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In vitro production of IL1β, IL1α, TNF and IL2 in healthy subjects: distribution, effect of cyclooxygenase inhibition and evidence of independent gene regulation*

Numerous studies have reported altered in vitro cytokine production in various diseases. In the present study we used specific immunoassays to quantitate production of interleukin 1β (IL 1β), IL 1α, tumor necrosis factor (TNF) and IL 2 from human peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMC). The distribution of cell-associated and secreted cytokines was studied in PBMC of 21 individuals; in response to lipopolysaccharide (LPS) the proportion of cell-associated IL 1β ranged from 13% to 56%, for IL 1α 29% to 98%, and for TNF 2% to 17%. In a larger cohort of 32 subjects, the total amount of immunoreactive cytokines produced in response to LPS or phytohemagglutinin was normally distributed within the study group. Mean production of IL 1α in response to LPS was 10.1 ng/ml and exceeded production of IL 1β (5.6 ng/ml) and TNF (2.2 ng/ml). The distribution pattern was characterized by high intersubject variability extending over two orders of magnitude and the presence of high and low “producers”. Production of IL 1α and IL 1β correlated (R = 0.69). In contrast, production of IL 1β did not correlate with production of TNF or IL 2.

2.1 Study population

The study was approved by the Human Investigation Review Committee of the New England Medical Center Hospitals. Healthy volunteers were recruited from laboratory and hospital personnel. Each volunteer completed a standardized questionnaire on medical history, medication, smoking habits and diet. Blood was obtained during the morning hours.

2.2 In vitro PBMC stimulation

Twenty milliliters of venous blood was drawn into heparinized (20 U/ml) syringes. The PBMC fraction was obtained...
by centrifugation of diluted blood (1 part blood to 2 parts pyrogen-free normal saline) over Ficoll-Hypaque (Ficoll
Type 400; Sigma, St. Louis, MO; and Hypaque-M, 90%;
Winthrop-Breon Lab., New York, NY) which was diluted
in ultrapure water. PBMC were washed twice in 0.15 M
NaCl and slides were prepared by cytocentrifugation. One
hundred cell differential counts were performed in a blind
fashion on coded slides after staining with Wright's stain. In
addition, some PBMC preparations were stained for non-
specific esterase (Sigma) and 200 cells were counted.
RPMI 1640 culture medium (Whittaker M.A. Bioproducts,
Walkersville, MD), supplemented with 2 mM L-glutamine,
100 U/ml penicillin and 100 μg/ml streptomycin, was ultra-
filtered (hollow fiber filter U2000; Gambro, Hechingen,
FRG) in order to remove LPS and other microbial products
as previously described [8]. The Ficoll-Hypaque and RPMI
media were LPS negative by the Limulus amebocyte lysate
assay with a detection limit of 20 pg/ml (Associates of Cape
Cod, Woods Hole, MA). PBMC were suspended at
5 × 10⁶/ml in RPMI with 2% heat-inactivated human serum
from a single AB donor, and 100 μl was aliquoted in each
well of 96-well flat-bottom microtiter plates. An equal
volume of either RPMI (control) or RPMI containing
various stimulants was then added. The cells were stimulated
with LPS (from E. coli O55:B5; Sigma) or with
PHA-P (Difco, Detroit, MI) at indicated concentrations.
LPS concentrations ranging between 0.5 and 10 ng/ml were
chosen because they more closely approximate clinical
situations than concentrations up to 50 μg/ml used in some
other studies. Stimulus aliquots were stored at 1 μg/ml
stock concentration for LPS and at 600 μg/ml for PHA, and
were diluted in RPMI immediately before use. All stimuli
were added to duplicate wells. In part of the study cells were
incubated with or without 1 μg/ml indomethacin. Crystal-
line indomethacin (Sigma) was diluted in 95% ethanol at
100 mg/ml. This stock solution was diluted with RPMI to
2 mg/ml and stored in aliquots at -70°C. The aliquots were
diluted 1000-fold immediately before use.

After 24 h at 37°C in 5% CO₂, SN in the wells were
replaced by medium for some of the subjects. The micro-
titer plates containing the cells were frozen at -70°C. At
the end of each study all plates were simultaneously thawed
and exposed to two more freeze-thaw cycles to lyse the
cells. The contents of duplicate wells, consisting of cell
lysates and SN, were pooled, spun at 13 000 × g for 1 min
and the SN was refrozen at -70°C. Approximately one
month later, the samples were diluted in 0.01 M phosphate-
buffered saline containing 0.25% BSA and 0.05% sodium
azide (BSA buffer) for cytokine assays. Dilutions of the cell
SN or lysates were adjusted to obtain measurements in the
sensitive range of the standard curves of each cytokine
assay.

2.3 Cytokine determinations

IL1β [9, 10], IL1α and TNF [12] were determined by
specific RIA as previously described. These RIA employ
polyclonal antisera raised in rabbits against human recom-
binant IL1β, IL1α or TNF. Briefly, samples were incubated
with specific antibody overnight, and radiiodinated cyto-
kine tracer was added and allowed to equilibrate during
another overnight incubation. Finally, bound radioactivity
was precipitated by sheep anti-rabbit IgG antiserum and
the antibody-antigen complexes were precipitated by cen-
trifugation. Radioactivity in the pellet was determined in a
gamma counter and expressed as percent binding of a zero
standard. Cytokine concentration was read from a standard
curve obtained with serial dilutions of known standards.
Recombinant cytokines for iodination and standard curves
were kindly provided by Dr. Alan Shaw, Glaxo Institute of
Molecular Biology, Geneva, Switzerland. IL2 was deter-
mained by ELISA (Genzyme Corp., Boston, MA). Statis-
tical analysis was performed using Stat-View software
(ABacus Concepts Inc., Calabasas, CA) on a Macintosh SE
computer (Apple Computer Inc, Cupertino, CA) and on a
Clinfo software system (Bolt, Beranek and Newman,
Cambridge, MA).

3 Results

3.1 Cell-associated vs. secreted cytokine

Cytokine levels were quantified separately in the cell-
associated and secreted compartments. PBMC from 21
donors were stimulated with 10 ng/ml of LPS for 24 h. SN
was withdrawn and replaced with medium. Cells in the
medium were lysed by three freeze-thaw cycles. Cytokine
concentrations were determined by RIA in the SN (se-
creted compartment) and in the lysate (cell-associated
compartment) (Fig. 1). IL1α remains mostly cell asso-
ciated (median 72%), slightly more IL1β is secreted than
remains cell associated (median 39%) and very little TNF
remains cell associated (median 10%). These results con-
firm previous studies on the distribution of cytokines
between the cell-associated and the secreted compartments
[13, 14]. Furthermore, for a given cytokine there is wide
interindividual variation in the amount of cell-associated
cytokine, ranging from 13% to 56% for IL1β, from 29% to
98% for IL1α and from 2% to 17% for TNF.

Because of the considerable proportion of cell-associated
cytokine, the differences in this proportion for different
cytokines and the wide interindividual variation, determi-
ination of the combined cell-associated and secreted com-

Figure 1. Relative proportion of cell-associated vs. total cytokine
production. PBMC from 21 subjects were stimulated with 10 ng/ml
of LPS. Cytokine concentrations were determined by RIA in the
SN (secreted) and the lysate (cell associated). Horizontal bars
indicate the mean proportion of cell-associated compartment for
each cytokine. IL1α concentrations were available for 18 of the 21
subjects.
3.2 Normal distribution of cytokine production

Of the group of 44 volunteers, 32 of the subjects indicated that they had not taken any medication for at least 1 week, whereas 12 volunteers had taken cyclooxygenase inhibitors during the past week (5 subjects Aspirin, 5 subjects Ibuprofen, 2 subjects Naproxen). Age and sex distribution of the two cohorts are summarized in Table 1. The mean response to 0.5 ng/ml of LPS was 10.1 ng/ml of IL1α, 5.6 ng/ml of IL1β and 2.2 ng/ml of TNF (Table 2) for PBMC from the study cohort without medication. Previous studies have shown that 0.5 ng/ml of LPS does not stimulate IL2 production from PBMC in vitro. Therefore, we used PHA as a stimulus for IL2 production. In vitro production of IL2 in response to 30 μg/ml of PHA averaged 9.4 ng/ml. The distribution of in vitro cytokine production in this study group is depicted in Fig. 2. There was a normal distribution for all four cytokines as calculated by the Wilk-Shapiro test. The largest SD (6.9 ng/ml) was seen for IL2 production, indicating high intersubject variability.

3.3 Covariation of cytokines

Fig. 2 shows that cytokine production from the cells of different donors vary up to two orders of magnitude. Correlation analysis was next performed to determine whether an individual with high production of one cytokine also exhibits high production of other cytokines in response to a given stimulus. Production of IL1α and TNF using LPS as a stimulus was compared. Fig. 3A depicts the production of TNF vs. the production of IL1β. Each square represents the data obtained from a single individual’s PBMC culture stimulated with 0.5 ng/ml of LPS. The quadrants of the graph, defined by the median production of each cytokine, distribute the subjects according to their cytokine response: low TNF and low IL1β producers, high TNF and high IL1β producers, and the two groups with mixed responses. The subjects are equally distributed in the four quadrants, indicating independent variation of production. This is reflected by a low correlation coefficient of $R = 0.18$. The correlation of IL1α to TNF production is also low ($R = 0.44$; data not shown).

In contrast, there is a high correlation of IL1β production with production of IL1α. The majority of subjects fall into the group of low IL1α and low IL1β producers or high IL1α and high IL1β producers (Fig. 3B). The correlation coefficient is $R = 0.69$. Using 30 μg/ml of PHA as a stimulus, we found no correlation between production of IL2 and IL1β ($R = -0.10$) or IL2 and TNF ($R = -0.27$) measured in the same PBMC samples.

3.4 Comparison of in vitro cytokine production with the proportion of monocytes in the population of PBMC

For the group of 32 subjects the mean percentage of monocytes in the PBMC cultures was 19.7% (± 10.5% SD) as determined morphologically. There was no correlation between the percentage of monocytes in the PBMC population and the amount of LPS-induced IL1β (correlation coefficient $R = 0.08$), IL1α ($R = 0.15$) or TNF ($R = 0.07$) produced. Correlation of IL1β production and

---

**Table 1.** Characteristics of study cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medicationa)</th>
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<td>Range</td>
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</table>

a) Cyclooxygenase inhibitors.

**Table 2.** Distribution of cytokine production for 32 subjects without medicationa)

<table>
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<th>Cytokine:</th>
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<th>IL1α</th>
<th>TNF</th>
<th>IL2</th>
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<td>Mean cytokine production</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
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<td>±4.7</td>
<td>±1.4</td>
<td>±6.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentile (10th-90th)b)</td>
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<td>(3.6-16.1)</td>
<td>(0.8-4.0)</td>
<td>(3.7-17.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a) Calculated for the data illustrated in Fig. 2.

b) Tenth percentile indicates concentrations below which samples from 10% of the subjects fall. Ninetieth percentile indicates concentration below which samples from 90% of the subjects fall. Data are not available for IL1α production in 1 and for IL2 production in 3 of the 32 subjects.

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**Figure 2.** Interindividual distribution of cytokine production. PBMC from 32 subjects were stimulated with 0.5 ng/ml LPS for induction of IL1β, IL1α and TNF, and with 30 μg/ml PHA for induction of IL2. Total (cell-associated plus secreted) cytokine was determined by RIA or ELISA.
Figure 3. Covariation of IL 1β, IL 1α and TNF production. (A) Concentration of TNF vs. concentration of IL 1β is plotted for respective subjects (correlation coefficient \( R = 0.18 \)). (B) Concentration of IL 1α vs. concentration of IL 1β (\( R = 0.69 \)). PBMC from 32 subjects were stimulated with 0.5 ng/ml LPS, and total production of IL 1β, IL 1α and TNF was assayed by RIA. Each square represents one subject. The vertical lines indicate the median concentration for IL 1β (5.9 ng/ml); the horizontal lines indicate the median concentrations of TNF (1.9 ng/ml) and of IL 1α (10.5 ng/ml). (A) has 31 entries since the sample from one of the subjects was not assayed for IL 1α.

Figure 4. Production of IL 1β vs. proportion of esterase-positive cells in the PBMC population. PBMC from seven subjects were stimulated with 5 ng/ml of LPS on two different days two days apart. Total (associated plus secreted) cytokine was determined by RIA. (A) Lack of correlation between production of IL 1β and proportion of esterase-positive cells for different individuals. Production of IL 1β (mean of two different days) is plotted vs. mean proportion of esterase-positive cells. (B) Intraindividual reproducibility of absolute production of IL 1β determined on two different days.

proportion of esterase-positive cells in the PBMC population was studied in a group of 7 subjects. In this group PBMC were isolated and stimulated on two different days, two days apart for each individual. There was no correlation (\( R = 0.09 \)) between the mean esterase-positive cell proportion and mean production of IL 1β, both determined as the mean of two different days (Fig. 4A). This lack of correlation is not due to lack of precision in determination of either cytokine concentration or esterase-positive cell proportion, since both these values are reproducible for a given subject on two different days (\( R = 0.87 \) for IL 1β data in Fig. 4B; \( R = 0.65 \) for esterase-positive cell proportion, data not in figure).

Furthermore, we examined whether for a given individual the day to day variation of in vitro IL 1β production correlated with day-to-day variation in the proportion of esterase-positive cells in the PBMC population (intraindividual correlation). If the absolute concentration of IL 1β is corrected for the proportion of esterase-positive cells (ng IL 1β per \( 2.5 \times 10^6 \) esterase-positive cells), the day-to-day reproducibility is reduced (\( R = 0.59 \)) when compared to the day-to-day reproducibility of either absolute IL 1β concentration (\( R = 0.87 \), panel B) or esterase-positive cell proportion (\( R = 0.65 \)). Thus, we found absolute production of IL 1β (e.g. per \( 2.5 \times 10^6 \) PBMC) to be the parameter that is the most reproducible in a given individual. This is probably due to the fact that mononuclear cells other than monocytes, e.g. lymphocytes, make IL 1 and TNF [13] and affect each other’s ability to synthesize these cytokines.

3.5 Effect of cyclooxygenase inhibition in vitro

Addition of indomethacin to the cultures increased IL 1β production in the study group without medication by an average of 27%. In this cohort of subjects, this increase did not reach significance (\( p = 0.055 \) by one-tailed paired
Independent production of IL1, IL2 and TNF

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The correlation coefficient is 0.27.

absence of indomethacin (x-axis). Each square represents one
determined by RIA. Production of IL1β in the presence of 1 µg/ml
with 0.5 ng/ml LPS in the presence or absence of 1 µg/ml
addition of indomethacin. PBMC from 32 donors were stimulated
observed intersubject variability in cytokine production is
cydooxygenase was inhibited by indomethacin. Thus, the
cydooxygenase products which suppress production of

Figure 5. Correlation of IL1β production in vitro with and without
addition of indomethacin. PBMC from 32 donors were stimulated
with 0.5 ng/ml LPS in the presence or absence of 1 µg/ml
indomethacin. Total (cell-associated plus secreted) IL1β was
determined by RIA. Production of IL1β in the presence of 1 µg/ml
indomethacin (y-axis) is plotted vs. production of IL1β in the
absence of indomethacin (x-axis). Each square represents one
individual. The (diagonal) regression line is calculated by the least
square method. The correlation coefficient is R = 0.83. Addition of
indomethacin increases LPS-induced IL1β production by a mean of

Student's t-test). However, increased production of IL1β by PBMC in the presence of indomethacin did show a high
degree of correlation (R = 0.83) when compared the production
from PBMC cultured without indomethacin (Fig. 5). Low production of IL1β in certain individuals could have been due to the effect of high levels of
cyclooxygenase products which suppress production of
IL1β in vitro at the level of translation [15]. As apparent from Fig. 5 and reflected in the high correlation coefficient, however, "low producers" for IL1β production without the
addition of indomethacin were also "low producers" when cyclooxygenase was inhibited by indomethacin. Thus, the observed intersubject variability in cytokine production is not due to differences in cyclooxygenase products. Rather,

3.6 Effect on cyclooxygenase inhibition in vivo

Production of IL1β was significantly increased in the group who had taken a cyclooxygenase inhibitor (8.3 ng/ml; n = 12) as compared the the group without medication (5.7 ng/ml; n = 32, p = 0.048 by one-tailed unpaired Student’s t-test; Fig. 6). When PBMC from both groups were stimulated in the presence of indomethacin, the production of IL1β was increased in the group without medication but was statistically unchanged in the group taking cyclooxygenase inhibitors.

4 Discussion

In the present study we measured the total synthesis of
IL1β, IL1α, TNF and IL2 by PBMC stimulated in vitro. We used this procedure to define the range and distribution pattern for the production of these cytokines in a cohort of healthy volunteers. We measured total (cell-associated plus secreted) cytokine concentrations in order to assess overall cytokine synthesis during 24 h, independent of release kinetics. This approximates the in vivo condition since both IL1 [16] and TNF [17] may be cell associated and exhibit biological activity in that compartment. Furthermore, we showed that the proportion of cell-associated vs. secreted cytokine differs for the two forms of IL1 and TNF and, moreover, exhibits wide intr indivisible variation. This latter finding is an important consideration in performing gene linkage studies in health or disease.

We chose to stimulate the entire population of PBMC rather than enriched subpopulations. Although most of the IL1 and TNF are produced by monocytes, it has been shown that T cells [18], B cells [19] and NK cells [13, 20] also synthesize IL1 and TNF. Thus, we believe that for the purpose of this study the response of the whole PBMC population is biologically more relevant than that of enriched subpopulations. Mononuclear cells other than monocytes may contribute to IL1 and TNF production through cell contact or through formation of other cytokines, such as IFN-γ. We demonstrate that the proportion of monocytes and production of IL1β do not correlate between individuals. For a given individual, correction of IL1β production for the monocyte proportion in the population of stimulated PBMC actually reduces the reproducibility of this parameter.

During enrichment procedures variability due to differences in monocyte adherence and recovery may interfere. Monocyte adherence can be altered in disease [21] and in subjects taking medication with cyclooxygenase inhibitory activity [22]. Finally, stimulating the whole PBMC population allows measurement of cytokines originating predominantly from monocytes (IL1β, IL1α and TNF) or lymphocytes (IL2 and TNF) in the same sample employing the same stimulus. This allowed us to examine whether IL1 or TNF production correlated with IL2 production in the samples stimulated with PHA.

Figure 6. Effect of cyclooxygenase inhibition in vivo and in vitro
on LPS-induced IL1β production. PBMC from 44 donors were stimulated with 0.5 ng/ml LPS with or without addition of 1 µg/ml
indomethacin. The bars to the left compare IL1β production in the
absence of in vitro indomethacin between the groups without
(n = 32) or with (n = 12) medication (cyclooxygenase inhibitors).
The bars to the right compare production of IL1β from the same
groups when stimulated in the presence of in vitro indomethacin.
Error bars indicate standard error of the mean. * Denotes
significant difference between the two subject groups by non-
paired, one-tailed Student’s t-test.
We report here that 0.5 ng/ml of LPS stimulated more IL 1α than IL 1β or TNF (IL 1α > IL 1β > TNF). This is somewhat surprising given the fact that transcription of IL 1β in PBMC exceeds that of IL 1α by 20- to 50-fold [23]. Since our results are based on measuring immunoreactive IL 1α and IL 1β, this discrepancy cannot be explained by inhibitors which may confound bioassays. The lower level of IL 1β in response to Fig. 4A is probably not a reflection of preferential degradation during incubation and freeze thawing since, in another study using a different stimulus (heat-killed S. epidermidis), we found production of IL 1β to exceed production of IL 1α [10].

There appears to exist a normal distribution for cytokine production in vitro, as judged from the pattern in Fig. 2 and as calculated by the Wilk-Shapiro test. Normal distribution of a parameter is a prerequisite for performing standard statistical procedures such as Student’s t-test on sample groups. Within the normal distribution the production of the four cytokines is spread over a wide range, indicating high intersubject variability. There appear to be individuals with high and with low production of particular cytokines in vitro.

We have previously examined the intrasubject reproducibility of in vitro cytokine production [10]. We demonstrated that in vitro production of IL 1β, IL 1α and TNF is a reproducible parameter when assayed in a given individual on different occasions, several days apart. Furthermore, when PBMC from healthy subjects were stimulated in different experiments as far as 25 weeks apart, PBMC from the majority of individuals produced similar amounts of IL 1β when compared between the two time points. Taken together with the results of the present study, there appear to be a few subjects who produce consistently low or consistently high amounts of a particular cytokine within a cohort of healthy subjects. This finding supports the concept of high and low producers in response to particular stimuli and the concept of genetic factors controlling cytokine synthesis. There is a parallel in the mouse model, where certain inbred strains, which are resistant to either Gram-negative or Gram-positive toxins, produce less IL 1 when stimulated in vitro. As judged from the pattern in Fig. 2 and as calculated by the Wilk-Shapiro test, normal distribution of a parameter is a prerequisite for performing standard statistical procedures such as Student’s t-test on sample groups. Within the normal distribution the production of the four cytokines is spread over a wide range, indicating high intersubject variability. There appear to be individuals with high and with low production of particular cytokines in vitro.

Correlation analysis reveals a high correlation between production of IL 1β and IL 1α contrasting a lack of correlation between IL 1β and TNF production within the study cohort. This suggests linked gene regulation for IL 1β and IL 1α, and independent gene regulation for IL 1β and TNF. There was no correlation between IL 2 production and production of either IL 1β or TNF within the study cohort.

There is ample evidence that arachidonic acid metabolites are endogenous regulators of IL 1 production. Macrophage IL 1 production in vitro is suppressed by addition of exogenous PGE₂ or PGI₂ and is augmented by inhibition of the cyclooxygenase pathway [26]. In humans, we have shown that dietary supplementation with eicosapentaenoic acid results in decreased production of IL 1β. IL 1α and TNF [27]. PGE₂ appears to reduce expression of IL 1 at the post-transcriptional level by inducing elevated levels of cyclic AMP [15]. When monocytes are stimulated in the presence of cyclooxygenase inhibitors like indomethacin, an enhancement of IL 1 synthesis via suppressed PGE₂ production has been observed [15, 16]. In the present study we have observed increased production of IL 1β by an average of 27% when PBMC were stimulated in the presence of 1 μg/ml of indomethacin. This increase did not reach significance (p = 0.055). We have previously reported increased production of TNF in the presence of indomethacin [12].

We were able to demonstrate that the enhancing effect of cyclooxygenase inhibitors on production of IL 1β also functions in vivo. When compared to the cohort without medication, we found that the mean production of IL 1β in vitro by stimulated PBMC was significantly higher (48%) in the group taking cyclooxygenase inhibitors.

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5 References