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Journal of Bone Research

Perspective

Mechanotransduction in Osteocytes: Emerging Insights into Lacunar-Canalicular Network Dynamics

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DESCRIPTION

The mechanotransduction capabilities of osteocytes represent one of the most sophisticated cellular sensing systems in the human body, orchestrating bone homeostasis through their extensive Lacunar-Canalicular Network (LCN). Recent advances in high-resolution imaging techniques and molecular biology have unveiled unprecedented details about how these terminally differentiated cells translate mechanical stimuli into biochemical signals that govern bone remodeling processes.

Osteocytes, comprising approximately 90%-95% of all bone cells, are strategically positioned within the mineralized matrix to function as the primary mechanosensors of bone tissue. Their stellate morphology, characterized by numerous dendritic processes extending through canaliculi, creates an interconnected network spanning the entire bone volume. This architectural arrangement enables osteocytes to detect subtle mechanical perturbations across multiple length scales, from nanometer-level deformations to tissue-level strain patterns.

The mechanotransduction process begins with the detection of interstitial fluid flow within the canalicular space, generated by mechanical loading of bone tissue. This fluid flow creates shear stress on osteocyte cell processes, activating mechanosensitive ion channels, particularly those of the Piezo family. Piezo1 channels, recently identified as key mechanotransducers in osteocytes, respond to membrane tension and fluid shear stress by allowing calcium influx, initiating downstream signaling cascades that regulate gene expression patterns associated with bone formation and resorption.

The primary cilium, a single non-motile organelle projecting from the osteocyte cell body, serves as a crucial mechanosensory apparatus. This structure contains specialized proteins including polycystin-1 and polycystin-2, which form mechanosensitive channel complexes. Upon mechanical stimulation, these channels facilitate calcium entry and subsequent activation of calcium-dependent signaling pathways, including the calcineurin-Nuclear Factor of Activated T cells (NFAT) pathway, which regulates the expression of bone matrix proteins and growth factors.

Connexin43 (Cx43) hemichannels and gap junctions play essential roles in osteocyte mechanotransduction and intercellular communication. Mechanical loading enhances Cx43 expression and channel activity, facilitating the propagation of calcium waves and the release of signaling molecules such as Prostaglandin E2 (PGE2) and Nitric Oxide (NO). These paracrine factors diffuse through the LCN to influence nearby osteoblasts, osteoclasts, and other osteocytes, creating a coordinated cellular response to mechanical stimuli.

The sclerostin-Wnt signaling axis represents a critical mechanotransduction pathway in osteocytes. Under mechanical loading conditions, osteocytes downregulate *Sclerostin* (*SOST*) expression through mechanisms involving the transcription factor *MEF2C* and microRNA-218. Reduced sclerostin levels disinhibit Wnt signaling in osteoblasts, promoting bone formation. Conversely, mechanical disuse upregulates sclerostin expression, leading to decreased bone formation and increased bone resorption.

Advanced imaging techniques have revealed the dynamic nature of the osteocyte LCN. Confocal microscopy and synchrotron radiation micro-computed tomography demonstrate that canalicular diameter and connectivity vary with mechanical loading history. Exercise and mechanical stimulation increase canalicular volume and improve network connectivity, while immobilization and aging result in canalicular infilling and network deterioration. These structural changes directly impact the efficiency of mechanotransduction and intercellular communication.

The integration of mechanical and hormonal signals occurs at the osteocyte level through complex molecular interactions. Parathyroid Hormone (PTH) and mechanical loading synergistically regulate osteocyte metabolism and signaling molecule production. PTH receptor activation enhances mechanosensitivity by increasing the expression of mechanotransduction-related genes and proteins, while mechanical loading modulates PTH receptor sensitivity and downstream signaling pathways.

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Received: 28-Feb-2025, Manuscript No. BMRJ-25-38135; **Editor assigned:** 03-Mar-2025, PreQC No. BMRJ-25-38135 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 17-Mar-2025, QC No. BMRJ-25-38135; **Revised:** 24-Mar-2025, Manuscript No. BMRJ-25-38135 (R); **Published:** 31-Mar-2025, DOI: 10.35841/2572-4916.25.13.313

Citation: James F (2025). Mechanotransduction in Osteocytes: Emerging Insights into Lacunar-Canalicular Network Dynamics. J Bone Res. 13:313.

Recent studies have identified the glycocalyx as an important component of osteocyte mechanotransduction. This glycoprotein-rich layer covering the cell surface and extending into the canalicular space functions as a mechanosensor that amplifies fluid shear stress signals. The glycocalyx composition, including hyaluronic acid, heparan sulfate, and various proteoglycans, influences mechanotransduction efficiency and may serve as a target for therapeutic interventions.

The role of oxidative stress in osteocyte mechanotransduction has gained considerable attention. Mechanical loading generates Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS) in osteocytes, which function as signaling molecules at physiological concentrations. However, excessive ROS production during aging or pathological conditions can impair mechanotransduction by damaging cellular components and disrupting signaling pathways. Antioxidant systems, including superoxide dismutase and catalase, are upregulated in response to mechanical loading to maintain redox homeostasis.

Emerging evidence suggests that osteocyte mechanotransduction is influenced by the local microenvironment, including mineral composition, collagen crosslinking, and the presence of microcracks. These factors modify the mechanical properties of the perilacunar and pericanalicular matrix, affecting strain transmission to osteocytes and their mechanosensory responses. Understanding these microenvironmental influences is crucial for developing targeted therapies for bone diseases characterized by impaired mechanotransduction. The mechanotransduction capabilities of osteocytes represent a sophisticated biological system that integrates mechanical, biochemical, and cellular signals to maintain bone homeostasis. The lacunar-canalicular network serves as both a structural framework and a functional communication system that enables osteocytes to sense mechanical stimuli and coordinate appropriate cellular responses.

CONCLUSION

Recent discoveries regarding mechanosensitive ion channels, primary cilia, connexin-mediated communication, and the sclerostin-Wnt pathway have significantly advanced our understanding of how osteocytes translate mechanical forces into biological responses. The dynamic nature of the LCN and its sensitivity to mechanical loading history highlight the importance of physical activity in maintaining bone health. Future research directions should focus on elucidating the molecular mechanisms underlying mechanotransduction dysfunction in bone diseases and developing targeted therapeutic strategies that can restore or enhance osteocyte mechanosensitivity. Understanding these processes will be crucial for addressing the growing burden of osteoporosis and other bone disorders in an aging population.