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Chronic Inflammation and Complications in Sjögren's Syndrome: Insights into Pathogenesis and Clinical Implications

Maryam Aertsz*

Department of Medicine, Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas, Sau Paulo, Brazil

Opinion Article

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***For Correspondence:** Maryam Aertsz, Department of Medicine, Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas, Sau Paulo, Brazil

E-mail: Aertsz.deg345@gmail.com

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DESCRIPTION

Sjögren's syndrome is a chronic autoimmune disorder characterized by the immune system's misguided attack on the body's exocrine glands, particularly the salivary and lacrimal glands, leading to symptoms of dry mouth and dry eyes. Named after the Swedish ophthalmologist Henrik Sjögren, who first described the condition in 1933, this syndrome extends beyond the hallmark sicca symptoms, often involving systemic manifestations and complications affecting various organs.

Pathophysiology

The pathophysiology of Sjögren's syndrome is rooted in autoimmune processes. Autoimmune reactions result in the infiltration of autoreactive lymphocytes, notably $CD4^+$ T cells, into the exocrine glands, inducing chronic inflammation and subsequent destruction of glandular tissue. This immune dysregulation leads to a reduction in saliva and tear production, causing the characteristic dry mouth (xerostomia) and dry eyes (xerophthalmia). While the primary impact is on the exocrine glands, Sjögren's syndrome can exhibit systemic involvement, affecting organs such as the lungs, kidneys, liver, and the nervous system.

The immune system's aberrant activation involves the production of autoantibodies, including anti-SSA (Ro) and anti-SSB (La), contributing to the autoimmune response. Chronic inflammation, marked by the release of inflammatory mediators, perpetuates tissue damage and increases the risk of complications, such as lymphoma in a subset of patients. Genetic predispositio ns, coupled with environmental factors, play a role in the susceptibility to Sjögren's syndrome. The interplay between these factors triggers and sustains the autoimmune response. Neurological implications, including peripheral neuropathy and cognitive dysfunction, further underscore the complexity of the disease.

Autoimmune basis

- Sjögren's syndrome is primarily an autoimmune disorder, characterized by the immune system mistakenly attacking the body's own tissues.
- Autoreactive lymphocytes, particularly $CD4^+$ T cells, infiltrate the exocrine glands, especially the salivary and lacrimal glands.
- This infiltration triggers an inflammatory response, leading to glandular destruction and a subsequent decrease in saliva and tear production.

Immune cell activation

- The initial trigger for immune activation in Sjögren's syndrome remains unclear, but both genetic and environmental factors are believed to contribute.
- Epithelial cells in the salivary and lacrimal glands may present self-antigens, activating autoreactive T cells.
- B cells are also involved, producing autoantibodies, such as anti-SSA (Ro) and anti-SSB (La), which contribute to glandular damage.

Glandular dysfunction

- Infiltration of lymphocytes leads to the formation of lymphocytic foci within the salivary and lacrimal glands.

- Chronic inflammation and progressive destruction of glandular tissue result in reduced saliva and tear production.
- Dysfunction in the exocrine glands contributes to the hallmark symptoms of dry mouth (xerostomia) and dry eyes (xerophthalmia).

Systemic involvement

- While the primary impact is on exocrine glands, Sjögren's syndrome can extend beyond, affecting various organs and systems.
- The immune system's activity may lead to systemic symptoms such as fatigue, joint pain, and skin manifestations.
- In some cases, the lungs, kidneys, liver, and nervous system can be involved, causing a range of complications.

Chronic inflammation

- Persistent inflammation is a key feature of Sjögren's syndrome.
- Inflammatory mediators, including cytokines and chemokines, contribute to tissue damage and perpetuate the autoimmune response.
- The chronic inflammatory state can lead to complications such as lymphoma in a small percentage of patients.
- Neurological Implications:
- Neurological symptoms may arise due to the involvement of the nervous system.
- Peripheral neuropathy, sensory disturbances, and cognitive dysfunction can occur, although the exact mechanisms are not fully understood.

Genetic and environmental factors

- Genetic predisposition plays a role in the susceptibility to Sjögren's syndrome.
- Environmental factors, such as viral infections or hormonal changes, may trigger the onset of the disease in genetically susceptible individuals.

Therapeutic approaches

- Treatment aims to manage symptoms and may involve immunosuppressive medications to modulate the immune response.
- Artificial tears and saliva substitutes are used for symptomatic relief.
- Ongoing research explores targeted therapies to address the underlying autoimmune processes.

CONCLUSION

Sjögren's syndrome is a complex autoimmune disorder characterized by the immune system's attack on exocrine glands, resulting in dry mouth and dry eyes. The pathophysiology involves autoreactive lymphocytes infiltrating glands, causing chronic inflammation and tissue destruction. Autoantibodies like anti-SSA and anti-SSB contribute to the autoimmune response. While primarily affecting exocrine glands, the syndrome can have systemic implications, impacting various organs. Genetic predisposition and environmental factors play roles, triggering and sustaining the autoimmune response.