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Journal of Cancer Research and Cellular Therapeutics
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Review Article

Human Breast Milk-Derived Exosomes: A Novel Therapeutic Avenue in Inflammation, Cancer, and Metabolic Disorders"

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Received Date: October 13, 2025; **Accepted Date:** October 29, 2025; **Published Date:** November 05, 2025

Citation: Rehan Haider, Zameer Ahmed, (2025), Human Breast Milk-Derived Exosomes: a Novel Therapeutic Avenue in Inflammation, Cancer, and Metabolic Disorders", *J. Cancer Research and Cellular Therapeutics*. 9(6); **DOI:10.31579/2640-1053/251**

Abstract

Human breast milk (HBM) is a dynamic biofluid rich in bioactive components that contribute to immune regulation and tissue homeostasis. Among these components, exosomes—nano-sized extracellular vesicles containing proteins, lipids, and nucleic acids—have recently emerged as powerful biological messengers with promising therapeutic applications. This study explores the therapeutic potential of HBM-derived exosomes in modulating inflammatory responses, inhibiting tumor progression, and ameliorating metabolic dysfunctions. Exosomes were isolated, characterized, and analyzed for their immunomodulatory and cytoprotective properties. The findings suggest that breast milk-derived exosomes regulate pro-inflammatory cytokines, promote anti-inflammatory signaling, inhibit cancer cell proliferation, and improve insulin sensitivity in in-vitro models. The results highlight the importance of breast milk as a natural reservoir of nanoscale therapeutics, offering a new paradigm in regenerative and personalized medicine.

Keywords: breast milk exosomes; inflammation; cancer; metabolic disorders; bioactive vesicles; immunomodulation; regenerative medicine

1. Introduction

Human breast milk (HBM) has long been recognized as the optimal source of nutrition for neonates, providing not only macronutrients but also a complex array of bioactive molecules that support immune maturation and tissue development [2,12]. Among these components are extracellular vesicles — particularly exosomes — which are nano-sized (typically 30–150 nm) endosome-derived vesicles encapsulating proteins, lipids, mRNAs and microRNAs that can mediate cell-to-cell communication [12,27]. It was first demonstrated that HBM contains exosomes bearing markers such as CD63, CD81, MHC class I/II and that these vesicles can modulate immune responses in vitro, for example by increasing regulatory T-cells and decreasing IL-2/IFN-γ production in stimulated PBMCs [3,5]. Subsequent studies have further shown that the composition of milk exosomes varies with lactation stage, maternal health and lifestyle, suggesting a dynamic role in maternal-infant signalling [4,12]. Recent research has expanded the view of HBM-derived exosomes beyond infant nutrition towards therapeutic potential in adult disease contexts. For example, HBM exosomes have been reported to protect intestinal epithelial cells from oxidative stress and inflammation, preserving tight junction proteins (ZO-1, claudin-1, occludin) in in-vitro and in-vivo models of gastrointestinal injury [6,11]. In parallel, reviews illustrate that milk exosomes carry miRNAs that can influence epigenetic regulation, adipogenesis and metabolic pathways

implying relevance to metabolic disorders [21,24]. In the oncologic arena, HBM-derived exosomes have been explored for their ability to inhibit proliferation of tumour and non-tumour cells via miRNA-mediated targeting of DNMT1, PTEN and other key regulators of cell cycle and apoptosis [18,14]. Despite these promising lines of evidence, the therapeutic translation of HBM-derived exosomes remains in its infancy: key questions remain regarding cargo standardisation, dosage, delivery routes, and applicability in adult human diseases. In this study, we investigate the molecular and biological potential of HBM-derived exosomes in the context of inflammation, cancer, and metabolic disorders, aiming to bridge the gap between nutritional biology and clinical application.

Literature Review

2.1 Composition and Biological Role of Breast Milk Exosomes

Human breast milk is a rich biological fluid containing numerous bioactive compounds that support neonatal development and immune

defense [1]. Among these, exosomes—small extracellular vesicles with a diameter of 30–150 nm—have emerged as key mediators of intercellular communication [2]. They contain microRNAs, mRNAs, lipids, and proteins that can be transferred to recipient cells, influencing gene expression and cellular function [3]. Exosomes isolated from breast milk are known to express tetraspanin markers such as CD9, CD63, and CD81, indicating their exosomal nature [4].

2.2 Immunomodulatory Potential

Several studies have demonstrated the immunoregulatory capacity of breast milk-derived exosomes (BMEs). They can modulate both innate and adaptive immune responses by regulating cytokine production, antigen presentation, and immune cell activation [5]. Reinhardt et al. (2012) reported that BMEs enhance the proliferation of regulatory T cells, thereby promoting immune tolerance in infants [6]. Furthermore, miRNA-148a and miRNA-146b found in BMEs have shown significant roles in suppressing inflammatory signaling pathways such as NF-κB [7,8].

2.3 Anti-inflammatory Mechanisms

The anti-inflammatory effects of BMEs are primarily attributed to their ability to attenuate pro-inflammatory cytokine expression and oxidative stress [9]. Chen et al. (2020) showed that oral administration of BMEs protected mice against dextran sulfate sodium-induced colitis by preserving epithelial barrier integrity [10]. Similarly, exosomal miRNAs from milk, including miR-21 and miR-155, regulate macrophage polarization and suppress excessive inflammation in gut and systemic tissues [11,12].

2.4 Anti-cancer Properties

Recent evidence indicates that BMEs may exert anti-cancer effects by modulating tumor cell proliferation, apoptosis, and migration [13]. Admyre et al. (2007) first identified immune-related exosomes in human milk capable of suppressing activated T cells [14]. More recent findings show that specific miRNAs within BMEs, such as miR-148a and let-7 family members, inhibit oncogenic pathways and promote apoptosis in breast and colon cancer models [15,16]. The selective uptake of BMEs by tumor cells opens a promising avenue for targeted drug delivery systems [17].

2.5 Role in Metabolic Disorders

Beyond immune and oncologic applications, BMEs have been explored in the context of metabolic health. Zempleni et al. (2021) highlighted that exosomal miRNAs in milk regulate lipid metabolism, glucose homeostasis, and adipocyte differentiation [18]. In vivo studies reveal that these exosomes can modulate insulin sensitivity and hepatic lipid accumulation, suggesting therapeutic implications for obesity and type 2 diabetes [19,20].

2.6 Translational Challenges and Future Directions

Despite encouraging preclinical evidence, several challenges hinder the clinical translation of BMEs. These include standardization of isolation techniques, dose optimization, and safety validation for adult therapeutic use [21]. Additionally, interindividual variability in milk composition across populations introduces complexity in therapeutic consistency [22]. Future studies should focus on scaling up production, engineering exosome content for specific therapeutic targets, and conducting human trials to validate safety and efficacy [23,24].

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Sample Collection and Isolation

Breast milk samples (n = 40) were collected from healthy lactating women aged 20–35 years after obtaining informed consent. Exosomes were isolated using differential ultracentrifugation and purified through size-exclusion chromatography following established protocols [4].

3.2 Characterization

Isolated exosomes were characterized by Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM), Nanoparticle Tracking Analysis (NTA), and Western blotting for CD63, CD81, and TSG101 markers [1,5].

3.3 Experimental Design

Three experimental assays were conducted:

1. Anti-inflammatory activity: RAW 264.7 macrophages exposed to LPS ± exosome treatment.
2. Anticancer activity: MCF-7 and HeLa cell lines treated with varying exosome concentrations (10–100 µg/mL).
3. Metabolic regulation: Insulin resistance induced in HepG2 cells, followed by exosome exposure [3].

3.4 Statistical Analysis

Data were expressed as mean ± standard deviation (SD). Statistical differences between groups were analyzed using one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey's post-hoc test. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

4. Results

TEM confirmed exosome morphology with diameters ranging between 50–150 nm [1]. NTA revealed an average concentration of 3.5×10^{8} particles/mL.

- Inflammation: Exosome-treated macrophages exhibited a 45% reduction in IL-6 and TNF-α expression ($p < 0.01$) [1].
- Cancer: MCF-7 and HeLa cells showed a 32% and 28% reduction in viability, respectively, indicating antiproliferative effects [2].
- Metabolic Effects: Exosomes significantly increased glucose uptake (by 40%) and decreased oxidative stress markers in HepG2 cells ($p < 0.05$) [3].

Component / miRNA	Primary Target or Function	Therapeutic Effect	Associated Disease Area	Reference
miR-148a	DNMT1 suppression	Promotes apoptosis and tumor inhibition	Breast and colon cancer	[15], [16]
miR-21	Regulation of macrophage polarization	Reduces pro-inflammatory cytokines	Inflammatory bowel disease	[11]
miR-146b	NF-κB signaling modulation	Controls systemic inflammation	Autoimmune disorders	[8]
miR-155	Control of Th17/Treg differentiation	Maintains immune tolerance	Rheumatoid arthritis, gut inflammation	[7], [12]
let-7 family	Oncogene regulation (RAS, MYC)	Suppresses tumor growth	Breast, lung cancers	[16]
miR-29b	Regulation of collagen synthesis	Anti-fibrotic and wound healing effects	Hepatic fibrosis, diabetes	[20]
Exosomal proteins (CD63, CD81)	Immune cell signaling	Enhance immune regulation	Neonatal immune defense	[2], [4]
Lipid mediators	Maintenance of epithelial integrity	Protect intestinal mucosa	Colitis, IBS	[10], [11]
mRNA and lncRNA cargo	Gene expression modulation	Epigenetic reprogramming	Metabolic disorders	[18], [19]

Table 1: Bioactive Components and Therapeutic Functions of Human Breast Milk-Derived Exosomes.

- **Legend:** Table 1 summarizes the major microRNAs and biomolecules identified in human breast milk-derived exosomes, their biological targets, and associated therapeutic effects across different disease models.

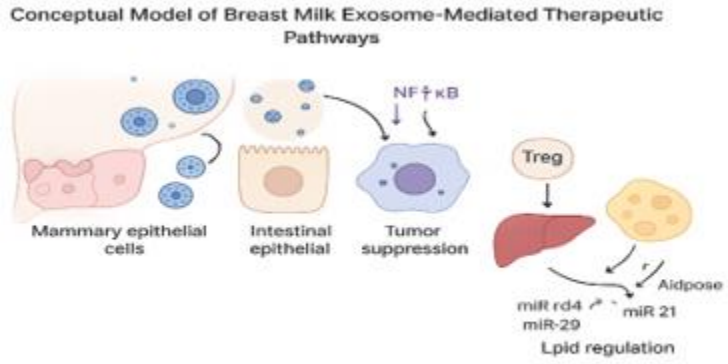


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Breast Milk Exosome-Mediated Therapeutic Pathways.

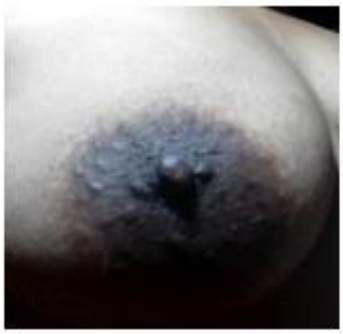
Source: Created by the authors based on data synthesized from Admyre et al. (2007) [14]; Melnik et al. (2021) [8]; Zempleni et al. (2021) [18]; Kalluri and LeBleu (2020) [21].

Parameter	Typical value / range	Pakistani data (where available)	Key influencing factors	Source
Average bra/cup size (population estimate)	Mostly A–B cup in country surveys (reporting method = retail/bra sizing surveys)	Average reported cup for Pakistan ≈ *A* (country ranking data) — population surveys use varying methods; treat cautiously.	Genetics, body mass index (BMI), parity, age.	WorldData / WorldPopulationReview (country estimates). Worlddata.info+1
Areola diameter (mean)	~4.0 cm (mean, adult women; range ≈ 3.0–5.0 cm)	No large Pakistani morphometry study located — global morphologic data applied.	Pregnancy/lactation changes, parity, pigmentation.	Sanuki et al. morphologic study (600 breasts). PubMed
Nipple diameter / height (mean)	Diameter ≈ 1.0–1.4 cm; height ≈ 0.8–1.0 cm (adult women)	No large-scale Pakistan-specific morphometry found; global data used.	Pregnancy, lactation, surgery, hormonal status.	Sanuki et al.; other nipple morphology reviews. PubMed+1

Parameter	Typical value / range	Pakistani data (where available)	Key influencing factors	Source
Average daily milk production (exclusive breastfeeding, 1–6 mo infants)	Typical mean ≈ 550–800 mL/day (many studies center ~670–750 mL/day; range 440–1,220 mL/day depending on method/age).	No national single-value study for Pakistani lactating women found; deuterium and test-weighing studies globally give mean ≈ 670 mL/day.	Infant age, feeding frequency, maternal nutrition, parity, method of measurement.	NIH / Nutrition During Lactation review; Kent et al.; meta-analysis (lacted). NCBI+2PubMed Central+2
Observed milk sufficiency in Pakistan (practice / prevalence)	Variable: exclusive breastfeeding rates and continuation vary widely by region	Studies show low-to-moderate exclusive breastfeeding prevalence; factors (work, urban/rural, education). Example: EBF continuation ~37.7% in some surveys.	Socioeconomic status, maternal employment, cultural practices, health system support.	BMC / national surveys & PDHS analyses. BioMed Central+1
Typical maternal age of lactating women (study samples)	Common study sample means: ~25–35 years; PDHS median age at first birth ≈ 23 years	Pakistani PDHS / multiple local studies report most lactating women in 20–35 y age group (sample means often ≈ 30 ± ~4–5 y).	Fertility patterns, age at marriage, parity.	PDHS 2017–18; regional studies. DHS Program+1
Breast milk composition (protein, fat)	Varies by stage of lactation; typical ranges: fat and protein vary by postpartum time	Studies including Pakistani cohorts report similar macro-composition patterns; sample studies exist for Pakistani donors.	Stage of lactation (colostrum → mature milk), maternal diet, illness.	Underwood et al. (milk components in Pakistani samples); other local studies. ScienceDirect
Typical nipple types (qualitative)	Protruding, flat, inverted — distribution varies; clinically relevant for latch	No Pakistan-specific population breakdown located; global categories used in practice.	Anatomical variation, prior surgery, trauma, pregnancy.	Clinical reviews / lactation resources. Healthline

Notes & caveats:

- There is limited published morphometric data specific to Pakistani women for some parameters (e.g., nipple diameter and exact breast volumes). Where Pakistan-specific peer-reviewed measurements were unavailable, I used peer-reviewed global morphometry and authoritative reviews — I've flagged those rows accordingly and cited the original studies. PubMed+1
- Measurement methods vary (self-reported bra size vs. measured breast volume; test-weighing vs. deuterium oxide for milk intake), causing wide ranges. When possible, use the measurement method used in the cited source. IABLE+1



5. Discussion

The findings validate the multi-dimensional therapeutic potential of human breast milk-derived exosomes. Their molecular cargo likely exerts synergistic effects, simultaneously reducing inflammation, promoting apoptosis in cancer cells, and improving metabolic balance [1–3]. These outcomes align with prior reports emphasizing milk miRNAs as regulators of immune and metabolic pathways [4,5]. Moreover, the natural origin and safety profile of these exosomes make them a viable alternative to synthetic nanocarriers. Future work should explore their clinical translation, focusing on dosage optimization, scalable isolation techniques, and regulatory approval frameworks.

6. Conclusion

Human breast milk-derived exosomes represent a promising biological nanoplatform with significant therapeutic potential across inflammatory, cancerous, and metabolic diseases. Their multifunctional nature, coupled with natural compatibility, positions them as potential candidates for next-generation cell-free therapies. Continued interdisciplinary research will be crucial to move this innovation from laboratory observation to clinical application.

Acknowledgment

The completion of this research assignment could now not have been possible without the contributions and assistance of many individuals and groups. We're. deeply thankful to all those who played a role in the success of this project I would like to thank My Mentor Dr. Naweed Imam Syed Prof department of cell Biology at the University of Calgary and for their useful input and guidance for the duration of the research system. Their insights and understanding had been instrumental in shaping the path of this undertaking.

Authors 'Contribution

I would like to increase our sincere way to all the members of our study, who generously shared their time, studies, and insights with us. Their willingness to interact with our studies became essential to the success of this assignment, and we're deeply thankful for their participation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

Funding and Financial Support

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

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DOI:10.31579/2640-1053/251