Stimulation by interleukin-7 of mononuclear cells in peripheral blood, synovial fluid and synovial tissue from patients with rheumatoid arthritis.

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Abstract

To determine how interleukin-7 (IL-7) affects the proliferation of T cells in patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), we evaluated the response of mononuclear cells (MNC) obtained from their peripheral blood (PB), synovial fluid (SF) and synovial tissue (ST) to stimulation by recombinant IL-7 and interleukin-2 (IL-2). Each cytokine was administered alone or combined with phytohemagglutinin (PHA). Cellular DNA synthesis was assayed by the [3H]-thymidine incorporation method. The stimulatory effect of 500 u/ml IL-7 on PBMNC obtained from 19 patients with RA was significantly lower than on PBMNC from 19 healthy controls. However, the same degree of stimulatory activity of 500 u/ml IL-2 was observed on the PBMNC from both RA patients and control subjects. The response of PBMNC to a suboptimal dose of PHA (0.2 micrograms/ml) was enhanced by adding either IL-7 or IL-2 (100 or 500 u/ml) to the cultures. The enhanced synthesis of DNA by both RA and control PBMNC on exposure to IL-7 following stimulation by a suboptimal dose of PHA was higher than that of IL-2. The effect of IL-7 on RA PBMNC was significantly greater than that of IL-2 at the concentration of 100 u/ml on PBMNC from the same RA patients. The stimulatory activity of IL-2 at the concentrations of 100 and 500 u/ml on SF MNC and ST MNC exceeded that of IL-7. In particular, an IL-2 dose of 500 u/ml had a marked effect on SF MNC. The PHA response of SF MNC was the lowest seen among the MNC from three different compartments. (ABSTRACT TRUNCATED AT 250 WORDS)

KEYWORDS: interleukin-1, interleukin-2, rheumatoid arthritis, lymphocyte proliferation, phytohemagglutinin

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Stimulation by Interleukin-7 of Mononuclear Cells in Peripheral Blood, Synovial Fluid and Synovial Tissue from Patients with Rheumatoid Arthritis

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To determine how interleukin-7 (IL-7) affects the proliferation of T cells in patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), we evaluated the response of mononuclear cells (MNC) obtained from their peripheral blood (PB), synovial fluid (SF) and synovial tissue (ST) to stimulation by recombinant IL-7 and interleukin-2 (IL-2). Each cytokine was administered alone or combined with phytohemagglutinin (PHA). Cellular DNA synthesis was assayed by the (3H)-thymidine incorporation method. The stimulatory effect of 500u/ml IL-7 on PBMCN obtained from 19 patients with RA was significantly lower than on PBMCN from 19 healthy controls. However, the same degree of stimulatory activity of 500u/ml IL-2 was observed on the PBMCN from both RA patients and control subjects. The response of PBMCN to a suboptimal dose of PHA (0.2μg/ml) was enhanced by adding either IL-7 or IL-2 (100 or 500u/ml) to the cultures. The enhanced synthesis of DNA by both RA and control PBMCN on exposure to IL-7 following stimulation by a suboptimal dose of PHA was higher than that of IL-2. The effect of IL-7 on RA PBMCN was significantly greater than that of IL-2 at the concentration of 100u/ml on PBMCN from the same RA patients. The stimulatory activity of IL-2 at the concentrations of 100 and 500u/ml on SF MNC and ST MNC exceeded that of IL-7. In particular, an IL-2 dose of 500u/ml had a marked effect on SF MNC. The PHA response of SF MNC was the lowest seen among the MNC from three different compartments. Thus, the stimulatory activity of IL-7 or IL-2 on RA MNC appears to differ according to the site of the body from which those cells were obtained or the state of cell activation.

Key words: interleukin-7, interleukin-2, rheumatoid arthritis, lymphocyte proliferation, phytohemagglutinin

Interleukin-7 (IL-7) was initially purified and cloned as a growth factor for murine B-cell progenitors (1-3) and human tonsillar B cells (4). Recent reports have shown that it also functions as a T-cell growth factor for both murine (5-7) and human (7-12) systems. In addition, IL-7 enhances the activity of natural killer (NK) and lymphokine-activated killer (LAK) cells (13), generates cytotoxic T lymphocytes against tumor cells (14, 15) and induces cytokine secretion by, and tumoricidal activity of, human peripheral blood monocytes (16).

The pathogenesis of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is not defined. It is, however, known that the certain mediator molecules such as interleukin 1 (IL-1), tumor necrosis factor α (TNFα) are, at least, involved in the disease development for RA (17). The T cells which predominantly infiltrate the synovial tissue of RA patients are activated by antigens in local lesions, proliferate to give clonal expansion, and form an inflammatory exudate called the pannus (18). Interleukin 2 (IL-2) is known as a T-cell growth factor and IL-2 gene expression is increased in RA synovia (19), although there is no study about IL-7 in RA. Recent reports (8, 9) have shown that recombinant human IL-7 and IL-2 are each mitogenic on human peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCN) and on T
cell enriched (E⁺) cells, and IL-7 enhances the proliferation of PBMC stimulated by anti-CD3 monoclonal antibody or lectin via IL-2-independent mechanisms, since anti-IL-2 or anti-IL-2 receptor (Tac) monoclonal antibody did not inhibit the activity of IL-7. In addition to IL-2, this activity of IL-7 plays an important role in the physiology of T cells in humans (9). Abnormalities of T cell phenotype and function have been reported in RA patients. Such abnormalities include a decrease of suppressor/cytotoxic (CD8⁺) T cells (20), an increase of helper/inducer (CD4⁺CD45RO⁺) T cells (21) and a low response of T cells in peripheral blood to phytohemaggutlin (PHA) (22).

These observation led us to determine how IL-7 affects the proliferation of T cells from patients with RA. In this study, we examined the effect of IL-7 and IL-2 on the synthesis of DNA in mononuclear cells from three different compartments in RA patients, i.e., the peripheral blood, synovial fluid and synovial tissue, and compared them with the PBMC obtained from control subjects.

Subjects and Methods

Patients. We studied 19 patients with RA, 5 men and 14 women, who met the diagnostic criteria of the American Rheumatism Association (ARA) (23). Their average age was 55.1 years (range 20 to 78 years). Patients were staged according to the method by Steinbrocker et al. (24): Stage I (1), Stage II (6), Stage III (2), and Stage IV (10). Using the functional classification, 3 patients were classified as I, 7 as II, 6 as III, and 3 as IV. Treatment administered included non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) (1 patient); NSAIDs plus gold sodium thiomalate (GST) (5 patients), NSAIDs plus D-penicillamine or bucillamine (7 patients), and NSAIDs plus low dose prednisolone, i.e., less than 5 mg/day (6 patients). We obtained peripheral blood samples from 19 healthy subjects who were sex and age-matched to the RA patients (average 53.2 years; range 27 to 76 years) to serve as controls. In addition, to examine MNC from three different compartments in the same individuals, specimens of synovial fluid and tissue were obtained from 2 RA patients undergoing total knee replacement.

Mononuclear cell preparation. Mononuclear cells (MNC) were isolated from heparinized peripheral blood or synovial fluid with 10 U/ml of heparin (Upjohn, Tokyo, Japan) and 20 U/ml hyaluronidase (Mochida Pharmaceutical Co., Tokyo, Japan) as the interface cell layer following Ficoll (Pharmacia, Uppsala, Sweden) Conray (Daichi Pharmaceutical Co., Tokyo, Japan) gradient sedimentation. MNC were washed 3 times with RPMI 1640 medium (GIBCO Lab., Life Technologies, Inc., Grand Island, NY, USA) supplemented with 100 U/ml of penicillin G, 100 μg/ml of streptomycin and 20 mM of Hepes buffer (GIBCO). MNC were resuspended at a cell concentration of 1 x 10⁶/ml in RPMI 1640 medium containing 10% of fetal bovine serum (FBS, heat-inactivated, GIBCO). MNC that infiltrated the synovial tissue of RA patients were isolated by the method of Ahlreden et al. (25). Synovial tissue was obtained from 4 RA patients during total knee replacement, and teased with scissors in Ca²⁺- and Mg²⁺-free Hanks' balanced salt solution (HBSS, GIBCO). After treatment with DNase (25 μg/ml, Sigma Chemical Co., St. Louis, MO, USA) and collagenase (200 U/ml, Worthington Biomedical Co., Freehold, NJ, USA) for 1 h at 37°C, the tissue was passed through a layer of iron mesh (pore size 210 μm; Iemoto, Tokyo, Japan). The cells were washed 3 times with RPMI 1640 medium and finally resuspended in Dulbecco's modified Eagle medium (GIBCO) containing 10% FBS at a cell concentration of 1 x 10⁶/ml. Cells were incubated overnight at 37°C in 5% CO₂. The nonadherent cells (> 90% of cells were MNC) were removed with prewarmed medium, washed 3 times with medium, and resuspended in RPMI 1640 medium with 10% FBS at 1 x 10⁶/ml.

DNA synthesis by MNC. The synthesis of DNA by MNC was measured by ³H-thymidine incorporation. MNC at a concentration of 1 x 10⁶/well in microtiter plates (Falcon, # 3072) were cultured in RPMI 1640 medium with 10% FBS for 72 h in 5% CO₂ in an incubator. Sixteen h before the end of culture, 1 μCi/well of ³H-thymidine (Amersham, UK) was pulsed. The cells were harvested on a glass fiber filter (Labo-Science Co., Tokyo, Japan) by an automated cell harvester (Labo-Science Co.). Radioactivity was measured with a liquid scintillation counter (Aloka, Tokyo, Japan).

Reagents. Human recombinant IL-7 was purchased from Genzyme Co., Boston, Mass, USA. The specific activity of IL-7 was 1 x 10⁶ units/mg protein as measured by bioassay for induction of ³H-thymidine uptake by mouse C3H/HeJ thymocytes. Human recombinant IL-2 was supplied by Shionogi Pharmaceutical Co., Osaka, Japan. The specific activity of IL-2 was 1 x 10⁶ J.R.U./mg protein. Phytohemagglutinin (PHA)-P was purchased from DIFCO Laboratories, Detroit, Michigan, USA.

Statistical analysis. Data are reported as mean ± SD. The difference in ³H-thymidine uptake by MNC with stimulation by the cytokines and PHA and without stimulation was analyzed by Student's t-test. A level of p<0.05 was accepted as statistically significant.

Results

Stimulatory activity of IL-7 and IL-2 on DNA synthesis of control PBMC. Our pilot experiment confirmed the results of other investigations (8, 9), that human recombinant IL-7 as well as IL-2 stimulated the spontaneous synthesis of DNA by control PBMC.
following culture for 3 days (Table 1). The addition of IL-7 to the culture at concentrations of $10^2$, $5 \times 10^2$, and $10^3$ u/ml significantly enhanced the synthesis of DNA by PBMC. The stimulatory activity of IL-2 on PBMC after 3 days of culture was greater than that of IL-7 (Table 1). The activity of IL-7 on control PBMC did not exceed that of IL-2, even after culture for 14 days (data not shown).

Response of PBMC from RA patients to IL-7. The cpm value for the spontaneous DNA synthesis of control PBMC after 3 days' culture was 368 ± 26 (Mean ± SEM). The synthesis of DNA by control PBMC rose when exposed to a concentration of 100 and 500 u/ml of IL-7 (668 ± 110 cpm for 100 u/ml, p < 0.01 and 1091 ± 135 cpm for 500 u/ml, p < 0.01), or of IL-2 (1693 ± 182 cpm, p < 0.01, 4975 ± 511 cpm, p < 0.01). The stimulatory activity of IL-2 at a concentration of 500 u/ml was about 5 times as high as the value of cpm obtained with IL-7. The response of PBMC to 500 u/ml of IL-7 (729 ± 104 cpm, n = 19) was lower than that of control PBMC (1091 ± 135 cpm, p < 0.05), although PBMC from both RA and control groups responded equally to IL-2 (Fig. 1).

Response of PBMC from RA patients to IL-7 and suboptimal dose of PHA. In a preliminary experiment, the suboptimal dose of PHA required to stimulate DNA synthesis in control PBMC was determined as 0.2 µg/ml in the final concentration for cultures (data not shown). The addition of 100 or 500 u/ml of either IL-7 or IL-2 to the culture of PBMC enhanced the synthesis of DNA by PBMC that had been stimulated by a suboptimal dose of PHA (p < 0.01, except p < 0.05 for 100 u/ml of IL-2 on RA PBMC, Fig. 2). The response of RA PBMC stimulated by the suboptimal dose of PHA to 100 u/ml of IL-7 (35248 ± 4957 cpm, n = 19) exceeded that obtained with the same concentration of IL-2 (28455 ± 3685 cpm, p < 0.05) and tended to be greater.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concentration of cytokine (u/ml)</th>
<th>IL-7 Exp. 1</th>
<th>IL-7 Exp. 2</th>
<th>IL-7 Exp. 3</th>
<th>IL-2 Exp. 1</th>
<th>IL-2 Exp. 2</th>
<th>IL-2 Exp. 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>651 ± 96</td>
<td>590 ± 104</td>
<td>357 ± 48</td>
<td>1244 ± 69</td>
<td>885 ± 171</td>
<td>533 ± 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>623 ± 102</td>
<td>637 ± 47</td>
<td>n. d.</td>
<td>2020 ± 62a</td>
<td>1248 ± 325a</td>
<td>n. d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>701 ± 93</td>
<td>690 ± 105</td>
<td>n. d.</td>
<td>2323 ± 161a</td>
<td>2911 ± 114a</td>
<td>n. d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>2963 ± 286a</td>
<td>895 ± 14a</td>
<td>730 ± 210a</td>
<td>7128 ± 162a</td>
<td>5792 ± 266a</td>
<td>2900 ± 78a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500</td>
<td>3222 ± 271a</td>
<td>n. d.</td>
<td>1384 ± 136a</td>
<td>8710 ± 609a</td>
<td>n. d.</td>
<td>7886 ± 779a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>3786 ± 604a</td>
<td>n. d.</td>
<td>1753 ± 145a</td>
<td>11055 ± 504a</td>
<td>n. d.</td>
<td>8286 ± 672a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each value represents mean ± SEM count per min of triplicate cultures. When results were compared between without and with cytokines in each group, the p values were less than 0.05 (a), or less than 0.02 (b), or less than 0.01 (c), or less than 0.001 (d), respectively.; Exp.: experiment number; n. d.: not done.
than that of control PBMNC to 100 u/ml of IL-7 (32372 ± 3113 cpm, n = 19, Fig. 2). RA and control PBMNC showed a similar value of 3H-thymidine uptake when 500 u/ml of IL-7 or of IL-2 was added to the PBMNC culture that had been stimulated by a suboptimal dose of PHA (Fig. 2).

Response of RA mononuclear cells in synovial fluid and tissue to IL-7. Mononuclear cells from the synovial fluid (SF MNC) obtained from 6 RA patients were stimulated by either 100 or 500 u/ml of IL-2 (p < 0.05, Fig. 3) and 500 u/ml of IL-7 (p < 0.05, Fig. 3). The response of SF MNC to 500 u/ml of IL-2 (12848 ± 3395 cpm, n = 6) was higher than that obtained with the same concentration of IL-7 (2672 ± 849 cpm, n = 6, p < 0.05, Fig. 3). Mononuclear cells from the synovial tissue (ST MNC) obtained from 4 RA patients were also stimulated by 100 or 500 u/ml of IL-2 alone (1424 ± 123 cpm, 3349 ± 601 cpm, p < 0.05, respectively), compared with the spontaneous synthesis of DNA (533 ± 99 cpm) after 3 days' culture. However, IL-7 (618 ± 119 cpm for 100 u/ml, 892 ± 182 cpm for 500 u/ml, respectively) had no significant effect on ST MNC. The effect of IL-2 (500 u/ml) on ST MNC was stronger than that of IL-7 (p < 0.01, Fig. 3).

Response of RA MNC in synovial fluid and tissue to IL-7 and suboptimal dose of PHA. The response of SF MNC (7232 ± 1598 cpm, n = 6) to a suboptimal dose of PHA was lower than that of ST MNC (13060 ± 2423 cpm, n = 4) and RA PBMNC (25531 ± 3348 cpm, n = 19). However, the co-addition of IL-7 or IL-2 with PHA to the cultures further enhanced DNA synthesis of SF
Stimulation of RA Lymphocytes by IL-7

Natsumeda et al.: Stimulation by interleukin-7 of mononuclear cells in peripheral

GM-CSF (26). Other investigators have recognized that IL-7 provides strong co-stimulatory signal for the activation and proliferation of T cells by anti-CD3 monoclonal antibody or lectins, and that IL-7 has a mitogenic effect on human lymphocytes (8, 9). We also confirmed that IL-7 as well as IL-2 has a mitogenic effect on PBMC from healthy subjects (Table 1). However, the stimuli for human PBMC may be present in heterologous serum, i.e., fetal bovine serum contained in culture medium, and/or cells that express HLA-DR antigens that induce autologous mixed lymphocyte cultures (27). Thus, these cytokines may act as T cell growth factors rather than mitogens.

PBMC included different leukocyte subsets such as T, B, NK cells and monocytes. In order to know on which subsets IL-7 acts, we separated control PBMC into E-rosette forming cells (E-RFC, T cells) and non-ERFC. We observed that T cells were the ones that responded to IL-7 (data not shown), which is consistent with the findings of Londei et al. (8).

At a concentration of 500 u/ml, the stimulatory activity of IL-7 on RA PBMC was significantly lower than that of control PBMC (Fig. 1). There was, however, no difference in the activity of IL-2 between RA and control PBMC (Fig. 1). The degree of low responsiveness of RA PBMC to IL-7 was correlated neither with the value of CRP as a marker for joint inflammation nor with disease stage (data not shown). In contrast, the co-stimulatory activity of IL-7 given with a suboptimal dose of PHA on RA PBMC tended to be higher than on control PBMC. In addition, this activity of IL-7 on RA PBMC was significantly greater than that of IL-2 at a concentration of 100 u/ml (Fig. 2). Thus, RA PBMC showed a low response when stimulated with IL-7 alone and a high response when stimulated with IL-7 plus a suboptimal dose of PHA. Although the reason for this low or high responsiveness of RA PBMC to IL-7 is unknown, there might be an abnormal proportion of T-cell subsets responding to IL-7 or a natural aberration of the T-cell activation pathway. Welch et al. (7) reported that CD4+ and CD8+ T cells were equally stimulated by IL-7, and that memory T cells (CD45R+−) responded better to IL-7 than unprimed T cells (CD45R+). Emery et al. (21) reported an increased percentage of memory T cells in peripheral blood of RA patients. Considering those findings, one would expect that the responsiveness of RA PBMC to IL-7 would be high. However, the biphasic response of RA PBMC to IL-7 that was

Discussion

Resting T cells of humans are stimulated by specific antigens which bind to T cell receptor molecules, and proliferate more effectively on exposure to T cell growth factors including IL-1, IL-2, IL-4, TNF, IL-6 and
demonstrated in this study could not be explained by the abnormal percentage of T cell subsets in RA patients.

Combe et al. (28) previously reported that the concanavalin-A (Con-A)-stimulated lymphoblasts from RA PBMCN responded defectively to exogenous IL-2. In our study, the responsiveness of RA PBMCN to IL-2 did not differ from that of control PBMCN either with or without the stimulation of a suboptimal dose of PHA (Figs. 1, 2). This difference may be because PHA differs from Con-A with respect to the T-cell populations stimulated by PHA and the profile of cytokines produced, and because IL-2 and PHA were simultaneously added from the beginning of the culture in our study.

In contrast to the responsiveness of PBMCN to the cytokines, the responsiveness of SF MNC to IL-2 was significantly higher than that of IL-7 or of ST MNC to both cytokines (Fig. 3). These results could be explained by the report of Lemm et al. (29), who found that the expression of the IL-2 receptor was enhanced by SF MNC. In vivo activation of SF MNC occurred, and those cells used IL-2 rather than IL-7 for their proliferation in vitro.

Mononuclear cells from RA synovial fluid (SF MNC) showed a lower to PHA stimulation than either the PBMCN or ST MNC (Fig. 4), consistent with the findings of Corrigall et al. (30). The co-stimulatory activity of IL-7 on SF and ST MNC with suboptimal dose PHA was equivalent to that of IL-2 at the concentration of 100 u/ml (Fig. 4). It is possible that ST MNC from RA patients had already been activated in vitro, while PBMCN were resting. The difference between PBMCN and SF or ST MNC in their responsiveness to IL-7 or IL-2 with or without PHA was clearly shown when MNC from the three different compartments was obtained from the same individual (data not shown). The differing responses to IL-7 and IL-2 by MNC among the three different compartments may depend on the stage of in vivo cell activation.

The marked responsiveness of RA PBMCN to IL-7 following stimulation by a suboptimal dose of PHA suggests the existence of an abnormal T cell function in patients with RA, leading to an augmented immune response in the IL-7-dependent growth pathway when the T cells migrate to and are activated by antigens at the site of chronic joint inflammation.

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Stimulation of RA Lymphocytes by IL-7


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