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Idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis: Pathophysiology, diagnosis, and novel therapeutic approaches.

Priya Anderson*

Department of Pulmonary Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, India

***Correspondence to:** Priya Anderson, Department of Pulmonary Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, India. E-mail: priya.a@pulmonology.aiimsindia.org

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Introduction

Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis is a rare but serious disease that falls under the category of interstitial lung diseases (ILDs). It predominantly affects men over the age of 60 and has a median survival of just 3 to 5 years following diagnosis. The insidious onset and overlapping symptoms with other respiratory conditions make IPF challenging to diagnose early. However, timely identification and intervention are crucial to managing symptoms and preserving lung function [1].

Unlike classical inflammatory diseases, IPF is thought to result primarily from repetitive alveolar epithelial injury, followed by an abnormal wound healing response. Fibroblasts and myofibroblasts proliferate and deposit excessive extracellular matrix components, such as collagen, leading to scarring of the lung tissue. This fibrotic remodeling distorts the lung architecture and impairs gas exchange. Genetic predispositions, such as mutations in the TERT, TERC, or MUC5B genes, and environmental exposures like smoking and occupational dust, contribute to disease development [2].

Patients with IPF typically present with progressive dyspnea on exertion and a persistent dry cough. On physical examination, "Velcro-like" crackles can be heard on auscultation, particularly at the lung bases. Digital clubbing is also seen in a significant proportion of cases. These symptoms progress over months or years, eventually leading to respiratory failure [3].

Diagnosing IPF involves excluding other causes of interstitial lung disease and integrating clinical, radiologic, and sometimes histopathological data. High-resolution computed tomography (HRCT) is the cornerstone of diagnosis and often reveals a usual interstitial pneumonia (UIP) pattern—marked by reticular opacities, honeycombing, and subpleural distribution. In uncertain cases, surgical lung biopsy may be needed, although less invasive techniques like transbronchial cryobiopsy are gaining popularity [4].

Recent research into IPF biomarkers, such as KL-6, surfactant proteins A and D, and matrix metalloproteinases, has opened doors to better disease monitoring and prognosis. Genetic testing, particularly in familial cases of pulmonary fibrosis, may help identify at-risk individuals and guide early surveillance strategies [5].

Conclusion

Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis represents a complex interplay of genetic, environmental, and cellular factors leading to progressive lung scarring. Early and accurate diagnosis is key to initiating timely treatment with antifibrotics and supportive care. Advances in our understanding of the molecular mechanisms behind fibrosis have paved the way for promising therapies that may change the course of the disease. Continued research and interdisciplinary collaboration will be essential in the quest for a cure.

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