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Chronic viral infections are difficult to treat, and new approaches are needed, particularly those aimed at reducing reactivation by enhancing immune responses. Herpes simplex virus (HSV) establishes latency and reactivates frequently, and breakthrough reactivation can occur despite suppressive antiviral therapy. Virus-specific T cells are important to control HSV, and proliferation of activated T cells requires increased metabolism of glutamine. Here, we found that supplementation with oral glutamine reduced virus reactivation in latently HSV-1–infected mice and HSV-2–infected guinea pigs. Transcriptome analysis of trigeminal ganglia from latently HSV-1–infected, glutamine-treated WT mice showed upregulation of several IFN-γ–inducible genes. In contrast to WT mice, supplemental glutamine was ineffective in reducing the rate of HSV-1 reactivation in latently HSV-1–infected IFN-γ–KO mice. Mice treated with glutamine also had higher numbers of HSV-specific IFN-γ–producing CD8 T cells in latently infected ganglia. Thus, glutamine may enhance the IFN-γ–associated immune response and reduce the rate of reactivation of latent virus infection.
Glutamine supplementation suppresses herpes simplex virus reactivation

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Chronic viral infections are difficult to treat, and new approaches are needed, particularly those aimed at reducing reactivation by enhancing immune responses. Herpes simplex virus (HSV) establishes latency and reactivates frequently, and breakthrough reactivation can occur despite suppressive antiviral therapy. Virus-specific T cells are important to control HSV, and proliferation of activated T cells requires increased metabolism of glutamine. Here, we found that supplementation with oral glutamine reduced virus reactivation in latently HSV-1–infected mice and HSV-2–infected guinea pigs. Transcriptome analysis of trigeminal ganglia from latently HSV-1–infected, glutamine-treated WT mice showed upregulation of several IFN-γ–inducible genes. In contrast to WT mice, supplemental glutamine was ineffective in reducing the rate of HSV-1 reactivation in latently HSV-1–infected IFN-γ−/−KO mice. Mice treated with glutamine also had higher numbers of HSV-specific IFN-γ–producing CD8 T cells in latently infected ganglia. Thus, glutamine may enhance the IFN-γ–associated immune response and reduce the rate of reactivation of latent virus infection.

Introduction

Approximately 60% of people in the United States are infected with herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and 20% with HSV-2. Prophylactic therapy with acyclovir or valacyclovir reduces the rate of cold sore (herpes labialis) recurrences by 40%–60% and the rate of genital herpes reactivation by 70%–80%. Thus, other approaches to reduce reactivation of HSV are needed. Control of reactivation of HSV correlates with virus-specific T cells (1). Increased T cell function might reduce virus reactivation. Nutrients, including glucose and certain amino acids, are critical for T cell activation (2). Activated T cells require increased metabolism of glucose and glutamine for proliferation, and deprivation or inhibition of synthesis of these molecules reduces T cell proliferation (3, 4).

Glutamine serves as a nitrogen source for rapidly dividing cells including lymphocytes, in which it is important for energy production and for nucleotide synthesis. Mitogen-stimulated proliferation of peripheral blood mononuclear cells and secretion of IL-2 and IFN-γ are dose-dependent on the level of glutamine (5). Glutamine is important for activation-induced proliferation of T cells (3, 6). Glutamine transporters are increased during T cell activation, and reduction of these transporters impairs T cell effector function (6, 7). Activation of naive T cells is associated with rapid uptake of glutamine, which requires the ASCT2 amino acid transporter (8). Activated human T cells require glutamine for production of IFN-γ; depletion of glutamine inhibits T cell proliferation and reduces production of IFN-γ and IL-2 (6, 9). Reduced availability of extracellular glutamine favors a Treg phenotype over a Th1 phenotype (10). Mice that receive glutamine have lower levels of HSV-1 in vaginal fluid, higher titers of IFN-γ in vaginal fluid, and increased numbers of activated CD8 cells in the spleen after HSV-1 infection (11). Glutamine deprivation and cellular stress have previously been shown to enhance replication of an HSV-1 mutant with deletion of virus infected cell polypeptide 0 (ICP0) (12). HSV-1 ICP0 is critical for virus reactivation. These observations suggest that low glutamine levels might be associated with increased virus reactivation, or conversely that high levels might reduce reactivation. On the basis of these findings, we postulated that glutamine supplementation might increase T cell function and improve control of a chronic virus infection.

Results and Discussion

UV irradiation of the eyes of latently infected mice induces reactivation of HSV-1 from mouse trigeminal ganglia in vivo (13). Therefore, we infected mice with HSV-1 by corneal scarification, and 2 weeks later we supplemented drinking water with glutamine, glycine, or no supplement. After 2 weeks of supplement (4 weeks after infection), the latently infected animals were anesthetized, the eyes were irradiated with UV light, and 2 days later the animals were euthanized and their trigeminal ganglia were homogenized and assayed for infectious virus. This assay tests for virus already reactivated from the ganglia in vivo, since the tissue is homogenized immediately after dissection. The percentage of UV-induced HSV-1 reactivation in trigeminal ganglia from mice treated with glutamine was about half that of mice...
treated with water or glycine in 3 independent experiments (Figure 1). The difference between glutamine and water was statistically significant in the first experiment ($P = 0.042$, Fisher’s exact test), but not in the second and third experiments, which had fewer animals; the difference was significant when the 3 experiments were pooled ($P = 0.0047$, Fisher’s exact test). In contrast, the difference between glycine and water was not significant in any of the individual experiments or in the pooled experiment ($P = 0.47$, Fisher’s exact test).

The standard animal model to assess spontaneous reactivation of HSV-2 is the guinea pig model. We infected guinea pigs intravaginally with $2 \times 10^5$ PFU of HSV-2 (strain MS), monitored the infection of HSV-2 is the guinea pig model. We infected guinea pigs intravaginally with $2 \times 10^5$ PFU of HSV-2 (strain MS), monitored the difference between glycine and water was not significant in the third experiment, which had fewer animals; the difference was significant when the 3 experiments were pooled ($P = 0.0047$, Fisher’s exact test). In contrast, the difference between glutamine and water was statistically significant in the first experiment ($P = 0.007$). At the end of the treatment periods, all animals were taken off therapy and HSV-2 DNA was determined by quantitative PCR. 

To further analyze the mechanism whereby glutamine treatment reduces reactivation of HSV in vivo, we performed RNA microarray experiments comparing gene expression of latently HSV-1–infected mouse trigeminal ganglia for animals treated with supplemental glutamine and those treated with glycine. While diet-associated differences in gene expression were noted in 3 independent experiments (Supplemental Table 1; deposited in NCBI Gene Expression Omnibus, GSE95716), 5 genes were consistently upregulated in all 3 experiments (Table 1 and Supplemental Table 2).

Figure 1. Reactivation of HSV-1 in trigeminal ganglia of mice receiving glutamine, glycine, or no supplement in their drinking water. Animals were inoculated with HSV-1 by corneal scarification, received supplemental amino acid 2 weeks later, and, after an additional 2 weeks, were anesthetized and their eyes exposed to UV irradiation. Two days later, animals were euthanized, trigeminal ganglia were removed and homogenized, homogenates were plated onto Vero cell monolayers, and the number of ganglia with reactivated virus was determined. Three separate experiments were performed (A–C), and results at day 5 in culture for all 3 experiments are shown (B). Experiment 1 had 25 mice in each group, and experiments 2 and 3 had 15 mice each in the glutamine and glycine groups and 7 and 10 mice in the no supplement group, respectively. Fisher’s exact test was used for statistics.
Figure 2. Rate of recurrences of genital HSV-2 in guinea pigs receiving glutamine or no supplement in their drinking water. Animals were inoculated intravaginally with HSV-2, and after recovery (2 weeks later on day 15) they were divided into 2 groups (based on lesion scores after acute infection) and glutamine was added to the drinking water of 1 of the 2 groups. Animals were monitored for recurrences, and disease scores were obtained each day; the mean number of cumulative recurrences per guinea pig in each group was plotted in each of 2 separate experiments (A and B). At the end of the treatment periods, all animals were taken off therapy (washout period) and monitored for recurrences in each of the 2 separate experiments (C and D). Experiment 1 (A and C) had 9 animals per group; experiment 2 (B and D) had 15 per group. Two-tailed t test was used for statistics.

Since glutamine increased the expression of IFN-\(\gamma\)-induced genes of latently infected mice, we tested whether mice unable to express IFN-\(\gamma\) would fail to show a decrease in reactivation of HSV-1 after glutamine treatment. Ifng\(^{-/-}\) mice (IFN-\(\gamma\) knockout mice) were infected with HSV-1 and treated with glutamine or no supplement as described above. The frequency of reactivation was higher in IFN-\(\gamma\) knockout mice compared with WT mice in the absence of supplemental glutamine, presumably because of the role of IFN-\(\gamma\) in controlling the viral load and reactivation. Treatment of IFN-\(\gamma\) knockout mice with glutamine had little effect on reducing the rate of reactivation compared with that in animals receiving no supplemental glutamine in 2 independent experiments (Figure 3, A and B), consistent with the observation that glutamine upregulates IFN-\(\gamma\)-inducible genes.

To further study the role of glutamine and IFN-\(\gamma\) in preventing reactivation, we looked at HSV-specific IFN-\(\gamma\)-producing CD8 T cells in the ganglia, since these cells are thought to be important for preventing reactivation in the ganglia (16). Latently infected mice treated with glutamine had significantly higher numbers of HSV-specific IFN-\(\gamma\)-producing CD8 T cells in trigeminal ganglia than untreated animals (\(P = 0.007\), Mann-Whitney test) (Figure 3C), while the total number of CD8 T cells in treated and untreated groups was not significantly different (\(P = 0.375\)) (Figure 3D). These results, along with the observa-
Therefore, glutamine may reverse the effects of stress on CD8 T cell responses and reduce reactivation.

While glutamine reduced the rate of in vivo HSV-1 reactivation in mouse trigeminal ganglia by only 50%, this is the same level of effect that antiviral suppressive therapy has in reducing the rate of symptomatic recurrences of HSV-1 herpes labialis (24). In addition, while acyclovir partially reduces HSV-2 genital recurrences, it does not reduce the 2- to 3-fold increased risk of HIV acquisition associated with HSV-2 (25). Thus, there is a clear need for other therapies to suppress oral and genital HSV recurrences. The ability of glutamine to reduce HSV reactivation in 2 different animal models suggests a new approach to reduce reactivation of the virus in humans.

Methods

Statistics. All statistics except microarray were done in JMP 7.0.2 (SAS Institute); P less than 0.05 was considered significant. Microarray data normalization and differential expression were computed using SAS and JMP/Genomics 4.0 (SAS Institute).

Study approval. All animal experiments were performed under protocols approved by the Animal Care and Use Committees of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the Food and Drug Administration. A complete description of methods is provided in Supplemental Methods.

Author contributions

YH, KW, KD, MS, LP, MBM, and PRK performed the animal studies. KW and YH did real-time PCR. KD quantified virus-specific
CD8 cells in ganglia. TGM performed the microarray experiments and analyses. JJC, YH, and KW designed the study. JJC, YH, KW, TGM, and PRK wrote the paper.

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