Circulating and Ex Vivo Production of Pyrogenic Cytokines and Interleukin-1 Receptor Antagonist in 123 Patients with Fever of Unknown Origin

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Circulating and ex vivo production of interleukin (IL)-1β, tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-α, IL-6, and IL-1 receptor antagonist (ra) and the diagnostic utility of these cytokines were studied in 123 patients with fever of unknown origin (FUO). Diagnoses were infections, 28; neoplasms, 14; noninfectious inflammatory diseases (NIID), 32; miscellaneous diseases, 10; and none made, 39. IL-1β, IL-6, and IL-1ra concentrations were higher in patients with infections, neoplasms, and NIID than in healthy controls. Patients with infections had higher concentrations of TNF-α than controls. The ex vivo production of IL-1β and IL-1ra in all patients with FUO did not differ from that in controls; however, production of TNF-α was lower in patients with neoplasms and NIID, and IL-6 production was lower in patients with neoplasms. Thirty-five patients with fever did not have elevated cytokines. Although some significant differences were found among the diagnostic subgroups, there was wide variation. Thus, measurement of these cytokines does not aid in the diagnosis of FUO.

Materials and Methods

Patients. All 167 patients fulfilling the criteria for FUO were studied prospectively from January 1992 until January 1994 in all eight Dutch university hospitals. Blood samples for cytokine measurements were drawn from 123 patients, none of whom used cyclooxygenase inhibitors or corticosteroids.

Blood samples. Blood was drawn from the antecubital vein and collected into three 4-mL endotoxin-free EDTA tubes. Body temperature and time of venipuncture were noted. Most blood was collected between 10 A.M. and 2 P.M. by one investigator (E.M.H.A.D.K.) and processed as described elsewhere [4].

Cytokine measurements. IL-1β, TNF-α, and IL-1ra were measured by RIA as described [4]. Interassay variation of the RIAs is <15%, and intraassay variation is <10%. The sensitivity of the assay with a 100-μL sample was 20 pg/mL for IL-1ra, IL-1β, and TNF-α. The TNF-α assay measures both free and soluble receptor-bound TNF-α. IL-6 was measured by ELISA (CLB, Amsterdam) according to the manufacturer’s directions [5]. The lower limit of detection of the ELISA is 3 pg/mL. There is no interference of soluble (s) IL-6R. All samples from the same patient were analyzed in duplicate. Control values were determined from 20 healthy sedentary volunteers for IL-1β, IL-1ra, and TNF-α and from 50 healthy controls for IL-6. Median values (range) for circulating cytokines were as follows: IL-1β, 40 pg/mL (20–65); TNF-α, 92.5 pg/mL (65–120); IL-6, <3 pg/mL; and IL-1ra, 21.2 pg/mL (110–490). Medians (range) for cytokine ex vivo production were
Results

Patient characteristics. The median age for the 123 patients was 52 years (range, 16–87). There were 61 males and 62 females. Seven patients died of the underlying disease causing the fever.

Circulating cytokines (figure 1). Median circulating IL-1β concentrations for all patients was 55 pg/mL (range, 20–150). Median IL-1β concentrations for all 5 diagnostic groups and controls differed (P < .005). Patients with neoplasms, infections, and noninfectious inflammatory diseases (NIID) had significantly higher median circulating IL-1β than control subjects (P < .05), but there were no significant differences between diagnostic groups.

Median circulating TNF-α concentrations for all patients with FUO was 110 pg/mL (range, 20–510). There were no significant differences among the 6 groups. By multivariate analysis, males had lower ex vivo production than females.

Median circulating IL-6 concentration for all patients was 55 pg/mL (range, 20–150). There were no significant differences among the 6 groups. By multivariate analysis, males had lower ex vivo production than females.

Median circulating IL-1ra concentration in all patients with FUO was 320 pg/mL (range, 0–2100). Patients with neoplasms, infections, and NIID had significantly higher median circulating IL-1ra than controls (P < .01). There were no differences between diagnostic groups.

Median circulating TNF-α concentrations for all patients with FUO was 110 pg/mL (range, 20–510). Patients with infections had significantly higher circulating TNF-α than controls (P < .01). There were no differences between diagnostic groups.

Discussion

We believe this study is the first prospective investigation of the role of the putative pyrogenic cytokines in FUO. We measured concentrations and ex vivo production of cytokines and evaluated their diagnostic value. Taken together, no pyrogenic cytokines were responsible for the fever in many patients and we could not link certain pyrogenic cytokines with disease categories. Despite the wide scatter, patients with infections had high IL-1ra and TNF-α plasma levels, patients with neoplasms had high IL-1β and IL-1ra plasma levels and low ex vivo production of TNF-α, and patients with NIID had low production of TNF-α.
Figure 1. Circulating interleukin (IL)-1β, tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-α, IL-6, and IL-1ra (pg/mL) in 123 patients with FUO by diagnosis. Symbols indicate subgroups—bacterial infection, hematologic tumors, and vasculitis/mixed cryoglobulinemia (○); nonbacterial infection, solid tumors, and granulomatous diseases (●); connective tissue (+). Bars indicate medians. Nos. are median concentrations (pg/mL). * P < .05.

The possibility that cytokine patterns might be useful in the diagnostic work-up of a patient with FUO has been suggested. Patients with viral meningitis have lower concentrations of TNF-α in cerebrospinal fluid than do patients with bacterial meningitis [6]. Similarly, patients with granulocytopenia and proven bacterial infections have higher IL-6 concentrations than patients with FUO [7]. Appreciable concentrations of IL-1β and TNF-α have been found in patients with meningococcal disease [8] but not in patients with typhoid fever [9]. Variation in cytokine levels has been observed in other diseases, including chronic inflammatory bowel disease [10], rheumatoid arthritis [11], and Hodgkin’s disease [12]. In our series of patients with FUO, despite significant differences in concentrations and ex vivo production capacity of cytokines and inhibitors between subgroups, these measurements did not aid in the diagnostic process. Pathophysiologic interpretation of the cytokine patterns found is difficult because of the degree of variation between patients with the same disease. It may well be that factors such as genetic background and nutritional status are predominant determinants in individual cytokine responses.

IL-1β, TNF-α, and IL-6 are thought to be the major endogenous pyrogens. Despite long-standing fever in all patients and a febrile state in most, we were unable to detect elevated concentrations of pyrogenic cytokines in all patients. There are a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon. Since the pyrogenic cytokines have a short half-life, it is possible that even if the set point in the hypothalamus had become elevated, the molecules had disappeared by the time of sampling. Alternatively, the set point may be raised by cytokines that are produced at the level of the organum vasculosum of the lamina terminalis [2]. These cytokines would then be induced by a circulating exogenous pyrogen or some endogenous molecule. Finally, there is the possibility that a major pyrogenic cytokine has yet to be identified.

Despite reports of increased concentrations of TNF-α in patients with fatal infection [13], TNF-α, IL-1β, and IL-6 concentrations were similar in patients who died of febrile illness
Figure 2. Ex vivo production of interleukin (IL)-1β, tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-α, IL-6, and IL-1ra (ng/mL) in 123 patients with FUO by diagnosis. Symbols indicate subgroups—bacterial infection, hematologic tumors, and vasculitis/mixed cryoglobulinemia (O); nonbacterial infection, solid tumors, and granulomatous diseases (●); connective tissue (+). Bars indicate medians. Nos. are median concentrations (pg/mL). * P < .05.

and in survivors. However, the median concentration of the antiinflammatory cytokine IL-1ra in those who died was higher than in surviving patients, pointing to greater cytokine activation in the former group.

In conclusion, this prospective study shows subtle changes in circulating concentrations and in ex vivo production of cytokines associated with FUO, but the measurements did not help in the diagnostic process of the intriguing clinical problem of FUO.

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References

Diagnosis of Measles with an IgM Capture EIA: The Optimal Timing of Specimen Collection after Rash Onset

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The optimal timing for collection of a single serum specimen to diagnose measles by using a monoclonal antibody-capture EIA was evaluated. Results of testing paired serum samples from 166 measles cases with at least 1 IgM-positive specimen were analyzed. Among persons whose second samples were IgM-positive, the seropositivity rate for first samples was 77% when collected within 72 h and 100% when collected 4–11 days after rash onset. Among unvaccinated persons whose first samples were IgM-positive, the rate for IgM positivity of second specimens declined from 100% at 4 days to 94% at 4 weeks after rash onset, then declined further to 63% at 5 weeks. Some previously vaccinated persons became IgM-negative during the third week after rash onset. In general, a single serum specimen collected between 72 h and 4 weeks after rash onset can be used to diagnose most cases of measles with an IgM capture EIA.

Measles continues to be a major health problem worldwide, with ~45 million cases globally each year [1]. The Pan American Health Organization is working toward the elimination of measles from Central and South America [2]. These elimination efforts have created renewed interest in sensitive and specific diagnostic assays that can be used by countries throughout the world to diagnose measles infections.

Currently, many different serologic techniques are used to diagnose measles; these are based on detecting either IgM or IgG antibodies [3, 4]. Serologic assays that detect IgG antibodies, including hemagglutination inhibition, RIA, plaque reduction neutralization, and microneutralization, have the disadvantage of requiring acute- and convalescent-phase specimens to measure a rise in IgG antibodies. Assays that detect IgM antibodies, such as RIAs and EIAs, often can be used to diagnose measles by testing only a single serum specimen. RIAs are reliable but have the disadvantage of requiring adequate facilities to store, use, and dispose of radioactive material. Most commercially available EIA kits use an indirect format. Although this format is relatively simple to use, its increased risk of false-positive results [5] and lower sensitivity can lead to misclassification of individual cases and outbreaks of measles.