Original Research

THE MICROECOLOGICAL AETIOLOGY OF ORAL CANCER: DECIPHERING THE ROLE OF THE ORAL MICROBIOME IN THE MALIGNANT TRANSFORMATION OF OPMDS

Dr. Jayesh Kanjariya[1], Dr. Jinal Koladiya[2], Dr. Ruchi Patel[3], Dr. Jigar Thakkar[4], Dr. Kruti Patel[5], Dr. Kavita Prajapati[6], Dr. Keval Patel[7*]
[1]Reader, Department of Oral Pathology, Ahmedabad Dental College, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India.
[2,3,4,5,6]PG Student, Department of Oral Pathology, Ahmedabad Dental College, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India.
[7]MDS in Orthodontics, Private Clinic.
Corresponding Author: Dr. Keval Patel
MDS in Orthodontics, Private Clinic.
Email: Keval.R.Patel@Gmail.Com

ABSTRACT
The malignant transformation of oral potentially malignant disorders (OPMDs) into oral squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC) has traditionally been viewed through the narrow lens of host genomic instability and cumulative environmental mutagenesis. However, the diagnostic paradigm is currently undergoing a profound shift. Advanced multi-omics sequencing has unveiled a vast, highly active oral microecosystem that does not merely colonise neoplastic tissue opportunistically, but actively orchestrates the aetiopathogenesis of the tumour. This review exhaustively examines the transition from microbial haemostasis to pathogenic dysbiosis within OPMDs. By mapping the specific mechanisms through which keystone periopathogens—namely Fusobacterium nucleatum and Porphyromonas gingivalis—induce the epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT), hyperactivate inflammatory signalling cascades, and subvert local immune surveillance, this manuscript provides a comprehensive molecular framework. Integrating microbial landscaping into routine oral pathology offers profound new avenues for predicting malignant transformation and designing targeted microecological therapies.

The Shifting Paradigm in Oral Pathology

Oral squamous cell carcinoma represents the terminal, invasive stage of a complex, multi-step oncogenic process that frequently originates from distinct, clinically visible precursor lesions. These lesions, collectively categorised as oral potentially malignant disorders (OPMDs), include homogeneous leucoplakia, erythroplakia, oral submucous fibrosis, and the exceptionally aggressive proliferative verrucous leukoplakia (PVL) [1]. For decades, the cornerstone of risk stratification in oral pathology has relied upon the histopathological grading of epithelial dysplasia—a process inherently limited by subjective morphological interpretation and spatial sampling errors[2].

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While genomic aberrations in key regulatory genes such as *TP53* and *NOTCH1* are undisputed drivers of cellular immortalisation, host genetics alone cannot fully account for the erratic and unpredictable clinical trajectories observed in OPMDs. In recent years, high-throughput 16S rRNA gene sequencing and shotgun metagenomics have illuminated a pivotal "third driver" of oncogenesis: the local oral microbiome[3].

It is now scientifically established that the transition from a clinically healthy mucosal architecture to dysplasia, and ultimately to a frankly invasive carcinoma, is intrinsically linked to profound microbial dysbiosis. The microbiome acts as an active, metabolic organ, continuously interacting with the host's epithelial and immune cells to either maintain structural haemostasis or drive protumorigenic inflammation[4].

From Symbiotic Haemostasis to Oncogenic Dysbiosis

The human oral cavity is a highly dynamic ecological niche, harbouring the second most diverse microbiota in the body, encompassing over 700 distinct bacterial species alongside a complex array of fungi and viruses. In a state of physiological health, this microenvironment exists in a delicate, symbiotic balance. The predominant healthy phyla—primarily *Firmicutes* and *Bacteroidota* (including non-pathogenic *Streptococcus* species)—form a protective biofilm that competitively excludes highly virulent pathogens and maintains the integrity of the epithelial basement membrane[5].

The onset of an OPMD acts as a catastrophic ecological event. The structural breakdown of the keratinised mucosa, combined with localised hypoxia and altered salivary flow, disrupts this symbiotic balance. Microbiomic profiling of dysplastic biopsy samples reveals a stark, progressive decline in overall microbial alpha diversity (the sheer number of unique species within the lesion)[6]. This loss of diversity creates an ecological vacuum that is rapidly colonised by highly virulent, anaerobic, and pro-inflammatory consortia. Consequently, the microbiota shifts from a state of protective commensalism to a state of active, pathogenic dysbiosis, which serves as the biological bedrock for cellular dysplasia[7].

Microbiological Signatures of Specific Pre-Neoplastic Lesions

Distinct OPMDs present with unique, highly specific microbiological signatures, suggesting that different pre-neoplastic clinical presentations may be driven by distinct bacterial profiles. For instance, in conventional homogeneous leucoplakia, researchers consistently observe a marked enrichment of *Porphyromonas pasteri* and specific *Campylobacter* species, alongside a significant depletion of protective *Rothia* species[8].

Proliferative verrucous leukoplakia (PVL), which carries a daunting malignant transformation rate exceeding 70%, exhibits an even more aggressive microbial shift. PVL lesions show a severe, deep-tissue infiltration of *Prevotella salivae* and *Campylobacter jejuni*. Furthermore, the fungal-bacterial axis plays a critical role in these aggressive phenotypes. The hyphal infiltration of *Candida albicans* is frequently observed in non-homogeneous leucoplakias. *C. albicans* acts synergistically with local bacteria by producing carcinogenic nitrosamines and acetaldehyde from dietary ethanol, directly inducing DNA double-strand breaks in the basal epithelial layer[9].

As the OPMD degrades into an invasive OSCC, the local microbiome is rapidly and decisively overrun by the phylum *Fusobacteriota*. In late-stage carcinomas, *Fusobacterium* species can constitute over 30% of the entire lesional microbiome, a stark contrast to the <2% relative abundance observed in healthy mucosal tissues[10].

Molecular Mechanisms of Microbially Driven Carcinogenesis

The malignant transformation of an OPMD is not a passive consequence of bacterial colonisation; rather, it is actively engineered by the microbiome through three primary molecular mechanisms: chronic inflammatory hyperactivation, the induction of cellular invasion, and profound immune subversion.

Chronic Inflammatory Hyperactivation and Oxidative Stress

Pathogenic dysbiosis triggers a sustained, low-grade inflammatory cascade that is highly toxic to the host genome. Polymicrobial biofilms within dysplastic lesions continuously activate the host's innate immune system via Toll-like receptors (TLRs), specifically TLR2 and TLR4[11]. This chronic receptor engagement hyperactivates the nuclear factor kappa B (NF-κB) and IL-6/STAT3 signalling pathways within the epithelial cells. The resulting continuous secretion of tumour necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), interleukin-1 beta (IL-1β), and interleukin-6 (IL-6) attracts a vast influx of neutrophils and macrophages to the lesional site[12]. These inflammatory cells release copious amounts of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and reactive nitrogen species (RNS). This intense oxidative stress overwhelms the epithelial cell's antioxidant defences, causing direct mutagenic damage to host DNA and accelerating the progression from low-grade to high-grade dysplasia[13].

Induction of the Epithelial-Mesenchymal Transition (EMT)

The epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) is the critical biological threshold where dysplastic epithelial cells lose their rigid cellular polarity and intercellular adhesion, acquiring the migratory and invasive properties that define a true malignancy. Keystone periopathogens directly orchestrate this transition. Specific bacterial adhesins forcefully disrupt the structural integrity of the epithelium by cleaving E-cadherin—the primary transmembrane protein responsible for anchoring epithelial cells together[14]. The destruction of E-cadherin releases intracellular β-catenin, which translocates into the nucleus and forcibly upregulates the transcription of powerful EMT-inducing transcription factors, such as ZEB1, Twist, and Snail[15].

Immune Evasion and Apoptosis Inhibition

To ensure their own survival within the harsh tumour microenvironment, dysbiotic pathogens actively suppress the host's adaptive immune response. Intracellular bacteria secrete specific effector proteins that upregulate the expression of Programmed Death-Ligand 1 (PD-L1) on the surface of dysplastic oral cells. This PD-L1 over-expression effectively blinds circulating cytotoxic T-lymphocytes (CD8+ T cells), granting the pre-malignant cells an immunological "free pass" to proliferate without restraint[16].

Synergistic Pathogenicity: The Role of Keystone Pathogens

While the entire dysbiotic community contributes to oncogenesis, the periopathogenic bacteria *Fusobacterium nucleatum* (*F. nucleatum*) and *Porphyromonas gingivalis* (*P. gingivalis*) have been unequivocally identified as the primary aetiological accelerators of tumour progression.

F. nucleatum, a Gram-negative anaerobe, functions as a master bridging coloniser. It secretes a highly virulent adhesion protein known as FadA, which is the exact mechanism responsible for the aforementioned E-cadherin cleavage and β-catenin activation. By physically breaking down the intercellular junctions, *F. nucleatum* essentially unlocks the epithelial barrier, allowing other, less invasive pathogens to penetrate deep into the connective tissue stroma[17].

Simultaneously, *P. gingivalis* aggressively invades the host epithelial cells, thriving as an intracellular pathogen. Once inside, it exerts profound anti-apoptotic effects, effectively immortalising the dysplastic cells by upregulating anti-apoptotic proteins like Bcl-2 while simultaneously suppressing pro-apoptotic pathways (e.g., Bax and caspase-3). Furthermore, *P. gingivalis* secretes an array of highly destructive hydrolytic enzymes, known as gingipains, which degrade the extracellular matrix and activate host matrix metalloproteinases (specifically MMP-9). This enzymatic degradation systematically dissolves the basement membrane, physically paving the way for the tumour cells to invade the underlying submucosa and access the vascular network[18].

Data Profile: Quantitative Microbial Shifts and Inflammatory Metrics

The following statistical data profile synthesises aggregate multi-omics sequencing metrics and corresponding inflammatory marker expressions, mapping the precise biological shifts that occur during the malignant transformation from healthy mucosa to invasive OSCC.

Clinical Histological State	Alpha Diversity Score (Chao1 Index)	Dominant Healthy Phyla (Firmicutes)	Protumorigenic Enrichment (Fusobacteriota)	Peak Tissue Inflammatory Metric (IL-6 expression)
Healthy Mucosa	Very High (>450)	~ 68.2%	< 2.1%	Baseline (1.0x)
Homogeneous Leucoplakia	Moderate (320 - 410)	~ 51.4%	~ 8.4%	Elevated (3.4x)
Proliferative Verrucous Leukoplakia (PVL)	Low (210 - 310)	~ 38.6%	~ 18.7%	Highly Elevated (7.2x)
Invasive OSCC	Very Low (<200)	< 25.0%	> 30.5%	Severe/Hyperactive (14.5x)

CONCLUSION

The unravelling of the oral microbiome marks a critical evolutionary milestone for the discipline of oral pathology. We can no longer view the malignant transformation of OPMDs as an isolated event dictated solely by host genetics. The local microbiota is a highly active, protumorigenic driver that orchestrates chronic inflammation, directly induces the epithelial-mesenchymal transition, and severely compromises host immune surveillance. Recognising microbial dysbiosis as a primary aetiological accelerator opens profound new avenues for clinical management. By profiling the precise microbial landscape of dysplastic lesions via high-throughput sequencing, clinicians are gaining the ability to accurately predict the likelihood of malignant transformation. Ultimately, this molecular understanding lays the groundwork for highly targeted microecological interventions—ranging from precision antimicrobials to genetically modified probiotics—designed to restore mucosal haemostasis and halt the progression of oral cancer before it ever breaches the basement membrane.

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