

<https://doi.org/10.59298/NIJRMS/2026/7.2.4651>

Immunotoxicity of Common Therapeutics in Chronic Diseases: Mechanistic and Safety Considerations

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ABSTRACT

Therapeutics used to manage chronic diseases—rheumatologic, metabolic, cardiovascular, infectious, and oncologic—carry diverse immunological risks that can undermine patient safety and long-term outcomes. Immunotoxicity encompasses immunosuppression and infection risk, hypersensitivity and allergic reactions, immune-mediated organ damage (autoimmunity), hematologic immune injury, and aberrant inflammatory responses such as cytokine release syndrome. Mechanisms range from direct cytotoxic effects on immune cells and off-target kinase inhibition to immunogenicity of biologic agents, Fc-mediated complement activation, formation of drug-protein haptens, and dysregulation of immune checkpoints. This review synthesizes mechanistic pathways, illustrates representative classes of therapeutics (conventional immunosuppressants, biologic DMARDs and monoclonal antibodies, small-molecule kinase inhibitors, hormone and metabolic therapies, and advanced cellular therapies), and describes common clinical phenotypes. It then outlines risk factors, pre-treatment assessment, monitoring strategies, and management approaches to mitigate harm, including screening for latent infections, vaccination strategies, therapeutic drug monitoring, and stewardship of immunomodulatory regimens. Finally, it highlights gaps in preclinical immunotoxicity testing, the role of pharmacogenomics, and priorities for future research and regulatory harmonization. Clinicians and drug developers must integrate mechanistic understanding with patient-centred monitoring to balance therapeutic benefit against immunologic risk.

Keywords: Immunotoxicity; biologics; immunosuppression; adverse immune effects; safety monitoring

INTRODUCTION

Chronic diseases remain the leading drivers of global morbidity, affecting populations across all age groups and socioeconomic settings [1]. Their management often requires prolonged or lifelong pharmacotherapy, frequently involving agents that modulate inflammation, metabolism, immunity, or cellular signaling [2]. As therapeutic options have expanded, especially with the growth of biologics and targeted small molecules, an increasingly complex spectrum of unintended immune effects has become apparent. These unintended effects, broadly classified as immunotoxicity, encompass a range of dysfunctional immune responses that arise directly from drug mechanisms or indirectly through immune dysregulation [3]. Immunotoxicity can present in many forms, including heightened susceptibility to common or opportunistic infections, reactivation of latent pathogens such as tuberculosis or hepatitis viruses, hypersensitivity and allergic reactions, drug-induced autoimmunity involving multiple organ systems, bone-marrow suppression with associated cytopenias, or paradoxical inflammatory syndromes that mimic or exacerbate underlying disease [4]. Because these adverse immune outcomes often overlap clinically with disease progression, treatment failure, or comorbid conditions, they present diagnostic challenges in routine practice [5]. The diversity of mechanisms underlying these events further complicates evaluation, making it essential for clinicians and regulatory scientists to develop an integrated framework that combines mechanistic understanding with practical strategies for prevention, detection, and management [6]. Such a framework is particularly important as many chronic disease therapies exert both therapeutic and

potentially harmful effects on the immune system, requiring continual risk–benefit assessment throughout the treatment course [7].

Mechanisms of Immunotoxicity

Understanding the mechanisms that drive immunotoxicity is critical for predicting patient risk and guiding safer therapeutic use [8]. A central pathway involves direct cytotoxicity to immune cells. Many classic cytotoxic drugs, including certain chemotherapeutics, purine analogues, and antimetabolites, impair bone-marrow progenitors or circulating lymphocytes [9]. This leads to neutropenia, lymphopenia, and reduced antigen-presenting capacity, all of which weaken host defenses and predispose to infections. A second mechanistic category involves off-target kinase or intracellular signaling inhibition [10]. Targeted inhibitors such as those directed against JAK, BTK, or PI3K pathways disrupt key signaling modules required for immune-cell development, cytokine signaling, and functional coordination [11]. As a result, patients may develop broad immunodeficiency, altered cytokine production, or impaired humoral responses despite receiving agents designed to improve disease control. Another major contributor to immunotoxicity is drug immunogenicity [12]. Biologic therapeutics, including monoclonal antibodies and recombinant fusion proteins, may be recognized as foreign by the immune system, prompting the formation of anti-drug antibodies. These antibodies can neutralize therapeutic effects, create circulating immune complexes that deposit within tissues, or cause immediate hypersensitivity reactions through IgE- or IgG-mediated pathways [13]. The effector functions of Fc regions in monoclonal antibodies further influence immunotoxic potential. Engagement of Fc gamma receptors or activation of complement pathways can induce targeted cell depletion, complement-mediated tissue damage, or systemic inflammatory responses, particularly when Fc engineering is incomplete or when patient-specific immune factors amplify these interactions. Small-molecule drugs may act through haptization, in which the parent drug or a reactive metabolite covalently binds to host proteins [14]. These drug–protein adducts behave as neoantigens that activate T cell-mediated immune responses, producing clinical manifestations ranging from mild maculopapular rashes to severe cutaneous adverse reactions such as Stevens–Johnson syndrome or toxic epidermal necrolysis [15]. Additional pathways involve modulation of immune checkpoints. Therapies that inhibit inhibitory pathways such as PD-1, PD-L1, or CTLA-4 remove restraints on immune activation, increasing antitumor immunity but also breaking peripheral tolerance [16]. Consequent autoimmune toxicities may affect endocrine glands, the gastrointestinal tract, lungs, skin, or myocardium, often emerging weeks to months after therapy initiation [17].

Some modern therapies also provoke excessive cytokine production. Cellular therapies such as CAR-T cells and bispecific T-cell engagers can induce overwhelming immune activation and cytokine release syndrome, characterized by fever, hypotension, organ dysfunction, and laboratory evidence of systemic inflammation [18]. Finally, alterations in the microbiome or epithelial barriers contribute to immunotoxic risks. Drugs that significantly disrupt microbial communities, including broad-spectrum antibiotics or agents that affect gastric acidity, can modify host–microbe interactions, impair mucosal immunity, and predispose to opportunistic infections while altering systemic immune tone [19]. Taken together, these mechanistic categories highlight the multifaceted ways in which chronic disease therapeutics can derail immune homeostasis.

Representative Therapeutic Classes and Their Immunotoxic Profiles

Conventional immunosuppressants

Conventional immunosuppressive agents remain foundational treatments for many chronic inflammatory and autoimmune diseases, yet their broad effects on immune-cell populations make them significant contributors to immunotoxicity [20]. Corticosteroids suppress multiple immune pathways, inducing lymphocyte apoptosis, reducing macrophage and dendritic cell activation, and downregulating inflammatory cytokines [21]. While effective for rapid symptom control, prolonged use impairs innate immunity, diminishes mucosal barrier function, delays wound healing, and weakens vaccine responses [22]. Antimetabolites such as methotrexate, azathioprine, and mycophenolate mofetil inhibit nucleotide synthesis and lymphocyte proliferation, producing dose-dependent marrow suppression, lymphopenia, and susceptibility to bacterial, viral, and opportunistic infections, including Pneumocystis, cytomegalovirus, and varicella-zoster virus [23]. Drug–drug combinations can intensify these effects, amplifying immunosuppression beyond what is expected from individual agents [24].

Biologic disease-modifying agents and monoclonal antibodies

Biologic therapies have transformed the treatment landscape for rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, multiple sclerosis, and other chronic immune-mediated disorders [25]. However, by selectively neutralizing cytokines or depleting specific immune-cell subsets, these agents introduce characteristic immunotoxicity profiles [26]. Tumor necrosis factor inhibitors, for example, impair granuloma maintenance, increasing the likelihood of reactivation of latent tuberculosis and raising susceptibility to invasive fungal infections [27]. IL-6 receptor blockade can blunt acute-phase responses and mask early signs of infection, complicating clinical detection. B-cell–targeting agents such as anti-CD20 monoclonal antibodies cause prolonged B-cell depletion, reducing

antibody production, diminishing vaccine responsiveness, and predisposing patients to hypogammaglobulinemia and recurrent sinopulmonary infections [28]. Immunogenicity remains an ongoing challenge, as anti-drug antibody formation can reduce therapeutic efficacy or precipitate infusion reactions.

Small-molecule kinase inhibitors and targeted agents

Targeted kinase inhibitors modulate intracellular signaling pathways central to immune-cell survival, differentiation, and communication [29]. JAK inhibitors broadly impair cytokine signaling across multiple hematopoietic lineages, contributing to viral reactivation particularly herpes zoster, and increasing risk of serious bacterial infections [30]. Some agents have also been associated with lymphopenia and changes in lipid metabolism that may compound cardiovascular risk. PI3K inhibitors, used in oncology and hematologic malignancies, can produce pronounced immune dysregulation, manifesting as autoimmune-like colitis, hepatotoxicity, and noninfectious pneumonitis [31]. Many kinase inhibitors also cause cytopenias by suppressing marrow progenitors, further compounding infection risk.

Metabolic and hormonal therapies with immune effects

Although metabolic therapies such as SGLT2 inhibitors and GLP-1 receptor agonists are not primarily immunomodulators, emerging evidence suggests they influence inflammation and host defense indirectly through metabolic-immune crosstalk [32]. Their immunotoxic potential remains relatively low, but some hormonal therapies, including older corticosteroid-sparing agents or androgen-modulating therapies, can shift leukocyte distributions, influence susceptibility to certain pathogens, or alter inflammatory tone [33].

Advanced cellular therapies and immune stimulants

Advanced immunotherapies provide powerful disease control but carry the highest risk of acute immune-mediated toxicity [34]. CAR-T cell therapies and bispecific T-cell engagers induce vigorous immune activation, frequently leading to cytokine release syndrome and immune effector cell-associated neurotoxicity syndrome [35]. While these toxicities are often reversible with early intervention, they pose substantial clinical risk. Conversely, immune stimulants and therapeutic vaccines used in chronic infections or malignancy can destabilize immune tolerance and precipitate autoimmune flare-ups in predisposed individuals.

Future Directions and Research Priorities

Advancing the safety of therapeutics used in chronic diseases requires a multifaceted research agenda that spans basic science, translational modeling, and real-world evidence [36]. A major priority is the development of validated biomarkers capable of predicting individual susceptibility to immunotoxicity and detecting early immune injury before clinical deterioration occurs. Such markers may include soluble cytokines, immune-cell transcriptomic signatures, metabolic indicators of immune activation, or genetic variants influencing drug metabolism and immune regulation [37]. Parallel to biomarker discovery is the need for improved in vitro and ex vivo platforms that more accurately recapitulate human immunology. Humanized organoid systems, microfluidic immune-tissue interfaces, and machine-learning-driven cytokine assays offer promise for predicting cytokine release potential, immunogenicity, and immune-cell depletion profiles [38]. Longitudinal real-world datasets are essential to capture rare but severe immune-mediated events that clinical trials are underpowered to detect. Integrating electronic health records, pharmacovigilance databases, and patient-reported outcomes can refine risk estimates and guide post-marketing safety policies [39]. Future therapies should also focus on restoring immune competence using targeted and reversible approaches that avoid broad immunosuppression, such as selective cytokine pathway tuning or precision microbial interventions informed by microbiome profiling. Finally, engineering biologics with reduced immunogenicity and optimized Fc architecture remains a key translational goal to minimize off-target immune activation while preserving therapeutic potency.

CONCLUSION

Immunotoxicity is a multifaceted safety challenge across therapeutics used for chronic diseases. Clinicians must balance therapeutic benefit with potential immune harms through pre-treatment screening, vaccination, targeted monitoring, and timely management of adverse immune events. Drug developers and regulators should prioritize improved preclinical immunotoxicity assays, post-marketing surveillance, and personalized risk stratification. With coordinated clinical vigilance and continued mechanistic research, it is possible to optimize efficacy while minimizing the immunologic costs of chronic disease therapy.

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CITE AS: Chelimo Faith Rebecca. (2026). Immunotoxicity of Common Therapeutics in Chronic Diseases: Mechanistic and Safety Considerations. NEWPORT INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN MEDICAL SCIENCES, 7(2):46-51 <https://doi.org/10.59298/NIJRMS/2026/7.2.4651>