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*J Immunol* 2010; 185:4485-4495; Prepublished online 1 September 2010; doi: 10.4049/jimmunol.0902245
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Lack of TNFR p55 Results in Heightened Expression of IFN-γ and IL-17 during the Development of Reactive Arthritis

Ricardo J. Eligá‡,† Ethelina Cargnelutti,*† María I. Serer,*† Patricia W. Stege,‡§ Susana R. Valdez,*‖ Marta A. Toscano,‡**, Gabriel A. Rabinovich,‡**, and Marí­a S. Di Genaro*†

Reactive arthritis (ReA), a type of arthritis originating from certain gastrointestinal or genitourinary infections. In previous studies, we reported the development of progressive Yersinia enterocolitica-induced ReA in mice lacking TNFR p55; however, the mechanisms underlying this effect are still uncertain. In this study, we investigated the impact of TNFR p55 deficiency in modulating Ag-specific Th1 and Th17 responses during this arthritogenic process. We found more severe ReA in TNFRp55−/− mice compared with their wild-type (WT) counterparts. This effect was accompanied by increased levels of Yersinia LPS in the joints of knockout mice. Analysis of the local cytokine profile revealed greater amounts of IFN-γ and IL-17 in arthritic joints of TNFRp55−/− mice compared with WT mice at day 21 postinfection. Moreover, altered IL-17 and IFN-γ production was observed in mesenteric and inguinal lymph nodes of Yersinia-infected TNFRp55−/− mice, as well as in spleen cells obtained from infected mice and restimulated ex vivo with bacterial Ags. Increased levels of cytokine secretion were associated with a greater frequency of CD4+ IL-17+, CD4+IFN-γ+, and IL-17+IFN-γ+ cells in TNFRp55−/− mice compared with WT mice. Remarkably, Ab-mediated blockade of IL-17 and/or IFN-γ resulted in reduced joint histological scores in TNFRp55−/− mice. A mechanistic analysis revealed the involvement of p40, a common subunit of heterodimeric IL-12 and IL-23, in the generation of augmented IFN-γ and IL-17 production under TNFR p55 deficiency. Taken together, these data indicate that, in the absence of TNFR p55 signaling, Th1 and Th17 effector cells may act in concert to sustain the inflammatory response in bacterial-induced arthritogenic processes. The Journal of Immunology, 2010, 185: 4485–4495.
pendedently of TNF during the course of streptococcal cell wall-induced arthritis (15). Furthermore, a recent study demonstrated increased levels of IL-17, IL-6, TGF-β1, and IFN-γ in synovial fluids and sera of patients with ReA (16), and emerging data indicate an essential role of the IL-23/IL-17 axis in the pathogenesis of spondyloarthritis (17). Although *Y. enterocolitica* induces strong Th1 responses (18), the possibility that IFN-γ and/or IL-17 might play a role in *Yersinia*-induced ReA remains largely unexplored. In addition, it is still uncertain whether Th1- and Th17-differentiation pathways are regulated by TNF signaling during the course of bacterial-induced inflammatory disease. In the current study, we aimed to dissect the mechanisms underlying the increased severity of the arthritogenic process in *TNFRp55−/−* mice following infection with *Y. enterocolitica*. Given the essential role of IL-17 in the host mucosal immune response (19), as well as the link frequently observed between gut inflammation and arthritis (20), we also wished to examine the in vivo cytokine profile observed in mucosal lymph nodes compared with articular lymph nodes during the reactive arthritogenic process. Our data showed an augmented local inflammatory response dominated by IL-17, IFN-γ, IL-12p70, and IL-23 (p19/p40) in *TNFRp55−/−* mice compared with WT mice. Ab-mediated blockade of IL-17 and/or IFN-γ resulted in significantly reduced histopathological changes in the joints of these mice, suggesting that IL-17 and IFN-γ participate in the severe arthritogenic process occurring in *TNFRp55−/−* mice. Collectively, these data support an in vivo regulatory role for TNFRp55 signaling in fine-tuning Th17 and Th1 programs during bacterial-induced ReA through modulation of the common p40 subunit of IL-23 and IL-12.

**Materials and Methods**

**Mice**

*TNFRp55−/−* mice (C57BL/6) were kindly provided by the Max von Pettenkofer Institute (Munchen, Germany). C57BL/6 WT mice were purchased from the Animal Facilities of the National University of La Plata, La Plata, Argentina. Breeding colonies were established at the Animal Facilities of the National University of San Luis. Mice were kept under specific pathogen-free conditions in positive-pressure cabinets (EHRET, Emmendingen, Germany) and provided with sterile food and water ad libitum. Male mice (6-wk old) were used for the experiments. At least three independent experiments were performed. Protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Medical Sciences, National University of Cuyo. Animal work was approved by the Animal Care and Use Committee of National University of San Luis.

**Bacterial culture and infection**

Strain MHC 700 *Y. enterocolitica O:3* (kindly provided by Dr. G. Kapperud, Department of Bacteriology, Oslo, Norway) was used for infection. Bacteria were cultured as described earlier (8). Mice were starved for 8 h and then were infected orogastrically, with 1–5 × 10⁸ yersinia in 200 μl saline, using a gastric tube. The number of inoculated bacteria was controlled by using a gastric tube. The number of inoculated bacteria was controlled by

**Assessment of arthritis**

Mice were examined daily for visual appearance of arthritis in peripheral joints, and the arthritis score was calculated until day 21 postinfection, as described earlier (21). Clinical severity was classified for each paw: 0, normal joint; 1, slight inflammation and redness; 2, severe erythematic and swelling affecting the entire paw; and 3, deformed joint paw with ankylosis, joint rigidity, and loss of function. Total score was based on the assessment of all paws, with a maximum score of 12 per animal, as described (21).

**Histopathological evaluation**

Histopathological examination of the joints was carried out at day 21. After routine fixation, decalcification, and paraffin embedding, 5-μm-thick sections were cut and stained with H&E. Histopathological scoring was performed, as described by Kyö et al. (22). Ankle joints from different groups of mice were assigned histopathological scores of 0–5, where 0, normal; 1, minimal infiltration; 2, mild infiltration; 3, moderate infiltration; 4, marked infiltration; and 5, severe infiltration. The same ankles were assigned a score for cartilage/bone resorption, according to the following criteria: 0, normal; 1, minimal (small areas of resorption); 2, mild (numerous areas of resorption); 3, moderate (obvious resorption of trabecular and cortical bone without full-thickness defects in the cortex; loss of some trabeculae); 4, marked (full-thickness defects in the cortical bone and marked trabecular loss without distortion of the remaining cortical surface profile); and 5, severe (full-thickness defects in the cortical bone and marked trabecular bone loss, with distortion of the remaining cortical surface profile). The total score was defined as the sum of the scores for inflammation and for cartilage/bone destruction. Each slide was scored by two independent observers, and the average score was recorded.

**Micellar electrokinetic chromatography in joint homogenates**

The presence of bacterial Ags was examined in homogenates of joints obtained from *Yersinia*-infected *TNFRp55−/−* mice and WT mice, as described (22). The presence of LPS in these samples was determined by micellar electrokinetic chromatography (MEKC). LPS from *Y. enterocolitica* O:3 was extracted by the hot phenol-water method, as described (23), and used as a positive control. For MEKC, we used a Beckman P/ACE MDQ instrument (Beckman Coulter, Fullerton, CA) equipped with a diode array detector and a data-handling system comprising an IBM personal computer and P/ACE System MDQ Software. The fused-silica capillaries (57 cm total length, 50 cm effective length, 75 μm internal diameter, 375 μm OD) were obtained from MicroSolv Technology (Eatonontow, NJ). Detection was performed at 197 nm, the capillary temperature was maintained at 18°C, and the voltage was set at 25 kV. Samples were pressure-injected at the cathodic side at 0.5 for 10 s. To achieve high reproducibility of migration times, the capillary was washed between analyses with sodium hydroxide for 2 min and then equilibrated with running buffer for 4 min. The background electrolyte used contained 20 mM phosphate buffer (pH 8.4) and 10 mM SDS. The electroosmotic flow marker was prepared by diluting 1 ml acetone with the background electrolyte (1:1), and sonication was applied for 5 min prior to injection.

**In vitro cultures**

At days 7, 14, and 21 postinfection, spleens were isolated, and erythrocytes were lysed in 0.16 M NaHCO₃ (pH 7.2). Cells (2 × 10⁶ cell/well) were cultured in 24-well plates for 72 h at 37°C in an atmosphere of 5% CO₂ in RPMI 1640 (HyClone, Logan, UT), supplemented with 10% FBS, 1 mM pyruvate, 100 IU/ml penicillin, 100 μg/ml streptomycin, and 50 μmol/ml 2-ME in the presence or absence of 10⁵ bacteria/ml heat-killed *Yersinia* (HKY), as an Ag-specific stimulus (24), or ConA (5 μg/ml), as a mitogenic stimulus. Culture supernatants were obtained and stored at −20°C until cytokine determination.

**Cytokine determination by ELISA**

Mouse IL-17, IFN-γ, IL-6, IL-β, TGF-β1, IL-12/L-23 p40, IL-17p (p19/p40), and IL-10 were determined in the joint, mesenteric lymph node (MLN), and inguinal lymph node (ILN) homogenates, prepared as described previously (8), as well as in spleen cell culture supernatants using capture ELISA kits (eBioscience, San Diego, CA), according to the manufacturer’s instructions. The limit of detection for the above-mentioned cytokines was 4 pg/ml for IL-17, 0.7 pg/ml for IFN-γ, 4 pg/ml for IL-6, 8 pg/ml for IL-β, 60 pg/ml for TGF-β1, 2 pg/ml for IL-12/L-23 p40, 30 pg/ml for IL-23 (p19/p40), and 30 pg/ml for IL-10. IL-12p70 was determined using the BD OptEIA set.

**Flow cytometry**

Splenocytes were isolated from spleens of *TNFRp55−/−* mice and WT mice 21 d postinfection. Cells (1 × 10⁶ cells/ml) were cultured for 72 h at 37°C in an atmosphere of 5% CO₂ in RPMI 1640 (HyClone), supplemented with 10% FBS, 2 mM L-glutamine, and 100 U/ml penicillin. Cells were restimulated with PMA (50 ng/ml) and ionomycin (750 ng/ml) for 6 h in the presence of GolgiPlug (BD 555029; BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA) for the last 5 h. After washing, cells were stained with PE-Cy5-conjugated anti-CD4 (RM4-5; BD Biosciences), fixed in 1% paraformaldehyde, and permeabilized using Becton Dickinson Permeabilizing solution (BD 340973; BD Biosciences), followed by staining with PE-conjugated anti-IL-17 (eBioscience, San Diego, CA) and/or FITC-conjugated anti-IFN-γ (eBioscience, San Diego, CA) and/or anti-CD8α (eBioscience). Samples were analyzed on a FACSARia flow cytometer (BD Biosciences). WinMDI 2.9 software was used for data analysis. A gate was established to define CD4⁻ T cells.

**Anti-cytokine–blocking experiments**

IFN-γ was blocked with a hamster anti-mouse IFN-γ mAb (MAb4851), and IL-17 was neutralized using a rat anti-mouse IL-17 mAb (MAB421; both from R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN). As control, the same doses of...
isotype-control Ab were injected. Briefly, TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> or WT mice were treated in vivo with an anti–IFN-γ mAb, an anti–IL-17 mAb, or a combination of both. Mice received anti-cytokine mAb (2.5 mg/kg) i.p. on days 16 and 18 postinfection. On day 21, ankle joints were obtained for histological analysis.

**Statistical analysis**

Differences between the groups were tested for significance using the Mann–Whitney U test or one-way ANOVA with the Dunnett multiple-comparison test, as appropriate. A p value <0.05 was considered statistically significant. The results are expressed as the mean ± SD.

**Results**

**Impact of TNFR p55 deficiency on the development of chronic ReA following Yersinia infection**

Through activation of TNFR p55 signaling, TNF was demonstrated to be a critical cytokine in the protective host response to *Yersinia* (5, 24). Moreover, in recent studies, we found that TNFR p55 signaling also plays a protective role against ReA induced by *Y. enterocolitica* O:3 (8). To further dissect the mechanisms involved in this protective effect, we first examined disease progression in TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice compared with WT mice. TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice that did not succumb to *Yersinia* infection (survival: 60%) developed a severe and progressive arthritis, with considerably increased clinical score compared with WT mice, at day 14 (Fig. 1A). Moreover, increased inflammatory swelling, disorganization of the synovial membrane, proliferation of synovial lining cells with pannus formation, and bone/cartilage degradation were clearly evident when histopathological changes were assessed in the joints of TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice on day 21 after *Yersinia* infection (Fig. 1B). Joint inflammation was observed until day 55, suggesting the development of chronic arthritis in TNFR p55-deficient hosts (data not shown). Interestingly, although WT mice showed a peak of arthritis on day 14, clinical severity was markedly attenuated in comparison with TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice (Fig. 1A), and histopathological changes were considerably reduced on day 21 postinfection (Fig. 1B). Taken together, these results indicate a protective and tempering function of normal TNFR p55 signaling in the development of *Yersinia*-induced chronic ReA.

**FIGURE 1.** TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice develop severe and progressive *Yersinia*-induced ReA. WT (n = 6) and TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> (n = 10) age-matched male mice were infected orally with *Y. enterocolitica* O:3 and monitored daily for arthritis onset and clinical severity. A, The clinical score was calculated in WT (n = 6) and surviving TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice (n = 6), as described in Materials and Methods, and represents the total paw swelling score for each mouse. B, Histopathological examination of representative joints of WT and TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice on day 21 postinfection (original magnification ×100). Histological index was calculated at day 21 postinfection. Results (mean score ± SD) are representative of two or three independent experiments. *p < 0.05. C, cartilage; JS, joint space; P, pannus; S, synovium.

**FIGURE 2.** TNFR p55 deficiency influences the abundance of *Yersinia* LPS in the joints. A, MEKC was performed in joint homogenates of WT and TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice at day 14 postinfection, and chromatograms were compared with purified *Yersinia* LPS as positive control. A sharp peak in LPS (arrow) was detected in homogenates of joints, but it was higher in TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice compared with WT mice. Data are representative of three independent experiments. B, Mean ± SD of WT and TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> LPS abundance measured by MEKC in three independent experiments. *p < 0.001.
Influence of TNFR p55 deficiency in the control of bacterial LPS in the joints of infected mice

Given the presence of outer membrane-specific Abs in sera from TNFRp55−/− infected mice (8), we further examined whether an increased bacterial Ag load in the joints of arthritic mice might contribute to the increased severity of ReA in these mice. For this purpose, we examined, by MEKC, the presence of LPS, the main outer membrane component of the bacteria, in joint homogenates of WT and TNFRp55−/− mice at days 14 and 21 postinfection. We observed a sharp peak corresponding to purified Yersinia LPS in joint homogenates of TNFRp55−/− and WT mice (Fig. 2), suggesting that Yersinia LPS may trigger articular inflammation in the early phase of arthritis in both groups of mice (day 14 postinfection). However, LPS levels were significantly higher in TNFRp55−/− mice compared with WT mice (p < 0.001) (Fig. 2B), suggesting increased bacterial Ags in mice devoid of TNFR p55 signaling. However, LPS was no longer detected at day 21 in knockout or WT mice (data not shown). Thus, despite the presence of a pronounced arthritogenic disease triggered by TNFR p55 deficiency, bacterial Ags seem to be cleared from the joints of knock out or WT mice (data not shown). Thus, despite the presence of a pronounced arthritogenic disease triggered by TNFR p55 deficiency, bacterial Ags seem to be cleared from the joints of mice devoid of TNFR p55 signaling. These results suggest that IL-17 produced by TNFR p55−/− mice may operate in concert to trigger chronic ReA in TNFR p55-deficient mice.

Differential expression of proinflammatory cytokines in the joints of Yersinia-infected TNFRp55−/− and WT mice

Compelling evidence indicates a critical role for IL-17 in sustaining the inflammatory response in several models of arthritis (25–27). This cytokine was shown to be fundamental in turning acute synovitis into a chronic destructive arthritis (28, 29). In contrast, IFN-γ is strongly induced by Yersinia infection (18, 24) and is essential for initiating joint inflammation in several arthritis models (30). Hence, we examined the relative abundance of IL-17 and IFN-γ in joint homogenates of TNFRp55−/− mice versus WT mice. Although we observed a comparable induction of articular IL-17 in WT and TNFRp55−/− mice at days 7 and 14 postinfection, the amounts of IL-17 were substantially higher in TNFRp55−/− mice when analyzed 21 d after bacterial infection (p < 0.05) (Fig. 3A). Thus, disruption of the TNFR p55 pathway results in uncontrolled articular inflammation that persists at day 21 and is accompanied by high amounts of IL-17 in the arthritic joints. In addition, IFN-γ was increased 7 d postinfection in WT and knockout mice; however, this cytokine was upregulated in inflamed joints of TNFRp55−/− mice but not in WT mice at days 14 and 21 postinfection (p < 0.05) (Fig. 3B). The increased arthritis severity, together with the higher IFN-γ levels and the lack of difference in IL-17 at day 14 postinfection of TNFRp55−/− mice, suggests a dominant contribution of IFN-γ to joint inflammation during this time period.

Given the role of IL-6 and TGF-β1 in promoting Th17 cell differentiation, we next examined the levels of these cytokines in the joints of Yersinia-infected WT and TNFRp55−/− mice. We found higher amounts of IL-6 in TNFRp55−/− mice compared with WT mice, an effect that started as early as day 7 (p < 0.05), peaked at day 14 (p < 0.05), and was sustained until day 21 (p < 0.05) after bacterial infection (Fig. 4A). Furthermore, the concentration of TGF-β1 was significantly higher in the joints of TNFRp55−/− mice at day 21 postinfection (p < 0.05) (Fig. 4B). Interestingly, lack of TNFR p55 led to upregulation of TGF-β1, even in the absence of bacterial Ags (Fig. 4B). Given the cooperative effects of IL-17 and IFN-γ in favoring ReA, we next investigated whether IL-10, a cytokine involved in Th17/Th17 inhibition, was diminished in TNFRp55−/− mice. Indeed, IL-10 production was increased at day 21 postinfection in TNFRp55−/− mice (Fig. 4C). Hence, the lack of TNFR p55 and the upregulation of TGF-β1 might augment local IL-10 production, which could contribute to the increased severity of ReA in TNFRp55−/− mice.

Influence of TNFR p55 deficiency in the control of bacterial LPS in the joints of infected mice

FIGURE 3. Lack of TNFR p55 augments IL-17 and IFN-γ production in the joints of mice with Yersinia-induced ReA. IL-17 (A) and IFN-γ (B) in joint homogenates of WT and TNFRp55−/− mice were prepared at different time points postinfection and assayed by ELISA. Results are shown as the mean ± SD of three independent experiments, with four or five mice per group. *p < 0.05.

FIGURE 4. Deficiency of TNFR p55 affects pro- and anti-inflammatory cytokines in the joints of mice with Yersinia-induced ReA. Levels of IL-6 (A), TGF-β1 (B), IL-1β (C), and IL-10 (D) in joint homogenates of WT and TNFRp55−/− mice obtained at different time points postinfection. Results are the mean ± SD of three independent experiments, with four to five mice per group. *p ≤ 0.05.
Impact of TNFR p55 deficiency on systemic production of IL-17 and IFN-γ during Yersinia-induced ReA

To determine whether Th17- and Th1-type cytokine profiles predominate at the systemic level in TNFRp55−/− mice infected with Yersinia, spleen cells from WT and TNFRp55−/− mice obtained 7, 14, and 21 d postinfection were stimulated ex vivo with HKY, and supernatants were examined for Ag-specific IFN-γ and IL-17 production (Fig. 5). Although discrete amounts of IFN-γ and IL-17 were detected in spleen cell cultures of Yersinia-infected WT mice, substantially higher concentrations of both cytokines were observed in TNFRp55−/− mice after HKY stimulation (Fig. 5C, 5D). However, no considerable changes were observed when spleen cells were obtained from both groups of mice and stimulated ex vivo with ConA (Fig. 5E, 5F). Interestingly, IL-17 reached concentrations significantly higher only in supernatants of TNFRp55−/− spleen cells isolated 14 d postinfection (p < 0.05; Fig. 5C). In contrast, the amounts of IFN-γ were abundant in supernatants of TNFRp55−/− spleen cells at all times tested (p < 0.05, p < 0.01, and p < 0.001 days 7, 14, and 21 postinfection versus WT spleen cells; Fig. 5D). These results indicate augmented Ag-specific Th1 and Th17 responses in spleen cells of TNFRp55−/− versus WT mice challenged with Yersinia. Thus, in the absence of TNFR p55 signaling, Th17- and Th1-type cytokines may play a role in driving the inflammatory response observed in Yersinia-induced ReA, suggesting an immunoregulatory role of the TNFR p55 pathway in attenuating Ag-specific Th1 and Th17 responses in vivo. Remarkably, the time-course study of IL-17 expression correlated well with the clinical outcome of progressive arthritis developed in TNFRp55−/− mice, suggesting a critical role for IL-17 in Yersinia-induced chronic ReA.

Impact of TNFR p55 signaling in the cytokine profile of mucosal and regional lymph nodes of Yersinia-infected arthritic mice

Because mice developed joint inflammation following oral delivery of Y. enterocolitica, we further studied the cytokine profile in mucosal lymph nodes compared with joint regional lymph nodes.

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**FIGURE 5.** Lack of TNFR p55 augments Ag-specific IL-17 and IFN-γ production by spleen cells of mice with Yersinia-induced ReA. Spleen cells from infected WT and TNFRp55−/− mice were obtained at days 7, 14, and 21 postinfection and cultured in the absence (A, B) or presence of HKY (Ag-specific stimulation) (C, D) or ConA (polyclonal activation) (E, F) for 3 d. Supernatants were collected and assayed by ELISA for IL-17 (A, C, E) and IFN-γ (B, D, F). Values represent the mean ± SD of two representative experiments with four mice per group at each time point postinfection. *p ≤ 0.05.
For this purpose, we examined the amounts of IL-17, IFN-γ, IL-6, and TGF-β1 in tissue homogenates of MLNs and ILNs. Remarkably, IL-17 was significantly higher in MLNs of TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice versus WT mice at day 7; this effect was in line with that found in ILNs (p < 0.001 and p < 0.01 compared with WT mice in MLNs and ILNs, respectively; Fig. 6). Although similar levels of IL-17 were detected in MLNs and ILNs in WT and TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice at day 14 postinfection, reduced levels of this cytokine were observed in MLNs of TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice compared with WT mice at day 21 postinfection (p < 0.05 versus WT mice), probably reflecting migration of effector Th17 cells to target tissues. In contrast, the differences in the levels of IL-17 in ILNs paralleled those found in the joints of TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> and WT mice (p < 0.01; Fig. 6B versus Fig. 3A). However, IL-17 expression in ILNs showed a peak at day 14 postinfection and a tendency toward diminished expression at day 21 postinfection, in contrast to the expression profile in the joints. In addition, IFN-γ was more abundant in MLNs from TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice versus WT mice early postinfection (day 7; p < 0.01; Fig. 6A). In contrast, an increase in IFN-γ could only be detected late postinfection (day 21) in ILNs of mice devoid of TNFR p55 (p < 0.01). In keeping with the essential role of IL-6 and TGF-β1 in promoting Th17 differentiation, these cytokines showed a similar profile to that of IL-17. Hence, substantially higher amounts of IL-6 and TGF-β1 were detected in MLNs from TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice compared with WT mice at day 7 postinfection (p < 0.01 versus MLNs from WT mice; Fig. 6A). Likewise, we also detected a strong correlation among IL-17 and the Th17-promoting cytokines IL-6 and TGF-β1 in ILNs, which showed a higher concentration in ILNs of TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice at day 7 (p < 0.05) or at day 21 (p < 0.01 and p < 0.05 for IL-6 and TGF-β1, respectively) postinfection (Fig. 6B). Taken together, these data indicate a significant correlation among cytokines produced in mucosal-associated lymph nodes and those prevailing in the joint regional lymph nodes of TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice early after bacterial infection, supporting a link between the intestinal mucosa and the local immune response operating in the arthritic joints.

**Increased numbers of IFN-γ– and IL-17–producing cells in TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice**

To determine the cell type responsible of producing IL-17 and IFN-γ during *Yersinia* infection, flow-cytometry analysis was performed in splenic cells obtained from TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> and WT mice on day 21 postinfection (Fig. 7A). A significantly higher frequency of CD4<sup>+</sup>IL-17<sup>+</sup> (p < 0.05), CD4<sup>+</sup>IFN-γ<sup>+</sup> (p < 0.05), and IL-17<sup>+</sup> IFN-γ<sup>+</sup> (p < 0.01) cells were detected in TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice compared with WT mice (Fig. 7B). These results support the concept that Th1 and Th17 cells may contribute to sustain joint inflammation during the arthritogenic process triggered by bacterial Ags. Moreover, the increased number of IL-17<sup>+</sup>IFN-γ<sup>+</sup>CD4<sup>+</sup>T cells in TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice suggested that these cytokines are produced by double-positive T cells producing IL-17 and IFN-γ.

**Reduced joint inflammation and bone/cartilage erosion by Ab-mediated neutralization of IFN-γ and IL-17**

To investigate the functional relevance of IFN-γ and IL-17 in progressive *Yersinia*-induced ReA, blocking experiments were conducted in TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> and WT mice by neutralizing IFN-γ, IL-17, or both cytokines in vivo. Remarkably, blockade of IFN-γ, IL-17,

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![Figure 6](https://example.com/figure6.png)

**FIGURE 6.** Lack of TNFR p55 influences cytokine production in mucosal lymph nodes and ILNs of mice with *Yersinia*-induced ReA. Levels of IL-17, IFN-γ, IL-6, and TGF-β1 in homogenates of MLNs (A) and ILNs (B) from WT and TNFRp55<sup>−/−</sup> mice at days 7, 14, and 21 postinfection. Values represent the mean ± SD of four or five mice per group evaluated each day postinfection. Results are representative of three experiments. *p* ≤ 0.05.
or both cytokines successfully suppressed joint inflammation in ankle joints isolated on day 21 postinfection and markedly reduced cartilage and bone erosion (Fig. 8). These data support the essential roles of IL-17 and IFN-γ in ReA progression in TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice.

**TNFR p55 signaling regulates p40 expression in MLNs and ILNs**

To identify possible mechanisms by which TNFR p55 deficiency leads to increased Th17- and Th1-type cytokines, we next sought to examine a potential convergent pathway that could be a common denominator to these divergent Th effector subsets. Hence, we examined the expression levels of the p40 common chain that is shared by the Th1-promoting cytokine IL-12 and the Th17-promoting cytokine IL-23 (9, 13, 31). Expression of p40 was shown to be critical in the pathogenesis of organ-specific autoimmune disorders, particularly multiple sclerosis (10) and chronic inflammatory arthritis (31, 32). Analysis of p40 expression in MLNs and ILNs at day 21 postinfection revealed critical differences in TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice versus WT mice (Fig. 9). In fact, considerably higher levels of p40 were detected in MLNs and ILNs of TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice compared with WT mice (p, 0.05; Fig. 9). To dissect further the role of IL-23 and IL-12 in these effects, IL-12(p70) and IL-23 (p19/p40) were also determined. We found increased levels of IL-12(p70) and IL-23 (p19/p40) in ILNs of TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice compared with WT mice (p, 0.05; Fig. 9B). The correlation of these results with IFN-γ and IL-17 production strongly suggests that the TNFR p55-signaling pathway can suppress p40 protein expression in mucosal and joint regional lymph nodes to counteract the development of Th1 and Th17 responses. Thus, a potential cross-talk among distinct proinflammatory pathways could be proposed that controls the amplification and resolution of pathogenic responses during *Yersinia*-induced ReA.

**TNFR p55 signaling regulates IL-10 production in MLNs and ILNs**

IL-10, a potent anti-inflammatory cytokine, can antagonize Th1 and Th17 responses through inhibition of IFN-γ and IL-17 (33, 34). In addition, IL-10 plays a critical role in mucosal homeostasis, because IL-10 deficiency leads to spontaneous colitis due to aberrant activation of dendritic cells (35). Thus, we compared the amounts of IL-10 in MLNs and ILNs of TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice versus WT mice. Notably, lack of TNFR p55 led to substantial differences in IL-10 kinetics and expression pattern (Fig. 10). IL-10 peaked earlier in MLNs of TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice, as shown by its expression levels on day 7 after *Yersinia* infection (p < 0.05 compared with MLNs of WT mice; Fig. 10A). In contrast, augmented IL-10 production was detected in MLNs of WT mice for only 21 d postinfection (p < 0.05 versus MLNs of TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice; Fig. 10A). Notably, lack of TNFR p55 led to substantial differences in IL-10 kinetics and expression pattern (Fig. 10). IL-10 peaked earlier in MLNs of TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice, as shown by its expression levels on day 7 after *Yersinia* infection (p < 0.01) compared with MLNs of WT mice; Fig. 10A). In contrast, augmented IL-10 production was detected in MLNs of WT mice for only 21 d postinfection (p < 0.05 versus MLNs of TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice; Fig. 10A). In contrast, the IL-10 peak was observed in ILNs from WT mice on day 14 postinfection, coincident with the onset of the recovery of the synovial inflammatory response (p < 0.05 versus ILNs of TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice; Fig. 10B). Notably, lack of TNFR p55 led to substantial differences in IL-10 kinetics and expression pattern (Fig. 10). IL-10 peaked earlier in MLNs of TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice, as shown by its expression levels on day 7 after *Yersinia* infection (p < 0.05) compared with MLNs of WT mice; Fig. 10A). In contrast, augmented IL-10 production was detected in MLNs of WT mice for only 21 d postinfection (p < 0.05 versus MLNs of TNFRp55<sup>2/2</sup> mice; Fig. 10A). Altogether, these results indicate that an altered production of IL-10 in MLNs and ILNs may contribute to the chronic progression of *Yersinia*-induced ReA in the absence of TNFR p55 signaling. Given the distinct roles of IL-10...
during immunoregulatory processes (35), this pleiotropic cytokine may negatively or positively regulate the inflammatory response based on its expression levels and the synergistic or additive actions of other cytokines.

**Discussion**

TNF is well-known as a master proinflammatory cytokine capable of amplifying or modulating cytokine cascades in organ-specific autoimmune diseases, including a broad range of rheumatic disorders.

**FIGURE 8.** Blockade of IFN-γ and/or IL-17 reduces inflammation and cartilage/bone erosion in ankle joints of TNFRp55−/− mice. On days 16 and 18 postinfection, TNFRp55−/− mice were treated with isotype-control Ab (IgG1 or IgG2a) (A), anti–IFN-γ (B), anti–IL-17 (C), or anti–IFN-γ plus anti–IL-17 (D) mAbs. E, Inflammatory cell infiltrates, bone/cartilage erosion, and total histological scores were assessed at day 21 postinfection. Results are the mean score ± SD of at least three mice per group. *p < 0.05 versus control group; one-way ANOVA with the Dunnett multiple-comparison test.

The identification of the pathogenic Th17 subset capable of inciting and perpetuating tissue injury via the release of IL-17 (9, 40) suggested the possibility that IL-17 may be involved in chronic *Yersinia*-induced ReA in TNFRp55−/− mice. In addition, unfavorable evolution has been reported in patients with spondyloarthropathies under treatment with TNF blockers (37). In the present work, we confirmed the protective role of TNF p55 signaling in *Yersinia*-induced ReA, demonstrating that, in contrast to WT mice, TNFRp55−/− mice developed joint inflammation with progression to a chronic arthritogenic process. Because ReA is an aseptic synovitis (1, 2) and no bacteria are commonly detected in the joints of arthritic mice (8), we investigated the presence of bacterial Ags in the joints using MEKC, a high-resolution separation technique widely used for trace analysis in biological samples (38). We detected *Yersinia* LPS at day 14 postinfection in the joints of WT and TNFRp55−/− mice, with a higher concentration of this bacterial component in mice lacking TNFR p55. This result is compatible with the impaired bacterial clearance previously found in these mice (8). As a consequence, bacterial Ags can trigger joint inflammation, as in other pathological conditions, such as Lyme arthritis (39). These results are in keeping with our previous observations on the arthritogenic properties of *Yersinia* LPS (23) and the relevance of *Yersinia* outer membrane Ags in triggering ReA in TNFRp55−/− mice (8). Importantly, LPS could not be detected at day 21 postinfection, suggesting that early stimulation with *Yersinia* Ags may be responsible for triggering the immunopathogenic mechanisms implicated in the chronicity of ReA (28).

**FIGURE 9.** Lack of TNFR p55 increases the IL-12/IL-23 p40 common subunit, IL-12p70 and IL-23 (p19/p40) during *Yersinia*-induced ReA. Levels of p40, IL-12p70, and IL-23 (p19/p40) were assessed in homogenates of MLNs (A) and ILNs (B) from WT and TNFRp55−/− mice at day 21 postinfection. Values represent the mean ± SD of four or five mice per group evaluated each day postinfection. Results are representative of three experiments. *p < 0.05.
Coexist, particularly in the absence of other regulatory signals, such as TNFR p55 signaling contrasts with the widely recognized counter-regulation of proinflammatory cytokines may also display double-edged effects and have regulatory attributes (44). Interestingly, we also found a substantial increase in IL-6 and IL-1β expression in TNFRp55−/− mice. However, the kinetics of these cytokine were not in line with arthritis progression, suggesting a secondary role for IL-6 and IL-1β in Yersinia-induced ReA in TNFRp55−/− mice.

The differentiation of naive CD4 T cells into specialized effector subsets is controlled, in part, by cytokines present at sites of Ag presentation (45). Although mouse Th17 cells require IL-6 and TGF-β1 for their initial in vitro differentiation and IL-23 for their expansion (46), the major cytokines that prime commitment of this lineage in response to in vivo infection are poorly understood (45). The concomitant increase in IL-17, as well as in IL-6 and TGF-β1, in the joints of TNFRp55−/− mice confirmed the requirement of the latter for sustained IL-17 secretion (46).

Because ReA is induced following oral infection, we also conducted a comparative analysis of the cytokine profile in MLNs and ILNs, as representative of mucosal and joint draining lymph nodes, respectively. Interestingly, we found a strong correlation among IL-17, IL-6, and TGF-β1 in MLNs and ILNs at early stages of Yersinia infection (day 7) and during the arthritis onset (day 14), supporting a link between gut and joint immune responses.

In accordance with Notley et al. (42), the coexistence of IL-17 and IFN-γ challenges the assumption that differentiation of these two subsets is mutually exclusive. In fact, more CD4+IL-17+ cells and CD4+IFN-γ−/− cells was concurrently found in TNFRp55−/− mice, indicating that Th1 and Th17 cells might contribute to sustain joint inflammation in these mice. Moreover, the higher number of IL-17+IFN-γ−CD4+ T cells in TNFRp55−/− mice indicates that these cytokines are produced by double-positive (Th1/Th17) T cells, suggesting a plasticity in T cell cytokine secretion and/or a possible developmental association between the Th1 and Th17 phenotypes; this finding is supported by in vivo studies in other mouse models (47). Importantly, Ab-mediated blocking experiments revealed a reversible protection from joint damage when IL-17, IFN-γ, or both cytokines were neutralized in vivo. These protective effects support a role for IL-17 and IFN-γ in ReA progression in the absence of TNFR p55 signaling, as demonstrated for other inflammatory diseases (48, 49).

Interestingly, recent studies reported defects in IFN-γ regulation in patients with other types of spondyloarthopathies, including ankylosing spondylitis (50). Thus, in a broader sense, our findings contribute to the understanding of the pathogenesis of ReA, and they have profound therapeutic implications, because specific blockade of the TNF pathway in rheumatic disorders might lead to exacerbation of pathogenic Th1 and Th17 responses (44). In contrast, recent studies suggested that a cross-talk among distinct regulatory T cell populations in the control of autoimmune inflammation (51). Accordingly, it was demonstrated that IL-6 and TGF-β1 upregulate IL-10 (52), and TGF-β1 amplifies IL-10–producing regulatory-type 1 cells (53). Given the alterations observed in these cytokines in our model, further experiments are warranted to elucidate the influence of TNFR p55 deficiency in regulatory T cell expansion in chronic ReA.

In the search for potential mechanisms responsible for the augmented Th17 and Th1 responses in TNFRp55−/− mice, we assessed the expression of p40, a common subunit of IL-12 and IL-23 heterodimeric cytokines, with respective Th1- and Th17-promoting activity (13). Given the upregulation of Th1 and Th17 responses in TNFRp55−/− mice, we hypothesized that p40 may act as a common mediator linking TNF signaling with Th1/Th17 responses.

(18), and IFN-γ regulates IL-17–producing T cells (41). To investigate the pathogenetic role of Th17 and Th1 responses as potential mechanisms underlying the exuberant inflammatory responses unleashed by TNFR p55 deficiency, we performed a comparative kinetic analysis of the levels of IL-17 and IFN-γ in the joints of WT and TNFRp55−/− mice at days 7, 14, and 21 postinfection. Values represent the mean ± SD of four or five mice per group evaluated each day postinfection. Results are representative of three experiments. *p < 0.05.
Importantly, we detected a substantial increase in p40 at day 21 in MLNs and ILNs of TNFRp55−/− mice, and this effect correlated with increased amounts of IL-12p70 and IL-23(p19/p40) in ILNs of these mice. These data substantiate a role for the TNFR p55 pathway in silencing p40 production in vivo and provide a rational explanation for the hyper-Th1 and hyper-Th17 responses observed in TNFRp55−/− arthritic mice. These findings are consistent with recent studies implying a functional cross-talk between TNF and IL-12p40 in vitro studies (54), collagen-induced arthritis (42), experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis (55), and streptococcal cell wall-induced arthritis (32). In this regard, we observed a self-limiting Yersinia-induced ReA in p40−/− mice (14). Taken together, these data and the severe and progressive arthritis that developed in TNFRp55−/− mice indicate a critical role for this common cytokine subunit in modulating Th1 and Th17 responses during the development of ReA.

In conclusion, our findings demonstrate that, in the absence of TNF signaling, redundant pathways, particularly Th1 and Th1 effector cells, may act in concert to sustain inflammation in bacterial-induced ReA, suggesting caution in the use of TNF blockers in cases of acute or chronic ReA.

Disclosures

The authors have no financial conflicts of interest.

References


