

哺乳動物の妊娠確立メカニズム

誌名	Journal of mammalian ova research = 日本哺乳動物卵子学会誌
ISSN	13417738
著者名	木村,康二
発行元	日本哺乳動物卵子学会
巻/号	22巻3号
巻号補足	
掲載ページ	p. 101-118
発行年月	2005年11月

農林水産省 農林水産技術会議事務局筑波産学連携支援センター
Tsukuba Business-Academia Cooperation Support Center, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Research Council
Secretariat



—Mini Review—

Mechanisms for Establishment of Pregnancy in Mammalian SpeciesKoji Kimura^{1*}

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Abstract: Cross-talk between the embryo and mother is necessary for the establishment of successful pregnancy. In the mouse, cervical stimuli during mating induce prolactin secretion from the pituitary and formation of the corpus luteum (CL) of pregnancy. Placental lactogen supports the maintenance of pregnancy after implantation. In the human, the embryo secretes chorionic gonadotropin (hCG), which has luteinizing hormone (LH) activity and maintains pregnancy before the luteal-placental shift occurs. In cattle and sheep, the mechanism underlying the establishment of pregnancy is unique. Their embryos secrete interferon (IFN)- τ , which is related to type I IFNs. IFN- τ prevents the secretion of prostaglandin $F_{2\alpha}$ (PGF $_{2\alpha}$) from the uterine endometrium by suppressing the expression of estrogen and oxytocin receptor. In the pig, estrogen secreted from the conceptus is a factor for maternal recognition of pregnancy. Estrogen leads to a shift in the direction of PGF $_{2\alpha}$ secretion from endocrine to exocrine and inhibits the regression of CL. Thus, each species has specific mechanisms for the establishment of pregnancy.

Key words: Mechanism, Pregnancy, Implantation

Introduction

In mammals, the fertilization and development of a fetus to term occur in the female reproductive tract. The events of the early stage of embryo development are similar in many species. For instance, oocytes are fertilized in the oviduct and then zygotes cleave and develop into blastocysts. However, after the embryo hatches from the zona pellucida, the process of embryonic development differs from species to species.

In some species, such as the mouse and human, embryos start to attach to the uterine wall immediately after hatching and provoke stromal decidualization. On the other hand, in cattle, sheep, and porcine, embryos do not implant immediately after hatching, they float in the uterine lumen and develop without any attachment to the uterus. Moreover, the placentas have different morphologies depending on the species. In cattle, sheep, porcine, and equine, an epitheliochorial placenta is formed. In the human, mouse, and rat, the placenta is a hemochorial type. These differences imply a large number of diversities exist among these species in the mechanisms underlying the establishment of pregnancy.

In this article, the mechanisms for the establishment of early stage of pregnancy in mammalian species that have been intensively researched, mouse, human, cattle, sheep, and pig, are discussed.

Mouse

The mouse is widely used for research into embryonic development and implantation. One reason for this is the similarities in the mechanisms of pregnancy between the mouse and human. In both species, embryo implantation leads to stromal decidualization. Moreover, both have a hemochorial type of placentation. In this section, the literature on the factors involved in the establishment of pregnancy in the mouse are reviewed.

Prolactin and related hormones

The estrous cycle in the mouse lasts four days (proestrus, estrus, metoestrus, and diestrus). The embryo migrates from the oviduct to the uterus on day 3 of pregnancy (day 1 = occurrence of vaginal plug) and attaches to the surface of the endometrium on day 4.5. Therefore, until the establishment of direct cell-to-cell communication between the fetus and the mother

Received: August 26, 2005

Accepted: September 2, 2005

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(implantation), some mechanisms that prevent the beginning of the next estrus cycle are necessary for maintaining pregnancy.

Prolactin (PRL) has luteotrophic activity in rodents [1]. During mating, cervical stimuli induce a semicircadian surge of PRL secretion from the pituitary. These PRL surges in turn stimulate the production of progesterone from the corpus luteum (CL), thus transforming the CL of the cycle into the CL of pregnancy, which secretes enough progesterone to establish early pregnancy [2].

Moreover, numerous PRL-related hormones secreted from the placenta have been identified. Two of these hormones were initially found in research for placental proteins that bind to the PRL receptor [3]. These two hormones are placental lactogen I (PL-I) and II (PL-II), both of which have lactogenic activity [3]. One of the most important targets of these hormones is the ovary. As described previously, the hypothalamus-pituitary PRL is involved in the establishment of early pregnancy. However, PL-I replaces PRL secreted from the pituitary after implantation [4]. At mid-pregnancy, the secretion of PL-II begins and increases as the PL-I secretion declines [4]. Therefore, PRL and PRL-related hormones contribute to the establishment of pregnancy in the mouse by maintaining CL. These PRL-related hormones share the same receptor, PRL receptor (PRLR) [5, 6]. The PRLR-gene-null mouse has been generated by a gene targeting technique and experiments with this mouse have revealed that PRLR is multifunctional [7]. Homozygous PRLR-gene-null (PRLR^{-/-}) female mice show multiple reproductive abnormalities. They mate irregularly, every 3 to 4 days, and never become pregnant (they are sterile) [8]. Moreover, the survival rate of embryos and the fertilization rates of oocytes from PRLR^{-/-} female mice are lower than in the wild types [9].

Implantation window and uterine receptivity

The endometrium of the uterus acquires the ability to support blastocyst growth, attachment, and subsequent events of implantation. This state of the uterus, termed 'uterine receptivity', is limited to a specific period of pregnancy, called the 'implantation window' [10, 11]. The implantation window is influenced by numerous factors.

Ovarian steroid hormones, progesterone (P₄) and estradiol-17 β (E₂), regulate the proliferation and differentiation of uterine endometrial cells in the mouse [12, 13]. E₂ induces the proliferation of uterine epithelial cells, while both E₂ and P₄ are required for the proliferation of stroma cells [14]. The coordinated

actions of these hormones are involved in the process of establishing an implantation window. On the day when the vaginal plug is detected (first day of pregnancy: day 1), the proliferation of uterine epithelial cells is induced by preovulatory ovarian E₂ secretion. On day 3, P₄ secreted from the newly formed CL induces the proliferation of P₄-primed stroma cells. On day 4, the proliferation of stroma cells is further stimulated by a small amount of E₂ secreted from the ovary, while epithelial cells stop proliferating and become differentiated. Therefore, the uterus reaches the receptive state on day 4 of pregnancy and proceeds to the non-receptive (refractory) state on day 5 [10, 15]. The uterus in the refractory state fails to respond to the presence of blastocysts. A similar event occurs in the mouse during lactation. While the mouse is lactating, implantation is delayed after postpartum fertilization. However, the implantation process resumes after lactation ends [16]. Moreover, ovariectomy before the E₂ surge on day 4 of pregnancy results in the failure of implantation and induces dormancy of blastocysts [17]. This state persists for many days as long as P₄ treatment continues. When E₂ is given to mice in these conditions, the uteri become receptive to blastocyst implantation. Recent research suggests that the concentration of E₂ within a very narrow range determines the duration of the window of uterine receptivity. The window of uterine receptivity remains open for an extended period at lower E₂ levels. At higher levels, however, the window closes very rapidly, accompanied by aberrant uterine expression of implantation-related genes [18]. Thus it is suggested that the synergistic function of E₂ and P₄ is essential for uterine receptivity for implantation of mouse embryo.

Role of LIF in implantation

Recently, besides ovarian steroid hormones, many factors in implantation and uterine receptivity have been discovered via technologies such as gene manipulation (gene knockout mice) and RNA differential display. One such factor is leukemia inhibitory factor (LIF), a member of interleukin-6 (IL-6) family of cytokines.

LIF is a cytokine and has pleiotrophic effects in various physiological systems, including cell survival, proliferation, and differentiation [19, 20]. LIF is widely used for regulating the undifferentiated proliferation of mouse embryonic stem cells [21], and transcripts of LIF are present in inner cell mass cells of mouse blastocysts [22]. Moreover, high levels of LIF expression are detected in the uterine endometrial glands of the mouse throughout the reproductive cycle

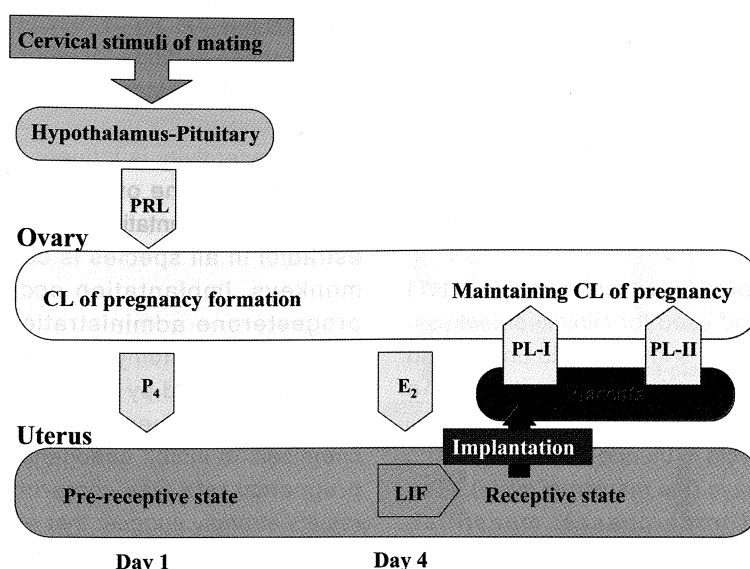


Fig. 1. Diagram of establishment of pregnancy in the mouse. Prolactin (PRL) secretion from the pituitary is induced by cervical stimuli during mating and forms the CL of pregnancy. On day 4 of pregnancy, estradiol-17 β (E₂) leads to the expression of leukemia inhibitory factor (LIF) in the uterus. LIF turns the uterus to a receptive state. After implantation, placental lactogen I (PL-I) and II (PL-II) contribute to the maintenance of pregnancy.

[23]. A significant level of LIF is expressed in the endometrial glands on day 1 (when the vaginal plug occurs) of pregnancy [24]. Another transient high level of LIF expression is observed on day 4 of pregnancy, the day of implantation. Afterwards, the expression declines and is present at a low level throughout the remainder of pregnancy. This expression pattern of LIF coincides with that of E₂, and thus E₂ regulates the expression of LIF in the uterus [23–25].

LIF's involvement in the implantation of the mouse embryo has been revealed by studies using LIF gene knockout mice [26]. Homozygous LIF-gene-null (LIF^{-/-}) female mice are sterile. However, when the blastocysts from LIF^{-/-} female mice mated with LIF^{-/-} males are transferred to wild-type recipient female mice, they implant normally and develop successfully to term [26]. When the blastocysts from wild-type female mice are transferred to LIF^{-/-} female recipient mice, they cannot implant. These results suggest that the failure of implantation in LIF^{-/-} female mice is not due to some specific defects in their embryos but rather to the unreceptive state of the maternal uterine environment [26]. The location of LIF^{-/-} embryos in LIF^{-/-} female uteri on days 5 to 7 is identical to that in a normal pregnancy. However, the initiation of implantation does not take

place in LIF^{-/-} female uteri. The embryos in LIF^{-/-} female uteri do not establish strong contact with uteri, and LIF^{-/-} uteri are unresponsive to decidualizing stimuli [25]. When LIF is injected intraperitoneally to LIF^{-/-} female mice on days 4 or 5 of pregnancy, embryo implantation is successfully induced [25]. Moreover, when LIF is injected into ovariectomized mice on day 3 of pregnancy and the mice are maintained for 3 to 4 days on P₄ (no nidatory E₂), LIF efficiently induces implantation [25]. These findings suggest that the transient expression of LIF on day 4 of pregnancy is the primary requirement for the initiation of embryo implantation, and that LIF can substitute for the nidatory E₂ surge at implantation.

Moreover, LIF affects embryonic development after implantation. The LIF receptor gene and gp130 gene are expressed at the blastocyst stage [27, 28]. Either the LIF receptor or the gp130 gene knockout mouse embryo can develop to the blastocyst stage and implant normally but die during the perinatal period [29, 30].

Summary

The schematic diagram of possible molecular cascades of events occurring in the early pregnancy of the mouse is depicted in Fig. 1. Recently, numerous genes that seem to be involved in the mechanisms

underlying the establishment of pregnancy have been discovered comprehensively using microarray techniques and mouse genome databases. However, their mechanisms have not been fully elucidated and further progress in this area is expected.

Human

Recently, assisted reproductive technologies (ART) have been developed and used for clinical objectives. For successful pregnancy, it is important to understand and elucidate the mechanisms underlying the establishment of pregnancy in humans.

The human ovarian cycle is uterine-independent and lasts approximately 28 days (the menstrual cycle). The cycle is composed of three phases: menstrual, proliferative, and secretory. After menstruation, the level of estradiol increases and multiple endometrial cell types undergo proliferation (the proliferative phase). Ovulation occurs approximately in the middle of the cycle, after which the CL is formed and starts to secrete progesterone (the secretory phase). Regardless of the presence of a living embryo, the level of progesterone, which is secreted from the newly formed CL, remains high for several days after ovulation, followed by regression of CL and menstruation. For a successful pregnancy, the embryo has to establish cross-talk with its mother and inhibit both the regression of CL and menstruation.

In this section, studies on the mechanisms underlying the establishment of pregnancy in the human are reviewed.

Implantation window and uterine receptivity

For human embryo transfer following ART, it is important to clarify the timing of the implantation window and the factors involved in uterine receptivity. The maternal endometrium does not accept the embryo at all times in the cycle. As with the mouse uterus, described above, the human uterus can accept an embryo only during a limited period of the cycle (the implantation window). An early report suggested that the human implantation window occurs in the middle of the secretory phase [31]. Recently it was suggested that the window exists around day 6 post-ovulation and lasts for 5 days [32–34]. Moreover, a high pregnancy success rate (84%) is observed when the embryo is implanted 8 to 10 days post-ovulation, compared with 18% when implantation occurs 11 days or more post-ovulation [35]; it is also reported that the window must last at least 3.5 days [36]. However, Formigli *et al.*

suggests that the period may be as long as 7 days [37]. Taking these findings together, it is hypothesized that the implantation window is 7–11 days post-ovulation.

In the case of the mouse, the implantation window or uterine receptivity is influenced by steroid hormones secreted from the ovary [17, 18]. Progesterone is required for implantation in all species, but the need for estradiol in all species is controversial. In rhesus monkeys, implantation occurs when exogenous progesterone administration alone is performed following ovariectomy 2–6 days post-ovulation [38], a finding confirmed by other groups [39]. However, in studies using anti-estrogen antibody or anti-estrogen chemicals to inhibit endogenous estrogen action, the pregnancy rate was compromised [40–42]. These results strongly suggest that estrogen is necessary for the establishment of uterine receptivity in primates.

In humans, the level of hormones during the menstrual cycle has been investigated [43]. It was clearly shown that an estrogen peak exists when implantation would occur, simultaneous with peak progesterone and 17 α -hydroxy-progesterone levels. Moreover, the levels of progesterone and estrogen in women within the implantation window during conception are not different from levels during non-conception cycles [44]. When gonadotropin administration or steroid hormone replacement was performed, the implantation window shifted [45–48]. These results suggest that the implantation window is flexible.

A diagnosis of uterine receptivity or an open implantation window is important for successful pregnancy following ART. The molecular events involved in the implantation of the human embryo remain obscure. Recently microarray [49–52], differential display PCR [53], and subtractive cDNA hybridization [54] profiling have revealed candidate genes for uterine receptivity. Those studies identified many genes that are up- or down-regulated during the implantation window. The involvement of these genes in the mechanisms of the implantation window will be investigated.

Human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG): its structure and functions

In the non-conception cycle, the level of progesterone declines gradually in the late secretory phase. However, in the conception cycle, no decrement of progesterone is found. This implies that the embryo inhibits luteolysis directly or indirectly. The human embryo secretes a peptide hormone, human chorionic

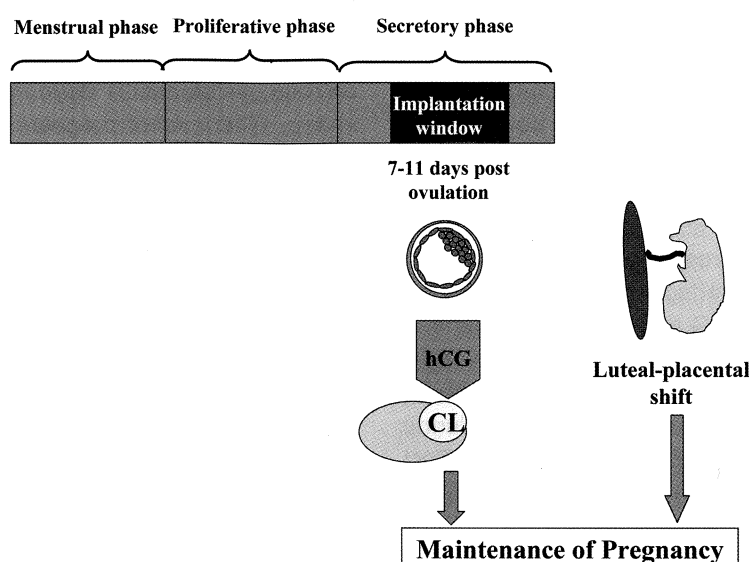


Fig. 2. Diagram of establishment of pregnancy in the human. The implantation window in the human occurs in the secretory phase of the menstrual cycle (7–11 days post-ovulation). When the human embryo develops to the blastocyst stage, it produces human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG). hCG has a luteotrophic effect and maintains the CL up to the luteal-placental shift.

gonadotropin (hCG), which appears to inhibit luteolysis and maintain the functional CL for the establishment of pregnancy [55–57]. The human embryo develops to blastocyst stage on day 5 and hatches from the zona pellucida on day 6 post-fertilization. Then trophoblast differentiates into two types of cells, the cytotrophoblast and the syncytiotrophoblast. The latter, a multinucleated non-dividing cell that develops from cytotrophoblast, secretes hCG [58]. Measurable hCG in embryo culture medium is first detectable at approximately day 7 [59–62]. However, its transcript is found as early as the 8-cell stage embryo [63]. This hormone is also detected in the blood of women as early as 8–12 days post-ovulation [64, 65], and then it doubles at intervals of 1.2–2.0 days over the next 8–9 days [65, 66].

hCG is a member of the glycoprotein family, which includes FSH, LH, and TSH [67]. It is composed of two subunits, α and β , that are non-covalently linked [67]. All glycoprotein hormones in this family have the same α subunit, which is a peptide of 92 amino acids that has two sites for N-linked glycosylation [67]. The β subunit is specific to each hormone. It is a peptide of 145 amino acids in length that has two N-linked glycosylation and four O-linked glycosylation sites [67]. The hCG β subunit is encoded by a cluster of six transcriptionally

active genes evolved from the LH β subunit gene [68–71]. DNA sequence studies have demonstrated approximately 96% identity between the hCG β and LH β genes. The remarkable differences between these two molecules are the number of glycosylation sites and patterns [67]. The hCG β subunit oligosaccharides terminate with sialic acid, while the LH β subunit contains sulfate. The sialic acid residues in O-linked glycosylation of the hCG β subunit are involved in the longer half-life of hCG *in vivo* compared with LH [67].

hCG acts through the same receptor (LH/hCG receptor) as LH, and its gene has been identified [72]. The LH/hCG receptor is a member of the subfamily of glycoprotein hormone receptors belonging to the superfamily of G protein-coupled receptors [73, 74]. The pattern of the LH/hCG receptor concentration in the CL is similar to that of progesterone production during the menstrual cycle (a decline in the late stage of the menstrual cycle) [75]. However, during early pregnancy, the down-regulation of the receptor expression is inhibited and both the LH/hCG receptor gene expression and binding activity are maintained [76].

Via binding to the LH/hCG receptor in the CL, hCG maintains acute regulatory protein (StAR), cytochrome P450 cholesterol side-chain cleavage (P450scc), and

3 β -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase (3 β -HSD), which are all involved in steroidogenesis [77]. Moreover, hCG increases the expression of the tissue inhibitors of metalloproteinases (TIMPs), which are some of the major products of the CL and regulate the tissue remodeling and activity of metalloproteinases (MMPs) [78].

In addition to the role of rescuing CL from regression, hCG directly or indirectly affects the receptive uterine endometrium. The LH/hCG receptor is also found in human endometrium [79] and myometrium [80]. Development of the endometrial stroma is delayed during the cycle of conception, unlike the case during the non-conception cycle [81–83]. A study on the effect of hCG infusion into the human uterus revealed that IGF binding protein-1 (IGFBP-1) and macrophage colony-stimulation factor (M-CSF) are down-regulated, while LIF, vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), and MMP-9 are up-regulated [84]. This suggests that hCG also influences the production of proteins in the uterus that are involved in the regulation of the uterine environment, such as endometrial differentiation, vascularization, and tissue invasion.

Summary

hCG, which is secreted from the embryo, is a signal for embryo-maternal cross-talk in humans. It acts not only on the ovary but also on the uterus to establish successful pregnancy. The mechanisms underlying the establishment of human pregnancy are illustrated in Fig. 2. hCG is involved in the maintenance of CL in early pregnancy. Anti-hCG antiserum given in early pregnancy decreases progesterone levels in blood and induces abortion. However, it has no effect on later stages of pregnancy [85]. These results suggest that the pregnancy-maintenance mechanisms shift from the ovary to the fetus/placenta (the luteal-placental shift) as pregnancy progresses [86].

Cattle and Sheep

As discussed above, in mice and humans the embryo can implant to the uterine wall immediately after it moves into the uterine cavity then hatches from the zona pellucida. This implies that direct cross-talk between the embryo (fetus) and its mother is established several days after fertilization. However, in cattle and sheep, both of which are ungulate ruminants, the embryo floats in the uterine cavity after it moves into the uterus and hatches. During this period, the embryo can grow to more than several centimeters in length

(elongation). Implantation occurs approximately 30 days after fertilization in cattle, 20 days in sheep. The estrous cycles are 21 days in cattle and 16 days in sheep. The level of progesterone that regulates the uterine environment to support embryo development declines at estrus. Therefore, the embryo must avoid first estrus post-fertilization by establishing communication with the mother and by maintaining the CL.

Prostaglandin F_{2 α} (PGF_{2 α}) is a luteolytic factor secreted from the uterine endometrium. The endometrium of cyclic ewes releases PGF_{2 α} in a pulsatile manner between days 15 and 17 of the cycle, and five episodes of PGF_{2 α} in 24 h are required for luteolysis [87, 88]. In cattle, PGF_{2 α} in uterine venous blood starts to increase on day 14 post-estrus and peaks on days 15–17 [89]. However, in pregnant ewes and cattle, the manner in which PGF is secreted from the uterus is modified [90, 91]. These results suggest that the embryo can regulate PGF_{2 α} secretion from the uterus.

In fact, the embryo can produce signal molecules to notify its presence to the mother (maternal recognition of pregnancy) and thus maintain pregnancy. In this section, studies on the maternal recognition of pregnancy in sheep and cattle are reviewed.

Progesterone: its importance for survival of the embryo

Progesterone is a key factor for regulating the uterine environment and establishing uterine receptivity for embryo implantation in many species. In cattle and sheep, progesterone induces the production of uterine secretion, affects the length of the estrous cycle, and alters the uterine environment to support embryo development [92–95]. In cattle, administration of progesterone in the first 4 days of the estrous cycle advances the uterine environment and accelerates the growth of the embryo [92]. In sheep, progesterone treatment in the first several days of the cycle also increases embryo growth [93, 96].

In embryo transfer (ET) in cattle, a technique used by the livestock industry, the progesterone level is positively correlated with the pregnancy rate after ET [97]. The administration of hCG, GnRH analog (Buserelin), or LH, all of which are luteotrophic hormones, induces accessory CL formation and increases the plasma progesterone concentration [97]. These results demonstrate that progesterone is important for the uterine environment supporting embryo development and pregnancy in cattle and sheep.

The period of maternal recognition of pregnancy

The period in which the uterus can accept embryonic signals to inhibit CL regression is limited in cattle and sheep. Moor and Rowson demonstrated that transferring the sheep embryo to a non-pregnant uterus before days 11–12 of the cycle can prolong luteal function. However, removal of the embryo from the uterus of the pregnant ewe before this time does not extend CL lifespan [98, 99].

In cattle, experiments in embryo removal by uterine flushing and intrauterine infusion on days 16–18 of conceptus homogenates or secretions to cyclic heifers demonstrated the critical role of conceptuses on days 16–18 in extending the CL lifespan in cattle [100–102]. These studies suggest that the periods of maternal recognition of pregnancy in sheep and cattle are post-estrus days 11–12 and 16–18, respectively.

Interferon-tau (IFN- τ): an embryonic signal for maternal recognition of pregnancy in cattle and sheep

1) Discovery of IFN- τ

To survive, sheep and cattle embryos have to make their presence known to their mothers and rescue CL during the period of maternal recognition of pregnancy. It was previously believed that the embryo produced a signal to the mother for the establishment of pregnancy. The homogenates of sheep conceptus rescue CL after intrauterine infusion [98, 99]. Intrauterine infusion of conceptus homogenates or secretions to cyclic heifers on days 16–18 post estrus also prolongs the CL lifespan [100–102]. Martal *et al.* suggested that the embryo secretes an antiluteolytic component that, when infused into the uterus, prevents CL regression. Moreover, they showed that this component, called trophoblastin, is thermolabile and inactivated by pronase [103]. Godkin *et al.* purified a protein secreted on days 13–21 by sheep concepti and named it ovine trophoblast protein-1 (oTP-1). oTP-1 is the same component as trophoblastin, described above [104]. In cattle, the same substance was identified using an immunological cross-reaction with antiserum against oTP-1 [105].

The cDNAs of oTP-1 have been cloned and their sequences determined. The sequences are very similar to those of interferon, and so the protein is called interferon- τ (IFN- τ) [106, 107]. The IFN- τ genes of ruminants share approximately 70% homology with IFN- ω . In the amino acid sequences, the homology with IFN- ω is approximately 80% [106, 107]. The IFN- τ genes have a 595-bp open reading frame (ORF) that encodes a 195-bp amino acid protein containing a 23-bp amino acid signal sequence [106, 107].

2) Properties of IFN- τ

The molecular weight of ovine IFN- τ (oIFN- τ) is approximately 18 kDa, and its isoelectric point ranges from 4.7–5.4 [104]. This protein is not glycosylated [108]. Bovine IFN- τ (bIFN- τ) has multiple isoforms and an isoelectric point range of 5.6–6.8. Its molecular weight is either 22 or 24 kDa, depending on its form; this variation is due to differential glycosylation. The 22-kDa form has a single high-mannose oligosaccharide chain, and the 24-kDa form has a single complex-type oligosaccharide chain [109]. These oligosaccharide chains are N-linked and do not have sialic acid ends [109].

Since IFN- τ is structurally similar to type I IFN, this molecule has the biological properties of type I IFN. IFN- τ can slow the proliferation of bovine kidney epithelial cells (antiproliferative activity) [110]. Moreover, IFN- τ protects several cell types that possess the type I receptor from lysis by viruses (antiviral activity) [111, 112]. These effects of IFN- τ are achieved with less cytotoxicity than IFN- α , β , or γ [113].

3) Antiluteolytic mechanisms of IFN- τ

In sheep and cattle, the CL regression is mediated by PGF_{2 α} secreted from the uterine endometrium. The release of PGF_{2 α} is influenced by steroid hormones such as estrogen and progesterone via binding to their respective endometrial receptors. During the early and mid-luteal phases, estrogen receptor expression is suppressed in the endometrium by the increase of progesterone [114, 115]. Continuous exposure of the uterus to progesterone inhibits the expression of the progesterone receptor and prevents its negative effect on the expression of estrogen receptor [116–118]. Then, the increase of ovarian estrogen secretion facilitates the increase in oxytocin receptor expression [119–121]. Finally, the oxytocin secreted from CL and the posterior pituitary induces the release of PGF_{2 α} from the uterine endometrium [122, 123]. In pregnant ewes, the pulsatile release of PGF_{2 α} is prevented by the conceptus. The expression levels of estrogen and oxytocin receptor are low or absent in the endometrium [114, 124–126]. These results demonstrate that IFN- τ appears to interrupt the cascade of CL regression. Intrauterine infusion of oIFN- τ in cyclic ewes during the period of maternal recognition of pregnancy decreases endometrial estrogen receptor mRNA and protein expression [127]. IFN- τ can also suppress estrogen receptor mRNA and protein expression in the luminal epithelium of the endometrium in response to estradiol administration [128]. Moreover, the promoter region of

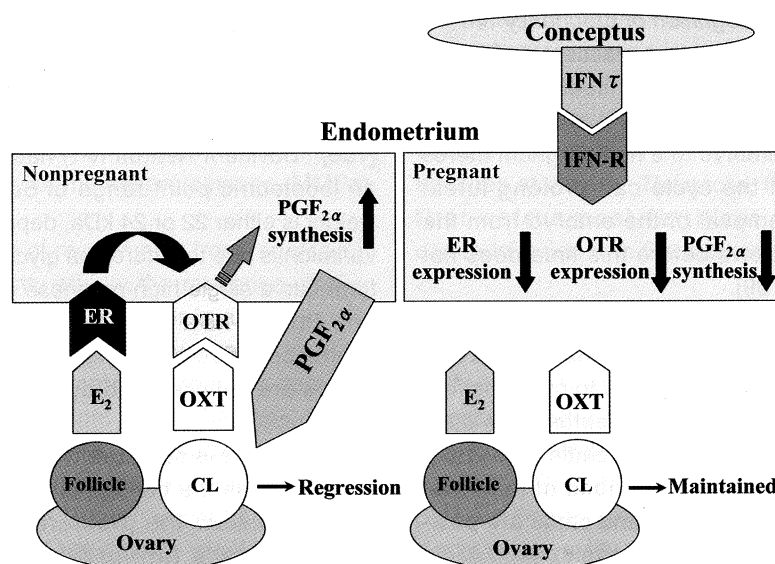


Fig. 3. Diagram of luteolysis and establishment of pregnancy in sheep and cattle. Without pregnancy, estradiol-17 β (E₂) from follicles binds to its receptor (ER) on the endometrium and induces the expression of oxytocin receptor (OTR). Oxytocin (OXT) secreted from CL binds to its receptor and in turn the synthesis of PGF_{2 α} is stimulated. PGF_{2 α} leads to CL regression. In pregnancy, IFN- τ secreted from the conceptus down-regulates the expression of ER and OTR by binding to the type I IFN receptor (IFN-R). Consequently, the synthesis of PGF_{2 α} is prevented. The expression of IFN- τ disappears when the conceptus starts to attach to the endometrium.

the estrogen receptor gene has IFN-stimulated response elements (ISREs) and IFN regulatory factor elements (IRFES) [129]. These observations suggest that IFN- τ inhibits oxytocin receptor up-regulation by preventing a rise in estrogen receptor expression.

In unilaterally pregnant ewes on day 16, the expression of estrogen receptor increases in pregnant horns but not in non-pregnant horns [130]. This result suggests that IFN- τ action is local (not in an endocrine manner). IFN- τ binds to the type I IFN receptor [111, 112, 131, 132]. The genes for the type I IFN receptor have been identified from the cDNA of ovine and bovine endometria [133, 134]. Moreover, the existence of type I IFN receptor protein in the ovine uterus has been demonstrated [135]. These findings suggest that IFN- τ inhibits PGF_{2 α} secretion from the uterus via binding type I IFN receptor to the endometrium.

4) Regulation of IFN- τ gene expression

The expression of the IFN- τ gene is very unique. It occurs during a limited period of embryo development before implantation. Furthermore, unlike other

members of the type I IFN family, the expression of this gene is not induced by viruses [136]. The expression is regulated by factors secreted from the uterus primed by progesterone. Although IFN- τ expression is induced outside an *in vivo* environment, *in vivo* factors are required for its sustained expression [137]. The addition of granulocyte-macrophage colony-stimulation factor (GM-CSF), which is expressed in the uterus, to culture medium enhances the expression of IFN- τ in the ovine embryo [138, 139]. Colony-stimulating factor 1 also enhances IFN- τ gene expression via Ras-responsive enhancer [140]. These observations suggest that IFN- τ expression is influenced by the uterine environment.

Analysis of the promoter region of the IFN- τ gene has revealed the transcription factors involved in the regulation of IFN- τ gene expression. Ets-2, a transcription factor widely expressed in embryo tissue, strongly enhances the expression of the IFN- τ gene [141]. This effect of Ets-2 is repressed by Oct-4, a POU-domain transcription factor [142]. Since the expression of Oct-4 protein is limited to trophoblast cells

of bovine blastocysts [143], Oct-4 is involved in the unique expression pattern of IFN- τ limited to trophoblastic lineage cells in the embryo. Moreover, the production of IFN- τ is sexually dimorphic (the female blastocyst produces more IFN- τ than that of the male) [144, 145], and it is suggested that the X-chromosomal factor is involved in the occurrence of the sexual dimorphism of IFN- τ production [146].

5) Summary

In ruminants, the secretion of PGF $_{2\alpha}$ from the uterus regulates CL regression. Maternal recognition of pregnancy in these species requires an embryonic antiluteolytic molecule, IFN- τ . Figure 3 illustrates the mechanisms underlying IFN- τ 's inhibition of CL regression.

Pig

As with the ruminants described above, pig embryos do not attach to the uterine wall just after hatching. During days 9–14 of pregnancy, the morphology of the pig embryo changes dramatically: from a spherical to an ovoid shape, then to a tubular and finally a thin filamentous form [147, 148]. Implantation is completed on day 20 of pregnancy [149]. During the pregnancy period, the level of progesterone is maintained and the regression of CL is inhibited. In this section, studies of maternal recognition and establishment of pregnancy in the pig are reviewed.

Maternal recognition of pregnancy

The estrus interval of the pig is 21 days, and the cycle is regulated by the presence of CL. The destruction of the uterine endometrial epithelium or hysterectomy before day 14 of the estrous cycle extends the CL lifespan beyond 30 days [150]. It has been suggested that the source of luteolysin is the uterine endometrium. In ruminants, the endometrium is a source of PGF $_{2\alpha}$, a luteolysin [87, 88]. When PGF $_{2\alpha}$ was administered to cyclic, hysterectomized, or pregnant gilts, CL regression was induced [151–153]. The concentration of PGF $_{2\alpha}$ in utero-ovarian vein plasma is elevated on days 12–13 of the estrous cycle, and it is related to both CL regression and the decline in progesterone level [154]. These observations demonstrate that PGF $_{2\alpha}$ secreted from the uterine endometrium is also a luteolysin in the pig.

Since the implantation, which accomplishes direct communication between embryo and uterus, is not completed during the early stage of pregnancy [149], the pig embryo has to produce substances that inhibit

CL regression and start cross-talk with its mother (maternal recognition of pregnancy). The period of maternal recognition of pregnancy in the pig is between days 11 and 18 of pregnancy, according to embryo removal experiments [155–157].

Estrogen is a signal for maternal recognition of pregnancy in the pig

In ruminants, the signal molecule for maternal recognition of pregnancy is IFN- τ , and this protein is secreted from trophoblast cells in the embryo [106, 107]. However, when total secretory protein from the pig conceptus was infused into the uterine lumen of cyclic sows during the period of maternal recognition of pregnancy, the estrous cycle was not prolonged and CL regression was not inhibited [158]. The pig embryo does not secrete an anti-luteolytic protein such as IFN- τ , which in maternal recognition of pregnancy in ruminants.

On the other hand, it is known that the pig embryo on days 11–18 of pregnancy produces and releases estrogen [159]. Pig embryos can convert progesterone to estradiol-17 β when they develop to the spherical stage [160], and its production increases as the embryos develop into the tubular and filamentous forms [161]. Estrogens are localized in the trophectoderm and endoderm of the conceptus on day 12 of pregnancy [161]. When estrogen is administered into the blood stream or uterus, the lifespan of CL is prolonged and CL regression is inhibited [162–167]. These observations support the hypothesis that estrogen is an embryonic signal for maternal recognition of pregnancy in pig.

The production of estrogen in the pig embryo is biphasic. When the uterine content of estrogen is measured, it increases rapidly on days 11–12 of pregnancy, declines on days 13–14, and then increases again [147, 168, 169]. The plasma estrone sulphate concentration of pregnant gilts also demonstrates a biphasic pattern [170, 171]. A single administration of exogenous estrogen between days 9.5 and 15.5, or on days 11 and 14 of the estrus cycle, failed to extend the inter-estrus interval beyond 30 days. However, estrogen treatment on days 11 and 14–16 can prolong the extension of CL function beyond 60 days [166]. These results indicate that the complete establishment of pregnancy in the pig requires both phases of estrogen stimulation.

Effect of estrogen on endometrium in maternal recognition of pregnancy

In non-pregnant gilts, PGF $_{2\alpha}$ is secreted from the

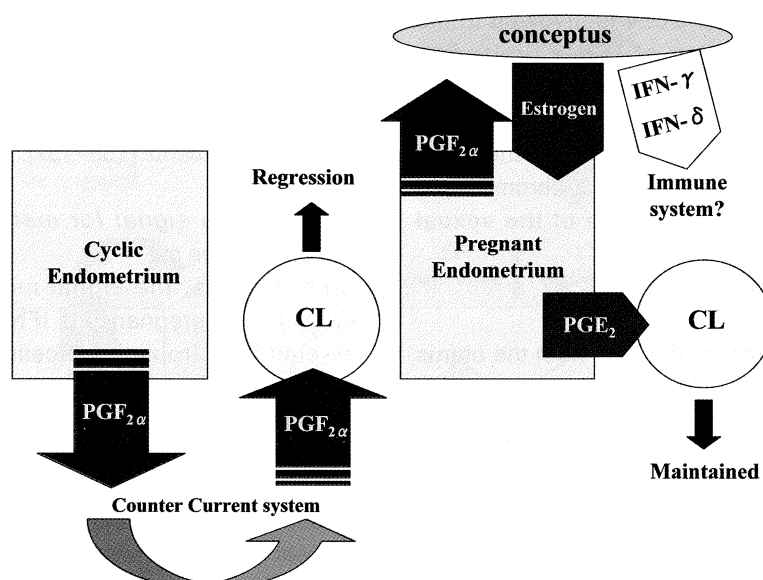


Fig. 4. Diagram of luteolysis and establishment of pregnancy in the pig. As in the other species, $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ is a luteolytic signal that induces the regression of CL. In pregnancy, the conceptus produces estrogen as a factor for maternal recognition of pregnancy. Estrogen alters the direction of $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ secretion from towards the uterine venous system (endocrine) to towards the uterine lumen (exocrine). Additionally, the conceptus produces PGE_2 , which has luteotrophic activity, and IFN- γ and δ , which may be involved in immunoregulation of the uterus.

uterine endometrium toward the endometrial stroma (in the endocrine direction) during the period of CL regression. $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ is secreted into the uterine venous system and transported into the ovarian artery by a counter-current exchange effect. Finally, $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ reaches the CL and induces its regression [172, 173]. The concentration of utero-ovarian vein $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ is significantly elevated between days 13 and 17 of the estrous cycle, when plasma progesterone concentrations decline [154]. However, in pregnant gilts, there is no change in the concentration of $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ in the utero-ovarian vein between days 12 and 25 of pregnancy [154]. In contrast, uterine flushings of pseudopregnant and pregnant gilts have significantly higher amounts of $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ than do those from cyclic gilts [168]. Based on these observations, Bazer and Thatcher hypothesized that estrogen secreted from the embryo is a key factor for the maternal recognition of pregnancy in pig, and that the secretion of $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ towards the uterine lumen (exocrine) rather than towards the uterine veins (endocrine) is involved in the establishment of pregnancy in the pig [174].

When estrogen was administered to gilts on day 14–20 of the estrous cycle, the luminal content of $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$

was greater in estrogen-treated gilts than in control gilts [163]. Moreover, an *in vitro* experiment showed that the secretion of $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ and PGE_2 is greater from the myometrial side (endocrine) for day 10 in pregnant and day 14 in cyclic gilts, whereas the secretion shifts toward the luminal side (exocrine) for day 12 and day 14 in pregnant gilts and for day 14 in estrogen-treated gilts [175]. These observations strongly suggest that estrogen from the pig embryo induces the transition from endocrine to exocrine secretion of $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$.

The mechanism by which estrogen shifts the uterine secretion of $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ toward the uterine lumen during pregnancy has not been elucidated completely. Estrogens, whether secreted from the embryo or injected, induce a transient release of calcium into the uterine lumen. When the endometrium from day 14 cyclic gilts is treated with calcium ionophore A23187, estradiol and prolactin change the secretion of $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ from an endocrine to an exocrine direction. This observation suggests that the reorientation of $\text{PGF}_{2\alpha}$ secretion of endometrium in pigs during the establishment of pregnancy involves interactive effects of estrogens and prolactin through increased calcium cycling across the uterine epithelium [176].

Estrogen has various effects on uterine endometrium. Estrogen also increases the PGE:PGF ratio [177–179]. PGE₂ has a luteotrophic effect and is involved in the maintenance of progesterone secretion from the CL [178]. Furthermore, estrogen maintains high LH receptor levels in both the uterus and CL [180, 181].

Interferons secreted from the pig embryo

The infusion of pig conceptus secretory proteins into the uterus extends the CL lifespan [158]. This suggests that the pig embryo does not produce a protein, such as IFN- τ in ruminants, that inhibits CL regression. However, a significant antiviral activity is found in uterine flushings and in embryo-conditioned culture medium on days 11–17 of pregnancy in pig [182]. IFN secretion by the pig embryo begins on days 12–13 of pregnancy and reaches a maximum on days 15–16 [183]. Two types of IFNs have been identified. One is type II IFN, IFN- γ , and the other is a novel type I IFN, IFN- δ , previously known as sp-1 IFN [184–186]. IFN- γ is secreted by the pig embryo in substantial amounts. The roles of these IFNs secreted from the pig embryo in pregnancy have not been revealed. They may be involved in the immunoregulation of the uterus during implantation.

Summary

In the pig, estrogen secreted from the embryo plays important roles in maternal recognition of pregnancy. The concept of the mechanism is illustrated in Fig. 4. However, the complete mechanisms underlying estrogen's induction of the shift in PGF_{2 α} secretion from endocrine to exocrine, or the mechanisms by which the maintenance of CL is supported, are not fully understood.

Conclusions

This article has reviewed the mechanisms by which pregnancy is established in mouse, human, sheep, cattle, and pig, and shows that these mechanisms vary widely among these species. Recently, the development of assisted reproductive technologies has contributed a great deal to medical science and livestock industries. Successful pregnancy using these techniques requires the control of the maternal environment and embryo development. However, since the mechanisms of pregnancy have not been fully elucidated, further studies are needed.

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