Cellular immunity to cartilage proteoglycans: relevance to the pathogenesis of ankylosing spondylitis

Paresh Jobanputra, Ernest H S Choy, Gabrielle H Kingsley, J Sieper, Alberto A Palacios-Boix, Dick Heinegård, Gabriel S Panayi

Abstract
Cellular immunity to cartilage proteoglycans may be responsible for sustaining chronic inflammation in ankylosing spondylitis. This hypothesis was examined by measuring peripheral blood and synovial fluid mononuclear cell proliferation in five preparations of human cartilage proteoglycan monomer in vitro. Peripheral blood mononuclear cells from 25 patients and synovial fluid mononuclear cells from five patients were compared with those from normal and disease control subjects matched for age. No significant differences were found between the three groups. This suggests that autoimmune responses to cartilage proteoglycans are unlikely to play a significant part in the pathogenesis of ankylosing spondylitis.


Autoimmunity to elements of the cartilage matrix may be responsible for sustaining chronic inflammatory arthritis and has been reported for type II collagen in rheumatoid arthritis (RA). Cellular immunity to human cartilage proteoglycans, the other major constituent of articular cartilage, is recognised in relapsing polyarthritis and may play a part in RA and ankylosing spondylitis. Other studies have suggested a specific role for cartilage proteoglycans in the pathogenesis of ankylosing spondylitis and T lymphocytes specific for cartilage proteoglycans have been described in the peripheral blood of patients with ankylosing spondylitis. Ankylosing spondylitis is characterised clinically by extra-articular sites such as the anterior uvea, entheses, and the aortic root being affected. Other proteoglycans immunologically related to cartilage proteoglycans occur at these sites providing further support for the idea that autoimmunity to cartilage proteoglycans is important in ankylosing spondylitis. Arthritis occurs in experimental animals following the injection of cartilage proteoglycans in complete Freund's adjuvant. This is of particular interest in adjuvant arthritis, a model with some clinical similarities to ankylosing spondylitis. Relatively few patients with ankylosing spondylitis have been studied and there are no reports of synovial fluid mononuclear cell responses to cartilage proteoglycans. This paper reports in vitro lymphocyte proliferation to cartilage proteoglycans in patients with ankylosing spondylitis, normal controls, and control subjects with arthritis using five different preparations of cartilage proteoglycans.

Patients and methods
PATIENTS AND CONTROLS
Patients were recruited from the rheumatology outpatient clinics of Guy's and Lewisham Hospitals. Twenty five patients with definite ankylosing spondylitis as defined by the modified New York criteria took part. Paired synovial fluid and peripheral blood samples were available for four patients and three control subjects with rheumatic disease: one with RA, one with psoriatic arthritis, and one with Reiter's syndrome. Peripheral blood samples from seven other control subjects with rheumatic disease were also tested. Three subjects with RA, three with psoriatic arthritis, and one with osteoarthritis. Twenty five healthy subjects served as controls, six of whom were known to be HLA-B27 positive. This group was recruited with the help of the tissue typing laboratory (Guy's Hospital) and had been typed for other reasons. The table gives the clinical characteristics of the patients with ankylosing spondylitis at the time of testing.

SEPARATION OF MONONUCLEAR CELLS
Peripheral blood and synovial fluid were collected under aseptic conditions into sterile universal tubes containing 0·2 ml heparin. Mononuclear cells were isolated by density gradient centrifugation on Ficoll-Metrizoate (Lymphoprep, Nyegaard, Norway). Cells were washed three times in Hank's balanced salt solution (HBSS) and adjusted to 2×10⁶ cells/ml in tissue culture medium which consisted of RPMI 1640 (Gibco, UK) supplemented with 10% heat inactivated fetal calf serum (Scrolab, UK), 2 mM glutamine, and penicillin and streptomycin at 200 U/ml.

ANTIGEN PREPARATIONS
Five preparations of the central protein core of the monomer believed to be the immunologically

| Characteristics of the 25 patients with ankylosing spondylitis studied in this work |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Median (range) age (years) | 46 (24-64) |
| Sex ratio (M/F) | 22/3 |
| Median (range) disease duration (years) | 10 (1-44) |
| Mean (range) ESR (mm/hour)* | 22 (3-50) |
| Patients with history of Peripheral arthritis | 11 |
| Iritis | 6 |
| Treatment NSAIDs only† | 19 |
| Disease modifying drugs | 5† |

* Data from 19 patients; ESR=erythrocyte sedimentation rate.
† NSAIDs=non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.
important fraction of cartilage proteoglycans were prepared as described previously by Heinegård and Sommarin using 4 M guanidine-HCl gradients. Three samples were prepared from knee condyles, one from the patella (all A1 D1 fraction, purified in two sequential gradients, first associative then dissociative; lowest fractions), and one from tracheal cartilage (D1 D1 fraction, purified by two sequential dissociative gradients). Preparations were dissolved in HBBS, filter sterilised, and stored in aliquots at -20°C. Tuberculin purified protein derivative (PPD) (Central Veterinary Laboratory, Tunbridge Wells, UK) served as a control antigen.

**STIMULATION OF MONONUCLEAR CELLS**

Mononuclear cells from patients and controls were stimulated with the core protein of cartilage proteoglycans. The concentrations of cartilage proteoglycans tested ranged from 0·2 to 20 μg/ml. Typically 2 × 10⁶ cells/well were cultured in 96 well flat bottomed plates (Nunc, Kamstrup, Denmark). Tuberculin PPD at a concentration of 10 μg/ml established in previous experiments (data not shown) served as a positive control antigen. Cells were cultured in triplicate in a 5% carbon dioxide incubator for six days with the addition of 7·4 kBq of tritiated thymidine ([³H]TdR: Amersham International, Amersham, UK), specific activity 1·9 × 10⁸ kBq/mmol, for the final 18–20 hours of culture. Cells were harvested on a semiautomated harvester (Skatron, Lier, Norway) and [³H]TdR incorporation measured as disintegrations per minute (dpm) by counting in a liquid scintillation counter.

**STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

The results are expressed as stimulation index (SI): the ratio of radioactivity incorporated (dpm) into stimulated cells compared with that incorporated into control cells. Groups were compared by Student's t test.

**Results**

There was no significant difference in the ages of patients with ankylosing spondylitis (median age 46 years (range 24–67)), normal control subjects (median 37·5 years (range 24–64)), and control subjects with rheumatic disease (median 41·5 years (range 29–66)). Figure 1 shows the results of antigen stimulation with cartilage proteoglycans and tuberculin PPD in peripheral blood in all three subject groups. There was no statistical difference between the three groups in their SI to tuberculin PPD or cartilage proteoglycans. Significant proliferation occurred when cells were stimulated with tuberculin PPD in contrast to the lack of proliferation to cartilage proteoglycans for all three groups.

The peripheral blood mononuclear cells of three patients showed significant responses to cartilage proteoglycans (SI 5·5, 9·7, 10·4). Two of these patients had peripheral arthritis and these two had active disease at the time of testing. Synovial fluid was available from one of these patients but synovial fluid mononuclear cells from this patient did not proliferate in response to cartilage proteoglycans. In addition repeated testing of peripheral blood mononuclear cells in these subjects did not show a consistently increased SI (data not shown). One patient with RA from the disease control group responded to cartilage proteoglycans (SI 3·3) and two of the normal control subjects also responded to cartilage proteoglycans (SI 3·0, 3·7), one of whom was HLA-B27 positive.

Figure 2 shows the proliferation response of paired peripheral blood and synovial fluid mononuclear cells to cartilage proteoglycans and tuberculin PPD. The proliferative responses of synovial fluid mononuclear cells to tuberculin PPD were reduced compared with the response
of the corresponding peripheral blood mono-
nuclear cells. There was no evidence of an
enhanced response to cartilage proteoglycans
with synovial fluid mononuclear cells. Four
further extracts of cartilage proteoglycans were
used as antigens in proliferation assays with
peripheral blood mononuclear cells from five
patients and synovial fluid mononuclear cells
from one patient. Concentrations of 1–20 μg/ml
were tested. No significant stimulation occurred
with any preparation of cartilage proteoglycans
in the presence of significant stimulation to
tuberculin PPD (data not shown).

Discussion
Proteoglycans are released from cartilage early
in the development of experimental models of
arthritis and in patients with acute forms of
arthritis such as reactive arthritis. The anti-
genic central protein core of these molecules is
unlikely to have been encountered by T lympho-
cytes during their development and this may
result in autoimmunity to cartilage proteoglycans
leading to prolonged synovitis. Cross reactivity
between microbial antigens and self antigens
such as cartilage proteoglycans may account
for autoimmune responses to cartilage. It has
also been suggested that as free fragments of
cartilage proteoglycans within a joint are cationic
and have a high molecular weight they may
produce synovial changes and their persistence
may lead to joint destruction independently of
immune responses. Cartilage proteoglycans,
however, although they are released in high
concentrations in acute joint inflammation
and in trauma, are found in lower concentrations
in chronic joint disease and are not disease
specific. Investigations of cell mediated
immunity to cartilage proteoglycans in in-
flamatory arthritis have shown a variety of
responses, though some experimental evidence has shown T lymphocytes specific for cartilage proteoglycans in patients with anky-
losing spondylitis, implicating such cells in the
pathogenesis of ankylosing spondylitis. Our
results with five preparations did not show any
specific response to cartilage proteoglycans in
patients with ankylosing spondylitis; in the
patients showing a response this was not repro-
ducible on repeated testing.

Proteoglycans are complex polydisperse
macromolecules with a central protein core
which binds a large number of negatively
charged carbohydrate side chains. Cartilage
proteoglycans vary with the anatomical origin
and depth of cartilage and the age of the subject
from whom they were extracted. The core
protein of larger cartilage proteoglycans
(molecular weight 210 000) shares many anti-
genic sites and peptide similarities, however,
though greater variation has been shown for
smaller proteoglycans. Monomers of cartilage
proteoglycans from different sources were used
as an antigen in this study and were purified and
stored under similar conditions to those used by
other workers. Some studies appear to have
used pooled sources of cartilage proteoglycans as antigens. Concentrations of cartilage prote-
glycans used in studies reporting a response to
cartilage proteoglycans were higher than in our
study—typically 30–50 μg/ml compared with
our range of 0.1–20 μg/ml, though in view of the
heterogeneity of cartilage proteoglycans direct
comparisons may not be valid. This hetero-
genicity of cartilage proteoglycans may provide
an explanation for the variety of responses
described in inflammatory arthritis. These
factors and the ubiquitous release of cartilage
proteoglycans in joint diseases makes it difficult
to envisage a role for cartilage proteoglycans as
autoantigens. In addition studies implicating
cartilage proteoglycans in the pathogenesis of
ankylosing spondylitis do not account for the
genetic basis of this disease. There appear to be
no other methodological differences in the cell
proliferation assays performed here compared
with those of other studies. Earlier studies have
measured the production of leucocyte inhibitory
factor as indicative of antigen responses. It has
been suggested that these methods may measure
different aspects of cellular immunity and may
be more sensitive.

In summary we have tested a large number of
patients with ankylosing spondylitis for evidence
of cellular immunity to purified monomers of
cartilage proteoglycans using a range of pre-
parations and have compared the responses with
healthy control subjects matched for age. There
was no evidence of a specific response in
patients with ankylosing spondylitis. Variations
in preparations of cartilage proteoglycans may
account for the differing responses described in
previous studies due to the heterogeneity of
human cartilage proteoglycans.

This study was supported by a core support grant (U9) from the Arthritis and Rheumatism Council (ARC) of Great Britain. PJ
was supported by an ARC Junior Research Fellowship during this study. We thank our colleagues in the rheumatology unit for
their help in obtaining clinical samples.

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doi: 10.1136/ard.51.8.959

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