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Neutrophil Extracellular Traps (NETs) in Chronic Bacterial Infections: A Double-Edged Sword in Host Defense and Pathogenesis

Ella Mae Roberts, Ethan Joseph White, Lily Ann Hughes, Oliver Thomas Martinez

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ABSTRACT
Neutrophil extracellular traps (NETs) are web-like chromatin structures released by neutrophils in response to bacterial infections. While NETs play a crucial role in trapping and neutralizing pathogens, their persistent presence in chronic bacterial infections can contribute to tissue damage, inflammation, and immune evasion. This article explores the protective and pathogenic roles of NETs in chronic bacterial infections, examining their impact on immune responses, bacterial persistence, and potential therapeutic interventions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Neutrophils serve as the first line of defense against bacterial infections through mechanisms such as phagocytosis, degranulation, and the formation of neutrophil extracellular traps (NETs). NETs, composed of decondensed chromatin and antimicrobial proteins, play a crucial role in trapping and neutralizing pathogens during acute infections. However, in chronic bacterial infections like tuberculosis, cystic fibrosis-associated Pseudomonas aeruginosa infections, and chronic osteomyelitis, NETs can have detrimental effects. Their persistent presence contributes to prolonged inflammation, immune dysregulation, and biofilm formation, which facilitates bacterial persistence and antibiotic resistance. Additionally, excessive NET formation can lead to tissue damage and exacerbate disease pathology. Understanding the dual role of NETs in host defense and chronic disease progression is essential for developing targeted therapies. Future research should explore strategies to modulate NET activity, such as controlled NET inhibition, enzymatic degradation, or immune modulation, to enhance bacterial clearance while minimizing inflammation and tissue damage.

2. NET Formation and Mechanisms of Action

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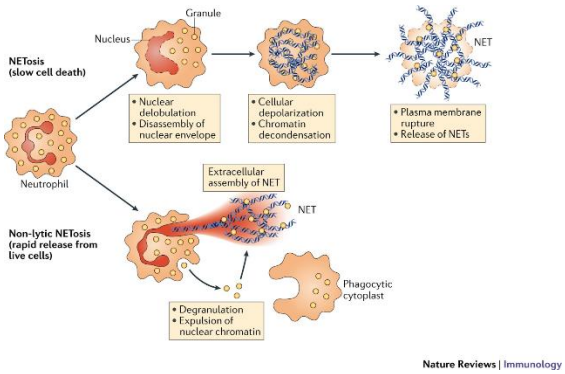

Fig.NET Formation and Mechanisms of Action

NETosis, the process of NET formation, occurs through distinct pathways:

- **Classical (suicidal) NETosis**: Involves NADPH oxidase-dependent pathways leading to neutrophil death.
- **Vital NETosis**: Allows neutrophils to continue functioning post-NET release.
- **Mitochondrial NETosis**: Utilizes mitochondrial DNA rather than nuclear chromatin for trap formation.

Key Components of NETs and Their Roles:

Component	Function
DNA Backbone	Forms structural support for NETs
Histones (H1, H2A, H2B, H3, H4)	Antimicrobial and pro-inflammatory roles
Elastase	Degrades bacterial virulence factors
Myeloperoxidase (MPO)	Enhances oxidative damage to bacteria
Lactoferrin	Sequesters iron to prevent bacterial growth

3. Protective Roles of NETs in Chronic Bacterial Infections

NETs exhibit multiple protective functions, including:

- **Bacterial Trapping and Killing**: NETs physically ensnare bacteria, preventing systemic dissemination. Studies on *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* demonstrate effective bacterial entrapment by NETs (Brinkmann et al., 2018).
- **Synergy with Other Immune Cells**: NETs enhance macrophage and dendritic cell activation, facilitating bacterial clearance (Jorch & Kubes, 2017).
- **Biofilm Inhibition**: NETs disrupt biofilms formed by *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, improving antibiotic penetration (Mulcahy et al., 2018).

4. Pathogenic Roles of NETs in Chronic Bacterial Infections

Despite their antimicrobial properties, persistent NET accumulation in chronic infections leads to adverse effects:

- **Tissue Damage and Inflammation**: NET components, particularly histones, contribute to excessive inflammation and tissue destruction in TB and osteomyelitis (Ramos-Kichik et al., 2009).
- **Bacterial Evasion and Resistance**: Pathogens like *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* develop mechanisms to degrade NETs using nucleases (Dwyer et al., 2014).
- **Promotion of Chronicity**: NETs contribute to a pro-inflammatory microenvironment that sustains bacterial persistence rather than clearance (Boeltz et al., 2019).

Impact of NETs in Chronic Bacterial Diseases:

Chronic Infection	NET Impact
Tuberculosis (*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*)	Excessive NETs exacerbate lung inflammation
Cystic Fibrosis (*Pseudomonas aeruginosa*)	NET accumulation worsens airway obstruction
Osteomyelitis (*Staphylococcus aureus*)	NETs contribute to bone resorption and biofilm protection

5. Therapeutic Implications and Targeting NETs

Given the dual nature of NETs, therapeutic strategies must balance their antimicrobial function while minimizing tissue damage. Potential interventions include:

- **NET Inhibition**: DNase therapy (e.g., recombinant DNase I) has been effective in cystic fibrosis by degrading excess NETs (Papayannopoulos et al., 2017).
- **Enhancing NET Clearance**: Targeting macrophage-mediated NET clearance pathways may reduce inflammation without compromising antimicrobial defense (Pieterse et al., 2016).
- **Modulating Neutrophil Responses**: Drugs like colchicine and metformin, which regulate neutrophil activation, show promise in reducing harmful NET formation (Carestia et al., 2020).

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Neutrophil extracellular traps (NETs) are a crucial yet paradoxical component of the immune response in chronic bacterial infections. While NETs aid in bacterial clearance by trapping and neutralizing pathogens, their persistent accumulation can have detrimental effects. In chronic infections such as tuberculosis, cystic fibrosis-associated Pseudomonas aeruginosa infections, and chronic osteomyelitis, excessive NET formation contributes to sustained inflammation, tissue damage, and bacterial survival within biofilms. This dual role of NETs presents a significant challenge in infection management, as uncontrolled NET activity can

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exacerbate disease progression while insufficient NET formation may compromise immune defense. Understanding the mechanisms regulating NET formation, clearance, and their interactions with bacterial biofilms is essential for developing novel therapeutic strategies. Future research should focus on targeted approaches to modulate NET activity, such as controlled NET degradation, immune modulation, or combination therapies that balance pathogen clearance with reduced tissue inflammation, ultimately improving treatment outcomes for chronic bacterial diseases.

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