

Acute Psychobiological Stressors and Short-Term Immune Changes: What, Why, for Whom, and to What Extent?

A series of recent studies (1-9) have assessed the effects of psychobiological short-term stressors on the immune response. In this paper we briefly review the results of these studies, comment on the nature of the stressors and other methodological parameters, discuss issues related to the time course and specificity of the phenomena, and consider the clinical implications of transient immunological changes.

What Changes?

Table 1 summarizes the nine studies we found, grouped according to the stressors used. An increase in natural killer (NK) cell numbers and a decreased mitogen response, particularly for concanavalin A (Con A), were the most consistent changes noted: NK cell numbers increased in four out of five studies, and Con A decreased in three out of three. The proliferative response to phytohemagglutinin (PHA) decreased in three studies, and was not significantly changed in two. Changes in CD8 numbers were inconsistent, but seemed to increase in studies with longer and/or more intensive stressors (i.e., those that produced larger heart rate increases). B cells and monocytes produced inconsistent results. No differences in CD3 numbers were reported across five studies, and CD4 num-

bers were unchanged in six out of seven studies. Overall, it is clear that short-term stressors can produce transient immunological alterations, with some facets of the immune response appearing more susceptible than others.

Why: Possible Mechanisms

The immunological changes observed following short-term stressors are very similar to those that have been described following epinephrine injections: increased percentages of NK cells, decreased blastogenic responses to mitogens (PHA, Con A, and pokeweed), and decreased percentages of CD4 cells; total T cells and monocytes did not change (10, 11). These epinephrine-induced changes are thought to reflect transient alterations in lymphocyte migration from lymphoid organs and peripheral blood mediated through adrenergic receptors on lymphocytes or via the sympathetic innervation of lymphoid organs (10-13). Splenectomy in response to an epinephrine infusion in patients show much smaller changes than normal subjects (14). Thus, stress-related catecholamine increases provide one mechanism for short-term immunological changes.

Does this mean that immune assays are simply a proxy for the measurement of epinephrine? Data from Cray et al. (10)

SHORT-TERM IMMUNE CHANGES

suggest not: leukocytes incubated with substantially larger epinephrine concentrations than levels expected *in vivo* did not affect mitogen stimulation. In addition, a recent review (12) suggests five general pathways through which the central nervous system (CNS) might influence lymphocyte migration, including the actions of other endocrines and neuropeptide transmitters.

For Whom?

Responses to stressors show considerable variability among individuals and across situations. Individual differences in cardiovascular reactivity have been studied extensively (15); since cardiovascular and catecholaminergic reactivity tend to covary when assessed under the same conditions (2, 15), researchers have analyzed immunological changes in relationship to cardiovascular reactivity (2, 3, 9). High reactivity subjects demonstrated greater immunological change than low reactivity subjects, with the latter showing little or no change (2, 3, 9). Table 1 also provides data on the magnitude of the changes in heart rate and blood pressure; by way of comparison, a single injection of 0.2 mg of epinephrine produced mean increases of 10 beats per minute in heart rate, 17 mm Hg in systolic blood pressure, and 12 mm Hg in diastolic blood pressure (10). Plasma epinephrine levels measured 30 to 60 minutes after the injection fell within a normal physiological range (11).

While low reactors showed little change, an individual's classification as low in heart rate reactivity could stem from low sympathetic reactivity, high vagal activation, or low to high coactivation

of the sympathetic and parasympathetic controls on cardiac chronometry; on the other hand, an individual's classification as high in heart rate reactivity could reflect elevated sympathetic reactivity, strong parasympathetic withdrawal, or moderate to strong reciprocal sympathetic activation to the heart (16). Moving beyond conceptualizations of heart rate reactivity as a unidimensional (i.e., sympathetic activation) vector to consider individual differences in the autoimmune origins of heart rate reactivity may provide a way of better quantifying these individual differences (16).

In general, a better understanding of individual differences will also require more consistent attention to methodological issues in future studies. Medication use (especially cardiovascular-altering drugs), dietary factors, age, recent caffeine intake, smoking, aerobic conditioning, and alcohol, in addition to genetic factors, can all have significant consequences for reactivity (15), and yet several studies did not report data for these factors. Independent, e.g. self-report data, verifying the efficacy and strength of the experimental stressor, are necessary to demonstrate that experimental manipulations were successful and should facilitate comparisons across studies. All subjects need to be studied at the same time of day to minimize error variance associated with diurnal variation in both neuroendocrine and immune parameters (12); several studies staggered data collection across the day. When repeated blood samples are collected over a period of several hours, use of an indwelling catheter avoids the additional stress of repeated venipuncture; adaptation periods of 30 minutes or more are advisable following catheter insertion (15). Comparisons of the average heart rate increases across

studies in Table 1 suggest that both the duration and intensity of psychological stressors (as indexed by cardiovascular changes) are related to the breadth and magnitude of immune changes. Obviously, at a minimum, heart rate and blood pressure measurements (and, ideally, plasma catecholamines) are needed to aid comparisons across studies in the future.

To What Extent?

How long do these short-term changes persist? Among the studies that have continued to assess subjects after the stressor ended, the immunological changes appear relatively short-lived (5, 9), although (not surprisingly) more intense stressors such as shock and noise may have somewhat longer-lasting consequences (6). In this regard, the epinephrine injection studies provide helpful data for comparison. The proliferative response to three mitogens was reduced for up to 60 minutes after injection (10), but all responses returned to pre-injection levels 2 hours later.

Could some of the immunological changes reported previously for acute stressors, such as examination stress (17), simply reflect changes in the migration of lymphocytes, rather than more enduring effects? Although some immunological parameters can change quickly, many others have well-characterized time courses; for example, development (or degradation) of antibody (IgG), either to a vaccine (17) or to a latent herpesvirus (17), cannot change over the course of hours. Similarly, changes in gene expression (17) are not transient.

Are the individuals who show greater SNS activity/reactivity also at risk for

AE: antigen extract; Con A: concanavalin A; cort, cortisol; DBP, diastolic blood pressure change; epi, epinephrine; HR, heart rate change; math, mental arithmetic; mono, monocytes; NC, no change; NKCA, NK cell activity; NE, norepinephrine; PHA, phytohemagglutinin; PWM, pokeweed mitogen; SBP, systolic blood pressure change.

Study	Stressor/Subjects	Group/Conditions	Cardiovascular/Endocrine Changes	Poststress Immune Changes
Landmann et al. (11)	8 min Stroop; 11 men, 4 women, median age = 20	High reactors (high) vs. low reactors (low) vs. no stress controls (C)	HR (+8); SBP (+13); DBP (+10); NC: epi, NE	TNK cells; T8 cells; Tmono; NC: CD3, CD4, CD8; leukocytes; PHA, TCD8; NC: CD4, B-cells
Manuck et al. (2)	20 min Stroop, math; 30 men, ages 16-30	High reactors (high) vs. no stress controls (C)	HR (high) = +18, Low = +7, C = +2; SBP (high) = +16, low = +7, C = +2; DBP (high) = +18, low = +4, C = 0; epi, NE (high ?); NC: cont	Stress: PHA, TCD4, TNK cells; NC: CD3, B-cells
Bachen et al. (3)	21 min Stroop; 44 men, ages 19-25	Stress vs. no-stress controls (C)	HR (stress) = +13, C = +1; SBP (stress) = +15, C = 0; DBP (stress) = +12, C = 0	Young: TNKCA, TCD8, TNK cells; Old: TCD8, TNK cells; NC: CD3, CD4, B-cells
Naliboff et al. (4)	12 min math; 12 younger women, V age = 31; 11 older women, V age = 71	Young vs. old; Within subjects, film vs. math	HR young = +18, old = +12, C = 0; SBP young = +7, old = +4, C = 0; epi, NE	Stress: TNK cells; CD8, TNK cells; Old: TCD8, TNK cells; NC: CD3, CD4, B-cells
Brosschot et al. (5)	30 min uncontrollable interpersonal stressor; 50 men, V age = 41	Stress vs. no-stress controls (C)	No data	Stress: TNK cells; CD8, NC: PHA, PWM, AG, CD3, CD4, HLADR, leukocytes, mono
Weisse et al. (6)	30 min electric shock; noise; 22 men, V age = 28	Controllable (CON) vs. uncontrollable (LC) stressor	No data	CON: Tcon A, Tmono cells; UCon: T8-cells, NC: PHA, CD3, CD4, CD8
Sieber et al. (7)	20 min noise, 30 min rest; 20 min noise; 55 men, ages 18-26	Escapable noise (E) vs. inescapable noise (I) vs. NR; no response (N) vs. NR; no noise (NN)	No data	I/N/NR: TNKCA; NC: NK cells; CD4, CD8, CD25, CD16, B-cells
Krapp et al. (8)	40 min recalls of negative (NEG) and positive (POS) emotional experiences; 10 men, 10 women, ages 18-30	Within-subjects design, 3-day session, order randomized	HR (NEG and POS) = +5; SBP (NEG) = -3	NEG and POS: PHA, Tcon A; NC: NKCA, CD3, CD4, CD8, Tmonocytes, mono
Zakowski et al. (9)	30 min viewing and recall of a "guilt" film; 29 men, V age = 31	Film vs. control (C)	SBP: film = +8, C = -5; DBP: film = +10, C = -2; cort: higher in film than C	Film: Tcon A; NC: PHA, IL-1, IL-2

TABLE 1. Studies Assessing the Effects of Short-term Stressors on Immunity

EDITORIAL COMMENT

more persistent down-regulation of immune function? Do those individuals differ in the speed with which they return to baseline? None of the studies reviewed in this paper provided data relevant to these important questions. However, recent evidence suggests that chronic stress may alter both SNS activity and immune function. Family caregivers of Alzheimer's disease (AD) victims who were low in social support displayed different patterns of age-related heart rate reactivity and blood pressure from caregivers who were high in social support (18). Earlier data from spousal caregivers in this sample showed that caregivers had poorer immune function than controls, and low social support was associated with greater declines in immune function over the course of a year (19); importantly, spousal caregivers had more prolonged infectious illness episodes (primarily respiratory tract infections) than controls. Similarly, Irwin and his colleagues (20) found higher levels of neuropeptide Y (NPY) in AD caregivers compared with controls; levels of NPY, a sympathetic neurotransmitter released during emotional stress, were inversely correlated with NK cell activity. Longitudinal studies such as these that evaluate SNS activity and reactivity, short-term immune and endocrine response to laboratory stressors, and longer-term changes in immunity and health are clearly needed. These issues may be even more important in older adults, since ag-

ing is associated with decrements in immune function, enhanced SNS activity, and changes in noradrenergic innervation of lymphoid tissues (13, 18-20).

The studies reviewed in this paper suggest a convergence among cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and psychoneuroimmunological research and the evaluation of differences among people who vary in autonomic activation. A better understanding of these individual differences in response to stress could help identify those individuals who may be more prone to long-term health changes.

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SHORT-TERM IMMUNE CHANGES

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