The impact of aflatoxin exposure on infectious disease: immune function, malaria and HIV-AIDS

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Aflatoxin and child health

- Acute liver toxicity
- Liver carcinogenicity
- Growth impairment
- Hepatosplenomegaly
- Immune suppression?
- Increased susceptibility to disease?
- Environmental enteropathy?
## Aflatoxin impairs immune function in animals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Demonstrated in:</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decreased B &amp; T cell activity</td>
<td>Mice</td>
<td>Reddy et al, 1987</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impaired macrophage &amp; neutrophil function</td>
<td>Poultry, mice, pigs</td>
<td>Neldon-Ortiz and Qureshi, 1992; Cusumano et al, 1996;</td>
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<td>Modified synthesis of inflammatory cytokines</td>
<td>Mice, rats, pigs</td>
<td>Jakab et al, 1994; Meissonnier et al, 2008; Qian et al, 2014</td>
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<td>Suppressed NK cell-mediated cytolysis</td>
<td>Mice</td>
<td>Reddy &amp; Sharma, 1989</td>
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<td>Decreased resistance to infectious disease</td>
<td>Poultry, pigs</td>
<td>Hamilton &amp; Harris, 1971; Edds et al, 1973; Wyatt et al, 1975; Joens et al, 1981</td>
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<td>Induced reactivation of chronic infection</td>
<td>Mice, poultry</td>
<td>Venurini et al, 1996; Kubena et al, 2001</td>
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<td>Decreased immunity following vaccination</td>
<td>Poultry, rabbits</td>
<td>Gabal &amp; Azzam, 1998; Gabal &amp; Dimitri, 1998</td>
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<tr>
<td>Results from in vitro studies</td>
<td>Ref.</td>
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<td>NK cell cytolysis impaired</td>
<td>Liu et al, 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Macrophage phagocytosis and production of reactive oxygen species impaired</td>
<td>Liu et al, 2002</td>
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<td>Reduced viability of haematopoietic progenitor cells</td>
<td>Roda et al, 2010</td>
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<td>Anti-inflammatory IL-10 secretion reduced, pro-inflammatory IL-6 secretion increased</td>
<td>Bruneau et al, 2012</td>
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<td>Antigen presentation function of porcine dendritic cells was disrupted by low level aflatoxin treatment</td>
<td>Mehrzad et al, 2014</td>
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<td>T cell proliferation inducing capacity of dendritic cells increased</td>
<td>Mehrzad et al, 2015</td>
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T cell activation and proliferation are critical for cellular immune function

Mechanism of immunotoxicity of aflatoxin in primary porcine splenocytes shown to involve oxidative stress and ERK1/2 MARK signalling pathway


Aflatoxin inhibited proliferation and IL-2 secretion in activated T cells
Inhibition of ERK1/2 or blocking oxidative stress countered these effects
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref</th>
<th>Study design/Population Characteristics</th>
<th>Mycotoxin biomarker</th>
<th>Immune parameter/infectious disease marker</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allen et al. 1992</td>
<td>- Gambia - Cohort - Sample size (n= 323) - Children 3-8 years</td>
<td>Serum aflatoxin albumin adduct</td>
<td>- Malaria – <em>P. falciparum</em> - Antibody titre – asexual stages of <em>P. falciparum</em> - HBV – HBSAg</td>
<td>- Mean AFB1 was higher in children with <em>P. Falciparum</em> parasitaemia (n=102) than children with no parasitaemia (n= 221) <em>P = 0.06</em>. - No significant associations with experience of malaria infection, antibody titre to asexual stages of <em>Plasmodium falciparum</em> or lymphoproliferative responses - AFB1 levels were higher in children who were HbsAg +ve than those who were HbsAg -ve</td>
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<td>Turner et al. 2003</td>
<td>- Gambia - Cohort - Sample size (n=472) - Children 6-9 years (251 male, 221 female)</td>
<td>Serum aflatoxin-albumin adduct</td>
<td>- Secretory IgA in salvia (sIgA) - Cell-mediated immunity (CMI) - Antibody responses to both rabies and pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccines</td>
<td>- AF-alb levels detected in 93% of sample - Children with detectable levels of AF-alb had significantly lower sIgA compared to those with non-detectable AF-alb levels (<em>P &lt;0.0001</em>) - There was no association between CMI responses to test antigens and AF-alb. - Only 1 of the pneumococcal antibody titers was associated with Af-alb (<em>P = 0.05</em>) the rabies antibody titre was not significant.</td>
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<td>Jiang et al. 2005</td>
<td>- Ghana - Cross-sectional - Sample size (n = 64) - Adults 19 to 86 years - (34 males, 30 females)</td>
<td>Plasma aflatoxin-albumin adduct</td>
<td>- Leukocyte immunophenotypes - T cells (CD3+) - subsets of T cells (CD4+ and CD8+) - B cells (CD19+) - NK cells (CD3-CD56+) - macrophages (CD14+)</td>
<td>- AF-alb levels detected in 98% of sample - Participants with high AFB1 levels had significantly lower percentages of CD3+ and CD19+ cells (<em>P = 0.002</em>) and lower percentages of CD8+ T cells (<em>P = 0.012</em>) than participants with low AFB1 levels - Correlation analysis showed that low levels of CD3+CD69+ and CD19+CD69 cells were significantly associated with high AFB1 levels - Similar results observed in a multivariate analysis</td>
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</table>
Turner et al, 2003
High AF-alb } Lower sIgA in children

Test for cell mediated immunity response to antigen challenge showed no difference between high and low AF-alb

Only 1 out of 5 vaccination antibody titre response showed marginal significant difference with AF-alb

Jiang et al 2005
High AF-alb } lower levels activated B and T cells

Also CD8 T cells that express perforin or granzyme were lower in patients with high AF-alb

Could lead to lowered immune response to infectious agents
Malaria

A study in Gambia in 1992 found an association between AF-alb and *Plasmodium* parasitaemia (Allen et al, 1992)

The association between AF-alb and anaemia in pregnant women in Ghana was stronger in women with malaria (Shuaib et al, 2010)

….but no association was found between AF-alb and malaria in Kenya in 2002 (Gong et al, 2012) or Ghana in 2007 (Jolly et al, 2007)
In Makueni, Kenya, high AF-alb was associated with hepatosplenomegaly
HIV

• HIV/AIDS is a huge problem in sub-Saharan Africa
• Aflatoxin induced immune suppression may contribute to HIV/AIDS in three ways:
  – Increased infection
  – More rapid progression of HIV
  – Reduced survivability with AIDS
AF-Alb associated with HIV+ve status

Jiang et al, 2008
HIV+ve

AF-Alb

Treg

Perforin

Jiang et al, 2011
HIV+ve

AF-Alb

Viral load

Keenan et al, 2011

Association between AF-alb and TB infection in HIV+ve patients

AF-alb associated with HIV+ve status
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<td>Jiang et al. 2008</td>
<td>- Ghana - Cross sectional - Sample size (n= 196) - HIV positive: 38.25 ± 9.44 years - HIV negative: 40.77 ± 17.52 years</td>
<td>Plasma aflatoxin-albumin adduct</td>
<td>• T cells (CD3+) • subsets of T cells (CD4+ and CD8+) • T cells phenotypes • B cells (CD19+) • NK cells (CD3-CD56+)</td>
<td>• high AFB1 was associated with lower perforin expression on CD8+ T-cells (P = 0.012) • HIV+ve participants with high AF-ALB had significantly lower percentages of CD4+ T regulatory cells (P = 0.009) and naïve CD4+ T cells (P = 0.029) and reduced percentage of B-cells (P = 0.03) compared to HIV positive with low AF-ALB.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jolly et al. 2011</td>
<td>- Ghana - Cross-sectional - Sample size (n= 314) - Adults (155 HIV-positive and 159 HIV-negative)</td>
<td>Aflatoxin albumin adduct</td>
<td>- Viral load - CD4 count - liver function parameters - HBV, HCV and malaria infection parameters</td>
<td>• Mean AF-ALB level was higher in the HIV+ve group compared with the HIV+ve group (P = 0.01). • HIV+ve participants with high AF-ALB levels (&gt; 0.93 pmol/mg⁻¹ albumin based on group median) showed statistically significant increased odds of having higher HIV viral loads (OR = 2.84; 95% CI = 1.17 – 7.78) and higher direct bilirubin levels (OR = 5.47; 95% CI = 1.03 – 22.85) compared to the HIV+ group with lower AF-alb levels(&lt;0.93 pmol/mg⁻¹). • CD4+ T cell counts did not differ significantly between the high AF-alb and low AF-alb group. • There were non-significant increased odds of being positive for HBV and malaria infection with higher AF-ALB levels.</td>
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<td>Keenan et al. 2011</td>
<td>- Ghana - Longitudinal Cohort - Sample Size (n= 141) - HIV positive adults</td>
<td>Aflatoxin albumin adduct</td>
<td>• CD4+ T- cells • Viral load • Malaria • tuberculosis • HBV • Pneumonia</td>
<td>• Tuberculosis was the only disease with a significant finding with those in the highest AF-ALB quartile having a HR of 3.39 (95% CI 1.15 – 9.98, P = 0.03)</td>
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Epigenetic consequences of early life exposure to Aflatoxin
No differences in gene expression of immune system genes observed in children at 6 months associated with maternal aflatoxin exposure during pregnancy

Some aflatoxin related changes in DNA methylation in immune genes

CCL28  Chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 28
TLR2  Toll-like receptor 2
TGF-β1  Transforming growth factor-β1

*Hernandez-Vargas H et al (2015)*
### Aflatoxin exposure and associated immune function damage in young children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENID trial in Gambia</th>
<th>MORDOR-HG Trial, Malawi</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Nutrient supplementation in pregnancy</em></td>
<td><em>Single dose azithromycin at 6 months, 3 month follow up</em></td>
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<td>Thymus size at 6 &amp; 12 months</td>
<td>Intestinal inflammation (fecal neopterin)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Antibody response to vaccination (Diphtheria, tetanus toxoid, Hib Ab) at 6 &amp; 12 months</td>
<td>Intestinal permeability (dual sugar test)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-natal maturation and homeostasis of CD4 T cells and B cells (Prof David Lewis, Stanford University) at 12 months</td>
<td>Immune activation (antibacterial response PCR)</td>
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Increased expression of immune related genes in AFB$_1$ treated HHL-16 cells
Immune suppression due to aflatoxin

- Aflatoxin causes disruption of the immune response and increases susceptibility to infection in several animal species
- Evidence from in vitro models reveals some of the mechanisms by which this immunotoxicity occurs
- There are currently only a few studies in humans showing an association between aflatoxin exposure and immune suppression
- High AF-alb may facilitate HIV associated immune hyperactivation and lead to more severe disease
- There is a need for further investigations:
  - Varied measures of immune response
  - Larger sample sizes
  - Longitudinal cohort studies
  - Repeat in different populations
  - Other mycotoxins (co-exposure)
Acknowledgements

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