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Immunological Biomarkers for Disease Progression in HIV-Infected Infants

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Abstract

Immunological biomarkers play a crucial role in assessing disease progression and guiding therapeutic strategies in HIV-infected infants, who represent a vulnerable population with unique immunological challenges. This review examines key immunological biomarkers that reflect immune activation, dysfunction, and resilience in the context of pediatric HIV/AIDS. Insights into biomarker dynamics provide valuable prognostic information and contribute to personalized management approaches aimed at optimizing clinical outcomes. Markers of innate immunity, such as soluble CD14 (sCD14) and cytokines like interleukin-6 (IL-6) and TNF-α, serve as early indicators of immune activation and inflammation in HIV-infected infants. Elevated levels of sCD14 are associated with monocyte/macrophage activation and microbial translocation, contributing to chronic immune activation and disease progression. Adaptive immune biomarkers, including CD4+ and CD8+ T cell subsets, CD4/CD8 ratio, and activation markers like CD38 and HLA-DR on T cells, play critical roles in assessing immune status and predicting treatment responses. Decreased CD4+ T cell counts and altered T cell activation profiles are indicative of immune suppression and increased susceptibility to opportunistic infections. The impact of antiretroviral therapy (ART) on immunological biomarkers is profound, with ART initiation leading to viral load suppression, CD4+ T cell recovery, and normalization of immune activation markers. Biomarkers of treatment response, combined with viral load monitoring, guide therapeutic decisions and optimize long-term outcomes.

Keywords: *HIV, infants, immunological biomarkers, disease progression, immune activation*

Introduction

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection in infants remains a significant global health challenge, particularly in resource-limited settings where vertical transmission from mother to child is prevalent. Pediatric HIV/AIDS is characterized by unique immunological dynamics due to the developing immune system of infants and the early onset of viral exposure. Immunological biomarkers, encompassing indicators of innate and adaptive immune responses, inflammation, and immune activation, play a pivotal role in assessing disease progression and guiding therapeutic

interventions in this vulnerable population.[1-2] Early diagnosis of HIV infection in infants is critical for timely initiation of antiretroviral therapy (ART) to suppress viral replication and preserve immune function. Immunological biomarkers provide valuable insights into the immunopathogenesis of HIV in infants, reflecting the interplay between viral replication, immune activation, and immune dysfunction. Biomarkers such as soluble CD14 (sCD14), a marker of monocyte/macrophage activation, and pro-inflammatory cytokines like interleukin-6 (IL-6) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) indicate the extent of immune activation and systemic inflammation in HIV-infected infants. These biomarkers not only aid in early diagnosis but also serve as prognostic indicators for disease progression and the risk of developing AIDS-related complications.[3-5] The immune response in HIV-infected infants is characterized by perturbations in both innate and adaptive immunity, leading to immune dysregulation and increased susceptibility to opportunistic infections. Innate immune biomarkers, including elevated levels of sCD14 and markers of endothelial activation, reflect ongoing viral replication and immune activation in early infancy. Conversely, adaptive immune biomarkers such as CD4+ T cell counts, CD4/CD8 ratio, and activation markers like CD38 on T cells, provide insights into the extent of immune depletion and dysfunction, influencing clinical management decisions and therapeutic outcomes.[6]

Antiretroviral therapy represents a cornerstone in the management of pediatric HIV/AIDS, aiming to achieve viral suppression, preserve immune function, and improve long-term health outcomes. Biomarkers of treatment response, such as reductions in viral load and normalization of immune activation markers, guide therapeutic decisions and monitor ART efficacy. Early initiation of ART in HIV-infected infants is crucial to prevent irreversible immune damage, reduce the risk of opportunistic infections, and optimize immune reconstitution. However, challenges in ART adherence, drug resistance, and access to pediatric formulations underscore the importance of biomarker-guided strategies to tailor treatment regimens and improve adherence rates.[7-8] Genomics, proteomics, and metabolomics offer insights into host-virus interactions, genetic determinants of disease progression, and biomarker signatures associated with treatment responses. Integration of these advanced technologies into clinical practice holds promise for personalized medicine approaches, enabling clinicians to stratify risk, predict outcomes, and optimize therapeutic interventions based on individual immune profiles.[9-10] Despite significant progress in biomarker discovery and therapeutic strategies, several challenges remain in translating research findings into clinical practice. Variability in biomarker expression, interpretation in the context of infant immune development, and standardization across diverse clinical settings pose obstacles to biomarker utility in routine clinical care. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts among researchers, healthcare providers, policymakers, and stakeholders to establish consensus guidelines, validate biomarker assays, and implement biomarker-driven approaches in pediatric HIV/AIDS care.[11-12] The future of biomarker research in pediatric HIV/AIDS is promising, with ongoing efforts focused on identifying predictive biomarkers of disease progression, refining treatment algorithms, and improving long-term outcomes. Emerging technologies and collaborative research initiatives hold potential for developing point-of-care diagnostics, biomarker panels, and therapeutic targets tailored to the unique immunological profiles of HIV-infected infants. By advancing biomarker-guided strategies and enhancing global access to comprehensive pediatric HIV/AIDS care, we can mitigate the impact of HIV infection,

improve treatment outcomes, and ultimately work towards eliminating pediatric HIV/AIDS globally.[13-14]

Innate Immune Biomarkers

In HIV-infected infants, innate immune biomarkers play a critical role in reflecting early immune activation and inflammation, providing valuable insights into disease progression and therapeutic responses. These biomarkers primarily encompass components of the innate immune system, which serves as the first line of defense against pathogens and orchestrates initial immune responses.[15]

Soluble CD14 (sCD14): One of the prominent biomarkers in pediatric HIV/AIDS is soluble CD14 (sCD14), a glycoprotein expressed predominantly by monocytes and macrophages. Elevated levels of sCD14 in plasma indicate microbial translocation from the gut, where damaged mucosal barriers allow microbial products such as lipopolysaccharide (LPS) to enter systemic circulation. In HIV-infected infants, increased sCD14 levels correlate with higher viral loads and systemic inflammation, reflecting ongoing immune activation and disease progression. Monitoring sCD14 levels provides insights into the extent of monocyte/macrophage activation and gut mucosal damage, influencing clinical management decisions and therapeutic strategies aimed at mitigating immune dysfunction.[16-17]

Cytokines (IL-6, TNF-α): Pro-inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-6 (IL-6) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) are pivotal innate immune biomarkers that contribute to immune activation and inflammation in HIV-infected infants. Elevated levels of IL-6 and TNF-α reflect the inflammatory response triggered by HIV replication and immune activation pathways. These cytokines play multifaceted roles in immune regulation, endothelial activation, and tissue damage, influencing disease severity and progression. Monitoring cytokine profiles provides insights into the dynamic interplay between viral replication, immune activation, and inflammatory pathways, guiding therapeutic interventions aimed at attenuating excessive inflammation and preserving immune function.[18-20]

Pattern Recognition Receptors (PRRs): Pattern recognition receptors, including Toll-like receptors (TLRs) and nucleotide-binding oligomerization domain (NOD)-like receptors (NLRs), are essential components of innate immunity that recognize conserved microbial structures and initiate immune responses. Dysregulation of PRR signaling pathways in HIV-infected infants contributes to chronic immune activation and impaired pathogen recognition. Biomarkers associated with PRR activation, such as elevated expression of TLRs and downstream signaling molecules, provide mechanistic insights into innate immune dysfunction and susceptibility to opportunistic infections. Targeting PRR pathways represents a potential therapeutic strategy to modulate innate immune responses and mitigate HIV-associated immune activation.[21-23]

Complement Activation Products: The complement system, a crucial component of innate immunity, plays roles in pathogen recognition, immune complex clearance, and inflammation. Activation of the complement cascade generates biologically active fragments such as C3a and

C5a, which mediate inflammation and recruit immune cells to sites of infection or tissue damage. Elevated levels of complement activation products in HIV-infected infants indicate ongoing immune activation and complement-mediated inflammation, influencing disease progression and immune dysregulation. Monitoring complement biomarkers provides insights into complement-mediated pathogenesis and informs therapeutic strategies aimed at modulating complement activation to preserve immune homeostasis.[24-26]

Innate Immune Cell Activation Markers: Biomarkers of innate immune cell activation, including CD163 and CD206 on monocytes/macrophages, reflect cellular activation states and immune responses in HIV-infected infants. Increased expression of CD163, a scavenger receptor involved in hemoglobin-haptoglobin complex clearance, correlates with monocyte activation and disease severity. Similarly, elevated levels of CD206, a marker of alternatively activated macrophages, indicate tissue repair and immune modulation in response to HIV-associated inflammation. Monitoring innate immune cell activation markers offers insights into cellular dynamics, immune activation pathways, and therapeutic responses in pediatric HIV/AIDS.[27-29]

Adaptive Immune Biomarkers

Adaptive immune biomarkers in HIV-infected infants play a crucial role in assessing immune status, disease progression, and therapeutic responses. These biomarkers encompass indicators of T cell subsets, activation markers, and functional immune responses that reflect the complex interplay between viral replication, immune activation, and immune dysfunction in pediatric HIV/AIDS.[30-31]

CD4+ T Cell Count: One of the primary adaptive immune biomarkers in pediatric HIV/AIDS is the CD4+ T cell count, which serves as a critical indicator of immune competence and disease progression. HIV infection leads to progressive depletion of CD4+ T cells, impairing immune responses and increasing susceptibility to opportunistic infections. Monitoring CD4+ T cell counts provides insights into the extent of immune suppression and guides decisions regarding antiretroviral therapy (ART) initiation and management strategies aimed at restoring immune function.[32-33]

CD4/CD8 Ratio: The CD4/CD8 ratio is another important biomarker in assessing immune dysfunction and disease progression in HIV-infected infants. A decline in the CD4/CD8 ratio is indicative of immune activation and exhaustion, reflecting impaired T cell homeostasis and heightened immune activation. Monitoring changes in the CD4/CD8 ratio over time provides prognostic information on disease severity and the risk of developing AIDS-related complications, guiding therapeutic interventions and clinical management decisions.[34-35]

T Cell Activation Markers (CD38, HLA-DR): Activation markers such as CD38 and human leukocyte antigen-DR (HLA-DR) on T cells are biomarkers of immune activation and functional T cell responses in HIV-infected infants. Elevated expression of CD38 and HLA-DR reflects T

cell activation, proliferation, and differentiation in response to HIV antigens and chronic immune stimulation. Persistent T cell activation contributes to immune exhaustion, reduced immune function, and disease progression. Monitoring these activation markers provides insights into immune dynamics, treatment responses, and the efficacy of ART in restoring T cell homeostasis.[36-37]

Cytokine Profiles: Cytokines produced by activated T cells, such as interferon-gamma (IFN-γ), interleukin-2 (IL-2), and interleukin-10 (IL-10), serve as biomarkers of immune responses and disease progression in HIV-infected infants. Altered cytokine profiles reflect dysregulated immune responses, cytokine storm, and immune dysfunction associated with HIV replication and chronic inflammation. Monitoring cytokine patterns provides insights into immune activation pathways, viral pathogenesis, and therapeutic responses, guiding strategies to modulate immune responses and enhance antiviral immunity.[38-39]

T Cell Functionality (Antigen-specific responses): Assessing T cell functionality, including antigen-specific responses and cytotoxic T lymphocyte (CTL) activity, is critical for evaluating immune competence and viral control in HIV-infected infants. Impaired T cell function compromises the ability to mount effective immune responses against HIV and opportunistic infections, contributing to disease progression and immune suppression. Biomarkers of T cell function, such as IFN-γ release assays and CTL assays, provide insights into T cell-mediated immunity, viral reservoir dynamics, and the efficacy of immunotherapeutic interventions aimed at enhancing immune responses.[40-41]

Immune Reconstitution: Antiretroviral therapy (ART) plays a pivotal role in restoring immune function and preserving CD4+ T cell counts in HIV-infected infants. Biomarkers of immune reconstitution, including recovery of CD4+ T cells, normalization of CD4/CD8 ratio, and reduction in T cell activation markers, monitor the efficacy of ART in suppressing viral replication and improving immune responses. Early initiation of ART optimizes immune reconstitution and reduces the risk of opportunistic infections, highlighting the importance of biomarker-guided strategies in pediatric HIV/AIDS care.[42-43]

Markers of Immune Activation and Inflammation

Markers of immune activation and inflammation play a crucial role in assessing disease progression, immune dysregulation, and therapeutic responses in HIV-infected infants. These biomarkers encompass a spectrum of molecules and pathways involved in the inflammatory response, reflecting the complex interplay between viral replication, immune activation, and immune dysfunction in pediatric HIV/AIDS.[44]

C-reactive protein (CRP): CRP is an acute-phase reactant produced by the liver in response to inflammation and tissue damage. Elevated levels of CRP in HIV-infected infants indicate systemic inflammation and immune activation, correlating with disease severity and progression. Monitoring CRP levels provides insights into the inflammatory burden, cardiovascular risk, and overall health status in pediatric HIV/AIDS, guiding clinical management decisions and

therapeutic interventions aimed at mitigating inflammation and reducing long-term complications.[45-46]

D-dimer: D-dimer is a fibrin degradation product generated during fibrinolysis and serves as a biomarker of coagulation activation and endothelial dysfunction. Elevated D-dimer levels in HIV-infected infants are associated with increased risk of thrombosis, endothelial damage, and cardiovascular events. Dysregulated coagulation and endothelial activation contribute to chronic inflammation and immune dysfunction, highlighting the importance of monitoring D-dimer as a prognostic marker for disease progression and vascular complications.[47-48]

High-sensitivity troponin: High-sensitivity troponin is a biomarker of myocardial injury and cardiac dysfunction, reflecting myocardial inflammation and cardiovascular risk in HIV-infected infants. Elevated levels of high-sensitivity troponin correlate with subclinical myocardial damage, cardiac fibrosis, and increased mortality risk in pediatric HIV/AIDS. Monitoring troponin levels provides insights into cardiac health, myocardial function, and the impact of chronic inflammation on cardiovascular outcomes, guiding preventive strategies and therapeutic interventions to mitigate cardiac complications.[49-50]

Pro-inflammatory cytokines: Pro-inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-6 (IL-6), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and interleukin-1 beta (IL-1β) play pivotal roles in mediating immune activation and inflammatory responses in HIV-infected infants. Dysregulated cytokine production contributes to chronic inflammation, tissue damage, and immune dysfunction, exacerbating disease progression. Monitoring cytokine profiles provides insights into immune activation pathways, therapeutic responses, and the efficacy of anti-inflammatory interventions aimed at attenuating excessive cytokine production and preserving immune homeostasis.[51-52]

Microbial Translocation Markers: Markers of microbial translocation, such as lipopolysaccharide (LPS) and intestinal fatty acid-binding protein (I-FABP), reflect gut mucosal damage and bacterial translocation in HIV-infected infants. Increased levels of LPS and I-FABP in systemic circulation indicate compromised gut barrier integrity, microbial translocation, and immune activation. These biomarkers provide insights into the gut-immune axis, systemic inflammation, and the pathogenesis of HIV-associated immune dysfunction, guiding therapeutic strategies to restore gut health and mitigate immune activation.[53-54]

Oxidative Stress Markers: Biomarkers of oxidative stress, including reactive oxygen species (ROS) and lipid peroxidation products, contribute to immune activation, cellular damage, and disease progression in HIV-infected infants. Oxidative stress disrupts immune function, exacerbates inflammation, and contributes to mitochondrial dysfunction and cellular apoptosis. Monitoring oxidative stress markers provides insights into the oxidative burden, antioxidant defenses, and therapeutic interventions targeting oxidative pathways to reduce immune activation and improve clinical outcomes.[55]

Impact of Antiretroviral Therapy (ART)

Antiretroviral therapy (ART) represents the cornerstone of treatment for HIV-infected infants, aiming to suppress viral replication, restore immune function, and improve long-term health outcomes. The impact of ART on pediatric HIV/AIDS extends beyond viral suppression to encompass immune reconstitution, prevention of opportunistic infections, and reduction of HIV-related morbidity and mortality.[56] The primary goal of ART in HIV-infected infants is to achieve and maintain viral suppression, reducing plasma HIV RNA levels to undetectable or very low levels (<50 copies/mL). Early initiation of ART in infants diagnosed with HIV infection minimizes viral reservoirs, limits viral diversity, and prevents viral evolution, thereby controlling viral replication. Viral suppression not only improves clinical outcomes but also reduces the risk of transmission to uninfected individuals, supporting public health efforts to curb the spread of HIV.[57] ART restores immune function by preserving and replenishing CD4+ T cells, enhancing immune responses, and improving immune competence in HIV-infected infants. Initiating ART early in infancy promotes robust immune reconstitution, restoring CD4+ T cell counts and CD4/CD8 ratio towards normal levels. Immune reconstitution not only reduces the risk of opportunistic infections but also enhances vaccine responsiveness and immune surveillance, improving overall health outcomes and quality of life.[58]

ART significantly reduces the incidence and severity of opportunistic infections in HIV-infected infants by restoring immune function and reducing immune activation. Effective viral suppression and immune reconstitution diminish the susceptibility to opportunistic pathogens such as Pneumocystis jirovecii, Mycobacterium tuberculosis, and cytomegalovirus (CMV). Preventive measures, including cotrimoxazole prophylaxis and vaccination strategies, further mitigate the risk of infections, contributing to improved morbidity and mortality outcomes in ART-treated infants.[59] Neurological complications associated with HIV infection, such as HIV-associated neurocognitive disorders (HAND) and developmental delays, are mitigated by early initiation and adherence to ART. Viral suppression in the central nervous system (CNS) prevents neuronal damage, reduces neuroinflammation, and supports normal neurodevelopmental trajectories in HIV-infected infants. ART plays a crucial role in preserving cognitive function, minimizing neurologic deficits, and optimizing neurobehavioral outcomes, emphasizing the importance of early diagnosis and intervention in pediatric HIV/AIDS.[60] Longitudinal studies demonstrate that early and sustained ART in HIV-infected infants contributes to improved long-term health outcomes and life expectancy. Children who receive timely ART experience fewer HIV-related complications, lower rates of mortality, and better overall health compared to untreated or late-treated counterparts. Improved adherence to ART regimens, regular monitoring of viral load, and comprehensive pediatric care contribute to sustained viral suppression, immune reconstitution, and enhanced quality of life throughout childhood and adolescence.

Challenges

One of the primary challenges is the timely diagnosis of HIV in infants, particularly in resource-limited settings where access to testing and healthcare infrastructure may be limited. Early diagnosis is crucial for initiating timely antiretroviral therapy (ART) and preventing disease progression. Drug resistance remains a significant concern in pediatric HIV/AIDS management. Poor adherence to ART regimens, limited availability of pediatric formulations, and viral diversity

contribute to the development of drug-resistant strains, complicating treatment options and necessitating alternative therapeutic strategies. Adherence to ART regimens poses a substantial challenge in pediatric populations due to factors such as caregiver responsibilities, stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, and the complexity of administering medications to infants and young children. Ensuring consistent adherence is essential for achieving viral suppression and preventing disease progression. Long-term retention in HIV care is essential for monitoring disease progression, adjusting treatment regimens, and addressing comorbidities. Challenges such as socioeconomic factors, geographic barriers, and healthcare access disparities can affect retention rates and continuity of care for HIV-infected infants. HIV-infected infants are at increased risk of opportunistic infections, including tuberculosis, pneumonia, and severe bacterial infections, which can complicate treatment outcomes and require integrated management approaches. Addressing co-infections and comorbidities is essential for optimizing health outcomes in this vulnerable population.[61]

Future Directions in Pediatric HIV/AIDS

Advancing technologies for early infant diagnosis, including point-of-care testing and nucleic acid amplification assays, can facilitate rapid detection of HIV infection and prompt initiation of ART. Improving diagnostic capabilities enhances early intervention and improves treatment outcomes. Research efforts focus on optimizing ART regimens for efficacy, safety, and adherence in pediatric populations. Development of new drug formulations, long-acting therapies, and simplified dosing schedules can enhance treatment adherence and viral suppression. Integrated care models that address the holistic needs of HIV-infected infants, including nutritional support, psychosocial care, and management of co-infections, are essential for improving overall health outcomes and quality of life. Continued research into HIV pathogenesis, immune responses, and novel therapeutic strategies, including immunotherapies and viral reservoir targeting, can advance treatment options and contribute to functional HIV cure approaches in pediatric populations. Strengthening health systems and increasing access to pediatric HIV/AIDS care through healthcare infrastructure development, training of healthcare personnel, and community engagement initiatives are critical for achieving global targets in pediatric HIV/AIDS elimination.[62]

Conclusion

The management of pediatric HIV/AIDS has evolved significantly over the years, driven by advances in antiretroviral therapy (ART) and our understanding of HIV pathogenesis. Despite these advancements, challenges persist, particularly in resource-limited settings where access to early diagnosis, optimal treatment regimens, and comprehensive care remains limited. The impact of HIV infection on infants extends beyond viral suppression to encompass complex immunological dynamics, neurodevelopmental concerns, and long-term health outcomes that require tailored approaches and ongoing research efforts. The pivotal role of ART in pediatric HIV/AIDS cannot be overstated, as it not only suppresses viral replication but also restores immune function, reduces opportunistic infections, and improves overall quality of life. However, challenges such as drug resistance, adherence to treatment, and retention in care underscore the

need for innovative strategies and concerted efforts to enhance treatment outcomes and ensure sustained viral suppression.

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