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Nano-Immunoengineering: Programmable Nanoparticles for Remodeling Immune Checkpoints in Cancer

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ABSTRACT

Immune checkpoint blockade has revolutionized cancer therapy by reactivating antitumor immunity, yet durable clinical responses remain limited to a subset of patients. Resistance arises from immune-suppressive tumor microenvironments, systemic toxicity, inadequate drug delivery, and adaptive immune escape mechanisms. Nano-immunoengineering has emerged as a powerful interdisciplinary strategy to address these limitations by integrating immunology, nanotechnology, and systems-level tumor biology. Programmable nanoparticles can be rationally designed to modulate immune checkpoints with high spatial, temporal, and cellular precision, enabling selective immune activation while minimizing off-target effects. These nanoplatforms facilitate targeted delivery of checkpoint inhibitors, gene regulators, peptides, and immunomodulatory agents, while also allowing co-delivery of synergistic therapeutics that reshape the tumor immune landscape. This review provides a comprehensive analysis of nano-immunoengineering approaches for remodeling immune checkpoints in cancer. We discuss immune checkpoint biology, nanoparticle design principles, targeting strategies, and mechanisms of immune reprogramming. Preclinical advances, combinatorial nano-immunotherapies, and translational challenges are critically evaluated. Collectively, programmable nanoparticles represent a transformative platform to overcome current barriers in cancer immunotherapy and advance precision immune checkpoint modulation.

Keywords: nano-immunoengineering; immune checkpoints; programmable nanoparticles; cancer immunotherapy; tumor microenvironment

INTRODUCTION

Immune checkpoints are regulatory pathways that maintain immune homeostasis by modulating the intensity and duration of immune responses. Under physiological conditions, these checkpoints prevent autoimmunity and limit tissue damage during inflammation. In cancer, however, tumors hijack immune checkpoint mechanisms to evade immune surveillance, suppress effector T cell activity, and establish an immunosuppressive microenvironment[1, 2]. The most extensively studied immune checkpoints include programmed cell death protein 1 (PD-1), its ligand PD-L1, and cytotoxic T lymphocyte–associated antigen 4 (CTLA-4). Additional checkpoints such as LAG-3, TIM-3, TIGIT, and VISTA have gained attention as contributors to immune exhaustion and resistance to therapy[3, 4].

Checkpoint blockade therapies using monoclonal antibodies have transformed the treatment landscape of melanoma, lung cancer, renal cell carcinoma, and several other malignancies. By interrupting inhibitory signaling pathways, these therapies restore T cell activation, proliferation, and cytotoxic function[5]. Despite these successes, a majority of patients either fail to respond or develop acquired resistance. Response rates vary widely across cancer types and are influenced by tumor mutational burden, antigen presentation capacity, immune cell infiltration, and metabolic constraints within the tumor microenvironment[6].

One major challenge is the systemic nature of immune checkpoint inhibitors. Antibody-based therapies circulate throughout the body, leading to immune-related adverse events such as colitis, dermatitis, endocrinopathies, and pneumonitis[7]. These toxicities reflect widespread immune activation rather than tumor-restricted effects. Furthermore, large antibody molecules often exhibit limited tumor penetration, particularly in poorly vascularized or fibrotic tumors, resulting in heterogeneous checkpoint inhibition[7, 8].

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Tumors also deploy compensatory immunosuppressive mechanisms in response to checkpoint blockade. Upregulation of alternative checkpoints, recruitment of regulatory T cells and myeloid-derived suppressor cells, secretion of immunosuppressive cytokines, and metabolic competition for nutrients such as glucose and tryptophan collectively blunt therapeutic efficacy[9, 10]. These adaptive resistance pathways highlight the need for multifaceted and precisely controlled immunomodulation.

Additionally, immune checkpoint expression is highly dynamic and context-dependent. PD-L1 levels can fluctuate in response to inflammatory cytokines, oncogenic signaling, and therapeutic stress. Immune checkpoint function is also shaped by subcellular localization, receptor clustering, and intracellular trafficking features that are difficult to regulate using conventional systemic therapies[11–13]. Collectively, these challenges underscore the limitations of current immune checkpoint blockade strategies and motivate the development of innovative delivery systems capable of spatially and temporally precise immune modulation.

Nano-immunoengineering offers a paradigm shift by enabling targeted, programmable, and multifunctional manipulation of immune checkpoints[14]. By leveraging nanoscale design, it becomes possible to localize checkpoint modulation to tumors or specific immune cell populations, co-deliver synergistic agents, and respond dynamically to the tumor immune microenvironment[14]. Understanding immune checkpoint biology in the context of tumor heterogeneity and immune regulation is therefore foundational to the rational design of nanoparticle-based immunotherapies.

2. Design Principles of Programmable Nanoparticles for Immunomodulation

Programmable nanoparticles are engineered nanostructures whose physical, chemical, and biological properties can be precisely tailored to achieve defined immunological functions[15]. In nano-immunoengineering, nanoparticle design is guided by the need to interact selectively with immune cells, tumor cells, or components of the tumor microenvironment while maintaining stability and biocompatibility in vivo[15].

Key design parameters include particle size, shape, surface charge, and composition. Nanoparticles ranging from 20 to 150 nm are generally optimal for tumor accumulation and lymphatic transport, enabling access to both tumor sites and immune organs such as lymph nodes[16]. Surface functionalization with polyethylene glycol or biomimetic coatings enhances circulation time and reduces nonspecific clearance. Shape and rigidity further influence cellular uptake and immune recognition.

Programmability is achieved through modular construction. Nanoparticles can incorporate targeting ligands, immune checkpoint inhibitors, nucleic acids, and stimuli-responsive elements within a single platform[17]. For example, pH-sensitive or enzyme-cleavable linkers allow drug release specifically within acidic tumors or immune cell endosomes. Redox-responsive materials exploit elevated intracellular glutathione levels for cytosolic release of genetic cargo[18, 19].

Importantly, nanoparticles can be designed to actively engage immune pathways rather than passively deliver drugs. Certain materials intrinsically activate pattern recognition receptors or modulate antigen presentation, thereby serving as both carriers and immune adjuvants. This multifunctionality distinguishes programmable nanoparticles from conventional delivery systems and enables precise control over immune checkpoint modulation[20, 21].

3. Nanoparticle-Mediated Delivery of Immune Checkpoint Inhibitors

Immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs) targeting programmed cell death protein-1 (PD-1), programmed death-ligand 1 (PD-L1), and cytotoxic T-lymphocyte–associated protein 4 (CTLA-4) have revolutionized cancer therapy[22]. However, their clinical success is limited by suboptimal tumor accumulation, immune-related adverse events, and resistance mechanisms driven by heterogeneous checkpoint expression. Nanoparticle-mediated delivery offers a powerful strategy to overcome these limitations by improving pharmacokinetics, enhancing tumor localization, and enabling precise immune modulation[22].

Nanoparticles can encapsulate or surface-conjugate monoclonal antibodies, antibody fragments, peptides, or small-molecule checkpoint inhibitors, protecting them from enzymatic degradation and rapid clearance[23]. Encapsulation prolongs circulation time while surface functionalization with targeting ligands enhances accumulation at the tumor–immune interface. Compared with free antibodies, nanoparticle-bound ICIs exhibit prolonged retention within tumors and improved penetration into immune-rich niches such as tertiary lymphoid structures and perivascular regions[24]. This localized delivery increases checkpoint blockade efficacy while reducing systemic immune activation and associated toxicities, including colitis, dermatitis, and endocrinopathies.

Controlled and sustained release is another key advantage of nanoparticle delivery. By tuning particle composition, size, and surface chemistry, ICIs can be released gradually over time, maintaining therapeutic concentrations within tumors without repeated high-dose systemic administration[25]. This approach is particularly valuable for fragile biologics that are susceptible to denaturation or rapid degradation in circulation.

Emerging strategies extend beyond extracellular checkpoint blockade to intracellular checkpoint modulation. Nanoparticles capable of delivering RNA interference molecules, antisense oligonucleotides, or CRISPR-Cas systems enable direct downregulation of checkpoint expression at the genetic or transcriptional level[26–28]. For example, nanoparticle-mediated delivery of siRNA targeting PD-L1 in tumor cells or antigen-presenting

cells results in sustained checkpoint suppression that is difficult to achieve with antibody-based therapies alone. These approaches offer long-lasting immune reprogramming with potentially fewer dosing requirements.
Importantly, nanoparticle surface engineering allows cell-type–specific targeting. By incorporating ligands that recognize markers on T cells, dendritic cells, or tumor cells, ICIs can be delivered selectively to specific immune compartments[29, 30]. This precision enables tailored immune activation, enhances antitumor efficacy, and minimizes off-target immune perturbation. Overall, nanoparticle-mediated delivery represents a next-generation strategy for refining immune checkpoint therapy through spatial, temporal, and cellular precision.

4. Remodeling the Tumor Immune Microenvironment Using Nano-Immunoengineering

The tumor immune microenvironment (TIME) is a dynamic and highly immunosuppressive ecosystem that critically determines response to immune checkpoint blockade. Immunosuppressive cell populations, including regulatory T cells (Tregs), myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs), and tumor-associated macrophages, cooperate with inhibitory cytokines, hypoxia, and metabolic constraints to limit effective antitumor immunity. Nano-immunoengineering provides a programmable platform to simultaneously target immune checkpoints and recondition the surrounding microenvironment[31, 32].
Nanoparticles can be engineered to reprogram suppressive immune cells by delivering agents that inhibit Tregs and MDSCs or repolarize macrophages toward pro-inflammatory phenotypes [31]. For instance, nanoparticles carrying small-molecule inhibitors, cytokines, or RNA therapeutics can suppress immunosuppressive signaling while enhancing antigen presentation and effector T-cell infiltration. When combined with checkpoint inhibition, these strategies amplify immune activation and overcome resistance driven by an immunologically "cold" microenvironment.
In addition to immune cell reprogramming, nanoparticles enable metabolic and cytokine modulation within the TIME. Delivery of metabolic regulators can alleviate nutrient competition and lactate-induced immune suppression, restoring T-cell functionality. Co-delivery of checkpoint inhibitors with cytokines such as interleukin-12 or interferon-γ further enhances immune activation while avoiding systemic toxicity through localized release[33].
Microenvironment-responsive nanoparticles add another layer of selectivity. Systems that respond to hypoxia, acidic pH, or tumor-associated enzymes selectively release immunomodulators within tumors, sparing normal tissues. This responsiveness ensures that immune activation is confined to pathological sites, reducing adverse effects and improving therapeutic indices[33–35].
By integrating checkpoint blockade with immune cell reprogramming, cytokine modulation, and metabolic normalization, nano-immunoengineering reshapes the immune landscape to support durable and effective antitumor immunity. This systems-level approach moves beyond single-target interventions toward holistic immune restoration.

5. Combinatorial Nano-Immunotherapies Targeting Multiple Checkpoints

Tumors frequently exploit multiple immune checkpoints simultaneously, limiting the effectiveness of monotherapies targeting a single pathway. Adaptive resistance mechanisms often involve compensatory upregulation of alternative checkpoints, leading to immune escape[36]. Combinatorial nano-immunotherapy addresses this challenge by enabling coordinated targeting of multiple immune checkpoints within a single therapeutic platform[36].
Programmable nanoparticles allow co-delivery of multiple checkpoint inhibitors, such as PD-1/PD-L1 and CTLA-4 blockers, or combinations of checkpoint blockade with cancer vaccines, cytokines, or metabolic modulators[37]. By synchronizing delivery and optimizing stoichiometry, nanoparticles overcome pharmacokinetic mismatches that often limit the effectiveness of combination therapies administered separately. This coordinated approach ensures simultaneous pathway inhibition at the tumor site, maximizing synergistic immune activation[37].
In addition to checkpoint combinations, nanoparticles can integrate immunotherapy with tumor antigen delivery or immune adjuvants, promoting robust T-cell priming and memory formation. Co-delivery of metabolic or stromal modulators further enhances immune infiltration and function, addressing both immunological and physical barriers to antitumor immunity[38]. Combinatorial nano-immunotherapies also reduce cumulative toxicity by lowering required doses of individual agents and confining immune activation to tumors. By preemptively targeting compensatory pathways, these systems mitigate adaptive resistance and improve the durability of immune responses[38]. Such multifunctional platforms exemplify the systems-level advantages of nano-immunoengineering in addressing immune complexity and tumor heterogeneity.

6. Translational Challenges and Clinical Prospects of Nano-Immunoengineering

Despite strong preclinical promise, several challenges must be addressed to enable clinical translation of nano-immunoengineering strategies. Manufacturing scalability and reproducibility remain major hurdles, particularly for multifunctional and biologic-laden nanoparticles[39]. Achieving batch-to-batch consistency in size, composition, and bioactivity is essential for regulatory approval and clinical adoption[39].

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Long-term safety is another critical consideration. Nanoparticle biodistribution, clearance, and potential immunogenicity must be rigorously evaluated, particularly for repeated dosing regimens. The effects of sustained immune modulation on immune memory, tolerance, and autoimmunity require careful investigation in clinically relevant models[40-44].

Patient stratification is equally important for successful translation. Biomarkers that predict response to nano-immunotherapies such as immune infiltration patterns, checkpoint expression, and metabolic signatures will be critical for selecting appropriate patient populations[45-46]. Advances in immune profiling, imaging, and systems biology are expected to facilitate rational clinical trial design and personalized treatment strategies[47].

Regulatory frameworks for complex nanomedicines are still evolving, necessitating standardized characterization and validation protocols. Nevertheless, continued advances in materials science, immunology, and precision oncology are steadily bridging the gap between laboratory innovation and clinical application. As these challenges are addressed, programmable nano-immunoengineering platforms are increasingly positioned to deliver meaningful clinical impact in cancer immunotherapy.

7. Conclusion and Future Perspectives

Nano-immunoengineering represents a transformative strategy for remodeling immune checkpoints in cancer with unprecedented precision. Programmable nanoparticles overcome key limitations of conventional checkpoint inhibitors by enabling targeted delivery, combinatorial modulation, and dynamic responsiveness to the tumor immune microenvironment. By integrating immunology, nanotechnology, and systems oncology, this approach offers durable and personalized immune activation while minimizing toxicity. Continued advances in nanoparticle design, translational manufacturing, and biomarker-driven patient selection will be essential for clinical success. As these technologies mature, nano-immunoengineering is poised to redefine the future of cancer immunotherapy and precision oncology.

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