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Nutrigenomics: A Molecular Nutrition - Unlocking Genetic Potential

Sagi Raju¹ and *Boini Sravanthi²

¹Associate Professor, Department of Animal Nutrition, C. V. Sc, Mamnoon, 506166, PVNRTGVU, Hyderabad, India

²M. V. Sc Scholar, Department of Animal Nutrition, C. V. Sc, Rajendranagar, 500030, PVNRTGVU, Hyderabad, India

*Corresponding Author's email: boinisravanthi1998@gmail.com

The Human Genome Project has revolutionized biological sciences by revealing the genetic structure of humans, paving the way for research into how genes interact with environmental factors like nutrition. This led to the emergence of nutrigenomics, which integrates genomics and nutritional sciences to explore how nutrients influence gene expression, protein synthesis, and metabolism.

Nutrigenomics investigates how dietary components affect gene activity, while nutrigenetics focuses on how individual genetic variation influences dietary responses. Together, these fields aim to develop personalized nutrition strategies to prevent or manage diet-related diseases (Müller & Kersten, 2003). Technologies such as transcriptomics, microarrays, and RNA interference (RNAi) have advanced this field: Transcriptomics studies gene expression by analyzing mRNA levels. Dietary components like vitamins and phytochemicals can regulate gene transcription and influence health outcomes (Müller & Kersten, 2003). Microarrays help compare gene expression between healthy and diseased cells and identify new biomarkers for disease and nutritional responses. RNAi is a tool for gene silencing that helps identify gene functions and targets of bioactive food compounds (Singh et al., 2005).

Proteomics studies the full range of proteins (proteome) and their functions, modifications, and interactions. Dietary fats like fish oil and conjugated linoleic acid impact lipid metabolism through changes in protein expression (de Roos et al., 2005). Metabolomics analyzes small molecules (metabolites) in response to dietary intake. For example, soy intake was shown to alter plasma lipid, amino acid, and carbohydrate profiles in women, highlighting individual variability in dietary responses (Solanki et al., 2003). These technologies collectively offer promising tools for the development of functional foods and precision nutrition, tailored to genetic profiles.

Nutrient-Gene Interaction

Diet is a complex combination of natural substances that not only provides energy and building blocks for the body but also plays a significant regulatory role in gene expression. Nutrients act as more than just metabolic fuels they function as antioxidants (radical scavengers), signaling molecules (nutritional hormones), and modulators of metabolic pathways. Phytochemicals, which are plant-derived secondary metabolites, also have roles in promoting animal and human health. Many diseases are linked to suboptimal or imbalanced nutrition, and these health conditions often result from complex interactions between multiple nutrients and various genes (Mariman, 2006). Because of genetic diversity, individuals differ in how they digest, absorb, metabolize, and excrete nutrients. Such genetic variability leads to different responses to the same diet and contributes to the occurrence of nutrition-related

diseases. The expression of genes is influenced not only by internal signals like hormones but also by external environmental stimuli, with nutrients being among the most significant (Van Ommen, 2004). Thus, nutrition is a key modulator of gene activity and phenotypic outcomes.

Benefits from Nutrigenomics

Nutrigenomics provides several important benefits that enhance our understanding of disease and nutrition. First, it helps identify new biomarkers for nutrition-related diseases by comparing gene expression in diseased and healthy tissues, allowing early detection and improved disease monitoring. Second, it enables the development of biomarkers to track the efficacy of nutritional interventions through gene expression profiling before, during, and after dietary treatment. Third, nutrigenomics aids in recognizing genes and molecular pathways as targets for disease prevention, offering insights into the roles that specific genes play in disease processes and how they might be modulated by diet. Lastly, this knowledge supports the creation of knowledge-based functional foods, which are designed to normalize disease-related gene expression and can be used preventively in the early, pre-symptomatic stages of illness.

Applications in Animal Science

Nutrigenomics holds significant promise in animal nutrition and livestock production. Gene expression studies can help identify molecular pathways and candidate genes responsible for economically important traits, such as milk yield or reproductive performance. This is especially relevant during the transition period and early lactation in dairy animals, when they are most vulnerable to nutritional imbalances. Nutrigenomics tools are being applied to better understand how diet affects health, disease resistance, and productivity in livestock. For example, in a study involving steers fed poor-quality diets, the expression of genes related to protein turnover, cytoskeletal remodeling, and metabolic homeostasis was found to be influenced by nutrition (Byrne et al., 2005). This shows how gene expression can respond directly to dietary inputs, providing a molecular basis for optimizing animal feeding strategies.

There is still limited but growing information on how diet influences genes associated with productive and reproductive traits in livestock. For instance, selenium deficiency has been shown to affect protein synthesis at the transcriptional level, leading to stress, impaired antioxidant defense mechanisms, and altered phenotypes related to selenium-related deficiency symptoms (Rao et al., 2001). This suggests that specific nutrients or their combinations could be used to modulate gene expression and improve overall animal health and productivity. Nutrigenomics also has the potential to reduce production losses by identifying gene markers related to traits like milk, meat, and wool production, and then optimizing their expression through dietary regimens. This approach supports more sustainable livestock production and the development of precision nutrition for animals.

Conclusion

Nutrigenomics is an emerging and transformative field that bridges nutrition and genetics, offering deep insights into how dietary components influence gene expression and overall health. By integrating advanced technologies such as transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics, nutrigenomics enables the identification of disease biomarkers, supports the development of functional foods, and paves the way for personalized nutrition strategies. In animal science, it holds great promise for enhancing productivity, health, and sustainability in livestock production through targeted dietary interventions. As research advances, nutrigenomics will continue to play a crucial role in shaping the future of both human and animal health.

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