



Brain Tumor Immunotherapy: Current Advances and Future Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Malignant brain tumors, particularly gliomas and glioblastoma multiforme (GBM), remain among the most lethal cancers due to their aggressive nature, genetic complexity, and resistance to conventional therapies. Immunotherapy has emerged as a promising approach to combat these tumors by harnessing the immune system's capacity to target and destroy cancer cells. This review explores the current advances in brain tumor immunotherapy, including immune checkpoint inhibitors, chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cell therapy, cancer vaccines, and oncolytic viruses. Despite significant progress, challenges such as the immunosuppressive tumor microenvironment, the blood-brain barrier, and tumor heterogeneity hinder the efficacy of these treatments. The review also delves into the unique immunological landscape of the brain, examining the role of microglia, astrocytes, and infiltrating immune cells, and their involvement in tumor-immune evasion. Prominent tumor-associated antigens like EGFRvIII, HER2, and survivin are discussed as key targets for immunotherapeutic strategies. Finally, the review outlines future prospects and research directions aimed at overcoming current obstacles and enhancing the effectiveness of immunotherapy for brain tumors.

Keywords: Brain Tumor, Immunotherapy, Current Advances, Future Prospects

INTRODUCTION

Malignant brain tumors, particularly gliomas and glioblastoma multiforme (GBM), are among the most aggressive forms of cancer, often proving fatal despite advancements in traditional therapeutic approaches such as surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy [1] [2]. Their resistance to these conventional treatments stems from several factors, including the highly invasive nature of the tumor cells, their genetic heterogeneity, and the presence of the blood-brain barrier (BBB), which limits the delivery of drugs to the tumor site. Furthermore, the brain's unique immune microenvironment, characterized by a predominantly immunosuppressive nature, creates significant obstacles for effective treatment [3].

Immunotherapy has emerged as a promising new frontier in oncology, aiming to harness the body's immune system to recognize and eliminate cancer cells. By modulating or enhancing immune responses, immunotherapy offers a novel strategy that could potentially overcome the limitations of conventional brain tumor treatments [4]. This review delves into the mechanisms behind brain tumor immunotherapy, examines the current therapies under investigation, and discusses the challenges and future prospects in developing immunotherapy for brain tumors.

CURRENT ADVANCES IN BRAIN TUMOR IMMUNOTHERAPY

Checkpoint Inhibitors: Checkpoint inhibitors have transformed cancer immunotherapy, with success in cancers like melanoma and lung cancer [5]. These drugs target immune checkpoints—molecules that regulate immune responses and prevent excessive inflammation but are exploited by tumor cells to evade detection. In brain tumors like glioblastoma, immune checkpoint inhibitors target molecules such as programmed death-1 (PD-1), programmed death-ligand 1 (PD-L1), and cytotoxic T-lymphocyte-associated protein 4 (CTLA-4) [6]. Early

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clinical trials have shown limited success, largely due to the highly immunosuppressive microenvironment of GBM, but ongoing research is focused on optimizing patient selection, combining checkpoint inhibitors with other therapies, and overcoming immune suppression [7].

Chimeric Antigen Receptor (CAR) T-Cell Therapy: CAR T-cell therapy involves engineering a patient's T-cells to express chimeric antigen receptors that recognize specific tumor-associated antigens (TAAs). For brain tumors, TAAs like EGFRvIII (a mutant form of the epidermal growth factor receptor commonly expressed in GBM) are targeted [8]. Early results from CAR T-cell therapies targeting EGFRvIII have demonstrated the feasibility of this approach, though challenges remain in ensuring CAR T-cells can penetrate the BBB and persist long enough in the hostile tumor microenvironment to effectively destroy tumor cells [9]. Efforts are underway to refine CAR T-cell design, improve delivery methods, and address the limitations posed by tumor heterogeneity [10].

Cancer Vaccines: Cancer vaccines aim to stimulate the immune system to recognize and attack tumor cells by presenting tumor antigens to immune cells. Personalized peptide vaccines that target specific tumor mutations have been explored in glioma patients, with some showing promising immunogenic responses [11]. However, these vaccines face challenges in maintaining durable immune responses and overcoming the brain's immunosuppressive environment. Dendritic cell vaccines, which use a patient's dendritic cells loaded with tumor antigens, are also being tested. Early-phase trials suggest some clinical benefits, but more robust responses are needed for widespread adoption [12].

Oncolytic Viruses: Oncolytic viruses selectively infect and kill tumor cells while stimulating an immune response against the tumor. Modified viruses, such as the herpes simplex virus (HSV), poliovirus, and adenovirus, have been investigated for their efficacy in treating gliomas and GBMs [13]. These viruses can enhance tumor antigen presentation and promote local inflammation, helping to overcome immune evasion mechanisms [14]. Clinical trials of oncolytic viruses like Toca 511 and DNX-2401 have shown encouraging results, though challenges in optimizing viral delivery, avoiding neurotoxicity, and achieving consistent immune activation remain.

BRAIN TUMOR IMMUNOLOGY

The Immune Microenvironment of the Brain: The brain is traditionally regarded as an "immune-privileged" organ, meaning it is shielded from the broader immune system to prevent excessive inflammation that could damage delicate neural tissues [15]. This immune privilege is largely maintained by the blood-brain barrier (BBB), a physical and selective barrier that limits the passage of immune cells, molecules, and pathogens from the bloodstream into the brain [16]. However, recent research has shown that the brain is not completely isolated from immune surveillance; it possesses its own mechanisms involving specialized cells that contribute to local immune responses.

Key players in the brain's immune microenvironment include:

1. **Microglia:** Microglia are the brain's resident macrophages and play a crucial role in maintaining immune surveillance and responding to injury or infection. They can phagocytose damaged cells and debris, and under normal circumstances, they help regulate inflammatory responses [17]. However, in the presence of brain tumors such as glioblastoma, microglia can be co-opted to support tumor growth by secreting anti-inflammatory cytokines and promoting an immunosuppressive environment.
2. **Astrocytes:** These star-shaped glial cells contribute to the immune landscape of the brain by supporting the BBB and regulating inflammation. In tumor contexts, astrocytes can release signals that promote tumor growth and immune evasion [18]. They are involved in maintaining homeostasis but may also facilitate immune suppression by secreting factors that inhibit T-cell function.
3. **Infiltrating Immune Cells:** Despite the BBB, immune cells from the periphery, such as T-cells, myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs), and macrophages, can infiltrate brain tissue, particularly in the context of brain tumors. These cells play varying roles depending on the tumor microenvironment. In gliomas and glioblastomas, tumor cells often manipulate infiltrating immune cells, converting them into pro-tumorigenic phenotypes that suppress effective anti-tumor immune responses [19].

Tumor-Immune Evasion in the Brain

One of the hallmarks of malignant brain tumors is their ability to evade immune detection and destruction. Tumors such as glioblastoma create an immunosuppressive microenvironment through several mechanisms:

- **Secretion of Immunosuppressive Molecules:** Tumor cells release molecules such as transforming growth factor-beta (TGF- β) and interleukin-10 (IL-10), which inhibit the activation of T-cells and other immune effectors.

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- **Expression of Immune Checkpoints:** Glioma cells upregulate immune checkpoint molecules such as PD-L1, which bind to PD-1 receptors on T-cells, leading to T-cell exhaustion and impaired immune activity.
- **Recruitment of Immunosuppressive Cells:** Gliomas recruit MDSCs and regulatory T-cells (Tregs), which actively suppress anti-tumor immune responses by inhibiting cytotoxic T-cell activity and promoting an immunosuppressive microenvironment.

The complexity of this immunosuppressive landscape makes it challenging for the immune system to mount an effective response against brain tumors [20]. Understanding the interaction between brain tumors and the immune microenvironment is critical for developing therapies that can re-activate immune cells and overcome tumor-mediated immune suppression.

Tumor-Associated Antigens (TAAs): Tumor-associated antigens (TAAs) are proteins or molecules that are abnormally expressed on the surface of tumor cells but are either absent or present at lower levels in normal cells [21]. These antigens are key targets for immunotherapies, as they provide a way for the immune system to differentiate between healthy and cancerous cells. In brain tumors, several TAAs have been identified as promising targets for immunotherapy [22].

Key Tumor-Associated Antigens in Brain Tumors

1. **EGFRvIII:**
 - The epidermal growth factor receptor variant III (EGFRvIII) is a mutated form of EGFR, found in approximately 25-30% of glioblastoma cases. This mutation results in the constitutive activation of the EGFR pathway, promoting cell proliferation and tumor growth. Importantly, EGFRvIII is specific to tumor cells and not expressed in normal tissue, making it an ideal target for immunotherapies like CAR T-cell therapy and vaccines [23]. Clinical trials involving EGFRvIII-targeting CAR T-cells have shown promise, though challenges remain, including antigen heterogeneity and immune escape mechanisms.
2. **HER2:**
 - The human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2) is another protein overexpressed in certain brain tumors, including gliomas and medulloblastomas. HER2-targeted therapies, like **trastuzumab**, have been successful in breast cancer treatment and are being investigated for brain tumors. HER2-specific CAR T-cells and vaccines are also under development, with some early-phase trials showing potential for tumor control [24].
3. **Survivin:**
 - Survivin is an anti-apoptotic protein that is overexpressed in many cancers, including brain tumors. It plays a role in promoting cell survival and resistance to apoptosis, contributing to tumor progression. Because of its high expression in tumor cells and its limited presence in normal adult tissues, survivin is a target for vaccine-based immunotherapies. Survivin-targeted vaccines are designed to stimulate an immune response specifically against tumor cells expressing this protein, though clinical trials are still in early stages.

Immunotherapeutic Strategies Targeting TAAs

- **Cancer Vaccines:** Cancer vaccines aim to train the immune system to recognize and attack tumor cells by presenting TAAs to immune cells such as dendritic cells. These vaccines can be personalized by identifying specific mutations in a patient's tumor and developing a corresponding vaccine. For example, vaccines targeting EGFRvIII have been developed for glioblastoma patients, although clinical trials have shown mixed results, often due to tumor heterogeneity and immune suppression.
- **CAR T-Cell Therapy:** CAR T-cell therapy involves engineering T-cells to express receptors that recognize TAAs, allowing them to specifically target and kill tumor cells. In brain tumors, CAR T-cell therapy has been developed to target antigens like EGFRvIII and HER2. While early results have been promising, significant challenges remain, such as ensuring that CAR T-cells can effectively penetrate the BBB and persist in the brain's immunosuppressive environment.

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Types of Immunotherapies for Brain Tumors

Immune Checkpoint Inhibitors

Immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs), such as anti-PD-1, anti-PD-L1, and anti-CTLA-4 antibodies, have revolutionized the treatment of various cancers by blocking the inhibitory pathways that prevent T cells from attacking tumors. In brain tumors, particularly GBM, early trials using ICIs have shown mixed results [25]. The brain's immunosuppressive environment, the low mutational burden of GBM, and the inability of these drugs to effectively penetrate the BBB contribute to these challenges.

CAR T-Cell Therapy

Chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cell therapy involves engineering a patient's T cells to express receptors that specifically recognize and target tumor cells. CAR T-cell therapy has shown success in treating hematologic cancers but faces challenges in solid tumors like GBM. Barriers include poor T-cell trafficking into the brain, the immunosuppressive tumor microenvironment, and tumor heterogeneity.

Cancer Vaccines

Cancer vaccines aim to stimulate the body's immune system to recognize and attack tumor cells by presenting tumor antigens to immune cells. For brain tumors, vaccines targeting specific tumor-associated antigens like EGFRvIII and survivin have been tested in clinical trials.

Oncolytic Virus Therapy

Oncolytic viruses are genetically modified viruses designed to selectively infect and kill tumor cells. They can also stimulate an anti-tumor immune response by releasing tumor antigens as the virus replicates and destroys tumor cells. Several oncolytic viruses have been developed for brain tumors, including herpes simplex virus (HSV), poliovirus, and adenovirus.

CHALLENGES IN BRAIN TUMOR IMMUNOTHERAPY

The Immunosuppressive Tumor Microenvironment

Brain tumors, particularly GBMs, create an immunosuppressive microenvironment that hinders effective immune responses. Tumor cells secrete immunosuppressive cytokines, recruit regulatory T cells (Tregs) and myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs), and express immune checkpoint molecules that inhibit T-cell activity. This complex immune landscape poses a significant challenge for immunotherapies, which must be able to activate immune cells in the face of strong suppression [26].

Blood-Brain Barrier (BBB)

The BBB is a physical and functional barrier that prevents most drugs, including immune cells, from entering the brain. Immunotherapies, particularly those involving large molecules such as monoclonal antibodies or engineered T-cells, face difficulties crossing the BBB to reach tumor sites. Strategies to enhance BBB permeability or develop treatments that bypass the BBB entirely are crucial for improving immunotherapy efficacy in brain tumors.

Tumor Heterogeneity

Gliomas and GBMs exhibit extensive genetic and phenotypic heterogeneity, both within the tumor and between patients. This diversity makes it difficult to identify universal therapeutic targets and may lead to treatment resistance [20]. For example, not all GBMs express the same tumor-associated antigens, complicating the development of antigen-specific therapies like CAR T-cell therapy and cancer vaccines.

Adverse Effects

While immunotherapy has shown promise, it can also lead to significant side effects, including immune-related adverse events (irAEs). These adverse effects arise from the activation of the immune system, which can lead to inflammation in healthy tissues, such as neurotoxicity in the case of brain tumors. Balancing efficacy with safety remains a key concern in the development of immunotherapies for brain cancer.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Combination Therapies

One promising avenue for overcoming the limitations of immunotherapy in brain tumors is the use of combination therapies. Combining checkpoint inhibitors with other modalities, such as radiation or chemotherapy, may enhance immune responses and improve outcomes. Radiation, for instance, can increase tumor antigen release and enhance immune cell infiltration, potentially sensitizing tumors to immunotherapies [4].

Targeting the Tumor Microenvironment

Future immunotherapies may focus on altering the tumor microenvironment to make it more conducive to immune activity. Strategies include targeting immunosuppressive cells like Tregs and MDSCs, modulating

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cytokine signaling pathways, and promoting pro-inflammatory conditions within the tumor [11]. Such approaches could help to overcome the immunosuppressive barriers that limit the effectiveness of current therapies.

Advances in Delivery Systems

Innovative delivery methods that can improve the penetration of immunotherapies across the BBB and into the tumor microenvironment are critical for the future success of brain tumor immunotherapy. Nanoparticle-based delivery systems, convection-enhanced delivery (CED), and focused ultrasound are among the technologies being explored to enhance drug delivery to brain tumors.

Personalized Immunotherapy

The future of brain tumor immunotherapy likely lies in the development of personalized treatments tailored to the unique genetic and immunological characteristics of each patient's tumor. Advances in genomic sequencing and bioinformatics may allow for the identification of patient-specific tumor antigens and immune signatures, enabling more precise and effective immunotherapeutic interventions.

CONCLUSION

Brain tumor immunotherapy has made significant strides in recent years, offering new hope in the fight against malignant brain tumors, particularly gliomas and glioblastoma multiforme (GBM). Therapies such as immune checkpoint inhibitors, chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cell therapy, cancer vaccines, and oncolytic viruses have demonstrated potential in engaging the immune system to combat these tumors. Despite encouraging early results, the road to successful immunotherapy for brain tumors remains complex. Key challenges include the immunosuppressive tumor microenvironment, the formidable blood-brain barrier (BBB), and the extensive heterogeneity of brain tumors. Overcoming these hurdles requires novel strategies to enhance immune cell penetration into the brain, disrupt tumor-driven immunosuppression, and personalize treatment approaches based on the specific characteristics of each patient's tumor. Looking ahead, a combination of immunotherapies, advancements in drug delivery systems, and a deeper understanding of the tumor-immune interaction will be essential in driving further progress. Continued innovation in engineering T-cells, optimizing oncolytic viruses, and refining personalized vaccine approaches offers hope for more effective and durable treatments. The future of brain tumor immunotherapy is promising, but sustained research, clinical trials, and interdisciplinary collaboration will be critical in realizing its full potential in improving patient outcomes.

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