

Sjögren's Disease: New Therapies Target Underlying Immune Pathways

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Sjögren's disease (SjD) is a chronic, multisystem autoimmune disorder characterized by lymphocytic infiltration of exocrine glands, leading to dryness, fatigue, and variable extraglandular involvement. Despite its significant clinical and socioeconomic burden, no disease-modifying therapies have yet been approved. Current management remains largely symptomatic, reflecting the complexity and heterogeneity of the disease and the limitations of past clinical trials.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **The Pivot:** New therapies for Sjögren's disease are moving beyond symptomatic relief to target specific immune pathways.
- **The Data:** Emerging strategies include modulating B-cell survival, inhibiting IgG recycling, and blocking co-stimulatory interactions, with encouraging signs of efficacy in phase II/III trials.
- **The Action:** Clinicians should be aware of these developing treatments, particularly for patients with moderate-to-severe systemic Sjögren's disease, as they represent a shift towards disease modification.

Understanding Sjögren's Disease Pathogenesis

Sjögren's disease (SjD) is a chronic, multisystem autoimmune disorder characterized by lymphocytic infiltration of exocrine glands, primarily leading to sicca symptoms (dryness) and fatigue. Patients may also experience variable extraglandular involvement, affecting organs such as the joints, skin, lungs, and kidneys. The disease imposes a significant clinical and socioeconomic burden, yet current management is largely symptomatic, as no disease-modifying therapies have received approval to date. This reflects the inherent complexity and heterogeneity of SjD, alongside challenges encountered in previous clinical trials ¹.

Advances in Immunopathogenesis Research

Recent progress in understanding the immunopathogenesis of SjD has clarified several key mechanisms driving the disease. These include epithelial activation, interferon-driven inflammation, B-cell hyperactivity, and T-cell dysregulation. These insights have been crucial in identifying specific immune pathways that can be targeted therapeutically. The goal of these new targeted therapies is to interrupt the self-perpetuating cycle of epithelial injury and immune activation that characterizes SjD ¹.

Emerging Therapeutic Strategies

The development of targeted therapies for SjD is focusing on several distinct immune pathways. Emerging strategies include the modulation of B-cell survival and signaling, which aims to reduce the overactive B-cell responses seen in

SjD. Other approaches involve the inhibition of IgG recycling, which could reduce autoantibody levels, and the blockade of intracellular kinase pathways. Additionally, therapies designed to block co-stimulatory interactions between immune cells are under investigation, seeking to dampen the aberrant immune activation 1.

Clinical Trial Progress and Efficacy Signals

Recent phase II and phase III studies evaluating these novel targeted therapies have shown encouraging signs of efficacy. These trials have largely focused on patients presenting with moderate-to-severe systemic disease. While these results are promising, they also highlight a current challenge: addressing the unmet therapeutic need in individuals with predominantly glandular symptoms or low systemic activity. The heterogeneity of SjD necessitates a broader range of therapeutic options to cover the full spectrum of disease presentation 1.

Clinical Implications for Practice Today

The development of targeted therapies for Sjögren's disease represents a significant shift from purely symptomatic management towards disease modification. While no new therapies are yet approved, the encouraging results from phase II and III trials suggest that clinicians may soon have more specific tools to manage SjD, particularly for patients with moderate-to-severe systemic manifestations. This could lead to improved long-term outcomes and a reduction in disease burden. Continued refinement of outcome measures and patient stratification will be essential to translate these mechanistic advances into effective, personalized treatments capable of altering the natural course of SjD 1.

Why this matters for clinical practice today: For clinicians managing Sjögren's disease, the prospect of disease-modifying therapies offers hope for patients who currently rely on symptomatic relief. Understanding the specific immune pathways targeted by these emerging drugs will be crucial for identifying suitable candidates and anticipating potential benefits. While awaiting regulatory approval, staying informed about these developments allows for proactive patient education and sets expectations for future treatment landscapes, potentially influencing referral patterns and multidisciplinary care planning for complex SjD cases.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the encouraging progress, the current focus of clinical trials on patients with moderate-to-severe systemic disease means that the therapeutic needs of individuals with predominantly glandular or low systemic activity remain largely unaddressed. Future research will need to expand its scope to include these patient populations. Furthermore, continued refinement of outcome measures and improved patient stratification methods are essential. These advancements will help ensure that mechanistic insights are effectively translated into personalized treatments that can alter the natural course of SjD for a wider range of patients 1.

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