

# Immunotherapy of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)

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## Immunotherapy of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) through mesenchymal stem cells



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### ABSTRACT

Many pathophysiologic pathways and immune-pathologic etiologies are addressed as Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) causes. Moreover, dysfunction of the immune system leads to inflammatory responses against intestinal components that boost disease severity. The use of routine treatments has limitations. Besides, patients may experience drug resistance. Therefore, the use of novel and effective therapies is essential. Relying on the immune regulatory functions of Mesenchymal Stem Cells (MSCs), researchers have suggested possible benefits of MSCs administration for IBD, both in experimental and clinical studies. Experimental animal models of IBD have shown effects of MSCs, MSC-derived exosomal micro RNAs, and MSC-based drug delivery systems on the regulation of the immune system (Th17 suppression versus T-regulatory cell biased responses). These studies have suggested MSCs' benefits on intestinal integrity, improved smooth cell function, and tissue repair. On the other hand, various clinical trials have been registered for MSCs application in IBD patients that show reliable safety in humans. Most clinical trials have used MSCs of bone marrow, umbilical cord, and adipose tissue that have been administered by intravenous or intra-tissue injection. Studies have evaluated clinical outcomes, patient symptoms, or healing processes; while immunological studies in the clinical era are missing. As we reviewed, huge shreds of experimental shreds of evidence have led to the inception of multiple clinical trials in phase I/II, showing promising results for IBD treatment. We suggest that further clinical investigation should be more focused on in-vitro/in-vivo assessed outcomes as well as the immunological endpoints to have more reliable results with more support for laboratory evidence.

### 1. Introduction

"Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)" refers to two diseases (ulcerative colitis/Crohn's disease) in which the gastrointestinal (GI) tract is

inflamed for a long time [1]. This prolonged inflammation damages the gastrointestinal tract and mainly presents at a young age (between 15 and 30 years old) [2]. It is divided into Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. There are no specific clinical manifestations for IBD and certain

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symptoms for it. Abdominal pain and chronic or recurrent diarrhea are symptoms making physicians suspected of IBD, and colonoscopy and biopsy are used to diagnose it [3]. Tissue ulcers caused by IBD can be painful and sometimes debilitating and life-threatening. Crohn's disease can appear anywhere in the gastrointestinal tract in different people. In some patients, the end of the small intestine (ileum) and others might be presented throughout the large intestine (colon) [4]. The most common areas of inflammation in Crohn's disease are the end of the small intestine and the colon. The main etiology for Crohn's is still unknown [5]. Stress and dietary factors are known to be causes of IBD exacerbation but are not described as an etiologic factor [6]. Immune system dysfunctions and heredity genetic factors are possible causes of the disease: Family history, white ethnicity, smoking, use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications, which could lead to intestinal inflammation and exacerbation of the disease, living in industrial cities, living in more northern climates, high-fat diets are risk factors for the disease [7].

Ulcerative colitis (UC) is the second medical condition defined in the IBD category. Ulcerative colitis is a disease of the rectum and upper areas of the colon, and the inflammation is usually superficial and limited to the mucosa but is continuous [8]. Diarrhea, rectal bleeding, phlegm, and abdominal cramping are the main symptoms of UC [9]. The exact cause of ulcerative colitis remains unknown. Previously, diet and stress were suspected to be the etiology of this condition, but as well as Crohn's disease, these factors remain only as triggers of the inflammation exacerbation [10]. One possible cause is thought to be immune system dysfunction. The immune system trying to fight off viruses or invading bacteria might trigger an abnormal immune response that can lead to autoimmune responses against the gastrointestinal tract. UC is more common in people with a positive family history of IBD [11].

Many immune-pathologic etiologies, as well as immune system dysfunction resulting in inadequate inflammatory responses against intestinal components or oxidative stress repercussions, are addressed to contribute to IBD. Researchers have proposed prospective advantages of MSC treatment for IBD in both experimental and clinical investigations, based on the immune regulatory activities of MSCs. They have shown that the use of MSCs in the treatment of IBD is not only safe but also as a multifunctional-cell-based drug, they have significant positive clinical outcomes, such as overcoming drug resistance, high efficacy, deletion of steroid drugs from the treatment protocol, and reduce their complications in patients. So, we aimed to review the current pieces of evidence about the MSC application in IBD treatment.

## 2. Pathophysiology

Based on previous studies, the role of genetics, immune dysregulation, luminal, and environmental factors in the pathogenesis of these diseases have been investigated. In inflammatory processes of the intestinal mucosa, several immunological factors are involved, all leading to chronic activation and inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract [12]. Histologically, intestinal inflammation is characterized by the secretion of polymorphonuclear leukocytes, monocytes, and macrophages [13]. There are many hypothesizes trying to find the pathophysiologic etiology of the disease. Naturally, due to a phenomenon known as oral tolerance, the mucosal immune system does not react with the contents of the intestinal duct as well as food and microbial flora [14]. The reduction of immunological response to a protein previously exposed via the oral route is known as oral tolerance [15]. When food is being consumed orally, protein antigens can be absorbed via the mucosal surfaces of the gastrointestinal system and make physical contact with immune cells in the intestinal lamina propria [16]. Numerous mechanisms are involved in the development of oral tolerance, including the removal of CD4+ lymphocyte T cells, which secrete anti-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-10 and TGF- $\beta$ , which contribute to suppressing the inflammation of the intestine [17]. Oral tolerance may be responsible for the lack of an immune response to food antigens and microbial flora in the intestinal tract. In IBD, oral tolerance dysfunction due to

inflammatory triggers may lead to uncontrolled inflammation of the intestine [16]. Activation of T helper 1, 17, and 22 cells (Th1, Th17, and Th22) as well as NK, and NKT cells are known to have roles in immune tolerance dysfunction [18]. Th22 cells secrete IL-22 that perform its actions through a receptor named IL-1R-22 and IL-10R2 that triggers JAK1 molecules pathways and STAT system. This cytokine mainly acts on epithelial cells and hepatocytes, is involved not only in antimicrobial defense but also in the production of acute-phase proteins and chemokines [19]. Various studies in mice lacking the IL-22 gene have shown an important role for this cytokine in the development of IBD [20].

Oxidative stress also plays an essential role in the pathogenesis of associated intestinal damage. Significant imbalances in total antioxidant activity have been identified in colonic mucosal biopsies as oxidative stress increases and antioxidant protection decreases [21]. If the free radicals quantity increased or the antioxidant protection decreased, a state of oxidative stress occurs, which may cause chronic or permanent damage to the cells [22]. One of the markers of oxidative stress is the increment of lipid peroxidation in cells, which is determined by measuring the number of reactants with thiobarbituric acid. Previous studies have shown the presence of oxidative stress in biological fluids such as saliva and plasma in IBD patients. The effectiveness of various therapies in treatment may be attributed to their antioxidant function. Compounds, such as sulfasalazine and its metabolites, 5-aminosalicylic acid, which are used in IBD treatment, are extremely effective in the depletion of reactive oxygens [23–25]. Neutrophils play a major role in inflammatory and immune responses. The enzyme myeloperoxidase is able to form a large number of oxidants by catalyzing the oxidation of electron donor compounds (such as halides) by hydrogen peroxide [26].

Genetically, IBD is a multigenic disorder that can cause UC and Crohn's disease. Nucleotide-binding domain oligomerization protein (NOD 2) and autophagy-dependent gene (ATG) functioning in innate immune cells (both parenchymal and hematopoietic) are involved in immune defense against bacteria, mycobacteria, and viruses; although, variations in these genes are known to be associated with Crohn's disease [27,28].

In subjects with Crohn's disease, the mucosal T cells have a faster cell cycle, which increases the number of these cells compared to healthy subjects. Subjects with UC also have increased expression of a caspase-8 inhibitor called FLIP, which inhibits cell death through death receptors. Resistance to apoptosis of mucosal T cells has also been observed in patients with Crohn's disease. An increase in Bcl2/BAX ratio in lamina propria T cells enhances resistance to programmed cell death. The Bcl2 family plays an important role in this mechanism [29–31].

## 3. Treatment methods

The first-line treatment of IBD with mild/or moderate severity is sulfasalazine and other aminosalicic acid compounds. The extent and severity of the disease should be determined before starting treatment. In mild to moderate disease, treatment can be provided on an outpatient basis, but patients with a severe fever, high heart rate, anemia, increased white blood cell count, and abdominal pain should be hospitalized [32,33]. In general, in the treatment of patients with inflammatory bowel disease, various drug groups are used including corticosteroids, Aminosalicylates, immunomodulators, antibiotics, and supportive medications. For many years, treatment for these patients has been limited to sulfasalazine and corticosteroids, but various oral Aminosalicylates are now used as the first line of treatment. Corticosteroids are still used as effective agents in improving symptoms in patients with moderate to severe severity, including antibiotics such as metronidazole, quinolones (such as ciprofloxacin), amoxicillin, and clarithromycin in the maintenance and maintenance of Crohn's patients [34–36]. Immunosuppressive drugs are widely used in individuals who are resistant to these treatments or patients getting highly dependent on corticosteroids. 6-Mercaptopurine and azathioprine are the most widely used. But methotrexate, cyclosporine, and anti-TNF agents are also used

**Table 1**  
Some examples of traditional and biological DMARDs in IBD treatment.

Traditional DMARDs Drugs			
Drug name	Mechanism of Action	Side effects	Reference
Methotrexate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inhibition of T cell activation</li> <li>• suppression of intercellular adhesion molecule</li> <li>• down-regulation of B Lymphocytes</li> <li>• Inhibition of methyltransferase activity</li> <li>• Inhibition of the binding of interleukin 1-beta</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hepatotoxicity</li> <li>• Ulcerative stomatitis</li> <li>• Abdominal pain</li> <li>• Leukopenia</li> <li>• Nausea</li> <li>• Acute pneumonitis</li> <li>• Fever</li> <li>• Kidney failure</li> <li>• Fatigue</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Oligospermia</li> <li>• Infertility</li> <li>• Thrombocytopenia</li> <li>• Megaloblastic anemia</li> <li>• Hemolytic anemia</li> <li>• Kidney stones</li> <li>• Headache</li> <li>• Stomach cramps</li> <li>• Headache</li> <li>• Retinopathy</li> <li>• Agitation</li> <li>• Paranoia and depression</li> <li>• Stevens-Johnson syndrome</li> <li>• Lymphopenia</li> <li>• Liver failure</li> <li>• Weakness</li> </ul>	[80,81]
Sulfasalazine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suppression of IL-1</li> <li>• Suppression of TNF-alpha</li> <li>• Apoptosis of inflammatory cells</li> <li>• Increase chemotactic factors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fatigue</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Oligospermia</li> <li>• Infertility</li> <li>• Thrombocytopenia</li> <li>• Megaloblastic anemia</li> <li>• Hemolytic anemia</li> <li>• Kidney stones</li> <li>• Headache</li> <li>• Stomach cramps</li> <li>• Headache</li> <li>• Retinopathy</li> <li>• Agitation</li> <li>• Paranoia and depression</li> <li>• Stevens-Johnson syndrome</li> <li>• Lymphopenia</li> <li>• Liver failure</li> <li>• Weakness</li> </ul>	[82-84]
Hydroxychloroquine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inhibits stimulation of the toll-like receptor</li> <li>• Induce apoptosis of inflammatory cells</li> <li>• Decrease chemotaxis</li> <li>• TNF-alpha</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headache</li> <li>• Stomach cramps</li> <li>• Headache</li> <li>• Retinopathy</li> <li>• Agitation</li> <li>• Paranoia and depression</li> <li>• Stevens-Johnson syndrome</li> <li>• Lymphopenia</li> <li>• Liver failure</li> <li>• Weakness</li> </ul>	[85,86]
Biological DMARDs Drugs			
Abatacept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inhibitor of T-cells costimulatory signal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anaphylactic reactions</li> <li>• Upper respiratory tract infections</li> <li>• Urinary tract infections</li> <li>• Herpes infections</li> <li>• High blood pressure</li> <li>• Fatigue</li> <li>• Upset stomach</li> <li>• Tuberculosis</li> <li>• Risk of Cancer</li> <li>• Liver injury</li> <li>• Demyelinating central nervous system</li> <li>• Anaphylaxis</li> <li>• Serious infections</li> <li>• Heart failure</li> <li>• Urinary tract infections</li> <li>• Diarrhea</li> <li>• Stomach pain</li> <li>• Stuffy nose</li> <li>• Sepsis</li> <li>• Reactivation of latent tuberculosis and hepatitis B</li> </ul>	[87,88]
Adalimumab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TNF inhibitor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tuberculosis</li> <li>• Risk of Cancer</li> <li>• Liver injury</li> <li>• Demyelinating central nervous system</li> <li>• Anaphylaxis</li> <li>• Serious infections</li> <li>• Heart failure</li> <li>• Urinary tract infections</li> <li>• Diarrhea</li> <li>• Stomach pain</li> <li>• Stuffy nose</li> <li>• Sepsis</li> <li>• Reactivation of latent tuberculosis and hepatitis B</li> </ul>	[89,90]
Certolizumab pegol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TNF inhibitor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serious infections</li> <li>• Heart failure</li> <li>• Urinary tract infections</li> <li>• Diarrhea</li> <li>• Stomach pain</li> <li>• Stuffy nose</li> <li>• Sepsis</li> <li>• Reactivation of latent tuberculosis and hepatitis B</li> </ul>	[91,92]
Etanercept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TNF inhibitor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reactivation of latent tuberculosis and hepatitis B</li> </ul>	[93]
Golimumab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TNF inhibitor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upper respiratory infections</li> </ul>	[94,95]
Sarilumab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction of IL-6, ICAM-1, MMP-3, VEGF</li> <li>• IL-6 receptor antagonist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viral infections</li> <li>• Neutropenia</li> <li>• Thrombocytopenia</li> <li>• Hyperlipidaemia</li> </ul>	[96]
Ustekinumab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inhibitor of IL-23, and IL-12</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infections of the upper respiratory tract</li> <li>• upper respiratory tract infections</li> <li>• tuberculosis</li> <li>• risk of cancer</li> <li>• headache</li> </ul>	[97]

DMARD: Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs.

in selective cases; While all these medications have side effects as well as immune system dysfunction, gastrointestinal disorders, skin disorders, avascular necrosis, kidney diseases, liver dysfunction, allergic reactions, and so on. Therefore, the use of alternative therapies is inevitable. With the advancement of MSC science, UC has also been treated with a variety of MSC-based drugs [35–38]. There are several DMARDs in order to IBD treatment; we summarized some of them in Table 1.

#### 4. Mesenchymal stem cells

In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest in the use of stem cells in the treatment of various diseases. One type of these fatal diseases is COVID-19; Alveolar type II cells can be infected by the SARS-CoV-2 through the expression of ACE2 and cause dysfunction of these cells, apoptosis, and the spread of lung tissue damage [39,40]. One group of these stem cells that are currently undergoing extensive studies are the Mesenchymal Stem Cells (MSCs), which due to the regulatory function of these immune systems, are highly repulsive. Consider the use

of MSCs as a means of regulating the immune system in the treatment of autoimmune diseases and also their role in the clinical application [41,42]. For a cell to be defined as a mesenchymal cell, it must have several characteristics. First of all, they must have the following phenotype CD105+, CD73+, CD90+, CD34-, CD14-CD11b-, CD45-, CD79a-, and CD19-. Secondly, they must be able to differentiate into adipocytes, osteoblasts, and chondroblasts. Mesenchymal cells produce and secrete a variety of immune-modulating factors, such as indoleamine 2,3-dioxygenase, prostaglandin E2, exosomes, FasL, PD-L2, PD-L1, and IL-6 [43,44]. MSCs are known as multipotent stromal cells. These cells have the ability to differentiate into different types of mesenchymal cells, including fat, bone, cartilage, and muscle in the intracellular and extracellular environment. Recent studies have shown that these cells can also obtain the germ cell phenotype under appropriate induction conditions. Using proper induction methods, MSCs can differentiate into many other types of cells and tissues as well as skeletal muscle, adipose tissue, synovial membrane, umbilical cord blood, and placenta [45,46]. Mesenchymal stem cells are known to have a regulatory function altering the immune system by affecting T lymphocytes. A unique feature of these cells is the ability to suppress and moderate immune responses [47]. MSCs have an inhibitory effect on various immune system cells such as T cells, B cells, natural killer cells (NK) and dendritic cells (CD11), CD + 11 which reduce and regulate immune responses [48–50]. Moreover, this type of immunomodulatory cells can reduce the expression of monocytes stimulus-assisting molecules, so MSCs are potent to adjust pro-inflammatory cytokines, including TNF- $\alpha$  and IL-12 [51,52]. The anti-inflammatory effect of MSCs is described in Fig. 1, briefly.

**5. Mesenchymal stem cells in IBD treatment**

Some researchers have shown that MCSs in IBD patients are dysfunctional. Grim et al. anticipated that MSCs of IBD patients contribute to the induction of pathogenic myofibroblasts in IBD patients. In UC, but not Crohn's disease, expression of two stem cell markers, Oct4

and ALDH1A was enhanced in the inflamed IBD colonic mucosa and linked with an increase in the mesenchymal lineage marker Grem1. These cells proliferated more and differentiated abnormally in UC, but not in Crohn's disease colonic mucosa. Crohn's disease MSCs, in contrast to normal and UC-derived MSCs, lose most of their clonogenic and differentiation abilities. Their findings also imply that the pathogenic PD-L1 low phenotype of Crohn's disease myofibroblasts may be due to significant damage to these cells in Crohn's disease. However, in UC, abnormal MSC differentiation appears to be implicated in the formation of pathogenic partly differentiated PD-L1high myofibroblasts inside the inflamed colonic mucosa. For the first time, their findings reveal that MSC progenitor activities are affected differently in Crohn's disease versus UC [53]. Due to these findings, some researchers have tried to solve this problem using MCS driven from other tissues such as adipose, bone marrow, and placenta. The characteristics of MSCs, especially their immunomodulatory function, have led to the use of these cells as immune system regulators for the treatment of IBD, as Gao et al.'s showed that Adipose-derived mesenchymal stem cell helped Crohn's disease treatment through the Wnt signaling pathway, and T cell immunoregulation [54].

In recent years, the therapeutic performance of MSCs on animal models of IBD or in-vitro models has been studied. Some studies have used MSCs or their productions as the medication; while some have used it as a vehicle for other medications or used in the drug delivery methods of IBD treatment. Interestingly, research in an animal model has shown that allogeneic mesenchymal stem cell transplantation could improve medical treatment with steroids. Cristóbal et al.'s study showed that after adipose-derived mesenchymal stem cells infusion, the steroid dosage can be greatly lowered or eliminated. Cristóbal et al. found positive long-lasting treatment outcomes [55]. These effects are attributed to the multipotential abilities of MSCs as it has been shown that bone marrow-derived MSCs can migrate to the bowel after being injected intraperitoneally in murine models and reduce the onset of colitis. Also, MSCs inhibit tumor cell growth and promoted apoptosis in tumor cells of the colon. In addition, previous studies demonstrated

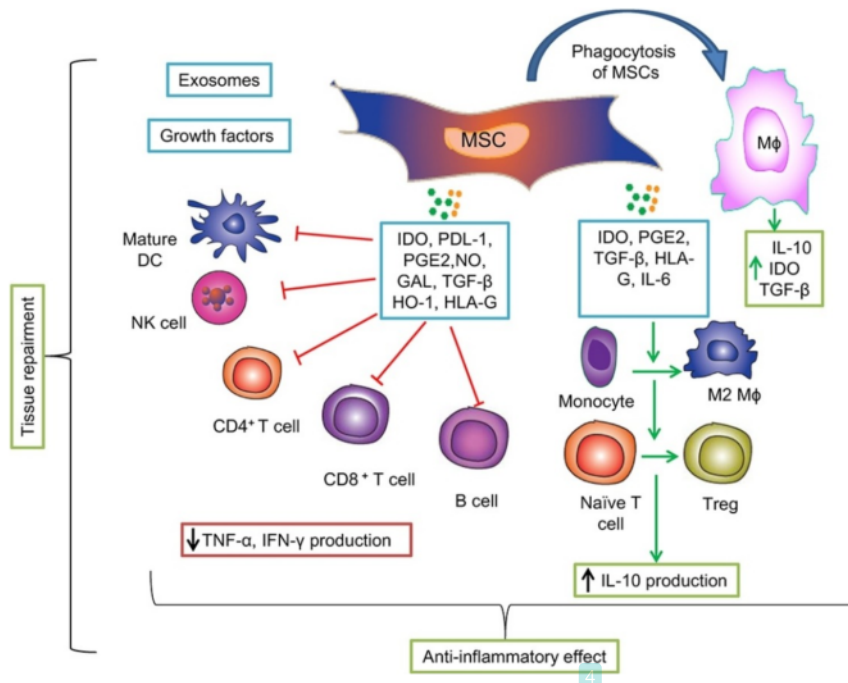


Fig. 1. Schematic of the anti-inflammatory mechanisms of mesenchymal stem cells. Figure is reused from Elsevier publisher [79].

**Table 2**  
Completed clinical trial studies on MSCs and IBD. (<https://www.clinicaltrials.gov>).

NCT Number	Title	Conditions	Characteristics	Locations	
1	NCT00294112	Prochymal™ Adult Human Mesenchymal Stem Cells for Treatment of Moderate-to-severe Crohn's Disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crohn's Disease</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcome Measures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of Participants with Reduction in Crohn's Disease Activity Index (CDAI) of at Least 100 Points</li> <li>• Number of Participants with Reduction in CDAI of at Least 70 points</li> <li>• Improvement as Assessed by the Inflammatory Bowel Disease Questionnaire (IBDQ)</li> <li>• Time to Improvement in IBDQ</li> <li>• Number of Participants with Reduction of at Least 50% in Fistulas in Participants with Fistulas Draining Under Moderate Compression</li> <li>• Number of Participants with Induction of Remission as Defined by Reduction of CDAI to Below 150</li> <li>• Time to Reduction in CDAI of at Least 100 Points</li> <li>• Time to Reduction in CDAI of at Least 70 Points</li> <li>• Time to Induction of Remission as Defined by Reduction of CDAI to Below 150.</li> <li>• Number of Participants with Adverse Events</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Osiris Clinical Site, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, United States</li> <li>• Osiris Clinical Site, Charlotte, North Carolina, United States</li> <li>• Osiris Clinical Site, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States</li> <li>• Osiris Clinical Site, Richmond, Virginia, United States</li> </ul>
2	NCT01144962	Dose-escalating Therapeutic Study of Allogeneic Bone Marrow Derived Mesenchymal Stem Cells for the Treatment of Fistulas in Patients With Refractory Perianal Crohn's Disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crohn's Disease</li> <li>• Fistula</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcome Measures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety and efficacy (fistula closure)</li> <li>• Clinical scores</li> <li>• Endoscopic scores</li> <li>• Quality of life</li> <li>• C-reactive protein (CRP)</li> <li>• Safety</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leiden University Medical Center (LUMC), Leiden, Zuid Holland, Netherlands</li> </ul>
3	NCT01157650	Treatment of Fistulous Crohn's Disease by Implant of Autologous Mesenchymal Stem Cells Derived From Adipose Tissue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crohn Disease</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcome Measures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security and tolerance</li> <li>• therapeutic effect</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clínica Universitaria de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain</li> <li>• Hospital Provincial de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain</li> <li>• Hospital Virgen del Camino, Pamplona, Spain</li> <li>• Shaanxi Provincial People's Hospital, Xi Ai, Shaanxi, China</li> </ul>
4	NCT02445547	Umbilical Cord Mesenchymal Stem Cell Treatment for Crohn's Disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crohn Disease</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcome Measures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crohn's disease activity index</li> <li>• Harvey-Bradshaw index</li> <li>• Corticosteroid dosage</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shaanxi Provincial People's Hospital, Xi Ai, Shaanxi, China</li> </ul>
NCT Number	Title	Conditions	Characteristics	Locations	
5	NCT00543374	Extended Evaluation of PROCHYMAL® Adult Human Stem Cells for Treatment-Resistant Moderate-to- Severe Crohn's Disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crohn's Disease</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcome Measures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Duration of clinical benefit (Crohn's disease activity index)</li> <li>• Re-induction of clinical benefit (Crohn's disease activity index)</li> <li>• Improvement in quality of life (Inflammatory Bowel Disease Questionnaire [IBDQ] instrument)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced Clinical Research Institute, Anaheim, California, United States</li> <li>• Veteran's Administration Medical Center (does not require vet status), Long Beach, California, United States</li> <li>• University of Southern California University Hospital, Los Angeles, California, United States</li> <li>• University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, California, United States</li> <li>• Western States Clinical Research, Wheat Ridge, Colorado, United States</li> <li>• Gastroenterology Center of Connecticut, Hamden, Connecticut, United States</li> <li>• Clinical Research of West Florida, Clearwater, Florida, United States</li> <li>• Borland-Groover Clinic, Jacksonville, Florida, United States</li> <li>• Venture Research Institute, Miami, Florida, United States</li> <li>• Shafran Gastroenterology Center, Winter Park, Florida, United States</li> <li>• and 48 more</li> </ul>
6	NCT00482092	Evaluation of PROCHYMAL® Adult Human Stem Cells for Treatment-resistant Moderate-to-severe Crohn's Disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crohn's Disease</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcome Measures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disease remission (CDAI at or below 150)</li> <li>• Disease improvement (Reduction by at least 100 points in CDAI)</li> <li>• Improvement in quality of life (IBDQ)</li> <li>• Reduction in number of draining fistulas</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Southern California University Hospital, Los Angeles, California, United States</li> <li>• University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, California, United States</li> <li>• Western States Clinical Research, Wheat Ridge, Colorado, United States</li> </ul>

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

NCT Number	Title	Conditions	Characteristics	Locations
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clinical Research of West Florida, Clearwater, Florida, United States</li> <li>Borland-Groover Clinic, Jacksonville, Florida, United States</li> <li>Shafran Gastroenterology Center, Winter Park, Florida, United States</li> <li>Atlanta Gastroenterology Associates, Atlanta, Georgia, United States</li> <li>University of Chicago Medical Center, Chicago, Illinois, United States</li> <li>Carle Clinic Association, Urbana, Illinois, United States</li> <li>Indiana University Medical Center, Indianapolis, Indiana, United States</li> <li>and 46 more</li> </ul>
NCT Number	Title	Conditions	Characteristics	Locations
7	NCT01541579 Adipose Derived Mesenchymal Stem Cells for Induction of Remission in Perianal Fistulizing Crohn's Disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crohn's Disease</li> </ul>	<p>Outcome Measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Combine remission of perianal fistulizing Crohn's</li> <li>Efficacy Assessment by week 24</li> <li>Efficacy Assessment by week 52</li> <li>Efficacy Assessment by week 104</li> <li>Safety analysis throughout the study:</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Univ.-Klinik Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria</li> <li>Krankenhaus, St. Veit/Glan, Austria</li> <li>Medizinische Universität, Wien, Austria</li> <li>Hospital Oost-Limburg, Genk, Belgium</li> <li>Gent University Hospital, Gent, Belgium</li> <li>Leuven University Hospital, Leuven, Belgium</li> <li>Hospital Hartziekenhuis, Roeselare, Belgium</li> <li>CHU d'Amiens, Amiens, France</li> <li>CHU de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, France</li> <li>CHU de Caen, Caen, France</li> <li>and 42 more</li> </ul>
8	NCT01233960 Evaluation of PROCHYMAL® for Treatment- refractory Moderate-to-severe Crohn's Disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crohn's Disease</li> </ul>	<p>Outcome Measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disease remission</li> <li>Disease Improvement</li> <li>Improvement in Quality of Life (IBDQ)</li> <li>Number of Adverse events as a measure of safety</li> <li>Infusional toxicity as a measure of safety and tolerability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, California, United States</li> <li>Clinical Research of West Florida, Clearwater, Florida, United States</li> <li>Shafran Gastroenterology Center, Winter Park, Florida, United States</li> <li>University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, United States</li> <li>Cotton-O'Neil Clinical Research Center, Topeka, Kansas, United States</li> <li>University of Maryland, Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland, United States</li> <li>Chevy Chase Clinical Research, Chevy Chase, Maryland, United States</li> <li>Saint Louis Center for Clinical Research, Saint Louis, Missouri, United States</li> <li>St. Louis Center for Clinical Studies, Saint Louis, Missouri, United States</li> <li>Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, Lebanon, New Hampshire, United States</li> <li>and 10 more</li> </ul>
9	NCT03220243 Stem Cell Coated Fistula Plug in Patients With Crohn's RVF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fistula</li> <li>Vagina</li> <li>Crohn Disease</li> </ul>	<p>Outcome Measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of participants with treatment-related adverse events (safety and toxicity).</li> <li>Number of participants with response to the treatment regarding potential cessation of drainage from their fistula.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Rochester, Minnesota, United States</li> </ul>
10	NCT01915927 Stem Cell Fistula Plug in Perianal Crohn's Disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perianal Crohn's Disease</li> </ul>	<p>Outcome Measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To determine the safety and toxicity of using autologous MSC coated fistula plug in patients with fistulizing Crohn's Disease.</li> <li>To assess in preliminary fashion the response of fistula healing induced by the GORE plug containing MSC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, United States</li> </ul>

MSCs were found to be able to migrate into the colon, reduce chronic inflammation, and regulate gut microbiome dysbiosis; all of these functions helped to prevent the development of colitis-associated colon cancer [56]. Completed clinical trial studies are listed in Table 2.

## 6. MSCs-derived exosomes in IBD research

In an experimental UC model, Gu et al. focused on the impact of “MSC-derived exosomal miR-181a” on intestinal barrier function, gut microbiota, and immunological responses. This MSCs product might help treat experimental colitis by improving intestinal barrier task. It acted as an anti-inflammatory and influenced the gut microbiome. This suggested that MSCs exosomal miR-181a could be useful as an effective treatment for UC [57].

Yang et al. evaluated a theory that says exosomes from MSCs stimulated by IFN- $\gamma$  can reduce colitis via micro-RNA-125a and micro-RNA-125b. This study shows that IFN- $\gamma$  treatment increased MSC exosomes that contribute to reducing colitis by increasing the levels of micro-RNA-125a and micro-RNA-125b, which bind to the 3' untranslated region of Stat3 and suppress Th17 cell development [58]. In another study, in a Dextran sodium sulfate (DSS)-induced colitis model, MSC-derived exosomal miR-181a reduced TNF- and IL-17 levels while improving intestinal barrier integrity [59].

Micro RNAs are a new class of non-coding and endogenous single-stranded RNAs that are abundant in plants and animals, and their immature variants become functional under several nuclear and cytoplasmic stages. Micro RNAs play a vital role in controlling various dimensions of the innate immune system, for example, controlling the ability to kill microbes, stimulate the production of cytokines, and provide antigen by MHC proteins. Micro RNAs play an important role in the proliferation of Th17 cells [60,61]. Induction and suppression of micro RNA expression in response to inflammation can affect various biological functions and cause pro-inflammatory or anti-inflammatory effects. Thus, micro RNAs are central regulators of inflammation. The balance between Th1 and Th2 cells plays a key role in causing inflammation. Th17 cells are characterized by the production of IL-17A and other cytokines such as IL-17F, IL-21, and IL-22. Recently, many studies have reported the role of Th17 cell pathogenesis in the development or progression of IBD. Some important regulatory pathways based on micro

RNAs prevent lymphocyte accumulation and the autoimmune process, thus highlighting the vital role of micro RNA regulation in Treg function. This issue was addressed by Heidari et al. study in which the immune response regulatory effects of MSCs-derived exosomes in the acute phase of DSS-induced colitis were investigated and in the lymph node and spleen of mice treated via exosomes, the levels of TNF- $\beta$ , IFN- $\gamma$ , IL-17, and IL-12 were reduced, while the levels of TGF- $\beta$ , IL-10, and IL-4 were elevated due to Treg cell induction. The results demonstrated that exosome delivery reduced colon shortening, bodyweight loss, hemorrhage, and colon damage [62–64]. The immunomodulatory effects of exosomes derived from MSCs are shown in Fig. 2.

## 7. MSCs effect on smooth cell function and intestine integrity

In Crohn's disease ileum, intrinsic myogenic changes occur in smooth muscle cells, which probably lead to stricture development. This process is widely associated with the TGF- $\beta$  function. Smooth muscle cells produced more IL-6 in Crohn's disease patients with stricture segments. Furthermore, IL-6 induces TGF-1 synthesis by Crohn's disease patients' intestinal smooth muscle cells by activating the STAT3 pathway [65,66]. Duan et al. study showed that in mice with trinitrobenzene sulfonic acid (TSA)-induced colitis, Extracellular vesicles derived from human placental mesenchymal stem cells significantly reduced clinical symptoms by suppressing inflammation and oxidative stress and promoting mucosal repair [67].

In colitis mice, Xu et al. produced phenotypically homogenous MSCs from human embryonic stem cells and investigated the molecular processes that promote mucosal integrity and regeneration. This study showed that MSCs from human embryonic stem cells infusions reduced colitis in rats by increasing the level of circulating IGF-1. Increased IGF-1 helps epithelial cells maintain their integrity as well as muscular repair and regeneration [68]. Liyun & Xiaocang have worked on a hypothesis that stated extracellular vesicles produced from human placental MSCs can influence collagen deposition in the intestinal mucosa of mice models of colitis. The findings of their study imply that these types of MSCs can significantly lower the severity of colon damage and intestinal mucosa collagen deposition in mice [69].

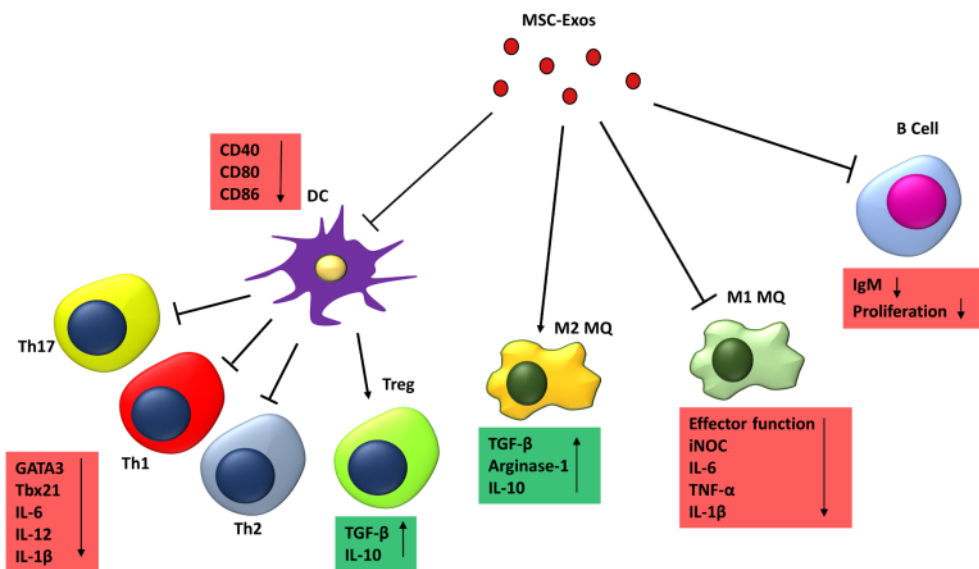


Fig. 2. Exosomes and immunomodulation mechanisms.



## 8. MCSs effect on IBD through oxidative stress pathways

Regmi et al. devised an approach to improve the microenvironment of MSCs by combining MSCs with quercetin (QUR)-loaded microspheres (MSCHS) in a mouse model of colitis, resulting in local medication delivery to the cells. MSCHS, in comparison to 3D-cultured MSCs (MSC3D) and 2D-cultured cells (MSC2D) in vitro, showed resistance to senescence-associated phenotype and oxidative stress-induced apoptosis. MSCHS and MSC3D had a greater anti-inflammatory effect than MSC2D in a mouse model of colitis by reducing neutrophil infiltration and regulating Th polarization into Th17 and Th1 cells, correspondingly. MSCHS outperformed MSC3D in terms of therapeutic results, owing to their higher in vivo survival capability. Furthermore, Regmi S et al. discovered that prostaglandin E2 (PGE2), a paracrine substance produced from MSCs, can directly drive epithelial regeneration by generating specialized tissue-repairing cell production using intestinal organoid culture. Interestingly, MSC3D and MSCHS had much higher regeneration-inducing potency than MSC2D because of their higher PGE2 production. Altogether, they propose a convergent MSCHS production approach using the ROS (reactive oxygen species) scavenger, which can maximize MSCs' inflammation-attenuating and tissue-repairing capacity, as well as implantation efficiency after transplantation [70].

Li et al. also showed immunosuppressive and anti-inflammatory effects of MCS therapy on the DSS-induced colitis model [71]. The goal of Wu et al. was to observe if and how flavonoid therapy improved the therapeutic efficacy of MSCs in dextran sulfate sodium (DSS)-induced colitis. The MSC treatment with Wogonin (a flavonoid) dramatically reduces enteric inflammation in IBD mice by increasing IL-10 expression, according to conducted research. Wogonin increases IL-10 and ROS levels in MSCs in vitro in a dose-associated system. Wogonin enhances IL-10 secretion by boosting HIF-1 expression as a transcript factor via the GSK3/AKT signaling pathway, according to western blot data. Finally, an in vivo IL-10 blockage experiment verified Wogonin's beneficial effects on MSCs. Flavonoid therapy significantly raises IL-10 release and improved the therapeutic results of MSCs in DSS-induced colitis, according to their findings. Thus, flavonoid therapy was proposed as a potential ideal method for MSC clinical application [72].

## 9. Randomised clinical TRIALS

Studies in recent years have contributed to our understanding of MSCs to some extent and have provided clues to the use of these cells as a promising tool for the treatment of diseases, especially autoimmune diseases. For example, the first phase I clinical trial report of a treatment cell using MSCs derived from autologous adipose tissue was published in 2005 in which topical injection of MSCs improved fistulas in the intestine. This result was confirmed in 2009 by the same research group in the Phase II clinical trial. Vieujean et al. evaluated the safety and efficacy of injecting local MSCs into strictures caused by Crohn's disease. They concluded that the injection of local MSCs into a non-passable Crohn's disease stricture was well tolerated in the short term, although there were multiple occlusions described in the follow-up. Combining the benefits of MSCs with the proven benefits of endoscopic balloon dilatation may enhance the result of CD stricture [73,74]. In the study of Dhere et al. (NCT01659762), in individuals experiencing Crohn's disease, an IV infusion of fresh autologous bone marrow mesenchymal stromal cells was found to be safe and effective at dosages of up to 10 million cells/kg BW. In their study (Dhere et al.), in individuals experiencing Crohn's disease, an IV infusion of fresh autologous bone marrow mesenchymal stromal cells was found to be safe and effective at dosages of up to 10 million cells/kg BW [75]. Based on Molendijk et al. trial, in individuals with perianal fistulizing Crohn's disease, local injection of allogeneic MSCs was not linked with serious adverse effects [76]. Forbes et al.'s [77] trial showed a reduced Crohn's disease activity score (NCT01090817). In a more recent study in 2021, Cabalza-

Wondberg et al. evaluated the efficiency, safety, and feasibility of an MCS application in the clinical trial, in form of case series. This study shows that allogeneic expanded adipose-derived mesenchymal stem cells could be helpful in the treatment of the perianal fistulas in Crohn's disease. This new treatment approach for complex perianal fistulas offers a potential therapeutic option [78].

## 10. Conclusion

MSCs, MSC-driven exosomal microRNAs and MSC-based drug delivery systems have been demonstrated to affect immune system modulation in experimental animal models of IBD (Th17 suppression versus T-regular cell biased responses). MSCs have been shown to enhance intestinal integrity and smooth cell function in several studies. Various clinical trials for MSCs administration in IBD patients have been filed with reliable safety in humans mostly including infusion of MCSs generated from bone marrow adipose tissue and the umbilical cord. Clinical research has looked at patient symptoms or the healing process while immune-pathologic studies have been lacking in the clinical period. As we've seen a slew of experimental data has prompted the start of a slew of phase I/II clinical trials all of which have yielded encouraging findings for IBD therapy. Overall our study shows that the use of MSCs in the treatment of IBD is not only safe but also the dangerous side effects of conventional and DMARDs drugs can be avoided and gives rise to enhancing the quality of treatment. We believe that future clinical research should focus more on in-vitro/in-vivo outcomes as well as immunological endpoints in order to provide more trustworthy results with more laboratory proof.

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This article is based on previously conducted studies and does not contain any new studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

## Credit authorship contribution statement

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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