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Short Communication

Effect of Vaccination on the Evolution of SARS-CoV-2-Specific B- and T-cell Responses

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DESCRIPTION

Vaccine breakthrough infections with SARS-CoV-2 Omicron resulted in greater protection than triple vaccination and led to population-level herd immunity. To investigate the underlying immunological processes, it was tracked the development of SARS-CoV-2-specific antibody and T cell responses in Bavarian residents between February 2021 and December 2022. Furthermore, we studied the time lag between finished immunization and break-through infection, as well as any re-infection that occurred.

Each vaccination raised peak neutralization titers against Wuhan, Delta, and Omicron BA.5, as well as circulating spike-specific T cell frequencies. Omicron BA.5 neutralization titers were most substantially related with a lower risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection after immunization, even when Spike-specific T cell responses are taken into account. Despite this, 97% of triple vaccines were sick with SARS-CoV-2, frequently within a few months after their third immunization. Breakthrough infections increased the amplitude and breadth of neutralization, extended virus-specific T cell responses to non-vaccine-encoded antigens, and protected against additional infections with an 88% effectiveness by December 2022. This effect was subsequently evaluated using mathematical modelling that took into consideration time-dependent infection risk in Bavaria, as well as antibody and T cell concentrations at every time point following breakthrough infection. Our data show that cross-variant protective hybrid immunity elicited by vaccination and breakthrough infection had a significant role in the decreased viral transmission observed in Bavaria in late 2022 and beyond.

In late 2021, the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron strain will emerge and dominate. High infection rates were seen in populations with high immunization coverage [1,2]. In Germany, around 63% of the population had been immunized by summer 2021, with the remainder boosted in autumn/winter 2021 [3]. Similarly, a considerable number of the Bavarian population, particularly health care professionals, received SARS-CoV-2 vaccines in the first half of 2021 and were boosted with a third RNA immunization between October and December 2021, soon before Omicron emerged in Bavaria. Despite high vaccination rates, SARS-CoV-2 Omicron quickly replaced Delta by spreading swiftly among vaccinated persons in repeated waves until December 2022, although with a decreased risk of severe COVID-19 [4,5]. Since then, the recorded case numbers have significantly decreased and have stayed at a fairly low level. commencing in 2023.

Parameters defining protective immunity to Omicron are likely analogous to those developed prior to Omicron; neutralizing antibody titers were found to be positively associated to protection against SARS-CoV-2 infection [6]. In a preclinical infection model, antibody transfer employing spike (S)-specific IgG was adequate to mediate protection from SARS-CoV-2 infection [7]. We recently demonstrated that nucleocapsid (N)-specific T cell responses were related with upper airway control of initial SARS-CoV-2 infection prior to antibody seroconversion [8]. Furthermore, memory T cells protected against infection in various pre-clinical models; vaccine-induced airway tissue resident T cells targeting the N protein protected mice against SARS-CoV-1 infection [9]. Similarly, intranasal immunization with vectors expressing N and membrane protein (M, both structural proteins of the virion) produced protective T cells. l reactions in a model of nonhuman primates [10]. Indeed, mounting data shows that SARS-CoV-2-specific T cell responses aid in infection management [11]. Furthermore, intramuscular vaccinations followed by BTI induce a state of "hybrid immunity" characterized by high S-specific antibody responses, broadening of virus-specific T cell responses to non-vaccine-encoded antigens, and formation of virus-specific T cell memory in the airway epithelium [12].

Despite the fact that BTI causes a high level of protective immunity, the adaptability of antibody and T cell responses after BTI, as well as their role to reducing infectious dissemination throughout the population and the creation of subsequent waves, remains unknown. We studied the kinetics of SARS-CoV-2-variant-specific neutralizing antibodies and T-cell responses to vaccine-encoded and non-encoded viral antigens during vaccination, as well as before and after immunization. following Omicron BTI spanning the pandemic to endemic transition (February 2021 to December 2022). The researchers next utilized mathematical

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modelling to evaluate the protective impact of antibody and T-cell responses following hypothetical re-exposure to neutralization sensitive and neutralization resistant SARS-CoV-2 variants, respectively.

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