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Hypoxia inducible factor-1-alpha (HIF-1α) is related to both angiogenesis and inflammation in rheumatoid arthritis

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Abstract

Objectives

Despite the important role of the transcription factor HIF-1α in angiogenesis and inflammation, only a few studies on HIF-1α expression have been performed in RA patients. The aim of the present study was to identify the layer in synovial tissue of RA patients where HIF1α is expressed and to find out whether HIF-1α expression is related to both angiogenesis and inflammation in synovium from RA patients.

Methods

A reproducible staining method for HIF-1α was developed. HIF-1α-positive cells were quantified in synovial tissue from patients with RA. As control we used synovial tissue from patients with osteoarthritis (OA). The number of HIF-1α-positive cells was compared with the number of blood vessels present and was correlated with the amount of inflammation. The amount of inflammation was determined by counting inflammatory cells, by estimating the proliferation marker Ki67 in inflamed tissue, and by using a recently published synovitis score which gives an accurate estimate of the amount of inflammation present.

Results

HIF-1α was expressed weakly in the lining layer and strongly in the sublining layer in RA synovial tissue. In contrast, HIF-1α was only weakly expressed in OA synovial tissue. The number of HIF-1α-positive cells correlated strongly with the number of blood vessels in RA synovial tissue and with inflammatory endothelial cell infiltration (blood vessels), cell proliferation (Ki67) and the synovitis score.

Conclusions

HIF-1α expression is strongest in the sub-lining layer of RA synovium and is related to both angiogenesis and inflammation in synovium from RA patients. These results thus suggest that HIF-1α could serve as an important new therapeutic target in RA, targeting both angiogenesis and inflammation.

Key words

HIF-1α, vessels, inflammation, rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis.
HIF-1α related to angiogenesis and inflammation in RA / E. Brouwer et al.

Introduction
Angiogenesis, defined as the development of new capillaries from existing blood vessels, plays a role in the development of synovial inflammation in rheumatoid arthritis (RA) (1-3). Evidence for this role is that levels of one of the most important angiogenic factors, vascular endothelial growth factor A (VEGF-A), along with levels of soluble VEGF-A receptor -1; sFlt-1 (Fms-like tyrosine kinase-1), and angiopoietin-1, correlate with the amount of inflammation and bone destruction in early arthritis (3). The close relation between angiogenesis and inflammation also has been established in animal models of RA. Moreover, in these models, treatment with angiogenesis inhibitors decreases disease activity (4, 5).

A key regulator of angiogenesis is the transcription factor HIF-1, which consists of an inducible part (HIF-1α) and a constitutive part (HIF-1β). Under normoxic conditions HIF-1α is continuously degraded (6, 7). However, hypoxia, oxygen radicals, and various hormones, growth factors and pro-inflammatory cytokines induce stable expression of HIF-1α, upon which it is dimerised with HIF-1β and translocates to the nucleus for transcriptional activity (8). Both hypoxia and pro-inflammatory cytokines (like TNF-α and IL1-β) are present in rheumatoid joints (8-13). A recent paper in a collagen induced arthritis animal model very elegantly showed that hypoxia is present in the synovium at the pre-arthritic stage of disease and has a close spatial relationship and a positive severity correlation with synovitis (14). Since both hypoxia and pro-inflammatory cytokines are found in RA stable HIF-1α expression is expected to be present in RA synovium.

Not only is HIF-1 a key regulator of angiogenesis, it is also a key regulator of inflammation. Fibroblasts from RA synovial tissue, which express HIF-1α under hypoxic conditions, are capable of secreting large amounts of SDF-1 (15), a chemokine of the CXC family involved in inflammation. In a mouse model of RA conditional knock out of HIF-1α resulted in almost complete inhibition of the inflammatory response (16, 17). Moreover, myeloid cells lacking HIF-1α did not induce arthritis in a mouse model for RA (16). Despite the important role of HIF-1α in angiogenesis and inflammation, only a few studies on HIF-1α expression in synovial tissue have been performed in vivo in RA patients. The results of these studies are inconclusive. Giambranolaki et al. reported extensive nuclear and cytoplasmic expression of HIF-1α in both the lining and the sublining layers of synovial tissue (18, 19), whereas Hitchon et al. reported that HIF-1α was present mostly in the lining layer (15). In addition, no studies have explored the relation of HIF-1α expression to angiogenesis and inflammation in RA patients.

The aims of the present study were to identify the location in synovial tissue of RA patients where HIF-1α is expressed and to find out whether HIF-1α expression is related to both angiogenesis and inflammation in synovium from RA patients. First, we developed a reliable staining method for HIF-1α using carcinoma tissue as a reference tissue. Next, we determined whether the expression of HIF-1α in RA synovial tissue correlated to both angiogenesis and inflammation. We found that nuclear HIF-1α is expressed mostly in the sublining layer and that HIF-1α expression is related to both angiogenesis and inflammation in RA patients.

Materials and methods
Tissue
Synovial tissue was obtained from 8 patients with longstanding RA and 7 patients with OA who underwent synovectomy or joint replacement surgery (Table I). Most RA patients used methotrexate as a disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drug. Synovial tissue was fixed in formalin and embedded in paraffin. Breast carcinoma and renal carcinoma tissue samples were used as positive controls. Tissue samples were used according to institutional and national ethical guidelines.

HIF-1α staining on paraffin-embedded tissue
Four different mouse monoclonal antibodies were tested: clone 54 (BD, Becton and Dickinson Company, Bio-
Table I. Patient characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Disease duration yrs</th>
<th>DMARD</th>
<th>Synovitis score</th>
<th>RF</th>
<th>ESR</th>
<th>CRP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RA1</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>MTX/SASP</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA2</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>MTX</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA3</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>MTX</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA4</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Prednisone</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA5</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA6</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>nd</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA7</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>MTX</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA8</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>MTX, AZA</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OA1  | 25  | m                    | none  | 1   | nd  | nd  | nd  |
OA2  | 51  | m                    | 10    | none| nd  | nd  | nd  |
OA3  | 61  | f                    | 1     | prednisone   | 1  | 7   | 22  | 26  |
OA4  | 58  | m                    | 1     | none        | 1  | 7   | 22  | 19  |
OA5  | 16  | m                    | 2     | none        | 0  | nd  | 7   | 5   |
OA6  | 46  | m                    | 2     | none        | 1  | nd  | nd  | <3  |
OA7  | 61  | m                    | 8     | none        | 2  | nd  | 16  | 7   |

RA: rheumatoid arthritis; OA: osteoarthritis; DMARD: disease modifying anti-rheumatic drug; Synovitis score: 0–1, no synovitis; 2–4 low-grade synovitis; 5–9 high-grade synovitis; RF: rheumatoid factor (cut-off value 15); ESR: erythrocyte sedimentation rate; CRP: C-reactive protein.

For the vascular marker CD31, a semi-quantitative scoring system of four fields was used (20) as described for HIF-1α.

### Cellular markers

Synovial tissue was also stained for three cellular markers: T-cells, CD3 (clone PS1, mouse monoclonal, Monosan, Uden, The Netherlands) diluted 1:25; B-cells, CD20 (clone L26, mouse monoclonal, DakoCytomation, Glostrup, Denmark) diluted 1:200; and macrophages, CD68 (clone PGM-1, mouse monoclonal, DakoCytomation, Glostrup, Denmark) diluted 1:50. The staining method was the same as described for the vascular marker CD31. A semi-quantitative scoring system of 0-3 was used for CD3, CD20 and CD68: 0 = no positive cells present, 1 = a small number of positive cells, 2 = a moderate number of positive cells, 3 = a large number of positive cells.

### Proliferation marker

As a proliferation marker we used Ki67 (clone MIB-1, DakoCytomation, Glostrup, Denmark) diluted 1:400. After deparaffinisation, sections were heated at 100°C for 10 minutes. Sections were then incubated with Ki67 for 30 minutes at room temperature, followed by peroxidase-conjugated rabbit-antimouse antibody (1/100) and goat-antirabbit antibody (1/100) for 30 minutes. The peroxidase staining reaction was developed using DAB. To quantify Ki67-positive endothelial cells, we used the quantitative scoring system of four fields. The presence of Ki67-positive cells in the subintimal infiltrates was scored by 2 independent observers using the semiquantitative scoring system.

### Synovitis score

The synovitis score developed by Krenn et al. (25) was used to score 4 points: 0 = none, 1 = slight, 2 = moderate, 3 = strong. The values for...
the three features were then added and interpreted as follows: 0-1, no synovitis; 2-4 low-grade synovitis; 5-9 high-grade synovitis (23).

**Statistical analysis**
Data were analysed using Graph Pad Prism Software (San Diego, USA). Student’s t-test, the Mann-Whitney U-test and Pearson’s or Spearman rank test was used as appropriate. P-values less than 0.05 were considered significant.

**Results**

**HIF-1α staining**
To detect the specific nuclear staining of HIF-1α four different antibodies were tested and also different antigen retrieval methods. Carcinoma tissue was used as reference tissue. As can be seen from Figure 1A there was a nuclear staining with antibody clone 54, but only in endothelial cells. Antibodies clone 67 and clone ESEE 122 gave a cytoplasmic staining as shown in Figure 1B and 1C respectively. Only antibody clone 67-sup showed the characteristic nuclear staining pattern of HIF-1α as previously described (24). Antigen retrieval with Tris-EDTA buffer for 60 min in a water bath gave the best result. In Figure 1D the specific nuclear staining for HIF-1α is shown in necrotic areas in breast carcinoma tissue.

**HIF-1α staining on synovial fibroblast like synoviocytes (FLS)**
The specificity of HIF-1α 67 supernatant for HIF-1α was further confirmed by staining on cultured FLS incubated with IL1-β, TNF-α and CoCl₂ (which mimics hypoxia) for 4 hours. After stimulation with IL1-β and TNF-α FLS showed bright nuclear staining with HIF-1α 67 supernatant in a 1:100 dilution (figure 2 A and B). Especially incubation with CoCl₂, which gives a chemical stabilization of HIF-1α, gave a strong positive signal (Fig. 2C). Non-stimulated FLS were negative for HIF-1α (Fig. 2D).

**HIF-1α staining on RA and OA synovial tissue**
RA and OA synovial tissue were stained for HIF-1α with clone-67 sup in a 1:100 dilution under the conditions described above. Some HIF-1α-positive cells were found in the lining layer but most were found in the sub lining layer in RA synovial tissue (Fig. 3A, C and D). Most HIF-1α-positive cells showed nuclear staining. A small percentage also showed weak cytoplasmic staining. HIF-1α-positive cells were present surrounding lymphoid aggregates and vessels and also in less cellular stromal areas (Fig. 3C and D).
A strong correlation was found between the number of HIF-1α-positive cells and the number of CD31-positive vessels (Fig. 3, G and H). In addition, significantly more HIF-1α-positive cells and CD31-positive vessels were found in RA synovial tissue than in OA synovial tissue (Fig. 4).

**Cellular markers**
CD3 (T-cells), CD20 (B-cells) and CD68 (macrophages) were used as cellular markers. Abundant infiltration of CD3-, CD20- and CD68-positive cells was found in RA but not in OA synovial tissue. Since CD68-positive macrophages have been used as biomarkers in several RA studies (25-27), we assessed the correlation between CD68-positive macrophages and HIF-1α-positive cells. We found an association between CD68-positive macrophages and HIF-1α-positive cells (Spearman r=0.51) and between the number of HIF-1α- and Ki67-positive endothelial cells (Spearman r=0.51).

**Synovitis score**
In order to investigate the severity of the synovitis we used the recently developed synovitis score by Krenn et al. (23) (Table I). The synovitis score was significantly higher in RA patients than in OA patients. Moreover, the synovitis score strongly correlated with the number of HIF-1α-positive (r=0.5980, p<0.05) and Ki67-positive cells (r=0.8430, p<0.05) (Fig. 5A and B).

**Proliferation of endothelial cells**
To investigate whether vessels proliferated, Ki67-positive endothelial cells were counted in four random fields. No significant difference was found between the numbers of Ki67-positive endothelial cells. Also, within RA patients no correlation was found between the number of CD31-positive vessels and the number of Ki67-positive endothelial cells.

**Discussion**
In the present study we found that in synovial tissue from RA patients HIF-1α-positive cells are present mostly in the sub-lining layer and that the expression is restricted mainly to the nucleus. In addition, we found that HIF-1α expression in synovial tissue from RA patients is related to both angiogenesis and inflammation. Our results for HIF-1α are in agreement with the results obtained from oncology studies showing that the staining in breast, renal, and colon carcinomas is predominantly nuclear (24, 28). These results would be expected, since HIF-1α is a transcription factor. Our results are also in line with those by Hitchon et al. (15), who detected HIF-1α primarily in the nuclei of lining cells in areas of synovial tissue where the lining cell layer was hyperplastic. Contradictory studies, in RA and OA showed an abundant presence of HIF-1α-positive cells both in the lining and in the sublining layer (18, 29). Moreover, in those studies the staining was both nuclear and cytoplasmic. The differences with our study probably can be explained by the use of different staining methods and...
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Fig. 4. Scores of HIF-1α positive cells and CD31 and CD34 positive vessels in 8 RA and 7 OA patients. HIF-1α positive cells, and CD31 and CD34 positive vessels were scored as described in materials and methods and expressed as number of positive cells or vessels per mm². Significant differences were found between RA and OA for all markers.

Fig. 5. Correlation of synovitis score with HIF-1α and Ki67 positive cells in RA and OA.
To investigate whether there was a correlation between inflammation and HIF-1α positivity, and between inflammation and proliferation, the data of RA and OA patients were joined. In Figure (A) a significant correlation is shown between HIF-1α positive cells and synovitis score (r=0.5980, p<0.05). In Figure (B) a significant correlation is shown between Ki67 positive cells and synovitis score (r=0.8439, p<0.05).

different monoclonal antibodies. Giatromanolaki et al. (29) used ESEE122 which in our hands gave an aspecific cytoplasmic staining in carcinoma tissue used as reference tissue. An explanation for the lower expression of HIF-1α as we found in the lining layer could be that under normoxic conditions HIF-1α becomes rapidly degraded. In the study by Hitchon et al. the synovial tissue was immediately processed (15). Since the lining layer is the superficial layer, greater exposure to oxygen concentration is expected to affect the lining layer the most. Increases in oxygen concentration are also expected when synovial tissue is removed from the hypoxic joint to normoxic environmental conditions. Conversely, synovial explants and fibroblast-like synoviocytes (present in the lining layer) cultured under hypoxic conditions show an increase in HIF-1α expression (15). Hypoxia is abundantly present in joints (10) especially in early RA there is a relative shortage of capillaries in relation to the number of infiltrating cells in synovial tissue (30), so oxygen would not be well supplied.
The association we found between HIF-1α and the number of vessels present suggests that HIF-1α could be an important inducer of angiogenesis in RA. Since several other studies have shown the importance of angiogenesis for the development of synovial inflammation in RA (2, 31-34), HIF-1α, as a mediator of angiogenesis, could be an interesting new target for therapy in RA.

Although we found a difference in the number of vessels between RA and OA, we did not find a difference in the number of proliferating Ki67-positive endothelial cells between RA and OA. In a study performed by Walsh et al. they also investigated the number of Ki67-positive endothelial cells together with PCNA (proliferating cell nuclear antigen) positive endothelial cells in RA and OA (35). For PCNA they found a significant difference between RA and OA. Unfortunately their results for Ki67 were not mentioned.
The second association we found was between HIF-1α expression and the number of infiltrating macrophages (CD68 positive) in the sublining layer. This result is in agreement with Hollander et al. (18) who found that HIF-1α expression was most abundant in areas of high macrophage infiltration. In our study HIF-1α expression not only correlated with the number of macrophages but also with the number of proliferating (as detected with Ki67)
cells. This implies that, in addition to subintimal macrophages and subintimal Ki-67 expression, which both are synovial tissue biomarkers (25-27, 36), subintimal. HIF-1α expression could also serve as a biomarker for RA. From the present study it can not be concluded whether cytokines produced by myeloid cells induce HIF-1α or whether HIF-1α induces myeloid differentiation and activation in response to inflammatory stimuli (16, 17). The recently described adjuvant arthritis model (14) could be useful in investigating whether HIF-1α expression precedes synovitis and cellular infiltration. Since hypoxia is already present at an early stage of subclinical synovitis, we expect that the same holds true for HIF-1α expression. Our results suggest that HIF-1α could be an important mediator of inflammation in RA. This possibility would further support HIF-1α as a new therapeutic target for RA.

In oncology, an ideal treatment strategy targets both cellular proliferation and angiogenesis (37, 38). We believe that the same holds true for RA: an ideal treatment strategy should target both inflammatory cells and vessel formation. Since HIF-1α, as shown by our study, is linked to both the number of proliferating cells and the number of vessels present in and RA, HIF-1α could be an important new therapeutic target in RA.

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