The thymus gland, where T lymphocyte development occurs, is targeted in malnutrition secondary to protein energy deficiency. There is a severe thymic atrophy, resulting from massive thymocyte apoptosis (particularly affecting the immature CD4⁺CD8⁺ cell subset) and decrease in cell proliferation. The thymic microenvironment (the non-lymphoid compartment that drives intrathymic T-cell development) is also affected in malnutrition: morphological changes in thymic epithelial cells were found, together with a decrease of thymic hormone production, as well as an increase of intrathymic contents of extracellular proteins. Profound changes in the thymus can also be seen in deficiencies of vitamins and trace elements. Taking Zn deficiency as an example, there is a substantial thymic atrophy. Importantly, marginal Zn deficiency in AIDS subjects, children with diarrhoea and elderly persons, significantly impairs the host’s immunity, resulting in an increased risk of opportunistic infections and mortality; effects that are reversed by Zn supplementation. Thymic changes also occur in acute infectious diseases, including a severe thymic atrophy, mainly due to the depletion of CD4⁺CD8⁺ thymocytes, decrease in thymocyte proliferation, in parallel to densification of the epithelial network and increase in the extracellular matrix contents, with consequent disturbances in thymocyte migration and export. In conclusion, the thymus is targeted in several conditions of malnutrition as well as in acute infections. These changes are related to the impaired peripheral immune response seen in malnourished and infected individuals. Thus, strategies inducing thymus replenishment should be considered as adjuvant therapeutics to improve immunity in malnutrition and/or acute infectious diseases.


It has been a long time since scientists noticed that in the context of the malnutrition-related immunodeficiency, the thymus undergoes a variety of alterations, comprising, among others, a consistent severe atrophy (reviewed in(1)), leading to the notion that the thymus can be considered as a barometer of malnutrition(2). Interestingly, such a thymic atrophy pattern can also be found in a variety of infectious diseases(3). Importantly, these two pathological situations likely cause profound alterations in the host’s immune system, in part as a consequence of targeting the thymus. Thus, the impact of malnutrition plus infection is a relevant issue in health sciences including public health, since in many countries malnutrition frequently parallels infections. Herein, we will review the similarities concerning the changes seen in the thymus of individuals suffering from malnutrition and/or infectious diseases. Yet, before discussing these specific data, it seemed useful to provide a general background of the normal thymus structure and function, comprising both the thymic microenvironment and the process of intrathymic T-cell differentiation.

Abbreviations: ECM, extracellular matrix; TCR, T-cell receptor; TEC, thymic epithelial cells.
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The thymic microenvironment and its role in T-cell differentiation

The thymus is a primary lymphoid organ, in which bone marrow-derived T-cell precursors undergo differentiation, ultimately leading to the migration of positively selected thymocytes to the T-cell-dependent areas of peripheral lymphoid organs (see Fig. 1). Such a process involves a sequential expression of various proteins and rearrangements of the T-cell receptor (TCR) genes. Most immature thymocytes express neither the TCR complex nor the CD4 or CD8 accessory molecules; being called double-negative thymocytes, and representing 5% total thymocytes. As maturation progresses thymocytes acquire the membrane expression of the CD4 and CD8 markers, generating the CD4+CD8+ double-positive cells, which comprise 80% of the whole population. In this stage, TCR genes are rearranged, and productive rearrangements yield the membrane expression of the TCR (complexed with the CD3) in low densities (TCRlow). Thymocytes that do not undergo a productive TCR gene rearrangement die by apoptosis, whereas those expressing productive TCR interact with peptides presented by molecules of the MHC, expressed on microenvironmental cells. This interaction determines the positive and negative selection events, crucial for normal thymocyte differentiation. Negative selection results in apoptosis-mediated cell death. Positively selected thymocytes progress to the mature expression of the CD4 and CD8 markers, generating the CD4+CD8+ double-positive cells, which comprise 80% of the whole population. In this stage, TCR genes are rearranged, and productive rearrangements yield the membrane expression of the TCR (complexed with the CD3) in low densities (TCRlow). Thymocytes that do not undergo a productive TCR gene rearrangement die by apoptosis, whereas those expressing productive TCR interact with peptides presented by molecules of the MHC, expressed on microenvironmental cells. This interaction determines the positive and negative selection events, crucial for normal thymocyte differentiation. Negative selection results in apoptosis-mediated cell death. Positively selected thymocytes progress to the mature
Thymocyte development is altered in protein–energy malnutrition

As stated earlier, one of the most conspicuous changes in malnutrition is thymic atrophy, which is essentially due to a massive thymocyte death, particularly affecting the immature stage of CD4+CD8- cells. Yet, it should be pointed out that, in addition to the increase in thymocyte death seen in thymuses from malnourished individuals, there is an intrathymic decrease in cell proliferation, as ascertained by the very low numbers of cells labelled with proliferating cell nuclear antigen, a marker for cell proliferation. Thus, protein–energy malnutrition-related thymocyte depletion results from enhanced thymocyte death plus decreased thymocyte proliferation. It should be pointed out that the major change in the thymic lymphoid compartment is also observed in human subjects suffering from malnutrition: a severe thymic atrophy with cortical compartment is also observed in human subjects suffering from malnutrition-induced thymic atrophy as well as accelerated lymphopenia, leading to the reduction in cell- and antibody-mediated responses, thus influencing the susceptibility to infectious diseases.

Early observations showed that mice maintained on a Zn-deficient diet develop a progressive thymic involution: after 4 weeks the thymus retains only 25% of its original size and at 6 weeks only a few thymocytes remain in the organ. Such changes are observed mostly in the thymic cortex, with a severe loss of CD4+CD8- thymocytes, and can be reversed by Zn supplementation. Moreover, marginal Zn deficiency, in the early post-natal period, also results in substantial reduction in thymic size.

The mechanism(s) of heightened apoptosis in Zn deficiency mice remain(s) to be precisely determined. However, glucocorticoid hormones seem to be involved, since Zn deficiency yields a chronic stimulation of corticosterone production, and adrenalectomy prevents thymic atrophy secondary to Zn deficiency.

These studies raise concern about the impact of intrathymic cell death in human subjects who are deficient in Zn due to suboptimal diet or chronic disease. In this respect, nutritional supplementation should be considered in chronically ill patients, with compromised immune defence, as reported in AIDS patients. Zn supplementation resulted in a significant increase in CD4+ T cells and a decreased mortality. This notion can also be applied in Chagas patients, since they exhibit a decrease in serum Zn concentrations; the same being observed in a variety of haemopoietic organs of infected rats. Accordingly, the severity of experimental Chagas disease is much higher in Zn-deficient mice.

Acute infections induce thymic atrophy

Severe thymic atrophy is also a common feature in acute infections, reflecting the massive depletion of CD4+CD8- cortical thymocytes (Table 1). This has been
Thymocyte depletion seen in malnutrition and acute infections is partially under hormonal control

It is now well established that the physiology of the thymus (including both lymphoid and microenvironmental compartments) is influenced by a variety of hormones and neuropeptides(7). It has been shown that glucocorticoid-circulating levels are increased in protein-malnourished mice, as compared to age-matched controls. Additionally, implanted corticosterone-containing pellets, able to generate glucocorticoid serum levels equivalent to those found in malnourished mice, were sufficient to yield thymocyte depletion(36). As discussed later, leptin also seems to be involved. It has been shown that human subjects and rodents lacking proper leptin production or expressing defective leptin receptors, bear a certain degree of immunodeficiency characterized by reduced T-cell proliferative response to various mitogens, impaired production of IL-4 and inappropriate antibody production after immunization(37–39). Interestingly, leptin/leptin receptor-deficient animals exhibit an atrophy of lymphoid tissues, particularly the thymus, and such a defect can be reversed by the reposition of the hormone(40). Leptin was also able to prevent starvation-induced thymic atrophy(40,41), strongly suggesting that this hormone is one mediator of malnutrition-induced thymic atrophy. It is thus conceivable that in malnutritional states, the imbalance in the production of leptin (which is decreased) and glucocorticoid hormones (which are increased) is at least partially responsible for thymocyte depletion and consequent atrophy of the organ, as we previously proposed(42,43).

The precise mechanisms responsible for the thymic atrophy seen in acute infections are not completely elucidated, and may vary in distinct diseases. But similar to malnutrition, one major pathway is related to the rise in glucocorticoid hormone levels in the blood, a classical effect comprised within the stress response of the organism to the infection. In fact, glucocorticoid serum levels are enhanced in Trypanosoma cruzi-infected mice(44,45), and, as discussed later, are likely involved, at least partially, in the T. cruzi-induced thymic atrophy(46). Thymocyte depletion seen in rabies virus-infected mice(47) can be prevented by adrenalectomy prior to infection. In murine Chagas disease, adrenalectomy alone did not prevent T. cruzi-induced cortical thymocyte depletion(48). Nevertheless, more recently it was demonstrated that a complete functional inhibition of glucocorticoid receptors by in vivo injection of RU-486, did prevent thymocyte depletion following acute T. cruzi infection(48). Whether leptin levels are down-regulated in acutely infected levels remains to be determined and represents an interesting open field of investigation.

### Table 1. Thymic atrophy in human subjects and experimental infectious diseases (modified from(3))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of infectious agent</th>
<th>Disease</th>
<th>Infectious agent</th>
<th>Cortical atrophy</th>
<th>CD4+CD8+ thymocyte depletion</th>
<th>Human subjects data</th>
<th>Animal data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viruses</td>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>HIV/SIV</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rabies</td>
<td>Rabies virus</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Measles</td>
<td>Measles virus</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hepatitis</td>
<td>Hepatitis virus (A59)</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ebola infection</td>
<td>Ebola virus</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bacteria</td>
<td>Tularemia</td>
<td>Francisella tularensis</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listeriosis</td>
<td>Listeria monocytogenses</td>
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<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syphilis</td>
<td>Treponema pallidum</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>Protozoa</td>
<td>Chagas disease</td>
<td>Trypanosoma cruzi</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malaria</td>
<td>Plasmodium chabaudi; Plasmodium berghei</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fungi</td>
<td>Paracocciodosis</td>
<td>Plasmodium brasilensis</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Histoplasmosis</td>
<td>Histoplasma capulatum</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neosporosis</td>
<td>Neospora caninum</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helminths</td>
<td>Schistosomiasis</td>
<td>Schistosoma mansoni</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trichinosis</td>
<td>Trichinella spiralis</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SIV, Simian immunodeficiency virus; ND, not determined.
epithelium from protein-malnourished mice include the
decrease in the volume of the epithelial tissue in the cortex
and in the medulla of thymuses from malnourished mice,
as compared to well-nourished control animals\(^{(49)}\). By
contrast, an increase of intracytoplasmic accumulations of
large, circular, homogeneously electron-dense profiles, rich
in free and esterified cholesterol was reported in both cor-
tical and medullary TEC of malnourished animals\(^{(50)}\). Unfor-
fortunately, no data were reported concerning TEC death
in this experimental model.

In \(T. \text{ cruzi}\) acutely infected mice, we demonstrated
changes in the expression of medullary and cortical-
specific markers, as compared to controls, together with a
general shrinkage of the thymic epithelial network\(^{(51)}\).

Conceptually, these findings tell us that the thymic
epithelium is morphologically altered in malnutrition and
infection. As seen later, functional changes of the thymic
epithelium are also seen in both these pathological condi-
tions.

\textit{Decreased thymic endocrine function in malnourished
and acutely infected individuals}

One functional parameter that has been largely evaluated
in malnutritional conditions is the thymic hormone pro-
duction by TEC. It was initially found that that protein-
malnourished mice exhibited abnormally low levels of
circulating thymulin\(^{(1,49)}\), and that such a decrease was also
observed in protein-malnourished rats and human sub-
jects\(^{(52)}\). Interestingly, even in human subjects protein
malnutrition secondary to \textit{anorexia nervosa}, low thymulin
serum levels were reported\(^{(53)}\). Furthermore, decreased
thymulin serum levels were reported in mice submitted
to diets designed to trigger deficiency in Zn, Fe, or vita-
mins\(^{(1,14,54)}\). At least regarding Zn deficiency, similar
results were found in human subjects\(^{(55)}\).

It is noteworthy that the decrease in thymic hormone
serum levels seen in malnutrition is not restricted to thy-
mulin, since it was recently reported with regard to thy-
moipoietin production\(^{(56)}\). In this study, the authors further
demonstrated that prenatal undernutrition was significantly
associated with reduced thymopoietin production in inter-
action with the duration of exclusive breast-feeding. These
findings provide support for the importance of fetal and
early infant programming of thymic function, and long-
term implications for the immune system, and conse-
quent disease risk.

In severe infection conditions, thymic endocrine func-
tion is also affected. We observed in \(T. \text{ cruzi}\)-infected mice
a transient decrease in the serum levels of the thymic hormone thymulin\(^{(51)}\). In HIV infection, we and others
showed a consistent and long-term diminution of thymulin
secretion, in terms of both serum levels and intrathymic
contents of the hormone\(^{(57-59)}\).

\textit{Increased extracellular matrix in the thymus of
malnourished children}

In addition to the abnormalities seen in TEC, the thymus
from malnourished children presents a further micro-
environmental alteration, namely, an increase in the
deposition of ECM proteins. We studied by histological,
ultrastructural and immunohistochemical means, thymuses
obtained in necropsies from malnourished children. There
is a consistent increase in the intralobular ECM-containing
network, which could be ascertained histologically by the
dense reticulin staining and immunohistochemically by the
higher contents of fibronectin, laminin and type IV col-
lagen. Importantly, the enhancement of thymic ECM in
malnourished individuals positively correlated with the
degree of thymocyte depletion\(^{(10)}\). This correlation may
represent a cause–effect relationship in which the contact
of thymocytes with abnormally high amounts of thymic
ECM triggers and/or enhances programmed cell death.
However, this notion is still hypothetical, demanding
experimental demonstration. Interestingly, similar changes
in thymic ECM were observed in glucocorticoid-hormone-
treated mice and TEC cultures\(^{(7)}\), leading to the hypothesis
that the enhanced ECM deposition seen in malnutrition
may be also related to high levels of glucocorticoid
hormones. Such an alteration was also seen in acute in-
tfections, as exemplified by experimental Chagas dis-
 ease\(^{(51,60)}\). In this infection model, changes in ECM were
accompanied by alterations in the migratory response of
thymocytes, with an abnormal export of CD4\(^+\)CD8\(^+\)
immature thymocytes, some of them having bypassed the
normal selective selection process\(^{(60-62)}\). Whether similar
cell migration abnormalities exist in malnourished subjects
is to be investigated.

\textit{Changes in the patterns of thymocyte migratory
responses in acute infections}

In addition to the thymocyte depletion seen in several
infectious diseases, changes in the migratory responses
have also been observed. As mentioned earlier, thymocyte
depletion parallels \(T. \text{ cruzi}\)-induced alterations of the thymic
microenvironment, comprising phenotypic changes and
functional changes in the TEC network, with an enhance-
ment in the deposition of cell migration-related molecules
such the ECM proteins, fibronectin and laminin, as well as
the chemokines CXCL12 and CCL21\(^{(60,61)}\). These changes
promote increased migratory responses to the correspond-
ing ligands, and are likely related to the abnormal release
of double-positive cells from the thymus into the periph-
ery, resulting in more than 15-fold increase in double-
positive cell numbers in subcutaneous lymph nodes. In this
vein, it is noteworthy that double-positive cells seen in
peripheral lymphoid organs express high densities of ECM
and chemokine receptors\(^{(60,61)}\). Among these abnormally
released double-positive cells in the periphery, we found
lymphocytes expressing potentially autoreactive TCR,
which are normally deleted in the thymus of uninfected
mice. This suggests that during the infection, immature
T lymphocytes escape from the thymic central tolerance
process and migrate to the lymph nodes where they even-
tually differentiate into mature CD4\(^+\) or CD8\(^+\) cells\(^{(3,63)}\).

In a second murine model of parasitic diseases, the
thymus was evaluated in mice acutely infected with \textit{Plas-
modium berghei}. Again there is a thymic atrophy, with loss of
cortical-medullary limits and the intrathymic presence
of parasites. We also analysed the thymic expression of ECM ligands and receptors, as well as chemokines and their respective receptors. An increased expression of ECM components was observed in the thymus from infected mice, in parallel to a down-regulation of fibronectin and laminin receptor surface expression in thymocytes from these animals. Moreover, in the thymus from infected mice, we found increased contents of CXCL12 and CXCR4 and decreased expression of CCL25 and CCR9. An altered thymocyte migration towards ECM elements and chemokines was seen when the thymus from infected mice were analysed. The evaluation of ex vivo migration patterns of CD4/CD8-defined thymocyte subpopulations revealed that double-negative and CD4+ and CD8+ single-positive cells from P. berghei-infected mice have higher migratory responses, as compared to controls. Interestingly, increased numbers of these T-cell subpopulations were found in the spleen of infected mice, suggesting an abnormal export of T lymphocytes from the thymus of mice undergoing acute malaria infection.

Conclusions

The various issues discussed earlier clearly show that the thymus is a constant target organ in malnutrition as well as in acute infections, being severely affected in both lymphoid and microenvironmental compartments, and resulting in abnormal intrathymic T-cell death, proliferation and migration. These changes likely have consequences, leading to the impaired peripheral immune responses, seen in malnourished and infected individuals. Thus, strategies able to promote thymus replenishment should be considered when designing adjuvant therapeutic approaches, in both malnutrition and acute infectious diseases.

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