

Vaccination against the Epstein Barr virus

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Running title: EBV vaccine candidates

Abstract

Epstein Barr virus (EBV) was the first human tumor virus being discovered and remains to date the only human pathogen that can transform cells in vitro. 55 years of EBV research have now brought us to the brink of an EBV vaccine. For this purpose, recombinant viral vectors and heterologous prime-boost vaccinations with them, EBV derived virus like particles and viral envelope glycoprotein vaccine formulations are explored and are discussed in this review text. Even so cell-mediated immune control by cytotoxic lymphocytes protects healthy virus carriers from EBV associated malignancies, antibodies might be able to prevent symptomatic primary infection, the most likely EBV associated pathology against which EBV vaccines will be initially tested. Thus, the variety of EBV vaccines reflects the sophisticated life cycle of this human tumor virus and only vaccination in humans will finally be able to reveal the efficacy of these candidates.

1. Importance of EBV as a vaccination target

The Epstein Barr virus (EBV) is a common human γ -herpesvirus with the most potent host cell transforming capacity of all infectious disease agents *in vitro* (1). It was discovered 55 years ago in Burkitt lymphoma (2, 3) and is associated with epithelial, lymphocyte and smooth muscle derived tumors in humans (4). Around 2% of all malignancies in humans are associated with EBV with an annual incidence rate of 200'000 (5). In addition to these EBV associated malignancies, this virus is associated with immune pathologies that result from a hyperactivation of EBV induced T cell responses (6). These include syndromes that result from CD8⁺ T cell lymphocytosis during symptomatic primary EBV infection called infectious mononucleosis (IM) (7), from virus induced cytokine production for the hyperactivation of myeloid cells resulting in hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis (HLH) (8) and possibly also from the autoimmune disease multiple sclerosis (MS) (9). Along the lines of EBV possibly setting up a pro-inflammatory environment in the brain of some MS patients, it was recently reported that encephalitis in at least one patient under immune checkpoint treatment blocking the inhibitory receptor PD-1 on T cells was associated with elevated EBV loads in blood and cerebrospinal fluid, as well as clonal expansion of T cells with EBV specific T cell receptors in the brain (10). Accordingly, loss of EBV specific T cell mediated immune control was observed upon PD-1 blockade in a preclinical model of EBV infection in mice with reconstituted human immune system components (HIS mice) (11). Thus, both EBV associated malignancies and immune pathologies justify the development of a vaccine against EBV, but which individual or combination of viral antigens should be targeted.

For the choice of vaccine antigen, the life cycle of EBV and its gene expression in the various virus associated diseases needs to be considered. EBV is primarily transmitted via saliva exchange and most likely crosses the mucosal epithelial cell barrier by transcytosis to infect B cells in submucosal secondary lymphoid tissues like tonsils (12, 13). In B cells EBV expresses latent viral gene products from its circularized and increasingly chromatinized multi-copy extrachromosomal DNA (14). Initial expression of 6 nuclear antigens (EBNAs) and 2 membrane proteins (LMPs) in the so called latency III program is curtailed with further B cell differentiation to just EBNA1, LMP1 and 2 (latency II) in germinal center B cells and to finally no viral protein expression in memory B cells (latency 0), the site of EBV persistence (15). The latent EBV proteins drive B cell proliferation allowing dissemination of the virus in the human body. From the reservoir in memory B cells EBV can reactivate upon plasma cell

differentiation (16), and then presumably amplifies virion production by lytic replication in epithelial cells for more efficient shedding into the saliva and further transmission (17). EBV associated pathologies originate from these different stages of the EBV life cycle. For example, post-transplant lymphoproliferative disease (PTLD) and some of the diffuse large B cell lymphomas (DLBCL) express latency III, Hodgkin and Burkitt lymphoma emerge from germinal centers with latency II or only EBNA 1 expression as the sole EBV protein (latency I), respectively, and early lytic EBV antigen specific CD8+ T cells expand mainly during IM. Furthermore, early lytic EBV antigen expression has recently been recognized to enhance virus associated tumor formation (1). These considerations identify latent and early lytic EBV antigens as promising candidates for vaccines, but also envelope proteins are explored as targets of neutralizing antibody responses that could curb transmission.

2. Protective immune responses against EBV infection

With the classes of EBV antigens that could be targeted for vaccination against EBV associated diseases in mind, the question arises which type of immune responses should be elicited. Information about protective immune responses against EBV can be gleaned from preclinical *in vitro* and *in vivo* models and clinical observations. Among the most informative clinical observations are primary immunodeficiencies that identify genetic lesions that predispose for EBV associated diseases (18, 19). These point towards cytotoxic lymphocytes as the main immune compartment that exerts immune control over EBV infection. The respective lymphocytes need to be positive for the cytotoxic granule machinery, including perforin, Munc13-4 and Munc18-2 (20-22). They need to carry the co-stimulatory and co-inhibitory molecules CD27, CTLA-4, SLAM protein family members like 2B4, 4-1BB and NKG2D in combination with the main activating receptors CD16 or the T cell receptor (23-33). Furthermore, they need to expand well after activation and depend on GATA2 and MCM4 for their differentiation (34-37). In contrast EBV specific immune control does not seem to depend on type I and II interferons, antibody production and MHC class II restricted T cell responses (18). This profile fits well to CD8⁺ T cells, natural killer (NK), NKT and $\gamma\delta$ T cells. Indeed, all of these cytotoxic lymphocyte populations have been shown to restrict EBV infection in the preclinical model of HIS mice (38-43). In addition the EBV specific CD8⁺ T cells might have a particular PD-1⁺Tim-3⁺KLRG1⁺CXCR5⁺TCF-1⁺ and BATF3⁺ phenotype that allows them to control EBV infected B cells in germinal centers (11, 44, 45). These CD8⁺ T cells recognize predominantly latent and early lytic EBV antigens (6). T cell lines have also been adoptively transferred to treat EBV associated malignancies, initially primarily PTLD (46). With respect to individual antigens EBNA1, LMP1 and LMP2 specific T cell lines have proven clinically efficacious in EBV associated lymphomas and nasopharyngeal carcinoma (47-49). Interestingly, T cells with these specificities have also been infused into MS patients with some clinical success (50, 51). Lytic EBV replication is in addition targeted by early differentiated CD56^{dim}NKG2A⁺KIR⁻ partially CD16⁺ NK cells (39, 52, 53). Both CD8⁺ T cells and NK cells significantly expand during IM (7, 53-56). In addition to early differentiated NK cells V γ 8V δ 2 T cells are elevated in a subset of children (57). They preferentially respond to Burkitt lymphoma cells with a latency I EBV gene expression that is also found in homeostatically proliferating EBV infected memory B cells (58). Finally, NKT cells preferentially respond to Hodgkin lymphoma and nasopharyngeal carcinoma cell lines (59). Thus, while CD8⁺ T cells

target all EBV latencies and early lytic EBV replication, NK, NKT and $\gamma\delta$ T cells seem to restrict lytic, latency II and latency I EBV infection, respectively. These might be the cytotoxic lymphocyte compartments on which immune control of EBV infection depends and that should be stimulated by EBV specific vaccination.

3. Recombinant viral vector vaccines

Recombinant viral vector vaccines are live viruses that are engineered to express extra proteins, which the vaccine is targeting to generate immunity. These vaccine platforms are relatively new and have several advantages over traditional vaccines. First, viral vectored vaccines can induce a broad range of immune responses, in particularly CD8+ cytotoxic T lymphocyte (CTL) responses that are important in clearing virally infected cells. This contrasts with most of the existing vaccine formulas that are designed to elicit primarily a humoral antibody response. The viral vector infects target cells and leads to antigen expression in the cytosol, where it can gain easy access to the classical MHC class I processing pathway, and subsequent presentation of the resulting peptide epitopes on MHC class I molecules to stimulate an antigen-specific CD8+ CTL response. Second, viruses are naturally immunogenic and they are adjuvants themselves as they express a range of pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs) to initiate an inflammatory response. This adjuvant effect is crucial for enhancing the protective immune response elicited by the vaccine. Third, viral vector vaccines have a high gene transduction efficiency (60) and can deliver the antigens to different cell types depending on the tropism of viral vectors used.

Many different viral vectors have been developed to use as vaccine candidates, including poxviruses, adenoviruses and Sendai virus. The choice of viral vectors for vaccine development mostly depends on the vector's specific properties such as immunogenicity, safety and infectivity. Also, the pre-existing immunity against the viral vectors in humans are often considered. Vaccinia virus and adenovirus are among the most widely used viral vectors, mainly due to their ability to induce antigen-specific CD8+ T cell response. Currently there are many clinical trials testing diverse viral vector vaccines in different disease settings, mainly infectious diseases (61, 62).

The first EBV vaccine tested in humans used live recombinant vaccinia virus expressing the EBV membrane antigen BNLF-1 (LMP1) (63). While there were no significant EBV titer variations between vaccinated and unvaccinated adults, only 3 of 9 vaccinated infants were infected with EBV within 16 months after vaccination compared to 10 out of 10 in the unvaccinated control. However, this vaccine platform is no longer accepted due to the risk of adverse effects (64). A safer alternative is the multiplication incompetent attenuated pox viral vectors such as modified vaccinia virus Ankara (MVA) (65, 66). Indeed, a MVA vaccine encoding the EBV antigens EBNA1 and LMP2 (MVA-EL) has been developed as a therapeutic vaccine against EBV-positive cancer (67, 68).

This vaccine has been evaluated for safety and immunogenicity in phase I clinical trials in EBV-positive nasopharyngeal carcinoma (NPC) patients. MVA-EL was well tolerated and there was an increase in T cell responses against at least one antigen after vaccination in 8 of 14 patients in the UK study and 15 of 18 patients in the Hong Kong study. However, the therapeutic efficacy of the MVA-EL has yet to be shown. A recombinant adenovirus vector has also been developed to induce EBV-specific T cell responses. Nevertheless, instead of using it as a direct vaccination, the adenovirus vectors encoding the LMP proteins or polyepitopes with or without EBNA1 were used to infect DCs or LCLs in vitro, so as to either expand EBV-specific T cells and infuse these back into patients or to adoptively transfer the infected DCs as cellular vaccination (49, 69-71). Considering the complexity of cellular vaccine approaches, adenovirus vectors encoding EBV antigens should be explored as a direct vaccination against EBV.

4. Heterologous prime-boost vaccination

Early work on adenovirus vaccines used serotypes such as human adenovirus 5 (hAd5), but pre-existing immunity that can neutralize the viral vector is widespread in the human population, thus limiting its potency and hampering its clinical use. Chimpanzee adenovirus vectors were then developed to avoid the pre-existing neutralizing immunity (72, 73). Furthermore, the immunogenicity of these vectors can establish neutralizing responses that limit its capacity for secondary injection, requiring the use of different viral vectors in the boost vaccination. Indeed, heterologous prime-boost strategies using two antigen formulations has been regarded as a new and better way of immunization (74, 75).

Different combinations of heterologous prime-boost vaccines have been tested in animal models and some are undergoing efficacy testing in clinical trials, mainly against infectious diseases (75-77). Among these, the combination of chimpanzee adenovirus and MVA has been shown to induce a strong CD8⁺ T cell response that correlates with efficacy in humans against a liver-stage malaria antigen (78). The same strategy has been applied to vaccine development against different diseases, including hepatitis C virus (HCV), Ebola virus and prostate cancer (79-81). Our group has also demonstrated that adenovirus prime and MVA boost vaccination against EBNA1 is efficient in eliciting comprehensive CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ T cell responses which can translate into protection against EBV antigen expressing lymphomas (82).

Though viral vectors generally elicit a higher magnitude of T cell responses, they are expensive to produce and usually take longer time to manufacture. In contrast to these, protein-based vaccines are generally safer and cheaper to produce. Our lab has developed a vaccine platform to deliver the EBV antigen EBNA1 to antigen presenting cells by fusing the antigen to a monoclonal antibody against the DC endocytic receptor DEC-205 (83-85). This recombinant protein vaccine, adjuvanted with the double-stranded RNA polyI:C, has been shown to induce robust T cell responses, but mostly CD4⁺ T cell responses and lacking CD8⁺ T cell responses when tested in vivo (82, 84). As viral vector vaccines are known for their superiority in inducing CD8⁺ T cell responses, we combined this approach with viral vector vaccines in order to stimulate strong CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ T cell responses (82). We have showed that this heterologous prime boost vaccination strategy is more efficient in inducing a protective T cell response than the homologous prime boost. The combination of the protein vaccine targeting DEC-205 and the adenovirus is only slightly less efficient than the adenovirus prime and

MVA boost in protecting the mice from T cell lymphoma challenge, with the later, however, having a better protection against B cell lymphomas. This is consistent with previous studies that also human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) antigen targeting to DEC-205 had to be boosted with a recombinant poxviral vaccine to elicit protective responses in nonhuman primates (86). Thus, a heterologous prime-boost approach should be considered in the future development of a vaccine against EBV that aims to elicit T cell mediated immune control.

5. Virus-like particles

Virus-like particles (VLPs) are defined as virus particles which do not contain any viral nucleic acids. The research efforts of the last decades led to the development of VLP vaccines, including human papillomavirus VLPs against cervical carcinoma and *Plasmodium falciparum* antigen displaying Alfalfa mosaic virus VLPs against malaria (87, 88). Because of their safety attributes and their ability to elicit virus-specific innate and adaptive immune responses without harming the host, VLPs were also investigated as versatile tools for EBV vaccine development.

In 2015, a novel Newcastle disease virus (NDV) VLP platform consisting of EBVgp350/220 ectodomain was shown to elicit strong, long-lasting neutralizing antibody responses in BALB/c mice, which were, however, not significantly higher than after vaccination with soluble gp350/220 (89). The NDV VLP platform was subsequently used to incorporate additional EBV envelope and latent antigens. The combination of gH/gL-EBNA1 and gB/LMP2 into VLPs both led to the generation of high neutralizing titers and EBV-specific T-cell responses in vaccinated BALB/c mice (90). A different, but possibly even more promising approach, is to use VLPs based on the EBV particle. In order to reduce oncogenicity of EBV for vaccination, genetic elements and/or proteins involved in DNA packaging are deleted (91). Already 20 years ago, the first generation of cell lines that produce EBV VLPs were created by removing the terminal repeats (TRs), which prior had been identified as packaging signals of EBVs DNA (92-94). Those first EBV VLPs were able to bind human B and epithelial cells and did contain large amounts of viral particles, but no viral DNA. In 2011, Ruiss et al. developed EBV-derived VLPs in which the deletion of TRs was complemented with the deletion of potential EBV oncogenes namely EBNA2, 3A, 3B and 3C, LMP1 and BZLF1 for additional safety (95). Those EBV VLPs were shown to be assembled and released via the endosomal sorting complex for transport (ESCRT). Infected B cells were capable of presenting multiple EBV antigens to CD8⁺ and CD4⁺ T cells, which led to significant T cell expansions in vitro. In immunized BALB/c mice, the EBV VLPs elicited EBV specific humoral and cellular immune responses (95).

Despite strong evidence of immune activation and good safety profile in mice, as a clinical vaccine the risk of remaining infectious oncogenic genomes of the early EBV VLPs remained high. Therefore, the development of EBV VLPs was further improved through the deletion of BFLF1/BFRF1A or BBRF1. In 2012, Pavlova et al. managed to create fully DNA free EBV VLPs. The BFLF1/BFRF1A mutant EBV strain elicited similar

strong CD4⁺ T cell responses as the EBV wildtype in vitro (96). Through these deletions the pathogenic potential of the EBV VLPs was reduced, however the responses against structural and lytic components of EBV may not be sufficient for the creation of an effective EBV vaccine.

Therefore, more immunogenic EBV VLPs were created by fusing latent antigens such as EBNA1 and EBNA3C to the abundant major tegument protein, BNRF1. Through this approach the EBV VLPs were able to stimulate potent T cell responses against structural as well as latent EBV epitopes. In ex vivo cultures with human peripheral blood mononuclear cells, the EBV VLPs, which contained EBNA1 latent EBV antigen, could inhibit the outgrowth of EBV infected B cells more proficient than their counterparts without latent antigen. This partial inhibition of EBV infection in B cells could also be translated into experiments with HIS mice, while 100% of the PBS-treated mice got infected after EBV challenge, only 14% of the VLP-EBNA1-immunized mice had detectable viral loads in their peripheral blood (97). Therefore, EBV derived VLPs might need to contain latent antigens in addition to the structural proteins to elicit protective immune responses.

6. Envelope protein formulations to elicit neutralizing antibodies

Gp350/220 is an EBV glycoprotein, which initiates the attachment of EBV to susceptible host cells expressing the complement receptor type 2 (CD21) and/or type 1 (CD35). Being crucial in the first step of EBV latent infection, gp350/220 is one of the antigenic candidates often in the focus of exploration for the development of a prophylactic EBV vaccine. In the past, multiple potent antibodies against the EBV gp350 protein were found in human blood samples (98). The neutralizing antibody that has been mainly characterized is the monoclonal 72A1 antibody. The broad interest in the 72A1 antibody led to the development of a humanized anti-gp350 antibody which blocked EBV infection of B cells in vitro to equivalent levels as the mouse-human chimeric 72A1 antibody construct (99). However, immunizing with the gp350 protein alone did not lead to a prevention of infection with EBV in a phase II clinical trial, but only to a partial prevention of acute IM (100, 101). Therefore, improvements of the gp350 protein vaccination were conceived (102) and it was identified that dimers, trimers and tetramers of gp350 are leading to significantly higher neutralizing antibody titers in mice (103, 104). Multimerized gp350 seems, therefore, to elicit more potent B cell responses.

Improvement of gp350 protein vaccines was not only achieved by multimerization, but also by the addition of adjuvants. A study of Heeke et al. included the use of GLA/SE as an adjuvant in addition to the vaccination with gp350 in mice and rabbits. GLA/SE is composed of the synthetic TLR4 agonist glucopyranosyl lipid A (GLA) integrated into stable emulsion (SE). Mice and rabbits that were vaccinated with GLA/SE-adjuvanted gp350 vaccines showed elevated EBV-neutralizing antibody titers. In vaccinated mice also high IgG titers and robust anti-gp350 CD4⁺ T-cell responses could be detected (105). Furthermore, by epitope mapping, it was found that the immune response against EBV's gp350 protein is mainly directed against one dominant neutralizing epitope of gp350. In an approach to focus the antibody response on this potent epitope, gp350 mimetic peptides with strong ionic, electrostatic or hydrogen bonds to the neutralizing region of the monoclonal antibody 72A1 (106) were generated by computer modeling (107). In mice, those gp350 mimetic peptides elicited antibody responses that were able to block the interaction of 72A1 antibody and gp350. This technique may lead to stronger peptide vaccines which could be combined for the neutralizing epitopes of multiple EBV envelope glycoproteins.

When EBV is already attached to the host B cells through gp350 – CD21 interaction or for the infection of epithelial cells, proteins such as EBV gH/gL and EBV

gB become critical for the entry of EBV. Whereas gp350 is unique to EBV, gH/gL and gB are conserved among other herpesviruses. Cui et al. compared the vaccination of rabbits with recombinant monomeric as well as multimeric EBV gH/gL and gB proteins to gp350 protein vaccines. The group found that vaccination with EBV gH/gL or gB protein vaccines elicited higher neutralization titers than gp350 protein vaccines (108). These antibody titers were even increased when gH/gL and gB proteins were multimerized. Recently, Snijder et al. also used the proteins from the EBV fusion machinery as targets and the group isolated neutralizing human antibodies from memory B cells (109). An anti-gH/gL antibody, AMMO1, showed potent inhibition of infection of B and epithelial cells in vitro. Therefore, vaccination for gp350 plus the herpesviral fusion complex might elicit the most comprehensive humoral immune responses to EBV,

Another promising approach for EBV vaccination, which also mainly focuses on the generation of neutralizing antibodies against viral glycoproteins, is the use of nanoparticles for the delivery of a high amount of EBV antigens. In 2015, nanoparticles containing a portion of the ectodomain of gp350 including the complement receptor 2 binding site were used to vaccinate mice and monkeys (110). Vaccinated mice developed anti-gp350 titers that were about 1000-fold higher than in mice with soluble monomeric gp350 vaccine and were protective against a challenge with vaccinia virus expressing gp350. Cynomolgus macaques immunized with the gp350 nanoparticles also generated anti-gp350 titers that were 3- to 10-fold higher than with soluble monomeric gp350 protein (110). More recently, the same group investigated the immunization of non-human primates with gH/gL- and gH/gL/gp42-based nanoparticles. Those highly immunogenic vaccines elicited virus-neutralizing antibody responses that were maintained for at least 3 months after vaccination. It could be shown that the vaccination-induced antibodies were able to inhibit the viral fusion with B and epithelial cells (111). Because of the lack of a challenge of the vaccinated animals, it remains unclear whether these neutralizing antibody titers would inhibit EBV infection in vivo.

7. Conclusions and outlook

From the many approaches summarized above, it is clear that the time is ripe for vaccination against EBV associated pathologies. From the frequent reinfections of healthy virus carriers with EBV (112, 113) it seems also clear that sterilizing immunity against EBV infection is probably utopic. Such immune protection would also have to be

watertight, because if it would be transient and just delay primary EBV infection, the ensuing initial encounters with the virus would carry a higher risk for IM (7). Therefore, establishing or maintaining immune control of asymptomatic persistent EBV infection should probably be the goal for EBV vaccination. In patients with already established EBV associated malignancies this might be an uphill battle. Furthermore, vaccination against these pathologies might be difficult to assess in initial clinical trials due to their low incidence rate, usually ranging below 50 per 100'000 individuals (4). Therefore, the most likely scenario to test EBV specific vaccine candidates are adolescents or young adults that are still EBV seronegative (around one third of this population) and who have a high risk to acquiring EBV with IM (30-50%) (7), followed by an increased risk for Hodgkin lymphoma and MS (114, 115). Even so natural immune control of EBV primarily relies on cytotoxic lymphocytes (18, 19), vaccine induced EBV neutralizing antibodies could convert IM into asymptomatic infection, because the elevated viral shedding into the saliva and CD8⁺ T cell lymphocytosis driven by early lytic EBV antigens suggest that uncontrolled lytic replication contributes to IM (6). Therefore, all the above discussed EBV vaccine candidates could prevent IM and provide the proof of concept that immunization against EBV is possible.

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Figure legend

Figure 1: EBV vaccine candidates. EBV specific vaccination aims to either stimulate protective T cell responses (top half) or neutralizing antibodies (bottom half), that target latent and lytic EBV infected B cells or prevent B and epithelial cell infection, respectively. For EBV specific T cell stimulation, recombinant adenoviruses encoding latent EBV antigens are explored for dendritic cell infection, followed by T cell expansion in vitro for adoptive transfer or injection into patients with EBV associated malignancies. Furthermore, latent EBV antigen targeting to dendritic cells with antibodies is investigated. Moreover, recombinant modified vaccinia virus Ankara (MVA) vectors expressing latent EBV antigens have been developed and tested in patients. Finally, EBV derived virus like particles (VLPs) have shown promising results in preclinical models, lowering EBV titers when a latent EBV antigen was transgenically expressed in the viral tegument. Neutralizing antibodies were also elicited with VLPs or EBV envelope proteins. These antibody responses were more potent after multimerization of the respective glycoproteins or their incorporation into nanoparticles. This figure was created in part with modified Servier Medical Art templates, which are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License: <https://smart.servier.com>.

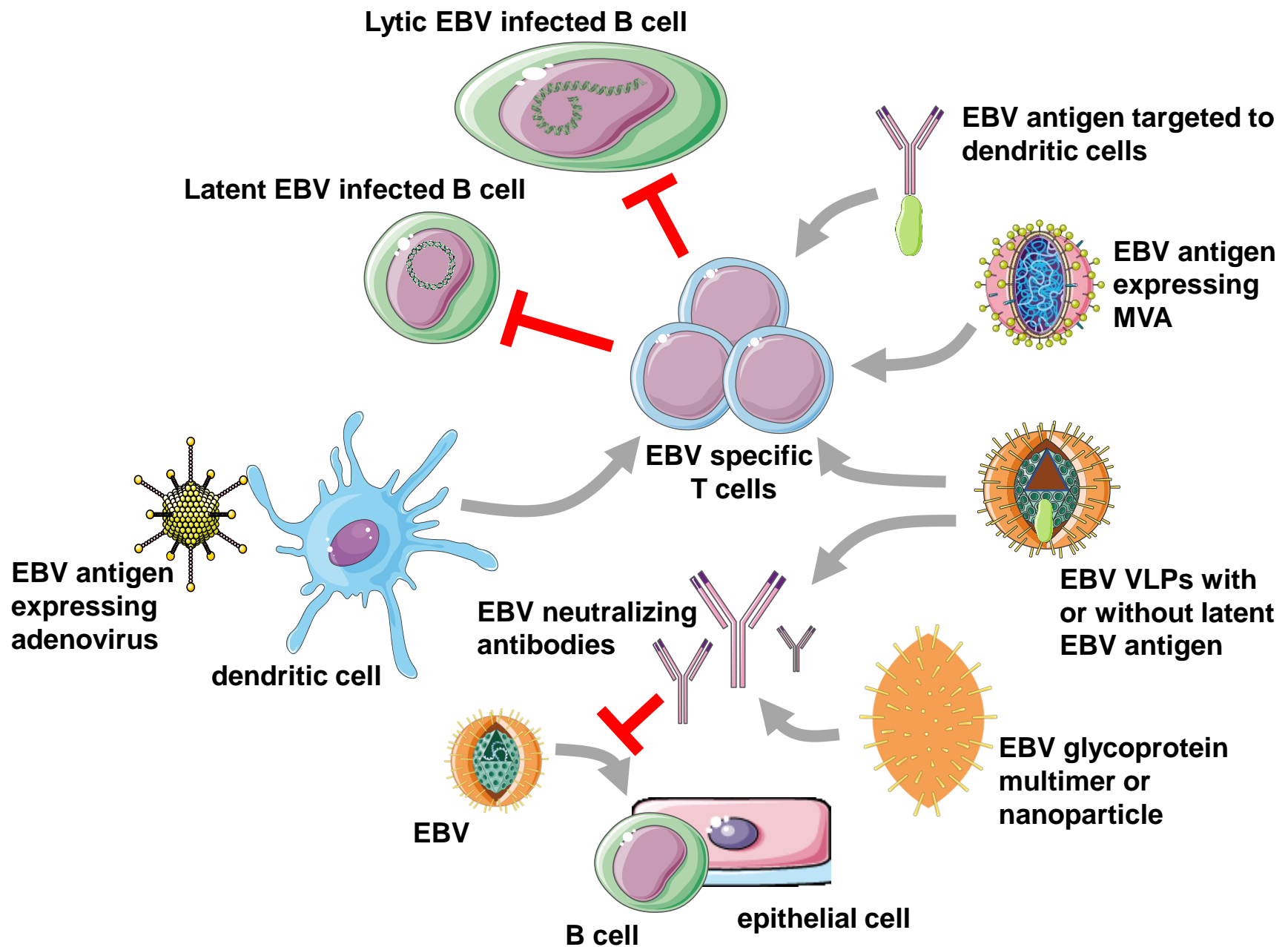


Figure 1