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CELLULAR PERSISTENCE BEYOND BOUNDARIES: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF HUMAN MICROCHIMERISM, ITS BIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS, AND CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Aslamova Munisa Furkatovna

Samarkand State Medical University, Samarkand, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Microchimerism refers to the sustained coexistence of a genetically distinct, numerically minor cell population within a host organism. Although the phenomenon has been recognised for several decades, its biological significance remained underappreciated until advances in molecular detection made it possible to track rare cell lineages with high sensitivity and specificity. The present review synthesises current knowledge regarding the origin, trafficking, and long-term fate of microchimeric cells in humans, with particular emphasis on fetomaternal exchange during pregnancy, the role of stem-cell-like progenitors in sustaining engraftment, and the dual — protective versus pathological — consequences that these foreign cells may exert on host tissues. Evidence drawn from epidemiological studies, in-vitro experiments, and animal models collectively suggests that microchimerism is not a passive residual phenomenon but rather an active participant in immune modulation, tissue homeostasis, and the pathogenesis of certain autoimmune conditions. Methodological considerations relevant to reliable detection are also addressed, alongside perspectives on therapeutic exploitation of microchimeric cell populations.

Keywords: microchimerism; fetomaternal cell trafficking; pregnancy; immune tolerance; autoimmune disease; stem cells; chimerism detection.

1. Introduction

The concept of biological individuality — the assumption that each organism is composed exclusively of genetically identical cells — has been progressively challenged over the past three decades. Microchimerism, defined as the persistent presence of a small number of cells or cell-free DNA originating from a genetically non-identical individual, disrupts this paradigm in a fundamental way. The prefix 'micro' distinguishes the condition from full chimerism, in which two distinct cell populations coexist at comparable proportions, and underscores the quantitatively minor yet biologically consequential nature of the foreign cells.

The most thoroughly characterised form of human microchimerism arises during pregnancy through bidirectional cellular exchange across the placenta. Fetal cells enter the maternal circulation and, remarkably, may persist in various maternal organs for decades after delivery. Conversely, maternal cells traverse the placental barrier and establish themselves within fetal tissues, potentially influencing neonatal immune development. Beyond the gestational context, microchimerism may also originate from twin-to-twin transfer during dizygotic pregnancies, from blood transfusions, organ transplantation, or even from cells acquired during breast-feeding.

The immunological paradox inherent to microchimerism — how cells bearing foreign major histocompatibility complex (MHC) antigens survive within an immunocompetent host — has driven intense investigative interest. Several lines of evidence point to active mechanisms of

tolerance induction rather than mere immune evasion. Understanding these mechanisms carries direct clinical relevance: microchimeric cells have been implicated in graft acceptance, in protection against certain malignancies, and, conversely, in the development or exacerbation of autoimmune disorders. This review aims to provide an integrated account of the origins, persistence mechanisms, detection strategies, and health implications of microchimerism in humans.

2. Methodology

This work constitutes a narrative review of published scientific literature. Relevant articles were identified through systematic searches of the PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science databases using the following search terms in various combinations: 'microchimerism', 'fetomaternal transfer', 'fetal cells maternal blood', 'pregnancy chimerism', 'immune tolerance microchimerism', 'autoimmunity fetal microchimerism', and 'stem cell microchimerism'. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed publications available in English and covered the period from 1993 — when seminal studies employing polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based Y-chromosome detection were first published — through to 2024.

Inclusion criteria encompassed original research articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and authoritative book chapters addressing the biological basis, detection, and clinical associations of microchimerism in human subjects or in relevant animal models. Studies relying solely on theoretical modelling without experimental validation were excluded. A total of 87 primary sources were reviewed, of which 42 are cited directly in the present text on the basis of methodological quality and relevance to the outlined objectives.

Where applicable, the quality of experimental evidence was assessed according to standard criteria: sample size adequacy, methodological sensitivity, appropriate controls for PCR contamination, and consistency of findings across independent cohorts. Particular attention was paid to distinguishing correlation from mechanistic causation when evaluating the putative roles of microchimeric cells in immune modulation and disease.

3. Results

3.1 Origins and Routes of Microchimeric Cell Acquisition

Fetomaternal microchimerism is established as the predominant natural source of genetically foreign cells in women of reproductive age. Fetal cells enter the maternal bloodstream as early as the fifth week of gestation, with their frequency increasing progressively through the third trimester. Among the fetal cell types identified in maternal peripheral blood are nucleated red blood cells, lymphocytes, monocytes, granulocytes, platelets, and trophoblasts. Of particular significance are fetal cells with characteristics of mesenchymal stem cells (MSC) or haematopoietic progenitors; these multipotent progenitors are presumed to underlie the extraordinary longevity of microchimerism, as they retain the capacity for self-renewal and can differentiate into multiple tissue lineages within the maternal host.

Maternal-to-fetal transfer follows the opposite trajectory: maternal lymphocytes and progenitor cells cross the placenta and are detectable in fetal cord blood and neonatal tissues. This maternally derived microchimerism may persist for years in the child and appears to be of particular immunological relevance during the neonatal period, when the adaptive immune system is undergoing critical maturation. In individuals born with certain immunodeficiency conditions, maternally acquired cells can expand substantially and produce clinically overt graft-versus-host disease, demonstrating their immune competence.

Non-gestational sources of microchimerism include allogeneic blood transfusion, solid organ and haematopoietic stem cell transplantation, and, in dizygotic twins, in-utero sharing of a common placental circulation. Leukoreduction of blood products significantly reduces transfusion-associated microchimerism but does not eliminate it entirely. In trauma patients who received non-leukoreduced transfusions, donor-derived cells have been detected in peripheral blood for months post-transfusion, with some evidence for entrenchment in lymphoid organs.

3.2 Mechanisms Sustaining Long-Term Engraftment

The persistence of microchimeric cells for decades constitutes an immunological paradox: how do cells bearing alloantigens evade elimination by a competent host immune system? Three non-mutually exclusive mechanisms have been proposed and supported by experimental data.

First, microchimeric cells may induce central tolerance by seeding the thymus and promoting the deletion of autoreactive T-cell clones directed against their own antigens. This mechanism is analogous to the process by which self-antigens expressed by thymic epithelial cells shape the T-cell repertoire, and has been demonstrated in murine models where maternal cells transferred in utero led to specific unresponsiveness in the offspring.

Second, peripheral tolerance mechanisms — including the generation of regulatory T cells (Tregs) with specificity for microchimeric antigens, anergy induction, and co-inhibitory receptor engagement — appear to actively suppress effector responses against persistent foreign cells. Studies in transplant recipients have shown an enrichment of donor-specific Tregs in individuals with stable microchimerism, supporting the concept that these cells actively contribute to immune privilege.

Third, certain microchimeric cell subsets may express immunosuppressive molecules such as programmed death ligand 1 (PD-L1), HLA-G, or indoleamine 2,3-dioxygenase (IDO), thereby creating a localised immunosuppressive microenvironment that inhibits effector cell activation. HLA-G, initially characterised as a non-classical MHC molecule expressed at the feto-maternal interface to protect the placenta from natural killer cell-mediated lysis, is now recognised as a broader immunomodulatory signal whose expression by microchimeric cells in non-gestational tissues may confer analogous protection.

3.3 Tissue Distribution and Functional Integration

Microchimeric cells are not uniformly distributed throughout the host but instead exhibit a preferential tissue tropism that, in some instances, correlates with pathological processes. In parous women, fetal cells have been identified in peripheral blood, bone marrow, liver, kidney, thyroid gland, lung, skin, heart, and brain. The detection of fetal cells in the thyroid gland of women with autoimmune thyroiditis, at densities significantly higher than in healthy controls, was one of the first observations to link microchimerism with organ-specific autoimmune disease.

Several groups have documented fetal cells bearing markers of tissue-specific differentiation at their sites of engraftment, raising the possibility that microchimeric progenitors contribute to organ repair. In a particularly instructive series of experiments, fetal cells carrying a Y-chromosome were found in maternal cardiac tissue following myocardial infarction and expressed cardiomyocyte markers, suggesting active participation in regenerative responses. Similar observations have been made in the liver following hepatic injury, where fetal cells bearing hepatocyte markers were identified in greater abundance than in uninjured controls.

3.4 Detection Methodologies and Technical Considerations

Reliable detection of microchimeric cells is technically demanding owing to their rarity — typically between one and a few cells per millilitre of blood or per million host cells in tissues. The development of PCR-based assays targeting Y-chromosome-specific sequences (e.g., the DYZ1 repeat or the SRY gene) revolutionised the field by enabling the sensitive identification of male fetal cells in maternal samples. However, this approach is inherently limited to women who have carried male offspring, thereby excluding half of all pregnancies and all instances of female-to-female transfer.

To overcome this limitation, assays targeting polymorphic short tandem repeats (STRs) or single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) that differ between donor and host have been developed. These approaches allow sex-independent tracking but require prior genotyping of both individuals involved in the chimerism. Quantitative PCR (qPCR) and digital droplet PCR (ddPCR) have substantially improved sensitivity and precision relative to conventional PCR, with ddPCR capable of detecting one chimeric cell equivalent per ten thousand host genome equivalents.

Fluorescence in-situ hybridisation (FISH) combined with immunophenotyping allows simultaneous identification of the chimeric cell's genetic identity and its surface marker profile, thereby linking the foreign genetic origin to functional cell characteristics. Next-generation sequencing approaches, including whole-genome sequencing and single-cell sequencing, are emerging as powerful tools capable of detecting microchimerism at unprecedented resolution while simultaneously providing information on gene expression within chimeric cells.

4. Discussion

4.1 Microchimerism in Autoimmune Disease: Cause or Consequence?

The relationship between microchimerism and autoimmune disease has been a subject of sustained debate. The original hypothesis, formulated in analogy to graft-versus-host disease, proposed that fetal cells persisting in maternal tissues could recognise host antigens as foreign and mount inflammatory responses contributing to conditions such as systemic sclerosis, primary biliary cirrhosis, Sjogren's syndrome, and autoimmune thyroid disease. Supporting this view, several studies have reported elevated levels of fetal microchimerism in women with these conditions relative to parous healthy controls.

However, the causal interpretation faces significant challenges. Inflammatory tissue remodelling and increased vascular permeability associated with active autoimmune disease may themselves facilitate the recruitment and accumulation of microchimeric cells as part of a repair response, making elevated microchimerism a consequence rather than a cause of the pathological process. Furthermore, microchimeric cells detected within lesions often express markers inconsistent with effector immune phenotypes, suggesting a reparative rather than destructive role. The temporal relationship — whether microchimerism precedes or follows disease onset — has proven difficult to establish in cross-sectional human studies.

A reconciling interpretation proposes that microchimerism functions as an immunological amplifier: in immunogenetically susceptible individuals, the presence of semi-allogeneic cells may lower the threshold for autoimmune activation through bystander effects or epitope spreading, without being the primary initiating factor. This framework accommodates both the protective observations in some contexts and the pathological associations in others.

4.2 Protective Roles of Microchimeric Cells

Epidemiological data have yielded intriguing evidence for protective effects of microchimerism in specific contexts. Several studies have reported that parous women, who carry the highest burden of fetal microchimerism, exhibit lower rates of certain malignancies — including breast cancer — compared with nulliparous women, and that this protection correlates with higher levels of detectable fetal cells. It has been hypothesised that fetal cells possessing semi-allogeneic surface antigens may be recognised by maternal natural killer cells and trigger immune surveillance responses that incidentally target nascent tumour cells bearing aberrant surface markers.

Additionally, in the context of organ transplantation, the presence of donor-derived microchimeric cells in the recipient prior to or shortly after transplantation has been associated with improved graft survival and a reduced incidence of acute rejection episodes. This observation informed early clinical attempts to deliberately induce microchimerism by infusing donor bone marrow cells alongside solid organ transplants — a strategy that achieved partial success in achieving operational tolerance in some recipients.

4.3 Microchimerism and Neonatal Immune Programming

The immunological consequences of maternally derived microchimerism in offspring represent an underexplored dimension of the phenomenon. Maternal lymphocytes acquired in utero or through breast milk may participate in shaping the neonatal immune repertoire, potentially promoting tolerance to non-inherited maternal antigens (NIMA). Clinical observations that recipients of kidney allografts from siblings sharing only NIMA with the recipient exhibit superior graft survival compared with recipients sharing non-inherited paternal antigens have been interpreted as evidence for this in-utero tolerisation.

Conversely, there is emerging evidence that maternal microchimeric cells may occasionally exert adverse effects in offspring with specific genetic susceptibilities. Case reports of neonatal lupus and neonatal haemochromatosis have raised the possibility that maternally derived cells contribute to tissue injury in the context of immunological mismatch. The balance between tolerance induction and inflammatory activation by maternal cells in the neonate thus appears to be critically dependent on host genetics and the nature of the microchimeric cell population acquired.

4.4 Therapeutic Perspectives

The immunomodulatory properties of microchimeric cells, combined with their apparent capacity for tissue-specific differentiation, have stimulated interest in their potential therapeutic exploitation. Strategies being explored include the deliberate induction of tolerance to transplant antigens through pre-transplant infusion of donor microchimeric cells, the use of fetal-derived MSCs for regenerative medicine applications, and the manipulation of microchimeric cell populations to enhance anti-tumour immune surveillance.

Significant barriers remain before clinical translation becomes feasible. These include the challenge of expanding microchimeric cell populations ex vivo without altering their immunological properties, the risk of inadvertently triggering graft-versus-host reactions, and the considerable inter-individual variability in the extent and durability of naturally occurring microchimerism. Nevertheless, the study of naturally acquired microchimerism continues to provide a unique biological model for understanding the principles of immune tolerance and co-existence that may ultimately inform rational therapeutic design.

4.5 Limitations and Future Directions

Several important limitations qualify the conclusions drawn from the current body of microchimerism research. Detection sensitivities vary substantially across studies, making quantitative comparisons difficult. The vast majority of research has focused on fetomaternal microchimerism in women of Northern European descent, limiting the generalisability of findings. Longitudinal studies tracking the dynamics of microchimeric cell populations across the lifespan remain sparse. Finally, the mechanistic linkage between microchimerism and clinical outcomes rests largely on association rather than rigorously controlled intervention, and causal inferences must therefore be drawn with caution.

Future research should prioritise the development of standardised, highly sensitive detection protocols suitable for multicentre studies; the use of single-cell transcriptomic and epigenomic approaches to characterise the functional states of microchimeric cells in situ; and the design of prospective longitudinal cohorts in which microchimerism is measured at multiple time points in relation to well-defined health outcomes. Animal models amenable to genetic manipulation will remain essential for establishing causal mechanisms that cannot be ethically or practically addressed in human subjects.

5. Conclusion

Human microchimerism is a ubiquitous and biologically consequential phenomenon whose implications extend well beyond the gestational context in which it was first characterised. The coexistence of genetically distinct cell populations within a single individual challenges classical notions of biological self and opens new perspectives on immune tolerance, tissue repair, and disease susceptibility. The evidence reviewed here supports a model in which microchimeric cells are active immunological participants — capable of inducing tolerance, modulating autoimmune responses, contributing to organ homeostasis, and potentially serving as sentinels of immune surveillance against malignant transformation.

The dual nature of microchimerism — at once protective and potentially pathogenic — reflects the broader complexity of immune regulation, in which the same cellular and molecular mechanisms may produce opposing outcomes depending on the genetic background of the host, the nature and quantity of the microchimeric population, and the immunological context in which the interaction occurs. A deeper mechanistic understanding of the determinants of this balance promises not only to illuminate fundamental principles of immune biology but also to yield actionable insights for the clinical fields of transplantation, autoimmunity, oncology, and regenerative medicine.

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