INNATE IMMUNE RESPONSE IN NON-ALCOHOLIC FATTY LIVER DISEASE: AN OVERVIEW OF ALTERATIONS IN TLR 9, MACROPHAGES AND TNFα

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Abstract

Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD) and Alcoholic Liver Disease (ALD) are two causes of chronic liver disease. In Indonesia, NAFLD is the most common case of hepatic disease for Indonesian people. Risk factors such as obesity, diabetes mellitus, and metabolic syndrome increase the risk of developing NAFLD. About 1.5 billion people worldwide suffer from fatty liver, with a prevalence of 25-30%. Hence, it will continue to increase sharply if risk factors or diseases are not mitigated with pharmacological treatment and diet. The innate immune response induces abnormalities in fatty liver, mediated by Kupffer cells and TLR9 (Toll-Like Receptor 9), leading to inflammation via proinflammatory cytokines, like TNFα. Hepatocyte injury releases signals in the form of mitochondrial DNA enclosed in microparticles, which travels into the plasma, and are then captured by TLR9. Activation of TLR9 on Kupffer cells is the starting point of the inflammatory process in the pathogenesis of NAFLD, and it triggers other immune responses that encourage the development of steatohepatitis until a more severe liver injury occurs. The latest study found that analysis is needed to determine the immunological mechanisms and therapeutic targets associated with inflammation in fatty liver disease as evidenced by various immunological approaches.

Keywords: innate immune response, TLR 9, macrophages, TNFα, Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease

Introduction

Nonalcoholic Fatty liver Disease (NAFLD) is becoming a significant health problem for approximately 25% of the world’s adult population. The abundance of cases results from unanticipated complications and the absence of early detection.¹² The most significant risk factor for NAFLD is metabolic syndrome. The prevalence of metabolic syndrome in Indonesia reaches 23%. Since 2013 to 2018, metabolic syndrome is associated with obesity which increased from 14.8% to 21.8%. It is also associated with hypertension,
the prevalence of which increased from 25.8% to 34.1%. Diabetes mellitus is another contributing factor, the prevalence of which increased from 6.9% to 8.5% in Indonesia.¹³

NAFLD is a chronic liver disease afflicting children and adults; it is caused by genetics and epigenetics factors, unhealthy dietary habits, and low habitual physical activity, leading to chronic liver disease. Environmental factors can lead to insulin resistance, oxidative stress, and lipotoxicity, which induce the formation of the fatty liver spectrum.¹³ NAFLD is indicated with lesser consumption of alcohol: less than 20 grams/per day in women, and less than 30 grams/per day in men.¹⁴

Inflammation promotes the progression of simple fatty liver to steatohepatitis, fibrosis, cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma, and cardiovascular disease. The mechanism of inflammation begins with receptor activation, which then activates signaling pathways via transcriptional phosphorylation mechanisms, releasing inflammatory mediators that form the causal mechanism in fatty liver disease. The classic inflammatory and metabolic receptor of TLR9 through NfkB activation will release various proinflammatory mediators.⁵,⁶

**Innate Immune Response in NAFLD**

The pathogenesis of NAFLD involves a plethora of mediators, including cytokines, chemokines, neurotransmitters, adiponectin, TNFα, micro-RNA (miRNA), Extracellular vesicles (EVs), and metabolites. These mediators activate immune cells, which release proinflammatory chemokines, and cytokines, thus causing hepatocyte apoptosis.⁵ The gut microbiota also can trigger an immune response in NAFLD. Intestinal barrier dysfunction worsens NAFLD and increases bacterial translocation. Destruction of the barrier by the gut microbiota causes bacterial products, such as endotoxins, to enter the blood circulation through the gut-liver axis, which then causes inflammation of the liver.⁵

The liver and adipose tissue can affect insulin resistance and systemic metabolism. Adipose tissue secretes adiponectin, leptin, TNFα, and IL6, as well as several lipid groups (ceramide, palmitic acid). These cytokines inhibit the function of the mitochondria and endoplasmic reticulum, causing stress and apoptosis of hepatocytes. Kupffer cells will produce TNF-related apoptosis-inducing ligand (TRAIL), Tumor necrosis factor (TNF), and Fas ligand (FasL) through phagocytosis to encourage hepatocyte apoptosis, steatohepatitis, and fibrosis.⁵

**Alterations in TLR9, Macrophages, and TNFα**

The metabolic system is derived pathways of the TLR receptor and NLR. PRR, such as TLR and NLR, is responsible for introducing immunogenic signals, representing significant changes in the liver.⁶

**TLR9/Toll-Like Receptor 9**

Toll-like receptor 9 (TLR9) is a receptor with primordial functions in inflammatory and metabolic processes. TLR9 regulates homeostasis under acute stress pressure,
working on unmethylated CPG DNA. TLR9 activation induces progression of NAFL to NASH. A study revealed that when mitochondrial DNA enclosed by microparticles is released into the plasma in steatotic hepatocytes, it will activate TLR9 in endosomes to undergo hyperactivation and produce inflammatory cytokines, such as IL6, TNFα, and IL1β, encouraging the development of steatohepatitis. It also stimulates exacerbation by strengthening inflammation and liver injury. By default, most TLR9 in resting conditions is localized in the endoplasmic reticulum of adipose tissue, intestines, and liver with adiponectin, mtDNA, and Peroxisome Proliferator-Activated Receptor (PPAR) levels under normal conditions, and NFkB is not activated. When hepatosteatosis begins, the secretion of mtDNA will activate TLR9. Adipose infiltration relies on the activation of TLR9 in Kupffer cells, which could occur by intestinal epithelium damage that causes endotoxins to enter the portal circulation or translocation of bacterial cells. Furthermore, when mtDNA is increased in the systemic circulation, adipocytes synthesis will be more depressed, accompanied by decreased adiponectin levels and decreased Adenosine Monophosphate Activated Protein Kinase (AMPK) activation. Increased activation of TLR9 will reduce PPAR activity and activate NFkB, producing proinflammatory cytokines. If the hepatic, gut, and visceral adipose tissue compartments are depressed, the proinflammatory positive feedback loops that rely on TLR9 will become stronger. When the amount of mtDNA in circulation is higher than that of adiponectin, TLR9 will suppress PPAR activation. Besides that, adiponectin levels that are too low cannot dampen the TLR9 signaling. Moreover, the availability of free cholesterol in cells will strengthen TLR9 signaling. Activation of Hepatic Stellate Cells (HSCs) indicates that liver fibrosis has begun. However, if there is antagonism of TLR9, it will prevent inflammatory paracrine loops in the tissue compartment, resulting in attenuation of fibrosis from the activation of HSCs. TLR9 antagonism reduces fat, inflammation, and fibrosis. It is mediated by adiponectin, which systematically increases energy expenditure and reduces fat, inflammation, and fibrosis. Furthermore, the PPAR signal will regain homeostatic function by attenuating TLR9 activation (Figure 1).
Role of Kupffer Cells in The Inflammation Process

Macrophages that reside in the liver are known as Kupffer cells. They represent approximately 90% of all tissue macrophages and 35% of non-parenchymal cells in the liver. There is a large number of intravascular macrophages in the hepatic tissue, where they fill the sinusoidal lumen and recognize antigens in the blood that are present along the cell surface. Kupffer cells have the extraordinary capacity to admit millions of red blood cells, platelets, and immune cells within the circulation. It also selects pathogens or products of the pathogens, which penetrate through the epithelial cells and enter the bloodstream toward the gut-liver axis, causing hepatocytes damage.\(^{11}\)

Kupffer cells can be activated by certain signal expressions, either in the form of Pathogen Associated Molecular Pattern (PAMP) or Damaged Associated Molecular Pattern (DAMP). These signals are captured by receptors on the surface of the macrophage membrane called TLR or receptors in the cytoplasm called NLR.\(^ {12}\) The role of Kupffer cells, among others, includes inducing inflammation by secreting inflammatory mediators, recruiting chemokines such as CCL2 and CXCL10, and recruiting fibrogenic monocytes into injured liver tissue.\(^ {7}\) The release of DAMP, including mitochondrial DNA by apoptosis, causes hepatocytes to directly activate TLR9 on the surface of Kupffer cells and trigger an inflammatory cascade. (Figure 2)\(^ {7}\)
When hepatocytes are damaged, it releases a signal in the form of mitochondrial DNA that TLR9 will capture. The signal serves as a danger sign and activates Kupffer cells. Activated Kupffer cells will release various inflammatory mediators, causes apoptosis, and begins the process of fibrogenesis (Figure 2). The mitochondrial DNA of hepatocytes serves as ligands, resulting in active TLR9 in Kupffer cells. In the pathophysiology of NAFLD, risk factors such as obesity and metabolic syndrome increase adipose tissue damage, thereby releasing Free Fatty Acids (FFAs) to the portal circulation, leading to triglycerides (TGs) accumulation in hepatocytes. Moreover, FFAs from adipocytes release elevated levels of cytokines and chemokines, such as MCP1, TNFα, IL6, as well as lower levels of functional adipokines such as adiponectin. Increased accumulation of triglycerides in hepatocytes leads to inflammation and apoptosis in liver cells, after which HSCs promote progressivity to fibrosis by accelerating the development of steatohepatitis to fibrosis (Figure 2).

In addition to adipose tissue disorders, the gut contributes to the release of bacterial products as PAMP, such as endotoxins or lipopolysaccharides, as well as molecular patterns associated with damage to other tissues that express DAMP in the liver, thereby activating Kupffer cell receptors to produce cytokines such as IL1β, TNFα, and IL6, which
increase liver injury.\textsuperscript{8} When DAMP and PAMP bind to TLR, it activates MYD88 or TRIF signaling pathway, which activates NFκB and Janus kinase (JNK). Activated NFκB secretes proinflammatory cytokines, leading to lipid accumulation, cell injury, and apoptosis. Meanwhile, when DAMP and PAMP bind to NLR in the cytoplasm, it activates NOD Like Receptor Family Pyrin Domain Containing 3 (NLRP3), the adaptor protein ASC, and Caspase1 axis to regulate IL1β production through the assembly of inflammasome complexes. This process leads to the production of proinflammatory cytokines, such as IL1β and IL18, causing liver inflammation and apoptosis.\textsuperscript{7,9}

**Correlation of Increased TNFα with NAFLD Incidence**

The cytokine TNFα, thought initially to be a classic inflammatory cytokine, is currently associated with steatosis, insulin resistance, and inflammatory diseases. Activation of proinflammatory cytokines such as TNFα in the liver and adipose tissue plays a vital role in the pathogenesis and progression of NAFLD. Insulin resistance correlates with higher serum TNFα levels in NASH patients. The stress on the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) disrupts the insulin receptor substrate-1 (IRS1), resulting in insulin resistance. Insulin resistance will impair metabolic regulation, prompting the unfolded protein response (UPR) to activate the gene that encodes transcription factor NFκB to release inflammatory mediators, such as TNFα.\textsuperscript{14,15} Tumor Necrosis Factor Receptor 1 (TNFR1) expression, as a receptor for TNFα, also correlates with disease activity and fibrosis. TNFα signal transduction is mediated by TNFR1 and Tumor Necrosis Factor Receptor 2 (TNFR2). TNFR1 is expressed in multiple sites, whereas TNFR2 expression is more restricted to endothelial cells, neurons, and immune cells. When TNFα binds to TNFR1, it leads to the formation of protein complexes by transmitting signals through cytoplasmic adaptor proteins. Moreover, TNFα-TNFR1 complexes can interact with the adaptor protein Fas Associated Protein with Death Domain (FADD), leading to activation of initiator caspase 8. Activated caspase 8 promotes the activation of downstream effector caspases, cleaves cellular substrates, and induces apoptosis.\textsuperscript{15}

In a study conducted by Neeta et al. in 2020, the curve of TNFα and adiponectin was built to predict the severity of fatty liver. The cut-off value of TNFα from the ROC curve was 11.2 pg/ml for NAFLD, with a sensitivity of 90.05%, specificity of 100%, and accuracy of 91.80%. The cut-off value of adiponectin from the ROC curve was < 4.2 µg/ml for NAFLD with a sensitivity of 80.49%, specificity of 85%, and accuracy of 80.32%. Studies show that there has been a significant increase in TNFα values, accompanied by a decrease in adiponectin in serum of people with fatty liver disease, which correlates with the degree of liver steatosis based on diagnostic tests using ultrasonography. In another study, obese children who had NAFLD significantly showed higher serum concentrations of TNFα compared to controls, which shows that TNFα is associated with metabolic syndrome.\textsuperscript{16,17} However, definitive diagnostics of fatty liver disease in adults require a histopathological picture for diagnostic accuracy.\textsuperscript{17}
A study in children and adolescents by Pacifico et al. in 2014 showed an increase in interventricular disturbances after examination of vascular imaging with noninvasive ultrasonography in 41 subjects from 54 subjects with obesity and NAFLD. There is increased septal thickness with left ventricular (LV) systolic and diastolic dysfunction. The NAFLD group also showed an increase in epicardial fat thickness. Fat thickness correlates with NAFLD and atherosclerosis in obese children and adolescents. Increased free fatty acids released by adipocytes in visceral organs, such as the heart and the liver, promote low-grade chronic inflammation, releasing of proinflammatory cytokines, such as TNFα.¹⁸

Pharmacological Interventions to Prevent The Progression of NAFL to NASH

The therapy of fatty liver disease is determined at the level of the disease. Most fatty liver diseases have fallen into fibrosis or even hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), thus requiring chemotherapy. Therefore, early prevention is needed to prevent the progression of NAFL to NASH. In addition to managing metabolic diseases, several pharmacological agents have been trialed in animals and humans, showing promising results. These agents include probiotics, pentoxyvulin, prednisolone, and vitamin E.¹⁹

The therapeutic agents target the signaling pathway of innate immune responses, from receptors to proinflammatory cytokines released by Kupffer cells. According to Wang et al., in 2021, only vitamin E effectively prevents NAFLD, judging by improvements in the histopathological condition of the liver cells that experience inflammation. Therapeutic targets are already known; however, further analysis is needed to develop pharmacological interventions in NAFLD.¹⁹

Conclusion

NAFLD is caused by many factors, such as genetics and epigenetics. TLR9 activation promotes the transcription factor NfκB on Kupffer cells to release inflammatory mediators, like TNFα. The innate immune response in NALFD is followed by lipid accumulation, cell injury, and apoptosis of hepatocytes. The chronic inflammatory process will promote more severe liver injury; therefore, analysis is needed compartment to determine the immunological mechanism associated with inflammation in fatty liver disease and to develop pharmacological intervention.²⁰

Competing Interests

There is no competing interest in this study.

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