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Perspective

The Role of Genetics in Leukemia Development and Treatment

Ignacio Sanz*

Department of Oncology, North Sumatra State Islamic University, Medan, Indonesia

DESCRIPTION

Leukemia is a type of cancer that affects the blood and bone marrow, is characterized by the uncontrolled growth of abnormal white blood cells. While leukemia can develop in individuals of any age, it is most commonly diagnosed in children and older adults. The development of leukemia is a complex process influenced by a combination of genetic, environmental and lifestyle factors. Among these, genetics plays an important role not only in the onset of leukemia but also in determining the most effective treatment strategies. Understanding the genetic basis of leukemia has transformed the way this disease is diagnosed, treated and managed, paving the way for more personalized and targeted therapies.

The development of leukemia is driven by genetic mutations that disrupt the normal regulation of cell growth and differentiation. These mutations can be inherited or acquired during a person's lifetime. Inherited mutations, although relatively rare, can predispose individuals to leukemia. For example, individuals with Down syndrome, which is caused by an extra copy of chromosome 21, have a significantly higher risk of developing Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) during childhood. Similarly, inherited mutations in genes such as *TP53*, which is known as the "guardian of the genome" due to its role in preventing the development of cancer, can increase the risk of leukemia.

Acquired mutations are changes in the DNA that occur in the cells of the bone marrow over time. These mutations can result from exposure to environmental factors such as radiation or certain chemicals, or they may occur spontaneously. One of the most well-known genetic abnormalities associated with leukemia is the Philadelphia chromosome, a result of a translocation between chromosomes 9 and 22. This translocation creates a fusion gene, which produces an abnormal protein that helps in the proliferation of leukemic cells. The Philadelphia chromosome is present in the majority of cases of Chronic Myeloid Leukemia (CML) and in some cases of Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL).

The accumulation of genetic mutations in hematopoietic stem cells in the bone marrow gives rise to all blood cells leads to the development of leukemia. These mutations can affect various signaling pathways, transcription factors and tumor suppressor genes, ultimately resulting in the uncontrolled growth of immature white blood cells. The specific combination of genetic mutations determines the subtype of leukemia and influences the disease's behavior, prognosis and response to treatment.

The identification of genetic mutations in leukemia has revolutionized the approach to treatment, leading to the development of targeted therapies and personalized medicine. In contrast, targeted therapies are designed to specifically attack the genetic abnormalities driving the growth of leukemic cells, sparing normal cells and reducing side effects. In addition to targeted therapies, genetic information is also used to guide decisions about other aspects of treatment, such as the intensity of chemotherapy and the need for bone marrow transplantation. For example, patients with certain favorable genetic mutations may be treated with less intensive chemotherapy, reducing the risk of long-term side effects, while patients with high-risk genetic profiles may be recommended for more aggressive treatment approaches, including stem cell transplantation.

Moreover, advances in genetic editing technologies, such as Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats and CRISPR-associated protein 9 (CRISPR-Cas9), have opened up new possibilities for directly correcting genetic mutations in leukemic cells. While still in the experimental stages, these approaches have the potential to provide curative treatments for certain types of leukemia in the future. As genetic research advances, the potential for even more personalized and effective treatments for leukemia grows, offering hope for better prognoses and ultimately, cures for this challenging disease.

Correspondence to: Ignacio Sanz, Department of Oncology, North Sumatra State Islamic University, Medan, Indonesia, E-mail: sanz@ign.id

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