Cytokine Signaling Dysregulation and Pruritus in Cutaneous T-Cell Lymphoma: Emerging Molecular Insights and Clinical Correlations

Manal Mohamed El-Sayed [1], Rania Abdelaziz Alakad [1], Hayam Elsayed Hassan Rashed [2], Amina Ahmed Mohamed Abdelhadi [3], Afnan Samy Ali Hussein Aziza [1]

1 Dermatology, Venereology and Andrology, Department, Faculty of Medicine, Zagazig University
2 Pathology Department, Faculty of Medicine, Zagazig University
3 Medical Microbiology and Immunology Department, Faculty of Medicine, Zagazig University

Corresponding Author: Afnan Samy Ali Hussein Aziza

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Abstract

Background: Cutaneous T-cell lymphoma (CTCL), particularly Mycosis Fungoides, represents a heterogeneous group of non-Hodgkin lymphomas characterized by malignant proliferation of skin-homing T lymphocytes and a chronic, often indolent clinical course. Among its most debilitating and frequently reported symptoms is pruritus, which significantly impairs quality of life and often correlates with disease progression. Despite its clinical importance, the molecular mechanisms underlying pruritus in CTCL remain incompletely understood.

Recent advances have highlighted the central role of cytokine signaling dysregulation in both disease pathogenesis and symptom generation. Alterations in immune regulatory pathways, particularly those governing T-helper cell polarization and intracellular signaling cascades such as the Janus kinase/signal transducer and activator of transcription (JAK/STAT) pathway, contribute to tumor progression and the establishment of a Th2-dominant microenvironment. This shift is associated with increased production of pruritogenic cytokines and chemokines, as well as enhanced interaction between malignant T cells, keratinocytes, and neural components within the skin.

Additionally, a complex network of mediators—including cytokines, neuropeptides, growth factors, and proteases—has been implicated in the modulation of itch perception in CTCL. These mediators not only amplify neural sensitization but also reflect underlying immune dysregulation, providing potential biomarkers for disease activity and therapeutic response. Importantly, emerging evidence suggests that specific intracellular regulatory proteins involved in cytokine feedback inhibition may play a dual role in tumor biology and symptom expression.

Understanding the interplay between cytokine signaling abnormalities and pruritus offers valuable insights into disease monitoring and targeted therapeutic strategies. This review aims to comprehensively explore the molecular mechanisms linking immune dysregulation to pruritus in CTCL, emphasizing their clinical implications and potential utility as biomarkers. Bridging the gap between molecular insights and clinical presentation may pave the way for more effective, personalized approaches to disease management and symptom control.

Keywords: *Cytokine Signaling, Pruritus, Cutaneous T-Cell Lymphoma*

Introduction

Cutaneous T-cell lymphomas (CTCLs) are a heterogeneous group of extranodal non-Hodgkin lymphomas characterized by the proliferation of malignant, skin-homing T lymphocytes, with Mycosis Fungoides representing the most common subtype. The disease typically follows a chronic, indolent course, initially presenting with patches and plaques that may progress to tumors or systemic involvement in advanced stages. This evolution reflects a complex interaction between malignant T cells and the cutaneous immune microenvironment, which plays a central role in disease progression and clinical heterogeneity [1,2].

From a dermatological perspective, MF remains a diagnostic challenge due to its ability to mimic benign inflammatory dermatoses such as eczema and psoriasis, particularly in early stages. Among its most distressing clinical features is pruritus, which affects a large proportion of patients and significantly impairs quality of life. Notably, pruritus may precede visible skin lesions or occur in clinically inapparent disease, suggesting that underlying molecular and immunological alterations extend beyond observable cutaneous pathology [3].

At the immunopathological level, MF is increasingly recognized as a disease arising from resident memory T cells that persist in the skin and undergo chronic antigenic stimulation. These cells express skin-homing receptors that facilitate their localization and long-term survival within the cutaneous environment. Over time, sustained immune activation promotes clonal expansion and malignant transformation, supporting the concept that mature T cells are the origin of CTCL [3,4].

A defining feature of disease progression is the shift from a T helper 1 (Th1)-dominant immune response in early stages to a T helper 2 (Th2)-skewed microenvironment in advanced disease. Early lesions exhibit anti-tumor immune activity mediated by cytotoxic T cells and Th1 cytokines, whereas advanced stages are characterized by increased expression of Th2 cytokines, which suppress cellular immunity and promote tumor survival. This immunological imbalance is closely linked to both disease progression and symptom burden, particularly pruritus [5].

At the molecular level, dysregulation of intracellular signaling pathways—especially the Janus kinase/signal transducer and activator of transcription (JAK/STAT) axis—plays a critical role in CTCL pathogenesis. Persistent activation of STAT proteins contributes to malignant T-cell survival, resistance to apoptosis, and promotion of a Th2-dominant cytokine profile. These alterations establish a link between molecular signaling abnormalities and both tumor progression and clinical manifestations [6].

Despite these advances, the precise mechanisms linking cytokine signaling dysregulation to pruritus severity remain incompletely understood. While multiple pruritogenic mediators have been identified, the role of intracellular regulatory pathways that modulate cytokine signaling has not been fully elucidated. Moreover, their potential as biomarkers for disease activity and therapeutic response represents an important yet underexplored area, highlighting a critical gap in current understanding.

Pathogenesis of Mycosis Fungoides: Immune Dysregulation and Tumor Microenvironment

The pathogenesis of Mycosis Fungoides is complex and multifactorial, involving interactions between malignant T lymphocytes, the skin microenvironment, and immune regulatory pathways. Current evidence supports the concept that MF originates from skin-resident memory T cells, a specialized subset of T lymphocytes that persist long-term within the epidermis and dermis. These cells express skin-homing markers and remain localized without recirculating, making them particularly susceptible to chronic antigenic stimulation. Prolonged exposure to environmental or microbial antigens is believed to drive clonal expansion and eventual malignant transformation, establishing the foundation for disease development [7,8].

From a dermatological and immunological perspective, the early stages of MF are characterized by a relatively preserved anti-tumor immune response. The lesional skin contains a significant proportion of reactive immune cells, including cytotoxic CD8+ T lymphocytes and T helper 1 (Th1) cells, which produce interferon-gamma and other pro-inflammatory cytokines. These cells exert inhibitory effects on malignant T-cell proliferation and contribute to disease containment. Clinically, this correlates with

the indolent behavior of early-stage MF, where lesions may remain stable for prolonged periods [9].

As the disease progresses, a critical immunological shift occurs within the tumor microenvironment, transitioning from a Th1-dominant to a Th2-dominant cytokine profile. This shift represents a key driver of disease progression and is associated with suppression of cellular immunity. Increased expression of Th2-associated cytokines promotes survival and proliferation of malignant T cells while inhibiting cytotoxic immune responses. This altered immune balance facilitates immune evasion and contributes to the progression from patch and plaque stages to more advanced disease forms, including tumors and erythroderma [9,10].

At the molecular level, dysregulation of intracellular signaling pathways plays a central role in mediating these immunological changes. In particular, aberrant activation of the Janus kinase/signal transducer and activator of transcription (JAK/STAT) pathway has been consistently implicated in CTCL pathogenesis. Persistent activation of STAT proteins enhances transcription of genes involved in cell survival, proliferation, and resistance to apoptosis. Furthermore, these signaling abnormalities promote the polarization of malignant T cells toward a Th2 phenotype, reinforcing the immunosuppressive tumor microenvironment [10,11].

In addition to T-cell intrinsic abnormalities, the tumor microenvironment in MF includes a diverse array of non-malignant cells such as macrophages, dendritic cells, mast cells, and keratinocytes, all of which contribute to disease progression. These cells engage in bidirectional communication with malignant T cells through cytokines, chemokines, and growth factors. This dynamic crosstalk not only supports tumor growth but also plays a critical role in shaping the inflammatory milieu associated with clinical symptoms, particularly pruritus [12].

Importantly, progressive dysregulation of cytokine signaling is not limited to overactivation but also involves impairment of physiological negative feedback mechanisms that normally regulate immune responses. Disruption of these regulatory pathways may lead to sustained activation of pro-tumorigenic signaling cascades, amplification of inflammatory mediators, and persistence of a Th2-skewed environment. This imbalance provides a mechanistic link between molecular signaling abnormalities, tumor progression, and symptom generation, forming the basis for emerging biomarker and therapeutic strategies in CTCL.

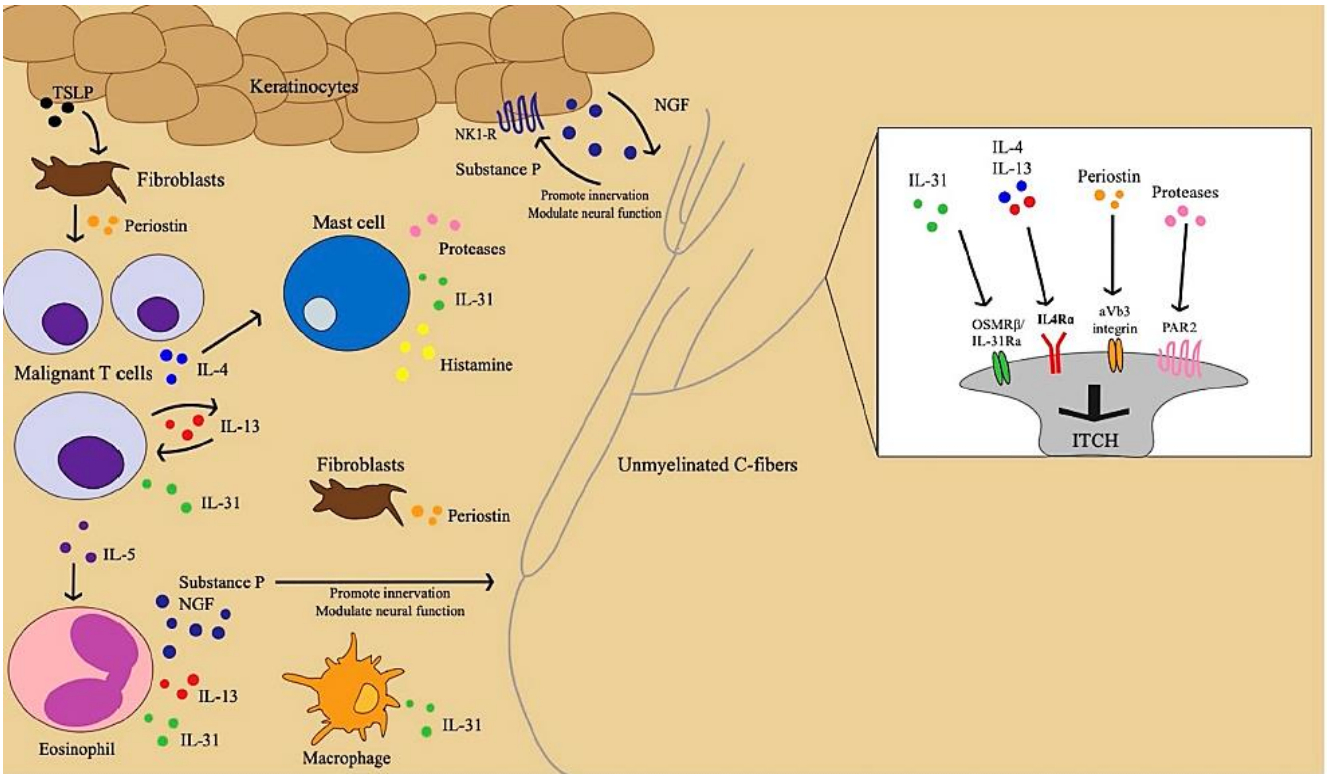

Figure 1: Mediators involved in MF pruritus [12].

Cytokine Signaling Dysregulation in Cutaneous T-Cell Lymphoma

Cytokine signaling plays a fundamental role in the pathogenesis of Mycosis Fungoides, acting as a key regulator of immune cell differentiation, proliferation, and survival. In CTCL, this tightly controlled system becomes profoundly dysregulated, leading to sustained activation of signaling pathways that promote malignant transformation and disease progression. Central to this process is the imbalance between pro-inflammatory and immunosuppressive cytokine networks, which not only drive tumor growth but also contribute to the development of clinical symptoms, particularly pruritus [13].

One of the most critical pathways implicated in this dysregulation is the Janus kinase/signal transducer and activator of transcription (JAK/STAT) pathway. Under physiological conditions, this pathway mediates signal transduction from cytokine receptors to the nucleus, regulating gene expression in a controlled and transient manner. However, in CTCL, persistent activation of STAT proteins—particularly STAT3, STAT5, and STAT6—has been consistently observed. This constitutive activation enhances transcription of genes involved in cell survival, proliferation, and resistance to apoptosis, thereby supporting the malignant phenotype of T cells [14].

Beyond its role in tumor cell survival, aberrant JAK/STAT signaling also plays a pivotal role in shaping the cytokine milieu within the tumor microenvironment. Persistent STAT activation promotes polarization toward a T helper 2 (Th2)-dominant phenotype, characterized by increased production of cytokines that suppress cellular immunity and facilitate immune evasion. This shift not only accelerates disease progression but also establishes a cytokine-rich environment that enhances communication between malignant cells and surrounding stromal and immune cells [14,15].

Importantly, cytokine signaling dysregulation in CTCL extends beyond malignant T cells to involve multiple components of the cutaneous microenvironment. Keratinocytes, dendritic cells, macrophages, and mast cells actively participate in cytokine production and signaling, creating a complex network of interactions that perpetuate inflammation and tumor growth. This bidirectional communication amplifies signaling cascades and contributes to the maintenance of a chronic inflammatory state within the skin [16].

A crucial yet often underappreciated aspect of cytokine signaling in CTCL is the disruption of physiological negative feedback mechanisms. Under normal conditions, intracellular regulatory proteins tightly control cytokine signaling by limiting the duration and intensity of pathway activation. In CTCL, impairment of these regulatory systems results in unchecked signaling activity, prolonged STAT activation, and sustained cytokine production. This loss of feedback control represents a key mechanism underlying persistent immune dysregulation and tumor progression [17].

Furthermore, dysregulated cytokine signaling has direct implications for symptom generation, particularly pruritus. Cytokines produced within the tumor microenvironment can interact with sensory neurons either directly or indirectly through intermediary cells, leading to neural sensitization and amplification of itch signaling pathways. This neuro-immune interaction highlights the role of cytokine networks not only in disease biology but also in the development of debilitating clinical manifestations [18].

Molecular Mechanisms of Pruritus in Cutaneous T-Cell Lymphoma

Pruritus is one of the most prominent and debilitating symptoms in Mycosis Fungoides and other forms of cutaneous T-cell lymphoma, affecting a substantial proportion of patients and often correlating with disease severity. Unlike conventional pruritic dermatoses, itch in CTCL is frequently refractory to standard antipruritic therapies, suggesting a complex and multifactorial pathophysiology. Increasing evidence indicates that pruritus in CTCL arises from intricate interactions between immune dysregulation, neural sensitization, and the tumor microenvironment [19].

A central mechanism underlying pruritus in CTCL is the dysregulated production of cytokines and

chemokines within the skin. The Th2-skewed immune response characteristic of advanced disease leads to increased secretion of cytokines that directly or indirectly activate sensory nerve fibers. These mediators can sensitize peripheral neurons, lowering the threshold for itch perception and amplifying neural signaling. Importantly, this cytokine-driven neuronal activation represents a key link between immune dysregulation and symptom generation [20].

In addition to cytokines, chemokines play a significant role in mediating pruritus by facilitating immune cell recruitment and enhancing local inflammation. Elevated levels of specific chemokines have been associated with increased itch intensity, particularly in advanced stages of CTCL. These molecules contribute to the recruitment of eosinophils and other inflammatory cells, which release additional pruritogenic mediators, thereby perpetuating a cycle of inflammation and neural activation [21].

Neuro-immune interactions are increasingly recognized as a fundamental component of pruritus in CTCL. Sensory nerve fibers in the skin are closely associated with immune cells, including mast cells and T lymphocytes, allowing bidirectional communication. Neuropeptides released from activated nerve endings can further stimulate immune cells, leading to the release of cytokines and other inflammatory mediators. This feedback loop enhances both inflammation and itch perception, contributing to the chronic and often intractable nature of pruritus in these patients [22].

Neurotrophins and neurotransmitters also play a critical role in modulating itch pathways. Increased levels of nerve growth factor and other neurotrophic factors have been observed in CTCL, promoting nerve fiber proliferation and heightened sensitivity of cutaneous nerves. Similarly, neuropeptides such as substance P have been implicated in the amplification of itch signals through activation of specific receptors on sensory neurons and immune cells. These findings highlight the importance of neural remodeling and sensitization in the persistence of pruritus [21,22].

Proteases and their receptors represent another important class of mediators involved in CTCL-associated pruritus. Enzymes such as kallikreins can activate protease-activated receptors on sensory nerves and keratinocytes, triggering itch signaling pathways. Increased expression of these proteases has been correlated with pruritus severity, suggesting their contribution to both disease activity and symptom burden. This mechanism further emphasizes the multifactorial nature of itch in CTCL, involving not only immune and neural components but also epidermal factors [23].

Clinical Correlation Between Cytokine Dysregulation and Pruritus Severity

Pruritus in Mycosis Fungoides is not merely a subjective symptom but a clinically significant parameter that reflects underlying disease activity and immune dysregulation. Several studies have demonstrated that the severity of pruritus correlates with disease stage, being more intense and persistent in advanced stages such as tumor-stage MF and Sézary syndrome. This clinical observation supports the concept that progressive alterations in the tumor microenvironment and cytokine signaling pathways contribute directly to symptom burden [24].

The transition from early-stage to advanced disease is accompanied by a shift toward a Th2-dominant cytokine profile, which plays a pivotal role in both tumor progression and pruritus amplification. Increased levels of Th2-associated mediators are associated with enhanced activation of sensory neurons and recruitment of inflammatory cells, thereby intensifying itch perception. Clinically, patients with erythrodermic disease or blood involvement often experience severe, generalized pruritus, reflecting a systemic extension of cytokine dysregulation [25].

Importantly, emerging evidence suggests that circulating and tissue-associated immune mediators may serve as objective indicators of pruritus severity. Elevated levels of specific cytokines and chemokines in serum and lesional skin have been shown to correlate with itch intensity, highlighting their potential role as biomarkers. These findings are particularly relevant in CTCL, where conventional clinical assessment may not fully capture disease activity or symptom burden [26].

In addition to cytokines, other components of the tumor microenvironment, such as eosinophils and mast cells, have been linked to pruritus severity. Increased eosinophilic infiltration in lesional skin has been associated with higher itch scores, suggesting that these cells contribute to the release of pruritogenic mediators. Similarly, mast cell activation and the release of proteases and neuroactive substances further

amplify itch signaling pathways, reinforcing the relationship between immune cell activity and clinical symptoms [23].

From a translational perspective, the correlation between cytokine dysregulation and pruritus provides a valuable opportunity for the development of novel biomarkers. Objective measurement of immune mediators in tissue and serum could enable better stratification of patients based on disease activity and symptom severity. This approach may also facilitate monitoring of therapeutic response, particularly in treatments targeting immune pathways, where changes in cytokine profiles may precede clinical improvement [20].

Furthermore, the integration of molecular and clinical parameters may enhance personalized management strategies in CTCL. By identifying specific cytokine signatures associated with severe pruritus, clinicians may tailor therapeutic interventions to target both disease progression and symptom control. This is particularly relevant given the limited efficacy of conventional antipruritic therapies and the growing interest in targeted immunomodulatory treatments.

Cytokine Signaling Regulators and Their Potential as Biomarkers

Cytokine signaling is tightly regulated under physiological conditions through a complex network of intracellular feedback mechanisms that ensure controlled immune responses. In cutaneous T-cell lymphomas, including Mycosis Fungoides, disruption of these regulatory systems contributes significantly to persistent immune activation and disease progression. Among these mechanisms, intracellular inhibitors of cytokine signaling play a pivotal role in modulating pathway activity, particularly within the Janus kinase/signal transducer and activator of transcription (JAK/STAT) axis, which is central to CTCL pathogenesis [27].

These regulatory proteins function primarily by attenuating cytokine signaling through multiple mechanisms, including direct inhibition of kinase activity and targeting signaling components for degradation. Under normal conditions, they act as negative feedback modulators, preventing excessive activation of immune pathways. However, in malignant conditions such as CTCL, dysregulation of these inhibitory systems leads to sustained activation of signaling cascades, thereby promoting tumor cell survival, proliferation, and immune evasion [28].

Importantly, alterations in cytokine signaling regulators are closely linked to the polarization of T helper cell responses. Dysregulation of these pathways contributes to the establishment and maintenance of a Th2-dominant microenvironment, which is a hallmark of advanced disease. This shift not only facilitates tumor progression but also enhances the production of pruritogenic mediators, thereby connecting intracellular signaling abnormalities with clinical symptomatology [29].

From a translational perspective, intracellular regulators of cytokine signaling represent promising candidates as biomarkers in CTCL. Their expression levels within lesional skin may reflect the degree of pathway activation and immune dysregulation, providing insight into disease activity at the molecular level. Furthermore, circulating levels or downstream signaling signatures may serve as minimally invasive indicators of systemic involvement and disease progression [30].

In addition to their diagnostic potential, these regulatory molecules may also have prognostic value. Variations in their expression or function could be associated with differences in disease behavior, including progression rate, treatment response, and symptom severity. This is particularly relevant in the context of pruritus, where cytokine-driven signaling pathways play a central role in mediating neural sensitization and itch perception [31].

Moreover, the assessment of cytokine signaling regulators before and after therapeutic intervention offers a valuable approach for monitoring treatment response. Changes in their expression may reflect restoration of immune balance or suppression of pathogenic signaling pathways, thereby serving as early indicators of therapeutic efficacy. This is especially important in CTCL, where clinical improvement may lag behind molecular changes, and reliable biomarkers are needed to guide management [30].

Therapeutic Implications and Clinical Management Strategies

The management of Mycosis Fungoides requires a stage-adapted, multimodal therapeutic approach that integrates disease control with symptomatic relief, particularly targeting pruritus and immune

dysregulation. Treatment decisions are guided by disease stage, extent of skin involvement, rate of progression, and patient-related factors, with therapies broadly categorized into skin-directed and systemic modalities. Importantly, modern therapeutic strategies aim not only to reduce tumor burden but also to modulate the underlying cytokine milieu and restore immune balance, thereby addressing both disease pathogenesis and clinical manifestations [32].

Skin-directed therapies remain the cornerstone of treatment in early-stage disease and play a critical role in controlling localized lesions and improving skin barrier integrity. Basic supportive care with emollients is essential to maintain epidermal function, reduce transepidermal water loss, and alleviate pruritus. Topical corticosteroids exert potent anti-inflammatory and immunosuppressive effects by inhibiting cytokine production and inflammatory signaling pathways, leading to both lesion improvement and reduction in itch intensity. In addition, topical chemotherapeutic agents such as mechlorethamine and carmustine directly target rapidly proliferating malignant T cells, while topical retinoids modulate gene expression to induce differentiation and apoptosis. These therapies collectively influence the local cytokine microenvironment, contributing to symptomatic relief and disease control [32].

Phototherapy represents a pivotal modality that bridges dermatological treatment with immunological modulation. Both narrowband ultraviolet B (NB-UVB) and psoralen plus ultraviolet A (PUVA) therapies induce apoptosis of malignant lymphocytes and alter cytokine signaling within the skin. These treatments reduce pro-inflammatory cytokines while enhancing anti-inflammatory mediators, thereby shifting the immune balance away from a tumor-promoting environment. PUVA, with its deeper dermal penetration, is particularly effective in infiltrative and folliculotropic disease, whereas NB-UVB is preferred in early patch-stage MF due to its favorable safety profile. The structured phases of phototherapy—clearance, consolidation, and maintenance—highlight the importance of sustained immunomodulation in achieving long-term disease control and reducing relapse rates [32].

Radiation-based therapies further exploit the radiosensitivity of MF and are highly effective across different disease stages. Localized radiotherapy provides excellent control of isolated lesions, while total skin electron beam therapy offers a comprehensive approach for extensive disease, achieving high response rates. Beyond tumor reduction, radiotherapy contributes to rapid alleviation of symptoms, including pruritus, by decreasing malignant cell burden and associated inflammatory mediators. However, its use requires careful consideration of potential adverse effects, including skin toxicity and systemic implications such as reduced sperm counts, which are particularly relevant from an andrological perspective [32].

Systemic therapies are indicated in advanced or refractory disease and target both malignant cells and systemic immune dysregulation. Retinoids such as bexarotene regulate transcriptional pathways involved in cell proliferation and apoptosis, while also reducing malignant T-cell trafficking to the skin. Interferons play a crucial immunomodulatory role by enhancing Th1 responses and suppressing Th2 cytokine production, thereby directly counteracting one of the key pathogenic mechanisms in CTCL. Cytotoxic agents, including methotrexate, gemcitabine, and liposomal doxorubicin, inhibit DNA synthesis and cellular proliferation, providing effective disease control in advanced stages. Methotrexate, in particular, exerts its effect through inhibition of folate metabolism and suppression of T-cell proliferation, although its use requires careful monitoring due to potential systemic toxicity [33].

The emergence of targeted immunotherapies has significantly advanced the treatment landscape of CTCL by focusing on specific molecular and cellular components of the disease. Monoclonal antibodies directed against surface markers such as CD30 and chemokine receptors such as CCR4 selectively eliminate malignant cells through immune-mediated mechanisms. Extracorporeal photopheresis represents a unique immunomodulatory approach that alters T-cell function and is particularly effective in erythrodermic disease. These therapies exemplify the transition toward precision medicine, where treatment is tailored based on the molecular and immunological characteristics of the disease [32,33].

Combination therapy has emerged as a key strategy to enhance therapeutic efficacy and minimize resistance. Integrating skin-directed therapies with systemic agents or combining multiple systemic

modalities can improve response rates and prolong remission. For example, combinations of phototherapy with retinoids or interferons not only enhance tumor control but also exert synergistic effects on cytokine modulation. Such approaches highlight the importance of targeting multiple pathogenic pathways simultaneously, particularly in advanced disease stages [32].

Despite these advances, pruritus remains a challenging symptom to manage and often persists even in patients with controlled disease. Conventional antipruritic therapies are frequently insufficient, reflecting the complex neuro-immune mechanisms underlying itch in CTCL. Emerging treatments targeting cytokine signaling pathways and neuropeptide-mediated interactions offer promising avenues for symptom control. By modulating immune mediators that directly activate sensory neurons, these therapies address the root cause of pruritus rather than merely suppressing symptoms, thereby improving therapeutic outcomes [34].

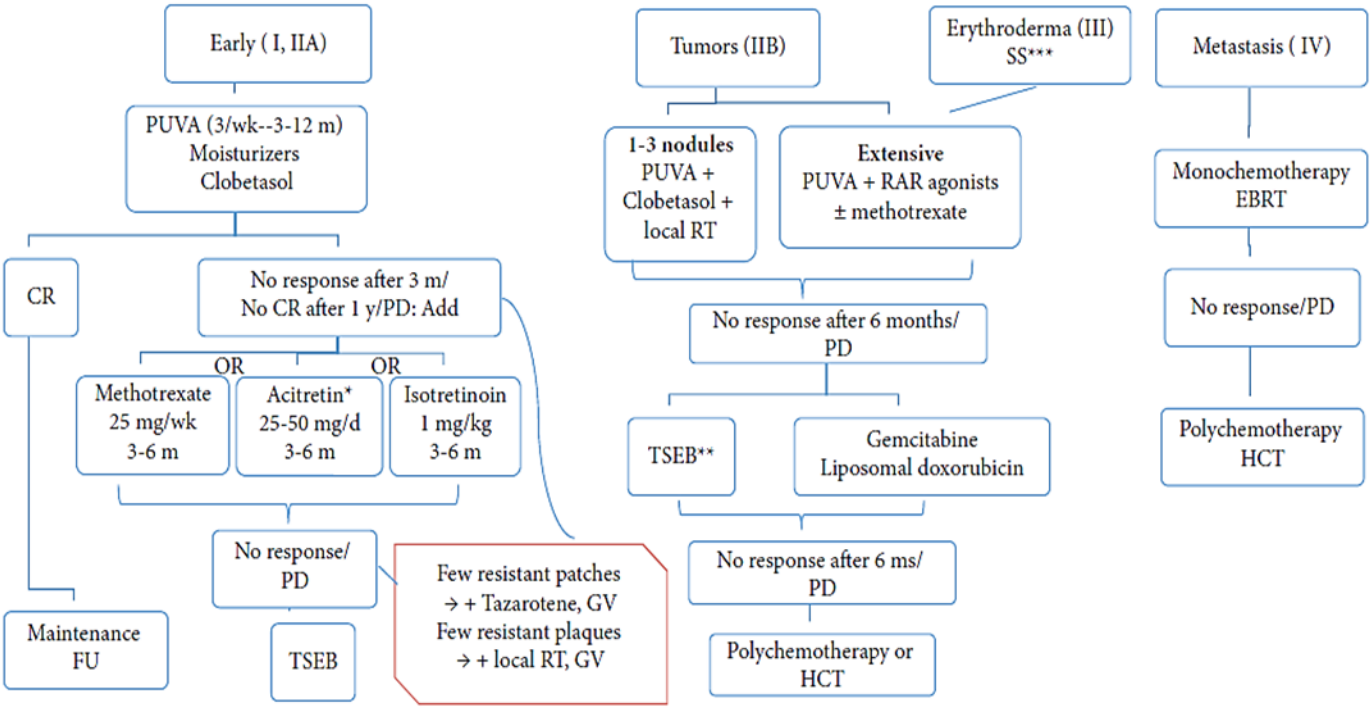

Figure 2: Algorithm for treatment of classic MF/SS in a stepwise pattern [34].

CONCLUSION

Cutaneous T-cell lymphoma, particularly Mycosis Fungoides, represents a complex interplay between malignant T-cell proliferation, immune dysregulation, and a dynamically evolving tumor microenvironment. Central to its pathogenesis is the disruption of cytokine signaling networks, which not only drive disease progression through a shift toward a Th2-dominant phenotype but also play a pivotal role in the development of pruritus. The close interaction between immune mediators and neural pathways underscores pruritus as a biologically driven manifestation rather than a secondary symptom, reflecting underlying molecular alterations within the skin and systemic circulation.

Advances in understanding cytokine signaling and its regulatory mechanisms have opened new avenues for both biomarker discovery and targeted therapeutic strategies. Integrating molecular insights with clinical assessment allows for a more comprehensive approach to disease evaluation and management, particularly in correlating tissue and circulating factors with symptom severity. Future directions should focus on refining personalized treatment approaches that simultaneously address tumor control and symptom burden, ultimately improving patient outcomes and quality of life through precision-based interventions.

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