**Impact of Radiation on Embryonic stem cells: A minireview**

**Abstract**

**Embryonic stem cells (ESCs)** are pluripotent cells derived from the inner cell mass of the blastocyst, a pre-implantation stage of the early embryo. These cells possess the unique ability to differentiate into all cell types of the three germ layers—ectoderm, mesoderm, and endoderm which underpins their immense potential in regenerative medicine, tissue engineering, and developmental biology. This article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the effects of radiation on ESCs, encompassing their cellular responses, differentiation potential, epigenetic stability, and strategies to enhance radiation resistance. Due to their self-renewal capacity and pluripotent nature, ESCs serve as an essential model for studying cellular differentiation, genetic regulation during development, and disease pathogenesis. However, the undifferentiated state of ESCs, combined with their high proliferative activity, renders them particularly susceptible to external environmental stressors, especially **ionizing radiation (IR).** Exposure to IR can induce various forms of cellular damage, including DNA strand breaks, oxidative stress, and disruption of epigenetic regulation, all of which may compromise the genomic integrity and developmental potential of ESCs. This sensitivity raises critical concerns regarding the safe application of ESCs in clinical settings, particularly in scenarios involving diagnostic or therapeutic radiation exposure. Furthermore, understanding the cellular responses of ESCs to ionizing radiation is not only crucial for ensuring their therapeutic safety but also provides valuable insights into how radiation may affect embryonic development. Given the increasing use of radiological procedures in medicine and the potential for accidental or occupational radiation exposure, elucidating the mechanisms of radiation-induced effects in pluripotent stem cells is essential for developing protective strategies and risk assessment frameworks.

**Keywords:** Radiation, Embryonic stem cells, cellular responses, resistance

**Introduction**

Radiation is a form of energy emitted from atomic nuclei or generated by devices such as X-ray machines and particle accelerators. It plays a critical role in both natural and artificial environments, impacting human health, ecological systems, and medical applications. Radiation can be broadly categorized into two types: ionizing and non-ionizing. Ionizing radiation includes high-energy particles or waves, such as X-rays, gamma rays, and alpha and beta particles, which possess enough energy to remove tightly bound electrons from atoms, resulting in ion formation [1, 2]. This process can disrupt molecular structures and initiate a cascade of biological effects, particularly when interacting with living tissues. Non-ionizing radiation, on the other hand, includes lower-energy forms such as ultraviolet (UV), infrared, microwave, and radio waves, which generally do not produce ions but can still have significant thermal or photochemical effects under certain conditions.

Among the biological targets most vulnerable to ionizing radiation are stem cells, particularly embryonic stem cells (ESCs), due to their high proliferative capacity and undifferentiated state. ESCs are pluripotent cells derived from the inner cell mass of the blastocyst and have the unique ability to differentiate into any cell type of the body. Their role in development, tissue regeneration, and therapeutic applications makes understanding their response to radiation a topic of significant scientific and clinical importance [3, 4]. Due to their pluripotency, ESCs have been used in numerous clinical settings and preclinical studies dealing with spinal injury, cardiovascular disease and various neurodegenerative diseases (Calabrese, 2022; Shroff and Gupta, 2015).

Radiation affects cells by damaging DNA, proteins, lipids, and other cellular components. The most critical target is DNA, where radiation can induce a spectrum of lesions ranging from base damage and single-strand breaks to the more deleterious double-strand breaks (DSBs). DSBs are particularly harmful because if not accurately repaired, they can result in chromosomal translocations, deletions, or even cell death [5, 6]. In stem cells, this genomic instability can lead to aberrant differentiation, apoptosis, senescence, or tumorigenic transformation. Most bodily tissues possess a pool of clonogenic cells that are mobilised in response to assaults such as trauma or radiation. Damage to the tissue is repaired by proliferation of clonogenic or tissue specific stem cells. Sterilisation of these clonogenic cells by radiation manifests as radiation damage (Rezvani, 2021; Avadanei-Luca, et al., 2025).

In the context of developmental biology and regenerative medicine, ESCs are highly sensitive indicators of radiation-induced perturbations. Their response to radiation differs from that of somatic cells due to their unique epigenetic landscape, metabolic state, and DNA repair mechanisms. ESCs preferentially employ homologous recombination (HR), a high-fidelity DNA repair process that operates primarily during the S and G2 phases of the cell cycle. However, this dependency also renders them vulnerable when damage occurs outside these windows [7, 8].

Moreover, radiation exposure during early embryonic development has been associated with a range of adverse outcomes, including teratogenesis, neurodevelopmental disorders, and increased cancer susceptibility in later life. These findings are based on epidemiological studies of atomic bomb survivors, in utero exposure cohorts, and experimental models that mimic human embryogenesis [3, 9].

Given the dual role of radiation in causing cellular damage and serving as a therapeutic tool, understanding its impact on ESCs is vital for various fields, including radiobiology, oncology, and stem cell-based therapies. On one hand, radiation is utilized in cancer treatment to eliminate malignant cells, including cancer stem-like cells. On the other hand, exposure to radiation during laboratory culture or medical imaging procedures could compromise the safety of stem cell products intended for clinical use [10].

This article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the effects of radiation on ESCs, encompassing their cellular responses, differentiation potential, epigenetic stability, and strategies to enhance radiation resistance. By elucidating these mechanisms, researchers and clinicians can better harness the therapeutic potential of stem cells while mitigating radiation-associated risks.

**Cellular Response to Radiation**   
ESCs activate several protective mechanisms in response to radiation-induced damage. Chief among these is cell cycle arrest, allowing time for DNA repair mechanisms to function. However, when the damage is irreparable, cells initiate programmed cell death (apoptosis) to prevent the inheritance of mutations. Compared to differentiated somatic cells, ESCs exhibit heightened sensitivity to radiation because of their limited DNA repair capacity and tendency to favor apoptosis over survival with genetic errors [11–15]. This sensitivity is linked to stem cells' unique epigenetic and regulatory profiles [16, 17], which also contribute to altered bystander effects [14].

Furthermore, ESCs often upregulate p53 and its downstream effectors, such as Bax and Puma, in response to genotoxic stress, promoting mitochondrial-mediated apoptosis. Unlike somatic cells that rely on non-homologous end joining (NHEJ), ESCs predominantly employ homologous recombination (HR) for double-strand break repair—an error-free but cell cycle-dependent mechanism—rendering them more vulnerable during certain phases of growth [13, 18]. Additionally, the presence of open chromatin in ESCs makes DNA more accessible to damage, while also facilitating transcriptional changes following stress [19].

**Effects on Differentiation and Development**   
Radiation exposure can severely impair the differentiation potential of ESCs. Damaged stem cells may lose the ability to generate specific lineages or may differentiate abnormally. Such disruptions can contribute to developmental abnormalities, growth retardation, or even tumorigenesis in offspring [20, 21]. Studies have demonstrated that even low doses of radiation can induce reactive oxygen species (ROS), leading to premature differentiation and genomic instability [22, 23]. These findings are reinforced by observations in iPSCs, which, like ESCs, require stable genomes to support normal development [24, 6].

Embryonic development is especially susceptible during early gestational windows, where ESCs play a pivotal role in forming all three germ layers. Radiation at this stage can impair gene networks involved in gastrulation, neural tube closure, and organogenesis. Abnormal lineage commitment may result in teratoma formation, dysregulated tissue patterning, or epigenetic imprinting defects passed on to daughter cells [3]. Studies using animal models have confirmed that prenatal radiation exposure increases the incidence of congenital malformations and behavioral abnormalities in offspring.

**Radiation-Induced Epigenetic Alterations in Stem Cells**   
Radiation not only inflicts direct damage to DNA but also triggers widespread epigenetic modifications in stem cells. These alterations include DNA methylation, histone modification, and changes in non-coding RNA expression, which together influence gene expression without altering the underlying DNA sequence [25]. Such epigenetic disruptions can have long-term consequences on stem cell identity, self-renewal capacity, and differentiation pathways.

Studies have revealed that ionizing radiation can cause hypomethylation in repetitive elements and hypermethylation of tumor suppressor gene promoters, leading to deregulated cellular behavior [26]. In ESCs, this may result in impaired pluripotency or unwanted lineage commitment. Moreover, altered expression of miRNAs after radiation exposure has been associated with aberrant cell cycle regulation, apoptosis, and cellular senescence [27]. These findings underscore the need to assess epigenetic stability alongside genetic integrity when evaluating the suitability of irradiated stem cells for clinical applications [28].

Emerging evidence suggests that chromatin remodeling complexes, such as SWI/SNF and Polycomb repressive complexes (PRCs), are also modulated by radiation-induced stress. PRC2 components like EZH2 have been shown to redistribute across the genome following DNA damage, silencing critical developmental regulators. Long-term exposure to low-dose radiation may also lead to heritable epigenetic memory, altering the behavior of stem cell progeny [25].

**Strategies for Enhancing Radiation Resistance in Stem Cells**   
To minimize the detrimental effects of radiation on stem cells, various strategies have been proposed and tested. Pre-treatment with radioprotective agents, such as antioxidants (e.g., N-acetylcysteine, ascorbic acid) or mitochondrial stabilizers, can reduce oxidative stress and DNA damage [29]. These compounds help scavenge reactive oxygen species (ROS), one of the primary mediators of radiation toxicity in cells.

Another promising approach involves genetic engineering or pharmacological activation of DNA repair pathways. Overexpression of key DNA repair proteins like ATM, RAD51, or DNA-PKcs has been shown to enhance survival and genomic stability in irradiated stem cells [30]. Additionally, modulating cell cycle regulators to promote G2/M arrest rather than S-phase damage accumulation may provide an opportunity for more efficient repair before mitosis.

Recent studies have also explored the role of hypoxic preconditioning, which can activate cellular defense mechanisms such as HIF-1α signaling, resulting in increased resilience to genotoxic stress [31]. These protective strategies are not only beneficial for research protocols but may also enhance the therapeutic potential of stem cells in regenerative medicine and radiological emergencies.

Other approaches include encapsulating stem cells in hydrogel scaffolds or using 3D spheroid cultures, which have been shown to buffer against radiation-induced oxidative stress through paracrine signaling and matrix-mediated protection. Furthermore, pharmaceutical agents like amifostine and melatonin are under investigation for clinical use to protect stem cells during radiotherapy.

**Research and Clinical Implications**   
Given their high radiosensitivity, ESCs represent a double-edged sword in biomedical applications. On one hand, this sensitivity necessitates stringent radiation safety protocols in both in vitro and in vivo experiments to prevent genotoxic alterations that may compromise pluripotency or lead to malignant transformation [11, 5].

Paradoxically, this same vulnerability is being leveraged in oncology, where similarities between cancer stem cells (CSCs) and ESCs have led to experimental strategies aiming to selectively eradicate CSC populations using targeted radiotherapy. CSCs, like ESCs, possess high proliferative capacity and enhanced DNA repair pathways, yet may remain susceptible to oxidative imbalance and epigenetic reprogramming induced by fractionated radiation doses [17]. Clinical trials are currently investigating combined approaches involving radiotherapy and radiosensitizers or inhibitors of DNA repair enzymes (e.g., PARP inhibitors) to selectively disrupt CSC survival while sparing healthy progenitor cells [1].

In regenerative medicine, ensuring the genomic and epigenetic stability of stem cells prior to transplantation is critical. Even transient exposure to low-level ionizing radiation during cell processing or imaging can influence differentiation trajectories or induce latent mutations that may later manifest as oncogenesis [15]. To address this, several stem cell banks have introduced screening protocols involving γ-H2AX assays and whole-genome sequencing to detect latent radiation-induced damage before cells are released for therapeutic use.

Moreover, the differential responses to radiation among various stem cell types, particularly mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs), offer insights into resilience mechanisms that could be harnessed for tissue repair. Unlike ESCs, MSCs exhibit higher thresholds for radiation-induced apoptosis and can engage robust anti-oxidative and pro-survival pathways. This makes them attractive candidates for use in radiation-induced injury, such as hematopoietic syndrome or wound healing in irradiated tissues [31]. Clinical studies have even demonstrated the efficacy of MSC transplantation in ameliorating radiation pneumonitis and improving epithelial regeneration.

**Effect of Radiation on Stem Cells: Methodological Approaches**   
**Cell Preparation**   
Accurate experimental evaluation of radiation effects on stem cells begins with the preparation of well-characterized cell populations. Human Embryonic stem cells (hESCs), mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs), and induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) are routinely cultured in defined media (e.g., DMEM or RPMI) supplemented with fetal bovine serum (FBS), L-glutamine, and penicillin/streptomycin under standard incubator conditions (37°C, 5% CO₂, humidified atmosphere). For hESCs and iPSCs, feeder-free systems using Matrigel or vitronectin with mTeSR1 medium are often preferred to maintain pluripotency [32].

Cell confluence, passage number, and viability must be standardized before radiation exposure, as these factors influence DNA repair capacity and cellular responses. Flow cytometric sorting is sometimes used to enrich for a specific stem cell subpopulation (e.g., CD105⁺/CD90⁺ for MSCs) to improve reproducibility. Additionally, karyotypic stability and expression of pluripotency markers (OCT4, SOX2, NANOG) are typically confirmed prior to experimentation [32].

**Radiation Exposure**

Experimental irradiation is typically performed using well-calibrated sources such as gamma irradiators (e.g., Cs-137 or Co-60) or clinical-grade linear accelerators for X-rays. Doses range from 0 Gy (sham control) to as high as 8–10 Gy, depending on the sensitivity of the cell type and the purpose of the study. In certain contexts, low-dose (≤1 Gy) exposures are used to study hormetic effects or low-dose hyper-radiosensitivity, while high-dose (≥4 Gy) regimens simulate therapeutic exposures [5].

Radiation may be delivered in a single fraction or in multiple subfractions (e.g., 2 Gy × 3 days) to mimic clinical scenarios such as fractionated radiotherapy. Dose rate (e.g., cGy/min) and irradiation time are meticulously documented. Shielding is often applied selectively to model partial exposure or simulate bystander effects in adjacent, non-irradiated cells[29].

**Post-Irradiation Incubation**

After irradiation, cells are returned to optimal culture conditions and monitored for biological responses over defined time points (e.g., 6, 12, 24, 48, and 72 hours). This time-course design captures early molecular responses (DNA damage signaling), intermediate events (cell cycle arrest, apoptosis), and late consequences (differentiation, senescence, or transformation)[11].

Parallel control groups (non-irradiated) must be maintained for each time point. In some protocols, conditioned media from irradiated cells is transferred to naïve cultures to investigate bystander effects, while other experiments include co-culture systems to simulate tissue-level responses[9,32].

**TABLE 1: Assays to Evaluate Effects**

| **Assay** | **Purpose** |
| --- | --- |
| MTT / XTT / CellTiter-Glo | Measure metabolic activity as a proxy for viability and proliferation |
| TUNEL assay | Detect DNA fragmentation indicative of late-stage apoptosis |
| Comet assay | Assess single- and double-strand DNA breaks at the single-cell level |
| Annexin V / PI Flow Cytometry | Differentiate early apoptosis (Annexin+/PI−) from necrosis (Annexin+/PI+) |
| qPCR / Western blot | Analyze gene/protein expression involved in DDR (e.g., ATM, p53, Bax) |
| γ-H2AX immunofluorescence | Visualize and quantify double-strand break foci as a direct damage marker |

**Conclusion**

Radiation exerts profound and multifaceted effects on ESCs, influencing their viability, genomic integrity, differentiation potential, and epigenetic landscape. These impacts are particularly critical given the central role of ESCs in early development and their growing importance in regenerative medicine and cancer therapeutics. The high radiosensitivity of ESCs underscores the need for stringent radiation safety measures in laboratory and clinical settings to prevent unintended genotoxic and epigenetic alterations that could compromise the cells' pluripotency or induce malignant transformation.

Beyond immediate cytotoxicity, radiation can induce latent effects that manifest over time, including genomic instability, aberrant differentiation, and epigenetic dysregulation. Such changes may not only reduce the therapeutic efficacy of stem cell-based interventions but also raise concerns about long-term safety, such as tumorigenesis or developmental abnormalities in transplanted tissues. Therefore, comprehensive assessment protocols incorporating genetic, epigenetic, and functional assays are essential for ensuring the quality and safety of stem cells intended for clinical applications.

Conversely, the vulnerability of ESCs to radiation also offers therapeutic opportunities. In oncology, understanding the radiosensitivity mechanisms of stem cells informs the design of targeted radiotherapy protocols aimed at eradicating cancer stem cells (CSCs), which share many biological characteristics with ESCs. Such strategies seek to overcome CSC-mediated tumor resistance and relapse by exploiting their unique DNA repair dependencies and apoptotic pathways.

Emerging protective strategies, including antioxidant pretreatment, genetic enhancement of DNA repair pathways, hypoxic preconditioning, and innovative culture systems like 3D scaffolds, show promise in mitigating radiation-induced damage. These approaches not only improve stem cell resilience during experimental manipulation and clinical processing but may also enhance their reparative potential in radiation injury contexts.

Future research must continue to elucidate the complex interplay between radiation and stem cell biology, particularly focusing on long-term epigenetic memory, bystander effects, and intercellular signaling under stress conditions. Advances in high-resolution genomic and epigenetic technologies will facilitate deeper insights into these processes, enabling the development of novel interventions to safeguard stem cell integrity.

Ultimately, integrating knowledge of radiation effects on ESCs into clinical protocols will enhance the safety and efficacy of stem cell therapies and improve radiotherapy outcomes. This will require multidisciplinary collaboration spanning radiobiology, stem cell science, genomics, and clinical medicine. Through such concerted efforts, it will be possible to maximize the therapeutic benefits of stem cells while minimizing the risks associated with radiation exposure.

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