



Obesity, diabetes, and cancer; a triad of interconnected risks and emerging evidence

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Abstract

Obesity has become a major risk factor for different types of cancer, and highlights research emphasizes the impact of inflammation related to obesity in this connection. Chronic low-grade inflammation associated with excess adipose tissue can disrupt metabolic signaling and immune responses, which may facilitate the tumorigenesis.

Keywords: Obesity, Inflammation, Type 2 diabetes, Cancer, Cytokines

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Introduction

Obesity is associated with a state of chronic low-grade inflammation primarily due to dietary factors and excessive fat accumulation (1). Adipose tissue, especially visceral fat, secretes various pro-inflammatory cytokines, including tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF- α) and interleukin-6 (IL-6), which contribute to systemic inflammation (2). This chronic inflammatory environment is implicated in several malignancies, containing breast tumor, colorectal cancer, and endometrial cancer (3). The inflammatory mediators released in obesity can promote cell proliferation, inhibit apoptosis, and lead to insulin resistance, further augmenting cancer risk (4). Numerous studies showed that, insulin is a potent growth factor that promotes cell proliferation and survival by activating several carcinogenic signaling pathways linked to cancer development, like the phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3K)/AKT and the mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) pathways (5,6). Excess insulin in obesity or diabetes can bind to the insulin receptor (INSR) as well as insulin-like growth factor 1 receptor (IGF1R), which not only enhances cellular proliferation but also reduces apoptosis in various cell types, including cancer cells (7). Moreover, the interaction between insulin and insulin-like growth factors (IGFs) plays a significant role in cancer development (8). The IGF signaling pathway, particularly IGF-1, is known to stimulate cell growth and inhibit apoptotic pathways, contributing to both tumor initiation and progression (9). The overexpression of the

IGF-1 receptor has been detected in various malignancies and is associated with a poor prognosis, underscoring the importance of insulin and IGF dysregulation in the context of diabetes-induced carcinogenesis (6). Meanwhile, insulin resistance contributes to a cascade of biochemical changes, including hyperglycemia and dyslipidemia, which further exacerbate cancer risk (10). Elevated blood glucose levels can provide a readily available energy source for rapidly proliferating cancer cells, a phenomenon often referred to as the Warburg effect, where cancer cells preferentially utilize glycolysis for energy production even in the presence of oxygen (11). Moreover, the metabolic disturbances associated with diabetes, such as dyslipidemia, can lead to the accumulation of lipid peroxides and free fatty acids, which have been interacted in promoting tumor cell proliferation and metastasis (12). This metabolic dysregulation underlines the importance of managing diabetes not only for the prevention of macrovascular and microvascular complications but also in mitigating cancer risk (13). This study sought into the specific mechanisms through which obesity-related inflammation (ORI) increases cancer risk, providing insights into the biological interplay between obesity and cancer development (14).

Search strategy

For this review, we conducted a search across several databases, including PubMed, Web of Science, EBSCO, Scopus, Google Scholar, the Directory of Open Access

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■ Implication for health policy/practice/research/medical education

Obesity is recognized as a major public health concern, leading to various metabolic disorders and chronic diseases, comprising type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disorders. In this condition the state of chronic low-grade inflammation is driven by various key cytokines, counting TNF- α , IL-6, leptin, IL-1 β , and IL-10, which is triggered by excess adipose tissue

Journals (DOAJ), and Embase. We utilized various keywords such as “obesity,” “inflammation,” “type 2 diabetes,” “cancer,” and “cytokines.”

Chronic inflammation in obesity

Prior studies showed that, obesity induces a state of chronic inflammation characterized by the infiltration of immune cells into adipose tissue, leading to the release of various pro-inflammatory cytokines, such as TNF- α , IL-6, and leptin, a hormone produced by adipocytes (15). These inflammatory mediators significantly modify the tumor microenvironment, creating conditions that favor cancer cell proliferation and survival (16). For instance, studies show that inflammation in adipose tissue alters the local extracellular matrix environment, promoting cancer progression through enhanced cell migration and invasion mechanisms (17). The inflammatory cytokines produced in obese individuals can also activate signaling pathways that are crucial for tumor development (18). For example, the activation of nuclear factor κ B (NF- κ B) and signal transducer and activator of transcription 3 due to persistent inflammation can lead to increased genes expression associated with cell growth, angiogenesis, and evasion of apoptosis, fostering a conducive environment for tumor initiation and progression (19). Additionally, the ORI contributes to genetic instability, which is a critical factor in cancer development (20). Immune infiltrates, particularly macrophages in the adipose tissue, produce ROS (reactive oxygen species) as part of the inflammatory response (21). Elevated levels of ROS cause oxidative stress, leading to DNA damage, mutations in oncogenes and tumor suppressor genes, and ultimately promoting the transformation of normal cells into cancerous ones (22). In individuals with obesity, the continuous proliferation of adipose tissue coupled with cellular stress from hypoxia results in an environment rife with genomic changes (23). Various studies have identified a correlation between obesity-related oxidative stress and mutations in the TP53 tumor suppressor gene as a crucial regulatory point in the cell cycle and apoptosis pathways (24). The mutations result in the loss of critical tumor suppression functions, thus leading to uncontrolled cell division and malignancy (25). Moreover, a significant aspect of obesity-related inflammation is its impact on immune system function (26). Chronic inflammation alters the balance between pro-inflammatory and anti-

inflammatory responses, which can impair the immune system's ability to detect and eradicate emerging malignant cells (27). Meanwhile, inflammatory conditions promote the expansion of regulatory T cells (Tregs) and myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs), which dampen the anti-tumor immune responses by inhibiting the functions of cytotoxic T lymphocytes and natural killer (NK) cells (28). Furthermore, the increased levels of leptin can directly affect immune cell function (29). Leptin signaling not only enhances the proliferation of pro-inflammatory macrophages but also skews T cell populations toward an inflammatory phenotype that can exacerbate tumor growth while simultaneously reducing effective anti-tumor immunity (30,31). As a result, the altered immune environment in obesity decreases the efficacy of immune surveillance, allowing for the survival and expansion of malignant cells (30). Finally, obesity is closely linked to insulin resistance, a condition that can further promote cancer risk through multiple mechanisms (32). Insulin resistance leads to elevated circulating insulin levels, which can drive tumor cell proliferation due to insulin's mitogenic effects (33). Elevated insulin levels may enhance the bioavailability of IGF-1, which is implicated in promoting cell growth and inhibiting apoptosis and has been associated with breast, prostate, and colorectal cancers (8). Likewise, the inflammatory cytokines characteristic of obesity can independently contribute to insulin resistance, which complicates the metabolic landscape further (1). As an example, TNF- α and IL-6 released from inflamed adipose tissue can interfere with insulin signaling pathways, exacerbating insulin resistance and establishing a feedback loop that facilitates further weight gain and higher cancer risk (34).

Role of cytokines in ORC

Cytokines, are small proteins released by different cell types to communicate and orchestrate immune responses, play a noteworthy role in the inflammatory processes associated with obesity (35). TNF- α is one of the most critical pro-inflammatory cytokines related to obesity. It is primarily secreted by adipocytes and macrophages present in adipose tissue (18). In obese individuals, elevated levels of TNF- α have been linked to insulin resistance, a hallmark of type 2 diabetes (36). TNF- α mediates inflammation and promotes apoptosis in adipocytes, contributing to the dysregulation of metabolic processes (37). Furthermore, its persistent expression can impair insulin signaling by interfering with the action of insulin receptor substrates, exacerbating insulin resistance (38,39). The role of TNF- α in promoting inflammation reflects how adipose tissue behaves as an active endocrine organ, where increased levels of this cytokine contribute to the overall inflammatory milieu (40). This impact is particularly apparent in visceral fat, which is more metabolically active than subcutaneous fat and is associated with greater health risks. IL-6 is another cytokine significantly involved in the

inflammation associated with obesity (41). It is produced by some cells, involving adipocytes, macrophages, and T cells (42). Elevated levels of IL-6 are commonly found in obese cases which is accompanying by metabolic syndrome and insulin resistance (43). IL-6 plays a dual role: while it can promote inflammatory responses, it also has some anti-inflammatory properties under specific conditions (44). The cytokine is released in response to infection and injury and stimulates the production of acute-phase proteins from the liver (45). Chronic elevation of IL-6 due to obesity can lead to persistent inflammatory states that contribute to various obesity-related diseases, including cardiovascular disease and cancer (2,46). Notably, research suggests that IL-6 can induce pathways of energy utilization that impact fat metabolism, indicating its role in both inflammation and metabolism (47). Additionally, leptin is an adipokine primarily produced by adipocytes (48). It has a fundamental role in regulating energy balance and appetite (49). However, in the context of obesity, leptin levels are often elevated due to increased adipose tissue mass (50). This hyperleptinemia can lead to leptin resistance, where the normal physiological effects of leptin, such as appetite suppression, become diminished, leading to further weight gain (51). It should remember that, leptin also has pro-inflammatory effects, promoting the recruitment and activation of immune cells, and enhancing the secretion of other inflammatory cytokines (52,53). It serves as a mediator linking obesity with inflammation and metabolic dysregulation, creating a vicious cycle that exacerbates chronic inflammatory states within adipose tissue (53). Likewise, interleukin-1 beta (IL-1 β), is a potent pro-inflammatory cytokine produced by activated macrophages and adipocytes (54). It plays an essential role in mediating inflammation and has been connected with insulin resistance in obesity (55). Besides, IL-1 β induces the expression of other inflammatory mediators and can initiate an inflammatory cascade leading to the recruitment of additional immune cells to sites of chronic inflammation (56,57). In obesity, increased levels of IL-1 β are associated with adipose tissue disorders and contribute to the development of insulin resistance (1). Clinical studies have indicated that targeting IL-1 β could lead to improvements in glycemic control and body weight regulation in individuals with obesity-related diseases (58). In contrast to other cytokines that promote inflammation, IL-10 acts as an anti-inflammatory cytokine, playing a crucial role in limiting inflammatory responses and maintaining homeostasis (59). Produced by various immune cells, including Tregs and macrophages, IL-10 inhibits the synthesis of pro-inflammatory cytokines and promotes the survival of adipocyte progenitor cells (60,61). In the background of obesity, the levels of IL-10 can be negatively affected by the obesity-induced inflammatory state, diminishing its protective effects (62). A previous study suggests that bolstering IL-10 activity or levels could provide therapeutic benefits in managing

obesity-related inflammation and metabolic dysfunction (63).

Cancer risks in diabetes and obese individuals

Type 2 diabetes, is accompanying by an increased risk of malignancy due to several mechanisms such as hyperinsulinemia and insulin resistance, since elevated insulin levels can activate insulin and IGF receptors on tumor cells, promoting their growth and survival (64). Meanwhile, diabetes and obesity create a pro-inflammatory environment through cytokines and adipokines, which can enhance tumor progression (65). Similarly, high glucose levels contribute to the oxidative stress and the formation of advanced glycation end-products (AGEs), which can damage cells and promote carcinogenesis (66). On the other hand, diabetes alters sex hormone levels, which may strengthen the potential of hormone-sensitive malignancies like breast and endometrial cancer (67). Finally, diabetes-associated processes, such as epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition (EMT), facilitate tumor invasion and metastasis (68,69). Several investigation found that, diabetes is strongly linked to an increased risk of various cancers (69). These studies showed that, hepatocellular carcinoma, likely due to chronic inflammation, insulin resistance, and fatty liver disease (70). Moreover, hyperglycemia and hyperinsulinemia are key contributors to the elevated risk of pancreatic cancer in diabetic patients (71). In addition, hormonal dysregulation and obesity, are correlated with enhanced endometrial malignancy risk (72). Similarly, postmenopausal women with diabetes have a greater risk of breast malignancy (73). Diabetic patients also prone to colorectal cancer, possibly through hyperinsulinemia and altered gut microbiota and lastly, kidney and bladder cancers have an increased risks, potentially due to chronic hyperglycemia and oxidative stress (4). Interestingly, diabetes is associated with a reduced risk of prostate cancer, though the reasons remain unclear (74).

Conclusion

Obesity-related inflammation significantly contributes to increased cancer risk through multiple intricate biological mechanisms. The chronic inflammatory environment alters the tumor microenvironment, induces genomic instability, impairs immune surveillance, and establishes insulin resistance, all of which play critical roles in cancer development. As obesity raise globally, understanding these underlying mechanisms can provide valuable insights for developing interventions aimed at mitigating obesity-associated cancer risks.

Authors' contribution

Conceptualization: Zeinab Aliyari Serej.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized [Perplexity](#) to refine grammar points and language style in writing. Subsequently, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as necessary, assuming full responsibility for the publication's content.

Ethical issues

The authors have fully adhered to ethical standards, including those related to plagiarism, data fabrication, and duplicate publication.

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