Treatment of strongyloidiasis in HTLV-1 and Strongyloides stercoralis coinfectied patients is associated with increased TNFα and decreased soluble IL2 receptor levels

Fernanda Sallesa, Andrea Bacellara, Mirla Amorima, Glória Orgeb,c, Michael Sundbergd,M a´rcia Limab, Silvane Santosb,c, Aure´lia Portoe and Edgar Carvalhoa,b,c,*

aEscola Bahiana de Medicina e Saúde Pública, Salvador, BA, Brazil; bServício de Imunologia, Hospital Universitário Professor Edgard Santos, Universidade Federal da Bahia, Salvador, BA, Brazil; cInstituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia de Doenças Tropicais-INCT-DT(CNPq/MCT), Salvador, BA, Brazil; dStanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, CA, USA; eFaculdade de Medicina, Universidade Federal de Sergipe, Aracaju, SE, Brazil

*Corresponding author: Present address: Hospital Universitário Prof. Edgard Santos, Laboratório de imunologia, 5º andar, Rua João das Botas s/n, Canela 40110-160, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil; E-mail: imuno@ufba.br, edgar@ufba.br.

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Background: Human T cell lymphotropic virus type 1 (HTLV-1) infection has been associated with recurrent and disseminated strongyloidiasis and adult T cell leukemia/lymphoma (ATLL).

Methods: We compared immunological aspects and markers for ATLL in HTLV-1 patients with or without strongyloidiasis, and evaluated the influence of Strongyloides stercoralis treatment on the immune response and clinical outcomes of HTLV-1 infection.

Results: Levels of TNFα and IFNγ were lower in patients coinfected with HTLV-1 and S. stercoralis than in patients with HTLV-1 only (p < 0.05), and there was an increase in TNFα levels after anthelmintic treatment. Levels of sIL-2R were higher in patients with HTLV-1 coinfected with S. stercoralis and anthelmintic treatment decreased sIL-2R levels (p < 0.05). The one patient who developed ATLL was coinfected with S. stercoralis.

Conclusion: These data show that helminthic infection has a modulatory role in HTLV-1 infection and that S. stercoralis may be a cofactor in the development of ATLL.

Keywords: HTLV-1, Strongyloides stercoralis, Leukemia, ATLL, Interleukin-2 receptor, sIL-2R

Introduction

Human T cell lymphotropic virus type 1 (HTLV-1) is the causal agent of HTLV-1 associated myelopathy (HAM/TSP), adult T cell leukemia/lymphoma (ATLL) and manifestations related to the myelopathy, such as overactive bladder and erectile dysfunction.1 – 3

HTLV-1 infects T cells inducing lymphocyte proliferation and an exaggerated production of TH1 cytokines such as IFNγ and TNFα.2 In contrast, helminthic infections are characterized by TH2 immune response. As individuals coinfected with HTLV-1 and Strongyloides stercoralis have decreased levels of IL4, IL5, IL13 and S. stercoralis IgE levels, disseminated and recurrent strongyloidiasis are common in patients with HTLV-1.4 – 6 There are also reports that S. stercoralis influences the development of ATLL.7 – 9 Indeed, helminthes down-modulate the exaggerated inflammatory response observed in HTLV-1 infection, which could prevent the development of neurological disease.10

The aim of this study was to evaluate in a cohort of patients infected with HTLV-1 and S. stercoralis if strongyloidiasis modifies the immunological response and clinical outcomes of patients with HTLV-1, before and after anthelmintic treatment.

Materials and methods

Patients and clinical outcomes

Thirty patients with S. stercoralis and HTLV-1, and 60 patients with HTLV-1 only were followed in a HTLV-1 clinic at the Hospital Universitário Professor Edgard Santos (HUPES), Bahia, Brazil. Patients were followed for 2 – 11 years. Study and control groups were matched by age (± 5 years) and gender. Exclusion criteria included HIV positive patients or patients with HAM/TSP.

Five clinical outcomes were analyzed: recurrence of strongyloidiasis, development of HAM/TSP, ATLL, overactive bladder and erectile dysfunction. Diagnosis for HAM/TSP was based on WHO’s established criteria (1989).11 Diagnosis of overactive bladder was based on the International Continence Society’s criteria12 and diagnosis of erectile dysfunction was based on the International
Index of Erectile Function (IIEF-5). 13 Strongyloidiasis was treated with cambendazol 5 mg/kg (n = 22) or ivermectin 200 μg/kg/day (n = 8). Written informed consent was obtained from each participant and the study was approved by the ethical committee of the Hospital Universitário Professor Edgard Santos.

**Assays to detect HTLV-1 infection and S. stercoralis infection**

Diagnosis of HTLV-1 infection was made by ELISA (Cambridge Biotech Corp., Worcester, MA, USA) and confirmed by western blot analysis (HTLV blot 2.4, Genelab, Singapore). At least three stool examinations were performed prior to treatment and S. stercoralis infection was determined by the Baermann technique.

**Cytokine profile**

The cytokine levels were determined by ELISA in supernatants of unstimulated lymphocyte cultures as previously described. 2-4 INFγ, TNFα, IL5 and IL10 levels, cytokines that are enhanced in HTLV-1 or strongyloidiasis, were measured by ELISA sandwich technique (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN, USA). In 17 patients coinfected with HTLV-1 and S. stercoralis, cytokine levels were measured before and after treatment. Serum sIL-2R was determined by ELISA (Human IL-2R alpha [Quantikine], R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN, USA). The HTLV-1 proviral load in peripheral blood mononuclear cells was measured by real time PCR as previously described. 14

**Statistical analyses**

The Pearson χ² test and Student’s t test were used to assess differences between gender and ages, respectively. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare cytokines levels before and after helminthiasis treatment. Fisher’s exact test and McNemar’s test were used to compare proportions. A p value <0.05 was considered significant.

**Results**

There were no differences in age, gender and clinical manifestations related to HTLV-1 in HTLV-1 infected patients with or without strongyloidiasis. With S. stercoralis infection, 26 patients were asymptomatic at entry, 3 presented with diarrhea and/or abdominal pain and 1 had disseminated strongyloidiasis. The levels of INFγ, TNFα, IL5, IL10 and sIL-2R in patients with HTLV-1 with or without strongyloidiasis and after strongyloidiasis treatment are shown in Figure 1. The levels of INFγ and TNFα were higher in the 60 patients with HTLV-1 without strongyloidiasis than in the 26 patients coinfected with HTLV-1 and strongyloidiasis (p < 0.05). There was an increase in TNFα levels after treatment compared with levels before treatment. This increase was observed in 14 of the 17 (82%) patients treated. INFγ levels increased and IL5 levels decreased after treatment but these differences were not significant (p > 0.05). The serum levels of sIL-2R of 22 patients coinfected with HTLV-1 and strongyloidiasis were higher than in the 55 patients with HTLV-1 without strongyloidiasis (p < 0.05), and sIL-2R levels reduced significantly after antihelminthic treatment (p < 0.05). This decrease was observed in 10 of 15 (67%) patients. The proviral load did not differ (p > 0.05) between the two groups.

Failure of strongyloidiasis treatment was observed in six patients treated with cambendazol, but they responded to ivermectin. In only one case, a 45-year-old woman, recurrence of strongyloidiasis was documented. She was initially treated with cambendazol and then with ivermectin but continued to have gastrointestinal symptoms despite negative stool examination. In 2008 S. stercoralis was again diagnosed and she died due to ATLL.

**Discussion**

The immune response in HTLV-1 infection is characterized by T cell activation with increased production of inflammatory cytokines and spontaneous T cell proliferation. 2 Our observation that levels of IFNγ and TNFα production in patients coinfected with HTLV-1 and S. stercoralis increase after antihelminthic treatment provides an argument in favor of a pivotal role for strongyloidiasis in modifying the immune response of patients with HTLV-1.

The exaggerated production of IFNγ after HTLV-1 infection decreases the defense mechanisms against helminthes and is associated with recurrent and disseminated strongyloidiasis. 3-6 This study shows that effective treatment for strongyloidiasis and surveillance for S. stercoralis in patients with HTLV-1 are important in modifying the prognosis for this coinfecion. Only one patient remained chronically infected with S. stercoralis and developed ATLL.

Strongyloidiasis has been suggested as a cofactor in the development of ATLL. 7-9 Up to 39% of patients coinfected with HTLV-1 and S. stercoralis presented with monoclonal integration of HTLV-1 proviral load DNA in their blood lymphocytes, a characteristic of ATLL. 7 Increased levels of sIL-2R and high proviral load are markers for ATLL. 14 The sIL-2R levels in patients coinfected with HTLV-1 and S. stercoralis were higher than in patients only infected with HTLV-1 and a significant decrease in these levels occurred after antihelminthic treatment. This, together with the occurrence of ATLL in a patient with strongyloidiasis, provides an argument in favor of a role for S. stercoralis in the development of ATLL.

We did not document that helminthic infection influences the development of neurological diseases in HTLV-1 infection. As all patients with strongyloidiasis were treated, we cannot rule out that helminthic infection, when present, down-modulates the immunological response and may attenuate neurological diseases associated with HTLV-1. However, there was an increase in the prevalence of neurological manifestations in all patients in the study indicating that patients with HTLV-1 may quickly develop neurological symptoms.

This study shows that early and effective treatment for strongyloidiasis in HTLV-1 infection is important to prevent recurrent and
disseminated strongyloidiasis. Evidence that after strongyloidiasis treatment there was an increase in TNF\(\alpha\) and a decrease in sIL-2R levels reinforces the role of helminthes in the modulation of HTLV-1 immune response and that S. stercoralis may be a cofactor in the development of ATLL.

**Authors’ contributions:** FS and EC were responsible for the study design. Clinical follow-up and information about patients were collected by FS, MA, AB and AP. GO, MS and EC participated in the data analysis and in the interpretation of the results. SS was responsible for the immunological studies and proviral load. FS and EC drafted the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. EC is guarantor of the paper.

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**Competing interest:** None declared.

**Ethical approval:** Ethical approval was granted by the ethical committee of the Hospital Universitário Professor Edgard Santos.

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