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Short Communication

Impact of Telomere Shortening on Aging and Cellular Lifespan

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DESCRIPTION

Aging is a complex biological process influenced by various genetic, environmental and molecular factors. One of the most significant mechanisms driving the aging process is telomere shortening, which plays a central role in regulating cellular lifespan. Telomeres, the protective caps at the ends of chromosomes, gradually erode over time with each cell division. This shortening is closely linked to the onset of cellular aging, known as cellular senescence and has far-reaching implications for tissue function, age-related diseases and overall longevity.

What are telomeres?

Telomeres are repetitive DNA sequences (TTAGGG in humans) located at the ends of linear chromosomes. They serve two key functions: protecting the chromosome ends from degradation or fusion with other chromosomes and preserving the genetic material during cell division. During DNA replication, the replication machinery is unable to fully copy the extreme ends of linear chromosomes, leading to the progressive loss of small amounts of telomeric DNA with each cell division. This phenomenon is known as the end-replication problem [1].

Cellular senescence and aging

As cells divide and their telomeres shorten, they eventually reach a threshold at which they stop dividing, a process known as replicative senescence. Senescent cells remain metabolically active but exhibit distinct changes in gene expression, morphology and function. These cells secrete a variety of inflammatory cytokines, growth factors and proteases, collectively referred to as the Senescence-Associated Secretory Phenotype (SASP). While the SASP plays a role in tissue repair and remodelling, its chronic presence can lead to tissue damage, inflammation and the progression of age-related diseases [2,3].

Telomere shortening and age-related diseases

Telomere shortening has been implicated in the development of a wide range of age-related diseases, including cardiovascular disease, neurodegenerative disorders and certain cancers. For example, individuals with shorter telomeres are at a higher risk of developing atherosclerosis, a condition characterized by the buildup of plaque in the arteries. This increased risk is thought to be due, in part, to the fact that shortened telomeres in vascular endothelial cells lead to senescence, reducing the cells' ability to repair damaged blood vessels [4,5].

Telomere shortening is also linked to immune system aging, or immunosenescence. Immune cells, such as T cells, undergo frequent cell division during immune responses. As telomeres shorten in these cells, their ability to proliferate and set up effective immune responses diminishes, leading to increased susceptibility to infections, reduced vaccine efficacy and a higher incidence of autoimmune diseases in older individuals [6,7].

Telomerase: The enzyme that replenishes telomeres

Telomerase is a specialized enzyme that counteracts telomere shortening by adding repetitive nucleotide sequences to the ends of chromosomes, thereby extending telomeres. Telomerase is highly active in germ cells (which give rise to eggs and sperm), stem cells and certain immune cells, allowing these cells to maintain their telomere length and divide indefinitely. This is important for processes such as reproduction, tissue regeneration and immune responses [7,8].

Lifestyle factors influencing telomere shortening

While telomere shortening is a natural part of aging, several environmental and lifestyle factors can accelerate or slow this process. Chronic stress, poor diet, smoking, sedentary behaviour and exposure to environmental toxins have all been shown to contribute to accelerated telomere shortening. For example, individuals with chronic psychological stress have shorter telomeres, potentially due to increased oxidative stress and inflammation, which can damage DNA and accelerate telomere erosion [9].

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Potential interventions to preserve telomere length

Given the role of telomere shortening in aging and disease, there is growing interest in developing interventions that can preserve or restore telomere length. One approach is the development of telomerase activators, which aim to enhance the activity of telomerase in somatic cells, potentially extending their lifespan. However, this approach carries risks, as increasing telomerase activity could also promote the growth of cancer cells [10].

CONCLUSION

Telomere shortening is a fundamental mechanism that limits cellular lifespan and contributes to the aging process. While it serves as a protective measure against cancer, it also leads to the gradual decline in tissue function and increases the risk of age-related diseases. Understanding the complex relationship between telomere biology, cellular aging and lifestyle factors opens the door to potential interventions aimed at extending health span and promoting longevity. By targeting the underlying mechanisms of telomere attrition, researchers hope to develop new strategies for delaying the onset of age-related diseases and enhancing the quality of life in older individuals.

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