The Epigenetic, Environmental, and Microbial Intersection of Crohn's Disease

Sammy Naser

Abstract

Crohn's Disease (CD), a debilitating subtype of Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD), affects over half a million Americans and is characterized by chronic inflammation of the digestive tract. Living with CD can profoundly impact an individual's quality of life, usually requiring lifestyle modifications, dietary changes, and ongoing medical management. Both genetic and environmental aspects can affect CD in patients. Genes such as NOD2, ATG16L1, and IL23R play vital roles in immune system function, influencing the body's ability to sense and respond to bacteria in the digestive tract. (Torres et al). Here, we explore the interactions between these genes and the gut microbiome to understand their collective impact on disease severity, treatment response, and clinical symptoms.

This study also investigates the dynamic relationship between genetic predisposition and environmental triggers in activating CD. Environmental factors, including viral or bacterial infections, can induce an autoimmune response, leading the immune system to attack the body's own cells and trigger inflammation. Despite being carriers of the gene and possessing genetic markers, not all individuals develop the disease, underscoring the complex interplay between genetics and the environment. The ultimate goal of the research is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between genetics and environmental triggers on the onset of CD, which could help disease prevention, pave the way for effective treatments, and potentially lead to a cure, because the exact cause of the disease remains unknown to this day.

Introduction

CD, a chronic inflammatory bowel disease named after Dr. Burrill B. Crohn, was first described in 1932. It can affect any part of the gastrointestinal (GI) tract and is characterized by symptoms such as abdominal pain, diarrhea, weight loss, fatigue, and rectal bleeding. The symptoms may vary in severity and may come and go. The inflammation associated with CD can lead to scar tissue formation and ulcers, primarily affecting any part of the GI tract, but it most commonly occurs in the ileum (the end of the small intestine) and the colon. The inflammation can be patchy, with normal areas of bowel in between affected areas. While the exact cause is unknown, a combination of genetic, environmental, and immune system factors is believed to contribute to its development, making it an autoimmune condition. (Torres et al). This autoimmune response occurs when the body's immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissues in the digestive tract, leading to inflammation and various symptoms. (*Cleveland Clinic).*

Diagnosing CD involves a comprehensive approach, including medical history, physical examination, blood tests, imaging studies, colonoscopies, and sometimes biopsy of affected tissue. Although there is no cure, various treatments, such as anti-inflammatory drugs, immunosuppressants, and biologics, aim to manage symptoms and control inflammation. In severe cases, surgery may be required to remove damaged portions of the intestine. *(Mayo Clinic).*

Complications of CD include strictures, fistulas, and nutritional deficiencies, which can have significant consequences. Strictures result in the narrowing of the intestine, fistulas create abnormal connections within the intestine or with other organs, and nutritional deficiencies can

lead to various health issues, especially chronic diseases like cancer, osteoporosis, and many other complications. *(Mayo Clinic).*

Chronic inflammation, an indicator of CD, is the response to sudden damage to the body. In order to heal, the body mounts an immune response by releasing inflammatory cells to an injury. However, long-term release of inflammatory (T-Cells) cells in the absence of infection can cause cells to attack body tissues, leading to detrimental inflammation. This pattern of chronic inflammation can lead to adverse symptoms such as abdominal pain, chest pain, fatigue, fever, joint pain or stiffness, mouth sores, and skin rash. (*Cleveland Clinic).*

In recent years, advancements in the field of CD have included the development of biological therapies targeting specific components of the immune system, especially in the GI. Personalized medicine, based on genetic studies and a better understanding of the immune system, has gained emphasis in treatment approaches. Some studies have explored the role of exclusive nutrition and specific diets, while imaging technologies like colonoscopy and capsule endoscopy have improved diagnosis and monitoring.

Ongoing research continues to investigate the underlying causes of CD, focusing on genetic, environmental, and gut microbial factors. The gut microbiome consists of many diverse communities of microorganisms and microbiota in the digestive tract, playing an essential role in digestion, immune function, and metabolism. In CD, imbalances in gut microbiome diversity can result in inflammation and contribute to disease progression. The gut microbiome's role in the disease is a significant area of exploration. (Núñez-Sánchez et al). Understanding the complex interactions between the microbiome and the immune system may provide important insights into disease development and potential treatment strategies. Clinical trials are also testing new drugs and treatment approaches to enhance therapeutic options.

While much progress has been made, there are many uncertainties in the field of CD, including the exact cause of CD and the absence of a cure. While genetic, environmental, and immune system factors are implicated, the specific triggers and mechanisms leading to the development of the disease are not fully understood. Today, there is still no cure for CD. Treatment focuses on managing symptoms, inducing and maintaining remission, and preventing complications. *(Mayo Clinic).* Achieving a complete cure remains an outstanding goal. However, tangible challenges include the need for more precise and effective individualized treatment strategies and understanding the long-term outcomes and potential complications associated with current treatments. Balancing the benefits and risks of medications and treatments, especially over extended periods, remains a critical consideration in managing this complex and challenging disease.

Crohn’s Disease and Genetics

The genetics of CD play a significant role in its development, and understanding the specific genes involved may shed light on the complexities of the condition. (Cirino). One key factor in the genetic foundation of CD is the NOD2 gene, which is located in a crucial position concerning Crohn's pathology. NOD2 encodes a protein, also named NOD2 (Nucleotide-binding oligomerization domain-containing protein 2), that plays a pivotal role in the immune system's response to bacterial invasion in the gastrointestinal tract. *(MedlinePlus).* In CD, variations in the NOD2 gene can lead to altered protein expression, affecting the immune system's ability to sense and respond appropriately to harmful bacteria. The effects and impacts of these genetic variations are important. Studies have demonstrated distinct patterns of NOD2 protein expression in CD patients compared to those without the condition. (Gao et al). The altered

expression of NOD2 in Crohn's patients contributes to an overactive immune response, leading to chronic inflammation in the digestive tract. This increased immune activity can result in the characteristic symptoms of CD, such as abdominal pain, diarrhea, and rectal bleeding. The effects of NOD2 gene variations also extend beyond the gastrointestinal tract. The NOD2 protein, when misregulated, has been associated with systemic inflammatory responses, impacting various tissues and organs. (Gao et al). This large-scale impact highlights the interconnectedness of genetic factors in CD and the potential for effects beyond the digestive system.

Overall, the many different genes, particularly the NOD2 gene, and their encoded proteins play a crucial role in the development and progression of CD. Understanding the effects of genetic variations on protein expression provides insights into the dysregulation of the immune system in Crohn's patients, contributing to chronic inflammation and associated symptoms.

The intricate interplay between genetics and microbial factors in CD is further exemplified by the pattern-recognition receptor NOD2, which also plays a crucial role in regulating host immunity and maintaining gut homeostasis. Loss of function mutations in NOD2 are strongly associated with CD, highlighting its significance in the disease pathology. (Gao et al). A notable aspect of NOD2's function is its ability to sense bacterial muropeptides, and understanding how microbial variations influence NOD2 signaling and host pathology is essential.

Recent research has delved into the impact of microbial factors, particularly the Firmicutes peptidoglycan remodeling enzyme, DL-endopeptidase, on NOD2 ligand levels in the gut and its repercussions on colitis outcomes. (Gao et al). Gao et al. 2022 conducted a study on a global cohort of 857 individuals, revealing that CD patients exhibited a decrease in DL-endopeptidase gene abundance, which negatively correlated with colitis severity. When fecal microbiota from CD patients with low DL-endopeptidase was introduced to mice, they became more likely to develop colitis, highlighting the role of microbial dysbiosis in disease susceptibility. The therapeutic implications of these findings are highly crucial. Managing DL-endopeptidase, particularly in its active form, alleviated colitis through the NOD2 pathway. Additionally, therapeutic interventions aimed at restoring NOD2 ligands, such as using a DL-endopeptidase-producing Lactobacillus salivarius strain or mifamurtide, a clinical similarity of muramyl dipeptide, demonstrated strong anti-colitis effects. This comprehensive study suggests that the depletion of DL-endopeptidase contributes to CD pathogenesis by affecting NOD2 signaling, providing a therapeutically modifiable target. The intricate details of how microbial factors influence NOD2 function shed light on potential paths for therapeutic interventions in CD, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of both genetic and environmental components in disease management.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors play a significant role in the complex fundamentals of CD, contributing to the variability in symptom severity and disease progression. An individual may carry the gene but not experience any symptoms of it. However, certain triggers from the environment may lead to the onset of CD. It is important to draw attention to triggers such as the flu, shedding light on the broader spectrum of environmental influences that individuals with Crohn's need to navigate. Beyond viral infections, other environmental factors, such as dietary choices, stress levels, and exposure to certain medications, can also impact the course of CD. (Chen et al).

The flu, as a specific example, introduces an additional layer of concern for individuals with Crohn's. Viral infections not only pose a direct threat to the immune system but can also trigger inflammatory responses in the gut, potentially leading to a flare-up of Crohn's symptoms. (Tresca; Tinsley et al). This highlights the interconnectedness between the immune system, environmental exposures, and the intricate balance required for maintaining gut health. (Cirino).

One example of environmental exposure is DNA Methylation, which controls the way DNA is subsequently made into protein and how DNA is accessed and transcribed. This results in individuals with the same genotype expressing different phenotypes based on DNA methylation. Oxidative stress gene expression, DNA methylation, and gut microbiota interaction may trigger CD. Another study delves into the intricate relationship between oxidative stress (OS) and CD, recognizing OS as a key pathophysiological mechanism in the disease. (Xu et al). This research explores the impact of various factors, including environmental influences, intestinal inflammation, gut microbiota, and epigenetic changes, on OS-related genes in CD. Using a multi-omics summary data-based Mendelian randomization (SMR) approach, the study identifies putative causal effects and underlying mechanisms of OS genes in CD.

Through comprehensive methods, OS-related genes were extracted, and intestinal transcriptome datasets were analyzed to identify differentially expressed genes (DEGs) related to OS in CD. The integration of CD genome-wide association study (GWAS) summaries with expression quantitative trait loci (eQTLs) and DNA methylation QTLs (mQTLs) from the blood was performed using SMR methods. This prioritized blood OS genes associated with CD risk, including BAD, SHC1, STAT3, MUC1, and GPX3. Additionally, putative intestinal genes were identified, with three involved in gene microbiota interactions: MUC1, CD40, and PRKAB1. The identification of genes like BAD, SHC1, STAT3, MUC1, and GPX3 associated with CD highlights their roles in apoptosis, immune response dysregulation, inflammation, mucosal barrier function, and oxidative stress. (Xu et al). These findings suggest potential targets for therapeutic intervention, such as drugs targeting inflammatory pathways, mucosal healing agents, antioxidants, and microbiota-modulating therapies. While directly targeting genetic differences may be challenging, understanding these pathways can guide the development of personalized treatments to manage CD symptoms effectively.

The study highlights the importance of OS genes in the regulation of CD, influenced by DNA methylation and host-microbiota interactions. This multi-omics integration study provides valuable insights for future targeted functional research, suggesting potential therapeutic interventions and pathways for disease prevention in CD.

Understanding and managing these environmental influences become crucial factors of a holistic approach to CD. Incorporating preventive measures during flu seasons, adopting dietary modifications that align with individual sensitivities, and implementing stress-reducing strategies are integral components of comprehensive disease management. The recognition of environmental triggers highlights the importance of personalized care plans that consider both genetic predispositions and external factors that can impact the complex nature of CD. (Li and Shi). By addressing environmental influences, individuals with Crohn's can take proactive steps toward minimizing symptom flare-ups and enhancing their overall quality of life. To minimize symptom flare-ups and improve quality of life in CD, individuals can take proactive steps to reduce exposure to oxidative stressors. This includes adopting a balanced diet rich in antioxidants, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, which can help neutralize and reduce oxidative damage in the body. Additionally, managing stress levels through relaxation techniques like meditation or yoga can help mitigate the inflammatory response triggered by

stress, therefore reducing OS. Regular exercise is also beneficial, as it promotes overall health and can help combat OS by increasing antioxidant enzyme activity. Lastly, avoiding smoking and limiting alcohol consumption can further minimize exposure to oxidative stressors, contributing to better symptom management and overall well-being in CD. (Scarallo and Lionetti).

Microbiome

The human gut microbiome, consisting of a vast community of bacteria, viruses, and yeast, has emerged as a pivotal factor in the pathogenesis and severity of CD. (Khanna and Raffals). The gut microbiota, comprising over 100 trillion microorganisms, establishes a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship with the host, influencing crucial physiological processes, including immune system development, intestinal homeostasis, behavior, and host metabolism. From birth, the gut microbiota plays a critical role in shaping these processes, and any disturbance in its balance, known as dysbiosis, is associated with various metabolic and gastrointestinal conditions, including CD and ulcerative colitis. (Khanna and Raffals).

Diet is recognized as a key influencer of the gut microbiome, and its role in maintaining a well-balanced and healthy gut microbial microenvironment is key. The interplay between the host, gut microbiota, and environmental factors contributes to the multifactorial pathogenesis of CD. The imbalance in the gut microbiome is implicated in the abnormal response within the gastrointestinal tract, leading to chronic inflammation of CD. Understanding these host-microbe interactions is vital for developing effective therapeutic interventions for CD.

In recent years, the exploration of nutritional interventions aimed at regulating the composition of the gut microbiota has gained some popularity. Exclusive enteral nutrition (EEN) has emerged as a successful non-pharmacological strategy for CD management. It is entirely formula-based, meaning no solid foods for around four to twelve weeks for most people, and is designed to induce remission in individuals with CD. EEN has been recommended as the first-line induction therapy for children with CD, achieving outcomes comparable to traditional corticosteroid treatments while avoiding growth restriction and ensuring complete nutritional coverage. (Scarallo and Lionetti). Despite the clear efficiency of EEN in clinical management, the precise mechanisms underlying its positive outcomes remain uncertain. This suggests the need for further research into the intricate relationship between dietary interventions, the gut microbiome, and CD pathogenesis.

The quest for more cost-effective and sustainable mitigation strategies for CD has led researchers to investigate the potential of dietary modifications. The development of specific diets tailored to modulate the gut microbiota has shown promise as a complementary approach to conventional pharmacological treatments. A recent example is the Crohn's disease exclusion diet (CDED), which has emerged as a promising therapeutic approach for managing CD, as demonstrated by a retrospective cohort study conducted at the Tel Aviv Medical Center. (Fliss-Isakov et al). The study analyzed real-world data from CD patients treated with the CDED between 2018 and 2021. Results showed that among patients with clinically active disease, a large proportion reached the clinical remission stage at both week 6 and week 12, with a positive association observed between high adherence to the CDED and clinical remission. Additionally, for patients undergoing remission maintenance, a high remission rate was maintained at week 12. (Fliss-Isakov et al). These findings highlight the potential of the CDED as a promising intervention for various CD indications, highlighting the need for further validation through larger, prospective, and controlled studies. The CDED, which is designed to mitigate

factors harmful to the gut microbiome and intestinal immunity while maintaining nutritional balance, offers a new dietary therapy with the potential to address the increasing rate of CD worldwide.

As pharmaceutical interventions, including anti-inflammatory therapies and biologics, often exhibit limitations in the long-term maintenance of intestinal integrity and are associated with significant costs and side effects, the exploration of nutritional interventions becomes vital for improving the quality of life of CD patients. Another interesting study on the microbiomes, published in Cell, illuminates a connection between oral health and CD, offering insights into the intricate interplay between the oral and gut microbiomes. (Abelar). The researchers initially focused on the gut microbiome and identified an overgrowth of foreign bacteria in individuals with CD, typically found in the oral cavity rather than the gut. This discovery prompted a shift in the study's focus to investigate the relationship between the gut and oral microbiomes. Of particular interest to the study was the role of periodontitis, an inflammatory condition caused by harmful bacteria in the gums. The study proposes that these bacteria, once inflamed, can enter the bloodstream, eventually reaching the gut. In the gut, these bacteria activate the inflammasome in colonic mononuclear phagocytes, triggering inflammation associated with CD. (Abelar). The study suggests that, under normal circumstances, the good bacteria in the gut would counteract these harmful bacteria. However, in patients with IBD, the good gut bacteria are weakened, making them less effective in combating the invading bacteria from the mouth. This imbalance leads to inflammation, contributing to the symptoms of IBD.

Furthermore, the study highlights another mechanism by which bacteria from the gums affect the bowel system by activating the body's T-cells, which can also develop inflammation in the intestines. The activation of T-cells adds another layer to the complex relationship between oral health and the development or exacerbation of CD. (Abelar).

Dr. Martin Abelar, a dentist in San Diego, California, emphasizes the critical link between oral health and the overall well-being of the body. (Abelar). He underscores the mouth as the gateway to the rest of the body, indicating that the treatment of the mouth can significantly impact the performance of other systems in the human body. While maintaining good oral hygiene may not serve as a cure for CD or IBD, it may play a role in lessening the severity of the disease and easing some of the painful symptoms by controlling the oral bacteria that can contribute to gut inflammation. (Abelar).

This study contributes to a broader understanding of the systemic nature of health and emphasizes the importance of considering oral health as a factor in the complex etiology of CD. Addressing oral health through regular brushing, flossing, and dental check-ups may have a positive impact on the regulation of oral bacteria, potentially offering a complementary approach to managing CD symptoms. However, further research may be needed to explore specific interventions and long-term effects.

The intricate interplay between the host, gut microbiota, and dietary factors is central to the pathogenesis and severity of CD. Non-pharmacological interventions, especially nutritional approaches targeting the gut microbiota, hold much promise as cost-effective strategies to complement existing treatments have become more popular and important. (Núñez-Sánchez et al). Further research is essential to analyze the specific mechanisms in which these interventions influence CD outcomes, paving the way for more effective and sustainable management of this complex and debilitating genetic disorder.

Future Directions

There has been much progress made in the field of CD over the last several years, but it still lacks definitive treatments and a cure. As this field of research progresses and evolves the understanding of CD and how to treat it effectively, and until a cure is discovered, here are strategies for expanding current ways in which the field can go about effectively treating CD:

Precision Medicine Approaches: As our understanding of the genetic and environmental factors underlying CD continues to evolve, there is a growing opportunity for the development of personalized medicine approaches. Future research should focus on integrating genetic profiling, microbiome analysis, and environmental exposure data to customize treatment strategies to individual patients. This personalized approach has the potential to optimize therapeutic outcomes and minimize adverse effects.

Microbiome Modulation: The gut microbiome plays a crucial role in the pathogenesis of CD, influencing immune system function and disease progression. (Khanna and Raffals). Future research should delve deeper into understanding the complex interactions between the microbiome and host physiology, as well as how microbial dysbiosis contributes to disease development. Therapeutic approaches aimed at modulating the microbiome, such as probiotics, prebiotics, fecal microbiota transplantation and microbial targeted therapies, hold much promise and cause the need for further investigation. These methods can inspire new therapeutic targets.

Pathways to Targets: While current treatment options for CD primarily target inflammation and immune system modulation, there is a pressing need to identify new novel therapeutic targets. Future research should explore emerging routes involved in disease pathogenesis, such as the role of the environment, immune system, and microbial dysbiosis. (Khanna and Raffals). Investigating these pathways may uncover new approaches for drug development and therapeutic intervention.

Longitudinal Studies and Biomarker Discovery: Longitudinal studies tracking disease progression over time are essential for identifying predictive biomarkers of disease activity, treatment response, and long-term outcomes in CD. Future research should prioritize the establishment of large-scale cohorts with comprehensive clinical, genetic, environmental, and microbiome data to facilitate biomarker discovery efforts. These biomarkers could help in early diagnosis, prediction, and treatment selection, ultimately improving patient care and management.

Integration of Omics Technologies: Integrating multi-omics technologies, including genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics, holds high potential for unraveling the complex molecular mechanisms underlying CD. Future research should leverage these high throughput approaches to gain insights into the heterogeneity of disease onset and severity, identify molecular subtypes, and illuminate key pathways driving disease pathogenesis. (Chen et al). By integrating data across multiple omics layers, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of disease biology and identify novel therapeutic targets.

Patient-Centered Outcomes Research: In addition to traditional clinical treatments and outcomes/endpoints, future research in CD should prioritize patient-centered outcomes, such as quality of life, symptom severity, and functional status. Engaging patients in research design and decision-making processes is essential for ensuring that study outcomes are meaningful and relevant to those living with the disease. By incorporating patient perspectives, researchers can better understand the holistic impact of CD and develop interventions that address the needs and priorities of individuals affected by the condition.

The Interesting concept of chaos theory in relation to Crohn's

In his book *Chaos: Making a New Science*, James Gleick explores the concept of chaos theory, which demonstrates that systems can be highly sensitive to initial conditions, where small changes in inputs can lead to drastically different outcomes. Chaos theory reveals that in certain complex systems, it's not possible to predict everything, and only the order in which events happen can be adjusted; they cannot be prevented or massively altered. This idea ties into CD in several profound ways.

Like the chaotic systems described in Gleick's work, Crohn's disease is unpredictable. We still do not fully understand how Crohn's develops, which genes are definitely involved, or why it affects some people more severely than others. Even though we have identified potential genetic markers, like NOD2, and environmental triggers, the exact mechanisms that lead to the onset and progression of Crohn's remain elusive. The disease behaves unpredictably, much like a chaotic system where only the sequence of events might be controlled or adjusted, but predicting the specific outcome is incredibly difficult.

In the context of Crohn's disease, chaos theory can explain why certain treatments work well for some patients but fail in others. The intricate interplay of genetic, environmental, and microbial factors creates an unpredictable system where targeted therapies may not always produce the same results across individuals. The personalized medicine approaches mentioned in the Future Directions section, such as precision medicine, microbiome modulation, and the integration of omics technologies, are attempts to bring some order to this chaos by tailoring treatments to the specific conditions of individual patients. However, even with advanced tools and personalized strategies, the treatment of Crohn's is not universally successful because, like a chaotic system, the disease can respond differently in each case. Even in remission, the disease may come back, depending on specific behavioral and environmental conditions. Until we fully understand the underlying mechanisms of Crohn's, its treatment will continue to be an exercise in managing chaos. This is why there is still no cure and why current treatments are limited in their effectiveness.

In summary of this interesting topic, Crohn's disease mirrors chaos theory in its unpredictability and complexity. While we can try to modify the order of treatment interventions, the disease's inherent variability often makes it difficult to predict outcomes. This recognition underscores the need for continued research and innovation as we strive to bring more clarity and precision to the treatment of this complex and chaotic disease.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the intricate interplay between genetic predisposition, environmental triggers, and immune system dysregulation in the development and progression of CD. Through an exploration of specific genes such as NOD2, and their interactions with the gut microbiome, this research deepens our understanding of the underlying mechanisms controlling disease severity, different treatment responses, and clinical symptoms.

By illuminating the roles of these genes in immune system function and bacterial recognition in the microbiome within the digestive tract, this research provides valuable insights into potential targets for therapeutic intervention. Understanding the dynamic relationship between genetic factors and environmental influences is extremely important for developing more personalized and effective treatment strategies, with the ultimate goal of alleviating

symptoms, developing remission, and potentially achieving a cure or efficient treatment for CD. (Chen et al).

Despite significant advancements in the field, many challenges continue, including the complexity of disease etiology and causation, the lack of a universal cure, and the need for more precise and customized approaches to treatment. Continued research efforts are essential to unraveling the mysteries and unknowns of CD, improving diagnostic methods, and expanding therapeutic options. By addressing these challenges directly, we can strive towards better outcomes, improved quality of life, and ultimately, a brighter future for individuals living with this debilitating condition.

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