

Cell-associated HIV-1 unspliced to multiply spliced RNA ratio at 12 weeks ART correlates with markers of immune activation and apoptosis and predicts the CD4⁺ T-cell count at 96 weeks ART

Alexander O. Pasternak, Mirte Scherpenisse, Ben Berkhout

Laboratory of Experimental Virology, Department of Medical Microbiology,
Academic Medical Center of the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

a.o.pasternak@amc.uva.nl

Background

Incomplete restoration of CD4⁺ T-cell count during virologically successful antiretroviral therapy (ART) is a major predictor of morbidity and mortality [1]. For better understanding of HIV-1 pathogenesis and improved design of curative strategies, it is important to determine whether the degree of HIV-1 persistence, measured at baseline or early on ART, can predict subsequent immunological response to the long-term therapy and whether viral persistence is associated with host biomarkers of immune dysfunction.

Study design and results

Total and episomal (2-LTR circles) HIV-1 DNA, unspliced and multiply spliced (total and tat/rev) cell-associated HIV-1 RNA [2], as well as markers of CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ T-cell activation, proliferation, senescence, apoptosis, exhaustion, thymic migration (**Table 1**), and CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ T-cell subsets (naïve, central memory, effector memory, transitional memory) (**Fig. 1**), were longitudinally measured in a cohort of 28 HIV-infected patients at 0, 12, 24, 48, and 96 weeks of virologically suppressive ART.

No baseline HIV-1 marker was predictive of CD4⁺ T-cell count at 96 weeks of ART. However, at 12 weeks of ART, cell-associated HIV-1 unspliced to multiply spliced-total (US/MS) RNA ratio strongly negatively correlated with both absolute CD4⁺ T-cell count at 96 weeks of ART ($\rho = -0,56$, $P = 0,004$) and with relative increase in CD4⁺ T-cell count between baseline and 96 weeks of ART ($\rho = -0,55$, $P = 0,004$) (**Fig. 2**). US/MS RNA ratio at 12 weeks ART was not associated with baseline CD4⁺ T-cell count. Moreover, US/MS RNA ratio at 12 weeks ART strongly positively correlated with markers of CD4⁺ T-cell activation (CD4⁺/CD38⁺/HLA-DR⁺: $\rho = 0,63$, $P = 0,001$) and apoptosis (CD4⁺/Annexin-V⁺/FAS⁺: $\rho = 0,59$, $P = 0,002$) (**Fig. 3**).

Conclusions

We observed that US/MS RNA ratio at 12 weeks ART positively correlated with immune activation and apoptosis and predicted lower CD4⁺ T-cell count at 96 weeks ART. Because HIV life cycle involves a temporal shift from the production of multiply spliced to the production of unspliced RNA species, higher US/MS RNA ratio in a patient might reflect the higher frequency of HIV-infected cells in the later stages of viral life cycle, which is characterized by expression of viral proteins and presentation of antigens. Such cells could exert pressure on the host immune system, causing persistent immune activation and apoptosis and contributing to poor immunological response to ART.

Literature

1. Corbeau P, Reynes J. Immune reconstitution under antiretroviral therapy: the new challenge in HIV-1 infection. *Blood* 2011;117:5582-90.
2. Pasternak AO, Lukashov VV, Berkhout B. Cell-associated HIV RNA: a dynamic biomarker of viral persistence. *Retrovirology* 2013;10:41.
3. Breton G, et al. Programmed death-1 is a marker for abnormal distribution of naive/memory T cell subsets in HIV-1 infection. *J Immunol* 2013;191:2194-204.

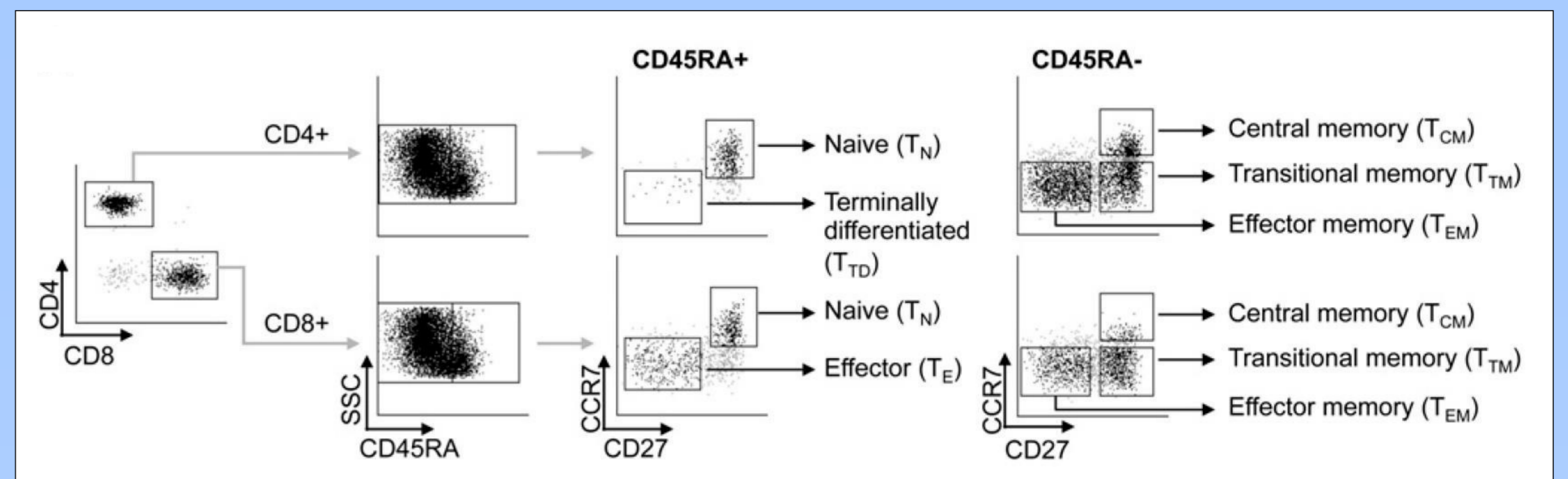


Figure 1. Flow cytometry gating strategy to identify CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ T cell subsets. T_N, T_{CM}, T_{TM}, T_{EM}, and T_{TD}/T_E cell subsets are identified based on their CD45RA, CCR7, and CD27 expression. Adapted from [3].

Table 1. Immunological parameters measured.

<u>Immune activation:</u> CD38, HLA-DR	<u>Alteration and exhaustion of immune cells:</u> PD-1, CTLA-4
<u>Immune proliferation:</u> Ki67	<u>Apoptotic potential of immune cells:</u> FAS (CD95), Annexin-V
<u>Immune senescence:</u> CD57	<u>Immunological tolerance:</u> Th17 (CCR6/CD161), Treg (FoxP3/CD25)
<u>Thymic migration:</u> CD31	

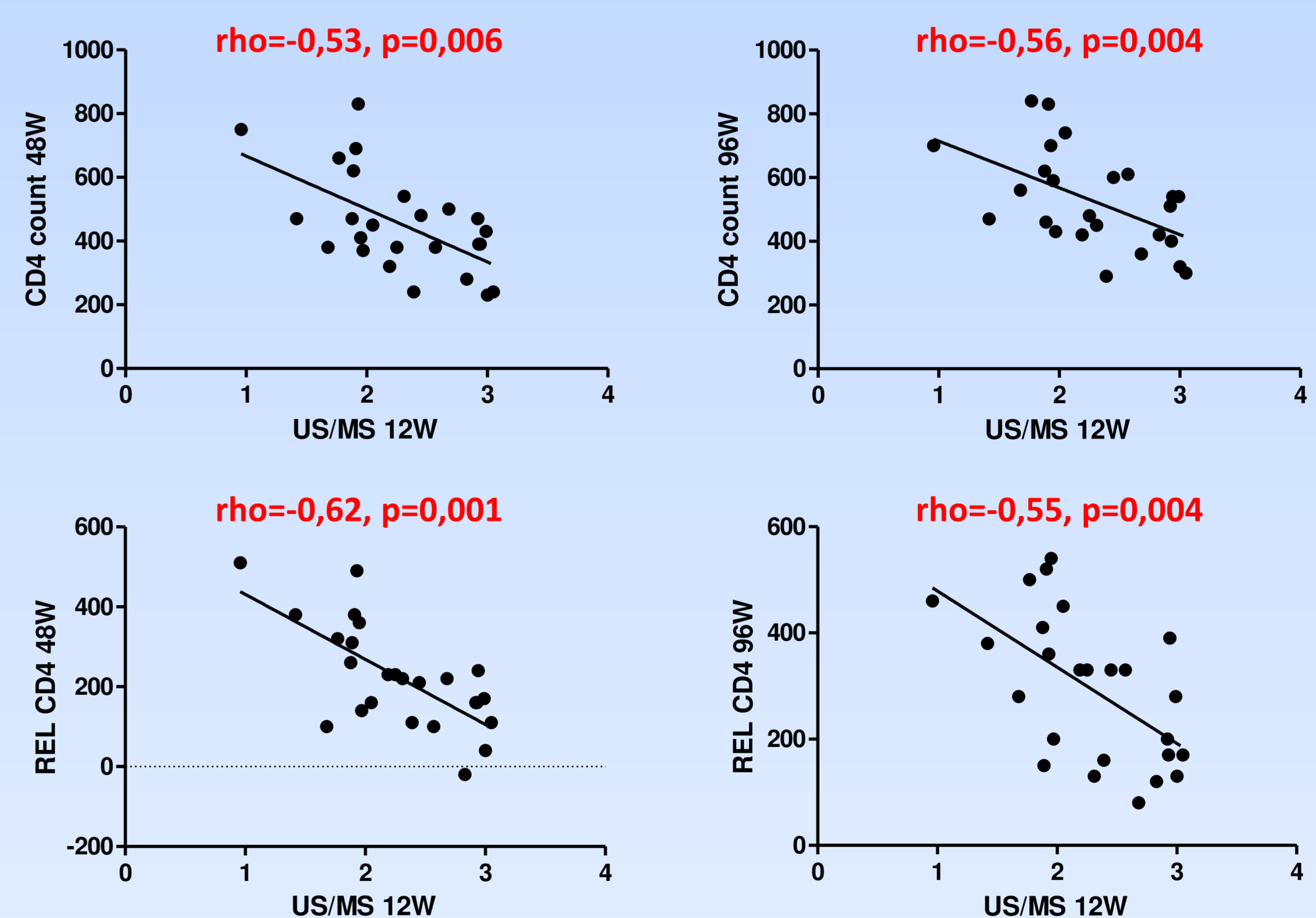


Figure 2. Cell-associated HIV-1 unspliced to multiply spliced RNA ratio at 12 weeks ART was predictive of the absolute and relative CD4⁺ T-cell count at 48 and 96 weeks ART.

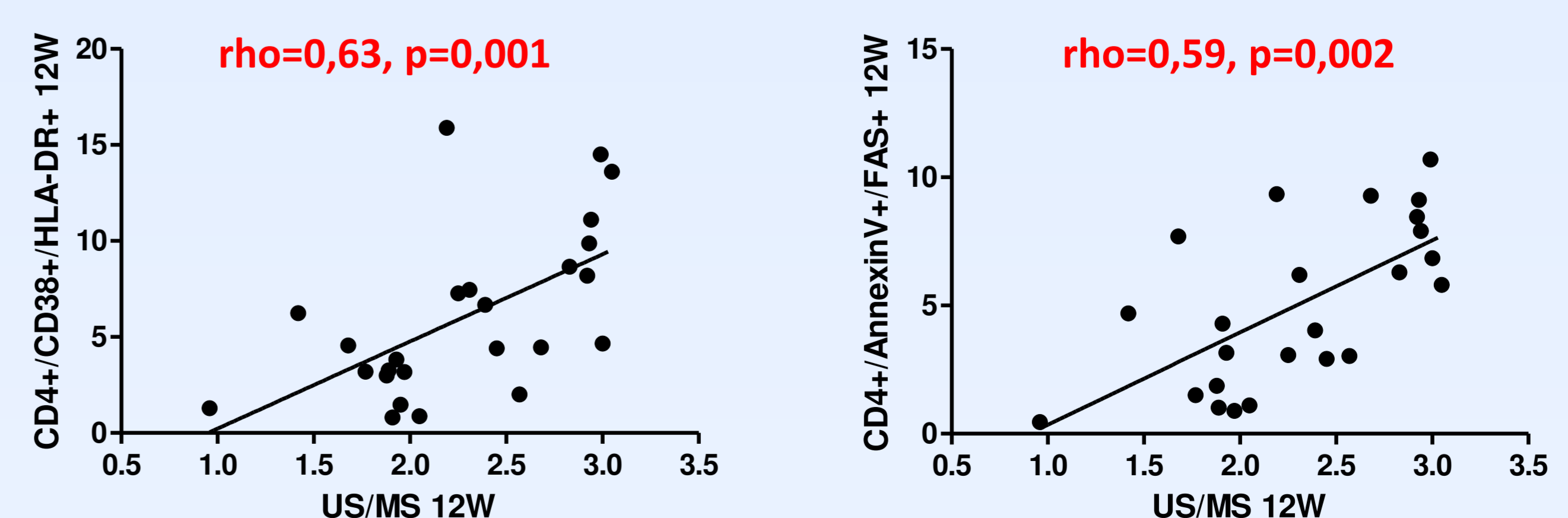


Figure 3. Cell-associated HIV-1 unspliced to multiply spliced RNA ratio correlated with markers of CD4⁺ T-cell activation and apoptosis at 12 weeks ART.