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The Role of Chronic Infections in Immune System Dysregulation and Autoimmune Diseases

Nasira A. Sitar

Faculty of Pharmacy Kampala International University Uganda

Satar.nasira@studwc.kiu.ac.ug

ABSTRACT

Chronic infections significantly impact the immune system, contributing to dysregulation and the development of autoimmune diseases. Persistent pathogens, such as viruses and bacteria, can evade immune clearance, leading to a sustained inflammatory response that disrupts the delicate balance of immune tolerance and activation. This review explores the mechanisms through which chronic infections influence immune system dynamics, focusing on the role of cytokines, immune cell modulation, and the alteration of immune signaling pathways. Infections like hepatitis C, Epstein-Barr virus, and others have been linked to autoimmune conditions such as systemic lupus erythematosus, rheumatoid arthritis, and multiple sclerosis. The persistent presence of these pathogens may lead to molecular mimicry, epitope spreading, and the activation of autoreactive T and B cells, driving the pathogenesis of autoimmunity. Additionally, we discuss the implications of chronic infections on therapeutic strategies for autoimmune diseases, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between infections and autoimmune dysregulation. By elucidating the complex relationships between chronic infections and the immune system, this review aims to highlight potential avenues for developing targeted interventions and improving patient outcomes in autoimmune disorders.

Keywords: Chronic Infections, Immune Dysregulation, Autoimmune Diseases, Cytokines, Pathogenesis

INTRODUCTION

The immune system is an intricate network of cells, tissues, and organs that defend the body against harmful invaders such as bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites [1]. It functions as the body's primary defense mechanism, distinguishing between self and non-self-entities and neutralizing pathogens before they can cause significant harm [2]. Under normal circumstances, this system is finely tuned, capable of eliminating infections while maintaining tolerance to the body's own tissues. However, when this balance is disrupted, the immune system can mistakenly target healthy cells and tissues, leading to autoimmune diseases.

Autoimmune diseases occur when the immune system fails to differentiate between self and non-self, attacking the body's own organs and tissues as though they were foreign invaders [3]. Examples of autoimmune diseases include rheumatoid arthritis (RA), systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), multiple sclerosis (MS), type 1 diabetes (T1D), and psoriasis, among others. These conditions can affect nearly every organ in the body and are typically chronic, requiring lifelong management [4]. Despite considerable advances in understanding these diseases, the precise causes of autoimmune disorders remain elusive. What is clear, however, is that genetic predisposition, environmental factors, and dysregulation of the immune system all contribute to their onset [5].

Among the many environmental triggers, chronic infections have garnered significant attention in recent years for their potential role in the development and exacerbation of autoimmune diseases. Chronic infections are infections that persist in the body for extended periods, often months or even years. These infections can be caused by a wide range of pathogens, including viruses (e.g., Epstein-Barr virus (EBV), HIV, hepatitis B and C), bacteria (e.g., Helicobacter pylori, Borrelia burgdorferi), and parasites (e.g., Toxoplasma gondii) [6]. While some chronic

infections may be asymptomatic or cause only mild symptoms, others can severely impact immune function, leading to long-term health consequences.

The relationship between chronic infections and autoimmune diseases is complex and multifaceted. Chronic infections can trigger immune system dysregulation through mechanisms such as molecular mimicry, bystander activation, epitope spreading, and chronic inflammation [7]. In some cases, persistent infections may directly initiate an autoimmune response by activating autoreactive immune cells, while in others, they exacerbate an existing autoimmune condition, leading to disease progression [8]. Notably, chronic infections may also play a role in immune system suppression, which can further impair the body's ability to regulate immune responses properly [9]. This review aims to explore the role of chronic infections in immune system dysregulation and their connection to the development of autoimmune diseases. By understanding the underlying mechanisms, we can better appreciate how persistent infections contribute to autoimmunity, offering insights into potential therapeutic approaches for managing both infections and autoimmune disorders.

Chronic Infections: A Brief Overview

Chronic infections are defined as persistent infections where the pathogen remains in the host over a prolonged period, often in a latent or subclinical state. Unlike acute infections, where the immune response typically resolves the infection within days or weeks, chronic infections persist for months or even years [10]. Common chronic infections include:

- **Viral infections**: HIV, Hepatitis B and C, Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV), and Cytomegalovirus (CMV)
- **Bacterial infections**: Helicobacter pylori, Mycobacterium tuberculosis, and Borrelia burgdorferi (responsible for Lyme disease)
- **Fungal and parasitic infections**: Candidiasis, Toxoplasmosis, and Malaria

These chronic infections may not always cause overt symptoms, but their persistence in the host can lead to long-term consequences, including immune system dysregulation [11,12].

Mechanisms of Immune System Dysregulation by Chronic Infections

Chronic infections can affect the immune system in several ways, leading to both overstimulation and suppression of various immune pathways. This dysregulation can set the stage for the development of autoimmune diseases through the following mechanisms:

1. Molecular Mimicry

Molecular mimicry occurs when pathogens share structural similarities with host proteins. During a chronic infection, the immune system mounts a response against the pathogen, but because of these similarities, it also begins attacking host tissues [7]. For example, EBV has been linked to multiple sclerosis (MS) due to the virus expressing proteins that closely resemble components of the myelin sheath, which insulates nerve fibers in the central nervous system [13]. Over time, the immune system begins to attack the myelin, leading to the neurodegeneration seen in MS.

2. Bystander Activation

Bystander activation occurs when immune cells that are not specifically targeting a pathogen are unintentionally activated during a chronic infection. The prolonged immune activation in response to the pathogen can result in collateral damage to healthy tissues, contributing to autoimmune disease [14]. In chronic Hepatitis C, for instance, sustained immune activation can lead to liver inflammation and fibrosis, as well as autoimmune conditions like autoimmune hepatitis and cryoglobulinemia [15].

3. Epitope Spreading

Epitope spreading refers to the phenomenon where, during an immune response, new epitopes (parts of antigens) are uncovered or created, broadening the scope of the immune attack. As the infection persists, damaged host cells expose new self-antigens, prompting the immune system to target these previously hidden epitopes [16]. This mechanism is particularly relevant in diseases such as systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), where chronic infections can lead to the presentation of nuclear antigens, exacerbating the autoimmune attack on various organs.

4. Chronic Inflammation

Inflammation is the immune system's natural response to infection or injury. In acute infections, inflammation subsides once the pathogen is cleared. However, in chronic infections, inflammation can become sustained, leading to tissue damage and immune dysregulation. Chronic low-level inflammation can drive autoimmune processes by constantly stimulating the immune system. For example, chronic infection with Helicobacter pylori has been linked to autoimmune diseases such as autoimmune gastritis and immune thrombocytopenia due to prolonged inflammation in the stomach lining [17].

5. Immunosuppression and Immune Evasion

Some chronic infections, especially viral infections like HIV and cytomegalovirus (CMV), actively suppress the immune system to avoid clearance [18]. This immunosuppression can impair the body's ability to regulate immune responses properly, leading to either a failure to control infections or a hyperactive immune response that

damages host tissues [19]. Immunosuppression caused by chronic infections can also alter the balance of regulatory T cells (Tregs) and effector T cells, contributing to the loss of immune tolerance seen in autoimmune diseases.

Chronic Infections as Triggers for Autoimmune Diseases

There is growing evidence suggesting that chronic infections can act as both triggers and perpetuators of autoimmune diseases. Some notable examples include:

-Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA): Studies have shown that chronic infections with Porphyromonas gingivalis, a bacterium involved in periodontal disease, may contribute to the onset of RA [20]. P. gingivalis is believed to drive autoimmunity through molecular mimicry and citrullination, a process that modifies proteins, making them more likely to trigger an immune response [21].

-Type 1 Diabetes (T1D): Chronic viral infections, such as with Coxsackievirus B and enteroviruses, have been implicated in T1D [22]. These viruses may infect pancreatic beta cells, triggering an immune response that ultimately destroys insulin-producing cells.

-Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE): Chronic infections with EBV are strongly associated with SLE. The virus is thought to activate B cells, leading to the production of autoantibodies against nuclear antigens, a hallmark of lupus [23].

- Multiple Sclerosis (MS): As mentioned, EBV is also linked to MS. The virus persists in B cells and may promote immune attacks on the central nervous system through molecular mimicry and epitope spreading [24].

Chronic Infection and Autoimmunity: A Two-Way Relationship

While chronic infections can trigger autoimmune diseases, autoimmune diseases can, in turn, increase susceptibility to infections. Individuals with autoimmune diseases often exhibit dysregulated immune responses, which can impair their ability to fight infections [8]. Moreover, immunosuppressive therapies used to treat autoimmune diseases, such as corticosteroids and biologics, can further weaken the immune system, making these individuals more prone to chronic infections [25].

This creates a vicious cycle where infections exacerbate autoimmune disease activity, and the autoimmune condition predisposes individuals to persistent infections, complicating both the diagnosis and treatment of these patients.

Therapeutic Implications

Understanding the role of chronic infections in autoimmune diseases opens new therapeutic possibilities. Targeting the underlying chronic infection can sometimes alleviate autoimmune symptoms. For example, treating *Helicobacter pylori* infection has shown improvement in conditions like autoimmune gastritis and immune thrombocytopenia [26]. Similarly, antiviral treatments for chronic hepatitis C have reduced autoimmune manifestations such as cryoglobulinemia and autoimmune hepatitis [27]. In addition, vaccination strategies may play a preventative role. Vaccines against hepatitis B and human papillomavirus (HPV) have the potential to reduce the incidence of related autoimmune conditions by preventing the chronic infections that may trigger them [28]. Furthermore, balancing immunosuppressive treatments with antimicrobial therapies could help manage autoimmune conditions without exacerbating the chronic infections that might drive them. These therapeutic strategies underscore the need for an integrated approach to treating both autoimmune diseases and their infectious triggers, aiming for long-term remission and improved patient outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Chronic infections play a critical role in immune system dysregulation, often serving as triggers or perpetuators of autoimmune diseases. Through mechanisms such as molecular mimicry, bystander activation, and chronic inflammation, persistent pathogens can disrupt the delicate balance of immune tolerance, leading to an immune attack on the body's tissues. Understanding these connections provides valuable insights into the pathogenesis of autoimmune diseases and highlights the potential for targeted treatments aimed at managing both the infection and the autoimmune response. Further research is essential to unravel the complexities of this relationship and to develop more effective therapies for individuals suffering from chronic infections and autoimmune diseases.

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