Heterologous immunization modulates B-cell epitope competition between helper peptides and the MPER segment in MPER/liposome vaccines

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Abstract

Subdominant B-cell immune responses to conserved epitopes are major obstacles in eliciting broadly neutralizing antibodies (bnAbs) against HIV-1 through natural infection or vaccination. Although the sequence conserved membrane proximal external domain (MPER) of HIV-1 gp41 is partially occluded on the virion surface, epitope-focused immunogens could mitigate access limitations. Here, we found that a MPER/liposome vaccine delivered with single CD4 T cell helper epitope results in a post-priming response hierarchy, eliciting low affinity MPER-specific B cells. Heterologous boosting, however, promotes MPER-specific B cell clonal expansion with greater functionality of plasma antibodies. Enhancement correlates with increasing B cell MPER-directed affinity and reduced germinal center B cell helper antigen competitive advantage. While helper peptide co-delivery increases affinity of serum antibodies, the outcome of subsequent MPER antibody responses is shaped by the priming antigen. Our results offer insights into heterologous immunization strategies to potentiate subdominant B cell responses against frequently mutating viruses.

Keywords

HIV-1 Env, MPER, immunodominance, heterologous immunization

Introduction

Vaccines against viruses provide protection primarily by inducing neutralizing antibodies (nAb) that prevent the acquisition of infection [1,2]. However, rapidly mutating viruses such as HIV-1 can evade host humoral responses through viral diversification [3-5]. In such cases, it is of great interest to develop vaccination strategies to elicit neutralizing antibodies against conserved epitopes that are not under immune pressure. Antibodies recognizing these epitopes can be cross-reactive and confer broad protection, but no effective vaccine against the highly diverse viral strains is yet available [6-8].

A subset of HIV-1 infected individuals develop potent and broadly neutralizing antibodies (bnAbs) within 2-3 years of infection, whereas the majority of infected individuals generate non-neutralizing or strain-specific nAbs [9-12] preferentially targeting immunodominant variable domains in the envelope (Env) surface spike protein, the gp160 trimer. Structural and genetic characterizations of bnAbs developed from infected individuals show unusual characteristics such as extensive somatic hypermutations (SHM) [13,14], highly improbable functional amino acid mutations [15], rare bnAb B cell precursors and autoreactivity [16,17]. The unusually high rates of SHM indicate an extensive B cell affinity maturation process necessary for most antibodies to achieve effective HIV-1 neutralization. In addition, B cell receptor (BCR) access to the conserved epitopes on Env gp120 is shielded by glycans estimated at greater than 50% of the molecular mass of the Env [18], [19]. Meanwhile, access to the neutralizing target on the gp41 subunit referred to as the membrane proximal region (MPER) is hindered by its location proximal to the viral membrane [20-24]. These intrinsic biophysical properties of the Env may profoundly impact B cell competitive fitness, giving rise to immunologically subdominant responses against the conserved neutralizing epitopes.

Through biophysical, structural and genetic characterizations of recombinant bnAbs, reverse vaccinology has provided critical insights on the new vaccine concepts such as structure-guided and epitope-focused immunogen design as well as germline targeting immunogen design. These approaches aim at inducing dominant antibody responses toward the conserved epitopes such as a quaternary site at the V2 trimer apex, a V3-glycan gp120 supersite, the fusion peptide, the MPER or the CD4 binding site [6,25], shifting away from the majority of strain specific-antibody responses. While germline-targeting immunogens with increased antigen valency and/or affinity for bnAb precursors serve as priming antigen to expand bnAb precursor B cells, development of multiple boosting immunogens and sequential immunization strategies remain

to be explored. Such regimens in the pursuit of affinity maturation and bnAb development of the primed bnAbs precursors are challenging [26-31].

With respect to the various epitope-focused vaccine targets, the MPER is amongst the most conserved across diverse HIV-1 clades and strains. That conservation and the broadest neutralization breadth manifest by MPER-specific bnABs [25,32-40] warrant its contiguous structural epitopes as key targets for vaccine design. However, its membrane proximal location at the base of Env trimer partially embedded in virion membrane hinders naïve B cell access, resulting in immunologically poor responses elicited by vaccination with membrane- bound Env trimers [41]. Many bnAbs exploit hydrophobic residues at the apex of their long heavy chain complementarity-determining region 3 (CDR3H) loop to facilitate interaction with the MPER and vicinal lipids to achieve neutralization breadth and potency [42-49]. In that regard, a high density MPER segment array on the surface of liposomes provides a membrane environment necessary for the elicitation of bnAb paratopes. Accordingly, the epitope-focused MPER/liposome vaccines resulted in eliciting high titer anti-MPER antibodies [50,51]. However, predominantly non-neutralizing sera Abs were elicited in a murine model, unable to bind the MPER of gp160 embedded on a membrane surface due to the incomplete quaternary structural mimicry of the MPER/liposome immunogen [49]. Nonetheless, a recent clinical human trial study with MPER/liposome vaccine observed that although there is no serum neutralizing activity per se detected, monoclonal antibodies rescued from rare B cells in immunized volunteers did exhibit some cross-reactive neutralizing activity [51]. This proof-of-concept emphasizes a critical need for developing vaccine strategies to further expand those B cells and gain sufficient neutralizing activity of serum antibodies.

Studies suggest that a heterologous vaccination regimen confers better protection against SARS-CoV-2 [52-54]. Boosting strategies are important to provide additional antigenic stimulation, facilitating the refinement of the antibody repertoire to enhance neutralization potency and breadth [55,56]. Likewise, a successful HIV-1 vaccine regimen will likely require sequential vaccination employing various antigens to expand and affinity mature the potential bnAb precursors specific to HIV-1 Env [57]. Given that immunodominance is dependent on the antigen context [58], factors that can modulate antibody responses through boosting immunogens are not well understood, particularly in the heterologous vaccination setting. Using a limited number of B cell epitopes in the context of MPER/liposome vaccines as bnAb targeting immunogen models, here we explored booster immunization strategies. We evaluated how

subdominant MPER-specific B cell responses are modulated after priming by competing B cell epitope responses directed at helper peptides following the subsequent boosting. While heterologous antigen boosting increases the anti-MPER antibody titers, the degree of plasma cell expansions and affinity maturation of the MPER-specific antibodies are greatly influenced by differences in affinity of B cells for the target MPER versus the competing helper peptides as well as the co-delivery of CD4 T cell helper peptides.

Results

pMPERTM/liposome vaccine elicits a dominant antibody response directed to LACK helper peptide antigen.

Previously, N- or C-terminally palmitoylated (p) MPER segments (referred to as NpMPER or CpMPER, a.a 662-682 of HxB_2 gp160) arrayed on the surface of a liposome vaccine induced strong MPER-specific antibody responses compared to gp160 immunogens. However, while anchoring the MPER to the membrane via palmitic acid or the transmembrane domain of the HIV-1 gp41 subunit facilitated co-delivery of the MPER segment and liposome vaccine components, the MPER chemical conjugation strategies influenced MPER membrane orientation and antigenic residue accessibility of the same MPER sequence. Consequently, distinct epitope specificities of the elicited antibodies by those various MPER immunogens derived from HxB_2 strain resulted [59]. For example, NpMPER/liposome elicited a dominant antibody response directed to the C-terminal region of the MPER involving a key epitope residue W680 and the chemical adduct NH_2. On the other hand, using a liposome vaccine incorporating an immunogen where the MPER preceded the transmembrane domain (MPERTM) induced a majority of antibody responses specific to the N-terminal region of MPER including an acetyl group (CH_3CO) at the N-terminal end (Figure S1A).

Accordingly, as shown in Figure 1A we synthesized an N-terminally palmitoylated MPERTM (pMPERTM) immunogen to eliminate undesirable BCR interaction with the NH_2 or the CH_3CO chemical adduct at the C- and the N-terminal end and investigated its immunogenicity in a pMPERTM/liposome formulation. Balb/c mice were immunized with either pMPERTM/liposomes (G1) or with NpMPER/liposomes (G2), for comparison. Both liposome vaccine formulations incorporated the soluble LACK MHC class II binding (I-A^d) helper peptide aa156-173 (sLACK) derived from the Leishmania parasite[60] along with a cyclic dinucleotide (CDN) adjuvant, specifically cyclic diadenylate monophosphate (c-di-AMP),

which acts as a STING agonist [61]. Both components were equivalently encapsulated inside the liposomes.

Given that the sLACK contains potential B cell epitopes that are recognized by the immune system and play a key role in activating B cell responses, the antigen-specific germinal center (GC) responses were analyzed by flow cytometry using fluorescently conjugated NpMPER/liposome-PE or palmitoylated-LACK (pLACK)/liposome-FITC (lipid-fluorophore detailed in methods section (Figure 1B and Figure S1B). The percentage and absolute number of MPER-specific GC B cells were greater following immunization with NpMPER/liposomes than that with pMPERTM/liposome (0.85 % vs 5.45 % and 370 vs 3168, respectively) (Figure 1C and 1D). The total population of GC B cells was also larger for G2 than that for G1 (Figure S1C).

Surprisingly, LACK-specific B cells were recruited to the GC with increased frequency relative to MPER-specific B cells reaching 38.8% on day 8 for G1 and 22.5% for G2 (Figure 1C and 1D). Consequently, the frequency of LACK-specific GC B cells coincided with serum antibody immunodominance directed against LACK (Figure 1E) at 30 days after priming. Further, the extent of affinity maturation of the elicited antigen-specific serum antibodies was assessed by ELISA assay based on the difference in binding of antibodies to the peptides at the low density (1:500 peptide:lipid ratio) versus at the high density (1:50 ratio) as previously established [62]. A considerable advantage in affinity maturation of the LACK-specific B cells compared to the MPER-specific B cells was evident. The relative affinity maturation of G1-LACK (95.3 %) and G2-LACK-78.2) were both high (Figure 1F). On the other hand, affinity maturation against the MPER was low (33%) and there was no significant difference between MPER-specific B cells between G1 and G2 (Figure 1F). Importantly, the affinity maturation was significantly better against LACK than against the MPER. The immunodominant antibody response was maintained regardless of differences in MPER conjugation strategy and sequence used. Therefore, the results suggest that intrinsic affinity of BCRs for the LACK is higher than that of MPER immunogens.

We next compared the antigenicity of the polyclonal antibodies elicited by NpMPER/liposomes vs pMPERTM/liposomes. While the binding of polyclonal antibodies from G2 to NpMPER immunogen is relatively high, the antibody binding for W680A mutant MPER (NpW680A) and pMPERTM was abolished as revealed by surface plasmon resonance (SPR) analysis (Figure 1G). The result confirms that the dominant antibody response in G2 is

directed towards the C-terminal W680 residue and the NH_2 chemical group as previously determined and noted above [59]. On the other hand, similar binding reactivity for NpMPER and NpW680A was obtained by polyclonal antibodies elicited by pMPERTM/liposome (Figure 1G). The results suggest that the pMPERTM can serve as a better priming immunogen, given that the pMPERTM-induced memory B cells imprint their epitope specificity free of NH_2 or CH_3CO group at the C-or N-terminus of the peptide immunogens.

Heterologous boosting with successive changes in MPER and helper epitope peptides promote the expansion of long-lived plasma cells augmenting the MPER-specific serum antibody response.

While the potential of pMPERTM as a prime immunogen is valid, the magnitude and affinity of pMPERTM-elicited serum antibodies are suboptimal. Given the LACK peptide immunodominance in generating humoral responses, we first tested whether heterologous boosting with different MPER immunogens and/or various helper epitope peptides could refocus immune responses away from the LACK. As shown in Figure 2A, control group (G1) was immunized three times with pMPERTM/sLACK, whereas mice primed with pMPERTM/sLACK were boosted first with pMPERTM/soluble HIV30 (sHIV30) helper peptides and subsequently with pMPERTM/soluble OVA (sOVA) helper peptides in the place of sLACK in G2. Since a relative binding affinity of pMPERTM-elicited antibodies are much higher for NpMPER and NpW680A (Figure 1G), the NpMPER and the NpW680A immunogens were also selected as a heterologous booster immunogen along with homologous sLACK (G3). In addition, the effect of heterologous B cell and CD4 T cell antigen boosting first with NpMPER/sHIV30, followed by NpW680A/sOVA was also compared (G4). Mice in each group were first primed with pMPERTM/sLACK followed by boosting twice with the indicated various MPER and/or the helper peptide antigens (Figure 2A). Immune sera collected 30 days after the final immunization were characterized to compare magnitude and quality of the elicited antibodies.

Overall, the MPER-directed serum titer was increased by ELISA measured against NpMPER/liposome antigen in all groups boosted with heterologous MPER and/or heterologous helper peptides compared to the control group boosted with homologous pMPERTM/sLACK (G1) (Figure 2B). However, significantly higher anti-MPER serum IgG titer (5.5-fold) was elicited when mice were boosted with both the heterologous MPER and the

heterologous helper epitope peptides (G4) compared to heterologous MPER and homologous sLACK in G3 (2.4-fold) and the homologous pMPERTM and the heterologous helper epitope peptides in G2 (1.5-fold) (Figure 2B). A relative binding affinity of purified polyclonal antibodies for MPER/liposome assessed by SPR analysis also trended with the ELISA results and was most evident for G4 (Figure 2C).

As plasma cells (PCs) are a source of circulating serum antibody levels, we next tested the effect of each immunization regimen on the generation of MPER-specific long lived plasma cells (LLPC). 30 days following the final immunization, isolated bone marrow (BM) cells were cultured in wells coated with NpMPER/liposome to assess the frequency of antibody secreting cells (ASCs). Enzyme-linked immunospot (ELISPOT) analysis demonstrated that the frequency of ASCs (spots/million cells) in BM is considerably higher in G4 (mean=129) compared to G3 (83), G2 (25) and G1(22) (Figure 2D). Therefore, the 5.8-fold increase in ASCs in BM for G4 correlates well with the 5-fold increase in serum antibody compared to that in the homologous immunization control group G1. Further, the analysis of antibody avidity for MPER/liposome within ASCs in BM estimated that the percentage of cells binding both MPER/liposomes at 1:500 and MPER/liposomes at 1:50 (peptide to lipid ratio, mol:mol) reached at nearly 50-55% in all groups (Figure 2E). We also measured affinity maturation of serum antibodies as short-lived PCs, with some PCs derived from memory B cells residing in tissues perhaps contributing to the total plasma antibodies. Although the affinity/avidity of anti-MPER serum antibody was enhanced by about 2-fold by boosting with the heterologous MPER and the heterologous helper peptides (G4) compared to the homologous immunization (G1), the affinity maturation rate of anti-MPER serum antibodies achieved 40% in total with G4 (Figure 2F), suggesting that a majority of ASCs may have produced low affinity antibodies.

Epitope mapping analysis suggests clonal selection and expansion of MPER-specific antibodies by heterologous boosts with successive changes in MPER and helper epitope peptides

We next assessed the qualitative difference in the polyclonal antibody responses elicited by each immunization group. The resulting purified serum IgGs collected at 30 days after the final boost were first investigated for MPER-N (a.a 662-676) vs MPER-C segment (a.a 667-683) specific antibody responses by SPR. The relative binding reactivity of the polyclonal antibodies for MPER-N/liposomes was comparable to that for MPER-C/liposomes when mice were

boosted with homologous pMPERTM/sLACK (G1) or when mice were boosted with NpMPER/sLACK and NpW680A/sLACK (G3) (Figure 3A). Boosting with pMPERTM/sHIV30 and pMPERTM/sOVA (G2) or with NpMPER/sHIV30 and NpW680A/sOVA immunogens (G4) induced a dominant antibody response directed to MPER-N domain (Figure 3A). To quantify MPER-N or MPER-C specific antibodies produced by ASCs in BM, BM cells were isolated for ELISPOT analysis 30 days after the final immunization. The frequency of MPER-N- specific ASCs was highest in G4 (84) followed by G3 (39)> G2 (23)> G1(12) spots/million cells, whereas the frequency of MPER-C specific ASCs was highest in G3 (40) >G4 (19)>G1 (11)>G2 (10) spots/million cells (Figure 3B). Although the magnitude of total ASCs was influenced by the context of both the MPER and the helper peptide immunogens, the recruitment of MPER-C-specific B cells appears to be influenced by the helper peptide function (Figure 3C).

To delineate the key epitope MPER residues recognized by the polyclonal antibodies from each group, a series of MPER mutants harboring single alanine substitutions were tested for the polyclonal antibody binding. A dominant contribution of MPER residues defining characteristics of antibody specificity appeared lacking when pMPERTM/sLACK-primed mice were boosted either with the homologous pMPERTM/sLACK antigens (G1) or with the homologous pMPERTM and the heterologous helper peptides (G2), as shown in Figure 3D. On the other hand, polyclonal antibody binding to MPER mediated by residues such as S668, F673, I675, W680 was apparent with each residue binding contribution ranging from 58-71% when the primed mice were boosted with the heterologous MPER and the homologous sLACK peptides (G3). Interestingly, the boost regimen with the heterologous MPERs and the heterologous helper epitope peptides (G4) elicited polyclonal antibody epitope specificity defined distinctively by a dominant contribution of residues D664, A667, S668 and W672 (Figure 3D), consistent with the frequency of ASCs producing antibodies directed to MPER-N domain exhibited in the serum antibodies (Figure 3A and B). Furthermore, the effect of the different boosting regimens on the function of antibody was also evident as the heterologous MPER immunogens (G3 and G4) compared to the homologous MPER immunogens (G1 and G2) induced improved antibody binding to gp160 expressed on the surface of 293T cells. Specifically, the heterologous G4 and G3 regimens resulted in a 3.1-fold and 1.8-fold increases, respectively, compared to the homologous G1 regimen MFI background (Figure 3E).

Secondary GC response *per se* is not correlated with the outcome of anti-MPER antibody responses.

Since the immunization regimen for G4 induced MPER-specific antibody responses greater in quality and quantity compared to the other groups, we next sought to understand the underlying cellular mechanisms for the superiority. Follicular T helper (Tfh) cells play an essential role in regulating GC reaction and consequently generating robust serum antibody responses [63]. Given that the difference in the immunization regimens between G3 and G4 (Figure 2A) is the homologous vs. the heterologous helper epitope peptides formulated in the booster vaccines, we investigated the magnitude of the secondary GC responses mediated by the different CD4 T cell helper peptides. The GC responses were measured by flow cytometry from spleens of mice 12 days post-secondary immunization at day 43. The NpMPER/sLACK boosting (G3) led to larger total Tfh (PD-1hi/CXCR5^{+}) cell frequency and numbers as well as GC B cell responses when compared to G4 boosted with the NpMPER/sHIV30 (Figure 4A, 4B and Figure S2). GC B cells were also stained with fluorophore-labeled MPER/liposome, LACK/liposome and HIV-30/liposome to assess each antigen-specific GC B cells, respectively. The frequency of MPER-specific GC B cells was slightly higher in G4 than that in G3, although not statistically significant (Figure 4C). However, the MPER-specific total GC B cell number was higher in G3 compared to that in G4 due to smaller total number of GC B cells. On the other hand, significantly more LACK-specific GC B cells than the MPER-specific GC B cells were recruited to GC reactions when mice in G3 were boosted with the sLACK (5.2% vs 1.3 %), whereas sHIV30-specific GC B cells were slightly higher than MPER-specific GC B cells in G4 boosted with the sHIV30 helper peptides (3.95 vs 1.85%) (Figure 4C).

Given that GC response is closely related to the future antibody response, recall responses were measured subsequently for anti-MPER antibody titers by ELISA. Priming of G3 and G4 with the same pMPERTM/sLACK elicited low antibody titers (Figure 4D). Boosting with the homologous sLACK in G3 induced antibody memory response with anti-MPER titer rising to day 29 and not increasing further, the heterologous boosting with sHIV30 in G4 increased the anti-MPER titer to day 29 and even by day 42 (Figure 4D). The same trend was observed when mice in G3 and G4 were boosted the second time with W680A/sLACK and W680A/sOVA. Thus, while the sLACK exerted stronger CD4 T cell help over sHIV30 to induce greater secondary GC responses, the greater anti-MPER antibody response was linked to boosting with heterologous sHIV30 than with homologous sLACK despite a smaller overall GC response.

The dominant LACK-specific secondary GC response boosted further the anti-LACK antibody titer following two homologous boosts with the sLACK in G3 (Fig, 4E, left panel). In contrast, boosting with the sHIV30 and the sOVA peptides induced weak anti-HIV30 and anti-OVA antibody responses compared to the anti-MPER antibody response in G4 (Figure 4E, right panel). The difference may be attributed to the lack of recall antibody responses mediated by HIV30- and OVA-specific memory B cells. Alternatively, or in addition, it may suggest that the intrinsic B cell affinity for the HIV30 and the OVA B cell epitopes stimulated against the helper peptides may be much lower than that for the LACK.

MPER-specific antibody responses are modulated by the immunogenicity of B cell epitopes for the helper peptides.

We next examined the capacity of sLACK, sHIV30 and sOVA CD4 T cell help to recruit MPER-specific GC B cells from spleens 12 days after mice were primed with NpMPER formulated with sLACK, sHIV30 or sOVA, respectively, (denoted as sG1, sG2 and sG3). As shown in Figure 5A-C, overall, GC responses and antigen-specific GC B cell frequencies induced by sLACK and sHIV30 trended similar to the secondary GC responses shown in Figure 4, suggesting that the relatively weak secondary GC responses induced by sHIV-30 are not due to the absence of sHIV30-specific memory CD4 T cells established after the prime in Figure 4, G4 above. Furthermore, the frequencies of Tfh and GC cells induced by sOVA were similar to the GC responses induced by sHIV30. The dominant LACK-specific GC response was consistent with greater anti-LACK antibody titer compared to anti-MPER antibody titer (Figure 5D, sG1). On the other hand, although sHIV30- and sOVA-specific GC B cells were slightly higher than the MPER-specific GC B cells, subsequent anti-HIV30 and anti-OVA antibody responses were much weaker than anti-MPER antibody responses (Figure 5D, sG2 and sG3).

The magnitude of CD4 T cell help is directly correlated with antigen amount [64]. Since CD4 T cell helper peptide encapsulation into liposome can be greatly influenced by the peptide sequence, we speculate that differences in the Tfh cell responses induced by the three different helper peptides could be attributed to the helper peptide encapsulation efficiency. To that end, we assessed the effect of liposome vaccine formulation on the recruitment of antigen-specific GC B cells. Three different groups of mice were primed with liposome vaccines arraying NpMPER and N-terminally palmitoylated CD4 T cell helper peptides (pLACK, pHIV30 or pOVA, and denoted as pG1, pG2 and pG3), respectively. In contrast to the sHIV30, the

frequency of Tfh cells from spleen of mice 14 days after the prime with NpMPER/pHIV30 was slightly higher than that induced by pLACK and pOVA (Figure 5E). GC frequency was comparable to each other (Figure 5F), suggesting that the delivery of HIV30 and OVA peptides covalently anchored in a liposome augmented the magnitude of GC responses compared to the delivery of sHIV30 and sOVA encapsulated into liposome, respectively.

On the other hand, the hierarchy of antigen-specific GC B cell frequencies was not affected by the augmented CD4 T cell help. As shown in Figure 5G, dominant LACK-specific GC B cells induced by NpMPER/pLACK trended very similar to the response elicited by NpMPER/sLACK (Figure 5C). The difference in the frequency of MPER- vs HIV30-specific GC B cells (4.9% vs 8.7%) and MPER- vs OVA-specific GC B cells (4.8% and 5.3%) was much smaller compared to that between MPER- vs LACK-specific GC B cells (2.2%vs 10.6%) (Figure 5G). Thus, the results suggest that the augmented anti-MPER response induced by G4 regimen over the antibody response elicited by G3 regimen (Figure 2A) may be linked to the intrinsic B cell affinity for antigens in the context of MPER/liposome vaccine. Subsequently, MPER-specific antibody responses were measured from immune sera collected 10 days post homologous booster immunization. Anti-MPER titer was similar in each immunization group (Figure 5H). However, NpMPER/pLACK elicited anti-LACK antibody titer much greater than anti-MPER antibody titer, whereas anti-HIV-30 and anti-OVA antibody titers were slightly higher or comparable to the anti-MPER antibody responses. Furthermore, the relative binding affinity of the purified polyclonal antibodies for low density MPER/liposome (1: 500) assessed by SPR analysis suggest that the affinity of MPER-specific antibodies elicited by NpMPER/pLACK is lower than that elicited by NpMPER/pOVA and NpMPER/pHIV30 (Figure 5I).

Priming immunogen along with augmented CD4 T cell help shapes the magnitude and the quality of the subsequent MPER-specific immune responses.

In view of the augmented CD4 T cell help by pHIV30 compared to sHIV30, we next examined the impact of co-delivery of the membrane-anchored helper peptides and the MPER arrayed on the surface of liposome. Mice primed with pMPERTM/sLACK were either boosted first with NpMPER/sHIV30 and second with NpW680A/sOVA in G1 as a control or boosted with NpMPER/pHIV30 followed by NpW680A/pOVA in G2 (Figure 6A). While all three helper epitopes exerted similar CD4 T cell helper function, LACK appears to be a more dominant B cell antigen compared to HIV30 and OVA (Figure 5). Therefore, we also examined the impact

of pMPERTM/pHIV30 priming in comparison with pMPERTM/sLACK. As indicated in Figure 6A, mice primed with pMPERTM/pHIV30 were followed by two booster immunizations with NpMPER/pOVA and NpW680A/sLACK .

Anti-MPER antibody titer was similar between G1 and G2 measured by ELISA of immune sera collected 30 days after the final immunization, whereas G3 induced modestly increased anti-MPER antibody titer compared to G1 and G2 (Figure 6B). Further ELISPOT analysis demonstrated that the frequency of ASCs in BM trended slightly higher in G2 (176) compared to ASCs induced by G1 (129) and G3 (132) spots /million cells, although not statistically significant. On the other hand, increased numbers of ASCs resided in the spleen from mice in G3 (187) compared to that in G1 (36) and G2(55) (Figure 6C). Additionally, augmented affinity maturation of MPER-specific antibodies produced from ASCs in BM elicited by G3 was pronounced compared to that elicited by G1 and G2 (Figure 6D). Likewise, the affinity of anti-MPER antibodies in plasma was also improved when mice were boosted with pHIV30 and pOVA compared to sHIV30 and sOVA helper peptides. Nonetheless the maximal effect on the induction of high affinity antibodies for the MPER was associated with either the priming immunogen per se and/or order of heterologous immunogens rather than NpMPER/pHIV30 and NpW680A/pOVA boosting module (Figure 6E). In line with the rate of antibody affinity maturation among the three groups, 27% of 293T cells expressing gp160 were stained by G3-elicited polyclonal antibodies followed by 8% and 2 % staining by the G2 and G1 equivalents (Figure 6F).

We next measured in a separate experiment the antigen-specific isotype switched memory B cells 30 days after priming with pMPERTM/sLACK (mG1) or pMPERTM/pHIV30 (mG2). The frequency and the number of MPER-specific memory B cells induced by pMPERTM/pHIV30 were larger than that by pMPERTM/sLACK (Figure 6G). Likewise, the MPER-specific recall antibody response was much higher 10 days after the homologous boost with pMPERTM/pHIV30 compared to that with pMPERTM/sLACK (Figure 6H). On the other hand, exposure of pHIV30 arrayed on the liposome surface induced higher anti-HIV30 antibody response compared to that induced by sHIV30 (Figure 6I and Figure 5D). Even though the anti-HIV30 antibody titer was higher than the anti-MPER antibody titer, the difference was smaller compared to that between anti-LACK and anti-MPER antibody titers (Figure 6I).

Discussion

In this study, we explored heterologous immunization strategies to understand factors that mitigate further expansion of existing off-target dominant B cell responses and potentiate subdominant MPER-specific B cell responses upon subsequent boosts. Earlier studies suggest that the relative affinity of the BCR determines whether a B cell will dominate the GC reaction [65,66]. In a noncompetitive environment, low affinity B cells can dominate the GC reaction [67], implying that immunogenicity of a MPER/liposome vaccine can be context dependent. Our results showed that the MPER-specific B cell responses are influenced by the competing B cell epitope directed against the helper peptides and their formulation since all other parameters such as antigen amount, valency and adjuvant are constant in the various liposome vaccines. The formulation methods of the helper peptides in the liposome vaccine appeared to modulate the amount of antigen for CD4 T cell help, influencing the GC responses and the resulting antigen-specific antibody responses with respect to their magnitude and affinity maturation. This was mainly associated with enhancing encapsulation efficiency of sHIV30 and sOVA through palmityl linkage to lipid to deliver more equivalent amounts of the helper peptide to draining lymph nodes.

Although very weak HIV30- and OVA-specific antibody responses are elicited by NpMPER/ sHIV30 and NpMPER/sOVA, the weak GC responses induced by the two helper peptides compared to the sLACK make it difficult to evaluate intrinsic B cell affinity for each helper peptide. Given the similar efficacy of CD4 T cell help on the GC responses induced by pLACK, pHIV30 and pOVA, respectively, the greater serum IgG response for the LACK peptide likely implies an intrinsically greater affinity/avidity of B cells for LACK. The data in Figure 5F and 5H regarding LACK relative to the HIV-30 and the OVA helper peptides supports this notion. Interestingly, MPER-specific GC B cells induced after priming and subsequent serum IgG responses were lowest with NpMPER/pLACK compared to pHIV30 and pOVA. Accordingly, difference in the magnitude of the vaccine-elicited antibodies specific for the MPER vs LACK was larger than that for the MPER vs pHIV-30 and for the MPER vs pOVA, indicating the influence of the helper peptide B cell epitopes on the MPER immune responses in the context of the liposome vaccines.

In heterologous prime-boost immunization settings, the dominant sLACK-specific B cells likely restrained pMPERTM-specific B cells through inter-clonal competition for the limited CD4 T cell help during GC reactions after priming. LACK-specific recall responses were

blunted following the two boosts that replaced the LACK with the sHIV30 and the sOVA peptides. As a result, greater B-cell clonal expansion and significant augmentation of the MPER-specific plasma responses were achieved by mitigating competition from B cells directed at HIV30 and OVA epitopes. Since the relative affinity differences between NpMPER vs HIV-30 or NpMPER vs OVA are more similar compared to NpMPER vs LACK booster immunogens, that comparability may be important. The narrowed antibody affinity gap upon the subsequent boost with NpMPER with sHIV30 followed by NpW680A with sOVA may be advantageous for existing MPER-specific memory B cells to quickly access antigen and/or for memory and naïve B cells to be recruited to secondary GCs enhancing resulting MPER-specific responses.

Blunting existing LACK- and HIV-30-specific memory B cells activation upon the sequential boosting with heterologous helper peptides would benefit existing MPER-specific memory B cells, given lower activation threshold for memory B cells compared to naïve B cells [68,69]. In addition, the lowered affinity gap along with the reduced helper peptide-specific memory B cell activation may compensate for the reduced CD4 T cell help provided by sHIV-30 and sOVA compared to sLACK. On the other hand, while the expansion of B cells expressing MPER-specific antibodies was promoted after the subsequent boosts with NpMPER/sLACK followed by NpW680A/sLACK, augmentation of the MPER-specific antibody response was less effective and achieved without further increased affinity of the MPER-specific antibodies. Our results underscore the competitive advantage of higher affinity B cells for limited CD4 T cell help in the elicitation of high affinity antibody response.

B cells presenting high surface peptide:MHC complex density are preferentially recruited into early GCs [70,71]. Similarly, increasing the quantity of HIV Env-specific CD4 T cell help improved the recruitment of rare VRC01 bnAb precursor B cells [72]. Our results show that increasing CD4 T cell help following subsequent boosts with pHIV30 and pOVA support greater affinity gain for MPER-specific serum IgG antibodies compared to the boosts with sHIV30 and sOVA (Figure 6D and 6E). However, the priming immunogen exerted greater influence on the outcome of MPER-specific responses, affecting the magnitude and the affinity maturation of the MPER-specific serum IgG responses. This MPER augmentation was associated with increased T cell help provided by pHIV30 over sLACK and the reduced affinity gap between B cells specific for the pMPERTM and for the pHIV30 compared to the competition between the MPER- and the dominant LACK-specific B cells for T cell help in

GCs. In turn, that resulted in greater MPER-specific memory B cell generation and anti-MPER antibodies with higher affinity at 10 days after homologous booster immunization with pMPERTM and pHIV30. Furthermore, the magnitude of MPER-specific antibody responses was also positively correlated with the induction of functionally relevant antibodies capable of binding gp160. Given the similar helper function and antibody affinity gap between OVA vs MPER and HIV30 vs MPER (Figure 5E-F and 5H), priming with pMPERTM/pOVA would have resulted in the similar outcome as the one induced by pMPERTM/pHIV30 priming. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that following boost with NpMPER/sLACK instead of NpMPER/pHIV30 after the priming with pMPERTM/pOVA may have limited MPER-specific recall responses in view of the immunodominant response directed at the LACK.

In line with our results, priming with HIV-1 fusion peptides conjugated to keyhole limpet hemocyanin (KLH) was more advantageous over an HIV-1 Env trimer vaccine for the induction of cross-clade neutralizing antibodies [73], underscoring the importance of a priming immunogen. Lack of robust MPER-specific B cell priming may limit the recall response breadth potential upon heterologous boosting somatic hypermutation of the MPER-N domain-specific memory B cells in the secondary GCs remains to be determined.

We showed previously that repeat immunizations of mice with pMPERTM/sLACK elicited MPER-specific antibodies of high affinity. Paradoxically, such antibodies were unable to binding surface expressed gp160 [49]. X-ray crystallographic analysis of recombinant mabs (rmAbs) derived from the animals revealed that the vaccine-elicited rmAb binding mechanism was structurally similar to that of human bnAb but with approaching angles unable to access the MPER on the virion. Indeed, current liposome vaccines lack quaternary structural mimicry of the steric constraints imposed by the viral membrane and the gp160 ectodomain that restrict MPER access. Such constraints are required for elicitation of high titer serum neutralizing antibodies. While improved MPER immunogen design awaits incorporation of such steric constraints into immunogen designs, our current studies suggest that optimal heterologous MPER/liposome vaccine regimens may increase the chances to recruit rare naïve B cells that can potentially develop into those producing neutralizing antibodies. Mitigating B cell responses directed at helper epitopes should be avoided by replacing helper peptides in each booster immunization. That goal can be readily achieved via our peptide/liposome vaccine platform, unlike with a complex protein antigen immunogen. The observations herein suggest

a means to suppress the existing dominant off-target helper epitope-specific immune responses elicited through a previous vaccination, obviating antigenic sin frequently observed in influenza infection and vaccination [74].

Methods

Immunization

All animal experiments were carried out in accordance with procedures and protocols approved by the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (DFCI) and Harvard Medical School Animal Care and Use Committee Institutional Review Board. Six-eight-week-old Balb/c mice were purchased from Taconic Bioscience (Germantown NY) and were housed and maintained in a specific pathogen free facility at DFCI. Mice were immunized subcutaneously with 50 µL of MPER/liposome formulations per side, as described in the following section. Blood samples were collected via tail vein puncture at various time points throughout the study. At the study's conclusion, mice were euthanized, and lymph nodes and spleens were harvested for further analysis.

MPER/Liposome Preparation

Liposomes were prepared according to methods described previously [59]. Briefly, N-terminally palmitoylated peptides including pMPERTM, NpMPER, or NpW680A were combined with lipids 1,2-dioleoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphocholine (DOPC) (Avanti Polar Lipids Inc., 850375), 1,2-dimyristoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphocholine (DMPC) (Avanti Polar Lipids Inc., 850345), 1,2-dioleoyl-sn-glycero-3-phospho-(1′-rac-glycerol) (DOPG) (Avanti Polar Lipids Inc., 840475), and 1,2-distearoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphoethanolamine-N-[methoxy(polyethylene glycol)-2000] (DSPE-PEG) (Avanti Polar Lipids Inc., 880120) at a molar ratio of 2:2:1:1. Additionally, N-terminally palmitoylated helper peptides pLACK, pHIV30, or pOVA were also included in the formulation of these liposomes (1:200 peptide to lipid ratio). The mixture was dried under a nitrogen stream and kept under vacuum overnight. The following day, liposomes were rehydrated in 1X Phosphate Buffered Saline (PBS), followed by six rounds of vortexing for 30 seconds at five-minute intervals. This was followed by six freeze-thaw cycles: the mixture was snap-frozen in liquid nitrogen for up to a minute and thawed at 37°C for five minutes. Finally, the liposomes were extruded 21 times through a 200 nm polycarbonate membrane (Whatman Inc., WHA10417004) to ensure uniform size. For soluble helper peptide-MPER liposome formulations, a final concentration of 40 µg per mouse of soluble peptides sLACK, sHIV30, or sOVA) were added to the liposomes at the time of rehydration in PBS.

Cyclic dinucleotide (CDN) adjuvant-containing liposomes were prepared by separately drying the lipids as above and incorporating the CDN for encapsulation at the time of rehydration to facilitate its encapsulation, followed by the same vortexing and freeze-thaw process. After extrusion, CDN liposomes were subjected to ultracentrifugation at 25PSI for 2 hours. The resulting pellet was resuspended in 1X PBS, and CDN encapsulation efficiency was quantified using a spectrophotometer. The final CDN concentration in the vaccine formulation was 5 µg per mouse, which was mixed with the liposome formulation at the time of immunization. The pMPERTM/liposome formulation was prepared at a molar peptide-to-lipid ratio of 1:300, while the NpMPER/liposome formulation was at 1:200. N-terminally palmitoylated helper peptides were consistently used at a 1:200 ratio in all experiments. The total lipid concentration was 25 mg/mL, with each mouse receiving 2.5 mg in a 100 µL volume. Mice (N=5 per group, unless otherwise indicated in the figure legends) were immunized subcutaneously on day 0 (primary immunization), followed by a booster on day 30 and a second booster 30 days after the first, unless specified otherwise in the figure legends.

Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) to quantify mice serum IgG

Antigen-specific IgG responses in mice sera was quantified using ELISA as described [49]. 96-well Immulon 2HB plates (Thermo Scientific, 3455) were coated overnight at 4°C with 100 µl of DOPC/DOPG (4:1) arraying NpMPER, pLACK, pHIV or pOVA at 1:50 or 1:500 peptide-to-lipid ratio (final concentration of 100 µg/ml liposome in PBS). The following day, plates were washed three times with 0.1% BSA-PBS and blocked with 100 µl of 1% BSA-PBS per well for 4 hours at RT. Mouse sera or polyclonal antibodies (PcAb), starting a dilution of 1:500, in 1% BSA-PBS were incubated overnight with gentle rocking at 4°C. After washing, specific binding was detected using goat anti-mouse immunoglobulin (IgG) secondary antibody tagged with horse radish peroxidase (HRP) (Bio-Rad, 1706516, 1:2000) for 1 hour at 4°C. Further, the plates were washed twice with 0.1% BSA-PBS and twice with PBS. Bound antibody was detected by incubating with o-phenylenediamine (OPD) (Sigma-Aldrich, p9029) solution in citrate buffer (pH 4.5) for 7 minutes. The OPD reaction was stopped with 2.25 M H_2SO_4, and absorbance was measured at 490 nm using a Victor X4 plate reader (Perkin-Elmer). Data was analyzed using Graphpad prism v10.

ELISPOT quantification of antigen specific ASCs

Antigen-specific antibody secreting cells (ASCs) from bone marrow and spleen of Balb/c mice were quantified by Enzyme-linked immunosorbent spot (ELISPOT) as described earlier [75]. Assay was performed in 96-well 0.45-µm, hydrophobic, high-protein-binding Immobilon-P polyvinylidene difluoride (PVDF) membrane plates (EMD Millipore, Billerica, MA). Plates were activated with 35% ethanol for 30 sec and then washed eight times with distilled water. The activated plates were incubated with 100 µl per well of 100µg/ml Np-MPER/liposome formulations in PBS (1:50 or 1:500 peptide:lipid ratio; 4:1 DOPC:DOPG ratio) overnight at 4°C. Next day, the plates were washed six times with 0.1% BSA-PBS, blocked with 200 µl/well 1% BSA-PBS for 4h at RT. Plates were briefly washed with RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% FBS, glutamine, 2-mercaptoethanol, and penicillin-streptomycin, and then blocked for 1 h at 37°C with the same medium. Bone marrow and spleens were isolated from mice and single cell suspensions were obtained by filtration through 70 µm cell strainers in growth media. The cell suspensions were strained again through 70 µm, and 500,000 cells were added to the wells in 50-µl volumes. Cells were incubated overnight at 37°C and 5% CO_2 in a humidified chamber. The next day, wells were washed six times with 0.1% BSA-PBS and blocked for 1.5 hours with 1% BSA-PBS. After discarding the blocking buffer, bound antibody was detected using 0.6 µg/ml alkaline phosphatase (AP)-conjugated goat anti-mouse secondary anti-IgG antibody (Jackson ImmunoResearch, West Grove, PA) in 1% BSA-PBS. To visualize MPER-specific bound antibody, wells were washed eight times, and 100 µl of 5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl phosphate/nitro blue tetrazolium (BCIP/NBT) solution was added for 5 minutes. Plates were washed with distilled water and dried overnight. Spots were quantified using a CTL ImmunoSpot ELISPOT plate reader and ImmunoSpot 3 software (CTL, Shaker Heights, OH).

ADAgp145 binding assay using Flow cytometry

HEK293T cells (ATCC, CRL-3216) were cultured in DMEM supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), 2 mM L-glutamine, and 1% penicillin-streptomycin. Cells , were transiently transfected with HIV-1 ADA gp145 Env at 60–70% confluence using polyethylenimine (PEI Max, Polysciences) in a 1:3 plasmid-to-PEI (weight to weight) ratio as described [49]. Cells were harvested 48 hours post-transfection in FACS buffer (1x PBS with 2% FBS, 1 mM EDTA, and 0.1% sodium azide). 100,000 cells were incubated with or without 5 µg PcAb at room temperature for 1 hour. Cells were washed 2X with FACS buffer followed by staining with Phycoerythrin (PE)-conjugated goat anti-mouse IgG (Southern Biotech, 1030-09,

1:500) and Zombie Aqua Fixable viability dye (BioLegend, 423101, 1:500) at 4°C for 30 minutes. Cell-surface fluorescence was analyzed using a BD LSR Fortessa. Data was analyzed using Flow Jo and median fluorescence intensity (MFI) was calculated by subtracting the signal from untransfected cells stained with the corresponding PcAb.

Surface plasmon resonance (SPR) measurements

BIAcore experiments were performed as described [59] using a BIAcore 3000 or BIAcore 1K system with either a Pioneer L1 sensor chip or a Series S L1 chip at 25°C. Data analysis was conducted using BIAevaluation 3.1 software (BIAcore). f. DOPC/DOPG liposomes (150–250 μM) in 20 mM HEPES, 0.15 M NaCl, pH 7.4 (HBS-N) were applied to the sensor chip surface at a flow rate of 3 μL/min to form a supported lipid bilayer. To remove multilamellar structures, 20 μL of 25 mM sodium hydroxide was injected at 100 μL/min, stabilizing the baseline response units (RU) between 3000 and 6000, corresponding to the immobilized bilayer. Polyclonal antibodies were purified from mouse sera using a GammaBind Plus Sepharose column (GE Healthcare). Purified antibodies 30-40μg/ml were injected over the peptide-liposome complex at a flow rate of 20 μL/min for 3 minutes. Following binding analysis, the peptide-liposome complexes were removed using sequential injections of 40 mM CHAPS and a 3:2 mixture of 50 mM sodium hydroxide and isopropyl alcohol. The same protocol was used to test antibody reactivity against both N-terminal and C-terminal MPER peptide/liposome complex.

For epitope mapping, DOPC/DOPG liposomes (150–250 μM) were injected at 3 μL/min to establish a lipid bilayer on the sensor chip. To remove excess multilamellar structures, 20 μL of 25 mM sodium hydroxide was injected at 100 μL/min, resulting in a stable baseline (RU: 4500–6000). Alanine-scanning mutagenesis was performed on parental MPER sequences used for immunization. Peptide variants (0.5 μM) were freshly prepared in the running buffer before injection. Each peptide (60 μL) was injected over the immobilized liposome bilayer at 5 μL/min, followed by antibody injection (60–80 μg/mL) for 3 minutes at 10 μL/min. To regenerate the sensor surface, liposomes were removed using 25 μL of 40 mM CHAPS at 5 μL/min, followed by 10 μL of a NaOH (50 mM)/isopropyl alcohol (6:4) mixture at 20 μL/min. Each peptide injection was performed on a freshly prepared liposome surface. The relative reactivity of purified polyclonal antibodies to MPER alanine mutants was determined by measuring response units at the 3-minute dissociation time point. Sensorgrams were recorded during a 3-minute association phase followed by a 3-minute dissociation phase. At least two independent

experiments were conducted, varying peptide and antibody concentrations to assess the relative binding reactivity to each MPER mutant.

Flow cytometry analysis

Single-cell suspensions were prepared from spleen tissue as described previously [50] by mashing the tissue through a 70 µm nylon mesh cell strainer (Corning, Durham, NC). Cells were then resuspended in FACS buffer. For each sample, 5 million cells were transferred to the wells of a conical-bottom 96-well plate and sequentially stained for 20 minutes on ice with Fixable Viability Zombie Aqua or Zombie NIR dyes (Biolegend), followed by washing with FACS buffer. Antibody staining was performed by first resuspending the cells in 50 µl of Fc block (CD16/32, BD Biosciences) and incubating on ice for 10 minutes. Afterward, cells were mixed with 50 µl of an antibody cocktail targeting T follicular helper (TfH) marker (CD4-Pacific blue (clone GK1.5), CD44-PECy7(clone IM7), CD62L-BV611(clone MEL-14), CXCR5-APC (clone L138D7), and PD1-FITC (clone 29F.1A12) (Biolegend). For antigen-specific GC B cell staining (MPER- and LACK/HIV/OVA-specific), cells were stained with viability dyes followed by incubation with 100 µg/ml NpMPER formulated with fluorescent 18:1 Liss Rhod PE and 1,2-dioleoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphoethanolamine-N-(lissamine rhodamine B sulfonyl) (ammonium salt), as well as pLACK/pHIV/pOVA formulated with fluorescent 18:1 PE CF1,2-dioleoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphoethanolamine-N-(carboxyfluorescein) (ammonium salt) liposomes (Avanti Polar Lipids, Inc, AL, USA). This incubation was performed for 1 hour on ice. After staining, the cells were washed twice with 200 µl of FACS buffer, followed by a Fc block as described above. Cells were then stained with antibodies targeting GC B cell markers (B220-PerCP/BV85 (clone RA3-6B2), IgD-BV510/APCCy7 (clone 1126C2A), CD38-BV421 (clone 90), GL7-Pac-Blue (clone GL7), IgG-APC (clone Poly4053) (Biolegend) and analyzed on an LSRFortessa II cell analyzer (BD Biosciences). Data analysis was performed using FACSDiva and FlowJo software (version 10.8.1, Tree Star). Cell gating strategies are outlined in figures S1B and S2. Flow cytometry was conducted at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

Statistical analysis

All mouse experiments were conducted two to three times, with each group consisting of 4–6 mice, unless indicated in the figure legends. Data were analyzed using either a non-parametric t-test for comparisons between two datasets or a one-way ANOVA for multiple groups, with Sidak's or Tukey's multiple comparison tests applied as appropriate. Statistical differences

were denoted by p-values: ****$p < 0.0001$, ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$, while $p > 0.05$ was considered not significant. Analyses were conducted using GraphPad Prism v10.

Lead Contact

Further information and requests for resources and reagents should be directed to and will be fulfilled by the lead contact, Mikyung Kim (mikyung_kim@dfci.harvard.edu).

Materials availability

All cell lines, plasmids, and other stable reagents generated in this paper are available from the lead contact under a complete Materials Transfer Agreement.

Data and code availability

- This paper does not report original code.
- Any additional information required to reanalyze the data reported in this paper is available from the lead contact upon request

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Declaration of interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Supplemental information

Document S1. Figures S1 and S2

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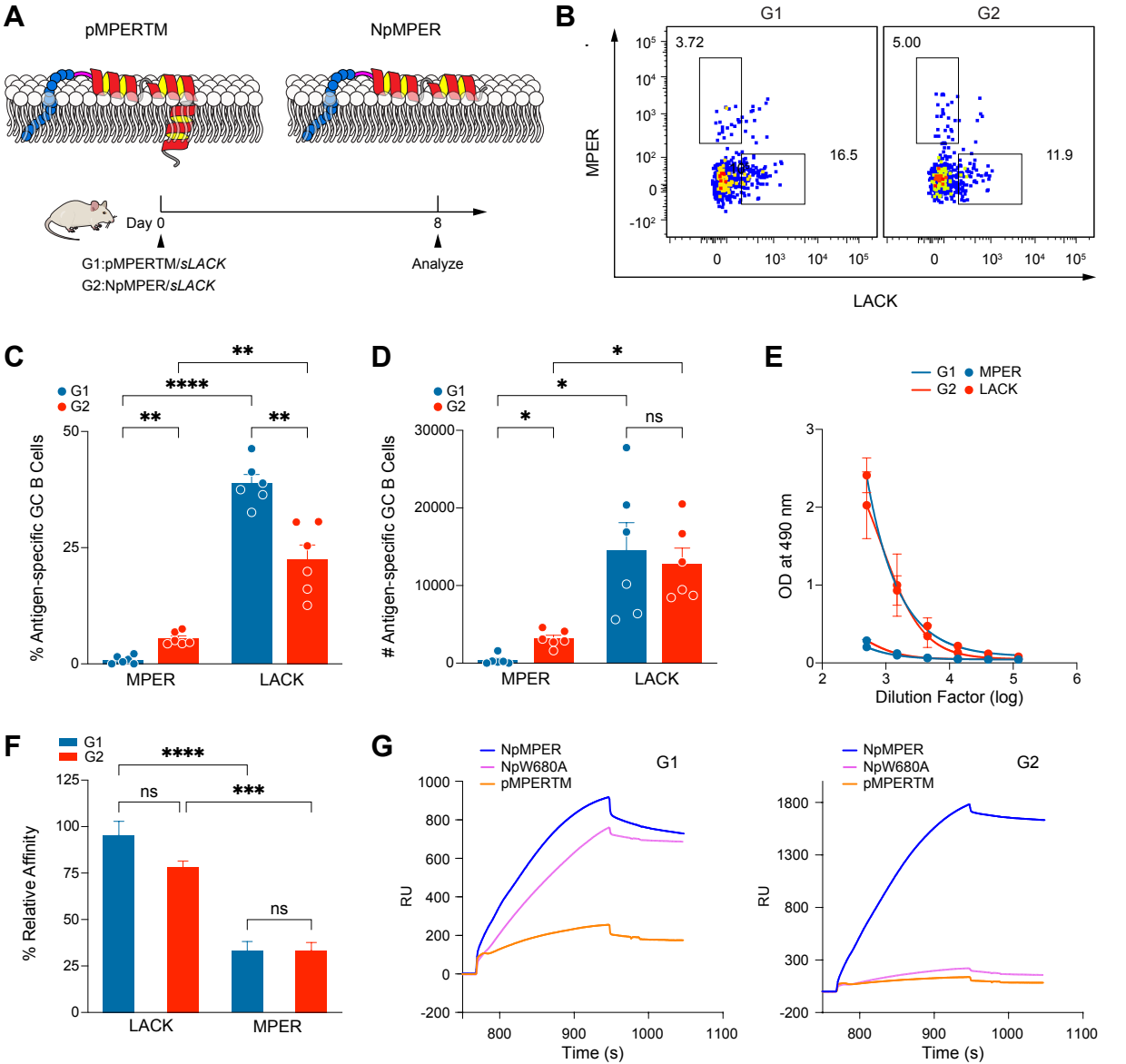
A
pMPERTM
NpMPER
Day 0
8
G1:pMPERTM/sLACK
G2:NpMPER/sLACK
Analyze
B
G1
G2
3.72
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5.00
11.9
MPER
LACK
C
G1
G2
% Antigen-specific GC B Cells
MPER
LACK
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Antigen-specific GC B Cells
ns
E
G1
G2
MPER
LACK
OD at 490 nm
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% Relative Affinity
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G
NpMPER
NpW680A
pMPERTM
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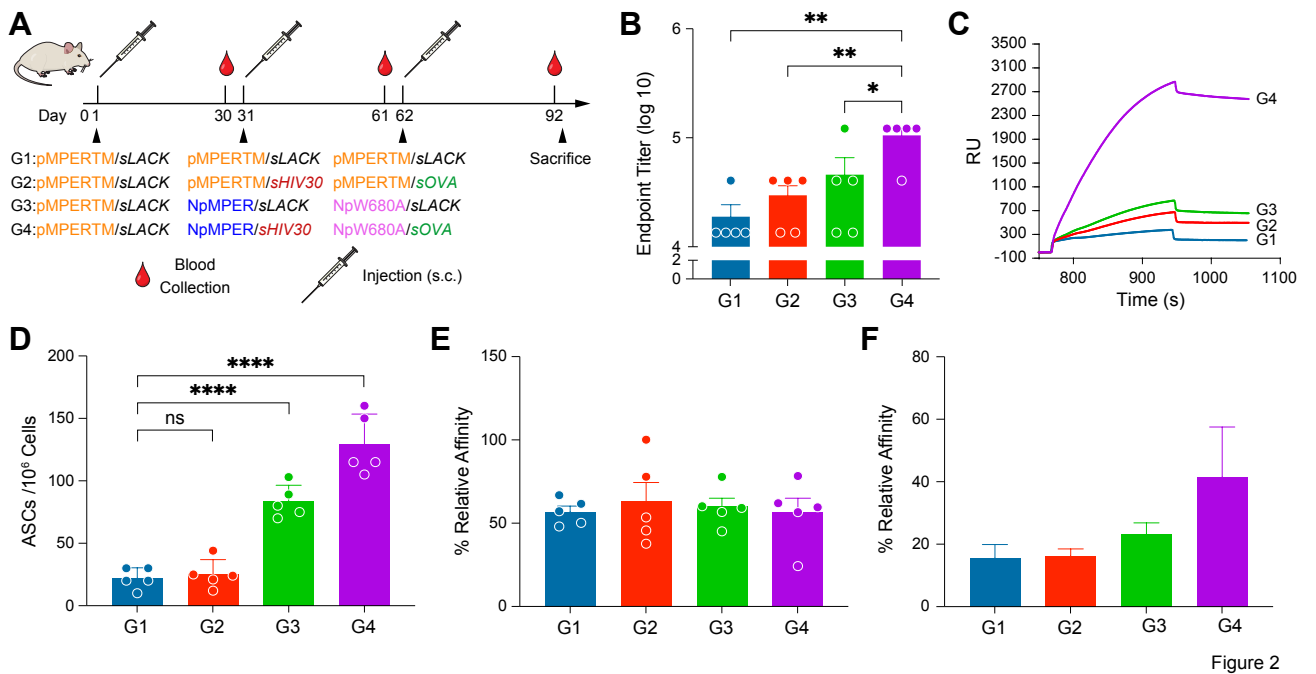
Time (s)

Figure 1

Figure 1. Dominant immune responses directed to the LACK helper peptide elicited by MPER/liposome vaccines.

A) Schematic representation of MPER immunogens arrayed on the surface of liposome vaccine. B) Representative flow cytometry staining of MPER ($B220^{+}IgD^{-}CD38^{-}GL7^{+}MPER\text{-}PE^{+}$) and LACK ($B220{+}IgD^{-}CD38^{-}GL7^{+}LACK\text{-}FITC^{+}$) specific GC B cells. Gating strategy in Figure S1B. C-D) Frequency (C) and number (D) of MPER- and LACK- specific GC B cells assessed on day 8 after primary immunization (also see Figure S1B-C). Data is represented as mean ± SEM (n=6). The results shown are representative of two independent experiments. Statistically significant differences between groups were determined by non-parametric t-test, denoted by p values: *$p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$*** $p < 0.001$. E) MPER- and LACK-specific IgG titers from the immune sera collected on day 30 after immunization with pMPERTM or NpMPER formulated with sLACK helper peptides. F) Percentage relative affinities of MPER- and LACK-specific serum IgGs collected 30 days after homologous boost immunization assessed by ELISA against MPER/liposome and LACK/liposome, respectively. Absorbance values used for calculating the ratio were specifically determined by finding the absorbance at the high density MPER or LACK/liposome (peptide to lipid ratio of 1:50) EC50 and using that EC50 dilution to find the absorbance given on the low density MPER or LACK/liposome (1:500) curve. The ratio was then plotted on the ordinate as a percentage to compare the relative affinity. G) Antigenicity of the purified polyclonal antibodies elicited by G1 and G2 immunogens. Surface plasmon resonance (SPR) sensograms depict the relative binding reactivity of the elicited antibodies for NpMPER/liposome, pMPERTM/liposome and NpW680A/liposome. Data shown is representative of three independent experiments.


A
Day 0 1
30 31
61 62
92
Sacrifice
G1:pMPERTM/sLACK pMPERTM/sLACK pMPERTM/sLACK
G2:pMPERTM/sLACK pMPERTM/sHIV30 pMPERTM/sOVA
G3:pMPERTM/sLACK NpMPER/sLACK NpW680A/sLACK
G4:pMPERTM/sLACK NpMPER/sHIV30 NpW680A/sOVA
Blood Collection
Injection (s.c.)
B
Endpoint Titer (log 10)
G1 G2 G3 G4
C
RU
Time (s)
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G3
G2
G1
D
ASCs /10^6 Cells
ns
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G1 G2 G3 G4
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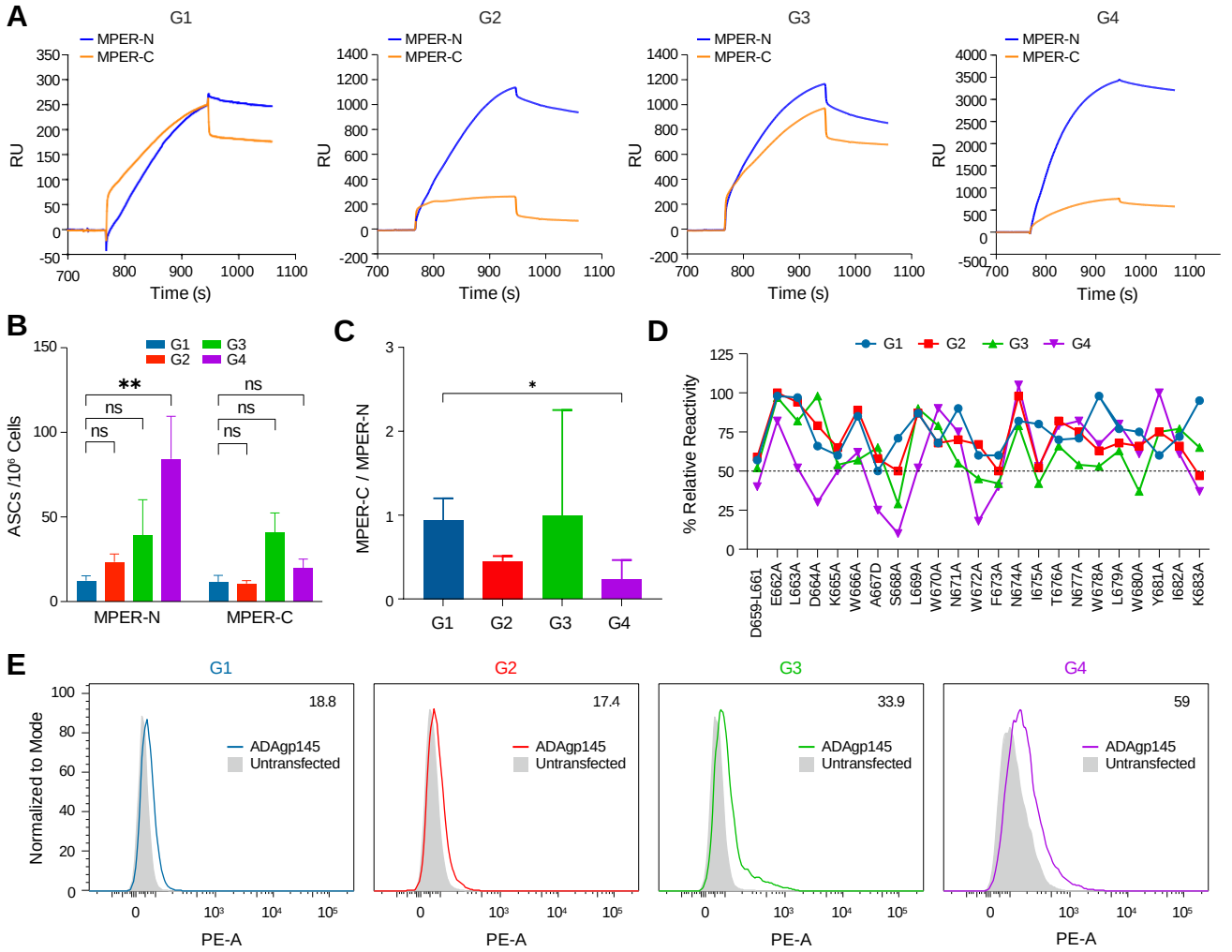
% Relative Affinity
G1 G2 G3 G4

Figure 2

Figure 2. Comparison of MPER-specific immune responses elicited by various heterologous immunization regimens.

A) Schematics of immunization schedule and heterologous immunization regimens. Balb/c mice were immunized subcutaneously with various MPER/liposome vaccines formulated with helper peptides and adjuvant at the specified time points. B) MPER-specific IgG endpoint titers (log10) from ELISA of immune sera against NpMPER/liposome collected 30 days after the third immunization (n=5). Data are representative of two independent experiments. Error bars represent mean ± SEM. Statistical differences were assessed by one-way ANOVA with Sidak's multiple comparison test $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$. C) Relative binding activity of the purified polyclonal antibodies elicited by each group for high density MPER/liposome (1:50) assessed by SPR analysis. The NpMPER/liposome was captured on L1 chip surface and sensorgrams illustrate the specific binding signal, measured in response units (RUs), on the y-axis as a function of time during the association and dissociation phases on the x-axis for each antibody at the concentration of 30ug/ml. Data shown are representative of three independent experiments. D) Frequency of MPER-specific ASCs in bone marrow 30 days after the final immunization with each group indicated in A. Numbers of MPER-binding ASCs were determined by ELISPOT assay using high density NpMPER/liposome (1:50) as the capture antigen. Data is represented as mean ± SEM from one of three independent experiments (n=5). Statistically significant differences between different groups were determined by one-way ANOVA with Sidak's multiple comparison test denoted by p values: $****p < 0.0001$ E) Relative affinities of antibodies secreted from ASCs measured by ELISPOT assay. The relative affinities were calculated by determining the high density MPER/Liposome (1:50) and low density (1:500) MPER/liposome binding ASCs from bone marrow cells. Data is represented as mean ± SEM from one of the three independent experiments (n=5). No statistically significant differences were observed F) Relative affinities of MPER-specific IgGs in serum collected 30 days after the third immunization were assessed by calculating the ratio of MPER/liposome binding at low density (1:500) to high density (1:50) using ELISA with percent of relative affinities plotted. Hence the higher the percentage, the greater the affinity. The data is presented as mean ± SEM from one of two independent experiments, each with n = 5. No statistically significant differences were observed.


A
G1
G2
G3
G4
MPER-N
MPER-C
RU
Time (s)
B
G1
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G3
G4
ASCs /10⁶ Cells
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ns
MPER-N
MPER-C
C
MPER-C / MPER-N
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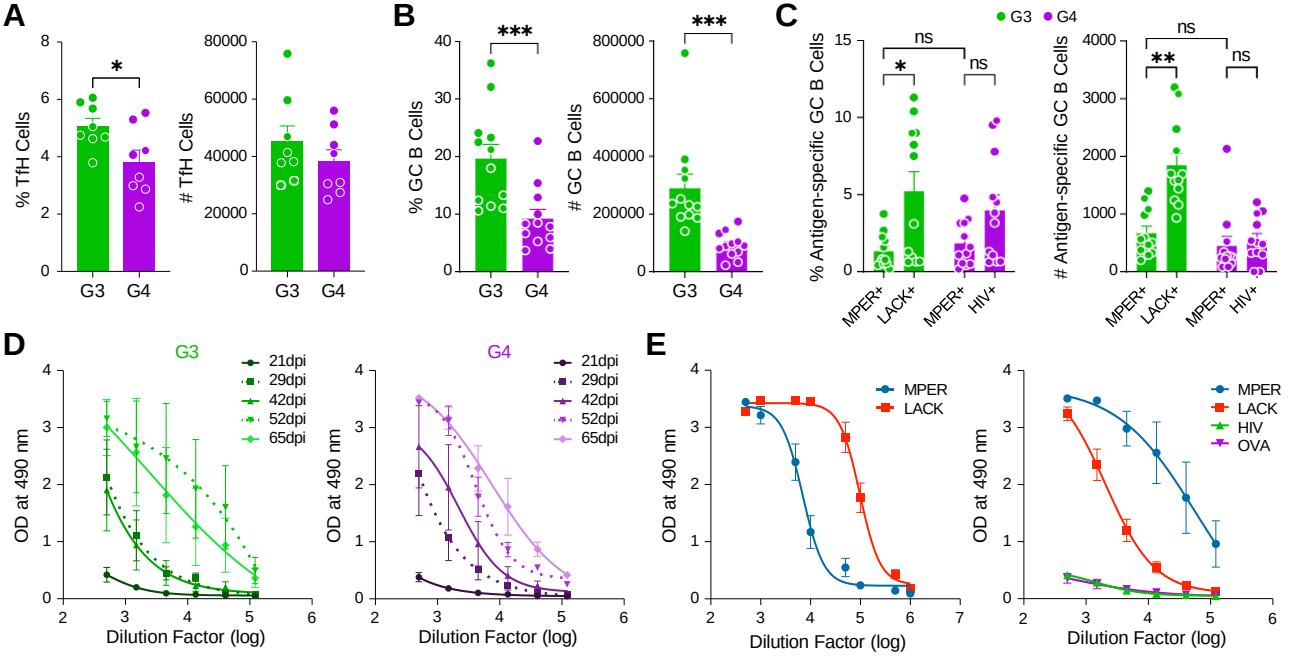
D
% Relative Reactivity
D659-L661
E662A
L663A
D664A
K665A
W666A
A667D
S668A
L669A
W670A
N671A
W672A
F673A
N674A
I675A
T676A
N677A
W678A
L679A
W680A
Y681A
I682A
K683A
E
Normalized to Mode
ADAgp145
Untransfected
18.8
17.4
33.9
59
PE-A

Figure 3

Figure 3. Characteristics of MPER-specific antibodies elicited by various heterologous immunizations.

A) Qualitative binding analysis of MPER-N and MPER-C domain- specific antibodies elicited by the indicated groups in Figure 2A. SPR sensorgrams are shown for the purified polyclonal antibody binding from each group to MPER-N/liposome and MPER-C/liposome. The antibodies were tested at a concentration of 30-40 ug/ml by injection over L1 chip-bound MPER/liposomes at a flow rate of 20 ul/min for 3 min. MPER-N is shown in dark blue, while MPER-C is in tan. B) Frequencies of MPER-N and MPER-C domain- specific ASCs in bone marrow measured by ELISPOT. Bar graph represents the quantification of ASCs calculated from 10^6 bone marrow cells from different groups as indicated in Figure 2A. Statistically significant differences between different groups were determined by two-way ANOVA with Tukey's multiple comparison test denoted by p values: $^{**}p < 0.01$ C) The ratio of MPER-C vs MPER-N- specific ASCs based on the frequencies of ASCs estimated in B. Statistically significant differences between different groups were determined by one-way ANOVA with Sidak's multiple comparison test denoted by p values: $^{*}p < 0.05$. Data in B and C is shown is representative of one of two independent experiments with no. of animals (n=5). D) Epitope mapping analysis by BIAcore of the purified polyclonal antibodies from each group by use of liposome-bound serial single alanine MPER mutants. The y axis shows the percent relative binding activities of antibodies against each single-residue mutant compared to that of wild-type MPER (100%). The % relative binding activities of antibodies against D659-L661 was calculated based on the difference in binding response units for wild type D659-L661 MPER (a.a 659-682) and for wild type MPER (a.a 662-682). E) ADA gp145 binding by the various vaccine-elicited antibodies by flow cytometry. Negative control staining with each corresponding the purified antibodies is in gray and MFI values are indicated after subtraction of the antibody binding from each group to untransfected 293T cells. Representative of n = 2 biologically independent experiments shown.


A
% TfH Cells
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% GC B Cells
# GC B Cells
C
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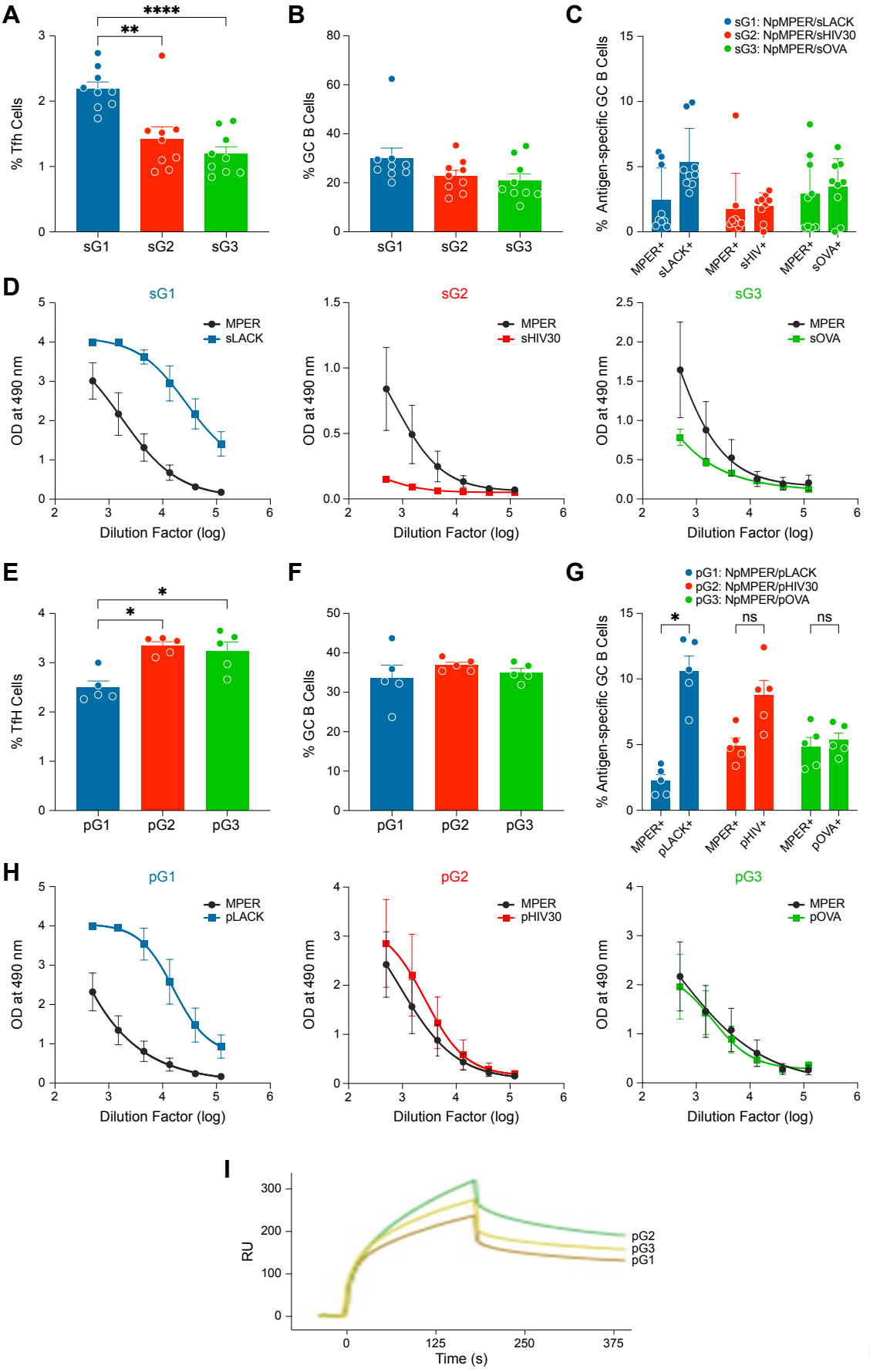
G4
% Antigen-specific GC B Cells
# Antigen-specific GC B Cells
ns
MPER+
LACK+
HIV+
D
G3
G4
21dpi
29dpi
42dpi
52dpi
65dpi
OD at 490 nm
Dilution Factor (log)
E
MPER
LACK
HIV
OVA

Figure 4

Figure 4. Secondary GC responses following boost with MPER immunogen formulated with homologous vs heterologous helper epitope peptides.

A-C) Frequencies and numbers following booster immunization of Tfh cells ($CD4^+CD44^+CD62L^-PD1^+CXCR5^+$) (A) (also see Figure S2) GC B cells ($B220^+IgD^-CD38^-GL7^+$) (B), and antigen-specific GC B cells). Statistical significance was determined using unpaired t-test, with p-values indicated as $*p < 0.05$, $***p < 0.001$. (C). Balb/c mice primed with pMPERTM/sLACK were boosted with NpMPER/sLACK (G3) or NpMPER/sHIV30 (G4). The TfH and GC responses induced by G3 and G4 were assessed by flow cytometry from spleen on day 12 after the boost. Symbols represent individual animals, and error bars indicate mean ± SEM. MPER- ($B220^+IgD^-CD38^-GL7^+MPER\text{-}PE^+$), LACK- ($B220^+IgD^-CD38^-GL7^+LACK\text{-}FITC^+$) and HIV30- ($B220^+IgD^-CD38^-GL7^+HIV\text{-}FITC^+$) specific GC B cells quantified and presented in bar graphs as percent and total cell number. The data are cumulative from two or three independent experiments. Error bars represent mean ± SEM. Statistical significance was determined using one-way ANOVA with Tukey's multiple comparison test, with p-values indicated as $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$. D) MPER-specific IgG titers from immune sera collected at the indicated timepoints. The broken lines indicate immune sera collected on day 29 and day 52 after primary immunization, respectively. The data are represented as binding curves, with log serial dilutions of serum on the x-axis and absorbance values on the y-axis. E) ELISA to check serum IgG titers for MPER/liposome, LACK/liposome, HIV30/liposome and OVA/liposome. The immune sera were collected 30 days after the third immunization and LACK- vs MPER-specific antibody titers induced by G3 regimen (left) are compared with MPER-, LACK-, HIV30- and OVA-specific antibody titers induced by G4 regimen (right).


A
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% Tfh Cells
sG1
sG2
sG3
B
% GC B Cells
sG1
sG2
sG3
C
sG1: NpMPER/sLACK
sG2: NpMPER/sHIV30
sG3: NpMPER/sOVA
% Antigen-specific GC B Cells
MPER+
sLACK+
MPER+
sHIV+
MPER+
sOVA+
D
sG1
MPER
sLACK
sG2
MPER
sHIV30
sG3
MPER
sOVA
OD at 490 nm
Dilution Factor (log)
E
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% TfH Cells
pG1
pG2
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F
% GC B Cells
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pG1: NpMPER/pLACK
pG2: NpMPER/pHIV30
pG3: NpMPER/pOVA
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MPER+
pLACK+
MPER+
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pOVA+
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pOVA
OD at 490 nm
Dilution Factor (log)
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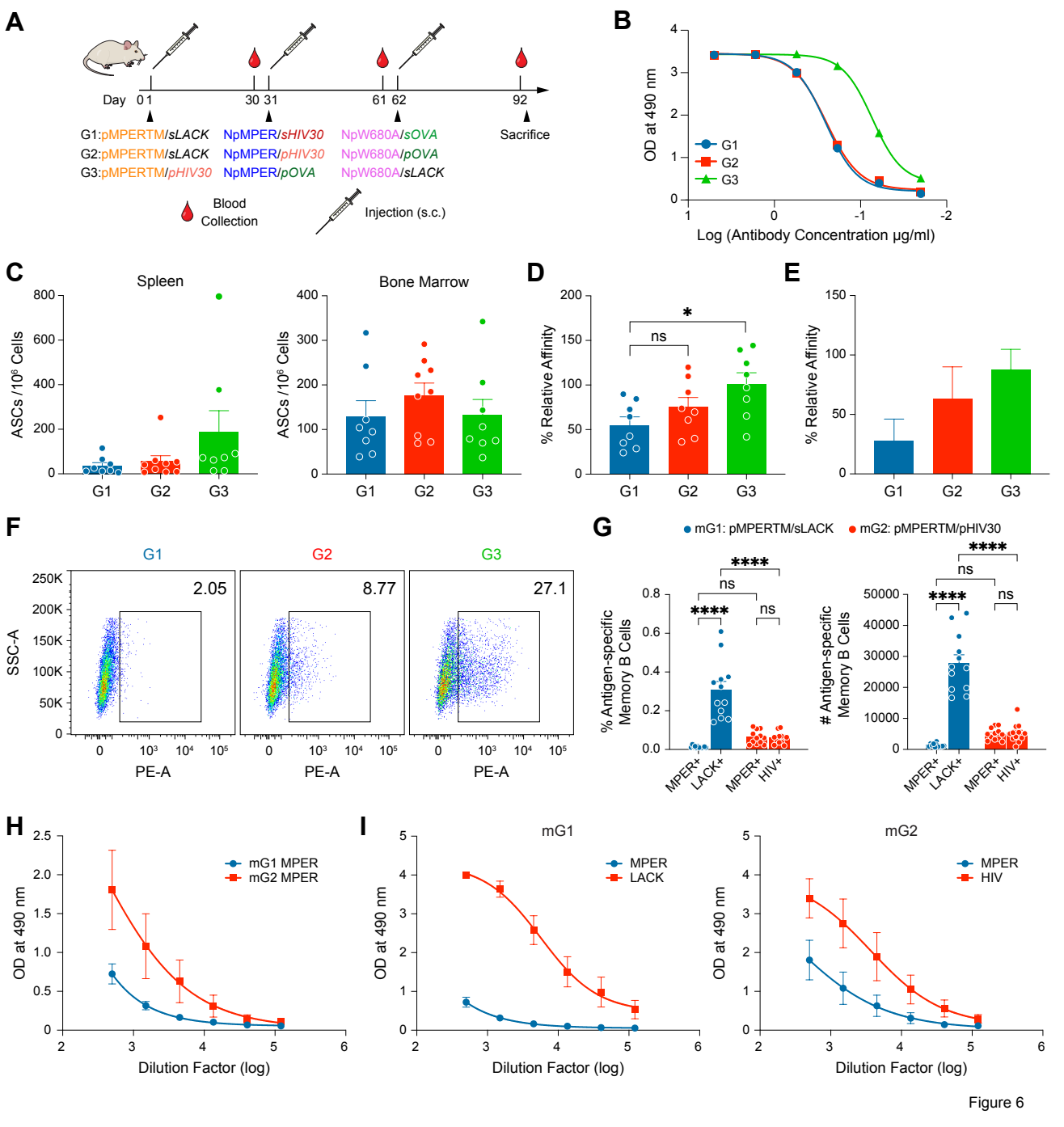
pG1
Time (s)

Figure 5

Figure 5. Effects of various helper epitope peptide formulation methods on the efficacy of CD4 T cell help and the antigen-specific antibody responses.

A-C) Flow cytometric analysis and quantification of the percentage of Tfh cells (A) Statistical significance was determined using one-way ANOVA with Tukey's multiple comparison test, with p-values indicated as $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{****}p < 0.0001$. GC B cells (B) and antigen-specific GC B cells in the spleens of Balb/c mice on day 12 post primary immunization. Mice were immunized with NpMPER/liposome with sLACK (sG1), sHIV30 (sG2) or sOVA helper peptides (sG3) encapsulated inside liposome vaccine, respectively. Error bars represent mean ± SEM from n = 8 animals, based on one of the two independent experiments. (D) Comparison of antigen-specific serum IgG titers measured by ELISA. MPER-specific IgG titers from immune sera of mice in each group collected 10 days after the homologous boost was compared with anti-LACK (sG1), anti-HIV30 (sG2) or anti-OVA antibody titers (sG3). (E-G) GC responses induced by co-delivery of helper peptides pLACK, pHIV30 or pOVA with NpMPER/liposome. (E) Frequency of Tfh cells, (F) GC B cells and (G) antigen-specific GC B cells in the spleen of Balb/c mice on day 12 after primary immunization with NpMPER/pLACK (pG1), NpMPER/pHIV30 (pG2) and NpMPER/pOVA (pG3). Data shown are representative of two independent experiments (n=5). (H) Immunogenicity of three different helper peptide antigens. MPER-specific IgG titers by ELISA are compared across the three groups, each corresponding to the specific CD4 T cell helper peptide pLACK (pG1), pHIV30 (pG2), and pOVA (pG3). The data are presented as binding curves, with log serial dilutions of serum on the x-axis and absorbance values on the y-axis. I) A relative binding affinity of the purified polyclonal antibodies for MPER/liposome. The MPER/liposome at low density (peptide to lipid ratio of 1 :500) was captured on the L1 chip surface and the polyclonal antibodies elicited by each group were passed over the chip surface at 30ug/ml for 3 mins at the flow rate of 20ul/min. The polyclonal antibodies from each group were purified from immune sera collected 10 days after boost.


A
Day 0 1
30 31
61 62
92
G1:pMPERTM/sLACK
G2:pMPERTM/sLACK
G3:pMPERTM/pHIV30
NpMPER/sHIV30
NpMPER/pHIV30
NpMPER/pOVA
NpW680A/sOVA
NpW680A/pOVA
NpW680A/sLACK
Sacrifice
Blood Collection
Injection (s.c.)
B
OD at 490 nm
Log (Antibody Concentration µg/ml)
G1
G2
G3
C
Spleen
Bone Marrow
ASCs /10^6 Cells
D
% Relative Affinity
ns
*
E
F
G1
G2
G3
2.05
8.77
27.1
SSC-A
PE-A
G
mG1: pMPERTM/sLACK
mG2: pMPERTM/pHIV30
% Antigen-specific Memory B Cells
# Antigen-specific Memory B Cells
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ns
MPER+ LACK+
MPER+ HIV+
H
mG1 MPER
mG2 MPER
Dilution Factor (log)
I
mG1
mG2
MPER
LACK
HIV

Figure 6

Figure 6. Effects of priming immunogen and enhanced CD4 T cell help on the outcome of MPER-specific antibody responses.

(A) Schematic of heterologous immunization strategies. B) Anti-MPER serum IgG titers determined against high density NpMPER/liposome (1:50) by ELISA. Immune sera were collected 30 days after the third immunization, combined from 5 mice for each group and purified using gamma-bind plus affinity column for the assay. Data shown is representative of two independent experiments. C) Frequency of MPER-specific ASCs in spleen and bone marrow. The MPER- specific ASCs from spleen (left) and bone marrow cells (right) at 30 days after the third immunization were determined from 8 mice by ELSPOT assay. Quantification of ASCs calculated from 10^6 cells from each group as indicated. Error bars indicate mean ± SEM. D) Percent relative affinities of MPER/liposome binding IgG ASCs in bone marrow as assessed by ELISPOT assay. The frequencies of low-density MPER/liposome (1:500) and high density MPER/liposome (1:50) binding IgG ASCs were determined, and the ratios of low density MPER to high-density MPER binding were plotted as % relative affinity on the ordinate as described in Figure 1F with higher percentage indicative of greater affinity antibodies. Data is represented as mean ± SEM. Statistically significant differences between different groups were determined by non-parametric t-test, denoted by p values: $*p < 0.05$. E) Percent relative affinities of MPER-specific serum IgG antibodies measured by ELISA. Antibody titers were measured using immune sera collected on day 30 after the third immunization. No statiscally significant differences were observed. F) Vaccine-elicited antibody binding to ADA gp145 expressed on the surface of 293T cells by flow cytometry. 293T cells were transfected to express ADA gp145, and binding was measured using anti-mouse IgG-PE. Flow cytometry plots show side scatter area (SSC-A) on the Y-axis and PE fluorescence (gp145 binding) on the X-axis. The data are presented as a representative example from one of two independent experiments. G) Frequency and total cell number of MPER-specific memory B cells. Balb/c mice were immunized with pMPERTM/sLACK liposome (mG1) or pMPERTM/pHIV30 liposome (mG2), and the MPER-specific IgG memory B cells from each group was assessed in spleen on day 30 post-primary immunization. Data shown are represented as combined two independent experiments (n=12). Statistically significant differences between different groups were determined by one-way ANOVA with Tukey's multiple comparison test denoted by p values: $****p < 0.0001$. H) Difference in quantity of anti-MPER IgG responses elicited by mG1 and mG2. Immune sera were collected 10 days after the homologous booster immunization. I) Comparison of MPER and helper peptide-

specific antibody titers elicited by pMPERTM/sLACK (mG1) and by pMPERTM/pHIV30 (mG2). Data in H-I are represented as one of the two independent experiments with n=6.