

EAACI POSITION PAPER



Eosinophils—from cradle to grave

An EAACI task force paper on new molecular insights and clinical functions of eosinophils and the clinical effects of targeted eosinophil depletion

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Abstract

Over the past years, eosinophils have become a focus of scientific interest, especially in the context of their recently uncovered functions (e.g. antiviral, anti-inflammatory, regulatory). These versatile cells display both beneficial and detrimental activities

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under various physiological and pathological conditions. Eosinophils are involved in the pathogenesis of many diseases which can be classified into primary (clonal) and secondary (reactive) disorders and idiopathic (hyper)eosinophilic syndromes. Depending on the biological specimen, the eosinophil count in different body compartments may serve as a biomarker reflecting the underlying pathophysiology and/or activity of distinct diseases and as a therapy-driving (predictive) and monitoring tool. Personalized selection of an appropriate therapeutic strategy directly or indirectly targeting the increased number and/or activity of eosinophils should be based on the understanding of eosinophil homeostasis including their interactions with other immune and non-immune cells within different body compartments. Hence, restoring as well as maintaining homeostasis within an individual's eosinophil pool is a goal of both specific and non-specific eosinophil-targeting therapies. Despite the overall favourable safety profile of the currently available anti-eosinophil biologics, the effect of eosinophil depletion should be monitored from the perspective of possible unwanted consequences.

KEYWORDS

allergic diseases, biologics, biomarker, COVID-19, eosinophils, non-allergic diseases

1 | EOSINOPHILS AND EOSINOPHILIA—INTRODUCTION

Eosinophils display both beneficial and detrimental activities in immunity which balance between maintaining health and homeostasis on one hand and causing disease on the other hand. Their role in the pathophysiology of various allergic and non-allergic conditions and diseases has been recognized for decades.^{1,2} Consequently, this has led to the development of a broad spectrum of therapies targeting eosinophils, either non-specifically by the inhibition of several upstream or downstream immune pathways or specifically by eosinophil-targeted treatments with biologics.^{3,4}

More recently, several so far unknown physiological functions of this cell population have been identified. In the context of these recent insights, eosinophils appear to behave as a double-edged sword with important regulatory (immunomodulatory), anti-inflammatory, anti-parasitic and anti-viral properties to maintain the homeostasis in the body.^{5,6} Alternatively, the involvement of pro-inflammatory eosinophils in the initiation, progression and persistence of inflammation with tissue remodelling is well-known and has been documented for many decades. Therefore, the eosinophil counts in biological specimens from different body compartments may serve as a biomarker that reflects the underlying pathophysiology of specific diseases, predict treatment success and monitor therapeutic progress.^{3,4,7} The precise definition of eosinophilia and the discrimination between a truly pathological condition and hypereosinophilia as an epiphenomenon is crucial for a correct interpretation and application of eosinophils as a biomarker in clinical practice.

In the context of these novel insights, the EAACI taskforce on eosinophils, which includes both basic scientists and clinicians,

aimed to shed more light on the differentiated functions of eosinophils to be considered in clinical practice as well as to evaluate the potential consequences of eosinophil depletion with targeted therapies. For clinically applicable algorithms aimed at guiding (biologic) treatments, we would like to refer to fairly recent reviews, including an EAACI task force paper.⁷⁻¹⁰

2 | EOSINOPHILS IN HEALTH, HOMEOSTASIS AND PROTECTIVE RESPONSES

2.1 | Origin and life cycle of human eosinophils

Eosinophils are innate immune cells and members of the family of white blood cells (WBC).¹¹ These cells were first described by Paul Ehrlich in the 19th century.¹² Eosinophils have a characteristic bilobed nucleus and large granules that stain intensely with the dye eosin, giving the cells their name. The granules contain several enzymes and cationic proteins, including peroxidases, lysosomal enzyme and major basic protein (MBP). Eosinophils originate from the bone marrow where they are produced from a myeloid progenitor shared with basophils.¹³ At the myelocyte stage, the progenitors stop dividing and enter into a maturation phase of approximately 4 days during which the cells mature into functional granulocytes.¹⁴ This process is under the control of cytokine receptors (e.g. $\beta c/CD131$ containing receptors: CD116/CD131, CD123/CD131 and CD125/CD131, binding to GM-CSF, IL-3 and IL-5, respectively¹⁵), alarmin receptors (e.g. ST2 binding to IL-33)¹⁶ and specific transcription factors (e.g. GATA1/2 and C/EBP α).¹⁷ Subsequently, mature eosinophils

are released from the bone marrow and can be detected at low numbers in the peripheral blood (approximately 50–150 cells/ μ L of blood/1%–3% of total WBC) in homeostasis/health.¹⁸ The possibility of in situ eosinophilopoiesis has been also described.¹⁹ In homeostasis, the half-life of eosinophils in the peripheral blood is unknown but is estimated between 11 and 63h.^{20–22} Hereafter, little is known of the fate of eosinophils.

In health, eosinophils can be detected in several tissues such as the gut and adipose tissue with various homeostatic functions (Figure 1). In several diseases, particularly those associated with allergies, increased numbers of pre-activated or primed eosinophils are found in peripheral blood and in inflamed target tissues.²⁵ Besides classical allergic diseases associated with eosinophilic infiltration of the target organs, a broad spectrum of non-allergic conditions (e.g. non-allergic eosinophilic asthma and eosinophilic bronchitis) associated with high eosinophil counts both in blood and tissue exists, for example eosinophilic granulomatosis with polyangiitis (EGPA) and chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps (CRSwNP). Interleukin-5 (IL-5) is a pivotal cytokine for the life cycle of eosinophils as it (i) is a growth factor for eosinophil progenitors, (ii) is involved in the mobilization of eosinophils from the bone marrow and (iii) plays an important role in their activation and homing into target tissues.²⁶ Nonetheless, the presence of IL-5 does not seem to be solely essential for eosinophil development as IL-5 knockout mice still have eosinophils²⁷ and a trial with mepolizumab (anti-IL-5 monoclonal antibody (mAb)) in patients with eosinophilic esophagitis (EoE) showed marked decreases in eosinophils in peripheral blood and inflamed tissue, but did not affect eosinophil numbers in the duodenum.²⁸ Similarly, mepolizumab treatment

significantly decreased eosinophils in the peripheral blood and sputum²⁹ but failed to substantially reduce airway tissue eosinophils as well as their degranulation products (major basic protein, MBP).³⁰ This may be due to a lack of IL-5 responsiveness of a putative subset of resident lung eosinophils.³¹ It is important to emphasize that the concept of resident lung eosinophils in humans still awaits confirmation. Alternatively, the low IL-5 responsiveness can be caused by downregulation of the IL-5R alpha after homing of eosinophils from the blood to the lung in segmental allergen-challenged allergic patients.³² There is growing consensus that IL-5 is important in reactive eosinophilia, while it seems less important for homeostatic eosinophils within tissues. Detailed and comprehensive overview of all the migration and activation factors of eosinophils as well their mediators and receptors are summarized in Gigon et al. (2023).³³

2.2 | Functions

Traditionally, eosinophils have been described as important cells of the innate immune defence against multicellular parasites, particularly helminths. This is largely based on observations of eosinophilia associated with parasitic diseases and of parasite killing by eosinophils and their toxic granules in vitro.³⁴ However, the situation may not be as clear cut and may also differ across species, as for instance, in mouse models, eosinophils only showed variable contribution to parasite killing.³⁵ The location of eosinophils in human and mice are similar, suggesting roles for these cells as identified in mice to have similar functions in humans, but this needs to be established in future studies. Yet, one of the most important roles

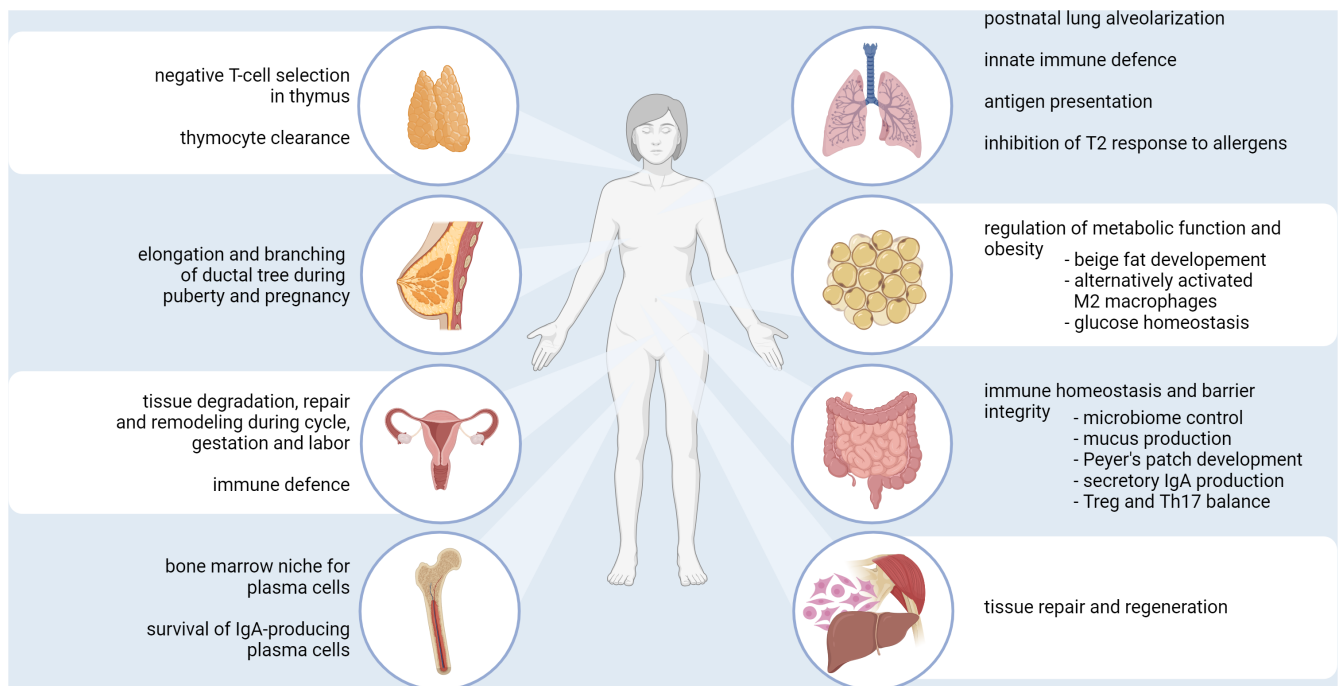


FIGURE 1 Eosinophils in health – overview of known functions and biological effects (adapted and modified according to Rodrigo-Munoz et al. 2021; Klion et al. 2020; Shah et al. 2020).^{11,23,24} Created with BioRender.com

priming agent) change to a pre-activated phenotype making them highly responsive to these targets.^{25,47} Pre-activation may also occur in patients with eosinophil-mediated disease.⁴⁸

2.5 | Effector mechanisms

Eosinophils possess an arsenal of cytotoxic functions that are particularly exerted extracellularly: that is, within the synapse between the cell and its large (i.e. parasite) targets. These functions include the abundant production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) by a membrane-bound NADPH oxidase (NOX-2),⁴⁹ degranulation of highly cytotoxic granular proteins (e.g. major basic protein [MBP], eosinophil peroxidase [EPX] and human-specific eosinophil cationic protein [ECP], or eosinophil-derived neurotoxin [EDN])⁵⁰ or peptides (e.g. polycationic peptides) into the synapse and killing of extracellular targets by eosinophil extracellular trap (EET) formation.⁵¹ In addition, eosinophils are a rich source of a multitude of cytokines (e.g. IL-4 and IL-13), chemokines and bio-active lipid mediators (e.g. leukotriene C4 and platelet-activating factor) that are released upon activation.⁵²⁻⁵⁴

2.6 | Degranulation and EET formation

With eosinophils being relatively inert or refractory while in circulation or in tissues, they must undergo receptor-mediated activation to release their cytotoxic contents and cause tissue damage. Eosinophils are home to a highly unique secretory organelle known as the crystalloid granule, which contains MBP at high concentrations leading to the formation of a crystalline core. Contents of crystalloid granules can only be released from eosinophils through degranulation. Several modes of degranulation occur in eosinophils, most falling under the category of classical exocytosis involving SNARE-mediated membrane fusion (including compound exocytosis and piecemeal degranulation, the latter mostly seen in allergic inflammation).^{53,55,56,57,58,59} In addition, free eosinophil granules may be released as intact, membrane-bound organelles by a form of necrotic release known also as cytolysis, which has recently been shown to use molecular components of the necroptotic pathway.⁶⁰ Eosinophils also release DNA into the extracellular space during EET formation. The molecular mechanism of this process is still poorly understood.^{51,61} EET formation occurs independently of degranulation although granule proteins have been detected on DNA strands.⁶² The association of granule products with DNA has been suggested both prior^{51,63} and after its release.⁶⁴ It has been shown that EETs add to the viscosity of mucus in the nasal exudates of chronic rhinosinusitis (CRS) patients.⁶⁵ Moreover, EETs have also been associated in humans with Charcot-Leyden crystals that have been historically associated with eosinophilia.⁶⁶ In addition, the eosinophil-derived Charcot-Leyden crystals in mucus in asthma patients play a role in allergic inflammation, goblet cell metaplasia, IgE synthesis, and bronchial hyperreactivity.⁶⁷

2.7 | Eosinophils as part of innate immunity

Apart from being involved in the defence against parasites, eosinophils are also involved in other aspects of immunity. These novel functions are currently emerging, and more research is essential to confirm their relevance in humans in vivo.

- **Anti-viral functions:** eosinophils are capable of inactivating viruses. For years, it was known that granular proteins, such as eosinophil cationic protein (ECP) and eosinophil-derived neurotoxin (EDN), clearly possess RNase activity that can antagonize viral replication in situ. A recent study implied that this anti-viral effect is lost in patients with allergic asthma.⁶⁸ This may explain why viral infections notoriously precede exacerbations of allergic asthma. Eosinophils possess several pathogen-related receptors capable of recognition of viral antigens (e.g. Toll-like receptors 3, 7, 9 and RIG-I receptor), they produce several cytokines with anti-viral effect (e.g. IL-2, IL-12 and IFN- γ), express co-stimulatory molecules (e.g. CD80, CD86, CD28 and CD40) and actively participate on viral antigen presentation to CD8 T lymphocytes.^{23,69,70,71} Another interesting area of possible role of eosinophils is the global pandemic of COVID-19 caused by novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Several possible defence mechanisms of eosinophils in COVID-19 were suggested and described, for example direct effect of certain granular proteins and antigen-presenting functions.⁶⁹ While eosinopenia was identified as a prospective screening, diagnostic and prognostic tool, the true role of eosinophils in lung pathology pursuant this infection is unclear.⁷² Eosinopenia was shown to be an early convenient diagnostic and screening tool for COVID-19 infection^{73,74} and as a prognostic marker of disease severity and unfavourable outcome in patients with COVID-19 pneumonia.^{75,76} Interestingly, eosinophilia (especially in asthmatic patients treated with inhaled corticosteroids) was associated with improved COVID-19 outcome.⁷⁷ However, studies analysing the outcome of COVID-19 in severe asthmatic patients treated with biologics showed inconsistent results.^{78,79}
- **Other anti-infectious effects of eosinophils:** The prominent role of eosinophils in parasitic infections has been well-established. These effects include antigen presentation and modulation of T-cell responses. They modulate the production of IgE and mucus production from goblet cells. Moreover, their granular proteins are directly involved in parasites killing and neutralization^{35,80} On the contrary, eosinophils can also possess detrimental effect in certain parasitic infections which can contribute to tissue damage.⁸¹ Eosinophils also play a role in the complex defence against selected bacteria. Although their phagocytic activity and bacterial killing is lower compared with neutrophils, they contribute to the clearance of selected bacteria while their granular proteins and enzymes help to neutralize bacterial proteins.^{82,83} Formation of eosinophil extracellular traps (stimulated by several mediators, for example thymic stromal lymphopoietin in humans) is an important

phenomenon in bacterial killing.⁸⁴ Finally, eosinophils exert also anti-fungal activities. They use their versatile CD11b surface receptor for recognition of β -glucan—a major cell wall component of fungi.⁴⁶ Proteases released from fungi activates protease-activated receptors in eosinophils followed by the release of various cytokines. Moreover, eosinophils can probably ingest fungal spores.⁸⁵

- **Modulation of inflammation and fibrosis:** often overlooked are the regulatory or even anti-inflammatory properties of eosinophils. Even in the context of mast cell-induced inflammation, a concept postulated by Austen in 1978, eosinophils can modulate the detrimental effects of mast cell activation, for example by oxidatively deaminating histamine or enzymatically inactivating other mast cell inflammatory mediators.⁸⁶ In addition, eosinophils have been found to be able to suppress T cells and hence the name “regulatory eosinophils” was established.⁸⁷ In addition, eosinophils play a pathophysiological role in fibrogenesis by the release of TGF- β to stimulate collagen production by parenchymal cells.⁸⁸ The role of eosinophils in tissue remodelling has recently been excellently reviewed by Siddiqui and colleagues.⁸⁹
- **Tissue homeostasis:** some years ago, Lee and colleagues put forward the so-called “Local Immunity and/or Remodelling/Repair (LIAR) hypothesis,” implying that eosinophils are an integral part of maintaining tissue functions at the sites they reside under homeostatic conditions: for example within the gut,²⁴ adipose tissue,^{38,39} cervix and endometrium.^{40,41} Their homeostatic functions depend on or are associated with the function of the tissue where residential eosinophils are found: (human) reproduction in the uterus or placenta, glycaemic control in adipose tissue, gut function in intestines and adipose tissue remodelling.^{39,90} Recently, an intriguing new study even implies eosinophils in sustaining physical and immunological fitness during ageing.⁹¹ Unfortunately, the majority of homeostatic functions of eosinophils has been described in murine models. It is, therefore, imperative to study which of these murine data can be translated into the human situation.
- **Other regulatory functions:** Another area of growing interest involves the role of eosinophils in the defence against certain tumours, particularly those of the gut.⁹² Although it is too early to define such a role, preliminary evidence in gut tumours showed that tissue eosinophilia is associated with a favourable outcome (see also the part 5.2).⁹³⁻⁹⁵

3 | CLASSIFICATION OF EOSINOPHILIC SYNDROMES

Eosinophilia is associated with a wide range of diseases with a variety of underlying causes which may affect different organs. The diagnostic approach to a wide range of eosinophilic syndromes is facilitated by the well-established division into *primary* and *secondary (reactive) eosinophilic states* (Figure 3)⁹⁴ which have been further refined according to updated classifications.^{96,97} Recently,

new refined diagnostic criteria and classification of primary eosinophil disorders was proposed⁹⁸:

- **Familial (hereditary) hypereosinophilia**—frequently detected in childhood and sometimes associated with immunodeficiencies;
- **Hypereosinophilia of unknown significance**—without familial clustering, underlying pathology, related molecular(genetic) abnormalities or hypereosinophilia-driven organ damage;
- **Secondary (reactive) hypereosinophilia**—non-clonal eosinophilia driven by overproduced cytokines and
- **Primary (clonal, neoplastic) hypereosinophilia**—driven by neoplastic eosinophils.

The classification of secondary eosinophilia is more challenging as many clinical situations are associated with eosinophilia that can be both part of the pathogenesis of the disease or a bystander phenomenon. As the discrimination between the two is often unknown examples are mentioned rather than clear classification criteria. The basic classification of eosinophilia based on the international consensus is provided in Table 1. In the current review, we will focus on eosinophilia mainly in the context of respiratory conditions and related pathologies.

4 | EOSINOPHILS AS A BIOMARKER TO AID DIAGNOSIS AND PREDICT AND/OR MONITOR TREATMENT RESPONSE

4.1 | Sampling techniques for eosinophils and related biomarkers from different compartments

Eosinophils can be detected in several body compartments, which include both fluids and tissues. Across these compartments, the presence of eosinophils may vary within individuals, depending on factors such as age and different sampling techniques reflect the inflammation in defined locations.¹⁰³ For the assessment and quantification of eosinophils in eosinophilic pulmonary syndromes, for example certain asthma phenotypes, bronchial biopsies have been traditionally considered the ‘gold’ standard as they provide information on the inflammatory and structural components of eosinophils and their spatial relationship within the lung tissue. Other endoscopically retrieved lung specimens include bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL) fluid, bronchial wash (BW) and bronchial brushings (BB).¹⁰⁴ These techniques allow qualification and quantification of the cellular components (including gene expression analysis) often combined with soluble fractions. However, their invasiveness and other drawbacks, such as the substantial dilution, negatively affect reproducibility (esp. BAL). Other biases including site selection (biopsies) or the risk of a pneumothorax (esp. BB), have driven the focus toward less invasive sampling methods including sputum analysis, sinonasal samplings, peripheral blood sampling and exhaled air analysis.^{7,105} However, within individual patients, blood eosinophils show substantial variability over time,¹⁰⁶ while

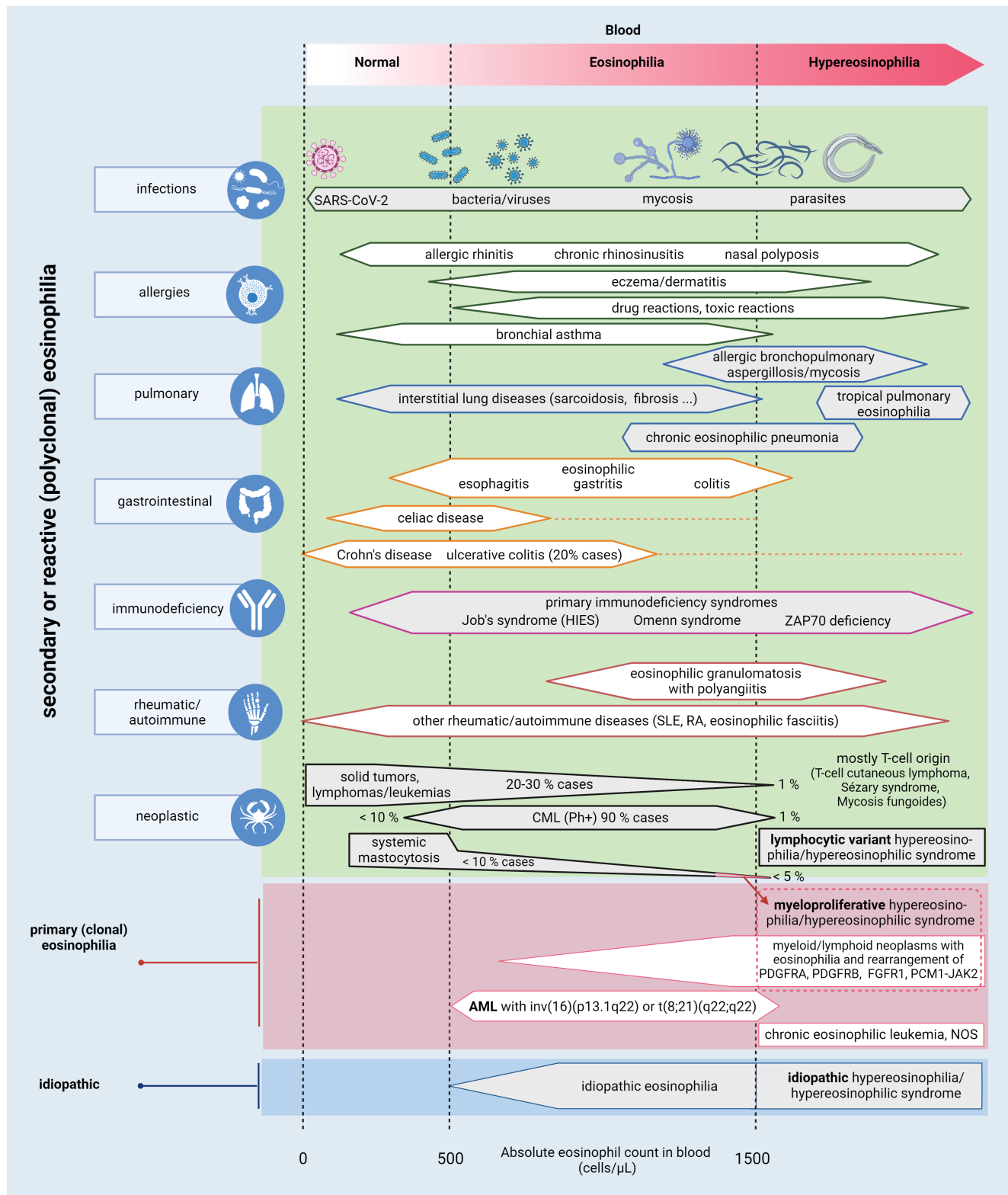


FIGURE 3 Schematic classification of eosinophilia. Created with BioRender.com

eosinophil numbers may vary across different lung specimen¹⁰⁷ as well as across different body compartments.³⁰ Hence, data from sampling sites should be interpreted cautiously and in the context of treatment.^{108,109}

4.1.1 | Blood eosinophils

The determination of eosinophil counts in peripheral blood is fast and inexpensive allowing assessment of the activity of allergic

TABLE 1 Modified schematic classification of eosinophilic syndromes and associated conditions.⁹⁶⁻¹⁰²

Primary (clonal) eosinophilia Group	Secondary (reactive) eosinophilia ^a	
	Group	Examples
Myeloid and lymphoid neoplasms with gene rearrangement of <i>PDGFRA</i> , <i>PDGFRB</i> or <i>FGFR1</i> or with <i>PCM1-JAK2</i> , <i>ETV6-JAK</i> or <i>BCR-JAK2</i>	Allergic disorders	Bronchial asthma, atopic dermatitis, contact dermatitis, chronic allergic rhinosinusitis with/without nasal polyposis, allergic acute and chronic urticaria
Chronic eosinophilic leukaemia not otherwise specified including cases with <i>ETV6-ABL1</i> , <i>ETV6-FLT3</i> or <i>BCR-JAK2</i>	Infectious diseases	Parasitic, bacterial, viral and fungal infections
Atypical chronic myeloid leukaemia with eosinophilia	Dermatoses (non-allergic)	Wells syndrome (eosinophilic cellulitis), pemphigus vulgaris, Gleich syndrome (episodic angioedema with eosinophilia), chronic spontaneous urticaria
Chronic myelomonocytic leukaemia with eosinophilia	Gastrointestinal disorders	Primary gastrointestinal eosinophilic disorders (esophagitis, gastritis, enterocolitis), chronic pancreatitis, inflammatory bowel diseases, coeliac disease
Chronic myeloid leukaemia in accelerated phase or transformation	Vasculitis	Polyarteritis nodosa, eosinophilic granulomatosis with polyangiitis (Churg-Strauss syndrome)
Acute myeloid leukaemia with eosinophilia	Rheumatic diseases	Systemic lupus erythematosus, rheumatoid arthritis, eosinophilic fasciitis (Shulman diseases)
Acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (only if eosinophils demonstrated to be a part of the neoplastic clone)	Respiratory non-allergic diseases	Acute and chronic eosinophilic pneumonia (incl. Löffler syndrome), allergic bronchopulmonary aspergillosis/mycosis, sarcoidosis, eosinophilic bronchitis
Systemic mastocytosis	Neoplastic disorders ^e	Solid tumours, systemic mastocytosis, lymphomas and acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, Langerhans cell histiocytosis
Hereditary (familial) hypereosinophilia	Drug induced eosinophilia	Antibiotics, anticonvulsants, antimalarial, ACE-inhibitors, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs
Idiopathic hypereosinophilic syndrome ^b	Primary immunodeficiencies	Hyper-IgE syndromes, DOCK8 deficiency, Omenn syndrome, Commel-Netherton syndrome
Idiopathic (hyper) eosinophilia ^c	Miscellaneous	Chronic graft-versus-host disease, atheroembolic disease, IgG ₄ -related diseases
Overlap hypereosinophilic syndrome ^d		

^aIn most cases, eosinophilia may be triggered by eosinopoietic cytokines.

^bPersisting eosinophilia ($\geq 1.5 \times 10^9/L$) for at least 6 months associated with tissue damage. If tissue damage is absent, preferred term is idiopathic hypereosinophilia.

^cExclusion of the following: reactive eosinophilia, lymphocyte-variant hypereosinophilia, chronic eosinophilic leukaemia not otherwise specified, myeloid malignancies associated with eosinophilia, eosinophilia-associated myeloproliferative neoplasms or acute myeloid/lymphoid leukaemia.

^dEosinophilic disease restricted to a single organ system accompanied by peripheral eosinophilia $\geq 1.5 \times 10^9/L$.

^eDisorders in which the eosinophils are not part of neoplastic clone.

TABLE 2 Levels of eosinophils in different body compartments.^{18,98,110,111}

	Cut off
Blood	[cells/ μ L]
Normal in healthy males	<120
Normal in healthy females	<100
Eosinophilic asthma	>150
Induced sputum	[%]
Normal in healthy individuals	<2-3
Cerebrospinal fluid	[cells/ μ L]
Normal in healthy individuals	<10

diseases, parasitic infections and other eosinophilic disorders. The commonly used 'normal' values for eosinophil counts in blood are less than $0.30-0.45 \times 10^9/L$ (i.e. 300-450 cells/ μ L) when including atopic subjects; however, ranges may vary among different

laboratories (usually between 50 and 500/ μ L (Table 2).^{98,110} Infants and toddlers have physiologically higher upper threshold.^{18,111} Moreover, certain studies with biologics defined blood eosinophilia even at a lower threshold, for example ≥ 150 cells/ μ L or ≥ 250 cells/ μ L. A recent large study in the general population showed that male sex, younger age, current smoking, obesity and the presence of metabolic syndrome were associated with higher blood eosinophil counts; when combined with the diagnosis of asthma, COPD and atopy, these factors were additive.¹⁸ When excluding these factors, blood eosinophil median values were 120 cells/ μ L in healthy males and 100 cells/ μ L in healthy females, respectively. Numbers of blood eosinophils are known to be affected by diurnal variations and tend to be higher late at night.¹¹² Circadian regulation of eosinophils seems to be at least partially controlled by type 2 innate lymphoid cells (ILC2) cells.¹¹³ On the contrary, physical exercise may reduce the numbers of circulating eosinophils.¹¹⁴ Although blood eosinophil counts do not completely reflect airway eosinophilic inflammation, particularly in children with

severe asthma, in patients with high dose systemic corticosteroids or other immunosuppressants,^{109,115} blood eosinophilia may be helpful for identification of eosinophilic asthma phenotype at a threshold of ≥ 150 cells/ μL .^{116,117} Published cut-off values predicting clinical response to anti-IL-5 biologics are >150 cells/ μL for mepolizumab, >300 cells/ μL for benralizumab and >400 cells/ μL for reslizumab,¹¹⁸ respectively. It needs to be emphasized that eosinophil numbers do not tell the whole story as the cells can exhibit different stages of (pre)-activation and/or different phenotypes. Combining eosinophil numbers and their phenotypes might provide better information on the role of eosinophils in disease. This has recently been reviewed.^{119,120}

4.1.2 | Sputum analysis

Assessment of airway inflammation is a pivotal part of diagnosis, phenotyping and clinical management of patients with complex airways disease.¹²¹ Changes in sputum cellular indices are reproducible, reliable¹²² and responsive to anti-inflammatory treatments.¹²³⁻¹²⁶ Using sputum as a strategy to guide treatment in asthma has been shown to lower the risk ratio of exacerbations and the total number of exacerbations requiring prednisone burst, when compared to just clinical guidelines.^{123,127} Since then, sputum measurements have been extended beyond cell counts.¹²⁸ Reports from different research laboratories globally have successfully and reproducibly measured a number of fluid-phase mediators, type 2 cytokines, activation markers, gene signatures, miRNA gene network,¹²⁹⁻¹³⁴ flow cytometric-based cell surface receptor expression and phagocytosis^{135,136} and microbiome, that are associated with different disease populations, indices of disease severity as well as treatment effects.^{137,138}

Eosinophilia can be detected in pulmonary diseases like asthma, eosinophilic pneumonias and hypersensitivity pneumonitis and idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis by means of induced sputum, or bronchoscopic methods like bronchoalveolar lavage, bronchial and transbronchial biopsies, cryobiopsy and, if needed, also by surgical lung biopsy.¹³⁹⁻¹⁴³

Gene expression patterns related to eosinophils have been quantified from sputum of asthma patients and in some studies were well-correlated with blood eosinophils.¹⁴⁴⁻¹⁴⁶ Although spontaneously coughed up sputum can be obtained easily and can provide useful information (esp. in COPD),¹⁴⁷ induced sputum generally yields better quality, higher cell yield and more reproducible samples.^{148,149} Presently, there are two widely used standardized sputum protocols with different processing/analysis techniques, that is the entire/whole sample method and the plug selection method. Both methods yield reproducible inflammatory cell counts (eosinophils, neutrophils), the former, however, typically has greater proportions of squamous epithelial cells and lower cell viability placing some limitations on differential cell count interpretation.^{150,151} Sputum eosinophilia is usually defined as $>2\%$ or $\geq 3\%$ of inflammatory cell counts^{7,124,152} and in patients

with asthma (across severities) has been found to be usually well-correlated with baseline blood eosinophils.^{117,153}

4.1.3 | Sinonasal sampling techniques

Several studies showed the usefulness of eosinophil measurements in sinonasal samples for evaluating the presence of an allergic or type 2 inflammatory component in rhinitis and chronic rhinosinusitis (CRS).¹⁵⁴⁻¹⁵⁶ To this end, nasal lavage (NAL), nasal secretion sampling with sponges, nasal brushes (NAB), nasal swabs and nasal biopsies (NB) are the most commonly applied techniques with varying ease of sampling, processing and analysis.^{105,157,158}

In patients with asthma, nasal eosinophilia has been used as an indicator of eosinophilic asthma¹⁵⁹ and appeared to better predict airway (sputum) eosinophilia than blood eosinophil counts.¹⁶⁰

4.1.4 | Other tissue samplings

Eosinophilic infiltration in cutaneous tissue obtained by skin biopsy can be found in numerous pathologic conditions, for example atopic dermatitis, eosinophilic cellulitis, granuloma faciale, eosinophilic pustular folliculitis, recurrent cutaneous eosinophilic vasculitis, chronic spontaneous urticaria and other diseases even in the absence of blood eosinophilia.^{100,161,162} In atopic dermatitis, intact eosinophils in skin are rare, but significant deposits of eosinophil-derived proteins are indicative of their local activation.¹⁶³ Although rarely a major diagnostic criterion, the presence and the number of eosinophils in skin biopsies is often used in the differential diagnosis of drug-induced skin eruptions versus acute graft versus host disease (GvHD), despite some conflicting evidence.¹⁶⁴⁻¹⁶⁶

Eosinophilia in cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) has been reported (i.e. ≥ 10 eosinophils/ μL or $\geq 10\%$ of total leukocyte count) in a number of conditions including eosinophilic meningitis—a rare condition caused by helminthic infections,¹⁶⁷ bacterial or fungal meningitis, hypereosinophilic syndrome (HES) and in children with CSF shunts. In the latter condition, CSF eosinophilia appeared a risk factor for shunt malfunction.^{168,169}

High eosinophil counts in umbilical cord have been associated with intra-amniotic infections. While in healthy state the foetal white cell pool is relatively small, in severe infections, immature neutrophils and even eosinophils may be recruited to umbilical and chorionic vessels causing umbilical vasculitis.¹⁷⁰

4.2 | Activation markers and surrogate biomarkers of eosinophilia

Eosinophil cationic protein (ECP) is the most commonly used clinical biomarker for eosinophil activity, and can be quantified in, for example plasma, serum, saliva, BALF, sputum and nasal lavage.^{171,172} It

is a useful tool in assessing asthma severity and in monitoring anti-inflammatory asthma therapy.

When using ECP as a biomarker, one should be aware that ECP levels are affected by age, smoking, circadian rhythm and seasonal variation. Serum ECP has been successfully used in guiding anti-inflammatory therapy in childhood asthma.¹⁷³ Furthermore, polymorphisms have been identified in genes coding for ECP and some of them have been shown to be associated with asthma¹⁷⁴ and allergic symptoms.¹⁷⁵ Other polymorphisms cause lower ECP levels, and specific genotyping could therefore be recommended in future asthma studies which include ECP measurements.¹⁷⁶

Measurement of *eosinophil peroxidase (EPX)* and *eosinophil-derived neurotoxin (EDN)* in either blood or urine may be an alternative to ECP measurements in blood as a reflection of eosinophil turnover and activity.^{177,178} In asthma, increased EDN levels have been observed in both blood and urine with further increases in symptomatic patients, while levels were reduced in response to ICS.¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, EDN is a promising candidate particularly in children: serum levels have been shown to correlate with disease severity¹⁸⁰ and urine levels can predict the development of asthma in wheezing children.¹⁸¹ EPX in sputum, nasal and pharyngeal samples was reported to be a specific marker of eosinophil activity comparable to ECP¹⁸² and associated with asthma severity.^{177,183} In addition, some studies imply that both granule proteins are expressed also by neutrophils, although in much lower amount.^{182,184}

Although currently not used clinically and requiring flow cytometric measurements, upregulated expression of many cell surface receptors and cell surface integrins on blood, sputum and BAL eosinophils are markers of eosinophil activation as is a decrease in side scatter activity upon eosinophil degranulation (Figure 2).¹⁸⁵

Validating markers of eosinophilia in relevant biological fluids is essential given the advancement of phenotype/endotype-driven precision medicine. These biomarkers are not only essential for choosing relevant treatment but also for monitoring treatment response.¹⁸⁶

4.3 | Fractional exhaled nitric oxide and its correlation with eosinophils

Fractional exhaled nitric oxide (FeNO) is a point-of-care biomarker of type 2 inflammation which can be simply and non-invasively measured in exhaled air from both adults and children (>4 years).¹⁸⁷ Given its correlation with blood eosinophils¹⁸⁸ and responsiveness to corticosteroids,^{189,190} FeNO has been considered a surrogate marker of eosinophilic airway inflammation for many years.¹⁹¹ Despite a modest relationship with sputum eosinophils,¹¹⁶ both biomarkers reflect different, partly overlapping, inflammatory pathways underlying several chronic respiratory disorders including asthma. In line with their different origins, biologics targeting eosinophils (i.e. anti-IL-5 monoclonal antibodies) failed to show a decrease in FeNO levels despite a substantial reduction in blood and/or airway eosinophils.^{192,193} The discrepancy

between FeNO, sputum and blood eosinophilia was described by many authors.^{194,195} This discrepancy could be explained by the differences between allergic and non-allergic eosinophilic asthmatic phenotypes and different sources of FeNO in classic allergic and T2-high phenotype. Different sources and the fact that all three biomarkers reflect different underlying mechanisms (or in the case of sputum vs. peripheral blood different locations) is the most important point, especially while, for example anti-IL5 strategies decrease significantly peripheral eosinophils and not FeNO and, for example dupilumab decreases FeNO and not so much peripheral blood eosinophils.¹⁹⁴

Unsurprisingly, recent analyses showed an overall superior sensitivity and specificity for blood eosinophils compared with FeNO in identifying airway eosinophilia (defined as sputum eosinophils $\geq 3\%$).¹⁹⁶ However, for overall asthma management including the prediction of asthma exacerbations, both blood eosinophils and FeNO appeared to have additive prognostic value.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, in patients with severe asthma, FeNO could predict the responsiveness and clinical effect of selected biologics, especially dupilumab.¹⁹⁸

4.4 | Eosinophilia as readout for immune responses associated with cancer

Eosinophilia has also been observed in some cancers, including breast, ovarian, cervical, prostate, colo-rectal, oral squamous and some haematological cancers (e.g. Hodgkin's lymphoma). The origin and the role of increased eosinophil numbers seem to differ across different cancers and vary from tumour-stimulating to anti-tumour activity.¹⁹⁹ The tumoricidal function of eosinophils is mainly in solid tumours and can be mediated by α -defensins, TNF- α , granzymes A and IL-18,^{200,201} while promoting regulatory T cells treatment is primarily directed at the main pathology.²⁰² Despite these data, it is still unclear whether this cancer-associated eosinophilia is an innocent bystander process or whether eosinophils play a causative role in the pathogenesis of these tumours. It is also possible that at least in part eosinophilia can be caused by the treatment of the tumour rather than the tumour itself.²⁰³ It is, however, important to emphasize that eosinophils might play a positive role in immune therapy at least in the treatment of certain cancers. This topic has been addressed in a recent review by Grisaru-Tal et al.⁹²

5 | EOSINOPHILIA AS THERAPY-GUIDING TOOL FOR TARGETED ANTI-EOSINOPHILIC TREATMENTS

The treatment of eosinophil-associated diseases depends on the underlying pathomechanism that is whether eosinophilia is due to (i) a primary or clonal process or (ii) a secondary, reactive one.^{100,204} Eosinophil-targeted therapies are aimed to reduce the eosinophil-associated inflammation and consequently, to alleviate clinical signs

and symptoms and to allow tapering off oral corticosteroids. Additionally, clinical trials with eosinophil-targeted treatment helped to provide novel information on the role of eosinophils and mediators either acting on/or produced by eosinophils in human diseases and homeostasis.

5.1 | Treatment of clonal eosinophilic disorders

The most common molecular defect identified in patients with clonal eosinophilic disorders is the *FIP1L1-PDGFR* gene fusion that results in constitutive, ligand-independent PDGFR tyrosine kinase activity.²⁰⁵ For patients with PDGFR-associated disease, the tyrosine kinase inhibitor (TKI) *imatinib* is first-line therapy and produces rapid and dramatic clinical and haematological responses with molecular remission (no detectable *FIP1L1-PDGFR*) typically observed within 2–3 months of treatment.^{206–208} In order to overcome imatinib resistance, second- and third-generation TKIs have been developed. Of those, *midostaurin* and *ponatinib* proved to be effective against D816V, the most common *KIT* mutation in patients with systemic mastocytosis who may also present with eosinophilia.²⁰⁹ Additional therapeutic strategies have been outlined by Radonjic-Hoesli et al. (2015).²⁰⁴

5.2 | Treatment of reactive eosinophilic disorders

The therapeutic approaches for reactive eosinophil disorders (e.g. eosinophilic asthma, rhinosinusitis) are either to directly target eosinophils or to inhibit cells and mediators stimulating eosinophilia and eosinophil activation. So far, corticosteroids (CS) via topical, inhaled or systemic route have widely been used as first-line therapy and may control eosinophilic inflammation in many cases. CS exert direct effects on eosinophils, for example by inducing eosinophil apoptosis or indirect ones by affecting inflammatory and tissue cells interacting with eosinophils resulting in a decreased production, recruitment and activation of eosinophils. Long-term use of especially systemic steroids causes harmful side effects.^{210,211} This underscores the benefits of eosinophil-targeted therapies in these conditions.^{212–214}

5.2.1 | Direct anti-eosinophil-targeted therapies

The past two decades have witnessed a tremendous boost in the development of anti-cytokine and anti-cytokine receptor monoclonal antibody therapies for the treatment and management of eosinophilic diseases.

Anti-IL-5 monoclonal antibodies—mepolizumab, reslizumab

The mounting popularity has remained with targeting the IL-5 pathway given its prime role in orchestrating eosinophil biology from maturation to mobilisation to degranulation.^{61,215} Anti-IL-5 monoclonal antibody therapy with *mepolizumab* or *reslizumab* resulted in a significant improvement of clinical signs and symptoms in the eosinophilic

subtype of asthma,^{216–218} chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps (CRSwNP)²¹⁹ and hypereosinophilic syndrome,^{220–223} whereas trials in atopic dermatitis,²²⁴ eosinophilic esophagitis²²⁵ and bullous pemphigoid²²⁶ revealed missing or moderate effects.

Effects reported on anti-IL-5 therapy with mepolizumab or reslizumab in patients with severe eosinophilic asthma, consist of reduced numbers of exacerbations, improved severity and quality of life scores, decreased numbers of blood and sputum eosinophils, systemic corticosteroid sparing effects and improvement in lung function.^{217,218,227,228} In initial studies, mepolizumab failed to significantly improve clinical features of asthma (allergen-induced late response, airway hyperresponsiveness, FEV₁ and peak flow recordings) as patients had not been selected for eosinophilic asthma.^{29,229} Following a paradigm shift, Nair et al. (2009)²¹⁸ and several other investigators confirmed clinical efficacy in patients with eosinophilic asthma.²²⁹ Mepolizumab is currently indicated as add-on therapy for adults and children (age ≥6 yrs.) with severe uncontrolled eosinophilic asthma, in two dosing regimens.²³⁰ It should be pointed out that the children with severe asthma have been underreported in clinical trials with biologics (e.g. 1%–6% of the study populations with mepolizumab) and available efficacy and safety data for the paediatric population are scarce.²³¹ In patients with CRSwNP, another chronic type 2 respiratory condition often coinciding with severe asthma, increased IL-5 levels in nasal secretions at baseline predicted clinical response to anti-IL-5 treatment with reslizumab.²³² However, clinical efficacy of anti-IL-5 targeting treatment has so far only been established for mepolizumab^{233,234} in large number of patients with recurrent refractory CRSwNP with or without concomitant asthma, and consequently, this biologic has been implemented into concurrent treatment algorithms.^{235–238} Clinical efficacy in the treatment of CRSwNP was also confirmed for other biologics: that is omalizumab²³⁹ and dupilumab.^{237,240,241}

The absent or moderate clinical efficacy of anti-IL-5 therapy in other eosinophil-associated diseases (e.g. atopic dermatitis, eosinophilic esophagitis, bullous pemphigoid) appeared to be related to the incomplete reduction in eosinophil numbers within the target tissues.^{30,225,226} In line with the initial studies in asthma,^{29,30} a phenotype selection toward a more eosinophil-driven disease might be required to reach clinically relevant effects using these targeted treatment modalities. Independently of efficacy, in all clinical studies a significant reduction and even full depletion of blood eosinophils has been observed.^{29,217,226} In addition to blood eosinophils, mepolizumab decreased the numbers of mature eosinophils within the bone marrow by 70%, as well as myelocytes and metamyelocytes by 37% and 44%, respectively, without affecting the numbers of blood and bone marrow CD34⁺, CD34⁺/IL-5R alpha⁺ cells (progenitors of eosinophils) and/or eosinophil/basophil colony-forming units.²⁴² To note, mepolizumab did not alter the physiological infiltration of eosinophils in the duodenal mucosa of patients with eosinophilic esophagitis.²⁸ Of similar interest, despite decreasing eosinophil (cells expressing IL-5Rα) numbers following a segmental allergen challenge in allergic asthmatics, mepolizumab (750 mg subcutaneously) had only a limited effect on airway activation markers.²⁴³ In line with these

observations, mepolizumab at the currently recommended dose (100 mg subcutaneously q4wk) does not completely abolish sputum eosinophils or any other cellular source of type 2 cytokines such as the innate lymphoid cells type 2 (ILC2) despite a significant reduction in blood eosinophils.²⁴⁴ Recent evidence from real-life studies suggests similar findings where both mepolizumab and reslizumab can normalize blood eosinophil levels, and yet 43% of patients respond suboptimally.²⁴⁵ Approximately 78% of these suboptimal responders show sputum eosinophilia despite (at least) 4 months of therapy.¹⁰⁸ In the MEX study, asthma exacerbations while on mepolizumab were eosinophilic in nature, as evident by sputum eosinophilia >2% and high FENO >50 ppb. Such persisting eosinophilia may well account for the lack of disease-modifying effects of (subcutaneous) anti-IL5 strategy.²⁴⁶

Other studies, however, showed, that sputum eosinophil count may not represent a more useful biomarker than blood eosinophils for predicting treatment response to mepolizumab.²⁴⁷ Of note, recent data showed that IL-5 may influence airway epithelium cells with negative impact on barrier function and immune capability.²⁴⁸ Interestingly, in patients with eosinophilic asthma and nasal polyposis with AERD, mepolizumab 100 mg s.c. was able to induce epithelial tight junction-related genes. Biological treatment effects not exclusively due to anti-eosinophil activity may thus be contributing to mechanisms of treatment response in asthma.²⁴⁹ As disease modifying asthma therapies should target fundamental pathobiological mechanisms involved in asthma,²⁵⁰ for example immune epithelial barrier disruption,²⁵¹ it remains to be seen how targeting of eosinophils—important players in Th2 immunity—truly contributes to achieve disease modification (keeping in mind the LIAR hypothesis and emerging concept of different eosinophilic subsets, see below).

According to published data on anti-IL-5 strategies so far, there does not seem to be an increased risk of neoplasms, infections and/or autoimmunity in humans.²⁵²⁻²⁵⁸ In long-term studies, both mepolizumab and reslizumab showed a positive benefit-risk profile without evidence for specific adverse event patterns in neither paediatric nor adult patients.^{253,254,255,259} Respiratory tract infection, headache and bronchitis were the most frequently reported adverse events based on an open-label long-term extension safety study in patients with severe eosinophilic asthma (COLUMBA).²⁶⁰ Whereas this was an open-label study, it could not be determined if the respiratory tract infections were increased due to treatment or typical of the disease. Anti-drug antibody (ADA) responses, which mainly were transient in adults, but no neutralizing antibodies have been observed in adults or children.^{259,260} Nevertheless, the immune system of children is still under development and long-term effects of IL-5 inhibition remain unclear, this warrants further investigation and long-term monitoring.

Anti-IL5R monoclonal antibody—benralizumab

Benralizumab exerts dual function by interfering with IL-5 binding to the IL-5 receptor alpha chain and promoting antibody-dependent cell-mediated cytotoxicity (ADCC) with consequent enhanced eosinophil apoptosis.²⁶¹ In adult patients with severe, uncontrolled

eosinophilic asthma, benralizumab as add-on therapy decreased the annual exacerbation rates, improved lung function and asthma symptom scores, as well as reduced oral CS use.^{199,262,263} However, in patients with mild to moderate, persistent asthma, no clear relationship between blood eosinophil counts and FEV₁ was observed following benralizumab therapy.²⁶⁴ Benralizumab was reported to significantly reduce both mature eosinophils and eosinophil progenitor cell numbers in peripheral blood, airway mucosa/submucosa, sputum and bone marrow (as well as peripheral blood basophils) in patients with (severe) eosinophilic and/or corticosteroid-dependent asthma.²⁶⁵⁻²⁶⁷ Based on two smaller early phase studies in asthma, in parallel with reduced blood eosinophil numbers, serum eosinophil-derived neurotoxin (EDN) and eosinophil cationic protein (ECP) levels decreased upon benralizumab.²⁶⁸ Interestingly, while no changes in TNF- α or IFN- γ levels were observed, serum IL-5, eotaxin/CCL11 and eotaxin-2/CCL24 levels increased after benralizumab administration.²⁶⁸ Despite an overall similar reduction in peripheral eosinophils across participating patients with OCS-dependent, severe eosinophilic asthma, in a phase III clinical trial with add-on benralizumab, 20% of patients were unable to reduce their corticosteroid dose without losing asthma control.²⁶³ In a real-life setting, suboptimal response to benralizumab was observed in 27% out of 74 severe asthmatics who were clinically prescribed this biologic. The majority of exacerbations were non-eosinophilic, associated with airway infections and reduced NK cells.²⁶⁹ Of note, add-on benralizumab compared with placebo failed to significantly lower the annualized rate of COPD exacerbations in two large studies (GALATHEA and TERRANOVA) in patients with moderate to severe COPD with blood eosinophilia,²⁷⁰ while only a subgroup of responders could be characterized by pooled data analysis.²⁷¹ In this context, it should be noted that the role of eosinophils may differ between COPD and asthma.²⁷²

In patients with *PDGFRA*-negative hypereosinophilic syndrome (HES), benralizumab treatment resulted in a significant clinical improvement with suppression of bone marrow and tissue eosinophilia with the possibility of withdrawal of background therapies.²²¹

Long-term observation of patients on benralizumab treatment revealed no differences in the rate and pattern of adverse events and in particular severe adverse events associated with infections as compared to the placebo groups.²⁷³ However, recent analysis of the exacerbations in patients treated with benralizumab showed that a sub-optimal response (SR) to therapy was associated with the presence of various respiratory infections (e.g. by *Moraxella catarrhalis*, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Staphylococcus epidermidis*, *Haemophilus influenzae*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and metapneumovirus). Patients treated with mepolizumab or reslizumab showed lower frequency of infections compared with benralizumab-treated patients. Sub-analysis of the patients with zero eosinophils in sputum during the benralizumab treatment showed still higher incidence of respiratory infections.^{82,273} Moreover, the use of the IL-4 receptor- α blocking antibody dupilumab was associated with less respiratory infections (and hence less use of anti-infective medication) in patients with moderate-to-severe asthma or severe CRSwNP.²⁷⁴ Therefore, it is key to consider

all potential consequences of manipulating the pool of eosinophils, which likely contains inflammatory, regulatory (homeostatic) and residential cells with distinct functions and activities. Whether dramatic depletion of eosinophils would impose long-term consequences on the organism in terms of side effects (especially infections) should be followed up and monitored (see also chapter 5.3).

5.2.2 | Other biologics affecting eosinophilic diseases

The first biologic used to treat allergic diseases (including asthma) was anti-IgE (see below). Later evidence from among others the U-BIOPRED (Unbiased Biomarkers for the Prediction of Respiratory Disease Outcomes) program applying sputum transcriptomics strongly suggests that in addition to IL-5 (and IgE), other cytokines such IL-33, thymic stromal lymphopoietin (TSLP) and IL-13 may be mediators of/contributors to eosinophilia.²⁷⁵ In addition, there are additional markers associated with eosinophilic conditions because of certain pathomechanisms which may directly or indirectly contribute to the development of eosinophilia and associated diseases.

Anti-IgE monoclonal antibody—omalizumab

Omalizumab forms complexes with free IgE blocking its binding to receptors on mast cells and basophils. Since eosinophils do not express functional high-affinity IgE receptor (FcεRI), omalizumab seems to exhibit indirect effects in eosinophilic diseases. Omalizumab has been proven effective in allergic/IgE-mediated diseases including asthma as it reduces the frequency of exacerbations and decreases the use of CS in paediatric and adult patients.²⁷⁶⁻²⁷⁸ Approximately 60% of asthmatic patients respond to treatment.²⁷⁹ In addition to a reduction in serum IgE and IgE⁺ cells within the airway mucosa, a decrease of overall type 2 inflammation including eosinophils, CD3⁺, CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ T lymphocytes; B lymphocytes, cells positive for the high-affinity Fc receptor for IgE in the airway mucosa has been reported following omalizumab treatment.²⁸⁰ An additional treatment response has been observed on the IgE⁺ antigen-presenting cells, that is monocytes, plasmacytoid DCs, limiting the facilitated antigen presentation and activation of T cells.²⁸¹ In allergic and non-allergic patients with CRSwNP and comorbid asthma, anti-IgE therapy decreased the size of nasal polyps and yielded beneficial effects on airway symptoms (nasal congestion, anterior rhinorrhoea, loss of sense of smell, wheezing and dyspnoea).²³⁸ A comprehensive review of 25 RCTs reports that patients with severe uncontrolled allergic asthma with high blood eosinophil counts and high FeNO, indicative of ongoing type 2/eosinophilic airway inflammation had greater reduction in asthma exacerbations upon treatment with omalizumab.²⁸² Therefore, prescription of omalizumab to allergic (atopic) and clearly eosinophilic asthmatics seems justified when targeted eosinophil-depleting treatment options are unavailable. However, omalizumab was unable to curb airway eosinophilia in more severe asthma, irrespective of blood eosinophil counts or atopy status.²⁸³ Indeed, severe asthmatics who exacerbated on omalizumab, when switched to mepolizumab

(targeting IL5) showed significant clinical improvement.²⁸⁴ When applied in eosinophilic esophagitis or atopic dermatitis, omalizumab failed to improve the clinical course despite depletion of IgE.²⁸⁵⁻²⁸⁷ Omalizumab was shown to moderately reduce tissue eosinophils in the duodenum and gastric antrum but not in oesophagus, while FcεRI expression on basophil and dendritic cell as well as free IgE levels were all significantly decreased in patients with eosinophilic gastrointestinal diseases.²⁸⁸ In patients at risk for geohelminth infections, omalizumab therapy was not associated with increased morbidity attributable to intestinal helminths.²⁸⁹ Overall, omalizumab has a favourable safety profile.²⁹⁰

More recently, another high-affinity monoclonal anti-IgE antibody, *ligelizumab*, has been developed to overcome some of the limitations of omalizumab. Although *ligelizumab* showed superiority in inhibition of IgE binding to FcεRI, basophil activation and IgE production by B lymphocytes, it was less potent than omalizumab in inhibiting the interaction of IgE with CD23. However, its effect on eosinophilia was not studied.²⁹¹ In a phase II trial, *ligelizumab* failed to demonstrate superiority on the Asthma Control Questionnaire 7 (ACQ-7) over placebo or omalizumab in severe asthmatics,²⁹² but showed potentially promising results in the treatment of chronic spontaneous urticaria (CSU) in another clinical study.²⁹³ However, its final position in the management of CSU in relation to omalizumab needs to be established.

Anti-IL-4/IL-13Rα monoclonal antibody—dupilumab

Dupilumab blocks the shared IL-4/IL-13 receptor α-chain and thus the activity of IL-13 and IL-4 resulting in an inhibition of type 2 inflammatory responses. *Dupilumab* was shown to significantly improve clinical outcomes in several type 2 diseases including moderate-to-severe eosinophilic asthma,^{294,295} atopic dermatitis,^{296,297} CRSwNP,^{239,298,299} perennial allergic rhinitis with comorbid asthma³⁰⁰ and eosinophilic esophagitis (EoE).³⁰¹

Although *dupilumab* is effective in controlling type 2/eosinophilic diseases, transient blood eosinophilia has been reported with *dupilumab* treatment.^{295,299} This phenomenon can be explained by the reduced expression of IL-4/IL-13-induced VCAM-1 on endothelial cells restricting eosinophil adhesion and tissue extravasation,³⁰² as well as by the inhibition of the direct effects of IL-4 on eosinophils reducing their chemotactic response.³⁰³ Moreover, reduction of the chemotactic agent eotaxin-3, VCAM-1 and thymus and activation-regulated cytokine (TARC) after *dupilumab* without simultaneous inhibition of eosinophilopoiesis in bone marrow might also reduce eosinophil extravasation.³⁰⁴ Additional mechanisms potentially underlying *dupilumab*-induced eosinophilia have been recently described in a review by Olaguibel et al.³⁰⁵ Blood eosinophilia has been reported in 4.1% of asthma patients on *dupilumab* treatment which in 4 out of 52 patients was associated with worsening of blood eosinophilia and the development of chronic eosinophilic pneumonia³⁰⁴ as well as eosinophilic pleural effusions and a cardiovascular accident associated with atrial fibrillation and (cutaneous) vasculitis in two respective case reports of uncontrolled asthma.³⁰⁶ Another study reported *dupilumab*-associated eosinophilia in <1% of AD patients which was

mainly transient.^{307,308} In the pathogenesis of dupilumab-associated conjunctivitis, reported in 8.6%–22.1% of atopic dermatitis patients, a prominent eosinophil influx was demonstrated in the conjunctiva.³⁰⁹ In a recent analysis of 11 dupilumab clinical studies, transient eosinophilia was reported in 0–13.6% of the treated patients with various diagnosis, it did not affect the efficacy of the treatment and was rarely of clinical consequence. Clinical symptoms of associated with eosinophilia were rare (7 patients in 4666 dupilumab-treated patients) and occurred only in patients with asthma or CRSwNP.³¹⁰ Treating physicians should be aware of this side phenomenon and the patient should be closely monitor regarding the potential eosinophil-related morbidity.³¹¹ Current update of GINA 2023 suggests not to use of dupilumab in patients with current or historic blood eosinophilia >1500 cells/ μ L.³¹²

Anti-TSLP monoclonal antibody—tezepelumab

Tezepelumab was studied in atopic dermatitis³¹³ and asthma³¹⁴ showing significant reduction of atopic dermatitis severity scores and asthma exacerbation rates, respectively, compared to placebo irrespective of baseline blood eosinophil counts or total IgE levels in asthma patients. In the phase II randomized double blind (CASCADE) study, blocking TSLP (tezepelumab) reduced airway submucosal inflammatory cells (eosinophils, neutrophils, T cells and mast cells) retrieved from bronchial biopsies.³¹⁵ In the phase III (NAVIGATOR) trial, tezepelumab reduced asthma exacerbation rates, improved asthma control and lung function especially in patients with eosinophils ≥ 300 cells/ μ L. Furthermore, a significant decline in annual asthma exacerbations was also observed in patients with eosinophils <300 cells/ μ L.³¹⁶ However, in another phase III (SOURCE) asthma trial, tezepelumab failed to allow a significant OCS dose reduction versus placebo, while an improvement was observed in patients with higher baseline eosinophil numbers (≥ 150 cells/ μ L).²⁹⁵ Tezepelumab is now registered both in the United States and in Europe.

Novel targeted therapies under investigation

Eosinophils express various surface molecules and receptors, for example CD52, receptors for TSLP, IL-33, prostaglandin D2 (DP2 or previously CRTh2) and Siglec-8, while also releasing cytokines which may serve as drug targets in eosinophilic diseases.

Alemtuzumab is a monoclonal antibody targeting CD52 currently registered for the treatment of relapsing–remitting multiple sclerosis and certain type of leukaemia. CD52 is expressed amongst other cells also on eosinophils and the treatment with alemtuzumab led to complete haematological response in 10/11 patients with idiopathic hypereosinophilic syndrome (I-HES) and chronic eosinophilic leukaemia-not otherwise specified (CEL-NOS).³¹⁷ Repeated bone marrow analysis showed a normalized eosinophil percentage (complete remission) in 3, and more than 50% reduction in eosinophil percentage (partial remission) in another 3 out of 8 patients. However, adverse events were common and related to infusion reactions and lymphopenia-related viral infections.³¹⁸

Targeting DP2 (CRTh2), the prostaglandin D2 receptor, by several DP2 antagonists including setipiprant, fevipiprant and timapiprant, showed some protection against the allergen-induced late response^{319,320} and significant reduced sputum eosinophils along with improvements in lung function in patients with (allergic) eosinophilic asthma,^{321,322} as well as improved nasal and ocular symptoms in allergic subjects exposed to grass pollen³²³ and decreased the oesophageal eosinophil load associated with reduced disease activity in patients with eosinophilic esophagitis.³²⁴ Two phase III trials of fevipiprant (LUSTER-1 and LUSTER-2) only showed very modest effects on exacerbations in patients with severe asthma, thus leading to discontinuation of further development of the drug for this indication.³²⁵

Another potential therapeutic target is Siglec-8, expressed on eosinophils. Chimeric antibodies directed against Siglec-8 were shown to reduce IL-5-induced eosinophilia in healthy and eosinophilic donors.³²⁶ A single dose of AK002 (*liretelimab*), an anti-Siglec-8 antibody, led to a complete depletion of blood eosinophils in healthy individuals already 1-h post-dosing and persisted up to 84 days. However, the ENIGMA-2 phase 3 trial in patients with eosinophilic gastrointestinal disease missed the symptomatic co-primary endpoint (press release by manufacturer).³²⁷ However, as the long-term consequences of complete depletion of eosinophils are unclear, further studies are needed.³²⁸

Dexpramipexole, a synthetic aminobenzothiazole, is an orally bioavailable small molecule originally developed for treating amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), which was coincidentally shown to reduce eosinophils both in peripheral blood and in target tissues. Therefore, it has been subsequently tested in eosinophilic diseases such as hyper-eosinophilic syndrome³²⁹ and CRSwNP with blood eosinophilia.³³⁰ In CRSwNP patients, dexpramipexole (for 6 months) had a favourable safety profile and effectively reduced eosinophils both in peripheral blood and in NP-tissue in the majority of patients but failed to reduce the nasal polyps' size and to improve upper respiratory symptom scores.³³⁰ A recent safety and efficacy study ('EX-HALE') clearly showed a marked reduction of peripheral eosinophils in eosinophilic asthma patients.¹⁵⁸ Interestingly, the study showed a favourable effect on lung function albeit being underpowered for this endpoint.

A proof-of concept study investigating an *anti-IL-33 antibody* (etokimab) in atopic dermatitis, reported a marked improvement of disease severity associated with a significant decrease of blood eosinophils upon a single administration.³³¹

IL-13 is a key cytokine in type 2 diseases, and eosinophils were shown to express the IL-13 receptor and release functional IL-13.^{61,332} Several antibodies blocking IL-13 have been/are under clinical investigation for asthma—for example *tralokinumab* or *lebrikizumab*^{333,334} and atopic dermatitis.³³⁵ Stratification of asthma patients revealed best effects on lung function in those with more pronounced type 2 profile/blood eosinophilia.³⁰⁴ But overall, neutralizing IL-13 alone seems to have limited effects on eosinophilic airway inflammation and clinical outcomes in asthma while the eosinophil-lowering

effects are most likely indirect.³³⁶ In contrast, more promising results were shown in atopic dermatitis.³³⁷

5.3 | To completely block or not completely block eosinophils—that is the question

Presently, an expanding armamentarium of new drugs targeting the eosinophils have been introduced into drug development while some of them have entered clinical practice. These targeted drugs range from relatively specific for inflammatory eosinophils (Mepolizumab/anti-IL-5) to targeting all IL-5R positive cells including (at least to a certain degree) resident eosinophils (Benralizumab/anti-IL5R). Associated with their application in chronic diseases, it is essential to understand the ‘cost’ of losing resident (i.e. homeostatic) eosinophils from healthy tissues during long-term treatment of type 2/eosinophilic inflammation (Figure 4).^{108,256,257,258,338}

Historically, eosinophils have been associated with helminthic infections and allergic diseases. As mentioned before, recent evidence revealed their important involvement in innate immune responses displaying regulatory/dampening effects.^{5,86} The Local Immunity and/ or Remodelling/Repair (LIAR) hypothesis suggests that resident tissue eosinophils secure local homeostasis, prevent remodelling and promote tissue repair.⁴¹ This was supported by a mouse model showing the presence of homeostatic resident eosinophils.³¹ So far, the anti-IL-5 trials and anti-IL-5R trials recorded limited adverse reactions to eosinophil depletion, but studies were mainly focussed on adult patients. Even the longitudinal follow-up studies showed that all the drugs were

well-tolerated, and no adverse effects of eosinophil depletion were reported.³⁴⁴ However, with benralizumab, it has come to notice that there is increased incidence of recorded respiratory infections which are not apparent with anti-IL-5 neutralising mAb therapies (mepolizumab and reslizumab). Moreover, the increase in infections may not be only ascribed to depleted eosinophils, but may also be the effect of the depletion of other IL-5R⁺ cells, such as basophils, involved in host defence.^{82,269} Despite the fact that both anti-IL5 and anti-IL5R showed favourable safety profiles with overall similar adverse events (in kind and number), future studies should provide further insight how the potential gatekeeper role of eosinophils based on their innate immunity involvement as well as their role in tissue homeostasis will be affected by long-term deep depletion.

5.4 | Off-target effects: lessons to be learned?

A worrying finding is that treatment with different immunomodulatory drugs can induce rare unforeseen side effects depending on the (immune) status of the patient. This rather cryptic issue is best illustrated by the effect of anti-IL-5 treatment in patients who suffer from rheumatoid arthritis combined with asthma. Andreev et al. have recently described an immune suppressive function of eosinophils in joint tissue. In a mouse model of serum-induced arthritis the authors describe compelling evidence that eosinophils are involved in dampening the inflammatory response in arthritis lesions.³⁴⁵ Importantly, the authors also describe a flare-up in the joints of RA patients who were treated with anti-IL-5 therapy. This finding is

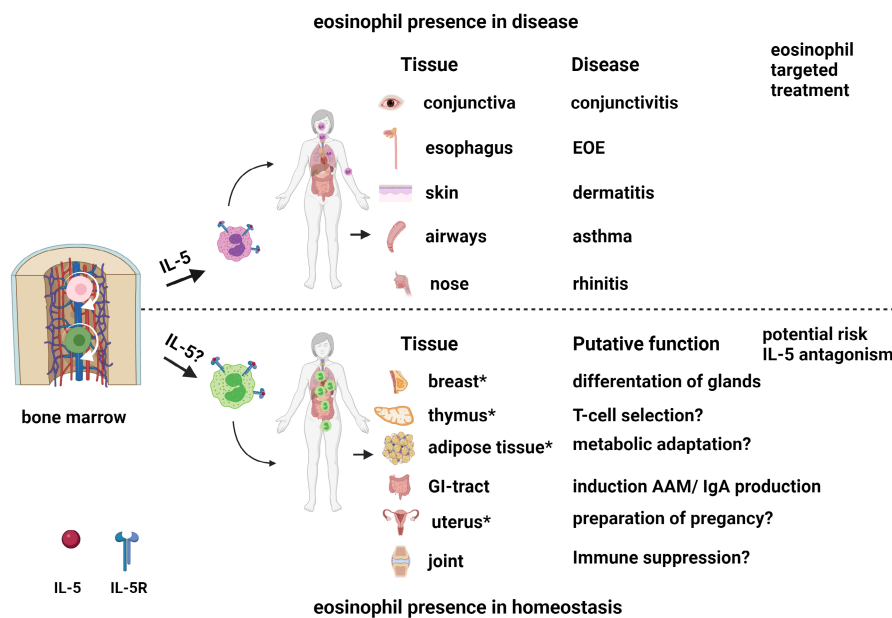


FIGURE 4 Balancing the potency of eosinophil inhibition in disease and tissue homeostasis. Inhibition of eosinophils, mostly via blocking IL-5 and/or its receptor has beneficial in many, predominantly allergic diseases. This IL-5 is produced by several cell types including Th2 cells³³⁹, type 2 innate lymphoid cells³⁴⁰, bone marrow stromal cells³⁴¹, mast cells³⁴² and even eosinophils.³⁴³ The recent appreciation of the potential role of eosinophils in tissue homeostasis, outlined in the LIAR hypothesis, indicate a potential risk of the antagonism of resident non-inflammatory eosinophils. These cells are responsive to IL-5, but their differentiation in the bone marrow seems independent of this cytokine. *only implicated in the mouse. Created with BioRender.com

TABLE 3 Possible effect of anti-eosinophil biologics on eosinophil counts in different specimen.

Molecule	Mepolizumab	Reslizumab	Benralizumab	Dupilumab	Omalizumab	Tezepelumab
References	[218,219,222,225,228,229,242,243,247]	[227,254]	[192,261,262,265,268]	[241,265,296,299,301,307]	[239,276,279,283,287]	[315,348,349,350,351]
Target	IL-5	IL-5	IL5R	IL4/13R α	IgE	TSLP
Inhibition of eosinophils	Direct	Direct	Direct	Indirect	Indirect	Direct
<i>Eosinophils in</i>						
Peripheral blood	↓↓	↓↓	↓↓↓	↓ (↑ ^a)	↓	↓↓
Airway/lung tissue	±	↓	↓↓↓	↓	±	↓↓
Sputum	↓	↓	↓↓	↓	↓	↓
BALF	↓	↓	↓↓	?	↓	↓↓
Oesophagus	↓	↓	↓ ^b	↓↓	∅	?
Duodenum	∅	?	↓↓	?	↓	?
Bone marrow	↓	↓	↓↓	∅	?	?
Residential lung eosinophils	∅	∅	Possible ↓	∅	∅	?

^aTransient increase followed by normalizing/decline in the majority of the subjects.

^bUnder investigation, available case reports.

supportive of the hypothesis that targeting type 2 inflammation can lead to exacerbation of T_H1/T_H17 inflammation. In addition, to off-target effects already described in this review, some more have been described in the context of targeting type 2 inflammation. These include alopecia, eosinophilic conjunctivitis and decreased numbers of goblet cells in the conjunctiva in some patients treated with dupilumab.^{346,347} Taking all these effects into account, it is clear that this might not only been seen as off-target, but in many instances are unknown or unforeseen effects. Rare side-effects associated with type 2/eosinophils targeted therapy might still be under the radar. Therefore, it is important to identify as many of these apparent off-target/unforeseen effects as possible as they might help us understand the pathogenetic mechanisms underlying type 2 diseases as well as the molecular mechanisms mediating the different targeted type 2/eosinophils treatments.

6 | CONCLUSIONS AND A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

It is evident, that the traditional concept of understanding eosinophils has recently changed in the context of newly unveiled cellular functions. Besides well-characterized pro-inflammatory and disease-driving effects of eosinophils, these cells evidently also possess homeostatic, anti-inflammatory and anti-infectious activities. Therefore, these features need to be considered during the process of selecting therapies that affect eosinophils to various degrees: that is from reduction to complete depletion (Table 3). As per the ongoing discussion, it is evident that there has been massive advancement in eosinophil-targeted therapies. All licenced targeted therapies to date have shown a positive treatment effect and improved the disease burden in patients with eosinophil-driven conditions. However,

from the perspective of precision medicine, a significant disease burden remains, as evident from the modest reduction in exacerbation rates in most reported studies across different eosinophilic diseases. There are several studies that highlight predictors of good clinical responses to biologics, but few of them focus on those patients who fail to respond adequately despite targeted treatment. This could be due to the involvement of multiple pathways that are activated at the same time in the most severe patients. Phenotyping patients based on blood eosinophils may not be accurate enough for endotypic targeting. For example, in asthma, using blood eosinophils as a (or the only) biomarker often proved inadequate for choosing the right drug for the right patient or for efficiently monitoring the therapeutic response. Moreover, a paradoxical and often transient increase in blood eosinophils can be observed after the initiation of certain mAbs, for example dupilumab. It is therefore pertinent to understand the underlying immunology, and possibly, to perform immune endotyping of patients before prescribing appropriate treatment. For some patients, this may implicate a combination of targeted therapies.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Milos Jesenak, Zuzana Diamant, Edward Knol and Leo Koenderman: Conceptualization; writing—original draft; writing—review and editing; supervision. **Dagmar Simon, Ellen Tufvesson, Ilja Striz, Sven F. Seys and Martina Koziar Vasakova:** Conceptualization; writing—original draft; writing—review and editing. **Manali Mukherjee and Paige Lacy:** Writing—review and editing. **Susanne Vijverberg, Tomas Slisz, Anna Sediva, Hans-Uwe Simon, Jana Plevkova, Jurgen Schwarze, Radovan Kosturiak, Neil E. Alexis and Eva Untersmayr:** Writing—original draft; writing—review and editing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

MJ has received consulting fees (ALK-Abello, Stallergenes-Greer, Takeda, Zentiva); honoraria for lectures, presentations (ALK-Abello, Stallergenes-Greer, Takeda, Zentiva, Mundipharma, AstraZeneca, SOBI, Chiesi, CSL Behring, Novartis, Benela, Pfizer, Viatris); support for attending meetings and/or travel (ALK-Abello, Stallergenes-Greer, Takeda, Novartis, Sanofi Pasteur) and honoraria for participation on Advisory Boards (ALK-Abello, Stallergenes-Greer, Chiesi, Novartis, SOBI, Pfizer, Sanofi Genzyme/Pasteur). **ZD** acted as a director respiratory/allergy for QPS-NL (2012–2020); she has received consulting fees from ALK, Antabio, Foresee Pharmaceuticals, GSK, Hippo-Dx, Sanofi-Genzyme, QPS-NL; has participated in the speakers' bureaus of Boehringer Ingelheim, Sanofi-Genzyme; and serves as an Asthma Expert Panel Chair for EUFOREA. **DS** reports a relationship with AbVie Inc, AstraZeneca, Galderma SA, LEO, Eli Lilly, Novartis, Pfizer, and Sanofi that includes consulting or advisory, and speaking and lecture fees. **ET** has received the independent *Type 2 Innovation Grant* from Sanofi Genzyme. **SFS** is employed by Galenus Health and Hippo Dx; has stocks of Hippo Dx; received honoraria from Teva Pharmaceutical. **MM** supported by an early career award from Canadian Institutes of Health Research and Canadian Asthma Allergy Immunology Foundation; reports grants from CIHR, CAAIF, Methapharm Specialty Pharmaceuticals, Sanofi, and personal fees from AstraZeneca, Novartis, and GlaxoSmithKline. **PL** reports grants from AstraZeneca (ESR-20-20,575, ESR-20-20,718), Natural Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC DG RGPIN-2021-02889), and Synergy Respiratory and Cardiac Care, as well as personal fees from GlaxoSmithKline Canada, AstraZeneca Canada, and Synergy Respiratory and Cardiac Care, Canada. **SV** reports no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript. **TS** has received honoraria for lectures and presentations (GlaxoSmithKline). **AS** has received consulting fees (Takeda, Octapharma), honoraria for lectures (Pharming). **HUS** is a consultant for Sanofi and GlaxoSmithKline. **IS** received honoraria for lectures from Sanofi-Genzyme, Thermo Fisher, Astellas, ALK-Abello, Stallergenes-Greer, GSK, Novartis, Ewopharma. **JP** reports no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript. **JS** reports no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript. **RK** has received consulting fees (ALK-Abello, Stallergenes-Greer, Chiesi); honoraria for lectures, presentations (ALK-Abello, Stallergenes-Greer, AstraZeneca, Chiesi, Benela, Pfizer, Viatris); support for attending meetings and/or travel (ALK-Abello, Stallergenes-Greer) and honoraria for participation on Advisory Boards (ALK-Abello, Stallergenes-Greer, Chiesi, Pfizer). **NEA** reports no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript. **EU** has received honoraria for lectures, presentations (Nordmark Pharma GmbH, GEKA mbH, Allergopharma, Bencard GmbH, MacroArray Diagnostics, Nutrica); honoraria for participation on Advisory Boards (Bencard GmbH, Desentum Oy) and is PI of research projects funded by Desentum Oy and Nordmark Pharma GmbH outside the submitted work. **MKV** has received consulting fees (Boehringer Ingelheim, Roche, InterMune, Promedior); honoraria for lectures, presentations (Boehringer Ingelheim, Glaxo Smithkline); support for attending meetings and/or travel (Boehring Ingelheim, Roche) and honoraria for participation on Advisory Boards (Novartis, Boehringer Ingelheim, Roche,

Glaxo Smithkline) and independent grant from Roche. **EK** received honoraria for lectures and advisory board membership for Sanofi Genzyme, received honoraria for lectures at Hycor-Abbott, GSK, Thermo Fisher, Novartis, Mark Two Academy and Springer. **LK** received honoraria for lectures and advisory boards of GSK.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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How to cite this article: Jesenak M, Diamant Z, Simon D, et al. Eosinophils—from cradle to grave. *Allergy*. 2023;78:3077-3102. doi:[10.1111/all.15884](https://doi.org/10.1111/all.15884)