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Vitamin D as an Immunomodulator in Infectious Diseases: A Biochemical Review

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Abstract

Vitamin D, traditionally associated with calcium homeostasis and skeletal health, has emerged as a critical immunomodulatory hormone influencing host defense against infectious diseases. Increasing evidence highlights its role in regulating innate and adaptive immune responses through genomic and non-genomic mechanisms mediated by the vitamin D receptor (VDR). This review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the biochemical pathways, molecular mechanisms, and clinical implications of vitamin D in infectious diseases. Vitamin D enhances innate immunity by inducing antimicrobial peptides such as cathelicidin and defensins, improving epithelial barrier integrity, and promoting autophagy and phagocytosis. In adaptive immunity, it suppresses pro-inflammatory T helper (Th1 and Th17) responses while promoting regulatory T cells, thereby maintaining immune homeostasis. Epidemiological studies consistently associate vitamin D deficiency with increased susceptibility to respiratory, bacterial, and viral infections, including COVID-19. However, randomized controlled trials yield inconsistent findings due to heterogeneity in baseline vitamin D status, dosing strategies, and population characteristics. This review critically evaluates current clinical evidence, highlighting its preventive potential, limitations in therapeutic application, and areas requiring further investigation. Despite strong mechanistic support, standardized clinical guidelines remain lacking. Future research should focus on personalized supplementation strategies, large-scale randomized trials, and exploration of gene–nutrient interactions. Vitamin D represents a promising adjunct in infectious disease prevention and immune modulation, but its optimal clinical application requires further high-quality evidence.

Keywords: Vitamin D; Immunomodulation; Infectious diseases; Innate immunity; Adaptive immunity; Cytokines; Supplementation

1. Introduction

Vitamin D deficiency has emerged as a significant global health concern, with growing implications that extend beyond its classical role in calcium homeostasis and skeletal integrity. Recent advances in immunology and molecular biology have identified vitamin D as a critical immunomodulatory agent, thereby elevating its relevance in the context of infectious diseases. The widespread expression of vitamin D receptors (VDR) in immune cells—including macrophages, dendritic cells, and lymphocytes—provides a strong biological basis for its involvement in host defense mechanisms and

immune regulation [4,8]. This paradigm shift has positioned vitamin D at the intersection of endocrinology and immunology, highlighting its potential role in mitigating infectious disease burden.

The research problem underpinning this field relates to the high global prevalence of vitamin D deficiency and its association with increased susceptibility to infectious diseases, particularly respiratory tract infections, tuberculosis, and viral illnesses such as COVID-19. Epidemiological studies consistently report that individuals with low serum 25-hydroxyvitamin D levels exhibit a higher incidence of infections and poorer clinical outcomes [1,6]. Despite these associations, the extent to which vitamin D deficiency causally contributes to infection risk, and whether supplementation can effectively reduce disease incidence or severity, remains a subject of ongoing scientific debate. At a mechanistic level, the biologically active form, 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D, regulates the expression of genes involved in antimicrobial defense, inflammatory pathways, and immune homeostasis. It enhances innate immune responses through the induction of antimicrobial peptides and modulates adaptive immunity by suppressing pro-inflammatory cytokine production [4,8]. These findings provide strong biological plausibility for a protective role of vitamin D in infectious diseases. However, while observational evidence is robust, interventional studies, including randomized controlled trials and meta-analyses, have produced heterogeneous results, with some demonstrating protective effects and others showing minimal or no benefit [2,9].

The current level of investigation reflects a well-established mechanistic foundation supported by a growing body of epidemiological data, yet limited by inconsistencies in clinical trial outcomes. Variability in study design, population characteristics, baseline vitamin D status, and supplementation protocols has contributed to these discrepancies. Consequently, despite increasing scientific interest and public health relevance, there remains no consensus regarding optimal vitamin D levels or standardized supplementation strategies for infection prevention. In light of these considerations, the present review aims to critically examine the biochemical mechanisms underlying vitamin D–mediated immune modulation and to synthesize current clinical evidence regarding its role in infectious diseases. By integrating mechanistic insights with clinical findings, this review seeks to clarify existing ambiguities and identify key directions for future research.

Structure, Sources, Metabolism, and Molecular Mechanisms of Vitamin D in Immune Regulation

Vitamin D is a fat-soluble secosteroid that exists predominantly in two forms: ergocalciferol (vitamin D_2), derived from plant sources, and cholecalciferol (vitamin D_3), synthesized endogenously in the skin following exposure to ultraviolet B (UVB) radiation. Among these, vitamin D_3 is considered more biologically effective due to its greater affinity for vitamin D-binding protein and its superior ability to maintain circulating levels of 25-hydroxyvitamin D [25(OH)D], the principal biomarker of vitamin D status [4]. Although dietary sources such as fatty fish, egg yolks, and fortified foods contribute to overall intake, endogenous synthesis remains the primary source in most individuals [8]. Following synthesis or ingestion, vitamin D undergoes a tightly regulated two-step hydroxylation process to achieve biological activation. The first hydroxylation occurs in the liver, where vitamin D is converted into 25(OH)D, the major circulating metabolite with a relatively long half-life. This is followed by a second hydroxylation step in the kidneys, catalyzed by the enzyme 1α-hydroxylase (CYP27B1), resulting in the formation of the biologically active hormone, 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D [$1,25(OH)_2D$] [3]. Notably, extra-renal

expression of CYP27B1 in immune cells such as macrophages and dendritic cells enables localized conversion of 25(OH)D into its active form at sites of infection. This autocrine and paracrine activation is critical for facilitating targeted immune responses without significantly altering systemic calcium homeostasis [4].

At the molecular level, the immunomodulatory effects of vitamin D are primarily mediated through its interaction with the vitamin D receptor (VDR), a ligand-activated nuclear transcription factor expressed in a wide range of immune cells. Upon binding of $1,25(OH)_2D$, the VDR undergoes conformational changes and heterodimerizes with the retinoid X receptor (RXR). This complex subsequently translocates to the nucleus, where it binds to vitamin D response elements (VDREs) within the promoter regions of target genes, thereby regulating their transcription [4]. Through this genomic mechanism, vitamin D influences the expression of a broad array of genes involved in antimicrobial defense, inflammation, cellular proliferation, and immune homeostasis. One of the hallmark effects of vitamin D in immune regulation is the induction of antimicrobial peptides, particularly cathelicidin (LL-37) and β-defensins, which exhibit broad-spectrum activity against bacterial, viral, and fungal pathogens [8]. In addition, vitamin D enhances key innate immune processes such as phagocytosis and autophagy, thereby improving intracellular pathogen clearance. Concurrently, it exerts a modulatory effect on cytokine production by downregulating pro-inflammatory mediators, including tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) and interleukin-6 (IL-6), while upregulating anti-inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-10 (IL-10) [4].

These effects are further mediated through the inhibition of critical inflammatory signaling pathways, including nuclear factor kappa B (NF-κB) and mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) pathways, both of which play central roles in the amplification of inflammatory responses [3]. Beyond its genomic actions, vitamin D also exhibits rapid non-genomic effects through membrane-associated receptors and intracellular signaling cascades, influencing processes such as calcium flux, cell migration, and immune cell activation [8]. Collectively, the integration of its metabolic activation and molecular signaling pathways underscores the role of vitamin D as a key regulator of immune function. Its ability to orchestrate both antimicrobial defense mechanisms and inflammatory control highlights its importance in maintaining immune balance and responding effectively to infectious challenges.

Role of Vitamin D in Innate and Adaptive Immunity and Its Implications in Infectious Diseases

Vitamin D plays a critical role in modulating both innate and adaptive immune responses, thereby influencing host susceptibility to infectious diseases. Within the innate immune system, vitamin D enhances early defense mechanisms by interacting with pattern recognition receptors, particularly toll-like receptors (TLRs), which are essential for pathogen detection. Activation of these pathways upregulates the expression of the vitamin D receptor (VDR) and the enzyme CYP27B1 in immune cells, facilitating the local conversion of circulating 25-hydroxyvitamin D into its active form at sites of infection [8]. This localized activation enables a rapid and targeted immune response. A key function of vitamin D in innate immunity is the induction of antimicrobial peptides, including cathelicidin (LL-37) and β-defensins, which exhibit broad-spectrum antimicrobial activity against bacteria, viruses, and fungi [8]. In addition, vitamin D enhances macrophage function by promoting phagocytosis and intracellular pathogen clearance. It also stimulates autophagy, a critical cellular process for degrading intracellular

pathogens such as *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, thereby contributing to effective microbial elimination [4]. These mechanisms collectively strengthen the host's first line of defense while maintaining controlled inflammatory responses. In the context of adaptive immunity, vitamin D exerts a regulatory effect by modulating T and B lymphocyte activity. It suppresses pro-inflammatory T helper cell subsets, particularly Th1 and Th17 cells, which are associated with the production of cytokines such as interferon-gamma (IFN-γ) and interleukin-17 (IL-17), both implicated in inflammatory tissue damage during infections [4]. Concurrently, vitamin D promotes the differentiation and function of regulatory T cells (Tregs), which play a crucial role in maintaining immune tolerance and preventing excessive immune activation. Furthermore, vitamin D inhibits B cell proliferation, plasma cell differentiation, and immunoglobulin production, thereby reducing the risk of hyperactive immune responses [8]. This balanced modulation ensures effective pathogen clearance while minimizing immune-mediated tissue injury.

The immunomodulatory effects of vitamin D extend to a wide range of infectious diseases. In viral infections, vitamin D has been shown to enhance antiviral defenses by reducing viral replication, strengthening epithelial barrier integrity, and modulating host inflammatory responses. These effects have been particularly highlighted in the context of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), where vitamin D deficiency has been associated with increased disease severity and adverse outcomes [6,7]. In bacterial infections, vitamin D enhances macrophage-mediated antimicrobial activity and autophagy, with well-documented effects in tuberculosis, where it contributes to improved intracellular pathogen clearance [4]. Although the role of vitamin D in fungal and parasitic infections is less extensively studied, emerging evidence suggests that it contributes to immune regulation by enhancing innate immune cell function and maintaining a balanced inflammatory response. However, the underlying mechanisms and clinical relevance in these infections remain incompletely understood, highlighting the need for further investigation [8]. Collectively, these findings underscore the dual role of vitamin D in enhancing antimicrobial defense while regulating immune homeostasis. Its ability to coordinate innate and adaptive immune responses positions it as a key factor in the pathophysiology and potential management of infectious diseases.

Clinical Evidence and Discussion

A substantial body of epidemiological evidence has established a consistent association between vitamin D deficiency and increased susceptibility to infectious diseases, particularly those affecting the respiratory system. Observational studies across diverse populations have demonstrated that individuals with lower serum 25-hydroxyvitamin D levels are at a higher risk of developing acute respiratory tract infections, as well as experiencing more severe disease outcomes [1,6]. These findings are further supported by large-scale cohort studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which reported correlations between vitamin D deficiency and increased rates of hospitalization, intensive care admission, and mortality [6,7]. While such studies provide important insights into population-level trends, their observational nature limits the ability to establish causality. In contrast, evidence from interventional studies, particularly randomized controlled trials (RCTs), has yielded more heterogeneous results. Meta-analyses have suggested that vitamin D supplementation may reduce the risk of acute respiratory infections, with the most pronounced benefits observed in individuals with baseline deficiency [2,9]. Notably, individual participant data meta-analyses have indicated that regular,

moderate-dose supplementation is more effective than high-dose bolus regimens, highlighting the importance of dosing strategy in determining clinical outcomes [2]. However, several RCTs have failed to demonstrate significant protective effects, leading to ongoing debate regarding the clinical utility of vitamin D supplementation in infection prevention and treatment.

These inconsistencies can be attributed to multiple factors, including variations in baseline vitamin D status, differences in supplementation protocols (dose, frequency, and duration), heterogeneity in study populations, and variations in outcome measures. Additionally, confounding variables such as comorbidities, nutritional status, and environmental factors may influence both vitamin D levels and infection risk, further complicating interpretation of results. Consequently, while the biological plausibility for vitamin D's protective role is well established, translating these findings into consistent clinical benefits remains challenging. Despite these limitations, current evidence suggests that vitamin D may be more effective as a preventive rather than therapeutic intervention. Its role in maintaining immune homeostasis and enhancing early antimicrobial responses supports its use in reducing infection risk, particularly in populations with documented deficiency. Furthermore, vitamin D supplementation is generally safe, cost-effective, and widely accessible, making it an attractive public health strategy, especially in regions with high prevalence of deficiency [1]. However, uncertainties remain regarding optimal serum levels, dosing regimens, and the identification of populations most likely to benefit from supplementation.

Controversies and Research Gaps

Despite robust mechanistic evidence supporting the immunomodulatory role of vitamin D, clinical findings remain inconsistent, giving rise to several key controversies. One of the primary challenges lies in the discrepancy between observational studies, which consistently report beneficial associations, and randomized controlled trials, which often yield modest or null effects [2,9]. This divergence raises questions regarding causality and suggests that vitamin D status may act as a marker of overall health rather than a direct determinant of infection risk in certain contexts. Another significant limitation is the lack of standardized definitions for vitamin D deficiency and insufficiency. Variations in threshold values across studies hinder comparability and contribute to inconsistent findings. In addition, genetic polymorphisms in the vitamin D receptor (VDR) and enzymes involved in vitamin D metabolism may influence individual responses to supplementation, introducing an additional layer of variability [4]. These genetic factors, combined with differences in age, ethnicity, geographic location, and baseline health status, underscore the complexity of vitamin D biology in clinical settings.

Furthermore, the majority of existing research has focused predominantly on respiratory infections, particularly in the context of influenza and COVID-19. There is comparatively limited evidence regarding the role of vitamin D in other infectious diseases, including bacterial, fungal, and parasitic infections, despite strong mechanistic rationale. This represents a critical gap in the literature and highlights the need for broader investigation across diverse infectious conditions. Future research should prioritize well-designed, large-scale randomized controlled trials with standardized methodologies, including consistent definitions of deficiency, uniform dosing protocols, and clearly defined clinical outcomes. Additionally, there is growing interest in personalized approaches to vitamin D supplementation, incorporating genetic profiling, baseline nutrient status, and environmental factors to

optimize therapeutic efficacy. Exploration of synergistic effects with other micronutrients and immune-modulating interventions may further enhance clinical outcomes. In summary, while vitamin D holds considerable promise as an immunomodulatory agent in infectious diseases, existing evidence is insufficient to support universal clinical recommendations. Addressing current research gaps through rigorous and standardized investigation will be essential for translating mechanistic insights into effective clinical practice.

Conclusion

Vitamin D has emerged as a pivotal immunomodulatory agent with far-reaching implications in the prevention and management of infectious diseases. Beyond its classical role in skeletal health, its ability to regulate both innate and adaptive immune responses underscores its significance in maintaining immune homeostasis and enhancing host defense. Mechanistic evidence clearly demonstrates that vitamin D influences key pathways involved in antimicrobial activity, cytokine regulation, and inflammatory control, thereby providing a strong biological rationale for its role in infectious disease modulation. Epidemiological studies consistently support an association between vitamin D deficiency and increased susceptibility to infections, as well as poorer clinical outcomes, particularly in respiratory illnesses [1,6]. However, the translation of these findings into clinical practice remains complex, as randomized controlled trials have produced variable results [2,9]. These inconsistencies highlight the multifactorial nature of vitamin D biology and the influence of factors such as baseline nutritional status, genetic variability, and differences in supplementation strategies.

Despite these challenges, vitamin D supplementation remains a promising, safe, and cost-effective approach, particularly as a preventive strategy in populations at risk of deficiency. Its accessibility and favorable safety profile make it an attractive candidate for public health interventions aimed at reducing the global burden of infectious diseases. Nevertheless, the absence of standardized guidelines regarding optimal serum levels, dosing regimens, and target populations limits its widespread clinical application. Future research should focus on large-scale, well-designed randomized trials with standardized methodologies to clarify the therapeutic potential of vitamin D. Additionally, emerging approaches in personalized medicine, including the consideration of genetic polymorphisms and individual variability in vitamin D metabolism, may enhance the precision and effectiveness of supplementation strategies. In conclusion, while vitamin D represents a biologically plausible and clinically relevant modulator of immune function, its full therapeutic potential in infectious diseases has yet to be definitively established. Bridging the gap between mechanistic insights and clinical outcomes will be essential for integrating vitamin D into evidence-based medical practice.

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