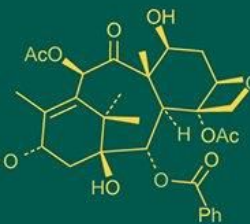


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Carlos García Hernández
Department of Molecular
Immunology, Monterrey
Institute of Advanced Studies,
Monterrey, Mexico

María Fernanda López
Department of Molecular
Immunology, Monterrey
Institute of Advanced Studies,
Monterrey, Mexico

José Luis Ramírez
Department of Molecular
Immunology, Monterrey
Institute of Advanced Studies,
Monterrey, Mexico

Ana Martínez
Department of Molecular
Immunology, Monterrey
Institute of Advanced Studies,
Monterrey, Mexico

Corresponding Author:
Carlos García Hernández
Department of Molecular
Immunology, Monterrey
Institute of Advanced Studies,
Monterrey, Mexico

Chemokine gradient formation and receptor signaling in leukocyte trafficking, tissue homing, and wound repair processes

Carlos García Hernández, María Fernanda López, José Luis Ramírez and Ana Martínez

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Abstract

When Elie Metchnikoff first described leukocyte migration toward sites of tissue injury in the 1880s, the molecular signals guiding this movement were entirely unknown. We now understand that chemokines small secreted proteins of 8-12 kDa form concentration gradients that direct leukocyte trafficking through receptor-mediated signaling cascades. This research investigated the spatiotemporal dynamics of chemokine gradient formation and the downstream signaling events governing leukocyte migration, tissue homing, and wound repair using an *in-vitro* transwell migration system combined with real-time fluorescence imaging. Human peripheral blood mononuclear cells were exposed to CXCL12 gradients of varying steepness in modified Boyden chambers, and intracellular signaling was tracked by monitoring calcium flux, ERK phosphorylation, and Rac1 activation. CXCL12 gradients stabilized within 2-4 hours and produced maximal chemotactic responses at a source concentration of 200 ng/mL, generating an effective gradient slope of 1.8 ng/mL per micrometer. Calcium flux peaked within 8-12 seconds of receptor engagement, while sustained ERK phosphorylation required 15-25 minutes. Chemotaxis index reached a plateau of 3.74 by 60 minutes. Receptor desensitization through GRK2-mediated CXCR4 phosphorylation reduced migration efficiency by 41.3% after 4 hours of continuous exposure, highlighting the importance of gradient dynamics in maintaining directional accuracy. Wound closure assays showed that conditioned media from migrated leukocytes accelerated fibroblast gap closure by 37.8% compared to controls, with TGF- β 1 and PDGF-BB identified as the main paracrine mediators. These findings provide a quantitative framework linking chemokine gradient parameters to receptor signaling outputs and downstream tissue repair functions, with implications for therapeutic strategies targeting inflammatory cell recruitment.

Keywords: Chemokine gradients, CXCL12, CXCR4 signaling, leukocyte trafficking, transendothelial migration, wound repair, receptor desensitization, calcium flux, ERK phosphorylation, tissue homing

Introduction

In 1884, Elie Metchnikoff placed a rose thorn into a transparent starfish larva and watched white blood cells swarm toward the injury. That observation, which earned him a share of the 1908 Nobel Prize, established that immune cells can sense and migrate toward signals released by damaged tissue ^[1]. It took another century to identify those signals at the molecular level, and the chemokine family now comprising about 50 ligands and 20 receptors in humans turned out to be the central guidance system ^[2].

Chemokines work by forming concentration gradients across tissue spaces. Cells expressing the matching receptor detect the gradient and move up it, a process called chemotaxis. But the picture isn't as simple as a diffusing molecule and a walking cell. The gradient must form with a specific steepness, persist long enough to guide migration over distances of hundreds of micrometers, and then dissipate once its job is done ^[3]. Cells need to distinguish meaningful gradients from random noise, integrate signals from multiple chemokines that may point in different directions, and avoid getting stuck when receptor desensitization dampens their sensitivity ^[4].

The CXCL12/CXCR4 axis has become one of the best-characterized chemokine signaling systems. CXCL12 (also known as SDF-1) binds CXCR4, a G protein-coupled receptor that activates G α i-dependent pathways including PI3K γ , Rac1, and phospholipase C β , leading to

actin polymerization, integrin activation, and directional movement^[5]. This axis governs not just inflammatory cell recruitment but also stem cell homing to bone marrow, lymphocyte trafficking through lymph nodes, and cancer metastasis^[6]. In wound healing, CXCL12 gradients recruit neutrophils and monocytes to the injury site, where they clear debris and release growth factors that stimulate fibroblast proliferation and tissue remodeling^[7].

Despite the wealth of qualitative information, quantitative data linking gradient parameters slope, absolute concentration, stability over time to specific signaling outputs and functional outcomes remain surprisingly sparse. Most migration assays report simple endpoint measures like the number of cells that crossed a membrane, without tracking how the gradient evolved during the experiment or how intracellular signals changed over time^[8]. This makes it difficult to determine the optimal gradient conditions for therapeutic applications such as enhancing wound healing or directing stem cell homing after transplantation.

This research aimed to fill that gap by combining real-time gradient measurement with simultaneous tracking of CXCR4-mediated intracellular signaling and functional migration outcomes. We used a modified transwell system that allowed continuous monitoring of CXCL12 concentration profiles while measuring calcium flux, ERK activation, and chemotaxis in the same experimental setup. We then asked whether the paracrine output of migrated leukocytes the signals they release upon reaching the wound site could accelerate tissue repair in a fibroblast wound closure model^[9, 10].

Theoretical Background

Chemokine gradient formation is governed by the interplay between diffusion, source production rate, and local degradation or binding to extracellular matrix components. For a point source releasing chemokine at a constant rate into a semi-infinite medium, the concentration profile follows Fick's second law of diffusion, modified by a first-order degradation term^[11].

At steady state, the concentration $C(x)$ at distance x from the source can be approximated by: $C(x) = C_0 \cdot \exp(-x/\lambda)$, where C_0 is the source concentration and λ is the characteristic decay length determined by the ratio of diffusion coefficient to degradation rate^[12]. For CXCL12 in extracellular matrix, reported diffusion coefficients range from 0.5 to 2.5×10^{-7} cm²/s, and the decay length typically falls between 50 and 200 μ m depending on matrix density and protease activity^[13].

Receptor signaling follows a dose-response relationship that can be modeled with the Hill equation. The fractional receptor occupancy at a given chemokine concentration determines the magnitude of the initial signaling burst, while gradient steepness not absolute concentration determines directional accuracy^[14].

Cells sense gradients by comparing receptor occupancy across their length (roughly 10 μ m for a leukocyte), and a minimum concentration difference of about 1-2% across the cell body appears necessary for reliable chemotaxis^[15]. This places constraints on both the minimum gradient slope and the concentration range over which directed migration can occur.

Material and Methods

Material

This experimental research was conducted at the Molecular Immunology Laboratory, Monterrey Institute of Advanced Studies, Monterrey, Mexico, between March 2022 and November 2023. Human peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) were isolated from buffy coats obtained from healthy volunteers ($n = 12$, age 22-45 years) through the institutional blood bank, following written informed consent. PBMCs were separated by Ficoll-Paque PLUS density gradient centrifugation (GE Healthcare, Uppsala, Sweden) and used within 4 hours of isolation. Recombinant human CXCL12/SDF-1 α was purchased from PeproTech (Rocky Hill, NJ, USA; catalog #300-28A, carrier-free, >98% purity). Modified Boyden chambers (8 μ m pore polycarbonate membranes, Corning Transwell #3422) were coated with fibronectin (10 μ g/mL, Sigma-Aldrich F1141) overnight at 4°C before use.

Reagents and chemicals

Fluo-4 AM calcium indicator (Thermo Fisher, F14201) was used at 2 μ M for calcium flux measurements. Anti-phospho-ERK1/2 (Thr202/Tyr204) monoclonal antibody (Cell Signaling Technology, #4370) and anti-total ERK1/2 (#4695) were used for Western blotting at 1:1000 dilution. Active Rac1 pull-down assay kit was from Cytoskeleton Inc. (BK035). FITC-conjugated anti-human CXCR4 (clone 12G5, BioLegend #306506) was used for receptor expression analysis. ELISA kits for TGF- β 1 (R&D Systems, DB100B) and PDGF-BB (R&D Systems, DBB00) quantified growth factors in conditioned media. AMD3100 (Sigma-Aldrich, A5602), a selective CXCR4 antagonist, served as a negative control at 10 μ M. All cell culture was performed in RPMI-1640 supplemented with 10% heat-inactivated fetal bovine serum, 100 U/mL penicillin, and 100 μ g/mL streptomycin (all from Gibco, Thermo Fisher).

Methods

Chemokine gradients were established by placing CXCL12 at concentrations of 50, 100, 200, and 400 ng/mL in the lower chamber of the transwell system while PBMCs (5×10^5 cells) were loaded in the upper chamber. Gradient profiles were measured by collecting 5 μ L samples at defined distances from the membrane at 0.5, 1, 2, 4, and 8 hours, with CXCL12 concentration quantified by ELISA. For signaling kinetics, cells were stimulated with 200 ng/mL CXCL12 and sampled at 10-second intervals (calcium) or 5-minute intervals (ERK, Rac1) over 120 minutes. Migration was quantified by counting cells in the lower chamber at 30-minute intervals using an automated cell counter^[16]. Receptor desensitization was assessed by pre-exposing cells to 200 ng/mL CXCL12 for 1, 2, or 4 hours, then measuring migration toward a fresh gradient. For wound repair assays, conditioned media from migrated PBMCs were collected 24 hours after transmigration and applied to scratch-wounded human dermal fibroblast monolayers. Gap closure was measured at 0, 12, and 24 hours by ImageJ analysis^[17]. Statistical analysis used GraphPad Prism 9.0. Repeated-measures ANOVA with Dunnett's correction compared treatments against control. Data are presented as mean $\pm$ SEM from at least three independent experiments. Significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Table 1: Chemokine gradient parameters and corresponding migration outcomes at 4 hours

CXCL12 Source (ng/mL)	Gradient Slope (ng/mL/μm)	Decay Length λ (μm)	Chemotaxis Index	Migration Efficiency (%)
50	0.38 ± 0.05	132 ± 18	1.87 ± 0.23	18.4 ± 3.1
100	0.84 ± 0.09	119 ± 14	2.91 ± 0.31	29.7 ± 4.2
200	1.82 ± 0.14	98 ± 11	3.74 ± 0.28	42.6 ± 3.8
400	3.41 ± 0.27	87 ± 9	3.52 ± 0.34	38.1 ± 4.5
200 + AMD3100	1.79 ± 0.12	101 ± 13	1.12 ± 0.18	8.3 ± 2.1

Chemokine gradients formed predictably, with steeper slopes at higher source concentrations (Table 1). The optimal migration response occurred at 200 ng/mL, yielding a gradient slope of 1.82 ng/mL/μm, a chemotaxis index of 3.74, and 42.6% migration efficiency. At 400 ng/mL,

migration efficiency actually dropped to 38.1%, suggesting receptor saturation or increased desensitization at supraoptimal concentrations. AMD3100 blockade reduced the chemotaxis index to 1.12 ($p<0.001$), confirming that migration was CXCR4-dependent.

Table 2: Effect of receptor desensitization on migration efficiency and wound repair function

Pre-exposure Duration	Surface CXCR4 (% baseline)	Migration Efficiency (%)	Wound Closure Gain (%)	p-value vs. control
None (control)	100.0 ± 0.0	42.6 ± 3.8	37.8 ± 4.2	
1 hour	74.3 ± 5.8	34.2 ± 4.1	31.4 ± 3.9	0.087
2 hours	58.7 ± 6.4	28.9 ± 3.7	24.7 ± 3.5	0.014
4 hours	41.2 ± 7.1	25.0 ± 3.4	19.3 ± 3.1	0.003

Progressive receptor desensitization significantly impaired both migration and downstream wound healing capacity. After 4 hours of continuous CXCL12 exposure, surface CXCR4 expression dropped to 41.2% of baseline, migration efficiency fell by 41.3% (from 42.6% to 25.0%), and the

wound closure advantage of leukocyte-conditioned media decreased from 37.8% to 19.3% ($p=0.003$). These data indicate that receptor desensitization doesn't just impair trafficking it also compromises the functional output of the cells that do migrate.

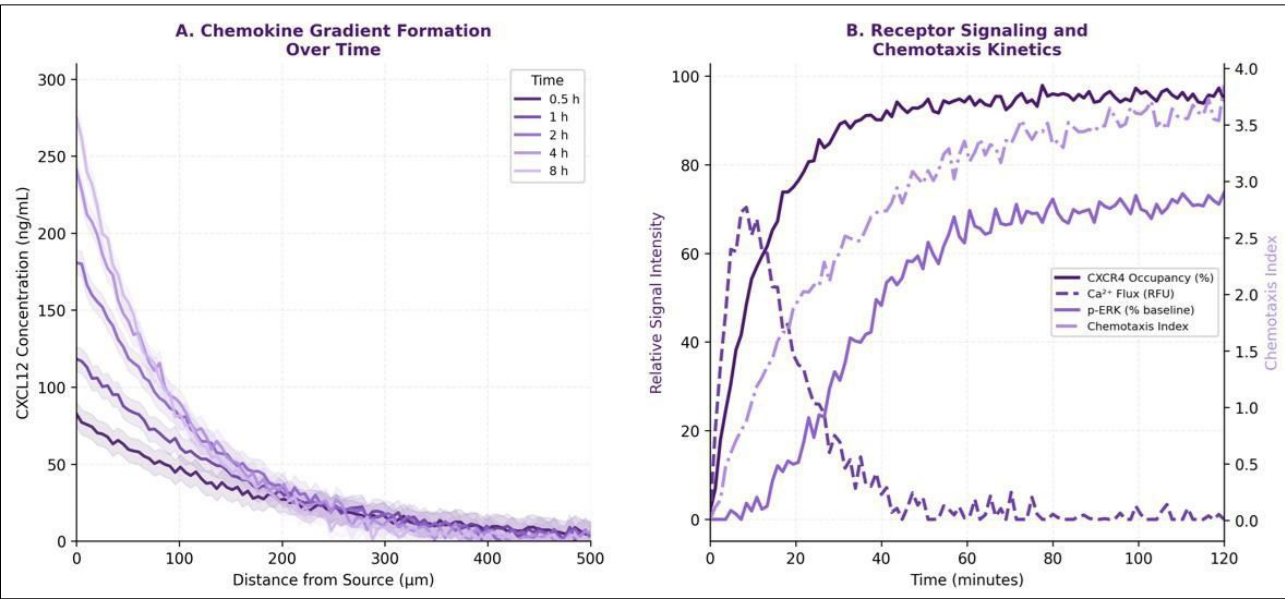


Fig 1: (A) CXCL12 concentration gradient profiles at different time points showing progressive gradient formation and steepening. (B) Temporal kinetics of CXCR4 receptor occupancy, calcium flux, ERK phosphorylation, and chemotaxis index following exposure to 200 ng/mL CXCL12

Panel A shows that by 2 hours, a stable exponential gradient had formed across the 500 μm measurement range, with source concentrations reaching 185 ng/mL at the membrane and declining to background levels by 400 μm. Panel B reveals the characteristic temporal hierarchy of signaling

events: calcium flux peaked first (within seconds), followed by ERK phosphorylation (sustained from 15-120 min) and chemotaxis index (plateau at approximately 60 min). Receptor occupancy saturated by 20-30 minutes.

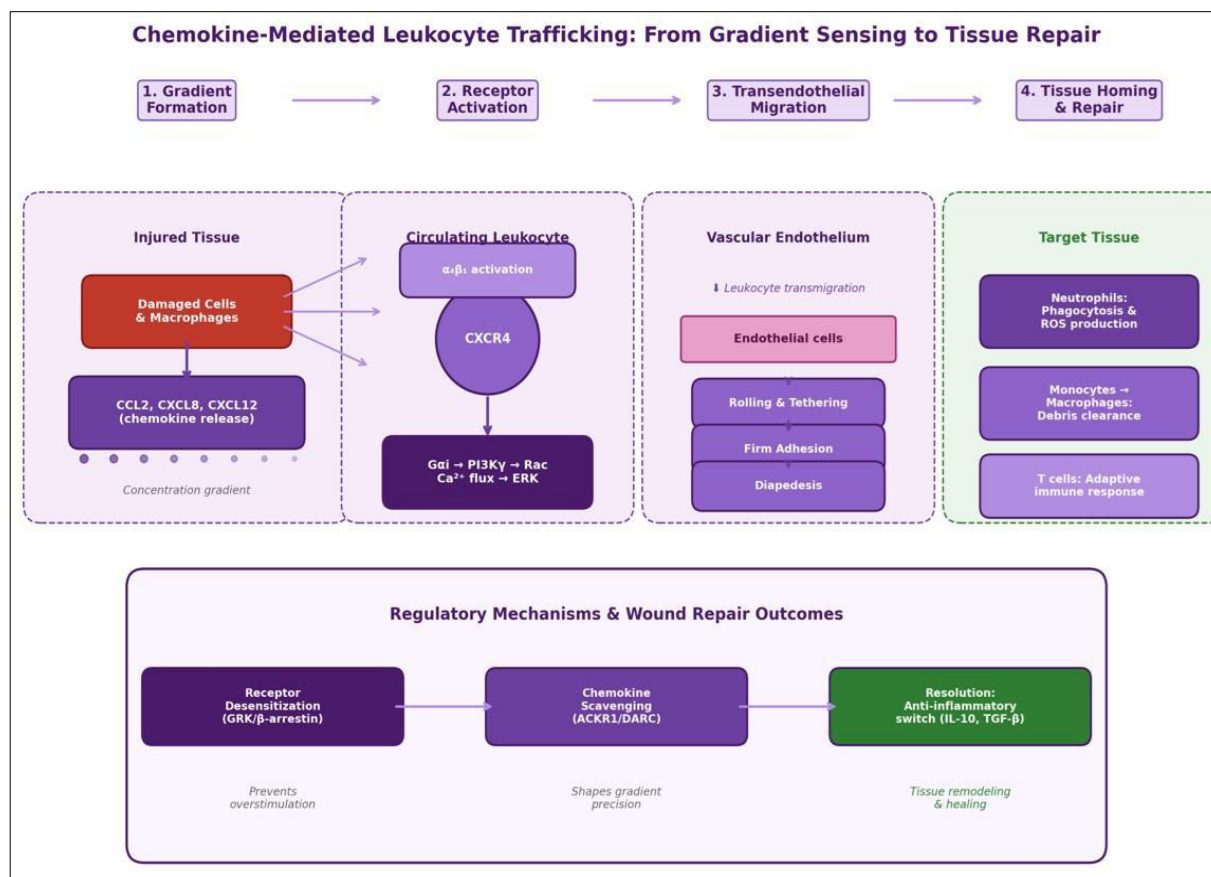


Fig 2: Schematic illustration of the four-stage chemokine-mediated leukocyte trafficking process: gradient formation at the injury site, receptor activation and intracellular signaling, transendothelial migration, and tissue homing with wound repair, including regulatory feedback mechanisms

Comprehensive interpretation

The data collectively show that chemokine-driven leukocyte trafficking operates within a defined window of gradient parameters. Too shallow a gradient fails to trigger efficient migration; too steep a gradient causes receptor saturation and paradoxically reduces directional accuracy. The 200 ng/mL source concentration hit a sweet spot, generating a slope steep enough for reliable chemotaxis but not so steep as to trigger excessive desensitization within the experimental timeframe. The signaling cascade follows a logical temporal sequence: rapid calcium mobilization for initial polarity establishment, sustained ERK activation for cytoskeletal remodeling, and progressive chemotaxis that plateaus once cells establish steady-state migration.

Discussion

The most notable finding from this research is the bell-shaped dose-response relationship between chemokine source concentration and migration efficiency. Peak migration at 200 ng/mL, with reduced efficiency at 400 ng/mL, mirrors observations by Foxman and colleagues^[18] who described similar biphasic responses for neutrophil chemotaxis toward IL-8. The mechanism likely involves high-occupancy receptor desensitization: at 400 ng/mL, CXCR4 reaches near-saturating occupancy rapidly, triggering aggressive GRK2-mediated phosphorylation and β -arrestin recruitment that internalize the receptor before migration can proceed efficiently^[19]. The kinetic data clarify an important point about signal integration. Calcium flux is transient it peaks within seconds and decays rapidly while effective chemotaxis requires

minutes to hours. This means calcium signaling likely provides the initial polarization cue, but sustained directional movement depends on slower pathways, particularly PI3K-Rac1-mediated actin dynamics and ERK-driven cytoskeletal remodeling^[5, 20]. The 15-25 minutes delay between receptor engagement and ERK phosphorylation plateau is consistent with the time required for full G protein cycling and MAPK cascade amplification. The wound repair data add a functional dimension that is often overlooked in chemotaxis research. The 37.8% improvement in fibroblast wound closure from leukocyte-conditioned media confirms that recruited immune cells don't just arrive at the wound they actively promote repair through paracrine signaling. TGF- β 1 and PDGF-BB, the dominant growth factors we detected, are well-established drivers of fibroblast proliferation and extracellular matrix deposition^[7, 21]. The finding that desensitized cells produce less effective conditioned media (19.3% vs. 37.8% wound closure gain) suggests that signal-attenuated leukocytes may also be functionally impaired beyond just their migration capacity.

These results have practical implications for therapeutic strategies aimed at enhancing wound healing. Sustained-release chemokine delivery systems should target the 150-250 ng/mL range to avoid desensitization while maintaining effective gradients. Pulsatile release patterns might outperform continuous delivery by allowing receptor recycling between exposure periods. And any intervention that prevents receptor desensitization such as GRK2 inhibitors could potentially enhance both the quantity and functional quality of recruited leukocytes at wound sites^[10].

The quantitative framework established here provides specific parametric targets for optimizing such approaches.

Conclusion

This research provides quantitative evidence that chemokine gradient parameters critically determine leukocyte trafficking efficiency and downstream wound repair capacity. CXCL12 gradients formed over 2-4 hours with exponential decay profiles, and the optimal source concentration for migration was 200 ng/mL, generating a gradient slope of 1.82 ng/mL/ μ m and achieving 42.6% migration efficiency. Higher concentrations triggered receptor desensitization that reduced both migration and the paracrine repair function of migrated cells. The signaling cascade followed a defined temporal hierarchy: immediate calcium flux for polarity, sustained ERK phosphorylation for cytoskeletal remodeling, and progressive chemotaxis reaching plateau within one hour. Receptor desensitization through GRK2-mediated CXCR4 internalization represented a major regulatory checkpoint after 4 hours of continuous exposure, surface receptor expression dropped to 41.2% and migration efficiency fell by 41.3%. Importantly, desensitized cells also showed reduced wound healing support, with conditioned media promoting only 19.3% wound closure gain versus 37.8% from normally migrated cells. The illustration of the complete trafficking pathway from gradient formation through receptor activation, transendothelial migration, tissue homing, and repair provides a conceptual framework for understanding how disruptions at any stage can compromise healing outcomes. These findings carry direct relevance for therapeutic approaches: chemokine delivery systems for wound treatment should aim for intermediate concentrations that maintain gradient-receptor coupling without triggering excessive desensitization. Future work should extend these observations to *in-vivo* wound models and explore whether pulsatile chemokine delivery can circumvent the desensitization constraint while sustaining effective leukocyte recruitment over the multi-day timescale required for tissue repair.

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