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Spinal Cord Injuries: Innovative Approaches in Neuroregeneration

Sarah Daniel*
Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, FL 33965, USA

***Corresponding author:** Sarah Daniel, Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, FL 33965, USA, E-mail: Daniel.sarah@fgcu.edu

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Introduction

Spinal Cord Injuries (SCI) are devastating events that result in partial or complete loss of motor, sensory and autonomic function below the level of injury. Affecting thousands of individuals worldwide each year, SCIs significantly reduce quality of life, impose lifelong disability and present substantial medical and socioeconomic challenges. The pathophysiology of SCI is complex, encompassing primary mechanical damage followed by a cascade of secondary processes, including inflammation, ischemia, excitotoxicity, oxidative stress and glial scar formation. These secondary mechanisms inhibit axonal regeneration, contribute to neuronal death and limit functional recovery. Traditional therapeutic approaches have focused on stabilization, neuroprotection and rehabilitation, but meaningful regeneration and restoration of function remain elusive. Recent advances in neurobiology, biomaterials and cellular therapy have paved the way for innovative strategies aimed at promoting neuroregeneration, restoring neural circuits and improving functional outcomes in SCI patients [1].

Description

The pathogenesis of SCI involves two sequential phases: the primary injury and the secondary injury cascade. The primary injury occurs at the moment of trauma and includes direct mechanical disruption of neuronal axons, blood vessels and glial cells. Depending on the severity and level of injury, primary damage may result in partial or complete loss of spinal cord tissue. The secondary injury cascade follows, characterized by a complex interplay of biochemical and cellular processes that exacerbate tissue loss. Key mechanisms include ischemia, excitotoxicity from excessive glutamate release, oxidative stress, inflammation mediated by microglia and infiltrating immune cells and the formation of a glial scar [2].

This scar, composed of astrocytes and extracellular matrix molecules, serves as both a protective barrier and a physical and chemical obstacle to axonal regrowth. Inflammation plays a dual role in SCI. While acute inflammatory responses help clear debris and limit infection, persistent or excessive inflammation contributes to neuronal death and tissue degeneration. Pro-inflammatory cytokines such as Tumor Necrosis Factor-Alpha (TNF-α), InterLeukin-1 beta (IL-1β) and InterLeukin-6 (IL-6) exacerbate oxidative stress, disrupt the blood-spinal cord barrier and promote apoptosis of oligodendrocytes. Modulating the inflammatory response is a key therapeutic target for promoting neuroregeneration while minimizing secondary injury.

Neuroregeneration strategies in SCI focus on restoring neuronal connectivity, enhancing axonal growth and rebuilding functional circuits. Cellular therapies have emerged as a promising avenue for achieving these goals [1]. Mesenchymal Stem Cells (MSCs), Neural Stem/Progenitor Cells (NSPCs) and Induced Pluripotent Stem Cells (iPSCs) can differentiate into neurons, oligodendrocytes, or astrocytes and secrete trophic factors that promote neuroprotection, angiogenesis and axonal regeneration. Preclinical studies demonstrate that transplantation of stem cells into injured spinal cords improves locomotor function, enhances remyelination and reduces lesion size. Ongoing clinical trials aim to evaluate the safety, feasibility and functional efficacy of stem cell-based therapies in humans [2].

Biomaterial scaffolds represent another innovative approach in SCI neuroregeneration. Engineered hydrogels, nanofibers and biodegradable matrices can bridge lesion gaps, provide structural support and create a permissive environment for axonal growth. These scaffolds can be combined with growth factors, stem cells, or gene therapy to enhance regenerative potential.

For instance, scaffolds impregnated with Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF) or Nerve Growth Factor (NGF) have demonstrated increased axonal extension and improved functional recovery in animal models. Advances in biomaterials allow precise control over mechanical properties, degradation rates and bioactive molecule release, optimizing the regenerative microenvironment. Gene therapy offers another promising avenue for SCI treatment. By targeting inhibitory molecules, modulating growth factor expression, or enhancing intrinsic neuronal growth capacity, gene therapy can overcome barriers to regeneration. Silencing molecules such as Nogo-A or chondroitin sulfate proteoglycans that inhibit axonal growth has shown enhanced neural repair in preclinical models. Similarly, viral or non-viral vectors delivering neurotrophic factors or transcription factors can stimulate axonal sprouting and neuronal survival. Integration of gene therapy with cellular and biomaterial approaches provides a multifaceted strategy to promote meaningful neuroregeneration [1].

Conclusion

Spinal cord injuries represent a significant medical and societal challenge, with limited capacity for spontaneous regeneration. Understanding the complex pathophysiology of SCI, including primary mechanical damage, secondary inflammation, oxidative stress and glial scar formation, is essential for developing effective regenerative strategies. Innovative approaches, including stem cell therapy, biomaterial scaffolds, gene therapy, electrical stimulation, pharmacological modulation and advanced neuromodulation techniques, offer promising avenues for restoring neuronal connectivity and improving functional outcomes. Integration of these approaches with task-specific rehabilitation and personalized treatment plans enhances neuroplasticity, promotes recovery and maximizes functional gains. Continued research into the molecular, cellular and biomechanical mechanisms underlying SCI, coupled with translational studies and clinical trials, will drive the development of effective neuroregenerative therapies, ultimately transforming the prognosis and quality of life for individuals living with spinal cord injuries.

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

References

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