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Immunohistochemistry in Oral Pathologies: Diagnostic and Prognostic Perspectives

Yashvi Shah, Rashmi Metgud , Smitha Naik and Aniruddh Tak

Abstract
Immunohistochemistry (IHC) has revolutionized the diagnostic and prognostic landscape of oral pathology by enabling precise detection of specific antigens within tissue sections. This article offers a comprehensive overview of IHC's evolution, fundamental principles, and practical techniques—ranging from direct and indirect labeling to advanced polymer- and gold-based methods. Emphasis is placed on the meticulous preparation of tissues, including formalin fixation and antigen retrieval, to ensure reliable staining outcomes. A detailed exploration of molecular markers follows, illustrating how cytokeratins, p53, Ki-67, bcl-2, and others elucidate the lineage, proliferative status, and malignant potential of various oral and maxillofacial lesions.
Subsequent chapters examine the IHC profiles of odontogenic cysts (e.g., odontogenic keratocyst, dentigerous cyst), odontogenic tumors (ameloblastoma, calcifying epithelial odontogenic tumor), and salivary gland neoplasms (mucoepidermoid carcinoma, adenoid cystic carcinoma), highlighting how distinct markers refine diagnosis and guide clinical management. Additionally, the role of IHC in assessing epithelial dysplasia is underscored, showing how markers such as p53 and Ki-67 predict disease progression. By integrating up-to-date methodologies and marker-specific insights, this article underscores IHC's indispensable role in enhancing diagnostic accuracy, identifying at-risk lesions, and informing targeted treatment strategies within the oral pathology domain.
Keywords*: Immunohistochemistry, Odontogenic Cysts, Odontogenic Tumors, Epithelial Dysplasia, Molecular Markers, Proliferation Markers, p53, Ki-67, bcl-2, Cytokeratins*

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I. Introduction

Immunohistochemistry (IHC) has emerged as a vital tool in diagnostic pathology, leveraging the specificity of antigen–antibody interactions to visualize distinct cellular components within tissue sections.[1] Its application in oral pathologies is especially valuable, given the morphological overlap among various lesions. By highlighting molecular markers, IHC aids in refining differential diagnoses, guiding prognostic assessments, and revealing potential therapeutic targets.[2,3] In this context, the methodology bridges traditional histopathology and molecular biology, offering deeper insights into the pathogenesis and progression of oral diseases.[4]

In oral and maxillofacial lesions, histological similarities can obscure critical diagnostic nuances, necessitating more refined investigative techniques.[3] Immunohistochemistry addresses this need by pinpointing specific antigens in tissue, enabling pathologists to distinguish between lesions that may appear alike under conventional stains.[5] From benign cysts exhibiting low proliferation indices to malignant tumors displaying oncogenic marker overexpression, IHC markers highlight key biological traits. Ultimately, this approach provides clinicians with a robust framework for accurate classification, prognosis, and the strategic planning of patient care.[3,5,6]

HISTORY

- **Developments in Immunolabeling**

The foundations of immunolabeling trace back to the mid-20th century, when researchers first applied fluorescent antibodies to detect microbial antigens in tissue. Although rudimentary, these initial experiments revealed the immense diagnostic promise of visualizing antigen–antibody reactions under the microscope. As fluorescence techniques became more reliable, they opened avenues for more sophisticated enzyme- and gold-based methods, progressively evolving into the modern immunohistochemical procedures widely used today in oral pathology and beyond.[1]

- **Milestones and Contributors**

Pioneering work by scientists such as Coons, Sternberger, and others established protocols for peroxidase-based detection systems, revolutionizing sensitivity and specificity in tissue antigen visualization. Later, Köhler and Milstein's development of monoclonal antibodies in 1975 offered a game-changing advancement, providing highly specific reagents capable of targeting unique epitopes. These milestones collectively transformed immunolabeling into a powerful investigative tool, setting the stage for current immunodiagnostic approaches in head and neck pathology.[5]

- **Evolution of Monoclonal & Polyclonal Antibody**

The transition from polyclonal to monoclonal antibodies marked a major shift in immunodiagnostics. Polyclonal antibodies, produced by immunizing animals with an antigen, recognize multiple epitopes but may yield background staining. Conversely, monoclonal antibodies—derived from a single hybridoma clone—bind a single epitope with remarkable specificity. This precision minimizes cross-reactivity and fosters reproducible results, crucial for delineating subtle differences in tissue architecture and marker expression within various oral lesions.[6]

II. PRINCIPLES OF IMMUNOHISTOCHEMISTRY

- **Mechanism of Antigen–Antibody Binding**

At the heart of immunohistochemistry lies the lock-and-key principle, where antibodies bind epitopes that match their variable regions. This selective attachment is what makes IHC so powerful: the labeled antibody only localizes where its corresponding antigen is present. Such specificity enables pathologists to distinguish cell types, detect aberrant protein expressions, and interpret complex tissue patterns, all of which are critical for diagnosing and understanding oral diseases at a molecular level.[8]

- **Tissue Fixation and Processing**

The preservation of tissue integrity is vital for accurate immunostaining. Formalin fixation remains standard in most pathology laboratories, as it stabilizes tissue morphology and preserves antigenicity to a workable extent. After fixation, tissues are processed through dehydration and embedded in paraffin. Although this method can mask certain antigens, subsequent antigen retrieval protocols often restore epitopes. By standardizing these steps, pathologists ensure consistent, interpretable results across various oral biopsy specimens.[11]

- **Antigen Retrieval Methods (Heat-Induced, Enzymatic)**

Because formalin-induced crosslinks can hide antigenic sites, retrieval techniques are essential. Heat-induced epitope retrieval (HIER), using buffer solutions in a microwave or pressure cooker, loosens crosslinks, exposing hidden epitopes. Alternatively, enzymatic digestion (e.g., trypsin) methodically cleaves protein crosslinks. Each approach demands optimization—factors like temperature, pH, and incubation time must be carefully controlled to maximize staining signal without compromising tissue morphology.[9]

- **Signal Amplification Techniques**

After antigen binding, signal visibility hinges on the amplification strategy. Avidin–biotin systems exploit the strong affinity between biotin and avidin, multiplying the number of detectable enzyme sites. Polymer-based systems take amplification further by adding multiple enzyme complexes per antibody, producing robust staining even when antigen levels are low. These methods collectively enhance sensitivity, ensuring that low-abundance proteins pertinent to early pathological changes do not go undetected.[8,10]

III. METHODS OF IMMUNOHISTOCHEMISTRY

- **Direct Method**

The direct method is the simplest immunolabeling approach, involving a primary antibody directly conjugated to a reporter enzyme or fluorochrome. While rapid and straightforward—reducing the number of incubation steps—its sensitivity can be lower than multi-layer techniques. Consequently, the direct method is best suited for high-antigen tissues or scenarios demanding minimal background interference.[11,13]

- **Indirect Method**

Widely employed for diagnostic purposes, the indirect method uses an unlabeled primary antibody followed by a labeled secondary antibody directed against the first. This two-step process not only amplifies the signal but also accommodates multiple detection formats. The result is enhanced sensitivity and clearer visualization of target proteins, making it a mainstay in oral pathology laboratories for routine lesion evaluation.[12]

- **Unlabeled Antibody Enzyme-Complex Techniques (PAP, APAAP)**

Unlabeled antibody methods like peroxidase–antiperoxidase (PAP) and alkaline phosphatase–anti-alkaline phosphatase (APAAP) increase detection stability. These techniques assemble immune complexes that anchor around antigenic sites, yielding intense and stable color reactions. Although slightly more involved than simpler

indirect protocols, PAP and APAAP methods are prized for their robust, reproducible staining quality in research and clinical diagnostics.[12-15]

- **Immunogold Silver Staining (IGSS)**

IGSS replaces traditional enzyme labels with tiny colloidal gold particles bound to antibodies. Silver enhancement then enlarges gold deposits, enabling light microscopy visualization. This technique shines in scenarios demanding heightened resolution or when electron microscopy correlates are needed. Its precision, however, typically involves more elaborate handling steps and specialized reagents.[16,19]

- **Avidin–Biotin and Streptavidin-Based Techniques**

Avidin–biotin methods capitalize on multiple biotin sites per antibody, permitting each labeled avidin molecule to bind numerous enzymes. Streptavidin, produced by Streptomyces bacteria, offers similar advantages with potentially lower background staining. Both systems are revered for their heightened sensitivity, making them especially valuable when examining low-abundance markers critical for early lesion identification.[20]

IV. MOLECULAR MARKERS IN IMMUNOHISTOCHEMISTRY

- **Epithelial Markers**

Epithelial markers help distinguish tissue origin and subtype in lesions spanning from benign cystic changes to malignant tumors. Cytokeratins, for instance, reveal differentiation patterns; specific subsets—like CK19—frequently appear in odontogenic epithelium. Epithelial membrane antigen (EMA) and carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA) further distinguish glandular or secretory components, shedding light on whether a lesion is purely squamous, mixed, or salivary gland–derived.[21-24]

- **Mesenchymal & Muscle Markers**

These markers confirm the presence of connective tissue or myogenic differentiation in oral lesions, aiding in diagnoses of sarcomas and myoepithelial-rich neoplasms. Vimentin targets mesenchymal cells, whereas desmin and smooth muscle actin (SMA) validate muscle origin. Such insights are critical when differentiating soft-tissue expansions, including myxomas or fibromas, from epithelial-based pathologies.[20,23,25]

- **Neural Markers**

Neural markers are particularly relevant in tumors originating from neural crest derivatives, such as schwannomas, neurofibromas, or melanocytic lesions. S-100 protein positivity, for example, might differentiate neural tumors from purely epithelial or mesenchymal proliferations. GFAP is a hallmark of glial lineage, while neurofilament proteins strengthen the identification of neuronal processes in mixed lesions.[26,27]

- **Melanocytic Markers**

In the oral cavity, pigmented lesions may represent a variety of pathologies, including melanomas, which demand swift intervention. HMB-45 and MART-1 aid in confirming melanocytic origin, distinguishing these lesions from vascular or hemorrhagic presentations. Their specificity ensures that clinicians avoid misdiagnosis and undertake the appropriate oncological workup and management.[28-30]

- **Lymphoid and Germ Cell Markers**

Oral lymphoid hyperplasias and lymphomas require immunophenotyping for accurate classification. CD3 identifies T-cells, while CD20 recognizes B-cells, helping pinpoint the lineage of lymphoproliferative disorders. Although germ cell markers like alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) and human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG) seldom appear in primary oral lesions, their detection is essential to rule out metastases or rare extragonadal germ cell tumors.[31]

- **Proliferation and Apoptosis-Related Proteins**

These markers elucidate a lesion's growth potential and propensity for malignant transformation. Ki-67 and PCNA quantify cell proliferation rates, guiding prognostic considerations in cysts and tumors alike. Overexpression of p53 can indicate disrupted cell-cycle regulation, whereas bcl-2's anti-apoptotic function often correlates with tumor resilience and higher recurrence risks. Thus, analyzing their expression patterns refines diagnostic accuracy and shapes treatment strategies.[32,33]

V. IMMUNOHISTOCHEMISTRY OF ODONTOGENIC CYSTS

Odontogenic cysts encompass lesions such as the **odontogenic keratocyst (OKC)**, **dentigerous cyst**, **radicular cyst**, and **glandular odontogenic cyst (GOC)**. Among these, the **OKC** stands out for its higher proliferation indices—marked by increased **Ki-67 and PCNA** activity—suggesting a more aggressive behavior and a tendency for recurrence. Meanwhile, **dentigerous** and **radicular cysts** generally show lower proliferative marker expression, aligning with their less aggressive clinical course, although inflammatory processes can still modulate immunohistochemical results.[34-37]

The **GOC** exhibits glandular or mucin-producing epithelial features, occasionally mimicking central mucoepidermoid carcinoma. **Cytokeratin 7, 19**, and mucin-related markers help confirm its odontogenic but glandular-like lineage. Accurate immunohistochemical profiling in these cysts not only supports proper diagnosis

but can also guide more definitive surgical approaches—particularly crucial in lesions like OKC, where high recurrence rates necessitate vigilant treatment planning.[36]

VI. IMMUNOHISTOCHEMISTRY OF ODONTOGENIC TUMORS

Odontogenic tumors such as **ameloblastoma**, **calcifying epithelial odontogenic tumor (CEOT)**, **adenomatoid odontogenic tumor (AOT)**, and connective tissue lesions (e.g., **odontogenic myxoma**) often present overlapping histological patterns. **Ameloblastoma** typically shows strong expression of epithelial markers (e.g., cytokeratins) and, at times, **bcl-2**—correlating with local aggressiveness and the potential for recurrence. **CEOT**, or Pindborg tumor, is characterized by amyloid deposits (Congo red–positive) and epithelial immunoprofiles, indicating its distinct yet epithelial-derived nature.[38-41]

AOT typically displays duct-like or rosette structures with strong cytokeratin positivity (e.g., CK19), confirming its benign epithelial origin. Conversely, **odontogenic myxoma** demonstrates mesenchymal characteristics, including **vimentin** positivity. By interpreting these immunostaining patterns in conjunction with morphological cues, clinicians differentiate benign, conservatively manageable lesions from those requiring more extensive surgical intervention.[40]

IMMUNOHISTOCHEMISTRY OF SALIVARY GLAND TUMORS

Salivary gland tumors—such as **pleomorphic adenoma**, **mucoepidermoid carcinoma**, **adenoid cystic carcinoma**, and **polymorphous low-grade adenocarcinoma (PLGA)**—are distinguished through their mixed cellularity and intricate growth patterns. **Pleomorphic adenoma** contains both epithelial and myoepithelial components, confirmed by **cytokeratin** and **smooth muscle actin (SMA)** positivity. **Mucoepidermoid carcinoma** features mucous, epidermoid, and intermediate cells, which can be visualized via **mucicarmine** staining and cytokeratin panels like CK7 and CK19.[44]

Adenoid cystic carcinoma is known for its cribriform architecture and **CD117 (c-kit)** positivity, correlating with a relentless clinical course despite slow progression. **PLGA**, usually arising in minor salivary glands, exhibits low-grade histology yet an infiltrative pattern, with **CK7** and **p63** marking its dual cellular origin. Together, immunohistochemical findings refine diagnostic accuracy and help predict tumor behavior, influencing the aggressiveness of treatment.[42,43]

VII. IMMUNOHISTOCHEMISTRY OF SALIVARY DUCT CARCINOMA (SDC)

Salivary duct carcinoma (SDC) often mirrors breast ductal carcinoma, displaying **cribriform** or **papillary** growth, central necrosis in advanced areas, and high-grade cellular atypia. **Immunophenotypically**, SDC cells typically form cohesive clusters positive for epithelial markers, emphasizing a malignant ductal lineage. Recognizing these morphological patterns compels a more focused immunoprofile analysis to confirm diagnosis and guide therapy.[45] Key markers in SDC include **androgen receptor (AR)**, **HER2/neu**, and sometimes **GCDFP-15**. AR expression can present treatment opportunities akin to hormone-receptor management in breast cancer, while HER2/neu positivity may signal the potential use of targeted biologic agents. Such marker-driven strategies underline the importance of precise immunohistochemistry in orchestrating effective treatment protocols for SDC's aggressive behavior.[47,48]

VIII. IMMUNOHISTOCHEMISTRY OF EPITHELIAL DYSPLASIA

Epithelial dysplasia in the oral cavity is a spectrum of precancerous changes, ranging from mild cellular atypia to severe dysplasia verging on carcinoma in situ. Histologically, these lesions show disordered epithelial maturation, yet **immunohistochemical** markers like **p53, Ki-67,** and **MCM proteins** highlight early molecular events preceding outright malignancy. Identifying elevated proliferation or apoptosis dysregulation supports timely clinical intervention to prevent malignant transformation.[46,49]

Dysplasia grading—mild, moderate, or severe—often correlates with immunostaining intensity for **bcl-2** or **EGFR**, emphasizing a continuum of risk. By stratifying lesions according to these markers, clinicians can decide if surgical excision, laser ablation, or stringent follow-up is warranted. Thus, IHC provides essential prognostic insights, bridging the gap between morphological classification and personalized patient management.[45,48,5]

Table 1 : Immunohistochemistry Markers and their significance

IHC Marker	Lesion(s) / Tissue	Significance
Cytokeratins (CKs)(e.g., CK7, CK13, CK19)	Most epithelial lesions: - Odontogenic epithelium (OKC, AOT, ameloblastoma)- Salivary gland tumors- Epithelial dysplasia	Identifies epithelial origin; specific CK subsets help distinguish subtypes (e.g., CK19 in ameloblastoma/AOT; CK7 & CK19 in salivary gland tumors, GOC).

p63	- Ameloblastomas - Polymorphous low-grade adenocarcinoma (PLGA)- Squamous lesions	Regulates epithelial proliferation; high expression can indicate aggressive behavior in epithelial tumors and help differentiate subtypes of salivary neoplasms.
Ki-67 (MIB-1)	- Odontogenic keratocyst (OKC) - Epithelial dysplasia - Salivary gland carcinomas	Proliferation marker; elevated indices suggest higher growth fraction, correlating with aggression or malignant potential (e.g., OKCs, dysplastic mucosa).
PCNA	- OKC, ameloblastoma - Dysplastic epithelium	Similar to Ki-67, reflects cellular proliferation. High PCNA activity often indicates increased recurrence risk and malignant transformation potential.
p53	- Oral epithelial dysplasia - OKC (sporadic and NBCCS-related) - Oral squamous cell carcinoma	Tumor suppressor protein; overexpression typically implies genetic instability. In dysplasia, p53 positivity correlates with progression toward malignancy.
bcl-2	- OKC - Ameloblastoma - Dysplastic lesions	Anti-apoptotic protein; heightened bcl-2 expression suggests resistance to cell death, contributing to lesion persistence or aggressive behavior (e.g., OKC).
EMA (Epithelial Membrane Antigen)	- Odontogenic cysts - Salivary gland tumors (e.g., mucoepidermoid carcinoma)	Highlights epithelial and secretory differentiation; helps differentiate glandular or secretory lesions from purely squamous epithelial processes.
CEA (Carcinoembryonic Antigen)	- Glandular or adenocarcinomas - Salivary gland tumors	Oncofetal antigen; supports diagnosis of glandular origin (e.g., salivary tumors) and can distinguish certain carcinomas from mesenchymal lesions.
S-100	- Neural/neuroectodermal lesions - Melanocytic lesions - Salivary gland tumors with nerve involvement	Neural crest marker; indicates Schwann cell or melanocytic lineage. In salivary tumors, can highlight perineural invasion, especially in adenoid cystic carcinoma.
GFAP (Glial Fibrillary Acidic Protein)	- Rare oral lesions of astroglial origin - Some peripheral nerve sheath tumors	Glial marker; typically not common in most odontogenic lesions, but can confirm glial/astrocytic differentiation if suspected in rare presentations.
Neurofilaments	- Neural tumors (neurofibroma, schwannoma) - Paraganglioma-type lesions	Structural proteins in neurons; used to confirm neuronal differentiation or infiltration in head and neck tumors, distinguishing them from purely epithelial lesions.
HMB-45, MART-1	- Oral melanocytic lesions (e.g., melanoma)	Melanocytic markers; confirm melanocyte origin, crucial for diagnosing oral melanoma versus other pigmented lesions or hemorrhagic changes.
CD3, CD20, CD30	- Lymphomas or lymphoproliferative disorders - Inflammatory infiltrates	Identify T- (CD3) and B- (CD20) lymphocytes; crucial for classifying lymphomas in the oral cavity. CD30 used in some T-cell lymphomas or Hodgkin's disease variants.
AFP (Alpha-Fetoprotein), HCG (Human Chorionic Gonadotropin)	- Rare germ cell tumors - Metastatic lesions	Germ cell markers; not commonly expressed in primary oral lesions, but essential for ruling out metastatic germ cell tumors or extragonadal presentations.
Desmin, SMA (Smooth Muscle Actin)	- Myogenic tumors - Myoepithelial components in salivary tumors (e.g., pleomorphic adenoma)	Muscle differentiation markers; confirm smooth or skeletal muscle origin. In salivary tumors, highlight myoepithelial cells in biphasic neoplasms.
Vimentin	- Mesenchymal tumors (e.g., odontogenic myxoma) - Connective tissue stroma	Broad mesenchymal marker; strong positivity confirms fibroblastic or myxomatous origins. Helps distinguish mesenchymal lesions from epithelial pathologies.
CD117 (c-kit)	- Adenoid cystic carcinoma (salivary gland) - Some GIST-like tumors (rare in oral cavity)	Tyrosine kinase receptor; frequent positivity in adenoid cystic carcinoma, can indicate potential for targeted therapy (e.g., tyrosine kinase inhibitors in certain contexts).
Androgen Receptor (AR), HER2/neu, GCDFP-15	- Salivary duct carcinoma (SDC) - High-grade salivary tumors	Ductal markers; AR overexpression in SDC suggests hormonal sensitivity, HER2 positivity can indicate targeted treatments, and GCDFP-15 underscores ductal differentiation.

EGFR (Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor)	- Dysplastic lesions - OSCC (Oral Squamous Cell Carcinoma)	Growth factor receptor; overexpression can signal more aggressive behavior or potential responsiveness to EGFR-targeted therapies in malignant transformations.
MCM Proteins	- Epithelial dysplasia - Carcinomas	DNA replication licensing factors; early indicators of heightened proliferative capacity. Can aid in identifying at-risk dysplastic lesions before overt malignancy develops.

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