In Utero Gene Therapy: A Prenatal Solution to Genetic Diseases

ADITI BHAGWAT[1], PUJA G. VYAWHARE[2], KANVESH CHAUDHURI[1], DARSHAN BORLE[1], SONAL BHINGARE[1]*, RUPALI R. TASGAONKAR[3]

[1] *Final Year B.Pharm Student, Yadavrao Tasgaonkar Institute of Pharmacy, Bhivpuri Road, Maharashtra, India*

[2] *Associate Professor, Yadavrao Tasgaonkar Institute of Pharmacy, Bhivpuri Road, Maharashtra, India*

[3] *Principal & Professor, Yadavrao Tasgaonkar Institute of Pharmacy, Bhivpuri Road, Maharashtra, India*

Corresponding author: Aditi Bhagwat

***Abstract*—In utero gene therapy (IUGT) is a new and promising way to treat genetic diseases before a baby is born; before symptoms even begin. Early treatment is essential for many inherited disorders that begin to compromise the baby's health during pregnancy or shortly after birth. IUGT uses the special fetal environment which includes immunological tolerance, large populations of stem cells, and developmental flexibility, to provide long-lasting therapeutic effects. This review outlines its potential benefits and limitations, as well as how it functions and which diseases or disorders it may be able to treat. In addition, it discusses about ethical issues and the necessary actions for safely implementing this method in real-world healthcare.**

***Keywords*— In utero gene therapy, prenatal treatment, genetic disorders, fetal therapy, early intervention.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Genetic diseases, especially those resulting from single-gene mutations (monogenic disorders), frequently start affecting the fetus during pregnancy or soon after birth. These early-onset diseases can cause serious, irreversible damage to tissues and organs, which can occasionally lead to early death or permanent disability. Traditional postnatal therapies, like standard gene therapy, bone marrow transplantation, or enzyme replacement therapy, are usually started after the condition has seriously harmed the fetus.

Early intervention before the emergence of clinical symptoms may enhance therapeutic outcomes, according to a growing scope of studies. One such promising approach is in utero gene therapy (IUGT). It involves giving the fetus genetic material at critical developmental phases in an effort to replace or repair damaged genes before the condition progresses. IUGT utilizes a number of unique features of the fetal environment, including increased tissue flexibility, a high concentration of stem cells, and immunological tolerance, which may improve the efficacy and safety of gene therapy.

As a result, IUGT offers the potential to not only prevent the onset of disease but also provide a long-lasting or even curative outcome especially for conditions where irreversible damage begins in utero, such as spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), certain lysosomal storage disorders (LSDs), and hemoglobinopathies This review looks into the science behind IUGT, as well as its potential uses, challenges, ethical issues, and the measures required to advance this prenatal treatment toward standard clinical practice.

II. LIMITATIONS OF POSTNATAL GENE THERAPY

While postnatal gene therapy has brought new hope for treating genetic diseases, it still faces several important challenges especially when it comes to conditions that begin affecting the baby before or shortly after birth.

2.1 Delayed Diagnosis

Many severe genetic disorders go undiagnosed until after the birth, and occasionally not until symptoms become visible. However, the damage might already

be done by then. For example, in diseases like spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), the loss of motor neurons starts during pregnancy. Similar to this, nerve damage can occur early in certain brain-related conditions, such as lysosomal storage diseases (LSDs), and by the time treatment begins, it might be irreversible.

2.2 Immune System Challenges

The active immune systems of newborns and elderly people might think of the therapy as a risk. This could decrease the effectiveness of the treatment by causing the body to attack the gene therapy tools (such as viral vectors) or kill the cells that are meant to carry the corrected gene.

2.3 Difficulty Reaching Key Organs

Postnatal gene therapy frequently has trouble getting to several bodily areas, particularly the brain and spinal cord. Natural barriers that restrict access to drugs protect these regions.

2.4 Trouble with Repeat Doses

Certain gene therapy techniques employ single-use viral vectors, such as AAVs. Following the initial dosage, the immune system could produce antibodies that prevent further therapy.

III. WHY THE FETUS IS AN IDEAL TARGET?

3.1 Immune Tolerance

Due to its immaturity, the fetal immune system is inherently resistant to foreign antigens. This makes it possible to introduce gene editing tools or viral vectors during the ideal window of time without inducing an immunological reaction.

3.2 Stem and Progenitor Cell Abundance

A significant percentage of stem and progenitor cells are found in fetal tissues. These cells can spread corrected genes to numerous lineages of differentiated cells in various organs and divide quickly. Long-term gene expression in proliferative cells can be guaranteed by integrating vectors such as lentiviruses.

3.3 High Vector-to-Cell Ratio, Small Size

A given vector dose can achieve greater systemic biodistribution due to the smaller fetal body, increasing therapeutic reach and lowering the necessary vector load.

3.4 Developmental Flexibility

Since tissues are still developing during organogenesis, there are chances to correct anatomy and restore enzyme activity before organ damage occurs.

IV. STRATEGIES FOR GENE DELIVERY BEFORE BIRTH

4.1 Viral Vectors

Adenoviral vectors have a high transduction efficiency but run the risk of triggering the immune system.
AAV vectors are frequently utilized because of their stable episomal expression and low immunogenicity.
Lentiviral vectors are appropriate for hematopoietic or hepatic applications because they can integrate their genome into dividing cells.

4.2 Non-Viral Methods

Although efficiency is still an issue, lipid nanoparticles, electroporation, and peptide-based carriers are being researched for safer delivery.

4.3 Routes of Administration

Amniotic cavity injection: Targets the gut and lung epithelium by taking advantage of the fetus's ability to swallow and breathe.

Intravenous (Umbilical Vein): Enables systemic distribution but carries risk of germline transmission.
Direct Injection: Used in animal models to enter target organs such as the liver or brain. The target tissue, disease pathology, and gestational age all influence the best approach.

V. VECTOR TECHNOLOGIES: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Vector Type	Particle Size (nm)	Cargo Capacity (kb)	Integration Profile	Transduction Efficiency (%)	Fetal Immune Response	BBB Penetration	Germline Risk	Clinical Stage	Optimal Target
AAV9	25	4.7	Non-integrating (episomal)	70-85%	Low	Yes	Minimal (<4%)	Phase 1/2 human (postnatal)	SMA/LSDs
Adenovirus	90-100	36	Non-integrating	85-95%	Moderate-High	Limited	Minimal	Preclinical	CF
Lentiviral	100-120	8	Integrating	40-60%	Low (ex vivo)	No	Moderate (insertional mutagenesis)	Phase 1/2 clinical	Hemophilia/ LSDs
LNP-mRNA	80-100	Variable (mRNA)	Non-integrating	30-50%	Low	Poor (IV only)	Minimal	Phase 1 preclinical	CF/SMA
PNA-Nanoparticles	50-200	Variable	Non-integrating	20-40%	Low	Limited	Minimal	Preclinical	Beta-Thalassemia

5.1 AAV9 - Current Clinical Gold Standard for Systemic CNS Delivery:

- Size: 25 nm icosahedral capsid
- Cargo: 4.7 kb transgene capacity
- Fetal biodistribution: Widespread CNS, muscle, liver, kidney, cardiac, endothelial transduction
- Immune profile: Low fetal immunogenicity; however, maternal AAV9 exposure may generate neutralizing antibodies affecting re-dosing
- Clinical stage: FDA-approved for postnatal SMA (Zolgensma); prenatal human trials expected 2025

5.2 Lipid Nanoparticles (LNPs) - Emerging for Multi-Gene/Editing Applications:

- Size: 80-100 nm
- Cargo: mRNA (unlimited length), plasmid DNA, CRISPR-Cas9 RNPs
- Advantages: Non-viral (minimal pattern recognition), scalable manufacturing (proven by COVID-19 vaccines), modular design
- Limitations: Lower transduction efficiency (~30-50%) vs. viral vectors; primarily IV administration
- Clinical stage: Preclinical in utero studies for CF multiorgan CFTR correction; human trials 2025-2026 expected

5.3 Lentiviral Vectors - Preferred for Ex Vivo HSC Gene Therapy:

- Integration: Integrates into genome; permanent gene expression
- Applications: Patient HSC transduction ex vivo, expansion, autologous transplantation
- Advantages: Sustained therapeutic effect; avoids systemic germline exposure via ex vivo approach
- Limitations: Insertional mutagenesis risk (~1 in 1-10 million per integration site); manufacturing complexity
- Clinical stage: Already FDA-approved for sickle cell disease (Casgevy); planned use for in utero hemophilia A and other HSC-dependent disorders

VI. LEAD DISEASE CANDIDATES WITH SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

SMA Type I - Pathology Timeline and Treatment Evidence:

Disease	Gene Affected	Inheritance	Fetal Path. Onset	Incidence (per births)	Untreated Prognosis	Postnatal Therapy	IUGT Vector	Prenatal Dx Method	Clinical Trial Status	Target Enroll.
SMA Type I	SMN1 deletion	Autosomal Recessive	12 wks	1:6,000-10,000	Median 10.5 mo	Nusinersen/ Zolgensma	AAV9	CVS/ NIPT	Preclinical planning	10-15
Cystic Fibrosis	CFTR mutation	Autosomal Recessive	14 wks	1:2,500-3,500	Progressive lung failure	CFTR modulators	LNP-CRISPR	CVS	Preclinical	8-12
MPS I-Hurler	IDUA deletion	Autosomal Recessive	20 wks	1:100,000	Cognitive decline 9 mo	HSCT <9 mo	AAV-enzyme	CVS/ NIPT	Phase 1 planning	5-10
Alpha-Thalassemia Major	HBA1/ HBA2 deletion	Autosomal Recessive	28 wks	Ethnic variable	Intrauterine death/ hydrops	In utero transfusion	Maternal HSC	CVS	Phase 2 active	10-20
Hemophilia A	F8 inversion/ mutation	X-linked Recessive	12 wks	1:5,000	Joint/CNS bleeding	Factor VIII replacement	Lentiviral HSC	CVS/ NIPT	Phase 1 planning	8-12
Beta-Thalassemia Major	HBB mutation	Autosomal Recessive	26 wks	Regional variable	Transfusion-dependent	HSCT/ gene therapy	LNP-CRISPR	CVS	Preclinical	6-10

Fetal Pathology:

- Motor neuron loss initiates weeks 12-20 gestation
- Fetal SMN protein levels 30-40% below controls in affected fetuses at 14 weeks gestation
- Abnormal motor neuron morphology: nuclei shape distortion, increased DNA fragmentation, reduced axon caliber (30-40% reduction)
- Neuromuscular junction defects: presynaptic vesicle accumulation, acetylcholine receptor disaggregation

Clinical Impact:

- SMA Type I median untreated survival: 10.5 months
- With SMN2 copy number ≤2: predictable rapid decline (median 10.5 months)
- Current standard of care (Zolgensma): 60% achieve motor milestones; some motor deficits remain even with early treatment
- Nusinersen (antisense): 39% death/ventilator-free survival at 18 months vs. 68% in controls—indicating substantial residual morbidity

Prenatal Treatment Evidence:

- Intra-amniotic antisense oligonucleotide injection in SMAΔ7 mouse models:
    - Increased motor neuron numbers vs. untreated
    - Enhanced motor axon development
    - Improved motor behavioral tests
    - Prolonged survival compared to postnatal P1-P3 treatment
- Fetal lamb studies: Feasibility of broad ASO distribution including to CNS via intra-amniotic injection
- Conclusion: Prenatal intervention mechanistically superior to even early postnatal therapy for SMA Type I

Cystic Fibrosis - Multiorgan CFTR Restoration:

Disease Biology:

- CFTR loss-of-function mutations impair cAMP-regulated chloride channel
- Multiorgan involvement: primarily lung and pancreas
- Meconium ileus (fatal bowel obstruction) occurs in ~15-20% of CF infants—develops prenatally

Fetal Pathology:

- Fetal CF lungs show reduced CFTR function by second trimester
- Pancreatic fibrosis initiates in utero
- Meconium ileus develops in intrauterine period

Preclinical IUGT Evidence:

- Murine CF models: In utero adenoviral CFTR delivery restored chloride transport, improved lung histology
- Ferret CF models (2025 PNAS publication):
    - Systemic lipid nanoparticle-CRISPR delivering CFTR corrected ~30-50% of lung epithelial cells
    - Restored pancreatic acinar cell function
    - Prevented meconium ileus in treated fetuses
    - Lung function test parameters improved compared to untreated littermates

Clinical Significance:

- Current postnatal therapy (CFTR modulators) partially restores function but does not prevent progressive lung disease
- Prenatal CFTR correction could prevent irreversible lung remodeling and enable normal lung development
- First human trial expected 2025-2026

VII. CURRENT GAPS IN TRANSLATION TO HUMAN TRIALS

Human IUGT has not yet entered clinical trials despite encouraging animal findings for a number of reasons:

7.1 Species Differences

Human and animal models differ in terms of organ maturity, immunological system development, and gestational timelines. For example, compared to primates, rodents have immature lungs from birth. 7.2 Technical Challenges

It is challenging to standardize vector dosing and delivery accuracy. It is still difficult to reach

particular embryonic organs without causing side effects or germline exposure.

7.2 Diagnostic Timing
For treatment to be effective, an accurate prenatal diagnosis (by cell-free fetal DNA, amniocentesis, or chorionic villus collection) must be made early enough. Although new genome-wide prenatal sequencing techniques increase detection, there may be ethical debates or uncertainty around their interpretation.

VIII. ETHICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Germline Editing
Although current IUGT protocols aim to avoid germline modification, systemic delivery before germ cell sequestration (7–8 weeks in humans) could alter heritable DNA, raising ethical and legal issues.

8.2 Informed Consent
A therapy that has unclear long-term effects on an unborn child requires parental approval. This makes consent more difficult, particularly when procedures have the potential to cause offtarget effects or miscarriages.

8.3 Regulatory and Cultural Differences
Germline gene editing is expressly prohibited in some nations (such as France). Others advocate for rigorously regulated research. For ethical clinical advancement, global policies must be harmonized.

IX. BRIDGING THE GAP

What Needs to Happen to move IUGT from the lab to clinic: -Ensure Safety in Large Animal Models: It's critical to keep an eye on immunological response, gene expression, and off-target consequences over an extended period of time. -Establish Ethical Guidelines: It is necessary to create global guidelines for consent, followup, and fetal intervention.

-Enhance Delivery and Imaging Systems: More accurate and easily accessible fetal navigation and ultrasound-guided delivery instruments are needed.
-Develop Scalable Vector Manufacturing: Strict quality control and reproducible manufacturing are required for clinical-grade viral vectors intended for fetal usage. -Educate Public and Policymakers: Winning over the public's trust and obtaining regulatory approval will need openness and communication.

X. CONCLUSION

In utero gene therapy represents a groundbreaking step forward in treating genetic diseases at their root before they cause irreversible harm. By acting during fetal development, this approach has the potential to deliver lifelong benefits, with fewer immune complications and better outcomes compared to treatments after birth. IUGT is getting closer to practical application despite ongoing ethical issues and technical obstacles, thanks to advancements in animal research, prenatal diagnostics, and accurate gene-editing technologies. This approach has the potential to change the way we treat children with hereditary illnesses in the future by providing hope for real solutions before life even begins, provided it is implemented with careful supervision and ongoing innovation.

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