

## A role for antibodies in natural HIV control

Arnaud Moris, Mathias Pereira, Lisa Chakrabarti

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1	A Role for Antibodies in Natural HIV Control
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3	Arnaud Moris <sup>1,2*</sup> , Mathias Pereira <sup>1</sup> and Lisa Chakrabarti <sup>3*</sup>
4	
5	Author affiliations:
6	<sup>1</sup> Sorbonne Université, INSERM, CNRS, Center for Immunology and Microbial Infections –
7	CIMI-Paris, Paris, France
8	<sup>2</sup> Institute for Integrative Biology of the Cell (I2BC), CEA, CNRS, Université Paris-Sud,
9	Université Paris-Saclay, Gif-sur-Yvette, France
10	<sup>3</sup> Virus and Immunity Unit, Control of Chronic Viral Infections (CIVIC) Group, Institut
11	Pasteur, Paris, France
12	
13	A.M. and L.A.C. contributed equally to this work
14	
15	* Correspondence:
16	Arnaud Moris (arnaud.moris@i2bc.paris-saclay.fr) and Lisa A. Chakrabarti
17	(chakra@pasteur.fr).
18	
19	Arnaud Moris, Center for Immunology and Microbial Infections - CIMI-Paris, 91 Bd de
20	l'Hôpital, 75013 Paris, France.
21	
22	Lisa Chakrabarti, Virus and Immunity Unit, Control of Chronic Viral Infections (CIVIC)
23	group, Institut Pasteur, 28 rue du Dr Roux, 75724 Paris Cedex 15, France
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- 27 Abstract (198 words)
- 28

#### 29 **Purpose of the review**

Rare patients naturally control HIV replication without antiretroviral therapy. Understanding the mechanisms implicated in natural HIV control will inform the development of immunotherapies against HIV. Elite controllers (EC) are known for developing efficient antiviral T cell responses, but recent findings suggest that antibody (Ab) responses also play a significant role in HIV control. We review the key studies that uncovered a potent memory B cell response and highly functional anti-HIV Ab in EC, and explore the mechanisms that may account for the distinct properties of their humoral response.

37

#### 38 Recent findings

39 EC maintain a large HIV-specific memory B cell pool that is sustained by efficient Tfh 40 function. Neutralizing Ab rarely show high titers in controllers, but seem capable, at least in 41 certain cases, of neutralizing contemporaneous viral strains. In addition, EC display a unique 42 HIV-specific Ab profile in terms of isotype, antigen specificity, and glycosylation pattern, 43 resulting in polyfunctional Ab effector functions that may promote infected cell lysis and 44 prime effectors of the antiviral immune response.

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#### 46 Summary

47 Lessons from EC studies argue for the importance of integrating the many parameters
48 defining a polyfunctional Ab response when evaluating candidate vaccines and
49 immunotherapeutic approaches directed at HIV.

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51 Key words: HIV control, memory B cells, neutralizing antibodies, ADCC, CD4+ T cell help.

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#### 58 INTRODUCTION

59

60 Different groups of HIV-infected individuals naturally control HIV-1 (HIV) replication in the 61 absence of combined antiretroviral therapy (cART): elite controllers (EC), who represent fewer than 1% of HIV-infected individuals and maintain very low to undetectable viremia 62 63 (generally <50 copies HIV RNA/mL); viremic controllers (VC), who show partial viral 64 control; and post-treatment controllers, who received cART but did not resume viral replication after treatment interruption [1,2]. Importantly, these groups of patients show a 65 66 very low risk of progression to AIDS and usually maintain high CD4+ T cell counts [3]. In 67 particular, EC show the strongest protection from disease and provide a unique opportunity to 68 study immune responses involved in natural viral suppression [4].

69

70 It was long thought that cytotoxic CD8+ T cells (CTL) were the unique players involved in 71 natural HIV control. Indeed, a fraction of EC exhibit potent CTL responses against HIV-72 infected cells, often associated with the expression of protective HLA alleles such as HLA-73 B\*57 and B\*27 [2]. However, a growing body of evidence suggests that the humoral 74 response, sustained by efficient CD4+ T cell help, is also a key player in HIV control. In this 75 review, we highlight the recent works that uncovered a potent memory B cell response in EC, 76 and that demonstrated the capacity of EC's sera to perform multiple effector functions 77 possibly involved in HIV control. We also examine the mechanisms that could underlie the 78 development and persistence of HIV-specific memory B cells in EC, including the 79 preservation of CD4+ T follicular helper (Tfh) cell functions and the possibility of more 80 efficient antigen presentation.

81

#### 82 Low Neutralizing antibody titers in EC

83 The role of the humoral response was initially neglected in the HIV control research field, as several studies had shown that EC had low HIV neutralizing antibody (NAb) titers as 84 85 compared to viremic individuals [5-9]. In addition, EC with the lowest levels of HIV 86 replication, who remained undetectable even in high-sensitivity viral loads assays ( $\leq 1$  copy 87 HIV RNA/mL), showed signs of low-intensity antibody responses, with fewer viral protein 88 bands on HIV western blots, lower NAb titers, and lower cross-neutralization breadth [10]. 89 Conversely, in viremic patients, the breadth of neutralization has been associated with higher 90 viral loads [8,9,11-15], longer duration of viral exposure, and higher viral diversity [16]. In other words, in EC as in viremic patients, the availability of viral antigens seems to determine
the magnitude of the antibody response, as well as its cross-neutralization capacity.

93

94 It should be noted, however, that EC show a marked heterogeneity, with some presenting 95 broad cross-neutralization capacity while others show minimal or no neutralization [5-8,17]. 96 A flurry of broadly neutralizing antibodies (bNAbs) capable of neutralizing diverse HIV 97 strains were identified during the past decade. Of note, some of the original bNAbs were 98 cloned from HIV-specific memory B cells isolated from EC, indicating that these rare patients 99 have the capacity to produce potent anti-HIV antibodies [17,18].

100

#### 101 Preserved memory B cell differentiation in EC

102 Memory B cells, which are essential to sustain humoral immunity in the long-term, can be 103 divided in 4 subpopulations: activated memory (AM), resting memory (RM), intermediate 104 memory (IM) and tissue-like memory (TLM) B cells [19]. AM and TLM B cells, with the 105 latter showing signs of anergy, are associated with higher levels of viremia [20,21]. In 106 contrast, RM cells, which contribute to the long-term persistence of humoral responses, are 107 decreased in progressor patients [19,22]. The picture that emerges is that of an abnormal 108 immune activation that drives memory B cell exhaustion. cART decreases TLM and AM B 109 cell proportions to near-normal levels in HIV-infected patients, but only restores the RM 110 compartment in a subset of patients [20,23,24]. In EC, the proportions of the four memory B 111 cell subsets are generally comparable to those observed in HIV-negative individuals [20,25]. 112 However, the proportions of TLM B cells remain slightly elevated in EC, suggesting a degree 113 of ongoing immune activation even in well-controlled HIV infection [20,25].

114

#### 115 Potent HIV-specific memory B cell responses in EC

116 A key difference between EC and treated patients is that EC maintain a high frequency of 117 HIV-specific memory B cells despite their low viral loads. These findings were obtained by 118 measuring the frequency of circulating memory B cells capable of binding gp140 fluorescent 119 probes [26] and by performing B cell ELISPOT assays [25]. Viremic patients who initiate 120 cART show a marked decrease in the frequency of HIV-specific antibody-secreting cells 121 (ASC), and patients treated in the long-term show low or undetectable HIV-specific ASC, 122 consistent with the notion that viral replication is needed to constantly drive plasmablast differentiation in these patients [26-29]. In contrast, EC maintain a sizable memory B cell 123 124 compartment despite limited antigenemia, suggesting that HIV-specific memory B cells are

either longer lived in these rare patients or still generated or renewed due to antigen/Tfhaccess in lymphoid structures even with very low blood antigenemia.

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128 This is not to say that EC are free of HIV replication. EC are more and more often treated 129 with cART, which decreases immune activation, slightly increases CD4+ T cell counts, 130 decreases ASC frequency, and further decreases the viral load in these already well-controlled 131 patients [26,30,31]. Simian models suggest that limited viral replication persists in the 132 germinal centers (GC) of lymphoid organs in untreated controller monkeys [32]. It is thus 133 conceivable that the persistence of HIV-specific memory B cells in EC depends on residual 134 viral replication in GC, at the very site of antibody response maturation. Interestingly, 135 residual HIV replication appears to drive a persisting low-grade inflammation in some EC and 136 to influence B cell fates. A specific inflammation profile, characterized by increased levels of 137 CXCL13, sCD40L, IP10, RANTES, and TNF $\alpha$  in plasma, has been associated with the 138 capacity to develop cross-neutralizing antibody responses in EC [33]. Further studies 139 confirmed the association between CXCL13 levels and the breadth of the neutralizing Ab 140 response in EC, emphasizing the role of this chemokine in Ab maturation [34].

141

#### 142 Association between memory B cells responses and HIV neutralization capacity

143 Several studies analyzed whether the persistence of HIV-specific ASC, which include plasmablasts and memory B cells, might correlate with the titers of HIV-specific Ab and/or 144 145 the breadth of neutralization. Most studies carried out on heterogeneous cohorts of EC failed 146 to observe a correlation between cellular B cell responses and the magnitude or neutralization 147 capacity of the Ab response [13,28,35]. Interestingly, by dividing EC into two subgroups 148 expressing or not the protective HLA-B\*57 allele, we observed among HLA-B\*57+ EC that 149 the frequency of HIV-specific ASC correlated positively with the capacity to neutralize 150 various HIV strains, including Transmitter/Founder viruses [25]. As EC show an early 151 spontaneous control of HIV replication [36], which is probably mediated by CTL antiviral 152 effect in HLA-B\*57+ EC [37], we propose that these CTL responses might favor the 153 establishment of efficient memory B cell responses with cross-neutralization capacity, 154 through the rapid control of the viral load, which could in turn avoid B cell exhaustion and 155 preserve Tfh function.

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#### 159 A role for autologous virus neutralization in HIV control?

- 160 HIV constantly evades the selective pressure imposed by NAbs through mutational escape, so 161 that at a given time the patient serum can neutralize previous but not contemporaneous viral 162 strains isolated from the same patient [38]. Intriguingly, significant levels of autologous NAbs 163 (that is, capable of neutralizing the contemporaneous viral strains) were detected in viremic 164 controllers [39]. Recently, an in-depth longitudinal characterization of the humoral response 165 in a HLA-B\*57+ viremic controller revealed that this patient harbored autologous NAbs 166 capable of neutralizing 88.5% of its circulating viral clones, suggesting that these NAbs 167 contributed to HIV control [40]. Interestingly, NAbs in this patient could also cross-neutralize 168 diverse heterologous HIV strains, suggesting that in some cases viral diversification can be 169 efficiently matched by a diversification of the NAb response.
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# 171 Preserved Tfh function may underlie the persistence of potent memory B cell responses 172 in HIV controllers

- 173 Th cells, which reside within GC, provide help to B cells in the form of costimulatory signals 174 and secretion of cytokines. Chronic HIV infection perturbs Tfh function, but paradoxically 175 leads to an increase in Tfh numbers, which contributes to GC hyperplasia and 176 lymphadenopathy [41]. Circulating Tfh (cTfh), defined as blood CXCR5+ CD4+ T cells, are 177 thought to represent a form of memory Tfh, that can reacquire B cell helper functions upon 178 antigenic stimulation [42,43]. Interestingly, an increased proportion of cTfh subsets that 179 express PD-1 [44] or PD-1 in the absence of CXCR3 [45,46] was associated with the 180 development of a broad HIV-neutralizing antibody response, in adults and children. This 181 suggests that Tfh that experience ongoing antigenic stimulation, as measured by PD-1 182 expression, are needed to sustain continued antibody maturation in the context of chronic HIV 183 infection.
- 184

185 HIV control is associated with the persistence of highly functional CD4 effectors endowed 186 with polyfunctional cytokine secretion and cytotoxic capacities [47,48]. The expression of 187 HIV-specific T cell receptors of particularly high affinity accounts for the persistence of CD4 188 effector responses in EC [49,50]. Recent studies indicate that Tfh function is also highly 189 efficient in EC. The frequency of HIV-specific cTfh, as measured by MHC-II tetramer 190 labeling, remains higher in EC than in treated patients, and correlates with a higher production 191 of HIV-specific antibodies in memory B cells/cTfh cocultures [51]. In addition, HIV-specific 192 Th defined functionally as CXCR5+ CD4+ T cells with IL-21 secretion capacity are also

193 preserved in EC, and show an association with the frequency of Env-specific memory B cells 194 [52]. Thus, key Tfh/B cell interactions are preserved in controlled HIV infection, which 195 enables continued antibody affinity maturation (see Graff-Dubois *et al.* in this issue). These 196 findings emphasize the need to induce robust Tfh function in vaccination and immune 197 restauration strategies targeting HIV.

198

#### 199 A bias in Ab isotype and specificity in EC

In addition to pathogen neutralization, Abs accomplish a variety of effector functions, with Fc receptors (FcR) binding leading to cytokine secretion, antibody-dependent cellular phagocytosis (ADCP), antibody-dependent cell-mediated cytotoxicity (ADCC), and activation of the complement cascade. These different functions are strongly influenced by the immunoglobulin (Ig) isotype and the glycosylation status of the Ig Fc regions [53].

205

Although the IgG1 subclass dominates HIV-specific responses, the proportion of IgG isotypes 206 207 varies depending on HLA type and clinical parameters [54-57]. A sequential study of Env-208 specific antibodies in controller and progressor patients showed that isotype profiles evolved 209 over time, with a more prevalent Env-specific IgG2 response in controllers at early time 210 points, while the IgG2 response developed more slowly in progressors [58]. In contrast, Env-211 specific IgG3 were present in both groups at early time points, but were progressively lost in 212 progressors [58]. Isotype variations likely impact Fc-dependent functions, as for instance 213 IgG1 and IgG3 generally bind Fc<sub>Y</sub>Rs with higher affinity than IgG2 and IgG4, with IgG3 214 being particularly efficient at mediating HIV internalization [59]. It is relevant that the loss of 215 HIV-specific IgG3 occurs in synchrony with the loss of Fc-mediated functions that have been 216 associated with viral control (see below) [60]. Accordingly, the sera from EC exhibiting 217 strong polyfunctional antiviral activities are enriched in Abs of IgG1 and IgG3 subclasses 218 [56]. Taken together, these studies suggest that the persistence of Env-specific IgG able to 219 bind FcyRs with high affinities could play a role in viral control.

220

Interestingly, HIV-specific IgA Abs were also detected at higher frequency in the sera of EC than in those of treated and viremic patients [61]. IgA responses in EC displayed broader antigen specificities and a particularly high avidity to the gp41 antigen [61]. Although serum IgA can clearly induce FcR-mediated phagocytosis of HIV [62], their phagocytic capacity appears reduced as compared to IgG1 and IgG3 [59]. However, IgA can engage  $Fc\alpha RI$  to trigger ADCC by monocytes and neutrophils, and IgG1 and IgA may actually cooperate rather than compete in the induction of FcR-mediated effector functions [63].

228

229 A role of Gag-specific antibodies in viral control has also been proposed. It is interesting that 230 Gag-specific IgG2 [64,65] and IgG1 [66,67] have been associated with long-term 231 nonprogression. Gag-specific IgG2 Abs seem particularly abundant in HLA-B\*57-negative 232 EC, and may reflect a role for the humoral response in viral control when the CD8 response is 233 not dominant [57,68]. However, the significance of anti-Gag responses in HIV infection 234 remains unclear, as Gag proteins are not expressed at the cell or virion surface, and should 235 thus not be accessible to Abs. Gag-specific Abs may still be able to capture secreted Gag, 236 broken virions, or infected cell fragments, which may in turn facilitate the uptake and 237 presentation of Gag antigens to Gag-specific CD4+ and CD8+ T cells, which are 238 immunodominant in EC and thought to play a key role in suppressing HIV replication [2,69].

239

#### 240 A more potent ADCC function in EC?

241 HIV-specific ADCC, primarily mediated by NK cells, develops rapidly in the course of HIV 242 infection and exerts an immune selective pressure on the virus, suggesting that it contributes 243 to decrease the pool of infected cells during the early stages of infection [70-72]. Whether 244 ADCC participates in viral control in EC during the chronic stage of infection remains 245 debated [73]. Several studies did not detect an improved capacity of EC sera to mediate 246 ADCC [56,74,75]. In contrast, Abs mediating ADCC were found to be increased in other EC 247 cohorts [5,76], with one study reporting a predominant ADCC response in HLA-B\*57-248 negative EC, as compared to HLA-B\*57-positive EC [77].

249

250 These contrasting findings reflect the heterogeneity of ADCC responses in EC, but also the 251 variable definitions of controller status in the different EC cohorts. The choice of the control 252 group may also influence study outcome, as for instance viremic patients at an advanced stage 253 of infection tend to show lower HIV-specific Ab levels in the circulation. There is clear 254 evidence that the level of Env-specific Ab binding at the surface of infected cells is a correlate 255 of ADCC activity [75]. Indeed, NAbs with an intrinsically higher capacity to bind the surface 256 of infected CD4+ T cells show more efficient ADCC activity against these cells [78]. 257 Competition between different types of antibodies may also influence ADCC function [79]. 258 IgG3 are likely important in NK-mediated ADCC, as they have a particularly high affinity for 259 FcyRIIIA, which is the only FcR expressed at the surface of NK cells in 80% of humans [80].

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260

ADCC activity also depends on the strength of NK cell activation. Specific associations between certain NK cell receptors allotypes and their MHC-I molecule ligands, such as KIR3DL1 and HLA-B\*57, influence disease progression and are associated with lower viremia [81]. Nonetheless, NK cells from EC and progressors have so far shown similar capacities to perform ADCC [56,74,82]. Therefore, the involvement of NK receptor allotypes in viral control may rely on the direct recognition of infected cells by NK cells, through NK receptor engagement rather than ADCC.

268

#### 269 Polyfunctional Ab-effector functions in EC

270 Given the diversity of Ab effector functions, it seems unlikely that a single attribute of the Ab 271 response may account for the unique capacity of EC to control HIV infection. To tackle this 272 issue, Ackerman and Alter developed a systematic approach to study in a single sample an 273 array of functions, including ADCC, NK activation, complement deposition (ADCD), ADCP, 274 and Ab attributes, such as glycosylation status and FcR binding capacity [56,66]. This 275 "systems serology" approach did not show a superior capacity of EC's sera to perform any of 276 the above-mentioned functions. Rather, it revealed that the different Ab functions, except for 277 ADCP, strongly correlated with one another in EC. In particular, ADCD correlated with all 278 other functions, suggesting that EC developed a more coordinated Ab response than other 279 patient groups [56]. EC exhibiting these polyfunctional antiviral activities had sera enriched 280 in IgG1 and IgG3 HIV-specific Abs, pointing out to the importance of isotype subclasses in 281 determining the overall quality of the antibody response [56].

282

283 Ab effector functions depend on binding to FcRs and to initiators of the complement cascade, 284 with these steps being tightly regulated by the glycolysation of the Ig Fc region [83,84]. In 285 humans, the IgG Fc-domain harbors a single glycosylation site that can accommodate up to 286 30 documented different glycan structures. In EC, a shift of the glycosylation profile toward 287 agalactosylated glycoforms was observed in the total Ab pool [85]. In particular, HIV-specific 288 Abs exhibited a high frequency of agalactosylated, afucosylated, and asialylated glycans [85]. 289 These particular Ab glycoforms have been associated with enhanced FcR-mediated antiviral 290 functions, and may thus account for the quality of Ab effector functions in EC. Interestingly, 291 in EC, the presence of the particular glycoform G1S1F was strongly associated with 292 emergence of HIV-specific IgG3, suggesting that coordinated changes underlie the 293 development of polyfunctional Ab responses [66]. Overall, systems serology studies are starting to shed light on the many interdependent parameters involved in defining the qualityof antiviral Ab responses.

296

297 In addition to mediating direct antiviral activities, FcR-dependent Ab functions such as ADCP 298 and complement deposition also enhance innate and adaptive immunity, by inducing cytokine 299 secretion and promoting viral antigen presentation. For instance, injection of bNAbs in SHIV 300 infected macaques and HIV-infected patients was shown to enhance T cell immunity and 301 increase the neutralization breadth of endogenous Abs [86,87]. CD8+ T cell responses in 302 particular were shown to contribute to durable viral control in bNAb-treated animals [88]. The 303 underlying mechanisms are not elucidated yet, but may depend on increased formation of 304 immune complexes and/or complement opsonisation (see Naranjo-Gomez & Pelegrin in this 305 issue). Viral immune complexes were shown to promote antigen capture and dendritic cell 306 (DC) maturation [89,90]. HIV immune complexes could also induce an antiviral state by 307 triggering the production of type I interferon by plasmacytoid DC [91]. The enhancing effect 308 of NAbs on adaptive antiviral immunity has yet to be fully investigated in EC, but it is 309 interesting to note that DC from EC are more efficient at capturing HIV particles [92].

310

#### 311 CONCLUSION

312 Increasing evidence suggest that humoral responses play an important role in natural HIV 313 control. EC maintain a large HIV-specific memory B cell pool that is sustained by efficient 314 Tfh function. NAb rarely show high titers in controllers, but seem capable, at least in certain 315 cases, of neutralizing contemporaneous viral strains, and thus of directly contributing to viral 316 control. In addition, EC display a unique HIV-specific Ab profile in terms of isotype and 317 glycosylation pattern, resulting in polyfunctional Ab effector functions that may promote 318 infected cell lysis and prime multiple effectors of the antiviral immune response. Lessons 319 from EC studies argue for the importance of integrating the many parameters defining a 320 polyfunctional Ab response when evaluating candidate vaccines and immunotherapeutic 321 approaches directed at HIV.

322

#### 323 KEY POINTS

- 324 Persistence of a large HIV-specific memory B cell pool in EC
- 325 Efficient Tfh help sustains memory B cells in EC
- 326 Efficient neutralization of contemporaneous autologous viral strains in some EC and VC
- 327 Increased frequency of Gag-specific antibodies in EC

328	- Persistence of Env-specific IgG3, which mediate NK-dependent ADCC in EC
329	- Shift of the HIV-specific IgG glycosylation profile in EC
330	- Polyfunctional Ab effector responses in EC
331	- Converging evidence that the humoral response plays a key role in natural HIV control
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