

# Coronavirus Infections and Type 2 Diabetes— Shared Pathways with Therapeutic Implications

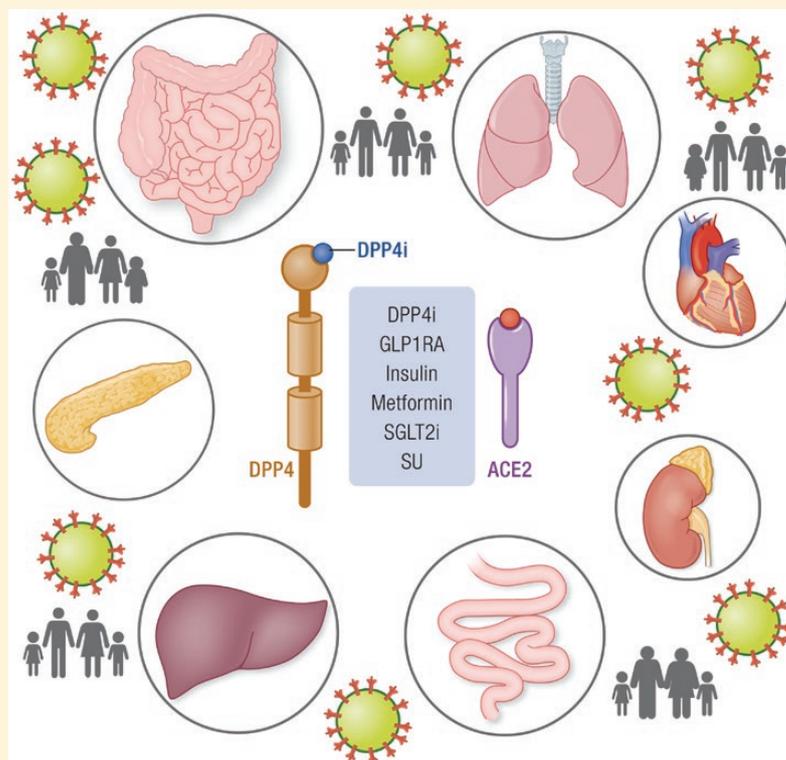
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**Abstract** Individuals with diabetes are at increased risk for bacterial, mycotic, parasitic, and viral infections. The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)-CoV-2 (also referred to as COVID-19) coronavirus pandemic highlights the importance of understanding shared disease pathophysiology potentially informing therapeutic choices in individuals with type 2 diabetes (T2D). Two coronavirus receptor proteins, angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) and dipeptidyl peptidase-4 (DPP4) are also established transducers of metabolic signals and pathways regulating inflammation, renal and cardiovascular physiology, and glucose homeostasis. Moreover, glucose-lowering agents such as the DPP4 inhibitors, widely used in subjects with T2D, are known to modify the biological activities of multiple immunomodulatory substrates. Here, we review the basic and clinical science spanning the intersections of diabetes, coronavirus infections, ACE2, and DPP4 biology, highlighting clinical relevance and evolving areas of uncertainty underlying the pathophysiology and treatment of T2D in the context of coronavirus infection.

## Graphical Abstract



**Key Words:** diabetes, obesity, virus, dipeptidyl peptidase-4, angiotensin converting enzyme 2, receptor

ISSN Print: 0163-769X  
ISSN Online: 1945-7189  
Printed in USA

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Received: 7 April 2020  
Accepted: 14 April 2020  
First Published Online: 15 April  
2020  
Corrected and Typeset 30 April  
2020.

### Essential Points

- ACE2 and DPP4 are coronavirus receptors.
- ACE2 and DPP4 control inflammation, and cardiometabolic physiology.
- DPP4 is a MERS-CoV but not a SARS-CoV-2 receptor.
- DPP4 inhibitors do not meaningfully modify immune response in human subjects.
- SARS-CoV-2 hospitalizations are more common in people with diabetes and obesity.
- Acute SARS-CoV-2 illness requires re-evaluation of medications used for type 2 diabetes.
- Insulin is the glucose-lowering therapy of choice for acute coronavirus-related illness in hospital.

The global epidemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)-CoV-2 (also referred to as COVID-19) has immediate implications for the therapy of common metabolic disorders such as type 2 diabetes (T2D). Moreover, individuals with obesity are known to be at increased risk for complications arising from influenza, and obesity is emerging as an important comorbidity for disease severity in the context of SARS-CoV-2 (1). Cells within the lung, including pneumocytes, represent major cellular sites for coronavirus entry and inflammation (2). Some of these pulmonary cells may also express key proteins facilitating coronavirus entry into cells, such as angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2), transmembrane protease serine 2 (TMPRSS2), and for some viral strains, dipeptidyl peptidase-4 (DPP4). ACE2 and DPP4 also have established pleiotropic metabolic activities directly contributing to the physiological and pharmacological control of cardiovascular and glucose homeostasis, and DPP4 inhibitors are widely used for the treatment of T2D. Here, we discuss current and evolving concepts relevant to the metabolic impact of coronavirus infections with attention to key pathways and mechanisms simultaneously linked to the pathophysiology and treatment of T2D.

### Rates of Diabetes and Obesity in Subjects with Coronavirus Infections

Diabetes is associated with an increased risk of severe bacterial (3) and viral respiratory tract infections, including H1N1 influenza (4). Analysis of more than 500 subjects hospitalized with SARS-CoV in China revealed that elevations in fasting glucose were associated with increased rates of death; however, hyperglycemia was often transient, and generally resolved after discharge from hospital in the majority of subjects (5). A diagnosis of diabetes was associated with a 3-fold increased

risk of mortality in a retrospective analysis of 114 adults hospitalized with SARS-CoV in Toronto in 2003 (6). A meta-analysis comparing patients presenting with H1N1 influenza vs. Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS)-CoV reported that subjects with MERS-CoV were older (average age, 54. vs. 36.2 years), with a 3-fold higher prevalence of diabetes (54.4 vs. 14.6%) in subjects with MERS-CoV vs. H1N1, respectively (7). Diabetes was the comorbidity most strongly associated with adverse outcomes in several smaller studies of MERS-CoV+ hospitalized subjects in Saudi Arabia (8, 9), and both hypertension and diabetes were strongly associated with mortality in larger retrospective analysis of 281 MERS-CoV+ Saudi subjects (10).

The rates of T2D in subjects with SARS-CoV-2 vary, depending on the age and location of the study population, the severity of illness, and the method of testing. In 1 report, diabetes was present in ~15% of 1099 patients, including children and adults, hospitalized in China with laboratory confirmation of the diagnosis (11). In contrast, diabetes was reported in 8.2% of 1590 Chinese subjects (mean age, 48.9 years) hospitalized with SARS-CoV-2, and rates of diabetes were higher (34.6% vs. 14.3%) in subjects with a composite endpoint (intensive care unit [ICU] admission, requirement for ventilation, death) reflecting disease severity (12). Consistent with these observations, a retrospective analysis of 174 hospitalized persons in 1 hospital in Wuhan, China, in February 2020 revealed a greater severity of illness, as assessed by laboratory evaluation of blood counts, parameters of coagulation, and biomarkers of inflammation in subjects with T2D (24/174) presenting without other comorbidities (13). Similarly, diabetes is among comorbidities associated with adverse outcomes in hospitalized patients with SARS-CoV-2 in both China and Italy (14). In a series of 168 lethal cases of SARS-CoV-2 pneumonia collected from 21 hospitals between January 21 and January 30, 2020, in Wuhan, China, 75% were men,

with a median age of 70, and diabetes was reported in 25% of the cases (15).

Analysis of a randomly selected subset of fatal SARS-CoV-2 cases in Italy (mean age, 79.5 years) revealed a prevalence of diabetes of 35% (16). A larger retrospective analysis of 1591 patients with SARS-CoV-2 hospitalized in ICUs of Lombardy, Italy, over a 4-week period reported a prevalence of T2D of 17% (17). Data reported for laboratory-confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infections in the United States from February 12 to March 28, 2020, and tabulated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for 7162 subjects with completed case information revealed a prevalence rates for diabetes of 6%, 24%, and 32%, for nonhospitalized, hospitalized but not requiring ICU admission vs. hospitalized in the ICU, respectively (18). Among hospitalized SARS-CoV-2+ patients assessed at a single health care center in New York between March 1 and April 2, 2020, the prevalence of diabetes was 15% in the SARS-CoV-2+ population (19). However, prevalence rates for diabetes (31.8% vs. 5.4%) and obesity (39.8% vs. 14.5%) were greater in the hospitalized vs. nonhospitalized subgroups, respectively. Furthermore, a body mass index (BMI) > 40 was among risk factors most predictive of the need for hospitalization (19).

Pancreatic injury, determined by assessment of plasma levels of amylase and lipase, was reported in 9/52 patients hospitalized with SARS-CoV-2-associated pneumonia in China, and 6/9 subjects also exhibited moderate increases in plasma glucose (20). This emerging putative association of pancreatic injury and SARS-CoV-2 is consistent with expression of ACE2 in the exocrine and endocrine pancreas (2).

Obesity is also a risk factor for increasing severity of SARS-CoV-2-related illness. Analysis of 124 consecutive ICU admissions in a single center in Lille, France, from February 27 to April 5, 2020, revealed greater rates of obesity and severe obesity among SARS-CoV-2 patients, relative to historical non-SARS-CoV-2 controls (21). The frequency of obesity was 47.5% in this observational study, compared with 25.8% in a historical control group of ICU subjects with non-SARS-CoV-2 illness, and the requirement for intubation and mechanical ventilation was higher in subjects with obesity. Related observations were reported in a retrospective analysis of 3615 SARS-CoV-2+ subjects presenting to the emergency room at a single medical center in New York from March 4 to April 4, 2020. Individuals with obesity or severe obesity <60 years old were more likely to require acute medical care and admission to the ICU (22).

Consistent with these findings, a great proportion of 3883 critically ill patients with SARS-CoV-2 admitted to ICUs from March 1 to April 5, 2020, in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland were reported to have a BMI > 30, relative to critically ill historical controls hospitalized in the ICU from 2017 to 2019 with viral pneumonia (23). Moreover, a progressive increase in BMI was associated with greater mortality in subjects with SARS-CoV-2 infection, relative to BMI-matched hospitalized ICU controls with viral pneumonia.

### Diabetes, Infection, and Immune Responses

Acute viral respiratory infection has been linked to the rapid development of transient insulin resistance, both in otherwise healthy euglycemic normal weight or overweight individuals (24). Moreover, infection, severe illness, and medications such as glucocorticoids impair insulin sensitivity and often necessitates adjustment of glucose-lowering medications and insulin dosage in the hospital. Worldwide, infectious diseases contribute to excess mortality in individuals with diabetes (25). Mortality was increased in older patients with diabetes in a retrospective analysis of people in French ICUs hospitalized with pulmonary and invasive pneumococcal infection (26). Nevertheless, some studies show no differences, when corrected for age and comorbidities, in plasma biomarker responses or hospitalization outcomes in people with diabetes hospitalized in the ICU with sepsis (27). The diagnosis of diabetes has been linked to increased susceptibility to and adverse outcomes associated with bacterial, mycotic, parasitic, and viral infections (28), attributed to a combination of dysregulated innate immunity and maladaptive inflammatory responses (3). Pulmonary and systemic coronavirus infection, including SARS-CoV-2, may be complicated by secondary bacterial infection, reflecting compromise of epithelial barrier function in the lungs and in the gastrointestinal tract. A substantial number of subjects with diabetes are at increased risk for infection because of concomitant immunosuppression associated with a history of solid organ transplantation (29).

### Coronavirus Infections and the Gastrointestinal Tract

As the primary site of energy absorption, the gut plays an important role in metabolic homeostasis, through production of metabolically active gut

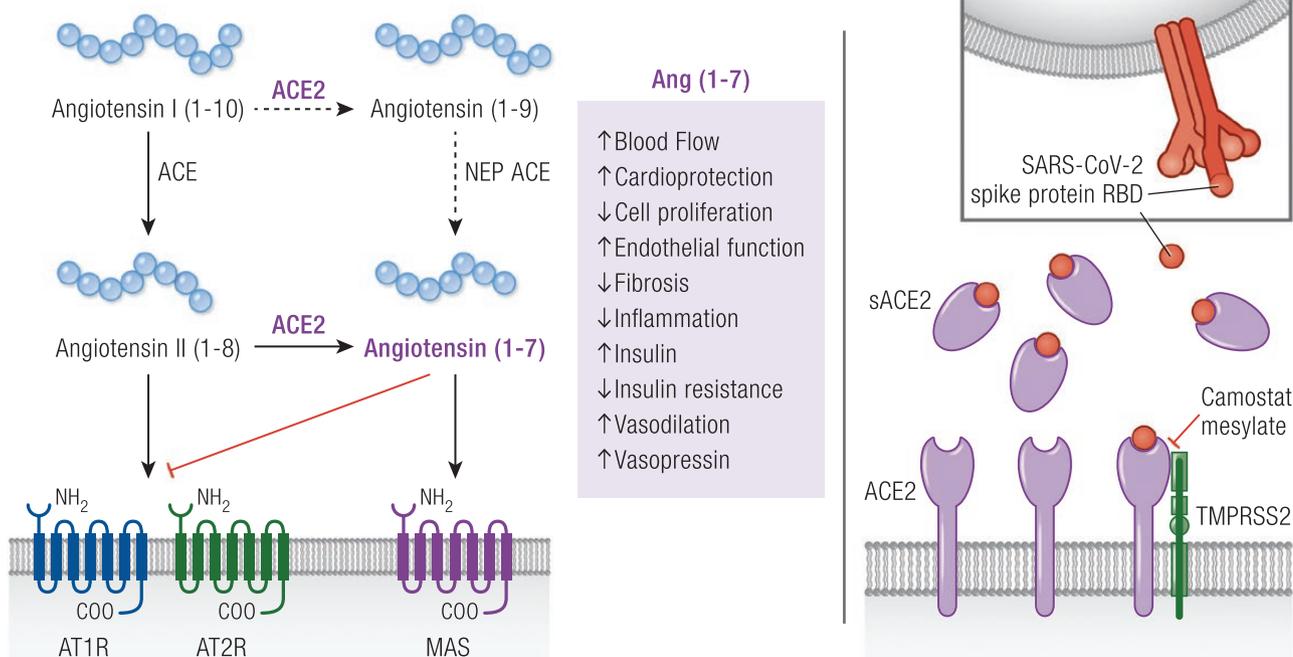
hormones, interaction with microbiota, and via its potential capacity to contribute to gluconeogenesis (30). Moreover, a healthy gut is essential for the absorption and action of several glucose-lowering medications, including the widely used metformin (31), delivered orally for the treatment of T2D. Of potential clinical relevance, DPP4, ACE2, and TMPRSS2 are substantially expressed beyond the lung within epithelial tissues including small and large bowel enterocytes (2, 32, 33). Experimental inoculation of MERS-CoV into the murine gut of human DPP4+ transgenic mice produces a lethal infection, associated with progressive systemic viral dissemination (34). Initial reports describing clinical symptoms in 1099 hospitalized SARS-CoV-2 patients in China reported a low rate (<5%) of gastrointestinal complaints. Consistent with the potential importance of enterocyte viral entry, symptoms of gut inflammation, including nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, are reported in some severely ill individuals with MERS (8). Notably, subjects with SARS-Cov-2 may present with gastrointestinal distress without symptoms of pulmonary infection (33). A subset of these individuals also exhibit clinical evidence of liver injury, and glucose levels were higher in more severely ill patients (35). Whether oral absorption of medications for

T2D, or the actions of some of these drugs on the liver, might be impaired in a proportion of infected subjects with T2D and gastrointestinal dysfunction has not been determined.

### ACE2 Biology Relevant to Diabetes

ACE2, an 805-amino acid transmembrane carboxypeptidase enzyme and functional coronavirus S1 subunit receptor cleaves the last amino acid of angiotensin (Ang) II (Fig. 1), and generates vasodilatory Ang (1-7), collectively modulating often opposing actions of Ang II and ACE through Ang and angiotensin (1-7) receptors. For example, reduction of ACE2 activity in the context of unopposed ACE1 action may lead to augmented signaling through angiotensin receptors (Fig. 1), increased aldosterone, and, possibly, increased blood pressure and hypokalemia.

The physiological actions of ACE2 relevant to metabolism are mediated in part through its expression in blood vessels, pancreas, and renal tubular epithelium and via its enzymatic generation of Ang (1-7), which may antagonize the actions of Ang II (Fig. 1) (36). Within the pancreas, ACE2 expression has been described in acinar cells and



**Figure 1.** Metabolism of angiotensin I by ACE and ACE 2 (left panel) to yield different bioactive angiotensin peptides that exert their actions through distinct G protein coupled receptors. Selective cardiometabolic actions of Ang (1-7) are shown. ACE, angiotensin-converting enzyme; AT1R, angiotensin II receptor type 1; AT2R, angiotensin II receptor Type 2; MAS = angiotensin (1-7) receptor. The ACE2 receptor consists of 2 forms (right panel), an 805 amino-acid membrane-spanning molecule, and a smaller 740 amino acid soluble (sACE2) circulating form, depicted below, which can theoretically serve as a decoy receptor for the MERS-CoV-2 protein. Both molecular isoforms of ACE2 are capable of binding a subset of coronavirus spike proteins, including the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein. TMPRSS2, the membrane-anchored protease important for activation of the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein, and one of its inhibitors, camostat mesylate, is depicted

within subsets of islet cells (37). Gain and loss of ACE2 function in preclinical studies reveals physiological and pharmacological roles for ACE2, both dependent and independent of Ang (1-7), in glucose control and  $\beta$ -cell function, renal physiology, blood pressure, atherosclerosis, and amelioration of experimental diabetes (38-42). Nevertheless, the importance of ACE2 for glucose control, independent of the angiotensin pathway in humans, has not been conclusively established.

ACE2 expression in the lung has been detected at low levels in some studies, and may be upregulated in the context of SARS-CoV-2 infection, with type 2 pneumocytes potentially serving as a key cell type facilitating pulmonary inflammation (43). However, ACE2 is highly expressed in several extrapulmonary tissues, including the gut (2), and has multiple, often beneficial, roles in cardiometabolic physiology, including potential therapeutic activities in the heart, pancreas, and kidney. The potential biological importance, clinical relevance, and use of drugs such as HMG CoA-reductase inhibitors, or medications blocking components of the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system, such as ACE inhibitors and angiotensin receptor blockers, in the context of hypertension, cardiovascular and renal disease, diabetes, and active SARS-CoV-2 infection has been reviewed (44-47).

Levels of urinary ACE2 protein and enzymatic activity are increased in subjects with both type 1 diabetes (T1D) (48) and T2D (49), and values for urinary ACE2/creatinine ratios correlate positively with fasting blood glucose and hemoglobin A1C (50). However, whether ACE2 is mechanistically linked to the development of dysglycemia or complications in people with diabetes is uncertain. ACE2 is also highly expressed in the human small and large intestine (51) and ACE2 mRNA transcripts are upregulated in duodenal biopsies taken from individuals treated with ACE inhibitors (52). Expression of ACE2 RNA and protein, as well as Ang (1-7) is upregulated in jejunal enterocytes isolated from rats with streptozotocin-induced diabetes (53). Whether hyperglycemia and/or insulin deficiency similarly regulates ACE2 expression in human tissues has not been studied.

ACE2 can also cleave other metabolically active substrates in addition to angiotensin, including apelin-13, des-Arg9-bradykinin, neurotensin (1-13)  $\beta$ -casomorphin, dynorphin A 1-13, and ghrelin (36). The cell-associated proteases TMPRSS2 and a disintegrin and metalloproteinase 17 both cleave ACE2; however, TMPRSS2 predominantly facilitates SARS spike protein-driven cellular entry (54). As described for DPP4, the

membrane-tethered ACE2 enzyme can be cleaved to yield a soluble circulating form ACE2(1-740); however, the biological importance of soluble ACE2 (sACE2) remains uncertain. The extracellular domain of both ACE2 and sACE2 bind SARS-CoV (55), and SARS-CoV-2 (56), raising the possibility of exploring pharmacological administration of recombinant sACE2 as a therapeutic approach to sequester and block coronavirus cellular entry (57).

Rats with streptozotocin-induced diabetes exhibit reduced pulmonary expression of ACE2 mRNA. Treatment of diabetic rats with the glucagon-like peptide-1R (GLP-1R) agonist liraglutide twice daily for 7 days increased pulmonary ACE and ACE2 mRNA expression, associated with increased surfactant protein expression in the lung, and up-regulated circulating levels of Ang (1-7, 58). Notably, liraglutide had no effect on glucose control or insulin levels in this model, consistent with the possibility that direct augmentation of pulmonary GLP-1R signaling, rather than indirect GLP-1 actions on islet hormones, contributes to the restoration of the pulmonary renin-angiotensin system. Similarly, administration of the DPP-4 inhibitor linagliptin once daily, or liraglutide twice daily for 4 weeks, attenuated cardiac fibrosis and prevented the Ang II-mediated reduction in cardiac ACE2 activity in rats with Ang II-induced hypertension (59). However, the putative pathophysiological significance of these findings in the context of experimental coronavirus infection has not been explored.

### Transmembrane Serine Protease TMPRSS2

TMPRSS2 is a serine protease highly expressed within the lung and gastrointestinal tissues, including stomach, small and large bowel, pancreas, and liver. TMPRSS2 cleaves and activates some influenza A and influenza B virus hemagglutinin envelope glycoproteins, thereby enabling viral membrane fusion and infectivity in human airway cells and type 2 pneumocytes (60). TMPRSS2 also cleaves and activates the spike protein of SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV, enabling virus-membrane fusion. Indeed, genetic inactivation of TMPRSS2 in mice attenuates the extent of lung damage and inflammation induced by experimental infection with MERS-CoV and SARS-CoV (61). The importance of TMPRSS2 for viral pathogenicity is also revealed through studies using TMPRSS2 inhibitors, such as camostat mesylate, which attenuates SARS-CoV-2 infection of human

lung cells cultured *ex vivo* (62). Camostat mesylate has been approved in Japan for the treatment of pancreatitis and short-term use for 28 days reduced urinary protein excretion, evident by 7 days, in 3 subjects with nephrotic syndrome secondary to diabetic kidney disease, without coexistent pancreatitis (63). There is little information informing whether the regulation of TMPRSS2 expression or activity is regulated by glucose, or dysregulated in the context of experimental or clinical diabetes.

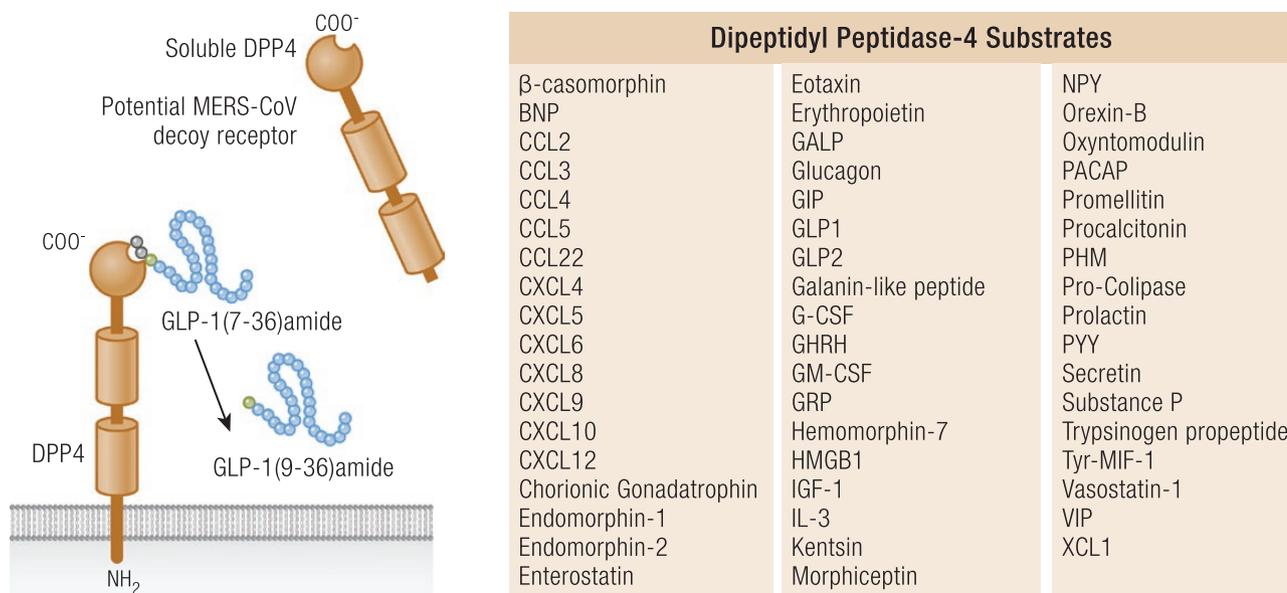
### Dipeptidyl Peptidase-4

DPP4, originally identified as the T-cell activation antigen cluster of differentiation 26 (CD26), is a widely expressed 766 amino-acid cell-surface endopeptidase that interacts with cellular proteins such as adenosine deaminase and caveolin-1 to generate intracellular signals governing immune responses (64). DPP4 also cleaves a wide range of peptide hormones, chemokines, and bioactive immunomodulatory proteins (Fig. 2) (65), most commonly at the position 2 alanine or proline, resulting in inactivation of peptide action, or switching of peptide receptor affinity (64). DPP4, like ACE2, is shed from the cell membrane, and circulates as a 727 amino-acid soluble moiety (sDPP4) containing amino acid residues 39 to 766 that retains catalytic activity. sDPP4 exerts pro-inflammatory activity alone, or through

association with factor Xa, independent of its catalytic actions by interacting with cell-associated caveolin-1 or proteinase activated receptor 2 on macrophages or lymphocytes (66). Circulating DPP4 activity and levels of sDPP4 are increased in humans with hepatitis C and miscellaneous viral infections (67). However, sDPP4 levels were lower when measured in 14 subjects with MERS-CoV infection (68). Similarly, circulating sDPP4 levels were also reduced in humans with primary HIV infection (69). Within the human respiratory tract, immunoreactive DPP4 has been localized to immune and endothelial cells, pleural mesothelium, lymphatics, and both type 1 and type 2 pneumocytes (70). Increased DPP4 RNA and protein expression was detected in pneumocytes from subjects with a history of smoking, or lung disease, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (70, 71).

### Human DPP4 is a Coronavirus Receptor

Membrane-associated human DPP4 is also a functional coronavirus receptor (72), interacting with MERS-CoV through the spike glycoprotein S1<sup>b</sup> domain. After binding DPP4, MERS-CoV S protein is cleaved and activated by TMPRSS2 or cathepsin L, facilitating viral entry (73). Human neutralizing antibodies directed against the receptor-binding domain of the MERS-CoV Spike protein block



**Figure 2.** Dipeptidyl peptidase-4 exists as a membrane anchored and smaller circulating smaller form (left panel), with both molecules retaining enzymatic activity. Right panel depicts peptide substrates of DPP4, as modified from (64). BNP, brain natriuretic peptide; CCL, CC motif chemokine ligand; CCXL, C-X-C motif chemokine ligand; GALP, galanin-like peptide; GIP, glucose-dependent insulintropic polypeptide; G-CSF, granulocyte colony stimulating factor; GLP-1, glucagon-like peptide-1; GLP2, glucagon-like peptide-2; GM-CSF, granulocyte macrophage colony stimulating factor; GRP, gastrin releasing peptide; HMGB1, high mobility group box 1; NPY, neuropeptide Y; PACAP, pituitary adenylate cyclase activating peptide; PHM, peptide histidine methionine; PYY, peptide YY; VIP, vasoactive intestinal polypeptide; XCL-1, X-C motif chemokine ligand 1.

viral binding to human DPP4, thereby inhibiting MERS-CoV infection (74). Similarly, recombinant human adenosine deaminase blocks spike protein S1 binding to DPP4 and inhibits MERS-CoV infection of cells transfected with human DPP4 (75). Studies examining 10 different bat cell lines *ex vivo* demonstrate that the susceptibility or resistance to MERS-CoV infection correlates with the presence or absence of cell surface-expressed DPP4, whereas anti-DPP4 antibodies blocked acute viral infection in susceptible bat cells in a dose-dependent manner (76).

A few naturally occurring *DPP4* polymorphisms have been described that alter the amino acid sequence of DPP4 so as to diminish binding of MERS-CoV subunit 1 protein with specific DPP4 isoforms; these variants are associated with reduced viral cell entry (77). Mouse DPP4 does not bind coronavirus spike protein subunits because of differential glycosylation of the mouse vs. the human DPP4 protein. The key amino acid differences mediating differential glycosylation have been localized to positions 288 and 330 (78, 79). Substitutions of the amino acids at A288L and T330R from human to mouse DPP4 using clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats-Cas9 gene editing is sufficient to confer murine susceptibility to MERS-CoV viral infection and replication (80), resulting in infected mice exhibiting severe lung injury and features of respiratory distress syndrome.

Similarly, transgenic mice engineered to express human DPP4 become susceptible to lethal coronavirus infection with MERS-CoV (81). High-fat diet-fed transgenic mice expressing human DPP4 infected with MERS-CoV exhibit more severe prolonged disease with unresolved pulmonary inflammation and delayed recovery, associated with dysregulated cellular immune and cytokine responses, despite apparently similar levels of viral replication and clearance (82). Humanized (hDPP4) mice may represent useful preclinical models for assessment of antiviral therapeutics. Studies administering 2 human antibodies (Regeneron 3051 and Regeneron 3048) demonstrate interruption of the interaction of the MERS-CoV spike protein with hDPP4, and attenuated lung pathology in mice with experimental MERS-CoV infection (83).

Surprisingly, transgenic mice overexpressing hDPP4 exhibited relative resistance to MERS-CoV infection, exemplified by less lung inflammation and reduced rates of mortality. Intriguingly, these hDPP4 transgenic mice with higher levels of hDPP4 expression also exhibited increased circulating levels of sDPP4 and administration of recombinant

sDPP4 attenuated lung histopathology and reduced the titers of virus recovered from lung tissue (84). In a small study of 14 subjects hospitalized in Korea, circulating levels of sDPP4 were lower in human subjects with MERS-CoV, relative to healthy controls (68). Levels of sDPP4 found effective for partial suppression of viral MERS-CoV entry into cells *ex vivo* were much higher than circulating levels of sDPP4 in human subjects. Hence, whether sDPP4 exhibits therapeutic potential for use as a soluble decoy receptor (Fig. 2), binding to and partially sequestering circulating MERS-CoV requires further investigation. Intriguingly, MERS-CoV strains with point mutations in the receptor-binding domain of the viral spike (S) protein have been isolated from an outbreak in South Korean subjects and these strains exhibit reduced binding to human DPP4 and decreased viral entry into cells *ex vivo* (85). However, the pathophysiological significance and implications of these findings requires further analysis.

### DPP4, Inflammation, and the Human Immune System

Early studies examining the immunological properties of DPP4 often used nonselective DPP4 inhibitors; however, highly selective DPP4 inhibitors have been developed for the treatment of T2D (64). Administration of the DPP4 inhibitor sitagliptin for 28 days to healthy human subjects had no effect on circulating leukocytes, including lymphocyte and T-cell subsets. Levels of 27 different plasma cytokines, and levels of more than a dozen cytokines released by stimulation of peripheral blood mononuclear cells with lipopolysaccharide or anti-CD3 antibody were not different in sitagliptin-treated subjects (86). Similarly, sitagliptin administration for 24 weeks to HIV+ men and women, without an AIDS-defining illness or diabetes, had no effect on viral RNA load, CD4+ T-cell count; regulated on activation, normal T cell expressed and secreted; or levels of soluble TNF receptor II concentrations. Levels of total stromal cell-derived factor-1, also known as CXCL12, declined in sitagliptin-treated subjects (87).

The immunological consequences of sitagliptin therapy for 8 weeks was also studied in 36 HIV+ men and women with impaired glucose tolerance, simultaneously treated with chimeric antigen receptor T-cell therapy. Sitagliptin treatment was associated with reduced circulating levels of both C-reactive protein (CRP) and the C-X-C motif chemokine 10 (88). A larger study randomized

90 HIV+ subjects on stable antiretroviral therapy without diabetes with  $\geq 100/\mu\text{L}$  CD4 cells to either sitagliptin or placebo for 16 weeks. No differences were observed in the primary study endpoint, the levels of soluble CD14, a circulating marker of monocyte activation (89). Levels of CXCL10 decreased; however, levels of other inflammatory biomarkers such as sCD163, IL-6, high-sensitivity CRP, sDPP4, sTNF-RI, sTNF-RII, and levels of total CD4 and CD8 counts were not different in sitagliptin-treated subjects (89). Similarly, in a small open label nonrandomized observational study of 34 subjects with T2D initiated on sitagliptin, levels of CD4(+)/CD8(+) cells, NK, and Th2 cells and plasma cytokine levels were not different after 1 year of therapy (90).

Consistent with the lack of a major effect of DPP4 inhibitors on immune function, administration of either the DPP4 inhibitor vildagliptin or the glucosidase inhibitor acarbose was compared in a crossover design for several weeks in 16 individuals with T2D. No differential effect of either drug was detected on plasma levels of IL-6 or CRP, nor was there any difference in the relative production of inflammatory cytokines from human mononuclear cells isolated from the study subjects and stimulated *ex vivo* (91). Hence, the available evidence does not support clinically meaningful alterations in markers of immune function after administration of DPP4 inhibitors in human subjects with or without T2D.

### Clinical Safety of DPP4 Inhibitors

DPP4 inhibitors are widely used clinically for the therapy of T2D, and act selectively to inhibit the catalytic activity of cell-associated and circulating sDPP4. When used in people with T2D, DPP4 inhibitors produce ~50% to 95% inhibition of DPP4 activity over a 24-hour period (92). Hence, some residual DPP4 enzyme activity is always present within tissues and in the circulation of subjects treated with DPP4 inhibitors. Extensive preclinical studies using highly selective DPP4 inhibitors have not demonstrated evidence of impaired T cell-dependent immune responses (93). Despite initial concerns surrounding the potential safety of DPP4 inhibitors (64), there have been no major safety concerns related to infections or compromised immune function after more than 13 years of clinical experience. A population-based cohort study of subjects with T2D assessed data from the UK Clinical Practice Research Datalink and found no increased risk of pneumonia in

22435 subjects treated with DPP4 inhibitors, compared with 188614 individuals treated with other non-insulin glucose-lowering agents (94). These findings are consistent with a meta-analysis of multiple DPP4 inhibitor trials encompassing 23456 study participants with T2D treated with a DPP4 inhibitor compared with 15300 controls in studies ranging from 18 to 104 weeks (95). No increased risk of infection was detected in subjects treated with DPP4 inhibitors. Consistent with these findings, results of large trials examining the safety of saxagliptin, alogliptin, sitagliptin, and linagliptin in humans with T2D at risk for cardiovascular or renal disease did not reveal clinically relevant safety concerns related to infections, immune, or inflammatory disorders (96-100).

### Use of Glucose-Lowering Therapies in Subjects with Coronavirus Infections

Metformin exerts anti-inflammatory actions in preclinical studies and reduces circulating biomarkers of inflammation in people with T2D (101). Metformin has also been used successfully in nonhospitalized subjects with stable hepatitis or HIV infections; however, there is scant information about the immunomodulatory actions of metformin in the context of coronavirus infection. Several reports studying antibody titers in a small number of individuals have suggested that immune responses to influenza vaccination are modestly impaired in metformin-treated subjects; however, the clinical significance, if any, of these observations is uncertain (102, 103). Metformin should be used with caution in unstable hospitalized patients and should be discontinued in people with concomitant sepsis or severe impairment of hepatic and renal function.

Although DPP4 serves as a co-receptor for a subset of coronaviruses, there are few data informing whether any of the structurally distinct small molecule DPP4 enzyme inhibitors might sterically interfere with and modify the binding of MERS-CoV subunits to DPP4. DPP4 activity also potentially modulates the levels and bioactivity of multiple immunomodulatory chemokines and cytokines (Fig. 2) (64). However, preclinical studies of mice with genetic or chemical reduction of DPP4 activity in the setting of diet-induced inflammation did not reveal dysregulation of tissue or systemic inflammatory markers, despite complete absence or marked reduction of DPP4 activity (104). The available evidence is insufficient to determine the impact, if any, of sustained partial

reduction of DPP4 activity, as achieved clinically in subjects with T2D treated with DPP4 inhibitors, on clinical outcomes in humans with active coronavirus infection. In individuals with active SARS-CoV-2 infection and clinically significant volume depletion or systemic sepsis, a reduction in renal function may necessitate adjustment of the dose of some DPP4 inhibitors.

GLP-1R agonists exert broad anti-inflammatory actions in animals with experimental inflammation, and reduce biomarkers of systemic inflammation in human subjects with T2D and in people with obesity (105). Circulating GLP-1 levels are induced by lipopolysaccharide in animals and humans (106), are increased in human subjects with sepsis and critical illness, and correlate with illness severity and mortality (107, 108). Multiple preclinical studies demonstrate that GLP-1R agonists attenuate pulmonary inflammation, reduce cytokine production, and preserve lung function in mice and rats with experimental lung injury (109–111). Notably, GLP-1R agonism reduces pulmonary type 2 immune cytokine responses and the extent of lung injury in mice following infection with a respiratory syncytial virus isolated from a child with severe lower respiratory tract infection (112).

The results of several large studies examining the cardiovascular safety of GLP-1R agonists did not reveal imbalances in rates of inflammatory disorders or severe infections (113–116). Liraglutide has been shown to be safe and effective when used for acute perioperative control of blood glucose in adult human subjects undergoing elective cardiovascular surgery (117). Similarly, twice-daily exenatide appears safe and effective when used alone or in combination with basal insulin for blood glucose management in noncritically ill hospitalized patients with T2D treated on general medicine or surgery wards (118). GLP-1R agonists have been explored as glucose-lowering agents in the perioperative period and in the ICU, and have generally been proven safe and effective for blood glucose management (119). However, the total number of subjects studied is small and duration of therapy is limited. Although GLP-1 safely lowers blood glucose in short-term studies of ventilated patients with critical illness (120), there is insufficient experience with the safety and use of GLP-1R agonists in critically ill subjects to make therapeutic recommendations for use of these agents in the context of coronavirus infection (121), and exenatide-based formulations should be stopped in subjects with deteriorating kidney function.

Insulin has been extensively used for decades to control glucose in critically ill hospitalized subjects with diabetes and the emerging use of continuous glucose monitoring may lower the rates of hypoglycemia associated with insulin use in the hospital, including in some subjects with critical illness (122). Intriguingly, selective loss of insulin action in murine immune cells has been shown to attenuate the anti-inflammatory T-cell response to experimental influenza infection (123). Moreover, insulin exerts anti-inflammatory actions in humans and reduces biomarkers of inflammation in hospitalized individuals with critical illness (124). Among available agents for the treatment of acute illness complicated by diabetes, insulin has been the most extensively used agent in human subjects with bacterial or viral infections and in hospitalized critically ill patients. However, there is little information surrounding potential benefits or risks of insulin in the context of acute coronavirus infection.

Sulfonylureas increase the risk of hypoglycemia and are best avoided in hospitalized subjects with severe medical illness. Although SGLT2 inhibitors are generally well tolerated in the outpatient setting, and cardioprotective most notably in the context of heart failure, SARS-CoV-2 infection may be associated with anorexia, dehydration, and rapid deterioration in clinical status. Hence, symptomatic individuals with T2D and active SARS-CoV-2 infection may be at heightened risk for volume depletion and euglycemic ketoacidosis. Accordingly, the available evidence suggests reevaluation of or discontinuation of these agents in very unwell ambulatory individuals, and the SGLT2 inhibitors should be routinely discontinued in unstable patients with severe SARS-CoV-2 infection upon admission to hospital (125).

### Type 1 Diabetes and SARS-CoV-2

The available information does not indicate increased susceptibility to coronavirus infections in children or adults with T1D. People with T1D may find that interruption of normal daily activities, changes in type and frequency of exercise, and alteration of diet routines may alter glucose control necessitating reexamination of insulin requirements. In many instances, interactions with health care providers may be facilitated through telephone, e-mail, as well as telemedicine interactions, including uploading of glucose data facilitating adjustment of insulin regimens. A rise in blood glucose or marked change in 24-hour glucose patterns may be an early harbinger

of impending clinical infection in some individuals, prompting more frequent blood glucose and ketone monitoring. In some areas, disruption to medication supply chains may require additional vigilance and more regular communication between pharmacies, insurance companies, health care providers, and individual patients. The use of medications such as acetaminophen may introduce error into some technologies used for glucometer readings or continuous glucose monitoring systems (126). Despite limitations of access to health care providers, individuals with unstable kidney function or active retinopathy may need to be seen in the diabetes clinic for assessment and appropriate therapy.

### Conclusions, Limitations, and Areas of Uncertainty

The available evidence implicates diabetes and obesity as important risk factors impacting the clinical severity of coronavirus infections, including SARS-CoV-2. Although ACE2 and DPP4 are important physiological regulators of glucose homeostasis, there is little compelling clinical evidence that drugs targeting ACE2- or DPP4-related pathways produce differential harm or benefit in the context of human coronavirus infections. Soluble decoy receptors for ACE2 or antisera directed against ACE2 may be promising investigational interventions to block cellular coronavirus entry; however, the metabolic consequences, if any, of these investigational agents have not been carefully studied and requires ongoing scrutiny.

DPP4 inhibitors and GLP-1R agonists may exert anti-inflammatory actions in human subjects and have been successfully used to control glucose in hospitalized patients. However, there is insufficient experience with these agents

to suggest they might safely replace insulin in critically ill subjects with coronavirus infection. Hence, the extensive historical experience with the use of insulin, bolstered by increasing adoption of continuous glucose monitoring, supports the ongoing use of insulin as the agent of choice in the management of severely ill subjects with diabetes and coronavirus infections. There is insufficient experience with diabetes and pregnancy in subjects with SARS-CoV-2 to make tailored therapeutic recommendations; however, modified screening guidelines for gestational diabetes have been proposed in the context of SARS-CoV-2 for individuals with limited access to regular clinics (127). The expression of ACE2 within the exocrine and endocrine pancreas highlights the need for vigilance in consideration of whether pancreatic inflammation reported in some individuals with SARS-CoV-2 infection may contribute to the exacerbation or development of diabetes in a subset of acutely ill patients. In hospitalized individuals with deteriorating renal function, the use of SGLT2 inhibitors and exenatide should be reconsidered or discontinued, and metformin and sulfonylurea dosing may also need to be reduced or stopped.

The rapid flow of new clinical information stemming from the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic requires ongoing scrutiny to understand the prudent use, risks and benefits of individual glucose-lowering agents, and related medications commonly used in subjects with diabetes at risk of or hospitalized with coronavirus-related infections. Moreover, the current pandemic highlights the importance of opportunities for continuing and expanding innovative delivery of diabetes care through use of wearable and portable monitoring devices and regular communication between people with diabetes and their health care providers.

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### Acknowledgments

This review is dedicated to all of the health care providers working on the frontlines of the SARS-Co-V-2 epidemic and the work they all do in collaboration helping people with diabetes meeting the enormous challenges we face together.

### Additional Information

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**Disclosure Summary:** D.J.D. is supported in part by a Banting and Best Diabetes Centre-Novo Nordisk Chair in Incretin Research, the Novo Nordisk Foundation Fund in Incretin Biology, Canadian Institutes of Health Research Foundation grant 154321, and investigatorinitiated grant support for preclinical studies from Merck Inc., Novo Nordisk Inc, and Shire/Takeda Inc. to Mt. Sinai Hospital. D.J.D. has received consulting or lectures fees within the past 12 months from Intarcia Inc., Merck Inc., Novo Nordisk Inc, and Pfizer Inc.

### Abbreviations

ACE, angiotensin-converting enzyme; Ang, angiotensin; BMI, body mass index; CD, cluster of differentiation; CoV, coronavirus; CRP, C-reactive protein; DPP4, dipeptidyl peptidase-4; GLP-1, glucagon-like peptide-1; hDPP4, human DPP4; ICU, intensive care unit; MERS, Middle East respiratory syndrome; SARS, severe acute respiratory syndrome; sDPP4, soluble DPP4; TMPRSS2, transmembrane serine protease 2; T1D, type 1 diabetes; T2D, type 2 diabetes