Asthma and Smoking: An Unfortunate Combination

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Asthma is an inflammatory disease of the airways in which a key role is played by certain cells and mediators (T-helper 2 cells, mast cells, eosinophils, interleukin 4 and 5). In certain disorders, such as irritant-induced asthma, reactive airways dysfunction syndrome, and asthma due to toluene diisocyanate, inflammation is mediated predominantly by T-helper 1 cells, macrophages and neutrophils. Smoking also produces bronchial inflammation, in this case mediated primarily by macrophages and neutrophils although eosinophil predominance has also been observed in some smokers (an allergic response to certain antigens). The remodeling of the airway wall that accompanies the chronic inflammatory cascade may alter the cell response profile making it difficult to determine which type of inflammatory infiltrate is predominant. The association of asthma and smoking is a reality in our society, and it is a combination that substantially modifies pathogenic mechanisms and gives rise to a more severe clinical picture. Resistance to some of the pharmacotherapies used routinely in the treatment of asthma (corticosteroids) has also been observed and this has favored the use of other drugs (antileukotrienes). One of the preventative measures that should be used more energetically is to encourage patients to stop smoking, paying particular attention to asthmatic smokers.


Introduction

Asthma is a chronic disease of the airways characterized by a disproportionate inflammatory response to specific or nonspecific stimuli.1 Some of the agents that provoke this response are known while others are not. After repeated exposure, these agents eventually trigger sustained inflammation that gets progressively worse, producing secondary alterations in the physiology of the bronchial response. The clinical manifestations of asthma are daily respiratory symptoms (cough, wheezing, dyspnea, and chest tightness), which affect the patient’s quality of life. During an attack these symptoms become more severe and endanger the patient’s life.1 However, there is some debate about whether asthma should be considered a single disease.2,3

Tobacco smoke, a toxic agent containing high levels of harmful substances, directly affects the airways, where it triggers a very strong local inflammatory response, independently of any concurrent secondary systemic reaction. Constant aggression against the airways through cumulative exposure to smoke from daily tobacco consumption leads to the onset of chronic bronchial hypersecretion and obstructive pulmonary disease, with chronic airflow limitation or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in many cases. COPD is an entity characterized by irreversible bronchial lesions and progressive destruction of the lung parenchyma once the process has begun.4

Both asthma and smoking-related lung disease are characterized by the presence of permanent airway inflammation and, according to current pathophysiologic knowledge, both asthma and COPD can be considered to

Eosinophil Infiltration

Eosinophilic inflammation is considered to be a consequence of the differentiation of Th2 cells, and the role these cells play in the pathogenesis of asthmatic disease has been well documented through analysis of the products of degranulation. Moreover, the eosinophils and neutrophils involved in the inflammation express a different pattern of surface markers, and the biological environment of the mediators involved in their recruitment, activation, and apoptosis is rather complex. There is a large body of scientific evidence in both animal and human models implicating eosinophils in different components of asthma, such as bronchial hyperreactivity and clinical deterioration. However, eosinophils may not be the only inflammatory cells implicated in inflammatory activity since we have so far been unable to investigate whether the total elimination of eosinophils from the site of inflammation can cure asthma or the side effects such suppression would produce.

Neutrophil Infiltration

Neutrophil infiltration is also found as the predominant inflammatory pattern in certain circumstances. It has been associated with the infectious—predominantly viral—etiologies of asthma attacks and with near-fatal asthma. The mechanism that activates and perpetuates this pattern in these situations is poorly understood and the extent of direct tissue damage attributable to the mechanism is unclear. It has been suggested, however, that the course of the neutrophil clearance mechanism after initiation of apoptosis may be a crucial factor in the appearance of permanent anatomical airway damage.

Bronchial Remodeling

The process of bronchial remodeling refers to the anatomical and functional loss of airway structure secondary to repeated cycles of inflammation caused by persistent aggressions or inflammatory triggers when such inflammation persists over time and resolves without complete repair. Remodeling is characterized by the appearance of permanent changes in the bronchial epithelium and the basement membrane as well as the underlying submucosa, capillaries, and smooth muscle. These changes permanently and irreversibly impair the correct functioning of the airways in almost all cases, and in most patients the airways are not susceptible to “restitutio ad integrum” even with long-term treatment. Apart from the structural changes, remodeling is accompanied by inflammatory cell infiltration and a complex proinflammatory environment in which the inflammatory mediators constantly modify the biochemical interactions and signaling of different cell types. Bronchial remodeling is characteristic of both eosinophilic and lymphocytic inflammation, but other inflammatory mechanisms may be present. The pathogenic significance of remodeling in the natural history of the disease is poorly understood, but such remodeling probably limits the effectiveness of current asthma drugs.
reestablishment of molecular repair mechanisms. These changes are implicated in the constant aggression produced by the exacerbated repair mechanisms and in the dysfunction of the physiology of programmed cell death. This last aspect in particular is currently the subject of intense research, as are the biochemical pathways that perpetuate inflammation through an imbalance between the mechanisms of cell removal by apoptosis, macrophage phagocytosis, and initiation of cell necrosis, the final result of which is irreversible bronchial obstruction. The results of this research reinforce the hypothesis of a biochemical balance in the activation and deactivation of the most important molecular pathways in the pathogenesis of chronic airway inflammation.

Asthma and Smoking

Only limited scientific information is available concerning the effects of smoking on asthma and its consequences, although certain aspects are better understood than others. In this section we will briefly discuss the main findings of interest in this context, which have revealed an important association between these 2 entities in the development of airway disease.

The Pathophysiology of Inflammatory Airway Disease in the Presence of Asthma and Smoking

Asthma and tobacco addiction are both prevalent in the general population. While their prevalence varies by geographical area, the rates for both are clearly high. Only scant information is available on the prevalence of the combination of the 2, and the figure varies greatly between epidemiological studies. It is estimated that around 50% of adult asthmatics in the developed world probably are or have been smokers. The high coincidence of asthma and smoking favors the development of a complex pathophysiology of inflammatory airway disease, the pathophysiologic and clinical expression of which is also diverse and multifaceted and so still poorly understood today. Different inflammatory phenotypes of the diseased airway have been investigated and described in the literature. Some authors, for example, found smoking-related inflammatory activity to be closely and causally related to the onset of the nonatopic asthma phenotype, and others found an association with greater impairment of lung function. However, many aspects of airway inflammation and its link with asthma and smoking remain unclear.

Clinical Characteristics, Lung Function, and Pathophysiologic Aspects Common to Asthma and Smoking

Asthmatic smokers have more symptoms, greater morbidity, and poorer health-related quality of life as measured by direct and indirect questionnaires than asthmatics who do not smoke. In some asthmatic smokers, direct toxic exposure to tobacco smoke is associated with a higher degree of immediate bronchial hyperresponsiveness and lower baseline lung function, an indirect indication of the existence of an inflammatory base different from that of nonsmoking patients with allergic asthma. Some authors report greater use of emergency health care among patients with asthma who smoke, although it is still unclear whether smoking is a risk factor for the onset of near-fatal asthma.

A noteworthy finding is that, over the long term, there is a synergy between asthma and the effects of prolonged exposure to tobacco smoke, and this effect can be observed in the sustained decline in lung function among these patients; it is estimated that the combination produces a decline of approximately 18% in forced expiratory volume in 1 second in 10 years.

Diagnosis and Pathophysiology of Asthma and Tobacco as the Cause of Inflammatory Airway Disease

Asthmatic smokers differ in certain ways from patients with COPD caused by cumulative and prolonged exposure to tobacco smoke. Most of these individuals test positive on a methacholine challenge test or demonstrate a greater than 15% improvement after inhaling a short-acting β-agonist. However, no information is currently available on the possible confounding effect of the intensity and level of cumulative tobacco consumption over many years on the elimination or disappearance over time of variability in the results of these tests. Furthermore, we do not know whether transient resistance to the antiinflammatory effect of corticosteroids is a consequence of heavy smoking alone, or a characteristic acquired by smokers over time. Many mechanisms of corticosteroid resistance have been posited. Little is known about the mechanisms that modify diagnosis in the natural history of inflammatory airway disease, that is, about the predominant mechanism (asthma, COPD, bronchitis) involved in the inflammatory activity. Likewise, the effect of smoking cessation on the alterations associated with airway inflammation in asthmatic smokers is poorly understood. It has been suggested that lung function could improve to some degree once the efficacy of oral corticosteroid treatment is reestablished and the tobacco-related resistance to these agents has disappeared. A progressive improvement in chronic respiratory symptoms has been observed among asthmatic smokers who stop smoking, although, paradoxically, in some of these patients symptoms worsen as a result of onset of chronic bronchitis and/or the characteristic bronchial obstruction associated with COPD.

Biological Mechanisms Common to the Inflammatory Pathophysiology of Both Asthma and Tobacco

The proinflammatory activity of tobacco in airways already inflamed by asthma is poorly understood. It is known that smoking favors a cell phenotype in normal individuals characterized by a predominance of CD8+ T-lymphocytes, neutrophilia, and higher macrophage counts within the most central airway wall, and by an increase in eosinophils in the peripheral lung. Almost no precise histological information is available on the natural history of airway inflammation in the presence of asthma and smoking. Only indirect and partial data is available on...
differences between inflammatory activity in current smokers and nonsmokers. For example, findings concerning inflammatory cell phenotypes show that eosinophil counts in induced sputum are higher among asthmatic smokers than among nonsmokers with asthma, whereas neutrophilia is more pronounced among asthmatic smokers. A greater variability in exhaled nitric oxide levels has also been found in asthmatic smokers, a phenomenon conditioned by the short and long-term effects of smoking. Certain proinflammatory transcription factors (nuclear transcription factor-κB) and cell signaling systems specific to both inflammatory activity (phosphorylation of the p38 mitogen-activated protein kinase enzyme) and certain very potent inflammatory mediators (for example IL-4, TNF-α, and IL-8) are elevated in bronchial secretions of asthmatic smokers. IL-8 has been shown to correlate positively with neutrophilia and negatively with forced expiratory volume in 1 second. IL-8 is also associated with corticosteroid resistance, while TNF-α is associated with macrophage metalloelastase activity. It has also been reported that bronchial remodeling is highly dependent on the intensity of tobacco consumption, although exhaustive data are not available to indisputably support this affirmation. Similarly, it has been hypothesized that tobacco smoking may regulate the type 1 immune response to common allergens. The generation of leukotriene B₄ by circulating leukocytes is also increased in asthmatic smokers.

Several experimental studies in animals and clinical studies in humans, as well as in vitro experiments, have attempted to determine the degree of oxidative stress and the predominant inflammatory profile in the mucosa inflamed by asthma, and to study the modifications produced by smoking in order to determine its role in the mechanisms that produce inflammatory airway disease and to gain a better understanding of the biological conditions of its expression in the onset of bronchitis, COPD, and asthma. It is a question that we can deliberate carefully, but the answer will most likely be “no.” We cannot escape the epidemiological and daily clinical reality of asthma and smoking—that the morbidity and mortality associated with both these diseases can be prevented using simple measures. An example of this can be found in the article published recently by Harrison and colleagues, who studied asthma deaths recorded on death certificates in the United Kingdom. Asthma deaths continue to be largely associated with behavioral factors and behaviors known to be harmful to health, including noncompliance with therapy. However, those authors found that up to 46% of...
asthma deaths were associated with smoking (a socially acceptable drug addiction). Overlooking this important clinical and epidemiological observation of the daily medical reality of these 2 diseases so prevalent in Spain will make it more difficult to implement the most effective solution to the pathophysiologic puzzle posed by asthma and smoking (in contrast to the biological challenge posed by achieving a greater understanding of its pathogenesis). We should not, therefore, lose sight of the common sense solution to this supposed dilemma in the clinical management of these patients, that is, we should remember the following: if you have asthma and smoke, rapidly alleviate your suffering and improve your asthma control by stopping smoking now!

REFERENCES

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