International Clinical Case Reports and Reviews
2024 Volume 2, Issue 1
DOI: 10.59657/2993-0855.brs.24.010

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Review Article

Open Access

Pathophysiology of Rheumatoid Arthritis

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Abstract

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic autoimmune disease characterized by joint inflammation and systemic manifestations. The pathogenesis of RA involves a complex interplay of genetic predispositions and environmental factors that contribute to autoantibody production and breakdown of immune self-tolerance. This review elaborates on the significant role of autoantibodies such as anticitrullinated protein antibodies (ACPAs), and genetic factors including HLA-DRB1 gene variants, in the initiation of the disease process. It further explores how environmental exposures like smoking and bacterial infections enhance susceptibility to RA. The article highlights the dysregulation of cytokine networks, emphasizing both proinflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α, IL-1, and IL-6, which drive the inflammatory processes, and anti-inflammatory cytokines like IL- 10 and IL-35, which attempt to modulate these responses. The pathology of RA is marked by the proliferation of fibroblast-like synoviocytes (FLS), excessive cytokine release, and the subsequent joint destruction. Insights into the molecular pathways of cytokine interaction and genetic markers provide a deeper understanding of RA mechanisms and underscore the importance of targeted therapeutic strategies. This comprehensive review underscores the need for continued research to refine our understanding of RA and improve management strategies, with a particular focus on cytokine targeting and modification of environmental risk factors such as smoking cessation.

Keywords: pathophysiology; rheumatoid arthritis; smoking cessation; immune self-tolerance

Introduction: Pathophysiology

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic autoimmune disorder characterized by persistent joint inflammation and damage. While the precise cause remains unclear, recent research has shed light on several key pathophysiological mechanisms underlying the disease. A hallmark of RA is the presence of autoantibodies called anti- citrullinated protein antibodies (ACPAs), which target proteins that have undergone a modification called citrullination, where the amino acid arginine is converted to citrulline. Numerous citrullinated self-proteins have been identified as potential autoantigens, such as fibrinogen, vimentin, and alpha-enolase. Certain genetic variants, particularly in the HLA-DRB1 gene containing the shared epitope sequence, can facilitate the presentation of citrullinated peptides to T cells, linking genetic risk to autoantibody generation. Environmental factors like smoking promote protein citrullination and ACPA production, potentially through oxidative stress mechanisms. Interestingly, the oral pathogen Porphyromonas gingivalis, which expresses its own citrullinating enzymes, may trigger ACPAs via molecular mimicry and epitope spreading [1].

RA is characterized by a breakdown of immune tolerance and the generation of autoreactive T cells. Regulatory T cells (Tregs), which normally maintain self-tolerance, exhibit impaired function in RA patients. This has been attributed to altered intracellular localization of the kinase PKCθ, which promotes pro-inflammatory signalling in Tregs upon exposure to TNFα. In contrast, pro-inflammatory T helper subsets like Th17 and Th1 cells are expanded and drive synovial inflammation through the release of cytokines such as IL-17, IFNγ, and GM-CSF. While Th17 cells were classically thought to be the dominant source of IL-17, recent studies have shown that mast cells and other cell types can also be significant producers of this cytokine in RA joints. IL17 enhances synovial inflammation by stimulating the release of other pro- inflammatory mediators and promoting osteoclast differentiation and bone erosion [1]. Fibroblast-like synoviocytes (FLS) in the inflamed synovial lining play a central role in RA pathogenesis. Activated by inflammatory cytokines and other stimuli, these cells acquire an aggressive, invasive phenotype that facilitates articular destruction. FLS proliferate excessively and secrete matrix-degrading enzymes like MMPs, as well as inflammatory mediators that perpetuate the

recruitment and activation of immune cells. The invasive behavior of FLS is promoted by signaling pathways like mTOR, which drive cytoskeletal reorganization and the formation of invasive structures called lamellipodia. Specific gene products, such as Angptl2 and Robo3, further enhance the migratory potential of FLS. Remarkably, FLS may disseminate from one joint to another by traveling through the vasculature, potentially explaining the evolution of RA from a mono/oligoarticular to a polyarticular disease [1].

In addition to T cells, other cellular players contribute to synovial inflammation through the release of soluble mediators. Activated monocytes/macrophages secrete pro-inflammatory cytokines like TNFα, IL-1β, and IL-6, which amplify inflammation and joint damage. Platelet derived microparticles can stimulate FLS to produce cytokines through surface-bound IL-1. Neutrophils and mast cells also infiltrate RA joints and discharge inflammatory proteases and cytokines.

Furthermore, synovial hyperplasia and angiogenesis lead to relative hypoxia, which induces pro-inflammatory pathways in FLS through transcriptional responses like HIF-1α stabilization. Cell death pathways, such as apoptosis, may further amplify synovitis through the release of autoantigens and pro-inflammatory signals [1]. In summary, RA pathogenesis involves a complex interplay between genetic risk factors and environmental exposures that trigger autoantibody formation and a breakdown of self-tolerance. This leads to persistent synovial infiltration by autoreactive lymphocytes, synovial proliferation driven by activated FLS, and chronic release of cytokines/mediators that coordinate joint inflammation and destruction. While recent advances have illuminated key molecular pathways, continued research is needed to fully delineate RA etiology and identify optimal therapeutic targets [1].

Role of cytokines in pathophysiology of Rheumatoid Arthritis [2]:

Pro-inflammatory Cytokines:

TNF-α: Main cytokine inducing inflammation in RA, promoting the production of other cytokines like IL-1 and IL-6. Influences the severity of RA through gene polymorphisms affecting its production.

IL-1: Consists of IL-1α and IL-1β, contributing to joint inflammation and destruction. Polymorphisms in IL-1 genes can alter susceptibility and severity of RA, particularly influencing IL1β levels.

IL- 6: Has both pro- and anti-inflammatory roles, crucial for immune response regulation. High levels in RA patients are linked to disease activity, influencing inflammation, osteoclast differentiation, and autoantibody production. IL-6 gene polymorphisms, such as rs1800795, are associated with RA susceptibility.

IL-7: IL-7 primarily acts as a pro-inflammatory cytokine that triggers the production of other inflammatory cytokines by monocytes. Its levels are notably higher in the synovial fluid of RA patients compared to those with osteoarthritis. IL-7 contributes to joint damage by activating fibroblasts and promoting osteoclastogenesis.

IL-12: This cytokine is pro-inflammatory and crucial for inducing the production of interferon-gamma (IFN-γ) and the differentiation of Th1 cells. Elevated IL-12 levels are associated with more severe RA symptoms. It enhances the production of several inflammatory cytokines and has been linked to increased RA susceptibility through gene polymorphisms.

IL-18: IL-18 is a pro-inflammatory cytokine that promotes the release of TNF-α, various matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs), and nitricoxide (NO), exacerbating inflammation. High levels of IL-18 in patients are correlated with more severe RA. It has been shown to worsen arthritis severity in animal models, and specific gene polymorphisms have been associated with increased susceptibility to RA.

IL-23: IL-23 has a pro-inflammatory role, enhancing the production of IL17 by Th17 cells and stabilizing Th17 cell populations. Increased levels of IL-23 correlate with higher levels of other proinflammatory cytokines in RA and contribute to bone erosion by inducing RANKL and osteoclastogenesis. Gene polymorphisms in IL-23 have been linked to a heightened risk of RA.

IL-27: IL-27 plays a dual role; it can induce IFN-γ production while inhibiting the production of IL-17 and IL-6.

The cytokine's effects on RA vary depending on the disease stage and can reduce arthritis severity in some animal models. Higher IL-27 levels are observed in RA, and certain gene polymorphisms are associated with an increased risk of the disease.

IL-32: IL-32 acts as a pro-inflammatory cytokine, stimulating the production of TNFα, IL-1β, IL-6, and IL-18, contributing to the inflammatory response in RA. Its levels are elevated in the synovial fluid of RA patients, where they correlate strongly with disease

activity. IL-32 exacerbates joint inflammation and cartilage damage in experimental models.

IL-33: The role of IL-33 in RA is complex and can be either proinflammatory or supportive of a Th2-type response depending on the context. IL-33 is present in the synovial tissue and cultured fibroblasts of RA patients and can exacerbate joint damage and synovial inflammation in animal models. Specific gene polymorphisms in IL-33 are associated with increased RA susceptibility and altered serum levels of the cytokine.

IL-17: Produced by Th17 cells, this cytokine plays a significant role in driving inflammation and bone erosion. Promotes the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines and MMPs, contributing to the pathology of RA. Genetic variations in IL-17 are linked to RA risk and disease progression.

Anti-inflammatory Cytokines [2]:

IL-4 and IL-13: Both cytokines suppress the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines, thus mitigating inflammatory responses. IL-4 can directly influence osteoclast activity, potentially reducing bone resorption. IL-13, sharing functional similarities with IL-4, also contributes to the suppression of inflammation.

IL-10: A critical anti-inflammatory cytokine, IL-10 limits immune responses by inhibiting the production of various pro-inflammatory cytokines. Plays a role in suppressing antigen presentation and the function of macrophages and dendritic cells.

IL-35: A newer member of the cytokine profile, contributing to the regulatory activities of Treg cells. Involved in suppressing autoimmune responses, suggesting a protective role in RA.

This underscores the intricate balance between pro-inflammatory and anti-inflammatory cytokines in RA pathogenesis. It highlights the potential for cytokine gene polymorphisms to influence disease susceptibility and severity, emphasizing the importance of understanding these mechanisms for the development of targeted therapies. The emerging focus on anti-cytokine agents offers hope for more effective RA treatments, reflecting the critical role of cytokines in driving the disease process.

Genetic factors and Rheumatoid arthritis [1]

Genetic factors are major determinants of RA risk, with the strongest being HLA-DRB1 alleles encoding the shared epitope sequence, as well as variants in genes like PTPN22 and PADI4, which are involved in immune regulation. More recently, genome-wide association studies have identified polymorphisms in molecules like CCR6 (a Th17 chemokine receptor) that alter RA risk. Beyond genetics, environmental exposures such as smoking, bacterial infections, and the microbiome influence RA development through mechanisms like induction of citrullination and neo-antigen generation. Diet, hormones, and neuroendocrine pathways may further modulate inflammation and bone loss in RA

Smoking and Rheumatoid arthritis [3]

A comprehensive meta-analysis, incorporating data from over 600,000 participants across 16 observational studies, including both case- control and cohort studies, has substantiated the association between smoking and an augmented risk of developing rheumatoid arthritis (RA). This meticulous synthesis aimed to elucidate the differential impact of smoking on RA risk, stratified by gender, rheumatoid factor (RF) positivity—a marker of disease severity—and smoking intensity.

The analysis revealed that smoking significantly elevates the risk of RA, with disparities observed between genders. Specifically, the risk for male smoker's doubles in comparison to non-smokers, while female smokers exhibit a 1.3-fold increased risk. The association intensifies for RF-positive RA, with male smokers facing a threefold higher risk, indicating a gender-specific differential in susceptibility. For both genders, heavy smoking, defined as 20 or more pack-years, similarly heightens RA risk.

This correlation between smoking and RA risk was consistent across varying study designs, underscoring the reliability of these findings. Based on these results, the authors highlight smoking, especially heavy smoking, as a modifiable risk factor for RA. They advocate for smoking cessation as a preventive measure to lower the incidence of this debilitating autoimmune disease, emphasizing the role of public health interventions in mitigating RA risk through smoking reduction strategies. This evidence reinforces the necessity of incorporating smoking cessation programs into RA prevention efforts, presenting a clear directive for healthcare policy and patient care practices aimed at reducing the burden of rheumatoid arthritis.

Conclusion

In summary, RA pathogenesis involves a complex interplay between genetic risk factors and environmental exposures that trigger autoantibody

formation and a breakdown of self-tolerance. This leads to persistent synovial infiltration by autoreactive lymphocytes, synovial proliferation driven by activated FLS, and chronic release of cytokines/mediators that coordinate joint inflammation and destruction. While recent advances have illuminated key molecular pathways, continued research is needed to fully delineate RA etiology and identify optimal therapeutic targets.

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Cite this article: Shah P, Trivedi J, Shah P. (2024). Pathophysilogy of Rheumatoid Arthritis. *International Clinical Case Reports and Reviews*, BioRes Scientia Publishers. 2(1):1-4. DOI: 10.59657/2993-0855.brs.24.010

Article History: **Received:** May 03, 2024 | **Accepted:** May 22, 2024 | **Published:** June 10, 2024