Cutting Edge: IL-6–Driven Immune Dysregulation Is Strictly Dependent on IL-6R α-Chain Expression

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IL-6 binds to the IL-6R α-chain (IL-6Rα) and signals via the signal transducer gp130. Recently, IL-6 was found to also bind to the cell surface glycoprotein CD5, which would then engage gp130 in the absence of IL-6Rα. However, the biological relevance of this alternative pathway is under debate. In this study, we developed a mouse model, in which murine IL-6 is overexpressed in a CD11c-Cre–dependent manner. Transgenic mice developed a lethal immune dysregulation syndrome with increased numbers of Ly-6G+ neutrophils and Ly-6C hi monocytes/macrophages. IL-6 overexpression promoted activation of CD4+ T cells while suppressing CD5+ B-1a cell development. However, additional ablation of IL-6Rα protected IL-6–overexpressing mice from IL-6–triggered inflammation and fully phenocopied IL-6Rα–deficient mice without IL-6 overexpression. Mechanistically, IL-6Rα deficiency completely prevented downstream activation of STAT3 in response to IL-6. Altogether, our data clarify that IL-6Rα is the only biologically relevant receptor for IL-6 in mice. The Journal of Immunology, 2020, 204: 747–751.

Elevated levels of IL-6 have been observed in numerous pathological conditions, and several drugs are successfully used in a series of human diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis, Castleman disease, and giant cell arteritis to target IL-6 and its receptor, IL-6R α-chain (IL-6Rα) (1). For other diseases like multiple myeloma and neuromyelitis optica, the clinical program for the development of IL-6–neutralizing agents is very advanced, and drugs targeting IL-6 or IL-6Rα might be licensed for these diseases in the near future (2).

IL-6, together with IL-11, IL-27, CNTF, LIF, OSM, CT-1, and CLC, belongs to the group of cytokines that use gp130 for signal transduction (3). Since its discovery in 1990, it was believed that the IL-6–signaling complex consists of a unique IL-6–binding receptor IL-6Rα (also known as CD126) and the signal transducer gp130 (4). The assembly of IL-6, IL-6Rα, and gp130 leads to activation of STAT3-mediated intracellular signaling pathways, which control cell survival, activation, and proliferation (2). IL-6Rα also exists in a soluble form, which is generated via secretion or shedding of membrane-bound IL-6Rα. The complex of IL-6 and soluble IL-6Rα is able to bind to gp130 and then induce STAT3 phosphorylation in cells that do not express IL-6Rα themselves. This signaling modality of IL-6 was termed IL-6 trans-signaling (5). A third modality of IL-6 signaling, called IL-6 cluster signaling, is mediated by cell-bound presentation of the IL-6/IL-6Rα complex in trans by a donor cell to a receiving cell that expresses gp130 (2, 6). In both IL-6 trans-signaling and IL-6 cluster signaling, cells that express gp130, but lack IL-6Rα, still respond to IL-6.

In 2016, an alternative pathway of IL-6 signal transduction was proposed in which IL-6 binds to the membrane-anchored
glycoprotein CD5 instead of IL-6Rx and, via gp130, initiates STAT3 phosphorylation in B cells (7). This study suggested the CD5-dependent pathway of IL-6 signaling was critical in the promotion of cancer progression (7). However, the mechanism for this novel IL-6 binding was not elucidated. In fact, soluble CD5, despite binding to IL-6, is unable to induce IL-6 trans-signaling (8). Massive overproduction of IL-6 is observed in sepsis (9) and has been reported during the cytokine release syndrome in response to CAR–T cell immune therapies (10). To keep exaggerated IL-6 responses in check, any design of therapeutic intervention needs to consider potential alternative signaling pathways of IL-6. In particular, the idea of CD5 as a molecule to substitute for IL-6Rx in forming the IL-6 signal transduction complex might be relevant in this context.

To test whether IL-6Rx can be functionally replaced in any IL-6–signaling modality, we used a set of genetically modified mice with IL-6 overexpression. High levels of IL-6 led to systemic inflammation, which subsequently resulted in a lethal outcome. In contrast, mice that overexpressed IL-6, but lacked IL-6Rx, did not show STAT3 phosphorylation and were completely protected from IL-6–mediated pathology, suggesting that IL-6Rx is indispensable for IL-6 signaling.

Materials and Methods

Mice

Mice with conditional Il6ra allele (Il6ra flox) (11) and CD11c-Cre mice (12) have been previously described. IL-6Rx full-knockout (Il6ra−/−) mice were selected from the breeding between Il6ra flox mice and CD11c-Cre mice, which displayed occasional spontaneous germline Cre activity. Principles used to generate mice with the knock-in of a transgene into the Il6ra locus will be reported elsewhere. For breeding strategies involving Il6ra−/− mice, we used the condition with soluble IL-6R only. Samples were fixed (Phosflow Lysis/ Fix Buffer 5×; BD Biosciences) and permeabilized (Phosflow Perm Buffer III; BD Biosciences) according to the manufacturer’s recommendations. Afterwards, cells were stained with CD45.2-BV650, CD45.1-FITC, and p-STAT3(Y705)-PE FACS Abs in PBS supplemented with 2% FCS. Stained cells were acquired on a CytoFLEX flow cytometer (Beckman Coulter) and analyzed with FlowJo software.

Flow cytometry

Peritoneal lavage preparations pooled from four to five mice per genotype were FACS sorted for CD4+ F4/80+ CD19− CD5− cells and for CD4+ F4/80− CD19+ CD5+ cells, using FACSAria III (BD Biosciences). Splenocytes pooled from four to five mice per genotype were FACS sorted for CD19− CD4+ CD5− cells. Sorted cells from Il6ra−/− mice (CD16−CD11c+) were mixed at 1:1 ratio with wild-type Il6ra+ mice (CD16+CD11c−) in U-bottom, 96-well plates (total amount of 1.0 × 106 cells), rested for 1 h in 200 µl of complete DMEM medium at 37°C, and stimulated with 50 ng/ml human IL-6 (Miltenyi Biotec) or 125 ng/ml of human IL-6/IL-6R complex (hyper–IL-6, kindly provided by the group of Dr. Rose-John, Kiel, Germany), which represents an equimolar amount as compared with the condition with soluble IL-6 only. Samples were fixed (Phosflow Lysis/ Fix Buffer 5×; BD Biosciences) and permeabilized (Phosflow Perm Buffer III; BD Biosciences) according to the manufacturer’s recommendations. Afterwards, cells were stained with CD45.2-BV650, CD45.1-FITC, and p-STAT3(Y705)-PE FACS Abs in PBS supplemented with 2% FCS. Stained cells were acquired on a CytoFLEX flow cytometer (Beckman Coulter) and analyzed with FlowJo software.

Immunoblotting

CD19+ B cells and CD4+ T cells were isolated using MACS technology (Miltenyi Biotec) from pooled spleen and lymph node preparations. For protein isolation, (0.4–8.0) × 106 cells pooled from individual mice (three to four per genotype) were incubated in 100 µl of complete RPMI medium at 37°C in the presence of recombinant murine IL-6 (PromoKine) and, afterward, were lysed in radioimmunoprecipitation assay buffer. Lysates were separated by SDS-PAGE (NuPAGE; Invitrogen) and transferred to polyvinylidene difluoride membranes (MilliporeSigma). Protein blots were probed with anti-phospho-tyrosine 705 STAT3, anti-total STAT3 (Cell Signaling), and anti-β-actin (Sigma-Aldrich). For detection, goat anti-rabbit (Santa Cruz Biotechnology) IgG-HRP–linked secondary Abs were used.

Results and Discussion

The cytokine IL-6 uses various signaling modalities (i.e., classic signaling, trans-signaling, and cluster signaling [also called trans-presentation]) (2) and might even signal through an alternative receptor complex composed of CD5 and gp130 (7). To assess the signaling modality of IL-6 under conditions of exaggerated IL-6 production, we created a murine system of sterile IL-6 overexpression in vivo. To this end, we generated mice carrying a CAG–loxPSTOPloxP–IL-6–IRES–eGFP transgene inserted in the Rosa26 locus will be reported elsewhere. For breeding strategies involving Il6ra−/− mice, we used the condition with soluble IL-6 only. Samples were fixed (Phosflow Lysis/ Fix Buffer 5×; BD Biosciences) and permeabilized (Phosflow Perm Buffer III; BD Biosciences) according to the manufacturer’s recommendations. Afterwards, cells were stained with CD45.2-BV650, CD45.1-FITC, and p-STAT3(Y705)-PE FACS Abs in PBS supplemented with 2% FCS. Stained cells were acquired on a CytoFLEX flow cytometer (Beckman Coulter) and analyzed with FlowJo software.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis and graphical representation were performed with Prism 5 software (GraphPad). Statistical significance was calculated using the unpaired two-tailed t test and Gehan–Breslow–Wilcoxon test for Kaplan–Meier survival curves. The p values < 0.05, < 0.01, and < 0.001 were marked as *, **, and ***, respectively.

Results and Discussion

The cytokine IL-6 uses various signaling modalities (i.e., classic signaling, trans-signaling, and cluster signaling [also called trans-presentation]) (2) and might even signal through an alternative receptor complex composed of CD5 and gp130 (7). To assess the signaling modality of IL-6 under conditions of exaggerated IL-6 production, we created a murine system of sterile IL-6 overexpression in vivo. To this end, we generated mice carrying a CAG–loxPSTOPloxP–IL-6–IRES–eGFP construct in the Rosa26 locus. Next, we used dendritic cell (DC)–directed CD11c-Cre transgenic mice (12) to activate IL-6 overexpression (OE) from a single copy of our Il6 transgene in mice on an IL-6Rx−sufficient background (IL-6DC–OEmIl6ra+/− and IL-6DC–OEmIl6ra−/− [i.e., IL-6DC–OEmIl6ra−/−]). As further controls, we used IL-6Rx−–sufficient (control) and IL-6Rx−–deficient (Il6ra−/−) mice without IL-6 overexpression (Supplemental Fig. 1A).

To directly assess IL-6 overexpression, we measured IL-6 levels in the serum of 5–6-wk-old mutant mice. As expected, both groups of mice with IL-6 overexpression showed elevated levels of IL-6 in comparison with wild-type controls and Il6ra−/− mice (Fig. 1A). IL-6 levels were significantly higher in IL-6DC–OEmIl6ra+/− mice than in IL-6DC–OEmIl6ra−/− mice, suggesting a positive feed-forward loop for IL-6 expression in mice sufficient for IL-6Rx. Mechanistically, transgenic IL-6 can promote IL-6 expression in IL-6DC–OEmIl6ra−/− mice, from the endogenous Il6 locus, which remained responsive to its natural regulation. In addition, IL-6 forms a complex with the soluble IL-6Rx and gp130 in the blood, which can prolong its half-life only in IL-6Rx−–sufficient, but not in IL-6Rx−–deficient, mice (14, 15).

To analyze cellular sources of transgenic IL-6, we assessed eGFP reporter expression driven by the CAG promoter after CD11c-Cre mediated excision of the loxP flanked STOP cassette. As expected, we found eGFP expression in DCs in IL-6DC–OEmIl6ra+/− and IL-6DC–OEmIl6ra−/− mice (Fig. 1B, Supplemental...
Fig. 1C). Because of leakiness of the CD11c-Cre recombinase expression (16), we also noted limited reporter expression in other myeloid cells and in T and B cells of these mice (Supplemental Fig. 1C).

High systemic levels of IL-6 ultimately led to the death of IL-6<sup>DC-OE</sup> mice in an IL-6R<sup>a</sup>-dependent manner (Fig. 1C). IL-6–overexpressing mice carrying both copies of Il6ra died within 6 wk of age, whereas deletion of one Il6ra allele (with one Il6ra allele intact in heterozygous Il6ra<sup>+/a</sup> mice) extended the survival of IL-6<sup>DC-OE</sup> mice until 11 wk of age. Strikingly, null deficiency in Il6ra restored the survival of IL-6<sup>DC-OE</sup> Il6ra<sup>+/a</sup> mice with IL-6 overexpression and, thus, fully rescued the phenotype of IL-6<sup>DC-OE</sup> mice. Of note, 3 out of 41 Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup> mice died during the observation period presumably because of their immunodeficiency (17), irrespective of IL-6 overexpression.

To study the impact of IL-6R<sup>a</sup> expression on IL-6 signaling, we isolated splenocytes from wild-type (Il6ra<sup>+/+</sup>), Il6ra<sup>2/2</sup>, and Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup> mice. We observed a robust IL-6R<sup>a</sup> expression on CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells and, to a lesser extent, on CD11b<sup>+</sup> myeloid cells, but very limited expression on CD19<sup>+</sup> B cells in wild-type mice (Fig. 1D). Deletion of a single Il6ra allele led to reduction in IL-6R<sup>a</sup> expression, suggesting a haploinsufficient gene dose effect (Fig. 1D), which, together with reduced frequencies of IL-6R<sup>a</sup>-positive cells in Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup> mice (Supplemental Fig. 2A), may contribute to the reduced mortality of IL-6<sup>DC-OE</sup> Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup> mice in comparison with IL-6<sup>DC-OE</sup> Il6ra<sup>+/a</sup> mice (Fig. 1C). To determine the consequence of the lack of IL-6R<sup>a</sup> in downstream signaling events, we stimulated total splenocytes isolated from Il6ra<sup>+/+</sup>, Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup>, and Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup> mice with IL-6 and assessed their STAT3 phosphorylation. We observed STAT3 phosphorylation only in wild-type and Il6ra heterozygous cells, whereas Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup> splenocytes were irreplaceable to stimulation with soluble IL-6 (Fig. 1E, Supplemental Fig. 2B). FACS-sorted CD5<sup>+</sup> and CD5<sup>+</sup> B cells, as well as CD5<sup>+</sup> T cells, isolated from Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup> mice did not respond to soluble IL-6 either, whereas their wild-type counterparts showed a clear STAT3 activation in response to soluble IL-6 (Supplemental Fig. 2C). In contrast, IL-6R<sup>a</sup>-deficient B cells (regardless of CD5 expression), and IL-6R<sup>a</sup>-deficient T cells responded to IL-6 in the presence of exogenous IL-6R<sup>a</sup> in the form of hyper–IL-6, which represents IL-6/IL-6R<sup>a</sup> fusion protein (Supplemental Fig. 2C). These data indicate that Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup> cells retain the ability to respond to IL-6 trans-signaling, whereas IL-6R<sup>a</sup> expression on the cell surface is nonredundant for classic IL-6 signaling. Together, this refutes the concept that alternative receptor molecules can compensate for the lack of IL-6R<sup>a</sup> expression.

As a consequence of IL-6 overexpression, CD11b<sup>+</sup> myeloid cells massively infiltrated secondary lymphoid organs, resulting in splenomegaly of IL-6R<sup>a</sup>-sufficient IL-6<sup>DC-OE</sup> mice (Supplemental Fig. 3). The most dramatic increase in response to transgenic IL-6 was observed in Ly-6G<sup>+</sup> neutrophils and Ly-6C<sup>hi</sup> monocytes/macrophages (Fig. 2A). Notably, the systemic increase in these myeloid cell subsets was completely abrogated in IL-6<sup>DC-OE</sup> Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup> mice lacking IL-6R<sup>a</sup>. It is likely that the systemic inflammatory response in IL-6<sup>DC-OE</sup> mice is dependent on the massive expansion of myeloid cells.

Initially, IL-6 was named “B cell hybridoma growth factor,” to acknowledge its stimulatory function on B cells (18). Although we did not detect robust expression of IL-6R<sup>a</sup> on the surface of B cells (Fig. 1D), IL-6 can pair with soluble IL-6R<sup>a</sup> and act on B cells expressing gp130. Importantly, a recent study suggested that IL-6 can bind to CD5 on B cells and activate STAT3 independently of IL-6R<sup>a</sup> (7). Among B cells, CD5 expression is rather restricted to B-1a cells, identifying this subset as a primary target for the IL-6–CD5-signaling module (19). Of note, mice with IL-6 overexpression on an IL-6R<sup>a</sup>-sufficient background exhibited a dramatic reduction in B-1a cells in the spleen (Fig. 2B), whereas IL-6R<sup>a</sup> deficiency completely prevented the IL-6–triggered loss of B-1a cells in IL-6<sup>DC-OE</sup> Il6ra<sup>−/−</sup> mice (Fig. 2B).
Because CD4+ T cells expressed high levels of IL-6Rα (Fig. 1D), we analyzed the T cell compartment in mice with activated IL-6 pathway. We noted a significant shift toward CD44+CD62L2 effector CD4+ T cells in the spleen of IL-6DC-OE mice in comparison with the other groups tested (Fig. 2C). However, the frequencies of effector CD4+ T cells in response to exaggerated IL-6 expression became normal again after IL-6Rα deletion. In accordance with a previous report (20), we found abundant CD5 expression on CD4+ T cells, however, irrespective of their IL-6Rα status (Fig. 2D).

To test STAT3 activation in specific lymphocyte subsets in mice with IL-6 overexpression, we performed immunoblotting with lysates from CD19+ B cells and CD4+ T cells. Both cell types isolated from IL-6DC-OE mice displayed STAT3 phosphorylation already in steady state without additional in vitro IL-6 stimulation (Fig. 2E). Importantly, the steady-state STAT3 phosphorylation (and also STAT3 phosphorylation in response to exogenous IL-6 stimulation in vitro) was absolutely dependent on the presence of at least one copy of Il6ra in CD19+ B cells and in CD4+ T cells (Fig. 2E).

In the current study, we observed a lethal immunopathology in mice that overexpressed IL-6 as long as they were kept on an IL-6Rα-sufficient background. Among several genetic models with IL-6 overexpression (reviewed in Ref. 21), we activated murine IL-6 overexpression driven by CAG promoter in a CD11c-Cre–dependent manner. By genetic ablation of Il6ra, the phenotype of profound immune dysregulation in mice with transgenic IL-6 was completely rescued. This argues against the biological significance of any IL-6 signaling systems that would be independent of IL-6Rα. In our model, we cannot draw a definite conclusion as to which IL-6 signaling modality (i.e., classic IL-6 signaling, IL-6 trans-signaling, or IL-6 cluster signaling [trans-presentation]), is the most relevant IL-6–signaling modality for the fatal immune dysregulation in IL-6DC-OE mice. All three signaling modalities depend on IL-6Rα, either on the side of the receiving cell (classic IL-6 signaling) or on the side of the donating cell in a soluble manner (IL-6 trans-signaling) or in a cell-bound manner (IL-6 trans-presentation) (2, 6). In steady state, CD4+ T cells and CD11b+ myeloid cells express relatively high levels of the membrane-bound IL-6Rα. Thus, we speculate that, at least initially, IL-6 overexpression is operational in lymphocytes and myeloid cells through classic IL-6 signaling. The massive expansion of granulocytes in IL-6DC-OE mice was a robust
observation. However, it remains to be determined whether the expansion of Ly-6G+ cells in IL-6DC-OE mice is a direct effect of IL-6. Recently, concerns have been raised as to whether circulating granulocytes can directly respond to IL-6 (22).

Taken together, although we did not aim to dissect direct and indirect effects of IL-6 overexpression in developing devastating inflammation, our data compellingly support the absolute requirement for IL-6Rα in mediating IL-6 effects in mice. The fact that our study did not confirm the IL-6–CD5-signaling module proposed for B cells (7) challenges the biological significance of IL-6 signals transduced by an IL-6/CD5/gp130 complex. Our conclusion is in accordance with the recent finding that soluble CD5, despite binding of IL-6, is unable to induceSTAT3-mediated signal transduction in gp130-expressing cells (8).

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We thank the members of the Waisman Laboratory and Bluestone Lab for valuable discussions.

Disclosures
The authors have no financial conflicts of interest.

References
Supplemental materials

IL-6–Driven Immune Dysregulation Is Strictly Dependent on IL-6R α-Chain Expression

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Supplemental Figures 1-3

Supplemental Table I
Supplemental Figure 1. Generation and analysis of mice with IL-6 overexpression (Related to Figure 1).

A – Breeding scheme to generate different groups of mice with IL6 overexpression. Tg - transgene; + - wild type (wt) allele; – - knock out allele; DC - dendritic cells; OE - overexpression.

B – Gating strategy used for Figure 1B. After defining VD- live cells autofluorescence in FITC channel was excluded by using “NOT Boolean Gating” FlowJo algorithm.

C – CD11c-Cre-mediated IL-6 overexpression followed by eGFP co-expression across different cell types in lymph nodes. Data depict representative FACS plots with average frequencies per group. Three to five mice per group were used. LN - pooled inguinal, brachial and axillary lymph nodes. All experiments were performed two to three times with similar results.
Supplemental Figure 2. Analysis of IL-6 singnaling modalities (Related to Figure 1).

A – FACS analysis of IL-6Rα expression across different cell types in the spleen. Data depict representative FACS histograms indicating IL-6Rα+ cells within the respective parental population. Bar diagram shows mean per group + SD. Isotype control was stained on corresponding cell populations isolated from Il6ra+/+ mice. Four mice per group were used. Total cells defined as VD- live cells; CD4+ T cells defined as VD-CD19- TCRβ+CD4+ cells; CD19+ B cells defined as VD-TCRβ-CD19+ cells, CD11b+ cells defined as VD-CD19-TCRβ-CD11b+ cells.

B – Western blot analysis of STAT3 phosphorylation in total splenocytes in response to IL-6 stimulation in vitro (300 ng/ml).

C – FACS analysis of STAT3 phosphorylation in response to in vitro stimulation with IL-6 (50 ng/ml) and hyper-IL-6 (125 ng/ml). Mean fluorescence intensity (MFI) of p-STAT3 was normalized to the condition without stimulation (time point 0) per genotype. CD5+ and CD5+ B cells were isolated from the peritoneal cavity, and CD5+CD4+ T cells were isolated from the spleen of Il6ra+/+ and Il6ra−/− mice, respectively.

*p < 0.05, ***p < 0.001, N.S. – not significant; two-tailed unpaired t-test. All experiments were performed two to three times with similar results.
Supplemental Figure 3. Analysis of different cell types in mice with IL-6 overexpression (Related to Figure 2).

A – Fractions and absolute numbers of different leukocyte subsets in the spleen and lymph nodes of the indicated mouse strains.

B – Cellularity in the spleen and lymph nodes of the indicated mouse strains.

Dot plot graphs (A-B) show values for individual mice and mean per group. Three to five mice per group were used. LN - pooled inguinal, brachial and axillary lymph nodes; VD - Viability dye; cDC - conventional dendritic cells, defined as VD\CD19^-\TCR\beta^-\CD11b^-\CD11c^+ cells; moDC - myeloid-derived dendritic cells, defined as VD\CD19^-\TCR\beta^-\CD11b^-\CD11c^+ cells.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001, N.S. – not significant; two-tailed unpaired t-test. All experiments were performed two to three times with similar results.
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Supplemental Table I. FACS antibodies and viability dyes used in the study.