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Immune Profiling in BPH: Understanding Chronic Inflammation as a Driver of Prostate Enlargement

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ABSTRACT

Benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) is a highly prevalent age-associated condition characterized by progressive enlargement of the prostate and lower urinary tract symptoms that significantly impair quality of life. Traditionally regarded as a hormonally driven disorder, BPH is now increasingly recognized as a chronic inflammatory disease in which immune dysregulation plays a central pathogenic role. Immune profiling studies of prostatic tissue, peripheral blood, and expressed prostatic secretions have consistently demonstrated persistent infiltration of innate and adaptive immune cells, accompanied by sustained cytokine and chemokine production. This chronic inflammatory milieu promotes epithelial and stromal proliferation, extracellular matrix remodeling, smooth muscle hypercontractility, and fibrotic changes that collectively drive prostate enlargement and functional obstruction. Emerging evidence also highlights the interaction between immune activation, oxidative stress, cellular senescence, aging, and metabolic dysfunction as critical amplifiers of inflammatory signaling in BPH. Importantly, interindividual variability in immune signatures correlates with prostate volume, symptom severity, and therapeutic responsiveness, underscoring the clinical relevance of immune heterogeneity. This section synthesizes current knowledge on immune cell composition, inflammatory mediators, and mechanistic pathways linking chronic inflammation to prostatic remodeling. Understanding immune profiling in BPH provides a framework for redefining disease pathogenesis and supports the development of targeted immunomodulatory strategies as adjuncts or alternatives to conventional therapies.

Keywords: Benign prostatic hyperplasia; chronic inflammation; immune profiling; cytokines; prostate remodeling

INTRODUCTION

Benign prostatic hyperplasia is one of the most prevalent nonmalignant disorders affecting aging men, with incidence and clinical impact increasing markedly after the fifth decade of life [1]. Although androgen signaling and age-related hormonal changes remain fundamental contributors to prostatic growth, these factors alone do not adequately explain the wide variability observed in disease onset, progression, symptom severity, or therapeutic response [2]. Increasing evidence now implicates chronic inflammation as a central pathogenic mechanism that integrates hormonal imbalance, metabolic dysfunction, oxidative stress, and progressive tissue remodeling in BPH [3]. Early histopathological studies consistently reported inflammatory cell infiltrates in hyperplastic prostate tissue, yet these findings were long regarded as incidental or secondary to tissue enlargement. Advances in immune profiling methodologies, including immunohistochemistry, flow cytometry, transcriptomic analyses, and multiplex cytokine assays, have fundamentally reshaped this interpretation [4]. These approaches have revealed structured and persistent immune cell populations within the prostate, accompanied by sustained production of pro-inflammatory mediators. Importantly, the extent of inflammation correlates with prostate volume, symptom burden, and risk of disease progression. Current understanding recognizes inflammation in BPH as an active,

organized, and self-perpetuating process that directly influences epithelial and stromal proliferation, extracellular matrix remodeling, and smooth muscle tone [5]. This paradigm shift reframes BPH as an immune-mediated disorder rather than a purely hormonally driven condition [6]. Appreciating immune dysregulation as a primary driver of pathogenesis provides a mechanistic framework for disease heterogeneity and highlights novel opportunities for targeted, inflammation-focused therapeutic strategies [7].

2. Immune Cell Infiltration in the Hyperplastic Prostate

2.1 Adaptive Immune Cells

Adaptive immune responses play a dominant role in the inflammatory landscape of BPH. CD4⁺ T lymphocytes constitute the most abundant immune cell population within hyperplastic prostatic tissue [8]. Phenotypic analyses reveal a skewing toward pro-inflammatory T helper subsets, particularly Th1 and Th17 cells [9]. Th1 cells secrete interferon- γ and tumor necrosis factor- α , which activate stromal fibroblasts, enhance antigen presentation, and sustain macrophage activation. Th17 cells produce interleukin-17, a cytokine strongly implicated in chronic inflammatory and fibrotic disorders, promoting recruitment of neutrophils and amplification of local cytokine networks [10]. CD8⁺ cytotoxic T cells are also present but appear less prominent than CD4⁺ subsets. Their contribution may involve epithelial injury and antigen release, perpetuating immune activation [11]. B cells and plasma cells are detected in a subset of patients, suggesting localized humoral immune responses and potential autoantibody production against prostatic antigens [12]. Regulatory T cells, which normally suppress excessive immune activation, are detectable in BPH tissue but often insufficient in number or functional capacity to counterbalance ongoing inflammation [13]. This imbalance favors chronic immune activation rather than resolution, reinforcing the concept of immune dysregulation in BPH.

2.2 Innate Immune Cells

Innate immune cells are equally critical in shaping the inflammatory microenvironment [14]. Macrophages are abundant within the prostatic stroma and display a mixed activation phenotype. Rather than conforming strictly to pro-inflammatory or anti-inflammatory states, these macrophages secrete both inflammatory cytokines, such as interleukin-6 and interleukin-1 β , and profibrotic growth factors, including transforming growth factor- β [15]. This dual functionality enables macrophages to simultaneously sustain inflammation and drive tissue remodeling. Mast cells are another prominent innate immune population in BPH [16]. They localize preferentially to stromal regions and perivascular areas, where they release histamine, proteases, cytokines, and angiogenic factors [17]. Mast cell mediators enhance smooth muscle contraction, vascular permeability, and fibroblast activation, linking immune activation directly to lower urinary tract symptoms [18]. Neutrophils and dendritic cells are less abundant but contribute to antigen presentation and early inflammatory signaling, particularly during episodes of acute exacerbation superimposed on chronic inflammation.

3. Cytokine and Chemokine Networks Sustaining Chronic Inflammation

Chronic inflammation in benign prostatic hyperplasia is sustained by a tightly regulated but persistent network of cytokines and chemokines that orchestrate immune cell recruitment, activation, and survival within the prostatic microenvironment [19]. Among these mediators, interleukin-6 plays a pivotal role and is consistently elevated in hyperplastic prostate tissue. Increased interleukin-6 levels correlate with prostate volume, inflammatory burden, and severity of lower urinary tract symptoms [20]. Through activation of downstream signaling pathways, interleukin-6 promotes epithelial cell proliferation, stromal expansion, and resistance to apoptosis, directly linking inflammatory signaling to tissue growth [21]. Interleukin-8 serves as a key chemotactic and pro-angiogenic factor, facilitating recruitment of neutrophils and promoting vascular remodeling that supports sustained immune infiltration [22]. Additional chemokines, including CCL2 and CXCL12, enhance the migration and retention of monocytes, macrophages, and lymphocytes within the prostate, reinforcing immune cell accumulation and local inflammatory signaling. Tumor necrosis factor- α and interleukin-1 β further amplify inflammatory responses by activating transcription factors that drive expression of secondary cytokines, chemokines, and adhesion molecules [23]. Crucially, these inflammatory mediators function within interconnected signaling loops rather than as isolated factors. Cytokine-driven immune cell activation leads to further mediator release, perpetuating inflammation even in the absence of an active infectious trigger [24]. This self-sustaining cytokine and chemokine network is characteristic of chronic inflammatory disorders and represents a defining pathogenic feature of progressive benign prostatic hyperplasia.

4. Mechanistic Links Between Inflammation and Prostatic Remodeling

4.1 Stromal and Epithelial Proliferation

One of the most direct consequences of chronic immune activation in benign prostatic hyperplasia is sustained stimulation of stromal and epithelial cell proliferation. Pro-inflammatory cytokines activate mitogenic and survival signaling pathways within prostatic cells, resulting in increased cell cycle progression, resistance to apoptosis, and expansion of both stromal and epithelial compartments [25]. Stromal fibroblasts are particularly responsive to inflammatory cues and undergo phenotypic differentiation into myofibroblasts [26]. These cells exhibit enhanced

contractile properties and secrete large amounts of extracellular matrix components and growth factors, thereby amplifying local tissue growth [27]. Stromal expansion not only increases prostate volume but also alters the biomechanical environment of the gland. Epithelial cells likewise respond to chronic inflammatory signaling by increasing proliferative activity and displaying altered differentiation patterns [28]. Persistent immune-mediated injury and repair disrupt normal epithelial–stromal communication, leading to dysregulated paracrine signaling that further promotes hyperplasia [29]. This reciprocal interaction between inflammatory cells, stroma, and epithelium establishes a self-sustaining cycle of tissue growth and remodeling.

4.2 Extracellular Matrix Remodeling and Fibrosis

Chronic inflammation also drives pathological extracellular matrix remodeling. Sustained release of transforming growth factor- β and other profibrotic mediators stimulates excessive deposition of collagen, fibronectin, and other matrix proteins [30]. Progressive fibrosis increases tissue stiffness and reduces compliance, altering the structural integrity of the prostate and contributing to luminal narrowing and urethral compression.

4.3 Smooth Muscle Tone and Functional Obstruction

Beyond structural remodeling, inflammatory mediators profoundly influence smooth muscle tone. Cytokines and mast cell–derived factors enhance smooth muscle contractility and impair relaxation, increasing urethral resistance independent of prostate size [31]. This functional component helps explain the weak correlation between prostate volume and symptom severity, highlighting inflammation as a key determinant of lower urinary tract dysfunction in BPH.

5. Interaction with Oxidative Stress, Aging, and Cellular Senescence

Chronic inflammation in benign prostatic hyperplasia is closely linked to oxidative stress and aging-related biological processes, forming a self-perpetuating cycle that drives disease progression [32]. Activated immune cells within the hyperplastic prostate generate reactive oxygen species as part of sustained inflammatory responses. When antioxidant defenses are overwhelmed, excess reactive oxygen species cause oxidative damage to cellular macromolecules, impairing normal epithelial and stromal cell function [33]. Oxidative stress also activates redox-sensitive signaling pathways that enhance transcription of pro-inflammatory cytokines and chemokines, thereby reinforcing immune activation and tissue remodeling. Aging further intensifies this pathogenic loop through immunosenescence and the accumulation of senescent cells in prostatic tissue [34]. Senescent epithelial and stromal cells acquire a pro-inflammatory secretory phenotype, characterized by continuous release of cytokines, growth factors, and matrix-modifying enzymes [35]. These factors promote immune cell recruitment, fibroblast activation, and extracellular matrix remodeling. Consequently, aging actively shapes and sustains the inflammatory microenvironment of the prostate, rather than simply increasing susceptibility to benign prostatic hyperplasia.

6. Therapeutic Implications and Future Directions

Recognition of chronic inflammation as a central driver of benign prostatic hyperplasia expands therapeutic possibilities beyond conventional approaches targeting androgen signaling and smooth muscle tone. Anti-inflammatory agents, cytokine-modulating therapies, and mast cell stabilizers offer potential to directly suppress immune-mediated tissue remodeling and functional obstruction [36]. Strategies aimed at restoring immune balance, including modulation of macrophage activation and reduction of pro-inflammatory T cell responses, may be particularly beneficial in patients with prominent inflammatory profiles [37]. In parallel, interventions targeting oxidative stress and metabolic dysfunction, such as lifestyle modification and antioxidant-supportive therapies, may indirectly reduce inflammatory burden and disease progression [38]. Future research should prioritize the integration of immune profiling into clinical evaluation, allowing stratification of patients based on inflammatory signatures and risk of progression. Longitudinal and interventional studies are needed to determine whether early targeting of inflammation can modify the natural history of BPH, improve symptom control, and reduce reliance on invasive surgical interventions.

CONCLUSION

Immune profiling has fundamentally reshaped our understanding of benign prostatic hyperplasia, revealing chronic inflammation as a central driver of prostate enlargement and functional impairment. Persistent infiltration of immune cells, sustained cytokine signaling, and interactions with oxidative stress and aging converge to promote pathological remodeling of the prostate. Appreciating the immune dimension of BPH not only clarifies disease mechanisms but also highlights novel opportunities for targeted, patient-specific interventions. As immune profiling technologies advance, they are poised to play an increasingly important role in the diagnosis, prognosis, and management of BPH.

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