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Commentary

The Gut-Liver Axis: Implications for Systemic Inflammation and Chronic Liver Disease

Sarah L. Whitmore*

Division of Hepatology and Translational Medicine, King's College London, United Kingdom

DESCRIPTION

The relationship between the gut and liver, often termed the gut-liver axis, has emerged as a central concept in understanding the pathogenesis of chronic liver disease. This bidirectional communication system involves the portal vein, bile secretion, the immune system and the intestinal microbiota. Increasing evidence now highlights how disturbances in this axis contribute to both local liver injury and systemic inflammation, with implications extending far beyond herpetology. Under physiological conditions, the gut and liver maintain a delicate balance. Nutrients, microbial products and immune signals flow from the intestines to the liver via the portal circulation. In return, the liver modulates gut microbial composition and immune tolerance through bile acids, antimicrobial peptides and immunoglobulins. However, in chronic liver disease-be it alcoholic liver disease, viral hepatitis, or the rapidly growing burden of Metabolic-Associated Steatosis Liver Disease (MASLD) this balance is disrupted, resulting in increased intestinal permeability and dymbiosis.

One of the earliest features of a disrupted gut-liver axis is a "leaky gut," where tight junction proteins in the intestinal epithelium weaken, allowing microbial-derived molecules such as LipoPolySaccharide (LPS) to enter the portal vein. These molecules, known as pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs), reach the liver and activate Toll-Like Receptors (TLRs) on Kupffer cells and hepatocytes, initiating an inflammatory cascade. This contributes to hepatic fibrosis, steatohepatitis and immune cell infiltration, all of which are hallmarks of chronic liver damage. Additionally, the shift in gut microbiota composition referred to as dysbiosis further amplifies liver injury. A reduced abundance of beneficial species such as Faecalibacterium prausnitzii and Bifidobacterium, along with an increase in pro-inflammatory bacteria like Enterobacteriaceae, has been documented in patients with cirrhosis and MASLD. This microbial imbalance not only drives local hepatic inflammation but also affects distant organs through systemic cytokine release, creating a state of chronic low-grade inflammation.

Moreover, alterations in bile acid metabolism play a significant role in shaping this pathophysiology. Bile acids, which are synthesized in the liver and modified by gut microbes, act as signaling molecules via receptors such as FXR and TGR5. These receptors regulate not only glucose and lipid metabolism but also the inflammatory tone of immune cells. Disruption in bile acid signaling due to microbial imbalance contributes to both metabolic dysfunction and hepatocellular injury.

The clinical implications of gut-liver axis disruption are becoming increasingly apparent. In cirrhosis, for example, bacterial translocation from the gut is a major driver of Spontaneous Bacterial Peritonitis (SBP) and hepatic encephalopathy. Furthermore, systemic inflammation linked to gut-derived endotoxins has been implicated in extrahepatic complications, including cardiovascular disease and chronic kidney injury.

In light of this, therapeutic approaches aimed at modulating the gut-liver axis are gaining traction. Fecal Microbiota Transplantation (FMT) has shown potential in improving hepatic encephalopathy and modulating systemic inflammation. Similarly, probiotics and prebiotics targeting specific microbial strains are under investigation as adjunct therapies in MASLD and cirrhosis. Another promising strategy lies in bile acid receptor agonists, such as obeticholic acid, which modulate both hepatic metabolism and inflammatory signalling *via* the gut microbiota.

Advanced molecular tools, including metagenomics, metabolomics and multi-omics integration, are now enabling deeper insights into host-microbiome interactions. These approaches may help in developing personalized microbial therapies based on an individual's microbial signature and immune profile. In high-income settings, where access to such technologies is readily available, these precision-based interventions are likely to be at the forefront of next-generation chronic liver disease management.

Correspondence to: Sarah L. Whitmore, Division of Hepatology and Translational Medicine, King's College London, United Kingdom, E-mail: sarahwhitmore@kcl.ac.uk

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CONCLUSION

The gut-liver axis represents a critical interface between environmental inputs, microbial activity and hepatic health. As our understanding deepens, it is increasingly clear that liver disease cannot be viewed in isolation but must be approached through a systemic lens. Disruption in this axis contributes not only to chronic liver injury but also to a host of systemic complications fueled by inflammation. In high-income countries, where diagnostic capabilities and therapeutic innovation are rapidly evolving, integrating gut-focused strategies into hepatology practice is both feasible and necessary. Targeting microbial pathways, restoring barrier integrity and modulating host-microbe interactions offer promising new avenues for preventing and treating chronic liver disease. Continued multidisciplinary collaboration spanning gastroenterology, immunology, microbiology and systems biology will be essential to fully harness the potential of the gut-liver axis in clinical care.