Antiviral drug ganciclovir is a potent inhibitor of microglial proliferation and neuroinflammation

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Ablerrated microglial responses contribute to neuroinflammation in many neurodegenerative diseases, but no current therapies target pathogenic microglia. We discovered unexpectedly that the antiviral drug ganciclovir (GCV) inhibits the proliferation of microglia in experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis (EAE), a mouse model for multiple sclerosis (MS), as well as in kainic acid–induced excitotoxicity. In EAE, GCV largely prevented infiltration of T lymphocytes into the central nervous system (CNS) and drastically reduced disease incidence and severity when delivered before the onset of disease. In contrast, GCV treatment had minimal effects on peripheral leukocyte distribution in EAE and did not inhibit generation of antibodies after immunization with ovalbumin. Additionally, a radiolabeled analogue of penciclovir, [18F]FHBG, which is similar in structure to GCV, was retained in areas of CNS inflammation in EAE, but not in naive control mice, consistent with the observed therapeutic effects. Our experiments suggest GCV may have beneficial effects in the CNS beyond its antiviral properties.

Microglia are the resident myeloid phagocytes of the central nervous system (CNS), where they fulfill important functions in normal physiology and in the response to injury or disease (Saijo and Glass, 2011). Activated microglia, which are a hallmark of neuroinflammation, may contribute to CNS damage and chronic neurodegeneration through the release of harmful cytokines, reactive oxygen species, or uncontrolled phagocytosis (Lucin and Wyss-Coray, 2009). For example, microglia contribute to neurodegeneration in superoxide dismutase 1 transgenic mouse models for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Boillée et al., 2006), and microglia lacking fractalkine receptor, CX3CR1, promote protein aggregation and disease in tau transgenic models of Alzheimer’s disease and related tauopathies (Bhaskar et al., 2010). Interestingly, microglial activation appears indicative of disease activity in multiple sclerosis (MS) patients based on positron emission tomography (PET) imaging with a ligand that binds to peripheral benzodiazepine receptors on activated microglia (Banati et al., 2000). These observations raise the possibility that selective inhibition of microglia may be beneficial in certain CNS disorders with a neuroinflammatory component, but today no treatments targeting aberrantly activated microglia are available to test this hypothesis.

Ganciclovir (GCV) is a prodrug nucleoside analogue, which in its canonical function requires bioactivation by viral thymidine kinase (tk) from viruses of the Herpesviridae family, including cytomegalovirus, Epstein–Barr virus, or HSV (Matthews and Boehme, 1988; Faulds and Heel, 1990). GCV was developed in the 1970s as an antiviral treatment and is currently used clinically to control cytomegalovirus and other viral infections. More recently, it has been used in research studies for the targeted deletion of cells genetically engineered to express HSV tk (HSVtk; Culver et al., 1992; Fillat et al., 2003) or for imaging tk expressing transgenic cells using modified, radiolabeled GCV analogues (Min et al., 2003). Besides its potent effects on...
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Marker ionized calcium-binding adaptor molecule 1 (Iba1) show marked proliferation during the active phase of disease (Fig. 1 A) based on its colocalization with the nucleotide analogue BrdU, which marks proliferating cells. This expansion of microglia is seen as early as 7 d postimmunization (d.p.i.; Fig. 1, B and C). Cells expressing Iba1 constituted close to 60% of proliferating cells in the brain, whereas astrocytes expressing glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) or CD3+ T cells showed less proliferation (Fig. 1, A and D; see Fig. 3 A). These results demonstrate that microglia, or recently infiltrated macrophages, undergo a sustained and early expansion in EAE.

GCV attenuates neuroinflammation

We noticed in earlier unrelated studies that the antiviral drug GCV reduced microglial activation (unpublished data); we therefore treated wild-type C57BL/6 mice with GCV or viral replication, GCV has been described to inhibit proliferation of uninfected cells, most notably of bone marrow cells, at concentrations close to the therapeutic doses (Matthews and Boehme, 1988), possibly by targeting endogenous tk or through other unknown mechanisms. We describe here our unexpected finding that GCV is capable of inhibiting proliferation of activated microglia in two disease models with neuroinflammation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Neuroinflammation in experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis (EAE) results in an expansion of proliferating microglia

It has been previously reported that microglial activation precedes the infiltration of T cells into the brain parenchyma and clinical symptoms in EAE (Ponomarev et al., 2005; Luo et al., 2007). Indeed, cells expressing the microglia/macrophage marker ionized calcium-binding adaptor molecule 1 (Iba1) show marked proliferation during the active phase of disease (Fig. 1 A) based on its colocalization with the nucleotide analogue BrdU, which marks proliferating cells. This expansion of microglia is seen as early as 7 d postimmunization (d.p.i.; Fig. 1, B and C). Cells expressing Iba1 constituted close to 60% of proliferating cells in the brain, whereas astrocytes expressing glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) or CD3+ T cells showed less proliferation (Fig. 1, A and D; see Fig. 3 A). These results demonstrate that microglia, or recently infiltrated macrophages, undergo a sustained and early expansion in EAE.

Figure 1. Neuroinflammation in EAE is characterized by expansion of proliferating microglia/macrophages. 8–12-wk-old mice were immunized subcutaneously with 200 µg MOG35–55 peptide emulsified in CFA and received an i.v. injection of 400 ng pertussis toxin at the time of immunization and 48 h later. Mice were sacrificed at 21 d.p.i.; BrdU was given three consecutive days before sacrifice. (A) Cerebellar sections from 21 d.p.i. EAE mice were double immunolabeled for BrdU (red) and cell type–specific markers (green) Iba1 (microglia/macrophages), GFAP (astrocytes), and CD3 (T cells). Images were taken outside of inflammatory foci to show individual cells. Far right column shows high magnifications of the white boxed areas. The proliferating cells appear yellow (arrows) after superimposition of single color images. (B–D) Cerebellar sections from naive (day –1) and EAE (7, 14, and 21 d.p.i.) mice were double immunolabeled for BrdU+ (red) and Iba1+ (green; B). Quantification of total BrdU+ cells (C) and percentage of Iba1+BrdU+ (D) in the cerebella. Bar graphs represent the mean of three to five sections from an individual mouse and SEM (n = 5–10 mice/group). **, P < 0.01; ***, P < 0.001 by ANOVA and Dunnett’s test. The experiments were independently performed three times. Bars: (A [left] and B) 50 µm; (A, right) 10 µm.
GCV inhibits microglia proliferation

The amelioration of EAE after GCV treatment was paralleled by strikingly lower numbers of proliferating cells in the brain but not in spleen at 21 d.p.i. (not depicted). GCV treatment specifically reduced the number of proliferating Iba1+ cells, whereas it did not affect the low numbers of proliferating GFAP+ astrocytes or CD3+ T cells at 21 d.p.i. (Fig. 3 A). In addition, the remaining Iba1+ cells in GCV-treated mice appeared smaller and resembled microglia with a ramified, non-activated morphology (Fig. 3 A). To characterize the cellular infiltrates in the CNS of EAE mice and to determine which cell populations were altered by GCV treatment, we used flow cytometry to analyze the mononuclear cells isolated from the CNS at 21 d.p.i. Consistent with histological analysis (Fig. 2 C), GCV treatment led to a significant reduction in frequency (Fig. 3 B, top) and absolute number (not depicted) of CD4+ T cells in the brains. Interestingly, the frequency (Fig. 3 B, middle) and absolute number (not depicted) of CD11b+CD45hi cells (presumably infiltrated macrophages/activated microglia) in the inflamed CNS were also significantly reduced by GCV treatment, whereas the CD11b+CD45lo cells (presumably resting microglia) were largely unaltered (not depicted). The majority of the CD11b+CD45hi cell population was BrdU+, and BrdU+CD11b+CD45hi cells were significantly reduced by GCV treatment (Fig. 3 B, bottom). These results

vehicle starting at 7 d.p.i. Remarkably, although vehicle-treated mice showed robust development of EAE, the disease was almost completely blocked with daily GCV treatment, both in terms of disease severity (Fig. 2 A) and incidence (Fig. 2 B). This effect was mirrored by a >95% reduction in the number of CD3+ T cells in the brain (cerebellum and spinal cord; Fig. 2 C). Additionally, when treatment was started after the EAE mice reached a disease score of 2, GCV-treated mice showed a reduction in disease severity similar to the one conferred by IFN-β (Fig. 2 D; P = 0.073 for GCV and P = 0.056 for IFN-β by two-way repeated measures ANOVA), which currently is a major treatment for MS patients (Killestein and Polman, 2011) and served here as a positive control (Axtell et al., 2010). However, it’s important to note that this approach did not result in a statistically significant reduction in disease. Most importantly, this therapeutic effect of GCV was not dependent on the presence of HSVtk, the canonical target of GCV which cleaves this prodrug into a nucleoside analogue (Faulds and Heel, 1990; Culver et al., 1992), and was achieved with an administered dose (100 mg/kg), which is the standard dose used in most mouse virus infection models (Faulds and Heel, 1990) and converts to a human equivalent dose of 8 mg/kg (using conversion factor 12.3 for mouse to human according to FDA guidelines). These doses are thus within the range for GCV used in humans, which can be from 5 mg/kg i.v. twice daily to 1 g three times per day orally.

**Figure 2.** GCV strongly inhibits EAE and neuroinflammation. EAE was induced as in Fig. 1, and mice were treated daily with PBS (vehicle) or 100 mg/kg GCV beginning at 7 d.p.i. (arrows). (A) Disease severity of vehicle- and GCV-treated mice was blindly scored daily. Data represent mean scores and SEM (n = 10–15 mice/group), * P < 0.05; **, P < 0.01 by Mann–Whitney U test. (B) Percent incidence of clinical disease (score > 0) on a given day from A, **, P < 0.001 by Mantel–Cox test. (C) Representative images and quantification of CD3+ T cells in cerebella and spinal cords at 21 d.p.i. from vehicle or GCV-treated mice (bars, 25 µm). Bar graphs represent the mean of three to five sections/mouse and SEM (n = 5–10 mice/group). **, P < 0.01; ***, P < 0.001 by two-tailed Student’s t test. (D) Mice with EAE were treated every alternate day with PBS (vehicle), 100 mg/kg GCV, or 1,000 U IFN-β after the clinical score reached 2. The animals were scored daily, and clinical scores after initiation of treatment are plotted (P = 0.073 for GCV and 0.056 for IFN-β, compared with vehicle, by two-way ANOVA). The experiments were independently performed five times for A–C and twice for D.
suggest that GCV mainly targets proliferating infiltrated macrophage/activated microglia, consistent with a critical role of infiltrating monocytes/macrophages in EAE progression (Ajami et al., 2011).

Furthermore, to determine whether the CNS-specific inhibitory effects of GCV on microglia/macrophages in EAE could be applied to other models, we treated wild-type FvB mice with kainic acid, a glutamate receptor agonist which causes acute excitotoxic neurodegeneration and prominent microglial activation (Luo et al., 2006). 5 d after injury, at the typical readout time in this model, we observed a 75% reduction in the number of BrdU-labeled Iba1-expressing cells in GCV- compared with vehicle-treated mice (Fig. 3 C). GCV treatment did not significantly affect clinical symptoms (seizures, not depicted) or excitotoxic cell death (Fig. 3 C). These findings indicate that the antiproliferative effect of GCV is not limited to EAE but may be a more general outcome and that the roles of proliferating microglia may be different in excitotoxic neurodegeneration and autoimmune inflammation.

GCV does not significantly restrain the peripheral immune response

Treating inflammatory pathology in the CNS without causing general immune suppression is a major challenge in improving therapies for immune-mediated diseases. GCV did not reduce cell proliferation in the spleen of mice with EAE (not depicted), although it had some effects on the distribution of leukocyte subsets in the spleen of these mice (Fig. 4 A). We observed significant increases after GCV treatment in macrophages (CD11b+, CD11c-, CD4/8-) and granulocytes (CD11b+Ly6Ghi, CD4/8-) and a decrease in CD4+ T cells and CD4+ dendritic cells (CD11b+CD11c+CD4+) at 21 d.p.i. (Fig. 4 A). Interestingly, arginase-expressing myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs), which express CD11b+Gr1hi, have been previously shown to promote T lymphocyte apoptosis.

Figure 3. GCV inhibits microglia/macrophage proliferation in the CNS. (A and B) EAE was induced as in Fig. 1, and mice were treated daily with vehicle (PBS) or 100 mg/kg GCV beginning at 7 d.p.i.; BrdU was administered for three consecutive days before sacrifice on 21 d.p.i. (A) Cerebellum from vehicle- or GCV-treated EAE mice were double immunolabeled for BrdU and cell type–specific markers Iba1 (microglia), GFAP (astrocytes), and CD3 (T cells). Bar graphs show the mean percentage and SEM of proliferating (BrdU+) microglia (Iba1+), astrocytes (GFAP+), and T cells (CD3+) from three to five sections/animal (n = 5–10 mice/group). (B) Mononuclear cells from cerebellum and spinal cord of vehicle- or GCV-treated EAE mice were enriched by Percoll gradients and analyzed by flow cytometry. Cells were stained with antibodies to BrdU and to cell surface markers CD45, CD11b, CD4, and CD8. (top) Flow cytometry analysis of CD45 and CD4 expression on gated CD8- cells. Bar graph shows mean ± SEM of percentages of CD45hiCD4+ cells. (middle) Flow cytometry analysis of CD45 and CD11b expression on gated CD8- cells. Bar graph shows mean ± SEM of percentages of CD45hiCD11b+ cells. (bottom) Flow cytometry analysis of CD45 and BrdU expression on gated CD8-CD4+ and CD8-CD11b+ cells. Bar graph shows mean ± SEM of percentages of CD45hiBrdU+ cells (n = 4 mice/group). **, P < 0.01; ***, P < 0.001 by two-tailed Student’s t test. Each experiment was independently performed twice. (C) Mice were injected with kainic acid to induce excitotoxic neurodegeneration and neuroinflammation, and BrdU was injected 1 d before sacrifice on day 5. Coronal sections were stained for Iba1 and BrdU (top) and with cresyl violet (for cell loss; bottom). Bar graphs show mean and SEM from analysis of the hippocampus of three to five sections/animal (n = 5 mice/group). **, P < 0.01; ***, P < 0.001 by two-tailed Student’s t test. Data shown are representative of two independent experiments. Bars, 50 µm.
To determine whether GCV would interfere with a de novo immune response against a foreign antigen in the periphery, we immunized C57BL/6 mice with OVA and treated them concurrently with injections of GCV or vehicle daily for 14 d. Immunized mice treated with vehicle mounted a strong OVA-specific antibody response, which was not reduced by GCV (Fig. 4 D). As a positive control, immunized mice treated with the immunosuppressive drug mitoxantrone, a current treatment option for MS (Hilas et al., 2010), completely abrogated this type of systemic immune response (Fig. 4 D). Together, these findings suggest that GCV has a preferential affinity for proliferating microglia/macrophages in the brain without causing systemic immunosuppression as they occur with conventional immunosuppressive drugs.

Figure 4. GCV does not alter T cell subset distribution or their ability to mount a systemic immune response. (A–C) EAE was induced as in Fig. 1, and mice were treated daily with vehicle (PBS) or 100 mg/kg GCV beginning at 7 d.p.i. Horizontal bars indicate the mean. (A) Splenocytes were isolated from 21 d.p.i. and stained with the indicated cell type–specific markers. Data represent mean absolute numbers of cells per spleen (n = 11 mice/group). *, P < 0.05; **, P < 0.01 by two-tailed Student’s t test. (B and C) Splenocytes (B) and mononuclear cells from the brain and spinal cord (C) were stimulated with PMA and ionomycin for 5 h, and cells were stained for CD3 and CD4, intracellular cytokines (IL-4, IFN-γ, and IL-17), and the transcription factor (FOXP3). Data represent the percentage of CD4+ T cells that expressed IFN-γ, IL-4, IL-17, and FOXP3 (n = 7 mice/group). (D) 2–3-mo-old naive or OVA122-immunized mice treated daily with vehicle, mitoxantrone, or GCV beginning at 0 d.p.i. were sacrificed at 14 d.p.i. Data represent the mean (±SEM) IgG antibody titer against OVA (n = 5 mice per group). ***, P < 0.001 by one-way ANOVA and Dunnett’s post-hoc test. Data are representative of three (A–C) or two (D) independent experiments.
Figure 5. GCV reduces disease severity and T cell infiltration in a dose-dependent manner but does not alter CD4 T cell subsets during the EAE course. (A and B) EAE was induced as in Fig. 1, and mice were sacrificed at 14 d.p.i. Beginning at 7 d.p.i. (arrow), mice were treated daily with vehicle or 25 or 100 mg/kg GCV. Disease severity was scored. Data represent mean scores + SEM (A) and mean + SEM of CD3+ cell numbers counted in various brain regions (B; n = 5 mice/group). *, P < 0.05; **, P < 0.01 by one-way ANOVA followed by Dunnett’s test. (C and D) Splenocytes (C) and mononuclear cells from the brain and spinal cord (D) were collected at indicated time points (day -1: naive animals) and stimulated with PMA and ionomycin for 5 h. Cells were stained for CD3 and CD4, intracellular cytokines (IL-4, IFN-γ, and IL-17), and the transcription factor (FOXP3). Data represent the percentage of CD4+ T cells that expressed IFN-γ, IL-4, IL-17, and FOXP3 (n = 7 mice per group). Horizontal lines represent the means of the vehicle (solid)- and GCV (dotted)-treated groups. (A–D) Data are representative of two independent experiments.
we measured concentrations of GCV in plasma, brain, and spinal cord by liquid chromatography/tandem mass spectrometry. At 21 d.p.i., GCV concentration was four- to five-fold higher in the brain (114 ± 0.038 µg/ml) and spinal cord (0.132 ± 0.014 µg/ml) than in plasma (0.03 ± 0.010 µg/ml) in EAE animals treated with GCV. The concentrations reached in the mouse CNS in our paradigm were therefore three- to sixfold lower than those reached in the CSF of patients treated with 2.5 mg/kg i.v. (0.31–0.68 µg/ml), and mouse plasma concentrations were >300-fold lower than the maximal plasma concentration reached in patients after a 1-h dosage regimen (8.27–9.0 µg/ml) with the standard clinical dose of 5 mg/kg i.v. (Genentech, 2010). Furthermore, upon introduction of a radiolabeled analogue of penciclovir (namely, 9-(4-[18F]fluoro-3-[hydroxymethyl]butyl)guanine [18F]FHBG), which is similar in structure to GCV, we found that [18F]FHBG accumulated and was retained in the brains of EAE animals but not in naive animals (Fig. 6, A–C), suggesting its direct interaction with the inflamed brain.

The aforementioned results open up the possibility that GCV might act directly through microglia in our paradigm. We therefore investigated whether GCV possesses the capacity to attenuate EAE in a dose-dependent manner but does not alter CD4 T cell subsets during the course of EAE.

To evaluate the dose-efficacy response of GCV, we treated MOG35–55 immunized mice daily with vehicle or 25 or 100 mg/kg GCV starting at 7 d.p.i. GCV reduced disease severity (Fig. 5 A) and T cell infiltration (Fig. 5 B) even at 25 mg/kg, showing a dose-dependent effect at 14 d.p.i. To determine whether GCV may affect T cells during the early phase of disease, we quantified the major T cell subsets in spleen and brain by flow cytometry. As EAE disease progressed, the changes in percentages of each CD4+ T cell subset, T H17, IFN-γ T H1, T H2, or T reg, in these organs followed different patterns (Fig. 5, C and D), but for each of the T cell subsets, GCV-treated animals were indistinguishable from vehicle-treated ones at any time point (Fig. 5, C and D). These findings thus support our earlier observation that GCV treatment does not significantly alter the abundance of CD4 T cell subsets in EAE (Fig. 4, B and C).

GCV and [18F]FHBG accumulate in the brain of EAE animals

We next asked whether GCV might be retained in the CNS and thereby exert localized effects. To explore this possibility, we measured concentrations of GCV in plasma, brain, and spinal cord by liquid chromatography/tandem mass spectrometry. At 21 d.p.i., GCV concentration was four- to five-fold higher in the brain (114 ± 0.038 µg/ml) and spinal cord (0.132 ± 0.014 µg/ml) than in plasma (0.03 ± 0.010 µg/ml) in EAE animals treated with GCV. The concentrations reached in the mouse CNS in our paradigm were therefore three- to sixfold lower than those reached in the CSF of patients treated with 2.5 mg/kg i.v. (0.31–0.68 µg/ml), and mouse plasma concentrations were >300-fold lower than the maximal plasma concentration reached in patients after a 1-h dosage regimen (8.27–9.0 µg/ml) with the standard clinical dose of 5 mg/kg i.v. (Genentech, 2010). Furthermore, upon introduction of a radiolabeled analogue of penciclovir (namely, 9-(4-[18F]fluoro-3-[hydroxymethyl]butyl)guanine [18F]FHBG), which is similar in structure to GCV, we found that [18F]FHBG accumulated and was retained in the brains of EAE animals but not in naive animals (Fig. 6, A–C), suggesting its direct interaction with the inflamed brain.

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to directly inhibit microglial proliferation in cell culture. Using a thymidine incorporation assay (Fig. 6 D) and measurement of cell confluence with an automated cell imaging device (Fig. 6 E), we found that GCV dose-dependently inhibited the proliferation of BV-2 mouse microglial cells in the absence of HSV tk and at concentrations that caused no significant cell death (Fig. 6 F). Given that GCV possesses a 1,000-fold higher affinity for HSV tk over endogenous cellular tk (Matthews and Boehme, 1988), it is conceivable that GCV targets activated microglia at least in part through a mechanism independent of endogenous tk. Together, our results demonstrate that GCV is capable of inhibiting the proliferation of activated microglia in vivo and in vitro.

Our results demonstrate that GCV inhibits the proliferation of activated CNS-resident microglia or infiltrating macrophages independent of HSV tk, whereas it does not significantly inhibit the proliferation of astrocytes or T cells infiltrating the brain. They further highlight the role of microglia in neuroinflammatory disorders and support microglia as a potential treatment target. Our results are in line with studies showing that the main therapeutic effects of IFN-β in MS are mediated through microglia/macrophages (Prinz et al., 2008) and that functional inhibition of microglia reduces clinical symptoms in EAE (Ponomarev et al., 2011; Sajo et al., 2011). Likewise, ablation of CNS-resident microglia reduced EAE in GCV-treated transgenic mice expressing HSV tk in the macrophage lineage (Heppner et al., 2005). However, in this genetically engineered model, GCV causes deletion of all HSV tk-expressing cells, leading to hematopoietic toxicity and necessitating the transfer of wild-type bone marrow into lethally irradiated transgenic mice. Using this transfer paradigm and dosing every 2 d, GCV did not affect EAE severity in nontransgenic control mice. In contrast, we discovered that activated microglia in wild-type mice with EAE were susceptible to inhibition by GCV alone (dosing) in the absence of HSV tk, at doses equivalent to the ones used to treat humans with viral infections (25 or 100 mg/kg body weight). These unexpected effects may be the result of a combination of higher doses of GCV used in our study and microglia’s unique ability to rejuvenate independent of the bone marrow (Geissmann et al., 2010; Ajami et al., 2011) or to proliferate in the specialized environment present in the inflamed brain. We also noted a selective accumulation of GCV in the inflamed brain and spinal cord of mice with EAE, suggesting its direct involvement in the modulation of microglia.

The mechanism by which GCV inhibits the proliferation of activated wild-type microglia remains unclear. The mice used here were negative for HSV-related virus MuHV-4 (not depicted), and we could not find any viral tk-related sequences in the mouse (or human) genome, supporting the possibility that GCV acts independently of viral tk in these cells. But it remains a possibility that EAE depends on immune-mediated bystander activation of an unknown virus and that GCV acts as an antiviral agent. Whether GCV or its analogues may have therapeutic effects in humans remains to be seen, but encouragingly, a stabilizing and statistically significant effect in a clinical study with acyclovir was detected in relapsing/remitting MS patients when comparing patients with their individual baseline (Lycke et al., 1996). However, only trends of improvements were detected in clinical studies of MS with valacyclovir (converted to acyclovir upon ingestion; Bech et al., 2002; Friedman et al., 2005). Altogether, our results identify GCV as a potential novel therapeutic for neurological diseases associated with microglial proliferation and neuroinflammation.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Mice. We obtained all C57BL/6 and FvB mice from the Jackson Laboratory. Mice were between 8 and 12 wk of age when experiments were initiated. Animal handling was performed in accordance with institutional guidelines and approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of the Veterans Affair Palo Alto Health Care System.

EAE induction and assessment. MOG35–55 peptide (MEVGWYRSPFS-RVHV-LYRNGK) was synthesized by the Stanford Protein and Nucleic Acid Biotechnology Facility and purified by high-performance liquid chromatography to >95% purity. Mice (8–12 wk old) were immunized subcutaneously with a total of 200 µg MOG35–55 peptide emulsified in CFA (200 µg mycobacterium tuberculosis; Difco adjuvants; BD) and received an i.v. injection of 400 µg pertussis toxin (List Biological Laboratories, Inc.) at the time of immunization and 48 h later. Mice were weighed and examined daily for clinical signs of EAE and scored as previously described (Luo et al., 2007): 0, no paralysis; 1, loss of tail tone; 2, hind limb weakness or paresis; 3, hind limb paralysis; 4, hind limb paralysis and forelimb paresis; 5, moribund or dead. 50 mg/kg BrdU was injected intraperitoneally for 3 d before sacrifice to label dividing cells.

Kainic acid administration. Kainic acid (Tocris Bioscience) was dissolved in PBS and injected subcutaneously (20 mg/kg) in mice (Luo et al., 2006). Mice were then weighed and examined daily for clinical signs of seizures.

GCV, IFN-β, and mitoxantrone treatments. Clinical grade GCV/Cytovene (Roche) was obtained as a lyophilized powder and reconstituted in deionized water before use. The drug was administered daily via intraperitoneal injections at 25 or 100 mg/kg body weight. In some experiments, 100 mg/kg GCV, 1,000 U/dose of recombinant mouse IFN-β (PBL Interferon Source; Axell et al., 2010), or PBS was given intraperitoneally every other day after the mice reached a clinical score of 2 or more. 0.5 mg/kg mitoxantrone (Teva Parenteral Medicine) was administered intraperitoneally daily as described previously (Lubin et al., 1987). Mice were scored daily starting at 7 d.p.i.

Tissue preparation. Mice were anesthetized with 400 mg/kg chloral hydrate (Sigma-Aldrich) before removal of the spleen, which was dissected in halves and weighed. Mice were then transcardially perfused with 0.9% saline, followed by the removal of the spinal cord and brain, which were dissected into hemibrains. One half of the spleen, a hemibrain, and the entire spinal cord were fixed for 24 h in 4% paraformaldehyde and cryoprotected in 30% sucrose. Brains were sectioned sagittally at 40 µm, whereas the spleens were sectioned transversely at 40 µm using a freezing microtome (Leica) and stored in cryoprotective medium at −20°C (Luo et al., 2006, 2007). The other half of brain and spleen were then processed for cell isolation.

Cell isolation from spleen and CNS tissue. Spleens and brains were dissociated by grinding through 100-µm cell strainers and suspended in RPMI-1640 with 10% FBS (RP10) or HBSS, respectively. To obtain a single-cell suspension, dissociated brain cells in HBSS were digested with 300 U/ml clostridial collagenase (type V, Roche) and 50 µg/ml DNase I (Sigma-Aldrich) for 1 h at 37°C with mild agitation and halted with the addition of RP10. The brain cells were then washed with HBSS and resuspended in 30%
treated BV-2 cells with Annexin V-FITC. Percent confluence was normalized to the respective 0-h percent confluence at the indicated concentrations, and percent confluence was measured with a TUNEL assay.

Immunohistochemistry. Immunohistochemistry was performed on free-floating sections according to standard procedures (Luo et al., 2007). Primary antibodies were against BrdU (1:2,000; Abcam), GFA (1:1,000; Dako), Bax (1:1,000; Wako Chemicals USA), and CD3 (1:1,000; BD). Before addition of primary antibody against BrdU, sections were treated in 3% HCl for 30 min at 37°C for antigen retrieval. Primary antibody staining was revealed using biotinylated secondary antibodies and the ABC kit (Vector Laboratories) with diaminobenzidine (DAB; Sigma-Aldrich). For double-immunolabeling, we used secondary antibodies conjugated to fluorophores (Alexa Fluor 664, Cy5 at 1:2,000; Invitrogen) against the animal primary antibodies were raised in. Staining was performed on three to five sections per animal and quantified by counting the number of positive stained cells. Light microscopy was performed with a CoolSNAP HQ camera (Photometrics) mounted on an IX71 microscope (Olympus). For confocal microscopy, we used an LSM510 META confocal microscope (Carl Zeiss).

Flow cytometry analysis. At various time points after EAE induction (including naive), isolated brain and spleen cells were stained with cell surface makers in FACS buffer (PBS, 1% FBS, and 0.2% NaAz) to determine the abundance of various cell types: CD11b (M1/70; BD) for macrophages, CD11c+ (N418; eBioscience) for dendritic cells, B220 (RA3-6B2; BD) for B cells, Ly6G (RB6-8L5; eBioscience) for neutrophils, CD4 (GK1.5; BD) for T cells, and CD8 (53-6.7; BD) for CD8+ T cells. To determine subsets of CD4+ T cells, isolated brain and spleen cells were stained with 50 ng/ml PMA and 1 µg/ml ionomycin for 5 h, with the addition of Golgistop (brefeldin A; BD) after 2 h to inhibit the secretion of vesicles containing cytokines. Intracellular cytokine and BrdU staining were then performed according to BD’s Cytofix/Cytoperm and BrdU protocols, respectively. The following antibodies were used to detect BrdU (PRB-1; eBioscience), FOXP3 (FJK-1-2b; eBioscience), IFN-γ (XMG1.2; eBioscience), IL-4 (BV6D-24G2; eBioscience), and IL-17A (eBio17B7; eBioscience).

Proliferation assay. To assess cell proliferation by thymidine incorporation, a total of 2 × 10^4 BV-2 cells were seeded in a 96-well plate for a maximum of 10% FBS containing DMEM and then serum starved for an additional 12 h before the addition of varying concentrations of GCV for a total of 24 h. Cultures were pulsed for the final 8 h with 1 µCi/well [³H]thymidine (GE Healthcare) before incorporation radioactivity was measured using a β plate scintillation counter (Luo et al., 2007).

In a second, independent proliferation assay, BV-2 cells were seeded at 2,000 cells/well in 96-well plates and incubated overnight. GCV was added at the indicated concentrations, and percent confluence was measured with a Cellavista automated image reader (Roche) at 48 h after GCV addition. Percent confluence was normalized to the respective 0-h percent confluence and is plotted as fold growth. Apoptosis was measured by staining GCV-treated BV-2 cells with Annexin V-FITC.

OVA immunization and measurement of antibody responses. Mice were immunized subcutaneously with 100 µg OVA (Sigma-Aldrich) emulsified in an equal volume of CFA. Two subcutaneous injections were administered near each armpit (50 µg/injection). 1 d before and 14 d after immunization, plasma was collected to analyze basal (~1 d) and peak (14 d) OVA-specific antibody responses. OVA-specific antibodies were quantified using ELISA. In brief, flat-bottom 96-well RIA plates (Costar) were coated with 100 µg/ml OVA in PBS + 0.02% sodium azide. Plates were incubated for 2 h at 37°C, washed with PBS, and blocked overnight at 4°C with PBS + 1% BSA. Plates were washed with PBS + 0.05% Tween. After the wash, 100 µl of diluted plasma (to create a dilution curve) or mouse anti-OVA IgG1 (Sigma-Aldrich; to create a standard curve) was incubated in the appropriate well for 2 h at 37°C. Plates were then washed with PBS + 0.05% Tween and incubated with alkaline phosphatase-conjugated goat anti-mouse IgG antibody (Sigma-Aldrich; diluted 1:1,000 in PBS + 1% BSA) for 2 h at 37°C. Plates were washed with PBS + 0.05% Tween, followed by PBS, and then bound antibodies were visualized by incubating with 1 µg/ml p-nitrophenyl phosphate in 10 mM diethanolamine–0.5 mM MgCl2 buffer (Sigma-Aldrich).

Statistics. All statistical analysis was computed using Prism (GraphPad Software). Differences between treatment conditions were established using unpaired Student’s t test (with two conditions) or ANOVA followed by Dunnett’s or Tukey’s post-test for multiple comparisons (for more than two conditions). EAE clinical score and percent incidence data were statistically evaluated using Mann–Whitney and Log-rank (Mantel–Cox) tests, respectively. P-values of <0.05 were considered significant. Statistic details are indicated in the respective figure legends.

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