Activating the CXCR3/CXCL10 pathway overrides tumor immune suppression by enhancing immune trafficking and effector cell priming in head and neck squamous cell carcinoma

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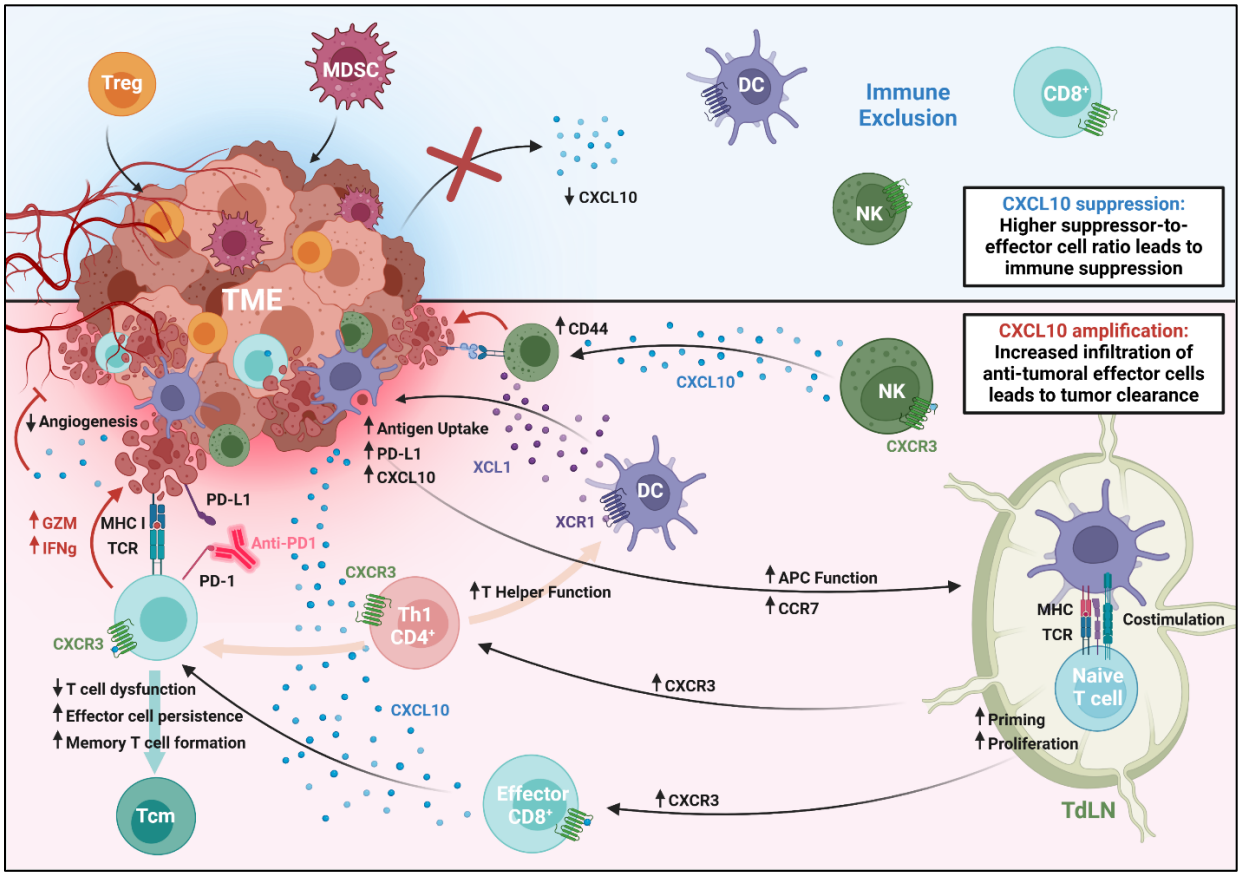
Graphical Abstract



SUMMARY

CXCL10 suppresses tumor growth and promotes immune memory by recruiting T and NK cells into the tumor microenvironment, promoting tumor-specific antigen recognition and effector functions, slowing T cell exhaustion, and inhibiting angiogenesis. CXCL10 directly and indirectly mobilizes an immune cell network that together supports an anti-tumoral microenvironment.

ABSTRACT

The immune-suppressive nature of the tumor microenvironment (TME) has limited the impact of immune checkpoint blockade in many cancers, often by restricting the infiltration and activation of anti-tumoral CD8+ T, CD4+ T, and NK cells. Here, we utilized murine models of head and neck squamous cell carcinoma and demonstrated that intratumoral (IT) delivery of CXCL10 drives tumor elimination and inhibits recurrence. CD8+ T cells recruited to tumors display enhanced activation, increased tumor antigen specificity, and decreased markers of T cell exhaustion, indicating that CXCL10 not only directs cell migration, but also enhances T cell effector functions. Despite delivery of CXCL10 into tumors, CD8+ and CD4+ T cells also show enhanced presence and proliferation in tumor-draining lymph nodes (TdLNs), consistent with antigen presentation and trafficking of these cells between tumors and TdLNs. CXCL10 also stunts angiogenesis and lymphangiogenesis within the TME, which likely contributes to its antitumoral effects. Finally, enhanced tumor clearance was observed by combining IT CXCL10 and anti-PD-1. Together, these findings provide the rationale for the clinical evaluation of CXCL10 as a strategy to enhance the efficacy of immunotherapy.

INTRODUCTION

Immunotherapy has revolutionized cancer treatment by leveraging the host immune system to target and eliminate tumors, offering new therapeutic approaches for patients with previously untreatable cancers. In particular, immune checkpoint blockade agents (ICBs) such as pembrolizumab and nivolumab have exhibited success in treating patients with recurrent or metastatic disease in several human cancers *(1)*. These agents work by disrupting PD-1/PD-L1 signaling cascades that block the activation and proliferation of cytotoxic T cells, inhibit cytokine production, and accelerate CD8+ T cell exhaustion *(2–4)*. However, despite promising results in triggering anti-tumor immune responses, favorable clinical outcomes remain limited and vary drastically across different cancers, with objective response rates of 33–40% in melanoma *(5, 6)*, 15–20% in non-small cell lung cancer *(7)*, 22–25% in renal cell carcinoma *(8)*, and 10-20% in head and neck squamous cell carcinoma *(9–11)*. The failure of these ICBs, as well as standard treatments, is due in part to the ability of resistant tumors to limit the infiltration and activation of cytotoxic CD8+ T and NK cells *(12–14)*. CD8+ T and NK release apoptosis-inducing cytotoxins like perforin and granzyme, as well as pro-inflammatory cytokines such as interferon gamma (IFN-γ) and tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF-α) to eliminate cancer *(15)*, and are essential for an effective response to immunotherapy. Accordingly, the abundance of cytotoxic cells within tumor tissue following various treatment strategies is associated with a positive prognosis in several cancers *(16–18)*. However, exclusion of these cells from tumors can result from physical barriers like dense extracellular matrix deposition *(19)*, immunosuppressive signaling from tumor and stromal cells (e.g., TGF-β and VEGF-mediated immune evasion) *(20)*, and dysfunctional vasculature that impairs effective immune cell infiltration *(21)*. Further, the mere infiltration of cytotoxic cells into the tumor microenvironment (TME) does not guarantee positive outcomes. Immunosuppressive cytokines and chronic antigen stimulation can lead to the dysfunction and exhaustion of these cells, limiting their ability to control tumor growth *(22, 23)*. Additionally, the exclusion of dendritic cells (DCs) also contributes to immune suppression by stunting the generation of T cells that are primed to tumor-specific antigens (TSAs) *(24, 25)*. Thus, to broaden the success of immunotherapy, approaches are needed that override the obstruction of key anti-tumoral cells and promote the generation and maintenance of T cells that are reactive to TSAs.

The chemokine receptor CXCR3 is a key regulator of cytotoxic immune cell responses within solid tumors *(26, 27)*. It responds to three interferon inducible ligands (CXCL9, 10, and 11) and controls the migration, spatial distribution, and function of activated T cell and NK cells *(28, 29)*. CXCL9 and 10 have been shown to be particularly important for the anti-tumoral functions of $CD8^+$ T cells, Th1 $CD4^+$ T cells, and NK cells *(30–32)* and reduced expression of either ligand contributes to immune exclusion within the TME *(26, 33, 34)*. Conversely, high expression of CXCL9, CXCL10, and their receptor, CXCR3, is associated with improved responses to ICB treatment in several

human cancers and murine cancer models *(35–37)*. CXCL10 has been shown to impact the polarization of $CD4^+$ T cells into anti-tumoral Th1 subtypes, reflecting its ability to influence T cell differentiation in addition to guiding migration *(38)*. It has also been shown to play a key role in facilitating interactions between CD8+ T cells and antigen-presenting DCs, fostering a pro-inflammatory niche that counters immunosuppressive factors and leads to effective T cell activation, expansion, and tumor elimination *(39, 40)*. These findings suggest that by increasing intratumoral CXCL10 levels, it may be possible to override immunosuppressive mechanisms and reprogram the TME to a more antitumoral state responsive to ICB immunotherapy.

To explore this hypothesis, we focused on head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC), a highly prevalent and aggressive cancer with limited immunotherapeutic success. HNSCC is a significant global health concern, ranking seventh in cancer incidence and accounting for more than 700,000 new cases diagnosed annually *(41)*. Approximately 75% of HNSCCs are associated with tobacco and alcohol use *(42, 43)*, though human papilloma virus (HPV) infection is rising as the major cause of oropharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma *(44, 45)*. Patients with HPV-negative, tobacco-related HNSCC undergo aggressive treatments involving surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, yet the 5-year survival rate remains at 40-50% *(46)*, and only 10-20% respond to PD-1/PD-L1 blockade *(9, 10)*, underscoring the need for new therapeutic strategies. The abundance of cytotoxic cells within tumor tissue following various treatment strategies is associated with a positive prognosis in HNSCC *(17, 18)*. Conversely, the loss of chromosome segment 9p21/9p24 in HPV-negative patients results in immunologically cold ICB-resistant HNSCC tumors, which correlates with a profound decrease in CXCL9 and CXCL10 expression and markedly reduced patient outcomes *(47, 48)*.

Here, we leverage the 4NQO-induced Murine Oral Squamous Cell (4MOSC1) carcinoma *(49)* and Murine Oral Carcinoma (MOC1) *(50)* mouse models of HNSCC to investigate the efficacy of IT delivery of CXCL10. We show that CXCL10 alone suppresses tumor growth and recurrence by enhancing the infiltration, activation, and effector function of CD8+ T cells, CD4+ T cells, and NK cells. CD8+ T cells acquired the ability to recognize tumor-specific antigens, which correlated with their migration to and proliferation in tumor-draining lymph nodes (tdLNs), despite the administration of CXCL10 into tumors. This, along with structural changes such as reduced angiogenesis and lymphangiogenesis, suggests that CXCL10 directly and indirectly mobilizes a network of immune cells that support a multimodal program of anti-tumoral activities, extending beyond the TME. Combining IT CXCL10 with anti-PD-1 therapy effectively doubled the number of mice that completely cleared tumors and showed durable responses. These findings provide the rationale for the clinical evaluation of IT CXCL10 as a strategy to overcome tumor-regulated immunosuppression, restoring sensitivity to ICB immunotherapies, and improving outcomes for HNSCC patients.

RESULTS

High CXCR3 and CXCL10 expression correlates with early tumor stage, increased immune infiltration, inflammatory gene signatures, and improved overall outcomes in patients with HNSCC.

To determine the impact of CXCR3 and CXCL10 on overall outcomes and inflammatory status in HNSCC patients, we first interrogated the Cancer Genome Atlas (TGCA, PanCancer Atlas) with cBioPortal (http://cbioportal.org) *(51, 52)*. Tumors with high *CXCR3* and *CXCL10* mRNA expression correlated with increased overall survival in patients with HNSCC as characterized by hazard ratios (HR) less than 0.5 and 0.73, respectively (**Fig. 1A-B**). These results are consistent with prior findings demonstrating that tumors with elevated co-expression of *CXCL10* and signal transducer and activator of transcription 2 (*STAT2*) are associated with better outcomes of oral cancer patients *(53, 54)*. Furthermore, high *CXCR3* and *CXCL10* mRNA expression in HNSCC

tumors show a positive correlation with CD8 antigen (*CD8A*) (**Fig. 1C-D**) indicating an elevated presence of $CD8^+$ cells. Bulk mRNA expression data was also utilized to gauge changes in the inflammatory signatures of the $CXCL10^{high}$ vs $CXCL10^{low}$ cohorts. These data showed that the expression levels of both interferon gamma (*IFNG*), a pleiotropic cytokine involved in multiple adaptive and innate inflammatory responses, and granzyme B (*GZMB*), a serine protease indicative of cytotoxic activity, were significantly higher in the $CXCL10^{high}$ tumors (**Fig. 1E**). IFN-γ is considered one of the main inducers of PD-L1 expression in cancer cells, rationalizing associations between *IFNG* expression or IFN-γ inducible gene signatures and positive clinical responses to PD-1/PD-L1 blockade in HNSCC patients *(35, 55)* as well as melanoma *(56)* and bladder carcinomas *(57)*. Additional differentially expressed genes associated with interferon-mediated inflammatory responses were revealed in the $CXCL10^{high}$ vs $CXCL10^{low}$ cohorts, including interferon-induced CXCR3 chemokines (*CXCL9* and *CXCL11*), *STAT1/2 (58)*, interferon regulatory factor 5 (*IRF5*) *(59)*, and interferon-induced guanylate-binding proteins (*GBP1/4/5*) *(60)* (**Fig. 1F, Fig. S1**). The differential expression of transporter associated with antigen processing 1 (*TAP1*) (**Fig. S1**), a protein involved in the processing and presentation of major histocompatibility complex class I (MHC1) restricted antigens for recognition by CD8+ T cells *(61)*, provides additional evidence of high *CXCL10* expression correlating with increased cytotoxic activity. HNSCC lesions are often classified as early-stage (stage I–II) and late-stage (stage III–IV), based on tumor size and local invasion *(62)*. A comparison of stage distribution amongst HNSCC tumors in $CXCL10^{high}$ vs $CXCL10^{low}$ cohorts showed that 62.85% of tumors in the $CXCL10^{low}$ cohort were graded in late-stage III–IV, whereas 44.87% of $CXCL10^{high}$ tumors were enriched in early-stage disease (**Fig. 1G**). These findings reinforce the role of CXCR3/CXCL10 signaling in regulating tumor-immune suppression and disease progression.

To explore the association between immune infiltration profiles and the average expression of the $CXCL10^{high}$ vs $CXCL10^{low}$ cohorts, cell enrichment profiles were also derived from TCGA gene expression data using the xCELL platform *(63)* (**Fig. 1H**). Elevated expression of *CXCL10* in HNSCC patients is associated with a broad increase in immune infiltration, with over 2-fold increases in $CD8^+$ T cell subtypes, particularly antigen-experienced central (T_{CM}) and effector (T_{EM}) memory CD8+ T cells. These cells are capable of rapid proliferation and differentiation into effector T cells, which enable a faster and more robust immune response upon re-exposure to tumor antigen *(64)*. CXCL10 expression also showed a very strong correlation with NK cell (>40-fold) and Natural Killer T cell (NKT) signatures (>4-fold) (**Fig. 1H**); NKT cells are a subset of CD1d-restricted T cells that have characteristics of both NK and T cells and act as an interface between the innate and adaptive immune system *(65)*. DCs not only serve as the primary producers of CXCL10, but are also required for the presentation of tumor-derived antigens to $CD4^+$ and $CD8^+$ T cells and their priming and activation *(25, 66)*. Notably, the data showed a correlation between high CXCL10 expression and broad DC gene signatures, including activated DCs (>2-fold), plasmacytoid DCs (pDCs, which express CXCR3) (>9-fold), and immature DCs (iDCs) (>500-fold) (**Fig. 1H**). These findings further indicate that increased CXCL10 expression has a strong association with anti-tumor immune signatures, particularly favoring the increased infiltration of cytotoxic effector cells and antigen-presenting DCs.

Figure 1. High *Cxcr3* and *Cxcl10* expression correlates with increased immune infiltration into tumors and improved outcomes of patients with HNSCC. (**A-G**) Transcriptomic data obtained and analyzed via cBioPortal (PanCancer Atlas, HNSCC cohort). Expression levels are based on whole tumor mRNA quantification. $CXCR3^{high}/CXCL10^{high}$ cohorts (n = 128 and 132) and $CXCL10^{low}/CXCL10^{low}$ cohort (n = 131 and 126) represent the upper 25% and lower 25% threshold for *Cxcr3* or *Cxcl10* mRNA expression, respectively. (**A**) Overall survival of $CXCR3^{high}$ vs $CXCR3^{low}$ cohorts to month 150, with hazard ratio of 0.5383 and p-value of 0.0016 (via Mantel-Cox and Mantel-Haenszel tests). (**B**) Overall survival of $CXCL10^{high}$ vs $CXCL10^{low}$ cohorts to month 150, with hazard ratio of 0.7330 and p-value of 0.1115 (via Mantel-Cox and Mantel-Haenszel tests). (**C-D**) Correlation of *Cxcr3* (**C**) and *Cxcl10* (**D**) with *Cd8a* mRNA expression

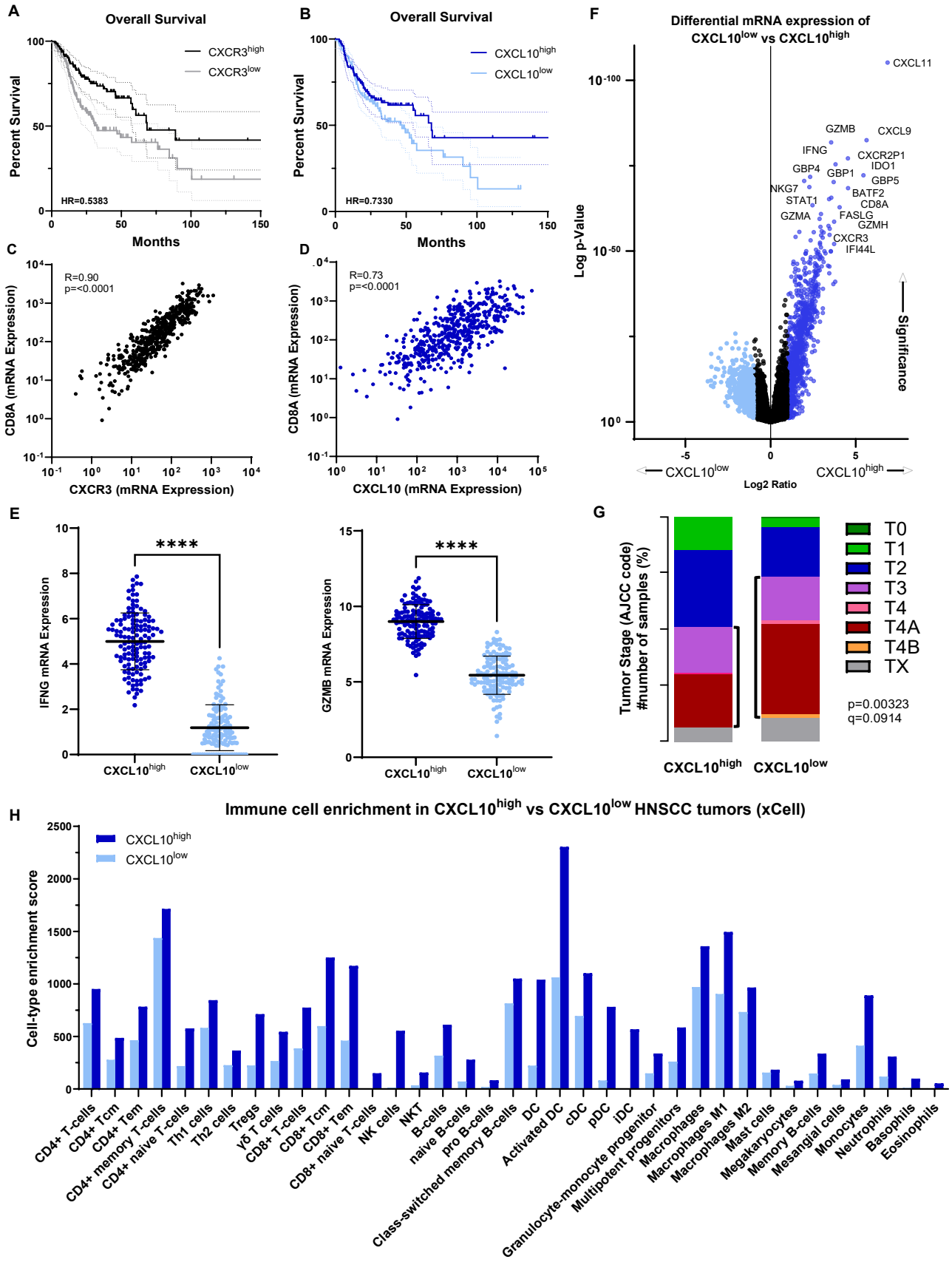

A
Overall Survival
CXCR3high
CXCR3low
Percent Survival
HR=0.5383
Months
B
Overall Survival
CXCL10high
CXCL10low
Percent Survival
HR=0.7330
Months
C
R=0.90
p=<0.0001
CD8A (mRNA Expression)
CXCR3 (mRNA Expression)
D
R=0.73
p=<0.0001
CD8A (mRNA Expression)
CXCL10 (mRNA Expression)
F
Differential mRNA expression of
CXCL10low vs CXCL10high
CXCL11
GZMB
CXCL9
IFNG
CXCR2P1
IDO1
GBP4
GBP1
GBP5
NKG7
BATF2
STAT1
CD8A
GZMA
FASLG
GZMH
CXCR3
IFI44L
Log p-Value
Significance
CXCL10low
CXCL10high
Log2 Ratio
E
****
IFNG mRNA Expression
CXCL10high
CXCL10low
****
GZMB mRNA Expression
CXCL10high
CXCL10low
G
Tumor Stage (AJCC code)
#number of samples (%)
T0
T1
T2
T3
T4
T4A
T4B
TX
p=0.00323
q=0.0914
CXCL10high
CXCL10low
H
Immune cell enrichment in CXCL10high vs CXCL10low HNSCC tumors (xCell)
CXCL10high
CXCL10low
Cell-type enrichment score
CD4+ T-cells
CD4+ Tcm
CD4+ Tem
CD4+ memory T-cells
CD4+ naive T-cells
Th1 cells
Th2 cells
Tregs
γδ T cells
CD8+ T-cells
CD8+ Tcm
CD8+ Tem
CD8+ naive T-cells
NK cells
NKT
B-cells
naive B-cells
pro B-cells
Class-switched memory B-cells
DC
Activated DC
cDC
pDC
iDC
Granulocyte-monocyte progenitor
Multipotent progenitors
Macrophages
Macrophages M1
Macrophages M2
Mast cells
Megakaryocytes
Memory B-cells
Mesangial cells
Monocytes
Neutrophils
Basophils
Eosinophils

Figure 1.

(Spearman's rank correlation). (**E**) Relative *Ifng* and *Gzmb* mRNA expression of CXCL10^{high} vs CXCL10^{low} cohorts. (**F**) Differential expression of genes between CXCL10^{high} vs CXCL10^{low} cohorts using Wilcoxon Rank Sum test. Log_2 fold-change and P value (adjusted) cut-offs are 1 and 0.05, respectively. (**G**) AJCC tumor stage distribution of patients in CXCR3^{high} and CXCR3^{low} cohorts. (**H**) Immune enrichment scores for indicated immune cell subtype in CXCR3^{high} and CXCR3^{low} cohorts.

Intratumoral CXCL10 suppresses tumor growth and recurrence in syngeneic mouse models of HNSCC.

Given the correlation between positive outcomes in HNSCC patients and high expression of CXCL10, we hypothesized that elevating tumor-localized CXCL10 levels by IT injection would promote tumor rejection in mouse models of HNSCC. Localized IT delivery rather than systemic administration is required for chemokine agonists in order to direct the migration of cells into the tumor. For initial studies, we employed the 4MOSC1 model as tumors from this model share 98.9% similarity to human tobacco-associated HNSCC based on exome sequencing and mutational signatures, as well as similar immune infiltrates, and limited clinical responses to immunotherapy *(49)*. 4MOSC1 tumors can be established orthotopically in the tongue or buccal space of mice, both of which are amenable to IT injection of CXCL10 *(67)*. Thus, the 4MOSC1 mouse model provides an excellent platform for studies that seek to reprogram the cellular and inflammatory status of the TME with exogenous ligand addition. As these experiments required large quantities of highly purified chemokine, we modified a previously described *E. coli* expression/purification system *(68)* to optimize the efficient production of murine CXCL10 with high yield (~13.5 mg/L) and purity (**Fig. S2A-E**).

As described in the Methods section, 4MOSC1 tumors were established by injecting one million 4MOSC1 cells into the buccal space of 6-8 week-old C57BL/6 mice. CXCL10 (10 µg) was administered intratumorally on days 3 and 6 post-tumor engraftment (**Fig. 2A**). This treatment schedule was informed by our prior observations that highlight a critical timeframe for development of adaptive immune responses in the 4MOSC1 model: specifically, early lymphablation (days 3 and 6 post-tumor engraftment) eliminated responses to ICB and worsened overall survival by limiting antigen-specific CD8-driven immunity whereas late lymphablation (beyond day 11) did not impact the effectiveness of ICB *(67)*. As shown in **Fig. 2B and 2C**, all mice treated with CXCL10 exhibited a significant reduction in tumor growth, with 30% (**Fig. 2C**, **Fig. S2F**; 24.4% of 4MOSC1 mice on average over all experiments) showing complete resolution and remaining tumor-free six weeks after clearance. Subsequent rechallenge with 4MOSC1 cells six weeks after the initial tumor clearance did not result in tumor formation, indicating the formation of durable immunological memory (**Fig. 2D**).

To explore the generalizability of these findings in other syngeneic models of murine HNSCC, we also used the Murine Oral Carcinoma (MOC1) model, which like the 4MOSC1 model, exhibits a partial response to PD-1/PD-L1 blockade that is comparable to patient outcomes *(69)*. Following detection of MOC1 tumors in the flank at day 7 post-tumor engraftment, CXCL10 (10 µg) was administered on days 9, 13, and 16 (**Fig. 2A**). Consistent with the 4MOSC1 model, a significant suppression of tumor growth was observed in all CXCL10-treated MOC1 tumors, with 22.2% (**Fig. 2E**, **Fig. S2F**; 21.9% of 4MOSC1 mice on average over all experiments) of the mice demonstrating a complete response and quickly clearing subsequent tumors upon rechallenge (**Fig. 2F**). While smaller in overall size, 4MOSC1 tumors from CXCL10-treated mice exhibit typical HNSCC histology, as indicated by hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) and pan cytokeratin (panCK) (**Fig. 2G-H**). Finally, to confirm the specificity of targeting CXCR3-expressing cells, we performed experiments utilizing CXCR3-deficient (CXCR3$^{-/-}$) mice in both the 4MOSC1 and MOC1 models. Mice lacking CXCR3 failed to eliminate tumors following treatment with CXCL10 (**Fig. 2I-J**),

demonstrating a direct role of CXCR3 activation in the anti-tumoral responses to CXCL10 treatment.

Figure 2. IT delivery of CXCL10 suppresses tumor growth and reoccurrence in syngeneic models of HNSCC. (**A**) Schematic detailing experimental setup and dosing schedule for 4MOSC1 and MOC1 models. 1.0 x 10^6 4MOSC1 or 2.0 x 10^6 MOC1 cells were implanted into the buccal space or flank, respectively, of C57BL/6 mice on day 0. Mice received either 10 µg CXCL10 in 50 µL of PBS (per dose) or 50 µL of PBS (vehicle) on the days indicated (▲). (**B**) Representative image of 4MOSC1 buccal tumors in vehicle vs CXCL10-treated mice at day 30. Tumor boundaries are traced with a dotted line, while an asterisk (*) indicates complete tumor clearance. 4MOSC1 (**C**) and MOC1 (**E**) tumor kinetics of vehicle vs CXCL10-treated mice (n = 9-10 per group). Survival proportions are shown on the right. 4MOSC1 (**D**) and MOC1 (**F**) tumor kinetics of tumor naïve age-matched mice or previous complete responders to CXCL10 treatment after rechallenge with 1.0 x 10^6 4MOSC1 or 2.0 x 10^6 MOC1 cells 6 weeks post-tumor clearance. (**G-H**) Representative H&E (**G**) and IF (**H**) staining of 4MOSC1 tumors from vehicle vs CXCL10-treated mice at day 10. Scale bar, 800 µm. (**I-J**) Tumor kinetics of WT or *Cxcr3*$^{-/-}$ mice receiving either vehicle or CXCL10 treatment. Differences between the tumor kinetics amongst experimental groups were analyzed by linear regression. Survival analysis was performed using the Kaplan–Meier method and log-rank tests. All data represent averages ± SEM, except where indicated.

CXCL10 remodels the tumor immune microenvironment by enhancing the infiltration of CD8+ T, CD4+ T, and NK cells.

Following activation, naïve T cells upregulate CXCR3 expression, which remains persistent on effector CD8$^+$ T cell as well as type-1 helper (Th1) CD4$^+$ T cells *(70, 71)* that support CD8+ T cell functions *(72, 73)*. CXCR3 is also highly expressed on innate NK cells and NKT cells, and is crucial for the localization of these first-line defenders to sites of inflammation and tumors *(33, 74)*. Thus, we hypothesized that CXCL10 treatment would promote the infiltration of these cell types within tumors. To explore changes in the immune status of the TME induced by IT CXCL10 administration in 4MOSC1 tumors, we employed the nCounter PanCancer Mouse Immune Profiling gene expression platform (NanoString Technologies), which surveys 770 immune-related gene signatures, thereby enabling broad characterization of immune cell populations and inflammatory status. As shown in **Fig. 3A**, CXCL10 treatment resulted in elevated T and cytotoxic cell mRNA signatures, including signatures specific to CD8$^+$ T cells and NK cells compared to vehicle treatment. To confirm whether the changes in the TME are dependent on these immune subtypes, we treated mice bearing 4MOSC1 tumors with CXCL10 and either CD8-depleting, NK1.1-depleting, or CD4-depleting antibodies. While a partial loss of CXCL10 response was observed with depletion of both CD4$^+$ and NK cells, CD8 depletion resulted in the rapid and robust growth of 4MOSC1 tumors despite CXCL10 treatment, highlighting the critical role that CD8$^+$ T cells play in the tumor immune response to CXCL10 (**Fig. 3B**). Subsequent analysis by flow cytometry further validated these findings: tumors from CXCL10-treated mice exhibited increased total CD8$^+$ T cell, CD4$^+$ T cell, and NK cell numbers starting as early as day 7, which persisted through day 10, compared to vehicle control (**Fig. 3C-D**).

The spatial distributions of tumor infiltrating T cells can be a determinant of overall outcomes and are categorized into three phenotypic categories: immune-desert (lack of leukocyte infiltration), immune-excluded (stromal infiltration without leukocytes entering the tumor parenchyma), and immune-inflamed (leukocyte infiltration beyond the tumor parenchyma) *(75, 76)*. In general, immune-inflamed tumors are associated with a more favorable overall prognosis and respond more positively to chemotherapy and ICB *(77)*. Thus, we also investigated the abundance and spatial distribution of infiltrating immune cells within tumors via immunofluorescence (IF) staining. At day 10, tumors from CXCL10-treated mice showed substantial increases in infiltrating CD8$^+$ and CD4$^+$ T cells within the tumor parenchyma and surrounding stroma, suggesting an immune-

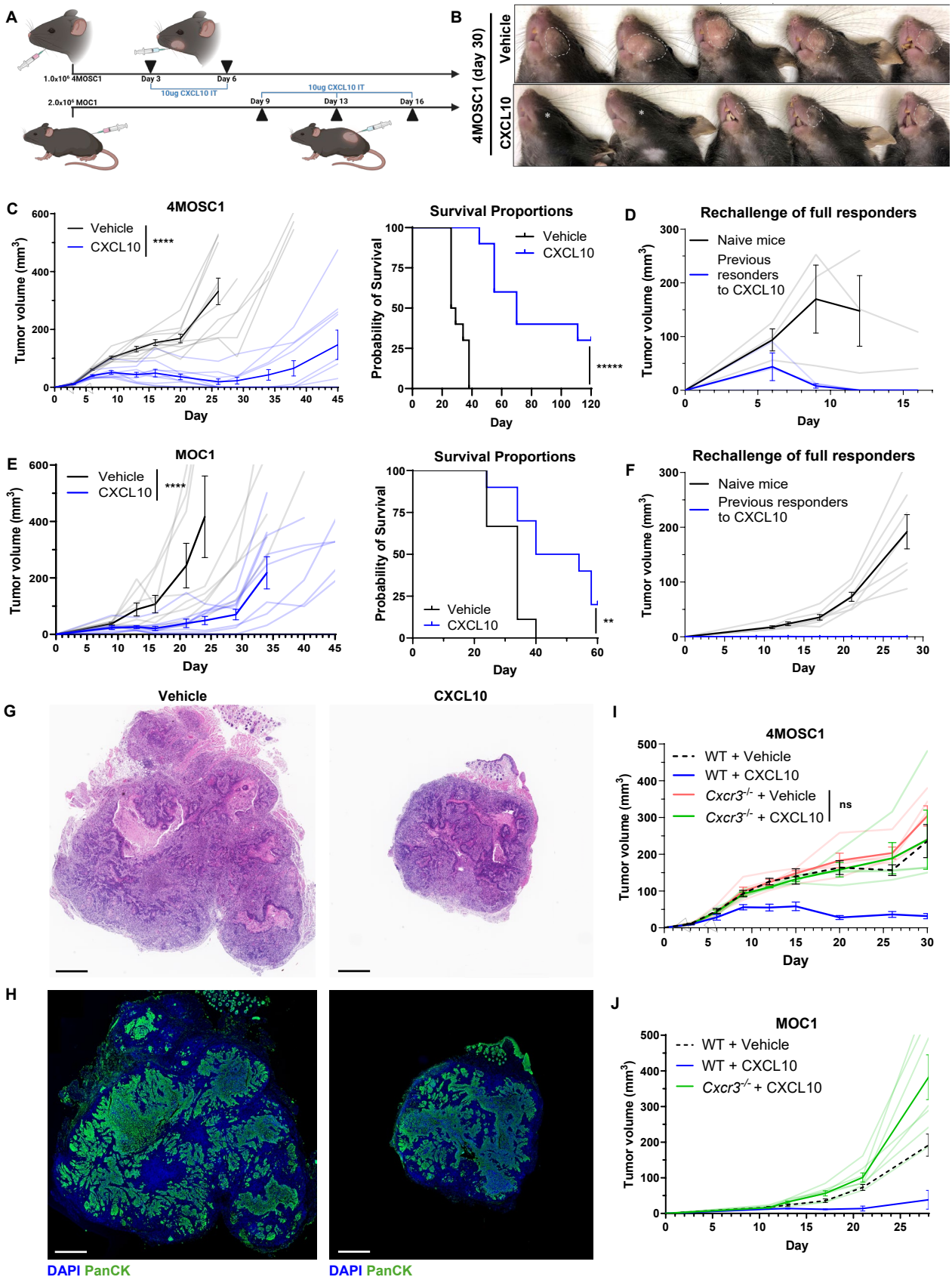

A
1.0x10⁶ 4MOSC1
Day 3
Day 6
10ug CXCL10 IT
10ug CXCL10 IT
2.0x10⁶ MOC1
Day 9
Day 13
Day 16
B
4MOSC1 (day 30)
Vehicle
CXCL10
C
4MOSC1
Vehicle
CXCL10
****
Tumor volume (mm³)
Day
Survival Proportions
Probability of Survival
*****
D
Rechallenge of full responders
Naive mice
Previous resonders to CXCL10
E
MOC1
F
Rechallenge of full responders
Previous responders to CXCL10
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Figure 2.

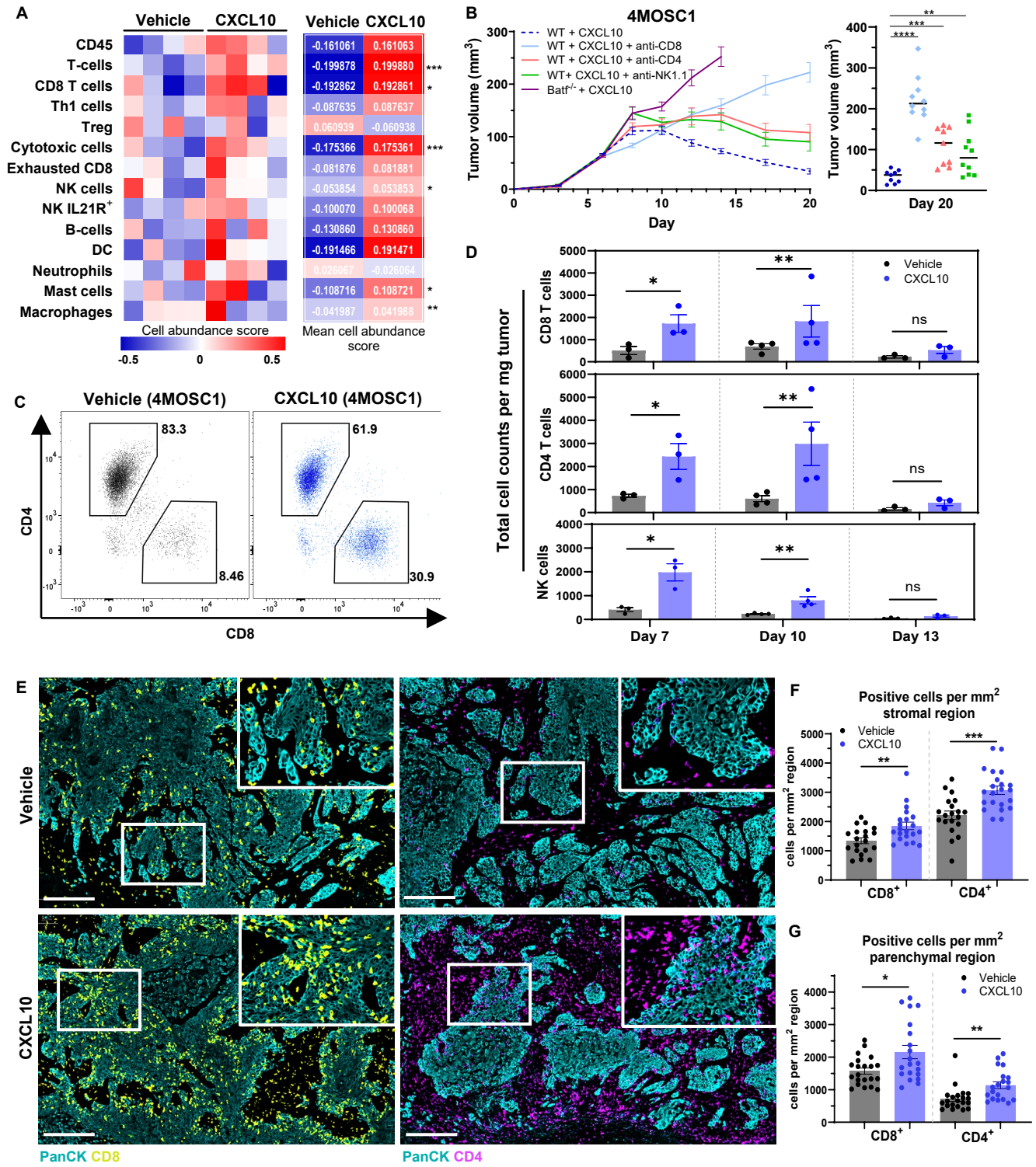
inflamed tumor phenotype, while tumors from vehicle-treated mice presented a more immune-excluded phenotype (**Fig. 3E-G**). In contrast to $CD8^+$ and $CD4^+$ T cell infiltration and distribution, most infiltrating NK cells were in the stroma of tumors from CXCL10-treated mice, similar to the vehicle control mice (**Fig. S3A-B**). However, tumors from CXCL10-treated mice also displayed a larger proportion of $CD44^+$ NK cells by flow cytometry at day 7, which persisted through day 13 compared to vehicle control (**Fig. S3C**). As increased CD44 expression on NK cells has been attributed to increased cytotoxic activity and IFN-γ production *(78, 79)*, these data suggest that CXCL10 treatment induced these cells to acquire activation markers consistent with increased anti-tumoral functions.

Figure 3. CXCL10 remodels the tumor immune microenvironment by enhancing infiltration of CD8+ T cells, CD4+ T cells, and NK cells. (**A**) 1.0 x 10^6 4MOSC1 cells were implanted into the buccal space of C57BL/6 mice on day 0. Tumors were treated on days 3, 6, and 9 with either vehicle or 10 µg of CXCL10 IT (per dose). mRNA from each tumor was isolated and comprehensive immune profiling was conducted using the NanoString nCounter PanCancer Mouse Immune Profiling gene expression platform. Rosalind software was used to analyze genes associated with the listed immune cells and each replicate assigned a cell abundance score (n = 4 mice per group). (**B**) Growth kinetics of 4MOSC1 tumors treated with either vehicle, CXCL10 alone, CXCL10 + anti-CD8, CXCL10 + anti-CD4, or CXCL10 + anti-NK1.1 antibody. Volumes of individual tumors in mm^3 at day 20 are shown on the right. (**C**) Representative flow cytometry plots showing relative $CD4^+$ and $CD8^+$ cells amongst total $CD3^+$ cells. (**D**) Absolute number of live $CD45^+CD3^+CD8^+$ T cells, $CD45^+CD3^+CD4^+$ T cells, and $CD45^+$NK1.1+ cells infiltrating vehicle or CXCL10-treated 4MOSC1 tumors at days 7, 10, and 13. Shown is the average number of cells infiltrating per mm^3 of tumor ($n = 3$ mice per group; multiple unpaired Student's *t* test; data are represented as mean ± SEM). (**E**) Representative immunostaining of CD8+ and CD4+ cells within the stroma and tumor parenchyma (PanCK) of vehicle and CXCL10-treated tumors at day 10. The scale bar represents 200 µm. (**F-G**) Quantification of total CD8+ (yellow) (**F**) and CD4+ (magenta) (**G**) cells within the tumor stroma and tumor parenchyma (panCK, cyan) ($n = 4$ mice per group; 5-6 regions of interest (ROIs) screened per tumor; ROI designation of stroma vs tumor parenchyma designated based on PanCK expression).

CXCL10 promotes the formation of effector and memory phenotypes in T cells.

In addition to the well-established involvement of the CXCR3-ligand system in recruiting cytotoxic effector cells to the TME, there is emerging evidence that the ligands also elicit phenotypic changes in CXCR3-expressing immune cells. For example, CXCL10 has been shown to induce CD4+ T cell polarization towards immune-supporting Th1 and Th17 lineages *(80, 81)*, and to promote terminal differentiation of effector CD8+ T cells *(82)*, as well as T cell interactions with DCs *(39)*. We therefore interrogated phenotypic changes of tumor-infiltrating immune cells in both CXCL10- and vehicle-treated 4MOSC1 tumors via bulk mRNA profiling (**Fig. 4, Fig. S4A**).

Results from NanoString gene expression profiling showed that tumors from CXCL10-treated mice not only displayed increased expression of T cell specific genes such as *Cd3d*, *Cd3g*, *Cd7*, and *Cd8b1*, but also many genes associated with T cell activation and cytotoxic function, notably *Cd69*, *Zap70*, *Il18r1*, *Gzmk*, *Fas* and *Fas* ligand (**Fig. 4A**) *(83–87)*. One of the most differentially expressed genes amongst treatment groups, *Cd96* (**Fig. 4A**), is known to be highly expressed on effector and memory $CD8^+$ T cells as well as on $CD4^+$ T effector memory cells (particularly Th1 cells), with expression being particularly elevated on antigen-experienced T cells and tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes *(88, 89)*. In addition to an increase in overall infiltration, flow cytometry analysis revealed that a larger proportion of total $CD4^+$ and $CD8^+$ T cells are $CD44^+CD62L^-$ by day 13 post-engraftment (**Fig. 4B, Fig. S3D**), indicating that CXCL10 treatment favors the formation of T effector (T_{EFF}) phenotypes *(90)* that carry out anti-tumoral functions including the secretion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Vehicle
CXCL10
Vehicle CXCL10
CD45 -0.161061 0.161063
T-cells -0.199878 0.199880 ***
CD8 T cells -0.192862 0.192861 *
Th1 cells -0.087635 0.087637
Treg 0.060939 -0.060938
Cytotoxic cells -0.175366 0.175361 ***
Exhausted CD8 -0.081876 0.081881
NK cells -0.053854 0.053853 *
NK IL21R+ -0.100070 0.100068
B-cells -0.130860 0.130860
DC -0.191466 0.191471
Neutrophils 0.026067 -0.026064
Mast cells -0.108716 0.108721 *
Macrophages -0.041987 0.041988 **
Cell abundance score
-0.5 0 0.5
Mean cell abundance score
B
4MOSC1
WT + CXCL10
WT + CXCL10 + anti-CD8
WT + CXCL10 + anti-CD4
WT+ CXCL10 + anti-NK1.1
Batf-/- + CXCL10
Tumor volume (mm3)
Day
Day 20
C
Vehicle (4MOSC1)
CXCL10 (4MOSC1)
83.3
8.46
61.9
30.9
CD4
CD8
D
Total cell counts per mg tumor
CD8 T cells
CD4 T cells
NK cells
Vehicle
CXCL10
ns
Day 7
Day 10
Day 13
E
Vehicle
CXCL10
PanCK CD8
PanCK CD4
F
Positive cells per mm2 stromal region
cells per mm2 region
CD8+
CD4+
G
Positive cells per mm2 parenchymal region

Figure 3.

of cytotoxic molecules and cytokines. Interestingly, while the total number of $CD8^+$ T_{EFF} cells is increased across timepoints, the proportion of $CD8^+$ cells displaying a T_{EFF} phenotype is reduced at day 10 within the CXCL10-treated group (**Fig. 4B**). However, this is likely due to an early increase in the proportion of $CD44^+CD62L^+$ cells within the total CD8+ T cells at day 10 that increases through day 13, rather than a larger proportion of naïve-like T cells as seen within vehicle-treated mice (**Fig. 4C**). This suggests the emergence of a prominent population of $CD8^+$ T cells with a central memory (T_{CM})-like phenotype *(90, 91)* in the tumors of CXCL10-treated mice. These T_{CM} cells can both self-renew and give rise to a pool of T_{EFF} cells, making them critical for long-term immunity *(91)*.

An increase in the expression of many genes involved in the function and maintenance of memory T cell subsets was also revealed from NanoString gene expression profiling (**Fig. 4A**). Notable examples include *Sell* (the gene controlling CD62L expression), *Il7r* (the gene controlling CD127, a marker highly expressed on both T_{CM} and T_{EM} cells) *(92)*, *Bcl2* (critical for the persistence of memory T cells) *(93)*, and *Cxcr6* (controls the retention of memory T cells) *(94)*. Tumors from CXCL10-treated mice also showed a marked increase in *Il10* gene expression (**Fig. 4A**). While there are some indications that IL-10 contributes to an immunosuppressive TME in certain contexts, mice and humans deficient in IL-10 signaling have increased rates of spontaneous tumor formation *(95–97)*. IL-10 also enhances the production of IFN-γ and granzyme, facilitates antigen recognition, and is critical for the generation and maintenance memory $CD8^+$ T cells, thereby promoting the cytotoxic activity and survival of antigen activated effector and memory $CD8^+$ T cells *(98, 99)*.

CXCL10 treatment leads to a greater proportion of tumor antigen-specific $CD8^+$ T cells.

In addition to promoting effector and memory T cell phenotypes, we hypothesized that CXCL10 treatment would enhance the development of $CD8^+$ T cells reactive to tumor-specific antigen (TSA-T cells) that are able to recognize distinct tumor neoantigens and eliminate cancer cells *(100)*. To explore this hypothesis, we employed the 4MOSC1-LucOS model in which mice develop 4MOSC1 tumors that express OVA peptide *(67)*. Using flow cytometry, we then quantified the abundance of tumor-infiltrating CD8+ TSA-T cells with the OVA-H-2Kb tetramer, as previously described *(67)*, and found that tumors from CXCL10-treated mice had a significantly higher proportion of these tumor specific T cells compared to control-treated mice (**Fig. 4D**). To compliment the quantification of TSA-T cells, we evaluated changes in the patterns of GZMB in our 4MOSC1 model in response to CXCL10 since increased release of cytotoxins is indicative of cytotoxic T cell activation and antigen-recognition *(15)*. As shown in **Figure 4E**, IF staining revealed more extensive release of GZMB in proximity to $CD8^+$ cells infiltrating the tumor parenchyma of CXC10-treated mice.

Presentation of tumor antigens by DCs is a critical step in the activation of cytotoxic CD8+ T cells and their ability to recognize tumor-specific antigens *(25, 66)*. Following antigen uptake, DCs undergo maturation, marked by increased expression of costimulatory molecules such as CD80, CD86, and CD40, upregulation of PD-L1, secretion of proinflammatory cytokines, and migration to tumor-draining lymph nodes (TdLN) via CCR7-CCL21α signaling *(101)*. Conventional type 1 DCs (cDC1s) also play a pivotal role in regulating the movement of effector T cells into the TME by secreting CXCL9 and CXCL10, indicating crosstalk between cDC1s and T cells within tumors *(102, 103)*. Accordingly, we evaluated gene signatures related to DC function and observed a significant increase in those corresponding to costimulatory makers such as *Cd86*, *Cd48*, and *H2-M3,* as well as a key regulator of major histocompatibility complex class I (MHC-I) *(104)*, *Nlrc5,* within the tumors of CXCL10-treated mice compared to vehicle controls (**Fig. 4A**) *(105)*. A larger proportion of DCs within the tumors of CXCL10-treated mice displayed increased expression of PD-L1 (**Fig. S3G**). Interferons also upregulate MHC-I and II expression and stimulate antigen

presentation, with IFN-γ serving as a particularly potent inducer of MHC-II antigen presentation*(106, 107)*. Thus, it is notable that tumors from CXCL10-treated mice displayed increased expression of IFN-related gene signatures (*Ifng*, *Ifnl2*, and IFN-inducible CXCR3 chemokines *Cxcl9*, *Cxcl10*, and *Cxcl11*, **Fig. 4A**), as well as many interferon-stimulated genes (*Isi44*, *Ifit1*, *Ifit2*, *Ifit3*, and *Isg15*) (**Fig. S4**). Additionally, there was an increase in *Ccr7* alongside a marked decrease in *Ccl21* expression within the TME following CXCL10 treatment, which may reflect an increase in DC trafficking to the TdLN (**Fig. 4A**). Consistent with the above, tumor rejection following CXCL10 treatment was lost in 4MOSC1 tumor-bearing Batf3$^{-/-}$ mice, which are deficient in cDCs *(108, 109)* (see above, **Fig. 3B**). These data support the dependence of CXCL10-stimulated CD8+ T cells on cDCs for priming to tumor-derived antigens and tumor rejection.

TdLNs are key sites for initiating and amplifying anti-tumoral immune responses, as these critical lymph nodes serve as hubs for antigen presentation by DCs to naïve T cells, inducing rapid proliferation to produce TSA-T cells *(110, 111)*. Thus, a higher density of proliferating T cells within the TdLN is indicative of more robust T cell activation, expansion, and trafficking to the TME, and correlates with improved local and systemic immune surveillance for tumor-specific antigen *(111–113)*. The specific TdLNs associated with 4MOSC1 buccal tumors have been mapped and are the primary location of T cell priming in the 4MOSC1 model *(67)*. Indeed, IF staining of TdLNs from CXCL10-treated mice showed a significant increase in both CD4$^+$ and CD8$^+$ T cells as well as antigen-presenting cells (CD11c$^+$) within the paracortex region (T cell zone) compared to TdLNs from vehicle-treated mice (**Fig. 4F-H**). CD4$^+$ and CD8$^+$ T cells within the TdLN of CXCL10-treated mice also displayed more robust proliferation, as indicated by increased Ki67 expression (**Fig. 4F**).

Altogether, these data suggest that CXCL10 treatment enhances the recruitment and activation of cells that support cytotoxic function by favoring the formation and maintenance of tumor antigen-specific populations. These results are not only the consequence of CXCL10 impacting T cells, but also indirectly affecting DCs. Moreover, although the treatment is localized to tumors, CXCL10 seems to mobilize a network of interacting immune cells that influence DC and T cell trafficking between tumors and TdLNs.

CD8+ T cell infiltrating tumors of CXCL10-treated mice exhibit reduced indications of early T cell dysfunction.

Without resolution of infection or disease state, effector T cells experience chronic antigen stimulation leading to the progressive loss of effector functions and gradual upregulation of negative costimulatory markers associated with T cell dysfunction (e.g., PD-1^{high}) until they reach a terminally exhausted state (TIM-3^{high}) *(114)*. Thus, one might expect an increase in the expression of PD-1 and other inhibitory molecules (e.g., TIGIT and CTLA4) to be correlated with the increased infiltration of activated TSA-T cells into tumors. This was indeed observed in the tumors of CXCL10-treated mice compared to a vehicle control using the NanoString bulk tumor profiling platform (**Fig. 4A**). However, a significant decrease in PD-1 expression compared to vehicle control was observed when probing only activated CD44$^+$CD8$^+$ T cell populations by flow cytometry (**Fig. 4I-J**), suggesting an effect of CXCL10 on inhibiting dysfunction. To evaluate if CXCL10 treatment alone can reduce markers of T cell dysfunction outside of the context of the TME, we conducted *in vitro* experiments with primary CD8$^+$ T cells from OT-1 transgenic mice whose TCRs are specific for the OVA peptide SIINFEKL (OVA$_{257–264}$) *(115)*. Upon stimulation with CXCL10, a decrease in PD-1, CTLA4, and TIGIT expression was observed in CD44$^+$CD8$^+$ OT-1 T cell populations compared to cells activated with only SIINFEKL peptide (**Fig. S5 A-C**). These results suggest that CXCL10 delays T cell progression towards dysfunction even when antigen stimulation persists.

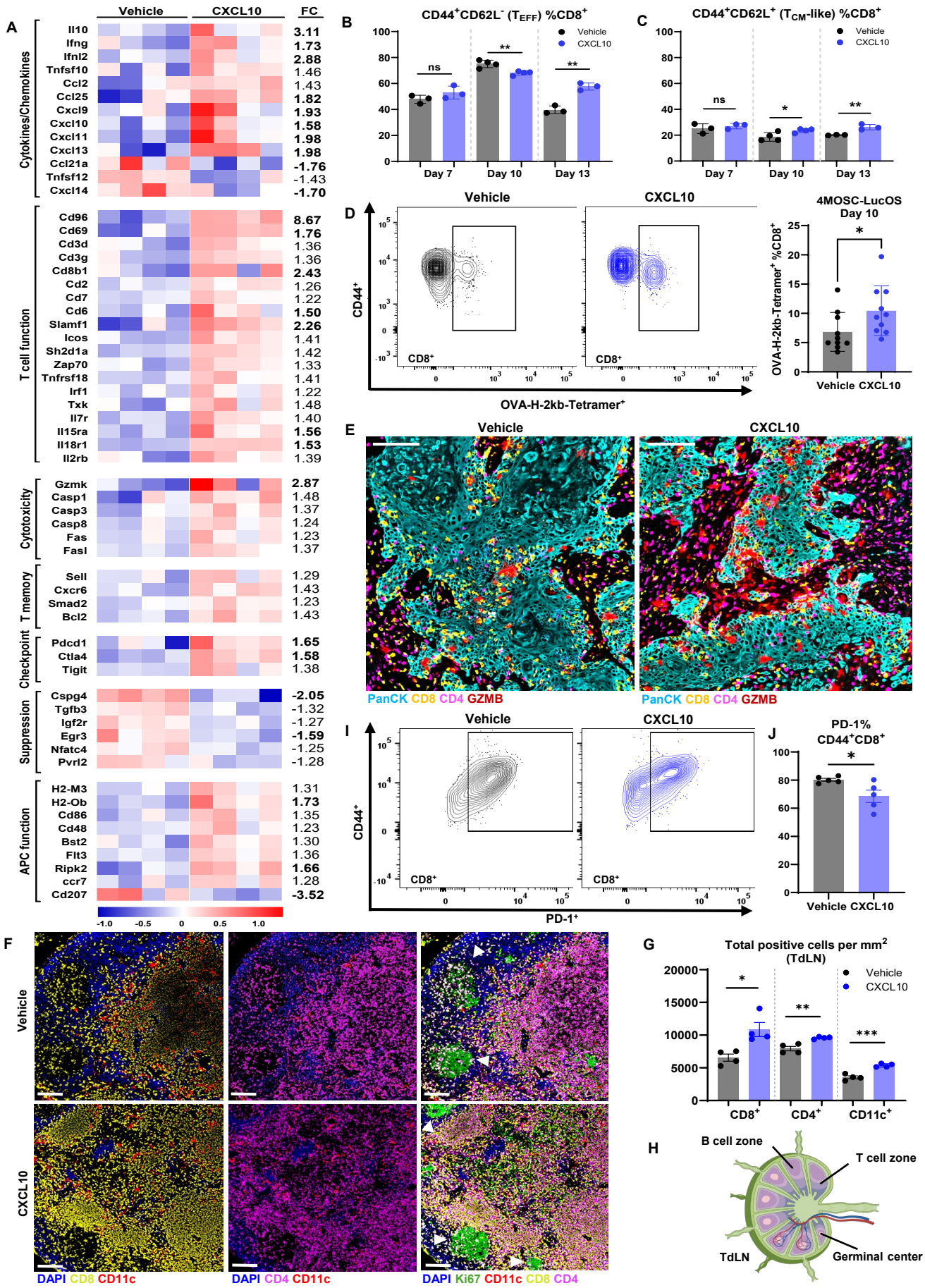
A
Vehicle
CXCL10
FC
Cytokines/Chemokines
Il10 3.11
Ifng 1.73
Ifnl2 2.88
Tnfsf10 1.46
Ccl2 1.43
Ccl25 1.82
Cxcl9 1.93
Cxcl10 1.58
Cxcl11 1.98
Cxcl13 1.98
Ccl21a -1.76
Tnfsf12 -1.43
Cxcl14 -1.70
T cell function
Cd96 8.67
Cd69 1.76
Cd3d 1.36
Cd3g 1.36
Cd8b1 2.43
Cd2 1.26
Cd7 1.22
Cd6 1.50
Slamf1 2.26
Icos 1.41
Sh2d1a 1.42
Zap70 1.33
Tnfrsf18 1.41
Irf1 1.22
Txk 1.48
Il7r 1.40
Il15ra 1.56
Il18r1 1.53
Il2rb 1.39
Cytotoxicity
Gzmk 2.87
Casp1 1.48
Casp3 1.37
Casp8 1.24
Fas 1.23
Fasl 1.37
T memory
Sell 1.29
Cxcr6 1.43
Smad2 1.23
Bcl2 1.43
Checkpoint
Pdcd1 1.65
Ctla4 1.58
Tigit 1.38
Suppression
Cspg4 -2.05
Tgfb3 -1.32
Igf2r -1.27
Egr3 -1.59
Nfatc4 -1.25
Pvrl2 -1.28
APC function
H2-M3 1.31
H2-Ob 1.73
Cd86 1.35
Cd48 1.23
Bst2 1.30
Flt3 1.36
Ripk2 1.66
ccr7 1.28
Cd207 -3.52
-1.0 -0.5 0 0.5 1.0
B
CD44+CD62L- (TEFF) %CD8+
Vehicle
CXCL10
ns
**
**
Day 7
Day 10
Day 13
C
CD44+CD62L+ (TCM-like) %CD8+
ns
*
**
D
Vehicle
CXCL10
CD44+
CD8+
OVA-H-2kb-Tetramer+
4MOSC-LucOS
Day 10
OVA-H-2kb-Tetramer+ %CD8+
*
Vehicle CXCL10
E
Vehicle
CXCL10
PanCK CD8 CD4 GZMB
PanCK CD8 CD4 GZMB
I
Vehicle
CXCL10
CD44+
CD8+
PD-1+
J
PD-1%
CD44+CD8+
*
Vehicle CXCL10
F
Vehicle
CXCL10
DAPI CD8 CD11c
DAPI CD4 CD11c
DAPI Ki67 CD11c CD8 CD4
G
Total positive cells per mm2
(TdLN)
Vehicle
CXCL10
*
**
***
CD8+
CD4+
CD11c+
H
B cell zone
T cell zone
TdLN
Germinal center

Figure 4.

Figure 4. Immune cells isolated from CXCL10-treated tumors exhibit increased activation and tumor antigen-specificity while showing reduced early indications of T cell dysfunction. (**A**) 1.0 x 10^6 4MOSC1 cells were implanted into the buccal space of C57BL/6 mice on day 0. Tumors were injected on days 3, 6, and 9 with either vehicle (50 µL of PBS) or 10 µg of CXCL10 in 50 µL of PBS. mRNA from each tumor was isolated and quantified using the NanoString nCounter PanCancer Mouse Immune Profiling gene expression platform. Rosalind software was used to analyze differentially expressed genes ($n = 4$ per group). Differentially expressed genes in vehicle- vs CXCL10-treated 4MOSC1 mice. Fold-change and P value (adjusted) cut-offs are 1.2 (1.5 bolded) and 0.05, respectively. (**B-C**) The frequency of $CD44^+CD62L^-$ cells (T_{EFF}) (**B**) or $CD44^+CD62L^+$ cells (T_{CM}-Like) (**C**) amongst total $CD45^+CD3^+$ $CD8^+$ cells at day 7, 10, and 13 ($n = 3$-4 per group; unpaired Student's *t* test; data are represented as mean ± SEM). (**D**) Representative flow cytometry plots showing proportion of OVA-H-2kB-Tetramer$^+$ cells amongst total $CD45^+CD3^+$ CD8 cells. Right panel, the OVA-H-2kB-Tetramer$^+$ cells amongst total $CD45^+CD3^+CD8^+$ T cells at day 10 ($n = 10$ mice per group; unpaired Student's *t* test; data are represented as mean ± SEM). (**E**) Representative immunostaining of PanCK (Cyan), CD8 (yellow), CD4 (magenta), and Granzyme B (red) positive cells within the tumors of vehicle and CXCL10-treated mice at day 10. The scale bar represents 100 µm. (**F**) Representative immunostaining of CD8 (yellow), CD4 (magenta), CD11c (red), and Ki67 (green) positive cells within TdLN of vehicle and CXCL10-treated tumors at day 10. The scale bar represents 100 µm. Germinal centers are indicated by ▲. (**G**) Quantification of total CD8+ and CD4+ cells within the TdLN ($n = 4$ mice per group; cell counts from whole TdLN; unpaired Student's *t* test; data are represented as mean ± SEM). (**H**) Schematic showing the general structure and cell-specific regions within LNs. (**I-J**) Representative flow cytometry plots showing proportion of $CD44^+PD\text{-}1^+$ cells amongst total $CD45^+CD3^+CD8^+$ T cells as well as quantification of these statistics (**J**) at day 10 ($n = 3$-4 mice per group; unpaired Student's *t* test; data are represented as mean ± SEM).

IT delivery of CXCL10 angiogenesis and lymphangiogenesis in tumors of 4MOSC1 mice.

Beyond its role in leukocyte trafficking, CXCL10 has also been shown to produce anti-angiogenic effects by inhibiting endothelial cell migration and proliferation associated with newly forming lymph and blood vessels in a CXCR3-dependent manner *(116, 117)*. Topical application of CXCL10 also blocked both vascular and lymphatic angiogenesis in mouse models of corneal inflammation, preserving vital sensory nerves in the cornea *(118)*. We therefore hypothesized that IT delivery of CXCL10 would reduce neovascularization in 4MOSC1 tumors compared to vehicle control. Tumors from CXCL10-treated mice showed downregulation of several genes that promote angiogenesis and play critical roles in regulating epithelial cell adhesion and vascular development , including *Dll4* (Delta ligand 4), *Cdh5* (VE-cadherin), and *Vwf* (Von Willebrand factor) (**Fig. 5A**). Elevated expression of Dll4, Cdh5, and Vwf are all recognized as prognostic biomarkers favoring increased metastasis and recurrence in several human cancers *(119–122)*. IF staining of 4MOSC1 tumor sections from CXCL10-treated mice also showed decreased lymph and blood vessel density compared to tumors from vehicle-treated mice (**Fig. 5B-C**). This suggests that in addition to recruiting and activating T and NK cells, IT CXCL10 signaling may promote anti-tumoral effects and reduce metastasis by decreasing angiogenesis and lymphangiogenesis within the TME.

Figure 5. CXCL10-treated tumors exhibit reduced angiogenesis and lymphangiogenesis. (**A**) Differentially expressed genes in vehicle vs CXCL10-treated 4MOSC1 mice. Fold-change and P value (adjusted) cut-offs are 1.2 (1.5 bolded) and 0.05, respectively. (**B**) Quantification of total CD31+ (red) and LYVE-1+ (green) cells within 4MOSC1 tumor sections ($n =$ mice per group; 4 ROIs were screened per tumor). (**C**) Representative immunostaining of PanCK (Cyan), CD31 (magenta), and LYVE-1 (green) positive cells of 4MOSC1 tumor sections of vehicle and CXCL10-treated mice at day 10. The scale bar represents 250 µm. The scale bar represents 250 µm.

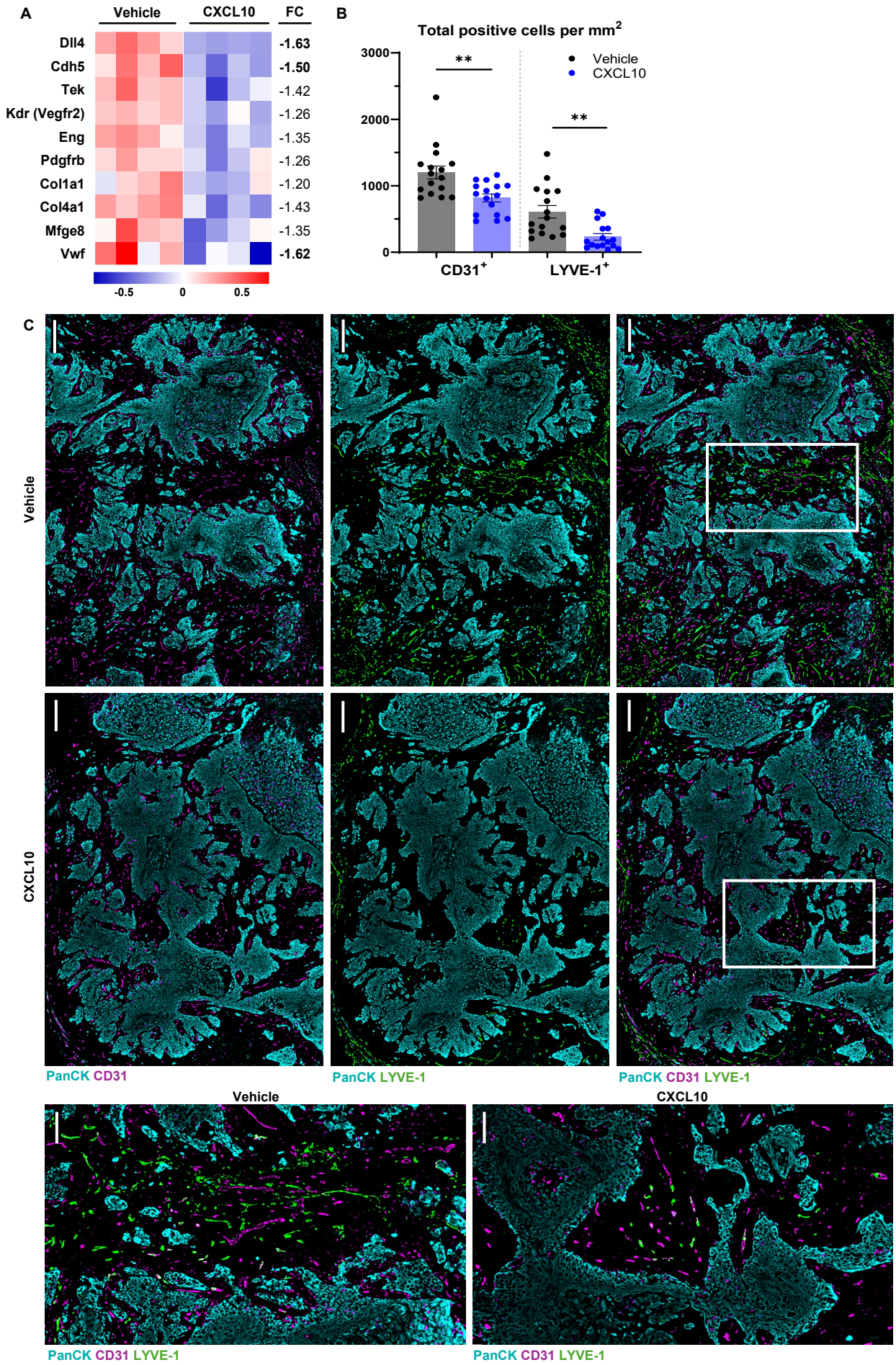
A
Vehicle
CXCL10
FC
Dll4
Cdh5
Tek
Kdr (Vegfr2)
Eng
Pdgfrb
Col1a1
Col4a1
Mfge8
Vwf
-1.63
-1.50
-1.42
-1.26
-1.35
-1.26
-1.20
-1.43
-1.35
-1.62
-0.5
0
0.5
B
Total positive cells per mm2
3000
2000
1000
0
**
**
Vehicle
CXCL10
CD31+
LYVE-1+
C
Vehicle
CXCL10
PanCK CD31
PanCK LYVE-1
PanCK CD31 LYVE-1
Vehicle
CXCL10
PanCK CD31 LYVE-1
PanCK CD31 LYVE-1

Figure 5.

Regions delineated by a white border in the right upper panels are shown at a larger scale in lower panel with a scale bar that represents 100 μm.

IT CXCL10 synergizes with anti-PD-1 treatment to promote a durable anti-tumoral response in mouse models of HNSCC.

When administered as a single agent, CXCL10 inhibited tumor growth and resulted in complete tumor elimination in 24.4% of 4MOSC1 mice on average over all experiments, compared to 18.1% of mice with anti-PD-1 alone (**Fig. S2F**). However, consistent with many molecular therapies, the remaining CXCL10-treated mice developed resistance in subsequent weeks despite initially positive responses, resulting in relapse and tumor progression following the cessation of treatment. Tumor resistance results from the development of immunosuppressive mechanisms that impair anti-tumoral effector functions of $CD8^+$ and $CD4^+$ T cells, which we showed to be key modulators of the CXCL10 response. It frequently arises from the exploitation of immune checkpoints such as the PD-1/PD-L1 pathway, which plays a central role in regulating T cell activation and exhaustion *(2–4)*. PD-1 is predominately expressed on activated T and B lymphocytes, while its ligand PD-L1 is expressed by antigen-presenting cells, such as activated DCs and peripheral blood monocytes, as well as cancer cells to evade immune detection *(4)*. Notably, as for human HNSCC, 4MOSC1 tumors characteristically exhibit a high number of infiltrating polymorphonuclear myeloid-derived suppressor cells (PMN-MDSCs) and monocytic myeloid-derived suppressor cells (M-MDSCs) that generally comprise the majority of PD-$L1^{hi}CD45^+$ immune cells within established tumors *(49, 123)*. Thus, the presence of these MDSCs likely contributes to the observed resistance. Indeed, 4MOSC1 tumors from CXCL10-treated mice contained a large percentage of PMN-MDSCs and M-MDSCs that were comparable to the vehicle-treated mice (**Fig. 6A**). However, the PMN-MDSC and M-MDSC populations expressed higher levels of PD-L1 following CXCL10 treatment (**Fig. 6B**), suggesting that the anti-tumor efficacy following CXCL10 treatment might be boosted with the addition of PD-1/PD-L1 blockade to yield more complete responses. To examine the effects of combined therapy in our HNSCC models, anti-PD-1 treatment intraperitoneally (IP) was initiated at the start of the first IT CXCL10 injection (**Fig. 6C**). As shown in **Figure 6D** the combination of CXCL10 and PD-1 blockade resulted in an increase in tumor regression in the 4MOSC1 model, with 40% (**Fig.6D-E, Fig. S2F**; 39.2% on average over all experiments reported in this study) of the mice exhibiting complete and durable responses (>6 months) and, in turn, increased survival when compared to either single agent therapy.

Like the 4MOSC1 model, MDSCs are a major immunosuppressive cell population in MOC1 tumors, with PMN-MDSC depletion resulting in the recovery of antigen-specific T cell responses *(124)*. Accordingly, the synergistic effect of combining CXCL10 with anti-PD-1 was also explored in the MOC1 model and resulted in 42.9% (**Fig. 6F-G**, **Fig. S2F**; 44.3% on average over all experiments reported in this study) of the mice showing complete tumor clearance and tumor-free survival for 6 months. This is a substantial improvement over treatments with either CXCL10 alone (28.6%, **Fig 6F-G**, **Fig. S2F**; 21.9% on average over all experiments reported in this study) or anti-PD-1 alone (28.6%, **Fig 6F-G**, **Fig. S2F**; 20.54% on average over all experiments reported in this study).

Figure 6. IT CXCL10 synergizes with anti-PD-1 treatment to promote a durable anti-tumoral response. (**A**) The frequency of PMN-MDSC and M-MDSC cells amongst total $CD45^+CD11b^+$ cells ($n = 5$ per group; unpaired Student's t test; data are represented as mean ± SEM). (**B**) The frequency of PD-$L1^+$ cells amongst total PMN-MDSC and M-MDSC cells ($n = 5$ per group; unpaired Student's t test; data are represented as mean ± SEM). Representative flow cytometry plots showing relative PD-$L1^+$ cells amongst total PMN-MDSC and M-MDSC cells are on the right. (**C**) Schematic detailing experimental setup and dosing schedule for 4MOSC1 and MOC1 models.

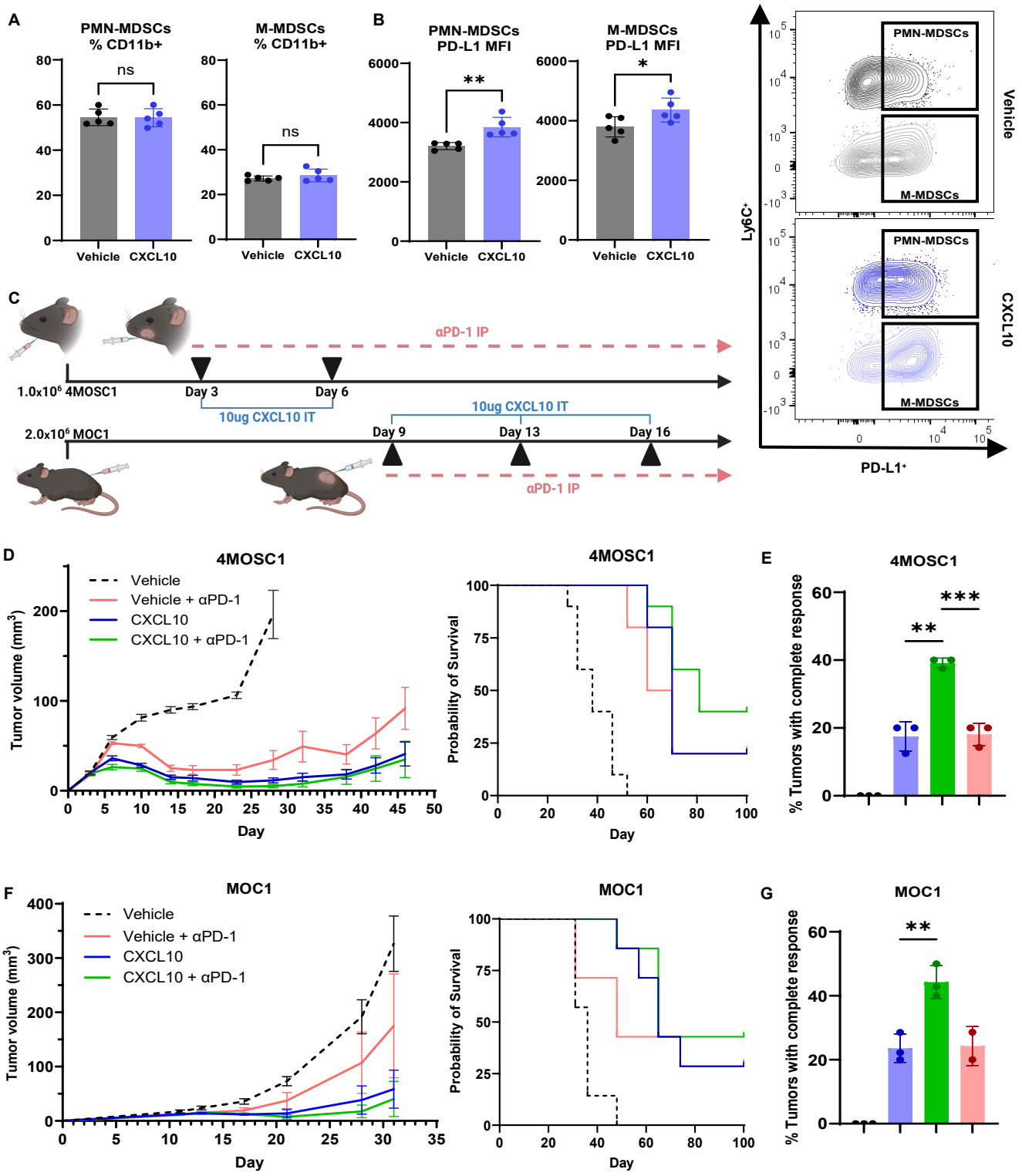
A
PMN-MDSCs % CD11b+
M-MDSCs % CD11b+
ns
Vehicle
CXCL10
B
PMN-MDSCs PD-L1 MFI
M-MDSCs PD-L1 MFI
**
*
C
αPD-1 IP
1.0x10⁶ 4MOSC1
Day 3
Day 6
10ug CXCL10 IT
2.0x10⁶ MOC1
Day 9
Day 13
Day 16
Ly6C+
PD-L1+
PMN-MDSCs
M-MDSCs
Vehicle
CXCL10
D
4MOSC1
Vehicle
Vehicle + αPD-1
CXCL10
CXCL10 + αPD-1
Tumor volume (mm³)
Day
Probability of Survival
E
% Tumors with complete response
***
F
MOC1
G

Figure 6.

1.0 x 10^6 4MOSC1 or 2.0 x 10^6 MOC1 cells were implanted into the buccal space or flank, respectively, of C57BL/6 mice on day 0. Mice received either 10 µg CXCL10 in 50 µL of PBS (per dose) or 50 µL of PBS (vehicle) on the days indicated (▲) and 200 µg of αPD-1 (5 mg/kg) IP every 3 days for 3 weeks initiated at time of vehicle or CXCL10 treatment. (**D, F**) 4MOSC1 (**D**) and MOC1 (**F**) tumor kinetics of mice of indicated treatment groups (*n* = 10 per group (4MOSC1); *n* = 7-8 per group (MOC1)). Survival percentage of 4MOSC1 (**D**) and MOC1 (**F**) mice receiving indicated treatment is shown on the right. (**E, G**) The percent of mice that fully cleared tumors (complete response) for indicated treatment group of matched duplicate experiments. (*n* = 3 per group, with the exception of the αPD-1 treatment group for MOC1 where *n* = 2; unpaired Student's *t* test; data are represented as mean ± SEM).

DISCUSSION

The successful infiltration of cytotoxic effector cells remains a critical determinant of the efficacy of ICBs such as PD-1/PD-L1 blocking agents. The CXCR3-CXCL10 chemokine system has demonstrated functional relevance in both the successful recruitment of CD8+ T cells into the TME, as well as enhancing the proliferation and function of intratumoral CD8+ T cells during anti-PD-1 treatment *(27)*. In fact, studies using the CERTIM pan-cancer cohort indicate that high expression of CXCR3 and its ligands were amongst the top correlative indications of positive responses to ICB therapy *(125)*. In this study, we demonstrated that intratumoral augmentation of CXCL10 increases the infiltration of cytotoxic effector cells, leading to suppressed tumor growth and improved outcomes in murine models of HNSCC. This included enhanced infiltration of CD8+ T cells, CD4+ T cells, and NK cells, all of which contributed to tumor regression in CXCL10-treated mice.

However, our data suggests that IT CXCL10 drives tumor clearance not only though boosting intratumoral infiltration of cytotoxic immune cells and cells that support cytotoxic function, but also by favoring conditions that promote the effector function of T cells. Previous studies have shown that CXCL10 induces CD4+ T cell polarization towards immune-supporting Th1 and Th17 lineages via STAT1, STAT4, and STAT5-dependent signaling *(80, 81)*. Conversely, CXCL11 causes CD4+ T cell polarization towards the immunosuppressive type 1 regulatory (Tr1) lineage (IL-10^{high}) mediated by STAT3- and STAT6-dependent pathways *(38)*. Additional data indicate that CXCL10 promotes the terminal differentiation of effector CD8+ T cells within the spleen *(82)* and facilitates T cell interactions with DCs *(39)*. CXCL10 has also been shown to stimulate PD-L1 expression on NK cells, enhancing the ability of these cells to stimulate the proliferation of T cells and increase production of IFN-γ and TNFα *in vitro (126)*. Together, these data suggest that CXCL10 not only acts as a chemoattractant but also influences the biological responses of CXCR3-expressing immune cells, potentially having a direct influence over their maturation and differentiation. Here, we showed that T cells recruited to the TME of CXCL10-treated mice displayed increased tumor antigen specificity, penetrance into the tumor parenchyma, and evidence of cytotoxic effector function, such as granzyme release.

Following priming with tumor-derived antigen, a subset of naïve T cells (T_N) proliferate, upregulate markers of activation, and downregulate circulatory markers like CD62L, differentiating into $CD44^+CD62L^-$ effector T cells (T_{EFF}) that carry out anti-tumoral functions including the secretion of cytotoxic molecules and cytokines. Other primed T_N cells differentiate into memory T cells, including long-lived central memory T cells (T_{CM}), characterized as $CD44^+CD62L^+$, as well as stem (T_{SCM}), effector (T_{EM}), and tissue residential (T_{RM}) memory T cell subsets *(64, 90)*. T_{CM}'s in particular can both self-renew and give rise to a pool of T_{EFF}, making them critical for long-term immunity. Our studies revealed an increase of T cells displaying T_{CM}-like markers in response to CXCL10 treatment, also suggesting that CXCR3-signaling may favor the formation of memory T cell subsets.

Our data also suggests that CXCL10 signaling through CXCR3 directly slows progression to dysfunction. Persistent antigen exposure can drive T cell dysfunction and exhaustion, characterized by reduced effector function and sustained expression of inhibitory receptors *(23, 114)*. In contrast, timely antigen clearance promotes the development of memory T cells. Thus, the duration and intensity of antigen signaling determines, in part, whether T cells become part of the functional memory pool or succumb to the progressive dysfunction associated with exhaustion. However, T cell dysfunction is not solely regulated by the persistence of antigen. Recent work demonstrated that prostaglandin E2 (*PGE2*) contributes to T cell dysfunction through the stimulation of $G\alpha_s$/cAMP signaling pathways in models of chronic stimulation of primary T cells *in vitro (115)*. Using the same model, CXCL10 treatment was shown to rescue T cells from dysfunction as reflected by restored levels of IFN-y and TNFα in the presence of PGE2 *(115)*. The mechanism is likely through CXCR3-mediated stimulation of $G\alpha_i$, which counters $G\alpha_s$/cAMP activation by PGE2. Consistent with these data, it has been demonstrated that $CXCR3^-$ $PD\text{-}1^{hi}$ $CD8^+$ T cells express higher levels of inhibitory molecules (including TIM-3, LAG-3 and TIGIT) than the other subsets, indicating a higher level of T cell dysfunction *(27)*.

The mechanisms by which CXCL10 treatment inhibits tumor growth do not appear limited to CXCR3-expressing immune cells. Consistent with the increase in TSA-T cells that accumulate in 4MOSC1 tumors in response to CXCL10 treatment, cDCs were shown to play a critical role in the efficacy of the CXCL10 treatment. We also observed increased antigen-presenting ($CD11c^+$) cells in TdLNs where these cells prime and activate CD8+ and CD4+ T cells, which also accumulate in the TdLNs. This is striking because administration of CXCL10 into tumors appears to promote the trafficking of CXCR3- and non-CXCR3-expressing cells between tumors and TdLNs, and the establishment of a network of anti-tumoral cells that results in the elimination of tumor cells.

Finally, CXCL10 does not just affect immune cells. We also observed a dramatic reduction of both angiogenesis and lymphangiogenesis in tumors from CXCL10-treated mice compared to control mice, consistent with prior reports and implicating CXCR3 signaling on endothelial cells *(116, 118)*. These data further define the multimodal mechanisms for the efficacy of CXCL10 treatment, as it is well established that increased rates of angiogenesis in solid tumors is essential for the maintenance of tumor growth, progression, and distal metastasis *(21, 117)*. Additionally, excessive angiogenesis produces a vasculature that is both structurally and functionally abnormal, reducing vasculature normalization, limiting blood perfusion, and interfering with the infiltration of immune cells *(21)*. Inhibition of angiogenesis also enhances T-cell infiltration and drug delivery to tumors, which further enhances the efficacy of ICB treatments *(127)*.

Importantly, IT delivery of CXCL10 as a single agent was sufficient to achieve significant anti-tumoral responses in two syngeneic murine models of HNSCC, with the rate of complete tumor clearance rivaling that of anti-PD-1 therapy alone at ~24.4%. However, it has been reported that responsiveness to anti-PD-1 therapy is *dependent* on CXCR3 and its chemokines, as CXCR3, CXCL9 and CXCL10 knockout mice exhibit markedly reduced survival in the anti-PD-1 responsive MC38 tumor model *(27)*. Indeed, complete tumor remittance increased from 18-24% with CXCL10 and anti-PD-1 as single agents to 39.2% and 44.3% in 4MOSC1 and MOC1 models, respectively, when given in combination (**Fig. S2F**). This synergistic anti-tumoral efficacy is consistent with prior studies of anti-PD-1 responsive MC38 colon adenocarcinoma and MCA1956 fibrosarcoma tumor models, which exhibited significantly higher levels of CXCL9 and CXCL10 than anti-PD-1 resistant tumors *(27)*.

As immune modulators that are generally administered systemically, ICBs such as anti-PD-1 and anti-CTLA-4 also disrupt normal immune regulation and tolerance in healthy tissues *(128, 129)*. The resulting unbridled immune activity can induce a wide spectrum of immune-related adverse events (irAEs) such as dermatitis, colitis, thyroiditis, and pneumonitis in a significant proportion of patients *(128–130)*. CTLA-4 blocking agents like ipilimumab have particularly high rates of irAEs,

which are reported in up to 60-70% of patients compared to 30% in those treated with anti-PD-1 *(128)*. Thus, in addition to improving the efficacy of ICBs, it will be important to determine if CXCL10/ICB combination treatments reduce the risk of irAEs by enabling anti-tumor efficacy to be achieved with a lower dose of the ICB. Meanwhile, localized therapeutics like CXCL10 may inherently have a reduced risk of irAEs by limiting chemokine activity to the tumor and minimizing systemic exposure and off-target immune activation in healthy tissues. As increased localized CXCL10 levels produced a higher proportion of TSA-T cells in our studies, off-target immune cell overactivation is expected to be minimized due to a more tumor-restricted immune response.

Our results are consistent with prior studies using epigenetic modulators and vaccination via CXCL9/CXCL10-engineered DCs; these studies demonstrated that amplification of CXCR3 signaling within the TME leads to improved responses to ICB in models of colorectal carcinoma, melanoma, and non-small cell lung cancer *(27, 131)*. mRNA-based therapeutics are also emerging as a platform for the intratumoral delivery of other immunomodulatory proteins *(132)*. While promising, these methods are less controlled with respect to CXCL10 levels and duration of treatment, which could impact efficacy and undesired effects. Our approach with intratumoral delivery of recombinant chemokine offers a more immediate and controlled therapeutic approach that can be discontinued or adjusted as needed while presenting a lower risk of immunogenicity and off-target activity. However, while significant efficacy was observed in the HNSCC models, responses to CXCL10 as a single agent as well as in combination with anti-PD-1 were still limited, as tumors regrew in ~75% and ~54-60% of the mice, respectively. Thus, additional modulators such as inhibitors of MDSCs, which are abundant in the HNSCC TME, may be worth exploring to determine if it is possible to further sensitize tumors to CXCL10-therapy. Consistent with this, recent work has demonstrated that hydrogel delivery of PD-L1 and inhibitors of DPP4 (a protease that rapidly deactivates CXCR3 ligands) greatly reduced degradation of CXCL10, promoting cancer regression in a lung metastasis model *(133)*. Finally, the use of CXCL10 as an immune-stimulating molecule may also be applicable to other cancer models beyond HNSCC, particularly those also characterized by an immune suppressive tumor microenvironment.

Taken together, our study shows that IT CXCL10 is a viable approach for enhancing the intratumoral recruitment of CXCR3 cells into the TME, as well as for promoting their effector functions, differentiation into long-term memory cells, and resistance to dysfunction. CXCL10 also appears to stimulate a larger network of interacting cells that are critical for tumor elimination and reshaping the vasculature to a state that is unfavorable for tumor proliferation and metastasis. Our findings provide the rationale for the future clinical evaluation of IT CXCL10 as a multimodal strategy to overcome resistance to ICB immunotherapies and improve outcomes in HNSCC patients and possibly other cancers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

CXCL10 production and purification

A previously described *E. coli* expression/purification system involving chemokine fused to the C-terminus of a His-tagged ubiquitin variant was used to produce murine CXCL10; the variant contains a tryptophan-serine sequence at the C-terminus to facilitate accurate determination of concentration *(68)*. The His-tag enables Ni-affinity chromatography purification of the detergent solubilized fusion protein, which is subsequently refolded in a redox buffer to form the correct disulfides. The ubiquitin facilitates cleavage of CXCL10 from ubiquitin by the deubiquitylating enzyme Usp2cc, leaving the native chemokine N-terminus that is required for WT activity. A final purification step by reversed phase HPLC is used to isolate the desired protein with purity suitable for *in vivo* use and a yield of ~15 mg/L. The identity of the final product was confirmed by mass spectrometry and the purity assessed via SDS-PAGE gel. The protein sequence of the final product:

IPLARTVRCNCIHIDDGPVRMRAIGKLEIIPASLSCPRVEIIATMKKNDEQRCLNPESKTIKNLMKA FSKRSKRAPWS

Functional integrity was assessed by cell migration assays with CXCR3$^+$ Jurkat cells (kind gift from Sudar Rajagopal, Duke University) and bioluminescent resonance energy transfer (BRET)-based G protein activation and β-arrestin recruitment assays *(134, 135)*.

Cell lines

The 4MOSC1 cell line was generated in-house *(49)*. MOC1 cells were generously provided by Dr. R. Uppaluri (Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA) *(50)*. Authentication of cell lines was confirmed by multiplex STR profiling (Genetica DNA Laboratories, Inc. Burlington, NC) to ensure cell identity. 4MOSC1 cells were grown on culture dishes pre-coated with collagen (Corning, #354249) in Defined Keratinocyte-SFM medium (#10744019; ThermoFisher) supplemented with 5 ng/mL EGF Recombinant Mouse Protein (#PMG8044; ThermoFisher), Defined Keratinocyte SFM Growth Supplement (1 vial/500 mL media) (#10784015; ThermoFisher), 50 pM Cholera Toxin (#C8052; Sigma-Aldrich), and 1% antibiotic/antimycotic solution (#BW17-603E; Fisher). MOC1 cells were cultured in a 2:1 IMDM (#12440-046; ThermoFisher) and Hams Nutrient Mixture (#11765054; ThermoFisher) supplemented with 5% fetal bovine serum (# sh30071.03; HYCLONE), 1% antibiotic/antimycotic solution (#BW17-603E; ThermoFisher), 5 mg/mL insulin (#10516; Sigma-Aldrich), 400 ng/mL Hydrocortisone (# H0135; Sigma-Aldrich,), and 5 ng/mL EGF (#01-107; Millipore). All cells were cultured at 37°C in the presence of 5% CO_2.

Antibodies

PD-1 antibody (clone J43, BE0033-2), isotype antibody (Armenian hamster IgG isotype control, BE0091), and CD8 depletion antibody (clone YTS 169.4, BE0117), CD4 depletion antibody (clone GK1.5, BE0003-1), and NK1.1 depletion antibody (clone PK136, BE0036) were obtained from Bio X Cell. Fluorochrome-conjugated antibodies were purchased from BD Biosciences (San Jose, CA) and BioLegend (San Diego, CA) unless otherwise indicated.

Mice

All the animal studies using HNSCC tumor xenografts and orthotropic implantation studies were approved by the University of California, San Diego Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), and performed according to protocol ASP #S15195, with all experiments adhering to relevant ethical regulations for animal testing and research. Mice were housed at the Moores Cancer Center (University of California, San Diego) in a Micro-Isolator and individually ventilated cages supplied with acidified water. The mice were fed 5053 irradiated Picolab rodent diet 20 from LabDiet. The temperature in the facility was maintained between ~18 and 23°C, with 40–60% humidity, and a 12 h light/12 h dark cycle. All animal manipulation activities were conducted in laminar flow hoods within the facility. Wildtype C57BL/6N mice were obtained from Charles River Labs. CXCR3$^{-/-}$ mice (B6.129P2-Cxcr3tm1Dgen/J), BATF3$^{-/-}$ mice (Batf3tm1Kmm/J), and OT-1 mice (C57BL/6-Tg(*TcraTcrb*)1100Mjb/J, 003831) were obtained from the Jackson Laboratory (Bar Harbor, ME) and bred in-house.

In vivo mouse tumor models and analysis

The ARRIVE essential 10 guidelines (https://arriveguidelines.org/arrive-guidelines) were followed to conduct all *in vivo* animal studies (murine). For the MOC1 model, 2 million MOC1 cells were implanted into the right flanks of female C57BL/6N or CXCR3$^{-/-}$ mice (4–6 weeks of age). When average tumor volumes reached 40–60 mm^3, (around day 10), the mice were randomized into groups for subsequent experiments. For the 4MOSC1 model, 1 million cells were transplanted into the right buccal space of female C57BL/6N, CXCR3$^{-/-}$, or BATF3$^{-/-}$ mice (4–6 weeks of age). When average tumor volumes reached 10-20 mm^3 (around day 3), the mice were randomized into groups and treatment initiated. For IT treatment, 10 µg chemokine in 50 µl PBS or vehicle control (50 µl PBS) were injected directly into tumors. 4MOSC1 mice were treated on days 3 and

6 post tumor cell implantation, and occasionally received a 3rd dose on day 9, as indicated in the individual experiments. MOC1 mice were treated three times (days 10, 14, and 17). For studies with checkpoint blockade inhibitors, the mice were treated IP with 10 mg/kg anti-PD-1 antibody (clone J43) three times a week for 3 weeks. For studies with depletion antibodies, mice were treated IP with 10 mg/kg of the indicated depletion antibody three times a week for 3 weeks. Tumor volumes were calculated as $(width^2)(length)/2$ (mm^3). The mice were euthanized after completion of the treatment or when control-treated mice succumbed to tumor burden. As needed, tumors were dissected for flow cytometric analysis or histologic and immunohistochemical evaluation. The GraphPad Prism version 10 statistical analysis program (GraphPad Software, Boston, MA) was used to produce figures.

Flow cytometry

Flow cytometry using comprehensive immune cell panels were utilized to gauge changes in immune cell infiltration and activation status in vehicle vs CXCL10-treated 4MOSC1 mice. Tumors were isolated, minced, and resuspended using the Tumor Dissociation Kit (#xxx; Miltenyi Biotec, San Diego, CA), diluted into DMEM for subsequent processing with the gentleMACS Octo Dissociator. Digested tissues were then passed through 70-µm strainers to produce a single-cell suspension. Samples were washed with PBS and processed for live/dead cell discrimination using Zombie viability stain (BioLegend, San Diego, CA). Cell suspensions were then washed with cell staining buffer (#420201; BioLegend) prior to staining with antibodies for 30 min at 4°C, protected from light. The following mouse antibodies and dilutions were used: CD45 (30-F11, 1:100), CD3 (17A2, 1:200), CD8a (53-6.7, 1:100), CD4 (RM4-4, 1:100), Slamf6 (330AJ, 1:100), PD-1 (29 F.1A12,1:100), CD44 (IM7, 1:100), CD19 (6D5, 1:100), CXCR3 (S18001A, 1:100), Tim3 (RMT3-23, 1:100), NK1.1 (PK136, 1:100), CD69 (H1.2F3, 1:100), CD62L (MEL-14, 1:100), Ly6C (HK1.4, 1:100), CD11b (M1/70, 1:100), CD11c (N418, 1:100), XCR1 (ZET, 1:100), CD64 (X54-5/7.1, 1:100), CD103 (2E7, 1:100), MHCII (M5/114.15.2, 1:200), CD80 (16-10A1, 1:100), IFNγ (XMGI.2, 1:100), granzyme B (GBII, 1:100), TNF-α (MP6-XT22, 1:100), LAG3 (C9B7W, 1:100), and Ki-67 (16A8, 1:100). Stained cells were washed and then fixed with BD cytofix for 20 min at 4°C, protected from light. In the case of intracellular staining, permeabilization was performed following surface staining by incubating the cells with intracellular targeted antibodies in fixation-permeabilization buffer (#88-8824-00; ThermoFisher) for 30 min at 4°C and protected from light. Samples were analyzed using a BD LSR Fortessa or BD LSR Fortessa X-20. Downstream analysis was performed using FlowJo version 10.8.1 (BD Life Sciences). The gating strategy for identifying NK, CD4, and CD8 T cell subsets is shown in **figure S3C**. The GraphPad Prism version 10 statistical analysis program (GraphPad Software, Boston, MA) was used to produce figures.

T cell activation with CXCL10 *in vitro*

For T cell activation studies, a protocol was adapted from *(115)*. Briefly, splenocytes were isolated from 4- to 6-week-old mice and mechanically disrupted. Red blood cells were lysed in red blood cell lysis buffer (BioLegend) according to manufacturer's instructions. $CD8^+$ T cells were isolated with an EasySep CD8 isolation kit by negative selection. For initial activation, naïve CD8+ T cells were cultured (0.5-1 million cells per mL) in 24-well plates with 50 U mL^{-1} IL-2 , 1 µg/mL of anti-mouse CD3 (#100340; BioLegend), and 2 µg/mL of anti-mouse CD28 (#102116; BioLegend) for 48 h. Cells were then collected, replated, and cultured in either 50 U/mL IL-2 (PeproTech) alone, 50 U/mL IL-2 with 100 nM $OVA_{257–264}$ peptide, or 50 U/mL IL-2 with $OVA_{257–264}$ and CXCL10 (concentrations varying from 1-100 nM) for 24-48 h. Cells were then washed with cell staining buffer and both surface and intracellular staining was performed as previously described above with the following antibodies: CD45 (30-F11, 1:100), CD3 (17A2, 1:200), CD8a (53-6.7, 1:100), CD4 (RM4-4, 1:100), Slamf6 (330AJ, 1:100), PD-1 (29 F.1A12, 1:100), CD44 (IM7, 1:100), CXCR3 (S18001A, 1:100), Tim3 (RMT3-23, 1:100), CD62L (MEL-14, 1:100), IFNγ (XMGI.2, 1:100), granzyme B (GBII, 1:100), TNF-α (MP6-XT22, 1:100), LAG3 (C9B7W, 1:100), and Ki-67 (16A8, 1:100). Stained cells were washed and then fixed with BD cytofix. For intracellular and

transcription factor staining, cells were stimulated with 1X cell activation cocktail with brefeldin A (BioLegend) in medium for 4–6 h at 37 °C before viability staining; unstimulated cells served as control. After surface staining, cells were fixed with a FOXP3/transcription factor buffer set (Invitrogen) and stained with intracellular antibodies for 45 min at room temperature. Samples were then analyzed using a BD LSR Fortessa or BD LSR Fortessa X-20. Downstream analysis was performed using FlowJo version 10.8.1 (BD Life Sciences). The GraphPad Prism version 10 statistical analysis program (GraphPad Software, Boston, MA) was used to produce figures.

Quantification of antigen-specific T cells *in vivo*

To detect TSA-T cells in the TME, 1 million 4MOSC1-LucOS cells, generation described in Saddawi-Konefka et al., 2022, were implanted into the right buccal space of female C57Bl/6 mice. When the average tumor volume reached 10-20 mm^3, mice were randomized into groups and treatment was initiated. Treatments included 10 µg chemokine in 50 µl of PBS or 50 µl PBS (vehicle control) which were injected directly into tumors on days 3 and 6. At days 10-15, tumors were isolated and processed to obtain a single-cell suspension as described above. For antigen-specific T cell tetramer staining, Flex-T™ Biotin H-2 K(b) OVA Monomer (#280051; BioLegend) paired with PE-streptavidin or APC-streptavidin (#405203 or 405207, respectively; BioLegend) were used according to manufacturers' instructions and as previously described *(67)*. Samples were analyzed using a BD LSR Fortessa or BD LSR Fortessa X-20. Data analysis was performed using FlowJo version 10.8.1 (BD Life Sciences), version 10.8.1. The GraphPad Prism version 10 statistical analysis program (GraphPad Software, Boston, MA) was used to produce figures.

The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) analysis

The cBio Portal (http://www.cbioportal.org/) was utilized to download and analyze transcriptomic data from the TCGA PanCancer Atlas data set for HNSCC *(51, 52)*. Hazard ratios were calculated from the log-rank test between cohorts to determine the relationship between CXCR3 and CXCL10 on overall outcomes and inflammatory status in HNSCC patients. $CXCR3^{high}/CXCL10^{high}$ cohorts (n=128 and 132) and $CXCL10^{low}/CXCL10^{low}$ cohort (n=131 and 126) represent the upper 25% and lower 25% threshold for *Cxcr3* or *Cxcl10* mRNA expression respectively. Differentially expressed genes displayed in figures represent Log_2 fold-change and P value (adjusted) cut-offs are 1 and 0.05, respectively between $CXCL10^{high}$ vs $CXCL10^{low}$ cohorts using Wilcoxon Rank Sum test. Average mRNA gene expression amongst $CXCL10^{high}$ vs $CXCL10^{low}$ cohorts were used to generate cell enrichment scores using the xCell Cell Enrichment (https://xcell.ucsf.edu/) analysis platform *(63)*. The GraphPad Prism version 10 statistical analysis program (GraphPad Software, Boston, MA) was used to produce figures.

NanoString nCounter Platform

RNA was isolated by homogenization of whole tumors in TRIzol® (Invitrogen) followed by phenol:chloroform extraction and RNeasy Mini Kt based column purification with on-column DNase treatment (Qiagen). Hybridization of samples was performed at The Next Generation Sequencing Core (Salk Institute for Biological Studies, La Jolla, CA) according to the NanoString Hybridization Protocol for nCounter XT CodeSet Gene Expression Assays. Samples were run on the nCounter SPRINT Profiler with the nCounter PanCancer Mouse Immune Profiling gene expression platform. Data was analyzed by ROSALIND® (https://rosalind.bio/) (San Diego, CA). Read Distribution percentages, violin plots, identity heatmaps, and sample MDS plots were generated as part of the QC step. Normalization, fold changes and p-values were calculated using criteria provided by NanoString. ROSALIND® follows the nCounter® Advanced Analysis protocol of dividing counts within a lane by the geometric mean of the normalization probes from the same lane. Housekeeping probes used for normalization were selected based on the geNorm algorithm as implemented in the NormqPCR R library (Perkins et al., 2012). Abundance of various cell populations was calculated using the Nanostring Cell Type Profiling Module with ROSALIND software. ROSALIND performs a filtering of Cell Type Profiling results to include results that have scores with a p-Value greater than or equal to 0.05. Fold changes and pValues were calculated

using the fast method as described in the nCounter® Advanced Analysis 2.0 User Manual. P-value adjustment was performed using the Benjamini-Hochberg method of estimating false discovery rates (FDR). Clustering of genes for the final heatmap of differentially expressed genes was done using the PAM (Partitioning Around Medoids) method using the fpc R library *(136)* that takes into consideration the direction and type of all signals on a pathway, the position, role and type of every gene, etc. Hypergeometric distribution was used to analyze the enrichment of pathways, gene ontology, domain structure, and other ontologies. The top GO R library was used to determine local similarities and dependencies between GO terms in order to perform Elim pruning correction. Several database sources were referenced for enrichment analysis, including Interpro *(137)*, NCBI *(138)*, MSigDB *(139, 140)*, REACTOME *(141)*, WikiPathways *(142)*. Enrichment was calculated relative to a set of background genes relevant for the experiment. GraphPad Prism version 10 statistical analysis program (GraphPad Software, Boston, MA) was used to produce figures.

Microscope image acquisition

Tissues (buccal tumors and cervical lymph nodes) were harvested, fixed in zinc formalin fixative (Sigma-Aldrich) and sent to the Biorepository and Tissue Technology Shared Resources (BTTSR) at Moores Cancer Center (San Diego, CA) for paraffin embedding, sectioning, and IF staining. Histology samples were analyzed using QuPath 0.5.1 (Edinburgh, UK). The following antibodies were used according to the BTTSR core's protocol: CD4 (anti-mouse, Abcam), CD8 (anti-mouse, Invitrogen), CD19 (anti-mouse, Cell Signaling), CD25 (anti-mouse, Cell Signaling), PanCK (anti-mouse, Dako), Granzyme B (anti-mouse, Invitrogen), CD11c (anti-mouse, Cell Signaling), CD80 (anti-mouse, Abcam), NK1.1 (anti-mouse, Cell Signaling), Ki67 (anti-mouse, GeneTex), LYVE-1 (anti-mouse, Invitrogen), and PD-1 (anti-mouse, Abcam). Slides were scanned using a PhenoImager HT (Akoya Biosciences) at 40x resolution. H&E stained sections underwent brightfield whole slide scanning using an AT2 Aperio (Leica Biosystems) at 40x resolution. All image analyses were performed using the QuPath software to perform pixel classification of stained cells and positive cell counts.

Statistical analysis

The sample size for each experiment was selected based on historical data and previous publications using the same tumor models (PMID: 31804466**,** PMID: 35879302). Mice from *in vivo* experiments were randomized before initiation of treatment or data collection. Data collection and analysis were not performed blind to the conditions of the experiments. Data analyses, variation estimation, and validation of test assumptions were conducted with GraphPad Prism version 10 statistical analysis program (GraphPad Software, Boston, MA) unless otherwise indicated. Differences between the tumor kinetics amongst experimental groups were analyzed using simple linear regression analysis. The differences between experimental groups in cell density, response values, and tumor volume were analyzed using independent *t*-tests or ANOVA (when >2 conditions). Survival analysis was performed using the Kaplan–Meier method and log-rank tests. The asterisks in each figure denote statistical significance, or ns for non-significant $p > 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; and $^{***}p < 0.001$. All the data are reported as mean ± SEM (standard error of the mean). Experiments were independently repeated at least three times with similar results.

Supplemental material summary

Fig. S1 lists the top 100 differentially expressed genes between CXCL10^{high} and CXCL10^{low} HNSCC tumors. **Fig. S2 A-E** shows the production and functional verification of produced CXCR3 ligands. **Fig. S2 F** shows a table detailing the proportion of mice exhibiting complete tumor clearance across multiple independent experiments for tumors treated with indicated treatment. **Fig. S3 A-B** shows representative IF images and quantification of NK cells within 4MOSC1 tumors of vehicle vs CXCL10 treated mice. **Fig. S3 C-H** shows supplemental flow data as referenced in the main text along with a representative gating strategy for T cells. **Fig. S4** shows an extended list of differentially expressed genes from 4MSOC1 tumors of vehicle and CXCL10 treated mice.

Fig. S5 shows that CXCL10 treatment promotes proliferation and reduced inhibitory markers in primary OT-1 CD8+ T cells *in vitro*.

DATA AVAILABILITY

(NOTE: Data files are currently being uploaded into detailed archives at the time of this submission and can be available from the corresponding author upon request for review)
The final analyzed tumor growth kinetic data and protocols will be made available at the time of associated publication, with all raw data (.xlsx), analyzed data (.prism) and metadata will be uploaded to the public repository Mendeley Data (https://data.mendeley.com/) [persistent link to data in repository, e.g., DOI, accession numberXXXX]. For images, all raw data (.xlsx), analyzed data (.prism) and metadata will be uploaded to the public repository BioImage Archive (https://www.ebi.ac.uk/bioimage-archive/). Flow flow cytometry data, all raw data (.fcs), analyzed data (.flowjo) and metadata will be collected and annotated according to the MIFlowCyt standard and uploaded to the FLOWrepository (www.flowrepository.org) [persistent link to data in repository, e.g., DOI, accession numberXXXX]. The final analyzed NanoString data and protocols will be made available at the time of associated publication, with all raw data (.rcc), analyzed data (.xlsx) and metadata will be uploaded to the NCBI-supported public functional genomics data repository Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/). [persistent link to data in repository, e.g., DOI, accession numberXXXX]. All additional data that support the findings in this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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Conflict of Interest

T.M. Handel is a cofounder of Lassogen Inc. and serves on the Scientific Advisory Boards of Abilita Bio, Abalone Bio and Aikium Inc. J.S. Gutkind reports consulting fees from Radionetics Oncology, BTB Therapeutics, Pangea Therapeutics, and io9 and is the founder of Kadima Pharmaceuticals. S. S Schokrpur receives consulting fees from OncoHost and Navya. The terms of these arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the University of California, San Diego in accordance with its conflict of interest policies. The other authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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