TITLE

METHODS FOR TREATING AND PREVENTING FIBROSIS BY IL-21 / IL-21R ANTAGONISTS

Related Applications

[0001] This application claims the benefit of priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/671,374, filed April 14, 2005, which is hereby incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

[0002] The present invention relates to methods for treating and preventing fibrosis and fibrosis-associated conditions.

Related Background Art

[0003] Injury to any organ typically leads to a physiological response involving platelet-induced hemostasis, followed by an influx of inflammatory cells and activated fibroblasts. Cytokines produced by these cell types drive the formation of new extracellular matrix and blood vessels, which collectively form granulation tissue. The formation of fibrous tissue is part of the normal beneficial process of healing following injury; fibrosis, however, is a condition characterized by an abnormal accumulation of a collagen matrix following injury or inflammation that alters the structure and function of various tissues.

Progressive fibrosis in the kidney, liver, lung, heart, bone, bone marrow, and skin is a major cause of, or contributor to, death.

[0004] Many of the diseases associated with the proliferation of fibrous tissue are chronic and often debilitating and include, for example, skin diseases such as scleroderma. Some, including pulmonary fibrosis, may be fatal, due in part to the fact that the current treatments have significant side effects and are generally not effective in slowing or halting the progression of fibrosis. There is, accordingly, a continuing need for new anti-fibrotic agents.

[0005] The IL-21 receptor (IL-21R) is a newly discovered member of the class I cytokine receptor family (Parrish-Novak et al. (2000) *Nature* 408:57-63; Ozaki et al. (2000) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 97:11439-44). The IL-21 receptor shows significant sequence and structural homology with the IL-4 receptor alpha (IL-4Rα) chain and is adjacent to the IL-4Rα in the human and mouse genomes, while its ligand, IL-21, shares significant homology with the cytokines IL-2, IL-4, and IL-15 (Sivakumar et al. (2004) *Immunology* 112:177-82; Habib et al. (2003) *J. Allergy Clin. Immunol.* 112:1033-45). IL-21 and IL-21R are thus newly described members of the gamma chain (γc)-dependent cytokine network because of their homology with cytokines and receptors that require the γc for functional signaling (Vosshenrich and Di Santo (2001) *Curr. Biol.* 11:R175-77). Because all members of the γc network exhibit important and unique roles in host immunity, there has been growing interest in dissecting the novel functions of the IL-21R during antigen-triggered immune responses *in vivo*.

[0006] Initial studies examining the function of IL-21 showed that NK cell expansion is antagonized, whereas antigen-specific T cell immunity is promoted by IL-21, including anti-tumor immunity (Ma et al. (2003) *J. Immunol.* 171:608-15; Kishida et al. (2003) *Mol. Ther.* 8:552-58; Di Carlo et al. (2004) *J. Immunol.* 172:1540-47), findings that suggest that IL-21 serves as a bridge between innate and adaptive immune responses (Collins et al. (2003) *Immunol. Res.* 28:131-40). IL-21 also regulates B cell and $CD8^+$ T cell function *in vivo* (Ozaki et al. (2002) *Science* 298:1630-34; Suto et al. (2002) *Blood* 100:4565-73; Mehta et al. (2003) *J. Immunol.* 170:4111-18; Pene et al. (2004) *J. Immunol.* 172:5154-57; Jin et al. (2004) *J. Immunol.*173:657-65; Zeng et al. (2005) *J. Exp. Med.* 201:139-48). Additional studies suggest that IL-21 is a T_H2 cytokine that can inhibit the

differentiation of naïve T_H cells into IFN-γ-secreting T_H1 cells (Wurster et al. (2002) *J. Exp. Med.* 196:969-77). Indeed, exogenous treatment with IL-21 potently inhibited IFN-γ production without affecting other T_H1/T_H2-associated cytokines, suggesting that the repression of IFN-γ by IL-21 is highly specific. Thus, by virtue of its ability to suppress the development of T_H1 cells, it was hypothesized that IL-21 might promote T_H2 responses (Wurster et al., *supra*). Nevertheless, the involvement of the IL-21R signaling pathway in T_H2 response development was not previously investigated in any T_H2-dependent disorder.

[0007] In schistosomiasis, T_H2 cytokines play an indispensable role in the pathogenesis of the disease (Wynn (2004) *Nat. Rev. Immunol.* 4:583-594; Pearce and MacDonald (2002) *Nat. Rev. Immunol.* 2:499-511). Indeed, IL-4/IL-13-, IL-4Rα-, and Stat6-deficient mice all show significantly impaired granuloma formation and liver fibrosis following infection with *S. mansoni* (Chiaramonte et al. (1999) *J. Clin. Invest.* 104:777-85; Kaplan et al. (1998) *J. Immunol.* 160:1850-56; Jankovic et al. (1999) *J. Immunol.* 163:337-42; Fallon et al. (2000) *J. Immunol.* 164:2585-91). Given the recent classification of IL-21 as a T_H2 cytokine (Wurster et al. (2002), *supra*; Mehta et al. (2005). *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 102:2016-21), the striking similarities between the IL-4 and IL-21 receptors (Sivakumar et al., *supra*; Habib et al., *supra*), and the critical role of the related IL-4Rα/Stat6-signaling pathway in this disease as well as in other T_H2 cytokine-driven inflammatory disorders (Wynn (2003) *Annu. Rev. Immunol.* 21:425-56), an important question evolving from these studies was whether IL-21R signaling plays a significant role in the initiation and/or maintenance of T_H2 immunity.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] The present invention provides methods of treating, ameliorating or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder, as well as methods of screening for compounds and compositions useful in those methods. The invention also provides methods of diagnosing, prognosing, and monitoring the progress (e.g., the course of treatment) of fibrosis and/or fibrosis-associated conditions. These methods are related to measuring and/or modulating the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R (i.e., the level of activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, the

level of expression of IL-21 and/or IL-21R (e.g., the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products), and/or the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R). The invention further provides antagonists of IL-21 or IL-21R for the treatment of fibrosis and/or fibrosis-associated conditions.

[0009] In one embodiment, the invention provides a method for treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder in a subject (e.g., a human) comprising administering to the subject a therapeutically effective amount of an agent that reduces the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the subject. In a further embodiment, the agent is an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist selected from the group consisting of an anti-IL-21R antibody, an anti-IL-21 antibody, an antigen-binding fragment of an anti-IL-21R antibody, an antigen-binding fragment of an anti-IL-21 antibody, and a soluble fragment of an IL-21R. In another further embodiment, the agent is a soluble fragment of an IL-21R, and the soluble fragment of the IL-21R comprises an amino acid sequence that is at least 90% identical to an amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of amino acids 1-538 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 20-538 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 20-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 1-236 of SEQ ID NO: 2, amino acids 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 1-529 of SEQ ID NO:5, amino acids 20-529 of SEQ ID NO:5, amino acids 1-236 of SEQ ID NO:5, and amino acid 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:5. In another embodiment, the soluble fragment of the IL-21R binds to an IL-21 polypeptide.

[0010] In another embodiment, the agent is a soluble fragment of an IL-21R, and the soluble fragment of the IL-21R comprises an amino acid sequence that is substantially identical to the amino acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:11, SEQ ID NO:13, SEQ ID NO:15, SEQ ID NO:17, SEQ ID NO:19, SEQ ID NO:21, SEQ ID NO:23, SEQ ID NO:25, or SEQ ID NO:27. In another embodiment, the amino acid sequence of the soluble fragment of the IL-21R comprises an amino acid sequence that is substantially identical to the amino acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:11 or SEQ ID NO:13. In another embodiment, the agent is a soluble fragment of an IL-21R, and the soluble fragment of the IL-21R is encoded by a nucleotide sequence that is substantially identical to the nucleic acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:10, SEQ ID NO:12, SEQ ID NO:14, SEQ ID NO:16, SEQ ID NO:18, SEQ ID NO:20, SEQ ID NO:22, SEQ ID NO:24, or SEQ ID NO:26. In another embodiment, the soluble fragment of

the IL-21R is encoded by a nucleotide sequence that is substantially identical to the nucleic acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:12 or SEQ ID NO:16.

[0011] In another embodiment, the agent is a soluble fragment of an IL-21R, and the soluble fragment of the IL-21R comprises an extracellular domain of IL-21R and an immunoglobulin Fc fragment. In a further embodiment, the amino acid sequence of the extracellular domain of the IL-21R comprises an amino acid sequence that is at least 90% identical to amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2 or amino acids 20-235 of SEQ ID NO:2. In another embodiment, the immunoglobulin Fc fragment has an altered function. In another further embodiment, the immunoglobulin Fc fragment has the amino acid sequence of amino acids 244-467 of SEQ ID NO:17.

[0012] In another embodiment, the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated disorder affects the liver, epidermis, endodermis, muscle, tendon, cartilage, heart, pancreas, lung, uterus, nervous system, testis, ovary, adrenal gland, artery, vein, colon, small intestine, biliary tract, or stomach. In a further embodiment, the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated disorder is interstitial lung fibrosis. In another embodiment, the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated disorder is the result of an infection with schistosoma. In another embodiment, the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated disorder is the result of wound healing. In a further embodiment, the wound healing results from a surgical incision.

[0013] In another embodiment, the invention further comprises administering to the subject at least one additional therapeutic agent. In another embodiment, the at least one additional therapeutic agent is selected from the group consisting of cytokine inhibitors, growth factor inhibitors, immunosuppressants, anti-inflammatory agents, metabolic inhibitors, enzyme inhibitors, cytotoxic agents, and cytostatic agents. In a further embodiment, the at least one additional therapeutic agent is selected from the group consisting of TNF antagonists, anti-TNF agents, IL-12 antagonists, IL-15 antagonists, IL-17 antagonists, IL-18 antagonists, IL-22 antagonists, T cell-depleting agents, B cell-depleting agents, cyclosporin, FK506, CCI-779, etanercept, infliximab, rituximab, adalimumab, prednisolone, azathioprine, gold, sulphasalazine, hydroxychloroquine, minocycline, anakinra, abatacept, methotrexate, leflunomide, rapamycin, rapamycin analogs, Cox-2 inhibitors, cPLA2 inhibitors, NSAIDs, p38 inhibitors, antagonists of B7.1, B7.2, ICOSL, ICOS and/or CD28, and agonists of CTLA4.

[0014] In another embodiment, the invention provides a method for identifying a compound for treating, ameliorating or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest; (b) contacting the cell or sample of interest with a compound; and (c) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest following contact with the compound, wherein a lower level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the contacted cell or sample of interest, in comparison to the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a noncontacted cell or sample of interest, identifies the compound as a compound useful for treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject.

[0015] In another embodiment, the invention provides a method for identifying a compound for treating, ameliorating or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest; (b) contacting the cell or sample of interest with a compound; (c) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest following contact with the compound; and (d) comparing the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the contacted cell or sample of interest with a reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, wherein a lower level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the contacted cell or sample of interest, in comparison to the reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, identifies the compound as a compound useful for treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject.

[0016] In another embodiment, the invention provides a method for monitoring the progress of fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject at a first time point; and (b) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject at a second time point, wherein a lower level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject at the second time point, in comparison to the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject at the first time point, provides an indication that the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated condition has decreased in severity.

[0017] In another embodiment, the invention provides a method for prognosing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring

the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject at a first time point; and (b) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject at a second time point, wherein a lower level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject at the second time point, in comparison to the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject at the first time point, indicates a decreased likelihood that the subject will develop fibrosis or the fibrosis-associated condition or a decreased likelihood that the fibrosis or fibrosis-associate condition will worsen in the subject.

[0018] In another embodiment, the invention provides a method for prognosing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject; and (b) comparing the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject to a reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, wherein a lower level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject, in comparison to the reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, indicates a decreased likelihood that the subject will develop fibrosis or the fibrosis-associated condition or a decreased likelihood that the fibrosis or fibrosis-associate condition will worsen in the subject.

[0019] In another embodiment, the invention provides a method for diagnosing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject, and (b) comparing the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject with a reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, wherein a higher level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject, in comparison to the reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, indicates the presence of fibrosis or the fibrosis-associated condition in the subject.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0020] FIG. 1 depicts the full-length cDNA sequence of murine IL-21R/MU-1. The nucleotide sequence corresponds to nucleotides 1-2628 of SEQ ID NO:4.

[0021] FIGS. 2A and 2B depict the amino acid sequences of murine and human IL-21R/MU-1. FIG. 2A depicts the amino acid sequence of murine

IL-21R/MU-1 (corresponding to the amino acids 1-529 of SEQ ID NO:5). There is a leader sequence (predicted by SPScan with a score of 10.1) at amino acids 1-19 (boldface type). A predicted transmembrane domain (underlined) is found at amino acids 237-253 of SEQ ID NO:5. Predicted signaling motifs include the "Box 1" motif at amino acids 265-274 and the "Box 2" motif at amino acids 311-324 (bold and underlined). Six tyrosines are located at amino acid positions 281, 319, 361, 368, 397, and 510, of SEQ ID NO:5. The WSXWS motif (SEQ ID NO:3) is located at amino acid residues 214-218 (in large, boldface type). Potential Stat docking sites include amino acids 393-398 and amino acids 510-513 of SEQ ID NO:5. FIG. 2B depicts the amino acid sequence of human IL-21R/MU-1 (corresponding to SEQ ID NO:2). The location of the predicted signal sequence (about amino acids 1-19 of SEQ ID NO:2); WSXWS motif (about amino acids 213-217 of SEQ ID NO:2); and transmembrane domain (about amino acids 236-252 (or 236-253, or 236-254) of SEQ ID NO:2 (underlined)) are indicated. Potential JAK binding sites, Box 1 and 2 signaling motifs, and Stat docking sites are indicated by labeled arrows.

[0022] FIG. 3 depicts the GAP comparison of human and murine IL-21R/MU-1 cDNA sequences (corresponding to nucleic acids 1-2665 of SEQ ID NO:1 and nucleic acids 1-2628 of SEQ ID NO:4, respectively). huMU-1=human IL-21R/MU-1, murMU-1=murine IL-21R/MU-1. Gap Parameters: Gap Weight=50; Average Match=10.000; Length Weight=3; Average Mismatch=0.000; Percent Identity=66.116.

[0023] FIG. 4 depicts a GAP comparison of human IL-21R/MU-1 protein (corresponding to amino acids of SEQ ID NO:2) and murine IL-21R/MU-1 protein (corresponding to amino acids of SEQ ID NO:5). The alignment was generated by BLOSUM62 amino acid substitution matrix (Henikoff and Henikoff (1992) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 89:10915-19). Gap parameters=Gap Weight: 8; Average Match=2.912; Length Weight=2; Average Mismatch=-2.003; Percent Identity=65.267.

[0024] FIG. 5 depicts a multiple sequence alignment of the amino acids of human IL-21R/MU-1 (corresponding to SEQ ID NO:2), murine IL-21R/MU-1 (corresponding to SEQ ID NO:5), and human IL-2 beta chain (GENBANK® Accession No. M26062). Leader and transmembrane domains are underlined.

Conserved cytokine receptor module motifs are indicated by boldface type. Potential signaling regions are indicated by underlining and boldface type.

[0025] FIG. 6 depicts signaling through IL-21R/MU-1. IL-21R/MU-1 phosphorylates Stat 5 in Clone E7 EPO IL-21R/MU-1 chimera expressing cells stimulated with EPO. Treatment of controls or chimeric BAF-3 cells with IL-3 resulted in phosphorylation of Stat 3, but not Stat 1 or 5.

[0026] FIGS. 7A-7B depict an alignment of the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of mature human IL-21R fused at the amino terminal to a honeybee leader sequence and His_6 and Flag tags. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the fusion protein depicted in FIGS. 7A-7B are set forth in SEQ ID NO:10 and SEQ ID NO:11, respectively. The amino acid sequences of the mature human IL-21R fragment and the honeybee leader / His tags fragment of the fusion protein correspond to amino acids 20-235 of SEQ ID NO:2 and amino acids 1-44 of SEQ ID NO:11, respectively.

[0027] FIGS. 8A-8C depict an alignment of the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of human IL-21R extracellular domain fused at the C-terminus via a linker to human immunoglobulin G1 (IgG1) Fc sequence. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the fusion protein depicted in FIGS. 8A-8C are set forth in SEQ ID NO:12 and SEQ ID NO:13, respectively. The amino acid sequences of the human IL-21R extracellular domain, the linker, and the human immunoglobulin G1 (IgG1) Fc sequence correspond to amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 236-243 of SEQ ID NO:13, and amino acids 244-467 of SEQ ID NO:13, respectively.

[0028] FIGS. 9A-9C depict an alignment of the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of human IL-21R extracellular domain fused at the C-terminus via a linker to human immunoglobulin G1 (IgG1) Fc sequence and His_6 sequence tag. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the fusion protein depicted in FIGS. 9A-9C are set forth in SEQ ID NO:14 and SEQ ID NO:15, respectively. The amino acid sequences of the human IL-21R extracellular domain, the linker, the human immunoglobulin G1 (IgG1) Fc sequence, and the His_6 sequence tag correspond to amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 236-243 of SEQ ID NO:15, amino acids 244-467 of SEQ ID NO:15, and amino acids 468-492 of SEQ ID NO:15, respectively.

[0029] FIGS. 10A-10C depict an alignment of the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of human IL-21R extracellular domain fused at the C-terminus via a linker to human immunoglobulin G1 (IgG1) Fc-mutated sequence. The human Fc sequence has been mutated at residues 254 and 257 from the wild-type sequence to reduce Fc-receptor binding. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the fusion protein depicted in FIGS. 10A-10C are set forth in SEQ ID NO:16 and SEQ ID NO:17, respectively. The amino acid sequences of the human IL-21R extracellular domain, the linker, and the human immunoglobulin G1 (IgG1) Fc-mutated sequence correspond to amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 236-243 of SEQ ID NO:17, and amino acids 244-467 of SEQ ID NO:17, respectively.

[0030] FIGS. 11A-11B depict an alignment of the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of human IL-21R extracellular domain fused at the C-terminus to a rhodopsin sequence tag. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the fusion protein are set forth in SEQ ID NO:18 and SEQ ID NO:19, respectively. The amino acid sequence of the human IL-21R extracellular domain corresponds to amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2.

[0031] FIGS. 12A-12C depict an alignment of the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of human IL-21R extracellular domain fused at the C-terminus to an EK cleavage site and mutated IgG1 Fc region. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the fusion protein depicted in FIGS. 12A-12C are set forth in SEQ ID NO:20 and SEQ ID NO:21, respectively. The amino acid sequences of the human IL-21R extracellular domain, and the EK cleavage site/mutated IgG1 Fc region correspond to amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2 and amino acids 236-470 of SEQ ID NO:21, respectively.

[0032] FIGS. 13A-13B depict an alignment of the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of murine IL-21R extracellular domain fused at the C-terminus to mouse immunoglobulin G2a (IgG2a). The nucleotide and amino acid sequences are set forth in SEQ ID NO:22 and SEQ ID NO:23, respectively.

[0033] FIGS. 14A-14B depict an alignment of the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of murine IL-21R extracellular domain fused at the C-terminus to Flag and His_6 sequence tags. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences are set forth in SEQ ID NO:24 and SEQ ID NO:25, respectively.

[0034] FIGS. 15A-15B depict an alignment of the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of (honeybee leader) murine IL-21R extracellular domain fused at the N-terminus to Flag and His_6 sequence tags. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences are set forth in SEQ ID NO:26 and SEQ ID NO:27, respectively.

[0035] FIG. 16 shows IL-21 and IL-21R expression profiles during highly polarized type-1 and type-2 immune responses. Groups of five IL-10/IL-4 KO (TH1, Δ) and IL-10/IL-12 KO (TH2, ●) mice were sensitized i.p. with *S. mansoni* eggs and challenged i.v. 14 days later. Lung RNA specimens were prepared individually for real-time RT-PCR analysis of IL-13 and IFN-γ (FIG. 16A) and IL-21R and IL-21 (FIG. 16B). The means ± SEM in gene expression were expressed as fold-increases over unchallenged WT controls after normalization to HPRT. Asterisks denote significant differences between groups at the given time point, * $p<0.05$.

[0036] FIG. 17 shows that type-2 cytokine production is reduced in the lungs of schistosome egg-challenged IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice. Groups of naïve WT (open bars) and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (filled bars) were i.v. challenged with live *S. mansoni* eggs and sacrificed on days 4, 7, and 14 post-challenge. (A) RNA was prepared from lung tissues and analyzed individually (N=5 per group/time point) by real-time RT-PCR. Results are shown as box-and-whisker plots with five-number summary bars showing the median, the quartiles, and the smallest and greatest percentiles in the distribution; bars (from bottom to top) indicate the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentiles, respectively, of the tested samples. The asterisks denote significant differences from wild-type values at the given time point, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$. (B) Spleens (Spl) and lung-associated lymph nodes (LN) were each pooled (2 separate groups, 3-4 mice per group) and single cell suspensions were assayed for IL-5, IL-10, IL-13, and IFN-γ after a 72-h incubation in the presence of Con A (CON, 1 μg/ml) or soluble egg antigen (SEA, 20 μg/ml). Cytokines were below the level of detection in unstimulated cultures. (C) Granuloma size (volume, $mm^3 \times 10^{-3}$) and the percentage of eosinophils in granulomas were quantified microscopically. (D) Real-time PCR analysis of T_H2-regulated inflammatory genes in granulomatous lung tissue. All data are representative of at least 2 separate experiments.

[0037] FIG. 18 shows that the type-2 response is impaired in *N. brasiliensis*-infected IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice. Lungs (A) and lung-associated lymph nodes (LALN) (B) were removed on day 7 from individual *N. brasiliensis*-infected and untreated C57BL/6 or IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (5/treatment group). RNA was isolated and cDNA was generated as described in the legend to FIG. 17. mRNA was analyzed individually for IL-13, IL-4, AMCase, Ym1, and FIZZ1 by real-time quantitative PCR. Fold changes are based on comparisons of infected mice to naive animals.

[0038] FIG. 19 shows that type-2 cytokine-driven inflammation is reduced in IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice. WT (open bars) and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (filled bars) were sensitized i.p. with eggs, challenged i.v. two weeks later with live *S. mansoni* eggs and then sacrificed on days 4 and 7 post-challenge. (A) RNA was prepared from lung tissues and analyzed individually (N=5 per group/time point) by real-time RT-PCR as described above in the legend to FIG. 17. (B) Spleens (Spl) and lung-associated lymph nodes (LN) were assayed for IL-5, IL-10, IL-13, and IFN-γ following antigen (SEA) or mitogen stimulation (CON). (C) Granuloma size (mm^3 X 10^{-3}) and the percentage of eosinophils in granulomas were quantified microscopically in WT (mice per group: N=10, day 4; N=15, day 7) and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (N=11, day 4; N=16, day 7). (D) Real-time PCR analysis of T_H2 inflammatory genes in granulomatous lung tissue (N=5 per group/time point). The asterisks denote significant differences from wild-type values at the given time point, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$. Data shown are the combined results of 3 separate experiments.

[0039] FIG. 20 shows that chronic liver disease following percutaneous *S. mansoni* infection is reduced in the absence of IL-21R. WT (open bars) and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (filled bars) were infected with 25-30 *S. mansoni* cercariae. All animals were sacrificed at week 9 (acute) or week 12 (chronic) post-infection. (A) RNA was isolated from liver tissues and analyzed individually (N=8-10 per group/time point) by real-time RT-PCR as described above in the legend to FIG. 17. (B) Spleens (Spl) and mesenteric lymph nodes (LN) were pooled in groups of 2-4 mice and single cell suspensions were assayed for IL-5, IL-10, and IFN-γ. The data shown are the averages of three separate pooled groups. (C) Granuloma size (mm^3 X 10^{-3}) and the percentage of eosinophils in granulomas were evaluated microscopically in WT mice (mice per group: N=30 for week 9,

N=17 for week 12) and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (mice per group: N=27 for week 9, N=19 for week 12). (D) Real-time PCR analysis of Th2 inflammatory genes in granulomatous liver tissue (N=8-10 per group/time point). Data shown are the combined results of 3 separate experiments conducted on week 9 and two performed on week 12. The asterisks denote significant differences from wild-type values at the given time point, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

[0040] FIG. 21 shows that the cellular composition of granulomas is unchanged by IL-21R deficiency. (A) The cellular composition of granulomas was evaluated in the livers of 9 week infected WT (N=10) and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ (N=9) mice. The average ± SEM of small lymphocytes (Sm Lym), large lymphocytes (Lg Lym), macrophages (Mac), Fibroblasts (Fibro), Eosinophils (Eos), and Mast Cells (Mc) are shown. (B) Lymphocytes were isolated from the perfused lungs of naïve WT and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (top panels) and on day 7 following i.v. challenge with 5000 *S. mansoni* eggs (bottom panels). The numbers in the histograms indicate the percentages of CD4$^-$ and CD4$^+$ T cells among total lung lymphocytes.

[0041] FIG. 22 shows that IL-21R-deficiency significantly slows the progression of T_H2 cytokine-dependent fibrosis. WT (open bars) and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (filled bars) were infected with *S. mansoni* cercariae. Animals were sacrificed at 9 (acute), 12 (chronic) (panels A-D) or 29 weeks (late chronic) (panel E) post-infection. (A) The average worm pairs, total worms and eggs/worm pair in thousands ± SE are shown for each group. No difference in infection intensity was noted in any experiment (*n*=number of mice). (B) Mice were bled at the time of sacrifice and SEA isotype-specific Ab titers were determined by ELISA. (C) Total serum IgE values in μg/ml. (D-F) Fibrosis was assessed by the amount of hydroxyproline in micromoles detected in the liver per 10,000 eggs (panel D) or in total liver (panels E and F). In panel F, infected WT C57BL/6 mice were treated with either an IgG2a control antibody (cIg – open bar) or with sIL-21R-Fc (filled bar) for 6 weeks. The asterisks denote significant differences from wild-type values at the given time point, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

[0042] FIG. 23 shows that IL-21 signaling promotes alternative macrophage activation by modulating IL-13 receptor expression. Bone marrow-derived macrophages were treated with various combinations of IL-4 (20 ng/ml), IL-13 (20 ng/ml), and IL-21 (20 ng/ml) overnight. Macrophages treated with IL-4,

IL-13, and IL-21 were pretreated with IL-21 for 6 hours prior to administration of IL-4 and IL-13. Cells were lysed 20 hr later and RNA was analyzed individually by real-time RT-PCR. (A) The ability of IL-21 to promote alternative macrophage activation was assessed by measuring Arg-1 and FIZZ1 gene expression. (B) Arginase activity was quantified in cell lysates by measuring the conversion of L-arginine to urea (mg/dL ± SEM, triplicate measurements) (C) Expression of IL-4Rα and IL-13Rα1 mRNA was evaluated by real-time PCR. IL-13Rα2 mRNA was nearly undetectable in all conditions (not shown). The data shown in panels A, B, and C are representative of 3 separate experiments. (D) Naïve C57BL/6 mice were challenged intravenously with 5000 live *S. mansoni* eggs and treated with PBS or rIL-21 (2 μg/dose) every other day from day 1 through day 6. Animals (5 per group) were sacrificed on day 7 and lung IL-13Rα2 mRNA levels were assayed by real-time PCR and expressed as fold-increase over untreated controls (open bar). Mice were also bled at the time of sacrifice and the amount of sIL-13Rα2 in individual serum samples was assayed by ELISA. The asterisks denote significant differences, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

[0043] FIG. 24 shows that alternatively activated macrophages do not produce significant quantities of active TGF-β1. The right panel shows active TGF-β1 following macrophage activation, while the left panel shows total TGF-β1 levels following macrophage activation. Bone marrow-derived macrophages were treated with various combinations of IL-4 (20 ng/ml), IL-13 (20 ng/ml), and IL-21 (20 ng/ml) overnight. Macrophages treated with IL-4, IL-13, and IL-21 were pretreated with IL-21 for 6 hours prior to administration of IL-4 and IL-13. 20 hours post-activation, supernatants were assayed for total and active TGF-β1 by ELISA. High levels of total TGF-β1 were detected in all groups (e.g., compare left panel "IL-4" with "Untreated") except for cells treated with IL-21 alone (compare left panel "IL-21" with "Untreated"). Although total TGF-β1 expression was high, active TGF-β1 was minimal in all groups (right panel). The data shown are representative of 3 separate experiments producing similar results.

DETAILED DISCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0044] To examine the role of the IL-21/IL-21R signaling pathway in the pathogenesis of fibrosis, immune responses were compared in mice lacking a functional IL-21R (IL-21R$^{-/-}$) and in wild type mice using various models of lung and liver inflammation. In one model, live schistosome eggs were injected intravenously into naïve or antigen-sensitized animals to study primary and secondary granulomatous inflammation in the lung. In another model, mice were infected percutaneously with *S. mansoni* cercariae and the development of egg-induced inflammation and fibrosis was observed in the liver. In another model, mice were infected with *N. brasiliensis*. Using these models, the influence of the IL-21R on type-2 cytokine-driven pathology in acute and chronic disease settings was studied. The results demonstrate an important role for the IL-21R in the generation of polarized type-2 responses *in vivo*, particularly in type-2 cytokine-mediated inflammation and fibrosis.

[0045] The present invention therefore provides methods for treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or fibrosis-associated disorders in a subject (e.g., a human, e.g., a human patient) using an agent(s) that reduces the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R (e.g., the level of expression of IL-21 and/or IL-21R (e.g., the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products (i.e., protein and/or mRNA)), the level of activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R, etc.) relative to an untreated control (e.g., a control subject afflicted with fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition, a control subject not afflicted with fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition) or relative to an appropriate reference level. In relation to identifying an agent(s) that reduces the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, measuring "the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R" includes, but is not limited to, (1) measuring the level of expression of IL-21 and/or IL-21R (e.g., measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products (e.g., protein and/or its corresponding mRNA)); (2) measuring the level of activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R; and (3) measuring the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R (e.g., in a cell or sample of interest, e.g., from a subject (e.g., a human patient, a control subject)). As described in further detail herein, exemplary agents useful to treat, ameliorate, and/or prevent fibrosis or fibrosis-associated conditions or disorders include anti-IL-21R antibodies, antigen-binding fragments of anti-IL-21R antibodies, anti-IL-21 antibodies, antigen-binding fragments of anti-IL-21

antibodies, and soluble fragments of IL-21R polypeptides. The invention further provides methods for monitoring the course of treatment of fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder, diagnosing and prognosing the same, and screening for compounds useful to treat fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder.

[0046] As used herein, "IL-21" or "IL-21R" means any polypeptide that is substantially identical to the naturally occurring IL-21 or IL-21 receptor protein, respectively. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences encoding human interleukin-21 (IL-21) and its receptor (IL-21R) are described, for example, in WO 00/53761, WO 01/85792, Parrish-Novak et al. (2000) *Nature* 408:57-63, and Ozaki et al. (2000) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 97:11439-44. Desirably, the IL-21 polypeptide binds IL-21R or the IL-21R polypeptide binds IL-21, and upon interaction there is an increase in the signaling activity of the IL-21/IL-21R pathway by at least 5%, 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, or more than 100% above control levels, as measured by any standard method. IL-21R is also known as "MU-1," "NILR," and "zalpha11."

[0047] An agent that decreases the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R encompasses any agent that decreases the signaling activity of the IL-21/IL-21R pathway, the level of activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, the level of expression of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, and/or the level of interaction of IL-21 and IL-21R by at least 5%, 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, or 100%. Optionally, the decrease in levels of IL-21 and/or IL-21R is assessed by measuring the level of reduction in fibrosis. An agent that decreases the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R encompasses any agent that decreases the interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R by at least 5%, 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, or 100%. These aforementioned agents that decrease the level of activity or expression of IL-21 and/or IL-21R and/or decrease the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R (i.e., agents that decrease the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R) may be referred to herein as "antagonists" of IL-21 and/or IL-21R.

[0048] An "IL-21 gene" or "IL-21R gene" is defined as a nucleic acid that encodes an IL-21 or IL-21R polypeptide, respectively.

[0049] "Fibrosis" is defined as any pathological condition resulting from an overproduction or aberrant production of fibrous tissue. Fibrosis may occur in any organ including, for example, kidney, lung, liver, skin, central nervous system, bone, bone marrow, cardiovascular system, an endocrine organ or the

gastrointestinal system. By "fibrosis-associated condition" is meant any condition that is related to fibrosis. Thus, fibrosis-associated conditions may be caused by, be concomitant with, or cause fibrosis.

[0050] Decreasing the level of activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R may refer to a reduction in the level or biological activity of IL-21 relative to the level or biological activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in an untreated control or reference sample (e.g., a reference level). Such level or activity may be decreased by at least 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, or 100%. A decrease in the activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R may also be associated with a reduction in type-2 ("Th2") cytokine expression and/or function, which may include a modulation in, e.g., IL-4, IL-13, AMCase, Ym1, and Fizz1/RELMα-levels and activity.

[0051] Decreasing the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R may refer to a decrease in the interaction in a treated cell or sample relative to the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R in an untreated control or reference sample. Such level of interaction may be decreased by at least 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, or 100%. The level of interaction may be assessed by several well-known molecular biology techniques, e.g., ELISA and Western blotting.

[0052] Decreasing the level IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products refers to a decrease in the mRNA and/or protein expression level in a treated cell or sample relative to the gene or protein expression level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in an untreated control or reference sample. Such expression may be decreased by at least 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, or 100%. The level of expression may be assessed by a number of well-known molecular biology techniques, e.g., Northern blotting or Western blotting.

[0053] By "treating or ameliorating fibrosis" is meant decreasing the level of fibrosis relative to an untreated control, as measured by any standard method. A reduction in fibrosis may also be measured by a reduction in any symptom associated with fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition. The examples disclosed herein provide exemplary methods of determining whether the level of fibrosis is decreased relative to a control.

[0054] By "treating or ameliorating a fibrosis-associated condition (or disorder)" is meant decreasing such condition before or after it has occurred. As compared with an equivalent untreated control, such reduction or degree of prevention is at least 5%, 10%, 20%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 80%, 90%, 95%, or 100% as measured by any standard technique. A subject who is being treated for a fibrosis-associated condition is one who a medical practitioner has diagnosed as having such a condition. Diagnosis may be by any suitable means. A subject in whom the development of a fibrosis-associated condition is being prevented may or may not have received such a diagnosis. One in the art will understand that these subjects (e.g., patients) may have been subjected to standard tests for diagnosing fibrosis-associated conditions or may have been identified, without examination, as one at high risk due to the presence of one or more risk factors. The examples disclosed herein provide exemplary methods of determining whether the level of a fibrosis-associated disorder is decreased relative to a control.

[0055] "Preventing" refers to delaying the onset of a fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition, or prohibiting the onset of fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject likely to develop such a condition.

[0056] By "an effective amount" is meant an amount of a compound, alone or in a combination, required to treat, ameliorate, reduce or prevent fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a mammal. The effective amount of active compound(s) varies depending upon the route of administration, age, body weight, and general health of the subject. Ultimately, the attending physician or veterinarian will decide the appropriate amount and dosage regimen.

[0057] By "substantially identical," when referring to a protein or polypeptide, is meant a protein or polypeptide exhibiting at least 75%, but preferably 85%, more preferably 90%, most preferably 95%, or even 99% identity to a reference amino acid sequence, e.g., SEQ ID NO:2, SEQ ID NO:5, and fusion proteins such as those set forth in SEQ ID NOs:11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25 and 27. For proteins or polypeptides, the length of comparison sequences will generally be at least 20 amino acids, preferably at least 30 amino acids, more preferably at least 40 amino acids, and most preferably 50 amino acids or the full-length protein or polypeptide. Nucleic acids that encode such "substantially identical" proteins or polypeptides constitute examples of "substantially identical" nucleic acids. It is recognized that, due to the redundancy of the genetic code, several nucleic acids

may encode a given protein or polypeptide; such nucleic acids are within the scope of the invention if they encode a polypeptide that is "substantially identical" to a reference polypeptide.

[0058] The nucleic acids related to the present invention may comprise DNA or RNA and may be wholly or partially synthetic. Reference to a nucleotide sequence as set forth herein encompasses a DNA molecule with the specified sequence (or a complement thereof), and encompasses an RNA molecule with the specified sequence in which U is substituted for T, unless context requires otherwise.

[0059] The isolated polynucleotides related to the present invention may be used as hybridization probes and primers to identify and isolate nucleic acids having sequences identical to or similar to those encoding the disclosed polynucleotides. Hybridization methods for identifying and isolating nucleic acids include polymerase chain reaction (PCR), Southern hybridization, *in situ* hybridization and Northern hybridization, and are well known to those skilled in the art.

[0060] Hybridization reactions may be performed under conditions of different stringency. The stringency of a hybridization reaction includes the difficulty with which any two nucleic acid molecules will hybridize to one another. Preferably, each hybridizing polynucleotide hybridizes to its corresponding polynucleotide under reduced stringency conditions, more preferably stringent conditions, and most preferably highly stringent conditions. Examples of stringency conditions are shown in Table 1 below: highly stringent conditions are those that are at least as stringent as, for example, conditions A-F; stringent conditions are at least as stringent as, for example, conditions G-L; and reduced stringency conditions are at least as stringent as, for example, conditions M-R.

Table 1: Stringency Conditions

Stringency Condition	Poly-nucleotide Hybrid	Hybrid Length (bp)[1]	Hybridization Temperature and Buffer[2]	Wash Temperature and Buffer[2]
A	DNA:DNA	>50	65°C; 1xSSC -or- 42°C; 1xSSC, 50% formamide	65°C; 0.3xSSC
B	DNA:DNA	<50	T_B*; 1xSSC	T_B*; 1xSSC
C	DNA:RNA	>50	67°C; 1xSSC -or- 45°C; 1xSSC, 50% formamide	67°C; 0.3xSSC

Stringency Condition	Poly-nucleotide Hybrid	Hybrid Length (bp)[1]	Hybridization Temperature and Buffer[2]	Wash Temperature and Buffer[2]
D	DNA:RNA	<50	T_D*; 1xSSC	T_D*; 1xSSC
E	RNA:RNA	>50	70°C; 1xSSC -or- 50°C; 1xSSC, 50% formamide	70°C; 0.3xSSC
F	RNA:RNA	<50	T_F*; 1xSSC	T_F*; 1xSSC
G	DNA:DNA	>50	65°C; 4xSSC -or- 42°C; 4xSSC, 50% formamide	65°C; 1xSSC
H	DNA:DNA	<50	T_H*; 4xSSC	T_H*; 4xSSC
I	DNA:RNA	>50	67°C; 4xSSC -or- 45°C; 4xSSC, 50% formamide	67°C; 1xSSC
J	DNA:RNA	<50	T_J*; 4xSSC	T_J*; 4xSSC
K	RNA:RNA	>50	70°C; 4xSSC -or- 50°C; 4xSSC, 50% formamide	67°C; 1xSSC
L	RNA:RNA	<50	T_L*; 2xSSC	T_L*; 2xSSC
M	DNA:DNA	>50	50°C; 4xSSC -or- 40°C; 6xSSC, 50% formamide	50°C; 2xSSC
N	DNA:DNA	<50	T_N*; 6xSSC	T_N*; 6xSSC
O	DNA:RNA	>50	55°C; 4xSSC -or- 42°C; 6xSSC, 50% formamide	55°C; 2xSSC
P	DNA:RNA	<50	T_P*; 6xSSC	T_P*; 6xSSC
Q	RNA:RNA	>50	60°C; 4xSSC -or- 45°C; 6xSSC, 50% formamide	60°C; 2xSSC
R	RNA:RNA	<50	T_R*; 4xSSC	T_R*; 4xSSC

1: The hybrid length is that anticipated for the hybridized region(s) of the hybridizing polynucleotides. When hybridizing a polynucleotide to a target polynucleotide of unknown sequence, the hybrid length is assumed to be that of the hybridizing polynucleotide. When polynucleotides of known sequence are hybridized, the hybrid length can be determined by aligning the sequences of the polynucleotides and identifying the region or regions of optimal sequence complementarity.

2: SSPE (1xSSPE is 0.15M NaCl, 10mM NaH_2PO_4, and 1.25mM EDTA, pH 7.4) can be substituted for SSC (1xSSC is 0.15M NaCl and 15mM sodium citrate) in the hybridization and wash buffers; washes are performed for 15 minutes after hybridization is complete.

T_B* - T_R*: The hybridization temperature for hybrids anticipated to be less than 50 base pairs in length should be 5-10°C less than the melting temperature (T_m) of the hybrid, where T_m is determined according to the following equations. For hybrids less than 18 base pairs in length, T_m(°C) = 2(# of A + T bases) + 4(# of G + C bases). For hybrids between 18 and 49 base pairs in length, T_m(°C) = 81.5 + 16.6($\log_{10}Na^+$) + 0.41(%G+C) - (600/N), where N is the number of bases in the hybrid, and Na^+ is the concentration of sodium ions in the hybridization buffer (Na^+ for 1xSSC = 0.165M).

Additional examples of stringency conditions for polynucleotide hybridization are provided in Sambrook, J., E.F. Fritsch, and T. Maniatis, 1989, Molecular Cloning: A Laboratory Manual, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, Cold Spring Harbor, NY, chapters 9 and 11, and Current Protocols in Molecular Biology, 1995, F.M. Ausubel et al., eds., John Wiley & Sons, Inc., sections 2.10 and 6.3-6.4, incorporated herein by reference.

[0061] The isolated polynucleotides related to the present invention may be used as hybridization probes and primers to identify and isolate DNA having sequences encoding allelic variants of the disclosed polynucleotides. Allelic variants are naturally occurring alternative forms of the disclosed polynucleotides that encode polypeptides that are identical to or have significant similarity to the

polypeptides encoded by the disclosed polynucleotides. Preferably, allelic variants have at least 90% sequence identity (more preferably, at least 95% identity; most preferably, at least 99% identity) with the disclosed polynucleotides. Alternatively, significant similarity exists when the nucleic acid segments will hybridize under selective hybridization conditions (e.g., highly stringent hybridization conditions) to the disclosed polynucleotides.

[0062] The isolated polynucleotides related to the present invention may also be used as hybridization probes and primers to identify and isolate DNAs having sequences encoding polypeptides homologous to the disclosed polynucleotides. These homologs are polynucleotides and polypeptides isolated from a different species than that of the disclosed polypeptides and polynucleotides, or within the same species, but with significant sequence similarity to the disclosed polynucleotides and polypeptides. Preferably, polynucleotide homologs have at least 50% sequence identity (more preferably, at least 75% identity; most preferably, at least 90% identity) with the disclosed polynucleotides, whereas polypeptide homologs have at least 30% sequence identity (more preferably, at least 45% identity; most preferably, at least 60% identity) with the disclosed polypeptides. Preferably, homologs of the disclosed polynucleotides and polypeptides are those isolated from mammalian species.

[0063] Calculations of "homology" or "sequence identity" between two sequences are performed by means well known to those of skill in the art. For example, one general means for calculating sequence identity is described as follows. The sequences are aligned for optimal comparison purposes (e.g., gaps can be introduced in one or both of a first and a second amino acid or nucleic acid sequence for optimal alignment and nonhomologous sequences can be disregarded for comparison purposes). In a preferred embodiment, the length of a reference sequence aligned for comparison purposes is at least 30%, preferably at least 40%, more preferably at least 50%, even more preferably at least 60%, and even more preferably at least 70%, 80%, 90%, 100% of the length of the reference sequence. The amino acid residues or nucleotides at corresponding amino acid positions or nucleotide positions are then compared. When a position in the first sequence is occupied by the same amino acid residue or nucleotide as the corresponding position in the second sequence, then the molecules are identical at that position. The percent identity between the two sequences is a

function of the number of identical positions shared by the sequences, taking into account the number of gaps, and the length of each gap, which need to be introduced for optimal alignment of the two sequences.

[0064] The comparison of sequences and determination of percent sequence identity between two sequences may be accomplished using a mathematical algorithm. In a preferred embodiment, the percent identity between two amino acid sequences is determined using the Needleman and Wunsch ((1970) *J. Mol. Biol.* 48:444-53) algorithm, which has been incorporated into the GAP program in the GCG software package (available at www.gcg.com), using either a Blossum 62 matrix or a PAM250 matrix, and a gap weight of 16, 14, 12, 10, 8, 6, or 4 and a length weight of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. In yet another preferred embodiment, the percent identity between two nucleotide sequences is determined using the GAP program in the GCG software package (available at www.gcg.com), using a NWSgapdna.CMP matrix and a gap weight of 40, 50, 60, 70, or 80 and a length weight of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. One preferred set of parameters is a Blossum 62 scoring matrix with a gap penalty of 12, a gap extend penalty of 4, and a frameshift gap penalty of 5. The percent identity between two amino acid or nucleotide sequences can also be determined using the algorithm of Meyers and Miller ((1989) *CABIOS* 4:11-17), which has been incorporated into the ALIGN program (version 2.0), using a PAM120 weight residue table, a gap length penalty of 12 and a gap penalty of 4.

[0065] "Substantially pure" is defined as a nucleic acid, polypeptide, or other molecule that has been separated from the components that naturally accompany it, e.g., genetic material, associated proteins, membranes, and cell debris. Typically, a polypeptide is substantially pure if it is at least 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, 95%, or even 99%, by weight, free from the proteins and naturally occurring organic molecules with which it naturally associates. For example, a substantially pure polypeptide may be obtained by extraction from a natural source, by expression of a recombinant nucleic acid in a cell that does not normally express that protein, or by chemical synthesis.

[0066] The term "isolated DNA" is defined as DNA that is relatively or substantially free of the genes and other DNA sequences that flank the DNA in the naturally occurring genome of the organism from which the given DNA is

derived. Thus, the term "isolated DNA" encompasses, for example, cDNA, cloned genomic DNA, and synthetic DNA.

[0067] "IL-21 fusion" polypeptide or protein, or "IL-21R fusion" polypeptide or protein is defined as all or part of an IL-21 or IL-21R amino acid sequence, e.g., the IL-21R extracellular fragment from amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, linked to a second, heterologous amino acid sequence. In one embodiment, the second, heterologous amino acid sequence is a tag sequence. Common tag sequences include myc tags, his tags, flag tags, etc. In another embodiment of the invention, the second, heterologous amino acid sequence is an immunoglobulin sequence, e.g., an Fc fragment. Such fusion proteins and polypeptides, which are described in greater detail herein, are encoded by nucleic acid sequences referred to as "IL-21 fusion genes" or "IL-21R fusion genes."

[0068] In the screening methods a "compound" refers to a chemical, whether naturally occurring or artificially derived. Such compounds may include, for example, peptides, polypeptides, synthetic organic molecules, naturally occurring organic molecules, nucleic acid molecules, peptide nucleic acid molecules, and components and derivatives thereof. For example, a useful compound according to the present invention reduces binding of IL-21 to IL-21R.

[0069] Antagonists of IL-21 and IL-21R for use in treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition may also consist of small molecules. The term "small molecule" refers to compounds that are not macromolecules (see, e.g., Karp (2000) *Bioinformatics Ontology* 16:269-85; Verkman (2004) *AJP-Cell Physiol.* 286:465-74). Thus, small molecules are often considered those compounds that are, e.g., less than one thousand daltons (e.g., Voet and Voet, *Biochemistry, 2nd ed.*, ed. N. Rose, Wiley and Sons, New York, 14 (1995)). For example, Davis et al. (2005) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* 102:5981-86, use the phrase small molecule to indicate folates, methotrexate, and neuropeptides, while Halpin and Harbury (2004) *PLos Biology* 2:1022-30, use the phrase to indicate small molecule gene products, e.g., DNAs, RNAs and peptides. Examples of natural and synthesized small molecules include, but are not limited to, cholesterols, neurotransmitters, siRNAs, and various chemicals listed in numerous commercially available small molecule databases, e.g., FCD (Fine Chemicals Database), SMID (Small Molecule Interaction Database), ChEBI (Chemical Entities of Biological Interest), and CSD (Cambridge

Structural Database) (see, e.g., Alfarano et al. (2005) *Nuc. Acids Res. Database Issue* 33:D416-24).

[0070] The term "pharmaceutical composition" means any composition that contains at least one therapeutically or biologically active agent and is suitable for administration to a subject. Any of these formulations can be prepared by well-known and accepted methods of the art. See, for example, *Remington: The Science and Practice of Pharmacy,* 21st Ed., (ed. A.R. Gennaro), Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Baltimore, MD (2005).

[0071] The present invention provides significant advantages over standard therapies for treatment and prevention of fibrosis-associated conditions. As described herein, administration of a therapeutic agent that reduces the level of activity or expression of IL-21 and/or IL-21R or decreases the interactions between IL-21 and IL-21R (i.e., reduces the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R activity) results in amelioration, reduction or prevention of fibrosis and fibrosis-associated conditions. In addition, the compound screening methods, provided by this invention, allow one to identify novel therapeutics that modify the injury process, rather than merely mitigating the symptoms.

Fibrotic Disorders

[0072] The generation of granulation tissue is a carefully orchestrated process in which the expression of protease inhibitors and extracellular matrix proteins is upregulated and the expression of proteases is reduced, leading to the accumulation of extracellular matrix. Abnormal accumulation of fibrous materials, however, may ultimately lead to organ failure (e.g., Border et al. (1994) *New Engl. J. Med.* 331:1286-92). The development of fibrotic conditions, whether induced or spontaneous, is caused at least in part by the stimulation of fibroblast activity. The influx of inflammatory cells and activated fibroblasts into the injured organ depends on the ability of these cell types to interact with the interstitial matrix, which contains primarily collagens. Exemplary tissues that may be affected by fibrosis include the kidney, lung, liver, skin, central nervous system, bone, bone marrow, tissues of the cardiovascular system, endocrine organs, and tissues of the gastrointestinal system.

[0073] The methods and compositions of the present invention are useful for any fibrosis or fibrosis-associated condition affecting any tissue including, for

example, fibrosis of an internal organ, a cutaneous or dermal fibrosing disorder, and fibrotic conditions of the eye. Fibrosis of internal organs (e.g., liver, lung, kidney, heart blood vessels, gastrointestinal tract) occurs in disorders such as pulmonary fibrosis, idiopathic fibrosis, autoimmune fibrosis, myelofibrosis, liver cirrhosis, veno-occlusive disease, mesangial proliferative glomerulonephritis, crescentic glomerulonephritis, diabetic nephropathy, renal interstitial fibrosis, renal fibrosis in subjects receiving cyclosporin, allograft rejection, HIV associated nephropathy. Other fibrosis-associated disorders include systemic sclerosis, eosinophilia-myalgia syndrome, and fibrosis-associated CNS disorders such as intraocular fibrosis. Dermal fibrosing disorders include, for example, scleroderma, morphea, keloids, hypertrophic scars, familial cutaneous collagenoma, and connective tissue nevi of the collagen type. Fibrotic conditions of the eye include conditions such as diabetic retinopathy, post-surgical scarring (for example, after glaucoma filtering surgery and after crossed-eyes (strabismus) surgery), and proliferative vitreoretinopathy. Additional fibrotic conditions that may be treated by the methods of the present invention may result, for example, from rheumatoid arthritis, diseases associated with prolonged joint pain and deteriorated joints; progressive systemic sclerosis, polymyositis, dermatomyositis, eosinophilic fascitis, morphea, Raynaud's syndrome, and nasal polyposis. As described herein, an IL-21/IL-21R pathway antagonist may be administered to treat or prevent fibrosis and fibrosis-associated disorders, or to ameliorate one or more of the symptoms associated with these disorders.

IL-21 or IL-21R Antagonists (IL-21/IL-21R Antagonists)

[0074] The IL-21 antagonists or IL-21R antagonists of the invention interact with IL-21 or IL-21R (e.g., mammalian IL-21 or IL-21R such as human, bovine, rat, mouse, horse, or dog), respectively, and reduce the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, e.g., reduce one or more biological activities associated with IL-21 and/or IL-21R. When this interaction involves direct binding, antagonists bind to IL-21 or IL-21R with high affinity (e.g., with an affinity constant of at least about 10^7 M^{-1}, preferably about 10^8 M^{-1}, and more preferably, about 10^9 M^{-1} to 10^{10} M^{-1} or stronger).

[0075] The level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R is desirably reduced by 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, or even 100%. An antagonist may, for

example, reduce the activity of IL-21R by neutralizing IL-21. An antagonist may be a fusion protein that includes a fragment of an IL-21R fused to a non-IL-21R fragment such as an immunoglobulin Fc region, e.g., the fusion proteins set forth in SEQ ID NOs:11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25 and 27. Other exemplary antagonists are anti-IL-21R or anti-IL-21 antibodies or antigen-binding fragments thereof, soluble forms of IL-21R, peptides, inhibitory polynucleotides (e.g., siRNAs, SNPs, and aptamers) and small molecules.

[0076] In one embodiment, the IL-21/IL-21R antagonist is an anti-IL-21R or anti-IL-21 antibody, or an antigen-binding fragment thereof. In a further embodiment, the antibody is a neutralizing antibody. If desired, the antibody may be a monoclonal or single-specificity antibody that binds to IL-21 or IL-21R or an antigen-binding fragment thereof (e.g., an Fab, $F(ab')_2$, Fv or a single chain Fv fragment). The antibody may be human, humanized, chimeric, or *in vitro*-generated antibody to IL-21 or IL-21R polypeptide.

[0077] Alternatively, the IL-21 antagonist or IL-21R antagonist may be a full length (e.g., a mutated sequence) or a fragment of an IL-21 polypeptide or an IL-21R polypeptide (e.g., human). Exemplary antagonists include, for example, an inhibitory IL-21 receptor-binding domain of an IL-21 polypeptide (e.g., human) or the extracellular domain of murine or human IL-21R. The IL-21 antagonist may have an amino acid sequence that is substantially identical to (e.g., having at least 85%, 90%, 95%, 98%, 99% sequence identity with) the naturally occurring IL-21R (e.g., SEQ ID NO:2 (human) or SEQ ID NO:5 (murine)) or a fragment thereof (see Table 2). Alternatively, the antagonist may have an amino acid sequence encoded by a nucleotide sequence that is substantially identical to the naturally occurring mammalian IL-21R or a fragment thereof (e.g., SEQ ID NO:1 (human) or SEQ ID NO:4 (murine)) or by a nucleotide sequence that hybridizes to one of the foregoing nucleotide sequences under stringent conditions, e.g., highly stringent conditions (see Table 1).

Table 2: Summary of Sequences

Designation	Description
SEQ ID NO:1	Nucleic acid sequence of human IL-21R cDNA
SEQ ID NO:2	Amino acid sequence of human IL-21R
SEQ ID NO:3	Amino acid sequence of conserved WSXWS motif
SEQ ID NO:4	Nucleic acid sequence of mouse IL-21R cDNA
SEQ ID NO:5	Amino acid sequence of mouse IL-21R
SEQ ID NO:6	Amino acid sequence of Fc fragment
SEQ ID NO:7	Nucleic acid (cDNA) sequence of human IL-21
SEQ ID NO:8	Amino acid sequence of human IL-21
SEQ ID NO:9	Peptide signal sequence
SEQ ID NO:10	Nucleic acid (cDNA) sequences of human IL-21R monomer fused to a honeybee leader sequence and amino terminal His_6 and Flag tags
SEQ ID NO:11	Amino acid sequence of human IL-21R monomer (20-235) fused to a honeybee leader sequence and amino terminal His_6 and Flag tags
SEQ ID NO:12	Nucleic acid (cDNA) sequence of human IL-21R extracellular domain (1-235) fused to an IgG fragment
SEQ ID NO:13	Amino acid sequence of human IL-21R extracellular domain (1-235) fused to an IgG fragment
SEQ ID NO:14	Nucleic acid (cDNA) sequence of human IL-21R extracellular domain (1-235) fused to an IgG fragment and a His_6 tag
SEQ ID NO:15	Amino acid sequence of human IL-21R extracellular domain (1-235) fused to an IgG fragment and a His_6 tag
SEQ ID NO:16	Nucleic acid (cDNA) sequence of human IL-21R extracellular domain (1-235) fused to an IgG fragment mutated at residues 254 and 257
SEQ ID NO:17	Amino acid sequence of human IL-21R extracellular domain (1-235) fused to an IgG fragment mutated at residues 254 and 257
SEQ ID NO:18	Nucleic acid (cDNA) sequence of human IL-21R monomer fused to a Rhodopsin tag
SEQ ID NO:19	Amino acid sequence of human IL-21R monomer (20-235) fused to a Rhodopsin tag
SEQ ID NO:20	Nucleic acid (cDNA) sequence of human IL-21R extracellular domain (1-235) fused to EK cleavage sites and an IgG1 fragment with a mutated Fc region
SEQ ID NO:21	Amino acid sequence of human IL-21R extracellular domain (1-235) fused to EK cleavage sites and an IgG1 fragment with a mutated Fc region
SEQ ID NO:22	Nucleic acid sequence of mouse IL-21R extracellular domain fused to a mouse genomic IgG2a fragment

Designation	Description
SEQ ID NO:23	Amino acid sequence of mouse IL-21R extracellular domain fused to a mouse genomic IgG2a fragment
SEQ ID NO:24	Nucleic acid (genomic) sequence of mouse IL-21R extracellular domain fused to Flag and His_6 tags
SEQ ID NO:25	Amino acid sequence of mouse IL-21R extracellular domain fused to fused to Flag and His_6 tags
SEQ ID NO:26	Nucleic acid sequence of mouse IL-21R extracellular domain fused to a honeybee leader sequence and amino terminal Flag and His_6 tags
SEQ ID NO:27	Amino acid sequence of mouse IL-21R extracellular domain fused to a honeybee leader sequence and amino terminal Flag and His_6 tags
SEQ ID NO:28	Sense primer for mouse IL-21
SEQ ID NO:29	Antisense primer for mouse IL-21
SEQ ID NO:30	Sense primer for mouse IL-21R
SEQ ID NO:31	Antisense primer for mouse IL-21R
SEQ ID NO:32	Sense primer for mouse IFN-γ
SEQ ID NO:33	Antisense primer for mouse IFN-γ

[0078] Optionally, the IL-21R polypeptide may be a soluble polypeptide incapable of membrane anchoring. Such soluble polypeptides include, for example, IL-21R polypeptides that lack a sufficient portion of their membrane spanning domain or are modified such that the membrane spanning domain is nonfunctional. For example, the IL-21R polypeptide may be a soluble fragment of an IL-21R (e.g., a fragment of an IL-21R containing the extracellular domain of murine or human IL-21R, including an amino acid sequence from about amino acids 1-235, 1-236, 20-235, or 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:2 (human), or from about amino acids 1-236, or 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:5 (murine)). Exemplary IL-21 antagonists may have an amino acid sequence that is substantially identical to amino acids 20-538 of SEQ ID NO:2 (mature human IL-21R), amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2 (extracellular domain of human IL-21R), amino acids 1-236 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 20-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 1-236 of SEQ ID NO:5, or amino acids 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:5.

[0079] An IL-21 antagonist of the invention may also be encoded by nucleic acids that hybridize to the nucleotide sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:1, SEQ

ID NO:4, SEQ ID NO:10, SEQ ID NO:12, SEQ ID NO:14, SEQ ID NO:16, SEQ ID NO:18, SEQ ID NO:20, SEQ ID NO:22, SEQ ID NO:24, or SEQ ID NO:26, under highly stringent conditions, e.g., as set forth in Table 1. Isolated polynucleotides which encode IL-21R proteins or fusion proteins, but which differ from the nucleotide sequence set forth in SEQ ID NOs:1, 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, or 26, by virtue of the degeneracy of the genetic code, are also encompassed by the present invention. Variations in the nucleotide sequence as set forth in SEQ ID NOs:1, 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, or 26, which are caused by point mutations or by induced modifications, are also included in the invention.

[0080] If desired, a soluble IL-21R polypeptide may include, or be fused to, a second moiety such as a polypeptide (e.g., an immunoglobulin chain, a GST, Lex-A or MBP polypeptide sequence). For example, a fusion protein may include a fragment of an IL-21R polypeptide, which is capable of binding IL-21, such as a soluble fragment of an IL-21R (e.g., a fragment containing the extracellular domain of murine or human IL-21R such as amino acids 1-235, 1-236, 20-235 or 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:2 (human), or amino acids 1-236 or 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:5 (murine)) fused to a second moiety (e.g., an immunoglobulin chain, an Fc fragment, a heavy chain constant regions of various immunoglobulin isotypes, including IgG1, IgG2, IgG3, IgG4, IgM, IgA1, IgA2, IgD, and IgE).

[0081] Desirably, the IL-21 antagonist of the invention reduces at least one biological activity associated with the naturally occurring IL-21R, including, for example, the ability to interact with or bind to an IL-21 polypeptide, the ability to associate with signal transduction molecules such as γc or JAK1, the ability to stimulate phosphorylation and/or activation of stat proteins (e.g., Stat 5 and/or Stat 3), and the ability to modulate (e.g., stimulate or decrease) proliferation, differentiation, effector cell function, cytolytic activity, cytokine secretion, and/or survival of immune cells such as T cells (CD8+ and CD4+ T cells, including Th1 and Th2 cells), NK cells, B cells, macrophages, and megakaryocytes.

[0082] According to the present invention, an IL-21 polypeptide is a cytokine showing sequence homology to IL-2, IL-4 and IL-15 (Parrish-Novak et al. (2000) *Nature* 408:57-63). Despite low sequence homology among interleukin cytokines, cytokines share a common secondary motif, i.e., a "four-helix-bundle"

structure that is representative of the family. IL-21 is expressed primarily in activated CD4+ T cells, and has been reported to have effects on NK, B and T cells (Parrish-Novak et al. (2000) *supra*; Kasaian et al. (2002) *Immunity* 16:559-69). IL-21 binds to IL-21R (also referred to as "MU-1," "NILR," and "zalpha11"). Upon IL-21 binding, activation of IL-21R leads to Stat5 and/or Stat3 signaling (Ozaki et al. (2000) *supra*).

[0083] The amino acid sequences of IL-21 polypeptides are publicly known. For example, the nucleotide sequence and amino acid sequence of a human IL-21 is available at GenBank Acc. No. NM_021803. The disclosed human IL-21 nucleotide sequence is presented below:

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1   gctgaagtga aaacgagacc aaggtctagc tctactgttg gtacttatga gatccagtcc
61  tggcaacatg gagaggattg tcatctgtct gatggtcatc ttcttgggga cactggtcca
121 caaatcaagc tcccaaggtc aagatcgcca catgattaga atgcgtcaac ttatagatat
181 tgttgatcag ctgaaaaatt atgtgaatga cttggtccct gaatttctgc cagctccaga
241 agatgtagag acaaactgtg agtggtcagc tttttcctgc tttcagaagg cccaactaaa
301 gtcagcaaat acaggaaaca atgaaaggat aatcaatgta tcaattaaaa agctgaagag
361 gaaaccacct tccacaaatg cagggagaag acagaaacac agactaacat gcccttcatg
421 tgattcttat gagaaaaaac cacccaaaga attcctagaa agattcaaat cacttctcca
481 aaagatgatt catcagcatc tgtcctctag aacacacgga agtgaagatt cctgaggatc
541 taacttgcag ttggacacta tgttacatac tctaatatag tagtgaaagt catttctttg
601 tattccaagt ggaggag (SEQ ID NO:7)
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[0084] The amino acid sequence of the disclosed human IL-21 polypeptide is presented below:

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MRSSPGNMERIVICLMVIFLGTLVHKSSSQGQDRHMIRMRQLIDIVDQLKNYVND
LVPEFLPAPEDVETNCEWSAFSCFQKAQLKSANTGNNERIINVSIKKLKRKPPST
NAGRRQKHRLTCPSCDSYEKKPPKEFLERFKSLLQKMIHQHLSSRTHGSEDS
(SEQ ID NO:8)
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[0085] Thus, an IL-21 polypeptide refers to a protein that is capable of interacting with or binding to IL-21R and having one of the following features: (i) an amino acid sequence substantially identical to a naturally occurring mammalian IL-21 or a fragment thereof (e.g., SEQ ID NO:8 (human)); (ii) an amino acid sequence which is encoded by a nucleotide sequence that is substantially identical to a naturally occurring mammalian IL-21 nucleotide sequence or a fragment thereof (e.g., SEQ ID NO:7 (human) or a fragment thereof); (iii) an amino acid sequence encoded by a nucleotide sequence degenerate to a naturally occurring IL-21 nucleotide sequence or a fragment thereof, e.g., SEQ ID NO:7 (human) or a fragment thereof; or (iv) a nucleotide

sequence that hybridizes to one of the foregoing nucleotide sequence sequences under stringent conditions.

[0086] In all foregoing aspects of the invention, the IL-21 or IL-21R polypeptides may be provided as a variant polypeptide having a mutation in the naturally occurring IL-21 or IL-21R sequence (wild type) that results in higher affinity (relative to the nonmutated sequence) binding to IL-21R or IL-21, respectively. Such mutations may be useful, for example, to increase resistance to proteolysis (relative to the nonmutated sequence). Some amino acid sequences in the disclosed sequences can be varied without significantly modifying IL-21 or IL-21R structure or function. In general, it is possible to replace residues that form IL-21 or IL-21R protein tertiary structure, provided that residues that perform a similar function are used. In other instances, the type of residue may be completely irrelevant if an alteration occurs in a noncritical area. Thus, the invention further includes IL-21 and IL-21R variants that show substantial IL-21-type biological activity. Such variants include deletions, insertions, inversions, repeats, and type substitutions (for example, substituting one hydrophilic residue for another, but not a strongly hydrophilic residue for a strongly hydrophobic residue). Small changes or "neutral" amino acid substitutions will often have little impact on protein function. (Taylor (1986) *J. Theor. Biol.* 119:205-18). Conservative substitutions may include, but are not limited to, replacements among the aliphatic amino acids, substitutions between amide residues, exchanges of basic residues, and replacements among the aromatic residues. Further guidance concerning which amino acid change is likely to be phenotypically silent (i.e., is unlikely to significantly affect function) can be found in Bowie et al. (1990) *Science* 247:1306-10 and Zvelebil et al. (1987) *J. Mol. Biol.* 195:957-61.

[0087] Optionally, the IL-21 or IL-21R antagonist is a fusion protein containing the IL-21 or IL-21R polypeptides or fragments thereof described herein fused to a second moiety such as an immunoglobulin chain, e.g., an Fc fragment, an epitope (tag) sequence, e.g., GST or myc, and additional well-known sequences such as Lex-A, or MBP polypeptide sequence. If desired, the fusion protein may include a fragment of an IL-21R polypeptide that is capable of binding IL-21, such as a soluble fragment of an IL-21R (e.g., a fragment of an IL-21R containing the extracellular domain of murine or human IL-21R from about amino acids 1-235,

1-236, 20-235, or 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:2 (human), or from about amino acids 1-236, or 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:5 (murine) or a fragment identical to, or substantially identical to, a polypeptide encoded by SEQ ID NOs:1 or 4) fused to a second moiety (e.g., an immunoglobulin chain, an Fc fragment, a heavy chain constant region(s) of the various isotypes, including: IgG1, IgG2, IgG3, IgG4, IgM, IgA1, IgA2, IgD, and IgE). Alternatively, the human Fc sequence has been mutated at one or more amino acids (e.g., mutated at residues 254 and 257 of SEQ ID NO:16) in the naturally occurring sequence to reduce Fc receptor binding. In other embodiments, the fusion protein may include the extracellular domain of murine IL-21R (from about amino acids 1-236, or 20-235 of SEQ ID NO:5 (murine)) fused to a murine immunoglobulin Fc chain (including, but not limited to, murine IgG, e.g., murine IgG2a or a mutated form of murine IgG2a).

[0088] Examples of antagonistic fusion proteins that may be used in the methods of the invention are shown in FIGS. 7-15. The fusion protein may include an amino acid sequence substantially identical to SEQ ID NO:11, SEQ ID NO:13, SEQ ID NO:15, SEQ ID NO:17, SEQ ID NO:19, SEQ ID NO:21, SEQ ID NO:23, SEQ ID NO:25, or SEQ ID NO:27 or an amino acid sequence encoded by a nucleotide sequence that is substantially identical to SEQ ID NOs:10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, or 26. One exemplary fusion protein contains the human IL-21R extracellular domain (e.g., amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2) fused at the C-terminus via a linker (corresponding to amino acids 236-243 of SEQ ID NO:17) to human immunoglobulin G1 (IgG1) Fc mutated sequence (corresponding to amino acids 244-467 of SEQ ID NO:17). The human Fc sequence has been mutated at residues 254 and 257 from the wild type sequence to reduce Fc receptor binding. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences are shown as SEQ ID NO:16 and SEQ ID NO:17, respectively.

[0089] The second polypeptide is preferably soluble. Optionally, the second polypeptide enhances the half-life, (e.g., the serum half-life) of the linked polypeptide. If desired, the second polypeptide includes a sequence that facilitates association of the fusion polypeptide with a second IL-21R or IL-21 polypeptide. The second polypeptide may include at least a region of an immunoglobulin polypeptide. Immunoglobulin fusions polypeptides are known in the art and are described in, e.g., U.S. Patent Nos. 5,225,538; 5,428,130; 5,514,582; 5,714,147; and 5,455,165.

[0090] Optionally, the second polypeptide is a full-length immunoglobulin polypeptide or a fragment thereof (e.g., a heavy chain, light chain, Fab, Fab_2, Fv, or Fc).

[0091] In one example, the second polypeptide has less effector function that the effector function of an Fc region of a wild-type immunoglobulin heavy chain. Fc effector function includes for example, Fc receptor binding, complement fixation and T cell-depleting activity (see, for example, U.S. Patent No. 6,136,310). Methods for assaying T cell-depleting activity, Fc effector function, and antibody stability are known in the art. In one embodiment, the second polypeptide has low or no affinity for the Fc receptor. In an alternative embodiment, the second polypeptide has low or no affinity for complement protein C1q.

[0092] A preferred second polypeptide sequence includes the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:6. This sequence includes an Fc region. Underlined amino acids are those that differ from the amino acids found in the corresponding positions of the wild-type immunoglobulin sequence:

HTCPPCPAPEALGAPSVFLFPPKPKDTLMISRTPEVTCVVVDVSHEDPEVKFNWYVDGVEVHNAK
TKPREEQYNSTYRVVSVLTVLHQDWLNGKEYKCKVSNKALPVPIEKTISKAKGQPREPQVYTLPP
SREEMTKNQVSLTCLVKGFYPSDIAVEWESNGQPENNYKTTPPVLDSDGSFFLYSKLTVDKSRWQ
QGNVFSCSVMHEALHNHYTQKSLSLSPGK (SEQ ID NO:6)

[0093] Fusion proteins may additionally include a linker sequence(s) joining the first moiety to the second moiety. For example, the fusion protein may include a peptide linker of about 4 to 20 amino acids, more preferably 5 to 10 amino acids in length, and most preferably about 8 amino acids in length. The amino acids in the peptide linker may include, e.g., Gly, Ser, Asn, Thr and Ala. Thus, a peptide linker may consist of a Gly-Ser element. In other embodiments, the fusion protein includes a peptide linker having the formula $(Ser\text{-}Gly\text{-}Gly\text{-}Gly\text{-}Gly)_y$, wherein "y" is 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, or 8.

[0094] In other embodiments, additional amino acid sequences can be added to the N- or C-terminus of the fusion protein to facilitate expression, detection and/or isolation or purification. For example, an IL-21/IL-21R fusion protein may be linked to one or more additional moieties, e.g., GST (i.e., glutathione S-transferase), His, FLAG, or myc tags. For example, the fusion protein may additionally include a GST peptide in which the fusion protein sequences are

fused to the C-terminus of the GST sequences. Such fusion proteins facilitate the purification or identification of the IL-21R/MU-1 fusion protein. In other embodiments, additional amino acid sequences may be added to the N- or C-terminus of the fusion protein to facilitate expression, steric flexibility, detection, and/or isolation or purification.

[0095] The fusion protein may also include a heterologous signal sequence at its N-terminus. For example, the native IL-21R signal sequence may be removed and replaced with a signal sequence from another protein. In certain host cells (e.g., mammalian host cells), expression and/or secretion of IL-21R may be increased using a heterologous signal sequence. A signal peptide that can be included in the fusion protein is MPLLLLLLLLLPSPLHP (SEQ ID NO:9). If desired, one or more amino acids can additionally be inserted between the first polypeptide moiety comprising the IL-21R/MU-1 moiety and the second polypeptide moiety.

[0096] The IL-21/IL-21R antagonists described herein may be derivatized or linked to another functional molecule, e.g., another peptide or protein (e.g., an Fab' fragment). For example, the fusion protein or an antibody, or antigen-binding portion, can be functionally linked (e.g., by chemical coupling, genetic fusion, noncovalent association or otherwise) to one or more other molecular entities, such as an antibody (e.g., a bispecific or a multispecific antibody), toxins, radioisotopes, cytotoxic or cytostatic agents, among others.

[0097] A chimeric or fusion protein of the invention may be produced by standard recombinant DNA techniques. For example, DNA fragments coding for the different polypeptide sequences are ligated together in-frame in accordance with conventional techniques, e.g., by employing blunt-ended or sticky-ended termini for ligation, restriction enzyme digestion to create appropriate termini, filling-in of sticky ends as appropriate, alkaline phosphatase treatment to avoid undesirable ligation, and enzymatic ligation. In another embodiment, the fusion gene can be synthesized by conventional techniques including automated DNA synthesizers. Alternatively, PCR amplification of gene fragments can be carried out using anchor primers that give rise to complementary overhangs between two consecutive gene fragments that can subsequently be annealed and reamplified to generate a chimeric gene sequence (see, for example, Ausubel et al., *supra*). Moreover, many expression vectors that encode a fusion moiety (e.g., an Fc

region of an immunoglobulin heavy chain) are commercially available. An IL-21R/MU-1 or IL-21 encoding nucleic acid can be cloned into such an expression vector such that the fusion moiety is linked in-frame to the immunoglobulin protein. In some embodiments, IL-21R/MU-1 or IL-21 fusion polypeptides exist as oligomers, such as dimers or trimers. An IL-21R/MU-1 or IL-21 monomer, and/or nucleic acids encoding an IL-21R/MU-1 or IL-21, can be constructed using methods known in the art.

Production of Nucleic Acids

[0098] The isolated polynucleotides of the invention may be operably linked to an expression control sequence, such as the pMT2 or pED expression vectors disclosed in Kaufman et al. (1991) *Nuc. Acids Res.* 19:4485-90, in order to produce the IL-21R or IL-21 polypeptides (including fragments and fusions thereof) recombinantly. Many suitable expression control sequences are known in the art. General methods of expressing recombinant proteins are also known and are exemplified in Kaufman (1990) *Meth. Enzym.* 185:537-66. As defined herein "operably linked" means enzymatically or chemically ligated to form a covalent bond between the isolated polynucleotide of the invention and the expression control sequence in such a way that the IL-21R or IL-21 polypeptide is expressed by a host cell that has been transformed (transfected) with the ligated polynucleotide/expression control sequence.

[0099] The term "vector," as used herein, is intended to refer to a nucleic acid molecule capable of transporting another nucleic acid to which it has been linked. One type of vector is a "plasmid," which refers to a circular double stranded DNA loop into which additional DNA segments may be ligated. Another type of vector is a viral vector, wherein additional DNA segments may be ligated into the viral genome. Certain vectors are capable of autonomous replication in a host cell into which they are introduced (e.g., bacterial vectors having a bacterial origin of replication and episomal mammalian vectors). Other vectors (e.g., nonepisomal mammalian vectors) can be integrated into the genome of a host cell upon introduction into the host cell, and thereby are replicated along with the host genome. Moreover, certain vectors are capable of directing the expression of genes to which they are operatively linked. Such vectors are referred to herein as "recombinant expression vectors" (or simply, "expression vectors"). In general,

expression vectors of utility in recombinant DNA techniques are often in the form of plasmids. In the present specification, "plasmid" and "vector" may be used interchangeably as the plasmid is the most commonly used form of vector. However, the invention is intended to include such other forms of expression vectors, such as viral vectors (e.g., replication defective retroviruses, adenoviruses and adeno-associated viruses), which serve equivalent functions.

[0100] The recombinant expression constructs of the invention may carry additional sequences, such as regulatory sequences (i.e., sequences that regulate either vector replication, e.g., origins of replication, transcription of the nucleic acid sequence encoding the polypeptide (or peptide) of interest, or expression of the encoded polypeptide), tag sequences such as histidine, and selectable marker genes. The term "regulatory sequence" is intended to include promoters, enhancers and any other expression control elements (e.g., polyadenylation signals, transcription splice sites) that control transcription, replication or translation. Such regulatory sequences are described, for example, in Goeddel, *Gene Expression Technology: Methods in Enzymology,* Academic Press, San Diego, CA (1990). It will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that the design of the expression vector, including the selection of regulatory sequences, will depend on various factors, including choice of the host cell and the level of protein expression desired. Preferred regulatory sequences for expression of proteins in mammalian host cells include viral elements that direct high levels of protein expression, such as promoters and/or enhancers derived from the FF-1a promoter and BGH poly A, cytomegalovirus (CMV) (e.g., the CMV promoter/enhancer), Simian virus 40 (SV40) (e.g., the SV40 promoter/enhancer), adenovirus (e.g., the adenovirus major late promoter (AdMLP)), and polyoma. Viral regulatory elements, and sequences thereof, are described in, e.g., U.S. Patent Nos. 5,168,062; 4,510,245; and 4,968,615.

[0101] The recombinant expression vectors of the invention may carry additional sequences, such as sequences that regulate replication of the vector in host cells (e.g., origins of replication and terminator sequences) and selectable marker genes. The selectable marker gene facilitates selection of host cells into which the vector has been introduced (see, e.g., U.S. Patents Nos. 4,399,216, 4,634,665 and 5,179,017, all by Axel et al.). For example, typically the selectable marker gene confers resistance of the host cell transfected or

transformed with the selectable marker to compounds such as G418 (geneticin), hygromycin or methotrexate. Preferred selectable marker genes include the dihydrofolate reductase (DHFR) gene (for use in dhfr$^-$ host cells with methotrexate selection/amplification), the *neo* gene (for G418 selection), and genes conferring tetracycline and/or ampicillin resistance to bacteria.

[0102] Suitable vectors, containing appropriate regulatory sequences, including promoter sequences, terminator sequences, polyadenylation sequences, enhancer sequences, marker genes and other sequences as appropriate, may be either chosen or constructed. Inducible expression of proteins, achieved by using vectors with inducible promoter sequences, such as tetracycline-inducible vectors, e.g., pTet-On™ and pTet-Off™ (Clontech, Palo Alto, CA), may also be used in the disclosed method. For further details regarding expression vectors, see, for example, Sambrook et al., *supra*. Many known techniques and protocols for manipulation of nucleic acids, for example, in preparation of nucleic acid constructs, mutagenesis, sequencing, introduction of DNA into cells, gene expression, and analysis of proteins, are also described in detail in Sambrook et al., *supra*.

[0103] A number of types of cells may act as suitable host cells for expression of the IL-21R/MU-1 or IL-21 or fusion protein thereof. Any cell type capable of expressing functional IL-21R/MU-1 or IL-21 protein or fusion thereof may be used. Suitable mammalian host cells include, for example, monkey COS cells, Chinese Hamster Ovary (CHO) cells, human kidney 293 cells, human epidermal A431 cells, human Colo205 cells, 3T3 cells, CV-1 cells, other transformed primate cell lines, normal diploid cells, cell strains derived from *in vitro* culture of primary tissue, primary explants, HeLa cells, mouse L cells, BHK, HL-60, U937, HaK, C3H10T1/2, Rat2, BaF3, 32D, FDCP-1, PC12, M1x or C2C12 cells.

[0104] The IL-21R or IL-21 polypeptide or fusion protein thereof may also be produced by operably linking the isolated polynucleotide of the invention to suitable control sequences in one or more insect expression vectors, and employing an insect expression system. Materials and methods for baculovirus/Sf9 expression systems are commercially available in kit form (e.g., the MAXBAC® kit, Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA). Soluble forms of the

polypeptides described herein may also be produced in insect cells using appropriate isolated polynucleotides as described above.

[0105] Alternatively, the IL-21R or IL-21 polypeptide or fusion protein thereof may be produced in lower eukaryotes such as yeast, or in prokaryotes such as bacteria. Suitable yeast strains include *Saccharomyces cerevisiae, Schizosaccharomyces pombe, Kluyveromyces strains, Candida,* or any yeast strain capable of expressing heterologous proteins. Suitable bacterial strains include *Escherichia coli, Bacillus subtilis, Salmonella typhimurium,* or any bacterial strain capable of expressing heterologous proteins. Expression in bacteria may result in formation of inclusion bodies incorporating the recombinant protein. Thus, refolding of the recombinant protein may be required in order to produce active or more active material. Several methods for obtaining correctly folded heterologous proteins from bacterial inclusion bodies are known in the art. These methods generally involve solubilizing the protein from the inclusion bodies, then denaturing the protein completely using a chaotropic agent. When cysteine residues are present in the primary amino acid sequence of the protein, it is often necessary to accomplish the refolding in an environment that allows correct formation of disulfide bonds (a redox system). General methods of refolding are disclosed in Kohno (1990) *Meth. Enzym.* 185:187-95, EP 0433225, and U.S. Patent No. 5,399,677.

[0106] A protein of the invention (or a fragment or fusion thereof) may also be expressed as a product of transgenic animals, e.g., as a component of the milk of transgenic cows, goats, pigs, or sheep which are characterized by somatic or germ cells containing a polynucleotide sequence, e.g., encoding the IL-21R or IL-21 or fusion protein thereof. Accordingly, the protein may be prepared by growing a culture transformed host cells under culture conditions necessary to express the desired protein. The resulting expressed protein may then be purified from the culture medium or cell extracts. Soluble forms of the protein may be purified from conditioned media. Membrane-bound forms of IL-21R protein of the invention can be purified by preparing a total membrane fraction from the expressing cell and extracting the membranes with a nonionic detergent such as TRITON® X-100 (EMD Biosciences, San Diego, CA).

[0107] The polypeptides described herein may be purified using methods known to those skilled in the art. For example, the protein of the invention may be

concentrated using a commercially available protein concentration filter, for example, by using an AMICON® or PELLICON® ultrafiltration unit (Millipore, Billerica, MA). Following the concentration step, the concentrate may be applied to a purification matrix such as a gel filtration medium. Alternatively, an anion exchange resin may be employed, for example, a matrix or substrate having pendant diethylaminoethyl (DEAE) or polyethyleneimine (PEI) groups. The matrices may be acrylamide, agarose, dextran, cellulose or other types commonly employed in protein purification. Alternatively, a cation exchange step may be employed. Suitable cation exchangers include various insoluble matrices comprising sulfopropyl or carboxymethyl groups. Sulfopropyl groups are preferred (e.g., S-SEPHAROSE® columns, Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO). The purification of the IL-21R/MU-1 protein or fusion protein from culture supernatant may also include one or more column steps over such affinity resins such as concanavalin A-agarose, AF-HEPARIN650, heparin-TOYOPEARL® or Cibacron blue 3GA SEPHAROSE® (Tosoh Biosciences, San Francisco, CA); or by hydrophobic interaction chromatography using such resins as phenyl ether, butyl ether, or propyl ether; or by immunoaffinity chromatography. Finally, one or more reverse-phase high performance liquid chromatography (RP-HPLC) steps employing hydrophobic RP-HPLC media, e.g., silica gel having pendant methyl or other aliphatic groups, can be employed to further purify the IL-21R/MU-1 or IL-21 protein. Affinity columns including antibodies to the protein of the invention may also be used in purification in accordance with known methods. Some or all of the foregoing purification steps, in various combinations or with other known methods, may also be employed to provide a substantially purified isolated recombinant protein. Preferably, the isolated protein is purified so that it is substantially free of other mammalian proteins.

Production of Antibodies

[0108] The IL-21 or IL-21R polypeptides of the invention may be used to immunize animals to obtain polyclonal and monoclonal antibodies that specifically react with the IL-21 or IL-21R and regulate the expression or activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, or regulate the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R. Such antibodies may be obtained, for example, using the entire IL-21R or fragments thereof as immunogens. The peptide immunogens may additionally

contain a cysteine residue at the carboxyl terminus and be conjugated to a hapten such as keyhole limpet hemocyanin (KLH). Additional peptide immunogens may be generated by replacing tyrosine residues with sulfated tyrosine residues. Methods for synthesizing such peptides are known in the art, for example, as in Merrifield (1963) *J. Amer. Chem. Soc.* 85: 2149-54 and Krstenansky and Mao (1987) *FEBS Lett.* 211:10-16.

[0109] Human monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) directed against IL-21 or IL-21R may be generated using transgenic mice carrying the human immunoglobulin genes rather than the mouse system. Splenocytes from these transgenic mice immunized with the antigen of interest are used to produce hybridomas that secrete human mAbs with specific affinities for epitopes from a human protein (see, e.g., WO 91/00906, WO 91/10741, WO 92/03918, WO 92/03917, Lonberg et al. (1994) *Nature* 368:856-59, Green et al. (1994) *Nat. Genet.* 7:13-21, Morrison et al. (1994) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 81:6851-55, and Tuaillon et al. (1993) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 90:3720-24).

[0110] Monoclonal antibodies may also be generated by other methods known to those skilled in the art of recombinant DNA technology. One exemplary method, referred to as the "combinatorial antibody display" method, has been developed to identify and isolate antibody fragments having a particular antigen specificity, and can be utilized to produce monoclonal antibodies (for descriptions of combinatorial antibody display see, e.g., Sastry et al. (1989) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 86:5728-32; Huse et al. (1989) *Science* 246:1275-81; and Orlandi et al. (1989) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 86:3833-37). After immunizing an animal with an immunogen as described above, the antibody repertoire of the resulting B cell pool is cloned. The DNA sequence of the variable regions of a diverse population of immunoglobulin molecules may be obtained using a mixture of oligomer primers and PCR. For instance, mixed oligonucleotide primers corresponding to the 5' leader (signal peptide) sequences and/or framework 1 (FR1) sequences, as well as primer to a conserved 3' constant region primer may be used for PCR amplification of the heavy and light chain variable regions from a number of murine antibodies (Larrick et al. (1991) *BioTechniques* 11:152-56). A similar strategy may also been used to amplify human heavy and light chain variable regions from human antibodies (Larrick et al. (1991) *Methods: Companion to Methods in Enzymology* 2:106-10).

[0111] Chimeric antibodies, including chimeric immunoglobulin chains, may also be produced by recombinant DNA techniques known in the art. For example, a gene encoding the Fc constant region of a murine (or other species) monoclonal antibody molecule is digested with restriction enzymes to remove the region encoding the murine Fc, and the equivalent portion of a gene encoding a human Fc constant region is substituted (see PCT/US86/02269; EP 184,187; EP 171,496; EP 173,494; WO 86/01533; U.S. Patent No. 4,816,567; EP 125,023; Better et al. (1988) *Science* 240:1041-43; Liu et al. (1987) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 84:3439-43; Liu et al. (1987) *J. Immunol.* 139:3521-26; Sun et al. (1987) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 84:214-18; Nishimura et al. (1987) *Canc. Res.* 47:999-1005; Wood et al. (1985) *Nature* 314:446-49; and Shaw et al. (1988) *J. Natl. Cancer Inst.* 80:1553-59).

[0112] If desired, an antibody or an immunoglobulin chain may be humanized by methods known in the art. Humanized antibodies, including humanized immunoglobulin chains, may be generated by replacing sequences of the Fv variable region that are not directly involved in antigen binding with equivalent sequences from human Fv variable regions. General methods for generating humanized antibodies are provided by Morrison (1985) *Science* 229:1202-07; Oi et al. (1986) *BioTechniques* 4:214-21; and U.S. Patent Nos. 5,585,089, 5,693,761 and 5,693,762, all of which are hereby incorporated by reference in their entireties. Those methods include isolating, manipulating, and expressing the nucleic acid sequences that encode all or part of immunoglobulin Fv variable regions from at least one of a heavy or light chain. Sources of such nucleic acid are well known to those skilled in the art and, for example, may be obtained from a hybridoma producing an antibody against a predetermined target. The recombinant DNA encoding the humanized antibody, or fragment thereof, may then be cloned into an appropriate expression vector.

[0113] Humanized or CDR-grafted antibody molecules or immunoglobulins may be produced by CDR grafting or CDR substitution, wherein one, two, or all CDRs of an immunoglobulin chain can be replaced. See e.g., U.S. Patent No. 5,225,539; Jones et al. (1986) *Nature* 321:552-25; Verhoeyan et al. (1988) *Science* 239:1534-36; and Beidler et al. (1988) *J. Immunol.* 141:4053-60, all of which are hereby incorporated by reference in their entireties. U.S. Patent No. 5,225,539 describes a CDR-grafting method that may be used to prepare

humanized antibodies of the present invention (see also, GB 2188638A). All of the CDRs of a particular human antibody may be replaced with at least a portion of a nonhuman CDR, or only some of the CDRs may be replaced with nonhuman CDRs. It is only necessary to replace the number of CDRs required for binding of the humanized antibody to a predetermined antigen.

[0114] Monoclonal, chimeric and humanized antibodies, which have been modified by, e.g., deleting, adding, or substituting other portions of the antibody, e.g., the constant region, are also within the scope of the invention. For example, an antibody may be modified as follows: (i) by deleting the constant region; (ii) by replacing the constant region with another constant region, e.g., a constant region meant to increase half-life, stability or affinity of the antibody, or a constant region from another species or antibody class; or (iii) by modifying one or more amino acids in the constant region to alter, for example, the number of glycosylation sites, effector cell function, Fc receptor (FcR) binding, complement fixation, among others.

[0115] Methods for altering an antibody constant region are known in the art. Antibodies with altered function (e.g., altered affinity for an effector ligand, such as FcR on a cell, or the C1 component of complement) may be produced by replacing at least one amino acid residue in the constant portion of the antibody with a different residue (see, e.g., EP 388,151 A1, U.S. Patent Nos. 5,624,821 and 5,648,260, all of which are hereby incorporated by reference in their entireties). Similar types of alterations may also be applied to murine immunoglobulins and immunoglobulins from other species. For example, it is possible to alter the affinity of an Fc region of an antibody (e.g., an IgG, such as a human IgG) for an FcR (e.g., Fc gamma R1) or for C1q binding by replacing the specified residue(s) with a residue(s) having an appropriate functionality on its side chain, or by introducing a charged functional group, such as glutamate or aspartate, or perhaps an aromatic nonpolar residue such as phenylalanine, tyrosine, tryptophan or alanine (see, e.g., U.S. Patent No. 5,624,821).

[0116] Human antibodies to IL-21 and/or IL-21R may additionally be produced using transgenic nonhuman animals that are modified so as to produce fully human antibodies rather than the animal's endogenous antibodies in response to challenge by an antigen. See, e.g., PCT publication WO 94/02602. The endogenous genes encoding the heavy and light immunoglobulin chains in the

nonhuman host have been incapacitated, and active loci encoding human heavy and light chain immunoglobulins are inserted into the host's genome. The human genes are incorporated, for example, using yeast artificial chromosomes containing the requisite human DNA segments. An animal which provides all the desired modifications is then obtained as progeny by crossbreeding intermediate transgenic animals containing fewer than the full complement of the modifications. One embodiment of such a nonhuman animal is a mouse, and is termed the XENOMOUSE™ as disclosed in PCT publications WO 96/33735 and WO 96/34096. This animal produces B cells that secrete fully human immunoglobulins. The antibodies can be obtained directly from the animal after immunization with an immunogen of interest, as, for example, a preparation of a polyclonal antibody, or alternatively from immortalized B cells derived from the animal, such as hybridomas producing monoclonal antibodies. Additionally, the genes encoding the immunoglobulins with human variable regions can be recovered and expressed to obtain the antibodies directly, or can be further modified to obtain analogs of antibodies such as, for example, single chain Fv molecules.

[0117] Other protein-binding molecules may also be employed to modulate the activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R. Such protein-binding molecules include small modular immunopharmaceutical (SMIP™) drugs (Trubion Pharmaceuticals, Seattle, WA). SMIPs are single-chain polypeptides composed of a binding domain for a cognate structure such as an antigen, a counterreceptor or the like, a hinge-region polypeptide having either one or no cysteine residues, and immunoglobulin CH2 and CH3 domains (see also www.trubion.com). SMIPs and their uses and applications are disclosed in, e.g., U.S. Published Patent Appln. Nos. 2003/0118592, 2003/0133939, 2004/0058445, 2005/0136049, 2005/0175614, 2005/0180970, 2005/0186216, 2005/0202012, 2005/0202023, 2005/0202028, 2005/0202534, and 2005/0238646, and related patent family members thereof, all of which are hereby incorporated by reference herein in their entireties.

[0118] As discussed herein, neutralizing or nonneutralizing antibodies (preferably monoclonal antibodies) binding to IL-21R or IL-21 or a fusion protein thereof may be useful in the treatment of immune conditions such as fibrosis and fibrosis-associated conditions.

[0119] Accordingly, the present invention further provides for compositions comprising an antibody that specifically reacts with an IL-21 or IL-21R or a fusion protein thereof.

Screening Assays

[0120] The IL-21R or IL-21 polypeptides or fusion proteins of the invention may also be used to screen for agents that are capable of binding to IL-21 or IL-21R, and regulating the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, e.g., the level of activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, the level of expression of IL-21 and/or IL-21R (e.g., the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products), and/or the level of interaction between IL-21 and IL-21R. Binding assays using a protein of the invention, or a binding partner thereof, which may be free or immobilized to a support, are well known in the art. Purified cell-based or protein-based (cell-free) screening assays may be used to identify binding partners and/or ligands (natural or synthetic, e.g., test compounds) to IL-21R or IL-21 polypeptides or fusion proteins of the invention. For example, IL-21R may be immobilized in purified form on a carrier and binding of potential ligands to IL-21R may be measured.

Methods for Diagnosing, Prognosing, and Monitoring the Progress of Fibrosis and Fibrosis-Associated Disorders, Related to IL-21

[0121] The present invention provides methods for diagnosing, prognosing, and monitoring the progress (e.g., monitoring the course of treatment) of disorders, i.e., fibrosis or fibrosis-associated conditions or disorders, related to IL-21 and/or IL-21R by, e.g., detecting and/or measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, wherein the phrase "level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R" and equivalents thereof includes, but is not limited to, (1) the level of expression of IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products (e.g., the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R protein and/or mRNA in a cell or sample of interest); (2) the level of activity of IL-21 protein and/or IL-21R protein (e.g., Th2 cytokine expression and/or function in a cell or sample of interest); and (3) the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R (e.g., in a cell or sample of interest). For example, the invention provides methods of diagnosing, prognosing and monitoring, e.g., by detecting the upregulation or downregulation of IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products and/or activity, and/or by measuring the interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R, etc. (including but not limited to the use of such

methods in human subjects). IL-21 and/or IL-21R levels may also be measured in a reference cell or sample of interest to produce or obtain a reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, or such reference level may be obtained through other methods, or may be generally known, by one of skill in the art. These methods may be performed by, e.g., utilizing prepackaged diagnostic kits comprising at least one of the group comprising an IL-21 or IL-21R polynucleotide (or fragments thereof); an IL-21 or IL-21R polypeptide (or fragments and/or fusion proteins thereof); an antibody to an IL-21 or IL-21R polypeptide (or derivatives thereof, or antigen-binding fragments thereof); or modulators of IL-21 or IL-21R polynucleotides and/or polypeptides as described herein, which may be conveniently used, for example, in a clinical setting.

[0122] "Diagnostic" or "diagnosing" means identifying the presence or absence of a pathologic condition. Diagnostic methods include, but are not limited to, detecting upregulation of the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R by determining a test amount of the gene products (e.g., RNA, cDNA, or polypeptide, including fragments thereof) of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, by measuring the activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, and/or by measuring the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R, in a biological sample from a subject (human or nonhuman mammal), and comparing the test amount with, e.g., a normal amount or range (e.g., an amount or range from an individual(s) known not to suffer from disorders related to IL-21, or from an individual known not to suffer from fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition). Although a particular diagnostic method may not provide a definitive diagnosis of disorders related to IL-21, it suffices if the method provides a positive indication that aids in diagnosis.

[0123] The present invention also provides methods for prognosing such disorders by detecting, for example, the upregulation of levels of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, e.g., by detecting upregulation of IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products and/or activity, and/or by measuring the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R, etc. "Prognostic" or "prognosing" means predicting the probable development and/or severity of a pathologic condition. Prognostic methods include determining the test amount of a gene product of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a biological sample from a subject, and comparing the test amount to a prognostic amount or range (i.e., an amount or range from individuals with varying severities of disorders, i.e., fibrosis and/or a fibrosis-associated condition, e.g., related to IL-21) for the level

of IL-21 and/or IL-21R. Various amounts related to the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a test sample are consistent with certain prognoses for disorders, e.g., fibrosis or fibrosis-associated conditions or disorders, related to IL-21 and/or IL-21R. The detection of an amount of IL-21 and/or IL-21R level at a particular prognostic level provides a prognosis for the subject.

[0124] The present invention also provides methods for monitoring the progress or course of such disorders related to IL-21 by detecting, for example, the upregulation of IL-21 and/or IL-21R levels, e.g., by detecting upregulation of IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products, activity, and/or the interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R. Monitoring methods include determining the test amounts of a gene product of IL-21 in biological samples taken from a subject at a first and second time, and comparing the amounts. A change in amount of an IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene product between the first and second times indicates a change in the course of an IL-21-related disorder, with a decrease in amount indicating remission of such disorders, and an increase in amount indicating progression of such disorders. Such monitoring assays are also useful for evaluating the efficacy of a particular therapeutic intervention in patients being treated for fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder.

Measuring the Level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R

[0125] The level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R (e.g., the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21 gene products, activity, and/or interaction) in methods of the invention (e.g., methods for screening for and/or identifying a compound for treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition, methods of diagnosing, prognosing, and/or monitoring the progress of fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition, and methods of treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition) outlined herein may be measured in a variety of biological samples, including bodily fluids (e.g., whole blood, plasma, and urine), cells (e.g., whole cells, cell fractions, and cell extracts), and other tissues. Biological samples also include sections of tissue, such as biopsies and frozen sections taken for histological purposes. Preferred biological samples include blood, plasma, lymph, tissue biopsies, urine, CSF (cerebrospinal fluid), synovial fluid, and BAL (bronchoalveolar lavage). It will be appreciated that analysis of a biological sample need not necessarily require removal of cells or tissue from the

subject. For example, appropriately labeled agents that bind IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products (e.g., antibodies, nucleic acids) may be administered to a subject and visualized (when bound to the target) using standard imaging technology (e.g., CAT, NMR (MRI), and PET).

[0126] In the methods of treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder, in the methods for identifying a compound for treating, ameliorating or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder in a subject, and in the diagnostic, prognostic, and monitoring assays and methods of the present invention, the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R is detected and measured to yield a test amount. The test amount is then compared with, e.g., a normal amount or range. For example, an amount above (e.g., a higher level) the normal amount or range is a positive sign in the diagnosis of disorders related to IL-21.

[0127] Normal amounts or baseline levels of IL-21 and/or IL-21R may be determined for any particular sample type and population. Generally, baseline (normal) levels of IL-21 and/or IL-21R are determined by measuring respective levels of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a biological sample type from normal (i.e., healthy) subjects. Alternatively, normal levels of IL-21 and/or IL-21R may be determined by measuring the amount in healthy cells or tissues taken from the same subject from which the diseased (or possibly diseased) test cells or tissues were taken. The level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R (either the normal amount or the test amount) may be determined or expressed on a per cell, per total protein, or per volume basis. To determine the cell amount of a sample, one can measure the level of a constitutively expressed gene product or other gene product expressed at known levels in cells of the type from which the biological sample was taken.

[0128] It will be appreciated that the assay methods of the present invention do not necessarily require measurement of absolute values for the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R because relative values are sufficient for many applications of these methods. It will also be appreciated that in addition to the quantity or abundance of IL-21 and/or IL-21R levels, variant or abnormal IL-21 and/or IL-21R levels or their expression patterns (e.g., mutated transcripts, truncated polypeptides) may be identified by comparison to normal levels and expression patterns.

[0129] Whether the level of a particular gene or protein in two samples is increased (i.e., higher) or reduced (i.e., lower), e.g., significantly above or

significantly below a given level, respectively, depends on the gene itself and, *inter alia*, its variability in expression, activity, and/or interaction with a ligand between different individuals or different samples. It is within the skill in the art to determine whether IL-21 and/or IL-21R levels are significantly similar or different among samples. Factors such as genetic variation between individuals, species, organs, tissues, or cells may be taken into consideration (when and where necessary) for determining whether the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R between two samples is increased or reduced. As a result of the natural heterogeneity in IL-21 and/or IL-21R levels between individuals, species, organs, tissues, or cells, phrases such as "significantly above" or "significantly below" cannot be defined as a precise percentage or value, but rather can be ascertained by one skilled in the art upon practicing the invention. Particular methods of detection and measurement of IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products, activity, and interaction are described herein.

Assays for Measuring IL-21 and/or IL-21R Gene Products

[0130] The methods of the present invention involve detecting and quantifying the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, e.g., the level of the gene products of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, the level of activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, and/or the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R, in biological samples. IL-21 and IL-21R gene products include mRNAs and polypeptides, and both can be measured using methods well known to those skilled in the art.

[0131] For example, mRNA can be directly detected and quantified using hybridization-based assays, such as Northern hybridization, *in situ* hybridization, dot and slot blots, and oligonucleotide arrays. Hybridization-based assays refer to assays in which a probe nucleic acid is hybridized to a target nucleic acid. In some formats, the target, the probe, or both are immobilized. The immobilized nucleic acid may be DNA, RNA, or another oligonucleotide or polynucleotide, and may comprise naturally or nonnaturally occurring nucleotides, nucleotide analogs, or backbones. Methods of selecting nucleic acid probe sequences for use in the present invention (e.g., based on the nucleic acid sequence of IL-21) are well known in the art.

[0132] Alternatively, mRNA may be amplified before detection and quantitation. Such amplification-based assays are well known in the art and include

polymerase chain reaction (PCR), reverse-transcription-PCR (RT-PCR), PCR-enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (PCR-ELISA), and ligase chain reaction (LCR). Primers and probes for producing and detecting amplified IL-21 gene products (e.g., mRNA or cDNA) may be readily designed and produced without undue experimentation by those of skill in the art based on the nucleic acid sequences of IL-21 and/or IL-21R. Amplified IL-21 and/or IL-21R gene products may be directly analyzed, for example, by gel electrophoresis; by hybridization to a probe nucleic acid; by sequencing; by detection of a fluorescent, phosphorescent, or radioactive signal; or by any of a variety of well-known methods. In addition, methods are known to those of skill in the art for increasing the signal produced by amplification of target nucleic acid sequences. One of skill in the art will recognize that, whichever amplification method is used, a variety of quantitative methods known in the art (e.g., quantitative PCR) may be used if quantitation of gene products is desired.

[0133] An IL-21 and/or IL-21R polypeptide (or fragments thereof) may be detected using various well-known immunological assays employing the respective anti-IL-21 and/or IL-21R antibodies that may be generated as described herein. Immunological assays refer to assays that utilize an antibody (e.g., polyclonal, monoclonal, chimeric, humanized, scFv, and/or fragments thereof) that specifically binds to, e.g., an IL-21 polypeptide (or a fragment thereof). Such well-known immunological assays suitable for the practice of the present invention include ELISA, radioimmunoassay (RIA), immunoprecipitation, immunofluorescence, fluorescence-activated cell sorting (FACS), and Western blotting. The ordinarily skilled artisan will also recognize that an IL-21 polypeptide may also be detected using a labeled IL-21R polypeptide(s). One of skill in the art will understand that the aforementioned methods may be applied to disorders related to IL-21, especially fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition.

Assays for Measuring the Activity of IL-21 and/or IL-21R

[0134] The activity of IL-21/IL-21R (e.g., in response to IL-21/IL-21R antagonists as modulators of cytokine production and cell proliferation/differentiation) can be tested using any one of a number of routine factor-dependent cell proliferation assays for cell lines including, without

limitation, 32D, DA2, DA1G, T10, B9, B9/11, BaF3, MC9/G, M+(preB M+), 2E8, RB5, DA1, 123, T1165, HT2, CTLL2, TF-1, Mo7e and CMK.

[0135] Assays for T cell or thymocyte proliferation are described, for example, in *Current Protocols in Immunology*, Coligan et al. (eds.) Greene Pub. Assoc. & Wiley-Interscience, NY, NY (1991) (Chapter 3, "In Vitro assays for Mouse Lymphocyte Function" and Chapter 7, "Immunologic studies in Humans"); Takai et al. (1986) *J. Immunol.* 137:3494-500; Bertagnolli et al. (1990) *J. Immunol.* 145:1706-12; Bertagnolli et al. (1991) *Cell. Immunol.* 133:327-41; Bertagnolli et al. (1992) *J. Immunol.* 149:3778-83; Bowman et al. (1994) *J. Immunol.* 152:1756-61. Assays for cytokine production and/or proliferation of spleen cells, lymph node cells or thymocytes are described, for example, in "Polyclonal T cell stimulation" Kruisbeek and Shevach in *Current Protocols in Immunology*, Vol. 1 Coligan et al. (eds.) pp. 3.12.1-14, John Wiley and Sons, Toronto (1994); and "Measurement of mouse and human Interferon gamma" Schreiber, R.D. in *Current Protocols in Immunology*, Vol. 1 Coligan et al. (eds.) pp. 6.8.1-8, John Wiley and Sons, Toronto (1994).

[0136] Assays for proliferation and differentiation of hematopoietic and lymphopoietic cells are described in, for example, "Measurement of Human and Murine Interleukin 2 and Interleukin 4" Bottomly et al. in *Current Protocols in Immunology*, Vol. 1 Coligan et al. (eds.) pp. 6.3.1-12, John Wiley and Sons, Toronto (1991); deVries et al. (1991) *J. Exp. Med.* 173:1205-11; Moreau et al. (1988) *Nature* 336:690-92; Greenberger et al. (1983) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 80:2931-38; "Measurement of mouse and human interleukin 6" Nordan, R. in *Current Protocols in Immunology*, Vol. 1 Coligan et al. (eds.) pp. 6.6.1-5, John Wiley and Sons, Toronto (1991); Smith et al. (1986) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.*. 83:1857-61; "Measurement of human Interleukin 11" Bennett et al. in *Current Protocols in Immunology*, Vol. 1 Coligan et al. (eds.) p. 6.15.1, John Wiley and Sons, Toronto (1991); "Measurement of mouse and human Interleukin 9" Ciarletta et al. in *Current Protocols in Immunology,* Vol. 1. Coligan et al. (eds.) p. 6.13.1, John Wiley and Sons, Toronto (1991).

[0137] Assays for T cell clone responses to antigens (which will identify, among others, proteins that affect APC-T cell interactions as well as direct T cell effects by measuring proliferation and cytokine production) include, for example, those described in: *Current Protocols in Immunology*, Coligan et al. (eds.) Greene Pub.

Assoc. and Wiley-Interscience, NY, NY (1991) (Chapter 3, "In Vitro assays for Mouse Lymphocyte Function"; Chapter 6, "Cytokines and their cellular receptors"; Chapter 7, "Immunologic studies in Humans"); Weinberger et al. (1980) *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 77:6091-95; Weinberger et al. (1981) *Eur. J. Immunol.* 11:405-11; Takai et al. (1986) *J. Immunol.* 137:3494-500; Takai et al. (1988) *J. Immunol.* 140:508-12.

Assays for Measuring the Interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R

[0138] Methods for detecting and/or measuring the level of interaction of IL-21 with IL-21R are well known in the art. For example, such interactions between a cytokine and its receptor may be detected and/or measured with, but not limited to, such techniques as ELISA, Western blotting, immunoprecipitation, Biacore analysis, etc.

Pharmaceutical Compositions

[0139] In one aspect, the invention features a method of treating, ameliorating, or preventing an IL-21-related disorder, i.e., fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition. The method may comprise contacting a population of cells with (e.g., by administering to a subject suffering from or at risk for fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder) an agent that reduces the level of IL 21 and/or IL 21R activity in the subject, e.g., an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist (e.g., an anti-IL-21R antibody, an anti-IL-21 antibody, an antigen-binding fragment of an anti-IL-21R antibody, an antigen-binding fragment of an anti-IL-21 antibody, and a soluble fragment of an IL-21R (e.g., an amino acid sequence that is at least 90% identical to an amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of amino acids 1-538 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 20-538 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 20-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 1-236 of SEQ ID NO: 2, amino acids 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 1-529 of SEQ ID NO:5, amino acids 20-529 of SEQ ID NO:5, amino acids 1-236 of SEQ ID NO:5, and amino acid 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:5)) in an amount sufficient to inhibit the activity of IL-21 in the cell or population.

[0140] IL-21/IL-21R antagonists for treating fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition may be used as a pharmaceutical composition when combined with a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier. Such a composition may contain, in addition

to the IL-21/IL-21R-antagonists and carrier, various diluents, fillers, salts, buffers, stabilizers, solubilizers, and other materials well known in the art. The term "pharmaceutically acceptable" means a nontoxic material that does not interfere with the effectiveness of the biological activity of the active ingredient(s). The characteristics of the carrier will depend on the route of administration, and are generally well known in the art.

[0141] The pharmaceutical composition of the invention may be in the form of a liposome in which an IL-21/IL-21R-antagonist(s) is combined with, in addition to other pharmaceutically acceptable carriers, amphipathic agents such as lipids which exist in aggregated form as micelles, insoluble monolayers, liquid crystals, or lamellar layers which exist in aqueous solution. Suitable lipids for liposomal formulation include, without limitation, monoglycerides, diglycerides, sulfatides, lysolecithin, phospholipids, saponin, bile acids, and the like. Preparation of such liposomal formulations is within the level of skill in the art, as disclosed, e.g., in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,235,871, 4,501,728, 4,837,028, and 4,737,323, all of which are incorporated herein by reference in their entireties.

[0142] As used herein, the term "therapeutically effective amount" means the total amount of each active component of the pharmaceutical composition or method that is sufficient to show a meaningful subject benefit, e.g., amelioration or reduction of symptoms of, prevention of, healing of, or increase in rate of healing of such conditions. When applied to an individual active ingredient, administered alone, the term refers to that ingredient alone. When applied to a combination, the term refers to combined amounts of the active ingredients that result in the therapeutic effect, whether administered in combination, serially or simultaneously.

[0143] In practicing the method of treatment or use of the present invention, a therapeutically effective amount of an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist is administered to a subject, e.g., a mammal (e.g., a human). An IL-21/IL-21R antagonist(s) may be administered in accordance with the method of the invention either alone or in combination with other therapies as described in more detail herein. When coadministered with one or more agents, an IL-21 and/or IL-21R antagonist may be administered either simultaneously with the second agent, or sequentially. If administered sequentially, the attending physician will decide on the appropriate

sequence of administering an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist in combination with other agents.

[0144] Administration of an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist used in a pharmaceutical composition of the present invention or to practice a method of the present invention may be carried out in a variety of conventional ways, such as oral ingestion, inhalation, or cutaneous, subcutaneous, or intravenous injection. Intravenous administration to the subject is sometimes preferred. When a therapeutically effective amount of an IL-21/IL-21R agonist or antagonist is administered orally, the binding agent will be in the form of a tablet, capsule, powder, solution or elixir. When administered in tablet form, the pharmaceutical composition of the invention may additionally contain a solid carrier such as a gelatin or an adjuvant. The tablet, capsule, and powder contain from about 5 to 95% binding agent, and preferably from about 25 to 90% binding agent. When administered in liquid form, a liquid carrier such as water, petroleum, oils of animal or plant origin such as peanut oil (albeit keeping in mind the frequency of peanut allergies in the population), mineral oil, soybean oil, or sesame oil, or synthetic oils may be added. The liquid form of the pharmaceutical composition may further contain physiological saline solution, dextrose or other saccharide solution, or glycols such as ethylene glycol, propylene glycol or polyethylene glycol. When administered in liquid form, the pharmaceutical composition contains from about 0.5 to 90% by weight of the binding agent, and preferably from about 1 to 50% of the binding agent.

[0145] When a therapeutically effective amount of an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist is administered by intravenous, cutaneous or subcutaneous injection, the binding agent will be in the form of a pyrogen-free, parenterally acceptable aqueous solution. The preparation of such parenterally acceptable protein solutions, having due regard to pH, isotonicity, stability, and the like, is within the skill in the art. A preferred pharmaceutical composition for intravenous, cutaneous, or subcutaneous injection should contain, in addition to a binding agent, an isotonic vehicle such as sodium chloride injection, Ringer's injection, dextrose injection, dextrose and sodium chloride injection, lactated Ringer's injection, or other vehicle as known in the art. The pharmaceutical composition of the present invention may also contain stabilizers, preservatives, buffers, antioxidants, or other additive known to those of skill in the art.

[0146] The amount of an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist in the pharmaceutical composition of the present invention will depend upon the nature and severity of the condition being treated, and on the nature of prior treatments that the subject has undergone. Ultimately, the attending physician will decide the amount of binding agent with which to treat each individual subject. Initially, the attending physician will administer low doses of binding agent and observe the subject's response. Larger doses of binding agent may be administered until the optimal therapeutic effect is obtained for the subject, and at that point the dosage is not generally increased further. It is contemplated that the various pharmaceutical compositions used to practice the method of the present invention should contain about 0.1 μg to about 100 mg IL-21/IL-21R antagonist per kg body weight.

[0147] The duration of intravenous therapy using the pharmaceutical composition of the present invention will vary, depending on the severity of the disease being treated and the condition and potential idiosyncratic response of each individual subject. It is contemplated that the duration of each application of an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist may be in the range of 12 to 24 hours of continuous i.v. administration. Also contemplated is subcutaneous (s.c.) therapy using a pharmaceutical composition of the present invention. These therapies can be administered daily, weekly, or, more preferably, biweekly, or monthly. It is also contemplated that where the IL-21/IL-21R antagonist is a small molecule (e.g., for oral delivery), the therapies may be administered daily, twice a day, three times a day, etc. Ultimately the attending physician will decide on the appropriate duration of i.v. or s.c. therapy, or therapy with a small molecule, and the timing of administration of the therapy using the pharmaceutical composition of the present invention.

[0148] The polynucleotide and proteins of the present invention are expected to exhibit one or more of the uses or biological activities (including those associated with assays cited herein) identified below. Uses or activities described for proteins, antibodies, or polynucleotides of the present invention may be provided by administration or use of such proteins, or antibodies, or by administration or use of polynucleotides encoding such proteins or antibodies (such as, for example, in gene therapies or vectors suitable for introduction of DNA).

Combination Therapy

[0149] In one embodiment, a pharmaceutical composition comprising at least one IL-21R/IL-21 antagonist, e.g., an IL-21R/IL-21 antibody, and at least one therapeutic agent is administered in combination therapy. Such therapy is useful for treating pathological conditions or disorders, such as immune and/or inflammatory disorders. The term "in combination" in this context means that the antagonist composition and the therapeutic agent are given substantially contemporaneously, either simultaneously or sequentially. If given sequentially, at the onset of administration of the second compound, the first of the two compounds may still be detectable at effective concentrations at the site of treatment.

[0150] For example, the combination therapy can include at least one IL-21R/IL-21 antagonist coformulated with, and/or coadministered with, at least one additional therapeutic agent. Additional agents may include at least one cytokine inhibitor, growth factor inhibitor, immunosuppressant, anti-inflammatory agent, metabolic inhibitor, enzyme inhibitor, cytotoxic agent, or cytostatic agent, as described in more detail below. Such combination therapies may advantageously utilize lower dosages of the administered therapeutic agents, thus avoiding possible toxicities or complications associated with the various monotherapies. Moreover, the therapeutic agents disclosed herein act on pathways that differ from the IL-21/IL-21R pathway, and thus are expected to enhance and/or synergize with the effects of the IL-21R/IL-21 antagonists.

[0151] Therapeutic agents used in combination with IL-21R/IL-21 antagonists may be those agents that interfere at different stages in the autoimmune and subsequent inflammatory response. In one embodiment, at least one IL-21R/IL-21 antagonist described herein may be coformulated with, and/or coadministered with, at least one cytokine and/or growth factor antagonist. The cytokine and/or growth factor antagonists may include soluble receptors, peptide inhibitors, small molecules, ligand fusions, antibodies (that bind cytokines or growth factors or their receptors or other cell surface molecules), and "anti-inflammatory cytokines" and agonists thereof.

[0152] Nonlimiting examples of the agents that can be used in combination with the IL-21R/IL-21 antagonists described herein, include, but are not limited to, antagonists of at least one interleukin (e.g., IL-1, IL-2, IL-6, IL-7, IL-8, IL-12,

IL-13, IL-15, IL-16, IL-17, IL-18, and IL-22); cytokine (e.g., TNFα, LT, EMAP-II, and GM-CSF); or growth factor (e.g., FGF and PDGF). The agents may also include, but are not limited to, antagonists of at least one receptor for an interleukin, cytokine, and growth factor. IL-21R/IL-21 antagonists can also be combined with inhibitors of, e.g., antibodies to, cell surface molecules such as CD2, CD3, CD4, CD8, CD20 (e.g., the CD20 inhibitor rituximab (RITUXAN®)), CD25, CD28, CD30, CD40, CD45, CD69, CD80 (B7.1), CD86 (B7.2), CD90, or their ligands, including CD154 (gp39 or CD40L), or LFA-1/ICAM-1 and VLA-4/VCAM-1 (Yusuf-Makagiansar et al. (2002) *Med. Res. Rev.* 22:146-67). Other compounds that can be used in combination with IL-21R/IL-21 antagonists described herein may include antagonists of the receptors for IL-1, IL-12, TNFα, IL-15, IL-17, IL-18 and IL-22.

[0153] Examples of agents useful in combination therapies with an IL-21R/IL-21 antagonist include IL-12 antagonists (such as antibodies that bind IL-12 (see e.g., WO 00/56772); IL-12 receptor inhibitors (such as antibodies to the IL-12 receptor); and soluble IL-12 receptor and fragments thereof. Examples of IL-15 antagonists include antibodies against IL-15 or its receptor, soluble fragments of the IL-15 receptor, and IL-15-binding proteins. Examples of IL-18 antagonists include antibodies to IL-18, soluble fragments of the IL-18 receptor, and IL-18 binding proteins (IL-18BP, Mallat et al. (2001) *Circ. Res.* 89:E41-45). Examples of IL-1 antagonists include interleukin-1-converting enzyme (ICE) inhibitors (such as Vx740), IL-1 antagonists (e.g., IL-1RA (anakinra (KINERET™), Amgen)), sIL-1RII (Immunex), and anti-IL-1 receptor antibodies.

[0154] Examples of TNF antagonists include antibodies to TNF (e.g., human TNFα), such as D2E7 (human anti-TNFα antibody, U.S. Patent No. 6,258,562, HUMIRA™, Abbott Labs); CDP-571/CDP-870/BAY-10-3356 (humanized anti-TNFα antibodies, Celltech/Pharmacia); cA2 (chimeric anti-TNFα antibody, REMICADE™, Centocor); and anti-TNF antibody fragments (e.g., CPD870). Other examples include soluble TNF receptor (e.g., human p55 or p75) fragments and derivatives, such as p55 kdTNFR-IgG (55 kD TNF receptor-IgG fusion protein, LENERCEPT™) and 75 kdTNFR-IgG (75 kD TNF receptor-IgG fusion protein, ENBREL™ (etanercept - Immunex)). See, e.g., van der Poll et al. (1997) *Blood.* 89:3727-34; Mori et al. (1996) *J. Immunol.* 157:3178-82. Further

examples include enzyme antagonists (e.g., TNFα converting enzyme inhibitors (TACE) such as alpha-sulfonyl hydroxamic acid derivative (WO 01/55112) or N-hydroxyformamide inhibitors (GW 3333, -005, or –022, GlaxoSmithKline) and TNF-bp/s-TNFR (soluble TNF binding protein, see, e.g., Lantz et al. (1991) *J Clin Invest.* 88:2026-31; Kapadia et al. (1995) *Amer. J. Physiol. Heart Circ. Phys.* 268:H517-25). TNF antagonists may be soluble TNF receptor (e.g., human p55 or p75) fragments and derivatives, such as 75 kdTNFR-IgG; and TNFα converting enzyme (TACE) inhibitors.

[0155] In other embodiments, the IL-21R/IL-21 antagonists described herein can be administered in combination with at least one of the following: IL-13 antagonists, such as soluble IL-13 receptors and/or anti-IL-13 antibodies; and IL-2 antagonists, such as IL-2 fusion proteins (e.g., DAB 486-IL-2 and/or DAB 389-IL-2 made by Seragen, see e.g., Sewell et al. (1993) *Arthritis Rheum.* 36:1223-33) and anti-IL-2R antibodies (e.g., anti-Tac (humanized antibody, Protein Design Labs, see Junghans et al. (1990) *Cancer Res.* 50:1495-502). Another combination includes IL-21R/IL-21 antagonists in combination with nondepleting anti-CD4 inhibitors such as IDEC-CE9.1/SB 210396 (anti-CD4 antibody, GlaxoSmithKline). Yet other combinations include IL-21R/IL-21 antagonists with CD80 (B7.1) and CD86 (B7.2) costimulatory pathway antagonists (such as antibodies, soluble receptors, or antagonistic ligands); P-selectin glycoprotein ligand (PSGL) and PSGL-1 inhibitors (such as antibodies to PSGL and/or PSGL-1 and small molecule inhibitors); T cell- and B cell-depleting agents (such as anti-CD4 or anti-CD22 antibodies), and anti-inflammatory cytokines and agonists thereof (e.g., antibodies). The anti-inflammatory cytokines may include IL-4 (e.g., Schering-Plough Biopharma); IL-10 (e.g., SCH 52000, recombinant IL-10, Schering-Plough Biopharma); IL-11; IL-13; and TGFβ or agonists thereof (e.g., agonist antibodies).

[0156] In other embodiments, at least one IL-21R/IL-21 antagonist can be coformulated with, and/or coadministered with, at least one anti-inflammatory drug, immunosuppressant, metabolic inhibitor, and enzymatic inhibitor. Nonlimiting examples of the drugs or inhibitors that can be used in combination with the IL-21R/IL-21 antagonists described herein, include, but are not limited to, at least one of: nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) (including,

but not limited to, aspirin, salsalate, diflunisal, ibuprofen, ketoprofen, nabumetone, piroxicam, naproxen, diclofenac, indomethacin, sulindac, tolmetin, etodolac, ketorolac, oxaprozin, tenidap, meloxicam, piroxicam, aceclofenac, tolmetin, tiaprofenic acid, nimesulide, etc.); sulfasalazine; corticosteroids (such as prednisolone); cytokine suppressive anti-inflammatory drugs (CSAID); inhibitors of nucleotide biosynthesis (such as inhibitors of purine biosynthesis (e.g., folate antagonist such as methotrexate)); and inhibitors of pyrimidine biosynthesis, e.g., a dihydroorotate dehydrogenase (DHODH) inhibitor such as leflunomide (see, e.g., Kraan et al. (2004) *Ann. Rheum. Dis.* 63:1056-61). Therapeutic agents for use in combination with IL-21/IL-21R antagonists may include one or more NSAIDs, CSAIDs, DHODH inhibitors (such as leflunomide), and folate antagonists (such as methotrexate).

[0157] Examples of additional agents that may be used in combination with IL-21/IL-21R antagonists include at least one of: corticosteroid (oral, inhaled and local injection); immunosuppressant (such as cyclosporin and tacrolimus (FK-506)); an mTOR inhibitor (such as sirolimus (rapamycin) or a rapamycin analog and/or derivative, e.g., ester rapamycin derivative such as CCI-779 (see, e.g., Elit (2002) *Curr. Opin. Investig. Drugs* 3:1249-53; Huang et al. (2002) *Curr. Opin. Investig. Drugs* 3:295-304)); an agent which interferes with the signaling of proinflammatory cytokines such as TNFα and IL-1 (e.g., an IRAK, NIK, IKK, p38 or MAP kinase inhibitor); TPL-2, Mk-2 and NFκb inhibitors; COX-2 inhibitors (e.g., celecoxib, rofecoxib, etc., and variants thereof); phosphodiesterase inhibitors (such as Rolipram); phospholipase inhibitors (e.g., an inhibitor of cytosolic phospholipase 2 (cPLA2) such as trifluoromethyl ketone analogs (U.S. Patent No. 6,350,892)); inhibitors of vascular endothelial cell growth factor (VEGF); inhibitors of the VEGF receptor; inhibitors of angiogenesis; RAGE and soluble RAGE; estrogen receptor beta (ERB) agonists, ERB-NFκb antagonists; interferon-β (for example, IFNβ-1a and IFNβ-1b); copaxone; and corticosteroids.

[0158] Other useful therapeutic agents that may be combined with an IL-21R/IL-21 antagonist include: budenoside; epidermal growth factor; aminosalicylates; 6-mercaptopurine; azathioprine; metronidazole; lipoxygenase inhibitors; mesalamine; olsalazine; balsalazide; antioxidants; thromboxane

inhibitors; growth factors; elastase inhibitors; pyridinyl-imidazole compounds; glucuronide- or dextran-conjugated prodrugs of prednisolone; dexamethasone or budesonide; ICAM-1 antisense phosphorothioate oligodeoxynucleotides (ISIS 2302; Isis Pharmaceuticals, Inc.); soluble complement receptor 1 (TP10; T Cell Sciences, Inc.); slow-release mesalazine; antagonists of platelet activating factor (PAF); ciprofloxacin; lignocaine; cyclosporin A; hydroxychloroquine (PLAQUENIL™); minocycline (MINOCIN™); and anakinra (KINERET™).

[0159] Choosing a particular therapeutic agent for administration in combination with an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist of the invention will largely depend on factors such as the particular subject, the desired target, and chosen length of treatment. Such decisions are well within the skill and knowledge of one skilled in the art.

[0160] Additional examples of therapeutic agents that can be combined with an IL-21R/IL-21 antagonist include one or more of: 6-mercaptopurines (6-MP); azathioprine; sulphasalazine; mesalazine; olsalazine; chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine (PLAQUENIL®); pencillamine; aurothiomalate (intramuscular and oral); azathioprine; colchicine; beta-2 adrenoreceptor agonists (salbutamol, terbutaline, salmeterol); xanthines (theophylline, aminophylline); cromoglycate; nedocromil; ketotifen; ipratropium and oxitropium; mycophenolate mofetil; adenosine agonists; antithrombotic agents; complement inhibitors; and adrenergic agents.

[0161] In one embodiment, an IL-21R/IL-21 antagonist can be used in combination with one or more antibodies directed at other targets involved in regulating immune responses. Nonlimiting examples of agents for treating or preventing immune responses with which an IL-21R/IL-21 antagonist of the invention can be combined include the following: antibodies against other cell surface molecules, including but not limited to CD25 (interleukin-2 receptor-a), CD11a (LFA-1), CD54 (ICAM-1), CD4, CD45, CD28, CTLA4, ICOSL, ICOS, CD80 (B7.1), and/or CD86 (B7.2). In yet another embodiment, an IL-21R/IL-21 antagonist is used in combination with one or more general immunosuppressive agents, such as cyclosporine A or FK506. In another embodiment, an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist is used in combination with a CTLA4 agonist, e.g., (e.g., CTLA4 Ig – abatacept (ORENCIA®)).

[0162] The entire contents of all references, patents, and published patent applications cited throughout this application are hereby incorporated by reference herein.

EXAMPLES

[0163] The following Examples provide illustrative embodiments of the invention and do not in any way limit the invention. One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that numerous other embodiments are encompassed within the scope of the invention.

Example 1: Materials and Methods

Example 1.1: Mice, Parasite Infections and Antigen Preparation

[0164] Female or male C57BL/6, C57BL/6/Ai-IL-10KO/IL-4KO mice and C57BL/6Ai-IL-10KO/IL-12KO were obtained from Taconic Farms (Germantown, NY) (Hoffmann et al. (1999) *J. Immunol.* 163:927-938). Breeding pairs of IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice on a C57BL/6 background were obtained from a breeding colony housed at Harvard School of Public Health (Boston, MA) (Kasaian et al. (2002) *Immunity* 16:559-69). All mice were housed under specific pathogen-free conditions at the National Institutes of Health in an American Association for the Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care-approved facility. The NIAID animal care and use committee approved all experimental procedures. *S. mansoni* eggs were extracted from the livers of infected mice (Biomedical Research Institute, Rockville, MD) as previously described (Wynn et al. (1995) *Nature* 376:594-96). For the induction of synchronous primary pulmonary granulomas, mice were given 5,000 eggs intravenously (i.v.). For the induction of secondary granulomas, mice were sensitized intraperitoneally (i.p.) with 5000 live eggs, and then challenged with 5,000 live eggs i.v. (Wynn et al. (1994) *J. Exp. Med.* 179:551-61). In the infection experiments, mice were infected percutaneously via the tail with 25-30 cercariae of a Puerto-Rican Strain of *S. mansoni* (NMRI) that were obtained from infected *Biomphalaria glabrata* snails (Biomedical Research Institute, Rockville, MD). Soluble egg antigen (SEA) and soluble worm antigenic preparations (SWAP) were from purified and homogenized from *S. mansoni* eggs and adult parasites as previously described (Cheever et al. (1994) *J. Immunol.* 153:753-59). All animals underwent perfusion at the time of

sacrifice so that worm and tissue egg burdens could be determined, as described elsewhere (*id.*). *Nippostrongylus brasiliensis* larvae (L3) were prepared as previously described (Katona et al. (1983) *J. Immunol.* 130:350-56). Mice were inoculated through s.c. injection of 500 L3. On day seven post-inoculation, lung tissue and mediastinal lymph nodes were collected for cytokine analysis.

Example 1.2: Histopathology and Fibrosis

[0165] The sizes of pulmonary and hepatic granulomas were determined on histological sections that were stained with Wright's Giemsa stain (Histopath of America, Clinton, MD). Around 30 granulomas per mouse were included in all analyses. A skilled pathologist evaluated the percentages of eosinophils, mast cells and other types of cells in the same sections. The number of schistosome eggs in the liver and the gut and the collagen content of the liver, as measured by hydroxyproline levels, were determined as previously described (Cheever et al., *supra*). Specifically, hepatic collagen was measured as hydroxyproline by the technique of Bergman and Loxley (Bergman and Loxley (1963) *Analytical Biochem.* 35:1961-65) after hydrolysis of a 200-mg portion of liver in 5 ml of 6N HCl at 110°C for 18 h. The increase in hepatic hydroxyproline was positively related to egg numbers in all experiments and hepatic collagen is reported as the increase above normal liver collagen in micromoles per 10,000 eggs; (infected liver collagen – normal liver collagen)/liver eggs X 10^{-4} or micromoles per worm pair. At late chronic time points, fibrosis is reported as total liver collagen per liver. The same individual scored all histological features and had no knowledge of the experimental design.

Example 1.3: FACS Analysis

[0166] Whole lungs were harvested and placed in RPMI. Tissues were disrupted by straining through a 70-micron nylon mesh (BD Falcon, San Diego, CA). The single cell suspensions were washed and RBCs were lysed by incubation with ACK lysis solution for 3 min. Lung lymphocytes were labeled with PE-Cy5 labeled anti-CD4 along with Fc Block (both antibodies from BD Pharmingen, San Diego, CA) in FACS buffer for 15 min at 4°C. After washing, the cells were analyzed on a FACS Calibur using FLOWJO™ software (Treestar, Inc., Ashland, OR).

Example 1.4: IL-21 Blocking Experiments with sIL-21R-Fc

[0167] C57BL/6 (10/group) mice were infected percutaneously via the tail with 30-35 *S. mansoni* cercariae. Beginning on week 6 post-infection, mice were treated with either mIL-21R-Fc (Wyeth Research) or Anti-*E. tenella* murine IgG2a control antibody (Wyeth Research). Each mouse received one 200 μg dose via i.p. injection 3X/week for a total of 5 weeks. Mice were sacrificed 12 weeks post-infection and hepatic fibrosis was measured by hydroxyproline assay.

Example 1.5: Lymphocyte Culture and Cytokine Detection Using the Enzyme-linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA)

[0168] Spleen and mesenteric lymph nodes (infection model) or lung-associated lymph nodes (pulmonary model) were removed aseptically and single cell suspensions were prepared as previously described (Hesse et al. (2000) *Am. J. Pathol.* 157:945-55). Cultures were incubated at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO_2. Cells were stimulated with SEA (20 μg/ml), SWAP (50 μg/ml), concanavalin A (Con A; 1 μg/ml), or medium alone. Supernatant fluids were harvested at 72 hours and assayed for cytokine production. IFN-γ, IL-5 and IL-10 were measured by sandwich ELISA using paired antibodies (BD Pharmingen, San Diego, CA) as previously described (*id.*). Cytokine levels were calculated with standard curves constructed using recombinant murine cytokines (BD Pharmingen, San Diego, CA). IL-13 levels were measured using murine IL-13 ELISA kits (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN) according to the manufacturer's protocol. TGF-β1 levels were quantified using mouse TGF-β1 DUOSET® ELISA development system (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN) according to manufacture's protocol. To avoid bovine-derived TGF-β1 contamination, cells were washed 3X in PBS and cultured in media containing 0.5% mouse serum.

Example 1.6: RNA Isolation and Purification and Real-Time Polymerase Chain Reaction

[0169] Total RNA was extracted from lung and liver tissue samples placed individually in 1 ml TRIZOL™ reagent (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA). The sample was homogenized using a tissue polytron (Omni International Inc., Marietta, GA) and total RNA was extracted according to the recommendations of the

manufacturer and further purified using RNEASY™ Mini Kit from Qiagen (Qiagen Sciences, Germantown, MD). Individual sample RNA (1 μg) was reverse-transcribed using SUPERSCRIPT II™ (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) and a mixture of oligo (dT) and random primers. Real-time polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) was performed on an ABI PRISM™ 7900 sequence detection system (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA). Relative quantities of mRNA for several genes was determined using SYBR™ Green PCR Master Mix (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA) and by the comparative threshold cycle method as described by Applied Biosystems for the ABI PRISM™ 7700/7900 sequence detection systems (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA). In this method, mRNA levels for each sample were normalized to hypoxanthine guanine phosphoribosyl transferase mRNA levels and then expressed as a relative increase or decrease compared with levels in uninfected controls. Primers were designed using PRIMER EXPRESS™ software (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA). Primers for IL-13, IL-4, IL-10, HPRT (Hesse et al. (2001) *J. Immunol.* 167:6533-44), IL-13Rα2 (Chiaramonte et al. (2003) *J. Exp. Med.* 197:687-701), Ym1, FIZZ1 and acidic chitinase (AMCase) (Sandler et al., *supra*) were published previously, and include:

[0170] IL-21
5' GCCAG ATCGC CTCCT GATTA 3' (sense) (SEQ ID NO:28);
5' CATGC TCACA GTGCC CCTTT 3' (antisense) (SEQ ID NO:29);

[0171] IL-21R
5' CTCCC CCCTT GAACG TGACT 3' (sense) (SEQ ID NO:30);
5' TTGCC CCTCA GCACG TAGTT 3' (antisense) (SEQ ID NO:31);

[0172] IFN-γ
5' AGAGC CAGAT TATCT CTTTC TACCT CAG 3' (sense) (SEQ ID NO:32);
5' CCTTT TTCGC CTTGC TGTTG 3' (antisense) (SEQ ID NO:33).

Example 1.7: Serum Antibody Isotype Analysis and Bone Marrow-Derived Macrophages

[0173] Total IgE was measured using the BD OPTEIA™ mouse IgE ELISA Set (BD Biosciences Pharmingen, San Diego, CA) according to the manufacturer's protocol. SEA-specific IgG1 and IgG2b isotype-specific antibody (Ab) titers were evaluated by indirect ELISA. IMMULON™ 4 plates (Thermo Labsystems Inc., Beverly MA) were coated with 10 μg/ml SEA (100 μl/well) diluted in PBS, and serum samples were analyzed using serial two-fold dilutions. Biotin-Rabbit Anti-mouse IgG1 (Zymed, San Francisco, CA) was used at a 1:1000 dilution. This was followed by peroxidase-labeled streptavidin (KPL, Gaithersburg, MD) substrate enzyme at a 1:1000 dilution. Second-step horseradish peroxidase-conjugated rabbit anti-mouse IgG2b (Zymed, San Francisco, CA) Ab was used at a 1:1000 dilution. The absorbance in the wells was read at 405 nm using a VMAX™ Kinetic Microplate Reader (Molecular Devices) after adding 100 μl one-component ABTS Peroxidase Substrate (KPL, Gaithersburg, MD).

[0174] Bone marrow was recovered from female C57BL/6 mice and cultured in Petri dishes (100 X 15 mm) containing supplemented DMEM media (L929-conditioned medium) for a period of 6 days. After six days, cells were harvested and seeded at a concentration of 0.5 X 10^6 cells/well in 24 well plates containing supplemented DMEM media (10% FBS, 2 mM L-glutamine, 100 U/mL penicillin, and 100 μg/mL streptomycin). Cells were stimulated with IL-4, IL-13, and IL-21 (R&D, Minneapolis, MN) for a period of 20 hours. In some assays, cells were pretreated with IL-21. Cells were lysed and RNA was purified using the RNA Cleanup procedure with the RNEASY™ kits (Qiagen Sciences, Germantown, MD).

Example 1.8: Arginase Activity Assay

[0175] Bone marrow-derived macrophages were plated at 6 X 10^5 per well in 96 well tissue culture plates and stimulated with combinations of IL-4, IL-13, and IL-21. IL-21 was added 6 hours prior to IL-4 or IL-13 stimulation. Following stimulation, cells were washed with PBS and lysed with 0.1% Triton X-100 containing protease inhibitor (Roche, Nutley, NJ). Lysates were transferred into a 96 well PCR plate and incubated with 10 mM $MnCl_2$ and 50mM Tris HCl (pH 7.5) to activate enzyme for 10min at 55°C. After enzyme activation, 25 μl of

lysate was removed and added to 25 μl 1M arginine (pH 9.7) in a new PCR plate and incubated for 20 hours at 37°C. 5 μl of each sample was added in duplicate to a 96 well ELISA plate along with 5 μl of each standard, diluted in the same assay conditions, starting at 100 mg/dL. The urea determination reagent from QUANTICHROM™ Urea Assay Kit (BioAssay Systems, Hayward, CA) was used according to the manufacture's protocol.

Example 1.9: Statistics

[0176] Hepatic fibrosis (adjusted for egg number) decreases with increasing intensity of infection (worm pairs). Therefore, these variables were compared by analysis of covariance, using the logarithm of total liver eggs as the covariate and the logarithm of hydroxyproline content per egg. Variables that did not change with infection intensity were compared by one-way ANOVA or Student's *t* test (Cheever et al., *supra*). Changes in cytokine mRNA expression and granuloma size were evaluated using ANOVA. Differences were considered significant when $p<0.05$*, $p<0.01$**, or $p<0.001$***.

Example 2: Regulation of IL-21 and IL-21R during Type-1- and Type-2-Polarized Responses

[0177] To investigate the regulation and function of the IL-21 receptor *in vivo*, several different experimental systems of T_H2-dependent inflammation were examined, including models of pulmonary and hepatic inflammation, as well as an experimental model of nematode infection (Pearce et al., *supra*; Wynn et al. (1994), *supra*). In each case, the immune responses of wild type (WT) animals were compared with IL-21R-deficient mice (Hoffman et al., *supra*; Kasaian et al. (2002), *supra*).

[0178] In comparison to IL-21 (Wurster et al. (2002), *supra*; Mehta et al. (2004) *Immunol. Rev.* 202:84-95), little is known about the regulation and function of the IL-21 receptor. To determine whether IL-21 and its receptor are regulated during a pathological T_H2 response *in vivo*, the *S. mansoni* model of granuloma formation was used. In this model, T_H2 cytokines are known to play a prominent role in lesion formation (Pearce and MacDonald, *supra*). Initial studies were designed to determine whether IL-21 and IL-21R mRNA expression were linked with polarized T_H2 cytokine responses *in vivo*. This was achieved by using mice

that develop highly exaggerated T_H1 (IL-$4^{-/-}$/IL-$10^{-/-}$) or T_H2 (IL-$12^{-/-}$/IL-$10^{-/-}$) cytokine responses following exposure to *S. mansoni* eggs. In IL-$4^{-/-}$/IL-$10^{-/-}$ "T_H1" mice, IFN-γ mRNA expression increased in the lung 75-fold over baseline by day 4 post-challenge and remained approximately 50-fold above background through day 14 (FIG. 16A). IL-13 mRNA was not detectable in these mice at any time point, confirming the establishment of a highly polarized T_H1 inflammatory response. In contrast, the IL-$12^{-/-}$/IL-$10^{-/-}$ "T_H2" mice displayed a 200 to 250-fold increase in IL-13 mRNA at all time points post-challenge, with little to no change in IFN-γ. In contrast to the T_H1/ T_H2 cytokines, which displayed a highly polarized pattern of expression, IL-21 was not associated with a polarized phenotype (FIG. 16B). In both groups, IL-21 mRNA levels increased at least 50-fold over baseline following challenge with schistosome eggs, although the increase observed in the T_H1-polarized mice was on average 3- to 4-fold greater than the T_H2 polarized animals (FIG. 16B; lower panel). IL-21R was also not specifically associated with a T_H1 or T_H2 immune response. However, in contrast to IL-21, which was more pronounced in T_H1 skewed animals, the maximal response for the IL-21R was observed in the T_H2-polarized mice (FIG. 16B; upper panel).

Example 3: Type-2 Cytokine Production is Reduced in the Lungs of IL-21R-deficient Mice During a Primary Response to Schistosome Eggs

[0179] Given the significant elevation in IL-21R expression in mice challenged with schistosome eggs (FIG. 16), the next series of experiments examined whether IL-21R signaling was influencing the development of the T_H2 response. In these experiments, naïve WT and IL-$21R^{-/-}$ mice were injected intravenously with live schistosome eggs and the production of T_H2 cytokines and T_H2-regulated genes were monitored in the lung, spleen, and draining lymph nodes over the following 14 days. In WT mice, IL-21R mRNA expression increased rapidly following egg exposure and remained elevated through day 14 (FIG. 17A). IL-21 showed a similar profile with peak expression occurring on day 7 and then declining slightly thereafter. Notably, there was a consistent and highly significant decrease in IL-21 expression on days 7 and 14 in the IL-$21R^{-/-}$ mice, suggesting that IL-21R was positively influencing the expression of its own ligand. Consistent with previous observations (Wynn et al. (1993) *J. Immunol.*

151:1430-40; Vella and Pearce (1992) *J. Immunol.* 148:2283-88), expression of the T_H2-associated cytokines IL-4 and IL-13 rose gradually in the granulomatous tissues of WT mice, with 5- to 15-fold increases detectable by day 14. In contrast, there was a marked and significant decrease in IL-4 and IL-13 mRNA expression in the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ tissues. Although little change in IFN-γ and IL-10 mRNA was detected in WT mice between day 4 and 14 post-challenge, production of IFN-γ and IL-10 also decreased slightly in the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ animals. Thus, the reduced T_H2 response observed in the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice was not associated with increased T_H1 cytokine production. The decrease in T_H2 cytokines was also specific to the granulomatous tissues, since significant T_H2 cytokine production was observed in lymph node and splenocyte cultures following *in vitro* stimulation with soluble egg antigen (SEA) or mitogen (FIG. 17B). In fact, SEA consistently stimulated stronger IL-5, IL-10, and IL-13 responses in the lymph node cultures prepared from IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice. Nevertheless, consistent with the reduced T_H2 response in the lung, a more rapid resolution of granuloma formation was observed in the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ animals (FIG. 17C). In addition, there was a marked decrease in several genes associated with Stat6-activation or "alternatively-activated macrophages" (AAMø) (Nair et al. (2005) *Infect. Immun.* 73:385-94; Zhu et al. (2004) *Science* 304:1678-82; Chiaramonte et al. (2003), *supra*; Gordon, S. (2003) *Nat. Rev. Immunol.* 3:23-35), providing further evidence of an overall reduction in the T_H2 effector response in IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (FIG. 17D).

Example 4: TH2 Response is Reduced in IL-21R$^{-/-}$ Mice Following *N. brasiliensis* Infection

[0180] To determine if the reduced T_H2 effector response was specific to *S. mansoni* pulmonary granuloma formation, WT and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice were infected with the intestinal nematode *N. brasiliensis*. Infection is established by inoculating third stage larvae (L3) under the skin. As the parasites mature, they migrate from the site of inoculation and enter the lungs via the circulatory system. Once inside the lungs, the parasites trigger a vigorous and highly polarized T_H2 response (Urban et al. (1993) *J. Immunol.* 151:7086-94), which was confirmed by analyzing the expression of several T_H2-associated genes in the lung (FIG. 18A) and lung-associated lymph nodes (FIG. 18B). The lungs and

lymph nodes of WT mice displayed marked increases in IL-4, IL-13, AMCase, FIZZ1/RELM1α, and Ym1 mRNA expression following *N. brasiliensis* infection (FIG. 18A and 18B). However, in agreement with the pulmonary granuloma model, significantly reduced levels of IL-4, IL-13, and AMCase were observed, as well as slightly reduced levels of Ym1 and FIZZ1 mRNA in the lungs of the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (FIG. 18A). The draining lymph nodes displayed a similar reduction, although the decreases in Ym1 and FIZZ1 were more significant in the lymph nodes (FIG. 18B). The only other major difference between the two tissues was the AMCase mRNA response, which appeared to be restricted to the lung. Together, these data confirm an important role for the IL-21R in T_H2 response development *in vivo*. Notably however, despite developing a markedly attenuated T_H2 response, the *N. brasiliensis* infected IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice displayed no significant delay in adult worm expulsion (not shown).

Example 5: Type-2 Cytokine-driven Inflammation is Diminished in the Lungs of IL-21R$^{-/-}$ Mice

[0181] The next series of experiments were designed to determine whether the IL-21R modulates the development of secondary T_H2 responses. For these experiments, WT and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice were sensitized with *S. mansoni* eggs and challenged intravenously 2 weeks later. As expected, the sensitized mice developed a robust granulomatous response that was 4- to 5-times greater (FIG. 19C) than the primary challenge animals (FIG. 17C). As observed in the primary model, there was a significant increase in IL-21 and IL-21R mRNA in the lungs following egg exposure, although the IL-21 response peaked much earlier during the secondary challenge. IL-21R was only modestly increased when compared with IL-21 although it remained significantly elevated at both time points, while IL-21 mRNA levels declined after reaching a peak on day 4 (FIG. 19A). Thus, there was evidence of tighter regulation of the ligand in the tissues. There was also a remarkable decrease in IL-21 expression in the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice, confirming a potent feedback mechanism between the receptor and its ligand. Among the T_H2-associated cytokines, IL-13 was the most robust response, displaying a 50- to 100-fold increase over baseline in WT mice. However, it was reduced to 10- to 20-fold above background in the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice, demonstrating that the IL-21R is required for maximum development of the secondary T_H2 response. Again, the

reduction in T_H2 cytokine expression in IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice was not accompanied by a significant increase in IFN-γ. In fact, IFN-γ mRNA expression decreased in the lungs of the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice. Nevertheless, the knockouts displayed a modest but consistent increase in IFN-γ production in the lymph nodes and spleen, suggesting a greater inhibition of the T_H2 cytokines overall (FIG. 19B). Consistent with the primary egg challenge model, the reduction in T_H2 and T_H1 cytokine production was more pronounced in the granulomatous tissues (FIG. 19A), although the SEA-induced T_H2 response was also partially reduced in the spleen (FIG. 19B). The significant reduction in secondary granulomatous inflammation was consistent with the development of a weaker T_H2 response in the lung (FIG. 19C). In addition, there was a marked decrease in FIZZ1, Ym1, and AMCase expression (FIG. 19D), further confirming a significant impairment of secondary T_H2 effector responses in the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice.

Example 6: IgG Antibodies, Granuloma Formation, and Type-2 Cytokines Are Substantially Reduced in Infected IL-21R-deficient Mice

[0182] Next, to determine if IL-21 signaling is required for the maintenance of a chronic T_H2-dominated response, animals were exposed percutaneously to *S. mansoni* cercariae, and their pathological reactions and immune responses at both acute and chronic time points post-infection were analyzed. As observed in the pulmonary granuloma studies, there was a marked upregulation in IL-21R and IL-21 mRNA expression in the livers of infected WT mice. In contrast, IL-21 mRNA was almost undetectable in the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice even after chronic infection (FIG. 20A). At the acute stage post-infection, the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice also manifested a marked reduction in T_H2 cytokine mRNA expression (FIG. 20A). However, the changes were again restricted to the granulomatous tissues because the lymph node and splenocyte responses of both groups were similar following *in vitro* stimulation with parasite antigens (FIG. 20B). The only consistent difference noted in the *in vitro* assays was a 2- to 3-fold decrease in IL-5 and IL-10 production in the splenocyte cultures. The IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice also developed significantly smaller granulomas at the acute stage post-infection (FIG. 20C), which was consistent with the reduced IL-4 and IL-13 mRNA responses in the liver (FIG. 20A). However, this was not accompanied by any obvious change in the percentage of eosinophils in the granulomas (FIG. 20C). A more detailed

microscopic analysis of the lesions confirmed that there was no detectable change in the overall composition of the granulomas (FIG. 21A). Experiments were also undertaken to determine whether IL-21R-deficiency was specifically affecting the recruitment of $CD4^+$ T cells to the granulomatous tissues. To address this issue, the pulmonary granuloma model was used in order to synchronize the recruitment of inflammatory cells. However, consistent with the microscopic evaluations of liver granulomas (FIG. 21A), the percentage of $CD4^+$ T cells in the lungs was similar in WT and IL-$21R^{-/-}$ mice both before and after egg exposure (FIG. 21B). Thus, changes in $CD4^+$ T cell recruitment or expansion are unlikely to explain the decreased Th1/Th2 cytokine responses observed in the tissues. Instead, they appear to result from a more general reduction in the overall inflammatory response. Importantly, both groups effectively downmodulated their granulomatous responses by week 12 post-infection (Pearce and MacDonald, *supra*). Consequently, there was no significant difference in granuloma size at the chronic time point (FIG. 20C). Minimal impairment in the T_H2 cytokine response was observed in the chronically infected knockout mice (FIG. 20A). The marked reduction in FIZZ1 and Ym1 observed at the acute stage had also diminished in the chronically infected IL-$21R^{-/-}$ animals (FIG. 20D). Nevertheless, expression of AMCase remained remarkably low on week 12, suggesting a sustained diminution of at least a subset of the T_H2-driven responses in chronically infected IL-$21R^{-/-}$ mice.

[0183] The IL-$21R^{-/-}$ mice were also examined for changes in serum antibody levels (FIG. 22). Consistent with their suppressed cytokine responses (FIG. 20A), the IL-$21R^{-/-}$ mice displayed a marked reduction in parasite specific IgG_1 (T_H2-associated antibody) and IgG_{2b} (T_H1-associated antibody) titers, which was maintained at the chronic time point (FIG. 22B). Interestingly however, this was not accompanied by any significant change in IgE (FIG. 22C), suggesting a selective impairment in only a subset of serum antibody isotypes. Exogenous IL-21 has been shown to inhibit IgE production (Suto et al. (2002) *Blood* 100:4565-73), which may explain the slight elevation of IgE in the chronically infected IL-$21R^{-/-}$ mice. Importantly, the overall reduction in type-2 responsiveness in the IL-$21R^{-/-}$ mice was not attributed to differences in parasite burden since similar numbers of eggs and paired adult parasites were found in the tissues of both groups at all time points (FIG. 22A).

Example 7: IL-21R-deficiency Slows the Progression of Hepatic Fibrosis

[0184] Because T_H2 cytokines are believed to play a major role in tissue fibrogenesis (Wynn (2004), *supra*), the development and progression of hepatic fibrosis in *S. mansoni*-infected IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice was next examined. Liver hydroxyproline levels were assayed at various time points post-infection as a direct measure of tissue collagen content. As expected, marked hepatic fibrosis was observed in the infected WT mice (FIG. 22D). In contrast, the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ displayed significantly less fibrosis at both the acute and chronic time points. Notably, by week 29 post-infection the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice exhibited more than a 50% decrease in total liver collagen content compared to WT mice (FIG. 22E), thus confirming an important and indispensable role for the IL-21R in the progression of T_H2-dependent fibrosis.

[0185] Experiments were undertaken to examine whether an IL-21 inhibitor could slow the progression of fibrosis in infected WT mice. For these experiments, groups of C57BL/6 mice were treated with sIL-21R-Fc or control protein for a total of 5 weeks, starting on week 6 post-infection, around the time when eggs are first detected in the liver. Although both groups had similar worm and tissue egg burdens (data not shown), mice receiving the IL-21 blocker displayed over a 50% reduction in hepatic fibrosis at the termination of the experiment (FIG. 22F). IL-4 and IL-13 mRNA expression also decreased in the liver, and granuloma size was reduced approximately 15% (data not shown). Thus, these data compliment the experiments performed with IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice.

Example 8: IL-21 Signaling Promotes the Development of Alternatively Activated Macrophages

[0186] Because Arg-1, FIZZ1, and TGF-β1 have been linked with the development of fibrosis, and the expression of several T_H2/Stat6-regulated genes were reduced in the diseased tissues of IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice (FIGS. 17-20) (see also, Gordon, *supra*; Nair et al., *supra*), experiments were undertaken to determine whether Arg-1, FIZZ1, and TGF-β1 were directly modulated in macrophages following stimulation with IL-21. Arg-1 and FIZZ1 are also well-known markers of alternatively activated macrophages (AAMø) (Gordon, *supra*). For these studies, bone marrow-derived macrophage cultures (BMMø) were generated and then stimulated with various combinations of IL-4, IL-13, and IL-21. As

expected, IL-4 and IL-13 both increased Arg-1 and FIZZ1 mRNA expression, with an additive effect observed when the two stimuli were used in combination (FIG. 23A). Notably however, although IL-21 had no effect on either gene when used alone, cultures that were pretreated with IL-21 displayed highly significant increases in Arg-1 and FIZZ1 mRNA expression when subsequently stimulated with IL-4 and IL-13 (FIG. 23A). The same combination also significantly increased the function of arginase in the cells (FIG. 23B). In contrast, IL-21 had no effect on the levels of total or active TGF-β1 in the culture supernatants (FIG. 24). Unexpectedly, IL-21 treatment alone significantly increased the expression IL-4Rα and IL-13Rα1 (FIG. 23C). In contrast, IL-4 and IL-13 had no effect when used alone (FIG. 23C) and there was no additional effect when the three stimuli were used in combination (not shown).

[0187] Because the IL-13Rα2 can also influence IL-13-dependent signaling (Chiaramonte et al. (2003), *supra*; Mentink-Kane et al. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 101:586-90; Wood et al. (2003) *J. Exp. Med.* 197:703-09), experiments were undertaken to examine whether IL-21 was regulating the production of the IL-13Rα2. Not surprisingly, because the IL-13Rα2 is primarily produced by nonhematopoietic cells like fibroblasts and smooth muscle (Chiaramonte et al. (2003), *supra*; Jakubzick et al. (2003) *Am. J. Pathol.* 162:1475-86; Zheng et al. (2003) *J. Allergy Clin. Immunol.* 111:720-28; Morimoto et al. (2006) *J. Immunol.* 176:342-48), there was no evidence of decoy receptor regulation in the BMMø cultures (data not shown). However, when the regulation of the decoy receptor *in vivo* was examined, IL-21 downregulated IL-13Rα2 mRNA expression in the lungs of i.v. egg-challenged mice and significantly decreased the levels of the soluble IL-13Rα2 in their serum (FIG. 23D). When viewed together, these data suggest that IL-21 contributes to the development of alternatively activated macrophages by upregulating the type-2 IL-4 receptor (signaling receptor) in macrophages and by simultaneously decreasing the levels of the soluble IL-13Rα2 (decoy receptor) in the serum. Both mechanisms likely contributed to the increased activation of Arg-1 and FIZZ1 in the IL-4/IL-13-stimulated macrophages. As such, they provide an additional mechanistic explanation for the impaired T_H2 responses and T_H2-dependent fibrosis in the helminth-infected IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice.

Example 9: Discussion

[0188] IL-21 was recently characterized as a T_H2 cytokine that can inhibit the differentiation of naïve T_H cells into IFN-γ-producing T_H1 cells (Wurster et al. (2002), *supra*). Because the immune response in schistosomiasis evolves from an early IFN-γ to a sustained and dominant T_H2 response (Pearce and MacDonald, *supra*), the influence of IL-21R signaling on the development of helminth-induced T_H2 responses was examined. Infection of WT mice with *S. mansoni* increased IL-21 and IL-21R expression in the liver, confirming an association of IL-21 signaling with helminth-induced type-2 immunity. However, in the lung, schistosome eggs induced significant IL-21 expression during both T_H1 and T_H2 polarized responses. In fact, IL-21 expression increased most when mice were polarized to a T_H1 response. These data suggested that IL-21 exhibits a less restricted pattern of expression than that of the other T_H2-associated cytokines. The receptor for IL-21 also failed to display a T_H1/T_H2-specific pattern. However, the IL-21 receptor was induced nearly 4-fold more in the lungs of T_H2 versus T_H1 polarized mice, which provided one of the first indications that IL-21R signaling might be involved in the regulation of T_H2-mediated inflammation.

[0189] To determine whether type-2 effector responses were compromised in the absence of the IL-21R, the expression of several genes that are induced preferentially under T_H2-polarizing conditions was examined. These genes included AMCase, Ym1, and FIZZ1, all of which are thought to play important and nonredundant roles in the regulation of T_H2-mediated inflammation (Zhu et al., *supra*; Chiaramonte et al. (2003), *supra*; Nair et al., *supra*; Mentink-Kane et al., *supra*; Guo et al. (2000) *J. Biol. Chem.* 275:8032-37). Although some variation was observed during a primary, secondary, or chronic immune response, in each case the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice displayed highly significant decreases in these T_H2-associated genes. Ym1 and AMCase are members of a family of proteins that share homology with chitinases of lower organisms (Nair et al., *supra*). Although their exact function in host immune reactions remains uncertain, they are thought to play important roles in eosinophil chemotaxis, tissue remodeling and fibrosis. Indeed, a recent study showed that AMCase neutralization could ameliorate allergen-driven inflammation and airway

hyperresponsiveness, thus confirming the participation of mammalian chitinases in T_H2 immunity (Zhu et al, *supra*). FIZZ1 is also associated with tissue fibrogenesis (Mentink-Kane et al., *supra*; Liu et al. (2004) *J. Immunol.* 173:3425-31). Consequently, a major function of the IL-21R may be to regulate the mechanisms of wound healing and fibrosis. Therefore, in addition to its participation in helminth-induced immune responses, the IL-21R may be involved in the regulation of a variety of T_H2-mediated inflammatory disorders.

[0190] In schistosomiasis, IL-21R-deficiency had a profound effect on the progression of the disease. Although infection intensities were the same in WT and IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice, the egg-induced inflammatory response decreased significantly in the absence of the IL-21R. There was also a marked reduction in secondary granuloma formation and a faster resolution of primary granulomas in the lung. Together, these data illustrate an indispensable role for the IL-21R in granulomatous inflammation. Previous studies showed that IL-4 and IL-13 are essential for lesion formation (Pearce and MacDonald; *supra*), thus the IL-21R is believed to be either directly or indirectly affecting the activity of these cytokines. These studies suggested that IL-21 was not acting alone since extremely high levels of IL-21 were observed in IL-4/IL-10 double knockout mice, yet granuloma formation was almost completely ablated in these T_H2-deficient animals (Hoffmann et al. (2000) *J. Immunol.* 164:6406-16; Sandler et al. (2003) *J. Immunol.* 171:3655-67). Thus, IL-21 appears to collaborate with IL-4 and IL-13 to induce a maximal response. The data disclosed herein show there is no detectable change in the cellular composition of the granulomas in IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice and no specific impairment in CD4$^+$ T cell recruitment. Together, these findings suggested that the IL-21R regulates the development of parasite-induced pathology by modulating the overall intensity of the T_H2 effector response.

[0191] IL-21 is not thought to regulate IL-4-induced T_H2 cell differentiation directly (Suto et al., *supra*; Wurster et al. (2002), *supra*). Instead, it was hypothesized in a recent paper that IL-21 might amplify T_H2-driven responses by downregulating the expansion of IFN-γ-producing T_H1 cells (Wurster et al. (2002), *supra*). As such, it is theorized that the IFN-γ response in schistosome-infected mice might increase in the absence of the IL-21 receptor. Although a small increase was observed in lung-associated lymph nodes *in vitro*, IFN-γ

production was consistently reduced in the granulomatous tissues. Thus, the studies did not show that endogenous IL-21R played a substantial role in the inhibition of IFN-γ production during helminth infection. However, the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice simultaneously generated weaker T_H1 and T_H2 cytokine responses in the tissues. The significant reduction in IgG_{2b} (T_H1-associated) and IgG_1 (T_H2-associated) antibody titers at all times post-infection supports this conclusion. Th2 cytokines were also decreased at the mRNA level in both the lungs and lymph nodes following *N. brasiliensis* infection. Indeed, all of the direct *ex vivo* data confirmed a marked reduction in T_H2 cytokine expression and function within the affected tissues. Nevertheless, there was no consistent reduction in T_H2 cytokine production by isolated lymphocytes following antigen restimulation, which suggests the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice are capable of generating significant T_H2 responses, at least *in vitro*. Thus, the data disclosed herein suggest the IL-21R is selectively augmenting T_H2 responses in the tissues. In addition to promoting the T_H2 response, the IL-21R also increased IL-21 production. Thus, the IL-21R appears to operate in an autocrine fashion to drive T_H2 cytokine expression and type-2 effector functions *in vivo*.

[0192] To further elucidate the mechanisms involved, experiments were undertaken to determine whether IL-21 was directly modulating macrophage function, because the *in vivo* data showed a marked reduction in several genes that have been associated with the "alternatively-activated" phenotype (Gordon, *supra*; Mantovani et al. (2005) *Immunity* 23:344-46). Macrophages and fibroblasts exhibiting an alternatively activated phenotype are major cellular constituents of schistosome granulomas and functional studies suggested they are critically involved in the progression of the disease (Hesse et al.(2001), *supra*). Indeed, an important study by Brombacher et al. showed that mice that are completely deficient in alternatively activated macrophages develop lethal egg-induced pathology following infection with *S. mansoni* (Herbert et al. (2004) *Immunity* 20:623-35). In addition, because macrophage-derived TGF-β1 has been implicated in the mechanism of IL-13-mediated fibrosis (Lee et al. (2001) *J. Exp. Med.* 194:809-21; Fichtner-Feigl et al. (2006) *Nat. Med.* 12:99-106), experiments were undertaken to determine whether IL-21 was modulating TGF-β1 production in macrophages. To investigate these issues, Arg-1 and

FIZZ1 mRNA, arginase activity, and TGF-β1 protein responses were measured in bone marrow-derived macrophages following stimulation with various combinations of IL-21, IL-4, and IL-13. Arg-1 and FIZZ1 are IL-4Rα/Stat6-dependent genes (Liu et al., *supra*; Hesse et al. (2001), *supra*; Munder et al. (1998) *J. Immunol.* 160:5347-54); therefore, they serve as functional markers of alternative macrophage activation. Importantly, the findings suggested that when macrophages were exposed to IL-21, they became much more sensitive to the Arg-1- and FIZZ1-inducing activities of IL-4 and IL-13. Arginase activity assessed by the production of urea also increased significantly, confirming IL-21 as an important stimulus for the development of highly functional alternatively activated macrophages. In contrast, IL-21 had no effect on the production of TGF-β1 by macrophages. Thus, the pro-fibrotic cytokine TGF-β1 does appear to be involved, which is consistent with previous studies that have investigated the role of TGF-β1 in schistosomiasis (Kaviratne et al. (2004) *J. Immunol.* 173:4020-29). Instead, IL-21 significantly increased IL-4Rα and IL-13Rα1 expression in BMMøs and decreased the production of the soluble IL-13 decoy receptor *in vivo*, which likely explains their heightened sensitivity to IL-4 and IL-13. As such, these data compliment the *in vivo* studies with IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice and suggest that an important function of IL-21R signaling is to enhance the development of AAMø, which have been implicated in the mechanism of fibrosis (Hesse et al. (2001), *supra*; Hesse et al. (2000), *supra*). Moreover, because AAMø have been shown to amplify CD4^{+} T_H2 cell differentiation (Bonecchi et al. (1998) *Blood* 92:2668-71), these data may also explain the overall reduction in helminth-induced T_H2 activity in the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice.

[0193] In human schistosomiasis, the development of fibrotic liver pathology is the principle cause of chronic morbidity and mortality (Pearce and MacDonald, *supra*; Wynn et al. (2004) *Immunol. Rev.* 201:156-67). Because the T_H2 cytokine response is known to play an important role in collagen deposition (Wynn et al. (2004), *supra*), a final series of experiments examined the influence of the IL-21R on the progression of hepatic fibrosis. Notably, development of fibrosis decreased significantly in the IL-21R$^{-/-}$ mice, with the knockout animals displaying over a 50% reduction in hepatic fibrosis by week 29 post-infection. Importantly, similar findings were also generated when infected WT mice were

treated with sIL-21R-Fc. Thus, the IL-21 receptor was revealed as a potential new target for anti-fibrotic therapy. In conclusion, these studies illustrate an essential role for the IL-21R in the progression of T_H2 cytokine-mediated disease. As such, the IL-21R should be added to list of important receptors that regulate type-2 immunity and macrophage polarization.

Example 10: Prophetic Treatments

[0194] A nonlimiting set of prophetic treatment examples follows.

[0195] A subject diagnosed with liver cirrhosis is administered an IL-21R fusion protein to reduce the accumulation of fibrotic tissue in the liver. The IL-21R fusion protein includes amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2 fused at its C-terminus via a linker (corresponding to amino acids 236-243 of SEQ ID NO:17) to a human immunoglobulin G1 (IgG1) Fc-mutated sequence (corresponding to amino acids 244-467 of SEQ ID NO:17).

[0196] A subject diagnosed with an infection with schistosoma is administered a soluble IL-21R fragment to reduce the accumulation of fibrotic tissue. The fragment contains amino acids 20-538 of SEQ ID NO:2.

[0197] Following surgery, a subject is administered an IL-21R antibody to reduce the accumulation of fibrosis due to surgical incision during the wound healing process.

[0198] A subject diagnosed with liver cirrhosis is administered an IL-21 antibody to reduce the accumulation of fibrotic tissue in the liver.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder in a subject comprising administering to the subject a therapeutically effective amount of an agent that reduces the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the subject.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the agent is an IL-21/IL-21R antagonist selected from the group consisting of an anti-IL-21R antibody, an anti-IL-21 antibody, an antigen-binding fragment of an anti-IL-21R antibody, an antigen-binding fragment of an anti-IL-21 antibody, and a soluble fragment of an IL-21R.

3. The method of claim 2, wherein the agent is a soluble fragment of an IL-21R, and wherein the soluble fragment of the IL-21R comprises an amino acid sequence that is at least 90% identical to an amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of amino acids 1-538 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 20-538 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 20-235 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 1-236 of SEQ ID NO: 2, amino acids 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:2, amino acids 1-529 of SEQ ID NO:5, amino acids 20-529 of SEQ ID NO:5, amino acids 1-236 of SEQ ID NO:5, and amino acid 20-236 of SEQ ID NO:5.

4. The method of claim 3, wherein the soluble fragment of the IL-21R binds to an IL-21 polypeptide.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein the agent is a soluble fragment of an IL-21R, and wherein the soluble fragment of the IL-21R comprises an amino acid sequence that is substantially identical to the amino acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:11, SEQ ID NO:13, SEQ ID NO:15, SEQ ID NO:17, SEQ ID NO:19, SEQ ID NO:21, SEQ ID NO:23, SEQ ID NO:25, or SEQ ID NO:27.

6. The method of claim 5, wherein the amino acid sequence of the soluble fragment of the IL-21R comprises an amino acid sequence that is substantially identical to the amino acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:11 or SEQ ID NO:13.

7. The method of claim 1, wherein the agent is a soluble fragment of an IL-21R, and wherein the soluble fragment of the IL-21R is encoded by a nucleotide sequence that is substantially identical to the nucleic acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:10, SEQ ID NO:12, SEQ ID NO:14, SEQ ID NO:16, SEQ ID NO:18, SEQ ID NO:20, SEQ ID NO:22, SEQ ID NO:24, or SEQ ID NO:26.

8. The method of claim 7, wherein the soluble fragment of the IL-21R is encoded by a nucleotide sequence that is substantially identical to the nucleic acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:12 or SEQ ID NO:16.

9. The method of claim 2, wherein the agent is a soluble fragment of an IL-21R, and wherein the soluble fragment of the IL-21R comprises an extracellular domain of IL-21R and an immunoglobulin Fc fragment.

10. The method of claim 9, wherein the amino acid sequence of the extracellular domain of the IL-21R comprises an amino acid sequence that is at least 90% identical to amino acids 1-235 of SEQ ID NO:2 or amino acids 20-235 of SEQ ID NO:2.

11. The method of claim 9, wherein the immunoglobulin Fc fragment has an altered function.

12. The method of claim 11, wherein the immunoglobulin Fc fragment has the amino acid sequence of amino acids 244-467 of SEQ ID NO:17.

13. The method of claim 1, wherein the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated disorder affects the liver, epidermis, endodermis, muscle, tendon, cartilage, heart, pancreas, lung, uterus, nervous system, testis, ovary, adrenal gland, artery, vein, colon, small intestine, biliary tract, or stomach.

14. The method of claim 13, wherein the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated disorder affects the liver, epidermis, endodermis, or lung.

15. The method of claim 14, wherein the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated disorder is interstitial lung fibrosis.

16. The method of claim 13, wherein the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated disorder is the result of an infection with schistosoma.

17. The method of claim 1, wherein the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated disorder is the result of wound healing.

18. The method of claim 17, wherein the wound healing results from a surgical incision.

19. The method of claim 1, further comprising administering to the subject at least one additional therapeutic agent.

20. The method of claim 19, wherein the at least one additional therapeutic agent is selected from the group consisting of cytokine inhibitors, growth factor inhibitors, immunosuppressants, anti-inflammatory agents, metabolic inhibitors, enzyme inhibitors, cytotoxic agents, and cytostatic agents.

21. The method of claim 19, wherein the at least one additional therapeutic agent is selected from the group consisting of TNF antagonists, anti-TNF agents, IL-12 antagonists, IL-15 antagonists, IL-17 antagonists, IL-18 antagonists, IL-22 antagonists, T cell-depleting agents, B cell-depleting agents, cyclosporin, FK506, CCI-779, etanercept, infliximab, rituximab, adalimumab, prednisolone, azathioprine, gold, sulphasalazine, hydroxychloroquine, minocycline, anakinra, abatacept, methotrexate, leflunomide, rapamycin, rapamycin analogs, Cox-2 inhibitors, cPLA2 inhibitors, NSAIDs, p38 inhibitors, antagonists of B7.1, B7.2, ICOSL, ICOS and/or CD28, and agonists of CTLA4.

22. The method of claim 1, wherein the subject is a human.

23. A method for identifying a compound for treating, ameliorating or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest; (b) contacting the cell or sample of interest with a compound; and (c) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest following contact with the compound,

wherein a lower level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the contacted cell or sample of interest, in comparison to the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a noncontacted cell or sample of interest, identifies the compound as a compound useful for treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject.

24. A method for identifying a compound for treating, ameliorating or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated disorder in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest; (b) contacting the cell or sample of interest with a compound; (c) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest following contact with the compound; and (d) comparing the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the contacted cell or sample of interest with a reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, wherein a lower level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the contacted cell or sample of interest, in comparison to the reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, identifies the compound as a compound useful for treating, ameliorating, or preventing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject.

25. A method for monitoring the progress of fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject at a first time point; and (b) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject at a second time point, wherein a lower level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject at the second time point, in comparison to the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject at the first time point, provides an indication that the fibrosis or fibrosis-associated condition has decreased in severity.

26. A method for prognosing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject at a first time point; and (b) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject at a second time point, wherein a lower level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject at the second time point, in comparison to the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject at the first

time point, indicates a decreased likelihood that the subject will develop fibrosis or the fibrosis-associated condition or a decreased likelihood that the fibrosis or fibrosis-associate condition will worsen in the subject.

27. A method for prognosing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject; and (b) comparing the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject to a reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, wherein a lower level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject, in comparison to the reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, indicates a decreased likelihood that the subject will develop fibrosis or the fibrosis-associated condition or a decreased likelihood that the fibrosis or fibrosis-associate condition will worsen in the subject.

28. A method for diagnosing fibrosis or a fibrosis-associated condition in a subject, comprising: (a) measuring the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in a cell or sample of interest from the subject, and (b) comparing the level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject with a reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, wherein a higher level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R in the cell or sample of interest from the subject, in comparison to the reference level of IL-21 and/or IL-21R, indicates the presence of fibrosis or the fibrosis-associated condition in the subject.