Identification of characteristic subepithelial surface granulomatosis in immune-related adverse event-associated enterocolitis

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Abstract
Immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs) have provided an additional treatment option for various types of human cancers. However, ICIs often induce various immune-related adverse events (irAEs). Enterocolitis is a major irAE with poorly understood histopathological characteristics. In this study, we retrospectively investigated the histopathology of colon tissue samples from 17 patients treated with ICIs. There were two major histological patterns of colitis: an ulcerative colitis-like pattern and a graft vs host disease-like pattern. Although these two patterns of colitis were mutually exclusive, both patterns often showed a characteristic that we call "subepithelial surface granulomatosis" (SSG), which has not been reported in other types of colitis. SSG was found even in colon tissue without symptoms or endoscopic findings of colitis. Given the increasing reports of sarcoid reaction or exacerbation of tuberculosis after treatment with ICIs, granuloma formation could be a histological hallmark of systemic immune activation by ICIs. Although statistical significance was not obtained, probably because of the small sample size, SSG may be a surrogate biomarker of systemic anticancer immune activation. We propose that a prospective study with larger sample size be performed.

KEYWORDS
biomarker, colitis, immune checkpoint inhibitors, immune-related adverse event, subepithelial surface granulomatosis
The increasing adoption of cancer immunotherapy with immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs) has given us an additional therapeutic option for various types of malignant tumors. However, the considerable success of ICIs has unfortunately increased immune-related adverse events (irAEs). Enterocolitis is a relatively frequent irAE, particularly in patients treated with ipilimumab, an anticytotoxic T lymphocyte-associated protein 4 (CTLA-4) antibody. Diarrhea occurs in 12%-13% of patients administered antiprogrammed death receptor-1 (PD-1), 30%-35% of those administered anti-CTLA-4, and 10% of those treated with combination therapy. Because irAEs greatly reduce quality of life and often show a clinical course different from that of ordinary autoimmune diseases, their appropriate diagnosis and treatment are important subjects. Based on our current understanding, irAE-associated enterocolitis does not show specific histological findings—any type of inflammation can be found. As described in this brief report, we investigated the histopathology of colon tissue from patients treated with ICIs. Interestingly, we discovered a characteristic feature that was a specific finding for the colon after treatment with ICIs. In addition, the theoretical mechanism of this feature would be consistent with efficient cancer immunity. In other words, this novel feature could be a potential surrogate marker of systemic anticancer immune activation.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Patients and specimens

With approval of the institutional review board (322-134: Clinopathological investigation of irAE caused by immune checkpoint inhibitors), the formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded material archives of Sapporo Medical University Hospital, Hakodate Goryoukaku Hospital, Sunagawa City Medical Center, Asahikawa Red Cross Hospital, Otaru City General Hospital, and Kushiro City General Hospital were searched for colorectal biopsy or surgical resection specimens from patients administered ICIs. Informed consent was obtained through an opt-out on the website according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. A total of 17 specimens were available: 16 were biopsies and one was a surgical resection specimen that was independent of the primary tumor. Patient histories were examined for relevant clinicopathological factors, including age, sex, primary tumor, type of ICI, intestinal symptoms, endoscopic findings, and other irAEs. The clinical effects of ICIs were evaluated according to RECIST (Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumors) criteria. In each evaluation, the best clinical response before intestinal symptoms was analyzed. To obtain concordant results regarding the histological analysis, each slide was examined on a multiheaded microscope by three pathologists.
| Age (years) | Sex | Tumor Type | Type of ICI (cycles) | Effect | Symptom | Endoscopic finding | Histology | SSG | Other irAE |
|------------|-----|------------|----------------------|--------|---------|-------------------|-----------|-----|-----------|
| 69         | M   | Lung ade no Ca | Pembrolizumab: 200 mg/3 wk (8) | PR     | Diarrhea | Nonspecific | GVHD-like | Positive | No        |
| 66         | M   | Lung ade no Ca | Nivolumab: 170 mg/2 wk (3) | PD     | Diarrhea | Normal | UC-like | Negative | No        |
| 55         | M   | Lung ade no Ca | Nivolumab: 150 mg/2 wk (11) | PD     | Diarrhea | Nonspecific | Non specific | Negative | No        |
| 69         | M   | Lung ade no Ca | Pembrolizumab: 200 mg/3 wk (16) | PD     | Diarrhea | Nonspecific | UC-like | Negative | No        |
| 70         | M   | Lung ade no Ca | Pembrolizumab: 200 mg/3 wk (16) | PR     | Diarrhea | UC-like | UC-like | Positive | No        |
| 67         | F   | Lung ade no Ca | Pembrolizumab: 200 mg (1) | PR     | Diarrhea, Melena | UC-like | Nonspecific | Negative | No        |
| 86         | F   | Lung SCC | Nivolumab: 150 mg/2 wk (5), 240 mg/2 wk (17) | SD     | Diarrhea | Nonspecific | GVHD-like | Negative | No        |
| 58         | F   | Lung SCC | Atezolizumab: 1200 mg/3 wk (10) | SD     | Diarrhea, melena | UC-like | UC-like | Positive | No        |
| 71         | M   | Lung SCC | Pembrolizumab: 200 mg/3 wk (3) | PR     | None | Normal | None | Positive | No        |
| 69         | F   | Lung carcinosarcoma | Pembrolizumab: 200 mg/3 wk (1) | PD     | Melena | Nonspecific | UC-like | Negative | No        |
| 66         | M   | Urothelial Ca | Pembrolizumab: 200 mg/3 wk (11) | CR     | Diarrhea | UC-like | UC-like | Positive | No        |
| 77         | F   | Urothelial Ca | Pembrolizumab: 200 mg/3 wk (10) | PR     | Diarrhea | Normal | GVHD-like | Positive | No        |
| 63         | M   | Urothelial Ca | Pembrolizumab: 200 mg/3 wk (15) | CR     | Melena | Ischemic | Nonspecific | Negative | No        |
| 74         | F   | Melanoma | Nivolumab: 3 mg/kg/2 wk (6) | CR     | Diarrhea, melena | UC-like | UC-like | Positive | No        |
| 74         | F   | Melanoma | Nivolumab: 3 mg/kg/2 wk (3) | PD     | Diarrhea | Nonspecific | GVHD-like | Positive | No        |
| 64         | F   | Renal tumor | Ipilimumab: 1 mg/kg + Nivolumab: 240 mg/3 wk (4) | CR     | Abdominal pain | Normal | GVHD-like | Positive | No        |
| 67         | F   | Mucoepidermoid Ca | Nivolumab: 240 mg/3 wk (4) | PR     | Diarrhea | Normal | GVHD-like | Positive | Dermatitis |

**Abbreviations:** Ca, carcinoma; CR, complete response; GVHD, graft vs host disease; ICI, immune checkpoint inhibitor; irAE, immune-related adverse event; PR, partial response; SCC, squamous cell carcinoma; SD, stable disease; SSG, subepithelial surface granulomatosis; UC, ulcerative colitis.
abscess. On the other hand, lymphocyte infiltration into the epithelium and occasional apoptotic bodies were characteristic findings in the GVHD-like pattern. Lymphocytes infiltrating into epithelial cells were CD8 positive, whereas CD4-positive cells were located in interstitial lesions of the lamina propria (Figure 1B). We could not find statistically significant difference in clinical effect of ICIs between these two groups (P = .27, Fisher's exact test).

Interestingly, nine of the 17 patients showed a characteristic mucosal lesion involving subepithelial aggregation of cells with occasionally elongated ovoid pale nuclei and abundant eosinophilic cytoplasm (Figure 2A). Importantly, this feature was recognized by standard hematoxylin and eosin staining. It sometimes mimicked the morphological characteristics of collagenous colitis, although no apparent collagen band was identified (Figure 2B). In addition, this lesion is often confusing with the aggregation of vascular endothelium. We therefore performed immunohistochemical detection of CD31 and CD34, the well-recognized markers of vascular endothelium. They were positive only in the interstitial blood vessels (Figure 2C). On the other hand, this feature was positive for CD68, indicating a monocyte/macrophage lineage (Figure 2D). Together with these morphological and immunohistochemical findings, these formations were identified as granuloma-like lesions at the surface of the colon. We named this feature "subepithelial surface granulomatosis" (SSG), which is not found another type of colitis. Notably, these surface granulomas were located beneath the epithelium and often along the basal membrane, whereas small rounded granulomas are found deep in the colon in Crohn's disease. Cheese-like necrosis, a typical histological feature of tuberculosis, was also not observed. While the UC-like and GVHD-like patterns were mutually exclusive, surface granuloma was found in both types of colitis. In addition, surface granuloma was observed even in a patient without significant symptoms or histological evidence of colitis other than granuloma (Case 9). Interestingly, eight of the nine patients with SSG achieved disease control (complete response, partial response, or stable disease). Moreover, eight of the 12 patients with disease control exhibited SSG in the colon tissue. However, likely because of the small sample size, this finding did not reach statistical significance (P = .13, Fisher's exact test).
4 | DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated histopathological findings in irAE-related colitis. The histological patterns of UC-like and GVHD-like pattern colitis have also been reported in some previous studies, although the differential mechanisms and clinicopathological importance of these patterns were unclear.4-6 We identified SSG as a novel feature that was specific to colon tissue after ICI administration. PD-1/programmed death-ligand 1 (PD-L1) inhibition sometimes complicates granuloma formation disorders, including sarcoid reaction and exacerbation of tuberculosis.7,8 SSG formation appears to be a more frequent event than these granuloma-forming adverse events. Granuloma formation after ICI administration can be attributed to a cellular immunity mechanism similar to that in mycobacterium tuberculosis infection. We assume that interferon-gamma (IFNγ) is the key factor underlying the granuloma formation induced by ICIs (Figure 3). Indeed, IFNγ is an essential cytokine for granuloma formation in mycobacterium infection.9 In addition, mycobacterium tuberculosis-specific peripheral T lymphocytes release a large amount of IFNγ, which is used to diagnose tuberculosis infection. On the other hand, tumor antigen-specific activated cytotoxic T lymphocytes (CTLs) produce abundant IFNγ, which leads to cancer cell death. Type 1 helper T cells would also be involved. The surface location of the SSG could be due to a reaction to enteric contents, including commensal bacteria, a potential determinant of clinical efficacy of ICIs. Consequently, SSG formation can be a hallmark of systemic CTL activation. Therefore, the histological finding of SSG may be useful as a surrogate marker for estimating the clinical effects of ICIs. Further clinicopathological investigation is required to determine the clinical significance of SSG in irAE histology.

Our study has some limitations. First, this study is based on a retrospective review of a limited number of medical records. The evaluation time points of the clinical response to the ICIs varied among patients. Grades of the intestinal symptoms were not available. In addition, multiple types of malignant tumors were included in the study. To obtain more reliable evidence, an appropriately designed prospective study is required, as well as a larger sample size and optimal control group. In addition, the appropriate biopsy timing or site should be identified. Second, even though SSG may a surrogate marker of systemic immune activation induced by ICIs, this marker might not necessarily reflect clinical efficacy. Immune activation may be a necessary but not sufficient condition. Although the immune system is activated, other immune escape mechanisms can inhibit cancer immunity. Third, only one patient who received a CTLA-4 inhibitor was included in this study, CTLA-4 inhibition may show a histology similar to that of autoimmune colitis in immunodysregulation polyendocrinopathy enteropathy X-linked (IPEX) syndrome, a disease associated with regulatory T cell deficiency.10 Further development of relevant biomarkers and their combination may provide a valid biomarker for estimating the clinical efficacy of ICIs.

In conclusion, we identified SSG as a characteristic histopathological feature of irAE-associated enterocolitis. Because this was a pilot study with a small sample size, further investigation in a larger population is required, particularly in terms of the type of ICI, clinical efficacy for cancer, or other parameters. However, we believe that the results of this pilot study are valuable and indicate a promising direction of future research.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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How to cite this article: Kubo T, Hirohashi Y, Keira Y, et al. Identification of characteristic subepithelial surface granulomatosis in immune-related adverse event-associated enterocolitis. *Cancer Sci*. 2021;112:1320-1325. [https://doi.org/10.1111/cas.14773](https://doi.org/10.1111/cas.14773)