Cytokines in the physiopathology of depression
Citoquinas en la fisiopatología de la depresión

ABSTRACT: This paper presents a bibliographical review on the relevance of the possible role of cytokines in depression. There is a consideration of the existing approaches to detection and diagnosis of depression; they are classified according to different criteria such as design methodologies and applications. Although the etiology of depression is still an issue, the focus of this paper is to highlight the various studies regarding the interactions of the immune system and brain activity linked to depression. These interactions are particularly important when trying to find a correlation between proinflammatory cytokines (such as IL-1, IL-6, and TNF-α) and depression. This includes a brief comparison of results obtained by different studies.

Keywords: depression, cytokines, inflammation, TNF-α, IL-1, IL-6

Palabras clave: depresión, citoquinas, inflamación, TNF-α, IL-1, IL-6

Introduction

Depression is a mental health disorder characterized by a group of affective, cognitive and somatic symptoms\(^1\). Depression boards a broad spectrum of clinical presentations\(^2\), for this reason, depressive disorders are classified into three main subclasses: Major Depressive Disorder, Dysthmic Disorder and Depressive Disorder NOS (No Otherwise Specified). Each of them is characterized by the presence to greater or lesser degree of different features such as psychotic, catatonic, atypical and chronic\(^3\). The fourth version of the Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-IV) is used to diagnose depression\(^4\), and tests like the Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (HDRS) and the Montgomery-Asberg Depression Rating Scale (MADRS) are used in several studies in order to rate depressive symptoms to determine the severity of depression\(^5,6\). Cognitive and sleep disturbances, fatigue, appetite suppression and depressed mood (sickness behaviour) are recognized as the most common symptoms of this disorder\(^7\). However, to determine the etiology and physiopathology of depression is still an issue because of its heterogeneity and the fact that depression appears concomitantly with many other diseases such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and coronary heart disease\(^8,9\).

Major depressive disorder (MDD), the most severe in the classification of depressive disorders, is considered a major public health concern with 4% of the adult population presenting active symptoms\(^10\). It is associated with social dysfunction, which affects everyday life activities, increased risk of substance abuse, obesity, and suicide\(^11,12\). Furthermore, 13 % of people in the USA and 27% of people in Europe have episodes of major depression at least once in their life\(^2\).

Currently, there are several studies regarding the interactions between the immune system and the brain activity focused on finding a more accurate representation of depression physiopathology. In particular, there is an increased interest in the consequences of inflammation in depression and the role of proinflammatory cytokines such as IL-1, IL-6, and TNF-α. The consideration of a new approach regarding inflammation is based on the fact that illnesses promoting inflammatory responses are associated with higher rates of depression, the administration of cytokines induces depressive episodes in non-psychiatric patients, the therapeutic administration of cytokines has led to depression in up to 50% of the patients, and that cytokines induce behaviors that are commonly present as symptoms of depression\(^13,20\).

The study aims to review the existing information about the relevance of the possible role of cytokines in depression and the underlying mechanisms.

Cytokines

Cytokines are large polypeptide regulatory mediator proteins secreted by white blood cells and other cells in the body. They play a role in the immune system specifically in inflammatory responses, the regulation of growth, differentiation, and function of cells. The most common classification of cytokines is into families of interleukins, tumor necrosis factors (TNF), interferons (INF), chemokines, haematopoietins and colony stimulating factors (CSF)\(^21\).

Interleukin-1 (IL-1) is the prototypic proinflammatory cytokine. It appears in two forms: IL-1alpha and IL-1beta. It functions as an immunoadjuvant as it is primarily under immune system control and it is highly inflammatory. The lea-
The precursor for 5-HT synthesis, decreasing the levels of serotonin in the brain\(^{29}\). Moreover, the inflammatory approach to describe depressive disorders pictures many mechanisms by which proinflammatory cytokines reach the brain and affect monoamine metabolism\(^{29,31}\).

Cytokine signals are able to reach the brain through humoral, neural and cellular pathways. Cytokines are relatively large proteins (ranging from 6–70 kDa) making them unable to pass through the blood-brain barrier (BBB)\(^{35}\). The presumptive non-exclusive mechanisms of how cytokines access the central nervous system (CNS) are: 1) Direct crossing of cytokines into the CNS, this occurs in the periventricular organs, where the blood-brain barrier (BBB) is physiologically absent, less restrictive (e.g. organum vasculosum laminae terminalis (OVLT) and the median eminence) or when it becomes leaky, the integrity of the BBB may be impaired due to traumas or certain pathological conditions resulting in increased access of various inflammatory cells and molecular constituents, including cytokines, to the brain, 2) Migration of cytokines by means of paracellular and transmembranous diffusion or active transport via saturable cytokine-specific molecules on brain endothelium, 3) Activation of endothelial cells, responsible for the subsequent release of second messengers like nitric oxide (NO) and prostaglandins (PGs) within the brain parenchyma, 4) Transmission of cytokine signals via afferent nerve fibers, such as the vagus nerve. 5) Entry into the brain parenchyma of peripherally activated monocytes\(^{14,32,33}\).

Cytokines may induce depressive symptoms by down-regulating the synthesis of serotonin. This might be because of the relationship between the immune system and the induction of indoleamine 2,3-dioxygenase (IDO). This enzyme is expressed in the neuroglia such as microglia, astrocytes, and neurons as well as in macrophages and dendritic cells. This enzyme is highly inducible by some cytokines including IFN-\(\gamma\), TNF-\(\alpha\), IL-1, and IL-6 through activation of a number of inflammatory signal transduction pathways these being signal transducer and activator of transcription 1a (STAT1a), interferon regulatory factor (IRF)-1, NF-\(\kappa\)B and p38 MAPK\(^{14,34}\). IDO switches the metabolism of tryptophan (TRP) toward the synthesis of kynurenine and quinolinic acid, to the detriment of serotonin synthesis (Figure 1). IDO's activity is augmented by the chronic activation of the immune system; this includes coronary heart disease, immunotherapy, obesity, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), atherosclerosis, and rheumatoid arthritis\(^{37}\).

**Conditions that support the inflammatory hypothesis in the physiopathology of depression**

**Stress and depression**

Stress is common in everyday life; however, traumatic stress can be a relevant factor for CNS illnesses as well as peripheral organ systems\(^{38}\). Also, chronic stress initiates changes in the immune system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and the immune system which in turn trigger depression\(^{39}\). In addition to immune stimuli, and physical stress such as infection, chronic inflammation, and tissue injury, exposure to psychological stressors can also induce cytokine expression in the brain\(^{31,36}\). One of the major environmental factors that may interact with cytokines and genetic predisposition to major depression is stress\(^{31}\). Physical and psychological stressors can activate immune cells in both the periphery and CNS to
β are also present when there is an increase of TNF and IL-1β, an important proinflammatory cytokines, in particular, TNF-α and IL-1β are able to damage synaptic plasticity and cognition promoting the progression of depressive disorders. Patients diagnosed with major depression show large deficits in declarative memory and cognitive, mental processes that rely on the ideal functioning of the hippocampus and medial temporal lobe.

Depression and other illnesses

High rates of depression are usually associated with diseases that involve upregulation of inflammatory processes. Medical illnesses that enhance the appearance of inflammatory markers such as Alzheimer’s disease, MS, obesity, rheumatoid arthritis and gastrointestinal inflammation, promote the development of depression in patients suffering from these diseases at higher rates than in healthy patients. Furthermore, treatments for conditions that include the use of proinflammatory agents such as interferon-γ (IFN-γ) or IL-2 induce depression. This was proved in patients suffering from chronic infectious hepatitis C and cancer. Cancer patients with depression show elevated levels of IL-6 compared to cancer patients without depression. Cardiovascular diseases that are principally caused by atherosclerosis and the associated inflammation of arteries wall can promote the development of depression and vice versa. The use of anti-inflammatory medications (aspirin) to prevent cardiovascular events.

Clinical Trials

The NCT00463580 study evaluated the effect of anti-inflammatory monoclonal antibodies in patients with treatment-resistant depression (TRD). It was a single site, parallel-group, randomized, double-blind controlled trial of infliximab versus placebo. Participants were patients with major depression, non-respondent to antidepressant therapies. Infliximab is a monoclonal antibody TNF-α antagonist that suppresses the body’s response to this cytokine. This study aimed to test the efficacy of infliximab (Remicade®) in reducing symptoms of depression compared to the effects of placebo. High sensitivity c-reactive protein (hs-CRP), TNF-α, sTNFRII, and sTNPRI were considered as biomarkers of inflammation and measured at baseline. The results showed that inhibition of TNF-α activity could not be regarded as a valid therapeutic strategy for TRD because infliximab did not show improvement of depressive symptoms. However, subjects with an elevated baseline of hs-CRP (hs-CRP >5mg/L) responded better to infliximab, showing a correlation between high inflammation and subsequent response to treatment.

Cytokines, like IL-6 and TNF-α, are identified as having both neurodegenerative and neuroprotective activities relevant to neuropsychiatric disorders when presented in non-physiological and physiological concentrations, respectively. Under stress conditions that induce cytokine production in the brain, the hippocampus (HC) suffers structural changes that may be associated with the atrophy of the HC in stress-linked depression. Patients with MDD show a reduction of hippocampal volume in both left and right HC. Evidence of the neurodegenerative activity of IL-6 relies on the association between high IL-6 plasma levels with a reduction in the volume of the HC. However, there is also evidence for the neuroprotective role of this cytokine. High levels of IL-6 are also present when there is an increase of TNF and IL-1β concentrations, suggesting a role of downregulation of neuroinflammation. In addition, healthy subjects that carry the genetic variant rs1800795 of IL-6 show larger volumes on the right side of the hippocampus, which highlights the possible neuroprotective role of IL-6. In the other hand, TNF-α may be necessary in brain development and as a modulator of synaptic plasticity when present in low concentrations. Synaptic plasticity is a fundamental mechanism of neuronal adaptation that becomes modified in depression, models of stress in animals and other conditions that alter mood. Increased levels of proinflammatory cytokines, in particular, TNF-α and IL-1β are associated with the reduction of the symptoms of depression.

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symptoms after treatment with TNF-alpha inhibitors including adalimumab and etanercept; nonetheless, these studies evaluated depressive symptoms comorbid with Crohn’s disease, psoriasis, and psoriatic arthritis, respectively.

Moreover, several clinical trials have demonstrated the neurocognitive processes between proinflammatory cytokines and depression. For this, they used endotoxin, which is a typhoid vaccination that increases cytokine expression, therefore, inducing a depressed mood in healthy patients. For one of the experiments, neuroimaging was used to evaluate the levels of IL-6 via a whole-brain regression analysis two hours post injection. Results showed that social exclusion leads to depression. For this, they used endotoxin, which is a proinflammatory cytokine, and depression. For this, they used endotoxin, which is a proinflammatory cytokine, and depression.

Conclusion

Throughout this review, we overviewed the role of cytokines in the immune system, its relationship with serotonin and tryptophan and the conditions that support the inflammatory hypothesis in the physiopathology of depression. Depression is without a doubt a complex disorder and understanding the roles of different processes that contribute to this disorder is a first step to achieve adequate treatment. The importance of this study lies in raising the possibility of finding psychotropic drugs that have a central anti-inflammatory action and that could provide a new generation of antidepressants.

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