Despite decades of advancements in the management and treatment, the prevalence of hypertension continues to remain high, as it has been difficult to achieve recommended blood pressure (BP) goals in a large proportion of this patient population at-risk for adverse outcomes. Accumulating evidence indicates that bone marrow (BM) plays critically important regulatory roles in both peripheral- and neuroinflammation associated with many pathophysiological conditions. This has led us to investigate the neural communication between the BM and the brain in hypertension. Thus, the objectives of this review are to summarize recent advances in knowledge that link neuroinflammation with hypertension, and the role of the autonomic nervous system–bone marrow communication in hematopoietic cell homeostasis and their impact on hypertension pathophysiology. In addition, we discuss the novel and emerging field of intestinal microbiota and roles of gut permeability and dysbiosis in cardiovascular disease and hypertension. Finally, we propose a brain–gut–bone marrow triangular interaction hypothesis and discuss its potential in the development of novel therapies for hypertension.

**Brain–Gut–Bone Marrow Axis**

Implications for Hypertension and Related Therapeutics

Monica M. Santisteban, Seungbum Kim, Carl J. Pepine, Mohan K. Raizada

**Abstract:** Hypertension is the most prevalent modifiable risk factor for cardiovascular disease and disorders directly influencing cardiovascular disease morbidity and mortality, such as diabetes mellitus, chronic kidney disease, obstructive sleep apnea, etc. Despite aggressive attempts to influence lifestyle modifications and advances in pharmacotherapeutics, a large percentage of patients still do not achieve recommended blood pressure control worldwide. Thus, we think that mechanism-based novel strategies should be considered to significantly improve control and management of hypertension. The overall objective of this review is to summarize implications of peripheral- and neuroinflammation as well as the autonomic nervous system–bone marrow communication in hematopoietic cell homeostasis and their impact on hypertension pathophysiology. In addition, we discuss the novel and emerging field of intestinal microbiota and roles of gut permeability and dysbiosis in cardiovascular disease and hypertension. Finally, we propose a brain–gut–bone marrow triangular interaction hypothesis and discuss its potential in the development of novel therapies for hypertension. (Circ Res. 2016;118:1327-1336. DOI: 10.1161/CIRCRESAHA.116.307709.)

**Key Words:** blood pressure ■ bone marrow ■ dysbiosis ■ hypertension ■ microbiota

Despite decades of advancements in the management and treatment, the prevalence of hypertension continues to remain high, as it has been difficult to achieve recommended blood pressure (BP) goals in a large proportion of this patient population at-risk for adverse outcomes. Accumulating evidence indicates that bone marrow (BM) plays critically important regulatory roles in both peripheral- and neuroinflammation associated with many pathophysiological conditions. This has led us to investigate the neural communication between the BM and the brain in hypertension.

Thus, the objectives of this review are to summarize recent advances in knowledge that link neuroinflammation with hypertension, and the role of the autonomic nervous system in regulation of BM cell activity. Furthermore, we will discuss the implications of gut pathophysiology and microbiota in BP control and hypertension. Finally, we will propose a unifying brain–gut–BM triangular interaction hypothesis, which we think contributes to persistent and chronic hypertension, and may provide an opportunity to develop novel therapeutic strategies for this disease.

**Neuroinflammation**

Our understanding of the involvement of neuroinflammation in the pathogenesis of hypertension has become more robust in the recent years. Multiple proinflammatory cytokines, such as leukotriene-B4, C–C chemokine ligand 2, nuclear factor-κb, high-mobility group box 1, tumor necrosis factor-α, interleukin (IL)-1β, and IL-6, have all been documented to be elevated in the brains of animal models of hypertension. Although the mechanisms remain under investigation, an enhanced vasodeleterious axis of the renin–angiotensin system, such as angiotensin type 1 receptors...
and angiotensin-converting enzyme, have been shown to be involved in driving central proinflammatory pathways. In contrast, central overexpression of angiotensin-converting enzyme 2, a member of the vasoprotective axis of the renin–angiotensin system, beneficially attenuates neurogenic hypertension. Consistent with this knowledge is the observation that shedding of membrane-bound angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 is involved in neurogenic hypertension. Finally, mice that have an overactive brain renin–angiotensin system also have elevated production of several proinflammatory cytokines in the brain. These findings highlight the importance of the renin–angiotensin system in neuroinflammation and hypertension.

How neuroinflammation modulates BP is an area of active investigation. Evidence indicates that increased inflammation in cardioregulatory brain centers is associated with elevated sympathetic nervous system drive that leads to increased BP; conversely, inhibiting these central proinflammatory pathways dampens the increase in BP. In addition, central nervous system injection of proinflammatory cytokines, including IL-1β and tumor necrosis factor-α, increases sympathetic nerve activity (SNA) and BP. Furthermore, inhibition of brain tumor necrosis factor-α attenuates the development of hypertension in animal models. Thus, although there is a general consensus of the role of proinflammatory cytokines in central BP control, the origin of these cytokines remains unclear. Although it is true that circumventricular organs may respond to systemic cytokines, these cytokines can also be produced centrally and released by neurons and microglial cells to induce proinflammatory processes.

The contribution of microglial cells is of particular relevance in this regard. Microglial cells are the innate immune cells of the brain, constantly surveying the brain environment, promoting immune homeostasis, and producing neurotrophic factors. They become activated in response to pathological insults and alterations in brain homeostasis. Our group was among the first to demonstrate the involvement of brain microglial cells in hypertension, an observation now supported by others. Inhibition of microglia activation is associated with attenuation of hypertension, sympathetic activation, and peripheral inflammation. Furthermore, specific deletion of brain microglia attenuates angiotensin II (Ang II)–induced hypertension. A particularly interesting issue is whether these microglia are directly responding to Ang II, or if this response is mediated by other neuronal factors. There is no consensus on this issue at present. Evidence indicates that resting microglia in the adult brain do not express angiotensin type 1 receptor, although others have demonstrated effects of Ang II on these cells both in vitro and in vivo. This discrepancy could be because of the fact that microglial cells do not express angiotensin type 1 receptor in normal physiological conditions unless primed by certain stimuli, such as prohypertensive stress signals. Thus, it would be reasonable to suggest that prohypertensive signals, such as Ang II, that are known to activate autonomic neurons, could generate mediators that could cause microglial cell activation/differentiation leading to their responsiveness to Ang II.

Support for this contention is the evidence that Ang II causes generation of reactive oxygen species and cytokines, such as C–C chemokine ligand 2 and high-mobility group box 1, that are known to affect microglia. Further investigation is needed to clarify this area of neuronal-mediated microglial activation.

### Brain–BM Communication

As mentioned above, neuroinflammation contributes to peripheral sympathoexcitation. Our group has shown that the femoral sympathetic nerve is activated, and BM norepinephrine contents are elevated during hypertension. BM is highly innervated by the sympathetic nervous system. This sympathetic innervation regulates hematopoiesis and the stem-cell niche homeostasis. Sympathetic signals from the brain are thought to travel through adrenergic nerve fibers to BM releasing neurotransmitters that affect hematopoietic stem and progenitor cell (HSPC) mobilization and release into the general circulation. For example, catecholaminergic neurotransmitters control the release of HSPCs from BM by G-CSF (granulocyte colony stimulating factor)–induced osteoblast suppression and bone CXCL12 regulation, or by directly modulating the Wnt-β-catenin pathway in HSPCs. BM sympathetic fibers can also regulate HSPC mobilization through substance P-mediated nociceptive signaling. Although this mechanism remains to be investigated in hypertension, it has been characterized in patients with diabetes mellitus.

Dysfunction of BM sympathetic tone or complete sympathetic denervation has been associated with impaired HSPC mobilization and loss of circadian rhythmicity of HSPC release. In addition, inhibition of norepinephrine reuptake is associated with enhanced HSPC mobilization. Sympathetic innervation to BM has also been shown to be important in several cardiovascular pathologies. In myocardial infarction and stroke, enhanced sympathetic drive to BM mobilizes HSPCs and increases the output of inflammatory monocytes, which has been specifically attributed to CCR2+ HSPCs. Our research indicates that in hypertension, enhanced sympathetic tone to BM is associated with loss of circadian rhythmicity possibly associated with altered adrenergic signaling. In addition, we have recently observed that Ang II regulates HSPC proliferation in BM and enhances production of inflammatory monocytes in the spleen via CCR2+ HSPCs. These studies provide convergent evidence that Ang II–induced increases of CCR2+ HSPCs and myeloid progenitors in BM and spleen could contribute to the development of hypertension.
of hypertension through increased sympathetic drive to BM. However, it remains to be determined if CCR2+ HSPCs are also activated in other models of hypertension and if CCR2+ HSPCs are rhythmically released from BM in response to sympathetic drive.

In addition to regulating HSPC mobilization from BM, the sympathetic nervous system regulates the immune system in a circadian manner. Adrenergic nerves have been shown to regulate recruitment of leukocytes to tissues. Norepinephrine stimulates immune cells to regulate proliferation, differentiation, maturation, and effector functions. Specifically, adrenergic receptor stimulation of immune cells has been implicated in both anti- and proinflammatory responses. Autonomic modulation of the immune system seems to be important in development of hypertension-related pathology and seems to be specifically biased toward enhanced proinflammatory responses. Autonomic modulation of the immune system seems to be important in development of hypertension-related pathology and seems to be specifically biased toward enhanced proinflammatory responses. Our data (Figure 1) show that CCR2 expressing inflammatory monocytes are increased in BM. Interestingly, similar increases are also observed in the spleen and peripheral blood, suggesting that there is constant trafficking of myeloid progenitors from BM to the spleen that contribute to monocyte-mediated inflammation in hypertension. It seems that in hypertension, autonomic modulation of the immune system is altered such that anti-inflammatory cholineric modulation of the innate immune system becomes proinflammatory. In addition, sympathetic drive seems to promote hypertension by norepinephrine-mediated T-cell activation. Interestingly, norepinephrine preferentially activates memory T-cells to release proinflammatory cytokines, which is particularly important because memory T-cells accumulate in the kidney and vasculature of hypertensive animals. Our data indicate that norepinephrine application into BM increases mobilization of immune cells, and this response is attenuated by application of acetylcholine. Furthermore, renal denervation has been shown to prevent immune cell activation and reduce renal inflammation in Ang II–induced hypertension. Therefore, it becomes evident that autonomic regulation of the immune system is not only important but also altered toward enhancing proinflammatory responses in hypertension.

Another important aspect to consider is a positive feedback loop, where neuroinflammation contributes to sympathetic excitation, which then promotes activation of the immune system and stem/progenitor cells in BM. In turn, this can feedback to the brain and exacerbate central inflammation generating a vicious proinflammatory cycle. Using BM-chimeric rats, our group has shown that proinflammatory progenitors from BM extravasate and enter the hypothalamic paraventricular nucleus to contribute to neuroinflammation in Ang II–induced hypertension. In addition, treatment with minocycline, an anti-inflammatory antibiotic, not only attenuates central microglial activation and hypertension but also decreases the number of BM-derived microglia/macrophages in the hypothalamic paraventricular nucleus. Similar findings in the hypothalamic paraventricular nucleus were reported in a mouse model of chronic stress, an important risk factor for the development of hypertension. Others have shown the presence of T-cell infiltration in the subfornical organ during Ang II–induced hypertension. Taken together, these observations indicate that sympathetic activation has a profound impact on BM proinflammatory progenitors, as some of these cells extravasate into the brain, and contribute to neuroinflammation.

The specific mechanisms underlying extravasation of BM cells into the brain remain a subject of extensive investigation. Studies indicate that a C–C chemokine ligand 2 gradient, leading to its increased concentration in the brain, could be one of these signals. In addition, proinflammatory Ly6C+ CCR2+ monocytes have been suggested to be the monocyte progenitor responsible for these extravasated cells in the brain. Although this view has not yet been evaluated in hypertension studies, there is evidence both from our group (Figure 1) and others indicating that Ang II–induced hypertension in mice models is associated with elevated Ly6C+ monocytes mostly expressing CCR2. Finally, a leaky blood–brain barrier associated with hypertension could also contribute to extravasation of BM cells into the brain.

Brain–Gut Communication

The gut enteric nervous system is complex and capable of functioning independent of extrinsic inputs. Communication between this system and the central nervous system has been extensively reviewed elsewhere. Therefore, we will focus on the effects of autonomic innervation on immune responses and gut function, as well as the effects of gut microbial factors on the central nervous system.

Autonomic input to the gut plays an important role in modulating the local immune response. Norepinephrine and sympathetic nerves are key in regulating lymphocyte migration and accumulation in the gut. Resident intestinal macrophages are closely regulated by both the vagus nerves and the sympathetic varicosities. Vagal nerve stimulation and blocking sympathetic drive prevent breakdown of the intestinal lumen–blood barrier and enhances epithelial cell barrier function, respectively. These observations suggest that both the sympathetic and the parasympathetic arms of the autonomic nervous system are important in regulating the gut’s immune response as well as function of the gut epithelial barrier. However, whether intestinal inflammation and barrier permeability are altered in hypertension remains to be determined.

The brain–gut communication seems to be bidirectional where gut microbiota and their products are implicated in sympathetic activation that maintains an influx of lymphocytes to intestinal tissue. This view is supported by evidence from germ-free (GF) mice, where lacking gut microbes seem to have a less anxious phenotype in both the elevated plus maze and the light dark box tests. Relevant to cardiovascular physiology, GF mice also have an exaggerated hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal stress response, in addition to a disruption of the blood–brain barrier. It is interesting to note that these mice also display global microglial defects. Taken together with the evidence that microglia homeostasis is regulated by bacterial short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), it is tempting to suggest that gut microbiota and its products hold the potential to regulate neural control mechanisms in hypertension.

Intestinal Microbiota and Hypertension

The gut microbiota has become one of the most active areas of research in cardiovascular and metabolic diseases. The human
Microbiota research is enabled by metagenomics, which allows high-resolution and culture-independent sequencing of bacterial DNA using either amplicons sequencing or whole-metagenome shotgun sequencing. Bioinformatics tools enabling research in the field of microbiota in cardio-metabolic diseases, including insulin resistance, obesity, and cardiovascular disease. Intestinal dysbiosis is an imbalance in the gut microbiota, which may be described by several characteristics, such as a decrease in richness and diversity, altered representation of bacterial metabolic pathways, and modifications in composition of Firmicutes and Bacteroidetes. In this section, we will highlight some of the tools enabling research in the field of microbiota in cardio-metabolic diseases, summarize the link between the intestinal microbiota and hypertension, and draw a conclusion by reviewing the effects of the intestinal microbes on intestinal pathology and immunity.

Microbiota research is enabled by metagenomics, which allows high-resolution and culture-independent sequencing of bacterial DNA using either amplicons sequencing or whole-metagenome shotgun sequencing. Bioinformatics analysis of sequencing data is usually performed in 2 ways: first, for taxonomic classification and second, for functional profiling by microbial product identification/prediction. Resulting data provide information on the presence of different species in a microbial population and their potential metabolic functions. However, the involvement of these microbial populations in pathophysiology requires more

gut microbiota is dominated by Firmicutes, Bacteroidetes, Actinobacteria, and Proteobacteria phyla. Recent studies note an association of intestinal dysbiosis with several cardiometabolic diseases, including insulin resistance, obesity, and cardiovascular disease. Intestinal dysbiosis is an imbalance in the gut microbiota, which may be described by several characteristics, such as a decrease in richness and diversity, altered representation of bacterial metabolic pathways, and modifications in composition of Firmicutes and Bacteroidetes. In this section, we will highlight some of the tools enabling research in the field of microbiota in cardio-metabolic diseases, summarize the link between the intestinal microbiota and hypertension, and draw a conclusion by reviewing the effects of the intestinal microbes on intestinal pathology and immunity.

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Figure 1. Chronic angiotensin II (Ang II)–induced hypertension results in increased differentiation and mobilization of inflammatory monocytes in mice. A and B, The average numbers of CCR2+ inflammatory monocytes (CD11b+ and Ly6C+) were significantly increased in both the bone marrow (BM, A) and the spleen (B) of Ang II–infused C57BL6 mice. Saline or Ang II (1000 ng/kg · min) was delivered by subcutaneously implanted osmotic mini-pumps (ALZET) for 3 weeks and CCR2+ monocytes were analyzed from each hind leg (1 femur and 1 tibia) or whole spleen by fluorescence-activated cell sorting. C, CCR2+ inflammatory monocytes were also increased in circulation after 3 weeks of Ang II infusion. Peripheral blood (PB) from above mice was collected and mononuclear cells were separated using Ficoll gradient. These cells were pregated on CD11b+ and analyzed for the expression of Ly6C and CCR2. (n=8–10).

Figure 2. Short-chain fatty-acid receptors involved in blood pressure regulation are altered in the ileum of spontaneously hypertensive rats (SHR). Short-chain fatty-acid (SCFA) receptors Olfr59 and free fatty-acid receptor 3 (Ffar3) are involved in blood pressure regulation to increase or decrease it, respectively. Intestinal bacteria are the main source of SCFAs; therefore, we sought to examine the SCFAs receptors in rat intestinal tissue. Ileum and colon tissues were excised for RNA extraction and real time-PCR from 20-week-old Wistar Kyoto (WKY) and SHR, as previously described (n=8 per group, mean arterial pressure [MAP] WKY: 99±3, MAP SHR: 158±2). We observed an increase in Olfr59 mRNA and a decrease in Ffar3 mRNA in the ileum, but not colon, of SHR.
**Implications for Human Hypertension**

It could be summarized from the above discussion that the brain, BM (immune system), and gut microbiota are potentially intertwined functionally to control BP, and their dysfunctions could be associated with hypertension. Key questions to be addressed are whether there is interplay among these organs in hypertension and if so, what is the contribution of this interplay in the overall hypertensive state? We propose the following brain–gut–BM triangular interaction hypothesis (Figure 3). This working hypothesis has been
developed by synthesizing available evidence from the literature, including our own work. We propose that hypertensive stimuli (such as Ang II, salt, stress, and other hypertension risk factors) trigger autonomic neural pathways resulting in increases in sympathetic and dampening of parasympathetic activities. This directly affects cardiovascular-relevant organs (such as blood vessels, heart, kidney, etc) to increase BP. We propose that increases in sympathetic drive to the gut and BM may also set in motion a sequence of signaling events that ultimately contribute to an overall increase of BP and establishment of hypertension. For example, increased SNA to the gut could result in increased gut permeability, gut inflammatory status, and dysbiosis, leading to an imbalance in microbial-derived metabolites in the plasma. These metabolites, working together with elevated sympathetic drive to the BM, may act as modulators for BM cell activity by increasing production and release of myeloid progenitors and other proinflammatory cells, and decrease in angiogenic progenitors. This could be a critical event for establishment of hypertension because increases in myeloid progenitors contribute to an overall increase in peripheral inflammation and neuroinflammation by differentiating into brain macrophages/microglia. Decreases in angiogenic cells also can lead to a compromised vascular repair capacity, a hallmark of hypertension. Neuroinflammation-associated increases in cytokines, chemokines, and reactive oxygen species accentuate autonomic neuronal activity and SNA to the gut and BM, thus perpetuating hypertension. Therefore, although there are multiple factors that cause high BP, we propose that involvement of SNA-mediated gut dysbiosis, BM proinflammatory cell activity, and neuroinflammation all play an important role in elevating BP.

The concept of gut microbiota affecting BP is novel and represents a paradigm shift in the hypertension field. However, several important gaps in knowledge remain in support of this hypothesis as outlined in the Table. If proven, this may have great implications for treatment of hypertension with the use of dietary supplements, such as pre- and probiotics, as well as appropriate fecal/bacterial transplantation. Some evidence already exists supporting a beneficial role for *Lactobacillus* probiotics in BP regulation.107–109 Furthermore, a meta-analysis of 9 randomized trials demonstrated a significant decrease in both systolic and diastolic BP in patients who consumed a daily dose of $\geq10^{11}$ CFU of probiotics.110

In summary, evidence in this review emphasizes that gut microbial composition holds the potential for playing an important role in BP control. This field is in its rudimentary stage, at present, and many important questions, as outlined in the Table, must be addressed before its full clinical and translational potential is recognized. First, a full-scale clinical study must be conducted to confirm dysbiosis in hypertensive patients; second, fecal transplantation studies would be useful in animals to establish the proof of concept of the role of gut microbial dysbiosis in hypertension and resistant hypertension; and finally, metabolic profiles of plasma must be conducted in patients to determine if there are bacterial metabolites unique to resistant hypertension.

**Summary and Future Directions**

In this review, we have presented a working hypothesis involving the brain, gut, and BM, whose dysfunctional interactions may be critical in persistent neuroinflammation and key in the development and establishment of hypertension. Of course, the story is just beginning and an extensive amount of research must be undertaken, and critical issues addressed, to further support, modify, or even refute this hypothesis. Some of these issues are as follows: (1) what are the characteristics of extravasated cells into the brain? Are they all activated microglia? How long do they remain in the brain? What is the role of the spleen in the extravasation of myeloid progenitors? Is there an increase in activated microglia in human hypertension? (2) Is there a unique signature of metabolite(s), such as SCFAs, or bacterial DNA in plasma of hypertensive animals or patients that could be considered as a marker for early detection? (3) Extensive studies must be conducted to further...
Do changes in SNA to gut and BM precede, accompany, or result in hypertension?

Are altered gut permeability, pathophysiology and dysbiosis universal for animal models of hypertension?

Do gut permeability and dysbiosis initiate hypertension or are they a consequence of hypertension? Does gut-targeted therapy reverse hypertension?

What is the contribution rate of BM-derived proinflammatory myeloid progenitors vs resident microglia? What is the involvement of spleen?

What are the molecular/cellular signals in extravasation of peripheral proinflammatory progenitors into the brain leading to persistent neuroinflammation and hypertension?

BM indicates bone marrow; BP, blood pressure; and SNA, sympathetic nerve activity.

characterize the autonomic regulation of SNA to the gut and BM. (4) The role of SCFAs, their receptors, and their targets (blood vessels, gut, BM, brain, etc) requires investigation. Answers to these and other related questions entrust optimism toward the development of a novel therapeutic approach for the control of hypertension.

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Disclosures

None.

References


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