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Dissertação de Mestrado

**ASPECTOS DA PROLIFERAÇÃO CELULAR NA INFECÇÃO POR  
HTLV-I E SUA RELAÇÃO COM O QUADRO CLÍNICO E A  
SENSIBILIDADE AOS GLICOCORTICÓIDES**

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## **RESUMO**

Linfócitos de pacientes infectados com o vírus linfotrópico de células T humanas tipo I (HTLV-I) podem apresentar anergia a estimulação e simultaneamente resistência relativa ao efeito imunossupressor dos glicocorticoides (GCs). Isto sugere que estas variáveis são influenciadas por vias de sinalização em comum. As quinases ativadas por mitógenos (MAPKs), subtipos de linfócitos e citocinas são candidatos potenciais para estes efeitos. Portanto, neste trabalho nós avaliamos o envolvimento das (i) MAPKs p38 e ERK, (ii) subpopulações de linfócitos (iii) e citocinas na anergia e na imunomodulação induzida por GCs. Vinte e um portadores assintomáticos (AC), dezenove pacientes com mielopatia associada ao HTLV-I / paraparesia espástica tropical (HAM/TSP) e vinte e um indivíduos controles não infectados fizeram parte deste estudo. As células mononucleares do sangue periférico destes indivíduos foram isoladas e mantidas em cultura para a avaliação da proliferação e da sensibilidade a dexametasona. A expressão das fosfo-MAPKs, dos marcadores extracelulares e das citocinas foi avaliada por citometria de fluxo. Pacientes HAM/TSP apresentaram uma razão p38/ERK elevada que influenciou na baixa resposta aos mitógenos e na alta sensibilidade aos GCs nestes indivíduos. Eles também apresentaram proporções elevadas de células T ativadas e reguladoras CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> que correlacionaram-se negativamente com as respostas aos mitógenos. Esses resultados sugerem que muitos mecanismos podem estar envolvidos na imunomodulação relacionada a infecção pelo HTLV-I e na alteração da sensibilidade aos GCs.

**Palavras chave:** HTLV-I; Proliferação; MAPK; Glicocorticóide.

## **ABSTRACT**

Lymphocytes of human T-lymphotropic virus type-I (HTLV-I) infected patients could be tolerant to mitogenic stimuli as well as glucocorticoid-induced immunomodulation. These data suggest that common signaling events are impaired during this infection. The mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPKs), lymphocyte subsets and cytokines are potential candidates for these effects. We investigated the role of (i) p38 and ERK MAPKs, (ii) lymphocyte subpopulations, (iii) and cytokines implicated in antigen or glucocorticoid-induced immunomodulation. Twenty-one asymptomatic carriers (AC), 19 patients with HTLV-I-associated myelopathy / tropical spastic paraparesis (HAM/TSP) and 21 healthy subjects took part in this study. Peripheral blood mononuclear cells were isolated and cultured *in vitro* to assess lymphocyte proliferation and sensitivity to dexamethasone. The expression of phospho-MAPKs, lymphocyte subsets and cytokines were assessed by flow cytometry. Patients with HAM/TSP had a higher p38/ERK ratio associated with a reduced response to mitogens and higher sensitivity to dexamethasone. HAM/TSP patients presented higher levels of activated T cells and CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> regulatory T cells, being negatively related to the mitogenic response. These results suggest that multiple underlying mechanisms could be involved with HTLV-related immunomodulation and altered cellular sensitivity to GCs.

**Key words:** HTLV-I, proliferation, MAPK, glucocorticoids

## **LISTA DE ABREVIATURAS**

AC = portador assintomático

ATL/L= leucemia/ linfoma de células T do adulto

DEX= dexametasona

ERK = quinase regulada por sinal extracelular

FT = fator de transcrição

GC = glicocorticóide

HTLV-I = vírus linfotrópico de células T humanas tipo I

HAM/TSP = mielopatia associada ao HTLV-I/paraparesia espástica tropical

JNK = quinase N-terminal c-Jun

MAPK = quinase proteína ativada por mitógeno

PBMC = células mononucleares do sangue periférico

PHA= fitoemaglutinina

RG = receptor de glicocorticóide

TCR = receptor de células T

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# **1. CARACTERIZAÇÃO E JUSTIFICATIVA**

## *1.1. Infecção pelo HTLV-I: Aspectos Clínicos e Imunológicos*

O vírus linfotrópico de células T humanas tipo I (HTLV-I) pertence à família *Retroviridae* e à subfamília *Oncovirinae*. Este vírus foi isolado no início da década de 80 (1, 2) e, a partir daí, tem sido alvo de grande interesse por parte de pesquisadores e médicos em sua atividade clínica. O HTLV-I apresenta duas fitas de RNA como material genético com nove genes (3-5). Estes últimos são classificados conforme a atividade exercida pela proteína codificada em estruturais, tais como *gag*, *pol* e *env*, e reguladores, tais como *tax* e *rex* (6).

Estima-se que 10 a 20 milhões de pessoas no mundo estão infectadas por HTLV-I (7, 8). Este tipo viral tem distribuição geográfica esparsa, com soroprevalência mais elevada nas ilhas do sul do Japão, na região sudeste dos EUA, nas ilhas do Caribe, nas Américas Central e do Sul, em regiões da África e na Indonésia (9). Uma estimativa bastante preocupante aponta o Brasil como o país com o maior número absoluto de casos desta infecção, aproximadamente 2,5 milhões (10).

Entre as formas de transmissão do HTLV-I, pode-se destacar: da mãe para o filho, especialmente no leite materno; através da atividade sexual; e através do sangue, por meio de transfusões ou agulhas contaminadas (4). Ele infecta as células do hospedeiro através da ligação entre uma glicoproteína do envelope viral, chamada H1<sub>RBD</sub>, e o transportador de glicose Glut-1, presente na membrana dos linfócitos, principalmente em linfócitos T ativados. (11)

Embora a grande maioria dos indivíduos infectados pelo HTLV-I permaneça assintomática, aproximadamente 10% destes vão desenvolver alguma manifestação clínica relacionada com a infecção (12, 13). Esse vírus está associado com principalmente duas doenças: a leucemia/linfoma de células T do adulto (ATL/L) (14, 15) e a mielopatia associada

ao HTLV-I, também chamada de paraparesia espástica tropical (HAM/TSP) (16, 17). A primeira delas é caracterizada pela expansão monoclonal de células T infectadas que apresentam um fenótipo CD4<sup>+</sup>, CD25<sup>+</sup>, L-selectina<sup>+</sup> e HLA-DR1<sup>+</sup> (18). Alguns estudos demonstraram também que os níveis de Foxp3, GITR (15) e CD45RO (19) em linfócitos do sangue periférico de indivíduos com ATL/L foram mais elevados comparando-se aos níveis observados em linfócitos de controles não infectados. Já clinicamente, este linfoma causa imunossupressão com surgimento de infecções oportunistas freqüentemente (6, 14).

A HAM/TSP, por sua vez, é uma patologia neurológica crônica, resultante de um processo inflamatório desmielinizante (20). O dano ocorre principalmente na medula espinhal torácica baixa, onde a passagem dos impulsos nervosos é prejudicada, logo, desencadeia os principais sintomas desta patologia: paraparesia (fraqueza) e espasticidade (rigidez) dos membros inferiores e distúrbios esficterianos (21). Ocorre um aumento nesta região da medula de células T CD8<sup>+</sup> específicas para componentes virais e de citocinas proinflamatórias (22). Além destas características, alguns pacientes com HAM/TSP apresentam ainda elevados níveis de carga proviral (17) e um aumento de células T ativadas no sangue periférico e no fluido cerebroespinhal (23).

O estado clínico assintomático, apesar de na maioria dos casos estender-se por muitos anos ou por toda a vida do indivíduo, pode compreender algumas alterações no sistema imune (10). Alguns pacientes já apresentam proliferação linfocitária espontânea *in vitro*, prejudicada imunidade celular e alterado perfil de células T e citocinas no sangue periférico (24, 25).

Estes portadores assintomáticos (AC - asymptomatic carriers) foram alvo de um estudo prévio realizado em nosso laboratório. Neste, demonstrou-se que as células mononucleares do sangue periférico (PBMCs) que apresentam proliferação linfocitária espontânea *in vitro* são anérgicas à estimulação via receptor de células T (TCR) e,

simultaneamente, apresentam uma relativa resistência aos glicocorticóides (GCs) (26). No entanto, os mecanismos que interferem nestes aspectos não foram demonstrados e também não foram incluídos nesta pesquisa indivíduos sintomáticos com HAM/TSP. Portanto, no presente trabalho analisamos três mecanismos que podem estar influenciando na resposta aos抗ígenos e na sensibilidade aos GCs em indivíduos infectados com HTLV-I (AC e HAM/TSP): expressões de quinases ativadas por mitógenos (MAPK); porcentagens de algumas subpopulações de linfócitos T no sangue periférico; e níveis de citocinas no sobrenadante das PBMCs.

### *1.2. Resposta aos Mitógenos x MAPKs*

A avaliação da resposta imune celular *in vitro* através da estimulação com mitógenos é importante, pois pode refletir a qualidade da resposta imune celular apresentada pelos indivíduos *in vivo*. Assim como os resultados produzidos recentemente no nosso laboratório (26), Kohno et al. (15) descreveu que linfócitos de indivíduos com ATL/L não respondem à estimulação por TCR *in vitro*. Além disso, já é sabido que esta doença causa debilitações graves na imunidade celular *in vivo*.

Um fator que pode estar influenciando na baixa resposta imune celular em alguns indivíduos infectados pelo HTLV-I é o elevado nível de ativação da MAPK p38. Esta enzima está intimamente relacionada com o estabelecimento e manutenção da anergia celular frente à estimulação mitogênica (27-29) e, portanto, pode ser a responsável pela fraca resposta apresentada por alguns indivíduos com HTLV-I. Fortalecendo esta hipótese, Fukushima (30) demonstrou que linhagens infectadas com HTLV-I, derivadas de dois pacientes com HAM/TSP, apresentaram níveis elevados de p38 fosforilada (estado ativado).

Foram descritos três mecanismos para a indução e manutenção da anergia coordenados pela p38. O primeiro deles, observado em células T reguladoras, consiste na

indução da expressão de p27<sup>kip1</sup>, um inibidor da quinase dependente de ciclina (cdk), resultando na parada do ciclo celular em G1. Inversamente, a inibição da p38 induz uma grande redução da p27<sup>kip1</sup>, resultando na progressão do ciclo celular (27, 29). O segundo mecanismo consiste na síntese de IL-10, uma potente citocina capaz de suprimir a resposta imune celular. A utilização de um inibidor específico da p38 (SB203580) aboliu completamente a produção de IL-10 por células T CD4<sup>+</sup> anérgicas, resultando na proliferação celular (27, 29). Por fim, o último mecanismo utilizado desta quinase na manutenção da anergia celular consiste na indireta inibição da síntese de IL-2, uma citocina crucial na proliferação de células T. A utilização do inibidor da p38 resultou na parcial recuperação da atividade de outra MAPK, chamada quinase regulada por sinal extracelular (ERK). e por esta última ter um papel importante na produção de IL-2, ocorre uma retomada também na síntese desta citocina, resultando na proliferação celular após estimulação por TCR (Figura 1) (29, 31, 32). Portanto, a p38 induz anergia celular, enquanto a ERK resulta em proliferação pelo seu papel na síntese de IL-2. Assim, devido ao fato de que a primeira inibe parcialmente a atividade da segunda e de que as mesmas possuem efeitos opostos quanto à proliferação celular, a razão p38/ERK apresentada pelos linfócitos pode ter uma importância na análise da intensidade da resposta imune celular.

Ao contrário da p38 e da ERK, a quinase N-terminal c-Jun (JNK) MAPK parece não interferir consistentemente na resposta aos mitógenos. Experimentos com células T CD4<sup>+</sup> JNK1<sup>-/-</sup>/JNK2<sup>-/-</sup> demonstraram que estas produzem níveis normais de IL-2 e proliferam normalmente (33, 34).

Além das MAPKs p38 e ERK, outro fator que pode interferir na resposta a mitógenos que se ligam ao TCR é a baixa expressão deste receptor ou de moléculas acessórias. Assim, cabe ressaltar que algumas linhagens celulares infectadas com HTLV-I apresentaram uma baixa expressão do TCR e das enzimas Lck e ZAP70 (enzimas envolvidas

nos eventos de sinalização iniciais) (35). No entanto, não existem dados na literatura quanto à expressão destas moléculas em linfócitos de pacientes, mas, caso estejam menos expressas, elas poderiam estar interferindo na resposta a estimulação via TCR.

### *1.3. Glicocorticóides*

Os glicocorticóides (GCs) encontram-se há muitos anos entre os fármacos mais vendidos no mundo para doenças inflamatórias e auto-imunes, tais como a asma, artrite reumatóide, lúpus eritematoso sistêmico, rinites alérgicas e HAM/TSP. Uma ampla variedade de GCs sintéticos foi e continua sendo desenvolvida para uso terapêutico com o objetivo de mimetizar algumas ações dos corticóides endógenos e diminuir os efeitos colaterais causados por sua administração.

Os GCs endógenos atuam em vários tipos celulares como reguladores essenciais do desenvolvimento, do metabolismo intermediário, da manutenção do tônus vascular, em alterações no sistema nervoso central (cognição, humor e sono) e na homeostase de funções efetoras do sistema imune inato e adaptativo (36-38). Entre os efeitos no sistema imune, inclui-se a supressão da: adesão celular; migração; ativação dos macrófagos; apresentação de抗ígenos; diferenciação; expressão de receptores de células T; ativação dos linfócitos T; proliferação celular (39). Os GCs regulam também a sobrevivência de linfócitos, podendo tanto induzir a apoptose em células maduras, como auxiliar na sobrevivência de células reativadas (40, 41).

Por serem moléculas altamente lipofílicas, os GCs atravessam livremente a membrana plasmática das células e ligam-se aos receptores de glicocorticóides (GR) que estão localizados no citosol. Estes receptores encontram-se inativos, ligados a proteínas de choque térmico (HSP90, HSP70 e HSP56) que os mantêm no citozol. Após a interação com o GC, o GR se dissocia do complexo protéico e transloca para o núcleo (42, 43), onde se liga a

sítios específicos no DNA, chamados de elementos responsivos aos glicocorticoides (GREs) (44). Dependendo do gene alvo, a transcrição é, então, ativada ou inibida (45). Os GCs alteram a expressão de uma enorme gama de genes, por exemplo, em PBMCs 9% do total global dos genes são menos expressos e 12% têm sua expressão aumentada após o tratamento com o GC sintético dexametasona (DEX) (46).

O mecanismo imunossupressor e antiinflamatório mais conhecido dos GCs resulta da inibição da atividade de alguns fatores de transcrição (FTs), tais como AP-1, NF-κB, NFAT e membros da família STAT, que estão envolvidos na ativação de genes proinflamatórios e imunoreguladores, tais como os que codificam algumas citocinas, receptores de citocinas, proteínas quimiotáxicas e moléculas de adesão. Esta inibição da atividade de FTs pode ocorrer de várias maneiras, uma delas é pela interação física destes com o GR (47). Outro mecanismo de inibição acontece quando o complexo GR-GC induz a transcrição da proteína IκB (IκBα), que se liga ao NF-κB no citoplasma e impede que ele migre para o núcleo, onde exerce sua função. O complexo GR-GC pode, ainda, induzir a expressão de fosfatases que inativam enzimas como a ERK que resultaria na ativação de FTs (48, 49).

Foram recentemente descritas várias isoformas do GR originadas por splicing alternativo. No entanto, muitas delas não estão presentes em células do sistema imune ou estão presentes em pequenas proporções (38). As duas isoformas amplamente expressas em linfócitos são GR $\alpha$  e GR $\beta$ . Residindo no citoplasma, somente a primeira é capaz de se ligar aos GCs, atuando posteriormente como fator de transcrição (50). A segunda, por sua vez, é menos expressa, incapaz de se ligar aos GCs e, além disso, age como um inibidor negativo do GR $\alpha$ , contribuindo para a resistência aos GCs (51).

#### *1.4. Resistência aos Glicocorticóides x MAPKs*

Embora a maioria dos indivíduos responda bem a terapias com GCs, uma pequena parte da população não responde de maneira adequada a estes fármacos, sendo então classificada como resistente aos corticosteróides (CR). Já os indivíduos que respondem a terapias com os mesmos são classificados como sensíveis aos corticosteróides (CS) (52, 53). Estudos *in vitro* demonstraram que indivíduos com artrite reumatóide, asma, depressão maior, colite ulcerativa e AIDS podem ser classificados em CS ou CR, segundo a capacidade dos GCs em inibir a proliferação após estímulo com PHA (54-57). Já quanto à sensibilidade a estes fármacos em indivíduos com HTLV, a literatura é conflitante (54). Um estudo prévio realizado em nosso laboratório, somente com ACs, demonstrou que indivíduos que apresentavam proliferação espontânea dos linfócitos T *in vitro* foram mais resistentes ao GC, após estímulo com PHA (26). Segundo Yamano (16), no entanto, pacientes que apresentavam proliferação espontânea responderam bem (redução da proliferação celular e alteração da produção de citocinas) ao GC prednisolona na ausência de estímulo mitogênico prévio. A estimulação prévia ou não dos linfócitos pode ser a causa dos resultados divergentes entre os estudos, já que o estado de ativação das células é um parâmetro importante na sensibilidade aos GCs. Contudo, mesmo nos estudos clínicos em indivíduos com HAM/TSP, também há divergências quanto aos reais efeitos dos GCs (54-56).

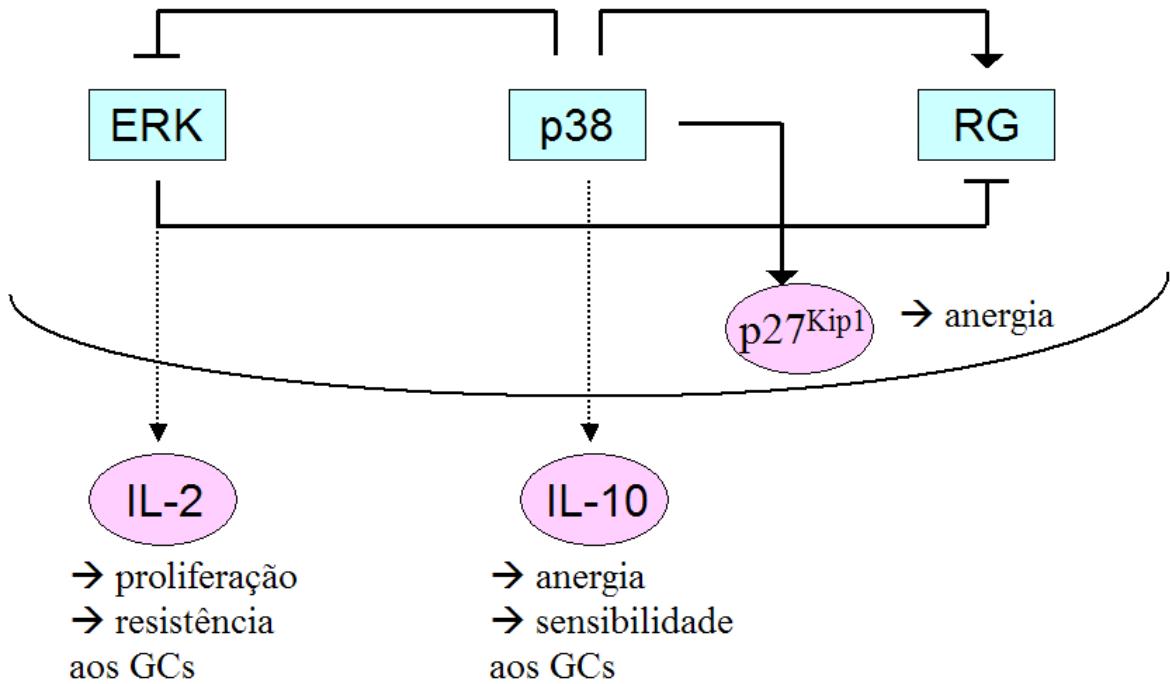
Um provável mecanismo para a alteração da sensibilidade aos GCs em indivíduos com HTLV-I dá-se, possivelmente, à capacidade deste vírus de ativar algumas rotas que modulam a sensibilidade a estes esteróides. As MAPKs são exemplos destas rotas e, como já citado, estudos com linhagens infectadas demonstram uma alta expressão da MAPK p38 (30).

A p38 modula a sensibilidade aos GCs positivamente pela fosforilação no sítio específico de serina 211 do RG, aumentando a atividade transcricional deste e, portanto, aumentando seu efeito (Figura 1) (57-59). A inibição farmacológica da atividade da p38

protege as células do efeito apoptótico induzido por GCs, demonstrando que os GCs possuem menos efeito na ausência desta MAPK. Além disso, sugerindo que esta quinase possui efeito sinérgico aos GCs (60)., a DEX aumentou os níveis de RNAm da MAPK quinase 3 e logo, aumenta também os níveis de phospho-p38 (p38 fosforilada/ativada) (60).

A ERK, ao contrário da p38, modula negativamente a sensibilidade aos GCs, fosforilando o RG nos resíduos de serina/treonina (Figura 1). Esta enzima atua como um agonista aos efeitos apoptóticos e imunossupressores dos GCs (58, 61, 62). Tsitousa (63) demonstrou que somente esta MAPK (e não a MAPK JNK) promove resistência à ação imunossupressora dos GCs em células T CD4+, sendo um importante mecanismo fisiológico de resistência a estes esteróides.

Da mesma forma como no controle do ciclo celular, a p38 e a ERK possuem efeitos opostos também na sensibilidade aos GCs, além de interagirem entre si. Portanto, novamente a razão p38/ERK apresentada pelos linfócitos pode ser importante na análise da sensibilidade aos GCs.



**Figura 1: Esquema representativo da atividade das MAPKs ERK e p38 no controle do ciclo celular e na sensibilidade aos glicocorticoides.** A p38 fosforila o receptor de glicocorticóide (RG) no resíduo de serina 211, aumentando sua atividade transcrecional. Ela também é importante na síntese de IL-10 (citocina que colabora na anergia e na sensibilidade aos GCs), na expressão de p27<sup>Kip1</sup> (inibidor do ciclo celular) e na inibição da atividade da ERK. Esta última, por sua vez, fosforila o RG nos resíduos de serina/treonina inibindo sua atividade e é crucial na síntese de IL-2 (citocina que aumenta a resistência aos GCs e induz proliferação celular). Resulta na estimulação: ( → ). Resulta na inibição: ( → ).

### 1.5. Subpopulações de Linfócitos T Periféricos

A prevalência de algumas subpopulações de linfócitos no sangue periférico é alterada durante infecções. Indivíduos com HAM/TSP infectados pelo HTLV-I, por exemplo, possuem uma maior proporção de células T ativadas ( $CD4^+CD25^+$  e  $CD8^+CD25^+$ ), células T  $CD4^+$  de memória ( $CD4^+CD45RO^+$ ), células  $CD8^+CD28^-$  e uma menor proporção de células T reguladoras naturais ( $CD4^+CD25^+Foxp3^+$ ) no sangue periférico (19, 64, 65). Neste contexto, cabe ressaltar que alguns tipos de linfócitos influenciam tanto na proliferação em

resposta aos antígenos, quanto na sensibilidade aos GC e, portanto, podem interferir nestes aspectos em indivíduos infectados pelo HTLV-I.

As células T ativadas são um exemplo de células que influenciam nos dois aspectos citados acima. Elas não respondem a um segundo estímulo mitogênio e sim, ativam rotas apoptóticas em um processo conhecido por morte celular induzida por ativação (66). Desta forma, o nível de proliferação total dos linfócitos após estímulo *in vitro* pode apresentar-se abaixo do esperado em culturas com muitas células ativadas. Estas células parecem também influenciar na sensibilidade aos GCs. Segundo Lee (67) , a resistência aos esteróides não é uma propriedade geral de todos os linfócitos, mas reside em subpopulações de células T que estão mais presentes em indivíduos resistentes e que expressam níveis intermediários de CD25.

Níveis alterados de células T reguladoras CD4<sup>+</sup>CD25<sup>+</sup>Foxp3<sup>+</sup> também podem alterar a intensidade da resposta aos antígenos. Elas possuem a habilidade de suprimir a ativação de outras células T, incluindo a supressão da produção de citocinas e da proliferação destas frente ao estímulo por TCR (68, 69). As células T reguladoras são especializadas em suprimir as respostas imunes mal empregadas ou excessivas, como por exemplo, as respostas contra抗ígenos próprios e contra substâncias inócuas do ambiente. Por outro lado, níveis aumentados destes linfócitos podem impedir a imunidade que protege o indivíduo contra cânceres e doenças infecciosas, caracterizando um estado de imunossupressão celular (69, 70). Como já mencionada, indivíduos com HTLV-I apresentam uma proporção menor de células CD4<sup>+</sup>CD25<sup>+</sup>Foxp3<sup>+</sup> no sangue periférico (65, 71), mas alguns autores acreditam que estas estão presentes em níveis normais nestes indivíduos e que apenas estão diluídas no maior número de células CD4<sup>+</sup>CD25<sup>+</sup> que estes apresentam (72, 73). Os mesmos autores demonstraram ainda que indivíduos com HAM/TSP apresentam uma proporção maior de células CD4<sup>+</sup>Foxp3<sup>+</sup>, mas a análise destes dois marcadores apenas também não reflete o real

nível de células T reguladoras, pois a proteína Foxp3 pode ser expressa em células ativadas (74, 75)

Assim como as células T reguladoras naturais CD4<sup>+</sup>CD25<sup>+</sup>Foxp3<sup>+</sup>, já bem estudadas e conhecidas, tem sido recentemente demonstrado que as células CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> possuem um potente efeito supressor da resposta imune, sendo capazes de inibir a função citotóxica e a proliferação de outras células T (76-78). Há contradições na literatura a respeito de marcadores mais específicos (79, 80), mas quanto ao mecanismo de supressão destas células, sabe-se que consiste na secreção de citocinas (IL-6, INF-γ ou IL-10) ou no contato célula-célula (81-83). Conforme o mecanismo imunossupressor apresentado pelas células T CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> reguladoras, pode-se classificá-las em três subtipos distintos. Indivíduos com HAM/TSP têm altos níveis de linfócitos T CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> (84, 85), mas não há nenhum estudo, até o momento, relacionando esta população de linfócitos com o potencial supressivo da mesma.

### *1.6. Citocinas Th1/Th2*

O aumento da síntese de citocinas é uma importante característica de respostas imunes e inflamatórias (47). Na infecção pelo HTLV-I também ocorrem alterações na produção destas moléculas, tanto em indivíduos assintomáticos, quanto em indivíduos sintomáticos. Sabe-se que este vírus pode induzir o aumento de INF-γ, TNF-α e IL-2 no sangue periférico, principalmente em indivíduos com HAM/TSP (86). Por outro lado, a citocina IL-10 foi indicada como um mecanismo imunoregulador para contrabalançar os efeitos do TNF-α, favorecendo na manutenção do estado clínico assintomático (87). Cabe mencionar que algumas citocinas influenciam tanto na proliferação, quanto na sensibilidade aos GC e, portanto, podem interferir nestes aspectos em indivíduos infectados pelo HTLV-I.

A IL-10 e o TGF- $\beta$  são capazes de suprimir a resposta imune celular, possuindo um papel importante na manutenção de infecções persistentes (28, 69). A primeira é produzida intensamente por células anérgicas (29) e ambas são mecanismos de supressão das células T reguladoras (69). Já a citocina IL-2 é crucial para a diferenciação e proliferação de células T durante respostas imunes (88) (Figura 1).

Quanto à modulação da sensibilidade aos GCs, a IL-2 e a IL-4 têm um papel já bastante estudado na diminuição dos efeitos destas drogas. Elas atuam diminuindo a afinidade de ligação do RG, que acaba resultando na redução do efeito supressor do corticóide em indivíduos saudáveis. Assim, os níveis de supressão destes igualam-se aos observados em indivíduos resistentes aos GCs (89). Outro mecanismo de atuação da IL-2 é através da estimulação da expressão do fator de transcrição AP-1 (que prejudica a ligação do RG no DNA) e da isoforma  $\beta$  do RG (que suprime a ação do RG $\alpha$ ) (51, 90). Já a Citocina IL-10 possui efeito oposto na sensibilidade aos GCs. Ela atua aumentando a expressão do RG $\alpha$  e potencializa o efeito imunossupressor destes esteróides (91) (Figura 1) .

Assim, o resultado final de uma resposta adaptativa entre citocinas, mitógenos e GCs depende da integração satisfatória dessas informações a nível intracelular, que ocorre através de uma integração molecular entre sinais originados destas fontes (47).

## **2. HIPÓTESE**

Os níveis alterados de MAPKs, subpopulações de linfócitos e citocinas modificam a resposta aos抗ígenos e a sensibilidade aos GCs, em indivíduos infectados pelo HTLV-I.

### **3. OBJETIVOS**

#### *3.1. Objetivo Geral*

Esse trabalho visa identificar os fatores que influenciam na resposta aos antígenos e na sensibilidade aos glicocorticóides, em indivíduos com HTLV-I.

#### *3.2. Objetivos Específicos*

- Quantificar a expressão das MAPKs fosfo-p38 e fosfo-ERK nos linfócitos T do sangue periférico de indivíduos infectados com HTLV-I e controles não infectados;
- Avaliar a proliferação induzida por mitógenos dos linfócitos T do sangue periférico de indivíduos infectados com HTLV-I e controles não infectados;
- Verificar a importância da p38 e da ERK nas respostas aos mitógenos de linfócitos do sangue periférico de indivíduos infectados com HTLV-I e controles não infectados;
- Avaliar a sensibilidade ao tratamento *in vitro* com GCs de linfócitos T do sangue periférico de indivíduos infectados com HTLV-I e controles não infectados;
- Verificar a importância da p38 e da ERK na sensibilidade aos GCs de linfócitos T periféricos de indivíduos infectados com HTLV-I e controles não infectados;
- Mensurar algumas subpopulações de linfócitos T periféricos de indivíduos infectados com HTLV-I e controles não infectados;
- Correlacionar a porcentagem de algumas subpopulações de linfócitos T periféricos com as respostas aos mitógenos e aos GCs.
- Mensurar os níveis de citocinas Th1/Th2 produzidos *in vitro* pelas PBMCs de indivíduos infectados com HTLV-I e controles não infectados;
- Correlacionar os níveis de citocinas com as respostas aos mitógenos e aos GCs.

## **4. ARTIGO CIENTÍFICO**

### **Involvement of the CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> regulatory T cells and MAPKs on lymphocyte response to antigens and glucocorticoids during HTLV-I infection**

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#### **4.1. ABSTRACT**

Lymphocytes of human T-lymphotropic virus type-I (HTLV-I) infected patients were previously found tolerant to mitogenic stimuli as well as glucocorticoid treatment. These data suggest that common signaling events are impaired during this infection. The underlying mechanisms of these phenomena may include changes in cellular composition, cytokine milieu and the differential activation of mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPKs). We investigated the role of (i) p38 and ERK MAPKs, (ii) lymphocyte subpopulations, (iii) and cytokines implicated in antigen or glucocorticoid-induced immunomodulation. Twenty-one asymptomatic carriers (AC), 19 patients with HTLV-I-associated myelopathy / tropical spastic paraparesis (HAM/TSP) and 21 healthy subjects took part in this study. Peripheral blood mononuclear cells were isolated and cultured *in vitro* to assess lymphocyte proliferation and sensitivity to dexamethasone. The expression of phospho-MAPKs, lymphocyte subsets and cytokines were assessed by flow cytometry. Patients with HAM/TSP had a higher p38/ERK ratio ( $p < 0.05$ ) associated with a reduced response to mitogens (phytohaemagglutinin or PMA + ionomycin) ( $p < 0.001$ ) and higher sensitivity to dexamethasone ( $p < 0.05$ ). HAM/TSP patients presented higher levels of activated T cells and CD8 $^+$ CD28 $^-$  regulatory T cells, being negatively related to the mitogenic response. These data suggest that multiple underlying mechanisms could be involved with HTLV-related changes in cellular response to mitogens and glucocorticoids.

**Key words:** HTLV-I, proliferation, MAPK, glucocorticoids

#### 4.2. Introduction

Human T-lymphotropic virus type I (HTLV-I) is a persistent retrovirus that infects 10-20 million people worldwide (Edlich et al., 2000). The majority of infected individuals remain asymptomatic. However 2-3% develop an aggressive T cell malignancy known as adult T cell leukemia/lymphoma (ATL/L) and another 1-3% develop a progressive inflammatory myelitis called HTLV-I associated myelopathy/ tropical spastic paraparesis (HAM/TSP) (Kaplan et al., 1990). In HAM/TSP, the damage occurs mostly in the white matter of the lower thoracic spinal cord, which is consistent with the clinical picture of spastic paraparesis associated with bladder and bowel sphincter symptoms (Aye et al., 2000). There is a higher frequency of infiltrating HTLV-I-specific CD8+ T cells and an increased production of proinflammatory cytokines damaging the spinal cord cells (Sakai et al., 2001). In addition high levels of proviral load and increased activated T cells in peripheral blood and cerebrospinal fluid can be found (Ijichi et al., 1989; Itoyama et al., 1988)

The HTLV-I infection has been associated with several peripheral immunological changes. For instance, a proportion of HTLV-I patients showed spontaneous proliferation of peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) when stimulated *in vitro* (Ijichi et al., 1989; Itoyama et al., 1988; Lopes et al., 2007). Furthermore, we recently demonstrated that PBMCs with spontaneous proliferation were highly tolerant (anergic) to both antigenic stimulation and glucocorticoid (GC) treatment *in vitro* (Lopes et al., 2007). Several potential mechanisms could be underlying these phenomena, including changes in cellular composition, some cytokines (Kubota et al., 1998; Yamano et al., 2005) and the differential activation of mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPKs). Of special note, the ERK and p38 MAPKs could be potentially targeted during these changes. ERK could be implicated with changes in cellular proliferation and glucocorticoid resistance (Li et al., 1999; Tsitoura and Rothman,

2004), while p38 may induce anergy and increased glucocorticoid sensitivity (Miller et al., 2005; Ohkusu-Tsukada et al., 2004). However, the expression and role of MAPKs during HTLV-I infection are largely unknown.

In addition, important changes in peripheral lymphocytes (Al-Fahim et al., 1999; Brito-Melo et al., 2004) may account for HTLV-I-related anergy. For instance, increased counts of activated and CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> regulatory T cells in association to lower counts of CD4<sup>+</sup>CD25<sup>+</sup>Foxp3<sup>+</sup> regulatory T cells have been observed in HAM/TSP patients (Brito-Melo et al., 2002; Yamano et al., 2005). These cellular subsets have been associated with anergy and suppression of replicating T cells (Filaci et al., 2007; Sakaguchi et al., 2008). Th1 and Th2 cytokines may also modulate cell proliferation and sensitivity to steroids. Interleukin (IL)10 as well as Tumor Grow Factor Beta (TGF-β) are capable to suppress cell proliferation (Sakaguchi et al., 2008). In addition, IL-2 and IL-4 can lead to decreased sensitivity to GCs while IL-10 enhances the effects of GCs (Brunetti et al., 1998; Kam et al., 1993; Xystrakis et al., 2006).

Here, we assessed the molecular and cellular mechanisms that may influence the response to antigens and GCs in HTLV-I-infected patients. Specifically, we addressed the role of (i) phospho-p38 and ERK MAPKs, (ii) lymphocyte subpopulations, (iii) and cytokines in HAM/TSP patients, asymptomatic carriers as well as healthy controls.

#### **4.3. Materials and Methods**

##### **4.3.1. Subjects**

HTLV-I-infected subjects were recruited from the Centro de Saúde Vila dos Comerciários (Porto Alegre, Brazil). Twenty one HTLV-I-infected asymptomatic carriers

(AC) (16 women), aged 15-71 years (mean  $\pm$  SD,  $47.8 \pm 13.3$  years) and nineteen untreated HAM/TSP patients (16 women), aged 15-70 years (mean  $\pm$  SD,  $50.8 \pm 11.8$  years) took part in this study. The duration of HAM/TSP varied from 2 to 20 years (mean  $\pm$  SD,  $8.05 \pm 6.25$  years). The diagnosis of HTLV-I infection was performed by an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) and confirmed by western blot assay and the diagnosis of HAM/TSP was made according to World Health Organization diagnostic criteria (Osame, 1990). Twenty one age-matched healthy subjects (17 women), aged 24-73 years (mean  $\pm$  SD,  $47.1 \pm 14.8$  years) were recruited as a control group. Exclusion criteria included current infection, anemia, leucopenia, any drug use (alcohol, GCs, antidepressant, immunosuppressant and anticoagulant), major depression, neoplasia, heart disease, diabetes mellitus. There were no differences in gender distribution or age among groups. Written informed consent was obtained from all subjects according to the Declaration of Helsinki. The study protocol was approved by both scientific and ethics committees from the PUCRS and Porto Alegre's city hall.

#### **4.3.2. Collection of peripheral blood and isolation of mononuclear cell**

Twenty milliliters of peripheral blood were collected by venepuncture in the morning (between 10 and 12 h) and stored in EDTA tubes prior to analyses. All sample were analysed within 4 h after collection. Peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) were isolated by centrifugation over a Ficoll-hypaque (Sigma) gradient (900 g, 30 min). The viability of cells was found to always exceed 95%, as judged from the cells' ability to exclude trypan blue (Sigma). PBMCs were resuspended in culture medium RPMI-1640 with foetal calf serum (FCS) 10% from Sigma with concentration adjusted to  $3 \times 10^6$  cells/mL.

#### **4.3.3. Assessment of phosphorilated MAPKs**

Differential activation of MAPKs from patients and control subjects were studied by flow cytometric analysis of intracellular phospho-p38 and phospho-ERK enzymes. PBMCs

were cultured in complete culture medium (RPMI-1640 supplemented with gentamicin 0.5%, glutamine 1%, hepes 1%, and fetal calf serum 10%; all from Sigma, USA) for 2 hours at 37°C in 5% CO<sub>2</sub> atmosphere. Cells were fixed by BD Cytofix Buffer (BD Biosciences, São Paulo, Brazil) for 10 min at 37°C and were frozen in 80°C until the moment of the analysis. Cells were then permeabilized with BD PhosFlow Perm Buffer III (BD Biosciences) for 30 min on ice and washed twice with BD Stain Buffer (BD Biosciences). Cells were resuspended at 1 x 10<sup>7</sup> cell/mL. Aliquots of 0.1mL were stained with 7µL of anti-CD4 PECY5 (BD Biosciences) and anti-phospho-ERK Alexa Fluor 488 (BD Biosciences) for 30 min or with anti-phospho p38 PE (BD Biosciences) during an overnight period, in the dark. The cells were then washed and resuspended for flow cytometric analyses. A minimum of 20,000 lymphocytes were gated by size (FSC) and granularity (SSC) with a flow cytometer (FACSCalibur, BD Biosciences, USA). Data was analyzed using Flowjo 7.2.5 software.

#### **4.3.4. Lymphocyte proliferation / viability assay**

PBMCs were cultured in flat-bottomed 96-well microplates at 1.5 x 10<sup>5</sup> cell/well in complete culture medium for 96 h at 37°C in an atmosphere with 5% CO<sub>2</sub>. Stimulation was performed with selective T-cell mitogen 1% phytohemagglutinin (PHA, from Gibco, USA) or 50 ng/mL of synthetic diacylglycerol phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate (PMA, from ACROS Organics, Belgium) plus 250 ng/mL of calcium ionophore ionomycin (all from Invitrogen, USA). Specific p38 (SB203580, Invitrogen, USA) or ERK (U0126, Biomol International, USA) MAPK inhibitors were also added in triplicates (10 µM) for some cultures when indicated. The proliferative response was determined by a modified colorimetric (MTT) assay as previously described (Luz et al., 2006). The optical density (OD) was determined using Biorad ELISA plate reader at a wavelength of 570 and 620 nm. Proliferation/viability was expressed as ΔOD (OD of stimulated – OD of nonstimulated cultures).

#### **4.3.5. Sensitivity to glucocorticoids**

Cellular sensitivity to GCs was evaluated by the ability of dexamethasone (DEX, a selective GC receptor agonist; Sigma, USA) to suppress T-cell proliferation *in vitro*. DEX ( $10^{-9}$  to  $10^{-5}$  M) was added in duplicates (50 µl/well) to PBMC cultures stimulated with PHA or unstimulated. To address the role of ERK and p38 over cellular GC sensitivity, specific MAPK inhibitors (U0126 and SB203580) were also used in some cultures when indicated. DMSO was used as negative control. The proliferative response was determined by a modified colorimetric (MTT) assay as previously described (Luz et al., 2006).

#### **4.3.6. Immunophenotyping**

PBMCs were washed with FACS Buffer, permeabilized with Perm 2 (BD Biosciences) for 10 min on ice and washed twice with FACS Buffer. Cells were stained with 1µL of anti-CD4 PE, anti-CD4 FITC, anti-CD3 PE, anti-CD8 PE, anti-CD8 FITC, anti-CD28 FITC, anti-CD25 FITC, anti-CD69 FITC, anti-Foxp3 PECy5 and anti-GITR PE for 30 min in the dark. Cells were washed and resuspended for flow cytometric analyses. A minimum of 20,000 lymphocytes were gated by size (FSC) and granularity (SSC) with a flow cytometer (FACSCalibur, BD Biosciences, USA). Data was analyzed using Flowjo 7.2.5 software.

#### **4.3.7. Quantification of cytokines**

PBMCs were stimulated with 1% PHA for 48h and supernatants were collected and stored at -50°C prior to analyses. The samples were thawed and cytokines (IL-2, IL-10, IL-4, IL-5, INF-γ and TNF-α) measured by cytometric bead array (CBA, BD Biosciences) according to the manufacturer procedures. A flow cytometer was used for these analyses (FACSCalibur, BD Biosciences, USA).

#### **4.3.8. Statistical Analysis**

The proportion differences between groups were analyzed by chi-square tests. One way ANOVA was performed to analyse cell proliferation (non-stimulated versus stimulated)

data. Multiple comparisons among levels were analyzed with Tukey post hoc test. Proliferation/sensitivity data were analyzed by repeated measures ANOVA that included one between-subjects variable (patients and controls) and one within-subjects variable (mitogen or DEX concentrations). Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to investigate some correlations. Data are expressed as mean  $\pm$  SEM in all figures and tables. Statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, SPSS 15.0 software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). The significance level was set at  $\alpha = 0.05$  (two-tailed).

#### 4.4. Results

##### 4.4.1. Analysis of phospho-MAPKs in lymphocytes

We analyzed the expression of phosphorylated (activated) p38 and ERK MAPKs in peripheral blood lymphocytes. Representative flow cytometric data are shown in Figure 1A. Asymptomatic carriers showed an increased percentage of lymphocytes positive for phospho-p38 than controls, ( $p=0.002$ , Figure 1B). In addition, there was a statistical trend for increased positivity for phospho-p38 than HAM/TSP in asymptomatic carriers ( $p=0.08$ ). There were no significant differences regarding cells positive for phospho-ERK (Figure 1C). The expression of phospho-MAPKs, as estimated by the mean fluorescence intensity, also followed the same pattern (Figures E-G). Of note, asymptomatic carriers had increased expression of phospho-p38 as compared to controls ( $p<0.01$ ).

Because p38 and ERK may have opposite cellular effects, we also analyzed the phospho-p38/phospho-Erk ratio in total lymphocytes. We observed that lymphocytes from HAM/TSP have a significantly higher p38/ERK ratio than control group ( $p<0.05$ , Figure 1D). Similar results were obtained when CD4 $^{+}$  T lymphocytes were analysed (data not shown).

#### **4.4.2. Role of MAPK on T-cell proliferation**

T-cell proliferation was investigated by stimulating PBMCs with two different stimuli that require (PHA) or not (PMA + ionomycin) TCR:CD3 signaling. It was found that cells of HAM/TSP patients responded poorly to both stimuli as compared to AC ( $p=0.003$ ) or healthy controls ( $p<0.0001$ ) (Figure 2).

To explore the role of MAPKs on mitogen-induced cell proliferation, we treated PBMCs with specific inhibitors of p38 (SB203580) or ERK (U0126). Figure 3A shows that U0126 efficiently inhibited T-cell proliferation among all subjects (all  $p<0.001$ ). However, the SB203580 was capable to increase proliferation only in the HAM/TSP group,  $p<0.01$  (Figure 3B).

#### **4.4.3. Cellular sensitivity to glucocorticoids**

Peripheral sensitivity to GCs was estimated by functional assays developed to measure the ability of DEX to suppress T-cell proliferation *in vitro*. We found that both unstimulated and stimulated PBMCs of HAM/TSP patients were significantly more sensitive to GCs as compared to asymptomatic carriers or healthy controls,  $p<0.05$  (Figure 4).

The role of ERK and p38 on GCs sensitivity was then assessed by treating cells with specific inhibitors for each kinase. The inhibitor of ERK (U0126) was capable to increase cellular sensitivity to GCs in controls ( $p<0.05$ , Figure 5A). There was also a statistical trend for increased GC sensitivity in cells of asymptomatic carriers treated with U0126 ( $p=0.10$ , Figure 5C). Interestingly, this inhibitor did not change cellular response to GCs in the HAM/TSP group ( $p=0.36$ , Figure 5B). We also observed a trend to a lower sensitivity to GCs in cells of HAM/TSP patients treated with specific inhibitor of p38 (SB203580) ( $p=0.17$ , Figure 5E).

#### **4.4.4. Immunophenotyping**

We also sought to investigate whether changes in peripheral cellular subsets could be associated with altered responses to mitogens / GCs during HTLV-I infection. Some important T-cell subsets were identified by flow cytometry and correlated with cellular response to mitogens/steroid. Of note, the HAM/TSP group showed a higher percentage of T CD4<sup>+</sup>CD25<sup>+</sup> cells ( $p=0.004$  versus control and  $p<0.05$  versus AC), CD8<sup>+</sup>CD25<sup>+</sup> cells ( $p=0.004$  versus control and  $p<0.05$  versus AC) and CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> cells ( $p=0.01$  versus control and  $p=0.007$  versus AC) in comparison to AC and controls (Table 1). Furthermore, AC had lower levels of CD4<sup>+</sup>CD25<sup>+</sup>Foxp3<sup>+</sup> regulatory T cells in comparison to controls ( $p=0.025$ ). Interestingly, lymphocyte subsets were found significantly correlated with T-cell proliferation (Figure 6). In particular, it was found that activated (CD4+CD25+ or CD8+CD25+) or regulatory CD8+CD28- T cells were inversely correlated with cellular proliferation. However, these cells were not correlated with sensitivity to GCs.

#### **4.4.5. Cytokine production**

We analyzed cytokines potentially implicated with response to mitogens and cellular sensitivity to GCs. Th1/Th2 cytokines (IL-2, IL-4, IL-5, TNF- $\alpha$ , INF- $\gamma$  and IL-10) were assessed in cultured cells supernatant of the different groups. However, there were no differences between cytokine levels among the groups investigated (Table 2).

### *4.5. Discussion*

Here, we investigated the cellular and molecular underlying mechanisms of HTLV-I-related changes in T-cell proliferation and cellular sensitivity to GCs. This is the first study that assessed the activation levels of phosphorilated p38 and ERK MAPKs in peripheral blood lymphocytes and their influence on mitogen response and sensitivity to GCs in HTLV-I infection. We found that peripheral cells of symptomatic individuals (HAM/TSP) showed a

poor response to mitogens and responded strongly to GCs. These findings were associated with elevated phospho-p38/phospho-ERK ratio observed in HAM/TSP patients. Specific inhibitors for p38 and ERK addressed the roles of these enzymes during T-cell stimulation and sensitivity to GCs in HAM/TSP patients. ERK was incapable to modulate sensitivity to GCs and p38 had a partial role in blunted response to different stimuli in patients with HAM/TSP. Additionally, HAM/TSP patients had significantly more CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> regulatory T cells and activated cells that would negatively influence the cellular responses to stimuli.

We demonstrated that PBMCs from HAM/TSP patients had a reduced proliferation to different stimuli, indicating anergy and potentially impaired cell-mediated immunity. Indeed, there are clinical works suggesting that HTLV-I infected patients, including asymptomatic subjects, may be associated with chronic immunosuppression (Katsuki et al., 1987; Tachibana et al., 1988). In line with our finding, Kohno (2005) demonstrated that lymphocytes of ATL/L patients are also anergic to stimuli *in vitro*. It must be mentioned that ATL/L has been characterized by a severe immunosuppressive state with repeated opportunistic infections.

The impaired T-cell response to mitogens observed in patients with HAM/TSP was associated to a higher phospho-p38/phospho-ERK ratio in this group. Patients with HAM/TSP have an increased expression of phospho-p38 relative to phospho-ERK. In accordance to these data, higher levels of phosphorylated p38 have been observed in cell lines derived from HAM/TSP patients (Fukushima et al., 2005). However, there was no previous information regarding the phospho-ERK expression in HAM/TSP patients. Other MAPKs could be also theoretically involved with anergy or altered sensitivity to steroids, including the c-Jun N-terminal kinase (JNK) MAPK. However, JNK does not seem to interfere consistently on response to mitogens and GCs. Moreover JNK1<sup>-/-</sup>/JNK2<sup>-/-</sup> CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells

produce normal levels of IL-2 and proliferate normally (Dong et al., 2000; Yang et al., 1998). In addition, Tsitoura (2004) demonstrated that JNK had no influence on the immunosuppressive effects of GCs. To explore the role of MAPKs on mitogen-induced cell proliferation, we treated PBMCs with specific inhibitors of p38 and ERK. The pharmacological inhibition of ERK significantly reduced the T-cell proliferation across all samples. Conversely, the inhibition of p38 increased the proliferation only in HAM/TSP group indicating that this kinase may lead to poor response to mitogens in this group. It is hypothesized that phospho-p38 could be involved with cellular anergy through different mechanisms including: (i) promotion of IL-10 secretion, (ii) inhibiting ERK-related IL-2 production and (iii) increasing cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor p27<sup>Kip1</sup> transcription leading to a G1 arrest of the cell cycle (Adler et al., 2007; Ohkusu-Tsukada et al., 2004; Sloan and Jerome, 2007). Our results are in accordance to previous studies with anergic T CD4+ cells, including T regulatory cells, that demonstrated a restoration of cellular proliferation following p38 inhibition. (Adler et al., 2007; Ohkusu-Tsukada et al., 2004). Another studies showed that the inhibition of this enzyme may also change the cytokine milieu resulting in cellular cycle progression (Kogkopoulou et al., 2006; Sloan and Jerome, 2007; Veiopoulos et al., 2004).

Moreover, the phenotypic characteristics of lymphocyte subpopulations could be also influencing the cellular response to antigens. We observed that CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> T cells were inversely correlated with the response to mitogens. Although previous works have described a higher percentage of CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> T cells in individuals with HAM/TSP, none of them related this finding to a potential suppressive effect (Brito-Melo et al., 2002; Brito-Melo et al., 2004). Similarly to natural CD4<sup>+</sup>CD25<sup>+</sup>Foxp3<sup>+</sup> T regulatory cells, the CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> regulatory T cells do not proliferate *in vitro* and have a strong suppressor activity of cellular immune responses, inhibiting the cytotoxic function and T-cell proliferation (Fenoglio et al., 2008; Filaci et al.,

2007; Filaci et al., 2004b; Simone et al., 2008). They may act either via the secretion of cytokines (IL-6, INF- $\gamma$  and IL-10) or direct cell-to-cell contact, depending on the subsets of CD8 $^{+}$ CD28 $^{-}$  regulatory T cells (Balashov et al., 1995; Chang et al., 2002; Filaci et al., 2004a). Importantly, a higher percentage of CD8 $^{+}$ CD28 $^{-}$  cells has been observed in patients with persistent viral infections including human immuno-deficiency virus (HIV) (Fiorentino et al., 1996; Weekes et al., 1999), cytomegalovirus (CMV) (Ouyang et al., 2003) and Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) (Klatt et al., 2005; Roos et al., 2000). Therefore, the expansion of regulatory subsets could be understood as a potential mechanism of virus escape from host immunity. There is also evidence indicating that repeated antigenic stimulation, as observed during viral infections, is associated with expansion of anergic T cells with reduced CD28 expression (Effros et al., 1996; Hazzan et al., 1997). Furthermore, age-related expansion of CMV-specific CD8 $^{+}$ CD28 $^{-}$  T cells (anergic) has been associated with shrinkage of T-cell repertoire or immunological space (Franceschi et al., 2000; Ouyang et al., 2003; Simone et al., 2008). In contrast to this finding, HAM/TSP had a lower proportion of natural regulatory (CD4 $^{+}$ CD25 $^{+}$ Foxp3 $^{+}$  T cells) T cells (Oh et al., 2006; Yamano et al., 2005). However, there are conflicting data in this field since recent studies reported unchanged peripheral counts of natural regulatory T cells in patients with HAM/TSP (Hayashi et al., 2008; Toulza et al., 2008). Future studies should better characterize CD8 $^{+}$ CD28 $^{-}$  regulatory cells as well as addressing their suppressive activity with functional assays. HAM/TSP patients had increased percentages of activated T cells that could be also implicated with a poor response to mitogens. These cells were negatively correlated with the intensity of mitogen response, suggesting their inhibitory role on cell proliferation and anergy. Indeed, they may have reached a maximal threshold for TCR stimulation or may be committed to apoptosis in a process known as activation-induced cell death (Osborne, 1996). Changes in TCR/CD3 expression would potentially account for peripheral anergy to stimuli. Indeed, CD3 down-

modulation on CD8 T cells has been associated with significant anergy during chronic antigenic stimulation, as observed during autoimmune diseases and some viral infections, such as cytomegalovirus and Epstein Barr virus (Trimble et al., 2000). Nonetheless, we observed that cells of HAM/TSP patients had increased CD3 expression on both CD4 and CD8 cells (data not shown).

In accordance to previous clinical studies (Croda et al., 2008; Nakagawa et al., 1996), cells of patients with HAM/TSP were highly sensitive to GCs *in vitro* compared to asymptomatic carriers and healthy controls. We also demonstrated this important change in cellular response to steroids was associated to lower levels of ERK expression relative to p38. Treatment with ERK inhibitor did not increase the sensitivity to GCs in this group, as expected under physiological conditions. In agreement to our data, previous studies addressed the role of ERK during GC resistance (Jamieson and Yamamoto, 2000; Miller et al., 2007; Thompson, 2008; Tsitoura and Rothman, 2004). In contrast, p38 inhibition may lead to a partial GCs resistance in HAM/TSP group, confirming the role of this MAPK in modulating the cellular response to steroids (Hittelman et al., 1999; Miller et al., 2005; Thompson, 2008; Wang et al., 2002). The effects of MAPKs in modulating the sensitivity to GCs may occur through post-transcriptional changes of the glucocorticoid receptors (GRs) (Duma et al., 2006). According to Miller (2005), the p38 may phosphorylate the GR at serine 211 residue, increasing the transcriptional activity of the GC/GR complex and sensitivity to GCs. In contrast, the MAPK ERK has shown opposite effects through phosphorylation of serine/threonine residues of the GR and may thus constitute an important mechanism of GR resistance (Jamieson and Yamamoto, 2000; Krstic et al., 1997; Tsitoura and Rothman, 2004). Finally, patients and controls had similar levels of Th1/Th2 cytokines in the stimulated PBMCs supernatant. This indicates that cytokine-independent mechanisms are influencing in

the cellular proliferation and GCs sensitivity, but future studies should also investigate the role of serum cytokines or cytokines secreted by specific lymphocyte subpopulations, including T CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> cells.

#### 4.6. Conclusion

We found that peripheral lymphocytes of HAM/TSP patients were highly anergic to mitogenic stimulation and responded strongly to GCs. These changes were correlated to a higher p38/ERK ratio. Phenotypic changes, including the presence of CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> regulatory T cells, may also account for the response to mitogens in this group of patients. Our data suggest that patients with HAM/TSP may have an impaired cell-mediated immunity, rising the question whether immunosuppressive treatment is really an appropriate therapy to these patients.

#### Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflicting financial interests.

#### 4.7. References

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## List of Figures

**Fig. 1.** Identification of peripheral lymphocytes expressing phosphorilated MAPKs. (A) representative histogram of groups (control = gray; HAM/TSP = continuous line; AC: dashed line). (B-C), percentage of phospho-p38<sup>+</sup> and phospho-ERK<sup>+</sup> cells. (D), p-p38/p-ERK ratio. (E-F), Mean fluorescence intensity (MFI) of p-p38 and p-ERK expression. (G), p-p38/p-ERK ratio of MFI. HAM/TSP: HTLV-I- associated myelopathy/ tropical spastic paraparesis. AC: asymptomatic carriers. Statistical significance differences are indicated: \*P < 0.05 \*\*P < 0.01

**Fig. 2.** Assessment of T-cell proliferation. PBMCs were cultured with (A) 1% PHA or (B) PMA + Ionomycin for 96h. Proliferation/viability was estimated by a colorimetric assay. Proliferation/viability was expressed as delta OD (i.e. OD of stimulated – OD of unstimulated cultures). HAM/TSP: HTLV-I- associated myelopathy/ tropical spastic paraparesis. AC: asymptomatic carriers. Statistical significance differences are indicated: \*P <0.05; \*\*P <0.01;\*\*\* P <0.001.

**Fig. 3.** The role of MAPK inhibitors on T-cell proliferation. PBMCs were cultured for 96h with T-cell mitogen PHA and (A) UO126 (ERK inhibitor) or (B) SB203580 (p38 inhibitor). Control cultures were treated with DMSO. Proliferation/viability was estimated by a colorimetric assay. The optical density (OD) was determined at wavelengths of 570nm and 620nm HAM/TSP: HTLV-I- associated myelopathy/ tropical spastic paraparesis. AC: asymptomatic carriers. Statistical significance differences are indicated: \*P < 0.05 \*\*P < 0.01. \*\*\*P < 0.001.

**Fig. 4.** Cellular sensitivity to dexamethasone *in vitro*. Glucocorticoid sensitivity was assessed by incubating PBMCs for 96h with (A) DEX only ( $10^{-5}$ ,  $10^{-6}$ ,  $10^{-7}$ ,  $10^{-8}$ , and  $10^{-9}$  M) or (B) DEX plus 1% PHA. Cellular sensitivity to glucocorticoids is presented as percentage of basal proliferation. 100% = culture medium without DEX (in graph A) or 1% PHA without DEX (in graph B). HAM/TSP: HTLV-I- associated myelopathy/ tropical spastic paraparesis. AC: asymptomatic carriers Statistical significance differences in T-cell sensitivity to isolated DEX concentrations are indicated \*  $P < 0.05$  and \*\*  $P < 0.01$  versus controls or AC. Statistical interaction of T-cell sensitivity to variation of concentration between groups is indicated #  $P=0.05$  versus HAM/TSP

**Fig. 5.** The role of MAPK inhibitors on cellular sensitivity to glucocorticoids. PBMCs were cultured for 96h with PHA 1%, dexamethasone (DEX) and U0126 (A-C, ERK inhibitor) or SB203580 (D-F, p38 inhibitor). Control cultures were treated with DMSO. Cell proliferation was estimated by a colorimetric assay. The cellular sensitivity to glucocorticoids is presented as percentage of basal proliferation. 100% = PHA + inhibitor, without DEX. Statistical significance differences in T-cell sensitivity to isolated DEX concentrations are indicated: \*  $p = 0.05$ .

**Fig. 6.** Correlation between lymphocyte subsets and mitogenic proliferation. Proliferation/viability was estimated by a colorimetric assay. The optical density (OD) was determined at wavelengths of 570 / 620nm. Proliferation/viability was expressed as  $\Delta$ OD (OD of stimulated culture – OD of unstimulated culture).

## List of Tables

**Table 1.** Surface Phenotypes of Lymphocytes from Control, HAM/TSP and AC.

Cell phenotype	Control	HAM/TSP	AC
<b>CD4 T cells</b>			
CD25 <sup>+</sup>	6.68 ± 0.65	24.20 ± 7.20 ** #	10.55 ± 1.45
CD69 <sup>+</sup>	1.07 ± 0.152	1.71 ± 0.53	1.24 ± 0.29
GITR <sup>+</sup>	1.881 ± 0.31	3.03 ± 0.91	2.03 ± 0.49
CD25 <sup>+</sup> Foxp3 <sup>+</sup>	2.22 ± 0.44	1.69 ± 0.27	1.12 ± 0.11 #
<b>CD8 T cells</b>			
CD25 <sup>+</sup>	0.71 ± 0.09	6.96 ± 2.57 ** #	1.95 ± 0.66
CD69 <sup>+</sup>	1.12 ± 0.32	2.01 ± 0.50	1.18 ± 0.32
CD28 <sup>-</sup>	43.49 ± 3.90	60.16 ± 3.45 * ##	41.28 ± 3.87
<b>Total T cell</b>			
CD3 <sup>+</sup> CD4 <sup>+</sup>	43.17 ± 1.74	44.23 ± 4.06	42.76 ± 2.00
CD3 <sup>+</sup> CD8 <sup>+</sup>	16.67 ± 1.67	22.04 ± 3.08	20.53 ± 1.82

The data is presented as mean percentage ± SEM. HAM/TSP: HTLV-I-associated myelopathy/ tropical spastic paraparesis. AC: asymptomatic carriers.

\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $P < 0.01$  versus controls. # $P < 0.05$ ; ##  $P < 0.01$  versus AC.

**Table 2.** Cytokine profiles in PBMCs supernatant in controls, HAM/TSP and AC groups.

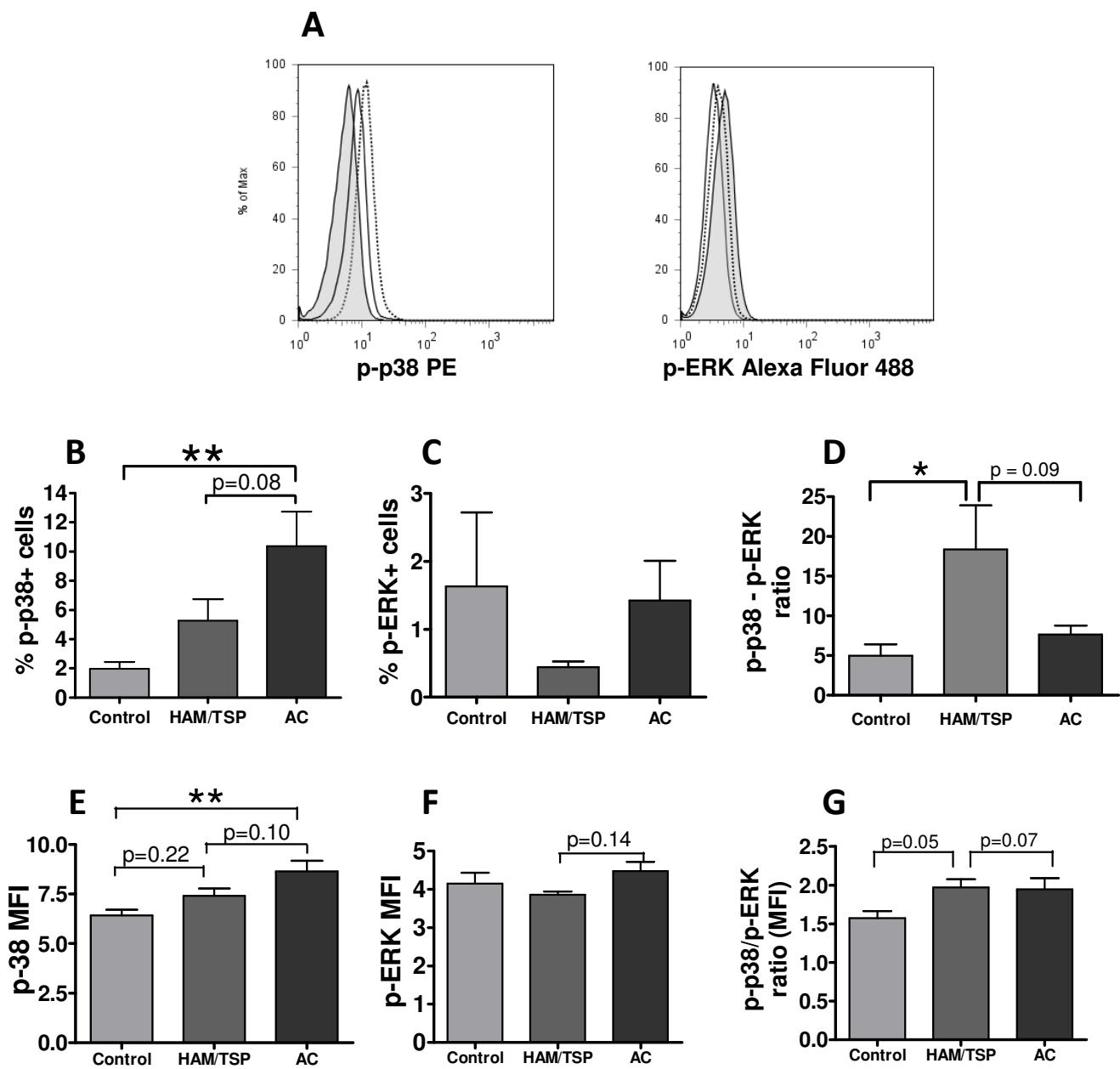
	Control	HAM/TSP	AC
	(n=12)	(n=13)	(n=15)
IL-2	670.06 ± 182.33	1150.12 ± 273.42	1406.53 ± 308.92
IL-4	1653.38 ± 784.75	1105.64 ± 625.41	694.03 ± 396.17
IL-5	1825.35 ± 645.46	2063.92 ± 641.43	4319.72 ± 514.83
TNF-α	1847.16 ± 525.81	1786.28 ± 468.70	1730.35 ± 404.29
INF-γ	2547.27 ± 851.19	3041.35 ± 862.50	2667.32 ± 690.74
IL-10	1163.075 ± 418.98	772.85 ± 303.72	972.88 ± 307.28

The PBMCs supernatant was collected after 48 h of cell culture with PHA.

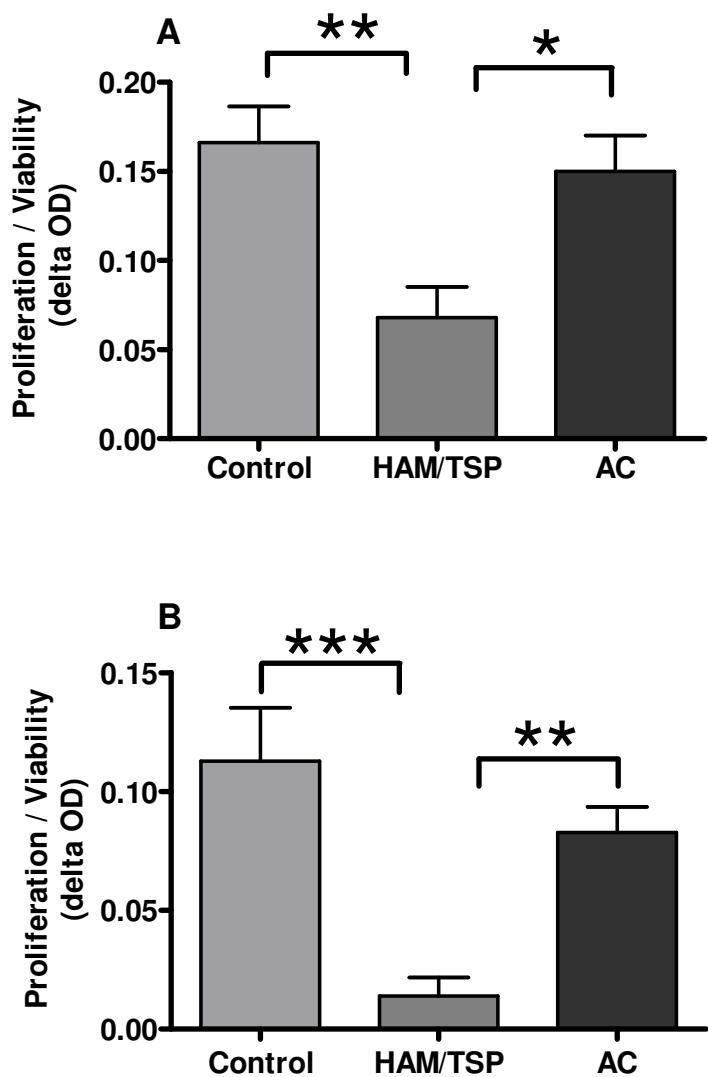
HAM/TSP: HTLV-I- associated myelopathy/ tropical spastic paraparesis.

AC: asymptomatic carriers. Data presented as mean (pg/mL) ± SEM.

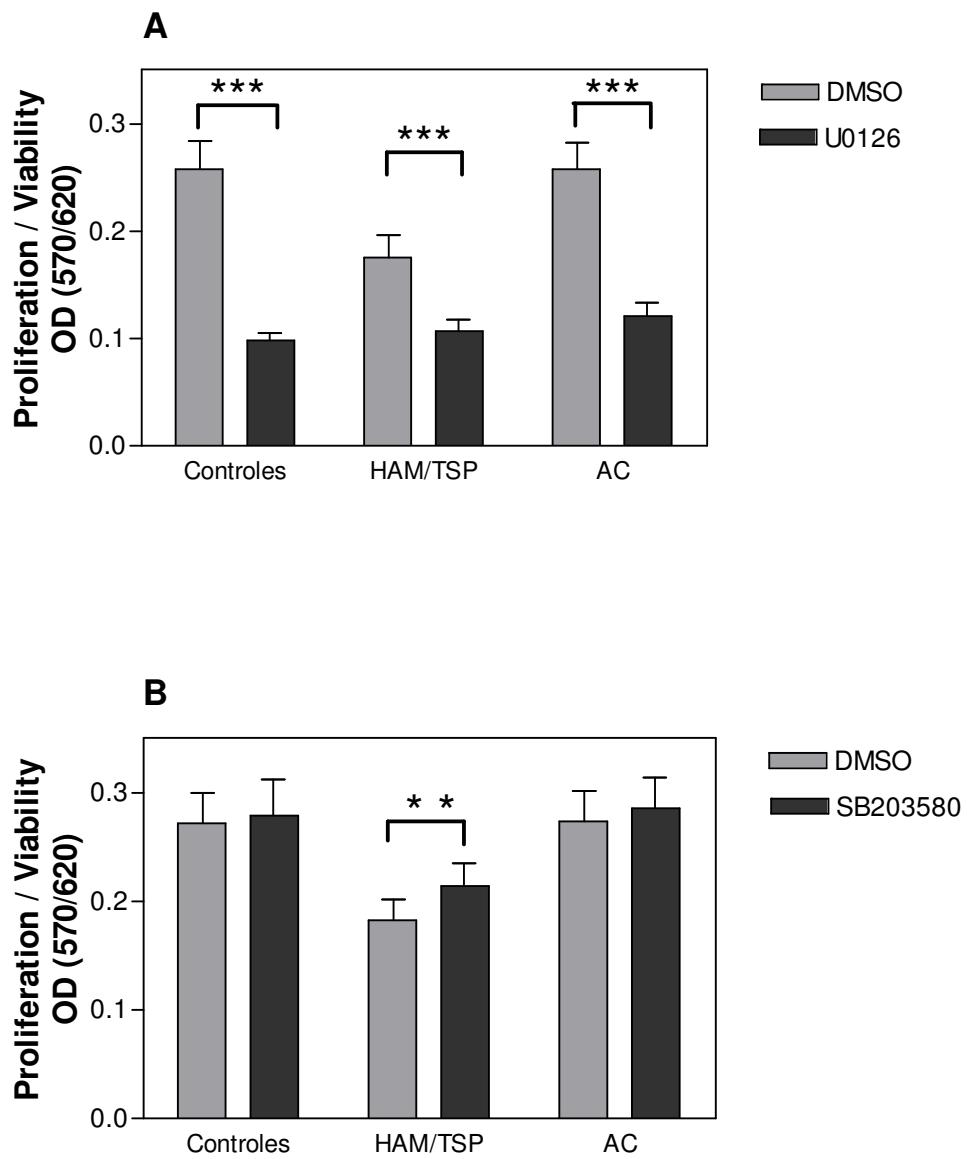
**Figure 1**



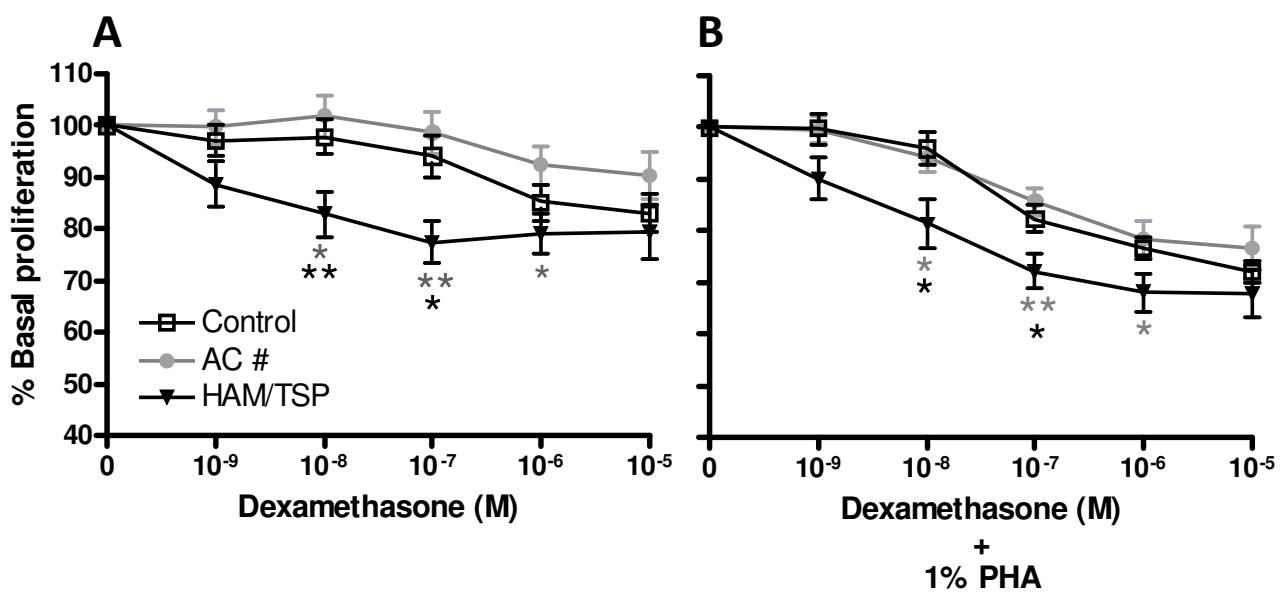
**Figure 2**



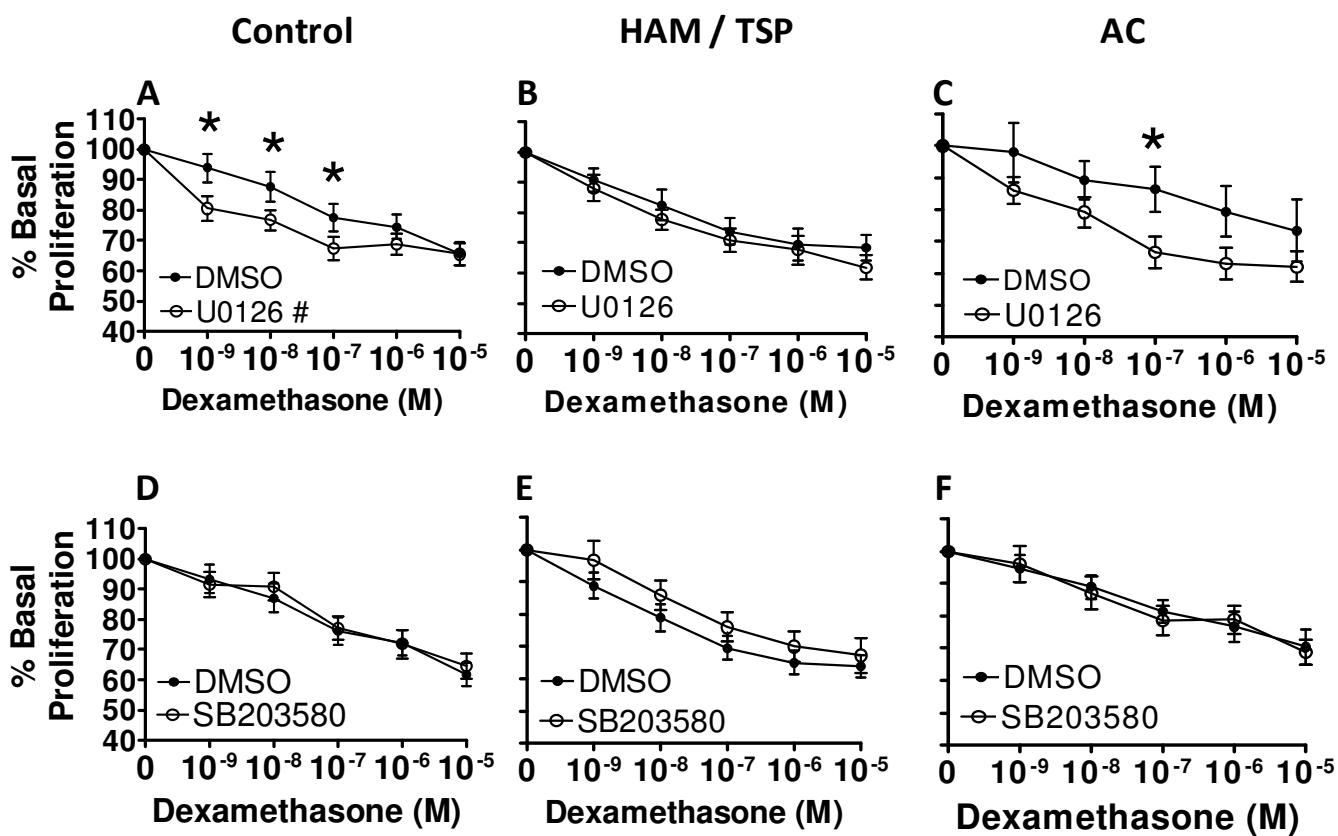
**Figure 3**



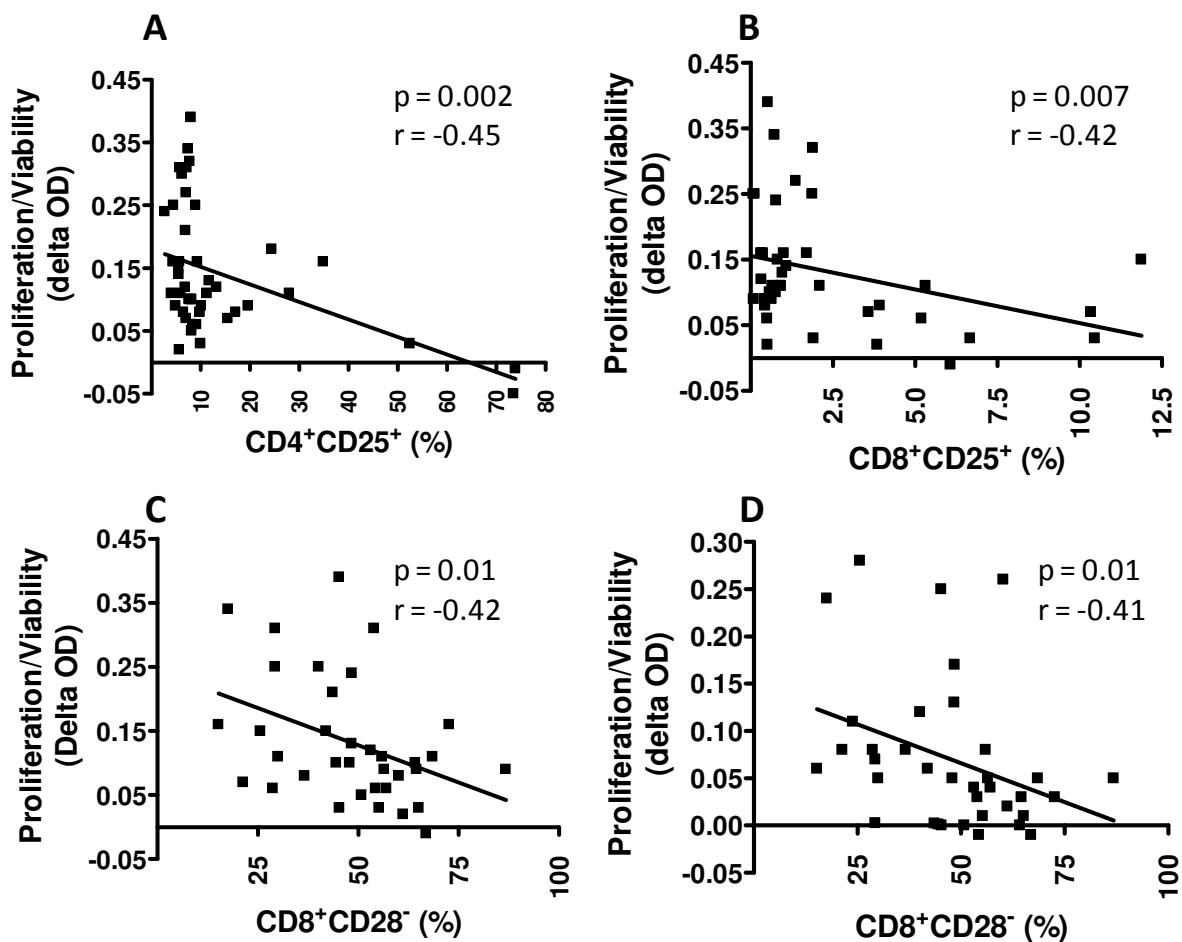
**Figure 4**



**Figure 5**



**Figure 6**



## **5. CONSIDERAÇÕES FINAIS**

Linfócitos de indivíduos infectados com HTLV-I podem apresentar uma fraca resposta imune celular à estimulação e, simultaneamente, relativa resistência aos GCs *in vitro* (26). Estes dois aspectos imunológicos são importantes, já que podem refletir na susceptibilidade a infecções e na sensibilidade aos fármacos GCs *in vivo*. No entanto, ainda não se tem conhecimento dos mecanismos que modulam estes aspectos na infecção pelo HTLV-I. Potenciais mecanismos são as MAPKs ERK e p38, subtipos de linfócitos T e citocinas no sangue periférico. Entre os nossos achados, destacamos que as MAPKs ERK e p38 realmente influenciam nas respostas aos GCs e aos抗ígenos e que as células T reguladoras CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> correlacionam-se inversamente com esta última.

Como primeiro objetivo para realização desse estudo, nós avaliamos a expressão das MAPKs fosfo-p38 e fosfos-ERK nos linfócitos do sangue periférico de indivíduos ACs, HAM/TSP e controles. Assim, através da técnica de citometria de fluxo, observamos que indivíduos infectados com HTLV-I apresentam maior expressão de fosfo-p38. Concordando com nossos dados, um estudo prévio demonstrou altos níveis de fosfo-p38 em duas linhagens obtidas a partir de pacientes com HAM/TSP (30). Nossos resultados são importantes, pois demonstram pela primeira vez o nível de ativação das MAPKs p38 e ERK em linfócitos de um grande grupo de pacientes. Estes resultados auxiliarão em trabalhos futuros que venham a avaliar outros aspectos celulares influenciados por estas quinases na infecção pelo HTLV-I.

Nosso segundo objetivo foi avaliar as respostas aos mitógenos de linfócitos de indivíduos ACs, HAM/TSP e controles. Alcançamos o mesmo através da adição de PHA ou PMA/Ionomicina nas PBMCs em cultura. Observamos que linfócitos de pacientes com HAM/TSP respondem pouco aos estímulos *in vitro*, sugerindo que estes possam também apresentar imunidade celular prejudicada *in vivo*. Dessa forma, fortalecendo esta hipótese, há

trabalhos clínicos indicando que indivíduos com HTLV-I, inclusive ACs, possam apresentar imunossupressão crônica (25, 92).

Além disso, também tínhamos como meta verificar as influências das MAPKs ERK e p38 sobre a resposta aos mitógenos. Para tal, acrescentamos nas culturas de PBMCs estimuladas inibidores específicos destas MAPKs, separadamente. Verificamos que a inibição da p38 resultou no aumento significativo da resposta aos mitógenos somente no grupo HAM/TSP, demonstrando que esta enzima possui um papel importante no controle da imunidade celular nestes pacientes. Este resultado é semelhante a estudos prévios utilizando células T CD4 anárgicas, incluído células T reguladoras, que demonstram uma restauração da proliferação celular após inibição da p38 (27, 29). Além disso, nossos resultados apontam esta quinase como um possível alvo terapêutico na melhoria da imunidade celular apresentada por indivíduos com HAM/TSP.

Outro objetivo central deste estudo era avaliar a sensibilidade aos GCs *in vitro*. Assim, através da adição de diferentes doses do GC sintético DEX nas culturas celulares, verificamos que novamente o grupo HAM/TSP diferiu dos grupos ACs e controle, apresentando maior resposta. No entanto, devido a este grande efeito imunossupressor, deve-se ter cautela na utilização terapêutica desta droga em indivíduos com HAM/TSP.

Verificamos também as influências das MAPKs ERK e p38 sobre a sensibilidade aos fármacos GCs. Para tanto, utilizamos inibidores específicos destas duas enzimas, isoladamente, em culturas com DEX. Assim, conforme esperado, indivíduos não infectados tornaram-se mais sensíveis aos GCs após inibição da ERK, mas o mesmo não ocorreu em indivíduos com HAM/TSP, demonstrando que esta enzima não exerce papel negativamente sobre a sensibilidade aos GCs nestes indivíduos.

Nós objetivamos nesse estudo, ainda, mensurar algumas subpopulações de linfócitos T no sangue periférico, através da técnica de citometria de fluxo, e correlacionar estes dados

com as respostas aos mitógenos e aos GCs. Assim, como já demonstrado por outros grupos de pesquisa (84, 85), verificamos que indivíduos com HAM/TSP apresentam elevadas proporções de células T ativadas e CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> reguladoras. No entanto, nós demonstramos que estas se correlacionam inversamente com as respostas aos mitógenos, sugerindo que as mesmas possuem um papel na baixa proliferação, após estímulo observado no grupo HAM/TSP. Portanto, nós fomos os primeiros a demonstrar um possível papel supressor das células T CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> sobre a resposta imune em indivíduos com HAM/TSP.

Outros objetivos desse trabalho foram mensurar os níveis de algumas citocinas do perfil Th1 e Th2 e correlacionar estes dados com as respostas aos antígenos e aos GCs. Para tanto, coletamos o sobrenadante das PBMCs estimuladas em cultura por 48hs e utilizamos o ensaio citofluorométrico com microesferas fluorescentes (cytometric bead array - CBA) para a quantificação das citocinas. Não identificamos diferenças significativas entre os grupos nos níveis das mesmas, sugerindo que mecanismos independentes de citocinas tenham maior importância na resposta aos mitógenos e na sensibilidade aos GCs.

Enfim, o presente estudo forneceu informações relevantes sobre as alterações causadas pelo HTLV-I, tanto a nível molecular quanto a nível celular, bem como suas influências em dois aspectos mais sistêmicos: resposta imune celular aos antígenos e sensibilidade aos fármacos glicocorticoides. Em outras palavras, nosso estudo contribuiu no entendimento destes dois aspectos relevantes na clínica desta infecção, além de fornecer conhecimentos adicionais para futuros estudos que possam, por exemplo, manipular as enzimas estudadas e se aprofundar na atividade das células T CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> supressoras bem como suas consequências na HAM/TSP.

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