Immunohistochemistry: Decoding cellular signatures in tissues.

Henry Lin*

Department of Paediatrics, Stanford University, School of Medicine, Stanford, USA

Description

Immunohistochemistry (IHC) is a powerful and widely used technique in both research and clinical settings to visualize specific proteins within cells and tissues. It combines the principles of immunology and histology, allowing for the identification and localization of proteins in tissue sections. This article explores the fundamentals, applications, and significance of immunohistochemistry in advancing our understanding of cellular biology and aiding in disease diagnosis and research.

The basis of immunohistochemistry

At its core, immunohistochemistry relies on the specific binding of antibodies to target proteins in tissue samples. Antibodies are versatile molecules that can recognize and bind to particular epitopes, or unique protein sequences. The binding of antibodies to specific proteins in tissue sections forms the foundation of immunohistochemical staining.

The immunohistochemical process

The immunohistochemical process involves several key steps:

Sample preparation: Tissue specimens are collected, fixed, and embedded in paraffin or other suitable materials, preserving their cellular architecture.

Sectioning: Thin sections (4-7 micrometers) of the tissue are cut using a microtome and placed on glass slides, ready for further processing.

Deparaffinization and antigen retrieval: Paraffin is removed, and antigen retrieval techniques are applied to expose the target proteins, enhancing antibody binding.

Blocking and primary antibody incubation: To prevent non-specific binding, sections are treated with blocking agents. They are then incubated with primary antibodies specific to the target protein.

Secondary antibody incubation: Sections are exposed to a secondary antibody linked to an enzyme or a fluorescent tag. The secondary antibody binds to the primary antibody, amplifying the signal.

Visualization: Enzymes linked to the secondary antibody catalyze reactions producing visible staining, or fluorescence is detected under a microscope for further analysis.

Applications of immunohistochemistry

Cancer research and diagnostics: IHC plays a critical role in identifying specific biomarkers that aid in cancer diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment decisions. It allows pathologists to classify and characterize tumors, helping design tailored therapeutic strategies.

Neuroscience: In neuroscience, IHC is utilized to identify and locate specific proteins in neural tissues, shedding light on neural connectivity, neurotransmitters, and neural disorders.

Infectious diseases: IHC can detect pathogens, aiding in the diagnosis of infectious diseases. It's instrumental in studying the tissue distribution of viruses, bacteria, or parasites during infection.

Autoimmune and inflammatory disorders: IHC assists in identifying immune cell infiltration and characterizing immune responses in various tissues, providing insights into autoimmune and inflammatory conditions.

Advancements and future directions

Advancements in immunohistochemistry, including multiplexing techniques, digital imaging, and image analysis software, have improved the accuracy, sensitivity, and efficiency of protein detection. Future research is likely to focus on enhancing multiplexing capabilities to visualize multiple proteins simultaneously, allowing a deeper understanding of cellular interactions and disease mechanisms.

Conclusion

Immunohistochemistry has revolutionized our ability to study proteins within tissue samples, providing crucial insights into cellular biology and disease pathology. From cancer diagnosis to unravelling the complexities of neurological disorders, immunohistochemistry continues to be an indispensable tool in both research laboratories and clinical settings, contributing significantly to advancements in medicine and our understanding of human health and disease.

***Correspondence to:** Henry Lin, Department of Paediatrics, Stanford University, School of Medicine, Stanford, USA; E-mail: Lin@stanford.edu

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