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Immunological Mechanisms in Implantation Failure and Recurrent Pregnancy Loss

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Introduction

Implantation failure and Recurrent Pregnancy Loss (RPL) represent major challenges in reproductive medicine, affecting approximately 1-2% of women of reproductive age. Recurrent pregnancy loss is traditionally defined as two or more consecutive pregnancy losses, while implantation failure refers to the inability to achieve pregnancy following multiple In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) cycles with good-quality embryos. While anatomical, genetic, endocrine and thrombophilic causes are well recognized, growing evidence highlights the critical role of immunological dysregulation in these conditions. Pregnancy is a unique immunological state, requiring a finely tuned balance between maternal immune tolerance and defense mechanisms to allow implantation and maintain fetal development. Aberrations in this immunological equilibrium can lead to implantation failure, early pregnancy loss, or adverse pregnancy outcomes. Understanding the immune mechanisms underlying these reproductive challenges is vital for accurate diagnosis, personalized management and the development of targeted therapeutic strategies [1].

Description

The maternal immune system must navigate a delicate balance during early pregnancy. On one hand, it must tolerate the semi-allogenic fetus, which expresses paternal antigens; on the other hand, it must retain the capacity to defend against pathogens. This immunological paradox is mediated by a complex interplay of innate and adaptive immune cells, cytokines and regulatory molecules within the uterine microenvironment. Dysregulation at any level can compromise implantation and contribute to recurrent pregnancy loss. Innate immune cells play a critical role in early pregnancy.

Adaptive immunity, particularly T cell subsets, is central to maternal-fetal tolerance. Regulatory T cells (CD4+CD25+FOXP3+ Tregs) suppress maternal immune responses against fetal antigens and facilitate successful implantation. A deficiency in Treg number or function has been linked to recurrent pregnancy loss, highlighting their importance in establishing immune tolerance. Conversely, an overactive Th1-type immune response, characterized by pro-inflammatory cytokines such as InterFeron-Gamma (IFN-γ) and Tumor Necrosis Factor-Alpha (TNF-α), can lead to cytotoxicity and placental injury, disrupting implantation. A balanced Th1/Th2/Th17/Treg ratio is therefore essential for successful pregnancy and skewing toward Th1 or Th17 dominance is commonly observed in women with RPL.

Cytokines, chemokines and growth factors constitute another critical component of the immunological milieu. InterLeukin-10 (IL-10), Transforming Growth Factor-beta (TGF-β) and Leukemia Inhibitory Factor (LIF) promote tolerance and trophoblast invasion, while pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α and IL-6 may impair implantation and placentation. Aberrant expression of these soluble mediators in the endometrium or maternal circulation has been correlated with implantation failure, recurrent miscarriage and poor pregnancy outcomes. For example, insufficient LIF expression in the endometrium is a recognized marker of implantation defects, as this cytokine is essential for embryo adhesion and decidualization [1].

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Autoimmune factors further contribute to immunologically mediated reproductive failure. AntiPhosphoLipid antibodies (aPL), including lupus anticoagulant and anticardiolipin antibodies, can impair trophoblast function, activate complement pathways and induce placental thrombosis, leading to early pregnancy loss. Other autoimmune conditions, such as systemic lupus erythematosus and autoimmune thyroid disease, are also associated with increased risk of RPL, mediated in part by immune dysregulation at the maternal-fetal interface. Emerging evidence also implicates complement system activation in implantation failure. Components of the complement cascade, when dysregulated, can induce inflammation, trophoblast apoptosis and placental vascular injury. Proper regulation of complement activity is therefore crucial for maternal-fetal tolerance and excessive activation may underlie some cases of unexplained RPL [2].

Conclusion

Implantation failure and recurrent pregnancy loss are complex conditions in which immunological dysregulation plays a central role. Aberrant function of innate immune cells, including uNK cells and dendritic cells, imbalances in adaptive immune subsets such as Tregs and Th1/Th17 cells, dysregulated cytokine and complement activity and the presence of autoimmune antibodies all contribute to the disruption of maternal-fetal tolerance. Understanding these immunological mechanisms is essential for developing targeted diagnostic and therapeutic strategies. While conventional approaches such as corticosteroids, IVIG and anticoagulation therapy provide benefits in selected cases, ongoing research into specific immune modulators and personalized interventions offers promise for improving outcomes. Integrating immunological assessment with reproductive care allows clinicians to address the underlying causes of implantation failure and RPL, ultimately enhancing fertility outcomes and supporting maternal and fetal health.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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