

## Forum Review

# Redox Imbalance and Its Control in HIV Infection

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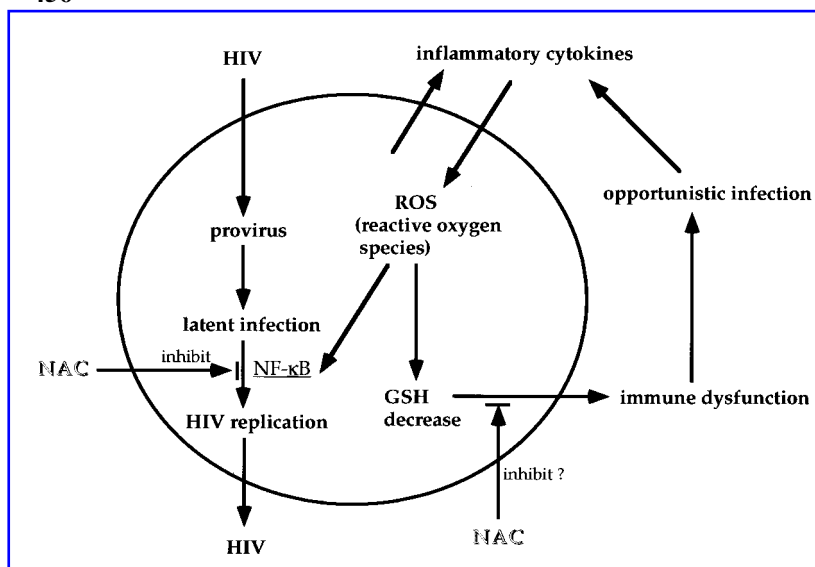
### ABSTRACT

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)-infected individuals are suffering from systemic oxidative stress. Reactive oxygen species act as second messengers for the activation of nuclear factor- $\kappa$ B (NF- $\kappa$ B), which augments the replication of HIV. Intracellular levels of glutathione (GSH), a major cytosolic antioxidant, in T cells decrease during the disease progression. Another redox-regulating molecule, thioredoxin (TRX), is also transiently down-regulated in the cells by acute HIV infection. In contrast, plasma levels of TRX are elevated in the late stage of HIV infection. Intracellular GSH and plasma TRX can be biomarkers to predict the prognosis of the disease. *N*-Acetylcysteine (NAC), a prodrug of cysteine that is necessary for GSH synthesis, has been used for HIV infection to prevent the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B and the replication of HIV. NAC shows some beneficial effects for HIV-infected individuals, although the intracellular GSH levels in lymphocytes are not significantly restored. The control of imbalanced redox status by antioxidants may be beneficial for the quality of life in HIV infection even in the era after the effective therapy with protease inhibitors has been applied. Redox control will be an important therapeutic strategy for oxidative stress-associated disorders including HIV infection. *Antioxid. Redox Signal.* 4, 455–464.

### GLUTATHIONE DEFICIENCY IN HIV INFECTION

**G**LUTATHIONE (GSH), a cysteine-containing tripeptide ( $\gamma$ -glutamyl-cysteinyl-glycine), is a major cytosolic antioxidant that is present in the cells at millimolar concentrations. It was first reported by Dröge *et al.* that human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)-infected individuals have lower levels of cystine and methionine in plasma and lower levels of GSH in peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) (21, 23). Buhl *et al.* also reported that total and reduced glutathione (GSH + GSSG and GSH) levels decrease in plasma and bronchoalveolar lavage fluids in HIV-infected individuals (10). Folks *et al.* have suggested that the inflammatory cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  play important roles in the progression of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) (27). Roederer *et al.* found that *N*-acetylcysteine (NAC), the acetylated cysteine that is converted into cysteine required for GSH synthesis, inhibits the cytokine-stimulated replication of HIV and activation of nuclear fac-

tor- $\kappa$ B (NF- $\kappa$ B) which controls the transcription of genes for HIV replication (68, 78). Furthermore, they revealed that GSH levels are different in subpopulations of PBMCs by fluorescence-activated cell sorter (FACS) analysis using monochlorobimane and that T cells are subdivided into high-GSH cells and low-GSH cells in healthy individuals. Thus, they found that high-GSH T cells are selectively lost in HIV-infected individuals (69). The intracellular GSH levels determined by FACS-measured glutathione-*S*-bimane fluorescence (GSB) in T cells decrease during the disease progression of AIDS (79). The suppressive effects of NAC on the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B and HIV replication were confirmed by other groups (35, 48, 65). Meanwhile, Schreck *et al.* reported that reactive oxygen species (ROS) serve as intracellular messengers for the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B and replication of HIV (75). These studies suggested that oxidative stress caused by elevated inflammatory cytokines and decreased GSH-dependent antioxidant functions in HIV infection promotes the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B and replication of HIV, resulting in the disease progression associated with the



**FIG. 1. Oxidative stress and GSH deficiency in HIV infection.** Plasma inflammatory cytokine levels are elevated in HIV-infected individuals. ROS induced by inflammatory cytokines enhance the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B and HIV replication, which are inhibited by NAC. Intracellular GSH deficiency introduces the immune dysfunction and opportunistic infection, which lead to the elevation of inflammatory cytokines. Modified from Roederer *et al.*, 1993 (71).

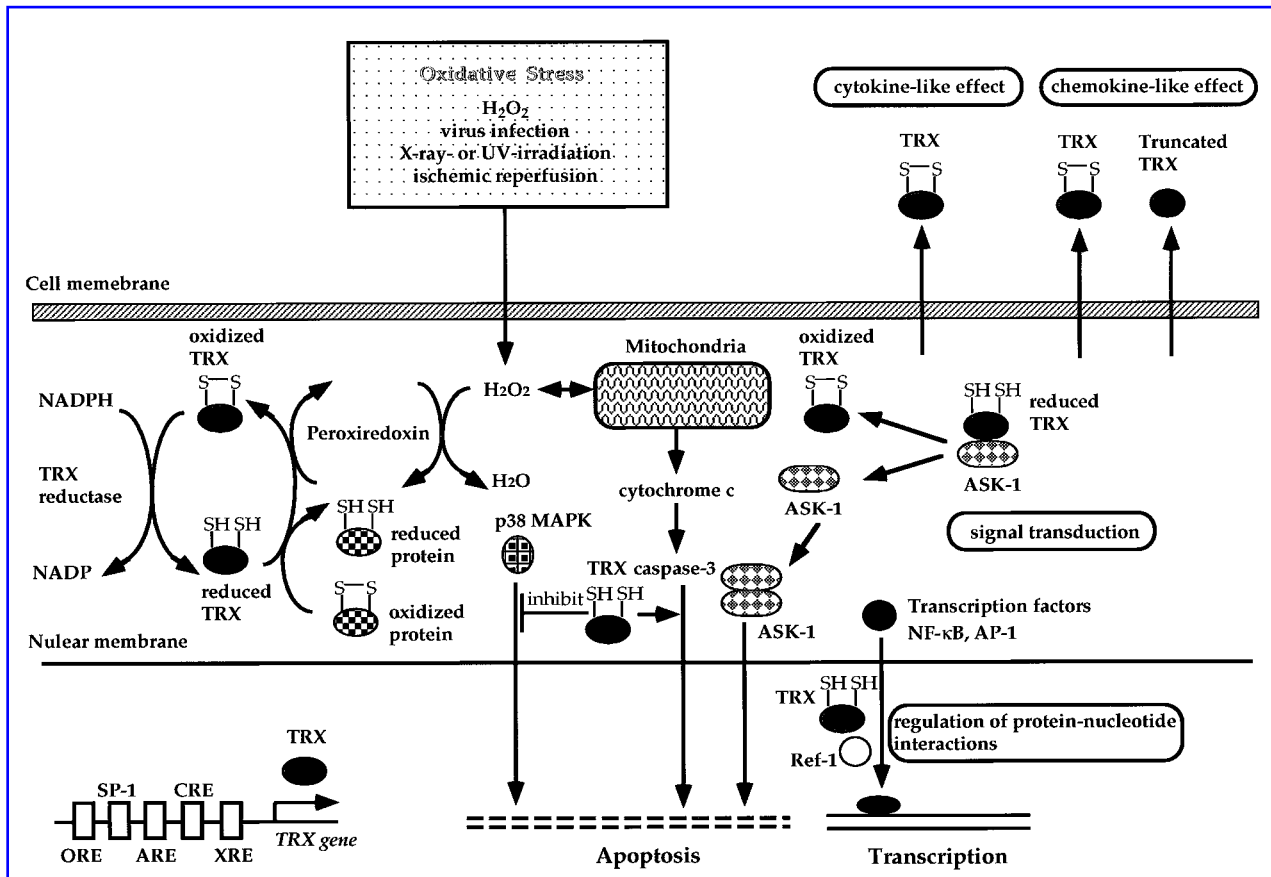
CD4<sup>+</sup> T-cell loss, the immunodeficiency, and the opportunistic infection. Therefore, it was supposed that GSH replenishment might have a potential to shut down the malignant cycle in the disease progression of AIDS (Fig. 1). Thus, GSH replenishment with NAC provided a rationale for the treatment of AIDS (19, 22, 70, 71, 79). In addition to NAC, GSH precursors such as oxothiazolidine carboxylate, which is converted into cysteine by 5-oxoprolinase, were proposed to inhibit the replication of HIV (6, 66, 77). Recently, *S*-adenosylmethionine has been also reported to increase GSH and to be a potential for GSH deficiency in HIV infection (11). The reason why ROS levels are elevated and intracellular GSH levels decreased in HIV-infected cells is still not fully understood. Roederer *et al.* suggested that inflammatory cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  may enhance the intracellular production of ROS, which leads to the decrease of intracellular antioxidant GSH levels (70). Alternatively, the down-modulation of manganese superoxide dismutase by HIV tat may partly explain the mechanism (26). More recently, Breitkreutz *et al.* reported that HIV-infected patients experience a massive cysteine catabolism in the skeletal muscle tissues that drains largely the GSH pool (9). According to the data from the clinical trial by Herzenberg *et al.*, GSH deficiency is associated with impaired survival in HIV disease (32). Low intracellular GSH (FACS-measured GSB) levels may be a parameter to predict poor survival in HIV-infected subjects. Especially, GSH deficiency in CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells is associated with marked decreased survival.

## THIOREDOXIN IN HIV INFECTION

### *Redox regulation by thioredoxin (TRX) and its related molecules*

TRX is a 12-kDa multifunctional protein with a redox-active disulfide/dithiol within the conserved active site sequence: -Cys-Gly-Pro-Cys- (36). Human TRX was cloned as adult T cell leukemia (ATL)-derived factor, which was originally reported as an inducer of interleukin-2 receptor/ $\alpha$  chain

(81, 85, 89), or 3B6-interleukin-1, which was an autocrine growth factor for Epstein-Barr virus-transformed cells (86, 88). Intracellular concentration of TRX is at about the micromolar level, whereas GSH is existing at the millimolar level. Therefore, GSH plays a major role as an intracellular antioxidant in a physiological condition and TRX is induced by a variety of oxidative stress including GSH deficiency. However, recent studies have shown that TRX is more effective than GSH in reducing some specific substrates in the redox regulation of signal transductions. Several biological functions of TRX are schemed in Fig. 2. The promoter sequence of the human TRX gene contains oxidative stress-responsive element, cyclic AMP-responsive element, xenobiotics responsive element, and antioxidant responsive element (42, 56). Reduced TRX catalyzes the reduction of the protein disulfide, and oxidized TRX is reduced by NADPH and TRX reductase. TRX-dependent peroxidase, peroxiredoxin (Prx), acts as an endogenous antioxidant, as well as GSH peroxidase (13). Especially, TRX plays a crucial role as an extracellular antioxidant possibly together with the secreted isoform of Prx, Prx IV, because extracellular GSH concentration is limited (7, 60). The mechanism of the cytoprotective effect of extracellular TRX is still to be clarified. There is accumulating evidence that TRX is involved in many cellular responses, including redox regulation of signal transduction (53). TRX negatively regulates the activation of p38 mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) (31) and apoptosis signal-regulating kinase-1 (ASK-1) (73). TRX regulates redox-sensitive transcription factors such as AP-1 and NF- $\kappa$ B in cooperation with Redox factor-1 in the nucleus more effectively than the GSH-dependent system (33, 46, 61). Overexpression of TRX in the cytoplasm suppresses the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B, whereas overexpressed TRX in the nucleus promotes the DNA binding of NF- $\kappa$ B (34). It is reported that the TRX system composed of TRX reductase, TRX, and Prx is deeply involved in the regulation of activation of NF- $\kappa$ B, which plays a key role in the replication of HIV (39). Therefore, it is supposed that the dysregulation of the TRX system may be associated with the replication of HIV and the disease progress in HIV infection.



**FIG. 2. Biological effects of TRX.** TRX is induced by a variety of oxidative stresses via oxidative stress responsive element (ORE), antioxidant responsive element (ARE), cyclic AMP responsive element (CRE), xenobiotics responsive element (XRE), and SP-1 in the promoter sequence of TRX gene. Oxidized TRX is reduced by NADPH and TRX reductase. TRX and Prx act as radical scavengers. Transcription factors such as NF-κB and AP-1 are regulated by TRX and Ref-1. TRX also regulates the signal transduction in apoptosis by the suppression of p38 MAPK or regulation of caspase-3. Reduced TRX is a negative regulator of ASK-1, and ASK-1 is activated when TRX is oxidized and dissociated from ASK-1. TRX and truncated TRX are secreted from the cells and show cytokine-like and chemokine-like effects. The dithiol-disulfide exchange may be necessary for the signal transduction from extracellular TRX. The target molecules on the cell surface should be clarified.

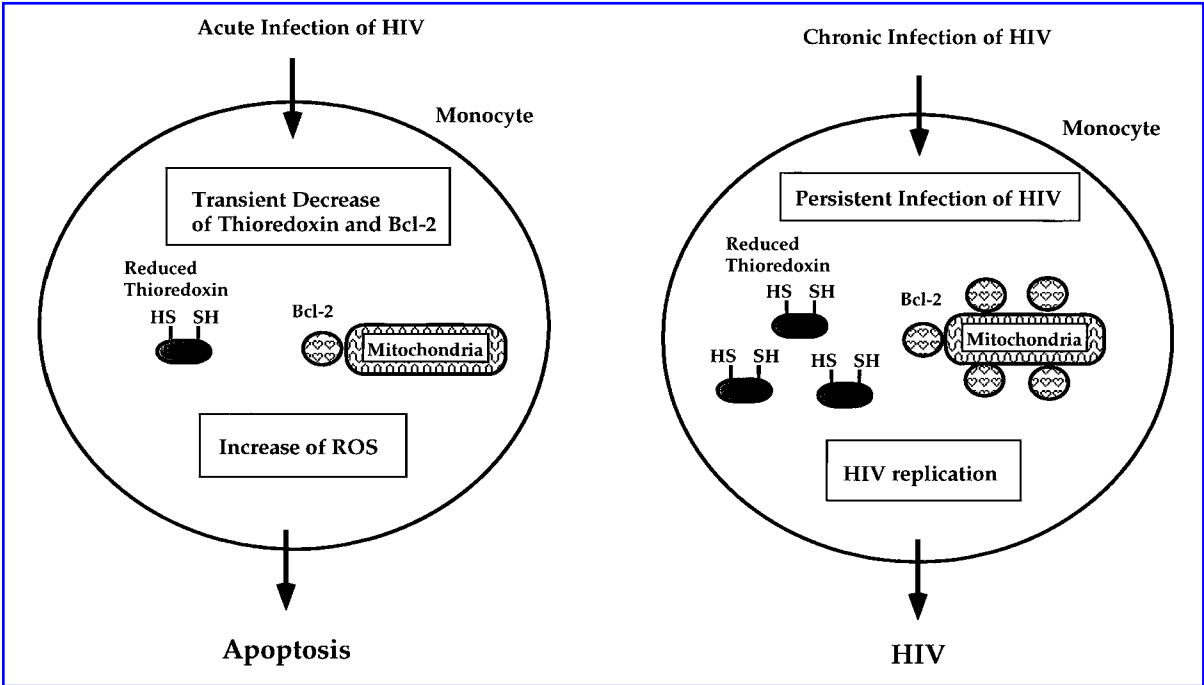
### TRX imbalance in HIV infection

Since the discovery of human TRX in the supernatant of human T-cell leukemia virus type-I (HTLV-I)-transformed ATL cells, we have found that TRX is overexpressed in HTLV-I-transformed cells. This prompted us to investigate the expression of TRX in another retroviral HIV infection. TRX high-expressing cells were significantly lost in the lymph nodes from AIDS patients (45). Acute infection of HIV on HTLV-I positive cells significantly decreased the expression of TRX inversely correlated with p24 antigen levels. Further study revealed that acute infection of HIV on monocytic cells induces a transient down-regulation of TRX and Bcl-2 and cellular apoptosis (2). NAC prevents the down-regulation of TRX and Bcl-2, suggesting that it is caused by oxidative stress induced by acute infection of HIV. The transient down-regulation of TRX and Bcl-2 was recovered from day 9 and day 11, respectively, after HIV infection toward a persistent infection. These results suggest that increased HIV replication is associated with oxidative stress and the transient

down-regulations of TRX and Bcl-2 in monocytes. Moreover, hydrogen peroxide production is correlated with the viral load and the enhanced hydrogen peroxide production is associated with the decreased levels of TRX and Bcl-2 in monocytes from HIV-infected individuals whose CD4 cell counts are  $>200/\text{mm}^3$ . In contrast, in patients with AIDS, Bcl-2 levels return to normal and TRX levels are higher than in healthy controls (2). Restoration of these antioxidant and antiapoptotic molecules may explain the reason why monocyte numbers remain relatively stable throughout the disease (Fig. 3).

### Plasma TRX levels as a marker for oxidative stress

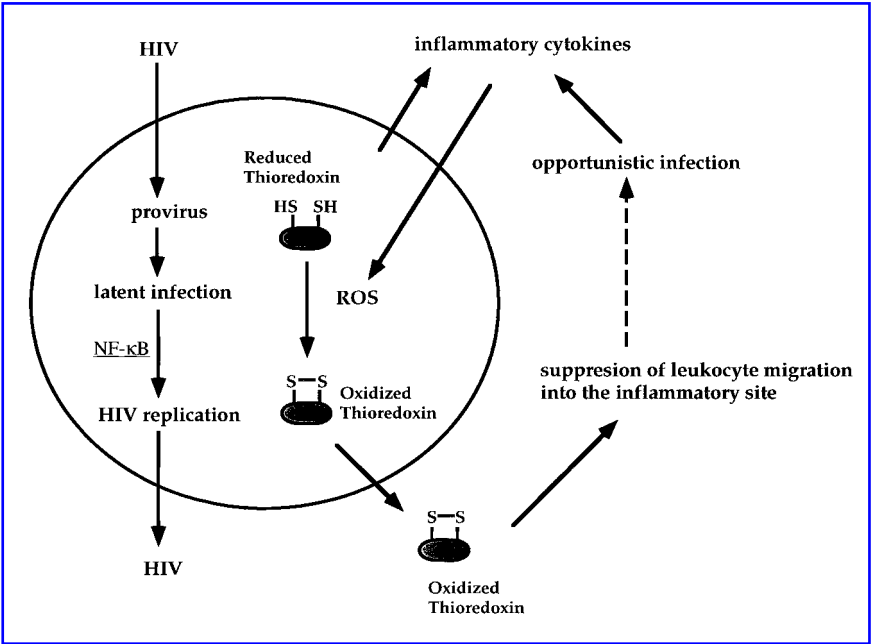
Plasma levels of TRX were significantly elevated in HIV-infected individuals compared with uninfected healthy volunteers (26.1 ng/ml,  $n = 136$  versus 12.3 ng/ml,  $n = 47$ ) (52). Roughly 25% (34/136) of HIV-infected individuals had plasma TRX levels more than the highest level in uninfected individuals (37 ng/ml), which means more than threefold higher levels of uninfected controls. Plasma levels of TRX



**FIG. 3. TRX and Bcl-2 in monocytes in acute or persistent infection of HIV.** Acute infection of HIV introduces the transient down-regulation of TRX and Bcl-2 associated with the increase of intracellular ROS, which results in the apoptosis of the cells. In persistent infection of HIV in monocytes, Bcl-2 levels return to normal, and TRX levels are higher than in healthy controls. Restoration of TRX and Bcl-2 may explain why monocytes remain stable during persistent infection of HIV.

were inversely correlated with intracellular GSH (FACS-measured GSB) levels in T cells, suggesting that oxidative stress in HIV infection leads to decreases of intracellular GSH levels and increases of plasma TRX levels. Roughly one third of HIV-infected individuals (57/173) had plasma TRX levels above 30 ng/ml, whereas <5% (2/46) of uninfected individuals had above this level. Among HIV-infected individuals whose CD4 counts were <200 /mm<sup>3</sup>, Kaplan–Meier survival analysis showed that subjects with elevated TRX levels (>30

ng/ml) died more shortly than subjects with normal TRX levels (<30 ng/ml) (54). Taken together with the previous report showing that low intracellular GSH levels are also associated with impaired survival in HIV disease (32), these results suggest that elevation of plasma TRX and GSH deficiency in lymphocytes reflect massive oxidative stress and poor prognosis in HIV infection. Most of TRX in plasma is shown to be in the oxidized form (54). Our recent study shows that circulating TRX inhibits the neutrophil recruitment into the in-



**FIG. 4. Elevated plasma TRX levels associated with poor prognosis of HIV infection.** TRX may be oxidized by the oxidative stress in HIV-infected cells and secreted into plasma. Circulating TRX suppresses the leukocyte migration into the inflammatory site, which may augment the incidence of opportunistic infection.

flammatory site in the mouse air pouch model (57). Therefore, it is possible that elevation of plasma TRX levels inhibits the neutrophil function as a primary response against infection and worsens the opportunistic infection in such immunocompromised hosts as AIDS, which may explain the reason why elevation of plasma TRX is associated with poor prognosis in AIDS (Fig. 4). However, plasma levels of TRX are also elevated in several oxidative stress-associated disorders other than AIDS. For examples, plasma/serum TRX levels are elevated in subjects with ischemia-reperfusion injury (54), rheumatoid arthritis (47, 90), hepatitis C virus infection (80), severe burns (1), and cancers (49, 55). It is supposed that TRX secretion into plasma may be a kind of host defense response against oxidative stress. Although the host immune function is not impaired, the inhibition of neutrophil migration into the inflammatory site by circulating TRX may suppress the inflammation. Actually, plasma TRX levels are not associated with the prognosis in these diseases other than AIDS. Even in HIV infection, plasma levels of TRX are not associated with the prognosis in the individuals whose CD4 cell counts are  $>200/\text{mm}^3$ . Therefore, elevated plasma levels of TRX may be associated with the impaired host defense only in the immunocompromised host such as those whose CD4 cell counts are  $<200/\text{mm}^3$ . In conclusion, measuring plasma TRX levels is one of the useful tools to see how much the host is suffering from oxidative stress. Plasma levels of the truncated form of TRX, which was originally reported to be an eosinophil cytotoxicity enhancing factor (76), remain to be analyzed in HIV infection, because the truncated form of TRX has been reported to be produced in HIV-infected macrophages (58), to be secreted by inflammatory cytokines (72), and to be present in human plasma (64).

## REDOX CONTROL THERAPY FOR HIV INFECTION

### NAC administration in HIV infection

NAC is a prodrug of cysteine capable of GSH synthesis, promoting detoxification, and acting directly as free radical scavengers. NAC has been clinically used to reverse GSH deficiency induced by acetaminophen or cyclophosphamide without any significant side effect. Therefore, NAC was proposed to be used for replenishment of GSH in HIV infection (19, 22, 70, 71, 79). However, the results of clinical trials to show that NAC could restore the intracellular GSH levels were controversial. De Quay *et al.* reported that oral administration of NAC restored the plasma cysteine levels and intracellular GSH levels 2 h after intake (17). Akerlund *et al.* reported that NAC restored the plasma cysteine levels in HIV-infected individuals with CD4 cell counts above  $200/\text{mm}^3$ , but failed to restore them in those whose CD4 cell counts  $<200/\text{mm}^3$  (3, 4). Witschi *et al.* reported that NAC failed to restore the GSH levels in lymphocytes and plasma of HIV-infected individuals (87). However, Kinscherf *et al.* reported that oral administration of NAC suppressed the decline of CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells in HIV-infected individuals (43). Breitkreutz *et al.* reported that NAC treatment restored immunological parameters including natural killer cell num-

bers in their randomized trials for HIV-infected individuals with and without antiretroviral therapy (8). Moreover, Herzenberg *et al.* reported that oral administration of NAC ( $6.9 \text{ g} \times 8 \text{ weeks}$ ) prolonged the survival of HIV-infected individuals in a randomized double-blinded, placebo-controlled study (18, 32). They also showed that oral administration of NAC restored the whole-blood GSH levels and GSB in T-cell subsets. There were no significant side effects in the rather high-dose ( $6.9 \text{ g/day}$ ) oral administration of NAC.

Although it was not clear that NAC could restore the intracellular GSH levels in lymphocytes in AIDS patients, NAC may be beneficial for AIDS therapy. There is accumulating evidence to support the beneficial effect of NAC. Recent studies have shown that NAC has several biological effects in addition to the replenishment of GSH. Nerve growth factor-dependent differentiation of PC12 cells is blocked by NAC but that is not inhibited by buthionine-[S,R]-sulfoximine treatment, suggesting that the effect of NAC is not mediated by the replenishment of intracellular GSH (40). The suppressive effects on NF- $\kappa$ B activation by NAC are dependent not only on its radical scavenging function, but also on other direct mechanisms. NAC inhibits the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B directly by suppression of I- $\kappa$ B kinases (59). Moreover, NAC can enhance the antibody-dependent cytotoxicity, interleukin-2 secretion, and production of anti-HIV chemokines (12, 25, 67). NAC restores lymphocyte mitogenicity and plasma albumin concentration in HIV-infected individuals (8). We also have data showing that NAC decreases the expression of CD21 on B- and T-cell surface independently on the intracellular GSH levels (Nishinaka *et al.*, submitted). As CD21 is also an enhancing factor for HIV infection (50), the down-regulation of CD21 by NAC may offer additional benefit for AIDS therapy. Interestingly, NAC suppresses TRX secretion from HTLV-I-transformed cells and shows the tendency to decrease plasma TRX levels in HIV-infected individuals (57). Therefore, NAC therapy will be beneficial for HIV infection, although the real mechanism is not fully understood. In addition to AIDS therapy, NAC will be valuable for the clinical application to several oxidative stress-associated disorders, including other infectious diseases, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, liver cirrhosis, parkinsonism, cachexia, and so on.

### Other antioxidants for AIDS therapy

Besides NAC, several antioxidants have been tried for AIDS therapy. Selenium, vitamin C, vitamin E, lipoic acid, and  $\beta$ -carotene are representative of antioxidants used for HIV-infected individuals. The general concept is that replenishment of antioxidant functions are beneficial for HIV-infected subjects, because they are suffering from systemic oxidative stress caused by elevated inflammatory cytokines and decreased antioxidant functions, including GSH deficiency. Olmsted *et al.* reported that selenium levels in blood are decreased in HIV-infected subjects (62). Selenium supplement increases glutathione peroxidase (GPx) activity (74) and inhibits the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B (41) and replication of HIV (37). Recent studies have shown that not only GPx, but also TRX reductase, contains selenocysteine (83), suggesting that selenium levels are quite important for the maintenance of

systemic antioxidant functions. Ascorbic acid (vitamin C) was reported to suppress the replication of HIV by reduction of reverse transcriptase activity (30). Israel *et al.* reported that butylated hydroxyanisole or  $\alpha$ -tocopherol (vitamin E) suppresses the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B independently of the increase of GSH (38). Then vitamin E and lipoic acid were proposed for AIDS therapy (63). Allard *et al.* reported that supplements of vitamin E and vitamin C reduced oxidative stress in HIV infection and produced a trend toward a reduction in viral load of HIV in a randomized placebo-controlled, double-blind study (5). In the case of  $\beta$ -carotene, several reports have shown that  $\beta$ -carotene supplement has no significant efficiency in HIV-infected individuals (14–16).

### Redox control by TRX for AIDS therapy

Previous reports have shown that administration of TRX in at the micromolar level rather attenuates the cytotoxicity caused by oxidative stress in an *in vitro* study (51) and the ischemic-reperfusion injury in an *in vivo* model (28). TRX-transgenic mice where human TRX is overexpressed under the control of  $\beta$ -actin promoter are also more resistant to a variety of oxidative stresses, including focal cerebral ischemia (82), and survive longer than wild-type mice (Mitsui *et al.*, submitted). Therefore, TRX administration may be beneficial as replenishment of antioxidant function in oxidative stress-associated disorders. We have collected evidence that TRX administration prevents leukocyte extravasation into the inflammatory site (57) and bleomycin- and cytokine-induced interstitial pneumonia in mice (Hoshino *et al.*, submitted). A previous *in vitro* study also showed that full-length TRX suppresses the replication of HIV, whereas the truncated form of TRX, which has no reducing activity, promotes the replication of HIV (58). Further study will be necessary to clarify that TRX administration may be beneficial for prevention of disease progression in the early stage of HIV infection.

## CONCLUSION

Oxidative stress plays a crucial role in the disease progression in HIV-infected individuals. In addition to the well known CD4 cell counts, intracellular GSH levels in lymphocytes and plasma levels of TRX are quite good prognostic markers for HIV infection. Recently, highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), which is a combination of three antiviral drugs including at least one protease inhibitor, has been recognized to be quite effective in suppressing the disease progression of HIV infection (44). In fact, serum levels of antioxidants in HIV-infected individuals treated with antiretroviral therapy including protease inhibitors are comparable to those in uninfected individuals (84). However, as HAART is quite expensive and now HIV infection is a more serious problem in developing countries, low-cost treatment would be important for HIV infection from the world-wide point of view. HIV-infected individuals have massive loss of sulfur, which is not ameliorated by HAART (9). Therefore, NAC is beneficial for the quality of life in patients with such low sulfur levels and even in patients under the condition of

cancer cachexia (20, 29). Restoration of antioxidant functions by NAC or other relatively nonexpensive supplements may still be beneficial at least for the quality of life of HIV-infected individuals. In conclusion, redox control will be an important strategy for oxidative stress-associated disorders, including HIV infection.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome; ASK-1, apoptosis signal-regulating kinase-1; ATL, adult T-cell leukemia; FACS, fluorescence-activated cell sorter; GPx, glutathione peroxidase; GSB, glutathione-S-bimane fluorescence; GSH, glutathione; HAART, highly active antiretroviral therapy; HIV, human immunodeficiency virus; HTLV-I, human T-cell leukemia virus type-I; MAPK, mitogen-activated protein kinase; NAC, *N*-acetylcysteine; NF- $\kappa$ B, nuclear factor- $\kappa$ B; PBMCs, peripheral blood mononuclear cells; Prx, peroxiredoxin; ROS, reactive oxygen species; TRX, thioredoxin.

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