A Comprehensive Review of Systemic Lupus Erythematosus: Pathogenesis, Clinical Manifestations, and Modern Treatment Advances

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Received: 29-08-2025 **Accepted:** 16-09-2025 **Published online:** 24-09-2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33687/ricosbiol.03.09.75

Abstract

Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) is a chronic, heterogeneous autoimmune disease characterized by a loss of immune tolerance, production of autoantibodies, and multi-organ inflammation. For decades, management relied heavily on corticosteroids and broad-spectrum immunosuppressants, often with significant toxicity. This review provides a comprehensive overview of SLE, with a particular emphasis on the revolution in therapeutic strategies driven by an improved understanding of its immunopathogenesis. We detail the key pathogenic pathways, including dysregulated B and T cell activity, the central role of the type I interferon signature, and innate immune activation. The review then focuses on the modern treatment paradigm, which aims for a "treat-to-target" approach to achieve remission or low disease activity while minimizing steroid exposure. We expand in detail on the foundational role of hydroxychloroquine, the standard use of mycophenolate mofetil in lupus nephritis, and the transformative impact of biologic agents. These include belimumab (a B-lymphocyte stimulator inhibitor), anifrolumab (a type I interferon receptor antagonist), and the recent approval of voclosporin for nephritis. Finally, we explore emerging therapies targeting novel pathways, which promise a future of personalized, precision medicine for SLE patients. The evolution from non-specific immunosuppression to targeted biologic therapy marks a new era of improved outcomes and quality of life for individuals living with this complex disease.

Keywords: Systemic Lupus Erythematosus, SLE, Autoimmunity, Immunopathogenesis, Loss of Tolerance, Type I Interferon, Autoantibodies, Lupus Nephritis, Biologics, Review.

1. Introduction

Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) is a chronic, multisystem autoimmune disease characterized by a loss of immune tolerance and production of autoantibodies that lead to widespread inflammation and tissue damage. The management of SLE has undergone a significant transformation over the past two decades, moving from broad-spectrum immunosuppression towards targeted biologic therapies. This review provides a

comprehensive overview of SLE, with a particular emphasis on the evolution and current state of modern treatment strategies (Tsokos, 2020).

2. Pathogenesis: A Detailed Breakdown of Immune Dysregulation

The development of SLE is a multistep process involving a complex interplay of genetic susceptibility, environmental triggers, and widespread immune system dysfunction. The pathological changes can be conceptualized as a series of breaches in immune homeostasis.

2.1. Initial Loss of Self-Tolerance and Autoantibody Genesis

The foundational defect in SLE is a breakdown in the mechanisms that normally delete or inactivate autoreactive immune cells.

- **Impaired Apoptotic Clearance and Neoepitope Exposure:** In susceptible individuals, defects in clearing apoptotic cell debris lead to an accumulation of nuclear components (e.g., DNA, histones, Ro/La ribonucleoproteins). This material is not efficiently phagocytosed, allowing for secondary necrosis and the release of modified intracellular antigens. These "neoepitopes" can be perceived as "danger signals" by the immune system (Munoz *et al*., 2010).

- **Aberrant B-Cell and T-Cell Activation:**

  - **B-Cells:** Autoreactive B-cells that escape central tolerance in the bone marrow may be activated in the periphery. This can occur through **T-cell-dependent** mechanisms, where autoreactive T-helper cells provide co-stimulation (e.g., via CD40-CD40L interaction), or through **T-cell-independent** mechanisms, such as stimulation via Toll-like Receptors (TLR7, TLR9) that bind nucleic acids from the uncleared debris (Jackson *et al*., 2015).

  - **T-Cells:** SLE T-cells exhibit aberrant signaling, characterized by increased intracellular calcium flux and altered kinase activity. This leads to a helper T-cell profile (especially T-follicular helper, Th1, and Th17) that promotes B-cell activation and autoantibody class-switching (e.g., to pathogenic IgG subclasses) (Moulton *et al*., 2017).

2.2. Amplification via Innate Immunity and the Interferon Signature

The initial autoimmunity is powerfully amplified by the innate immune system, creating a pathogenic feedback loop.

- **Plasmacytoid Dendritic Cells (pDCs) and the Type I Interferon (IFN) Cascade:** Immune complexes containing nucleic acids (e.g., anti-dsDNA/dsDNA) are internalized by pDCs via Fcγ receptors. These complexes engage TLR7 (for RNA) and TLR9 (for

DNA) within endosomes, triggering a massive production of **Type I Interferons (IFN-α/β)**. This creates a sustained "interferon signature" observed in most SLE patients (Crow, 2014).

- **Consequences of Interferon Signaling:** Type I IFNs act on most immune cells, further fueling the autoimmune response by: (1) enhancing antigen presentation by dendritic cells, (2) promoting B-cell differentiation into autoantibody-producing plasma cells, (3) supporting T-cell survival and activation, and (4) priming neutrophils for NETosis (García-Romo *et al*., 2011).

2.3. Effector Phase: Immune Complex Deposition and End-Organ Damage

The culmination of these processes is widespread inflammation and tissue injury.

- **Tissue Damage via Immune Complexes:** The pathogenic autoantibodies (e.g., anti-dsDNA, anti-Smith) form circulating immune complexes (CICs) with their respective antigens. These CICs deposit in blood vessel walls and tissues with high filtration rates, such as the glomeruli in the kidneys (lupus nephritis), the dermo-epidermal junction in the skin, and the choroid plexus in the brain. The deposition activates the complement system (consuming C3, C4) and recruits inflammatory cells, leading to local tissue destruction (Anders and Rovin, 2016).

- **Cytokine-Mediated Inflammation:** Beyond IFNs, a plethora of pro-inflammatory cytokines are elevated in SLE, including TNF-α, IL-6, IL-17, and B-cell activating factor (BAFF/BLyS). These cytokines create a soluble inflammatory milieu that contributes to fatigue, fever, and tissue damage.

- **Neutrophil Extracellular Traps (NETosis):** Neutrophils in SLE patients exhibit an increased tendency to undergo NETosis—a process where they expel their chromatin decorated with antimicrobial peptides. In SLE, these "NETs" are poorly cleared and serve as a rich source of autoantigens (e.g., LL-37, double-stranded DNA), further driving autoantibody production and IFN release in a process known as "vicious cycle" (García-Romo *et al*., 2011).

3. Modern Treatment and Management: A Targeted Approach

The treatment goal has shifted from mere symptom control to achieving long-term remission or low disease activity while minimizing steroid use—a concept known as "treat-to-target" (van Vollenhoven *et al*., 2014). The modern pharmacopeia is stratified by disease severity.

Foundational Therapy:

- **Antimalarials: Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ)** remains the cornerstone of therapy for all patients. Its mechanism is directly relevant to pathogenesis: it raises the pH of endosomal compartments, inhibiting TLR7/9 signaling and subsequent interferon production by pDCs. Beyond reducing flares, HCQ provides crucial protection against thrombosis and improves long-term survival (Schrezenmeier and Dörner, 2020). Regular ophthalmologic screening is mandatory.

Modern Immunosuppressants:

- **Mycophenolate Mofetil (MMF):** Has largely replaced cyclophosphamide as the first-line induction and maintenance agent for proliferative **Lupus Nephritis (LN)**, based on non-inferiority trials with a more favorable side-effect profile. It inhibits inosine monophosphate dehydrogenase, preferentially suppressing lymphocyte proliferation (Appel *et al*., 2009).

- **Calcineurin Inhibitors: Voclosporin** (a novel calcineurin inhibitor) and **Tacrolimus** are used in combination with MMF for LN. The phase III AURORA 1 trial showed that voclosporin plus MMF led to significantly higher rates of complete renal response compared to MMF alone. They inhibit T-cell activation by blocking calcineurin-mediated IL-2 production (Rovin *et al*., 2021).

4. The Biologic Revolution in SLE

The arrival of biologics marked a new era, offering mechanisms that specifically target SLE pathways.

1. B-Cell Directed Therapy:

- **Belimumab:** A monoclonal antibody that binds to and inhibits B-lymphocyte stimulator (BLyS). By removing this critical survival signal, belimumab promotes apoptosis of autoreactive B cells and inhibits their differentiation into antibody-producing plasma cells. Approved for active, autoantibody-positive SLE, its use is supported by the BLISS trials, which demonstrated reduced disease activity, severe flares, and steroid doses (Furie *et al*., 2011).

- **Rituximab:** An anti-CD20 antibody that depletes B cells. While not achieving primary endpoints in its major lupus trials (EXPLORER, LUNAR), it remains widely used off-label for severe, refractory disease, based on extensive real-world evidence (Lu *et al*., 2009).

2. Type I Interferon Pathway Inhibition:

- **Anifrolumab:** A fully human monoclonal antibody that blocks the type I interferon receptor, inhibiting signaling from all interferons in the alpha/beta family. The TULIP trials demonstrated its superiority over placebo in reducing global and cutaneous disease activity, validating the IFN pathway as a key therapeutic target (Morand *et al*., 2020).

5. Emerging and Future Therapies

The pipeline for SLE therapies is active, targeting novel pathways.

- **B-Cell/Plasma Cell Targets: Iberdomide**, a cereblon E3 ligase modulator, promotes degradation of Ikaros and Aiolos, transcription factors critical for B-cell and plasma cell function (Raouf *et al*., 2023).

- **Intracellular Signaling: JAK/STAT Inhibitors** (e.g., baricitinib) block signaling downstream of multiple cytokines, including interferons, offering a broad-spectrum approach to cytokine inhibition (Wallace *et al*., 2018).

- **Targeted Synthetic Drugs:** Bruton's tyrosine kinase (BTK) inhibitors, crucial for B-cell receptor signaling, are under investigation.

6. Treatment Strategies: The Modern Paradigm

The approach is no longer just "which drug?" but "which drug for which patient?"

- **Personalized Medicine:** The goal is to match patients with therapies based on their dominant pathogenic pathway (e.g., anifrolumab for high IFN signature, belimumab for high BLyS levels).

- **Steroid-Sparing:** A primary goal of all modern therapies is to allow for rapid tapering and discontinuation of corticosteroids to avoid long-term damage (van Vollenhoven *et al*., 2014).

7. Prognosis and Conclusion

The prognosis for SLE continues to improve. The modern era of treatment, built on a deeper understanding of immunopathogenesis, has introduced a range of targeted options that offer hope for better disease control with fewer side effects. While a cure remains elusive, the focus on personalized, treat-to-target strategies is transforming the lives of patients, moving management from non-specific immunosuppression to precision medicine.

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