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Short Communication

Cytokine modulation correlates with severity of monkeypox disease in humans

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**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Human monkeypox is a zoonotic disease endemic to parts of Africa. Similar to other orthopoxviruses, virus and host have considerable interactions through immunomodulation. These interactions likely drive the establishment of a productive infection and disease progression, resulting in the range of disease presentations and case fatality rates observed for members of the *Orthopoxvirus* genus.

**Objectives:** Much of our understanding about the immune response to orthopoxvirus infection comes from either *in vitro* or *in vivo* studies performed in small animals or non-human primates. Here, we conducted a detailed assessment of cytokine responses to monkeypox virus using serum from acutely ill humans collected during monkeypox active disease surveillance (2005–2007) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

**Study design:** Nineteen serum samples that were from patients with confirmed monkeypox virus infections were selected for cytokine profiling. Cytokine profiling was performed on the Bio-Rad Bioplex 100 system using a 30-plex human cytokine panel.

**Results:** Cytokine profiling revealed elevated cytokine concentrations in all samples. Overproduction of certain cytokines (interleukin [IL]-2R, IL-10, and granulocyte macrophage-colony stimulating factor) were observed in patients with serious disease (defined as >250 lesions based on the World Health Organization scoring system).

**Conclusions:** The data suggest that cytokine modulation affects monkeypox disease severity in humans.

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1. Background

Monkeypox virus (MPXV) is an orthopoxvirus similar to smallpox, and can cause an acute systemic lesional disease associated with high morbidity. Over the last 30 years there has been a marked increase in the number of cases reported in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) [1].

Immunopathogenesis is believed to play a major role in disease severity and outcome during orthopoxvirus infections. Cytokine storm during variola virus infection has been suggested in human cases and non-human primate models [2–4]. Induction of a cytokine storm is driven by inflammatory mediators and cellular constituents which lead to overproduction of inflammatory cytokines, resulting in massive inflammation, sepsis and septic shock [5]. To date, the presence of cytokine storm following MPXV infection is predicted but yet to be empirically demonstrated.

2. Objectives

To determine if a cytokine storm is associated with MPXV infection, serum samples were collected from individuals presenting with febrile illness and rash during active monkeypox disease...
surveillance in the DRC (2005–2007). Monkeypox infection was confirmed by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) [1].

3. Study design

3.1. Sample acquisition and processing

Methods for sample acquisition and processing are published elsewhere [1]. In MPXV-infected patients [1], disease severity (mild or <25 lesions, moderate or 25–99 lesions, severe or 100–250 lesions, and serious or >250 lesions) was determined using the World Health Organization scoring system used during smallpox eradication [6,7]. Samples were stratified based on geographic location, disease severity, and transmission source (human or animal). Nineteen cases were selected for cytokine profiling. The breakdown of disease severity was: mild = 4 cases; moderate = 5 cases; severe = 5 cases; serious = 5 cases. Ethical approval was obtained from participating institutions, and informed consent was obtained from patients and parents/guardians.

3.2. Human cytokine analysis

Serum cytokines were measured in triplicate using Cytokine Human Magnetic 30-Plex Panel (Life Technologies, Grand Island, NY). Briefly, serum samples were thawed, vortexed, and centrifuged to remove any cryoprecipitates. Pre-mixed, lyophilized stock cytokines were rehydrated and serially diluted 3-fold to produce the standard curve. Fifty microliters of standards, or blanks were assayed per replicate well as per manufacturer’s instructions (Life Technologies, Grand Island, NY). Data were acquired on a Bio-Rad Bioplex 100 system (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, CA), and exported into GraphPad Prism (GraphPad Software, La Jolla, CA) for analysis. Normal human cytokine ranges and averages were obtained from the Bio-Plex Suspension Array System Technical Note 6029 available on the Bio-Rad website (www.bio-rad.com). Statistical significance was determined using unpaired T tests conducted at the 95% confidence level.

4. Results

4.1. Cytokine responses are predictive of disease severity

Nineteen serum samples (Table 1) from confirmed MPXV infections were analyzed using a multiplex cytokine assay. Although concentrations of interleukin (IL)-2R were similar between mild, moderate, and severe cases, concentrations were significantly higher (P < 0.05) for serious cases (Table 2). MIP-1α and MIP-1β concentrations in all cases were elevated, and concentrations of these cytokines were significantly elevated (P < 0.05) in mild cases compared to moderate and severe cases. Although all cases had elevations in serum concentrations of IL-1RA, IL-6, and IL-15, moderate cases had significantly lower concentrations of IL-1RA (this difference was not statistically significant [P > 0.05]), severe cases had significantly lower concentrations of IL-6 (P < 0.05), and moderate and severe cases had lower concentrations of IL-15 compared to other disease categories (this difference was not statistically significant [P > 0.05]). IL-10 concentrations were elevated above normal range for all categories of disease severity; however, the difference between serious cases and cases in all other severity categories was statistically significant (P < 0.05). IL-10 concentrations were roughly proportional to disease severity. Differences between mild, moderate, and severe were not statistically significant (P > 0.05). Granulocyte macrophage-colony stimulating factor (GM-CSF) was noticeably elevated above normal human range only for serious disease cases; concentrations in mild, moderate, and severe disease were not significantly different (P > 0.05).

Serum concentrations of IL-1β, IL-1RA, IL-2R, IL-4, IL-5, IL-6, IL-8, IL-13, IL-15, IL-17, MCP-1, and RANTES were consistently elevated across all severity categories. Interferon (IFN)-α, IFN-γ, IL-2, IL-7, IL-10, IL-12p40, MIG, eotaxin, and tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-α concentrations were not significantly elevated for any severity category.

5. Discussion

From serological examination of cytokine responses to human MPXV infection, a cytokine storm appears to occur during human monkeypox disease. We also found evidence of a prominent Th helper 2 (Th2) response, and a dampened Th1 response, following MPXV infection. Th2-associated cytokines IL-4 (and the closely related IL-13), IL-5, and IL-6 were elevated above normal human range and IL-10 was elevated in serious cases, whereas serum concentrations of Th1-associated cytokines (IL-2, TNF-α, IL-12, IFN-γ) fell within normal range for all severity categories. During MPXV infection, Th2 immune responses (e.g., IL-10, IL-4) could downregulate Th1-immune responses (e.g., IL-12, INF-γ, IL-2) as has been seen during infection with recombinant vaccinia virus expressing IL-4 [8]. IL-4, IL-10, and IL-13 increase vaccinia virus replication
in patients with atopic dermatitis and in mice deficient in Th1 cytokines challenged with vaccinia virus [8–10]. IL-10 release is often a strong indication of cytokine storm. IL-10 dampens the inflammatory response by downregulating the function of neutrophils, monocytes, and dendritic cells. In addition, IL-10 reduces the production of Th1 cytokines and promotes the development of regulatory T cells [Treg] and the survival of B cells [11–15]. Although we did not directly assay for a Treg response, the data suggest that immunomodulation of these cytokines might occur during human MPXV infections.

We determined that a certain subset of cytokines were associated with disease severity. MIP-1α and MIP-1β were significantly elevated in cases of mild disease compared to moderate and severe cases. MPs are pro-inflammatory chemokines which are produced during the innate immune response and promote the migration of granulocytes to areas of infection. GM-CSF, IL-10, and sIL-2R were present in extremely high concentrations in serum samples from serious disease cases.

Study limitations include time point after exposure that the serum samples were obtained and influence of other microbial agents on immune response to MPXV infection. As serum samples were taken from symptomatic patients (fever, rash) during a surveillance program, duration of infection is unknown but can be assumed to be at least 4 days post-exposure. Also, we cannot rule out the presence of other bacterial, parasitic, or viral agents endemic to the DRC. Despite these limitations, we were able to use cytokine-profiling techniques to assess immunological correlates of monkeypox disease in humans. Our data revealed potential indicators or factors for development of serious disease. Future studies should build on this work to assess these potential biomarkers for serious disease and/or targets for intervention. These data will also be useful in the evaluation of animal models. A major shortcoming for animal models is the lack of human data for comparison. Our study is the first step in compiling human data on immunological correlates of monkeypox disease that can evaluate the relevance of animal models to the human condition.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency [Project # 195726]. Opinions, interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations are those of the author and are not necessarily endorsed by the U.S. Army.

**Competing interests**

None declared.

**Ethical approval**

Ethical approval for the original surveillance study was obtained from the participating institutions, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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**Table 2**

Serum concentrations of cytokines/chemokines in patients with monkeypox infection.

| Cytokines, chemokines, or growth factors | Normal range | Mild disease | Moderate disease | Severe disease | Serious disease |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| IL-1β                                   | 0.02–0.70    | 134.77 (43.28) | 649.17 (314.10) | 1002.01 (468.50) | 144.82 (67.79) |
| IL-1RA                                  | 0.20–665.00  | 7586.08 (2046.00) | 2656.27 (502.60) | 7480.04 (2946.00) | 6983.21 (2108.00) |
| IL-2                                    | 0.03–90.00   | 36.08 (9.19) | 4.31 (1.97) | 55.42 (27.49) | 71.02 (37.18) |
| IL-2R                                   | 28.00–594.00 | 1327.69 (186.70) | 1806.10 (154.80) | 1557.05 (168.80) | 4239.94 (401.60) |
| IL-4                                    | 0.01–3.00    | 170.94 (40.59) | 298.23 (8.44) | 206.17 (28.35) | 258.27 (27.28) |
| IL-5                                    | 0.01–7.00    | 13.25 (1.02) | 15.07 (0.61) | 16.12 (0.44) | 13.75 (0.50) |
| IL-6                                    | 0.02–9.00    | 314.09 (84.87) | 795.90 (374.30) | 23.12 (7.10) | 200.82 (48.67) |
| IL-7                                    | 0.01–14.00   | 25.88 (8.45) | 0.00 (0.00) | 8.63 (3.79) | 8.45 (5.55) |
| IL-8                                    | 0.08–116.00  | 13.9243 (2767.00) | 11.2423 (3892.00) | 10.2326 (3613.00) | 7944.93 (2736.00) |
| IL-10                                   | 5.90–637.00  | 5.07 (1.39) | 9.23 (1.04) | 24.54 (9.54) | 377.05 (171.60) |
| IL-12p40                                | 36.00–646.00 | 562.22 (116.10) | 692.93 (16.98) | 512.59 (70.32) | 798.86 (90.67) |
| IL-13                                   | 0.01–9.00    | 24.83 (3.41) | 25.64 (3.33) | 33.24 (2.73) | 26.05 (3.42) |
| IL-15                                   | 0.06–5.00    | 198.03 (83.50) | 32.31 (15.93) | 33.68 (10.18) | 194.93 (95.07) |
| IL-17                                   | 0.22–31.00   | 97.40 (19.42) | 100.01 (6.61) | 93.12 (8.76) | 89.04 (9.79) |
| IFN-α                                   | 3.30–63.00   | 87.06 (17.14) | 55.80 (4.96) | 54.12 (6.65) | 60.09 (7.29) |
| IFN-γ                                   | 0.60–124.00  | 86.42 (21.16) | 145.54 (5.20) | 112.31 (13.96) | 135.50 (15.28) |
| TNF-α                                   | 0.10–98.00   | 16.03 (3.71) | 35.62 (8.12) | 17.41 (1.93) | 22.15 (2.96) |
| GM-CSF                                   | 0.80–122.00  | 8.86 (3.41) | 89.62 (44.43) | 101.71 (32.39) | 393.00 (421.50) |
| Eotaxin                                  | 1.20–39.00   | 54.00 (11.51) | 37.35 (4.41) | 24.05 (4.43) | 72.93 (23.15) |
| MCP-1/CCL2                               | 2.00–48.00   | 4128.88 (751.00) | 5263.45 (2461.00) | 1514.07 (323.00) | 3621.06 (966.10) |
| MIP-1α/CCL3                              | 0.01–2.00    | 480.30 (107.90) | 170.10 (7.51) | 188.17 (26.48) | 323.10 (88.28) |
| MIP-1/β/CCL4                             | 1.70–47.00   | 899.01 (240.70) | 167.85 (20.04) | 207.37 (20.17) | 354.69 (95.02) |
| RANTES/CCL4                              | 100.00–2282.00 | 22197.50 (10134.00) | 48143.00 (12034.00) | 28224.70 (9701.00) | 10128.00 (41612.00) |
| MIG/CCL9/IL-18                           | 86.00–7911.00 | 557.48 (108.40) | 370.46 (39.88) | 403.00 (90.98) | 1887.37 (546.70) |
| IP-10/CCL10                              | 5.90–637     | 61.23 (15.69) | 80.05 (13.52) | 66.78 (16.33) | 525.07 (167.00) |

**Abbreviations:** SEM, standard error of the mean; TNF-α, tumor necrosis factor-alpha; IFN, interferon; IL, interleukin; IL-1RA, interleukin-1 receptor antagonist; IL-2R, interleukin-2 receptor; IL-12p40, interleukin-12 p40 subunit; MCP-1, monocyte chemoattractant protein-1; MIP-1α, macrophage inflammatory protein-1α; GM-CSF, granulocyte macrophage-colony-stimulating factor; SEM, standard error of the mean.

1. Values were obtained from Technical Note 6029 "Bio-Plex suspension array system" from Bio-Rad (www.bio-rad.com).
2. Values represent the average for samples belonging to the specific disease category (mild, moderate, severe, serious).
3. P < 0.05 compared to other severity categories.

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Acknowledgements

Many people assisted with the collection of samples that were used during this study. We would like to specifically thank the Congolese health workers in the Sankuru District for their surveillance efforts and the DRC Ministry of Health and World Health Organization Country office in Kinshasa. We would also like to thank Laura Bollinger (Integrated Research Facility, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases) for editorial assistance.

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