Several studies document that patients with rheumatoid arthri-
tis (RA) have an increased risk of developing non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. There are likely multiple factors that contribute
to this increased risk, including disease activity and the use of immunosuppressive drugs. Recently, reports have linked
development of lymphoma in patients with RA taking methotrexate (MTX) with the ubiquitous transforming herpes
virus, Epstein-Barr virus (EBV). Although not all lymphomas
developing in patients with RA involve EBV or MTX, a relation-
ship between EBV, MTX, and development of lymphoma
in some patients appears highly probable.

Evidence linking MTX, EBV, and development of lymphomas in patients with RA takes 3 forms: multiple case
reports of the presence of EBV RNA within lymphoma cells, regression of the lymphoma after stopping MTX, and the bi-
ological plausibility of the association, reflecting the well rec-
ognized relationship between EBV induced lymphoprolifer-
tive disorders in other states of chronic immunosuppression.

To date, more than 50 cases of lymphoma occurring in patients with RA taking MTX have been reported. EBV RNA
can be found in pathologic tissue using in situ hybridization in
these tumors. In some cases, support for the role of EBV in the emergence of the malignancy has been observation of mono-
clonal EBV genomic material in the lymphoma tissue.

Importantly, MTX withdrawal has resulted in regression of the EBV positive lymphomas in multiple patients.

Immunosuppressed patients have an increased risk of developing a B cell lymphoproliferative disorder that involves EBV. Patients undergoing various forms of solid organ
transplants are at particular risk for this complication, es-
specially if the immunosuppression is highly T cell selective. In addition to posttransplant patients, patients with immunodefi-
ciency that is congenital, acquired, or iatrogenically induced
also have a significantly higher risk of acquiring similar EBV
induced lymphoproliferative disorders. Nearly 90% of post-
transplant lymphoproliferative disorders are associated with
EBV. The common theme in these disorders is impaired T cell immunity that results in loss of control against prolifera-
tion of EBV infected B cells. The progression from poly-
clonal lymphoproliferation induced by EBV to monoclonal malignancy is complex. In some of these patients, regression
of EBV associated lymphomas occurs when immunosuppres-
sion is stopped, suggesting that at some stages these tumors
are under immunomodulatory control. The presence of BCL-
6 gene mutations predicts shorter survival and refractoriness to reduced immunosuppression, and may be a useful clinical
marker to determine whether reduction in immunosuppression
should be attempted or more aggressive therapy should be instituted.

Patients with RA are known to have a defect in EBV direct-
ed suppressor T cell function. Whether weekly low dose
MTX in RA augments this defect in suppressor T cell function
has not been established, although opportunistic infections are
clearly associated with MTX use.

Thus, there is compelling evidence for an association
between MTX, EBV, and development of lymphoma in some
patients with RA. Combining two recent series of 44 non-
Hodgkin’s lymphomas occurring in MTX treated patients
with RA, 13 (30%) had EBV RNA. However, it is also clear that the development of such lymphomas is uncommon.

What is the incidence of MTX associated lymphoma in RA?
First, no studies describe an increased risk of developing lymph-
oma in RA associated with MTX use. Moder et al found 39 hematologic malignancies in a cohort of 16,263 patients with
RA. No increase in lymphoma was observed in patients taking
MTX. Beauparlant et al reviewed studies showing an association between cancer and RA, but found none that
showed MTX increases the risk. Second, there is general
acceptance that MTX is not oncogenic. The lack of reports
of increased lymphoma risk in psoriasis treated with MTX
supports this view.

As noted, however, several studies show an increased
background risk of lymphoma in RA, which confounds the
analysis of the MTX associated risk. Of particular note are
two recent studies that indicate the risk of lymphoma in RA is
related to disease activity or extraarticular manifestations.
Baeklund et al did a case control study of all RA patients
admitted to the hospital between 1965 and 1983 in Upsala,
Sweden. Few of these patients received immunosuppres-
sives. Forty-two cases of lymphoma in the 11,683 patients
were identified. Each patient was matched to controls and the
data were analyzed in relation to inflammatory activity of RA.

Strikingly, the risk of lymphoma increased as the inflammatory
activity increased. Patients judged to have high levels of
inflammatory activity had an odds ratio of over 25 of devel-
oping lymphoma. In a study of US veteran men with Felty’s
syndrome, considered to be an extraarticular complication
reflecting active RA, Gridley et al found that patients with

Editorial

Rheumatoid Arthritis, Methotrexate, and Lymphoma: Risk Substitution, or Cat and Mouse with Epstein-Barr Virus?
Felty’s syndrome had a nearly 12-fold increased risk of developing lymphoma compared to RA patients without Felty’s. These findings are consistent with the notion that several chronic infectious and inflammatory diseases increase the risk of B cell lymphomas.

Thus, active RA itself may contribute to an increased risk of developing lymphoma. However, EBV appears not to play a role in such lymphomas. Kamel, et al found that in a population based case control study of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma in patients with RA, only one of 42 lymphomas was EBV positive. Since few of these patients were receiving immunosuppressive therapy, it seems likely that EBV induced lymphoproliferation represents a minority of lymphomas in the general RA population. It is possible that MTX or other immunosuppressive drugs, by reducing disease activity of RA, actually decreases the risk of lymphoma, but that in some cases, development of an EBV associated lymphoproliferative disorder is an unfortunate result. This hypothesis could be supported by studies of lymphomas developing in RA patients that determine the presence of EBV in lymphoma tissue and the relationship to MTX treatment and disease activity.

What are the implications for patients with RA? First, there appears to be a risk of “doing nothing.” Patients with active RA appear to have an increased risk of developing lymphoma. It is likely that treatment with MTX could reduce this risk by effectively treating RA. Although the risk of developing lymphoma while taking MTX appears to be low, we need to inform our patients that a number of lymphomas have been reported and that it is uncertain whether there is an increase in the incidence of lymphoma after MTX treatment. Indeed, the package insert for MTX has this warning. Second, in those patients who develop lymphoma, it seems reasonable to determine the EBV status of the lymphoma and to halt MTX therapy and observe for a period of several weeks before beginning cytotoxic chemotherapy or radiation therapy in EBV positive patients, since these lymphomas may regress after discontinuation of MTX. Finally, in patients whose lymphoma progresses in spite of stopping MTX, consideration should be given to treating those positive for EBV with the anti-CD-20 monoclonal antibody, rituximab.

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Supported by the Research Service of the Department of Veterans Affairs. I am grateful for the helpful review by Dr. William H. Schubach, Chief of Oncology, VA Puget Sound Health Care System.

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