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F. Calmon-Hamaty, B. Combe, M. Hahne, J. Morel. Lymphotoxin alpha revisited: general features and implications in rheumatoid arthritis. *Arthritis Research and Therapy*, 2011, 13 (4), pp.232. 10.1186/ar3376 . hal-02193310

**HAL Id: hal-02193310**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02193310>**

Submitted on 25 May 2021

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REVIEW

# Lymphotoxin $\alpha$ revisited: general features and implications in rheumatoid arthritis

Flavia Calmon-Hamaty<sup>1</sup>, Bernard Combe<sup>1,3</sup>, Michael Hahne<sup>1,4</sup> and Jacques Morel<sup>\*1,3</sup>

## Abstract

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic inflammatory disease affecting synovial joints. Therapies blocking tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  (TNF $\alpha$ ) are now routinely used in the management of RA. However, a significant number of patients with RA do not respond or develop resistance to anti-TNF therapies, and the participation of other cytokines in RA pathogenesis has been reported as well. Lymphotoxin  $\alpha$  (LT $\alpha$ ) is the closest homolog to TNF $\alpha$  and has been implicated in inflammation and autoimmunity since its original description in 1968. In spite of that, little is known about the role of LT $\alpha$  in RA or the potential of blocking this cytokine as an alternative therapeutic approach. In this review, we aim to summarize the general features of LT $\alpha$  and what is currently known about its participation in RA.

## Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic inflammatory disease affecting synovial joints. A hallmark of RA is the pseudotumoral expansion of fibroblast-like synoviocytes (FLSs), which invade and destroy the joint. Tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  (TNF $\alpha$ ) plays a major role in promoting RA, and blocking this cytokine is effective for treating patients with RA [1]. However, a significant number of patients do not respond or become resistant to anti-TNF therapies; approximately 50% of the patients still receive anti-TNFs 5 years after the start of treatment [2]. The participation of other cytokines in RA has also been reported and could explain the absence of response to anti-TNFs. Often, patients treated with anti-TNFs show secondary effects such as recurrent infections [3]. Therefore, it is important to define additional therapeutic

strategies in order to better control synovial inflammation and joint destruction observed in RA. Although lymphotoxin  $\alpha$  (LT $\alpha$ ) has been associated with autoimmune and inflammatory diseases and is the closest homolog to TNF $\alpha$ , few data pointing to a role for LT $\alpha$  in RA are available [4-10]. In this review, we aim to summarize the general features of LT $\alpha$  and what at present is known about its role in RA.

## Lymphotoxin $\alpha$ in general

LT $\alpha$ , formerly known as TNF $\beta$ , was originally described in 1968 as a cytotoxic factor produced by T lymphocytes after antigenic or mitogenic stimulation [11]. Later on, in 1984, human LT $\alpha$  was purified from a B-lymphoblastoid cell line [12,13] and its structure was determined by classic protein-sequencing methods, making LT $\alpha$  the first member of the TNF superfamily to be characterized [14]. TNF $\alpha$  was subsequently purified, and sequence comparison and receptor competition experiments revealed that these two proteins were homologous [15,16]. Indeed, LT $\alpha$  is the closest homolog to TNF $\alpha$ .

LT $\alpha$  and TNF $\alpha$  are 30% homologous in their primary amino acid sequence, but of greater significance is the observation that the regions of major sequence homology indicated a similarity in their tertiary and quaternary structures [15]. LT $\alpha$  is structurally similar to TNF $\alpha$ : LT $\alpha$  is a soluble homotrimer composed of 17-kDa monomers and binds to and signals specifically through TNF receptors 1 and 2 (TNFR1 and TNFR2) to exert its biological activities.

Although LT $\alpha$  and TNF $\alpha$  have many similarities, there are some distinct molecular and biological differences [17,18]. Like TNF $\alpha$ , LT $\alpha$  binds with high affinity to TNFR1 and TNFR2 [19]. However, the N-terminus of LT $\alpha$ , unlike that of TNF $\alpha$ , resembles a traditional signal peptide, making its conversion to a soluble form extremely efficient. Thus, LT $\alpha$  is never found at the cell surface, a unique feature among the TNF superfamily members. LT $\alpha$  is anchored to the cell membrane only in association with membrane-bound LT $\beta$ , as LT $\alpha\beta$  heterotrimers [20]. LT $\alpha\beta$  is structurally distinct from LT $\alpha$  and comprises two membrane-anchored heterotrimers, the predominant LT $\alpha_1\beta_2$  form and a minor LT $\alpha_2\beta_1$  form,

\*Correspondence: j-morel@chu-montpellier.fr

<sup>1</sup>Institut de Génétique Moléculaire de Montpellier, 1919 route de Mende, CNRS UMR5535, Montpellier, France

Full list of author information is available at the end of the article

both of which interact with the LT $\beta$  receptor (LT $\beta$ R) [18,21,22]. Besides binding to TNFR1 and TNFR2, LT $\alpha$  binds to HVEM (herpesvirus entry mediator), a receptor discovered as an entry route for herpes simplex virus, but this binding is relatively weak [23].

LT $\alpha$  is expressed by CD4<sup>+</sup> T helper type 1 (Th1) cells, CD8<sup>+</sup> cells, natural killer (NK) cells, B cells, and macrophages [18]. LT $\alpha$  has specific roles in the development and function of the immune system, mainly in lymphoid organ development, organization and maintenance of lymphoid microenvironments, host defense, and inflammation [18]. However, most of the evidence pointing to these roles came from genetically deficient mice and the relevance of LT $\alpha$  in humans is less clear. Moreover, these mice models make it difficult to determine the relative role of LT $\alpha$  in these systems. This is because the *LT $\alpha$*  gene is closely linked to the *TNF $\alpha$*  and *LT $\beta$*  genes and targeting the *LT $\alpha$*  gene can lead to collateral damage to the neighboring genes [24]. Additionally, LT $\alpha$  could somehow control the expression of TNF $\alpha$  and the absence of LT $\alpha$  could interfere with the production of this cytokine. In any case, although LT $\alpha$  was once considered to be redundant to TNF $\alpha$ , the fact that the same cell types express both LT $\alpha$  and TNF $\alpha$  and that knockout mice for either cytokines can manifest different phenotypes suggest that the two cytokines have overlapping and different functions.

In regard to the development of secondary lymphoid organs, it was shown that mice deficient in LT $\alpha$  are completely devoid of peripheral lymphoid tissues, such as Peyer patches (PP) [25]. It has been demonstrated that LT $\alpha$  mediates PP formation through TNFR1 because TNFR<sup>-/-</sup> mice either lack or have abnormal PP whereas TNF $\alpha$ <sup>-/-</sup> mice have normal PP [26].

Several studies suggested a role for LT $\alpha$  in host defense against certain infections. Mice deficient in LT $\alpha$  are highly susceptible to *Staphylococcus aureus* infections [27]. Other studies showed the LT $\alpha$  requirement for granuloma formation and resistance to *Mycobacterium*, *Leishmania*, and *Plasmodium* infections in mice [28-31]. However, whether these functions are mediated by LT $\alpha$ , LT $\beta$ , or even TNF $\alpha$  is unclear. The contribution of LT $\alpha$  to host defense was further challenged by recently generated LT $\alpha$ <sup>-/-</sup> mice showing intact TNF $\alpha$  production, which allows the evaluation of LT $\alpha$  alone, as opposed to the earlier generated LT $\alpha$ <sup>-/-</sup> mice that showed altered expression of TNF $\alpha$  [32].

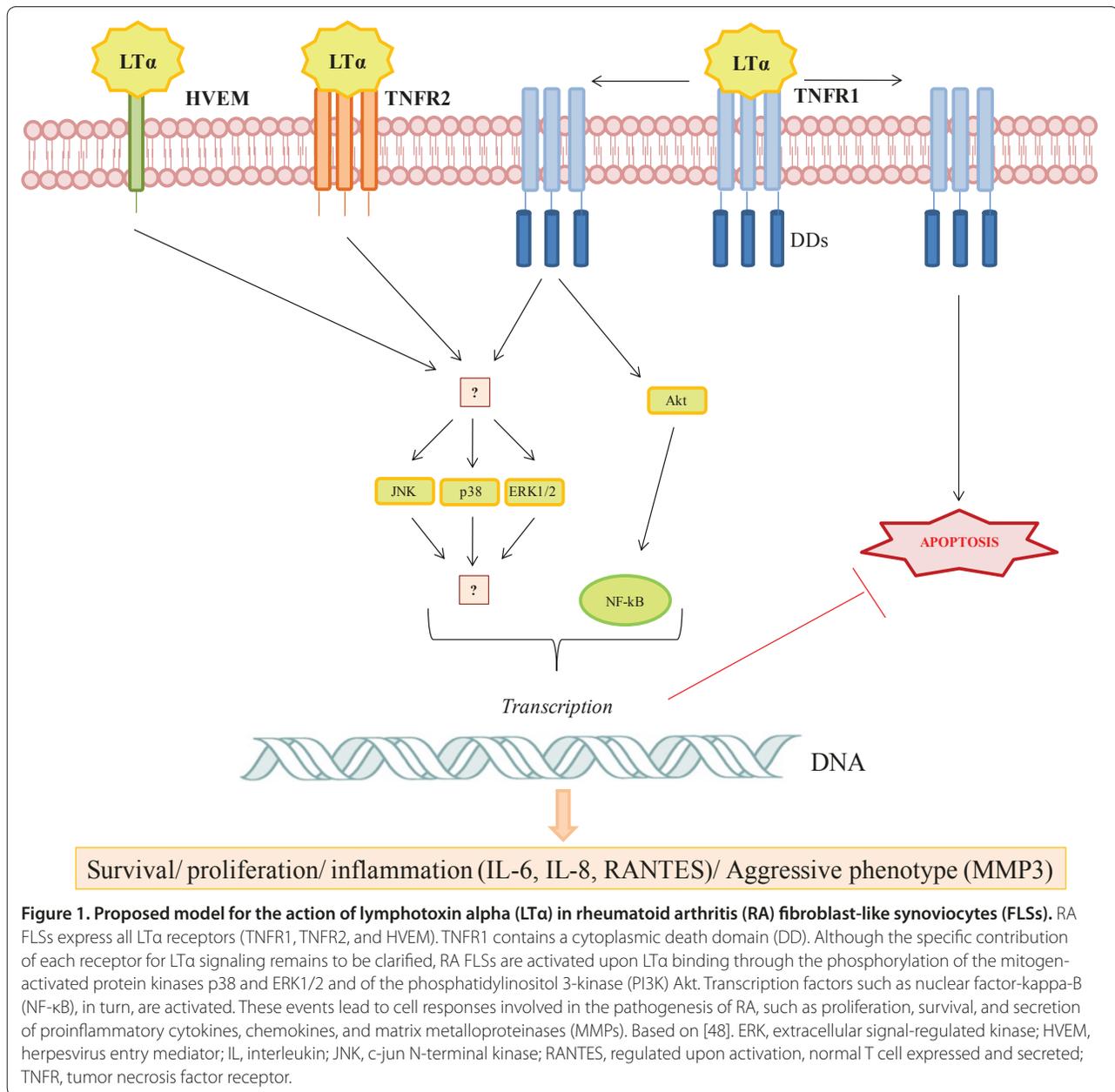
LT $\alpha$  has been implicated in inflammation since its initial description. LT $\alpha$  induces inflammation *in vivo* when expressed under the control of the rat insulin promoter (RIP) at the sites of transgene expression in the pancreas and kidney of RIPLT mice [33], and this occurs even in LT $\beta$ <sup>-/-</sup> mice [34], indicating that LT $\alpha$  alone induces inflammation. Additional data suggesting a

proinflammatory role for LT $\alpha$  derive from studies on experimental allergic encephalomyelitis (EAE) and show that myelin basic protein-specific T-cell clones secrete LT $\alpha$  [35] and that LT $\alpha$ <sup>-/-</sup> mice are resistant to inflammation and clinical signs of EAE whereas LT $\beta$ <sup>-/-</sup> mice can still develop EAE [36]. The mechanisms through which LT $\alpha$  promotes inflammation and lymphoid organ development are still poorly understood. One possibility is the induction of adhesion molecules in endothelial cells. *In vitro* studies showed that recombinant human LT $\alpha$  induces expression of intercellular adhesion molecule (ICAM) and E-selectin in human endothelial cells [37]. RIPLT mice overexpressing LT $\alpha$  exhibited a high expression of ICAM-1 and vascular cell adhesion molecule-1 in the vasculature of the inflamed pancreas and kidney independently of T or B cell-derived cytokines [38]. LT $\alpha$  could also contribute to inflammation by the induction of chemokines. In this manner, LT $\alpha$  induces the expression of RANTES (regulated upon activation, normal T cell expressed and secreted) and monocyte chemoattractant protein-1 in a murine endothelial cell line [39]. Moreover, LT $\alpha$  contributes to lymphatic vessel functions in steady-state conditions and induces lymphangiogenesis in inflammation through mechanisms yet to be characterized [40].

LT $\alpha$  is required for the differentiation of NK cells and plays a role in the recruitment and antitumor activity of mature NK cells [41-43]. When inoculated subcutaneously with syngeneic B16F10 melanoma cells, LT $\alpha$ <sup>-/-</sup> mice develop enhanced tumor growth and metastasis in comparison with wild-type littermates. This was associated with a lower number of NK cells and with slower migration of these cells from the bone marrow to peripheral organs [44]. Established, preclinical graft-versus-host disease (GVHD) models showed that LT $\alpha$  contributes to the development of GVHD, the most frequent complication of allogeneic transplantation [45]. Naïve and alloreactive CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells secrete soluble LT $\alpha$  after T-cell receptor stimulation. LT $\alpha$  participates in GVHD-mediated epithelial cell apoptosis, target organ damage, and mortality and this is mediated through TNFR1 signaling [45]. These effects were not redundant to TNF $\alpha$ , as GVHD patients treated with TNFRFc, which cross-reacts with and blocks LT $\alpha$ , have outcomes different from those of patients treated with anti-TNF $\alpha$  monoclonal antibody, as do patients with a chronic autoimmune disease such as RA [8].

### **Lymphotoxin alpha in rheumatoid arthritis**

The first reports suggesting a role for LT $\alpha$  in RA came from an analysis in patients with RA by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction, and immunohistochemistry. It has been reported that LT $\alpha$  levels are elevated in the



serum and the synovial tissue of patients with RA in comparison with the healthy controls or patients with osteoarthritis [6,46]. A relevant piece of evidence linking LT $\alpha$  to RA was provided by a case report describing an RA patient with no beneficial clinical effect after therapy with infliximab, a monoclonal antibody that specifically blocks TNF $\alpha$ . Interestingly, subsequent treatment of this patient with etanercept, a TNFR2-Fc fusion protein that also blocks LT $\alpha$ , resulted in clinical remission of the disease [8]. The different ligand specificities of etanercept and infliximab could account for the different outcomes of this patient after both treatments. Increased LT $\alpha$  expression has been shown in the synovial tissue of this

patient [8]. These data, together with the biological similarities between LT $\alpha$  and TNF $\alpha$ , suggest that resistance to TNF $\alpha$  blockage may occur when TNF $\alpha$  is not the dominant inflammatory cytokine and that LT $\alpha$  may play a role in the disease. An important advancement in the understanding of the participation of LT $\alpha$  in RA came from a study using the collagen-induced arthritis (CIA) mouse model, the most commonly used animal model for arthritis [47]. In this model, the blocking of LT $\alpha$  with a monoclonal antibody significantly improved the disease [47]. The main mechanism responsible for this improvement in the CIA model appears not to be the blocking of soluble LT $\alpha$  but the depletion of LT $\alpha$  expressing Th1 and

Th17 cells [47]. Still, the anti-LT $\alpha$  antibody applied in this study also binds to soluble LT $\alpha$  and inhibits its binding to a TNFR2.Ig in a competition ELISA [47]. An example of a dual functionality of an antagonist in RA is the well-established monoclonal antibody infliximab, which binds specifically to TNF $\alpha$ . Besides blocking secreted TNF $\alpha$ , infliximab can activate the complement cascade and deplete membrane-bound TNF $\alpha$ -expressing cells through a cytotoxic mechanism [18]. Recently, our group provided more evidence for a role of LT $\alpha$  in RA when we demonstrated that LT $\alpha$  can trigger activation (that is, proliferation and induction of an inflammatory and aggressive phenotype) of FLSs [48]. The mechanisms through which LT $\alpha$  activates FLSs are depicted in Figure 1, in a proposed model for the action of LT $\alpha$  in RA FLSs. To better evaluate the role of LT $\alpha$  in RA, our group analyzed LT $\alpha$  levels in whole sera, plasma, and synovial fluid of patients with RA, patients with osteoarthritis, and healthy controls. We were unable to detect LT $\alpha$  reliably with the commercially available ELISA kits in these samples. However, this does not mean LT $\alpha$  is not expressed locally in joints of patients with RA. While it would be interesting to detect circulating LT $\alpha$  in synovial fluid, it would be equally or even more important to obtain *in situ* evidence of LT $\alpha$  expression in arthritic tissue, where it might exert effects such as those we reported on synovial fibroblasts.

## Conclusions

TNF $\alpha$  is known to play a crucial role in RA, but several other proinflammatory cytokines have been identified to contribute to the disease as well [49]. LT $\alpha$  can easily be placed in the context of the RA synovium as it is secreted by CD4<sup>+</sup> Th1 cells, CD8<sup>+</sup> T cells, NK cells, and macrophages, cell types that are increased in the arthritic joint. The fact that LT $\alpha$  activates RA FLSs and thus may contribute to synovial hyperplasia suggests that LT $\alpha$  can also play a disease-promoting role in RA [48]. It will be important to further characterize the relevance of LT $\alpha$  in RA by detecting it *in vivo* in patients with RA.

## Abbreviations

CIA, collagen-induced arthritis; EAE, experimental allergic encephalomyelitis; ELISA, enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay; FLS, fibroblast-like synoviocyte; GVHD, graft-versus-host disease; ICAM, intercellular adhesion molecule; LT $\alpha$ , lymphotoxin alpha; NK, natural killer; PP, Peyer patches; RA, rheumatoid arthritis; RIP, rat insulin promoter; RIPLT, rat insulin promoter lymphotoxin; Th, T helper; TNF, tumor necrosis factor; TNFR, tumor necrosis factor receptor.

## Competing interests

Wyeth as part of Pfizer participate in the funding of a project on the effect of anti-TNF (soluble receptor and monoclonal antibodies) on LT $\alpha$  in rheumatoid arthritis

## Acknowledgments

We thank Wyeth (now part of Pfizer Inc, New York, NY, USA) and GERIR (Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches Immuno-Rhumatologiques, Montpellier, France) for their financial support. This study was supported by contract interface number 05.524-DRV/MC/SS.

## Author details

<sup>1</sup>Institut de Génétique Moléculaire de Montpellier CNRS-UMR 5535, 1919 Route de Mende, 34293 Montpellier, Cedex 5, France. <sup>2</sup>Department of Immuno-Rheumatology, Hôpital Lapeyronie, 371 Avenue du Doyen Gaston Giraud, 34295 Montpellier, Cedex 5, France. <sup>3</sup>University of Montpellier 1, 2 Rue École de médecine CS 59001, 34060 Montpellier, Cedex 2, France. <sup>4</sup>University of Montpellier 2, Route de Mende, 34199 Montpellier, Cedex 5, France.

Published: 26 July 2011

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doi:10.1186/ar3376

**Cite this article as:** Calmon-Hamaty F, et al.: **Lymphotoxin alpha revisited: general features and implications in rheumatoid arthritis.** *Arthritis Research & Therapy* 2011, **13**:232.