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Oxidative stress and inflammatory pathways in sickle cell anemia: Diagnostic and therapeutic insights

Mohd Afzal, Vipin Chand[1], Deepak Kumar[2], Shivam Mishra[3], Layba Hussain Ansari[3]

Department of Medical Laboratory Technology, Arogyam Institute of Paramedical and Allied Sciences (Affiliated to H.N.B. Uttarakhand Medical Education University), Roorkee, Uttarakhand, [1]Department of Medical Laboratory Technology, Gg School of Nursing and Paramedical Runkata, (Affiliated to Atal Bihari Vajpayee Medical University Lucknow), Agra, Uttar Pradesh, [2]Department of Medical Laboratory Technology, OM Sterling Global University, Hisar, Haryana, [3]Department of Medical Laboratory Technology, Guru Nanak College of Paramedical Sciences and Hospital (Affiliated to H.N.B. Uttarakhand Medical Education University), Jhajra, Dehradun, India

Address for correspondence: Dr. Mohd Afzal, Department of Medical Laboratory Technology, Arogyam Institute of Paramedical and Allied Sciences (Affiliated to H.N.B. Uttarakhand Medical Education University), Roorkee, Uttarakhand, India. E-mail: afzalglocal@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Sickle cell anemia (SCA) is a genetic hemoglobinopathy marked by persistent hemolysis, vaso-occlusion, and many organ problems. Oxidative stress and inflammation are crucial in the pathophysiology of SCA, contributing significantly to disease severity and development. High levels of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and persistent inflammatory reactions worsen red cell sickling, endothelial dysfunction, and vascular damage. The present research gives a thorough overview of the processes that underpin inflammation and oxidative damage in SCA, emphasizing their interconnectedness and clinical significance. Hemolysis-induced ROS generation, redox imbalance, and antioxidant depletion disrupt cellular homeostasis, while Pro-inflammatory cytokines like interleukin-6 and tumor necrosis factor-α promote immunological activation and leukocyte adherence. Diagnostic approaches involving oxidative and inflammatory biomarkers are gaining clinical relevance for disease monitoring and therapeutic guidance. Current therapeutic strategies focus on antioxidant agents like Vitamin E and N-acetylcysteine, disease-modifying drugs such as hydroxyurea, and lifestyle interventions to mitigate oxidative damage. Anti-inflammatory drugs, statins, omega-3 fatty acids, and new biologics are all being investigated for their capacity to reduce chronic inflammation. Advanced techniques, including genetic treatment approaches and stem cell-based transplants, show promise for therapeutic outcomes. Future research should emphasize personalized treatment approaches, integrative antioxidant and anti-inflammatory therapies, and the implementation of large-scale, long-term clinical trials to establish efficacy and safety. Addressing these gaps is critical for establishing focused, patient-specific interventions that can greatly improve the quality of life and clinical outcomes for people with SCA.

Keywords:

Antioxidant therapy, cytokines, hydroxyurea, inflammatory pathways, oxidative stress, reactive oxygen species, sickle cell anemia

Introduction

Sickle cell anemia (SCA) is a hereditary blood condition caused by a point mutation in the β-globin gene. The mutation substitutes valine for glutamic acid at the sixth amino acid position of the β-globin chain. This genetic change produces an aberrant type of hemoglobin known as hemoglobin S (HbS). When oxygen levels are low, HbS polymerizes, causing red blood cells (RBCs) to stiffen and form a distinctive sickle shape. These deformed cells have decreased deformability, increased adhesion to the vascular endothelium, and are prone to hemolysis.[1]

SCA is a serious public health problem in Sub-Saharan Africa, India, the Middle East, and among people of African heritage across the world. Persistent RBC destruction–related anemia, repeated episodes of painful vascular blockages, and multi-organ consequences are all hallmarks of the condition. These pathophysiological symptoms result from the interaction

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of aberrant erythrocyte characteristics, persistent inflammation, oxidative damage, and endothelial dysfunction. Despite breakthroughs in supportive care and disease-modifying treatments like hydroxyurea, hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (HSCT), and new gene therapies, SCA is still a life-threatening syndrome with few treatment choices for the majority of patients.[2]

The significance of oxidative stress and inflammation in sickle cell anemia

Oxidative stress and chronic inflammation play essential roles in the pathogenesis of SCA. Oxidative stress occurs when the creation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) exceeds the body's antioxidant defense systems' ability to neutralize them. Chronic hemolysis, ischemia-reperfusion damage, and white blood cells and endothelial cell activation all contribute to high ROS generation in SCA. Free hemoglobin generated during intravascular hemolysis acts as a powerful pro-oxidant, reducing nitric oxide (NO) and causing vascular dysfunction.[3]

In SCA, the inflammatory environment includes upregulated expression of inflammatory signaling molecules (e.g. interleukin [IL]-6, tumor necrosis factor [TNF]-α), leukocyte adherence, ROS generation, and overexpression of adhesion molecules such vascular cell adhesion molecule (VCAM)-1 and intercellular adhesion molecule (ICAM)-1. These pathways lead to endothelial activation, vasoconstriction, and chronic organ damage. The interaction of oxidative and inflammatory pathways exacerbates cellular harm and maintains the vaso-occlusion/ischemia cycle.[4]

Understanding the molecular pathways that connect oxidative stress and inflammation is essential for finding possible indicators of disease severity and creating targeted treatments. Antioxidants, anti-inflammatory drugs, and inhibitors of certain signaling pathways are all being investigated as adjuncts to traditional therapy. Integrating oxidative and inflammatory markers into standard diagnostics may help improve disease monitoring and prognosis in SCA patients.[5]

The goal of this study is to extensively examine the interplay between oxidative stress and inflammatory pathways in the pathophysiology of SCA, with an emphasis on their diagnostic and therapeutic implications. SCA is essentially a hereditary illness, although oxidative damage and chronic inflammation have a significant impact on its clinical severity. This review focuses on recent advances in understanding how ROS, free hemoglobin, NO deficiency, and pro-inflammatory cytokines contribute to vascular dysfunction and organ injury.

This work's originality stems from its integrated strategy, which connects molecular processes with actual therapeutic applications. It also examines developing biomarkers for disease monitoring and new therapy options, such as antioxidants, anti-inflammatory drugs, and gene-based therapeutics. This review, by combining new discoveries and highlighting gaps in existing understanding, provides insights into more focused, effective, and accessible therapy options, which are especially beneficial in resource-constrained situations where SCA burden is highest.

Methodology

Search strategy

The present study used a narrative method to highlight and integrate current understanding about the roles of oxidative stress and inflammatory pathways in SCA, as well as diagnostic and therapeutic advances. An detailed examination of the literature was carried out using internet databases including PubMed, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. Relevant keywords and medical subject headings phrases, such as but not limited to, were used. Keywords are "sickle cell anemia," "oxidative stress," "inflammation," "reactive oxygen species," "cytokines," "antioxidant therapy," "hydroxyurea," "anti-inflammatory treatment," and "gene therapy" were used in various combinations. Selected articles were critically reviewed to extract relevant information about pathophysiology, diagnostic biomarkers, and therapeutic strategies. Emphasis was placed on both mechanistic insights and translational relevance. Data were organized under thematic headings to ensure logical flow and clarity of content. Gaps in current research and future directions were also identified to guide further investigation in this domain. The literature reviewed in this manuscript encompasses publications from the period 2011–2025.

Pathophysiology of Sickle Cell Anemia

Figure 1 depicts the sequence of events in SCA, beginning with the inheritance of the HbS gene and progressing to the production of abnormal hemoglobin, RBC sickling during deoxygenation, vaso-occlusion, hemolysis, and the resulting clinical complications such as pain crises, organ damage, and anemia.

Genetic basis and hemoglobin S mutation

SCA is an autosomal recessive condition caused by a single mutation in the β-globin gene (HBB) on chromosome 11. The GAG → GTG mutation at codon 6 of the β-globin gene replaces glutamic acid with valine in the hemoglobin β-chain. The mutant hemoglobin is known as HbS.[6]

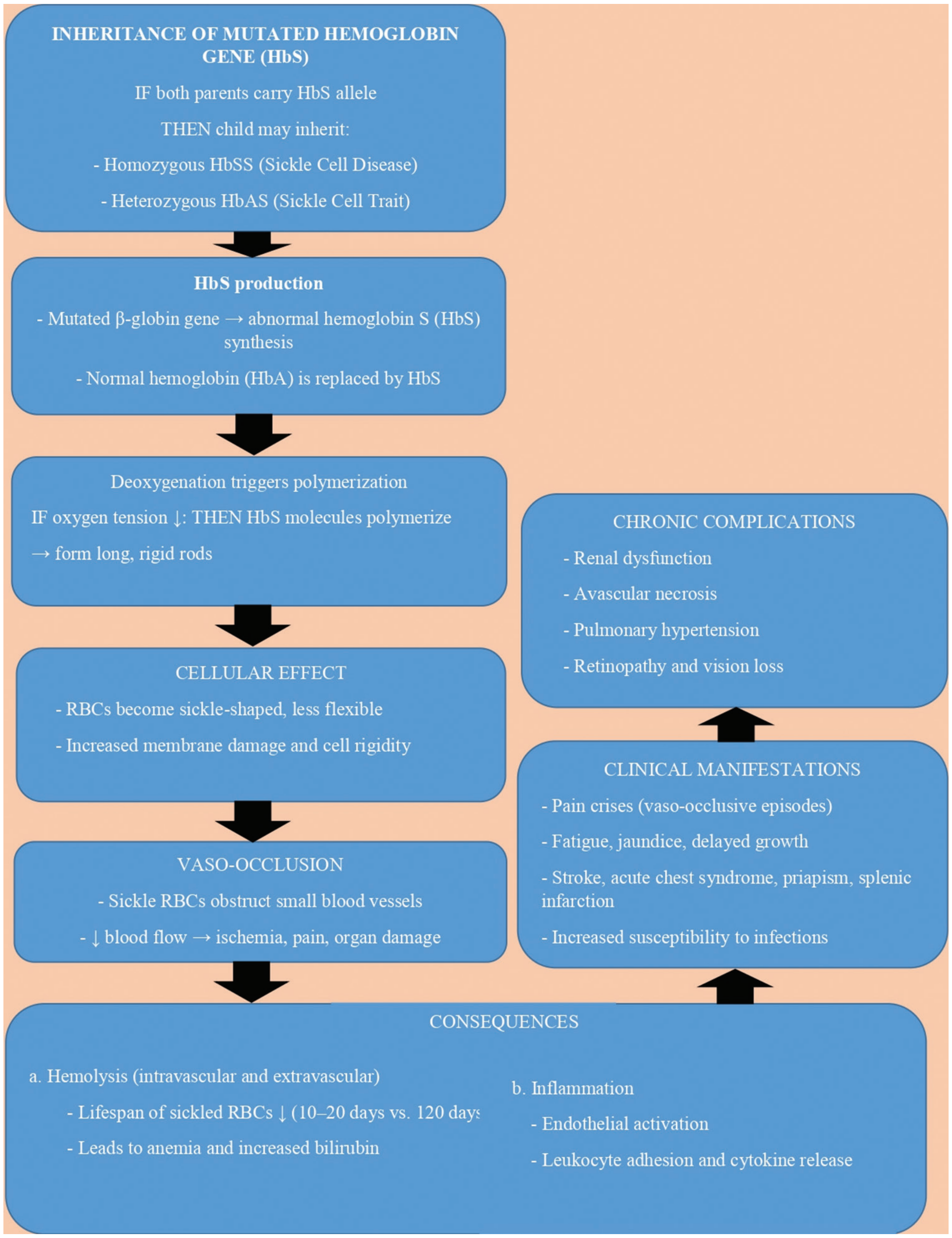

Figure 1: Sickle cell anemia pathophysiology

Under deoxygenated circumstances, HbS polymerizes, forming long, stiff strands that deform the RBC into its distinctive sickle shape. These sickled RBCs are less deformable, more adherent to the endothelium, and prone to premature destruction (hemolysis). The irregular form also disrupts blood flow, resulting in microvascular occlusion, tissue ischemia, and discomfort.[7]

Individuals with homozygous HbSS receive the faulty gene from both parents and usually have severe illness. Heterozygous individuals (HbAS), often known as carriers or people with sickle cell trait, are typically asymptomatic but may develop issues in extreme conditions.[8]

Mechanisms of sickling and hemolysis

SCA is characterized by the polymerization of HbS under low oxygen conditions, leading to the sickling of RBCs. Under hypoxic circumstances, HbS molecules form hard polymers, distorting the typically flexible biconcave RBCs into elongated, sickle-shaped forms. This sickling is initially reversible with reoxygenation, but it becomes irreversible after several cycles of deoxygenation and reoxygenation, resulting in persistent membrane damage.[7]

Sickled RBCs contribute to increased vascular obstruction and compromised microcirculation because they are more stiff, more likely to rupture, and have a tendency to stick to the vascular endothelium. These malformed cells are also more vulnerable to mechanical and oxidative damage, leading in premature death–a process known as hemolysis. In SCA, hemolysis takes place both within blood vessels (intravascular) and outside them (extravascular), leading to the release of free hemoglobin and heme into the circulation. These metabolites deplete NO, impair vascular homeostasis, and increase oxidative stress and inflammation. These processes work together to cause the persistent anemia, pain crises, and organ destruction that are associated with SCA.[9]

Role of vaso-occlusion in disease progression

Vaso-occlusion is a key pathogenic event in SCA that influences disease development and clinical severity. It happens when hard, sickled RBCs clog tiny blood arteries, hindering regular circulation and the transport of oxygen to body tissues. This occlusion is increased by sickled RBCs, leukocytes, and platelets adhering to the activated vascular endothelium.[10]

The resultant ischemia-reperfusion damage causes local hypoxia, inflammation, and endothelial dysfunction, setting off a vicious cycle of additional sickling and vascular blockage. Vaso-occlusion is the underlying cause of SCA's distinctive painful episodes (vaso-occlusive crises [VOCs]), which result in sudden complications including cerebral infarction, pulmonary crisis, and splenic trapping. Chronic, repetitive vaso-occlusive episodes cause cumulative tissue and organ damage, such as avascular necrosis, renal failure, pulmonary hypertension, and cognitive impairment. Targeting the mechanisms of vaso-occlusion is thus critical for controlling and changing the disease course in SCA.[11]

Oxidative Damage in Sickle Cell Anemia

Definition and sources of oxidative stress

Oxidative stress is described as a breakdown in equilibrium induced by the excessive production of ROS, which overwhelms the body's antioxidant defense mechanisms. ROS refers to free radicals like superoxide anion (O_2^-) and hydroxyl radical (OH^-), as well as non-radical compounds like hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2). While ROS play vital roles in normal cellular signaling, excessive buildup causes damage to lipids, proteins, and DNA, compromising cellular integrity and functionality.[12]

In SCA, oxidative stress plays a major role in disease progression and is significantly exacerbated by both intrinsic and extrinsic causes:

Autoxidation of hemoglobin S

HbS, the aberrant hemoglobin type in SCA, is physically unstable and spontaneously oxidizes more quickly than normal adult hemoglobin A (HbA). Even in conditions of normal oxygen tension, this mechanism produces superoxide radicals and other ROS. The unstable HbS also causes the development of methemoglobin and ferryl hemoglobin, which contribute to oxidative stress.[13]

Chronic hemolysis

Intravascular hemolysis is a distinguishing feature of SCA. The ongoing breakdown of sickled RBCs leads to the release of free hemoglobin and heme into the bloodstream. Free hemoglobin quickly depletes NO, a vital molecule for maintaining vascular tone and acting as an antioxidant, thereby promoting endothelial dysfunction. Free heme functions as a prooxidant, stimulating the Fenton reaction and producing highly reactive hydroxyl radicals, exacerbating oxidative damage.[14]

Inflammatory cell activation

Chronic inflammation in SCA involves active leukocytes (particularly neutrophils and monocytes), which create large levels of ROS as part of the inflammatory response. These immune cells produce pro-inflammatory cytokines like TNF-α and IL-1 β, which enhance oxidative damage and stimulate endothelial cell activation.[15]

Mitochondrial dysfunction

In response to recurrent ischemia-reperfusion cycles produced by vaso-occlusion, mitochondrial metabolism in diverse tissues is compromised, resulting in excessive ROS generation. This adds to a feedback loop that causes more oxidative damage and inflammation.[16]

Impaired antioxidant defenses

Patients with SCA frequently have low levels of natural antioxidants including compounds like glutathione (GSH), antioxidant enzymes such as superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), and the fat-soluble nutrient Vitamin E (tocopherol). Depletion of these defensive mechanisms exposes cells to oxidative damage, prolonging the injury cycle.[17]

Hemolysis and reactive oxygen species generation

In SCA, hemolysis–referring to the early breakdown of RBCs–is a persistent and damaging process that significantly promotes the generation of ROS. The repetitive sickling and unsickling of RBCs in reaction to variations in oxygen tension damages the cell membrane, making them more brittle and prone to rupture. This hemolytic process takes place both intravascularly (in blood vessels) and extravascularly (in the spleen and liver), releasing hemoglobin and heme into the plasma.[18]

When free hemoglobin enters the bloodstream, it oxidizes and forms methemoglobin and superoxide radicals (O_2^-). These unstable intermediates rapidly create H_2O_2 and hydroxyl radicals through Fenton and Haber-Weiss reactions, resulting in enhanced oxidative stress. Free heme, which is produced during hemolysis, functions as a strong prooxidant and catalyzes ROS generation, causing lipid peroxidation of cell membranes and mitochondrial damage in surrounding tissues.[19]

Furthermore, ROS produced during hemolysis depletes NO, an important vasodilator and antioxidant. Free hemoglobin scavenges NO, causing endothelial dysfunction, vasoconstriction, and elevated expression of adhesion molecules, collectively promoting vaso-occlusion and inflammation.[20]

Additionally, hemolysis stimulates leukocytes and endothelial cells, which generate ROS. During the respiratory burst, neutrophils, for example, create superoxide via the NADPH oxidase complex, which enhances the oxidative environment.[21]

Redox imbalance and antioxidant depletion in sickle cell anemia

SCA, a genetic hemoglobinopathy, is distinguished not only by chronic hemolytic anemia and VOCs, but also by an ongoing state of oxidative stress. A key factor in the progression of SCA is the disruption of redox homeostasis, commonly referred to as redox imbalance. This imbalance results from increased ROS production combined with a weakened antioxidant defense mechanism, causing damage at both the cellular and molecular level.[22]

Redox imbalance in sickle cell anemia

SCA's aberrant HbS goes through recurrent cycles of polymerization and depolymerization due to oxygenation-deoxygenation processes. These cycles produce erythrocyte sickling, resulting in increased mechanical fragility and hemolysis. When free heme and iron are released into the circulation during hemolysis, Fenton reactions are set off, producing very reactive hydroxyl radicals (OH). Furthermore, ischemia-reperfusion damage, leukocyte activation, and NADPH oxidase overactivity all increase ROS generation. The major ROS implicated include: (1). Superoxide anion (2) H_2O_2 (3) Hydroxyl radicals. These ROS have the ability to oxidize lipids, proteins, and nucleic acids, causing endothelial dysfunction, inflammation, and membrane damage in RBCs, exacerbating hemolysis and increasing vaso-occlusion.[23]

Antioxidant depletion in sickle cell anemia

Under normal physiological settings, the body balances oxidative stress using both enzymatic and non-enzymatic antioxidant mechanisms. However, in individuals with SCA, these antioxidant defenses are frequently overwhelmed or reduced.[24]

In the setting of SCA, the body's antioxidant defense system is critical in mitigating the negative consequences of oxidative stress. GSH, an essential intracellular tripeptide, works as a direct scavenger of free radicals and as a cofactor for glutathione peroxidase (GPx), which catalyzes the reduction of H_2O_2 and lipid peroxides, protecting cellular components from oxidative stress. SOD contributes by converting highly reactive superoxide radicals to H_2O_2, which is subsequently dissolved into water and oxygen by CAT.[25]

This enzyme cascade is essential for decreasing oxidative damage on erythrocytes and tissues. In addition, non-enzymatic antioxidants like ascorbic acid (Vitamin C) and tocopherol (Vitamin E) protect membranes by suppressing lipid peroxidation, with Vitamin E stabilizing cell membranes and Vitamin C rebuilding damaged Vitamin E, so maintaining antioxidant synergy. These components work together to maintain redox equilibrium, but SCA depletion increases cellular susceptibility and contributes considerably to disease pathogenesis.[17]

The decreased availability of these antioxidants in SCA might be attributed to increased use to neutralize excess ROS, reduced production, or loss owing to persistent hemolysis. For example, GSH levels in sickle RBCs are much lower, compromising their capacity to detoxify peroxides and maintain membrane integrity.[26]

Clinical implications

The combined impact of redox imbalance and insufficient antioxidant levels in SCA carries significant clinical consequences. Excessive production of ROS combined with poor antioxidant defenses makes RBCs more susceptible to oxidative damage, resulting in increased hemolysis. This persistent hemolytic condition adds to chronic vascular inflammation and endothelial dysfunction, both of which are important causes of VOCs. Furthermore, prolonged oxidative stress promotes the aging and turnover of RBCs, lowering their lifetime and functional efficiency. Over time, these processes lead to gradual organ damage, most notably in the kidneys, lungs, and brain, where microvascular blockage and hypoxia are common.[27]

Antioxidant therapy (e.g. N-acetylcysteine, L-glutamine, or vitamin supplementation) has emerged as a promising adjuvant in SCA treatment. These procedures seek to restore redox equilibrium, safeguard biological components, and lessen the severity of illness effects.[28]

Biomarkers of oxidative damage in sickle cell anemia

Oxidative damage is a major factor in the pathogenesis of SCA, and identifying particular biomarkers offers critical information on the level of oxidative damage, disease progression, and therapy response. Oxidative stress biomarkers in SCA indicate an altered balance between oxidative stress generation and antioxidant protection and may be identified in a range of biological samples such as blood plasma, erythrocytes, and urine.[29]

Lipid peroxidation products

Malondialdehyde (MDA), a consequence of lipid peroxidation, is a well-studied biomarker of oxidative stress in SCA. Elevated MDA levels in SCA patients suggest oxidative damage to RBC membranes, which contributes to their stiffness and susceptibility to hemolysis. F2-isoprostanes, another kind of lipid peroxidation marker, are likewise elevated in SCA and offer a consistent and specific indicator of oxidative damage *in vivo*.[30]

Protein oxidation markers

Oxidative alterations in plasma proteins can be assessed using biomarkers notably, advanced oxidation protein products and protein carbonyl concentrations. These levels are higher in SCA patients and are linked to chronic inflammation and endothelial dysfunction.[31]

DNA oxidation markers

8-hydroxy-2′-deoxyguanosine (8-OHdG), a widely used marker for oxidative DNA damage, represents the effect of oxidative stress on nucleic acids. Elevated 8-OHdG levels in urine or plasma indicate oxidative damage at the genomic level in SCA patients.[32]

Antioxidant enzyme levels and activity

Decreased levels or activity of antioxidant enzymes serve as indirect markers of oxidative stress. SCA patients frequently have low levels of SOD, GPx, and CAT, indicating antioxidant depletion. GSH levels are also frequently low, indicating poor detoxification of H_2O_2 and lipid peroxides.[33]

Inflammatory and endothelial markers

Although C-reactive protein (CRP), VCAM-1, and ICAM-1 are not the only indicators of oxidative stress, increased levels in SCA are frequently associated with oxidative damage and vascular injury. Their presence shows a link between oxidative damage and inflammatory/vascular issues in the illness.[34]

Clinical utility

Monitoring oxidative stress indicators in SCA not only improves knowledge of disease causes, but also helps to assess the efficacy of antioxidant therapy such L-glutamine, N-acetylcysteine, and vitamin supplements. Regular monitoring of these indicators may aid in the prediction of disease severity, the frequency of VOCs, and the risk of organ damage, allowing for more customized and prompt treatment interventions.[35]

Inflammatory Pathways in Sickle Cell Anemia

Inflammation is crucial to the development and progression of SCA. The condition is distinguished not only by hemolytic anemia and vaso-occlusion, but also by a chronic pro-inflammatory state, even during stable periods. This persistent inflammation causes severe endothelial impairment, immune dysregulation, and multi-organ dysfunction in those who are afflicted.[36]

Chronic inflammation and immune activation

SCA is becoming recognized as a chronic inflammatory illness characterized by ongoing hemolysis, ischemia-reperfusion damage, and cellular stress. Free hemoglobin produced during hemolysis serves as a danger-associated molecular pattern, inducing innate immune responses. This activates monocytes, macrophages, and neutrophils, resulting in the generation of ROS and pro-inflammatory chemicals. Consequently, the immune system stays activated even without infection, leading to widespread inflammation, heightened pain sensitivity, and repeated VOCs.[37]

Role of cytokines and chemokines

Pro-inflammatory cytokines and chemokines are overexpressed in SCA and serve critical roles in developing and maintaining inflammation. TNF-α and IL-6 levels are much higher during both steady-state and crisis periods. TNF-α activates endothelial cells and increases adhesion molecules, whereas IL-6 stimulates leukocyte recruitment and acute phase response. Cytokines including IL-1 β, IL-8, and interferon-γ enhance the inflammatory cascade, leading to endothelial damage, pain crises, and neutrophil and monocyte migration to vascular sites.[38]

Endothelial dysfunction and leukocyte adhesion

Endothelial dysfunction is a characteristic of inflammation in SCA, as demonstrated by decreased NO availability, increased oxidative stress, and increased expression of adhesion molecules such as VCAM-1, ICAM-1, E-selectin, and P-selectin. These molecules facilitate the attachment of sickled RBCs, activated white blood cells, and platelets to the lining of blood vessels. This causes intravascular plugging, decreased blood flow, and ischemia, which are all important processes in vaso-occlusion and tissue damage. Furthermore, active endothelial cells produce more cytokines and chemokines, which perpetuates the inflammatory cycle and improves leukocyte-endothelial interactions.[39]

Crosstalk between oxidative stress and inflammation

There is a significant bidirectional link between oxidative stress and inflammation in SCA. Persistent hemolysis and reduced blood flow (ischemia) elevate the generation of ROS, which in turn activate transcription factors such as nuclear factor kappa B and AP-1, regulating the expression of pro-inflammatory cytokines. As a result, inflammatory cells generate additional ROS, resulting in a self-sustaining loop of cellular damage, inflammation, and oxidative stress. This relationship worsens vascular dysfunction, accelerates erythrocytes aging, and increases the likelihood of complications such acute chest syndrome, stroke, and kidney failure. Understanding this dynamic provides intriguing targets for therapeutic approaches to disrupt the cycle of inflammation and oxidative damage in SCA.[40]

Diagnostic Approaches

This Table 1 provides a comparative overview of traditional and modern diagnostic tools used in the evaluation of anemia. It highlights the integration of advanced technologies, including genetic testing, oxidative stress markers, and inflammatory profiling–especially relevant in conditions like SCA–to improve diagnostic accuracy and patient management.

Clinical assessment and laboratory parameters

SCA is diagnosed by a complete examination that includes clinical assessment as well as confirmatory laboratory studies. Early and correct diagnosis is critical for initiating effective therapies, reducing complications, and improving long-term results.[51]

The clinical evaluation begins with a thorough patient history and physical examination. Chronic anemia, recurrent episodes of pain (VOCs), fatigue, delayed growth and development in children, frequent infections, and symptoms associated with organ dysfunction such as jaundice, splenomegaly, leg ulcers, or neurological deficits are all key clinical features of SCA. A family history of hemoglobinopathies or consanguinity may raise concern.[52]

The laboratory diagnosis begins with a complete blood count, which usually indicates normocytic normochromic anemia, an increased reticulocyte count due to compensatory erythropoiesis, and variable leukocytosis. Peripheral blood smears reveal distinctive characteristics such as sickled erythrocytes, target cells, Howell-Jolly bodies (particularly in asplenic patients), and nucleated RBCs.[53]

Hemoglobin electrophoresis remains the gold standard for determining the existence of aberrant hemoglobin. In SCA, HbS predominates, with little or significantly decreased HbA and varying quantities of fetal hemoglobin (HbF). Due to high HbF levels at birth, high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) or isoelectric focusing are preferable techniques for reliable detection in newborns.[54]

Serum bilirubin, lactate dehydrogenase, and haptoglobin levels may also be measured to assess continued hemolysis. Elevated levels of CRP and erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) can indicate the presence of inflammation or infection. Oxygen saturation levels, urinalysis, and organ function tests (such as renal and liver function panels) can also help evaluate problems and guide treatment.[55]

In areas with a high frequency, newborn screening programs and genetic counseling are key components of early detection and prevention. Confirmatory molecular testing for HBB gene mutations may be used when hemoglobinopathy panels produce equivocal results or for prenatal diagnosis in at-risk pregnancies.[56]

Overall, combining clinical characteristics with hematological and biochemical indicators allows for earlier diagnosis, risk classification, and proper therapy of SCA patients.

Table 1: Advances in diagnostic approaches for anemia

Reference number	Diagnostic parameter	Traditional approach	Advanced/modern approach
[41]	Hemoglobin measurement	Manual colorimetric assays	Automated hematology analyzers (e.g., sysmex, coulter)
[42]	Red cell morphology	Peripheral blood smear under microscope	Digital imaging, AI-assisted morphology analysis
[43]	Hemoglobin typing	Alkaline gel electrophoresis	HPLC, capillary electrophoresis, IEF
[44]	Genetic testing	Family history analysis only	PCR, NGS for HbS, HbC, and β-thalassemia mutations
[45]	Oxidative stress markers	Not routinely assessed	GSH, MDA, SOD, ROS
[46]	Inflammatory markers	ESR	CRP, IL-6, TNF-α, IL-1β, adhesion molecule profiling
[47]	Iron studies	Serum iron, TIBC, Ferritin	sTfR, hepcidin assay
[48]	Reticulocyte count	Manual methylene blue staining	Flow cytometry-based reticulocyte enumeration
[49]	Bone marrow assessment	Aspiration and biopsy	Molecular cytogenetics, Immunophenotyping by flow cytometry
[50]	Point-of-care hemoglobin tests	WHO color scale	Portable hemoglobinometers, smartphone-integrated devices

AI=Artificial intelligence, ESR=Erythrocyte sedimentation rate, sTfR=Soluble transferrin receptor, GSH=Glutathione, MDA=Malondialdehyde, SOD=Superoxide dismutase, ROS=Reactive oxygen species, HPLC=High-performance liquid chromatography, PCR=Polymerase chain reaction, HbS=Hemoglobin S, HbC=Hemoglobin C, TIBC=Total iron binding capacity, WHO=World Health Organization, IEF=Isoelectric focusing, CRP=C-reactive protein, IL-6=Interleukin-6, TNF-α=Tumor necrosis factor alpha, NGS=Next-generation sequencing

Measurement of oxidative stress markers

Oxidative stress plays a crucial role in the underlying pathology and progression of SCA. The assessment of oxidative stress indicators gives useful insights into the amount of redox imbalance, aids in disease monitoring, and may guide therapy methods.[57]

Oxidative stress signals are widely classified as pro-oxidant indicators and antioxidant defense components.

Pro-oxidant markers

MDA: MDA is a significant consequence of lipid peroxidation and is often used as a reliable biomarker of oxidative damage to cell membranes. Elevated MDA levels in SCA patients indicate persistent oxidative damage to erythrocyte membranes and the vascular endothelium.[58]

ROS: Fluorescent probes and chemiluminescent assays can directly detect ROS, including superoxide anions (O_2^-), H_2O_2, and hydroxyl radicals (OH). Increased ROS production in SCA is caused by hemolysis, ischemia-reperfusion damage, and activated immune cells.[59]

8-Isoprostane and 8-Hydroxydeoxyguanosine (8-OHdG): These indicators show that lipids and genetic material (DNA) have been oxidatively damaged, respectively. Their increased levels in urine or plasma indicate systemic oxidative damage in SCA patients.[60]

Antioxidant defense markers

GSH: GSH is a vital intracellular antioxidant that helps neutralize free radicals and supports the function of enzymatic antioxidant systems. Depleted GSH levels in SCA indicate decreased antioxidant capability and increased redox stress.[61]

SOD, CAT, and GPx: These are enzymatic antioxidants detected in erythrocyte lysates or plasma. In SCA, their activities might change–either increasing as a compensatory response or decreasing due to oxidative damage and enzyme inhibition.[62]

Total antioxidant capacity (TAC): TAC tests determine the cumulative impact of all antioxidants in plasma. A lower TAC in SCA patients indicates an overworked antioxidant system.[63]

Analytical techniques

Spectrophotometry and ELISA are commonly used to measure oxidative stress indicators such MDA, reduced GSH, and antioxidant enzyme activity. A more precise and focused method for measuring MDA, 8-hydroxydeoxyguanosine (8-OHdG), and isoprostanes–markers of oxidative damage to DNA and lipids–is HPLC. Analyzing intracellular oxidative species concentrations in leukocytes and erythrocytes using flow cytometry and fluorescence imaging methods provides important insights into the oxidative state of cells. Additionally, point-of-care diagnostic tools targeting specific markers of oxidative stress are currently under development, aiming to deliver rapid, bedside assessment and monitoring oxidative stress in SCA patients in real time.[64]

Clinical significance

Assessing oxidative stress markers enhances our insight into the pathophysiology of SCA and helps evaluate the effectiveness of antioxidant treatments like Vitamin E, N-acetylcysteine, and hydroxyurea. Incorporating these biomarkers into routine evaluations may offer prognostic benefits and support the development of personalized treatment plans.[65]

Inflammatory biomarkers in sickle cell anemia diagnosis

Inflammation is a hallmark of SCA, even during steady-state periods. Chronic immune activation and episodic inflammatory bursts during VOCs contribute to the pathophysiology and clinical severity of the disease. The evaluation of inflammatory biomarkers offers valuable diagnostic and prognostic insights and may support the monitoring of disease activity and therapeutic response.[66]

Inflammatory biomarkers in sickle cell anemia

CRP: CRP is an acute-phase protein produced by the liver in response to IL-6. Elevated CRP levels are prevalent during VOCs and infections in SCA patients, making it a sensitive indicator of systemic inflammation.[67]

Erythrocyte sedimentation rate

ESR is a nonspecific marker of inflammation that is commonly elevated in SCA, particularly during inflammatory complications like osteomyelitis or acute chest syndrome. However, its interpretation must take into account concomitant anemia.[68]

Cytokines

IL-6 is a pro-inflammatory cytokine that increases during VOCs and is linked to disease severity and endothelial activation in SCA. TNF-α exacerbates inflammation by activating endothelial cells and boosting adhesion molecules, leading to increased leukocyte adherence and vascular inflammation. IL-1 β is a powerful cytokine that causes fever, discomfort, and promotes endothelial dysfunction. Furthermore, IL-8 serves as a chemokine, attracting neutrophils to inflamed tissues and causing local inflammation and tissue damage during VOCs.[69]

Adhesion molecules
Soluble VACM-1 and soluble ICAM-1 levels are elevated in SCA, indicating endothelial dysfunction and increased leukocyte adhesion.[70]

High-sensitivity C-reactive protein
hs-CRP can identify low-grade inflammation even in the steady state and may act as a prognostic marker for future VOCs.[71]

Ferritin
While ferritin is predominantly an iron-storing protein, it also functions as an acute-phase reactant, which is frequently high in SCA owing to inflammation and recurrent transfusions.[72]

Clinical utility
These inflammatory indicators can assist distinguish between vaso-occlusive events and infectious or inflammatory consequences. Their repeated measurements also help to assess the efficacy of anti-inflammatory and disease-modifying medications like hydroxyurea. Moreover, higher levels of cytokines and adhesion molecules are being explored as predictive indicators associated with the emergence of vaso-occlusive events, organ impairment, and overall pathological burden.[73]

Emerging diagnostic tools and technologies
The evaluation and surveillance of SCA are improving as new technologies seek for greater accuracy, speed, and convenience. These technologies are extremely important for early identification, illness severity assessment, and treatment response evaluation, particularly in low-resource settings.[74]

Point-of-care devices
Recent innovations have led to the development of rapid, low-cost POC diagnostic tools for early SCA screening. Devices such as paper-based hemoglobin solubility tests, microfluidic electrophoresis chips, and smartphone-integrated sensors allow detection of hemoglobin variants (HbS, HbF, HbA) using minimal blood volume and without the need for extensive laboratory infrastructure. These technologies are especially useful in neonatal screening and rural outreach programs.[75]

Biosensors and wearable devices
Nanotechnology-based biosensors are being investigated for the real-time detection of oxidative stress biomarkers, inflammatory mediators, and hemolysis products. Wearable devices that track physiological parameters–such as oxygen saturation, heart rate variability, and body temperature–can provide early alerts for imminent VOCs.[76]

Advanced imaging techniques
Functional MRI, Doppler ultrasound, and transcranial Doppler (TCD) imaging have proved useful in determining organ damage and cerebrovascular risk in SCA patients. TCD, in example, is frequently utilized for stroke risk screening in children with SCA, allowing for prompt treatments such as transfusion therapy.[77]

Genomic and proteomic approaches
Next-generation sequencing allows for thorough investigation of genetic modifiers, such as polymorphisms in BCL11A or HBS1 L-MYB, that alter HbF levels and illness severity. Proteomic profiling is being used to discover particular protein markers associated with inflammation, oxidative damage, and hemolysis.[78]

Artificial intelligence and machine learning
Artificial intelligence-powered algorithms are being created to assess complicated clinical, laboratory, and imaging data in order to predict disease progression, the risk of complications, and therapy results. Machine learning models are also being used to automate the interpretation of peripheral smear and electrophoresis data, hence increasing diagnostic efficiency.[79]

Microfluidic platforms
Microfluidic devices simulate blood flow in capillaries and are used to investigate RBC deformability, adhesion, and aggregation under physiological settings. These platforms give vital information on the rheological anomalies of sickle RBCs and are being developed for diagnostic purposes.[80]

Emerging diagnostic tools are transforming the management of SCA by allowing for earlier identification, improved risk classification, and real-time monitoring. Integrating these techniques into clinical practice has the potential to greatly improve patient outcomes and minimize disease-related morbidity, particularly in low-resource healthcare settings.[81]

Therapeutic Strategies Targeting Oxidative Stress

Oxidative stress is a key factor in the pathogenesis of SCA, leading to hemolysis, endothelial dysfunction, and chronic inflammation. Targeted treatment techniques attempt to restore redox equilibrium while minimizing tissue damage.[82]

Antioxidant therapies (e.g., Vitamin E, N-acetylcysteine)
Antioxidants aid to combat ROS, which are overproduced in SCA owing to continuous hemolysis and ischemia-reperfusion damage.[83]

Two commonly studied agents include:

Vitamin E (α-tocopherol): A lipid-soluble antioxidant that defends cell membranes against oxidative damage. Vitamin E supplementation has been proven to prevent lipid peroxidation and increase the membrane integrity of RBCs, reducing hemolysis.[84]

N-acetylcysteine

As a precursor to GSH, NAC lowers oxidative stress and restores intracellular antioxidant reserves. Clinical studies indicate that NAC can reduce vaso-occlusive episodes and enhance endothelial function in SCA patients.[85]

Role of hydroxyurea and other pharmacological agents

Hydroxyurea

This remains the primary pharmacological treatment for SCA. While hydroxyurea is primarily utilized to enhance HbF levels, it also has antioxidant properties by lowering leukocyte count, decreasing hemolysis, and enhancing red cell hydration. It reduces the total oxidative load and indirectly inhibits inflammation.[86]

Voxelotor

A recently developed agent enhances hemoglobin's oxygen-binding affinity, which helps prevent sickling and hemolysis, thereby indirectly lowering the production of ROS.[87]

L-glutamine

Approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for SCA, L-glutamine is thought to improve the redox potential of sickle RBCs by increasing NAD and GSH availability, thus countering oxidative stress.[88]

Statins and ACE inhibitors

Although mainly used to treat cardiovascular diseases, these agents have shown potential in decreasing endothelial oxidative damage and inflammation in SCA.[89]

Nutritional and lifestyle interventions

Nutritional strategies and lifestyle modifications can significantly impact oxidative balance in SCA patients.

Dietary antioxidants: Consuming a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and foods high in polyphenols–like berries, green tea, and dark chocolate–can boost the body's natural antioxidant levels. Micronutrients including zinc, selenium, and Vitamins C and A are required for enzymatic antioxidant activity.[90,91]

Hydration and avoidance of triggers

Proper hydration maintains blood viscosity and lowers the likelihood of VOCs. Avoiding environmental and physiological stressors such as high temperatures, illnesses, and excessive activity can help to reduce oxidative and inflammatory reactions.[92]

Regular moderate exercise

While vigorous exercise may raise ROS, moderate activity boosts antioxidant enzyme production and endothelial function, providing long-term protection.[93]

Therapeutic Strategies Targeting Inflammation

Chronic inflammation is a characteristic of SCA, which is characterized by prolonged hemolysis, endothelial activation, and immunological dysregulation. TNF-α, IL-6, and IL-1 β are major inflammatory cytokines that play a significant role in driving VOCs and organ damage. Thus, addressing inflammation is a viable approach to disease regulation and symptom reduction.[94]

Anti-inflammatory agents and cytokine inhibitors

Corticosteroids

While beneficial in lowering acute inflammation, their long-term usage in SCA is restricted due to the dangers of rebound pain, avascular necrosis, and immunosuppression. Nonetheless, short-term corticosteroid therapy (e.g., dexamethasone) has demonstrated some benefit in treating acute chest syndrome and VOC.[95]

Cytokine inhibitors: Biologic agents targeting pro-inflammatory cytokines are gaining attentionsuch as, anakinra (IL-1 receptor antagonist) and Canakinumab (anti-IL-1 β monoclonal antibody) have shown potential in reducing systemic inflammation and tocilizumab (anti-IL-6 receptor antibody) may help attenuate endothelial dysfunction and systemic inflammation, though more studies are needed in SCA-specific populations.[96,97]

TNF-α inhibitors: Although infliximab and etanercept are typically used to treat autoimmune diseases, they may lower inflammatory signals and vascular damage in SCA. However, clinical evidence in this area is still scarce.[98]

Statins, omega-3 fatty acids, and novel compounds

Statins: In addition to decreasing cholesterol, statins have anti-inflammatory and endothelium-stabilizing actions. Simvastatin and atorvastatin have been evaluated in SCA patients for their potential to reduce vascular inflammation and enhance NO availability, showing promising early results.[99]

Omega-3 fatty acids

Omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids, commonly found in fish oil, help lower inflammation by reducing the production of leukotrienes and prostaglandins. According to studies, supplementation may reduce the frequency of VOCs, enhance erythrocyte deformability, and lower CRP levels.[100]

Novel anti-inflammatory compounds

Crizanlizumab

A monoclonal antibody targeting P-selectin, it inhibits leukocyte and platelet adhesion to the endothelium, reducing VOC frequency. It is FDA-approved and marks a shift toward targeted anti-adhesion therapy in SCA.

FTX-6058 and voxelotor

While primarily targeting hemoglobinopathy, these novel agents also demonstrate anti-inflammatory and endothelial protective effects.

Role of stem cell therapy and gene therapy approaches

HSCT: Stem cell therapy, particularly HSCT, is a potential treatment for SCA. Allogeneic HSCT, which replaces a patient's faulty hematopoietic stem cells with healthy donor cells capable of making normal HbA, is now the only known solution. Successful engraftment lowers sickling crises and chronic inflammation by correcting endothelial dysfunction and reducing inflammatory biomarkers (CRP, IL-6, TNF-α). However, this approach faces challenges, including limited availability of HLA-matched donors, the risk of graft-versus-host disease (GVHD), and high treatment costs.[101]

To address these constraints, autologous stem cell-based techniques are being explored. In this approach, a patient's own hematopoietic stem cells are harvested, genetically edited to fix the HbS mutation, and then reinfused. This prevents immune rejection and GVHD while also reducing systemic inflammation from hemolysis and endothelial activation. Both allogeneic and autologous stem cell treatments have the potential to repair the genetic abnormality in SCA while also decreasing its chronic inflammatory effects.[102]

Gene therapy: Gene therapy has the potential to change the treatment of SCA by directly targeting the underlying genetic problem. LentiGlobin or CRISPR-Cas9 can be used to introduce functional β-globin genes or fix sickle cell mutations in patients' hematopoietic stem cells. These therapies attempt to restore normal hemoglobin synthesis, and preliminary clinical trials have shown encouraging results, including fewer VOCs and lower levels of inflammatory markers. Another successful technique is to decrease BCL11A, a major transcriptional repressor of HbF. By suppressing or altering this gene, HbF synthesis increases, inhibiting sickle hemoglobin polymerization and thereby lowering hemolysis, inflammation, and related problems. Collectively, these gene therapy techniques have tremendous potential for slowing disease progression and reducing inflammation in SCA patients.[103]

Future Directions and Research Gaps

Personalized medicine and targeted therapies

Personalized medicine can enhance treatment for SCA by addressing patient-specific genetic and molecular markers, potentially improving outcomes and reducing consequences from oxidative stress and inflammation.

Integrative approaches combining antioxidant and anti-inflammatory strategies

Future treatments should focus on comprehensive approaches that incorporate both antioxidants and anti-inflammatory medications to lessen the dual impact of oxidative stress and chronic inflammation in individuals with sickle cell disease.

Need for large-scale clinical trials and long-term studies

There is a pressing need for thorough, large-scale clinical trials and long-term research to assess the efficacy and safety of developing treatment methods, assuring evidence-based care for sickle cell patients.

Conclusion

Oxidative stress and chronic inflammation are important factors in the development of SCA, a complicated hereditary condition, and its associated consequences. This study explores the roles of ROS generation, reduced antioxidant levels, and inflammatory cytokine activity in driving hemolysis, vaso-occlusion, and organ damage in affected individuals.

Treatment approaches aimed at reducing oxidative stress–like antioxidants and hydroxyurea–and those targeting inflammation, including cytokine inhibitors, statins, and gene therapy, hold promise for comprehensive disease management. The combination of personalized medicine and combined antioxidant-anti-inflammatory treatments has the potential to transform care by personalizing therapies to unique patient profiles.

Moving forward, large-scale, long-term clinical trials are required to verify novel medicines and improve diagnostic tools. Finally, improving outcomes and quality of life for people with SCA demands a multidisciplinary, patient-centered approach based on molecular understanding.

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