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HISTOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE LUNGS AND PATHOLOGICAL ALTERATIONS

Akhmedova Lola Abdulkhamidovna

Andijan State Medical Institute,Uzbekistan

Abstract: The lungs are vital organs responsible for gas exchange, providing oxygen to tissues and removing carbon dioxide from the bloodstream. Histologically, the lungs are composed of a branching bronchial tree ending in alveoli, where gas exchange occurs across the alveolar-capillary barrier. Pathological conditions such as pneumonia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and pulmonary fibrosis cause characteristic alterations in lung histology that directly impair respiratory function. This article reviews the normal histological structure of the lungs and describes common pathological changes with emphasis on their diagnostic and clinical relevance.

Keywords: lung histology, alveoli, pneumonia, COPD, pulmonary fibrosis

Introduction

The lungs are essential organs for respiration and survival, providing the interface between the external environment and the circulatory system. Each lung is divided into lobes and lobules and contains a highly specialized histological architecture adapted to optimize gas exchange. The bronchial tree, composed of bronchi, bronchioles, and terminal bronchioles, progressively narrows and transitions into respiratory bronchioles and alveolar ducts. At the end of this branching system are alveoli, the structural and functional units of the lung. The thin alveolar epithelium, together with the capillary endothelium and fused basement membrane, forms the alveolar-capillary barrier through which efficient diffusion of oxygen and carbon dioxide occurs.

Normal lung histology ensures the maintenance of adequate ventilation and perfusion. Type I alveolar epithelial cells cover most of the alveolar surface and facilitate gas exchange, while type II cells produce surfactant to reduce surface tension and prevent alveolar collapse. Macrophages within alveoli provide immune defense against inhaled pathogens. Any disruption to this architecture leads to significant impairment of pulmonary function.

Pathological conditions manifest with distinct histological features. Pneumonia is characterized by inflammatory exudates filling alveolar spaces, while COPD shows bronchial wall thickening, goblet cell hyperplasia, and alveolar destruction (emphysema). Pulmonary fibrosis presents with interstitial collagen deposition and thickening of the alveolar walls, severely limiting gas exchange. These histological changes correlate with clinical symptoms such as dyspnea, hypoxemia, and reduced pulmonary compliance.

This article aims to describe normal lung histology and analyze structural alterations observed in major respiratory diseases, highlighting their diagnostic value and clinical implications.

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The lungs are highly specialized organs that serve as the primary site of gas exchange, providing oxygen for cellular metabolism and eliminating carbon dioxide, a byproduct of energy production. They occupy the thoracic cavity and are divided into lobes, lobules, and acini, each possessing a unique histological organization. This intricate structure ensures that the pulmonary system can adapt to varying physiological demands, from rest to intense exercise, while maintaining homeostasis.

Histologically, the respiratory system is organized into conducting and respiratory portions. The conducting system, which includes the trachea, bronchi, and bronchioles, is lined by pseudostratified columnar epithelium containing ciliated cells, goblet cells, and basal cells. This epithelial arrangement not only allows efficient airflow but also provides defense through mucociliary clearance, removing inhaled particles and pathogens. As the airway branches into smaller bronchioles, the epithelium transitions into simple cuboidal cells, reflecting the gradual adaptation from conduction to gas exchange.

The respiratory portion begins with respiratory bronchioles and continues into alveolar ducts and alveoli, which represent the functional units of gas exchange. The alveolar wall, or interalveolar septum, is composed of a thin layer of type I pneumocytes, responsible for gas diffusion, and type II pneumocytes, which secrete pulmonary surfactant to reduce surface tension and prevent alveolar collapse. In addition, alveolar macrophages provide immune surveillance by phagocytosing microorganisms and debris. This highly specialized histological design ensures that the lungs function efficiently under normal conditions.

Pathological processes such as pneumonia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and pulmonary fibrosis result in distinct structural alterations that impair respiratory function. In pneumonia, alveoli are filled with inflammatory exudates, reducing surface area for gas exchange. COPD is characterized by chronic inflammation, mucus hypersecretion, airway remodeling, and emphysematous destruction of alveolar walls. Pulmonary fibrosis involves excessive collagen deposition within alveolar septa, leading to thickening of the alveolar-capillary barrier and progressive respiratory insufficiency. These changes highlight the importance of understanding normal histology to recognize and interpret disease-related alterations.

Therefore, the study of lung histology not only provides essential insight into basic physiology but also establishes the foundation for diagnosing and managing pulmonary diseases. The purpose of this article is to review the normal histological organization of the lungs and to describe characteristic pathological alterations observed in major respiratory disorders, emphasizing their diagnostic and prognostic significance.

Methods

Histological study of lung tissue is performed on biopsy, surgical, or autopsy specimens. Samples are fixed in 10% formalin, embedded in paraffin, and cut into 4–6 µm sections. Hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) staining provides a general overview of the bronchial epithelium, alveolar spaces, and vascular structures. Special stains such as Periodic Acid–Schiff (PAS) for mucus, Masson's trichrome for collagen, and Gram or Ziehl–Neelsen stains for microorganisms are frequently applied. Immunohistochemistry is used to identify specific inflammatory markers,

fibrosis-related proteins, or tumor antigens in cases of neoplasia. Electron microscopy provides ultrastructural details of alveolar epithelial and endothelial cells.

Histological evaluation of lung tissue is performed on specimens obtained from surgical resection, bronchoscopy-guided biopsy, or autopsy. Proper fixation and preparation are essential to preserve delicate pulmonary structures. Samples are typically fixed in 10% neutral buffered formalin, followed by dehydration, paraffin embedding, and sectioning at 4–6 micrometers.

Routine staining with hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) is the primary method for evaluating general tissue architecture, including the bronchial epithelium, alveolar spaces, vascular structures, and interstitial tissue. This staining allows visualization of cellular morphology, inflammatory infiltration, and gross pathological alterations.

To obtain more detailed information, additional histological and histochemical stains are applied. Periodic Acid–Schiff (PAS) highlights mucus and basement membranes, useful in evaluating goblet cell hyperplasia and epithelial thickening in chronic bronchitis. Masson's trichrome stain is employed to demonstrate collagen deposition, which is crucial in assessing interstitial fibrosis. Gram and Ziehl–Neelsen stains aid in the identification of bacterial and mycobacterial organisms in infectious pneumonia. Congo red is used when amyloidosis is suspected.

Immunohistochemistry provides further diagnostic accuracy by identifying cell-specific markers and inflammatory mediators. For instance, antibodies against surfactant proteins can confirm type II pneumocyte activity, while markers for CD68 highlight macrophage infiltration. Fibrotic activity can be studied using α-smooth muscle actin and collagen-specific antibodies.

Electron microscopy serves as a valuable adjunct in selected cases, offering ultrastructural details of alveolar epithelial cells, endothelial junctions, and surfactant lamellar bodies. It is particularly useful in the evaluation of diffuse interstitial lung diseases and rare congenital disorders of surfactant metabolism.

In addition, morphometric analysis and digital image processing are increasingly used to quantify structural changes such as alveolar wall thickness, fibrotic deposition, and capillary density. These advanced methods provide objective data that can be correlated with clinical and functional outcomes, enhancing the translational value of histological research.

Altogether, a combination of routine histology, special staining, immunohistochemistry, and ultrastructural analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of pulmonary histology under both normal and pathological conditions.

Results

In normal histology, the lungs display a well-organized bronchial tree lined by pseudostratified columnar epithelium with ciliated cells and goblet cells. Bronchioles lack cartilage and glands, while terminal bronchioles lead into respiratory bronchioles and alveolar ducts. Alveoli are lined predominantly by thin type I pneumocytes, supported by type II pneumocytes, which secrete

surfactant. Capillaries closely appose alveolar walls, forming the thin alveolar-capillary barrier critical for gas exchange.

In pneumonia, alveoli are filled with neutrophilic infiltrates and proteinaceous exudates, leading to consolidation of lung tissue. In COPD, histological changes include hypertrophy of submucosal glands, goblet cell hyperplasia, chronic inflammation of airway walls, and emphysematous destruction of alveolar septa. Pulmonary fibrosis shows thickened alveolar septa with extensive collagen deposition, fibroblast proliferation, and distortion of alveolar architecture, resulting in honeycomb-like lung tissue.

Discussion

Histological analysis of lung tissue provides essential information for diagnosing and characterizing respiratory diseases. Each pathological entity has unique structural alterations that correlate with functional impairment. Pneumonia demonstrates acute inflammatory processes that explain impaired gas exchange and hypoxemia. COPD reflects chronic injury associated with environmental exposures such as smoking, and histology explains symptoms like airway obstruction and loss of elastic recoil. Pulmonary fibrosis illustrates the progressive replacement of functional parenchyma with fibrotic tissue, which accounts for restrictive physiology and reduced lung compliance.

While radiological imaging and pulmonary function tests are important in clinical practice, they cannot fully substitute for histological evaluation in identifying specific cellular and structural changes. Moreover, histology provides insight into disease mechanisms, guides treatment strategies, and assists in prognostic evaluation. Modern techniques such as immunohistochemistry and molecular histopathology further enhance diagnostic accuracy by detecting specific markers of inflammation, fibrosis, or neoplasia.

Conclusion

Lung histology illustrates the delicate structural arrangement necessary for efficient gas exchange. The integrity of alveoli, bronchioles, and the alveolar-capillary barrier is critical for maintaining adequate respiration. Pathological processes such as pneumonia, COPD, and pulmonary fibrosis disrupt this architecture in different ways, producing characteristic histological patterns that directly explain clinical manifestations. Histological analysis therefore remains indispensable for the diagnosis, staging, and management of pulmonary diseases.

Although imaging and functional tests are valuable in monitoring respiratory disorders, histology provides the most direct and detailed evaluation of structural pathology. Advances in molecular pathology and immunohistochemistry continue to expand the diagnostic potential of histology, making it an even more powerful tool in respiratory medicine. A deeper understanding of structural alterations in the lung not only improves diagnostic precision but also facilitates the development of targeted therapies to reduce the burden of pulmonary diseases.

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