Lung Tissue Engineering: Scaffolds, Bioprinting, and Restoration

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Introduction

Lung tissue engineering and regenerative medicine represent a rapidly evolving field with the potential to revolutionize the treatment of chronic and acute respiratory diseases. Significant advancements are being made in developing novel strategies to repair and regenerate damaged lung tissue, offering hope for patients with conditions such as idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, COPD, and acute respiratory distress syndrome. This endeavor involves the sophisticated combination of biomaterials, cellular components, and advanced fabrication techniques to create functional lung constructs that can restore respiratory function. The ultimate goal is to develop therapeutic solutions that go beyond managing symptoms and actively promote tissue repair and regeneration. One of the foundational approaches in this field is the utilization of decellularized scaffolds derived from native lung tissue. These scaffolds retain the intricate extracellular matrix (ECM) architecture, providing a biocompatible framework that supports cell adhesion, proliferation, and differentiation. The process of decellularization meticulously removes cellular components while preserving the structural integrity of the ECM, creating a promising substrate for recellularization with functional lung cells [1]. Complementary to scaffold-based approaches, the field is increasingly exploring the potential of bio-ink formulations for three-dimensional (3D) bioprinting. This advanced manufacturing technique allows for the precise deposition of cells and biomaterials in a layer-by-layer fashion, enabling the creation of complex, three-dimensional lung tissue models. The development of bio-inks that can maintain cell viability and promote tissue development is a critical area of research [1]. While significant progress has been made, several challenges remain in the field of lung tissue engineering. Among the most pressing are the difficulties in achieving adequate vascularization within engineered constructs and the complex process of re-establishing functional innervation. These vascular and neural networks are crucial for the survival, integration, and function of engineered lung tissue in vivo [1]. To address these challenges, researchers are investigating therapeutic strategies that involve the transplantation of stem cells and the utilization of extracellular vesicles. Stem cells, with their multipotent differentiation capacity and immunomodulatory properties, hold great promise for promoting lung tissue regeneration. Extracellular vesicles, on the other hand, act as potent signaling mediators, delivering therapeutic cargo that can enhance repair mechanisms and reduce inflammation [1]. Further exploration into the use of decellularized extracellular matrix (dECM) from lung tissue highlights its potential as a biomaterial for engineering functional lung constructs. The ability of dECM to support cell growth and differentiation makes it a valuable component in therapeutic applications aimed at treating various lung diseases. This focus on biomimicry of the native lung environment is key to achieving functional restoration [2]. Parallel to scaffold-based methods, the application of 3D bioprinting is gaining traction for creating intricate lung tissue models. These models are invaluable for disease modeling and drug screening, offering a more physiologically relevant platform than traditional 2D cell cultures. The precise printing of multiple cell types and biomaterials to replicate the native lung architecture and function remains an active area of investigation, with ongoing progress in developing advanced printable bio-inks [3]. Induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) represent another significant avenue for lung regeneration research. Strategies are being developed to efficiently differentiate iPSCs into various lung cell types, such as epithelial and endothelial cells. The therapeutic application of these differentiated cells in animal models of lung injury is demonstrating promising results in improving lung function, showcasing their potential for clinical translation [4]. Finally, the role of extracellular vesicles (EVs), particularly exosomes, in lung tissue repair is being critically examined. EVs derived from stem cells can deliver therapeutic molecules, including microRNAs and proteins, to target damaged lung tissue, thereby promoting regeneration and mitigating inflammatory responses in a variety of lung conditions. This represents a novel cell-free therapeutic approach [5].

Description

Lung tissue engineering and regenerative medicine aim to create functional lung tissue for therapeutic purposes, addressing the critical need for treatments for severe respiratory diseases. This field integrates principles from biology, engineering, and materials science to develop innovative solutions. Central to many regenerative strategies is the use of decellularized scaffolds derived from native lung tissue. These scaffolds serve as a natural blueprint, preserving the complex extracellular matrix (ECM) that provides structural support and biochemical cues essential for cell behavior. Decellularization processes are carefully controlled to remove cellular components while ensuring the integrity of the ECM, creating a suitable environment for recellularization with specific lung cell types [1]. Alongside scaffold-based approaches, 3D bioprinting has emerged as a powerful tool for fabricating intricate lung tissue constructs. This technology allows for the precise spatial arrangement of cells and biomaterials, enabling the recreation of the complex architecture and cellular heterogeneity of the native lung. The development of advanced bio-inks that support cell viability and function is a key focus in this area [1]. Despite these advancements, significant hurdles remain in the clinical translation of engineered lung tissue. Chief among these are the challenges associated with achieving functional vascularization and innervation within the engineered constructs. Effective vascular networks are vital for supplying nutrients and oxygen to cells and for removing metabolic waste, while innervation is crucial for regulating lung function [1]. To overcome these limitations, researchers are exploring therapeutic modalities that leverage the regenerative potential of stem cells and the signaling capabilities of extracellular vesicles (EVs). Stem cells, particu-

larly mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs), offer immunomodulatory properties and the ability to differentiate into various lung cell lineages. EVs, acting as intercellular messengers, can deliver therapeutic molecules that promote repair and reduce inflammation [1]. The application of decellularized extracellular matrix (dECM) from lung tissue is a cornerstone in the development of biomaterials for engineering functional lung constructs. The inherent biological properties of dECM facilitate cell attachment, proliferation, and differentiation, making it an attractive candidate for regenerative therapies aimed at restoring lung function in various disease states [2]. 3D bioprinting technology is being further refined to create sophisticated lung tissue models for disease research and drug development. The ability to precisely control the placement of multiple cell types and biomaterials is crucial for mimicking the native lung architecture and function. Ongoing research focuses on developing novel bio-inks that can be printed with high resolution and maintain cellular viability throughout the fabrication process [3]. Induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) represent a promising cell source for lung regeneration due to their ability to differentiate into a wide range of lung cell types. Research efforts are directed towards optimizing differentiation protocols and evaluating the therapeutic efficacy of iPSC-derived cells in preclinical models of lung injury, with the goal of improving overall lung function [4]. Extracellular vesicles (EVs), especially exosomes, are gaining recognition for their role in promoting lung tissue repair. Stem cell-derived EVs can deliver bioactive molecules, such as microRNAs and proteins, that modulate cellular responses, reduce inflammation, and stimulate regeneration of damaged lung tissue, offering a cell-free therapeutic strategy [5]. Further research is also exploring bio-artificial lungs utilizing microfluidic devices and engineered lung spheroids. These platforms aim to mimic the critical gas exchange function of the alveoli, providing in vitro models for studying lung physiology and pathology. The development of micro-architectures that replicate alveolar structures is a key aspect of this research [6].

Conclusion

Lung tissue engineering and regenerative medicine are advancing rapidly to address respiratory diseases. Key strategies include using decellularized lung scaffolds and 3D bioprinting with specialized bio-inks to create functional lung tissue. Challenges in vascularization and innervation are being tackled by incorporating stem cells and extracellular vesicles. Decellularized extracellular matrix (dECM) provides a natural framework for cell growth. 3D bioprinting enables precise construction of lung models for research and drug screening. Induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) are being differentiated into lung cells for therapeutic applications. Extracellular vesicles (EVs) deliver regenerative cargo to damaged tissues. Bio-artificial lungs using microfluidics mimic gas exchange functions, and engineering alveolar units is a focus for restoring lung repair.

Acknowledgement

Conflict of Interest

None.

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How to cite this article: Kim, Robert. "Lung Tissue Engineering: Scaffolds, Bioprinting, and Restoration." *J Tissue Sci Eng* 16 (2025):466.

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