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Organ-on-a-chip Technology: Bringing Human Biology to Life on a Chip

Ananya Saxena[1], Richa Arora[2*] and Komal[3]
[1]B.Tech Biotechnology , 2nd year , ICAR-IVRI, Izatnagar, Bareilly, U.P, India
[2]Scientist, Division of Veterinary Biotechnology , ICAR-IVRI, Izatnagar, Bareilly, U.P, India
[3]Assistant Professor, Department of Veterinary Clinical Complex, College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Kishanganj, BASU, Patna, Bihar, India
*Corresponding author: richaarora5521@gmail.com
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Introduction

Organ-on-a-chip is a complex interdisciplinary field comprising cell biology, microfluidics, and advanced biomaterials. It is a small, engineered microfluidic culture device that recreates the selected complex structures and functions of living human organs. These living, three-dimensional cross-sections of human organs provide a window into their inner workings and the effects that drugs can have on them, without involving humans or animals. It combines living human cells, microfluidics, engineered materials such as flexible polymers and porous membranes, mechanical and chemical signals that cells would experience in the body, and sensors and imaging to measure tissue behaviour. Despite the name, it is not a complete miniature organ. It is just a functional model of a key organ interface or process. For example, a lung chip may reproduce the thin barrier between air and blood, while a gut chip may reproduce intestinal flow, epithelial cells, mucus, resident microbes, and immune interactions.

Significance of Organ-on-a-Chip Technology

Drug development is a notoriously slow and expensive process that takes up to 10 years and costs more than $3 billion to bring a single new compound from the lab bench to the market. A major cause of this inefficiency is the traditional reliance on testing drugs in animals before they're ever tried in humans. Animal models often don't accurately reflect human physiology, so drugs that appear safe and effective in mice or rats frequently prove harmful or ineffective in humans. This biological mismatch means many toxic or ineffective compounds still advance

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through expensive clinical trials, while other, potentially life-saving ones never make it to the market at all. But animals aren't the only flawed stand-in for the human body. Long before a drug reaches an animal, it is usually tested in a traditional cell culture dish, where cells are typically grown as a flat layer at the bottom of a static pool of culture medium. It's a convenient setup, but it looks almost nothing like conditions inside the human body. Real tissue is constantly in motion and under pressure from blood, air, and digestive fluid flowing past it; it also stretches and contracts with every breath or heartbeat; it exists in three dimensions, surrounded by other cell types, immune cells, and shifting gradients of oxygen and nutrients. Strip away all of that, and cells behave differently in a petri dish. Their genes switch on and off differently, their barriers weaken, their metabolism shifts, and their response to drugs becomes unreliable. In other words, the two gold standards of pre-clinical testing that are animals and petri dishes are each missing a piece of the puzzle. Organ-on-a-chip technology was built to close both gaps at once, recreating the mechanical and biological cues of real human tissue in a system small enough to sit on a lab bench.

Principle of Organ-on-a-Chip

1. Fabrication of the Microfluidic Chip

The first step in developing an organ-on-a-chip is fabricating a microfluidic device, which serves as the structural framework for growing living cells. Basically, it is the process of designing and manufacturing or making chips. It includes creating all the physical parts of the chip, such as microchannels, chambers for cells, porous membranes, inlet and outlet ports, and fluid pathways. It is an important step as the shape and size of the microchannels determine the fluid flow through the chip, the arrangement of cells, how nutrients and oxygen will reach the cells, and how accurately the chip will mimic a real organ. The chip is commonly made from polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS), a transparent, flexible, biocompatible silicone polymer. PDMS is widely used because it is inexpensive, easy to mold into microscopic structures, permeable to gases such as oxygen and carbon dioxide, and compatible with optical microscopy.

Using techniques such as soft lithography, engineers create tiny channels, chambers, and reservoirs within the PDMS. These microchannels typically range from 10 to 500 μm in width, closely matching the dimensions of blood capillaries in the human body. The completed chip also contains inlet and outlet ports that allow fluids to enter and leave the system. Unlike conventional cell culture plates, the microfluidic architecture allows researchers to precisely control fluid movement, nutrient supply, and mechanical forces experienced by the cells.

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2. Designing Organ-Specific Compartments

After the chip has been made, it is designed to resemble the architecture of a particular organ. Different organs require different structural arrangements because their tissues interact differently within the body. For example, a lung-on-a-chip contains two parallel microchannels separated by a thin, porous membrane in the upper channel representing the air-filled alveolar space, followed by a lower channel representing the blood capillary and a porous membrane that acts like the alveolar-capillary barrier, allowing oxygen, nutrients, signalling molecules, and drugs diffuse between the two compartments. Similarly, Liver chips contain channels that mimic hepatic sinusoids, kidney chips replicate nephron tubules, and a gut chip contain epithelial and vascular compartments. The design of these compartments ensures that the cells experience spatial organization similar to that of their native tissue.

3. Surface Modification and Extracellular Matrix Coating

Freshly fabricated PDMS is hydrophobic, meaning cells cannot easily attach to its surface. Therefore, the chip undergoes surface treatment, commonly using oxygen plasma, to increase its hydrophilicity and to improve cell adhesion. Next, the channels are coated with extracellular matrix (ECM) proteins, which provide a natural surface for cell attachment. Common ECM proteins include collagen, fibronectin, laminin, gelatin, and matrigel (a commercially available basement membrane extract). This extracellular matrix performs several important functions, such as supporting cell attachment, promoting cell survival, regulating cell differentiation, maintaining tissue-specific morphology, and facilitates communication between the cells. By recreating the biochemical environment surrounding cells in living tissues, the ECM coating enables cultured cells to behave more naturally than they would on bare plastic surfaces.

4. **Cell Seeding and Tissue Formation**

Once the chip is prepared, the living cells are introduced into the appropriate compartments through the inlet ports. This process is known as cell seeding. The choice of cells depends on the organ being modeled. Researchers may use primary human cells isolated directly from tissues, stem cell-derived differentiated cells, immortalized cell lines, and patient-derived cells for personalized medicine applications. For example, a liver-on-a-chip may contain hepatocytes, liver sinusoidal endothelial cells, Kupffer cells, and hepatic stellate cells. Each cell type is introduced into its designated channel and then allowed time to attach to the ECM-coated surface. Over several hours to days, the cells proliferate, spread, and establish their cell-cell junctions, and then gradually form tissue-like structures. Unlike traditional two-

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dimensional cultures, these cells interact with their neighboring cells in a three-dimensional, physiologically relevant environment.

5. **Continuous Perfusion Through Microfluidic Flow**

After the cells have attached and formed tissues, the chip is connected to external pumps or gravity-driven flow systems that continuously circulate culture medium through the microchannels. This flowing medium functions similarly to that of blood by delivering oxygen, glucose, amino acids, vitamins, and hormones along with required growth factors. At the same time, this fluid medium also removes carbon dioxide, metabolic waste products, and cellular toxins excreted by the cells.

This flowing medium is carefully controlled to reproduce physiological conditions. For example, blood vessels naturally experience laminar flow, where fluid moves in smooth parallel layers. This produces shear stress, which is a frictional force exerted on endothelial cells. Shear stress influences numerous cellular processes like cell alignment, gene expression, and inflammatory responses, and more. Because conventional static cultures lack continuous perfusion, organ-on-a-chip models provide a much more realistic simulation of human circulation.

6. Induction of Mechanical and Physical Stimuli

Living organs are constantly exposed to mechanical forces that influence their function. Organ-on-a-chip devices recreate these physical cues to better mimic the in vivo environment. But different organs require different types of stimulation. For example, the lung requires vacuum chambers which are positioned alongside the cell culture chambers which periodically stretch the flexible membrane, simulating the exact same expansion and contraction which occurs during breathing. Similarly, Heart requires electrical stimulation, which causes cardiomyocytes to contract rhythmically, reproducing the beating motion of cardiac tissue. This mechanical stimulation significantly affects cell morphology, protein synthesis, gene regulation, cell differentiation, tissue maturation, and drug responses. Without these physical forces, many cells can lose their normal physiological behaviour, even if the nutrients are supplied adequately.

7. Functional Tissue Formation and Physiological Activity

Once the cells have been exposed to the appropriate biochemical and mechanical environment, they begin functioning similarly to cells in the human body. They establish cell-cell communication, cell-matrix interactions, tissue polarity, and physiological signalling pathways. As a result, organ-specific functions emerge.

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Single-Organ to Multi-Organ-on-a-Chip Systems

Since the development of the landmark lung-on-a-chip in 2010, the field has expanded to cover a vast array of tissue models, including heart, liver, kidney, gut, brain, skin, blood-brain barrier, bone marrow, pancreas, placenta, and retina platforms. More recently, advances in microfluidics have led to multi-Organ-on-a-Chip (MOOC) or "Body-on-a-Chip" systems. By interconnecting individual tissue compartments via a shared microfluidic network, these models allow researchers to evaluate systemic interactions. MOOC systems make it possible to model complete ADMET (Absorption, Distribution, Metabolism, Excretion, and Toxicity) profiles—such as assessing how an oral drug absorbed through a gut compartment is metabolized by a liver compartment before inducing downstream toxicity in a kidney compartment. Current research focuses on combining these platforms with induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs), real-time biosensors, and artificial intelligence (AI) to create patient-specific "human-on-a-chip" models for precision medicine.

Applications

1. **Drug Discovery and Development**

Drug discovery and development involve identifying new therapeutic compounds and evaluating their safety and effectiveness before they enter clinical trials. Traditional cell cultures and animal models often fail to accurately predict human responses, contributing to the high failure rate of drug candidates. Liver-on-a-chip and multi-organ chips recreate human tissue architecture and fluid flow, allowing researchers to evaluate drug metabolism, toxicity, and efficacy under physiologically relevant conditions. This improves the prediction of human responses and helps identify unsuitable drug candidates earlier in development.

2. **Disease Modeling**

Disease modeling aims to reproduce human diseases in laboratory systems to better understand disease mechanisms and identify therapeutic targets. Conventional models often fail to replicate the complex interactions occurring within human tissues. Disease-specific organ chips can mimic pathological conditions such as inflammation, fibrosis, cancer, or viral infections, allowing researchers to observe disease progression and evaluate potential treatments in a controlled environment.

3. **Personalized Medicine**

Personalized medicine tailors medical treatment according to an individual's genetic background, disease characteristics, and predicted response to therapy rather than using a uniform treatment strategy. Patient-derived cells, including induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs), can be incorporated into organ chips to create personalized disease models. These

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chips enable clinicians to evaluate multiple treatment options before administering therapy to the patient.

4. Toxicity Testing

Toxicity testing evaluates whether chemicals, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, or environmental compounds produce harmful effects in the human body. Liver-, kidney-, heart-, and lung-on-a-chip platforms reproduce organ-specific physiology, allowing researchers to detect toxic effects that are frequently missed in conventional cell cultures.

5. Cancer Research

Cancer research focuses on understanding tumor initiation, progression, metastasis, and treatment resistance to develop more effective therapies. Tumor-on-a-chip systems recreate the tumor microenvironment, including blood vessels, immune cells, and extracellular matrix, enabling researchers to study metastasis and evaluate anticancer drugs under realistic conditions.

6. Infectious Disease Research

Infectious disease research investigates how viruses, bacteria, fungi, and parasites infect human tissues and how the immune system responds. Lung-, gut-, and airway-on-a-chip models simulate human infection in vitro, enabling researchers to study pathogen entry, immune responses, and antiviral drug efficacy without relying solely on animal models.

7. Regenerative Medicine and Tissue Engineering

Regenerative medicine seeks to restore or replace damaged tissues and organs using cells, biomaterials, and engineered tissues. Organ chips provide controlled biochemical and mechanical environments that support stem cell differentiation and tissue maturation, allowing researchers to optimize regeneration strategies before clinical application.

8. Reducing Animal Experimentation

Biomedical research traditionally depends on animal experiments to assess drug safety and efficacy. However, species differences often limit the translation of animal results to humans, while ethical concerns continue to encourage the development of alternative testing methods. Organ-on-a-chip systems replicate key aspects of human organ physiology, providing more human-relevant experimental models that can complement or reduce the need for animal studies in drug development and toxicology.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite its significant applications, organ-on-a-chip (OOC) technology faces several limitations and challenges that hinder its widespread adoption. One of the major challenges is the complexity of accurately replicating the full physiological environment of human organs,

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including immune responses, neural regulation, and long-term tissue interactions. Standardization remains a significant issue, as variations in chip design, fabrication methods, cell sources, and culture conditions can lead to inconsistent and non-reproducible results across laboratories. The fabrication and operation of OOC devices require specialized equipment, technical expertise, and skilled personnel, making the technology costly and limiting its accessibility. Maintaining the long-term viability and functionality of cultured cells is also challenging, particularly for chronic disease studies. Additionally, integrating multiple organ systems into a single body-on-a-chip while preserving physiological relevance remains technically demanding. Regulatory acceptance is another major hurdle, as standardized validation protocols and guidelines are still under development, restricting the routine use of OOC models in drug approval processes. Consequently, although organ-on-a-chip technology holds great promise, further advances in standardization, scalability, cost reduction, and regulatory validation are essential before it can be widely implemented in pharmaceutical research and clinical applications.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

Organ-on-a-chip technology represents a transformative shift in preclinical research by providing human-relevant *in vitro* models. By bridging cell biology, material science, and microfluidics, OOC platforms offer safer, faster, and more accurate avenues for drug discovery and disease modeling. As advancements in iPSCs, gene editing (CRISPR-Cas9), integrated biosensors, and artificial intelligence continue to mature. Organ-on-a-chip systems in future will play a central role in accelerating precision medicine and reducing reliance on animal testing.

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