ISCSITR- INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES (ISCSITR-IJBS)

Vol.7, Iss. 1, January-June, 2026, pp. 1-7.
https://iscsitr.com/journals/ISCSITR-IJBS
Journal ID: 6548-7246

Molecular Mechanisms of DNA Replication, Repair, and Recombination in Eukaryotic Cells

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Abstract

DNA replication, repair, and recombination are fundamental processes in eukaryotic cells that ensure genome stability and integrity. The coordination of these processes is essential for cell division, DNA damage response, and the preservation of genetic information across generations. This paper reviews the molecular mechanisms underlying these processes, highlighting key enzymes, proteins, and regulatory pathways involved in DNA replication, repair, and recombination. Recent advancements in our understanding of the molecular details of these mechanisms are discussed, with a focus on their relevance to disease prevention and therapeutic strategies. The integration of these processes ensures the faithful transmission of genetic material, protecting the organism from genetic instability and disease.

Keywords

DNA replication, DNA repair, DNA recombination, eukaryotic cells, genome stability, DNA damage response, cell division.

How to cite this paper: Jonathan Fredrick & Poonguzhali TV. (2026). Molecular Mechanisms of DNA Replication, Repair, and Recombination in Eukaryotic Cells. *ISCSITR – International Journal of Biological Sciences (ISCSITR-IJBS)*, **7**(1), 1–7.

URL: https://iscsitr.com/index.php/ISCSITR-IJBS/article/view/ISCSITR-IJBS_2026_07_01_001/ISCSITR-IJBS_2026_07_01_001

Published: 20th January 2026

1. Introductıon

DNA replication, repair, and recombination are crucial to maintaining genomic stability in eukaryotic cells. These processes involve a series of coordinated steps that ensure the accurate duplication, correction, and rearrangement of genetic material. DNA replication is the process through which a cell duplicates its entire genome before cell division. DNA repair mechanisms respond to damage caused by various internal and external factors, maintaining genome integrity. DNA recombination, involving the exchange of genetic material, plays a role in generating genetic diversity and repairing DNA breaks.

In eukaryotes, these processes are tightly regulated and interact with various cellular pathways, including cell cycle checkpoints and the DNA damage response. Understanding the molecular mechanisms behind these processes is essential for uncovering the basis of many diseases, particularly cancer, where genomic instability plays a central role.

2. DNA Replication in Eukaryotic Cells

DNA replication in eukaryotic cells is a highly regulated and complex process. It occurs during the S-phase of the cell cycle and involves the synthesis of an identical copy of the genome. The process begins with the formation of the pre-replication complex at origins of replication, where key proteins such as the Origin Recognition Complex (ORC) bind to the DNA, marking the replication origins. The helicase, including the minichromosome maintenance (MCM) complex, unwinds the DNA, creating single-stranded regions that serve as templates for replication.

The primase-polymerase complex, composed of DNA primase and DNA polymerase α, synthesizes short RNA primers to initiate DNA synthesis. DNA polymerase δ and ε then extend the primers, synthesizing the new DNA strands. The leading strand is synthesized continuously, while the lagging strand is synthesized in Okazaki fragments. The process is completed by the activity of DNA ligase, which seals the nicks between Okazaki fragments, ensuring the integrity of the newly synthesized DNA.

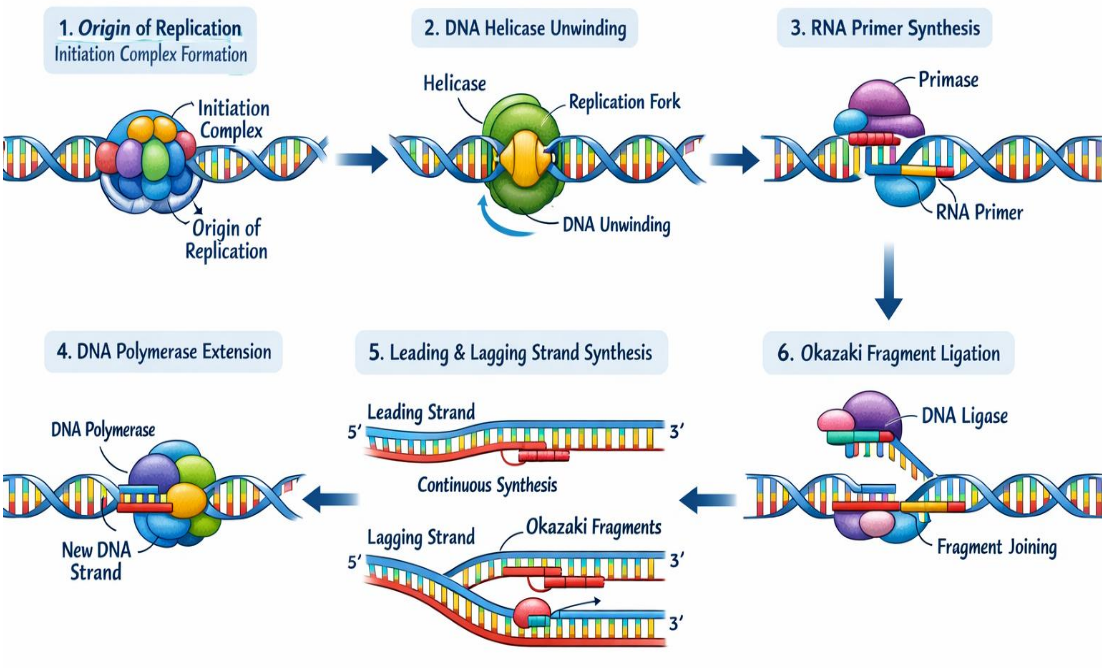

Figure 1: DNA Replication Mechanism in Eukaryotic Cells

3. DNA Repair Mechanisms

DNA repair is essential for maintaining the stability of the genome by correcting errors and lesions caused by environmental factors, such as radiation and chemicals, or by internal cellular processes like replication errors. Eukaryotic cells employ several DNA repair pathways, including direct reversal, base excision repair (BER), nucleotide excision repair (NER), and double-strand break repair (DSBR).

In BER, DNA glycosylases recognize and remove damaged bases, followed by excision of the sugar-phosphate backbone and resynthesis of the DNA strand by DNA polymerase. NER, on the other hand, removes bulky DNA lesions, such as those induced by UV light, by excising a segment of the strand containing the damage. The DSBR pathway, involving homologous recombination (HR) or non-homologous end joining (NHEJ), repairs double-strand breaks that can arise due to replication fork collapse or DNA damage.

Table 1: Summary of DNA Repair Pathways

Repair Mechanism	Type of Damage Targeted	Key Proteins Involved	Repair Outcome
Base Excision Repair	Single base modifications	DNA glycosylases, AP endonuclease, DNA polymerase	Corrects base lesions
Nucleotide Excision Repair	Bulky DNA lesions (e.g., UV-induced pyrimidine dimers)	XPC, TFIIH, ERCC1, DNA polymerase	Excision of damaged segment
Homologous Recombination	Double-strand breaks	RAD51, BRCA1/2, MRE11, ATM/ATR	Accurate repair via homologous template
Non-Homologous End Joining	Double-strand breaks	Ku70/80, DNA-PKcs, Ligase IV	Error-prone repair

4. DNA Recombination in Eukaryotic Cells

DNA recombination is a critical process in eukaryotic cells that facilitates genetic diversity and maintains genome integrity. This process occurs naturally during meiosis, where homologous chromosomes exchange genetic material, contributing to genetic variation in offspring. Recombination is also involved in DNA repair, particularly in response to double-strand breaks. There are two major pathways for recombination: homologous recombination (HR) and non-homologous recombination.

In HR, a double-strand break is resected to expose 3' single-stranded DNA ends, which then invade a homologous template, such as the sister chromatid, to guide accurate repair. The Holliday junction intermediates are resolved, and DNA synthesis fills in the gaps. In contrast, NHEJ directly ligates the broken DNA ends without the need for a homologous template, which is more error-prone and can lead to small insertions or deletions.

5. Integration of Replication, Repair, and Recombination

The molecular processes of DNA replication, repair, and recombination are interconnected. DNA replication forks are vulnerable to stalling, leading to the formation of DNA double-strand breaks. These breaks can be repaired through homologous recombination or non-homologous end joining. If replication errors or damage accumulate, the cell's ability to repair these breaks becomes critical in maintaining genomic integrity.

Recent studies suggest that replication stress—such as that induced by DNA damage or aberrant replication—can activate the DNA damage response (DDR) pathways, which then modulate repair and recombination processes. The interplay between these processes is coordinated by various checkpoints and regulatory proteins, ensuring that cells can survive replication stress while maintaining genome stability. Dysregulation of these pathways is often observed in cancer cells, where defects in repair and recombination contribute to genomic instability and tumorigenesis.

6. Clinical Relevance: DNA Repair and Disease

Defects in DNA replication, repair, and recombination mechanisms are linked to several genetic disorders, including cancer, neurodegenerative diseases, and premature aging syndromes. For example, mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, which are crucial for homologous recombination, increase susceptibility to breast and ovarian cancers. Similarly, deficiencies in the NER pathway, such as those seen in xeroderma pigmentosum, result in extreme sensitivity to UV radiation and a higher risk of skin cancers.

The understanding of these molecular mechanisms has opened up new avenues for therapeutic intervention. Targeting DNA repair pathways, particularly those involved in homologous recombination and DNA damage sensing, has become an emerging strategy in cancer therapy. Inhibitors of DNA repair enzymes, such as PARP inhibitors, are already in clinical use for the treatment of cancers with defects in DNA repair, such as BRCA-mutant tumors.

7. Literature Review

The molecular mechanisms of DNA replication, repair, and recombination in eukaryotic cells have been extensively studied, revealing critical insights into genome stability and the maintenance of genetic integrity. Key research has focused on the processes of DNA replication, which ensures the accurate duplication of the genome during cell division

(Kunkel and Bebenek 1998; Stillman 1991). The mechanisms of DNA repair are particularly crucial in correcting damage caused by both endogenous factors, like replication errors, and exogenous factors, such as UV radiation and chemical mutagens. Notable pathways like base excision repair (BER), nucleotide excision repair (NER), and double-strand break repair (DSBR) have been well-characterized, with specific enzymes and proteins involved in each pathway (Lindahl and Wood 1989; Sancar et al. 2001). For instance, proteins such as RAD51 in homologous recombination are essential for repairing DNA double-strand breaks with high fidelity, while non-homologous end joining (NHEJ) provides an alternative, error-prone mechanism for repair (Jasin 1995).

Furthermore, DNA recombination, a process often associated with genetic diversity during meiosis, also plays a vital role in maintaining genome stability during the repair of damaged DNA (Sankaran and Haber 2007). Disruptions in these processes can lead to genomic instability, contributing to a variety of diseases, most notably cancer (Shiloh 2003). The identification and understanding of these pathways have opened new therapeutic avenues, particularly in targeting DNA repair mechanisms for cancer treatment (Rassool and Isaacs 2018). The intricate coordination between DNA replication, repair, and recombination ensures not only the faithful transmission of genetic material but also protects the organism from mutagenic damage, underscoring the importance of these mechanisms in both cellular health and disease prevention.

8. Conclusion

DNA replication, repair, and recombination are vital processes that maintain the integrity of the eukaryotic genome. The complex interplay between these pathways ensures that genetic material is accurately replicated, repaired when damaged, and recombined when necessary to generate genetic diversity. The advances in our understanding of these processes have provided insight into their roles in diseases such as cancer and neurodegeneration, offering potential therapeutic targets for future treatments. Ongoing research into the molecular mechanisms of DNA maintenance promises to reveal even more sophisticated regulatory networks that could have profound implications for human health.

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