Clinical significance of interleukin-6 measurement in early rheumatoid arthritis: relation with laboratory and clinical variables and radiological progression in a three year prospective study

Miek A van Leeuwen, Johanna Westra, Pieter C Limburg, Piet L C M van Riel, Martin H van Rijswijk

Abstract

Objective—To evaluate the clinical significance of interleukin-6 (IL-6) measurements in relation to laboratory and clinical measures of disease activity and radiological progression in early rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

Methods—A prospective study was performed in 51 patients with early RA during the first three years of the disease, with monthly clinical and laboratory assessments and biannual radiographs of the hands and feet. IL-6 was measured by enzyme linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). Cross sectional (n = 51) and longitudinal (n = 20) correlations between plasma IL-6 concentrations and values of C reactive protein (CRP), serum amyloid A protein (SAA), erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR), haemoglobin (Hb), platelets, and joint scores were calculated, and correlations made between time integrated values of IL-6, CRP and ESR, and radiological progression over three years (n = 20).

Results—Significant correlations were found between IL-6 and the acute phase response and platelets, but variable results were obtained for the correlation between IL-6 and Hb. In contrast to a significant correlation between time integrated values of CRP or ESR and radiological progression, time integrated values of IL-6 did not correlate with radiological progression over three years follow up.

Conclusion—The course of disease activity and the radiological progression of joint damage are better reflected by CRP, SAA, and ESR values than by plasma IL-6 concentrations, particularly in stages of low disease activity.


Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a systemic disease characterised by chronic inflammation of synovial joints. Chronic synovitis often leads to destruction of joint cartilage and bone, and is systemically accompanied by a marked acute phase response. Cytokines play a central role in both the local events and the systemic acute phase response. Interleukin-1 (IL-1) and tumour necrosis factor α (TNFα) are considered to be the major cytokines mediating inflammatory joint destruction and have been shown to be potent inducers of IL-6 synthesis. Though it is often present in high concentrations in the synovial fluid, IL-6 has little influence on cartilage and bone destruction, but appears to act rather at a systemic level, where its major effect is the induction of the hepatic synthesis of acute phase proteins. In addition, IL-6 has been shown to play a regulatory role in platelet production in vivo, and evidence is increasing that IL-6 is one of the cytokines involved in the aetiology of anaemia of chronic disease. In RA, measurement of the acute phase response by erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) or C reactive protein (CRP) concentration is generally used to monitor disease activity, and the course of changes in CRP concentrations over time have been shown to be related to the progression of radiological joint damage in RA. As the inflamed synovium is thought to be the main source of plasma IL-6 in RA, theoretically, IL-6 concentrations could yield a more direct reflection of joint inflammation and destruction compared with acute phase reactants.

The aim of the present study was to evaluate the clinical significance of plasma IL-6 measurements in relation to clinical and laboratory measures of disease activity and to radiological progression during the first years of RA. In addition, we analysed the relation between IL-6 and haemoglobin and platelet counts in early RA.

Patients and methods

Patients

We analysed the data of 51 patients, selected from a cohort of 149 patients with RA, who had completed a three year follow up study: 31 had active disease (clinical indication for therapeutic joint aspiration) at the time of investigation and 20 were selected randomly from those patients (132/149) who developed radiological joint damage within the first three years of the disease. All patients met the 1958 ARA criteria for classic or definite RA and had joint symptoms for less than one year at entry to the study. Monthly blood samples were available in addition to monthly clinical data, comprising the number of tender and swollen
Correlation

Patients were treated with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), disease modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs), low dose corticosteroids, or combinations of these, as clinically indicated.

ASSAYS

CRP and serum amyloid A proteins (SAA) were measured by enzyme linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA)\(^9\) in EDTA plasma, haemoglobin and platelet counts were measured using standard procedures, and ESR was measured according to Westergren.

Measurements of IL-6 were performed in EDTA plasma by ELISA\(^9\) using a combination of the anti-IL-6 monoclonal antibody (MAb) IL-6-16 and biotinylated polyclonal sheep antibody Sh-a-IL-6 (both kindly provided by Dr L Aarden, Amsterdam). Measurements were performed in serial dilutions (starting at 1:3) in the presence of an excess of normal sheep serum. As standard, we used recombinant human IL-6 (rhIL-6) from Genzyme (Boston, MA), with a range of detection of 3–100 pg/ml. Control experiments revealed that rhIL-6, spiked to normal serum at different concentrations, was recovered in this ELISA to an extent of 95–115%. Both intra-assay and interassay variability were <10%.

STATISTICS

Correlation coefficients were calculated with the Spearman rank test. Mean correlations were assessed after Z transformation.

Results

PATIENT CHARACTERISTICS AND TREATMENT

The 51 patients studied included 38 women and 13 men; at entry to the study they were aged 16–72 years (median 52), and 50 were IgM rheumatoid factor positive (>10 IU/ml). The initial DMARD was hydroxychloroquine (n = 35), intramuscular gold (n = 10), or D-penicillamine (n = 2). Four patients were treated with NSAIDs only.

RELATION BETWEEN PLASMA IL-6 AND THE OTHER SYSTEMIC VARIABLES

For the cross sectional study (n = 51), the results of the samples taken at the time of joint aspiration (n = 31) and the samples at entry in the follow up study (n = 20) were used. Table 1 shows the values of the respective variables and the correlations between plasma IL-6 concentrations and values of the concurrent laboratory and clinical variables (36 observations per patient) were calculated. Table 2 shows the means of the within individual correlation coefficients and 95% confidence intervals (95% CI), assessed after Z transformation of the individual correlation coefficients. The 95% CI was significant (p ≤ 0.05) for all mean correlations.

Most patients with a significant correlation (p < 0.05) between IL-6 and CRP also showed a significant correlation between IL-6 and the other laboratory and the clinical variables. In the few patients without a significant correlation between IL-6 and CRP, drug treatment did not differ from that received by the other patients. There was a significant within individual correlation between CRP and SAA values in all patients (p < 0.001), and no differences appeared to exist between CRP and SAA in relation to IL-6.

RELATION BETWEEN IL-6 AND RADIOPHICAL PROGRESSION

In our patients the radiological score at entry to the study ranged from 0 to 37 (median 3), and the radiological progression score during the three year follow up was from 0 to 203 (median 50). As radiological progression is essentially a cumulative phenomenon, the results of the monthly values of the different process variables were transformed into time integrated values (area under the curve) according to the trapezoidal rule. Table 3

![Table 1](image_url)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plasma conc</th>
<th>Correlation with IL-6</th>
<th>Correlation with CRP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IL-6 (ng/l)</td>
<td>51 (9–602)</td>
<td>0.56***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRP (mg/l)</td>
<td>36 (0–9–340)</td>
<td>0.56***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAA (mg/l)</td>
<td>36 (2–1000)</td>
<td>0.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESR (mm/1st h)</td>
<td>50 (5–135)</td>
<td>0.74***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hb (g/l)</td>
<td>124 (81–152)</td>
<td>0.31***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrombocytes (× 10^9/l)</td>
<td>307 (145–626)</td>
<td>0.56***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Plasma concs are median (range) of n = 51. IL-6 = Interleukin-6; CRP = C reactive protein; SAA = serum amyloid A; ESR = erythrocyte sedimentation rate; Hb = haemoglobin.  
*p ≤ 0.05; **p ≤ 0.01; ***p ≤ 0.001.

Values are mean and 95% CI of within individual correlations after Z transformation.

IL-6 = Interleukin-6; CRP = C reactive protein; SAA = serum amyloid A; ESR = erythrocyte sedimentation rate; Hb = haemoglobin; RAI = Ritchie articular index.
shows the between individual correlations between radiological progression after three years and the time integrated values of IL-6, and the time integrated values of CRP and ESR during 36 months. A weak, non-significant correlation was found between time integrated IL-6 values and radiological progression, compared with a significant correlation between time integrated CRP and ESR values and radiological progression.

### Discussion

In previous studies, we and others have demonstrated a highly significant correlation between the acute phase response, joint swelling, and radiological progression during the first years of RA. In the present study we have analysed the clinical value of IL-6 measurements in the monitoring of disease activity and radiological progression in early RA, based on the supposed role of IL-6 as mediator between the inflammatory process in the joints and the systemic acute phase response.

In the cross sectional study in 51 patients we found highly significant correlations between IL-6 and both the acute phase proteins and platelets, and a significant but weaker correlation between IL-6 and Hb. In the longitudinal study in 20 patients during three years follow up, similar results were found with highly significant within individual correlations between IL-6 and the different variables in the majority of the patients, but in fewer patients for Hb. However, the correlation between time integrated IL-6 values and radiological progression during three years follow up was not significant.

The relations between plasma IL-6 and acute phase proteins, and haematological variables in RA reported in the literature have been contradictory. Differences in sensitivity of the assays and in patient selection may, in part, explain these discrepancies. In addition, most of the studies were cross sectional. In our longitudinal study, the within individual correlations between plasma IL-6 and the other process variables varied between patients. The significant correlation between IL-6 and platelet counts in most patients is in agreement with the potent thrombopoietic activity of IL-6 in vitro, and with clinical reports of reactive thrombocytosis in inflammatory diseases.

We found both IL-6 and platelet counts in most patients is in agreement with the potent thrombopoietic activity of IL-6 in vitro, and with clinical reports of reactive thrombocytosis in inflammatory diseases.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IL-6</td>
<td>0.250 &lt;0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRP</td>
<td>0.477 &lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESR</td>
<td>0.684 &lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IL-6 = Interleukin-6; CRP = C reactive protein; ESR = erythrocyte sedimentation rate.


