Background: Natural killer (NK) cells are innate cytotoxic and immunoregulatory lymphocytes that play a critical role in tumor immunosurveillance. Their activation states are regulated by an interplay of activating and inhibitory surface receptors, including T-cell immunoglobulin and mucin-domain containing molecule 3 (TIM-3), an immune checkpoint receptor (ICR) that is expressed on terminally-differentiated NK cells. The role TIM-3 plays in the context of NK cell-mediated anti-tumor response remains evasive, partly because TIM-3 has four known ligands: galectin-9, phosphatidylserine, HMGB1 and CEACAM-1.

Methods: In the context of head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC), single-cell RNA sequencing and flow cytometry were implemented to study the prevalence, phenotypes and functional differences of TIM-3+ NK cells in patient tumors and blood. In vitro killing and proliferation assays were used to evaluate whether the four TIM-3 ligands differentially modulate TIM-3+ NK cell functions and whether abrogation of TIM-3/ligand interaction is a valid therapeutic strategy to enhance NK cell-mediated anti-tumor effector mechanisms. Finally, TCGA survival analysis and digital spatial profiling were employed to study the potential impact of etiology-associated differences on HNSCC patient survival.

Results: We demonstrate that TIM-3 is the dominant NK cell ICR, that it marks dysfunctional NK cells in tumors but not in circulation, and that galectin-9 is the only TIM-3 ligand that consistently suppresses NK cell cytotoxic and proliferative capacity. Galectin-9-induced effects on cytotoxicity can be abrogated using the clinical-grade anti-TIM-3 blocking antibody, MBG453. Clinically, high intratumoral TIM-3+ NK cell gene signature associates with worse outcome in HPV+, but not HPV- HNSCC patients. This may be due to higher intratumoral galectin-9 protein expression in HPV+ HNSCC lesions, as well as higher frequencies of circulating and tumor-infiltrating TIM-3+ NK cells in HPV+ patients.

Conclusions: Our data stress the importance of TIM-3 in the context of NK cells and suggest that targeting the TIM-3/galectin-9 pathway may be a cogent immunotherapeutic strategy to reinvigorate NK cell effector function in HPV+ HNSCC patients.

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Ethics Approval: Peripheral blood and tumor tissues from treatment-naive HNSCC patients were collected with their written consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, under the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute Review Board-approved protocol (99-069).