Systemic Lupus Erythematosus
Margrit Wiesendanger
Division of Rheumatology, CUMC
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SLE Epidemiology: who is at risk?
One of the most common autoimmune diseases affecting women of all ages
Predominantly women in child-bearing years (M:F ratio is 1:10)
Incidence in the US: 1.6 - 7.6 cases/100,000
Prevalence in the US: 15 - 50 cases/100,000
Disease prevalence and severity differs among ethnic subsets: African-American > Hispanic > Asian > Caucasian
Mortality patterns:
Early mortality is due to active disease,
thrombosis, and infections.
Late mortality is due to late complications of disease,
atherosclerotic heart disease, and infections.

Immune characteristics
Hallmark: formation of auto-antibodies, whose targets include ubiquitously expressed nuclear and cytoplasmic components
Auto-antibodies can be detected in serum up to 9 years before the first sign or symptom of lupus
Mechanisms of antibody-mediated pathogenesis include the formation of immune complexes, triggering the classical pathway of complement activation, Fc receptor-mediated phagocytosis.

Cellular autoantigens in SLE

Cellular apoptosis: a source of self antigens?

Epitope spreading: how a B cell-targeted autoantigen (DNA) can give rise to a T-cell response to an associated protein (histone)

Joan T. Merrill, Doruk Erkan & Jill P. Buyon
"Epitope spreading": how tissue damage allows the immune response to amplify the scope of its targets

Evidence for genetic susceptibility in lupus

- Approximately 10-fold increase in clinical disease in monozygotic vs. dizygotic twins
- 8-fold or greater relative risk for SLE in first-degree relatives, with 10 to 16 percent of patients with SLE having an affected first- or second-degree relative
- Association and linkage studies show an association of the disease with particular HLA haplotypes
- Whole genome scans: multiple additional susceptibility loci have been described, each conferring a small risk -- it all adds up

Certain HLA class II alleles may preferentially present selected autoantigens; the resultant autoantibody profile defines clinical subsets in SLE

- HLA-B8/DRB1*0301/DQB1*0201 -- anti-Ro antibody
- HLA-DRB1*1501/DQB1*0602 -- nephritis
- HLA DR2/DQw1 -- anti-Ro antibody
- HLA DR3/DQw2 -- anti-La
- DR2 or DR3 with DQB1*0201, 0602, 0302 -- anti-dsDNA antibody
- DR4 with DQw5 -- anti-U1 RNP antibody
- DR4 with DQw6 -- anti-Smith antibody
- DR4, DR7 with DQw7 -- lupus anticoagulant

Other genetic associations in lupus: apoptosis and phagocytosis

- Homozygous deficiencies of early complement components (C1q, C2, C4) -> loss of apoptotic body clearance
- Mannose-binding ligand (MBL) polymorphisms -> decreased clearance of apoptotic bodies
- FcγRIIB receptor allele -> loss of function -> increased inflammation
- FcγRIIIA receptor allele -> gain of function -> increased inflammation
- Promoter polymorphisms of interleukin-10 -> loss of regulation

Clinical SLE 1997 Classification Criteria: best at discriminating lupus from other autoimmune diseases

- Positive antinuclear antibody (ANA)
- Malar rash
- Discoid rash
- Photosensitivity
- Oral/nasal ulcers
- Non-erosive arthritis

Need 4 criteria to enroll a patient in a clinical study of lupus (very specific)
But:
Lack sensitivity for diagnosing an individual patient, and do not include many important manifestations of the disease

Anti-Nuclear Antibodies

- Positive in >95% SLE patients
- ELISA screen vs. Hep2 cell preparation (immunofluorescence)
- Sensitive but not very specific (superseded the LE cell prep)

Examples are provided for illustrative purposes: do not memorize!
Lupus rashes are photosensitive

MALAR
• Fixed erythema, flat or raised
• Spares the nasolabial folds
• Heals without scarring
• May correlate with systemic disease

DISCOID
• Erythematous raised patches with keratotic scaling and follicular plugging
• Commonly scars

Photosensitivity: a rash that is induced or exacerbated by sun exposure

Proposed mechanism of systemic complications from sun exposure:
• Ultraviolet A and B exposure induces apoptosis of keratinocytes
• Activated dendritic cells migrate to draining lymph nodes and initiate a systemic flare of autoimmunity
• Lupus nephritis and other systemic features may result

Cutaneous immunopathology

Light microscopy:
Thickening of the dermal-epidermal junction, inflammatory cells associated with a dermal appendage

The lupus band test:
IgM and C3b at the dermal-epidermal junction in non-sun exposed skin

Oral or nasopharyngeal ulcers

• Typically painless
• Hard palate location
• Sometimes just erythema
• Nasal ulcer may cause erosion/septal perforation
• Can correlate with systemic disease activity

Non-erosive polyarthritis

Typically symmetric, involves peripheral (not axial) joints. In contrast to rheumatoid arthritis, erosions and overt swelling are uncommon.

Jaccoud’s arthropathy: ligamentous laxity resulting in deformity
Serositis: inflammation of the pleura or pericardium

- **Pleuritis** (40-60%)
  - Inflammation of the pleural lining, leading to pain associated with respiration
- **Pericarditis** (5-30%)
  - Inflammation of the pericardial lining, leading to chest pain
  - An effusion (accumulation of fluid in the pericardial sac) may occur but rarely interferes with cardiac filling

- Symptoms may vary: chronic cough, chest pain, shortness of breath, exercise intolerance, fatigue

Renal disease in lupus: inflammation of the glomerulus

- **ACR criterion** = glomerulonephritis
- **Classes of Lupus Nephritis (LN)**
  - WHO Class I-VI
  - Activity index
  - Chronicity index

- Pathology does not always correlate with clinical manifestations

WHO Classification of lupus glomerulonephritis

- Class II (mesangial)
- Class III (focal proliferative)
- Class IV ( diffuse proliferative)
- Class V (membranous)
- Class VI (advanced sclerosis)

Neuropsychiatric Lupus

- Seizures or psychosis
  - Medications or prior damage must be excluded -- in order to be considered as a classification criterion
- Associated with a higher morbidity and mortality
- Often lack of neuroimaging, biochemical, histologic correlation
- Differential diagnosis: infection, illicit drugs, vasculitis and clot
- Other CNS disease, not included in classification criteria: transverse myelitis, stroke, depression, headache, cognitive impairment

Cytopenias

- Coomb’s positive hemolytic anemia
- Leukopenia (lymphopenia)
- Thrombocytopenia, immune-mediated

Other Lupus Immunologic Criteria

- Anti double stranded-DNA antibody
  - Virtually pathognomonic for SLE
  - May vary with disease activity, along with hypocomplementemia
- Antiphospholipid syndrome immunologic assays
  - False positive RPR (VDRL uses bovine cardiolipin in assay)
  - Anticardiolipin IgM/IgG antibody
  - Lupus anticoagulant
  - Anti j2-glycoprotein I antibody
Popular lupus manifestations that failed to make the cut for “criteria”

- Constitutional features: fever, malaise, fatigue, anorexia/weight loss, lymphadenopathy
- Raynaud’s phenomenon
- Vasculitis
- Alopecia
- Antiphospholipid syndrome

Antiphospholipid Syndrome (APS)

Diagnosis requires: antiphospholipid antibodies (antibodies targeting phospholipid protein complexes), at two time points AND documented clot or pregnancy loss

25-40% of lupus patients have antiphospholipid Ab (+/- clot)

Manifests as thrombosis in vessels of any size, resulting in stroke, myocardial infarction, digital gangrene, placental infarction, renal failure, etc.

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In general, treatment is tailored to the clinical manifestation, because the most potent interventions are also the most toxic.

Severe diffuse discoid rash, alopecia despite antimalarials, moderate dose steroids, dapsone…

Resolution of rash after aggressive treatment with high dose steroids and cyclophosphamide (for CNS vasculitis)

Molecularly targeted therapy: balancing efficacy and safety?

Targeting B Cells

- **Rituximab**: a chimeric anti-CD20 monoclonal antibody (murine variable region, human framework) first approved for the treatment of B cell lymphoma
- Depletes CD20⁺ B cells, but spares the CD20⁻ plasma B cells
- Postulated to disrupt B cell-driven antigen presentation and cytokine networks

**Caveat Emptor:**
- The EXPLORER study (large cohort of lupus patients) showed no benefit over placebo
- Unclear if B cell depletion “resets” the immune repertoire -- for good or ill

Targeting T Cells

- **Abatacept (CTLA4-Ig)**
  - A fusion protein joining the extracellular moiety of the CTLA4 molecule with the Fc portion of an IgG antibody
  - Binds the costimulatory molecules CD80/CD86 with high affinity, preventing the antigen-presenting cell from activating a T cell via CD28 ("signal 2") – may also deliver an inhibitory ‘tolerogenic’ signal to the APC itself
  - Synergizes with cyclophosphamide in the treatment of lupus nephritis in NZB/W mice – clinical trials for lupus are ongoing
  - Somewhat effective in the treatment-refractory rheumatoid arthritis, and no safety issues to date

Systemic Lupus Erythematosus -- key concepts

A systemic autoimmune syndrome with pleiotropic organ involvement (affects multiple organs in multiple ways)

May present in a variety of ways

The clinical course is unpredictable

Other diseases may mimic lupus

Diagnosis is often delayed

Laboratory testing serves as an adjunct to the clinical history and physical findings