SARS-CoV-2-Specific Antibody and T Cell Response Kinetics According to Symptom Severity

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INTRODUCTION

Infection with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) causes coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which is a currently ongoing worldwide pandemic. Understanding the antibody and T-cell responses to SARS-CoV-2 in humans is crucial for characterizing the pathogenesis of COVID-19 and developing vaccines against SARS-CoV-2.

Several studies have investigated the antibody responses to SARS-CoV-2 and reported that most patients produced IgM and IgG antibodies within 15 days of symptom onset. IgM and IgG antibodies were developed sequentially or simultaneously, and the levels of antibodies were different according to disease severity; patients with severe symptoms had greater antibody levels than those with mild symptoms. However, the longevity of SARS-CoV-2-specific antibody responses are unknown. More importantly, the comparison of the longevity of SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses with that of antibody responses is still lacking.

SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses are essential for controlling SARS-CoV-2 through the adaptive immune response. Previous studies have examined SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses, but they focused only on T-cell responses during the acute phase of the disease or during convalescent phase, with phenotypic characteristics and correlations of antibody responses according to disease severity. As such, there is a lack of data on the detailed kinetics of SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses in terms of even short-term longevity. We thus evaluated the detailed kinetics of antibody and T-cell responses against SARS-CoV-2 at the acute (1 week from symptom onset), convalescent (1 month from the symptom onset), and post-convalescent (2 months from the symptom onset) phases in COVID-19 patients with a wide range of symptom severity, from mild to moderate to severe/critical.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Patients and collection of clinical specimens. We enrolled confirmed cases of COVID-19 prospectively who were admitted to four university-affiliated hospitals (Asan Medical Center, Chung-Ang University Hospital, Soonchunhyang University Seoul Hospital, and Inje University Sanggye Paik Hospital) in South Korea between February 2020 and January 2021. All patients agreed to peripheral blood sampling, upon which the plasma and peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) were separated immediately and then stored in a −80 °C deep freezer (plasma) or a liquid nitrogen tank (PBMCs). The blood samples were analyzed at three time points: acute phase (1 week since symptom onset), convalescent phase (1 month after symptom onset), and post-convalescent phase (2 months after symptom onset). The severity of illness was classified into three groups according to NIH classification: group 1, asymptomatic or mild; group 2, moderate; and group 3, severe or critical. This study
was reviewed and approved by the ethical committee of institutional review boards of each participating institution, and all participants signed written informed consent.

**Diagnosis of COVID-19.** Diagnosis of COVID-19 was confirmed by real-time reverse transcription–polymerase chain reaction for the RdRp, N, and E genes of SARS-CoV-2. Viral RNA was extracted from nasopharyngeal swab specimens using the STARMag™ 96 X 4 Universal Cartridge kit (Seegene, Seoul, Republic of Korea) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. The extracted RNA was assayed with the PowerChek 2019-nCoV real-time polymerase chain reaction kit (KogeneBiotech, Seoul, Republic of Korea), which targets the RdRp gene of SARS-CoV-2 and the E gene of beta-coronavirus, or the Alplex™ 2019-nCoV assay (Seegene), which targets the RdRp and N genes of SARS-CoV-2 and the E gene of beta-coronavirus. Cycle threshold values less than 40 for the RdRp gene were considered positive results.

**Measurement of IgG and IgM antibodies.** Plasma was isolated from blood specimens by centrifugation at 2,500 rpm for 10 minutes. To inactivate SARS-CoV-2, the plasma was irradiated with up to 6 million rad from a 60Co gamma source or treated with 0.5% Triton X-100 (Sigma-Aldrich) and the reaction was stopped with a stop solution (Sigma-Aldrich) or medium-containing solvent, and incubated for 24 hours. The resulting spots were counted with an automated ELISPOT reader (AID/ESPO; Autoimmun Diagnostika GmbH, Strassberg, Germany), and the results were expressed as the number of spot-forming cells per 5.0 × 10⁶ PBMCs.

**Statistical analyses.** Categorical variables were compared using Fisher’s exact test or Pearson’s χ² test as appropriate. Continuous variables were compared using the Mann-Whitney U test, Student’s t-test, or Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance with Dunn’s multiple comparison tests. The antibody levels and T-cell responses between 1 week and 1 month or 1 month and 2 months after symptom onset were compared by paired t-test. The clinical results were analyzed using SPSS Statistics for Windows (v. 23.0; IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). Graph plotting and analysis for the relative OD values (450 nm) and spot-forming cell data were done using GraphPad Prism 5 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA). All tests of significance were two tailed, and P values < 0.05 were considered to be significant.

**RESULTS**

**Clinical characteristics of the patients.** Twenty-five patients with COVID-19 were classified according to disease severity as mild (n = 5), moderate (n = 9), and severe/critical (n = 11, with nine severe patients and two critical patients). Detailed baseline characteristics and clinical outcomes of the patients according to disease severity are shown in Table 1. Age and hypertension correlated highly with disease severity (P = 0.01 and P = 0.03, respectively). In the severe/critical group, one patient received convalescent plasma therapy and one patient died at the hospital.

**Kinetics of IgG and IgM antibodies.** SARS-CoV-2-specific IgG and IgM antibodies were measured in 67 plasma specimens obtained from 23 patients at three time points. The IgG and IgM antibody levels showed peak levels at 1 month after symptom onset and decreased at 2 months regardless of the symptom severity (Figure 1). The IgG antibody level (mean ± SD) in the mild and moderate groups increased between 1 week (mild, 0.23 ± 0.19; moderate, 1.44 ± 3.34) and 1 month (mild, 11.15 ± 9.69; moderate, 34.73 ± 54.44) after symptom onset, then decreased at 2 months (mild, 6.49 ± 5.73; moderate, 20.42 ± 26.93), but the differences between 1 week and 1 month (mild, P = 0.165; moderate, P = 0.204), and between 1 month and 2 months (mild, P = 0.116; moderate, P = 0.192) were not significant (Figure 1A and B). Meanwhile, the IgG antibody level in the severe/critical group increased significantly between 1 week (0.24 ± 0.22) and 1 month (85.17 ± 54.76, P < 0.001) after symptom onset, then decreased significantly at 2 months (46.15 ± 36.96, P < 0.001; Figure 1C). At 1 month, the IgG response level was significantly greater in the
severe/critical group compared with other groups (between mild and severe/critical, \( P < 0.01 \); between moderate and severe/critical, \( P < 0.05 \), Supplemental Figure 1A). At 2 months, the IgG response level in the severe/critical group was significantly greater than in the mild group (\( P < 0.01 \), Supplemental Figure 1A).

The patterns of IgM antibody levels were similar with IgG antibody levels. The IgM antibody level in the mild group increased slightly between 1 week (0.23 ± 0.08) and 1 month (0.93 ± 0.63, \( P = 0.130 \)) after symptom onset, then decreased at 2 months (0.38 ± 0.14, \( P = 0.08 \), and these differences were not significant (Figure 1D). The IgM antibody levels in the moderate and severe/critical groups increased significantly between 1 week (moderate, 0.47 ± 0.52; severe/critical, 0.24 ± 0.24) and 1 month (moderate, 1.36 ± 0.64, \( P < 0.01 \); severe/critical, 1.51 ± 0.51, \( P < 0.001 \)) after symptom onset, then decreased significantly at 2 months (moderate, 0.91 ± 0.54, \( P < 0.001 \); severe/critical, 1.05 ± 0.59, \( P < 0.01 \); Figure 1E and F). At 1 month, the more severe the symptoms, the greater the IgM antibody levels, but the differences between the groups were not significant. At 2 months, the IgM antibody levels in the mild group was significantly less compared with other groups (between mild and moderate, \( P < 0.05 \); between mild and severe/critical, \( P < 0.01 \); Supplemental Figure 1B).
IFN-γ producing T-cell responses. T-cell responses were analyzed in 54 PBMC specimens obtained from 19 patients. IFN-γ-producing T-cell responses generally increased between 1 week and 1 month after symptom onset (Figure 2). In the severe/critical group, IFN-γ-producing T-cell responses increased significantly between 1 week ([mean ± SD] S1, 32.11 ± 59.95; S2, 13.78 ± 16.43; N, 11.33 ± 9.62) and 1 month (S1, 383.5 ± 348.5, P < 0.05; S2, 237.6 ± 200.5, P < 0.05; N, 306.1 ± 331.5, P < 0.05; Figure 2C, F, and I), but the mild and moderate groups were not significantly different between 1 week and 1 month. The IFN-γ-producing T-cell responses decreased between 1 month and 2 months after symptom onset, but the differences were not significant in all groups, except only the moderate group was stimulated with S1 (Figure 2B).

When the patients were classified according to symptom severity, IFN-γ-producing cell responses did not show significant intergroup differences at any time point after symptom onset (Supplemental Figure 2). At 1 month, IFN-γ-producing cell responses stimulated with S2 peptide in the moderate group were slightly greater than that in the severe/critical group (moderate, 280.4 ± 256.4; severe/critical, 237.6 ± 200.5; P = 0.718; Supplemental Figure 2).

DISCUSSION

We investigated the SARS-CoV-2-specific humoral and cellular responses in patients with a wide range of COVID-19 symptom severity, from mild to critical, at multiple time points (i.e., acute phase, convalescent phase, post-convalescent phase). We found that the antibody levels of both IgM and IgG decreased notably between the convalescent phase and the post-convalescent phase, whereas the SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses decreased slowly until the post-convalescent phase. The antibody response levels correlated closely with symptom severity, whereas SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses were not significantly different according to symptom severity. Although the 2-month interval from symptom onset is somewhat short, our data provide important information during this pandemic.

Previous studies reported that the acute antibody responses to SARS-CoV-2 infection were similar to those in other viral infections, in which seroconversion takes place within 2 weeks and the IgG level peaks around 2 to 3 weeks after symptom onset. However, the kinetics of the IgM and IgG antibodies after reaching their maximum levels were yet to be clarified. Our data show that both IgM and IgG antibodies reached peak levels around 1 month after symptom onset and decreased at 2 months after symptom onset. This change in IgG is distinct from that in SARS-CoV, which showed that the corresponding IgG levels could be maintained at high levels for up to 100 days after symptom onset.

A recent study reported that SARS-CoV-2-specific antibodies decay rapidly between 30 days and 90 days after symptom onset, which is in line with our current findings. However, another study reported that antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 did not decline within 4 months after diagnosis. These discrepancies may be explained in part by the differences in the type of antibody assay and patient population, including various severities of illness. Notably, long-term follow-up studies on Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus and SARS-CoV showed that the corresponding antibodies persisted for 3 and 2 years, respectively. Therefore, further studies on the short-term and long-term antibody kinetics against SARS-CoV-2 are needed.

**FIGURE 1.** Change of IgG and IgM antibody responses against the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 S1 protein in paired samples classified with symptom severities. The change of IgG and IgM antibody responses in the mild group at 1 week, 1 month, and 2 months after symptom onset in (A, D) the mild group, (B, E) the moderate group, and (C, F) the severe/critical group. OD = optical density. This figure appears in color at www.ajtmh.org.
Several studies investigated SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses in patients with COVID-19.\textsuperscript{6-13} Sattler et al.\textsuperscript{11} showed that dysfunctional T-cell responses were more common in deceased patients than in the comparators. Ni et al.\textsuperscript{10} reported a strong correlation between neutralizing antibody titers and SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses during the convalescent period. Multiple studies showed there is some cross-reactivity of T-cell responses between SARS-CoV-2 and other beta-coronaviruses.\textsuperscript{7,9,13} However, there are a limited number of studies of T-cell responses based on the symptom severity of COVID-19 or the persistence of T-cell responses. Kroemer et al.\textsuperscript{8} reported that although the SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses against the N protein were greater in those with severe illness than in those with mild illness, the T-cell responses against S protein and M protein were not significantly different according to symptom severity. Sekine et al.\textsuperscript{12} reported that SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses in asymptomatic or mild COVID-19 patients were high in the absence of a detectable humoral response. These studies are partially in line with our findings that SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses were not significantly different according to symptom severity.

It is worth noting that only a few studies investigated the longevity of SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses after natural infection. One study reported the kinetics of SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses during the early phase (up to 1 month after symptom onset).\textsuperscript{13} In our study, the SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses were relatively maintained between 1 month and 2 months after symptom onset, which is somewhat different from the marked decreasing trend observed in antibody responses. These findings indicate that T-cell memory against SARS-CoV-2 may be quite durable, and that measuring T-cell immunity is a more reliable marker than antibody levels for characterizing the adaptive immune response against COVID-19. This also suggests that even if the antibody level wanes rapidly after symptom onset, the severity of illness and viral shedding upon re-exposure to SARS-CoV-2 may be minimized when T-cell immunity can be maintained.\textsuperscript{26} Therefore, our data provide important insight into the durable immune response against COVID-19 and vaccine development.

Our study has several limitations. First, as we did not analyze the levels of neutralizing antibodies, and it is difficult to extrapolate our data to the protective antibody response. Second, the follow-up duration (2 months after symptom onset) was short, and more data might be needed to further understand the durability of the immune response.

Figure 2. Change of interferon-\(\gamma\)-producing T-cell responses to severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2-specific overlapping peptides in paired samples classified with symptom severities. Spot-forming cells per \(5 \times 10^5\) peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) stimulated with spike protein 1 (S1), spike protein 2 (S2), and nucleocapsid protein (N) at 1 week, 1 month, and 2 months after symptom onset in (A, D, and G), the mild group, (B, E, and H) the moderate group, and (C, F, and I), the severe/critical group. This figure appears in color at www.ajtmh.org.
different according to symptom severity and were relatively SARS-CoV-2-specific at symptom onset, with a decreasing trend thereafter. In contrast, and waned after reaching a peak around 1 month after symptom onset, and to analyze them according to severity of illness. In conclusion, our data show that SARS-CoV-2-specific antibody responses were greater in those with severe symptoms and waned after reaching a peak around 1 month after symptom onset, with a decreasing trend thereafter. In contrast, SARS-CoV-2-specific T-cell responses were not significantly different according to symptom severity and were relatively maintained during the post-convalescent phase.

Received December 16, 2020. Accepted for publication May 3, 2021. Published online June 17, 2021.

Note: Supplemental figures appear at www.ajtmh.org.

Acknowledgment: The American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene has waived the Open Access fee for this article due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Financial support: This work was supported by a grant from the Korea Health Technology R&D Project through the Korea Health Industry Development Institute, which is funded by the Ministry of Health & Welfare, Republic of Korea (grant no. HW20C2062).

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