To the Editor: In their recent article, Scammell and colleagues (5) discuss afferent signals that drive preoptic prostaglandin E2 synthesis and fever after intravenous injection of lipopolysaccharide (LPS). The authors examine the concept of these signals being carried to the brain by the vagus nerve and take a closer look at afferent signals to the brain. These observations indicate that prostaglandin synthesis in the anteroventral preoptic region is necessary for the production of fever.

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To the Editor: In our recent article (9), we described the attenuation of lipopolysaccharide (LPS) fever by inhibition of prostaglandin synthesis in the preoptic area. We and others have proposed that LPS and circulating cytokines may activate perivascular and meningeal cells, which then release prostaglandin E2 into the preoptic area to initiate fever. As a small point in our discussion, we suggested that febrile unresponsiveness to LPS after vagotomy could be due to the development of tolerance to LPS. Specifically, bacterial translocation can occur after gastric or truncal vagotomies (2) and an increased portal bacterial load could produce LPS tolerance. Romanovsky presents well-reasoned arguments against this idea and in support of the vagal hypothesis, but we feel this perspective cannot account for many observations.

Romanovsky argues that LPS tolerance results in attenuation of the second phase of fever but has little effect on the first phase. This phenomenon has been shown in several studies in which animals were treated with LPS for several days, but we are unaware of any in which a low dose of LPS or bacteria was administered over several weeks, modeling the tolerance that may occur with vagotomy. Direct evidence such as measurements of portal LPS, Kupffer cell reactivity, and cytokine concentrations and bioactivity after vagotomy may help clarify this important concern.

The strongest evidence in support of the vagal hypothesis is Simons and colleagues (10) recent study that demonstrated an attenuation of fever to a very low dose of intravenous LPS (1 µg/kg) after hepatic but not celiac or gastric vagotomy. The authors effectively demonstrate that the hepatic branch of the vagus nerve accounts for much of the effect of subdiaphragmatic vagotomy. Still, it is important to point out that after LPS these hepatic vagotomy rats had persistently higher rectal temperatures than the vehicle controls. Restraint stress can increase portal concentrations of LPS and interleukin-6 (11), and it is possible that subtle stress fevers could be masking small LPS fevers. More importantly, these researchers have shown that slightly higher doses of LPS (10 µg/kg iv) produce normal fevers in vagotomized rats (8), indicating the existence of other, nonvagal signaling pathways.

Several lines of evidence suggest an important signaling role for barrier cells at the blood-brain interface. Low doses of systemic LPS or interleukin-1 induce production of interleukin-1 and cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) on central nervous system (CNS) endothelial cells, perivascular microglia, and meningeal macrophages, indicating that these cells can respond to blood-borne pyrogens (1, 3, 7). In addition, LPS-induced activation of autonomic regulatory neurons as indicated by expression of c-Fos and corticotropin-releasing factor (CRF) is not blocked by vagotomy (5).

As we, Romanovsky, and others have previously suggested (4, 6, 8), pyrogens may signal the brain through multiple routes, depending on the site and intensity of inflammation. It is possible that the hepatic branch of the vagus may be one of the most sensitive signaling pathways. However, LPS-induced COX-2 expression in CNS barrier cells and the persistence of c-Fos and CRF after vagotomy indicates that nonvagal, vascular pathways also play an essential role in the febrile response. Future experiments may help clarify the relative contributions and interactions of these vagal and vascular mechanisms.

REFERENCES


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