Estrogen turns down “the AIRE”

Pearl Bakhru, Maureen A. Su


Genetic alterations are known drivers of autoimmune disease; however, there is a much higher incidence of autoimmunity in women, implicating sex-specific factors in disease development. The autoimmune regulator (*AIRE*) gene contributes to the maintenance of central tolerance, and complete loss of AIRE function results in the development of autoimmune polyendocrinopathy syndrome type 1. In this issue of the *JCI*, Dragin and colleagues demonstrate that AIRE expression is downregulated in females as the result of estrogen-mediated alterations at the *AIRE* promoter. The association between estrogen and reduction of AIRE may at least partially account for the elevated incidence of autoimmune disease in women and has potential implications for sex hormone therapy.

Find the latest version:

http://jci.me/86800/pdf
Estrogen turns down “the AIRE”

Pearl Bakhru and Maureen A. Su

Department of Pediatrics, Department of Microbiology and Immunology, School of Medicine, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA.

Autoimmune disease: sex-dependent differences

The incidence of autoimmune disease is increasing worldwide; therefore, the need to understand the basis of autoimmunity has taken on a new urgency. Progress in identifying genetic contributors to autoimmunity has been made through the study of monogenic autoimmune diseases. Such an approach has identified critical immune-regulatory genes, such as the autoimmune regulator (AIRE), which encodes a nuclear protein that functions as a key regulator of thymic central tolerance (reviewed in ref. 1). AIRE enforces self tolerance by diverting autoreactive CD4+CD25+FOXP3+ T cells (3), whereas AIRE deletion increases the differentiation of immunoregulatory CD4+CD25−FOXP3−T cells (3), whereas estrogen enhances survival of T cells in patients with autoimmunity (4). Thus, there is a plethora of evidence that sex hormones directly modulate T cells in the periphery.

Early clues that sex hormones may also modulate thymic stromal populations, such as mTECs, came from elegant studies that utilized bone marrow chimeras (5, 6). These studies showed that thymic epithelial cells express estrogen receptor (ER) and androgen receptor (AR) and that expression of these hormone receptors in the stromal compartment is required for altering bone marrow–derived T cell subsets in the thymus (5, 6). In this issue, Dragin et al. confirm that sex hormones indeed act on receptors on thymic stromal cells to impinge upon T cell development within the thymus. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that sex hormones regulate AIRE expression in mTECs and, in particular, estrogen decreases AIRE to predispose females to autoimmunity (7).

Estrogen-mediated AIRE downregulation

Transcriptional control of AIRE is complex and involves cis-regulatory elements and epigenetic modifications (Figure 1A). Identified regulators include enhancer elements that contain NF-κB response elements (8, 9); transcription factors, including activator protein-1 (AP-1), specificity protein 1 (Sp1), nuclear factor Y (NF-Y), and ETS family transcription factors (10); histone modifications (9); and DNA methylation (11). Dragin et al. report that direct binding of estrogen/ER complexes to the AIRE promoter is unlikely, as predicted estrogen response elements are lacking at this site. Instead, estrogen-dependent downregulation of AIRE transcription was determined to be dependent on DNA methylation, an epigenetic mark of gene silencing (Figure 1B). An inhibitor of DNA methyltransferases (DNMTs), 5-aza-2′-deoxycytidine, blocked estrogen-mediated modulation of AIRE, and addition of estrogen to primary human mTEC cultures increased DNA methylation at the AIRE promoter. Notably, it remains to be clarified exactly how estrogen promotes DNA methylation. One could speculate that estrogen/ER complexes may promote DNMT function to increase DNA methyla-
The finding that estrogen downregulates AIRE has substantial clinical implications. Estrogen downregulation of AIRE may account, in part, for the increased risk of autoimmunity in females. Dragin et al. demonstrated that AIRE expression is lower in females than males, and this difference was only seen after the onset of puberty, a time when females have higher circulating levels of estrogen than males. In postpubertal females, AIRE mRNA levels were reduced by approximately 50% compared with those of males (7). This finding is significant in light of recent reports that demonstrated that partial (in addition to complete) loss of AIRE function enhances susceptibility to autoimmune disease. For instance, patients and mice with a single copy of a dominant AIRE mutation have a quantitative decrease in AIRE function and develop autoimmune manifestations (14, 15). Thus, “dialing down” AIRE function to intermediate levels also elevates the incidence of autoimmunity. Given this, the effects of estrogen on reducing AIRE expression could account for the increased autoimmune predisposition noted in females. Estrogen downregulation of AIRE may be particularly relevant to autoimmune thyroiditis, which mostly affects females, as Dragin et al. show that estradiol treatment exacerbates autoantibody production in a mouse model of autoimmune thyroiditis through a thymus-dependent mechanism (7).

Figure 1. Estrogen downregulates AIRE-mediated central (thymic) tolerance. (A) AIRE in mTECs plays a major role in protection against autoimmunity. AIRE upregulates expression of TSAs, so that high-affinity T cells (Teff) that recognize these TSAs are triggered to undergo negative selection. Additionally, AIRE induces Treg development. AIRE expression is regulated by NF-κB responsive enhancer elements (~3 kB upstream of AIRE), transcription factors (Sp1, AP-1, NF-Y, ETS family transcription factors [ETS/TF], and AR [not shown]), and DNA methylation of the AIRE promoter region. (B) Estrogen (E)/ER complexes downregulate AIRE through DNA methylation. Although the mechanism is not known, ER may potentially facilitate DNMT activity or bind to other transcription factors to induce DNA methylation. DNA methylation results in AIRE gene silencing with decreased AIRE-dependent TSA expression, escape of self-reactive T cells from negative selection, and decreased Treg development. These estrogen effects contribute to increased susceptibility to autoimmune.

Clinical implications of estrogen-mediated AIRE regulation

The findings in the study by Dragin and colleagues provoke a number of follow-up questions. First, the authors show that, in addition to estrogen, other sex hormones (progesterone and the androgen dihydrotestosterone [DHT]) also affect AIRE mRNA levels. Progesterone, similarly to estrogen, decreased AIRE expression, while the androgen DHT increased AIRE. What are the mechanisms by which these hormones regulate AIRE transcription? Our data indicate that DHT/AR complexes bind directly to androgen response elements (AREs) in the AIRE promoter to upregulate AIRE transcription (18). Does progesterone act through its receptor to bind directly to the AIRE promoter? Or does progesterone function through an epigenetic mechanism?

Second, AIRE is expressed not only in mTECs, but also in extrathyMIC AIRE-expressing cells (eTACs), thymic B cells, and other cell types (1). How do sex hor-
mones influence AIRE expression in these alternative AIRE-expressing cell types? Furthermore, the transcription factor FEZF2 can regulate the expression of TSAs independently of AIRE (19). Do sex hormones also influence FEZF2 expression? Third, sex hormone profiles are not only different between males and females after puberty, but also in the first six months of life, when neonates undergo “mini-puberty” with adult levels of circulating sex hormones (20). Are differences in AIRE expression already present at this early time period? Testing AIRE expression in this neonatal window is of particular importance, because this time period has been reported to be crucial for AIRE function (21). On the opposite end of the age spectrum, sex hormone production decreases in older adults. What is the effect of decreased sex hormone levels on AIRE expression and autoimmunity risk? A recent study reported that there was no difference in the transcriptome, including Aire and AIRE-dependent TSAs, of mTECs from male versus female mice (22), a finding that appears to be in direct conflict with the findings of Dragin et al. A possible explanation for the discrepancy in the two studies is the differences in ages of the mice studied. Dumont-Lagacé and colleagues utilized 24-week-old mice, whereas Dragin et al. evaluated 6- to 8-week-old mice. Of note, thymic involution is considerable in 24-week-old animals; therefore, this additional factor may be important at this time point. Together, both of these reports raise the question of how age, sex hormone levels, and possibly thymic involution might act on AIRE expression in males and females.

Finally, whether sex hormone modulation can be utilized for therapeutic purposes is an intriguing question. In theory, SERMs or other therapies that antagonize AIRE expression is an intriguing question. In theory, modulation can be utilized for therapeutic purposes. In addition, sex hormone levels, and possibly thymic involution might act on AIRE expression in males and females.

Acknowledgments
This work was funded in part by grants from the NIH/National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) (RO1 NS079683), the NIH/National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), the Department of Defense (CA140238), a Jefferson Pilot Award, and Yang Family Biomedical Scholars.

Address correspondence to: Pearl Bakhru or Maureen A. Su, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Lineberger Cancer Center, CB 7295, 450 West Drive, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599, USA. Phone: 919.445.6054; E-mail: pearlish@email.unc.edu (P. Bakhru). Phone: 919.445.6059; E-mail: masu@email.unc.edu (M.A. Su).