Duration of Antibody Responses after Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

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Among 176 patients who had had severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), SARS-specific antibodies were maintained for an average of 2 years, and significant reduction of immunoglobulin G–positive percentage and titers occurred in the third year. Thus, SARS patients might be susceptible to reinfection >3 years after initial exposure.

Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) represents the first pandemic transmissible disease to emerge in this century. It was caused by a previously unknown coronavirus, the SARS-associated coronavirus (SARS-CoV) (1). SARS-CoV spreads from animals to humans by a rapid adaptation and evolution process (2,3). A large number of closely related viruses are present in wildlife reservoir populations (4–6). Therefore, due to cross-species transmission of the same or a similar coronavirus, SARS could recur. Immune protection against infection with other human coronaviruses, such as OC43 and 229E, is short-lived (7). To assess SARS patients’ risk for future reinfection, we conducted a longitudinal study of immunity in convalescent patients.

The Study

Shanxi Province in China was 1 of the SARS epicenters during the 2002–03 outbreaks. For our study, serum samples were taken from patients in 7 designated SARS hospitals in the province during March–August 2003. Follow-up serum samples were taken at 6 months, 1, 2, and 3 years after the onset of symptoms. A total of 176 cases that met the World Health Organization (WHO) SARS case definition (8) and had known transmission history were in-
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rate of change varied. Both the OD readings (0.93) and positive percentages peaked at 90–120 days; however, the rate of reduction of the average OD readings was much faster, dropping by 22% (0.73) and 40% (0.54) at 1 and 2 years, respectively, after symptom onset (Figure 1).

A similar observation was obtained for IgM trends in this same cohort. The percentage of patients who were IgM positive within the first 7 days was 21.4% and peaked at 76.2% after 21–30 days (Table). The patterns of IgM-positive percentage and average OD readings were similar; both peaked at 21–30 days. After 60 days, the average OD readings dropped to 0.167, close to the cutoff value of 0.160.

Among the cohort of patients with known transmission histories, we were able to obtain a complete collection of serum samples from 18 patients at 6 months, 1, 2, and 3 years. The IgG levels of these 18 patients were analyzed separately to obtain an IgG trend that more accurately represented convalescent SARS patients (Figure 2). All 18 patients had positive IgG at 6 months and at 1 year (i.e., 100% positive); only 1 patient became IgG negative at 2 years. However, at 3 years, the positive percentage dropped to 55.56%. The reduction of OD values mimicked that of the positive percentage, again at a faster rate. The average OD readings dropped from 0.94 at 6 months to 0.64 at 1 year, which represents a reduction of 33.33%. The OD further dropped to 0.52 (45.83% reduction) by 2 years and to 0.25 by 3 years.

Conclusions

To our knowledge, the 3-year follow-up conducted in this study is the longest longitudinal study ever reported. With a large number of patients who had confirmed transmission history (176) and a complete dataset for 18, the level of confidence is high that the results obtained in this study are representative for convalescent SARS patients. Similar results have been reported from longitudinal studies of SARS patients with smaller cohort size (18–98 patients) and shorter follow-up period (240 days to 2 years) (9–14). The general trend of IgM peaking at ≈1 month after symptom onset and IgG peaking at 2–4 months was consistent among different studies.

Our results provide strong evidence that SARS-CoV antibodies are reduced ≥3 years after the symptom onset. Because antibodies play an important role in protective immunity, these findings have important public health implications for SARS vaccine development, SARS-CoV surveillance, and vaccination strategy.

Table. Cumulative rates of SARS-CoV antibodies among 176 SARS patients with known transmission histories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time after symptom onset, d</th>
<th>IgG</th>
<th></th>
<th>IgM†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. samples tested</td>
<td>No. positive samples (%)</td>
<td>Average OD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2 (11.76)</td>
<td>0.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8–14</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10 (38.46)</td>
<td>0.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17 (77.27)</td>
<td>0.351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33 (91.67)</td>
<td>0.493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–60</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>67 (93.06)</td>
<td>0.627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61–90</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33 (94.29)</td>
<td>0.745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91–120</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11 (100.00)</td>
<td>0.965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121–210</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23 (100.00)</td>
<td>0.932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>211–365</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>46 (93.88)</td>
<td>0.734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>366–763</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>86 (89.58)</td>
<td>0.535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>764–1,265</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15 (53.57)</td>
<td>0.250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SARS-CoV, severe acute respiratory syndrome–associated coronavirus; Ig, immunoglobulin; OD, optical density; ND, not determined because for most samples the IgM readings already reached background level on day 90.
†For some patients, we did not have enough serum to test for IgM after testing for IgG; hence, a smaller number of serum samples were tested for IgM than for IgG.

Figure 1. Change of immunoglobulin G (IgG) patterns among 176 convalescent severe acute respiratory syndrome patients with known transmission history. See the Table for number of samples used for the calculation at each time point. OD, optical density.

Figure 2. Change of immunoglobulin G (IgG) patterns among 18 convalescent severe acute respiratory syndrome patients with known transmission history. OD, optical density.
immunity against SARS-CoV (15), the findings from this study will have important implications with regard to assessing risk for reinfection among previously exposed populations (e.g., hospital staff) and evaluating the duration of antibody-mediated immunity that any candidate vaccine could provide.

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References


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