

## CHAPTER 2

### Mechanisms of Intestinal Tolerance to Dietary Proteins

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## **A b s t r a c t**

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Oral tolerance is defined as the lack of a systemic immune response against antigens previously administered through the gastrointestinal tract. Therefore, in an antigen rich environment such as the intestine, the oral tolerance avoids the development of immune responses against food antigens and the commensal microbiota maintaining immune homeostasis in health. Nevertheless, in some circumstances the immune system fails to develop and/or maintain immune tolerance, triggering an abnormal immune response against the commensals, which occurs in inflammatory bowel diseases and/or against food antigens as evident in celiac disease. In this chapter, we will discuss the unique properties of the immune system in the gastrointestinal tract and study how dendritic cells, the most potent antigen presenting cells, control mechanisms of immune homeostasis in the intestine.

## **Keywords**

Dendritic cells, tolerance, intestine, immunity.

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## **1. Characteristics of the Gastrointestinal Mucosa**

The mucosa of the gastrointestinal tract (GIT) is the longest in the human body comprising  $100\text{m}^2$  (200 times bigger than the skin surface). It consists of a monolayer of epithelial cells specialized in the absorption of water and nutrients and also provides a physical barrier with the external environment.

The intestinal epithelial cells (IEC) constitute the frontier between the external antigen-rich environment [in its lower or distal compartments the GIT carries a total of  $10^{12}$  bacteria per gram of human tissue<sup>1</sup>] and the immune system in the lamina propria (LP) underneath, which comprises the connective tissue between the apical epithelial layer and the inner muscularis mucosae. Barrier function of the IEC is elicited by an array of tight-junctions between the IEC blocking the passage of substances from the lumen. In addition to the epithelial barrier, some IEC like the Goblet cells secrete mucins which constitute the mucus layer on the apical membrane of the IEC. This mucus layer carries a high concentration of anti-microbial defensins, neutrophils and secreted IgA helping to maintain immune homeostasis in the GIT<sup>2,3</sup>.

Although IEC are not immune cells, their role in GIT homeostasis and disease cannot be disregarded since some pathologies display increased epithelial gut permeability due to defective or “leaky” tight-junctions. The leakage of food and microbiota antigens through the IEC occurs in some forms of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) like in Crohn’s disease; mucosal exposure to luminal antigens probably provides the basis for sensitivity to food antigens in Crohn’s disease, responses to which can then be elicited only through challenge via gut mucosa but not through skin challenge<sup>4</sup>. Patients with celiac disease (CD) have increased epithelial gut permeability too, allowing passage of luminal content antigens including gluten to the LP. The composition of the mucus layer is also altered in CD patients<sup>5,6</sup> as well as the microbiota composition<sup>6-11</sup>. Nevertheless, it remains elusive whether such altered properties of the IEC compartment and the microbiota are cause or consequence of the disease.

## **2. The Immune System in the Gastrointestinal Tract**

Dendritic cells (DC) and macrophages ( $M\phi$ ) are the main antigen presenting cells (APC) in the GIT and changes in their numbers, phenotype and function have been reported in GIT diseases including CD<sup>12-15</sup>. Nevertheless, DC and  $M\phi$  have different functions. DC, the most potent APC, are unique in their capacity to migrate to the lymph nodes to perform antigen presentation and indeed are the only cells which can present antigens to stimulate naïve T-cells<sup>16</sup>. DC, therefore, control the mechanisms of immunity/tolerance in the GIT, maintaining immune tolerance against harmless antigens (mainly derived from the diet and the commensals) whilst also maintaining the capacity to trigger active immune responses, against invading pathogens<sup>17</sup>.  $M\phi$ , on the contrary, do not migrate to the lymph nodes and fail to perform antigen presentation to naïve T-cells. However,  $M\phi$  provide a first line of phagocytic defence against invading antigens<sup>18</sup> and also modulate effector T-cell responses in the tissues<sup>19,20</sup>. They also help to maintain intestinal tolerance by reducing local inflammation<sup>21</sup> and contributing to epithelial cell renewal<sup>22</sup>. Differential functions at induction and effector sites influence the outcome of the immune responses in the GIT allowing the establishment of regulatory mechanisms required to maintain the properties of the mucosal immune system<sup>23</sup>. Different compartments of the immune system in the GIT can be classified, according to their function and location, into i) sampling; ii) induction; and iii) effector areas.

## 2.1. Sampling Areas

The sampling areas of the GIT immune system are those areas where antigens are sampled by the DC<sup>24</sup> (Figure 1).

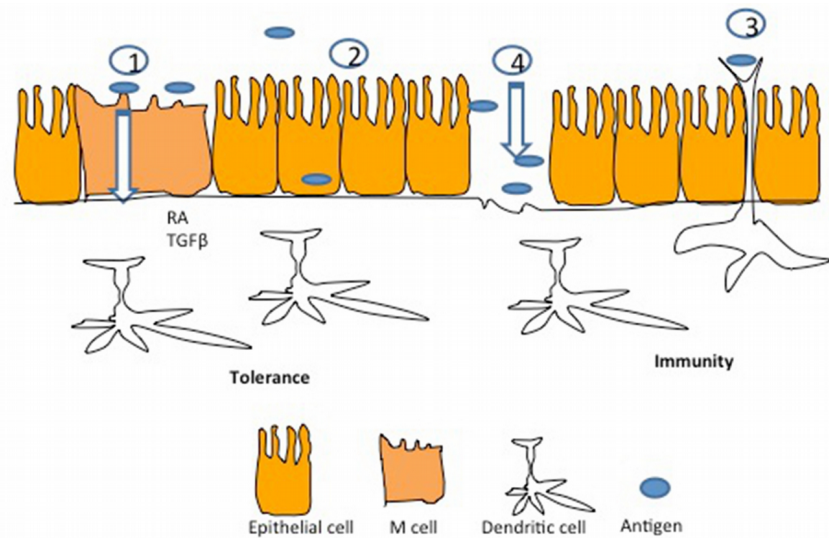


Figure 1. Dendritic cell antigen sampling. DC can sample antigens via (1) M cells at Peyer's Patches, (2) intestinal epithelial cell derived tolerosomes, (3) following direct uptake after sending their veils or dendrites between the epithelial cells or (4) after breakdown of the epithelial integrity. While the first two mechanisms promote immune tolerance, the last two are related with development of active immune responses.

### 2.1.1. Antigen Transfer Via M Cells at the Peyer's Patches

Peyer's Patches (PP) are lympho-epithelial organs mainly located in the small bowel submucosa. On their apical and external surface PP are covered by a subset of specialized IEC called Microfold or M cells. Such M cells are specialized for direct transfer of particulate antigens from the GIT lumen into tissue beneath the dome of the PP, a compartment rich in DC which will sample the antigens.

### ***2.1.2. Indirect Sampling Via Enterocytes***

In contrast to the underdome compartment of the PP, where DC are enriched, DC and other APC such as M $\phi$  are also spread throughout the whole lamina propria of the GIT where they constitute a cell network in intimate contact with the basal membrane of the IEC. In order to maintain the GIT epithelial integrity, IEC can sample the luminal content and secrete antigens onto the basolateral membrane through release of vesicles into the LP where they will be taken up by DC. Such vesicles have been defined as “tolerosomes” as they promote development of tolerogenic responses via LP-DC<sup>25,26</sup>. Nevertheless, DC can also get indirect access to luminal antigens following phagocytosis of apoptotic IEC although in that case they would promote active immune responses against the foreign antigens<sup>24</sup>.

### ***2.1.3. Direct Uptake by DC***

LP-DC expressing CX3CR1 can extend their veils, or dendrites, between the IEC while establishing tight-junctions in order to maintain the integrity of the epithelial barrier<sup>25</sup> and hence gaining direct access to luminal antigens. Nevertheless, recent evidence has redefined such CX3CR1<sup>+</sup> cells as a subset of tissue-resident tolerogenic M $\phi$ <sup>20,28</sup>.

### ***2.1.4. Direct Access Following Epithelial Breakdown***

When the epithelial integrity is compromised, due to an increase in transepithelial permeability and/or IEC apoptosis (as induced in CD by IL-15 as discussed in other chapters), then the luminal content will have direct access to LP-DC which will trigger an active immune response against the invading pathogens or, in disease, to food or microbiota antigens<sup>24</sup>. Increased epithelial permeability has been associated with several GIT diseases including CD.

## **2.2. Induction Areas**

Following antigen uptake by the DC, induction areas are those compartments where DC present antigen to naive T-cells. In the GIT, induction areas are comprised of organized lymphoid tissues (including the PP as previously described, the appendix and some lymph nodes) and the mesenteric lymph nodes draining the gut. During antigen presentation DC will not only generate antigen-specific T-cells but will also control their differentiation into pro-inflammatory and/or tolerogenic T-cells

## **2.3. Effector Areas**

Following T-cell priming, antigen-specific effector lymphocytes will migrate back to the GIT to elicit their function at the effector areas in the epithelial compartment and/or the LP.

### ***2.3.1. Intraepithelial Lymphocytes***

Intraepithelial lymphocytes (IEL) constitute a heterogeneous pool of T-cells on the basal membrane of the epithelial and intercalating with the enterocytes. In contrast to immune cells in the LP and non-mucosal immune tissues, IEL constitute a unique mix of lymphocytes. In resting conditions, in healthy controls, human IEL constitute around 20-40 cells per 100 enterocytes in the ileum where they are more frequent. They are characterized by the expression of the CD103 integrin, and most of them (70-90%) have a cytotoxic CD3<sup>+</sup>CD4<sup>-</sup>CD8<sup>+</sup> profile with a classical TCR $\alpha\beta$ . Although non-classical TCR $\gamma\delta$  lymphocytes are not very common in other compartments, they represent up to 30% of the total IEL in the GIT being the tissue where they are mainly found. Finally, the IEL compartment comprises a third CD45<sup>+</sup>CD3<sup>-</sup>CD7<sup>+</sup> NK-like cells with cytotoxic capacity<sup>29,30</sup>.

### 2.3.2. *Lamina Propria*

The LP contains an array of immune cells in addition to fibroblast, smooth muscle cells, lymph and blood vessels. Indeed, although it is not an organized lymphoid tissue, LP of the GIT contains the largest number of immune cells (mainly effector B and T-cells but also DC and M $\phi$ ) in the human body.

#### 2.3.2.1. *B-cells and IgA*

Different B-cell subsets produce different types of immunoglobulins (Ig). IgM/IgG are involved in systemic antibody responses and IgE mediates allergic reactions but the major component of antibody responses in the GIT is IgA. Therefore, IgA is the main Ig in mucosal compartments and the human body secretes over 3g/day. Ig-A promotes a non-aggressive exclusion of pathogens, limiting their access to the IEC, and accumulates in the mucus layer which is also rich in other immune molecules like defensins and bacteriocines, enhancing all together its immune protective function forming the first immune barrier of the GIT<sup>3,31</sup>.

#### 2.3.2.2. *T-cells*

Following antigen presentation, DC determine the outcome (pro-inflammatory/tolerogenic) of the responding antigen-specific T-cells. In both cases, T-cells will migrate from the lymph nodes to the LP where, as the effector site, they will elicit their function (either pro-inflammatory or regulatory).

The role of the *pro-inflammatory lymphocytes* in the GIT has been clearly stated in several intestinal pathologies including CD. Production of pro-inflammatory cytokines by the T-cells compromises the integrity of the epithelial barrier and is also related to structural modifications of the extracellular matrix<sup>32,33</sup>. Production of pro-inflammatory cytokines promote a positive auto- and paracrine feedback for production of chemokines and other pro-inflammatory cytokines which exacerbate the immune response and the



tissue injury. Generation of gluten-specific pro-inflammatory T-cells following antigen presentation by DC is the ultimate cause of CD pathogenesis.

*Regulatory T-cells*, are CD4<sup>+</sup> lymphocytes characterized by the expression of high levels of CD25 in which activity is controlled by the expression of the FoxP3 transcription factor. In contrast to pro-inflammatory T-cells, regulatory T-cells mediate immune homeostasis. Some regulatory T cells produce large quantities of regulatory cytokines (mainly IL-10). As a consequence, regulatory T-cells block the proliferation of pro-inflammatory T-cells, inhibit the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines and cooperate with local B-cells to enhance their production of IgA<sup>34</sup>. However, T-cell properties are dynamic<sup>35-37</sup> so their discrimination into pro-inflammatory and regulatory T-cells may be an oversimplification caused by cell density and/or cell contact inhibition<sup>38</sup>.

In summary, the immune system in the GIT promotes immune tolerance against the encountered antigens, mainly derived from commensals and food, via GIT-DC which promote the generation of antigen specific Ig-A secreting B-cells and regulatory T-cells which together maintain immune homeostasis. Nevertheless, in some pathologies like CD, DC “are confused” and fail to recognize gluten as a harmless dietary antigen. When that happens, DC promote the development of gluten-specific pro-inflammatory T-cells which control progression of the disease. In the following sections, we will therefore discuss the properties of GIT-DC and try to understand some of the causes which may cause their malfunction in CD.

### **3. Dendritic Cells Biology**

DC are potent APC. In contrast to other APCs such as B-lymphocytes (excluding already activated B cells) or M $\phi$ , DCs are unique in their capacity to initiate a primary immune response by stimulating naïve T-cells; they also control the outcome (tolerogenic or proinflammatory) of the immune responses<sup>16,39-41</sup>.

DC precursors migrate from the bone marrow to virtually all tissues in the body, including the mucosa in the GIT. Once in the tissues, DC become sentinels and sensors of the immune system. DC are sentinels as they are highly effective capturing and processing antigens<sup>42,43</sup> and hence sampling the surrounding environment. DC are also sensors given their capacity to discriminate the nature (harmful/harmless) of the sampled antigen via their high expression of pattern recognition receptor (PRR) molecules [including Toll-like receptors (TLRs)<sup>44-46</sup>] but also given their capacity to become activated in the presence of an innate immune stress (e.g. pro-inflammatory cytokines or oxidative stress)<sup>47,48</sup>. Therefore, DC occupy the interface between the innate and the highly specialized antigen-specific adaptive immune system.

When DC capture a “danger antigen”, as recognized via their PRR and/or following maturation induced by an innate immune response, tissue DC lose their high antigen-processing capacity and migrate to secondary lymphoid organs in a CCR7-dependent manner<sup>49,50</sup> in a process of maturation which will promote their capacity to present the antigens to T-cells. Within the lymph nodes, mature DC will deliver three different signals to the naïve T-cells which will control their differentiation into antigen-specific pro-inflammatory T-cells. Such signals include i) an increased expression of the processed antigens on the surface of the HLA-II molecules; ii) increased expression of co-stimulatory molecules CD80(B7.1)/CD86(B7.2) (T-cell CD28/CTLA4 ligands) and/or CD40 (T-cell CD40L ligand); and iii) increased capacity to produce pro-inflammatory cytokines, like IL-12<sup>51,52</sup>. Therefore, lymph node mature DC have lost their antigen-capturing ability but are efficient for antigen presentation and lymphocyte stimulation controlling their differentiation into antigen-specific effector (pro-inflammatory) T-cells. However, DC can also drive development of non-inflammatory (tolerogenic or regulatory) lymphocytes if, at the time of the antigen presentation, they display a decreased expression of the first two signals coupled with an increased capacity to produce regulatory cytokines, like IL-10. In this manner, DC control the development of pro-inflammatory responses against foreign

harmful antigens whilst maintaining immune tolerance against harmless antigens.

### **3.1. Dendritic Cells and Migration Markers: Connecting Induction and Effector Areas**

Antigen specific B- and T-cells express tissue-specific homing markers which control their migration back to the target tissues where the antigen is found. Lymphocytes migrating back to the GIT express on their surface the  $\alpha4\beta7$  integrin<sup>53</sup> and/or the chemokine receptor CCR9<sup>54</sup>. The ligand for the  $\alpha4\beta7$  heterodimer is the MAdCAM-1 molecule which is expressed by endothelial cells in the LP post-capillary venules of both the small and large bowels<sup>55,56</sup>. On the contrary, the ligand for CCR9 is the CCL25/TECK chemoattractant expressed by small-bowel epithelial cells<sup>57,58</sup>; there is a gradient of expression which is maximal at the proximal end of the small bowel and gradually decreases in the ileum to become undetectable in the colon<sup>59</sup>. Therefore, while  $\alpha4\beta7^+$  lymphocytes have general mucosal tropism, those co-expressing CCR9<sup>+</sup> are specifically directed towards the small intestine, like pro-inflammatory gluten-specific T-cells in CD.

T-cell expression of such homing markers is controlled by DC. Thus, DC not only control the outcome (proinflammatory/toregonic) of the immune responses but also the location of that response via homing marker imprinting on antigen-specific lymphocytes<sup>60</sup>. Prior to stimulation, naïve T-cells express migration markers that lead them to lymphoid tissues<sup>61</sup>. DC entering tissues from the blood gain specificity induced by their tissue of residence. DC within the tissues, particularly after exposure to antigens, will migrate to the draining lymph nodes and deliver a fourth signal to the T-cells as they induce the expression of homing or migration markers on the responding lymphocytes<sup>62-65</sup>. Therefore, antigen specific responding lymphocytes are directed back to the target tissues where the antigens were found so that immune responses are performed in a compartmentalized tissue-specific way. The mechanisms through which DC induce the expression of tissue-specific homing markers on responding T-cells remain elusive but seem

to involve –among other components– fat soluble vitamins like vitamin A and D. The 25-OHD molecule (generated in the skin following the ultraviolet light-dependent activation of vitamin D) induces the expression of skin-homing markers on DC and hence on the T cells they stimulate T-cells<sup>66</sup>. Retinoic acid (RA), which is a metabolite of dietary vitamin A, induces the expression of gut-homing markers  $\alpha4\beta7$  and/or CCR9 on DC which then stimulate T-cells with similar properties<sup>62,65,67,68</sup>. DC from the GIT –but not from other tissues–possess the enzymatic machinery necessary to synthesize RA<sup>69-71</sup> providing the mechanism by which GIT-DC gain gut specificity that will then control the migration of the antigen specific lymphocytes back to the GIT effector compartments<sup>62,65,68</sup>. Moreover, DC themselves also express tissue-specific homing markers which vary according to their location<sup>65</sup>. Circulating myeloid DC from CD patients (both untreated at diagnosis and after clinical remission following gluten-free diet) display an altered expression of migration markers with very high expression of CCR9<sup>72</sup> suggesting an increased small bowel migratory capacity which may correlate with a higher infiltration of DCs in target tissues<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, the mechanisms producing changes in homing capacity of circulating DC are unknown since it is generally accepted that DC normally die within lymph nodes and do not recirculate<sup>73</sup>.

#### **4. Dendritic Cells and Oral Tolerance**

GIT-DC are exposed to a large amount of foreign, but harmless, antigens mainly derived from the commensal bacteria and the food. Therefore, in contrast to DC from other tissues, GIT-DC promote the immune tolerance against such antigens<sup>74-76</sup>.

The lower immunogenic capacity of intestinal DC results from a number of factors. One of them is that GIT-DC have lower expression of PRRs -including TLR molecules-<sup>77</sup> which confers on them a lower capacity to recognize bacterial antigens in such microbiota-rich environment. In addition to decreased TLR expression, GIT-DC also display an immature phenotype as compared with DC

from other tissues; they have lower expression of both HLA-II molecules and surface co-stimulatory molecules, increased phagocytic capacity and higher capacity to produce regulatory cytokines such as IL-10<sup>77-79</sup>. Such a tolerogenic profile confers GIT-DC with a reduced stimulatory capacity when compared with DC from other tissues<sup>65</sup> which is key in preventing inflammatory processes in the absence of invading pathogens. In addition to their decreased stimulatory capacity, GIT-DC also promote the differentiation of both T-cells with antigen-specific regulatory properties and IgA-secreting B-cells which mediate immune tolerance in the GIT<sup>80-84</sup>. Last, but not least, GIT-DC also imprint gut-homing markers ( $\alpha 4\beta 7$  and/or CCR9) on both Ig-A secreting B-cells and regulatory T-cells<sup>81,85</sup> so trafficking of such tolerogenic T-cells and IgA secreting B-cells is restricted to the gastrointestinal compartment. GIT-DC tolerogenic properties are dependent on RA which is essential for intestinal immune tolerance; it is only intestinal DCs (but not DC from other tissues) that possess the enzymatic machinery necessary to convert vitamin A into RA<sup>69-71</sup> and therefore provide the capacity to generate gut-homing regulatory T-cells and IgA-secreting B-cells<sup>81,85-89</sup>. Nevertheless, GIT-also maintains the capacity to trigger an active immune response against invading pathogens. Given that plasticity to maintain immune tolerance against food/commensals while triggering active immune responses against invading pathogens, it has been recently suggested that the GIT contains different DC subsets, each of them being responsible for different outcomes of the immune responses as discussed in the next section.

#### **4.1. DC Subsets in the GIT**

Intestinal DCs were originally classified into two mutually exclusive subsets: tolerogenic (CD103<sup>+</sup>) and proinflammatory (CX3CR1<sup>+</sup>) DC which respectively control immune tolerance against food and commensals or trigger immune responses against invading pathogens respectively<sup>90-92</sup>. Tolerogenic CD103<sup>+</sup>DC, are derived from newly arrived DC, have the capacity to migrate to the lymph nodes in a CCR7 dependent manner, and possess the machinery (enzyme RALDH2) necessary to metabolize vitamin A and generate RA generation which mediates several GIT-DC properties. On the contrary, CX3CR1<sup>+</sup>DC are

derived from newly arrived monocytes and lack both the enzymatic machinery to synthesize RA and the capacity to migrate to the lymph nodes; they would elicit a pro-inflammatory effect against invading pathogens.

#### **4.1.1. *CX3CR1<sup>+</sup> APC***

CX3CR1<sup>+</sup>DC were originally identified as the GIT-DC subset with capacity to send their dendrites through the IEC, establishing tight-junctions with them, and accessing luminal antigens<sup>25</sup>. Although originally defined as DC, CX3CR1 is virtually absent on colonic DC and CX3CR1<sup>+</sup> APC have been recently redefined as M $\phi$ <sup>20,28,93</sup>. Their pro-inflammatory role has also been revisited given their capacity to expand T-cells with regulatory properties on an IL-10 dependent manner<sup>20,94</sup>. Moreover, CX3CR1<sup>+</sup>M $\phi$  also contribute to immune homeostasis given their capacity to extend their projections between the IEC and migrate towards the lumen in the presence of an infection while becoming loaded with bacterial antigens, thus limiting their access the LP<sup>18,95</sup>.

#### **4.1.2. *CD103<sup>+</sup> DC***

Intestinal CD103<sup>+</sup> DC can migrate to the lymph nodes, in a CCR7 dependent manner. Within them, the subset co-expressing CD11b<sup>+</sup> (murine analog of human CD1c, which identifies type 1 myeloid DC) is unique to the gut controlling the immune tolerance mainly via retinaldehyde dehydrogenase type 2 (RALDH-2) required to generate retinoic acid which mediates several GIT-DC properties<sup>28,96,97</sup>.

CD103<sup>+</sup>DC are decreased in the duodenum of CD patients<sup>14</sup> suggesting that they are related with the lack of oral tolerance against dietary gluten in such patients. However, most our knowledge about the tolerogenic GIT CD103<sup>+</sup>DC subset have been obtained from murine models which, although essential to further our understanding on DC biology, may not always be translated into the human context<sup>93,98</sup>. Thus, although a majority of human GIT-DC have a regulatory profile<sup>65,77,78,99</sup> that is not restricted to the CD103<sup>+</sup> population which are not the main DC subset in the human GIT<sup>14,93,100</sup>. RALDH2 expression is

not restricted to human CD103<sup>+</sup> subset as it is also found on CD103<sup>-</sup> DC and even M $\phi$ <sup>100</sup>. Moreover, recent evidence suggests that the system is more dynamic than originally described; “tolerogenic” CD103<sup>+</sup>CD11b<sup>+</sup>DC can also drive pro-inflammatory Th17 responses<sup>28</sup>, CD103<sup>-</sup>DC can also generate RA and migrate to the lymph nodes<sup>101</sup> and, finally, DC subsets and function also depend on the mouse strain and GIT location<sup>102</sup> proving GIT-DC plasticity.

Together, and although different DC subsets may exist in the GIT, it seems that the distinction between different DC subsets with different functions may be an oversimplification; DC properties are dynamic and depend on the surrounding microenvironment in which they are found.

## **4.2. Intestinal DC Plasticity**

Tissue DC express different migration markers which are modulated by the local microenvironment<sup>65,103</sup> as DC acquire tissue-specific migration markers and the capacity to imprint them on lymphocytes they stimulate<sup>62,65,68,104</sup>. However, the tissue microenvironment does not only modulate DC homing marker expression but also their maturation status as innate immune factors induce DC maturation. In the absence of inflammation, GIT-DC acquire a regulatory profile following exposure to various “sedative” signals mainly secreted by the IEC<sup>105-108</sup> including thymic stromal lymphopoietin (TSLP), regulatory cytokines like TGF- $\beta$  and IL-10 and RA<sup>65,81,107,108</sup> (Figure 2). Under such a sedative environment, and in the absence of external immune insults, GIT-DC acquire an immature phenotype characterized by decreased expression of PRR, but also of HLA-Class II molecules, co-stimulatory molecules and also an increased capacity to secrete regulatory cytokines. Given their capacity to metabolize vitamin A and generate RA, GIT-DC in such a calming environment will generate antigen-specific gut-homing T-cells with regulatory function and IgA-secreting B-cells which will in turn promote and maintain the mechanisms of immune tolerance against dietary and commensal antigens.

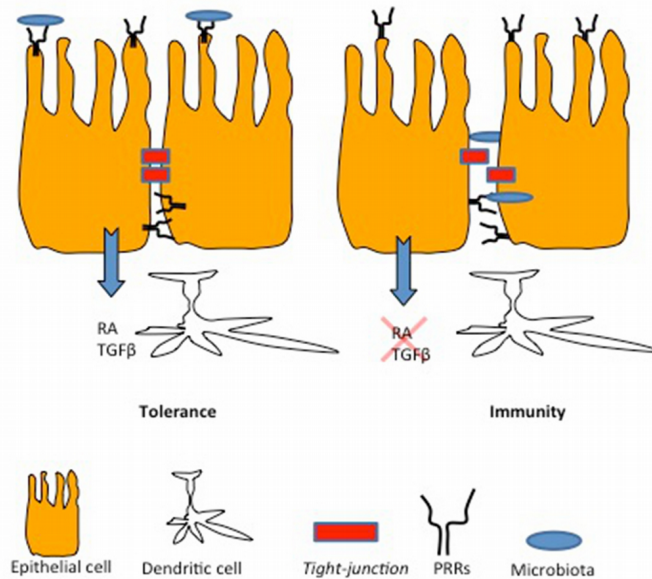


Figure 2. Epithelial cells and dendritic cell crosstalk.

Left: In resting conditions, in healthy controls, intestinal epithelial cells (IEC) recognize microbiota antigens in their apical membrane via pattern recognition receptors (PRR). When that happens, IEC secrete TGF- $\beta$  and retinoic acid (RA) hence modulating lamina propria dendritic cells towards a tolerogenic phenotype.

Right: In the presence of invading bacteria, tight-junction integrity is compromised and pathogens get access through being recognized by PRR located on the basolateral membrane of the IEC. In this setting, IEC block the secretion of inhibitory signals and, conversely, of DC modulation towards tolerance.

The intestinal immune system is, however, dynamic. In the presence of danger signals its regulatory profile disappears as IEC stop secreting “sedative” signals. This is partly due to the fact that IEC can recognize the presence of invading bacteria. IEC are programmed to secrete TGF- $\beta$  and RA when recognizing bacteria in their apical membrane by means of their PRRs; however, in the presence of invading bacteria tight junction integrity is affected so pathogens access through and are recognized by the PRRs located on the basolateral membrane of the IEC<sup>109-112</sup>. In this setting, IEC block the secretion of inhibitory signals and, conversely, of DC modulation towards



tolerance. Furthermore, the presence of an innate immune response against invading bacteria involves the secretion of different pro-inflammatory cytokines and/or oxygen reactive species with the ability to induce DC maturation<sup>47,48</sup>. Under such conditions, DC recognize captured antigens as invading pathogens, blocking immune tolerance and triggering active immune responses (Figure 2). This capacity of DCs to respond rapidly and efficiently to their microenvironment grants them the ability to control the immune system and the balance between immunity and tolerance. Nevertheless, the system is not perfect and factors altering the balance can lead to malfunctioning DC as in CD.

## **5. Dendritic Cells in Celiac Disease**

DC maintain immune homeostasis in the GIT while in CD, they trigger an antigen-specific immune response against dietary gluten. DC themselves are the cell type expressing the HLA-DQ2/8 molecules (the main susceptibility genes in CD), a type of HLA-II molecule unique in their capacity to accommodate gluten antigens and perform antigen presentation. Nevertheless, the reason why gluten is recognized as a harmful antigen by DC remains elusive. Increased expression of TLR molecules on GIT-DC and MyD88 signalling has been reported in some pathologies like IBD<sup>77,113</sup>. Although GIT-DC have not been extensively studied in CD, tissue PRR expression is altered in the celiac mucosa<sup>10,114,115</sup> and gluten antigens are also recognized in a MyD88 dependent manner<sup>116,117</sup> so a potential role of PRR on gluten recognition in CD cannot be discarded.

Another possibility, however, suggests that DC do not recognize gluten as harmful antigen directly but only as a consequence of an innate immune response triggered in the GIT. As discussed in other chapters of this book, gluten antigens have a dual effect on the GIT mucosa of the CD patients as it triggers an innate immune response followed by a secondary antigen specific adaptive immune response. The second is triggered by the DC, which, as previously discussed, fail to recognize gluten as a harmless dietary antigen.

The reason for DC “confusion” could be a consequence of the first non-specific innate immune response. Such innate response<sup>118</sup> is characterized by the production of IL-15 by IEC in a NF-kB dependent manner following gluten recognition<sup>119,120</sup>. IL-15 has a direct effect disrupting the epithelial barrier as it increases tight-junction permeability<sup>121,122</sup> and induces apoptosis of IEC<sup>123-126</sup>. Under such immunological stress, IEC stop secreting their sedative signals (Figure 2). IL-15 also has the capacity to activate DC directly and the DC would then mature towards a pro-inflammatory phenotype (Figure 3). Gluten-induced IL-15 production by IEC is central in the first steps of CD pathogenesis and it also elicits co-adjuvant effects with RA exacerbating inflammatory responses to dietary antigens<sup>127</sup>. Therefore, gluten antigens sampled by DC are recognized as harmful and DC promote the differentiation of gluten-specific gut-homing pro-inflammatory T-cells; once back in the effector tissue (lamina propria) these T- cells will promote development and progression of the disease. DC, are therefore responsible for the incapacity of CD patients to establish immune tolerance against ingested gluten proteins; instead, they cause development of antigen-specific immune response.

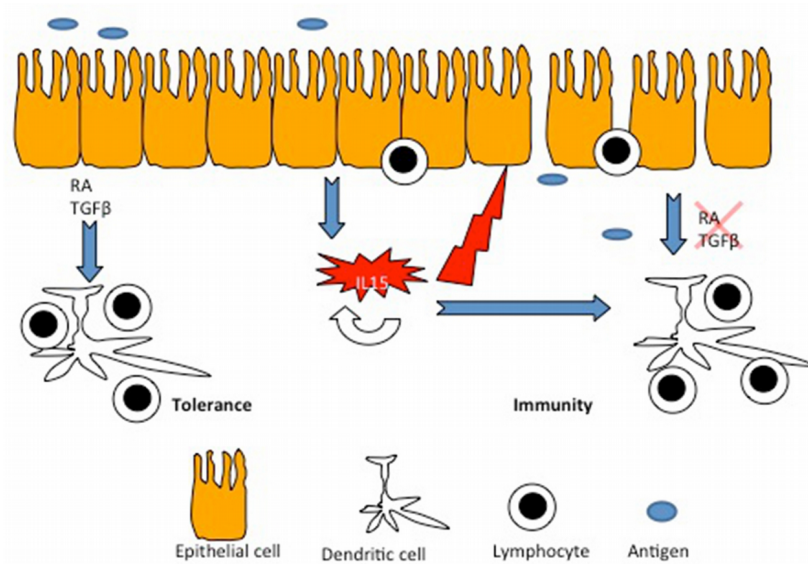


Figure 3. Dendritic cells and celiac disease. In resting condition, in healthy controls, intestinal epithelial cells (IEC) secrete sedative signals, including TGF- $\beta$  and retinoic acid (RA), which modulate lamina propria dendritic cells (DC) towards a tolerogenic phenotype. In celiac disease, dietary gluten antigens induce an innate immune response characterized by IL-15 production by IEC. Pro-inflammatory IL-15 increases tight-junction permeability and induces IEC apoptosis. In such stressful environment, IEC stop the secretion of the sedative signals and therefore of DC modulation towards tolerance. Pro-inflammatory cytokines like IL-15 also have a direct maturation effect on DC. As a consequence, gluten antigens reaching to the lamina propria are now recognized as harmful so DC trigger the development of an antigen-specific immune response and hence the development of celiac disease pathogenesis.

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