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Commentary

Immune System Dysregulation in Rheumatoid Arthritis and Targeted Therapeutic Approaches

Rachel Joy*

Department of Rheumatology, University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom

DESCRIPTION

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) is a chronic autoimmune disorder characterized by inflammation and pain in the joints, leading to damage if left untreated. It primarily affects the synovial joints but can also involve other tissues and organs. The disease arises when the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissue, particularly the synovium, which is the lining of the joints. The immune system is designed to protect the body from harmful invaders such as bacteria, viruses and other pathogens. However, in autoimmune diseases like RA, the immune system becomes dysregulated and starts attacking the body's own tissues. In RA, the immune cells, including T-cells and B-cells, target the synovial membrane. This process is exacerbated by the presence of autoantibodies, such as Rheumatoid Factor (RF) and Anti-Citrullinated Protein Antibodies (ACPA).

The primary mechanism behind RA involves the activation of both the innate and adaptive immune systems, which mistakenly identify the synovial tissue as harmful, triggering an inflammatory. This response is characterized by the recruitment of various immune cells, such as macrophages, dendritic cells and neutrophils, to the site of inflammation. These cells release pro-inflammatory cytokines, including Tumor Necrosis Factor (TNF)-alpha, Interleukin-1 (IL-1) and IL-6, which promote the destruction of cartilage and bone. Over time, the chronic inflammation leads to joint deformity, pain and loss of function.

Sources and risk factors

Several factors are believed to contribute to the development of RA, though its exact cause remains unknown. These include genetic predisposition, environmental triggers and hormonal influences. Genetic factors play a significant role in the susceptibility to RA, with certain gene variations, particularly in the Human Leukocyte Antigen (HLA) region, being strongly associated with the disease. In addition, environmental factors such as smoking and infections can trigger or worsen RA in genetically predisposed individuals.

Hormonal changes are also linked to the onset of RA, as women are more likely to develop the disease, especially during their reproductive years. This has led to the hypothesis that estrogen may influence immune function in a way that predisposes women to autoimmune conditions.

Treatment options

Currently, there is no cure for RA, but a variety of treatments are available to manage symptoms, reduce inflammation, and slow disease progression. The main treatment goals are to control pain, preserve joint function, and improve quality of life.

Nonsteroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs): These drugs, such as ibuprofen, are commonly used to relieve pain and reduce inflammation. However, they do not stop the underlying disease process and may have side effects with long-term use.

Disease-Modifying Antirheumatic Drugs (DMARDs): DMARDs, such as methotrexate, hydroxychloroquine and sulfasalazine, work by slowing the progression of RA and preventing joint damage. Methotrexate is often the first-line treatment for moderate to severe RA.

Biologic agents: Biologics are a class of drugs that specifically target immune system molecules involved in RA. TNF inhibitors, such as etanercept and infliximab, are commonly used. Other biologics target interleukins (IL-6 inhibitors like tocilizumab) or B-cells (rituximab). These drugs have revolutionized RA treatment, offering patients better control over the disease.

Corticosteroids: Steroids like prednisone are used to reduce inflammation quickly but are generally prescribed for short-term use due to their potential for significant side effects when used long-term.

Advanced diagnostic tools

Early and accurate diagnosis of RA is important for effective treatment and preventing long-term joint damage. Several

Correspondence to: Rachel Joy, Department of Rheumatology, University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom, E-mail: rachel.joy9@bristol.ac.uk

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advanced diagnostic tools and techniques are available to aid in the early detection and monitoring of RA:

Serological testing: Blood tests are commonly used to detect specific markers of RA, such as Rheumatoid Factor (RF) and Anti-Citrullinated Protein Antibodies (ACPA). The presence of ACPA, in particular, is highly specific for RA and can help distinguish it from other types of arthritis.

Imaging techniques: Imaging plays a vital role in diagnosing and monitoring the progression of RA. X-rays, while useful for assessing joint damage, may not detect early changes. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and ultrasound provide higher-resolution images and can identify inflammation and early signs of joint damage before they become apparent on X-rays. MRI is particularly effective at assessing soft tissues, such as the synovium.

Ultrasound: High-frequency ultrasound can detect synovitis (inflammation of the synovial membrane) and erosions in joints, making it an important tool for early diagnosis and monitoring treatment efficacy.

RA is a complex autoimmune disease that affects millions of people worldwide. Understanding the immune system's role in the disease, including the mechanisms of inflammation and immune dysregulation, is necessary for developing effective treatments.