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## **Identification of Unique Clusters of T, Dendritic and Innate Lymphoid Cells in the Peritoneal Fluid of Ovarian Cancer Patients**

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## **Abstract**

**Problem:** We hypothesize that activated peritoneal immune cells can be redirected to target ovarian tumors. Here, we obtain fundamental knowledge of the peritoneal immune environment through deep immunophenotyping of T cells, dendritic cells (DC) and innate lymphoid cells (ILC) of ovarian cancer patients.

**Method of study:** T cells, DC and ILC from ascites of ovarian cancer patients (n=15) and peripheral blood of post-menopausal healthy donors (n=6) were immunophenotyped on a BD Fortessa cytometer using three panels- each composed of 16 antibodies. The data were analyzed manually and by t-SNE/DensVM. CA125 levels were obtained from patient charts.

**Results:** We observed decreased CD3<sup>+</sup> T cells and a higher proportion of activated CD4<sup>+</sup> and effector memory  $CD4^+/CD8^+$  T cells, plasmacytoid DC,  $CD1c^+$  and  $CD141^+$  myeloid DC and CD56Hi NK cells in ascites. t-SNE/DensVM identified eight T cell, 17 DC and 17 ILC clusters that were unique in the ascites compared to controls. Hierarchical clustering of cell frequency distinctly segregated the T cell and ILC clusters from controls. Increased CA125 levels were associated with decreased CD8+/CD45RA+/CD45RO−/CCR7− T cells.

**Conclusions:** The identified immune clusters serve as the basis for interrogation of the peritoneal immune environment and the development of novel immunologic modalities against ovarian cancer.

## **Keywords**

Ovarian cancer; Immunophenotyping; Peritoneal fluid; ascites; CD8 T cells; Innate lymphoid cells; dendritic cells; CA125

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Author contributions

This article was conceptualized by MSP and AKS. JV, MSP and AKS helped major parts of the text. JV, GEL, MF, AK, ARC and LB helped with data and sample acquisition. JV, MC, NK and AKS helped with data analysis and development of figures.

**Conflict of interest disclosure statement**. All of the co-authors declare that they do not have any relationships that could be construed as resulting in an actual, potential, or perceived conflict of interest with regard to the manuscript being submitted for review.

## **1 Introduction**

High grade serous ovarian cancer (HGSOC) originates in the secretory epithelium of the fallopian tubes or from cortical inclusion cysts in the ovary  $1-3$ . Metastasis beyond these primary tissues occurs at preferred sites such as the omentum, diaphragm and serosal surfaces within the peritoneal cavity. Proliferation of serous ovarian tumors at these primary and secondary sites is associated with accumulation of ascites in the majority of HGSOC patients <sup>4–6</sup>. Obstruction of the lymphatic ducts is the cause for accumulation of this peritoneal exudate <sup>5,7,8</sup>. Ascites contains acellular factors derived from the tumors, the mesothelial linings as well as the underlying stroma. Cytokines, chemokines, growth factors and other molecules present in the peritoneal fluid and their potential roles in progression and metastasis of ovarian tumors are topics of intense interest  $9$ . There is also a significant cellular component in ascites that is composed of tumor cells and spheroids, mesothelial cells, stromal cells and immune cells 5,9,10. In this study, we employ deep immunophenotyping to map the complex immune milieu present in the ascites of HGSOC patients.

There are separate immune cell compartments in most patients with cancer that influence tumor progression. Immune cells in peripheral circulation are most studied for their phenotype as well as their potential roles in developing immunotherapies against HGSOC. The second compartment includes the immune cells infiltrating the solid tumor microenvironment. Supporting an important role for adaptive immune cells, infiltrating  $CD8+T$  cell are positively associated with survival in multiple studies  $11,12$ .

The immune cells in ascites constitute the third most relevant immune compartment in HGSOC. There are limited studies conducted on this compartment even though the immune cells in ascites represent all major subsets of lymphoid and myeloid lineages  $13$ –15. Ascites immune cells are abundant (typically >100 million per patient; Patankar et al unpublished observations), however, their composition, function and relationship to immune cells infiltrating ovarian tumor stroma remains obscure. The potential for ascites immune cells to target and lyse tumor cells/masses is not well defined. There is evidence that the peritoneal NK cells have suppressed cytolytic activity 16. In contrast, biology of the peritoneal cytolytic T cells or the drivers of adaptive immunity, dendritic cells is poorly understood. Potential of such an abundant source of readily accessible immune cells for development of immunotherapy regimens is also understudied.

This study was undertaken to develop a foundation for understanding and harnessing the peritoneal immune environment of HGSOC patients. We have employed high-dimensional immunophenotyping to identify common and unique subsets of T cells, dendritic cells and innate lymphoid cells (ILCs). The focus on these three immune groups is due to their established role in immunologic control of tumor progression. Ascites immunome datasets from HGSOC patients were visualized by dimensionality reduction and analyzed by support vector assisted machine learning (densVM) algorithms to identify immune cells and their distribution patterns. These fundamental datasets will serve as the basis for deeper exploration of the peritoneal immune cells and their roles in the biology, patient stratification and therapy of HGSOC.

## **2 Materials and Methods**

#### **2.1 Human Samples**

Ascites samples were obtained from patients with ovarian cancer who were recruited at the time of their initial diagnosis (Table 1). None of the patients had been previously treated for their disease at the time of sample collection. All patients signed an informed consent and the studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board of University of Wisconsin-Madison. Ascites samples were heparinized at time of collection and then spun in a Beckman centrifuge at 450xg, 25°C for 20 minutes. The liquid fraction was removed and frozen for later use, while the cell pellet was washed twice in PBS-1%FBS for 10 minutes each at 300xg. Cells were counted and resuspended at appropriate concentrations in FBS-10% DMSO, frozen, and stored in liquid nitrogen until needed.

#### **2.2 Flow Cytometry and Standardization**

Isolated mononuclear cells were first labeled with Zombie® NIR stain (BioLegend) according to manufacturer's instructions to discriminate live/dead cells. MCs were then labeled with flourochrome-conjugated monoclonal antibodies, listed in Table 2, as previously described 17. Samples were then acquired using the LSR Fortessa in a five laser (355nm, 405nm, 488nm, 562nm, 633nm) 20-detector configuration (BD Biosciences).

#### **2.3 Data Analysis**

FlowJo v.10 software (FlowJo LLC, Ashland, OR) was used to identify well-characterized populations. Unbiased identification of immune cells was performed using Cytofkit [\(github.com/JinmiaoChenLab/cytofkit](http://github.com/JinmiaoChenLab/cytofkit)) 18. Data was pre/post processed as previously described 17. Statistical significance was determined unpaired t-test, using Prism® v. 8 (GraphPad Software, Inc, La Jolla, CA).

## **3 Results**

#### **3.1 Subset diversity of adaptive T cells in High Grade Serous Ovarian Cancer Ascites**

To determine the abundance and functional diversity of  $CD4^+$  and  $CD8^+$  T cells in High Grade Serous Ovarian Cancer (HGSOC) ascites, we first devised and validated a 16-marker panel (Table 2) to comprehensively phenotype subtypes and effector status using healthy post-menopausal donor peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs; Supplementary Figure 1). Hereafter, in this study, we employ HD PBMCs as technical reference, and not as a comparator for the phenotype of the immune cells in the ascites of HGSOC patients. Experiments with the HD PBMC samples indicated that relative abundance of CD3+T cells was above 40% in all donors (Supplementary Figure 1G). The CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells were more abundant than  $CD8^+$  T cells (Supplementary Figure 1H). Higher proportion of the  $CD4^+$  T cells were of the  $T_H2$  phenotype and nearly all of the  $T_{\text{regs}}$  were memory T cells (Supplementary Figure 1 I and J). Additionally, majority of the CD8+ T cells were of the effector memory phenotype (Supplementary Figure 1K). The distribution of the T cell subsets is in accordance with published literature, therefore providing us a general validation of the T cell phenotyping antibody panel and the flow cytometry gating methods used in our analysis.

Of the fifteen HGSOC ascites samples analyzed, three patients had very low levels (<10% relative abundance) of  $CD3^+$  T cells (Figure 1C; Supplementary Figure 2). For the majority of the patients (8/15), the relative abundance of the CD3<sup>+</sup> T cells was between 25–42% of the total live CD45<sup>+</sup> immune cells (Figure 1C). In general, all of the HGSOC ascites samples had comparable proportion of  $CD4^+$  and  $CD8^+$  T cells (Figure 1D). Further analysis of T cell subsets found a greater proportion were  $T_H1$ ,  $T_H2$ , effector memory, and central memory (Figure 1E), with the majority of  $T_{\text{regs}}$  in HGSOC ascites being of the memory phenotype (Figure 1F).

Next, we examined the different proportions of  $CD8<sup>+</sup>$  T cells and found that a large proportion of CD8+ T in HGSOC ascites have an effector memory phenotype (Figure 1G). Overall, these data shows an equal distribution of  $CD4^+$  and  $CD8^+$  T in HGSOC ascites, with an enrichment of enriched  $T_H1$ ,  $T_H2$ , effector memory, and central memory.

#### **3.2 Dendritic cell distribution in HGSOC Ascites**

Because of their importance in bridging the innate and adaptive arms of the immune system, we analyzed antigen presenting cells (APCs) in HGSOC ascites. The antibody panel for analysis of APCs was first tested on HD PBMCs samples (Supplementary Figure 3). A key observation from the HD PBMC samples was that a higher proportion of APCs in HD PBMCs had an HLA-DR<sup>+</sup>CD16<sup>−</sup>CD14<sup>+</sup> phenotype, indicative of macrophages (Supplementary Figure 3). Dendritic cells (DCs), key APCs  $^{19}$ , classically defined by a HLA-DR+CD16−CD14− phenotype (Figure 2A,B) were a higher proportion of APCs in HGSOC ascites (Figure 2E).

Increasing recognition of phenotypically diverse and tissue-specific DC/macrophage subsets led us to first examine the well-defined subtypes within the HLA-DR+CD16−CD14− DC group. Plasmacytoid DCs (pDCs) (Figure 2C) were found to be the more represented subset in HGSOC ascites (Figure 2F). Collectively our data reveal a high proportion of DCs in HGSOC ascites with most being pDCs, and a reduction of CD14<sup>+</sup> macrophages.

#### **3.3 Innate lymphoid cells in HGSOC ascites**

Innate lymphoid cells (ILCs), described by their lack of antigen-specific receptors, have been found to mirror the  $T_H$  cytokine profiles <sup>20</sup>. Use of both surface and intracellular markers (Table 2 and Supplementary Table 1), allowed us to identify lineage negative (CD3, CD14, CD19), CD34−CD45+ ILCs in HGSOC ascites and HD PBMCs (Figure 3, Supplementary Figure 4). Moreover, we identified conventional  $CD56<sup>Hi</sup>$  and  $CD56<sup>Low</sup>$ natural killer cells (NKs) (Figure 3C), ILC3s ( $CD56+ROR\gamma t^+$ ), and LTi-like cells (CD56−RORγt <sup>+</sup>) in HGSOC ascites (Figure 3D). NK cells were found in higher proportion in HGSOC ascites compared to ILC3s and LTi-like cells (Figure 3E). A similar pattern was observed in HD PBMCs (Supplementary Figure 4E). Analysis of NK subsets, CD56<sup>Bright</sup> and CD56<sup>Dim</sup>, found an equal proportion in HGSOC ascites (Figure 3F). Overall, we found a greater proportion of NK cells in HGSOC ascites, with no difference in proportions of ILC3s or LTi-like cells.

## **3.4 Clustering analysis reveals a unique immunome signature of HGSOC ascites**

To test whether HGSOC ascites have a unique immunome, we employed dimensionality reduction to analyze the three data sets. To benchmark our computational analysis and ensure that cluster identification was consistent with published literature, we included the data from HD PBMCs as internal controls. Pre-gated populations of interest from each data set (T cells, DCs, and ILCs) were visualized with t-SNE dimensionality reduction and partitioned with DensVM clustering (Figure 4A). t-SNE/DensVM identified 8 unique clusters within the T cell data set and 17 unique clusters for both the ILC and DC data sets (Figure 4A). In addition, when HD PBMCs and HGSOC ascites samples were visualized separately, distinct cluster distributions were observed for both ILCs and T cells (Figure 4B). This analysis also allowed for unbiased phenotyping of clusters identified by t-SNE/ DensVM (Supplementary Figure 5, Supplementary Table 1).

In order to assess the variation in immune cell clusters among patients, we conducted hierarchical clustering based on cell frequency distribution. First, T cell cluster distribution showed low degree of segregation between the HGSOC ascites samples (Figure 5A). The frequencies of clusters 2 and 4 were generally uniformly higher in all of the HGSOC patients (Figure 5A). In contrast, frequencies of clusters 7 and 8 were lower in the majority of the HGSOC ascites samples (Figure 5A).

Cluster distribution from the DC dataset revealed two major groupings of the HGSOC ascites samples (Figure 5B). Two clusters (#1 and #14) that were enriched in HGSOC ascites samples, highlighting populations (CD8α−, CD11b− dendritic cells and CD11b<sup>+</sup> dendritic cells, respectively) that were not captured in our manual analysis (Figure 2).

Similarly, to T cell clustering results, ILCs cluster distribution showed lower degree of distinction between the HGSOC ascites samples (Figure 5C), with segregation of HGSOC ascites from HD samples. Clusters #1, 2, 3, and 13 were all elevated in HGSOC ascites samples. Clusters #1–3 were found to be tissue-resident-like natural killer cells (Supplementary Table 1). Interestingly, clusters #9, 11, 14, and 17 (all fitting the phenotype of cNKs) were elevated in HD PBMC samples, in agreement with our manual data analysis (Supplementary Figure 4F).

#### **3.5 Correlation of immune cell subsets from ascites with serum CA125 levels.**

The serum levels of the biomarker CA125 typically correspond to ovarian cancer disease progression. We reasoned that since an increase in serum CA125 is associated with higher tumor burden, there would likely be a correlation between the levels of serum CA125 and specific immune cell types in the ascites. While the study was not significantly powered to directly correlated CA125 levels with majority of the clusters identified through our deep immunophenotyping, the most significant correlation was observed with the  $CD8^+$  T effector cells defined by Cluster #5 (Figure 6). This cluster is defined as T cells that are CD8+/CD45RA+/CD45RO−/CCR7−. Elevated serum CA125 levels were highly correlated with decreased proportion of Cluster #5 (Figure 6).

## **4 Discussion**

The results of this study provide a framework for deep immunophenotyping to identify unique subsets of immune cells present in the peritoneal fluid of HGSOC patients. In this study, we have specifically characterized T cells, dendritic cells and ILC subsets from the ascites of HGSOC patients. Immune cells in ascites of ovarian cancer patients have been previously identified and characterized using conventional flow cytometry methods  $21-24$ . These previous approaches require cell labeling and analysis in batches as only limited number of fluorophores were included in each experiment. Our deep immunophenotyping approach has allowed us to characterize multiple subsets of T cells, DCs and ILCs in a single experiment. This approach not only provides more clarity of the different subsets of immune cells but also allows us to capture this data using minimum amount of biological samples. The T and DC subsets identified in our studies in addition to the information provided in previous studies is providing important insights into the immune environment in the peritoneum of ovarian cancer patients. To our knowledge, our study is the first to characterize the peritoneal ILCs from this patient population.

Manual analysis of the flow cytometry data suggests that the ascites immune cells have a higher proportion of activated  $CD4^+$  and effector memory (both  $CD4^+$  and  $CD8^+$ ) T cells. An increase in DCs and the DC subsets (pDCs and  $CD1c^+$  and  $CD141^+$  mDCs) is also observed in the HGSOC ascites.

Another major finding from the manual analysis of the flow cytometry results was the significant increase in proportion of the CD56<sup>brigh</sup>t NK cells. This population of NK cells is compromised in cytolysing cancer targets but is more efficient in producing cytokines. To the contrary, the CD16<sup>+</sup> NK cell population that is classically associated with cytotoxic responses was significantly reduced in the HGSOC ascites. This observation confirms our previous studies where we demonstrated that MUC16, a mucin highly expressed by ovarian tumors downregulates CD16 on NK cells and suppresses their cytolytic function <sup>13,25–27</sup>. In this context, it is important to note that the serum levels of CA125, a repeating peptide epitope present in MUC16 26,28,29, negatively correlate with the proportion of CD8 effector cells in the peritoneal environment. This correlation may result from the fact that higher levels of serum CA125 reflect a more advanced state of the cancer and hence a more immunocompromised peritoneal environment. It will also be important to determine if similar to the immunosuppressive effects of MUC16 on NK cells, this mucin also plays a role in suppressing cytolytic T cell responses. Our demonstration that MUC16 is a ligand of the glycoimmune checkpoint receptor Siglec-9, an inhibitory ITIM-containing receptor that negatively regulates innate and adaptive immune cells is significant in this context because increase expression of Siglec-9 has been detected on T cells in the ovarian cancer microenvironment 25,30–32 .

The multiparameter deep-immunophenotyping data afford us the opportunity to classify multiple subsets of the immune cells from ascites and conduct hierarchical clustering. Eight unique clusters of T cells and 17 individual clusters of DC and ILCs were identified based on the level of expression of the cell surface markers that are the hallmarks of each cluster. t-SNE mapping of the cluster frequencies showed a shared hierarchy of the T cell and ILCs of

the ascites immune cells. The shared hierarchy of the peritoneal immune cells among HGSOC patients suggest that the immune cells are under the influence of common activating and suppressive factors that influence the phenotype of the T cells and ILCs. This finding indicates that the phenotypes identified in in this study are representative of a significant proportion of HGSOC patients. In the future, it will be important to determine if there is an association between the proportions of the peritoneal immune cell subsets with the mutations found in the serous ovarian tumors.

A limitation of our study is that the phenome of the immune cells from the HGSOC ascites fluid was compared with that of the T cells, DC and ILC from the peripheral blood of healthy donors. We are in the process of obtaining a bank of matched immune cell samples from the ascites and peripheral blood of HGSOC patients. Future studies will compare the phenome of the immune cells from these matching set of immune cell samples. However, it should be noted that in our previous studies conducted with a limited panels of antibodies, we did not observe major differences in the phenotypes of T cells, B cells and NK cells from the peripheral blood of HGSOC patients and healthy donors  $^{13}$ . Therefore, we expect that similar to the immune cells from healthy donors, the peripheral T cells and ILCs of HGSOC patients will show a hierarchy that is distinct than the immune cells from the ascites.

The deep immunophenotyping results provide important insights into the peritoneal immune environment of HGSOC patients. It is expected that the results from these studies can be used to manipulate the peritoneal immune cells and redirect them to target the metastasized ovarian tumors. Immunotherapeutic agents that activate the peritoneal immune cells and block the immunosuppressive mechanisms can be used to develop robust immunologic responses against HGSOC.

We have conducted a detailed analysis of the T cells, DCs and ILCs from the peritoneal fluid of HGSOC patients. Through deep immunophenotyping we have identified unique clusters of the peritoneal immune cells. The T cells and ILC from HGSOC ascites hierarchically cluster together as compared to the immune cell subsets from the peripheral blood of healthy donors. Since the ascites samples were obtained from HGSOC patients prior to their debulking surgery and chemotherapy, the phenotypes identified in this study are the result of the influence of factors produced in the tumor microenvironment. Therefore, these phenotypes should be considered as the baseline for peritoneal immune cells in HGSOC patients. These baseline phenotypes can be compared to those identified in future studies where the HGSOC patients are treated with immunotherapies. Such comparisons will provide an assessment of the functional capacity of the peritoneal immune cells in response to the treatment modalities. Additionally, the deep phenotyping datasets can also be used to identify and expand immune cell subsets that can most effectively be used to target peritoneal ovarian tumors.

## **Supplementary Material**

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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#### **Figure 1.**

T Cells Identified in High Grade Serous Ovarian Cancer Ascites Mononuclear cells isolated from High Grade Serous Ovarian Cancer (HGSOC) ascites samples were stained with T cell specific markers. (A) Representative gating scheme identifying CD3<sup>+</sup> T cells (left) and CD4/CD8 subsets (right) in HGSOC ascites. (B) Representative gating scheme identifying regulatory T cells (T<sub>reg</sub>) and T<sub>reg</sub> subsets. (C) Proportion of CD3<sup>+</sup> T cells in HGSOC from total live cells. (D) Proportion of CD4<sup>+</sup> and CD8<sup>+</sup> from CD3<sup>+</sup> T cells. (E) Proportion of CD4<sup>+</sup> T cell subsets. (F) Proportion of T<sub>reg</sub> subsets. (G) Proportion CD8<sup>+</sup> T cells subsets. Data represented as max/min, median, and 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles. Statistical significance was determined by ANOVA followed by Tukey test and are demonstrated by letters, with different letters indicating statistical differences within a subset (<0.05). HGSOC,  $n = 15$ .

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## **Figure 2.**

Antigen presenting cells identified in HGSOC ascites. Mononuclear cells isolated from HGSOC ascites samples were stained with antigen presenting cell (APCs) lineage defining markers. (A) Representative gating scheme identifying Lin(CD3,19,56)−HLA-DR+ cells in HGSOC ascites samples. (B) Representative gating scheme identifying dendritic cells (DCs; HLA-DR+CD14−CD16−) and macrophages (HLA-DR+CD14+CD16−). (C) Representative gating scheme identifying myeloid (mDCs) and plamacytoid dendritic cells (pDCs). (D) Representative gating scheme identifying CD1c<sup>+</sup> mDCs (left) and CD141<sup>+</sup> mDCs (right). (E) Proportion of HLA-DR+CD16− CD14− and CD14+ APCs from total live cells. (F) Proportion of pDCs, CD1c mDCs, and CD141 mDCs from total DCs. Data represented as max/min, median, and 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles. Statistical significance was determined by ANOVA followed by Tukey test. \*p < 0.05, \*\*\*\*p < 0.0001. HGSOC,  $n = 15$ .

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#### **Figure 3.**

Innate Lymphoid Cells Identified in HGSOC Ascites. Mononuclear cells isolated from HGSOC ascites samples were stained with innate lymphoid cells (ILC) lineage defining markers. (A) Representative gating scheme identifying CD34−CD45+ cells in HGSOC ascites samples. (B) Representative gating scheme identifying Lin (CD3, 14, 19) negative ILCs. (C) Representative gating scheme identifying natural killer cells (NKs) and NK subsets, CD56<sup>Bright/Dim</sup>. (D) Representative gating scheme identifying ILC3s (top) and Ltilike (bottom) cells. (E) Proportion of NKs, ILC3s, and LTi-like cells in HGSOC ascites from total lineage negative lymphoid cells (F) Proportion of NK cells subsets from total NK cells. Data represented as max/min, median, and 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles. Statistical significance was determined by ANOVA followed by Tukey test. \*\*\*\* p < 0.0001. HGSOC, n = 15.

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## **Figure 4.**

Subset diversity in HGSOC ascites as revealed dimensionality reduction visualization. (A) t-SNE map generated for pre-gated CD3+ T cells (top), Lin−CD14−CD16−HLADR+ DCs (middle), and Lin−CD34−CD45+ ILCs (bottom). (B) Separate HD and HGSOC visualized using t-SNE maps generated from merged data set for T cells (top), DCs (middle), and ILCs (bottom).



#### **Figure 5.**

Cluster distribution analysis reveals unique HGSOC immune signature. Hierarchical clustering of cluster frequencies within T cells, DCs, and ILCs from HGSOC (red) and HD (blue).



## **Figure 6.**

Initial CA-125 level is inversely correlated to proportion of ascites CD8 effector cells. Linear regression plot of first CA-125 level against proportion of cluster 5 (CD8+ CD45RA + CD45RO- CCR7-CD62L-) T cells.

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## **Table 1.**

Demographic and diagnosis information of ovarian cancer patients included in this study



## **Table 2**

Antibodies used for flow cytometry analysis.



![](_page_17_Picture_74.jpeg)