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Molecular Basis of Epigenetic Dysregulation in Autoimmune Diseases: A Focus on DNA Methylation and Histone Modifications

Luka Marković, Ayse Demir, Samuel Ngugi, Johanna Lundström

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ABSTRACT
Autoimmune diseases result from a complex interplay between genetic predisposition and environmental factors, with epigenetic modifications playing a critical role in disease pathogenesis. DNA methylation and histone modifications are key regulators of gene expression, and their dysregulation has been implicated in the aberrant immune responses characteristic of autoimmune disorders. This article provides a comprehensive review of the molecular mechanisms underlying epigenetic alterations in autoimmune diseases, emphasizing the roles of DNA methylation and histone modifications. We explore their functional implications in diseases such as systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), rheumatoid arthritis (RA), multiple sclerosis (MS), and type 1 diabetes (T1D). Furthermore, we discuss recent advances in therapeutic strategies targeting epigenetic modifications to mitigate autoimmunity.

INTRODUCTION:

Autoimmune diseases arise due to the breakdown of immune tolerance, leading to an immune attack against self-antigens. While genetic mutations contribute to disease susceptibility, they fail to fully explain the variable onset and progression of autoimmune conditions. Epigenetic mechanisms, including DNA methylation and histone modifications, serve as crucial regulators of immune cell function and contribute to the aberrant gene expression observed in autoimmunity. This review aims to elucidate the molecular basis of epigenetic dysregulation in autoimmune diseases, with a specific focus on DNA methylation and histone modifications.

2. DNA Methylation and Autoimmune Diseases

DNA methylation, a fundamental epigenetic mechanism, involves the addition of a methyl group to cytosine residues in CpG dinucleotides, leading to transcriptional repression. Aberrant DNA methylation patterns have been identified in multiple autoimmune disorders, influencing disease susceptibility and progression.

2.1 DNA Hypomethylation and Gene Activation

DNA hypomethylation in regulatory genes can lead to their aberrant activation, contributing to

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autoimmune pathology. In SLE, hypomethylation of CD40L and IFNG genes results in overexpression of pro-inflammatory cytokines, perpetuating immune dysregulation. Similarly, in RA, hypomethylation of key inflammatory genes, such as TNF-α and IL-6, drives chronic inflammation and joint destruction.

2.2 DNA Hypermethylation and Gene Silencing
Conversely, DNA hypermethylation of immune regulatory genes can lead to immune tolerance defects. Studies on T1D have demonstrated hypermethylation-induced silencing of the FOXP3 gene, essential for regulatory T-cell (Treg) function, thereby impairing immune suppression. In MS, hypermethylation of genes involved in oligodendrocyte differentiation impairs remyelination, exacerbating neurodegeneration.

2.3 Environmental Triggers and DNA Methylation Alterations
Environmental factors, such as infections, diet, and smoking, modulate DNA methylation patterns, influencing autoimmune susceptibility. For instance, Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) infection alters DNA methylation in B cells, promoting autoreactive responses in SLE patients. Studies have also linked vitamin D deficiency to altered DNA methylation in RA and MS, highlighting the impact of environmental exposures on epigenetic regulation.

3. Histone Modifications in Autoimmune Diseases Histone modifications, including acetylation, methylation, phosphorylation, and ubiquitination, regulate chromatin accessibility and gene transcription. Dysregulated histone modifications have been implicated in autoimmune pathogenesis through altered immune cell differentiation and function.

3.1 Histone Acetylation and Immune Activation
Histone acetylation, mediated by histone acetyltransferases (HATs), relaxes chromatin structure, allowing gene transcription. Hyperacetylation of pro-inflammatory cytokine genes, such as IL-17 and IFN-γ, has been observed in RA and SLE patients, contributing to chronic inflammation. Conversely, histone deacetylases (HDACs) suppress immune activation, and HDAC inhibitors have been explored as potential therapeutics for autoimmune diseases.

3.2 Histone Methylation and Immune Dysregulation
Histone methylation, mediated by histone methyltransferases (HMTs), can either activate or repress gene expression, depending on the specific histone residue modified. In MS, aberrant H3K27 methylation has been linked to altered T-cell differentiation, promoting pathogenic Th17 responses. Similarly, reduced H3K9 methylation in SLE patients leads to increased expression of inflammatory mediators, exacerbating disease severity.

3.3 Histone Phosphorylation and Autoimmune Pathways
Histone phosphorylation plays a role in cellular stress responses and inflammatory signaling. Increased histone phosphorylation at H2AX has been observed in autoimmune diseases, indicating heightened DNA damage responses in affected individuals.

4. Therapeutic Targeting of Epigenetic Dysregulation Given the pivotal role of epigenetic modifications in autoimmunity, targeting DNA methylation and histone modifications offers promising therapeutic avenues.

4.1 DNA Methylation Modulators

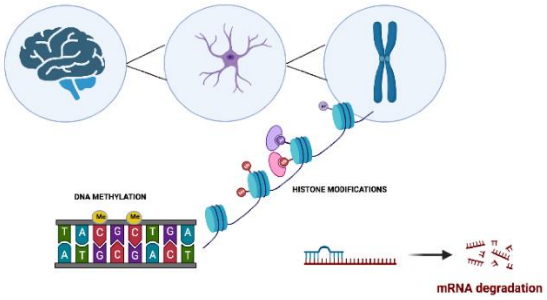

Fig.DNA Methylation Modulators

DNA methyltransferase inhibitors (DNMTis), such as 5-azacytidine, have been investigated for their potential to restore immune tolerance in autoimmune diseases. Preclinical studies in SLE models have demonstrated that DNMT inhibition reduces autoreactive T-cell activation and mitigates disease severity.

4.2 Histone Deacetylase (HDAC) Inhibitors

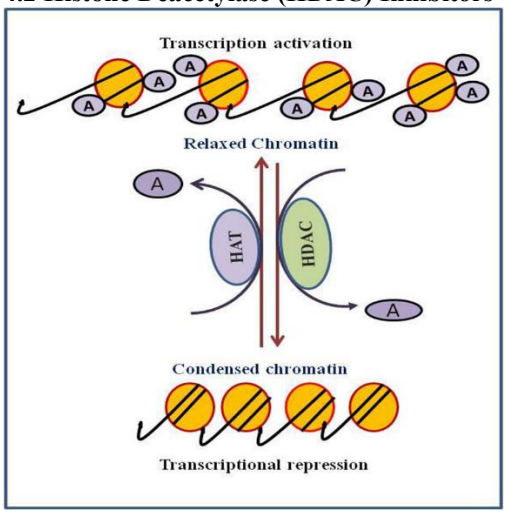

Fig.Histone Deacetylase (HDAC) Inhibitors

HDAC inhibitors, including vorinostat and trichostatin A, have shown efficacy in modulating

inflammatory gene expression and improving immune regulation in autoimmune disease models. Clinical trials are currently assessing the therapeutic potential of HDAC inhibitors in RA and MS.

4.3 Histone Methylation Regulators

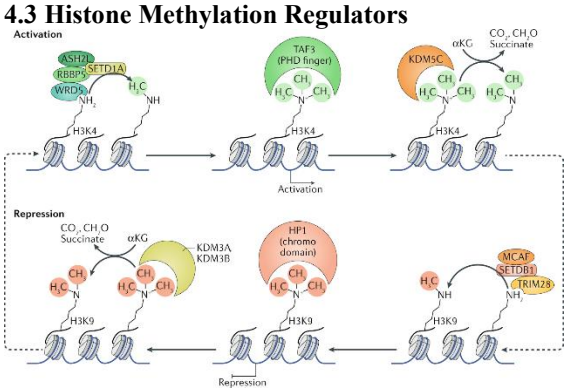

Fig.Histone Methylation Regulators

Targeting histone methyltransferases and demethylases holds promise for modulating immune responses. EZH2 inhibitors, which reduce H3K27 methylation, are being explored as potential therapeutics for autoimmune disorders characterized by aberrant histone methylation.

5. CONCLUSION:

Epigenetic modifications, particularly DNA methylation and histone modifications, play a crucial role in autoimmune disease pathogenesis. Dysregulated epigenetic patterns contribute to abnormal immune activation and loss of tolerance, highlighting their significance as therapeutic targets. Advances in epigenetic research have provided insights into novel treatment strategies aimed at restoring immune homeostasis. Future research should focus on precision epigenetic therapies tailored to individual autoimmune disease profiles.

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