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Emerging Therapeutic Targets in Immune and Inflammatory Disorders: Advances Beyond Conventional Receptors

Jelang Jelku D. Sangma[1,2]

[1]*Department of Food Science and Nutrition, University of Agricultural Sciences, GKVK, Bangalore, Karnataka, 560065, India*
[2]*AICRP-WIA, ICAR (CIWA), Bhubaneswar, College of Community Science, Central Agricultural University, Tura, Meghalaya - 794005, India*

Corresponding author: **Jelang Jelku D. Sangma** | E-mail: **jelang.jelku3@gmail.com**

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Abstract

Immune and inflammatory disorders, including autoimmune diseases, allergic conditions, and chronic inflammatory syndromes, represent a major global health burden. Conventional therapeutic strategies largely rely on broad immunosuppression or blockade of well-characterized cytokines and cell-surface receptors; however, many patients experience incomplete responses, loss of efficacy, or treatment-associated adverse effects. Recent advances in immunology, genomics, and molecular medicine have revealed multiple therapeutic opportunities beyond traditional receptor-targeted interventions. Emerging approaches focus on intracellular signaling pathways, immune metabolism, epigenetic regulation, innate immune sensors, microbiome–immune interactions, and precision cellular therapies aimed at restoring immune balance rather than suppressing immune function. These innovations offer prospects for improved specificity, long-term disease control, and reduced systemic toxicity. This review summarizes current progress in novel therapeutic targets and discusses future directions in the development of safer and more effective treatments for immune and inflammatory disorders.

Keywords: *Immune disorders; chronic inflammation; therapeutic targets; immune metabolism; epigenetic regulation; inflammasomes; microbiome; precision immunotherapy.*

Introduction

Immune and inflammatory disorders comprise a broad group of conditions characterized by dysregulated immune responses that lead to chronic tissue damage, impaired organ function, and long-term health complications. These disorders include autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus, chronic inflammatory diseases such as inflammatory bowel disease and psoriasis, as well as allergic and immune-mediated conditions affecting millions of people worldwide [1]. Over recent decades, advances in immunology have significantly improved our understanding of immune mechanisms, leading to the development of targeted biologic therapies that block key cytokines or immune receptors involved in disease progression. Despite these advances, many patients continue to experience incomplete responses, relapse, or therapy-related adverse effects, highlighting the need for improved treatment strategies [2]. Traditional therapies largely rely on broad immunosuppression or inhibition of well-known immune mediators such as tumor necrosis factor (TNF), interleukins, and other receptor-driven pathways. While these treatments have transformed clinical management, they often suppress immune function globally, increasing susceptibility to infections and limiting long-term use. Furthermore, immune diseases are highly heterogeneous, meaning that therapies effective in some patients may fail in others due to differences in molecular pathways, genetic backgrounds, or environmental influences. Consequently, researchers are increasingly focusing on precision-based therapeutic approaches that target disease-driving mechanisms more selectively [3].

Recent scientific breakthroughs have revealed that immune regulation extends beyond classical receptor-mediated signaling. Emerging evidence highlights the importance of intracellular signaling cascades, metabolic programming of immune cells, epigenetic control of gene expression, innate immune sensing pathways, and interactions between the immune system and the microbiome. These discoveries have opened new avenues for drug development aimed at restoring immune balance rather than simply suppressing immune activity. Therapies targeting immune metabolism, inflammasomes, transcriptional regulators, and cellular reprogramming are now entering experimental and early clinical stages, offering promising alternatives to conventional approaches, single-cell technologies, and systems biology have enabled deeper characterization of immune cell subsets and disease mechanisms, paving the way for personalized immunotherapies. Cell-based treatments, gene-editing technologies, and microbiome modulation strategies are increasingly

being explored as tools to achieve long-term immune tolerance and durable disease remission [4]. This evolving landscape suggests that future therapies will move toward combination and individualized approaches that integrate molecular targeting with patient-specific disease profiling. This review discusses emerging therapeutic targets beyond conventional receptor-focused treatments and highlights recent progress in developing innovative strategies for immune and inflammatory diseases. It also outlines future challenges and opportunities in translating these discoveries into safer and more effective clinical therapies.

2. Targeting Intracellular Signaling Pathways in Immune Regulation

Recent advances in immunology have revealed that immune cell activation and inflammatory responses are governed not only by surface receptors but also by complex intracellular signaling networks that determine immune cell fate and function. These signaling cascades transmit external stimuli into transcriptional and metabolic responses, ultimately controlling cytokine production, cell proliferation, and immune memory formation. Dysregulation of intracellular signaling pathways contributes significantly to chronic inflammation and autoimmune pathology [5]. Among the most extensively studied intracellular pathways are the Janus kinase/signal transducer and activator of transcription (JAK–STAT), nuclear factor kappa B (NF-κB), mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK), and phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3K)/Akt pathways. Targeted inhibitors of JAK enzymes have already demonstrated clinical success in conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, and atopic dermatitis. However, challenges remain regarding selective pathway inhibition, as excessive suppression can impair normal immune defense mechanisms. Current research is therefore focused on developing next-generation inhibitors that selectively modulate specific signaling nodes or downstream transcriptional events while preserving protective immune responses [6], attention is being directed toward inflammasome signaling complexes, particularly the NLRP3 inflammasome, which regulates the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-1β and IL-18. Aberrant inflammasome activation has been linked to autoimmune diseases, metabolic disorders, and neuroinflammatory conditions. Small-molecule inhibitors targeting inflammasome activation and caspase signaling are emerging as promising therapeutic tools, offering opportunities to dampen inflammatory responses without broad immunosuppression, intracellular pathway modulation represents a shift from blocking external signals to fine-tuning internal immune responses, potentially enabling more precise therapeutic interventions with fewer systemic side effects.

3. Immune Cell Metabolism as a Therapeutic Target

Immune cell function is closely linked to cellular metabolic programming, a field now referred to as immunometabolism. Activated immune cells undergo metabolic reprogramming to meet energy and biosynthetic demands required for proliferation and cytokine production. Pro-inflammatory immune cells typically rely on glycolysis, while regulatory and memory immune cells depend more heavily on oxidative phosphorylation and fatty acid metabolism [7]. In chronic inflammatory diseases, immune cells often remain locked in pro-inflammatory metabolic states, sustaining disease progression. Consequently, targeting immune metabolism has emerged as a novel therapeutic strategy aimed at restoring immune balance rather than suppressing immunity entirely. Researchers are exploring metabolic inhibitors that can selectively redirect immune cell energy utilization, thereby reducing pathological inflammation while preserving immune competence [8]. For instance, modulation of pathways involving mTOR signaling, AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK), and hypoxia-inducible factors has demonstrated potential in controlling inflammatory responses. Additionally, metabolites themselves, such as short-chain fatty acids produced by gut microbes, can influence immune tolerance and inflammation, further linking metabolism with immune regulation. Therapeutic strategies aimed at metabolic rewiring are still in early stages but offer exciting opportunities for precision immunomodulation. Future interventions may combine metabolic targeting with conventional treatments to enhance therapeutic efficacy and reduce treatment resistance.

4. Epigenetic and Transcriptional Regulation of Immune Responses

Epigenetic regulation plays a crucial role in controlling immune cell identity and responsiveness by modifying gene expression without altering the underlying DNA sequence. Mechanisms such as DNA methylation, histone modification, and chromatin remodeling determine whether inflammatory genes are activated or suppressed. Abnormal epigenetic programming contributes to persistent immune activation in autoimmune and inflammatory diseases [9]. Recent research indicates that immune cells retain epigenetic "memory" following inflammatory exposure, predisposing them to exaggerated responses upon reactivation. Targeting epigenetic regulators offers a strategy to reverse pathological immune memory and restore immune tolerance. Histone deacetylase inhibitors, DNA methyltransferase inhibitors, and bromodomain inhibitors are currently being explored for their immunomodulatory effects [10]. Transcription factors that regulate immune cell differentiation, including NF-κB, STAT family proteins, and RORγt, also represent potential therapeutic targets. Modulating transcriptional regulators may enable selective control of inflammatory pathways while maintaining protective immune functions. Furthermore, advances in gene-editing technologies such as CRISPR-based tools allow for precise manipulation of immune cell gene expression, opening avenues for personalized immune therapies [11].

Epigenetic targeting offers the potential for long-lasting therapeutic effects by reprogramming immune cells rather than merely suppressing inflammation temporarily, although concerns regarding specificity and long-term safety require continued investigation.

5. Microbiome Modulation and Novel Cellular Therapeutic Approaches

The human microbiome, particularly the gut microbiota, plays a fundamental role in immune system development and immune homeostasis. Dysbiosis—an imbalance in microbial communities—has been associated with autoimmune diseases, allergies, metabolic disorders, and chronic inflammatory conditions. Microbial metabolites influence immune tolerance, regulatory T cell development, and mucosal immune responses, making microbiome modulation an attractive therapeutic target [12]. Emerging interventions include probiotics, prebiotics, dietary modifications, and fecal microbiota transplantation aimed at restoring beneficial microbial populations. Advances in microbiome research are also enabling the identification of specific microbial strains or metabolites capable of modulating immune responses, offering prospects for precision microbiome-based therapeutics [7]. In parallel, cellular therapies are gaining attention as potential long-term solutions for immune-mediated diseases. Regulatory T cell therapy, engineered immune cells, and mesenchymal stem cell therapies are being explored for their ability to suppress pathological immune responses while promoting tissue repair. Additionally, gene-modified immune cells and adoptive cell transfer approaches are under investigation for autoimmune and inflammatory disorders beyond their established use in oncology, microbiome-targeted interventions and cell-based therapies represent a new generation of treatments aimed at restoring immune balance rather than suppressing immune function. Continued research is needed to ensure safety, scalability, and long-term effectiveness, but these strategies hold promise for transforming future therapeutic paradigms.

6. Innate Immune Sensors and Inflammasomes

Innate immune pathways act as the body's first line of defense by detecting danger signals from pathogens or tissue damage and triggering inflammatory responses. Among these pathways, inflammasomes play a central role by sensing cellular stress or pathogen-associated molecular patterns and activating inflammatory cytokines such as IL-1β and IL-18. Dysregulated inflammasome activation, however, contributes to a wide range of diseases, including autoinflammatory syndromes, metabolic disorders, and neurodegenerative conditions. Key therapeutic targets in this area include inhibitors of the NLRP3 inflammasome, modulators of the STING pathway, regulators of Toll-like receptor signaling, and molecules that influence cytosolic nucleic acid sensing pathways [9]. By selectively dampening pathological innate immune activation while preserving essential host defense, these approaches represent a promising frontier in the treatment of inflammatory and autoimmune diseases.

7. Microbiome-Driven Therapeutic Strategies

The human microbiome, encompassing the diverse communities of bacteria, viruses, fungi, and other microbes residing in the gut and tissues, plays a critical role in maintaining immune homeostasis. Disruption of these microbial ecosystems—referred to as dysbiosis—can promote chronic inflammation and contribute to autoimmune and inflammatory diseases. Emerging microbiome-based therapeutic strategies aim to restore immune balance without broadly suppressing immunity [6]. These include the development of defined microbiome-derived therapeutics, targeted probiotic and postbiotic interventions, modulation of microbial metabolites with immunoregulatory effects, and optimization of fecal microbiota transplantation protocols. By harnessing the microbiome's natural ability to regulate immune responses, these approaches offer the potential for systemic immune modulation with reduced side effects compared to conventional immunosuppressive therapies.

8. Cellular and Precision Immunotherapies

Advances in cellular engineering and immunology are enabling highly specific strategies to modulate the immune system. Cellular and precision immunotherapies focus on restoring immune tolerance rather than broadly suppressing immune function. Regulatory T cell (Treg) therapy, for example, leverages the body's natural suppressive mechanisms to counteract autoimmunity and chronic inflammation [4]. Engineered immune cells, such as chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) Tregs, are being developed to target disease-specific antigens with high precision. Other emerging approaches include antigen-specific tolerance induction and nanoparticle-guided delivery of immunomodulatory agents to precisely modulate immune activity in desired locations. Collectively, these therapies offer a paradigm shift toward restoring normal immune function and maintaining long-term immune equilibrium in patients with immune-mediated diseases.

9. Tissue-Specific Immune Targeting

Immune responses vary significantly between different tissues and organs, reflecting the unique microenvironments and resident immune cell populations in each site. Consequently, therapies that selectively target tissue-specific immune circuits may achieve greater efficacy while minimizing systemic adverse effects. Current research focuses on regulating tissue-resident immune cells, developing organ-targeted drug delivery systems, and modulating the local immune microenvironment [8]. For example, nanoparticle carriers or antibody-drug conjugates can deliver immunomodulatory agents directly to inflamed tissues, reducing off-target effects and enhancing therapeutic potency. This approach recognizes the spatial complexity of inflammation and opens new opportunities for precision medicine that considers both systemic and localized immune regulation.

10. Role of Artificial Intelligence in Target Discovery

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning are increasingly transforming immune therapy development by accelerating the discovery of novel targets and predicting therapeutic responses. AI can integrate vast datasets from multi-omics analyses—including genomics, transcriptomics, and proteomics—to map complex immune pathway interactions [9]. This enables drug repurposing strategies, personalized therapy prediction, and the identification of novel biomarkers for disease progression or treatment response. By uncovering previously unrecognized patterns in immune regulation, AI-supported platforms can prioritize the most promising therapeutic targets and streamline the drug development process. The integration of AI into immunology research is poised to enhance precision medicine, allowing therapies to be tailored to individual immune profiles with unprecedented accuracy.

11. Future Perspectives and Challenges

Despite the rapid pace of innovation, several challenges remain in translating these discoveries into widely accessible therapies. Long-term safety and efficacy must be rigorously evaluated, particularly for advanced cellular and microbiome-based treatments. The high cost of developing and delivering personalized therapies poses additional barriers to accessibility, while selecting the most appropriate intervention for individual patients requires robust biomarkers and predictive models. Regulatory approval pathways and complex manufacturing requirements further complicate the translation of cutting-edge therapies to clinical practice. Looking forward, successful treatments are likely to combine metabolic, cellular, and molecular strategies, leveraging systems biology approaches to create tailored interventions that restore immune balance while minimizing adverse effects.

12. Conclusion

The landscape of therapeutic development for immune and inflammatory diseases is evolving rapidly. Traditional approaches that target individual receptors are giving way to strategies that engage deeper regulatory mechanisms, including metabolic pathways, epigenetic modifications, innate immune sensors, and microbiome interactions. Emerging therapies aim to achieve more precise, durable, and safer modulation of the immune system by restoring homeostasis rather than broadly suppressing immunity. Continued integration of systems biology, precision medicine, advanced cellular engineering, and AI-driven target discovery will shape the next generation of immune therapies, offering hope for patients with complex immune-mediated disorders.

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