

Follicular Vascular Remodeling and Its Relationship with Oocyte Developmental Competence in Assisted Reproductive Cycles

Elisabeth Carvajal*

Department of Reproductive Vascular Biology, Andean Center for Fertility Research, Medellín, Colombia

DESCRIPTION

Follicular development within the ovary depends on a tightly regulated balance between hormonal signaling, metabolic activity, and vascular supply. Among these factors, angiogenesis within the follicular environment plays a central role in ensuring adequate delivery of oxygen, nutrients, and endocrine signals required for oocyte maturation. In assisted reproductive cycles, controlled ovarian stimulation alters the natural angiogenic process, leading to variations in follicular vascularization that may influence oocyte competence and subsequent embryo development.

Angiogenesis refers to the formation of new blood vessels from pre-existing vasculature. Within the ovarian follicle, this process is primarily regulated by vascular endothelial growth factor, fibroblast growth factors, and angiopoietins. These signaling molecules coordinate endothelial cell proliferation, migration, and differentiation, resulting in the development of a capillary network surrounding the follicle. This vascular system ensures efficient exchange of metabolic substrates and hormonal signals between the systemic circulation and the follicular microenvironment.

As follicles grow under gonadotropin stimulation, their metabolic demand increases significantly. Oxygen consumption, glucose uptake, and lipid metabolism intensify to support oocyte maturation and granulosa cell proliferation. Angiogenesis responds to this increased demand by expanding vascular networks around developing follicles. Insufficient vascular development may result in hypoxic stress, impaired nutrient delivery, and reduced oocyte quality. Oocyte competence refers to the ability of an oocyte to undergo successful fertilization and support early embryonic development. This competence is influenced by both intrinsic factors within the oocyte and extrinsic factors from the surrounding follicular environment. Vascular supply plays a crucial role in shaping this environment by regulating oxygen tension, metabolite availability, and endocrine signaling. Variations in follicular blood flow have been associated with differences in oocyte maturation rates and embryo quality outcomes.

Doppler ultrasound studies have been used to evaluate follicular blood flow in clinical settings. Parameters such as vascular impedance, resistance index, and pulsatility index provide indirect measures of angiogenic activity. Follicles with higher perifollicular blood flow have been associated in some studies with improved oocyte retrieval outcomes and higher fertilization rates. However, variability in measurement techniques and patient populations has limited the consistency of these findings. Metabolic interactions within the follicle are closely linked to vascular development. Granulosa and theca cells rely on glucose and lipid metabolism to support steroidogenesis and oocyte maturation. Angiogenic signaling influences the delivery of these substrates, while metabolic activity within follicular cells can, in turn, regulate angiogenic factor expression. This bidirectional relationship forms a metabolic-vascular feedback system essential for follicular health.

Hypoxia within the follicular environment can activate hypoxia-inducible factors that regulate angiogenic gene expression. Moderate levels of hypoxic signaling are necessary for normal follicular development and luteinization. However, excessive or prolonged hypoxia may disrupt mitochondrial function and increase oxidative stress, negatively affecting oocyte quality. The balance between oxygen supply and consumption is therefore critical for optimal follicular function. Oxidative stress represents another important link between angiogenesis and oocyte competence. Reactive oxygen species are generated during cellular metabolism and can influence both vascular signaling and oocyte integrity. Controlled levels of oxidative signaling participate in normal follicular development, but excessive accumulation may damage cellular structures and impair meiotic progression. Antioxidant systems within follicular fluid help regulate this balance, although their efficiency may decline with age or metabolic disorders.

Women with polycystic ovarian syndrome often exhibit altered follicular angiogenesis patterns. Increased vascular endothelial growth factor expression and abnormal vascular remodeling have been observed in ovarian tissue from affected individuals. These changes may contribute to disrupted follicular maturation and

Correspondence to: Elisabeth Carvajal, Department of Reproductive Vascular Biology, Andean Center for Fertility Research, Medellín, Colombia, E-mail: elisabeth.carvajal.acfr@biogenmail.org

Received: 02-Jun-2025, Manuscript No. JFIV-25-41851; **Editor assigned:** 04-Jun-2025, PreQC No. JFIV-25-41851 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 18-Jun-2025, QC No. JFIV-25-41851; **Revised:** 24-Jun-2025, Manuscript No. JFIV-25-41851 (R); **Published:** 02-Jul-2025, DOI: 10.35841/2375-4508.25.13.416

Citation: Carvajal E (2025). Follicular Vascular Remodeling and Its Relationship with Oocyte Developmental Competence in Assisted Reproductive Cycles. *J Fertil In Vitro IVF World w Reprod Med Gent Stem Cell Biol.* 13:416.

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reduced oocyte quality despite high follicle counts during stimulation cycles.

Endometriosis has also been associated with abnormal angiogenic activity within the ovarian environment. Chronic inflammatory signaling in this condition promotes excessive or dysregulated blood vessel formation, which may interfere with normal follicular development. This altered vascular state may contribute to reduced oocyte competence and impaired embryo development in some patients undergoing assisted reproductive treatment. Mitochondrial function within oocytes is closely linked to follicular vascularization. Adequate oxygen and nutrient supply are essential for mitochondrial oxidative phosphorylation, which supports energy production during maturation and fertilization. Impaired angiogenesis may lead to mitochondrial dysfunction, reduced Adenosine Triphosphate (ATP) production, and compromised embryo development after fertilization. Current evidence supports a significant relationship between follicular angiogenesis and oocyte developmental competence in assisted reproductive treatment.

Vascular supply, metabolic activity, and oxidative balance collectively shape the follicular microenvironment and influence reproductive outcomes. Continued research integrating vascular biology, reproductive endocrinology, and cellular metabolism may improve understanding of oocyte development and enhance clinical strategies in assisted reproduction.

CONCLUSION

Current evidence supports a significant relationship between follicular angiogenesis and oocyte developmental competence in assisted reproductive treatment. Vascular supply, metabolic activity, and oxidative balance collectively shape the follicular microenvironment and influence reproductive outcomes. Continued research integrating vascular biology, reproductive endocrinology, and cellular metabolism may improve understanding of oocyte development and enhance clinical strategies in assisted reproduction.