

Diagnostic Value of Anti-Nucleosome Antibodies in the Assessment of Disease Activity of Systemic Lupus Erythematosus: A Prospective Study Comparing Anti-Nucleosome with Anti-dsDNA Antibodies

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ABSTRACT. *Objective.* To determine the diagnostic value of anti-nucleosome antibodies in the assessment of clinically active systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) and active nephritis.

Methods. A 12 month prospective study of 87 patients diagnosed with SLE. At each evaluation, disease activity was scored by SLE Disease Activity Index and Lupus Activity Criteria Count, and blood samples were collected for laboratory tests. Autoantibodies were detected by ELISA.

Results. Nearly all patients were female (96.6%). The mean age was 33 years and the mean disease duration was 60.7 months. About half the patients presented with nephritis (49.4%) and active SLE (50.6%) at the first clinical examination. During the study period, the prevalence of active SLE decreased from 50.6% to 29.1%. The prevalence of anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies was 40.0%–58.6% and 10.9%–21.8%, respectively, throughout the study period. The sensitivity of anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies for active SLE was 72.7%–100% and 31.3%–54.8%, respectively. The specificity of anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies for active SLE was 66.7%–83.7% and 88.7%–100%, respectively. The sensitivity and specificity of anti-nucleosome antibodies for active nephritis were 32.0%–67.5% and 46.2%–67.3%, respectively. The sensitivity and specificity for anti-dsDNA antibodies for active nephritis were 16.0%–35.4% and 85.1–97.5%, respectively.

Conclusion. Anti-nucleosome antibodies are more sensitive than anti-dsDNA antibodies to active SLE and active nephritis. Thus, anti-nucleosome antibody reactivity may be a useful marker in the diagnosis and assessment of active SLE. (First Release June 15 2006; J Rheumatol 2006;33:1538–44)

Key Indexing Terms:

ANTI-NUCLEOSOME ANTIBODIES ANTI-dsDNA ANTIBODIES LUPUS NEPHRITIS
SYSTEMIC LUPUS ERYTHEMATOSUS DISEASE ACTIVITY

Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) is an autoimmune disease characterized by the production of a large array of autoantibodies against antigens located in the cytoplasm, nucleus, and surface of the cell. There is abundant evidence for triggering of the immune response in SLE by autoantigens and for its dependence on T cells¹⁻³. Double-stranded DNA (dsDNA), although previously believed to be the most important autoantigen in the pathogenesis of SLE and lupus nephri-

tis⁴, has been shown to possess relatively few immunological properties⁵.

Recent studies have shed new light on the pathogenesis of SLE and lupus nephritis by identifying the nucleosome as the autoantigen responsible for the generation of a number of anti-nuclear antibodies⁶⁻⁹. Studies using murine lupus models have identified nucleosome-specific T cells capable of driving the production of nucleosome-specific autoantibodies along with anti-dsDNA and anti-histone antibodies¹⁰. Nucleosome-specific antibodies appear earlier than anti-dsDNA and anti-histone antibodies, suggesting that the loss of tolerance to nucleosomal components may be the initial key event of SLE^{11,12}. Indeed, nucleosome-bound anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies have been observed in the renal glomerulus of rats. The cationic portion of the histone attached to the nucleosome binds to the anionic portion of heparan sulfate in the glomerular basement membrane¹³⁻¹⁵.

Apoptotic defects and impaired apoptotic cell clearance may lead to an overload of autoantigens (DNA, histones, and nucleoprotein complex), particularly of the nucleosomes driving the production of autoantibodies in SLE¹⁶.

The use of the nucleosomes as substrate in immunoenzym-

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Accepted for publication March 23, 2006.

matic tests (ELISA) has made detection of anti-nucleosome antibodies possible and is likely to shed more light on the pathogenesis of SLE and on the relevance of anti-nucleosome antibodies to clinical practice. To date few cross-sectional studies have been published surveying the prevalence of anti-nucleosome antibodies in human SLE¹⁷⁻²⁰.

We prospectively evaluated the diagnostic value of anti-nucleosome antibodies as markers of active SLE and active nephritis, compared to anti-dsDNA antibodies, during a 12 month period.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study population consisted of Brazilian patients referred to a university hospital (HUWC, Fortaleza, Ceará) between April 1999 and February 2001 and diagnosed with SLE according to the criteria of the American College of Rheumatology^{21,22}. All patients gave their written informed consent before enrolling in the study.

Patients were followed at the outpatient facility for 12 months and evaluated every 4–6 weeks. Blood and urine samples were collected at each encounter and submitted for blood cell count, dosage of serum urea, creatinine, albumin, C3 and C4, urinary sediment, and 24-hour proteinuria at the university hospital laboratory. After centrifugation, sera were stored in Eppendorf tubes at -80°C for assessment of anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies at the laboratory of the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM), Hôpital Necker, Paris, France. Nephritis was diagnosed for samples with a 24-hour proteinuria > 500 mg/dl associated with hematuria (≥ 5 erythrocytes/high power field), leukocyturia (≥ 5 leukocytes/high power field), and/or cylindruria.

SLE activity was assessed at each encounter using the Lupus Activity Criteria Count (LACC)²³ and the SLE Disease Activity Index (SLEDAI)²⁴. The former was used to calculate the diagnostic properties of autoantibodies in active SLE. Patients were classified in 4 groups according to the number of episodes of disease activity during the study period: e.g., no activity, mild activity (1–2 episodes), moderate activity (3–5 episodes), and severe activity (≥ 6 episodes).

Antigens. Nucleosome core particles (H1-stripped) were prepared as described, with slight modifications²⁵. Briefly, nucleosomes were isolated by digesting chromatin from mouse erythroleukemia L 1210 cell nuclei with *Staphylococcus aureus* nuclease. H1 and nonhistone proteins were stripped from the soluble chromatin by adding 5 M NaCl dropwise (0.55 M final concentration), at 0°C . Samples of the stripped chromatin [a maximum of 200 optical density units at 260 nm (OD_{260}), corresponding to 50 mg DNA] were fractionated on a Sepharose 6B gel filtration column equilibrated in 10 mM Tris, 1 mM EDTA, pH 7.4 (TE), 0.55 M NaCl, and 0.2 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride (PMSF), at a flow rate of 7 ml/h. Nucleosome fractions were collected by spectrophotometry after determination of the OD_{260} . Polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis was used to examine core particle samples for the presence of contaminant nucleoprotein species and for free DNA²⁶. Fractions corresponding to pure mononucleosomes (that eluted at ~ 270 – 300 ml) were dialyzed extensively against TE and 0.2 mM PMSF, concentrated on PM-30 filters (Amicon, Lexington, MA, USA), and stored on ice at 1–1.5 mg/ml. Analysis by sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis showed the presence of the core made up of the 4 histones in equimolar amounts, indicating that this preparation yielded “intact” mononucleosome core particles^{26,27}.

Lambda phage dsDNA was purchased from Boehringer (Mannheim, Germany).

Determination of anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibody reactivities. Antibody determination was conducted by one of the authors (SK), who was blinded to all clinical information. Autoantibody reactivity was assessed by ELISA, based on the method developed by Burlingame and Rubin²⁸ and as described^{12,25}. Briefly, antigen-coated plates ($5 \mu\text{g/ml}$ for each antigen) were

washed with phosphate buffered saline-0.1% Tween, pH 7.4 (PBST), and postcoated for 2 h with 0.1 ml of PBS-10% fetal calf serum (FCS). Sera to be tested (diluted 1:100 in PBST-10% FCS) were added to the plates and then allowed to react for 2 h. Bound IgG antibodies were detected with peroxidase-conjugated goat anti- γ or anti- μ sera added to plates for 1 h. Binding was measured by adding ABTS substrate solution (Boehringer), and OD was read at 405 nm. Appropriate positive and negative controls were included in each plate. Uncoated plates were used to determine background activity, which was subtracted from the OD obtained with coated plates.

Cutoff for discriminating anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA reactivity. To determine cutoff values for anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies, antibody reactivity was determined as described above in serum samples obtained from a control group of 26 Brazilian volunteer blood donors. The cutoff value was established as the mean value of the group plus 3 standard deviations. Samples were considered to be positive for anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies at optic density values > 0.167 and > 0.195 , respectively.

Statistical analysis. Sensitivity and specificity were determined for active SLE and active nephritis. The McNemar test was performed to analyze paired data measured on a nominal scale. Pearson's coefficient was used to investigate the correlation between the 2 criteria of active SLE. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Microsoft Excel and SPSS 8.0 for Windows were used for data storage and analysis.

RESULTS

The study cohort included 87 patients examined 8–12 times at an outpatient facility throughout a period of 12 months. The group consisted of 84 women (96.6%) and 3 men (3.4%). The mean age was 33.0 ± 10.9 years, and 65.5% of the patients were non-Caucasian. Mean disease duration was 60.7 ± 66.2 months.

The main clinical manifestations of SLE observed at baseline included arthritis (69%), photosensitivity (63.2%), skin lesions (59.8%), and nephritis (49.4%). When applying the LACC criteria, about half the patients ($n = 44$) were found to have active SLE at baseline. This figure decreased to 29.1% by the end of the study period (Figure 1A). When disease activity was quantified by SLEDAI, the mean score fell from 8.22 ± 8.28 at baseline to 4.69 ± 5.28 by the end of the study period. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the 2 sets of criteria ranged from 65.5% to 86.5% and was $> 70\%$ in 11 of 12 evaluations. Mean findings for hemoglobin, serum albumin, 24-h proteinuria, and prevalence of hypocomplementemia (C3) during the 12 month study period are presented in Figures 1B–1E.

The treatment consisted of an initial endovenous administration of 0.75 g/m^2 of cyclophosphamide, followed by monthly doses of 1.0 g/m^2 during 6 months, then quarterly doses until completing 2 years. Azathioprine was administered orally to maintain remission, at a dose of 2 mg/day. Mycophenolate mofetil was administered to only one patient, at a dose of 1 g/day. Prednisone was administered at a daily dose of 5–60 mg/day.

The prevalence of anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies ranged from 40.0% to 58.6% and from 10.9% to 21.8%, respectively, throughout the study period (Table 1). Anti-nucleosome antibodies were most prevalent at the fifth evaluation, with a tendency to gradually decrease over time,

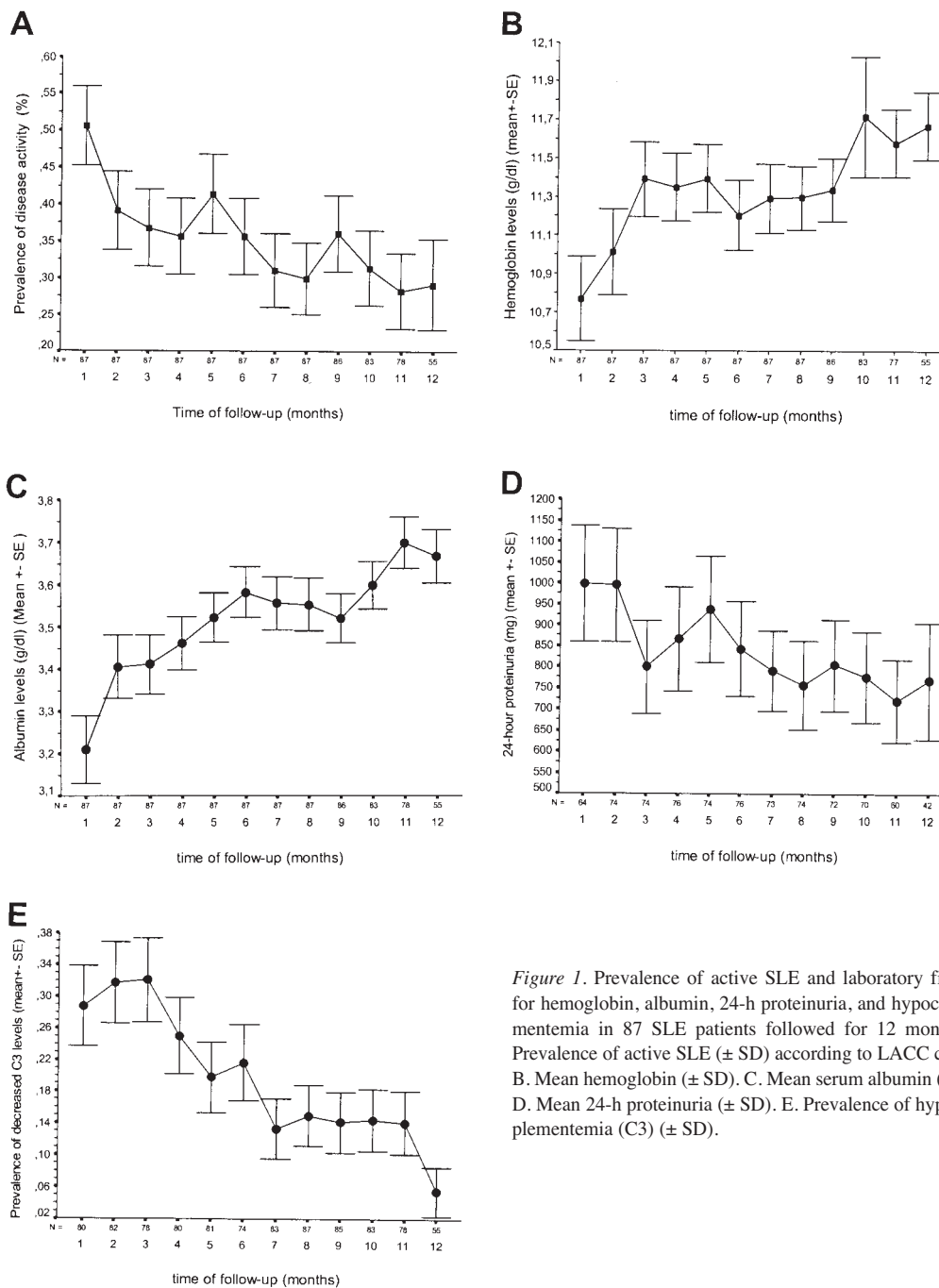


Figure 1. Prevalence of active SLE and laboratory findings for hemoglobin, albumin, 24-h proteinuria, and hypocomplementemia in 87 SLE patients followed for 12 months. A. Prevalence of active SLE (\pm SD) according to LACC criteria. B. Mean hemoglobin (\pm SD). C. Mean serum albumin (\pm SD). D. Mean 24-h proteinuria (\pm SD). E. Prevalence of hypocomplementemia (C3) (\pm SD).

reaching the lowest levels by the 11th and 12th month. Anti-dsDNA antibodies were most prevalent at the first 2 evaluations (21.8%) and decreased fairly steadily afterwards.

During the 12 month study period, the sensitivity of antibodies to active SLE ranged from 72.7% to 100% for anti-nucleosome antibodies and from 31.3% to 54.8% for anti-dsDNA antibodies. The specificity of antibodies to active SLE ranged from 66.7% to 83.7% for anti-nucleosome antibodies and from 88.7% to 100% for anti-dsDNA antibodies (Table 2). The corresponding values for active nephritis are shown in

Table 3. The sensitivity and specificity of anti-nucleosome antibodies to active nephritis ranged from 32.0% to 67.5% and from 46.2% to 67.3%, respectively. The sensitivity and specificity for anti-dsDNA antibodies to active nephritis varied from 16.0% to 35.4% and from 85.1% to 97.5%, respectively.

When patients were classified according to the number of episodes of disease activity throughout the study period, the following distribution was observed: no activity, 22 patients (25.3%); mild activity, 16 patients (18.4%); moderate activity, 23 patients (26.4%); and severe activity, 26 patients (29.9%).

Table 1. Prevalence of anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies in patients with SLE during a 12 month observation period.

Month	No. of Patients	Prevalence of Anti-nucleosome, % (95% CI)	Prevalence of Anti-dsDNA, % (95% CI)
1	87	44.8 (34.2–55.5)	21.8 (13.0–30.7)
2	87	50.6 (39.9–61.3)	21.8 (13.0–30.7)
3	87	44.8 (34.2–55.5)	18.4 (10.1–26.7)
4	87	51.7 (41.0–62.4)	16.1 (8.2–24.0)
5	87	58.6 (48.1–69.2)	20.7 (12.0–29.4)
6	87	52.9 (42.2–63.6)	20.7 (12.0–29.4)
7	87	54.0 (43.3–64.7)	18.4 (10.1–26.7)
8	87	49.4 (38.7–60.1)	12.6 (5.5–19.8)
9	86	51.2 (40.4–61.9)	16.3 (8.3–24.2)
10	83	47.0 (36.0–58.0)	16.9 (8.6–25.1)
11	78	40.0 (28.6–50.9)	13.0 (5.2–20.4)
12	55	40.0 (26.6–53.4)	10.9 (2.4–19.4)

Table 2. Specificity and sensitivity of anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies for active SLE during a 12 month observation period.

Evaluation	Antibody	Specificity, % (95% CI)	Sensitivity, % (95% CI)
1	Nucleosome	83.7 (72.2–95.2)	72.7 (59.0–86.4)
	DNA	100	43.2 (27.9–58.4)
2	Nucleosome	67.9 (54.9–80.9)	79.4 (65.1–93.7)
	DNA	88.7 (79.9–97.5)	38.2 (21.0–55.4)
3	Nucleosome	74.5 (62.7–86.4)	78.1 (63.0–93.3)
	DNA	89.1 (80.6–97.6)	31.3 (14.3–48.2)
4	Nucleosome	67.9 (55.2–80.5)	87.1 (74.6–99.6)
	DNA	98.2 (94.6–100.0)	41.9 (23.5–60.3)
5	Nucleosome	66.7 (53.3–80.1)	94.4 (86.6–100)
	DNA	98.0 (94.1–100)	47.2 (30.1–64.4)
6	Nucleosome	71.4 (59.2–83.6)	96.8 (90.2–100)
	DNA	98.2 (94.6–100)	54.8 (36.3–73.4)
7	Nucleosome	66.7 (54.4–78.9)	100
	DNA	96.7 (92.0–100)	51.9 (31.7–72.0)
8	Nucleosome	68.9 (56.9–80.8)	92.3 (81.3–100)
	DNA	98.4 (95.1–100)	38.5 (18.4–58.5)
9	Nucleosome	72.7 (60.6–84.9)	93.5 (84.4–100)
	DNA	96.4 (91.3–100)	38.7 (20.5–56.9)
10	Nucleosome	73.7 (61.9–85.5)	92.3 (81.3–100)
	DNA	94.7 (88.8–100)	42.3 (22.0–62.7)
11	Nucleosome	80.4 (69.6–91.1)	90.9 (77.9–100)
	DNA	100	45.5 (22.9–68.1)
12	Nucleosome	79.5 (66.2–92.7)	87.5 (69.3–100)
	DNA	100	37.5 (10.9–64.1)

The average findings for anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies by level of SLE activity are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

DISCUSSION

This is the first clinical study to report sequential measurements of anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibody concentrations in patients with SLE. Patients were followed prospectively for 12 months and tested for anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies by ELISA 8–12 times at an outpatient facility.

Disease activity was observed in 50.6% of patients at baseline, but decreased to 29.1% by the end of the study period, possibly due to improved clinical control of SLE through more frequent medical consultations. Other laboratory findings suggest significant improvements, with a tendency toward increased hematocrit, hemoglobin, and serum albumin levels, and decreased occurrence of hypocomplementemia, reflecting improved disease control.

In our study anti-nucleosome antibodies were more preva-

Table 3. Specificity and sensitivity of anti-nucleosome and anti-dsDNA antibodies for active lupus nephritis during a 12 month observation period.

Evaluation	Antibody	Specificity, % (95% CI)	Sensitivity, % (95% CI)
1	Nucleosome	59.1 (44.4–73.8)	48.8 (33.7–64.0)
	DNA	90.9 (82.3–99.5)	34.9 (20.5–49.3)
2	Nucleosome	46.2 (30.3–62.0)	47.9 (33.6–62.2)
	DNA	94.9 (87.9–100.0)	35.4 (21.7–49.1)
3	Nucleosome	52.5 (36.8–68.2)	42.6 (28.3–56.8)
	DNA	97.5 (92.6–100)	31.9 (18.4–45.4)
4	Nucleosome	48.9 (34.1–63.7)	52.4 (37.1–67.7)
	DNA	93.3 (86.0–100)	26.2 (12.7–39.6)
5	Nucleosome	48.9 (34.5–63.4)	67.5 (52.8–82.2)
	DNA	85.1 (74.8–95.4)	27.5 (13.5–41.5)
6	Nucleosome	51.1 (36.6–65.5)	57.5 (42.0–73.0)
	DNA	87.2 (77.6–96.9)	30.0 (15.6–44.4)
7	Nucleosome	49.0 (35.2–62.9)	58.3 (42.0–74.7)
	DNA	88.2 (79.3–97.2)	27.8 (12.9–42.6)
8	Nucleosome	48.1 (34.4–61.8)	45.7 (29.0–62.5)
	DNA	90.4 (82.3–98.5)	17.1 (4.5–29.8)
9	Nucleosome	47.9 (33.6–62.2)	50.0 (33.9–66.1)
	DNA	87.5 (78.0–97.0)	21.1 (7.9–34.2)
10	Nucleosome	53.1 (38.9–67.2)	47.1 (30.0–64.1)
	DNA	87.8 (78.5–97.0)	23.5 (9.1–38.0)
11	Nucleosome	67.3 (54.1–80.6)	51.7 (33.2–70.2)
	DNA	91.8 (84.1–99.6)	20.7 (5.7–35.7)
12	Nucleosome	53.3 (35.2–71.5)	32.0 (13.3–50.7)
	DNA	93.3 (84.3–100)	16.0 (1.3–30.7)

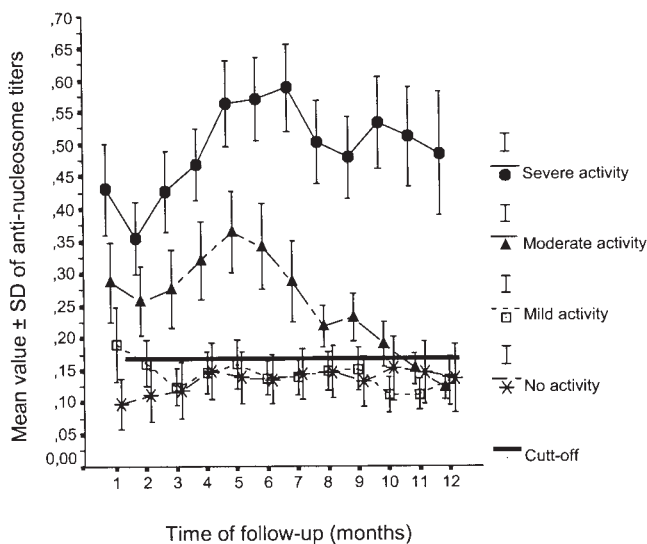


Figure 2. Average serum titers (\pm SD) of anti-nucleosome antibodies according to disease activity (LACC score) in SLE patients during 12 month observation period.

lent than anti-dsDNA antibodies (40.0%–58.8% vs 10.9%–21.8%, respectively). Interestingly, 23.0%–37.8% of patients with negative anti-dsDNA tests were positive for anti-nucleosome antibodies. In other studies dealing with anti-dsDNA-negative sera of SLE patients, 7%–52% of samples were anti-nucleosome antibody-positive^{18,19,25,29-32}. Thus,

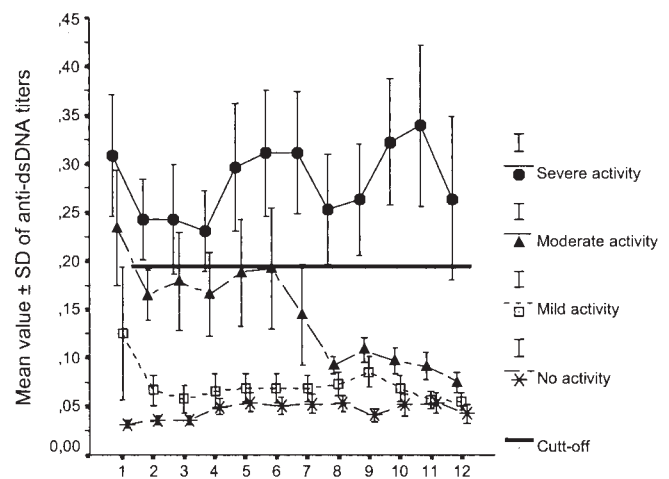


Figure 3. Average serum titers (\pm SD) of anti-dsDNA antibodies according to disease activity (LACC score) in SLE patients during 12 month observation period.

anti-nucleosome antibody reactivity appears to be a useful marker of active SLE in patients who are anti-dsDNA antibody-negative.

In SLE studies reviewed for this report, anti-nucleosome antibodies were found to be more prevalent than anti-dsDNA antibodies (31%–88% vs 21%–82%)^{18,19,25,29-32}. However,

differences in prevalence for the same antibody may be caused by the use of different detection techniques^{26,33-35}.

The association of anti-dsDNA antibodies with active SLE and lupus nephritis is well established. Although nephritis was observed in roughly half the patients at baseline, the prevalence tended to decrease steadily throughout the study period. Similarly, the number of patients with active disease decreased, and were observed in less than one-third of the patients by the end of the study. The highest prevalence of anti-dsDNA antibodies was observed early (first and second evaluations) and halfway through the study period (fifth and sixth evaluations), coinciding with the highest prevalence of active disease. While anti-dsDNA antibodies are mostly present in patients with active SLE, anti-nucleosome antibodies may be detected in active and inactive SLE alike^{17,18,25}. Anti-dsDNA antibody levels above the cutoff threshold were almost exclusively observed in patients with severely active disease. In contrast, in most of our patients, anti-nucleosome antibody levels remained elevated at even moderate levels of disease activity.

Our findings draw attention to the fact that anti-nucleosome antibodies are more sensitive than anti-dsDNA antibodies to active SLE (73%–100% vs 31%–55%). Thus, anti-nucleosome antibody reactivity appears to be a potentially valuable tool in the assessment of patients with anti-dsDNA antibody-negative SLE. In a Korean study, 32% of anti-dsDNA antibody-negative patients presented renal disorders and positive anti-nucleosome antibodies²⁹. Nephritis was not found in patients who had neither anti-dsDNA nor anti-nucleosome antibodies. Similarly, in our study, anti-nucleosome antibodies were more sensitive than anti-dsDNA antibodies to active nephritis (32.0%–67.5% vs 16.0%–35.4%, respectively). Interestingly, at the first 3 evaluations, when the prevalence of lupus nephritis was higher, no statistically significant difference was observed in the sensitivity rates of the 2 autoantibodies. In this and earlier studies, however, anti-dsDNA antibodies were more specific for active SLE and lupus nephritis. While the specificity of anti-nucleosome antibodies varied from 46.2% to 67.3%, that of anti-dsDNA antibodies ranged from 85.0% to 97.5%.

Thus, considering the high levels of sensitivity observed, anti-nucleosome antibodies may be a useful marker for active SLE and active lupus nephritis, especially in patients who are anti-dsDNA antibody-negative.

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