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HEPATOCYTES: HISTOLOGICAL STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONAL SPECIALIZATION

Kholdarova Erkinoy Samadullayevna

Andijan State Medical Institute, Uzbekistan

Abstract: Hepatocytes are the principal parenchymal cells of the liver, comprising nearly 70–80% of its cellular mass. Their unique histological architecture and functional heterogeneity underlie the liver's role in metabolism, detoxification, and protein synthesis. Understanding the microscopic features of hepatocytes is critical for evaluating normal physiology and pathological alterations in hepatic diseases. This study analyzes the histological organization, cytological features, and functional specializations of hepatocytes based on current histological and ultrastructural research.

Keywords: hepatocytes, histology, liver lobule, sinusoidal system, glycogen, detoxification, ultrastructure

Introduction

Histology provides a foundation for understanding the cellular basis of organ function. The liver, as the largest gland in the human body, performs essential metabolic, synthetic, and detoxification processes. Hepatocytes, the dominant cell type of the liver, are arranged in lobular structures and form intimate associations with sinusoidal endothelial cells, Kupffer cells, and stellate cells.

From a structural perspective, hepatocytes exhibit distinct polarity, characterized by a basal surface facing the sinusoidal capillaries and an apical surface forming bile canaliculi. This polarity enables simultaneous interaction with blood components and bile drainage. Functionally, hepatocytes store glycogen, regulate plasma protein synthesis, and metabolize lipids, drugs, and toxins. Histological assessment of hepatocytes is therefore indispensable in both normal physiology and liver pathology, such as hepatitis, cirrhosis, and hepatocellular carcinoma.

The purpose of this article is to provide a detailed histological and functional analysis of hepatocytes, emphasizing their microscopic features, ultrastructural organization, and alterations in disease conditions.

Hepatocytes exhibit distinctive morphological and cytological characteristics that reflect their broad range of functions. They are polygonal in shape, often containing a centrally placed nucleus, with some being binucleated or even polyploid—features associated with their high regenerative capacity. The cytoplasm of hepatocytes is rich in organelles such as mitochondria, rough and smooth endoplasmic reticulum, lysosomes, and peroxisomes, all of which are directly linked to the metabolic and detoxification processes of the liver. The presence of glycogen granules and lipid droplets further emphasizes their crucial role in energy metabolism.

A unique aspect of hepatocytes is their **functional polarity**, which distinguishes the sinusoidal and canalicular domains of the cell. The sinusoidal surface, lined with microvilli, is directly exposed to the blood plasma flowing through the sinusoids, enabling efficient exchange of

metabolites, nutrients, and waste products. In contrast, the apical surface contributes to the formation of bile canaliculi, which collect bile and direct it toward the biliary ducts. This dual orientation allows hepatocytes to perform simultaneous but distinct processes: detoxification and secretion into blood circulation, alongside bile production for digestion and excretion.

Histological examination of hepatocytes has both academic and clinical importance. Normal hepatocyte morphology serves as a baseline for diagnosing various liver disorders. For instance, ballooning degeneration and fatty change are early markers of viral hepatitis and steatohepatitis, respectively, while architectural disarray and nuclear atypia are hallmarks of hepatocellular carcinoma. Furthermore, the ability of hepatocytes to regenerate following injury, such as in partial hepatectomy, reflects their vital role in maintaining liver homeostasis.

Advancements in histological techniques, including immunohistochemistry and electron microscopy, have provided deeper insights into hepatocyte biology. Markers such as albumin, cytokeratin 18, and glutamine synthetase help identify functional zonation within the liver lobule, distinguishing periportal and pericentral hepatocyte populations. These findings highlight the complexity of hepatocyte function and their adaptation to the metabolic demands of different lobular zones.

Given their structural complexity and functional versatility, hepatocytes are indispensable for sustaining life. A detailed understanding of their histological organization not only enhances our comprehension of liver physiology but also provides crucial insights for the diagnosis and treatment of hepatic diseases. The aim of this article is to analyze the histological and functional characteristics of hepatocytes, with particular attention to their cellular architecture, ultrastructural features, and pathological alterations observed in common liver diseases.

Methods

This article is based on a structured review of histological and ultrastructural data concerning hepatocytes. A systematic search was performed using PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science databases for studies published between 2000 and 2024.

Histological features were primarily studied using hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) staining, which revealed hepatocyte arrangement within hepatic lobules and cords. Periodic acid–Schiff (PAS) staining was analyzed to highlight glycogen storage within hepatocyte cytoplasm. Immunohistochemistry for markers such as albumin, cytokeratin 18, and glutamine synthetase was reviewed to determine hepatocyte functional heterogeneity.

Electron microscopy studies provided ultrastructural data on organelles, including abundant rough endoplasmic reticulum, mitochondria, and peroxisomes. Findings were synthesized qualitatively and compared across normal and diseased liver states.

Results

Histological sections demonstrated that hepatocytes are large, polygonal cells with a central, round nucleus and prominent nucleolus. Binucleation was observed in up to 20% of hepatocytes, reflecting their high regenerative capacity. Cytoplasm contained basophilic regions

corresponding to rough endoplasmic reticulum and eosinophilic regions reflecting mitochondria. PAS staining confirmed abundant glycogen storage, particularly in periportal hepatocytes.

Hepatocytes were arranged in cords one or two cells thick, radiating from the central vein of hepatic lobules. These cords were separated by hepatic sinusoids lined with fenestrated endothelial cells. The sinusoidal surface of hepatocytes displayed numerous microvilli, enhancing contact with blood plasma. On the opposite side, bile canaliculi were evident, forming small channels that collected bile secretions.

Ultrastructural studies revealed a dense population of mitochondria, rough and smooth endoplasmic reticulum, and peroxisomes. The rough endoplasmic reticulum was associated with plasma protein synthesis, while smooth endoplasmic reticulum and peroxisomes were responsible for detoxification.

Discussion

The histological features of hepatocytes highlight their role as multifunctional metabolic cells. Their unique polarity ensures that blood detoxification and bile secretion occur simultaneously. The presence of glycogen granules and lipid droplets indicates their central role in energy storage. The abundance of organelles reflects their active participation in protein synthesis, detoxification, and oxidative metabolism.

Pathological conditions induce significant changes in hepatocyte histology. In viral hepatitis, hepatocytes show ballooning degeneration, cytoplasmic vacuolization, and nuclear changes. Cirrhosis is characterized by hepatocyte loss, nodular regeneration, and fibrotic septa disrupting lobular architecture. In hepatocellular carcinoma, hepatocytes lose normal polarity and exhibit pleomorphic nuclei with atypical mitoses.

These observations demonstrate that hepatocyte histology serves not only as a window into normal physiology but also as a critical diagnostic tool for liver diseases.

Conclusion

Hepatocytes are central to liver function, combining structural complexity with remarkable metabolic versatility. Their histological organization, ultrastructural features, and functional polarity allow simultaneous synthesis, storage, and detoxification processes. Alterations in hepatocyte morphology provide key diagnostic markers for liver pathology, underscoring the importance of histological evaluation in hepatology. Future advances in imaging and molecular histology will further refine our understanding of hepatocyte biology, offering new opportunities for therapeutic interventions.

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