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Low-Level CD4⁺ T Cell Activation Is Associated with Low Susceptibility to HIV-1 Infection

Fransje A. Koning, Sigrid A. Otto, Mette D. Hazenberg, Linda Dekker, Maria Prins, Frank Miedema, and Hanneke Schuitemaker

Different features have been found with low susceptibility to HIV type 1 (HIV-1) in exposed seronegative individuals. These include genetic make-up such as homozygosity for the CCR5-Δ32 allele and the presence of HIV-specific CTLs. We studied immune activation and immune responsiveness in relation to HIV-1 susceptibility in 42 high-risk seronegative (HRSN) participants of the Amsterdam Cohort Studies and 54 men from the same cohort who were seronegative at the moment of analysis but later became HIV seropositive. HRSN had higher naive (CD45RO CD27) CD4 and CD8 T cell numbers and lower percentages of activated (HLADR CD38, CD70) CD4 and proliferating (Ki67) CD4 and CD8 T cells, irrespective of previous episodes of sexually transmissible infections. Furthermore, whole blood cultures from HRSN showed lower lymphoproliferative responses than healthy laboratory controls. These data suggest that low levels of immune activation and low T cell responsiveness may contribute to low HIV susceptibility. The Journal of Immunology, 2005, 175: 6117–6122.

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Abbreviations used in this paper: HIV-1, HIV type 1; HRSN, high-risk seronegative; STI, sexually transmissible infection; ACS, Amsterdam cohort studies; pre-SC, pre-seroconversion; IQR, interquartile range; UAR, unprotected anal receptive intercourse.
were below the limit of detection of 1000 copies/ml plasma at 6 mo before seroconversion for all participants. There was no difference in age between the groups (HRSN individuals, n = 42, median: 36.1 years, interquartile range (IQR): 32.3–41.7; pre-SC controls, n = 54, median: 35.2 years, IQR: 29.5–40.2). Table I shows risk behavior of the study participants. History of other STIs (Table II) was self reported (syphilis and gonorrhea episodes) or measured in HSV-1, HSV-2, or HHV-8 Ab-specific ELISAs (38, 39). In addition to cryopreserved samples from HRSN participants and pre-SC controls for FACS analyses, we used fresh blood samples from 10 HRSN participants from whom updated contact addresses were available and who were willing to donate fresh blood. The HIV-seronegative status of HRSN individuals was confirmed using a standard HIV Ab test (Vidas HIV DUO; bioMérieux). Fresh blood samples of 193 healthy blood donors of other STIs (Table II) were self reported (syphilis and gonorrhea episodes) or measured in HSV-1, HSV-2, or HHV-8 Ab-specific ELISAs (38, 39).

This study was approved by the medical ethical committee of the Academic Medical Centre Amsterdam (AMC) and informed consent was obtained from all study participants.

FACS analysis
Cryopreserved PBMC samples were thawed and stained with the following combinations of mAbs: 1) CD4 (-APC; BD Biosciences), CD8 (-PerCP; BD Biosciences), HLA-DR (-FITC; BD Biosciences), and CD38 (-PE; Sanquin); 2) CD4 (-PerCP; BD Biosciences), CD45RO (-APC; BD Biosciences), CCR5 (-FITC; BD Pharmingen), and CXCR4 (-PE; BD Pharmingen); 3) CD4 (-PerCP; BD Biosciences), CD8 (-FITC; BD Biosciences), biotinylated CD70 (a kind gift of Dr. R. A. W. van Lier, AMC, Amsterdam, The Netherlands), and streptavidin-APC (BD Biosciences); 4) CD4 or CD8 (-PerCP; BD Biosciences), CD45RO (-PE; BD Biosciences), biotinylated CD27 (Sanquin), and streptavidin-APC (BD Biosciences). Cells were then fixed (FACS lysing solution; BD Biosciences), permeabilized (FACS permeabilization buffer; BD Biosciences), and stained intracellular with Ki67 (-FITC; DakoCytomation). Incubations were performed for 20 min at 4°C. Analysis was performed on FACS Calibur (BD Biosciences) with CellQuest software. Absolute numbers of cell subsets were calculated using the absolute numbers of CD3⁺ lymphocytes that were determined at the time of sample collection, before PBMC isolation and cryopreservation.

Proliferation assay
Lymphocyte proliferation was measured by [³H]thymidine incorporation. Briefly, fresh whole blood samples were cultured in IMDM alone or with Abs directed against human CD3 (anti-CD3) either with or without anti-CD28, a combination of anti-CD2 and anti-CD28, or with 5 µg/ml PHA. After 3 days, [³H]thymidine was added to the culture, and cellular DNA was harvested after 24 h. [³H]thymidine incorporation was counted in a 1205 Betaplate scintillation counter and corrected for T cell input using CD3 counts obtained by FACS analysis.

Statistical analyses
Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare groups because most data were not normally distributed. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software (version 11.5; SPSS).

Results
Expression of activation markers in HRSN and pre-SC samples
To examine if immune activation plays a role in the host susceptibility for HIV-1, we compared the expression of CD4 and CD8 lymphocyte activation markers between HRSN and pre-SC samples from ACS participants who became HIV-1 seropositive later during follow-up. The pre-SC control samples were chosen at least 6 mo before HIV-1 seroconversion (median: 36.7 mo, IQR: 15.5–52.4). There was no difference between the groups in the calendar period of sampling or in age.

The absolute number of CD4 T cells was higher in HRSN participants than in pre-SC controls, while there was no significant difference in the number of CD8 T cells (Fig. 1A). The numbers of

![Figure 1](http://www.jimmunol.org/)
were lower (Fig. 1). The percentages of proliferating (Ki67) cells were found between HRSN and pre-SC samples.

HRSN participants compared with pre-SC controls, and the number of different unprotected anal receptive intercourse partners, and the occurrence of syphilis, gonorrhea, HSV-1, HSV-2, and HHV8 in HRSN individuals and pre-SC controls. As expected, HRSN participants reported higher risk behavior (Table I), and a higher proportion of HRSN participants had experienced a syphilis episode compared with the pre-SC controls (Table II). HRSN individuals and pre-SC controls were indifferent for infections with gonorrhea, HSV-1 and HSV-2, and HHV8 (Table II). Comparing individuals who had and who had not reported a syphilis and/or gonorrhea episode, we found that pre-SC controls who reported at least one such episode in their lifetime had a statistically significant higher percentage of both CD70+ and Ki67+ CD4 T cells compared with pre-SC controls who never reported a syphilis or gonorrhea episode (Fig. 3). Interestingly, no significant differences in T cell activation levels were found between HRSN individuals who did and who did not report a syphilis or gonorrhea episode. Inclusion of other STIs in this analysis resulted in too small no-STI control groups. Except for the differences mentioned above, no other recurrent trends were observed when this analysis was performed for each STI separately (data not shown).

Finally, excluding participants who did not report a syphilis episode, we found similar differences in T cell markers between HRSN individuals and pre-SC controls as reported above (data not shown). The same holds true for gonorrhea, HSV-1, HSV-2, and HHV8, confirming that the lower T cell activation levels found in HRSN participants compared with pre-SC controls are not explained by differences in STI history.

Expression of activation markers in relation to STI occurrence

To examine whether the differences found in the expression levels of activation markers might be explained by differences in risk behavior or associated with the occurrence of STIs, we determined the number of lifetime partners, the number of different unprotected anal receptive intercourse partners, and the occurrence of syphilis, gonorrhea, HSV-1, HSV-2, and HHV8 in HRSN individuals and pre-SC controls. HRSN individuals and pre-SC controls were indifferent for infections with gonorrhea, HSV-1 and HSV-2, and HHV8 (Table II). Comparing individuals who had and who had not reported a syphilis and/or gonorrhea episode, we found that pre-SC controls who reported at least one such episode in their lifetime had a statistically significant higher percentage of both CD70+ and Ki67+ CD4 T cells compared with pre-SC controls who never reported a syphilis or gonorrhea episode (Fig. 3).

In vitro proliferation

The observation that HRSN individuals have lower CD4 T cell activation levels than pre-SC controls despite high STI incidence suggests that CD4 T cells from HRSN participants are less responsive to Ag exposure than T cells from pre-SC controls. To test whether HRSN individuals also have low lymphoproliferative responses compared with healthy blood donor controls, we collected fresh blood samples from the HRSN participants. Collected samples were tested for HIV Abs and proved seronegative.

When compared with laboratory controls, we found statistically significant lower levels of [3H]thymidine incorporation in fresh whole-blood samples from HRSN participants after stimulation with PHA (HRSN (n = 10), median: 799 cpm/10^3 T cells, IQR: 547–997; controls (n = 193), median: 1294 cpm/10^3 T cells, IQR: 4210.6, 46 556 44–98 51 241 76–113 0.427

Table III. HIV coreceptor expression on CD4+ T cells

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CD4+ T Cells</th>
<th>HRSN</th>
<th>Pre-SC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%CCR5+</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%CCR5+ of CD45RO+</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%CXCR4+</td>
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<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCR5+ CD45RO+ (cells/μl)</td>
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</table>

* Mann-Whitney U test; values of p < 0.05 are depicted in bold type.
Discussion

Immune activation may play a role in HIV-1 transmission efficiency. Zhang et al. (34) have shown that at the site of SIV infection, mostly resting CD4 T cells are infected. They hypothesized that initial low-level replication in these resting CD4 T cells sustains local infection but that only higher levels of virus production by activated CD4 T cells may enable spread of infection from the initial site throughout the lymphatic tissue. High levels of activated CD4 T cells at the site of HIV-1 exposure may increase HIV-1 transmission efficiency while low levels of activated CD4 T cells may be associated with a persistent HIV-seronegative status despite high-risk sexual behavior.

To test this hypothesis, we examined whether low expression levels of cellular activation markers correlated with persistent HIV-seronegative status despite high-risk sexual behavior. Indeed, HRSN participants showed lower levels of CD4 T cell activation (HLADR+/CD38+ and CD70+) and CD4 and CD8 T cell proliferation (Ki67+) compared with pre-SC controls, suggesting lower levels of activated CD4 target cells. Differences in activation levels were significant but small, which does not exclude a relevant biological effect. Whether the differences in CD4 cell activation level are indeed mechanistically relevant for HIV susceptibility remains to be established.

HRSN samples did show higher percentages of HLADR+CD38+CD8+ T cells compared with pre-SC controls. Differences in CD38 and/or HLA-DR expression on CD4 and CD8 T cells have been reported before (17) and may be indicative of an active, CD4-independent, CD8 immune response, possibly, but not necessarily, directed against HIV-1. Nevertheless, we and others (31, 32, 40) have shown that the detection of HIV-1-specific CTLs is not necessarily associated with resistance to HIV-1 infection. Excluding either participants from our analyses, who did not report a syphilis episode, a gonorrhea episode, or who tested negative for HSV-1, HSV-2, or HHV-8, gave the same results (data not shown). This suggests that the reported differences between HRSN participants and pre-SC controls are not related to differences in pathogen exposure. In fact, pre-SC controls who reported a syphilis or gonorrhea episode had elevated levels of CD4 T cell activation compared with pre-SC controls who did not report a syphilis or gonorrhea episode while this difference was not found in HRSN participants.

It has been shown in healthy individuals that increased levels of immune activation are associated with low naive T cell numbers and increased numbers of memory and effector T cells (41). HRSN individuals had higher numbers of naive T cells and lower numbers of memory-effector T cells compared with pre-SC controls despite high pathogen exposure, again suggesting that in these individuals pathogen exposure did not reduce the same level of immune activation. Indeed, lymphoproliferative responses in HRSN individuals were significantly lower than in healthy controls, confirming previous results by Salkowitz et al. (11), who compared lymphoproliferative capacity of HRSN hemophiliacs with healthy blood donors. These data suggest that a less reactive immune system results in lower immune activation levels, which may lower the chance of HIV-1 seroconversion. This protective effect may be due to lower numbers of activated CD4 T cells at the site of infection that otherwise would have contributed to the spread of the infection to draining lymph nodes.

In contrast with our data, one study reported no differences in CD4 T cell numbers, elevated CD8 effector (CD62L−RA+) numbers and lower naive, and CD28−CD8 T cell subsets in HRSN men compared with blood bank donors (17). In another study, elevated percentages of CD38+CD8 T cells but no difference in HLADR+CD38+CD8 percentages nor in naive or memory CD8 T cell numbers were found in HIV-exposed seronegative female sex workers compared with low-risk blood donors (7). Conceivably, differences in levels of immune activation reported in these...

![FIGURE 3](Image 311x95 to 551x270) Expression of activation markers in relation to reported syphilis and gonorrhea episodes. Median percentages of HLADR+/CD38+, CD70+, and Ki67+ cells within the CD4+ (left panel) and CD8+ (right panel) T cells of HRSN participants (●) and pre-SC controls (□) who did (■) or did not (▲) report a syphilis or gonorrhea episode. Error bars indicate interquartile range. *, p < 0.05.

![FIGURE 4](Image 296 to 531) T cell proliferation capacities of HRSN participants and healthy controls. Median [3H]thymidine incorporation by T cells stimulated with PHA, CD2/CD28, CD3, or CD3/CD28 mAbs and by unstimulated T cells of HRSN (●) and blood donor controls (□). Error bars indicate interquartile range. *, p < 0.05; **, p < 0.001.
studies may reflect higher pathogen exposure in HRSN individuals compared with the low-risk blood donors that were used as controls. To be able to distinguish between effects of pathogen exposure and exposed seronegative status, in the present study we used samples taken before HIV seroconversion from a control group that consisted of participants of the same cohort study who eventually became HIV-1 seropositive.

As mentioned, other known factors may be involved in protection from HIV-1 seroconversion. In agreement with our previous observations (31) and other reports (12, 14, 16, 42), we found significantly higher RANTES production of PHA-PMBC in vitro before and after CD8 T cell depletion in HRSN individuals compared with low-risk blood donors (data not shown). In addition, because the CCR5-Δ32 genotype has been associated with resistance to HIV infection (22, 23), we analyzed our data excluding those individuals who carried the CCR5-Δ32 allele. One of 42 HRSN participants was homozygous for the 32-bp deletion and 3 were heterozygous, whereas 4 of 54 pre-SC controls were heterozygous for the deletion. Exclusion of these individuals from our analyses did not change our findings (data not shown).

As compared with the pre-SC samples, HRSN participants showed a significantly lower proportion of CXCR4-expressing CD4+ T cells both in the CD45RO-negative and CD45RO-positive subsets and a lower CCR5 expression only in the CD45RO-negative subset. In agreement, reduced CXCR4 expression has been associated with duration of commercial sex work in seronegative female sex workers (7). However, others have reported higher CXCR4 expression levels in exposed seronegative female sex workers as compared with low-risk blood donors (8, 43). The relevance of CXCR4 expression for HIV transmission efficiency is unclear as CCR5-using and not CXCR4-using variants are generally considered to establish new infections. Moreover, we found no difference in absolute numbers of CXCR4-expressing CD4+ T cells between HRSN and preseroconverters, which makes it unlikely that CXCR4 expression is directly involved in a low HIV susceptibility.

The lower activation level of CD4 T cells in HRSN participants compared with pre-SC controls suggests a role for CD4 T cell activation in HIV-1 susceptibility. Local infection of resting CD4 T cells may occur in HRSN individuals, resulting in low HIV-1 DNA levels detected in some exposed seronegative individuals (44, 45). This would provide an explanation for the presence of HIV-1-specific CTL responses to regulatory HIV-1 proteins in many exposed seronegative individuals, including participants of our present study (28, 30, 31).

Taken together, our data suggest that HRSN individuals have less reactive CD4 T cells, which may result in low numbers of activated CD4 T cells at the site of initial infection, preventing high-level HIV-1 replication and seroconversion after transmission. The underlying mechanism of this low CD4 T cell activation remains to be elucidated. To our knowledge, these individuals do not have a clinical record of frequent infections. Apparently, low CD4 T cell activation and low T cell responsiveness do not hamper efficacious responses to common pathogens as may be reflected by the selectively activated HLADR-CD38+CD8 T cells.

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Disclosures
The authors have no financial conflict of interest.

References


