



Combination of anti-citrullinated protein antibodies and rheumatoid factor is associated with increased systemic inflammatory mediators and more rapid progression from preclinical to clinical rheumatoid arthritis

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ABSTRACT

The development of rheumatoid factor (RF) and/or anti-citrullinated protein antibodies (ACPAs) can be observed years prior to clinical diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis (RA). Nevertheless, the interaction between these two autoantibodies and their combined effect on development of RA is unclear. We measured RF, cytokines, and ACPA subtypes in serial pre-clinical serum samples collected from 83 US veterans who all developed RA. Levels of cytokines and ACPAs were compared between the following groups: anti-cyclic citrullinated peptide (anti-CCP)-/RF- (double negative), anti-CCP+/RF-, anti-CCP-/RF+, or anti-CCP+/RF+ (double-positive). The double-positive subgroup had significantly higher levels of 20 inflammatory cytokines and 29 ACPA reactivities, and the shortest interval, 1.3 years, between the preclinical sample timepoint and diagnosis of RA. Thus, the combined presence of ACPAs and RF is associated with a more rapid progression to RA, suggesting that anti-CCP+/RF+ individuals have a more advanced preclinical disease state and that the onset of RA may be imminent.

1. Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) affects approximately 0.5% of the general population [1,2], and is characterized by inflammation and destruction of the synovial joints [3,4]. The window of opportunity for reducing the severity of joint damage with treatment comes early in the course of the clinically apparent disease [5]. As a result, much effort is underway to identify predictive biomarkers for the future development and diagnosis of RA prior to the onset of clinical symptoms as well as biomarkers to classify the mechanisms underlying the development of RA [6,7].

It is now well established that elevations of rheumatoid factor (RF), anti-citrullinated protein antibodies (ACPA), and cytokines precede the onset of the clinical findings of inflammatory arthritis that can be classified as RA during a period that can be termed ‘Preclinical RA’ [8–20]. ACPAs are highly specific for RA and are detected in 60–70% of RA patients [21–24]. Anti-CCP tests capture several overlapping reactivity of ACPA targets and thus do not represent a single ACPA

specificity [25]. RF is also present in nearly 70% of RA patients; however, it is less specific than ACPA for RA and its role in RA pathogenesis is not fully defined [26,27].

Previous studies found that RF or ACPAs had the potential to serve as biomarkers predictive for RA disease severity [28,29] as well as for the conversion of the preclinical state to clinical rheumatoid arthritis [16,19]. Further, it has been shown that the presence of both ACPAs and IgA RF predicted the most rapid progression from the preclinical state to clinical rheumatoid arthritis [19]. Others have shown that higher concentrations of either RF or ACPAs are associated with a more aggressive disease course, characterized by greater disease activity and lower remission rates [23,30,31]. Indeed, both RF and ACPAs are known to contribute to the pathogenesis of RA, and we recently demonstrated that they interact to promote inflammation in experimental models of RA [32]. Still incompletely understood, however, is the potential interactions and thus relationship between the detection of these autoantibodies, individually as compared to together, and the timing of

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the transition from preclinical to clinically apparent and classified RA.

Defining the specific autoantibody specificities, and combinations of autoantibody specificities, as they relate to the development of clinical RA in these asymptomatic preclinical patients could yield key biomarkers for identifying individuals at high risk for the imminent development of RA [33]. Several studies have described the presence of RF and ACPAs in the blood prior to the onset of arthritis and the clinical diagnosis of RA [8–16]. Given that prior work demonstrated that ACPA and RF are both elevated in the pre-clinical phase of RA in this pre-clinical RA cohort [8,9], here we focus on how ACPA and RF positivity and the co-occurrence of these autoantibodies promote the transition from preclinical to clinical onset of RA.

In this manuscript, we evaluate the relationship between positivity for RF and/or ACPA with the presence of multiple cytokines in pre-clinical RA to test the hypothesis that positivity for both RF and ACPA in preclinical RA is associated with imminent onset of clinically apparent inflammatory arthritis and higher levels of inflammation. Specifically, we examined the presence of RF by nephelometry and anti-CCP ACPA autoantibodies detected by commercial assays, as well as 34 different ACPA autoantigens and 48 cytokines and chemokines detected by multiplex arrays, in serial serum samples collected from a cohort of patients during the preclinical phase of RA. We sought to elucidate the temporal relationships between autoantibody status, systemic inflammation, and progression to clinical RA. An additional goal was to determine which autoantibodies may be most useful in predicting the likelihood and timing of onset of clinical RA as a precedent for future studies to further evaluate these connections. We demonstrate that the co-occurrence of ACPAs and RF in preclinical RA is associated with an increase in systemic inflammation, as well as a shorter transition period from preclinical to clinical RA.

2. Methods

2.1. Patient samples and clinical measures

The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC), Stanford University, and the University of Colorado. The protocol now resides at WRNMMC and remains an active protocol. Informed consent was not possible due to the retrospective analysis of this serum repository cohort, and the requirement for informed consent was waived by the ethics committees at WRAMC, the University of Colorado and Stanford University. All investigators conformed to the principles expressed in the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki [34].

As previously described [8,9], samples studied included serial serum samples obtained from the Department of Defense Serum Repository (DoDSR), which stores serum samples obtained from the United States Armed Forces personnel during enlistment and deployment on average every year. Samples are stored in a central repository at -30°C . The subjects studied in this analysis were members of the United States Armed Forces who were assigned to the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC) Rheumatology Clinic in 1989–2003, and were diagnosed with RA during the longitudinal sample collection. At clinical diagnosis, all subjects satisfied the 1987 American College of Rheumatology classification of RA or were considered to have RA by a board-certified rheumatologist [35].

The samples studied were serial serum samples collected at time points up to 14 years before and at the time of clinical diagnosis of RA. A total of 288 banked serum samples from a representative cohort of 83 patients were analyzed using a bead-based multiplex cytokine assays and a bead-based rheumatoid arthritis autoantigen array, which includes a CCP antigen bead, as previously described [8,9,36]. Clinical data, such as age, gender, race, and presence of joint erosions, were available for each of the subjects, as were the results of RF tests by nephelometry performed at the Rheumatology Clinical Research Laboratory (positivity defined as ≥ 15 IU/ml) and anti-CCP2 tests to

measure IgG antibodies to CCP (CCP2 assay with positivity defined as ≥ 5 units/ml) [8]. Investigators at Stanford University were blinded to the samples' disease classification at the time of antibody and cytokine profiling. Only after testing was complete was the coding key provided to link the serum samples to the corresponding data on the subject.

2.2. Multiplex cytokine analysis

As previously described [9,37–39], multiplex analysis of 48 cytokines and chemokines was performed on the serum samples using the Bio-Plex™ bead array (Bio-Rad) run on a Luminex 200 system (Luminex Corporation) according to the manufacturer's instructions, with the exception that the proprietary Bio-Rad assay dilution buffer was modified to contain reagents that reduce the effect of heterophilic antibodies (RF) in multiplex immunoassays [40]. Data processing was performed with the Bio-Plex Manager 5.0 software (Bio-Rad), and serum concentrations (pictograms per milliliter) were interpolated from standard curves for each respective cytokine or chemokine. This protocol and data generated were MAIME compliant and were deposited in the Gene Expression Omnibus Repository (accession number GSE32021; <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE32021>).

2.3. Multiplex autoantigen arrays

As previously described [38], serum levels of ACPA antibodies targeting 44 putative RA-associated autoantigens were measured by using a custom bead-based immunoassay on a Bio-Plex platform [36,39]. Of the 44 antigens contained in the bead-based array, 34 are citrullinated and 10 are native (Fig. 6). Serum was diluted to a 1:30 ratio in a proprietary sample dilution buffer provided by Bio-Rad, mixed with the antigens conjugated to spectrally distinct fluorescent microspheres (Bio-Rad), and then incubated with an anti-human phycoerythrin (Cy3)-labeled antibody (Jackson ImmunoResearch). The resulting fluorescence intensities were analyzed on a Luminex 200 platform (Luminex Corporation).

The number of ACPA reactivities detected in each of the samples by multiplex antigen array was determined by calculating the z-score of the reactivity (fluorescence intensity) of the sample to each antigen. Positivity was defined as a z-score of 1.5 standard deviations above the mean reactivity to a given antigen in the entire sample set.

2.4. Statistical analysis

For all analyses other than that presented in Fig. 4, samples were categorized by autoantibody status (using the CCP2 results for CCP): anti-CCP-/RF- (double-negative; $n = 68$), anti-CCP+/RF- ($n = 28$), anti-CCP-/RF+ ($n = 37$), and anti-CCP+/RF+ (double-positive; $n = 98$). For Fig. 4, all samples, including those that remaining seronegative throughout collection time, were utilized: anti-CCP-/RF- (double-negative; $n = 125$), anti-CCP+/RF- ($n = 28$), anti-CCP-/RF+ ($n = 37$), and anti-CCP+/RF+ (double-positive; $n = 98$). Statistical analysis of the differences in patient characteristics between the different groups was performed using a Kruskal-Wallis test (Table 1). The measured cytokine data were normally distributed, and levels of each cytokine and chemokine were compared between groups using unpaired *t*-test with Welch's correction (Fig. 2). *P* values < 0.05 were considered significant. The statistical analyses were made using PRISM (GraphPad Software).

Additional comparisons were performed on multiplex cytokines as well as multiplex ACPAs of samples using Significance Analysis of Microarrays (SAM) version 3.08 (Figs. 1 and 3) [41]. Output was sorted on the basis of false discovery rates (FDRs) in order to determine which antigens had the greatest differences in autoantibody reactivity between groups of samples. The use of FDRs obviates the need to adjust for multiple comparisons. Cluster 3.0 [42] was used to subject SAM

Table 1
Clinical characteristics of the patient cohort stratified by RF and anti-CCP autoantibody status at the time of initial sample collection*.

Characteristic	Total patient cohort (n = 83)	Anti-CCP-/RF- (n = 55)	Anti-CCP+/RF- (n = 6)	Anti-CCP-/RF+ (n = 6)	Anti-CCP+/RF+ (n = 16)
Sociodemographics and comorbidity					
Male sex	59.0	58.2	66.7	33.3	68.8
Race/ethnicity					
White	68.7	69.1	83.3	33.3	75.0
African-American	25.3	23.6	16.7	66.7	18.8
Other	6.0	7.3	0	0	6.2
RA Factors					
Age at diagnosis, mean \pm SD years	49.9 \pm 10.0	40.3 \pm 10.2	36.3 \pm 10.0	31.3 \pm 7.9	43.2 \pm 8.8
Erosions					
Positive	50.6	45.5	83.3	33.3	62.5
Negative	41.0	47.3	0	50.0	31.3
Not done	8.4	7.2	16.7	16.7	6.2

Significant differences between the four autoantibody status groups for each characteristic were tested by the Kruskal-Wallis test. None of the comparisons were significant. Significance was defined as a p-value less than 0.05.

*Except where indicated otherwise, values are the percent.

RA = rheumatoid arthritis; anti-CCP = anti-cyclic citrullinated peptide; RF = rheumatoid factor; SD = standard deviation.

results to unsupervised hierarchical clustering according to similarities in ACPA specificities, cytokines, or chemokines detected, and Java TreeView 1.1.3 [43] was used to visualize the results as a heatmap.

In some patients, certain markers were detected at an early time point but not at a later time point (this was observed in 10% or fewer of samples). For descriptive analyses relating to autoantibody status and relative days before clinical RA diagnosis, if a patient tested positive for a given antibody marker (e.g. anti-CCP or RF) at one time point but negative for that same marker at all subsequent time points, then that patient was designated negative for that marker. Conversely, if a patient initially tested positive for a given marker (e.g. anti-CCP or RF), subsequently negative, but at an even later time point tested positive once more, then that patient was considered positive for that marker throughout the time course studied. This trend was observed in < 3% of patients that were subsequently defined negative, and in < 2% of patients described as positive.

3. Results

3.1. ACPAs and RF in the military cohort

The characteristics of the 83-patient cohort at the time of clinical diagnosis are shown in Table 1, with patients grouped based on their CCP (based on the CCP2 test results) and RF (based on RF test results by nephelometry) autoantibody status. The studied cohort was 59% males, and had a mean age of clinical diagnosis of 40 years. Furthermore, there was no significant difference in gender or age at diagnosis between the four autoantibody status groups as tested using a Kruskal-Wallis test. At the time of initial sample collection, 19% of the patient samples were classified as anti-CCP+/RF+ (double-positive), 7% were anti-CCP+/RF-, 7% were anti-CCP-/RF+, and 67% were anti-CCP-/RF- (double-negative). The time of sample collection relative to age at clinical RA diagnosis, race, and erosion presence did not differ significantly between the groups as tested using a Kruskal-Wallis test.

A total of 288 samples were used from the 83 patients from the cohort. Of these samples, 34% were classified as double-positive, 10% were anti-CCP+/RF-, 13% were anti-CCP-/RF+, and 43% were double-negative.

Within the overall cohort, 19 patients, 22.9% of the total number, remained seronegative (CCP-/RF-) throughout the time of sample collection and observation. Given that these individuals were never positive for autoantibodies during the time of sampling and observation, their corresponding 57 samples were excluded from analyses to prevent an artifactual extension of the period of preclinical positivity. Hence, we utilized the remaining 231 samples from 64 unique patients for all analyses except only those corresponding to Fig. 4. Of the remaining

231 samples, 42% were classified as double-positive, 12% were anti-CCP+/RF-, 16% were anti-CCP-/RF+, and 30% were double-negative.

3.2. Concurrence of ACPAs and RF is linked to RA-associated inflammation

We used multiplex bead-based assays to measure the levels of 48 different cytokines and chemokines in 231 serial serum samples collected from the 83 patients, all of whom developed clinical RA at some point during the longitudinal sample collection. We then compared these levels between groups of samples stratified according to their individual autoantibody positivity status: the double-negative group, the anti-CCP+/RF- group, the anti-CCP-/RF+ group, and the double-positive group. Four-way multiclass group comparisons were performed with SAM, and the output was sorted on the basis of FDRs. The analysis indicated that levels of 20 of the 48 cytokines and chemokines were significantly (significance was defined as a q-value < 5%) higher in the double-positive group compared to the other three groups (Fig. 1).

To ensure that the relationships observed are not an indirect result of being closer to seropositive RA disease onset, the analysis was restricted to a similar time interval, between 1 and 5 years prior to disease diagnosis, between the four groups. Four-way multiclass group comparisons were performed with SAM, and the output was sorted on the basis of FDRs. The analysis indicated that levels of 16 of the 48 cytokines and chemokines were significantly (significance was defined as a q-value < 5%) higher in the double-positive samples compared to samples in the other three groups.

When compared solely to the double-negative group, the double-positive group exhibited significantly higher levels of 26 of the 48 inflammatory cytokines and chemokines as determined by an unpaired *t*-test using Welch's correction. Of the 26 elevated cytokines, results for 6 are presented in Fig. 2a, including tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF- α), granulocyte macrophage-colony stimulating factor (GM-CSF), interferon gamma (IFN- γ), interleukin 12 subunit p70 (IL-12p70), granulocyte-colony stimulating factor (G-CSF), and interleukin 15 (IL-15). The double-positive group exhibited significantly elevated levels of these cytokines, compared to the CCP+/RF- and CCP-/RF+ groups as well. Additionally, we found that the double-positive group had significantly lower levels of a single chemokine, RANTES (CCL5), when compared to the other three groups (Fig. 2b). Although many of the cytokines analyzed, including those most upregulated in the double-positive group, are highly related and thus at reduced risk for Type I error that can occur in multiplex cytokine analysis, stringent implementation of Bonferroni's correction for the 26 potentially independent cytokines would require a *P*-value < 0.002, and this was achieved for all the cytokines shown in Fig. 2. Hence, we conclude that the differences in

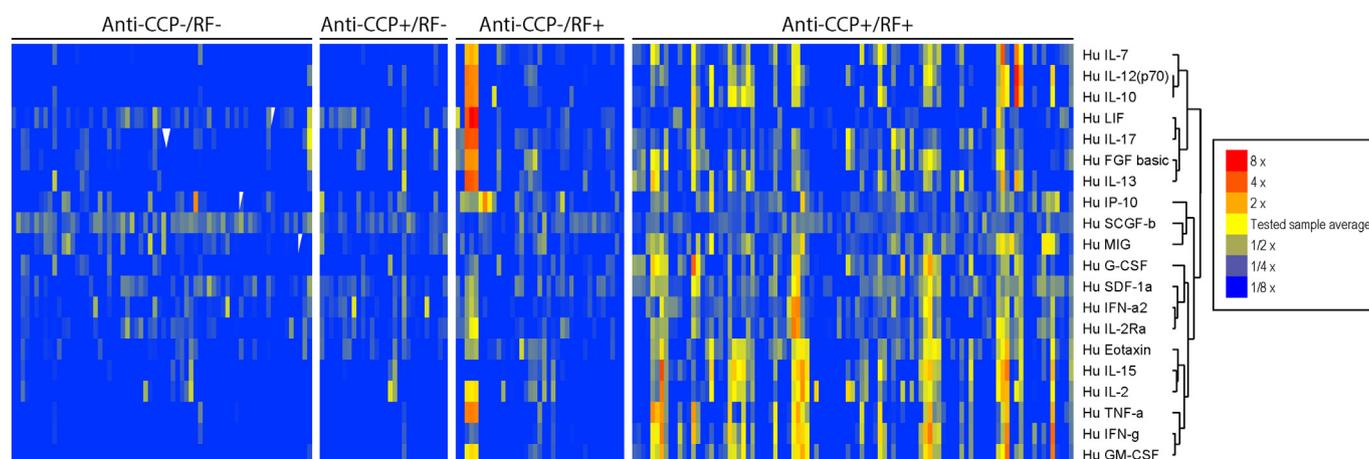


Fig. 1. Serum levels of human cytokines and chemokines are significantly higher in anti-RF +/anti-CCP + patients. Heatmap showing the unsupervised analyte clustering results of SAM multiclass analysis comparing serum levels of human cytokines and chemokines between groups of serum samples with different RF and anti-CCP autoantibody status. All the cytokines or chemokines listed (20 total) had a q-value of 0 in the SAM analysis, where the q-value represents the false discovery rate (q-value ≤ 5 was considered significant). Labels on the color key are the fluorescence intensity relative to the average of entire sample set. Columns represent individual samples, and rows represent unique human cytokines and chemokines. Hu = human; IL = interleukin; MIG = monokine induced by interferon gamma; GM-CSF = granulocyte macrophage colony stimulating factor; IFN-g = interferon gamma; TNF = tumor necrosis factor; G-CSF = granulocyte colony stimulating factor; IL-2Ra = IL-2 receptor subunit a; IL-12(p70) = IL-12 p70 subunit; SDF-1a = stromal cell-derived factor-1a; LIF = leukemia inhibitory factor; FGF = fibroblast growth factor; IP-10 = interferon gamma-induced protein 10; SCGF-b = stem cell growth factor beta; IFN-a2 = interferon alpha-2.

cytokine and chemokine levels identified in our analysis are indeed significant and not merely a by-product of the increased probability of identifying at least one significant result due to chance as more hypotheses are tested.

A smaller, but in most cases statistically significant, increase in cytokine and chemokine reactivity levels was observed in the anti-CCP-/RF + group compared to the double-negative and anti-CCP +/RF- groups (Fig. 2a). Though potentially related to the activity of RF as a heterophilic antibody [44], we have previously suggested [32] that modest upregulation of cytokines and chemokines in the anti-CCP-/RF + group may be explained by the presence of some anti-CCP-/RF + patients possessing ACPAs that either do not react with the synthetic CCP in the commercial anti-CCP2 assay or are present at a level that is below the detection range of this assay. To further investigate this possibility, we used a multiplex antigen array containing 34 putative citrullinated autoantigens to identify what, if any, ACPA specificities were elevated in the anti-CCP-/RF + group compared to the double-negative group (Fig. 3). The level of ACPA reactivity was elevated in the anti-CCP-/RF + group compared to the double negative group for 29 of the 34 citrullinated autoantigens when tested with an unpaired *t*-test (Fig. 4). These results suggest that increased levels of ACPAs, like cytokine and chemokine levels, are associated with the presence of RF, as indicated by the significant increase in ACPA reactivity in the anti-CCP-/RF + group when compared to the double-negative group (Fig. 4).

3.3. Concurrence of ACPAs and RF indicates imminent onset of clinical RA

We next examined the relationship between a sample's anti-CCP/RF autoantibody status and the time between sample collection and the transition to RA as determined by clinical diagnosis by a board-certified rheumatologist. The mean interval between sample collection and diagnosis of clinical RA was calculated by taking the difference in time between the sample collection date and the RA clinical diagnosis date, and then calculating an average of the time for each of the autoantibody groups. The mean interval was 1.3 years in the double-positive group, 2.0 years in the anti-CCP-/RF + group, 3.5 years in the anti-CCP +/RF- group, and 5.8 years in the double-negative group (Fig. 5a). Statistical analysis indicated that the samples in the double-positive group were significantly closer to developing clinically apparent RA than the

samples in the other three groups ($P < 0.01$ by unpaired *t*-test with Welch's correction). This finding suggests that the concurrence of ACPAs and RF reflects a preclinical disease state that is closer to the disease severity observed at clinical diagnosis.

Because we found that serum samples designated anti-CCP-/RF + have, in some cases, have positive ACPA reactivities (Fig. 3) and have higher levels of cytokines and chemokines than the serum samples designated anti-CCP-/RF- (Fig. 2), we examined how the number of ACPA reactivities in a sample relates to the length of the interval between the sample's collection and the corresponding patient's diagnosis with RA. The 37 samples in the anti-CCP-/RF + group, were divided into three groups based on the number of ACPA reactivities that were enriched above the mean reactivity for the given antigen in the entire sample set: ACPA number > 1 , ACPA number > 2 , and ACPA number > 3 . The mean interval between sample collection and diagnosis of clinical RA was calculated by taking the difference in time between the sample collection date and the RA clinical diagnosis date, and then calculating an average of the time for each of the ACPA reactivity number groups. The mean interval was 5.6 years in the ACPA number > 1 group, 4.2 years in the ACPA number > 2 group, and 1.1 years in the ACPA number > 3 group. We found that the higher number of ACPA specificities a sample contained, the shorter the interval between the sample's collection and the subsequent diagnosis of clinical RA (Fig. 5 b). This suggests that ACPAs that are not detected by the commercially available anti-CCP2 assay synergize with RF in promoting inflammation and the pathogenesis of RA, such that the concurrence of RF and ACPAs reflects a relatively advanced disease state that is closer to the onset of clinical RA. This is consistent with the anti-CCP +/RF + group exhibiting the highest number of ACPA reactivities in a multiplex RA autoantigen array analysis when compared to the single-positive and double-negative groups (Fig. 6).

4. Discussion

In this study, we examined RA-related autoimmunity and inflammation in the preclinical period through multiplex analyses of autoantibodies and cytokines in serial serum samples collected at serial time points during the period leading-up to the diagnosis of clinical RA. We detected the presence of ACPAs, RF, and certain inflammatory chemokines and cytokines in the circulation years before the clinical

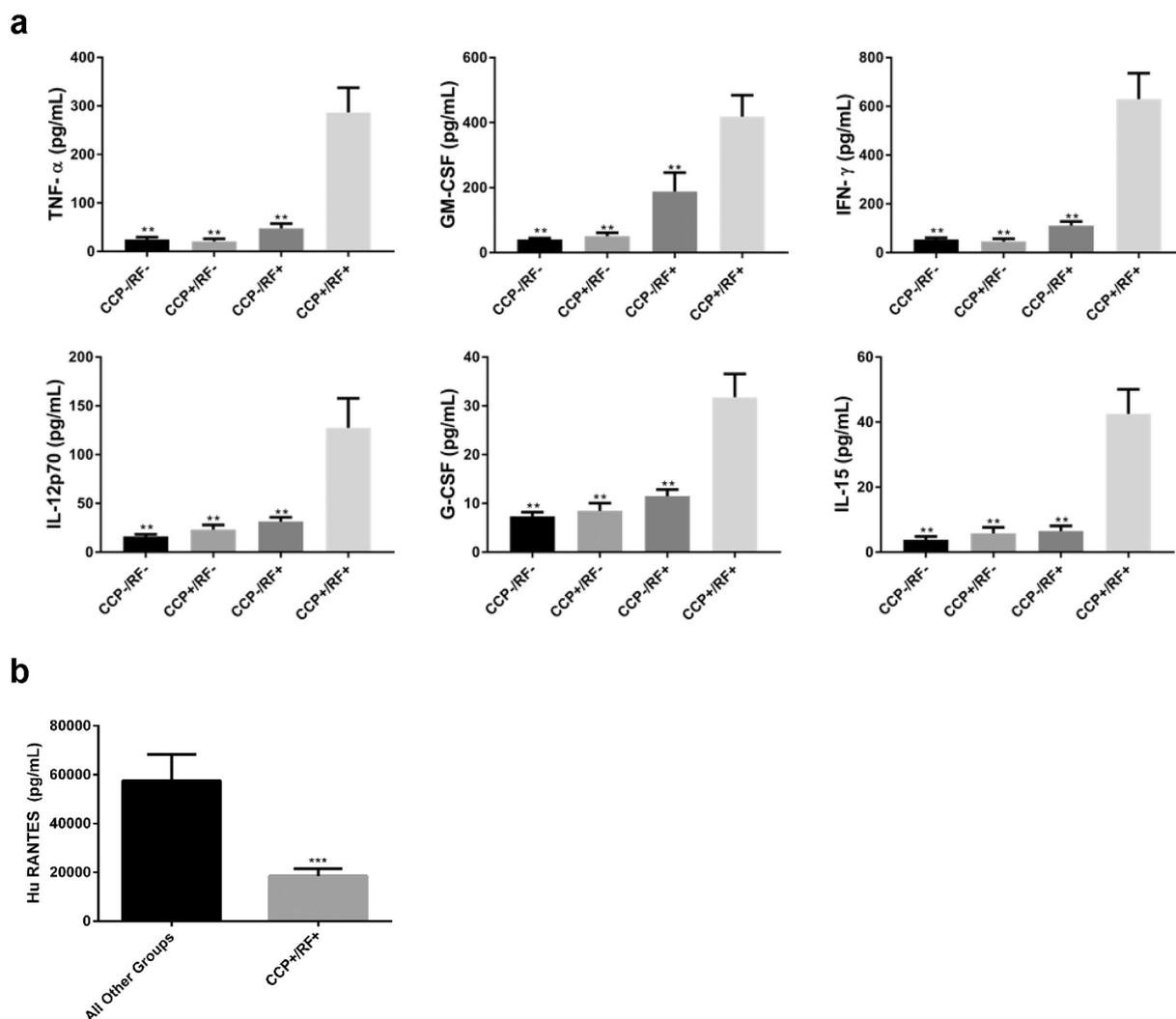


Fig. 2. Anti-CCP +/RF+ serum samples contain significantly different levels of RA-associated cytokines compared to other autoantibody groups. (a) Quantification of six representative cytokines and chemokines that are significantly elevated in anti-CCP +/RF+ samples compared to anti-CCP-/RF-, anti-CCP +/RF- and anti-CCP-/RF+ groups. Patient serum samples were grouped according to autoantibody status: anti-CCP-/RF- (*n* = 68), anti-CCP +/RF- (*n* = 28), anti-CCP-/RF+ (*n* = 37), anti-CCP +/RF+ (*n* = 98). Comparisons were made between each of the other three groups and the anti-CCP +/RF+ group using an unpaired t-test with Welch’s correction. TNF-α = tumor necrosis factor α; GM-CSF = granulocyte macrophage-colony stimulating factor; IFN-γ = interferon gamma; IL-12p70 = interleukin 12 subunit p70; G-CSF = granulocyte-colony stimulating factor; IL-15 = interleukin-15; pg/mL = picograms per milliliter. The bar charts and error bars represent the mean and SEM (standard error of mean). **P* < 0.05; ***P* < 0.01 compared to the anti-CCP +/RF+ group. (b) Quantification of RANTES levels in anti-CCP +/RF+ group and all other groups. Comparisons were made between the anti-CCP +/RF+ group and the three remaining groups, combined, using an unpaired t-test with Welch’s correction. The bar charts and error bars represent the mean and SEM. ****P* < 0.001 compared to all other groups.

diagnosis of RA. Further, we demonstrated that the concurrence of ACPAs and RF in the preclinical phase is indicative of a higher inflammatory and more advanced disease state that is temporally closer to the onset of clinical RA.

Several previous studies showed that ACPAs and RF synergize in mediating RA-associated inflammation and disease activity [19,32,45,46] and can be associated with the onset of RA [18,19]. Our present findings support this conclusion in an independent patient cohort with preclinical RA. We further show that, among patients who later developed clinical RA, serum levels of inflammatory cytokines associated with RA pathophysiology [4] are significantly higher in samples that are positive for both ACPA and RF autoantibodies as compared to samples that have neither autoantibody or only one of the autoantibodies, with the exception of one chemokine that was decreased in the double-positive group. Several inflammatory cytokines were also elevated, albeit to a lesser extent, in the anti-CCP-/RF+ samples. Interestingly, we show that anti-CCP-/RF+ samples can show reactivity to citrullinated autoantigens when analyzed by antigen array,

indicating that they contain ACPAs that were not detected by the CCP2 assay. This suggests that certain individuals within the anti-CCP-/RF+ classification may in fact represent a sub-class that is a more advanced preclinical disease state than those who did not show reactivity to the citrullinated autoantigens. The increased inflammation seen in the double-positive group supports a role for anti-CCP and RF autoantibodies synergizing to promote inflammation and progression from preclinical to clinical RA.

The study has several limitations. First, our samples derived from a military population that has a lower mean age at diagnosis and higher percentage of males than other RA populations [47]. Hence, caution should be exercised before generalizing these results. Second, in this study, we did not perform longitudinal comparisons within individual patients because sufficient numbers of serial samples were not available from the majority of patients. Since each sample was tested individually, and not in regard to the subject it was taken from, samples obtained over time from the same subject may be categorized into different, and in certain cases more than one, ACPA and RF positivity

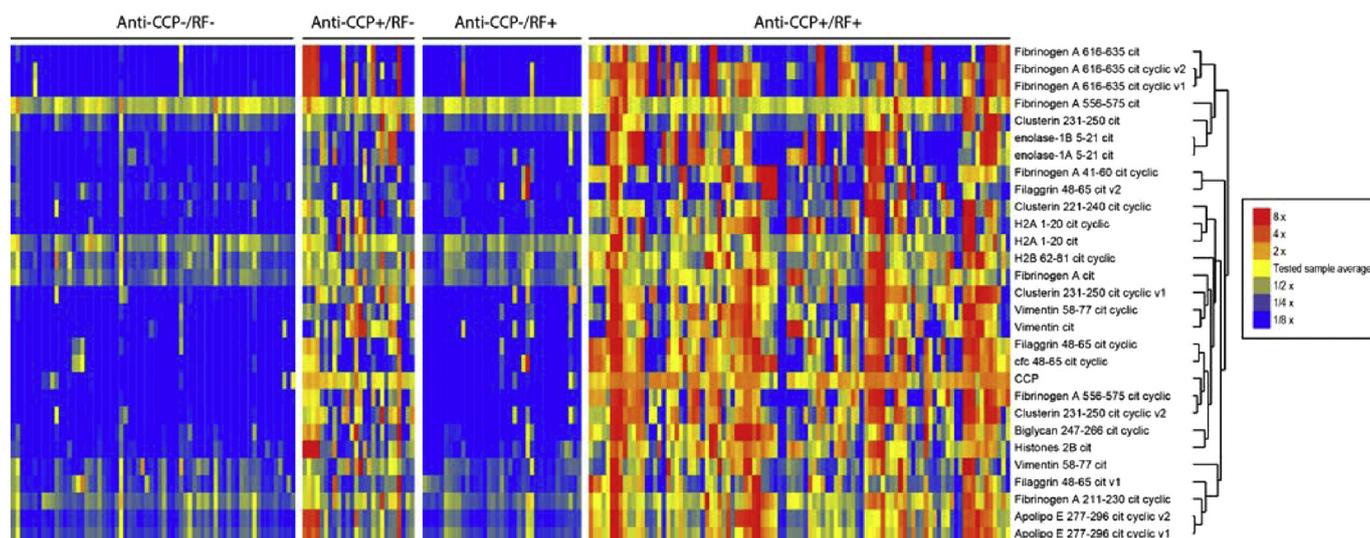


Fig. 3. The anti-CCP-/RF+ patients show elevated levels of ACPA reactivities compared to double-negative patients. Heatmap showing the unsupervised analyte clustering results of SAM multiclass analysis comparing antibody reactivity to putative citrullinated autoantigens between groups of serum samples with different RF and anti-CCP autoantibody status. All the listed antigens (29 total) had a q-value of 0 in SAM analysis, where the q-value represents the false discovery rate (q-value ≤ 5 is significant). Labels on the color key are the fluorescence intensity relative to the average of the entire sample set. Columns represent individual samples, and rows represent distinct antigens. Cit = citrullinated; CCP = cyclic citrullinated peptide; ApolipoE = apolipoprotein E; H2B = histone 2B; H2A = histone 2A; cfc = filaggrin; v = version.

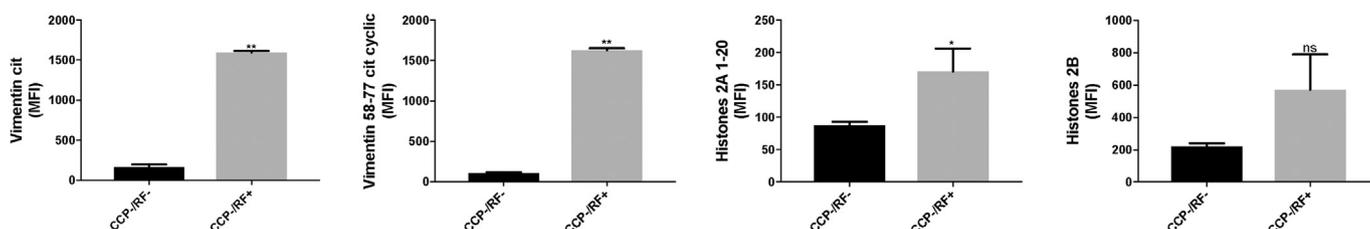


Fig. 4. ACPA reactivities are elevated in the anti-CCP-/RF+ group compared to the double negative group. All patient serum samples, including those that remained seronegative, were grouped according to autoantibody status: anti-CCP-/RF- ($n = 125$) and anti-CCP-/RF+ ($n = 37$). Comparisons were made between the two groups using an unpaired t-test with Welch’s correction. The bar charts and error bars represent the mean and SEM (standard error of mean). * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; ns = not significant compared. Cit = citrullinated; MFI = median fluorescence intensity.

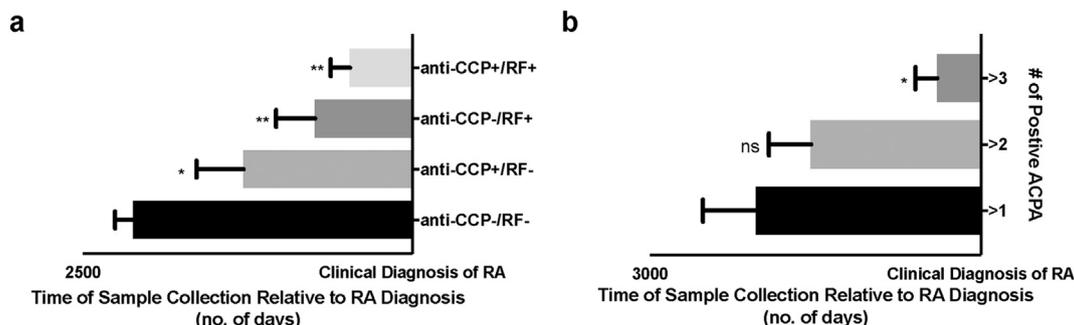


Fig. 5. Concurrence of RF and ACPAs is associated with a shorter time to onset of clinical RA. (a) Patients were grouped according to autoantibody status, anti-CCP-/RF- ($n = 63$), anti-CCP+/RF- ($n = 28$), anti-CCP-/RF+ ($n = 37$), anti-CCP+/RF+ ($n = 98$). Comparisons were made between each of the other three groups and the anti-CCP-/RF- group using an unpaired t-test with Welch’s correction. * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; ns = not significant compared to the anti-CCP-/RF- group. (b) Within the anti-CCP-/RF+ group, patients were divided into subgroups according to the number of ACPA reactivities detected in their sera by autoantigen array analysis: ACPA number > 1 , ACPA number > 2 , and ACPA number > 3 . Comparisons were made between ACPA number > 1 and either of the other two groups using an unpaired t-test with Welch’s correction. The bar charts and error bars represent the mean and SEM (standard error of mean). * $P < 0.05$ and ns = not significant compared to ACPA number > 1 .

group(s). When performing statistical analyses this represents a potential confounding factor. In the future, it will be important to further validate the findings using large cohorts with more comprehensive sets of serial samples that will enable longitudinal comparisons. Third, classification of each study subject was based on their most characteristic autoantibody profile for all visits. Thus, individuals that were anti-

CCP+ on one visit only, which was then followed by subsequent negative samples, are classified as anti-CCP-. Conversely, if the anti-CCP+ test result reappears on a subsequent visit, this individual is deemed to be anti-CCP+. Although this was only relevant to a small number of individuals studied, such may lose some of the nuances of how the ACPA response evolves over time in individuals as previously

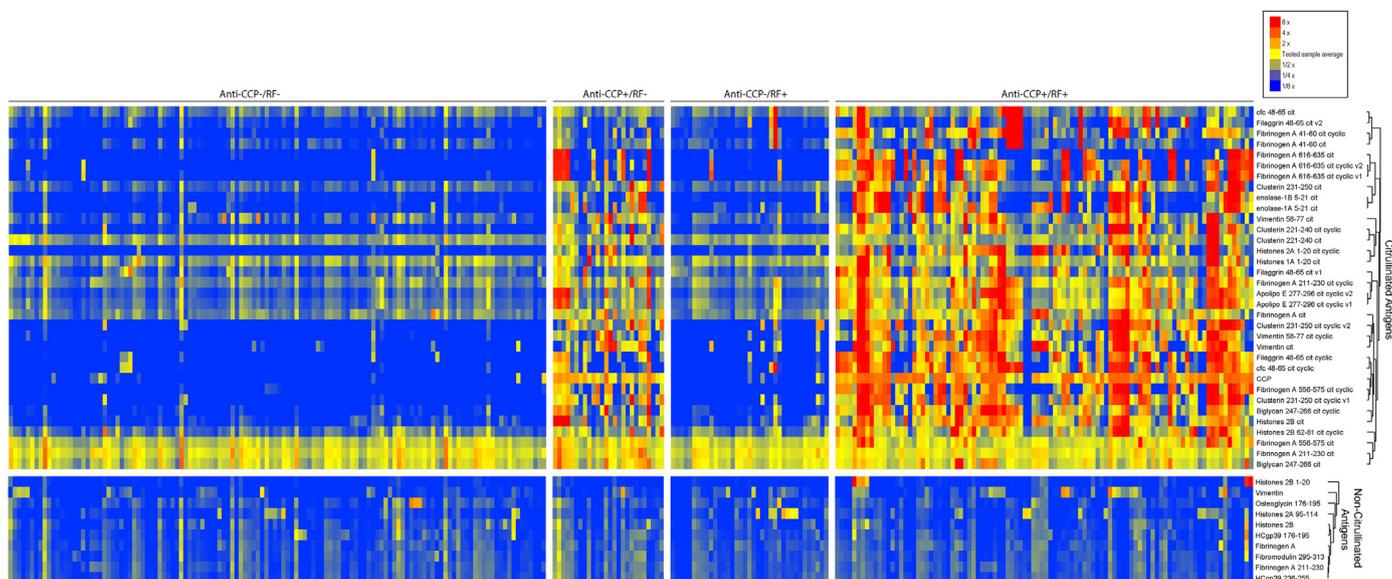


Fig. 6. Overall heatmap of 44 putative RA-associated autoantigens measured using a custom bead-based immunoassay. Heatmap showing the unsupervised analyte clustering and antibody reactivity to putative citrullinated autoantigens between groups of the serum samples with different RF and anti-CCP autoantibody status anti-CCP–/RF– ($n = 125$), anti-CCP +/RF– ($n = 28$), anti-CCP–/RF+ ($n = 37$), anti-CCP +/RF+ ($n = 98$). Of the 44 antigens in the bead-based array, 34 are citrullinated and 10 are native. Columns represent individual samples, and rows represent unique ACPA. Cit = citrullinated; v = version; HCgp39 = human cartilage glycoprotein 39.

demonstrated by our group [39]. Finally, our methods minimize the possibility of RF resulting in a falsely elevated signal in sandwich immunoassays. The fact that the signal observed in the single-positive RF + group is relatively low or absent suggests that artifacts due to heterophilic antibodies are not a significant confounding factor in our study; however, this possibility is not completely eliminated.

5. Conclusions

In summary, our findings show that samples that are positive for both RF and ACPA autoantibodies during the preclinical phase of RA have higher levels of systemic inflammation than samples which have neither or only one of these autoantibodies. Furthermore, our data suggest that concurrence of RF and ACPAs is indicative of a more advanced preclinical disease state that is temporally closer to transition into clinical RA. This suggests a pathogenic process in which these two types of autoantibodies are present and driving the transition from asymptomatic to symptomatic RA. Our results yield insight into the ACPA/RF profile in the preclinical phase of RA and its relation to the onset of clinical RA, and this information that could be useful in developing better algorithms for predicting the imminent onset of clinical RA and thus providing for primary prevention, earlier treatment, and/or more effective treatment.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

All authors were involved in drafting the article or revising it critically for intellectual content, and all authors approved the final version to be published. Study conception and design: Sokolove, Holers, Edison, Deane, Robinson. Acquisition of data: Lingampalli, Sokolove, Lahey. Analysis and interpretation of data: Lingampalli, Sokolove, Holers, Deane, Robinson.

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