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Mini Review

IgA Antibodies: The Mucosal Guardians of Human Immunity

Cebolla G, Bremand H, Rinehart E, Nordstrom W, Czerkinsky M, Mandleywala G

Institute for Research in Molecular Medicine, Iran

* **Corresponding Author:** Rinehart E, Institute for Research in Molecular Medicine, Iran

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Abstract

Immunoglobulin A (IgA) is a specialized class of antibody that serves as one of the principal protective barriers between the human body and the external environment. Unlike antibodies that predominantly operate within the bloodstream, IgA is highly concentrated at mucosal surfaces lining the respiratory, gastrointestinal, and genitourinary tracts, as well as in secretions such as saliva, tears, breast milk, and intestinal fluids. Its distinctive ability to neutralize pathogens while limiting unnecessary inflammation makes it particularly important for maintaining mucosal health. IgA exists mainly in two forms: serum IgA, which circulates in the blood, and secretory IgA (sIgA), which is transported across epithelial cells into mucosal secretions. Secretory IgA can bind microorganisms, toxins, and antigens and prevent their attachment and penetration without producing extensive tissue-damaging inflammatory responses. Beyond pathogen defense, IgA contributes to the regulation of the intestinal microbiome and the development of immune tolerance to harmless environmental and dietary antigens. Abnormal IgA production or function has been associated with several conditions, including selective IgA deficiency, IgA nephropathy, certain autoimmune disorders, and mucosal infections. Understanding IgA therefore provides important insights into the relationship between antibody-mediated immunity, epithelial barriers, and the human microbiome. This article reviews the structure, production, functions, clinical

Introduction

The immune system must continuously distinguish between harmful organisms and the enormous number of harmless substances encountered every day. This challenge is particularly significant at mucosal surfaces, where the body comes into direct contact with food, microorganisms, airborne particles, and environmental antigens. Immunoglobulin A, commonly abbreviated as IgA, is an antibody specifically adapted to this environment. It is the predominant immunoglobulin class found in many mucosal secretions and represents a major component of the body's first-line immune defense.

IgA does not simply destroy microorganisms. Instead, it frequently prevents them from attaching to epithelial surfaces, neutralizes toxins and viruses, and helps control interactions between microorganisms and the mucosal immune system. This protective strategy allows IgA to provide effective defense while minimizing excessive inflammation.

Structure of IgA

Like other immunoglobulins, IgA is composed of heavy and light polypeptide chains. Its basic antibody structure contains two antigen-binding regions that recognize specific molecular targets.

IgA occurs primarily in two structural forms:

Monomeric IgA

Monomeric IgA consists of a single antibody unit and is the predominant form found in the circulation. It is produced mainly by plasma cells located in lymphoid tissues and bone marrow.

Dimeric IgA

At mucosal sites, IgA is commonly produced as a **dimer**, consisting of two IgA molecules linked by a **J (joining) chain**. This dimeric form interacts with the polymeric immunoglobulin receptor on epithelial cells.

During transport through epithelial cells, part of this receptor becomes associated with IgA and forms the **secretory component**. The resulting molecule is known as **secretory IgA (sIgA)**.

This secretory component helps protect IgA from enzymatic degradation in mucosal secretions.

Production of IgA

IgA production is closely associated with mucosal immune tissues. Specialized immune cells stimulate B lymphocytes to undergo class-switch recombination, allowing them to produce IgA instead of other antibody classes.

IgA-producing plasma cells are abundant in tissues associated with the gastrointestinal and respiratory systems.

A simplified pathway can be described as:

Antigen exposure → B-cell activation → class switching to IgA → plasma-cell differentiation → IgA secretion → mucosal protection

The local environment of mucosal tissues plays an important role in regulating IgA production

IgA and the Gut Microbiome

The human gastrointestinal tract contains a complex community of microorganisms collectively known as the gut microbiome. These microorganisms participate in digestion, metabolism, immune development, and protection against invading pathogens.

IgA contributes to the regulation of this microbial ecosystem by binding selected microorganisms and microbial antigens.

IgA in Breast Milk

Breast milk contains substantial amounts of secretory IgA, particularly during the early period of lactation

Maternal IgA can provide passive immune protection to the infant's gastrointestinal tract. Because an infant's immune system is still developing, antibodies present in breast milk can help protect mucosal surfaces from potentially harmful microorganisms

Importantly, secretory IgA functions primarily at mucosal surfaces rather than producing systemic immunity in the same manner as circulating antibodies.

IgA and Respiratory Defense

The respiratory tract is continuously exposed to airborne particles, viruses, and bacteria. Secretory IgA present in respiratory secretions contributes to defense by binding inhaled pathogens and interfering with their ability to attach to respiratory epithelial cells.

This mucosal defense system is particularly important because respiratory pathogens can encounter the body before systemic immune responses have been activated.

IgA therefore represents an important component of early respiratory immune protection

Future Perspectives

Research into IgA is increasingly focused on the relationship between mucosal immunity, microbiome composition, vaccination, and chronic disease.

Future studies may improve understanding of how IgA recognizes specific microorganisms and how these interactions influence health and disease.

Conclusion

IgA is a fundamental component of human mucosal immunity. Its concentration at epithelial surfaces allows the immune system to confront microorganisms at their points of entry while maintaining a relatively controlled inflammatory environment

Through neutralization, prevention of microbial attachment, immune exclusion, and regulation of the microbiome, IgA performs functions that extend beyond conventional antibody-mediated pathogen destruction

Both insufficient and abnormal IgA responses can have clinical consequences, demonstrating the importance

of maintaining appropriate mucosal immune regulation. Continued research into IgA biology may contribute to improved diagnostic methods, mucosal vaccines, and antibody-based therapies.

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