an IL-10-dependent manner. Accordingly, Vinuesa and colleagues found that children with high numbers of IL-10-producing CD25⁺ T_F cells in their tonsils had lower levels of IgE in their blood, whereas those with lower CD25⁺ T_F cell numbers displayed high IgE titers.

"Because this T cell subset is particularly abundant in the tonsils, which are con-



The frequency of IL-10-producing CD25⁺ T_F cells in the tonsils is higher in children with low serum IgE levels than in children with high IgE titers.

Credit: Cañete et al., 2019

stantly exposed to inhaled and ingested molecules, we think that these cells may be important to prevent IgE-mediated allergic reactions to harmless foreign antigens," Cañete explains.

"We therefore predict that deficiencies in this T cell subset could underpin susceptibility to allergic and anaphylactic reactions induced by inhaled and ingested antigens," Vinuesa adds. "Should this be the case, our findings may open up new avenues for boosting CD25⁺ T_F cells to reduce the risk of allergy."

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ORIGINAL PAPER

Cañete, P.F., R.A. Sweet, P. Gonzalez-Figueroa, I. Papa, N. Ohkura, H. Bolton, J.A. Roco, M. Cuenca, K.J. Bassett, I. Sayin, E. Barry, A. Lopez, D.H. Canaday, M. Meyer-Hermann, C. Doglioni, B. Fazekas de St Groth, S. Sakaguchi, M.C. Cook, and C.G. Vinuesa. 2019. Regulatory roles of IL-10-producing human follicular T cells. *J. Exp. Med.* 216:1843–1856.

<https://doi.org/10.1084/jem.20190493>

PATIENTS WITH IL-6 RECEPTOR DEFICIENCY

Loss-of-function mutations in human *IL6R* lead to recurrent infections, eczema, and abnormal inflammatory responses

The proinflammatory cytokine IL-6 induces cell growth and proliferation by binding to its receptor, IL-6R, forming a complex that can associate with the membrane glycoprotein GP130 and activate a signaling pathway that leads to the nuclear import of STAT transcription factors. Excess IL-6 causes a variety of inflammatory diseases, and tocilizumab, an antibody that blocks the IL-6 receptor, is an effective treatment for several of these conditions, including rheumatoid arthritis.

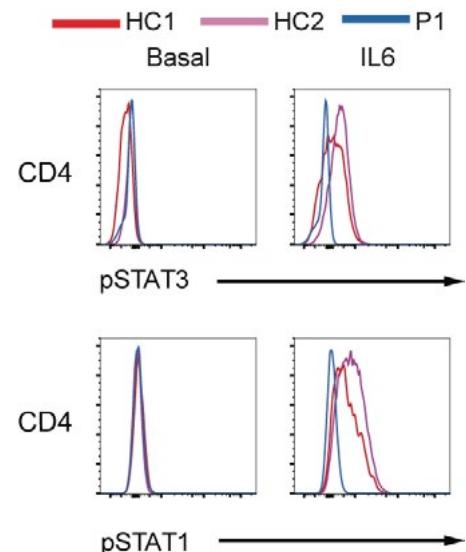
"However, while the consequences of excessive IL-6 signaling in humans have been well established, the consequences of impairment have been more elusive," says James Thaventhiran, a research scientist at the Medical Research Council Toxicology Unit, University of Cambridge. Patients with loss-of-function mutations in the genes encoding GP130 or STAT3 are susceptible to recurrent infections, are prone to eczema and other allergic disorders, and suffer from a variety of skeletal and connective tissue abnormalities. But, because GP130 and STAT3 are also components of several other signaling pathways, the contribution of diminished IL-6 signaling to these symptoms is unclear.

Thaventhiran and colleagues, including co-corresponding authors Kaan Boztug of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Rare and Undiagnosed Diseases, and

Joshua Milner of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (now at Columbia University), identified two unrelated patients with loss-of-function mutations in the gene encoding IL-6R. Both patients suffered from recurrent bacterial infections of the skin and lung that were accompanied by abnormally low levels of inflammation (including reduced levels of the IL-6-induced acute-phase protein CRP). The patients also displayed elevated IgE levels and suffered from allergic diseases including eczema.

"Aspects of these patients' clinical phenotype—particularly their elevated IgE, atopic dermatitis, and susceptibility to staphylococcal infections—are shared by patients with mutations in the genes encoding STAT3, GP130, and ZNF341 (a transcription factor that regulates STAT3 levels)," says Boztug.

The patients with *IL6R* mutations did not, however, show any skeletal or connective tissue defects. "Our results therefore clarify the contribution of deficient IL-6 signaling to the phenotype of patients with loss-of-function mutations in *GP130*, *STAT3*, or *ZNF341*," says Milner. "This may indicate novel therapeutics for the alleviation of some of these patients' symptoms, such as using recombinant soluble IL-6R to increase the presentation of IL-6 to GP130. It is surprising, though, that a receptor which can contribute to so many other



Fluorescence histograms show that, compared with cells from two healthy controls (HC1 and HC2), IL-6-induced phosphorylation of STAT3 and STAT1 is absent in the CD4⁺ T cells of a patient with a null mutation in *IL6R* (P1).

Credit: Spencer et al., 2019

RESEARCHER DETAILS



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ORIGINAL PAPER

Spencer, S., S. Köstel Bal, W. Egner, H. Lango Allen, S.I. Raza, C.A. Ma, M. Gürel, Y. Zhang, G. Sun, R.A. Sabroe, D. Greene, W. Rae, T. Shahin, K. Kania, R.C. Ardy, M. Thian, E. Staples, A. Peccia-Bekkum, W.P.M. Worrall, J. Stephens, M. Brown, S. Tuna, M. York, F. Shackley, D. Kerrin, R. Sargur, A. Condliffe, H.N. Tipu, H.S. Kuehn, S.D. Rosenzweig, E. Turro, S. Tavaré, A.J. Thrasher, D.I. Jodrell, K.G.C. Smith, K. Boztug, J.D. Milner, and J.E.D. Thaventhiran. 2019. Loss of the interleukin-6 receptor causes immunodeficiency, atopy, and abnormal inflammatory responses. *J. Exp. Med.* 216:1986–1998.

<https://doi.org/10.1084/jem.20190344>

ZIKA-ASSOCIATED BIRTH DEFECTS MAY DEPEND ON MOTHER'S IMMUNE RESPONSE

Risk of developing fetal microcephaly is linked to the types of antibody produced by pregnant mothers in response to Zika infection

The Zika virus is spread by mosquitoes in tropical and subtropical regions, and, in most adults, the symptoms of infection, if any, are fairly mild. But the widespread Zika outbreak in Brazil in 2015–2016 revealed that infection during pregnancy can cause a wide range of fetal abnormalities, with microcephaly occurring in around 5% of live births by Zika-infected mothers.

"Why some Zika virus-infected pregnant women deliver apparently healthy newborns while others have babies with microcephaly is unknown," says Davide Robbiani from The Rockefeller University in New York.

Various factors have been proposed to increase the risk of microcephaly, including previous exposure to viruses that are similar to Zika, such as dengue virus or West Nile virus. Antibodies generated by the body's immune system to combat these viruses may recognize the Zika virus but, instead of neutralizing it, help it to enter the mother's cells and possibly cross the placenta to infect the unborn fetus.

Robbiani and colleagues, including co-senior author Michel Nussenzweig, worked with researchers and physicians in Brazil to analyze blood samples collected during the 2015–2016 outbreak from Zika-infected mothers who had given birth to either

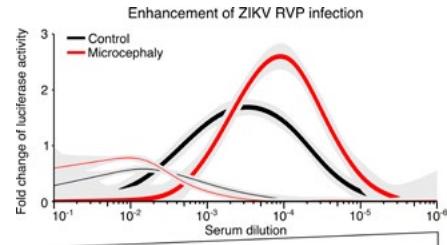
apparently healthy or microcephalic children.

Through a series of laboratory tests, the researchers saw no significant differences in the antibodies produced against dengue or other Zika-related viruses, suggesting that prior exposure to these pathogens does not increase the risk of Zika-associated birth defects.

However, when Robbiani and colleagues analyzed the activity of antibodies produced against the Zika virus itself, they saw several differences in the antibodies produced by the mothers of babies with microcephaly. Antibodies from these mothers were actually more effective at neutralizing the Zika virus than the antibodies produced by mothers of healthy newborns. In addition, in a different assay, these antibodies showed an enhanced ability to boost the entry of Zika virus into human cells grown in the laboratory.

The researchers confirmed their findings in macaques infected with the Zika virus. Pregnant monkeys that produced more of the antibodies capable of enhancing viral entry into cells were more at risk of giving birth to babies suffering from Zika-induced brain damage.

"Though our results only show a correlation at this point, they suggest that



Anti-Zika antibodies from mothers whose children developed microcephaly (red) enhance the infectious activity of luciferase-labeled Zika reporter viruses more strongly than antibodies from mothers whose children developed normally (black).

Credit: Robbiani et al., 2019

antibodies may be implicated in Zika fetal disease," Robbiani says. "Antibodies may exist that, instead of protecting, enhance the risk of microcephaly, so the next step will be to figure out which antibodies are responsible for this, and how they promote fetal damage. This has significant implications for vaccine development; a safe Zika vaccine would have to selectively elicit antibodies that are protective, while avoiding those that potentially enhance the risk of microcephaly."

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Photos courtesy of The Rockefeller University



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Robbiani, D.F., P.C. Olsen, F. Costa, Q. Wang, T.Y. Oliveira, N. Nery, A. Aromolaran, M.S. do Rosário, G.A. Sacramento, J.S. Cruz, R. Khouri, E.A. Wunder, A. Mattos, B. de Paula Freitas, M. Sarno, G. Archangelo, D. Daltro, G.B.S. Carvalho, K. Pimentel, I.C. de Siqueira, J.R.M. da Almeida, D.F. Henriques, J.A. Lima, P.F.C. Vasconcelos, D. Schaefer-Babajew, S.A. Azzopardi, L. Bozzacco, A. Gazumyan, R. Belfort, A.P. Alcântara, G. Carvalho, L. Moreira, K. Araujo, M.G. Reis, R.I. Keesler, L.L. Coffey, J. Tisoncik-Go, M. Gale, L. Rajagopal, K.M. Adams Waldorf, D.M. Dudley, H.A. Simmons, A. Mejia, D.H. O'Connor, R.J. Steinbach, N. Haese, J. Smith, A. Lewis, L. Colgin, V. Roberts, A. Fries, M. Kelleher, A. Hirsch, D.N. Streblow, C.M. Rice, M.R. MacDonald, A.R.P. de Almeida, K.K.A. Van Rompay, A.I. Ko, and M.C. Nussenzweig. 2019. Risk of Zika microcephaly correlates with features of maternal antibodies. *J. Exp. Med.* 216:2302–2315. <https://doi.org/10.1084/jem.20191061>

FERROPTOSIS DRIVES TUBERCULOSIS PATHOLOGY

Study finds that iron-induced cell death promotes tissue necrosis and facilitates mycobacterial spread

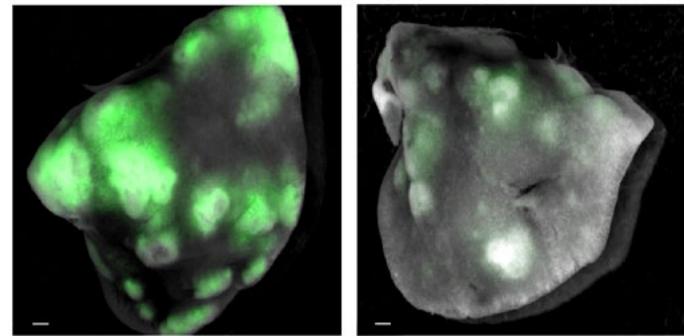
The World Health Organization estimates that tuberculosis killed 1.5 million people worldwide in 2018, the highest death toll for any disease caused by a single infectious agent. New approaches to treating the disease could involve targeting the host cell pathways triggered by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (Mtb) infection. For example, macrophages infected with Mtb can undergo necrosis, a proinflammatory form of cell death that contributes to tissue damage and may facilitate bacterial spread by releasing Mtb into the surrounding tissue.

There are, however, several different modes of necrosis with their own distinct triggers and effector molecules, and the precise pathways induced by Mtb infection have remained unclear. One recently discovered necrotic pathway is ferroptosis, in which elevated iron levels induce the production of hydrogen peroxides that react with membrane lipids to form toxic lipid peroxides capable of disrupting the plasma membrane. "Since iron overload is also known to promote tuberculosis under certain conditions, we wondered whether ferroptosis plays a role in the necrotic cell death and tissue necrosis triggered by Mtb infection," explains Alan Sher, a researcher at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

Sher and colleagues, including first author Eduardo Amaral, examined mouse macrophages infected with Mtb and found that their necrotic death was accompanied by increases in intracellular iron and mitochondrial superoxide levels, as well as lipid peroxidation. Moreover, Mtb infection suppressed the expression of Gpx4, an enzyme that can reduce lipid peroxides and limit their toxic effects on the cell.

"The Mtb-induced death of macrophages *in vitro* therefore exhibits the major hallmarks of ferroptosis," Amaral says. Accordingly, treating these cells with an iron chelator or a ferroptosis inhibitor called ferrostatin-1 prevented their death upon Mtb infection.

Amaral et al. saw similar effects *in vivo*. Mice infected with Mtb showed a decrease in macrophage Gpx4 expression and an increase in lipid peroxide levels. Treatment with ferrostatin-1 suppressed pulmonary necrosis in



Sytox Green staining of lung tissue from Mtb-infected mice shows that, compared with a vehicle-treated control (left), tissue necrosis is reduced upon treatment with the ferroptosis inhibitor ferrostatin-1 (right).

Credit: Amaral et al., 2019

these animals and reduced bacterial numbers in both the lungs and spleens, strongly suggesting that ferroptosis is critical to the spread of Mtb. "Clearly, further preclinical studies are required to validate ferroptosis as a viable target for host-directed therapy of active tuberculosis," Sher says. "But the potential to simultaneously lessen tissue damage while reducing pathogen burden and dissemination is an attractive aspect of this strategy."

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ORIGINAL PAPER

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SECRETED SPLICE VARIANTS MEDIATE RESISTANCE TO ANTI-PD-L1 THERAPY

Non-small cell lung cancers can acquire resistance to immunotherapy by producing soluble versions of PD-L1 that can act as decoys and prevent immune checkpoint blockade

Many tumor cells evade the immune system by expressing high levels of the transmembrane protein PD-L1, which binds to its receptor, PD-1, on the surface of cytotoxic T cells and activates an immune checkpoint that inhibits T cell function. Therapeutic antibodies that prevent this checkpoint by binding to PD-1 or PD-L1 have proven to be beneficial treatments for a variety of cancers, from melanoma to non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC).

"However, the incidence of acquired resistance to PD-1 and PD-L1 blocking antibodies is increasing," says Ryohei Katayama from the Japanese Foundation for Cancer Research in Tokyo. "Several groups have described mechanisms underlying resistance to PD-1 blockade, but the mechanisms surrounding resistance to anti-PD-L1 treatment remain poorly understood."

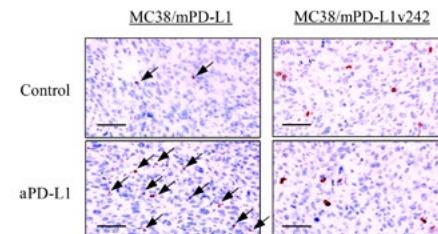
Katayama's team, including first author Bo Gong, analyzed two NSCLC patients who initially responded to anti-PD-L1 treatment before undergoing a relapse and found that their relapsed tumors expressed splice variants of PD-L1 that lacked the protein's transmembrane domain. These splice variants are therefore secreted from cells, leading to high levels of soluble PD-L1 in the patients' blood and lung fluid. The same

variants were also found in another 2 of 15 cancer patients who had acquired resistance to anti-PD-L1 therapy.

"We hypothesized that the secreted variants act as decoys that attenuate the neutralizing activity of anti-PD-L1 antibodies," says Gong. Indeed, the researchers found that soluble PD-L1 was able to compete for anti-PD-L1 antibodies, preventing them from binding to cell surface PD-L1 and reactivating T cells in vitro.

To test the effects of soluble PD-L1 in vivo, Katayama and colleagues injected mice with murine cancer cells expressing a secreted PD-L1 splice variant and found that the tumors formed by these cells were more resistant to anti-PD-L1 therapy. In fact, the researchers found, only 1% of cells need to express soluble PD-L1 for the tumor to be resistant to PD-L1 blockade. However, the tumors remained susceptible to anti-PD-1 antibodies, suggesting that these could be used as an alternative treatment for patients resistant to anti-PD-L1 therapy.

"Taken together, our findings suggest that the presence of soluble PD-L1 splicing variants or the level of soluble PD-L1 in plasma or pleural effusion may work as a biomarker to predict a patient's response to PD-L1 blockade



Immune checkpoint blockade with anti-PD-L1 antibodies (bottom row) causes cytotoxic T cells expressing granzyme B (arrows) to accumulate in tumors overexpressing full-length membrane-bound PD-L1 (left). But tumors overexpressing soluble PD-L1 are resistant to anti-PD-L1 treatment (right).

Credit: Gong et al., 2019

therapy and that anti PD-1 antibody treatment could be a therapeutic option to overcome soluble PD-L1 variant-induced resistance," Katayama says.

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HETEROTYPIC SPHEROIDS DRIVE OVARIAN CANCER METASTASIS

Fibroblasts and ascitic cancer cells form metastatic units that promote the dissemination of tumor cells throughout the abdominal cavity

High-grade serous ovarian cancer (HGSOC)—the most aggressive form of ovarian cancer—is characterized by the early and rapid dissemination of cancer cells to other sites within the abdomen. Cancer cells that escape from the primary tumor are thought to form spheroids in the ascitic fluid that accumulates in HGSOC patients. These spheroids can then attach to the peritoneal membrane that lines the abdominal cavity and invade the underlying extracellular matrix to form secondary, metastatic tumors.

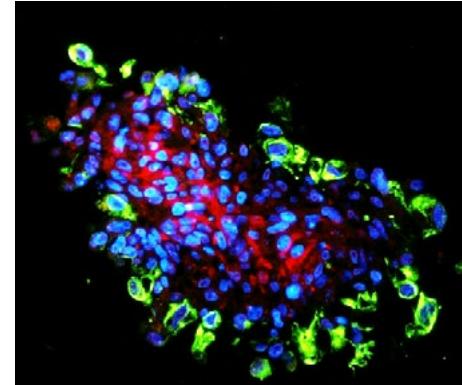
"Given the proposed function of spheroids during ovarian cancer metastasis, we wanted to investigate the processes by which ascitic tumor cells (ATCs) assemble into spheroids and execute peritoneal dissemination," says Qinglei Gao from Tongji Medical College, Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, China.

Gao and colleagues, including co-first author Zongyuan Yang, found that ATCs from HGSOC patients tend to form heterotypic spheroids with cancer-associated fibroblasts (CAF) present in the ascites. These CAFs protect the cancer cells from apoptosis and facilitate their invasion of the peritoneum, eventually forming the stroma of the newly formed metastases. "Due to their inherent malignant potential and contribution to peritoneal dissemination, we termed

these CAF-containing heterospheroid structures metastatic units," Gao says. "Intriguingly, stromal fibroblasts and the resultant heterospheroids are rarely found in low-grade serous ovarian cancer, which might explain its reduced tendency for dissemination."

Gao's team determined that ATCs from HGSOC patients express high amounts of integrin $\alpha 5$, a cell adhesion molecule whose levels correlate with poor patient outcomes. The researchers found that integrin $\alpha 5$ mediates the association of ATCs with fibroblasts during spheroid formation and that EGF secreted from these fibroblasts subsequently helps to sustain integrin $\alpha 5$ expression. Inhibiting this signaling pathway with a neutralizing anti-EGF antibody impaired spheroid formation and reduced peritoneal tumor burden in mice injected with both ATCs and CAFs.

Gao et al.'s results suggest that targeting CAFs could prevent metastasis in HGSOC patients. The researchers found that early administration of imatinib, a tyrosine kinase inhibitor that can eliminate CAFs by blocking PDGF signaling, reduced tumor burden and improved survival in a mouse model of metastatic ovarian cancer. This treatment was even more effective when combined with liposome clodronate to additionally eliminate tumor-associated macrophages, which have also been



Heterotypic spheroids consisting of epithelial cancer cells (green) surrounding a core of fibroblasts (red) form in the ascites of HGSOC patients. These spheroids act as metastatic units that facilitate the dissemination of ovarian cancer cells throughout the abdominal cavity.

Credit: Gao et al., 2019

reported to promote spheroid formation in ovarian cancer.

"Together, our results suggest that early targeting of stromal CAFs to destroy metastatic units could be a new therapeutic strategy to limit HGSOC progression," Gao says.

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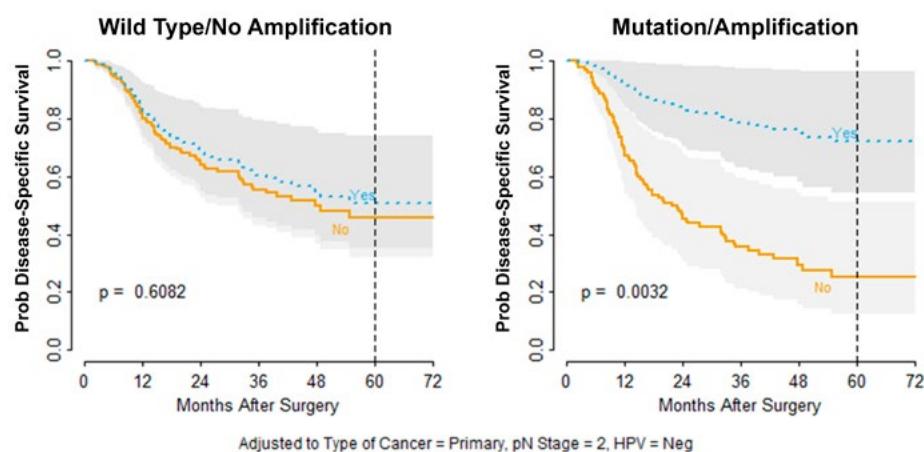
ASPIRIN MAY HELP SOME PATIENTS SURVIVE HEAD AND NECK CANCER

By lowering prostaglandin E₂ levels, regular use of aspirin or other NSAIDs could prolong the life of patients with mutations in the *PIK3CA* gene

Head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC) accounts for about 4% of all cancers in the United States and continues to have high rates of patient mortality. Risk factors for HNSCC include smoking, alcohol use, and human papillomavirus infection, but several studies have shown that regular use of aspirin can reduce the risk of developing the disease. However, whether aspirin or other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) can promote the survival of patients who have already developed HNSCC is unclear; studies investigating this question have so far produced conflicting results.

One possibility is that NSAIDs are only effective against some types of HNSCC. Around 35% of HNSCC tumors carry mutations that activate the *PIK3CA* gene, which encodes the catalytic subunit of the signaling enzyme PI3K α . Researchers led by Professor Jennifer Grandis at the University of California, San Francisco, investigated whether regular NSAID use specifically improved the survival of HNSCC patients with alterations in the *PIK3CA* gene.

The researchers analyzed a group of 266 HNSCC patients who had had their tumors surgically removed and, in most cases, were then treated with adjuvant chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy. Patients without any alterations in their *PIK3CA* gene were no better off if they also took NSAIDs on a regular basis (defined as two or more doses per week for at least six months). By contrast, regular NSAID usage dramatically enhanced the survival of patients whose *PIK3CA* gene was mutated and/or



Compared with no or occasional NSAID usage (orange lines), regular NSAID use (blue lines) had no effect on the survival of HNSCC patients with wild-type *PIK3CA* (left), but dramatically increased the survival of patients with a mutated or amplified *PIK3CA* gene (right).

Credit: Hedberg et al., 2019

amplified. Among these patients, NSAIDs increased the overall five-year survival rate from 25% to 78%.

NSAIDs also inhibited tumor growth in mice injected with cancer cells harboring a mutant *PIK3CA* gene. By analyzing these mice, Grandis and colleagues found that NSAIDs likely inhibit tumor growth by reducing the production of prostaglandin E₂. This proinflammatory molecule has been implicated in a variety of cancers and can be induced by the PI3K α signaling pathway. NSAIDs may therefore also be effective against a variety of cancers that contain activating mutations in *PIK3CA*. Indeed, previous

studies have shown that regular aspirin usage can aid the survival of colorectal cancer patients carrying mutated *PIK3CA*.

"The present study is the first to demonstrate that regular NSAID usage confers a significant clinical advantage in patients with *PIK3CA*-altered HNSCC," Grandis says. "Inconsistencies in the type, timing, and dosages of NSAIDs taken by patients in this study limit our ability to make specific therapeutic recommendations. But the magnitude of the apparent advantage, especially given the marked morbidity and mortality of this disease, warrants further study in a prospective, randomized clinical trial."

RESEARCHER DETAILS



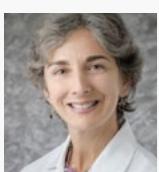
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ANTIBIOTIC TREATMENT ALLEVIATES ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE SYMPTOMS IN MALE MICE

By altering the gut microbiome, long-term antibiotic treatment reduces inflammation and slows the growth of amyloid plaques in male APPS1-21 mice

The community of bacteria that live in the gastrointestinal tract—the gut microbiome—is generally harmless, but, because they affect the activity of the body's immune system, these bacteria can influence a wide range of diseases, even in distant tissues such as the brain.

"Recent evidence suggests that intestinal bacteria could play a major role in various neurological conditions including autism spectrum disorders, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's disease (AD)," explains Sangram Sisodia from The University of Chicago.

AD is characterized by the formation of amyloid plaques and the activation of brain-resident immune cells called microglia. These cells can help remove amyloid plaques, but their activation may also exacerbate the disease by causing neuroinflammation.

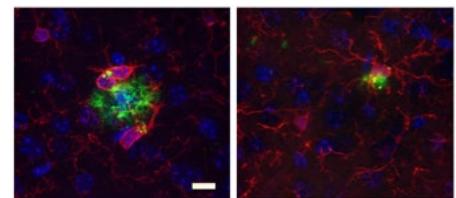
AD patients exhibit changes in their gut microbiome, and Sisodia and colleagues previously found that gut bacteria may influence the development of Alzheimer's-like symptoms in rodents. Long-term antibiotic treatment limited the formation of amyloid plaques and reduced microglia activation in male, but not female, APP_{SWE}/PS1_{ΔE9} mice, which express mutant proteins associated with familial AD. "While compel-

ling, our published studies on the role of the gut microbiome on amyloid plaque formation were limited to a single strain of mice," Sisodia says.

Sisodia and colleagues, including first author Hemraj Dodiya, therefore examined the effects of antibiotics on a different mouse model of AD known as APPS1-21. Long-term treatment with a cocktail of antibiotics again reduced the formation of amyloid plaques in male mice but had no effect on females. Antibiotic treatment also appeared to alter the activation of microglia in male mice, changing them from a form that is thought to promote neurodegeneration to a form that helps to maintain a healthy brain.

To prove that these improvements in Alzheimer's symptoms were caused by alterations in the gut microbiome, the researchers transplanted fecal matter from untreated mice into antibiotic-treated animals. This procedure restored the gut microbiome and caused an increase in amyloid plaque formation and microglial activation.

But why do alterations in the gut microbiome only affect male mice? Sisodia and colleagues discovered that long-term antibiotic treatment changed the gut bacteria of male and female mice in different ways. The changes in the



Compared with a control (left), long-term antibiotic treatment (right) reduces the size of amyloid plaques (green) and alters the appearance of microglia (red) in the brains of male APPS1-21 mice.

Credit: Dodiya et al., 2019

microbiome of female mice caused their immune systems to increase production of several proinflammatory factors that could influence the activation of microglia.

"Our study shows that antibiotic-mediated perturbations of the gut microbiome have selective, sex-specific influences on amyloid plaque formation and microglial activity in the brain," Sisodia says. "We now want to investigate whether these outcomes can be attributed to changes in any particular type of bacteria."

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STROKE DRUG MAY ALSO PREVENT ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

The genetically engineered protein 3K3A-APC reduces amyloid- β deposition in mice by inhibiting transcription of BACE1

3K3A-APC is a genetically modified version of a human blood protein called activated protein C, which reduces inflammation and protects both neurons and the cells that line the walls of blood vessels from death and degeneration. 3K3A-APC has beneficial effects in various mouse models of disease, including traumatic brain injury and multiple sclerosis, and is currently being developed to treat stroke in humans, where it has been shown to be safe, well tolerated, and capable of reducing intracerebral bleeding.

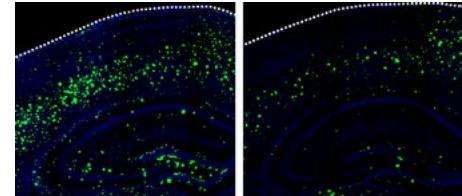
"Because of its neuroprotective, vaso-protective, and anti-inflammatory activities in multiple models of neurological disorders, we investigated whether 3K3A-APC can also protect the brain from the toxic effects of amyloid- β toxin in a mouse model of Alzheimer's disease," says Berislav V. Zlokovic, Director of the Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute at the Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California.

Toxic amyloid- β peptides accumulate in the brains of Alzheimer's patients, leading to neurodegeneration and reduced blood flow within the brain. Zlokovic and colleagues, including

co-first authors Divna Lazic and Abhay Sagare, found that a four-month course of daily 3K3A-APC injections significantly reduced amyloid- β deposition in the brains of 5XFAD mice, which usually produce large amounts of the toxic peptide. 3K3A-APC treatment prevented these mice from losing their memory and helped maintain normal cerebral blood flow. By reducing the levels of microglia and proinflammatory cytokines, 3K3A-APC also suppressed inflammation within the brain, another common feature of Alzheimer's disease.

Zlokovic and colleagues found that 3K3A-APC protects the brain by inhibiting the NF- κ B-dependent transcription of BACE1, a protease that helps generate amyloid- β by cleaving amyloid precursor protein. 3K3A-APC inhibited the activation of NF- κ B in neurons, resulting in a 50% reduction of BACE1 levels in the cortex.

Several different inhibitors of BACE1 have been tested in clinical trials for Alzheimer's disease, but the new study suggests that using 3K3A-APC to block the expression of BACE1 could be an alternative approach, particularly at early



Compared with a control (left), 3K3A-APC treatment (right) greatly reduces the accumulation of amyloid- β (green) in the brains of 5XFAD mice.

Credit: Lazic et al., 2019

stages of the disease, when amyloid- β has yet to accumulate to levels capable of permanently damaging the brain. Besides suppressing inflammation independently of its anti-amyloidogenic effect, 3K3A-APC also directly protects neurons and brain vasculature from the toxic effects of amyloid- β .

"Our present data support the idea that 3K3A-APC holds potential as an effective anti-amyloid- β therapy for early stage Alzheimer's disease in humans," Zlokovic says.

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