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Metabolic pathways in the fate and function of T cells - Evidence review

Dott. A. Colonnese[1]

1 Nutritional Biologist, Italy

1. ABSTRACT

The analyzed study is a narrative review examining how metabolic pathways influence the growth, activation, and differentiation of T cells, which are fundamental components of the immune system. The publication highlights that effector, regulatory, and memory T cells have different metabolic needs and that signals such as mTOR and AMPK contribute to guiding their function.In section 6.3 of “The Choice to Live in Health or Illness” by Dr. A. Colonnese and R. Panzironi, the publication is cited to support the idea that mTOR and AMPK must be modulated with balance, as an effective immune system response requires both attack capabilities and control mechanisms. Independent studies confirm that mTOR influences the choice between effector, regulatory, and memory programs, while AMPK is associated with metabolic programs favorable to regulatory cells. However, the clinical significance of pharmacological modulation depends on the cell type, dosage, timing of intervention, and pathological context. The evidence is therefore solid on a mechanistic level, but does not allow for the definition of a general personalized therapeutic strategy.

ONLINE ARTICLE

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MISSION

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Through articles, reviews, in-depth analyses and expert contributions, the Journal champions evidence-based medicine and science, fostering a correct interpretation of scientific data and countering misinformation. Every piece of content is developed with the aim of translating the complexity of research into understandable, useful and applicable information, while keeping intact the principles of accuracy, transparency and scientific independence.

Free from political, industrial and commercial influence, the journal stands as an authoritative and independent editorial space, dedicated to promoting scientific culture, professional development and the growth of health awareness among the public.

2. ANALYZED STUDY

The question addressed by the publication is how cellular metabolism contributes to determining what T cells will do after activation: fight an infection, limit an excessive response, or preserve immune memory. The hypothesis discussed is that these functions do not depend solely on the signals received by the cells, but also on how they obtain and use energy and materials to grow.The point relevant to the book's section concerns the role of mTOR (a protein that integrates nutrient and growth signals) and AMPK (a protein that detects reduced energy availability). The review describes mTOR as being associated with growth and effector differentiation programs, and AMPK as being linked to more frugal metabolic programs. This helps explain why "The Choice to Live in Health or Illness" by Dr. A. Colonnese and R. Panzironi highlights the need to balance immune activation with tolerance.Since the available material is only the abstract and the publication is a review, it is not a single experiment that causally demonstrates in humans what the best therapeutic balance between mTOR and AMPK is. Its function is to synthesize the biological evidence available at the time and indicate potential opportunities for modulating the immune response.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS OF THE ORIGINAL STUDY

The publication is a narrative review of the scientific literature on the relationship between metabolism and T-cell function. It is not a clinical trial, does not recruit participants, and does not compare patient groups. The available abstract states that the authors discuss the signaling pathways that regulate metabolism and how the metabolic phenotypes of effector, regulatory, memory, and alloreactive T-cells integrate with immune function.The full text is not accessible in the provided material. Consequently, the bibliographic search criteria, the number of selected publications, any inclusion and exclusion criteria, the quality assessment procedures for the studies, and a quantitative synthesis methodology are not reported in the available material. Furthermore, sample sizes, predefined endpoints, statistical analyses, or follow-ups are not reported, as these elements belong to the primary studies potentially discussed in the review and are not described in the abstract.

4. RESULTS

The central finding reported in the abstract is that T-cell metabolism is dynamic and has a significant impact on their ability to grow, activate, and differentiate. In simple terms, cells destined for different immune tasks do not necessarily use the same "fuel" nor do they adopt the same energy strategy.The authors indicate that specific metabolic pathways provide energy and biosynthetic precursors, which are the materials needed to build new cellular components. Effector, regulatory, memory, and alloreactive T cells are described as populations with distinct metabolic needs. The abstract links these profiles to the signals that control metabolism, including those capable of influencing inflammation and autoimmune diseases.The finding most relevant to the passage in the book is not a numerical value, but a biological framework: metabolic differences between T-cell subtypes could offer possibilities for modulating the immune response. The abstract does not report quantitative results, effect sizes, P-values, or clinical comparisons. Therefore, it does not allow for determining which drug, dose, or combination of interventions could make the immune response simultaneously more effective and safer in a specific person.

5. INTERPRETATION

The biological message is that the immune system does not have a single on-off switch. A T cell must adapt its metabolism to the task at hand: expanding rapidly and producing inflammatory molecules, curbing a potentially harmful response, or persisting as a memory cell. mTOR and AMPK participate in this regulation, but they do not act as two independent and universal controls.The segment supported by the publication subject to the Evidence Review is the idea that the metabolic modulation of T cells can influence the balance between effector response, tolerance, and immune memory. Independent studies show that the loss of mTOR signaling hinders the differentiation of effector T helper cells and, under certain experimental conditions, favors regulatory cells [1]. Other experiments have observed that regulatory cells depend more on fatty acid oxidation and exhibit activated AMPK, while Th1, Th2, and Th17 effector

cells show increased glycolysis [2].These data make the book's narrative biologically consistent, but they do not prove that increasing AMPK or reducing mTOR is always desirable. The function of mTOR depends on the T cell population, the phase of the response, and the clinical target. In particular, mTOR inhibition can promote memory programs in infection and vaccination models [3], showing that the same pathway can produce different consequences depending on the context.

6. INDEPENDENT CONFIRMATORY EVIDENCE

Initial direct confirmation of the link between mTOR and the functional choice of T cells comes from a genetic experiment in mice. Delgoffe and colleagues studied T cells lacking mTOR and observed that, while they could initially activate and produce interleukin-2, they failed to differentiate into Th1, Th2, and Th17 effector T helper cells. Under the experimental conditions used, the mTOR-deficient cells tended instead to differentiate into regulatory T cells expressing Foxp3, a regulator of their identity. The study therefore supports the conclusion that mTOR helps promote effector programs and, overall, limits the generation of regulatory programs [1]. This is strong causal evidence at the cellular and murine level, but not a therapeutic demonstration in humans.A second study reconstructed the metabolic side of this same distinction. In cell cultures and mouse models, Michalek and colleagues found that Th1, Th2, and Th17 cells expressed higher levels of the glucose transporter Glut1 and relied heavily on glycolysis, the rapid transformation of glucose into energy. Regulatory T cells, on the other hand, showed greater fatty acid oxidation and activated AMPK. Furthermore, AMPK stimulation reduced Glut1 and increased the generation of regulatory cells in a mouse model of asthma [2]. This is a mechanistic confirmation particularly relevant to the book's premise that different metabolic programs contribute to a more aggressive or a more regulated immune response. However, it remains an experimental model, not proof that fasting or a drug will automatically produce the same effect in every person.The need for balance also emerges from studies on memory T cells. Araki and colleagues observed that rapamycin, an mTOR inhibitor, increased the quantity and quality of CD8 memory T cells after viral infection in mice and improved memory responses even after vaccination in non-human primates. RNA interference experiments linked this effect to the mTORC1 pathway, the mTOR complex involved in growth signals [3]. The result does not contradict the role of mTOR in effector activation: rather, it shows that the effect of reducing its activity varies with the immunological phase, as it can limit certain effector programs while simultaneously promoting long-term memory.

7. CONFLICTING EVIDENCE

No directly conflicting evidence of sufficient relevance has been identified; this does not prove the absence of contrary results. The main limitation of the simplified narrative "mTOR accelerates, AMPK brakes" is that the biological consequence of mTOR modulation changes according to dose, duration, cell population, and immune status.A clinically relevant example comes from a randomized study in elderly volunteers. Mannick and colleagues observed that treatment with everolimus, an mTOR inhibitor, increased the response to the influenza vaccine by approximately 20% compared to the control group at doses considered relatively well-tolerated; furthermore, it decreased the proportion of CD4 and CD8 T cells expressing PD-1, a receptor associated with inhibitory T-cell signals [4]. This finding does not prove that mTOR inhibition always boosts immunity, but it shows that it cannot be described solely as immunosuppressive or solely as harmful to defense against infections and tumors.The discrepancy is therefore primarily contextual: reducing mTOR may attenuate specific effector responses, but at other times it may favor immunological memory or improve certain aspects of the vaccine response. The clinical study focused on immunosenescence, i.e., the age-associated decline in immune function, and does not allow for the results to be transferred to young people, oncology patients, or all autoimmune diseases.

8. QUADRO COMPARATIVO E SINTESI DELLE EVIDENZE

The table distinguishes the publication subject to the Evidence Review from the independent research used to verify the steps of the narrative.

Quadro comparativo

Reference	Study type	Population or model	Main result	Direction of evidence	Strength of evidence
Original study	Narrative review	Literature on metabolism and T cells; full text not available	Describes distinct metabolic needs of effector, regulatory, and memory T cells.	biologically consistent evidence	moderate
[1]	Animal and cellular	Murine T cells with mTOR deletion	The absence of mTOR reduced Th1, Th2, and Th17 differentiation and favored Foxp3-positive cells under specific conditions.	direct confirmation	moderate
[2]	Animal and cellular	Murine CD4 cells and murine asthma model	Effector cells showed increased glycolysis; Tregs showed increased lipid oxidation and activated AMPK.	direct confirmation	moderate
[3]	Animal and cellular	Infected or vaccinated mice and vaccinated non-human primates	Rapamycin increased the quantity and quality of CD8 memory T cells.	biologically consistent evidence	moderate
[4]	RCT	Elderly volunteers	Everolimus increased the response to the flu vaccine by approximately 20%.	discordant evidence	moderate

9. SINTESI EDITORIALE E CONCLUSIONI

CONCLUSIONS

The analyzed publication consistently supports the idea that metabolism and T-cell function are closely linked. Independent evidence confirms that mTOR promotes key effector programs and that AMPK is associated with the metabolic programs of regulatory cells. It is also well-documented that the effect of mTOR inhibition is context-dependent and can promote immune memory. The book's narrative is therefore mechanistically supported, while personalized clinical application requires further validation in specific populations and diseases.

Aggiornato al 25/11/2026. Questo contenuto riflette una sintesi divulgativa delle evidenze scientifiche al momento della pubblicazione e non sostituisce il parere medico.

10. TRANSPARENCY AND SCIENTIFIC RESPONSIBILITY

Artificial Intelligence was used solely as a tool for editorial and documentary support. All content, interpretations, bibliographic citations and conclusions have been verified, reviewed and approved by the author, who assumes full scientific responsibility for them.

The manuscript was also subjected to independent peer review prior to publication.

To ensure the greatest transparency, the complete history of the article, including the dates of submission, revision, acceptance and publication, as well as information on the peer review process, is available on the dedicated Article History page.

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