

# Cyclooxygenases in Inflammatory Bowel Disease

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**Abstract-** Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) is a long-term condition that presents as Ulcerative Colitis (UC), or Crohn's Disease (CD) based on its manifestations. It is characterized by inflammation in the small intestine and colon, impacting millions of individuals globally. The development of IBD is influenced by genetic, environmental, and immunological factors. Various pro-inflammatory agents such as TNF- $\alpha$ , IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, IL-12, TGF- $\beta$ , INF- $\gamma$ , COX-2, and increased reactive oxygen species contribute to significant intestinal damage. Typical symptoms of IBD include fever, abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea, weight loss, blood in the stool, and an elevated risk of colon cancer. Changes in colonic motility linked to IBD can worsen discomfort and diarrhea. Prostaglandins, particularly elevated in IBD patients, may modulate these alterations. The enzyme Cyclooxygenase-2, responsible for producing prostaglandins, is targeted in IBD treatment. The role of PGE2 in the pathogenesis of IBD is intricate; while it can have anti-inflammatory effects by inhibiting pro-inflammatory cytokines, it can also act pro-inflammatory in IBD. Dysregulation of PGE2 production in IBD can lead to excess levels in inflamed gut tissue, perpetuating chronic inflammation by attracting immune cells, increasing blood vessel permeability, and causing tissue damage. The context-dependent role of PGE2 in IBD warrants further research for a comprehensive understanding. Modulating PGE2 levels or its signaling pathways may provide potential therapeutic options for managing IBD. This review specifically examines the involvement of Cyclooxygenases and coxibs in treating IBD.

**Index Terms-**Cyclooxygenases, Inflammation, Ulcerative Colitis, Prostaglandins.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Inflammation

The term "inflammation" originates from the Latin "to set on fire," and it represents the body's natural response to harmful pathogens and stimuli. When stimulated by infections, dead cells, or irritants, the innate immune system generates inflammation as a defensive immunological reaction. The initial line of defense against infections is the innate immune system, which is crucial for promptly identifying invasive infections and inducing a pro-inflammatory response. On the other hand, the adaptive immune system is responsible for establishing immunological memory and eliminating specific pathogens during the later stages of infection [1].

Inflammation manifests in two stages: acute inflammation and chronic inflammation [2]. The immune system's response to infection and injury, inflammation, is associated with the pathogenesis of various diseases such as cardiovascular, neurological, and autoimmune diseases, as well as stroke, cancer, and arthritis. The primary benefits of inflammation include eliminating harmful substances and restoring tissue integrity and physiological function.

Acute inflammation is a transient form of innate immunity that is initiated by immune cells. It is characterized by a rapid influx of blood granulocytes, typically neutrophils, followed by monocytes that differentiate into inflammatory macrophages. These macrophages multiply and impact the functions of resident tissue macrophages. The four key indicators of acute inflammation are tumor (swelling), dolor (pain), calor (heat), and rubor (redness). Following the removal of the initial harmful stimulus through phagocytosis, the inflammatory response can subside and resolve.

Inflammation involves a complex network of molecular and cellular mechanisms that coordinate various pre-existing or newly synthesized mediators to induce specific reactions. Prolonged and uncontrolled immune responses can lead to irreversible tissue damage, chronic illnesses, and chronic inflammation. Chronic inflammatory diseases, also known as non-communicable chronic diseases, are a major cause of global mortality. The lack of control over the intensity and resolution time of inflammation significantly contributes to the development of chronic inflammatory diseases.

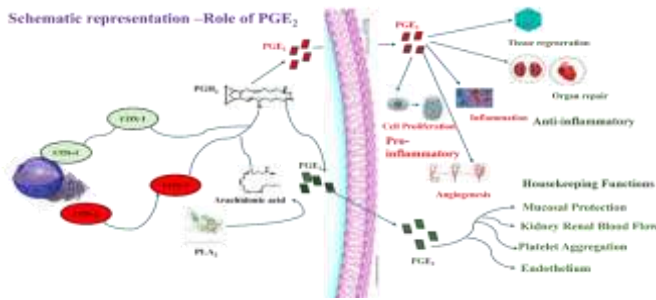


Figure 1: Schematic representation-Role of PGE<sub>2</sub>

## II. INFLAMMATORY BOWEL DISEASE

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) encompasses conditions such as Ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease, characterized by inflammation of the intestinal tract. IBD is a prevalent global health issue affecting populations in both developed and developing countries. Common initial symptoms of ulcerative colitis (UC) include abdominal discomfort, blood in the stool, weight loss, and vomiting, with lesions primarily found in the rectal and colonic regions. Crohn's disease (CD) symptoms can occur in any part of the gastrointestinal system and may include fever, nutritional deficiencies, diarrhea, and intestinal blockage, among others. CD typically presents as a chronic, recurrent condition with complex clinical manifestations.

In CD, inflammation affects multiple layers of the intestine and appears as patches, while in UC, inflammation begins in the rectum and progresses proximally within the mucosal layer. Structural alterations in the enteric nervous system (ENS) have been observed in patients with CD or UC, including abnormalities in ganglia and nerve bundles. The prevalence of IBD is increasing globally, influenced by factors such as changes in diet, antibiotic use, hygiene practices, and environmental conditions.

Genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors play a significant role in the development of IBD, with genetic predisposition increasing the risk of disease. The chronic inflammation associated with IBD can lead to complications such as colorectal cancer and cardiovascular disease. Management of IBD involves ongoing medication, surgery, and lifestyle modifications to control symptoms and prevent disease progression. Various therapeutic options, including biological agents, immunomodulators, and surgery, are available, but not all patients respond well to traditional treatments, necessitating the development of safer and more effective anti-inflammatory drugs.

Oxidative stress and inflammation are critical mechanisms in the pathogenesis of IBD, leading to intestinal damage and complications. Individuals with IBD are at increased risk for colorectal cancer, and the use of nonsteroidal anti-

inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may help reduce this risk. Furthermore, IBD has been identified as a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, highlighting the importance of managing inflammation and other risk factors in individuals with IBD to prevent cardiovascular complications. Dietary factors, including fiber intake, play a crucial role in modulating gut microbiota and may impact the development and progression of IBD. Antibiotic use can alter gut microbiota composition, emphasizing the importance of judicious antibiotic use, particularly in children, to maintain a healthy gut microbiome.

### Common Symptoms of IBD

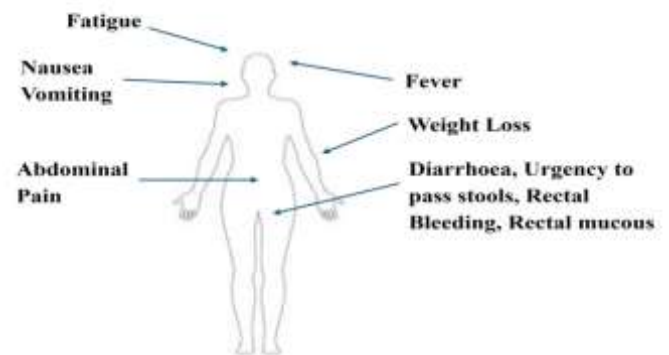


Figure 2: Common Symptoms of IBD

### Cyclooxygenases

There are three isoforms of the COX enzyme known to exist: COX-1, COX-2, and COX-3. These enzymes play a crucial role in the formation of various inflammatory prostaglandins. Prostaglandins interact with G-protein coupled membrane receptors, influencing numerous physiological and pathological processes. While both COX-1 and COX-2 enzymes convert arachidonic acid into prostaglandins, they have distinct distributions and functions in the body. COX-1 is constitutively expressed throughout the body, serving various homeostatic functions such as aiding in blood clotting, maintaining gastric mucosa, and regulating renal blood flow. On the other hand, COX-2 is an inducible form involved in producing prostaglandins that mediate pain and inflammation. COX-3, a splice variant of COX-1 sensitive to acetaminophen, has an unknown function. Both COX genes encode two isoenzymes found in coral, tunicates, and vertebrates. The specific origin of these genes from early duplication events or individual duplications during evolution remains uncertain. In vertebrates, the intron-exon configuration of COX genes is conserved across species. The COX enzymes possess unique cyclooxygenase and peroxidase active sites in their catalytic domain and belong to the myeloperoxidase family. They are predominantly located on the nuclear envelope and the luminal side of the endoplasmic reticulum membrane.

COX enzymes facilitate the conversion of arachidonic acid into prostaglandin G<sub>2</sub>, subsequently reduced to prostaglandin H<sub>2</sub>. Downstream synthases convert PGH<sub>2</sub> into various prostaglandin isomers through isomerization, oxidation, and reduction reactions. The enzyme autoinactivates over time, with a short lifespan. Both COX-1 and COX-2 proteins consist of around 600 amino acids with a calculated molecular weight of 75-80 kDa post-translational modifications. COX-2 can be induced by pro-inflammatory cytokines, growth factors, and bacterial lipopolysaccharide.

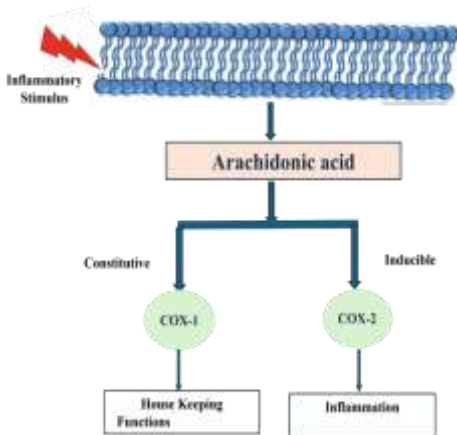


Figure 3: Role of Cyclooxygenases

### Cyclooxygenases in IBD

IBD, a complex ailment, is part of a group of inflammatory gut disorders with unknown causes and long-term effects. It is impacted by genetic, immunological, and environmental factors [3]. IBD includes Ulcerative colitis, which affects the colon, and Crohn's disease, which can affect the gastrointestinal tract in both children and adults. The prevalence of IBD is increasing due to various factors such as diet, medication, hygiene, and lifestyle.

Studies have shown that inflammation may promote tumor growth by stimulating blood vessel formation and cell proliferation while suppressing the immune system and cell death [4]. Research also demonstrates a 40–50% reduced risk of developing colorectal cancer with prolonged use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) [5]. NSAIDs target cyclooxygenase (COX) enzymes to exert their anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving effects. Colorectal cancer (CRC) can be hereditary, sporadic, or associated with colitis, and various factors like genetics, chronic inflammation, and lifestyle choices contribute to an increased risk [6].

Ulcerative colitis, a common form of IBD, is associated with an increased risk of colon cancer development (CRC). Research has linked COX-2 to the development of CRC [7]. Individuals with IBD have a 60% higher incidence of CRC compared to the general population [8]. Furthermore, studies have shown that regular use of NSAIDs over a long period

can reduce the risk of developing colorectal cancer and adenomas by 40–50% [4].

Epidemiological and clinical studies suggest that aspirin and other NSAIDs can slow the spread of colorectal cancer cells and improve overall survival in patients with high levels of COX-2 [9]. NSAIDs have been shown to reduce tumor growth in mouse models of colorectal cancer by targeting the COX-2 gene [10].

COX-2 plays a key role in inflammation and cancer by producing prostaglandins, particularly PGE<sub>2</sub>, which promotes tumor growth [11]. Studies have linked urinary PGE<sub>2</sub> metabolite levels to an increased risk of various cancers, and NSAIDs have been shown to reduce PGE<sub>2</sub> levels and potentially inhibit tumor growth [12].

Overall, the findings suggest that NSAIDs, by targeting COX-2 and reducing PGE<sub>2</sub> levels, may have anti-tumor effects and play a role in preventing cancer development. Further research is needed to fully understand the mechanisms involved in the relationship between inflammation, NSAIDs, and cancer progression.

### Tumorigenic role of PGE<sub>2</sub>

Prostaglandin E<sub>2</sub> (PGE<sub>2</sub>), a bioactive lipid, is known to have a significant impact on various biological processes related to inflammation and cancer. Studies have shown that PGE<sub>2</sub> can activate crucial signaling pathways controlling cell proliferation, apoptosis, angiogenesis, inflammation, and immune response, showcasing its diverse physiological functions [13]. Together with similar prostanoids like PGI<sub>2</sub>, PGE<sub>2</sub> acts as a vasodilator, aiding in the recruitment of immune cells to sites of inflammation or injury, leading to swelling and edema [14]. Increased levels of COX-2 and PGE<sub>2</sub> are often observed in human colon adenomas and adenocarcinomas, suggesting a role in promoting cancer development [15,16].

Elevated PGE<sub>2</sub> levels have been associated with the exacerbation of inflammatory pathways, immune responses, and stress reactions, especially in conditions like inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), where PGE<sub>2</sub> and COX-2 contribute to inflammation and potential carcinogenesis in the colon [17]. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), particularly selective COX-2 inhibitors, have been used as preventive measures against colorectal cancer, with regular NSAID use showing a reduced risk of colorectal cancer development [4]. However, long-term use of these medications carries risks such as gastrointestinal toxicity and cardiovascular events due to the reduction of protective prostaglandins [18, 19].

Research has suggested that targeting specific enzymes like microsomal PGES-1 (mPGES-1) could help regulate PGE<sub>2</sub>

levels without affecting the synthesis of other important prostaglandins, offering a potential strategy to address the impact of PGE<sub>2</sub> on various diseases [20, 21]. PGE<sub>2</sub> has been linked to the development of inflammatory diseases and angiogenesis through its effects on factors like IL-17 and vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) [22, 23]. Additionally, studies have shown the potential role of PGE<sub>2</sub> in tumor growth, suggesting that targeting PGE<sub>2</sub> synthesis pathways like mPGES-1 could be a promising approach for cancer therapy [24, 25].

Understanding the complex interplay of PGE<sub>2</sub> and its receptors like EP4 in diseases such as colorectal cancer provides valuable insights into potential therapeutic targets for intervention [26, 27]. Furthermore, research on the regulation of PGE<sub>2</sub> synthesis and its downstream effects, such as the activation of peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor  $\delta$  (PPAR $\delta$ ), sheds light on the intricate mechanisms underlying PGE<sub>2</sub>-mediated pathologies [24, 28].

In conclusion, PGE<sub>2</sub> plays a crucial role in inflammation, cancer development, and various disease processes, highlighting the importance of further research into targeting PGE<sub>2</sub> pathways for therapeutic purposes.

#### Protective role of PGE<sub>2</sub>

PGH<sub>2</sub>, derived from the digestion of AA by COX, undergoes further processing by specific PG synthases to produce a variety of PG metabolites [29]. PGs play a crucial role in promoting wound healing, reducing inflammation, and maintaining mucosal integrity in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, thus safeguarding its health [30- 35]. In conditions like inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), the GI mucosa tends to increase its production of PG, which could serve as an adaptive response to facilitate healing [34, 36- 42]. Notably, therapies involving COX inhibitors have been shown to worsen IBD symptoms, underscoring the protective role of PGs in these conditions [43- 50].

Studies in mice have revealed that genetic deletion of enzymes involved in PG synthesis, such as COX-1, COX-2, or mPGES-1, can lead to increased susceptibility to conditions like chemically induced colitis [21, 51-52]. Furthermore, specific PG metabolites like PGE<sub>2</sub> have been linked to tumor progression, while others like PGD<sub>2</sub> exhibit tumor-inhibiting properties [53-56]. PGE<sub>2</sub>, in particular, has been associated with both initiating acute inflammation and exerting immunosuppressive effects that aid in tissue regeneration and restoration of homeostasis post-inflammation. Targeting COX-2 pharmacologically during later stages of inflammation has been shown to impede full tissue repair in organs like the liver, lung, and colon [57-60].

In cancer-related contexts, PGE<sub>2</sub> plays a role in promoting angiogenesis, cell migration, and invasion via interactions

with myofibroblast cells within the tumor microenvironment [61]. The immune regulatory functions of PGE<sub>2</sub> involving regulatory T cells (Tregs) and myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs) further highlight its significance in modulating anti-tumor immunity [62-65]. Additionally, PGE<sub>2</sub> has been shown to enhance tissue regeneration in various organs, indicating its potential therapeutic applications in conditions requiring tissue repair [66-68].

Moreover, various natural and synthetic compounds have been studied for their effects on COX-2 and PGE<sub>2</sub> in the context of inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD) [ 69-78]. These studies highlight the potential therapeutic approaches targeting COX-2 and PGE<sub>2</sub> pathways in managing conditions like IBD.

Therefore, understanding the multifaceted roles of PGs, particularly PGE<sub>2</sub>, in health and disease underscores their significance as potential targets for therapeutic interventions and further research in various clinical settings.

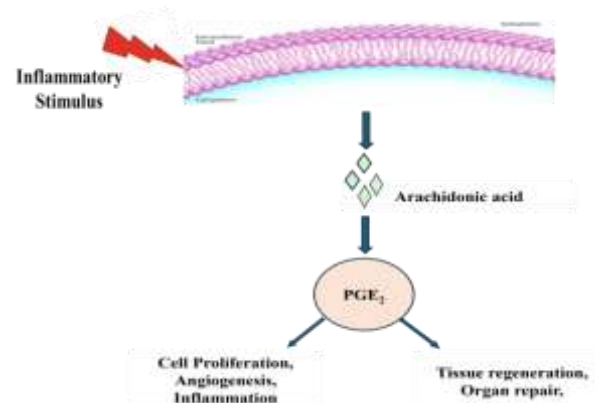


Figure 4: Role of PGE<sub>2</sub>

#### Acknowledgements

Author Acknowledge Dr. K. Subbaramaiah for his valuable corrections, suggestions in preparation of the review.

#### V. CONCLUSION

PGE<sub>2</sub> levels are elevated in disease. However, it is important to understand that modulating its levels via intervention is context dependent. While blocking its levels of PGE by targeting the enzymes in its synthesis and degradation is an important approach in cancer treatment and prevention. However, inhibiting its levels can have the opposite effects since PGE<sub>2</sub> has a cytoprotective role and can be harmful. Thus, it's important to appreciate its paradoxical effects on biology. This review is an effort to highlight this fact. It's important to further investigate the signal transduction pathways by which PGE<sub>2</sub> regulates different biological effects. The role of the receptors that mediate PGE<sub>2</sub> effects need to be further investigated.

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