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Perspective

Immunological Mechanisms of Oral Tolerance Breakdown in Food-Related Hypersensitivity Disorders

Lina Petrova*

Department of Gastrointestinal Immunology, Black Sea University of Medical Sciences, Varna, Bulgaria

DESCRIPTION

Food-related hypersensitivity disorders arise when the immune system mounts inappropriate responses against dietary antigens that are normally harmless. Under physiological conditions, ingestion of food proteins induces a state of immune non-reactivity known as oral tolerance, which prevents excessive immune activation in the gastrointestinal tract. Failure of oral tolerance mechanisms can lead to allergic sensitization, chronic inflammation, and systemic immune responses. This article examines the immunological processes involved in the establishment and breakdown of oral tolerance, with emphasis on antigen presentation, regulatory immune pathways, epithelial barrier function, and microbiome interactions.

The gastrointestinal tract represents one of the largest immune interfaces in the human body. It is continuously exposed to a vast array of dietary antigens, commensal microorganisms, and environmental molecules. Despite this constant exposure, the immune system typically avoids mounting harmful responses against food-derived proteins. This controlled state of immune non-reactivity is maintained through a complex network of cellular and molecular mechanisms collectively referred to as oral tolerance.

Oral tolerance is established through antigen sampling by specialized cells within the intestinal epithelium and underlying immune structures. Dendritic cells play a central role in capturing dietary antigens and transporting them to mesenteric lymph nodes. Within this environment, antigen presentation occurs in the presence of regulatory signals that promote immune suppression rather than activation. Regulatory T lymphocytes are essential for maintaining oral tolerance. These cells produce anti-inflammatory cytokines that suppress effector T-cell responses and prevent excessive immune activation. Key mediators include interleukin-10 and transforming growth factor-beta, which influence multiple immune cell populations and maintain mucosal equilibrium.

Epithelial cells lining the intestinal surface also contribute actively to immune regulation. These cells form a physical barrier that limits antigen penetration while producing signaling molecules that shape immune responses. Under normal conditions, tight junction proteins maintain barrier integrity and restrict passage of macromolecules into underlying tissues. Breakdown of epithelial barrier function is an important factor in the development of food hypersensitivity disorders. Disruption of tight junctions can increase permeability, allowing larger antigenic molecules to access immune cells in the lamina propria. This increased exposure enhances the likelihood of immune activation and sensitization. Genetic predisposition influences susceptibility to oral tolerance failure. Variations in genes associated with epithelial barrier integrity, cytokine signaling, and antigen processing can alter immune responses to dietary antigens. These genetic factors may interact with environmental exposures to determine disease risk.

The intestinal microbiome plays a significant role in shaping immune responses within the gastrointestinal tract. Commensal microorganisms produce metabolites that influence epithelial function and immune cell differentiation. Short-chain fatty acids derived from microbial fermentation have been shown to promote regulatory T-cell development and support immune tolerance. Alterations in microbial composition, often referred to as dysbiosis, have been associated with increased risk of food allergy and other hypersensitivity conditions. Reduced microbial diversity may impair the development of regulatory immune pathways and contribute to inappropriate immune activation.

Antigen presentation in the gut is highly context dependent. When dendritic cells encounter antigens in the presence of anti-inflammatory signals, they promote tolerance. However, under inflammatory conditions, these same cells may initiate sensitization and activate effector T-cell responses. This functional plasticity is a key factor in determining immune outcomes following food antigen exposure. B lymphocytes contribute to food hypersensitivity through antibody production. In allergic conditions, class switching to immunoglobulin E leads to the production of allergen-specific antibodies. These antibodies bind to mast cells and basophils, sensitizing them to subsequent exposure and triggering rapid allergic responses upon re-exposure to the antigen.

Correspondence to: Lina Petrova, Department of Gastrointestinal Immunology, Black Sea University of Medical Sciences, Varna, Bulgaria, E-mail: lina.petrova@bsu-immunology.bg

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Mast cells play a central role in clinical manifestations of food allergy. Upon antigen recognition, cross-linking of immunoglobulin E receptors triggers degranulation and release of histamine and other inflammatory mediators. These substances induce vascular permeability, smooth muscle contraction, and gastrointestinal symptoms. Eosinophils are also involved in chronic food-related inflammatory conditions. These cells accumulate in tissues during allergic responses and release cytotoxic proteins that contribute to epithelial damage. Persistent eosinophilic inflammation can lead to tissue remodeling and long-term functional impairment.

The balance between effector and regulatory immune responses determines whether oral tolerance is maintained or disrupted. Regulatory T cells counteract inflammatory signals and prevent excessive immune activation. When regulatory function is impaired, effector responses may dominate, leading to sensitization and allergic disease. Dietary components themselves can modulate immune responses. Certain food-derived molecules possess immunomodulatory properties that influence cytokine production and epithelial integrity. Diets lacking fiber or rich in processed foods may negatively affect microbial composition and immune regulation.

CONCLUSION

Oral tolerance represents a complex immunological process that prevents inappropriate immune responses to dietary antigens. Breakdown of this system involves interactions among epithelial barriers, dendritic cells, regulatory lymphocytes, and microbial communities. Disruption of these mechanisms leads to food hypersensitivity disorders characterized by allergic inflammation and tissue injury. Continued investigation into tolerance mechanisms may support development of strategies aimed at restoring immune balance in affected individuals.