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Involvement of CD14 and Toll-Like Receptors in Activation of Human Monocytes by Aspergillus fumigatus Hyphae

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Invasive fungal infections represent an increasing problem associated with high mortality. The present study was undertaken to identify leukocyte subsets that are activated by hyphal fragments in a whole-human-blood model, as well as to examine the involvement of CD14 and Toll-like receptors (TLRs) in activation of monocytes by hyphae. Incubation of whole human blood with hyphal fragments from Aspergillus fumigatus and Scedosporium prolificans for 6 h caused induction of mRNAs for tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF-α), interleukin-1β (IL-1β), and IL-6 in T cells, B cells, and monocytes, but not in granulocytes, as analyzed by reverse transcription-PCR with mRNA isolated from very pure populations of these leukocyte subsets. In primary adherent human monocytes, induction of TNF-α by hyphal fragments was dependent on plasma. Heat treatment of plasma at 56°C for 30 min strongly reduced the ability of plasma to prime for activation. Pretreatment of human monocytes with different concentrations (1, 3, and 10 μg/ml) of monoclonal antibody (MAb) HTA125 (anti-TLR4) or MAb 18D11 (anti-CD14) for 30 min inhibited the release of TNF-α induced by hyphal fragments in a dose-dependent manner. Maximal inhibitions of 35 and 70% were obtained with 10 μg of HTA125 and 18D11 per ml, respectively. In contrast, pretreatment with MAb TL2.1 (anti-TLR2) did not affect signaling induced by hyphae. Pretreatment with the lipid A antagonist B975 blocked lipopolysaccharide signaling but did not inhibit TNF-α production induced by hyphal fragments. Our results suggest that T cells, B cells, and monocytes are involved in the innate immune response to invasive fungal pathogens and that serum components are relevant for activation of monocytes by hyphae. CD14 and TLR4 may be involved in signaling of Aspergillus hyphae in monocytes, but further studies to elucidate this issue are warranted.

Sepsis caused by fungal infections is a major and increasing problem that is responsible for high rates of morbidity and mortality (6, 19, 37). As the number of immunocompromised patients has increased, invasive aspergillosis has become the second most common opportunistic fungal infection (1, 11). The major host defense against invasive aspergillosis has been shown to be mediated by cells of the innate immune system. Macrophages in the lung ingest inhaled airborne Aspergillus conidia and thereby inhibit their intracellular germination (16, 31, 36). In addition, polymorphonuclear leukocytes, as well as monocytes, cause damage to escaping conidia and hyphae by secretion of oxidative metabolites and nonoxidative compounds, thereby preventing establishment of invasive infections (7, 16, 31).

The role of cytokines in the host response to Aspergillus has just recently begun to be elucidated (3, 4, 28–30). It was recently demonstrated that killed hyphal fragments and, to a lesser degree, conidia from Aspergillus fumigatus provoke an inflammatory response in whole human blood (A. Warris, J. E. Wang, P. E. Verweij, P. Gaustad, and T. G. Abrahamsen, unpublished data), as seen by release of the proinflammatory cytokines tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF-α) and interleukin-6 (IL-6). The anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10 was not significantly induced by any of the fungal structures. The chain of events that leads to activation of human leukocytes by fungal structures is still elusive.

The Toll protein in Drosophila was recently demonstrated as being involved in dorsoventral patterning in embryonic development (2), as well as mediating antifungal defense in the adult fly (15). Mammalian homologues of Toll, termed Toll-like receptors (TLRs), have been cloned (22), and TLRs are attributed key roles in the induction of immunity (20, 21). Today, only two of these receptors have any known ligands. TLR4 has been shown to mediate cell signaling by lipopolysaccharide (LPS) (27, 34), whereas TLR2 has been implicated in the response to diverse bacterial products (9, 17). Despite their role in antifungal defense in the fly, the involvement of TLRs in the host response to fungal pathogens in mammals has not previously been studied.

The present study examined the influence of blockade of CD14, TLR2, and TLR4 with specific monoclonal antibodies (MAbs) on activation of human monocytes by hyphal fragments. The requirement of plasma for cell activation by hyphae was also studied. Finally, we have identified the leukocyte subsets responsible for cytokine release in whole blood stimulated with hyphal fragments from A. fumigatus or Scedosporium prolificans.
Reagents and antibodies. MAb TL2.1 was generated as previously described (9). MAb HTA125 was a kind gift from Kensuke Miyake (Saga Medical School, Saga, Japan) (32). A MAb against CD14 (18D11) and a negative control antibody (immunoglobulin G1 [IgG1]) were purchased from Dianova (Hamburg, Germany). B975 is a synthetic analogue of Rhodobacter capsulatus lipopolysaccharide A, provided by Rhodobacter capsulatus (S. prolificans) (lanes 9 to 12). Monocytes (CD14+), granulocytes (CD15+), T cells (CD3+), and B cells (CD19+) were isolated by immunomagnetic separation. mRNA from these cells was isolated by oligo(dT)25-coated magnetic beads, reverse transcribed, and analyzed for transcripts encoding TNF-α (A [443 bp]), IL-1β (B [802 bp]), IL-6 (C [628 bp]), and β-actin (D [660 bp]) by PCR. Unstim., unstimulated.

RT and PCR were performed in a PCR Cycler (GeneAmp 9600; Perkin-Elmer Cetus Corp., Norwalk, Conn.). Synthesis of cDNA was performed by RT directly on the mRNA attached to the oligo(dT)25 beads by using a GeneAmp RNA PCR kit (Perkin-Elmer). Subsequently, the cDNA pool was analyzed by PCR for cDNA specific for TNF-α, IL-6, and β-actin with specific primers as previously described (33).

Plasma cytokine analysis. At the indicated times, plasma was removed from the blood by centrifugation at 7,000 × g for 2 min and stored at −20°C for later analyses by enzyme immunoassay (EIA) specific for TNF-α according to protocols provided by the manufacturer (CLB, Amsterdam, The Netherlands). The detection limit was 1 pg/ml.

Statistical evaluation. Data are presented as means ± standard errors. Student’s t test or analysis of variance with Tukey’s post hoc assessment was used to evaluate the statistical significance of the results. Differences with P values of <0.05 were considered significant.

RESULTS

Cytokine mRNAs in leukocyte subsets. Figure 1 shows accumulation of mRNAs for TNF-α (A), IL-1β (B), IL-6 (C), and β-actin (D) in pure populations of leukocyte subsets isolated after stimulation of whole human blood with hyphal fragments from A. fumigatus or S. prolificans, as detected by RT-PCR. Figure 1A shows that TNF-α mRNA was detected in all leukocyte subsets in unstimulated blood (lanes 1 to 4). Stimulation with hyphal fragments from A. fumigatus or S. prolificans caused enhanced levels of TNF-α mRNA in monocytes (lanes 5 and 9), T cells (lanes 7 and 11), and B cells (lanes 8 and 12), but not in granulocytes (lanes 6 and 10). Neither IL-1β mRNA (Fig. 1B) nor IL-6 mRNA (Fig. 1C) was detected in leukocytes isolated from unstimulated blood (lanes 1 to 4). In contrast, in blood treated with hyphae from A. fumigatus or S. prolificans, IL-1β mRNA was strongly induced in monocytes (lanes 5 and 9). Low levels of IL-1β were also detected in granulocytes (lanes 6 and 10), T cells (lanes 7 and 11), and B cells (lanes 8 and 12). Figure 1C shows that, similar to TNF-α, IL-6 mRNA was induced in monocytes (lanes 5 and 9), T cells (lanes 7 and 11), and B cells (lanes 8 and 12), but not in granulocytes (lanes 6 and 10).

Dependency on plasma for stimulation of human monocytes by hyphal fragments. Figure 2A shows that hyphal fragments...
FIG. 2. Dependency on plasma for stimulation of TNF-α release by human monocytes (four donors) by hyphal fragments from *A. fumigatus*. (A) Human monocytes isolated from whole blood were spiked with autologous plasma (0, 1, 5, or 10%) and cultured for 8 h in the absence or presence of hyphal fragments. (B) Monocytes were stimulated with hyphal fragments in the presence of 5% untreated plasma or 5% plasma that had been heat treated at 56°C for 30 min. Supernatants were subsequently analyzed for TNF-α by EIA. Data are means ± standard errors of four experiments.

**DISCUSSION**

This is the first study of the involvement of TLRs in the host response to filamentous fungal pathogens. The partial inhibition of hypha-induced activation observed with antibodies against TLR4 and CD14 suggests that several receptors may be involved, of which TLR4 and CD14 are two candidates. A receptor complex consisting of TLR4, CD14, and MD-2 mediates LPS signaling (27, 34). This may suggest that hyphae activate cells through mechanisms partly similar to those of LPS. Compared with control antibody, a weak inhibition was also observed with TL2.1 (anti-TLR2), and we cannot rule out a role for TLR2 in hyphal signaling. Another interpretation of these results is that different TLRs are actually involved. The weak and partial inhibition of monocyte activation by anti-TCR2 and anti-TLR4 antibodies may be attributed to cross-reactivities with yet uncharacterized TLRs. The immunostimulatory molecule(s) in the hyphal fragments that interacts with pathogen recognition receptors on monocytes is not known. The hyphal cell wall consists of β-glucan and galactomannan, which have immunogenic properties (12). An undefined "endo toxin" derived from *A. fumigatus* mycelia that is toxic in animal models of aspergillosis has also been described (5). The latter study supports the contention that hyphae may activate LPS signaling pathways. However, the failure of a lipid A antagonist to interfere with hyphal stimulation demonstrates that hyphae activate cells differently from LPS. More studies are clearly warranted to elucidate the involvement of CD14 and TLRs in recognition and signaling of hyphae in vitro and in vivo, as well as the roles of these receptors during invasive fungal infections.

We observed an absolute requirement of serum for activation of human monocytes by hyphae. Plasma contains secreted pathogen recognition receptors such as LPS-binding protein (LBP), soluble CD14 (sCD14), and mannann-binding lectin (reviewed in reference 20). Mannann-binding lectin opsonizes
mamman for presentation to signaling receptors (8, 10). Binding of microbial ligand to mannan-binding lectin results in an amplified cascade of complement activation (8), and Aspergillus hyphae have indeed been demonstrated to activate complement via both the alternative and classical pathways in human serum (13, 14). A role for mannan-binding lectin in the innate response to fungal infections, however, has not yet been demonstrated (20). In support of the contention that activation of leukocytes is mediated by complement, inactivation of complement by heat treatment strongly attenuated activation in the present study. Hence, studies of complement receptor involvement in activation of monocytes by hyphae are warranted. Inactivation of complement by heat treatment did not result in complete loss of leukocyte activation, which suggests that other factors in the plasma, such as LBP and sCD14, also may be involved in cellular activation by hyphae. Alternatively, the residual activation obtained by heat-treated plasma may also be due to cross-linking of Fc receptors by natural antibodies to hyphae. Further studies are clearly needed to dissect the basis for the serum requirements observed in the present study.

This is the first report on the induction by hyphae of mRNAs for TNF-α, IL-1β, and IL-6 in leukocytes. The ability of hyphae to induce cytokine release has been previously observed by us and others (35; Warris et al., unpublished). That cytokine mRNAs were increased in T cells, B cells, and monocytes in blood stimulated with hyphal fragments suggests that these leukocyte subsets contribute to the cytokine production during invasive fungal infection. This notion is supported by the fact that a similar pattern was seen with hyphal fragments isolated from two different fungal pathogens. Furthermore, the fact that hyphal fragments induce cytokine production in several leukocyte subsets supports the contention that cytokines play important roles in the host’s defense against fungal pathogens (3, 4, 28–30). The failure of hyphal fragments to induce cytokine mRNA production in granulocytes is somewhat surprising. Polymorphonuclear leukocytes, as well as circulating monocytes, are thought to represent the major host defense against invasive fungal infections, by secretion of microbicidal compounds (7, 16, 31). However, hyphal structures are too large to be phagocytosed and thus have to be attacked extra-cellularly. This calls upon other cell types, such as B cells and T cells. Whether NK cells may also play a role in this respect is not known. The cytokine pattern induced by hyphae in the present study is partly different from what has been previously reported with bacterial components, in which only T cells and monocytes were activated (39). A role for lymphocytes in innate immune responses has gained new support due to the recent discovery that members of the TLR family are expressed on mammalian T cells (18, 23) and B cells (25).

Our data suggest that T cells, B cells, and monocytes are involved in the innate host response to invasive fungal infections and that serum components are relevant for activation of monocytes by hyphae. CD14 and TLR4 may be involved in signaling of Aspergillus hyphae in monocytes, but further studies are warranted to elucidate this issue.

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