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Opinion Article

Microvascular Regulation in Hepatic Function and Injury

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DESCRIPTION

Liver Sinusoidal Endothelial Cells (LSECs) are specialized endothelial cells that line the hepatic sinusoids, forming a unique interface between circulating blood and hepatocytes. They possess distinct structural and functional characteristics, including fenestrations, absence of a basement membrane and a high endocytic capacity, which enable them to regulate substance exchange, maintain immune homeostasis and support metabolic processes. In healthy liver, LSECs contribute to vascular tone, clearance of macromolecules and waste products and modulation of immune responses. Their role extends beyond simple structural support, influencing hepatocyte function, stellate cell activity and Kupffer cell behavior, thus playing an integral part in maintaining overall liver homeostasis.

LSECs exhibit remarkable endocytic capacity, enabling them to internalize and degrade circulating macromolecules, immune complexes and lipoproteins. This function contributes to the maintenance of blood composition and prevents accumulation of potentially harmful substances. LSECs express a variety of scavenger receptors, mannose receptors and Fc receptors that mediate the uptake of these molecules. The clearance function of LSECs also extends to gut-derived antigens and bacterial products, positioning them as critical regulators of systemic and local immune responses. By modulating antigen presentation and cytokine production, LSECs help maintain a tolerogenic environment under physiological conditions.

Inflammatory liver conditions are associated with activation of LSECs. These cells respond to inflammatory cytokines and pathogen-associated molecular patterns by upregulating adhesion molecules, chemokines and pro-inflammatory mediators. This activation facilitates the recruitment of leukocytes, including neutrophils, monocytes and lymphocytes, into the hepatic parenchyma. While recruitment of immune cells is essential for pathogen clearance and tissue repair, persistent activation of LSECs can sustain chronic inflammation, promote hepatocyte injury and contribute to the progression of diseases such as autoimmune hepatitis, viral hepatitis and alcoholic liver disease.

LSECs are also involved in the pathophysiology of Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD) and its progressive form, Non-Alcoholic Steatohepatitis (NASH). In these conditions, lipid accumulation, oxidative stress, and metabolic dysregulation affect endothelial function. LSECs exhibit increased expression of adhesion molecules and inflammatory mediators, leading to recruitment of immune cells and amplification of hepatic inflammation. Endothelial dysfunction in NAFLD is associated with impaired vasodilatory responses and altered sinusoidal perfusion, which exacerbate hepatocyte stress and contribute to progression toward fibrosis and cirrhosis.

During viral hepatitis, LSECs act as both mediators and modulators of immune responses. They can capture viral particles and present antigens to T lymphocytes, influencing antiviral immunity. However, prolonged viral infection or excessive immune activation may impair LSEC function, reduce fenestrations and trigger inflammatory signaling cascades. These alterations can contribute to hepatocellular injury and facilitate fibrogenic processes. In addition, LSECs may influence viral persistence by regulating the balance between immune activation and tolerance, demonstrating their complex role in disease outcomes.

LSECs also influence the immune tolerance observed in the liver. Their unique phenotype allows them to present antigens in a manner that favors regulatory immune responses rather than activation of effector cells. This property is essential for preventing unnecessary immune activation against gut-derived antigens and dietary products. In pathological conditions, alterations in LSEC antigen presentation, cytokine production and interaction with other immune cells can disrupt tolerance, contributing to autoimmune liver diseases, chronic inflammation and progression to fibrosis or cirrhosis.

Angiogenesis is another aspect of LSEC function that becomes relevant in liver pathology. In chronic liver disease, hypoxia and tissue remodeling stimulate LSECs to produce angiogenic factors, leading to the formation of new but often abnormal vascular structures. These vessels contribute to altered sinusoidal blood flow, portal hypertension and enhanced fibrotic

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deposition. Abnormal angiogenesis also supports tumor development and progression in hepatocellular carcinoma, highlighting the dual role of LSECs in both normal repair processes and disease pathology.

The response of LSECs to environmental factors, including dietary components, alcohol and toxins, is also important in liver disease. Exposure to harmful substances can impair endothelial function, induce inflammatory signaling and reduce fenestrations, accelerating the progression of chronic liver injury. Protective interventions, including antioxidants, lifestyle modification and pharmacologic therapy, may preserve LSEC function and slow disease progression, emphasizing the sensitivity of these cells to systemic influences.

The cumulative evidence underscores that LSECs are active participants in both physiological and pathological processes. Their interactions with hepatocytes, stellate cells, Kupffer cells and circulating immune cells create a dynamic environment that balances tolerance and defense. Disruption of this balance contributes to disease development and progression, emphasizing the need to consider endothelial function in the study and treatment of liver disorders. As research advances, a deeper understanding of LSEC biology is expected to inform novel therapeutic approaches, ultimately improving patient outcomes across a spectrum of liver diseases.