

**Title: Challenges to drug discovery for celiac disease and approaches to overcome them**

**Abstract**

**Introduction:** The only available effective treatment for celiac disease is strict and long-term compliance with a gluten-free diet. Dietary gluten restriction must be strict and long term, but is difficult to achieve in many cases and alternative dietary strategies have been investigated in the past few years.

**Areas covered:** This review highlights the progress that has been made in the development of new therapeutics for CD. Detailed information of the evidence about the targets of the drugs related to their mechanisms of action is covered. The therapies are classified in five mechanisms: modification of gluten, intraluminal therapies, immunomodulation, intestinal permeability and modulation of adaptative response. The actual development phase and future approach are also described and discussed.

**Expert opinion:** There are several limitations in each of the treatment targets related to their complications or the lack of complete response to normal gluten containing diet. The most desired therapy for celiac patients is the induction of gluten tolerance that would be curative. Therefore, it is expected that shortly, alternative or complementary tools for the treatment of gluten-free diet will be available to patients with celiac disease and will improve their quality of life.

**Keywords**

Celiac Disease, gluten tolerance, immunomodulation, proteases, tissue transglutaminase, Intestinal permeability.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Celiac disease (CD) is characterized by an immune-mediated sensitivity to gluten. It is considered to be a multifactorial disorder with a broad spectrum of symptoms and intestinal villous alterations that include lymphocytic enteritis and mucosal atrophy [1]. The prevalence of CD in developed countries is approximately 1% [2]. However, the currently available serology-based diagnostic techniques (anti-gliadin, anti-transglutaminase, and anti-endomysial antibodies) may lead to misdiagnosis of some cases [3, 4]. For this reason, several strategies have been developed in the past few years to optimize the early diagnosis of CD in higher-risk groups [5, 6, 7, 8].

Gluten is a protein that is insoluble in both water and diluted salt solutions [9]. This protein triggers intestinal inflammation mediated by the human leucocyte antigen (HLA) system via HLA-DQ2 or DQ8 molecules. Intestinal inflammation may lead to the malabsorption of nutrients, as well as secondary iron deficiency (anemia) and osteoporosis.

The only available effective treatment for CD is strict and long-term compliance with a gluten-free diet (GFD). Nonetheless, it has been shown that mucosal recovery can be lengthy. Moreover, 30%–50% of patients have persistent lesions in the intestinal mucosa and recurrent symptoms despite dietary gluten restriction (GFD-resistant CD or non-responsive CD) [10, 11]. Gluten restriction requires extensive personal effort, which has psychological and social consequences and may limit full compliance [12, 13]. Unintentional or deliberate non-compliance with GFD occurs in up to 50% of cases [14, 15]. In addition, approximately 1% of patients with celiac disease do not respond to GFD (refractory CD [RCD]). These patients are diagnosed mainly in adulthood after long-term exposure to gluten and are at risk of developing complications such as RCD type II (an intestinal lymphoma) or its more severe complication, enteropathy-associated T-cell lymphoma (EATL) [16, 17].

## 2. PATHOGENESIS OF CD

CD develops in genetically predisposed individuals as an immune response to gluten present in certain grains (wheat, barley, and rye [18]). Although oats are considered safe for patients with CD, different oat varieties have distinct immunogenic potentials in patients with celiac disease based on the presence of toxic prolamines [19]. The immune system involves innate responses (caused by the direct toxic effects of gluten on the epithelium) and adaptive or specific

responses (via CD4<sup>+</sup> T lymphocytes in the lamina propria or underlying tissue). These responses are complementary and may result in damage to the intestinal mucosa [20].

Some gluten fragments, including  $\alpha$ -gliadin, trigger an innate, toxic, and acute immune response not associated with T lymphocytes or HLA-DQ2/8 antigens [21, 22, 23]. Gluten causes oxidative stress through the production of nitric oxide via the activity of nitric oxide synthetase (iNOS) in intestinal epithelial cells [24, 25, 26, 27] and induces the expression of ligands such as MICA [28] in these cells. Gliadin can also directly disrupt the intercellular junctions between enterocytes [29, 30, 31]. However, the primary inflammatory mechanism involves the secretion of IL-15 by intestinal epithelial cells subjected to stresses [32]. This pro-inflammatory cytokine induces the expression of NKG2D in adjacent intraepithelial lymphocytes, causing apoptosis in MICA-bound intestinal epithelial cells, leading to villous atrophy [33, 34]. Epithelial cytotoxicity, together with the weakening of intercellular junctions, favors an increase in intestinal permeability, increasing the access of dietary gluten to the lamina propria, thereby triggering a local adaptive response.

The adaptive immune response is antigen-specific and is mediated by T-cells after antigenic presentation by antigen-presenting cells (APCs) carrying HLA-DQ2 or DQ8 molecules [35]. Macrophages and dendritic cells (DC) are the main APCs in the lamina propria and are increased in active celiac lesions [36]. These APCs are activated by IL-15 [35, 37, 38, 39] and are responsible for presenting gluten antigens, such as  $\alpha$ -gliadin, to naive T lymphocytes in the lymph nodes via HLA-DQ2/8 molecules [37, 40, 41, 42] after the modification of  $\alpha$ -gliadin by the enzyme transglutaminase 2 (TG2) [43, 44]. Following antigen presentation, CD4<sup>+</sup> T-cells become antigen-specific and migrate to the lamina propria where they respond to gluten through the secretion of pro-inflammatory cytokines (IFN- $\gamma$ , TNF- $\alpha$ , and IL-18) and decreased production of regulatory or anti-inflammatory cytokines (IL-10 and TGF- $\beta$ ) [45, 46]. This pro-inflammatory activity is associated with tissue remodeling events, including crypt hyperplasia typical of CD, intestinal villous atrophy, and the activation of B lymphocytes, which stimulate the production of antibodies [35, 47]. In summary, gliadin has a dual effect in the intestine of patients with CD, and the activation of the innate immune response is essential for triggering the adaptive response in genetically susceptible individuals [48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53].

### **3. NEED FOR NEW NON-DIETARY THERAPIES**

The only effective treatment available for CD is long-term compliance with a GFD. Dietary compliance has been shown to be a safe and effective therapy; however, it is neither ideal nor highly effective in clinical practice. In adults with CD, daily consumption of small amounts of gluten (50 mg) for 3 months may cause damage to the small intestine [54]. Therefore, dietary

gluten restriction must be strict and long term, but is difficult to achieve in many cases. For example, the production and distribution of gluten-free foods are complex, which makes the final product more expensive than the equivalent non gluten-free food, and are consequently not achievable in all countries. In addition, a frequently cited limitation is the unpleasant taste and texture of gluten-free foods, which reduces flavor and consumption. In addition, cross-contamination with other food products may occur. Hence, unintentional dietary compliance is common [55]. Therefore, the current therapy significantly affects the psychological and social outcomes and the quality of life of individuals with CD [56]. In addition, the lower proportion of whole grains and fibers in gluten-free products and the higher consumption of refined carbohydrates have increased the rates of hepatic steatosis, coronary syndrome, and cardiovascular events [57, 58]. The European Union (EU) Ordinance No. 828/2014 of July 30, 2014, has established the norms to determine the quantity of gluten in food products. In EU countries, foods with less than 20 ppm of gluten are labeled as gluten-free [59], even though the threshold to trigger symptoms varies for each individual [60, 61]. This may explain why only 50% of individuals with CD adhering to a GFD achieve complete recovery of the duodenal mucosa. The unintentional or deliberate consumption of gluten is the leading cause of poor intestinal immune response [62].

A study conducted in the United Kingdom found that 40% of individuals with CD were unhappy with the GFD [63] because of the imposed dietary and social restrictions, higher cost, and poor taste of products. All participants were interested in other treatments, with vaccination considered the preferred strategy [63]. In addition, in many cases, compliance with GFD is difficult and costly, which leads to poor compliance and, ultimately, to poor clinical outcomes with the persistence of the existing symptoms [64, 65].

In summary, although full compliance with GFD is the main therapy for CD, the need to develop new, alternative long- and short-term dietary therapies is evident to i) promptly restore mucosal integrity in the diagnostic phase ; ii) allow short-term non-compliance in some cases (e.g., during travel and social events); and iii) improve clinical and social outcomes for patients with CD. For these reasons, alternative dietary strategies have been investigated in the past few years. The different non-dietary strategies are grouped according to the therapeutic objectives in Table 1.

#### 4. THERAPIES BASED ON THE MODIFICATION OF GLUTEN

##### a) GENETICALLY MODIFIED WHEAT STRAINS AND

Lower exposure to dietary gluten may reduce the risk of the onset of CD [66]. The wheat strains used to date can be more immunogenic than ancestral or wild strains such as tritordeum or *Triticum monococcum* [67, 68, 69]. Therefore, the genetically-engineered diploid wheat strains that have no (or only small amounts) of immunogenic gluten peptides are potentially useful for patients with CD.

One possibility is the selection wheat strains with a reduced content of immunogenic epitopes, such as hexaploid strains generated from diploid and tetraploid species more than 1000 years ago. It has been shown that these strains confer immunogenicity and have a lower percentage of  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ ,  $\gamma$ , and  $\omega$  gliadins. *Psyllium* [70] is an alternative to gluten because it has a minimal effect on the smell and texture of wheat and good cooking properties [71]. Bread made with psyllium is appreciated by both patients with CD and healthy individuals for its texture and flavor. Another alternative is the use of genetic engineering, via RNA interference, to silence genes that encode immunogenic epitopes [72]. Recent studies evaluated the silencing of the HMW-G gene in a transgenic wheat strain (Bobwhite) and found that the content of wet gluten and the period of crop development were decreased. Gene silencing is an alternative to the production of gluten-free products [73]. Other studies have performed genetic modifications in wheat with the deletion of essential gliadin genes. The deletion of the  $\alpha$ -gliadin locus on chromosome 6 in a hexaploid strain of wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) decreased the number of immunogenic epitopes recognized by T-cells, but did not significantly affect the cooking properties [74]. The deleted gliadin genes may need to be replaced with non-immunogenic gliadin or avenin genes to improve dough elasticity. The transgenic wheat strain E82 has been used in patients with non-celiac gluten sensitivity with undetectable immunogenic peptides in feces, and the good tolerability and high acceptance of the bread characteristics of this strain have been presented [75]; this method is pending evaluation in patients with CD to confirm these promising results.

##### b) PRETREATED FLOURS

Another therapeutic measure is the fermentation of wheat flour with different probiotics of the genus *Lactobacillus*. The rationale is that *Lactobacillus* contains peptidases that, when incorporated into the sourdough during fermentation, hydrolyze glutamine and proline-rich gluten peptides, including the highly immunogenic 33-mer gliadin peptide [76]. In a double-blind study of 17 patients with CD, the symptomatic response to two types of bread containing 2 g of gluten was analyzed: one bread was fermented with traditional yeast and the other with

*Lactobacillus*. Intestinal permeability in the patients with CD who consumed the bread fermented with the traditional yeast was increased, as evidenced by the increased excretion of the carbohydrates lactulose and L-rhamnose. In contrast, intestinal permeability in the patients who consumed the bread fermented with *Lactobacillus* was not significantly changed. The main limitation of the study was the period of fermentation (2 days), which was not sufficient to evaluate the possible inactivation of peptidases and draw definitive conclusions [77]. Similar approaches include gluten degradation by proteases during wheat fermentation [78]. Bread produced with protease-treated flours has a lower concentration of glutamine and gliadin, but is crumbly and presents an unpleasant flavor. Other studies incubated gliadin with anti-transglutaminase antibodies and lysine methyl-ester. Gliadin with modified lysine loses its affinity for HLA-DQ2, which causes less activation of T-cells in the intestine. The pretreatment of whole-wheat flour with lysine methyl-ester and transglutaminase derived from *Streptomyces mobaraensis* reduced the stimulatory effect of the flour on T-cells [79]. The use of anti-transglutaminase of microbial origin improved bread texture and volume. However, the use of microbial transglutaminase in food preparations is still controversial, and more studies are needed to develop non-immunogenic flours and validate their use in the production of bread and other baked goods with a good consistency and high nutritional value [80, 81].

#### ~~e) DETOXIFICATION OF GLUTEN USING DIGESTIVE PROTEASES~~

~~The hydrolysis of gluten proteins is difficult due to the presence of high concentrations of proline and glutamine. These amino acids inhibit proteolysis by gastric and pancreatic enzymes and by endopeptidases and exopeptidases of the intestinal brush border [82]. The partial digestion of gluten peptides produces large oligopeptides, such as 33-mer and 26-mer, which have a high affinity for HLA-DQ2 or DQ8. These oligopeptides are innocuous in most people but are responsible for CD pathogenesis. Hence, a potential treatment for CD is the use of extrinsic enzymes to hydrolyze these oligopeptides to smaller sizes and decrease their recognition by the immune system. Prolyl-endopeptidases (PEPs) can hydrolyze peptide bonds between a carboxyl group and an internal proline residue that are not hydrolyzed by digestive enzymes [83, 84]. Therefore, the dietary administration of PEP concomitant with gluten is a possible therapeutic approach to complement the action of digestive proteases, hydrolyzing glutamine and proline-rich immunogenic oligopeptides and preventing their accumulation [85]. At present, several candidate fungal and microbial PEPs are available for the treatment of CD. The PEPs from the fungus *Aspergillus niger* efficiently digests gluten proteins in vitro [83, 86]. PEPs from the bacterial species *Flavobacterium meningosepticum*, *Sphingomonas capsulata*, and *Myxococcus xanthus* [87] are active at duodenal pH, moderately resistant to acidic pH, and maintain~~

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enzymatic activity in the small intestine of rats [88]. A randomized, double-blind, crossover study analyzed 20 asymptomatic patients with CD on a GFD. These patients received 5 g gluten for 14 days and were randomized to receive gluten along with PEP from *Flavobacterium meningosepticum* for another 14 days. After 14 days, the administration of gluten with PEP resulted in improved absorption of carbohydrates and fats [89].

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The co-administration of two proteases acting on complementary amino acid residues, a PEP from *Sphingomonas capsulata* that recognizes proline residues and a cysteine protease from germinated barley seeds that recognizes glutamine residues, has been investigated as a means to maximize the effectiveness of dietary supplementation with PEP. The combined action of these proteases completely detoxified gluten [90]. This two enzyme system was designated IMGX-003 (previously ALV003), and the efficacy of this synergistic system was superior to that of the isolated peptidases [91]. The safety, tolerability, and activity of IMGX-003 were assessed in two randomized, double-blind, controlled placebo crossover, Phase 1 clinical trials using a single ascending dose (100, 300, 900, and 1800 mg) of ALV003 [92]. The first study included twenty four healthy volunteers and four patients with CD; all patients were administered ALV003 in the fasted state. The second study comprised 52 healthy volunteers and one patient with CD who received the endopeptidase together with 1 g of gluten per day. All patients tolerated ALV003 without severe adverse effects. The second study found that 100 mg and 300 mg of ALV003 degraded gluten in the human stomach, similar to in vitro observations. A Phase IIa study provided either ALV003 or placebo to 20 patients with CD and randomized them to receive 16 g of gluten for 3 days. There were no significant differences in the clinical response between the two groups. Nonetheless, the participants in the intervention group did not present with intestinal mucosal lesions, whereas the placebo group experienced an increase in intraepithelial lymphocytes. A Phase IIa clinical trial was conducted to determine the efficacy and safety of ALV003 for the prevention of gastrointestinal symptoms caused by gluten and the improvement of the immune response of patients with CD. Adult patients with CD were randomized to receive either ALV003 (n = 20) or placebo (n = 21). Subsequently, 2 g gluten was administered daily for 2 months. There were no significant differences in symptoms between the two groups. The degree of histological damage in duodenal biopsies from patients with CD who received ALV003 was lower than that in the placebo group [93], suggesting that ALV003 could prevent histological damage in patients who consumed moderate doses of gluten. However, there are several limitations to oral enzyme therapy. First, the apparent lack of efficacy may be the greatest limitation to its use in conventional clinical practice. Second, it is necessary to determine the quantity of enzyme supplement that needs to be administered, the

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ratio of endopeptidase administered relative to the amount of gluten ingested, and the length of therapy necessary to achieve the degradation of gluten-derived immunogenic peptides [95].

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Other studies evaluated the efficacy of a PEP from *Aspergillus niger* (AN-PEP). A double-blind, randomized, controlled placebo clinical trial examined the safety and efficacy of this PEP in sixteen patients with CD on a GFD with Marsh grade 0 duodenal histology [94]. In the first phase of the study, 7 g gluten was administered with AN-PEP for 2 weeks, and a duodenal biopsy was performed. The second phase involved the administration of a GFD without endopeptidases. In the third phase, fourteen patients without histological changes in the duodenal biopsy received 7 g gluten with either a placebo or AN-PEP for 2 weeks. No adverse effects were observed, and the scores on the quality of life questionnaires were highest of the three phases. The primary objective was to detect histological alterations. In the first phase, two patients presented with histological changes according to Marsh classification. In the third phase, in the placebo group, two patients presented as Marsh grade 2, and five patients had an increased number of intraepithelial lymphocytes. In the group treated with AN-PEP, only one patient exhibited worse histological scores, suggesting that AN-PEP was not effective in the prevention of mucosal damage induced by 7 g gluten per day. Nevertheless, it is necessary to assess whether AN-PEP is effective against lower doses of gluten or as a pretreatment before foods containing traces of gluten. Currently, the pharmacological process of AN-PEP has been interrupted and it is now available as a nutritional supplement.

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Nevertheless, another second-line PEP currently in development is KumaMax. Although the actual development is phase I, this glutenase has a power 100 times higher than IMGX 003 [95].

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## 5. INTRALUMINAL THERAPIES

### a) DETOXIFICATION OF GLUTEN USING DIGESTIVE PROTEASES

The hydrolysis of gluten proteins is difficult due to the presence of high concentrations of proline and glutamine. These amino acids inhibit proteolysis by gastric and pancreatic enzymes and by endopeptidases and exopeptidases of the intestinal brush border [82]. The partial digestion of gluten peptides produces large oligopeptides, such as 33-mer and 26-mer, which have a high affinity for HLA-DQ2 or DQ8. These oligopeptides are innocuous in most people but are responsible for CD pathogenesis. Hence, a potential treatment for CD is the use of extrinsic enzymes to hydrolyze these oligopeptides to smaller sizes and decrease their recognition by the immune system. Prolyl endopeptidases (PEPs) can hydrolyze peptide bonds between a carboxyl group and an internal proline residue that are not hydrolyzed by digestive enzymes [83, 84]. Therefore, the dietary administration of PEP concomitant with gluten is a possible

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differences in symptoms between the two groups. The degree of histological damage in duodenal biopsies from patients with CD who received ALV003 was lower than that in the placebo group [94], suggesting that ALV003 could prevent histological damage in patients who consumed moderate doses of gluten. A subsequent, larger (n=494) phase II study examined the effects of oral ALV003 on mucosal morphometric abnormalities in biopsies from patients with nonresponsive CD despite following a GFD for at least 1 year[95]. Patients were assigned randomly to receive placebo or ALV003 (100–900 mg/d for 12 or 24 weeks).The primary end point was a change in the villous height/crypt depth ratio but there were no significant differences between ALV003 and placebo groups in this outcome measure. All groups, including placebo, had significant improvements both in histologic and in symptom scores, indicating a trial effect of more stringent dietary gluten avoidance. A post hoc subgroup analysis of the data from this study found a reduction in celiac related symptoms in Transglutaminase seropositive subjects that was most evident in those receiving the highest dose of ALV003 (900 mg). This finding opens the way for additional evaluation of ALV003 in selected patients at higher risk for continued gluten exposure. However, there are several limitations to oral enzyme therapy. First, the apparent lack of efficacy may be the greatest limitation to its use in conventional clinical practice. Second, it is necessary to determine the quantity of enzyme supplement that needs to be administered, the ratio of endopeptidase administered relative to the amount of gluten ingested, and the length of therapy necessary to achieve the degradation of gluten-derived immunogenic peptides [85]. Recently, a Phase III clinical trial randomized, double-blind, controlled-placebo with 398 patients following a GFD for at least one year was efectuated. Patients were treated for 12 weeks with ALV003 or placebo. The severity of abdominal pain and bloating was reduced by 58% and 44%, respectively, in the cohort receiving the highest ALV003 dose (900 mg, n=14) relative to placebo (n=54)[96]. A metaanalysis tries to explain this fact[97]. Celiac patients in GFD might involuntary take small quantities of gluten that can be metabolize by these enzymes decreasing the symptomatology.

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Nevertheless, another second line PEP currently in development is KumaMax. Although the actual development is phase I, this glutenase has a power 100 times higher than IMGX-003[99].

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#### b) GLUTEN-SEQUESTERING POLYMERS (BL-7010)

An alternative to gluten detoxification is the oral use of polymer resins such as poly-hydroxyethyl-methacrylate-co-styrene-sulfonate (P-HEMA-co-ss) or BL-7010 [100, 101], which sequester intraluminal gliadin and consequently prevent the access of immunogenic gluten peptides to the intestinal mucosa. In vitro studies, **in murines**, have shown that this polymer agglutinates gliadin molecules and prevents their degradation. In vivo studies in transgenic HLA-DQ8 mice sensitized to gliadin demonstrated that the use of P-HEMA-co-ss decreased intestinal damage-[102]. However, it is necessary to determine whether this quench is specific to gliadin or if it may also block the availability of other nutrients. Indeed, it also remains to be confirmed whether gluten can be also effectively neutralized by this resin in vivo. In Phase I studies of this compound, the most common side effect was diarrhea.

#### c) GLUTEN-NEUTRALIZING ANTIBODIES

Potential problems related to the non-specificity of polymers are minimized if specific oral IgG antibodies that bind to and inactivate intraluminal antigens are used, as observed in other diseases, such as *Clostridium difficile* infection [103, 104]. Cow colostrum has been used because it is readily available and contains a high concentration of antibodies. Nonetheless, the lack of clinical efficacy of this type of antibody prevented its analysis in Phase I studies. The use of antibodies that neutralize the IgY gluten from hen's egg yolk has been proposed as a safe and effective therapy for patients with CD with mild or moderate symptoms due to short-term non-compliance with a GFD and who are not allergic to eggs [105]. Ten patients with mild to moderate symptoms received 1 g of antibodies daily during meals. This treatment had a good safety profile; the quality of life and associated symptoms improved, IgA anti-transglutaminase

antibody titer decreased, and the intestinal permeability to lactulose and mannitol was improved at 6 weeks [106]. These antibodies may be labeled as food additives and can be used as an adjuvant therapy that would not render the strict compliance with GFD unnecessary, but would allow short-term non-compliance (e.g., during trips, meetings, and social events) and improve the quality of life for patients.

## 5.6. IMMUNOMODULATION AND GLUTEN TOLERANCE

### a) HELMINTH THERAPY

Given that CD is triggered by the lack of immune tolerance to dietary antigens, corroborating the precepts of the hygiene hypothesis [107], several approaches have been used to modulate the immune system and desensitize its response to gluten. One of the strategies used to control the immunoregulatory activity is helminth therapy, predominantly with the pig roundworm *Trichuris suis* and the human hookworm *Necator americanus*, with variable success [108, 109]. Chronic infection with helminths, such as hookworms, has been proposed to alter the Th1 immune response, allowing the control of different inflammatory pathologies, including inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) and CD. However, the use of hookworms in Crohn's disease did not control the symptoms, limiting therefore its therapeutic usefulness [110]; notwithstanding, this strategy may be useful for the treatment of CD. In a double-blind, placebo-controlled study conducted for 21 weeks, patients with CD on a GFD were infected with *Necator americanus* and subsequently received a gluten-containing diet. Although there were no significant differences in clinical manifestations between both groups, patients with hookworm infections had less intestinal mucosal inflammation, decreased levels of IFN- $\gamma$ , IL-17, IL-23, and higher levels of IL-10 and TGF- $\beta$  [109]. Another study conducted for 52 weeks in 12 patients infected with *Necator americanus* after the controlled and gradual introduction of gluten in the diet reported the absence of histological lesions in the intestine and lower anti-transglutaminase antibody titers over time [111]. These findings suggested that long-term helminth infection in the intestine suppresses the immune response to gluten and does not cause severe side effects. Nevertheless, more studies are needed to confirm these findings and the safety of the treatment.

### b) INDUCTION OF MUCOSAL TOLERANCE

An alternative approach to desensitize the immune response to gluten is the direct induction of immune tolerance in the intestinal mucosa [112]. Using murine models (HLA-Q8\*) of CD, the peripheral immunization of the intestinal mucosa with  $\alpha$ -gliadin via the intranasal route decreased IFN- $\gamma$  levels and the proliferation of T lymphocytes, and increased the levels of IL-10

[113, 114]. Gliadin previously treated with *Lactococcus lactis* was administered together with a biodegradable polymer (TIMP) composed of lactic-co-glycolic-acid with gliadin in its nucleus (TIMP-GLI), allowing the compound to reach the lymphoid tissues, where the APCs are located. However, it was not possible to determine whether this strategy could suppress the immune response of T-cells to other gluten epitopes. Currently, the safety and pharmacokinetic profiles of intravenous TIMP-GLI in patients is under assessment in a Phase I trial (NCT03486990). In this trial 0,1- 0,5-1-2-4 y 8mg/kg de TIMP-GLI are administrated intravenously and it is evaluated in 48 hours its side effects, electrocardiogram, proinflammatory cytokine in blood and in urine determination in order to ensurance the safety of the product.

c) VACCINATION: NEXVAX2

The objective of immunotherapy is the induccion-complete recovery of immune gluten tolerance ~~to gluten~~, which therefore renders this approach attractive to both patients and researchers. The efficacy of vaccines against allergic diseases for which antigenic peptides are known has already been demonstrated. The characterization of the gluten epitope repertoire enable the development of the drug nexvax2, which induces antigen-specific regulatory T-cell populations that decrease the pro-inflammatory activity mediated by classical T lymphocytes [115]. This vaccine is administered subcutaneously and contains three peptides derived from  $\alpha$ -gliadin,  $\omega$ -gliadin, and hornein, which collectively cover around 60% of the total immunogenic epitopes found in the gluten. Using murine models, such approach decreased T-cell proliferation together with the levels of IL-2 and IFN- $\gamma$  by increasing the levels of regulatory T-cells [116]. The vaccine was evaluated in two multicenter, double-blind phase I studies with a hundred and eight and twenty-eight patients with CD following a GFD, respectively, who were randomized to receive nexvax2 at different doses (60  $\mu$ g, 90  $\mu$ g, 150  $\mu$ g, and higher doses according to the patient's tolerance) or placebo. Different routes and times of administration were analyzed, being the primary objective the evaluation of side effects. Gastrointestinal symptoms, including nausea, vomiting, abdominal distention, or abdominal pain, occurred in 50% of patients between 2 and 5 hours of the administration of the first dose. However, these adverse effects were less frequent in subsequent doses, which indicated a specific immune tolerance to nexvax2. None of the evaluated patients presented a positive titer for anti-transglutaminase antibodies or anti-deamidated gliadin during treatment. Patients who received 150–300  $\mu$ g underwent a duodenal biopsy between 15 and 28 days after the beginning of the study, and no changes in intestinal histology or lymphocyte number were observed [117]. These results evidenced that the intradermal administration of 150  $\mu$ g of nexvax2 twice per week for 8 weeks could modulate the immune response to these immunogenic peptides without causing duodenal damage.

Although Goel et al. [117] analyzed the safety of this therapeutic approach, new experimental designs are necessary to fully confirm its efficacy. Indeed, it is important to note that it is needed to determine the amount of gluten that can be consumed by patients vaccinated with nexvax2, together with the duration of its protective effect. Also, a major limitation of vaccination is that it is only suitable for patients who harbor the HLA-DQ2.5 haplotype; as the peptides used for sensitization are only recognized by heterodimers [118]. This therefore renders at least one-third of the patients without the possibility of benefiting from this therapeutic approach. Hence, it is necessary to identify the specific epitopes that are recognized by all patients and that allow the safe reintroduction of gluten in the diet [54], regardless of the HLA haplotype.

#### **6.7. MODULATION OF INTESTINAL PERMEABILITY**

##### **a) MODULATION OF THE TIGHT JUNCTIONS BETWEEN ENTEROCYTES: ZONULIN RECEPTOR ANTAGONISTS**

In healthy individuals, the tight junctions between intestinal epithelial cells control the movement of substances from the lumen of the gastrointestinal tract to the circulation. Tight junctions are impaired in patients with CD and in their first-degree relatives, causing an increased intestinal permeability, which ultimately increases the transfer of gluten peptides to the lamina propria, where they can trigger immune responses [119, 120]. Zonulin is a precursor of prehaptoglobin-2, which regulates epithelial permeability and is overexpressed in the intestine of patients with CD compared with healthy subjects [121]. The effect of zonulin is similar to that of the zonula occludens toxin (ZOT), which is secreted by *Vibrio cholerae*. Zonulin decreases intestinal permeability through the disruption of the tight junctions [121]. Lammers et al. [122] shown that gliadin binds to the CXCR3 receptor and triggers the synthesis of zonulin, which enhances an increase in intestinal permeability. Larazotide acetate or INN-201 (previously known as AT1001), an octapeptide derived from ZOT, antagonizes the action of zonulin by blocking the CXCR3 receptor and preventing therefore the intestinal damage mediated by ZOT [123]. A randomized, double-blind Phase 1 clinical trial evaluated the safety and efficacy of this orally administered drug: gluten associated with AT1001 was administered to fourteen patients with CD for 4 days consecutively, being these patients compared with a group of seven patients who received placebo (without gluten) [124]. Intestinal permeability in both groups was determined through the measurement of the excretion of lactulose and mannitol. Upon stimulation with gluten, intestinal permeability remained intact in the intervention group, and the number of adverse events, gastrointestinal symptoms, and inflammatory markers were not increased in this group compared with the placebo group. A Phase IIb study evaluated a hundred and eighty-four patients with CD in remission, in which the patients received ascending doses of

AT1001 followed by 3 g gluten daily for 42 days. Although sixty-one patients showed significant improvement in gastrointestinal symptoms and a lower serological titer, the primary objective of the study (to assess improvements in intestinal permeability by the decreased levels of lactulose and mannitol in the feces) was not achieved [125]. Other Phase IIb studies determined the efficacy of different doses of larazotide [126, 127, 128]. A preliminary trial (CLIN1001-004) [127] evaluated different doses of AT1001 (0.25, 1, 4, and 8 mg three times per day) in eighty-six patients with CD in remission following a GFD for 6 months. Patients were randomized to receive either larazotide or placebo. The excretion of lactulose and mannitol was lower in the patients treated with 1 mg of the drug, but the intergroup differences were not statistically significant. Moreover, these patients exhibited better clinical response and an IgA anti-transglutaminase antibody titer of less than 10 IU/mL. In a second trial (CLIN 1001-006) [126], a hundred and eighty-six patients with CD following a GFD for 6 months were randomized to receive either larazotide (1, 4, or 8 mg three times per day) or placebo. The excretion of lactulose and mannitol and clinical symptoms were lower in the group that received 1 mg AT1001, although this difference was not statistically significant. Furthermore, the largest study conducted on this subject (CLIN 1001-012) analyzed the efficacy of larazotide in three hundred and forty-two patients with CD following a GFD for more than 1 year with persistent symptoms [128]. This study did not use high doses of gluten, and the participants were randomized to receive either larazotide (0.5, 1, or 2 mg three times per day) or placebo. The treatment with 0.5 mg significantly reduced digestive and extra-digestive symptoms (especially headache and asthenia) compared with placebo, demonstrating an inverse relationship between the therapeutic effect and the administered dose; i.e., lower doses were more effective than higher doses. The possible explanations for this dose-response relationship are the desensitization of the receptor or the aggregation of the peptide at higher doses leading to a lower therapeutic effect. Therefore, larazotide may be a novel treatment for managing the symptoms of patients with CD on a GFD and improving their quality of life [125].

## **7.8. MODULATION OF THE ADAPTIVE IMMUNE RESPONSE**

### **a) TRANSGLUTAMINASE INHIBITORS**

Tissue transglutaminase type 2 (TG2) is an intracellular enzyme that plays a fundamental role in the pathogenesis of CD. Gluten-derived peptides are presented to T-cells by APCs via HLA-DQ2 or HLA-DQ8 molecules. However, gliadin peptides need to be deaminated by TG2 to be properly accommodated in the HLA-DQ2/8 bound, which allows a more efficient antigenic presentation and, therefore, the trigger of an adaptive immune response. The inhibition of gliadin deamination by TG2 inhibitors reduces the binding affinity of the peptides to APCs [51]. TG2

inhibitors are classified by their mechanism of action as competitive cinnamoyl triazole, reversible, or irreversible. Competitive cinnamoyl triazole inhibitors inhibit the activity of TG2, competing and blocking the access of the substrate to the active site without covalent modification of the enzyme. In contrast, irreversible TG2 inhibitors bind irreversibly to the enzyme, causing covalent modification. Rauhavirta et al. [129] demonstrated that the direct toxic effects of predigested gliadin (trans-epithelial resistance, cytoskeletal reorganization, expression of binding proteins, and phosphorylation of the extracellular-signal regulated kinase) in intestinal cultures were reduced in the presence of two irreversible TG2 inhibitors (R281 and R283). In addition, the authors measured the secretion of TG2 autoantibodies in cultures of mucosal biopsies of the small intestine from patients with CD and quantified the levels of regulatory T-cells and Ki-67-positive crypt cells following exposure to gluten. R281 increased the number of CD25-positive cells, regulatory T-cells, and the proliferation of crypt cells, but did not significantly affect the secretion of antibodies in biopsies of patients with CD. Although these results are promising, TG2 is a ubiquitous enzyme and its sequence is similar to that of other types of transglutaminases, non-selective inhibitors may present systemic side effects. This limitation was overcome through the development of three soluble transglutaminase inhibitors (ZED1098, ZED1219, and ZED1227) highly selective to intestinal TG2, which increased their therapeutic utility in CD. However, TG2 deficiency in murine models has been associated with splenomegaly, the production of autoantibodies, and the development of glomerulonephritis [130], suggesting the importance of caution in the development of therapeutic approaches focused on inhibition of TG2. [Actualy, phase 2 trials on tgase-inhibitor ZED1227 are currently recruiting patients. \(EudraCT Number: 2017-002241-30\)](#)

#### b) HLA-DQ2 BLOCKERS

The blockade of HLA-DQ2 or DQ8 molecules is a promising therapeutic strategy to prevent the activation of gluten by the immune system. This therapy has been previously evaluated in other diseases associated with the HLA system although it has been ineffective. This is likely due to the difficulty of specifically targeting the drugs to the affected tissues. Nevertheless, drugs can reach the intestinal epithelium of patients with CD via the oral route [131]. In this regard, several peptides with a high affinity for HLA-DQ2 have been designed by amino acid substitution and dimerization or inclusion of the aldehyde groups [20]. These peptide antagonists have shown moderate efficacy in the inhibition of the production of IFN- $\gamma$  in cell cultures of patients with CD,



demonstrating a potential to decrease the gluten-induced activation of T-cells. The main drawback of HLA blockers is the ability to maintain partial agonist effects on gliadin-stimulated T-cells, which causes an exacerbated immune response. In addition, the binding affinity of most antagonist peptides is not strong enough to completely block the access of stimulatory gliadin peptides to HLA-DQ2. Consequently, efforts have been intensified to identify optimal HLA-DQ2 antagonists, particularly those based on peptides, with 50 times higher binding affinity to HLA-DQ2 than the immunodominant gluten peptides. Nonetheless, it is unknown whether this type of HLA-DQ2 blocker can reach its target in the lamina propria or compete with gluten-derived peptides, and whether these blockers cause hypersensitivity reactions or immunosuppression that lead to secondary infections. At present, preclinical studies on the inhibition of HLA-DQ2 are under development to identify and evaluate the efficacy of a non-toxic, non-immunogenic, and highly specific antagonist with a high affinity for HLA DQ2.

#### **8.9 OTHER EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENTS**

Although the described alternative strategies to GFD in patients with CD are specific for this disease, it should be stressed that CD is immune-mediated. Therefore, it is not surprising that the inflammatory processes occurring in these patients share mechanistic and functional similarities with other inflammatory diseases of the gastrointestinal tract, including IBD. Most of the current research in new drugs for intestinal inflammation focuses on IBD; however, in contrast to CD, in which it is possible to control the immune response via the GFD, some of the drugs designed to desensitize the immune response in patients with IBD may be effective in CD.

These drugs include the humanized monoclonal antibody specifically directed against integrin  $\alpha 4\beta 7$  (vedolizumab), which inhibits leukocyte migration and adhesion to the gastrointestinal tract and may therefore be an effective treatment for CD. In this respect, a clinical trial (NCT02929316) to evaluate the benefit of blocking the leukocyte migration and adhesion to the intestinal mucosa is currently underway. Other drugs that block leukocyte migration to the gastrointestinal tract include CCR9 receptor inhibitors that, in contrast to integrin  $\alpha 4\beta 7$ , which inhibits cellular migration to the entire gastrointestinal tract, specifically block immune migration to the small intestine, the site of inflammation in CD [132].

The inhibition of the CD40-CD40L interaction, anti-IFN- $\gamma$  and anti-TNF- $\alpha$  therapies, JAK-Stat inhibitors, and IL-10 and IL-22 agonists are potential therapeutic options that were tested for IBD and which are under evaluation for RCD. Similarly, given the essential role of IL-15 in the pathogenesis of celiac disease, its neutralization is being explored in CD and RCD. It is given that the proliferation of premalignant and malignant lymphocytes depends on IL-15. A Phase II

clinical trial evaluated the efficacy of the anti-IL-15 monoclonal antibody AMG714 in patients with rheumatoid arthritis and psoriasis, finding that the treatment was effective for rheumatoid arthritis [82]. Phase IIa clinical trials of AMG 714 for CD (NCT02637141) and RCD II (NCT02633020) were concluded; the preliminary results were presented during the 2018 DDW meeting. In both studies, the effect of IL-15 versus placebo was determined over 12 weeks in CD and 2 weeks in RCD II. The monoclonal antibody AMG714, named as PRV 015, showed an excellent tolerance with a significant decrease of symptoms and duodenal lymphocyte infiltrate in CD patients. In those with RCD II, AMG 714 successfully blocked the pathogenic process, as it prevented T-cell clonal expansion. Phase IIb trials has been announced to demonstrate the efficacy of IL-15 antagonist in CD with failure to GFD response and RCD.

Cladribine (2-CdA) is a synthetic purine nucleoside with a cytotoxic effect and represents a promising therapy for RCD II. In addition, recent studies assessed the effectiveness of allogeneic bone marrow transplantation for the treatment of ECR II or EATL because of its high therapeutic potential, despite the possibility of several immunological complications. Furthermore, therapeutics with mesenchymal stem cells may be a useful option because of their low immunogenic potential and the absence of co-stimulatory molecules. Therefore, this therapeutic modality has potential applications in the treatment of RCD II and EATL; however, no clinical trials to date have evaluated its efficacy.

#### **9.10. EXPERT OPINION**

Strict compliance to the GFD is currently the only effective therapy for CD. Although patients with type I or type II RCD present a premalignant profile and therefore require active immunomodulation to reduce disease development, the restoration of intestinal homeostasis can be quickly and easily achieved in most patients with classical CD by strict compliance with a GFD. Moreover, in most cases, a GFD is more cost-effective than active interventions with drug therapies. Therefore, the pharmacological treatment of CD requires a cost-benefit ratio similar to that of GFDs. Nevertheless, the restriction of gluten consumption is difficult for some patients, especially those who are diagnosed as an adult and must make lifestyle changes. Moreover, compliance is challenging because of economic reasons (higher cost of gluten-free products), technical reasons (purchase of food products with proven safety and no possibility of cross-contamination), and social reasons (incompatibility of diet with lifestyle). In addition, despite adherence to a GFD, some patients have symptoms and/or histological lesions even in the absence of RCD. Although it is true that a GFD is the preferred approach for all patients, it should not be forgotten that GFD can be entirely or partially complemented with other therapies. Three

potential alternative or complementary strategies to GFDs can be adopted, depending on whether one seeks a better quality of gluten-free foods, a specific immunomodulation strategy, or a complete intervention.

The more significant limitations of GFDs are that gluten-free products are more expensive and their organoleptic properties may be different from those of traditional gluten-containing products. Therefore, the modification of dietary gluten (described in Section 4a) would allow the development of better and/or cheaper gluten-free products. This strategy would not therefore eliminate the need for GFD, but could make it more attractive for patients, thereby increasing the rate of adherence to treatment.

The therapies discussed in Sections 4b, 5, 7, 8, and 9 are based on immunomodulation. In these cases, the long-term adoption of different strategies is needed to suppress the active immune response to gluten. These therapies are therefore less cost-effective than full compliance to the GFD, but may be beneficial when used in a timely manner. This would be the case for instance of newly diagnosed patients where complementary to the GFD, immunomodulation would improve the clinical and mucosal recovery in the short-term. Furthermore, the patients who achieve clinical and histological remission may benefit from the withdrawal of the medication and remain exclusively on a GFD, although they may be treated appropriately in situations in which dietary compliance is beyond their control (e.g., leisure and travel).

Last, but not least, the strategies detailed in Section 6 aim to induce oral tolerance to dietary antigens. In contrast to prophylactic measures, these approaches would be curative and permanently eliminate the need for dietary compliance. This option is the most desired by patients, but has the most difficulties and restrictions, as previously discussed.

Notwithstanding, progress has been made in recent years in the development of new therapeutics for CD, as evidenced by the different approaches described in this review. Therefore, it is expected that shortly, alternative or complementary tools for the treatment of GFD will be available to patients with CD and will improve their quality of life.

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