

# Network pharmacology of JAK inhibitors

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**Small-molecule inhibitors of the Janus kinase family (JAKs) are clinically efficacious in multiple autoimmune diseases, albeit with increased risk of certain infections. Their precise mechanism of action is unclear, with JAKs being signaling hubs for several cytokines. We assessed the in vivo impact of pan- and isoform-specific JAKi in mice by immunologic and genomic profiling. Effects were broad across the immunogenomic network, with overlap between inhibitors. Natural killer (NK) cell and macrophage homeostasis were most immediately perturbed, with network-level analysis revealing a rewiring of coregulated modules of NK cell transcripts. The repression of IFN signature genes after repeated JAKi treatment continued even after drug clearance, with persistent changes in chromatin accessibility and phospho-STAT responsiveness to IFN. Thus, clinical use and future development of JAKi might need to balance effects on immunological networks, rather than expect that JAKs affect a particular cytokine response and be cued to long-lasting epigenomic modifications rather than by short-term pharmacokinetics.**

JAK inhibitor | tofacitinib | systems pharmacology

A drug's mechanism of action usually refers to the specific molecular or biologic activity that it perturbs, and drug optimization aims at maximizing potency and specificity vs. this target. However, the molecular target may be far removed from the processes that ultimately drive the therapeutic effect. For instance, even though the target is known, it remains unclear which cell or pathway is pivotally affected by anti-PD1 during cancer immunotherapy. Given the interdependencies of cellular and molecular players in biological systems, a drug is likely to have effects far broader than its molecular target. Conversely, it may be hampered by inherent resistance to perturbation of interconnected networks. This complexity is encapsulated in the concepts of network pharmacology, which proposes that drug development focus on network-level alterations, rather than on exquisite specificity for an individual target (1).

JAK kinase inhibitors (JAKis) have been intensively and successfully pursued over the last two decades (2, 3) and could be considered poster children of network pharmacology. JAK kinases (JAK1/2/3 and TYK2) are the initial mediators of signaling pathways triggered by many cytokines and hematopoietic growth factors, and activate transducers of the STAT family to prompt cell activation and phenotypic differentiation in all immunocyte lineages (4). The cytokine network is an unusually interconnected one, because cytokines can induce each other, or each other's receptors, and can enhance or stifle each other's signaling pathways. Further complexity stems from the widespread sharing of JAK kinases by cytokine receptors (e.g., JAK1 is connected to receptors for interferons, IL-2, -4, -6, -7, -9, -10, -11, -15, -21, and -27), and because most cytokine receptors are equipped with two different JAKs (e.g., JAK1 and JAK3 for IL-2R). Thus, even the most exquisitely specific JAK inhibitor (JAKi) will have pleiotropic effects that resonate through the immune system, affecting many cells and signals.

The therapeutic potential of inhibiting cytokine signaling in autoimmune diseases led to the development of first-generation JAKi (2, 3, 5), with good kinome-wide specificity, but shared cross-reactivity against several JAKs. Several proved to have clinical efficacy [e.g., against rheumatoid arthritis (RA), ulcerative colitis, psoriasis, or myeloproliferative diseases (6)]. They also have significant

side effects that likely reflect cytokine blockade, such as bacterial and fungal infections, in particular, (re)activation of the varicella zoster virus, and at high doses, anemia and thrombocytopenia (2, 3). A new JAKi generation targets single JAK isoforms, which might improve adverse events by restricting the range of activity. Efficacy has been observed with JAK1-selective compounds (7) and compounds of reported specificity for JAK3 (ref. 8, but see ref. 2). However, the premise of substantially improved in vivo specificity remains unproven, because the impact of JAKi compounds on the immunological network is poorly understood.

Here, we explored the systemwide impact of JAKi by comprehensive immunologic and genomic profiling, comparing treatments with established pan-JAKi drugs to more recent isoform-specific inhibitors, making observations that provide important clues for future development and clinical application.

## Results

Our immunogenomic explorations of JAKis used clinically efficacious doses of several compounds (Table S1). Two of them have cross-JAK activity and are already Food and Drug Administration-approved or in advanced clinical trials: Tofacitinib, a pan-JAKi (Tofa; aka CP-690,550), and Baricitinib, a JAK1/2 inhibitor (Bari; LY3009104) (2, 3). Two others have specificity for either JAK1 (PF-02384554; hereafter, JAK1i) or JAK3 (PF-06651600; JAK3i), with another JAK3-specific inhibitor in a few experiments (PF-06263313). This strategy discriminated between consequences of blocking one pathway and network-level effects resulting from a broader spectrum of activity or cascading effects through the cytokine network.

## Significance

**JAK kinase inhibitors (JAKis) have advanced options for treatment of autoimmune diseases. Because JAKs are signaling hubs for several cytokine receptors, JAKis' overall impact on the immune system and how they actually improve diseases like rheumatoid arthritis remain poorly understood. Combined immunophenotyping and genomic profiling revealed broad JAKi effects on the immunogenomic network, irrespective of inhibitor fine specificity, with effects on population homeostasis and coregulated gene-expression networks, particularly in innate immunocytes. Persistent repression by JAKis of IFN signature genes lasted beyond drug clearance and correlated with changes in the structure of the underlying chromatin, with direct implications for practical use of the drugs. Further JAKi development may need to take into account their broad network and epigenomic effects.**

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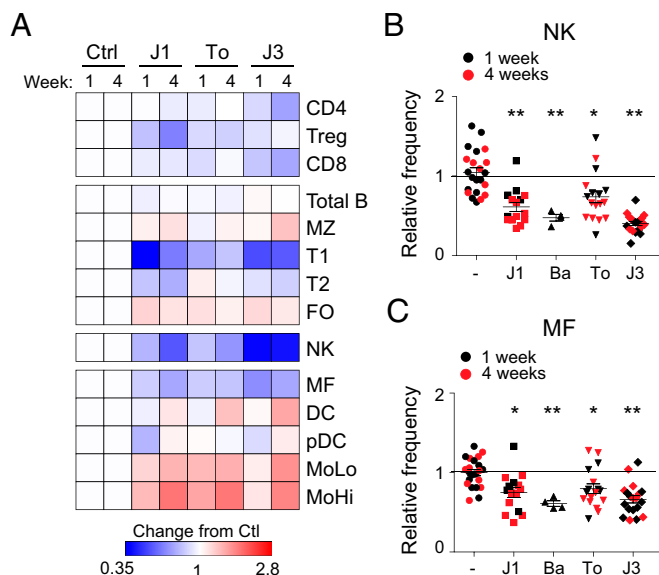
Data deposition: The data reported in this paper have been deposited in the Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) database, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo) (accession no. GSE84568).

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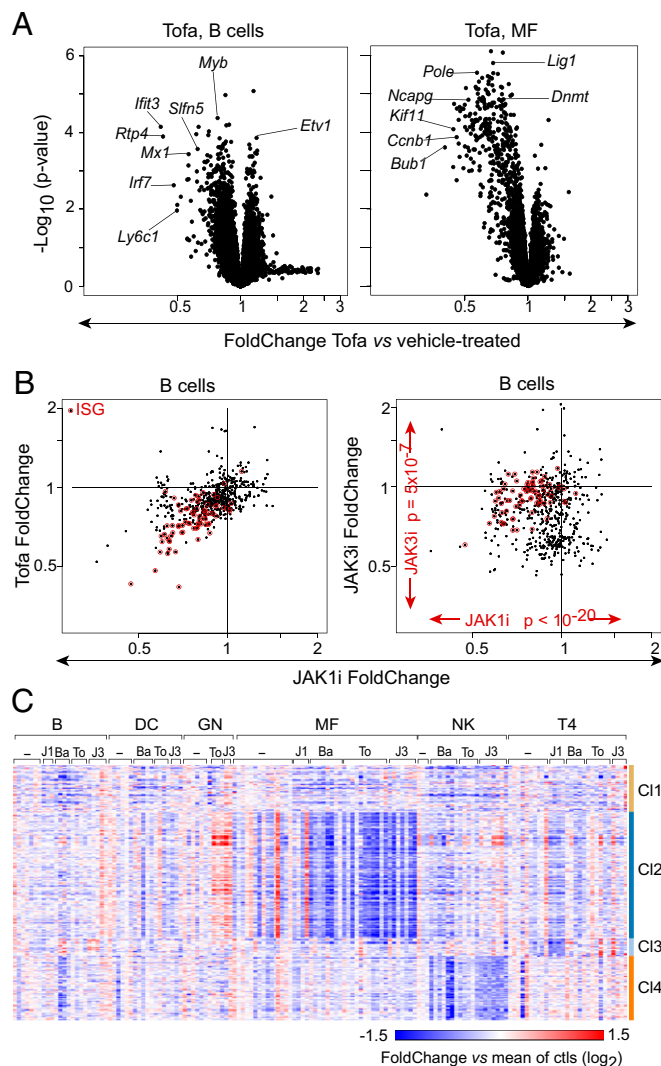
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**Effects on JAKis on Immunophenotypes.** We first assessed the impact of JAKi treatment on the size of the main immunocyte populations. JAKi were administered by oral gavage twice daily for 1 or 4 wk, at doses chosen to mimic clinical applications [average daily concentration equal to the concentration giving ~80% inhibition of IFN- $\alpha$  (JAK1i and pan-JAKi) or IL-15 (pan- and JAK3i) p-STAT signals *in vitro*]. Healthy and otherwise unperturbed mice were used to assess drug effects independent of modification of disease parameters in a disease model, much as one functionally evaluates disease susceptibility variants in healthy controls. Impact on immunocyte populations was assessed by flow cytometry of splenic populations, profiling the main lymphoid and myeloid cell types (salient results are provided in Fig. 1, and full results are provided in Fig. S1). Overall, there were no radical changes in cell pools, although small and reproducible adjustments did occur, most as soon as after 1 wk of treatment (all  $P < 0.01$ ). Most affected were natural killer (NK) cells (Fig. 1B; mean fold change 0.3–0.7) and macrophages (MFs; Fig. 1C; mean fold change 0.3–0.6), the former consistent with previous clinical reports (9, 10). Adaptive lymphocytes did not change greatly overall, save for subtle redistributions of B-cell subsets (Fig. 1A and Fig. S1C) and a drop in Treg with JAK1i (Fig. S1D). These effects seemed mostly shared by all JAKis, suggesting a spread consistent with the range of cytokines affected and/or network-level adaptation.

**Systemwide Genomic Effects on JAKis.** We then performed gene-expression profiling to assess JAKi effects on the transcriptional network of immune cells, most broadly for B cells and MFs, representing lymphoid and myeloid lineages, but also including dendritic cells (DCs), polymorphonuclear neutrophils (GNs), NK cells, and CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells (T4; all together 238 datasets passing quality criteria, collated from several independent experiments). As described above, treatments lasted 1 wk, aiming at integrated effects on the immunogenetic network. As illustrated for Tofa effects in B cells and MFs (Fig. 24), changes were mostly reductions in gene expression and relatively modest (very few transcripts reduced > twofold). This modest repressive effect was



**Fig. 1.** Changes in immunocyte populations induced by JAKi treatment. Splenocyte profiles were assessed by flow cytometry after treatment with JAKi. Several experiments with treatments of 1 and 4 wk were combined. Values were normalized to the mean of vehicle-treated mice in the corresponding experiment. (A) Mean fold change for each cell type relative to its vehicle-treated control is represented on the heat map. (B and C) Data from several experiments are shown for NK cells (B) and macrophages (MF) (C). J1, JAK1i; Ba, Bari; To, Tofa; J3, JAK3i. \* $P < 0.01$ ; \*\* $P < 0.001$  Mann-Whitney  $u$  test).



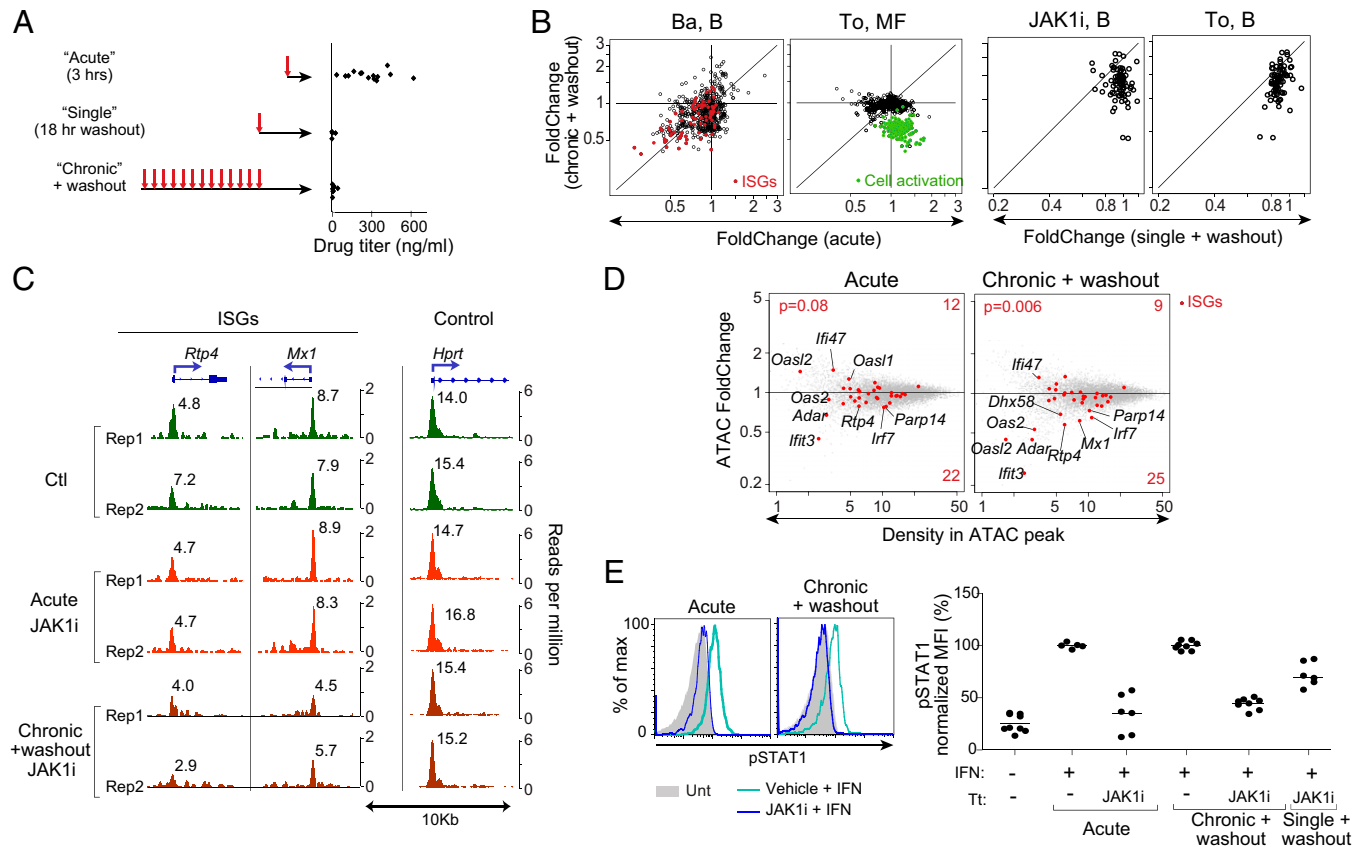
**Fig. 2.** Effects of JAK inhibition on the immunological transcriptome. Immunocytes were sorted from JAKi-treated mice (repeated dosing, twice daily, 1 wk), and mRNAs were profiled on genomewide microarrays. (A) Range and significance of changes: fold change vs. *P* value ("Volcano") plots for B cells (Left) and MF (Right) from Tofa-treated mice; all expressed genes are shown. (B) Drug specificity: fold change/fold change plot comparing effects of Tofa and JAK1i (Left) or Tofa and JAK3i (Right) in B cells. (C) Heat map of fold changes in the JAKi-affected gene set in six different splenic cell types, after treatment with different compounds (fold changes for each sample calculated vs. mean of all vehicle-treated samples). Cluster assignment is shown at right.

true in all cells examined and for monospecific-JAK as well as pan-JAK inhibitors (Fig. S1 A and B).

Because the drug effects on transcript levels were weak, we selected a set of 478 genes significantly [at false discovery rate (FDR) of 0.01] affected by any one drug in any one cell type. Of these effects, some were cell-type-specific, and others were ubiquitous. For instance, a gene cluster repressed by Tofa and by JAK3i in MFs was hardly affected in B cells (blue circle in Fig. S2D; see below for gene cluster details) and in most other cell types. However, a sizeable fraction of targets were affected in both cell types, in particular a set of IFN-responsive genes (ISGs; red in Fig. 2B and Fig. S2D). Transcripts for some characteristic Th cytokines showed a bias after JAK1i (*Ifng*, *Il10*, and *Il-2/21*, but not the *Il17* family), but not with other JAKi (Fig. S3), possibly reflecting a balancing consequence of multiple concurrent







**Fig. 4.** Repeated JAK1i treatment leads to persistent effects on the ISG network. (A) Schematic representation of treatment protocol used to examine adaptive effects of JAK1i. Drug concentration in plasma at the end of each treatment are shown at right. (B) Gene expression profiling. (B, Left) Comparison of drug-induced changes in acute (x axis) vs. chronically (y axis) treated B cells showing ISGs (highlighted red) or MF cell activation/growth cluster (highlighted green). (B, Right) Comparison of drug-induced changes after a single treatment plus washout (x axis) vs. chronic treatment (y axis) also with washout per A, focusing on responsive ISGs. (C) B cells from mice treated with JAK1i per regimens in A were purified, and the genomewide landscape of accessible chromatin was determined by ATAC-seq (two replicates per condition). Representative ATAC-seq pileups around TSSs for tonic-sensitive ISGs are shown on the same scale for all profiles. (D) Genomewide changes in TSS ATAC-seq signals after JAK1i treatment, shown as ATAC-seq signal density (x axis) vs. fold change relative to vehicle (y axis) after acute (Left) or chronic (Right) treatment. Tonic-sensitive ISGs are shown in red. The count of genes with increased or decreased ATAC signal is shown (P value from a chi-square test vs. a random distribution). (E) Responsiveness to IFN signaling: B cells from acutely or chronically treated mice were challenged with IFN *in vitro*, and the resulting p-STAT1 was measured by flow cytometry. Phospho-STAT1 mean fluorescence intensity (MFI) was normalized to the mean of the IFN-only controls in each experiment (data pooled from two experiments).

by long treatment was unaffected at short times (Fig. 4B, *Left*). All of the JAKi compounds used here have relatively short half-lives (~1–2 h; Fig. S64). Accordingly, repression of ISG expression had largely disappeared after a 16- to 18-h washout period after a single administration, for both the selective JAK1i and the pan-JAK inhibitor (Fig. 4B, *Right*). This comparison raised an important paradox: If the 16-h drug washout was sufficient to abolish transcriptional effects of one treatment, how could the chronic treatments described above, all of which included the same 16-h washout before profiling, show altered ISG expression? The implication was that repeated knockdown of tonic IFN signals by the drugs had a cumulative effect on the ISG network.

To elucidate the underlying mechanisms of this persistent transcriptional impact, we analyzed the state of the chromatin at the corresponding ISG loci, using assay for transposase-accessible chromatin with high-throughput sequencing (ATAC-seq) (18). We have recently shown that the acute response to IFN is accompanied by correlated changes in chromatin accessibility, reflected in the intensity of ATAC-seq signals in specific peaks around ISG transcriptional start sites (TSSs) or enhancer elements (17). Chromatin from splenic B cells was analyzed after acute or chronic treatment with JAK1i. The ATAC-seq profiles at TSS regions of two ISG loci (equally scaled in Fig. 4C) showed decreased chromatin accessibility after chronic treatment, but

little or no change after acute treatment. This bias was generally true, as confirmed by quantitation of peak signals and calculation of a fold change relative to control-treated samples ( $P = 0.006$  and  $0.08$  for chronic and acute treatments, respectively; Fig. 4D). As might be expected, those ISGs showing the strongest reduction in chromatin accessibility were also the most sensitive to IFN (Fig. S6B). We asked whether these persistent changes in chromatin structure also extended to responsiveness to IFN, assessed by induction of STAT1 phosphorylation 20 min after IFN challenge *ex vivo*. Indeed, mice subjected to long-term treatment showed reduced p-STAT1 responses to IFN (Fig. 4E). Thus, repeated dampening by JAK1i led to an adaptation of the IFN network, at the level of chromatin and of signaling pathways, that persisted even when the causal drug had essentially disappeared.

**One Cytokine, Two JAKs: Similar Effects?** An additional level of complexity in the JAK-controlled network is that signals from most cytokines involve two different JAKs (3). It is usually unclear whether both JAKs contribute, or whether each has distinct signaling and transcriptomic consequences (for instance, by triggering parallel signaling pathways) (19, 20). We addressed this question using the response of NK cells to IL-2 as a model. IL-2 binding to the low-affinity IL-2R $\beta\gamma$  receptor complex

expressed by NK cells (Fig. S7A) activates JAK1 and JAK3, which phosphorylate each other and STAT5, the key downstream transducer for IL-2 (21). Relative contributions of JAK1 and JAK3 to IL-2-induced responses are unclear (22, 23). IL-2 induced a robust response in primary NK cells ex vivo after 8 h of culture (Fig. S7C; listed in Dataset S2), which included a sizeable component of IFN- $\gamma$ -sensitive genes (Fig. S7D), likely a secondary autocrine response, given the known induction of IFN- $\gamma$  by IL-2 in NK cells (see also Fig. S7H) (24).

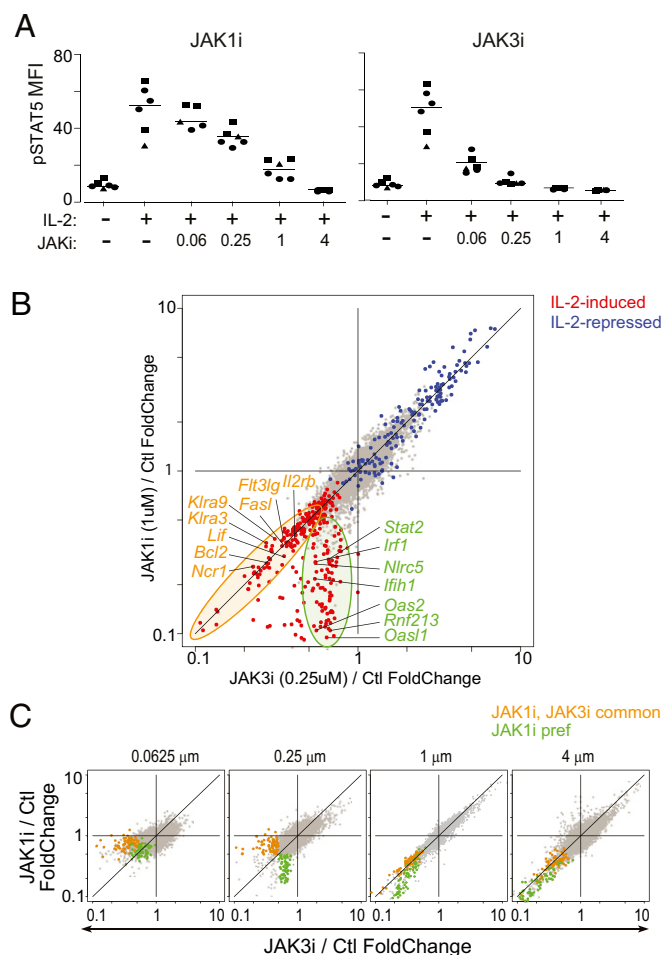
We first benchmarked the effects of selective JAK inhibition on IL-2 signaling by monitoring STAT5 phosphorylation (pSTAT5) in splenic NK cells ex vivo. JAK3i was more efficacious than JAK1i in this respect (Fig. 5A and Fig. S7B). We then compared the effects on the transcriptional response to IL-2 of inhibiting either JAK, with doses that yielded partial and comparable pSTAT5 inhibition, computing inhibition ratios (IL-2 + JAKi/IL-2 alone) for each drug. Transcripts repressed by IL-2 (defined in Fig. S7C) were equivalently de-repressed by both inhibitors (blue dots along the diagonal in Fig. 5B). However, there was a marked divergence in the capacity of JAK1i and JAK3i to block IL-2-induced transcripts (red dots). Many were equivalently repressed by both, but a distinct gene set was much more effectively repressed by JAK1i (orange and green circles in Fig. 5B; listed in Dataset S3). When the profiling was repeated with a wider dose range, the selective capacity of each inhibitor for these gene sets, still apparent at low or intermediate doses, converged at saturating doses (Fig. 5C and Fig. S7E).

Pathway analysis showed that JAK1i-preferential targets among IL-2-induced genes were mostly ISGs ( $P = 10^{-22}$ ; Fig. S7F), whereas the common targets belonged to a network of STAT5-responsive genes ( $P = 10^{-15}$ ), including cytokines/chemokine transcripts such as *Lif*, *Flt3lg*, or *Tnfrsf18*, and whose promoter regions were significantly enriched for the STAT5 motif (Fig. S7G). Taking pathway and motif enrichment results into account, we propose that the direct IL-2 signals were transduced equivalently through JAK1 and JAK3, whereas JAK1 partook more effectively in the secondary autocrine response to IL-2-induced IFN- $\gamma$  (green traces in Fig. S7E), although JAK3i could eventually shut it down as well. Thus, JAK1i and JAK3i have unequal effects on IL-2-induced transcripts at pharmacologically relevant doses. One practical implication is that solely measuring changes in STAT phosphorylation provides an incomplete window on true compound activity. The results also explain the paradoxical effect of JAK3i on the ISG signature noticed in vivo. To answer the question posed at the onset, inhibitors of two different JAKs could indeed affect different facets of the response to a single cytokine, but with a dose-dependence (over a narrow range), which implies that fine consequences of JAKi treatment may shift over drug peaks and troughs in a treated individual.

## Discussion

Examining the impact of JAKi compounds on the immunogenomic network led to several major conclusions. First, whether on cells or genes, the effects are broad but subtle, overlapping between compounds, even those that target single JAK isoforms with high specificity. Second, the signaling and transcriptional network adapts to repeated JAK blockade, with the drug's effect persisting even after the compound has cleared. Third, when two JAK isoforms are involved in signals from a given cytokine, selectively blocking one or the other has a different impact on that cytokine's overall signature. These conclusions have direct and important implications for the use and future development of this class of drugs.

Because JAKs combinatorially route signals from many cytokine receptors, there was some expectation that their blockade would resonate through the immunogenomic network. These network effects were identifiable as clusters of genes flagged by traditional differential expression filters (Fig. 2), but other gene sets were spotted through changes in coexpression patterns within independently defined regulatory modules (Fig. 3). The latter finding indicated that JAKi treatments subtly rewire the regulatory connections within immunogenomic modules, and further illustrates the potential of network analyses to identify



**Fig. 5.** Different effects of JAK1i and JAK3i on IL-2-induced transcripts. NK cells were purified by negative selection, activated IL-2 in vitro, alone or with graded concentrations of JAK1i or JAK3i. (A) Signal transduction from the IL-2 receptor evaluated by staining for phospho-STAT5. Different symbols indicate data from separate experiments. (B) Inhibition ratios (calculated as a ratio of expression values, JAKi+IL-2/IL-2) for JAK3i (x axis) and JAK1i (y axis); both JAKi at 0.25  $\mu$ M. Red and blue highlights are transcripts induced or repressed by IL-2, respectively, as determined in Fig. S7. (C) Inhibition ratios at 0.25  $\mu$ M JAKi in a first experiment were used to define JAK1i-preferred (green dots) and JAK1i/JAK3i-common effects (orange dots); these were then highlighted on similar JAK3i and JAK1i comparisons across a range of doses for each drug in a second experiment.

drug mechanisms (14), here flagging the NK receptor family for attention. Comfortingly, the strongest effects on the genomic network (cell growth transcripts in MF, effector functions in NK) corresponded to the most numerically perturbed immunocyte populations.

How do JAKis effectively improve RA and other auto-inflammatory diseases? Previous suggestions included a suppression of pathogenic Th1/Th17 differentiation (7, 25) or a local effect on IFN and IL-6 signaling in RA joints (26). Our results flag innate cell populations as alternative or additional contributors. Effects in Th cells were modest, but the reduction in numbers and expression of activation clusters in MFs was suggestive, in light of their integrative role in destructive synovitis (27). Conversely, perturbations of NK cells, in numbers or in the wiring of their effector networks, support the notion that NK deficits underlie, at least in part, the viral reactivation events [noting that no correlation between changes in proportions of blood NK cells and infectious adverse events in patients has been observed (10, 28)]. Notably, *Klra8* [encodes Ly49h, intimately



involved in the response to mouse cytomegalovirus (16)] appeared as a differential hub in the network-level analysis, strongly suggesting that changes in NK receptors may be linked to JAKi adverse events involving large DNA viruses.

After the first generation of pan-JAKi drugs, the hope was that isoform-specific inhibitors might limit adverse risk profiles by narrowing cellular and molecular targets. However, we observed effects on cell homeostasis (NK and MF) in general with all JAKi, and even specific gene sets like ISGs were affected by all JAKi (Fig. 2B). This overlap is consistent with reported efficacy in early RA trials for both JAK1i and a reported JAK3i-biased inhibitor (8, 29, 30). There were, however, quantitative differences between signatures of isoform-specific JAKi (e.g., JAK1i remains more effective than JAK3i at inhibiting ISGs), and the comparative effect of JAK1i and JAK3i on the IL-2 response varies with dosage. Thus, one should not consider that isoform-specific JAKi will provide sharply delineated blockade of a specific pathway, but, rather, quantitative nuances of network-level effects, which may differentiate therapeutic windows relative to adverse events.

Adaptive resistance is defined as the state wherein biological systems (bacterial populations, tumors) become refractory to a drug through compensatory tuning of drug-affected pathways, often epigenetic. In the timeframe of our studies, the opposite occurred: Cumulative dampening of tonic signals by JAK1i and pan-JAKi drugs reset signaling pathways and chromatin structure such that they became refractory to further cytokine stimuli. ISG expression is maintained by tonic levels of IFN signals, partly triggered by commensal microbes (31), and involves several positive feedback loops (IFN induces STAT1/2). Thus, we propose that JAKi repression of tonic signaling blocks these feed-forward loops, the system rapidly turning into a low-responsive mode, a dampening amplified by the closing of accessible chromatin regions (circuits involving positive feedback overreact to dampening). This remnant dampening of IFN networks by JAKi is consistent with the clinical efficacy observed in regimens that include long daily periods with low drug presence, but may be a

key contributor to viral reactivation. Operationally, these effects imply that choices of therapeutic dose and regimen should be less concerned with compound pharmacokinetics than with the persistent effects on the epigenetics of target networks.

## Materials and Methods

JAKis were administered by oral gavage (0.5% methyl cellulose), twice daily to 5-wk-old C57BL/6J males (Jackson Laboratory) following Harvard Medical School Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee Protocol 02954. For systematic immunophenotyping by flow cytometry, splenocytes were stained with three antibody panels (lymphoid, myeloid, and B subsets; Table S2).

For ex vivo expression profiling, immunocytes were sorted to high purity. RNA was prepared and analyzed on microarrays per ImmGen SOP ([www.immgen.org](http://www.immgen.org)). Profiles were combined from experiments with 7–14 d of JAKi treatment, with drug effects quantified as mean FC between JAKi and vehicle, statistical significance estimated by *t* test FDR. Affected genes were filtered as mean FC vs. vehicle-treated <0.65 (or >1.8) with  $-\log_{10}(P \text{ value}) > 1.8$  (FDR < 0.01) for any one cell type and any one drug, with CV across untreated <0.4. For DCE analysis, Pearson correlations between genes were computed to define two coexpression networks (from treated and untreated cells; Dataset S4) and *P* value [Bonferroni corrected ( $<5.0e-7$ )] for the difference in two corresponding coexpression values computed after Fisher's *r*-to-*z* transformation. Module coherence was computed for modules from Jojic et al. (15) (separately for vehicle- and JAKi-treated) as the ratio of average correlation between genes within the module and intermodule correlation, significance of the difference between coherence in control and treated samples computed by Monte Carlo permutation of treatment status. For chromatin accessibility, purified splenic B cells were used for ATAC-seq per ref. 17; the ~10M unique reads/sample peaks identified by macs2 from merged datasets, and signal density in those 56,212 peaks computed in each dataset.

Detailed experimental procedures are shown in [SI Materials and Methods](#).

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