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MORPHOLOGICAL AND VASCULAR ADAPTATIONS IN THE LIVER DURING NON-ALCOHOLIC FATTY LIVER DISEASE (NAFLD): A STEREOLOGICAL AND IMMUNOHISTOCHEMICAL INVESTIGATION

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Abstract: *Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) encompasses a spectrum of hepatic disorders, ranging from simple steatosis to non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), which can progress to fibrosis, cirrhosis, and hepatocellular carcinoma. This study investigates the morphological and vascular adaptations in liver tissue associated with NAFLD using stereological techniques and immunohistochemical analysis. Liver biopsies from 40 patients with varying stages of NAFLD were analyzed and compared to healthy controls. Stereological measurements quantified volumetric and numerical changes in hepatocytes, lipid vacuoles, and fibrotic tissue, while immunohistochemistry identified expression levels of CD34, α-SMA, and VEGF. Findings reveal progressive structural disorganization, sinusoidal capillarization, and increased fibrosis as disease severity increases. These results highlight the importance of microarchitectural and vascular assessment in NAFLD diagnosis and treatment monitoring.*

1.1 Epidemiology and Risk Factors

NAFLD affects approximately 25% of the global population and is particularly prevalent in Western countries. Its incidence is rising in parallel with the obesity epidemic. Risk factors include insulin resistance, dyslipidemia, hypertension, and sedentary lifestyle. NAFLD can occur in both adults and children and is increasingly recognized as a hepatic manifestation of metabolic syndrome. Genetic predisposition also plays a role, with variants in PNPLA3 and TM6SF2 genes associated with increased disease susceptibility.

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3.5 Capillarization and Neoangiogenesis

The immunohistochemical staining for CD34 revealed widespread sinusoidal capillarization, especially in the pericentral and midzonal regions in NASH and fibrotic livers. This is indicative of vascular remodeling which is a key feature in the transition from simple steatosis to NASH. VEGF was predominantly expressed in hepatocytes and endothelial cells adjacent to fibrotic bands, highlighting the role of neoangiogenesis in fibrotic progression. This pattern of expression suggests a paracrine loop where hypoxia-induced VEGF secretion promotes aberrant vascular development.

4.1 Clinical Implications

The findings of this study are clinically significant in identifying morphological biomarkers that may precede clinical symptoms of advanced NAFLD. Understanding the interplay between hepatocellular damage, vascular changes, and fibrosis can improve early detection strategies. These markers, if validated in larger cohorts, may be incorporated into diagnostic algorithms alongside imaging and serological indicators.

4.2 Future Directions

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to monitor dynamic changes in hepatic microarchitecture and correlate these with clinical outcomes. Emerging technologies such as AI-assisted image segmentation, spatial transcriptomics, and 3D tissue reconstruction could refine morphological assessments. Moreover, therapeutic trials should consider evaluating the reversal of vascular and fibrotic alterations as endpoints in NAFLD treatment efficacy.

1.2 Pathophysiology of NAFLD

The pathogenesis of NAFLD is multifactorial and involves a complex interplay of metabolic, genetic, and environmental factors. The widely accepted 'multiple-hit' hypothesis suggests that insulin resistance, oxidative stress, lipid peroxidation, and inflammatory cytokines contribute to hepatic injury. The initial accumulation of triglycerides within hepatocytes (steatosis) sensitizes liver tissue to subsequent insults such as mitochondrial dysfunction, endoplasmic reticulum stress,

and activation of resident immune cells. These processes culminate in hepatocellular ballooning, inflammation, and eventually fibrotic remodeling.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

All procedures involving human participants were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committees. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before inclusion in the study. Sample handling and analysis were conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki principles. Data anonymity and patient confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study period.

3.6 Summary of Quantitative Morphometric Data

Table 1 below summarizes the volume densities and immunohistochemical scores for key hepatic components across the different NAFLD stages and the control group. Data include volume density of hepatocytes (Vv[Hep]), lipid vacuoles (Vv[Lip]), sinusoids (Vv[Sin]), fibrosis (Vv[Fib]), and IHC scores for CD34, α-SMA, and VEGF.

4.3 Role of Hepatic Stellate Cells

Hepatic stellate cells (HSCs) are central to the fibrogenic response in NAFLD. Under quiescent conditions, HSCs store vitamin A and reside in the space of Disse. Upon activation by inflammatory cytokines (e.g., TGF-β, TNF-α) and oxidative stress, they transdifferentiate into myofibroblast-like cells expressing α-SMA and secrete large amounts of extracellular matrix proteins. This leads to sinusoidal constriction, altered perfusion, and progressive fibrosis. The degree of α-SMA positivity in this study directly correlated with fibrosis score, confirming HSC activation as a pathological hallmark.

5.1 Recommendations for Clinical Practice

Based on our findings, integrating stereological and immunohistochemical profiling into clinical workflows may enhance the early detection of NASH. Non-invasive imaging methods, such as MRI elastography and contrast-enhanced ultrasound, could be calibrated using histological data to improve diagnostic

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precision. Routine monitoring of angiogenic and fibrogenic biomarkers (e.g., VEGF, α-SMA) may also provide prognostic value and guide treatment strategies.

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