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Epigenetic Modifications in Amphibians Exposed to Environmental Pollutants

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Abstract

Environmental pollutants pose significant threats to amphibian populations, contributing to global declines. Beyond direct toxicity, pollutants can induce epigenetic modifications that alter gene expression without changing DNA sequences. This study examines DNA methylation patterns, histone modifications, and non-coding RNA regulation in amphibians exposed to heavy metals, pesticides, and endocrine-disrupting chemicals. Results indicate pollutant-associated epigenetic alterations in genes related to development, immune function, and stress response. Such modifications may impair metamorphosis, reproductive success, and disease resistance. Understanding pollutant-driven epigenetic changes provides critical insight into trans generational effects, adaptive capacity, and conservation strategies aimed at mitigating environmental stress in vulnerable amphibian species.

Keywords: Epigenetics, amphibians, environmental pollutants, DNA methylation, histone modification, endocrine disruptors, heavy metals, pesticides, gene expression regulation, developmental toxicity, immune response, oxidative stress, trans generational effects, environmental stressors, conservation biology, ecotoxicology, bio monitoring, habitat contamination

Introduction

Amphibians are among the most environmentally sensitive vertebrates and serve as important bio indicators of ecosystem health. Over recent decades, global amphibian populations have declined due to habitat loss, climate change, emerging diseases, and widespread environmental pollution. Contaminants such as heavy metals, pesticides, and endocrine-disrupting chemicals can interfere with normal physiological and developmental processes. While toxicological impacts have been extensively studied, growing evidence suggests that pollutants also induce epigenetic modifications—heritable changes in gene expression that occur without altering DNA sequences. Mechanisms including DNA methylation, histone modification, and non-coding RNA regulation may mediate stress responses and developmental abnormalities. These epigenetic alterations can influence metamorphosis, immune competence, and reproductive success, potentially leading to long-term population effects. Understanding pollutant-

induced epigenetic changes in amphibians is essential for assessing ecological risk and developing effective conservation and remediation strategies.

Epigenetics, amphibians - environmental pollutants

Epigenetics refers to heritable and reversible modifications in gene expression that occur without changes in the underlying DNA sequence. In amphibians, epigenetic regulation plays a critical role in development, metamorphosis, immune responses, and adaptation to fluctuating environmental conditions. However, increasing exposure to environmental pollutants has raised concerns about their influence on amphibian epigenomes. Contaminants such as heavy metals, agricultural pesticides, industrial effluents, and endocrine-disrupting chemicals can alter DNA methylation patterns, modify histone proteins, and influence non-coding RNA activity. These changes may disrupt endocrine signaling, delay metamorphosis, impair gonadal development, and reduce disease resistance.

Amphibians are particularly vulnerable because of their permeable skin, biphasic life cycle, and dependence on aquatic and terrestrial habitats. Pollutant-induced epigenetic alterations can occur during critical developmental windows, potentially leading to persistent or trans-generational effects. Such modifications may influence phenotypic plasticity, stress tolerance, and population dynamics. Understanding how environmental pollutants shape amphibian epigenetic landscapes provides valuable insight into mechanisms of toxicity and resilience. Integrating epigenetic biomarkers into ecological risk assessment enhances conservation efforts aimed at mitigating pollution-driven amphibian declines.

DNA methylation - histone modification

DNA methylation and histone modification are key epigenetic mechanisms regulating gene expression in amphibians exposed to environmental pollutants. DNA methylation typically involves the addition of methyl groups to cytosine residues, often leading to gene silencing or altered transcriptional activity. Pollutants such as heavy metals and endocrine disruptors can disrupt normal methylation patterns, affecting genes involved in development, immunity, and stress response. Histone modifications, including acetylation, methylation, and phosphorylation, alter chromatin structure and influence gene accessibility. Environmental contaminants may interfere with enzymes that regulate these histone changes, thereby modifying transcriptional profiles. Together, altered DNA methylation and histone modification can impair metamorphosis, reproductive function, and adaptive capacity, contributing to long-term ecological and population-level consequences.

Endocrine disruptors

Endocrine disruptors are environmental chemicals that interfere with hormonal signaling pathways, leading to physiological and developmental abnormalities in amphibians. Common disruptors include pesticides, industrial compounds, pharmaceuticals, and plastic-derived chemicals that mimic or block natural hormones such as estrogen and thyroid hormones. In amphibians, thyroid signaling is essential for metamorphosis, making them particularly vulnerable to disruption. Exposure can result in delayed metamorphosis, gonadal deformities, altered sex ratios, and impaired reproductive capacity. Emerging evidence suggests endocrine disruptors also induce epigenetic modifications, including altered DNA methylation and histone patterns, which may cause persistent and Trans-generational effects on gene regulation and population stability.

Heavy metals & pesticides

Heavy metals and pesticides are major environmental contaminants affecting amphibian populations worldwide. Metals such as cadmium, lead, mercury, and arsenic accumulate in aquatic habitats and enter amphibian tissues through permeable skin and diet. These toxicants generate oxidative stress, disrupt enzyme activity, and impair immune and reproductive functions. Similarly, agricultural pesticides, including organophosphates and herbicides, interfere with nervous and endocrine systems. Beyond direct

toxicity, both heavy metals and pesticides can trigger epigenetic alterations such as abnormal DNA methylation and histone modification. These changes may disrupt gene regulation during critical developmental stages, leading to delayed metamorphosis, deformities, reduced fertility, and increased disease susceptibility.

Gene expression regulation

Gene expression regulation refers to the complex mechanisms that control when, where, and to what extent genes are activated or silenced. In amphibians, precise regulation of gene expression is essential for processes such as embryonic development, metamorphosis, immune defense, and stress adaptation. Environmental pollutants can disrupt these regulatory networks by inducing epigenetic changes, including altered DNA methylation, histone modifications, and non-coding RNA activity. Such disruptions may lead to abnormal transcription of genes involved in endocrine signaling, detoxification pathways, and cellular repair mechanisms. Persistent misregulation of gene expression can impair growth, reproductive success, and survival, ultimately influencing population stability and long-term ecological resilience.

Developmental toxicity - immune response

Developmental toxicity in amphibians arises when environmental pollutants interfere with critical stages of embryogenesis and metamorphosis. Exposure to heavy metals, pesticides, and endocrine-disrupting chemicals during early life stages can cause morphological deformities, delayed metamorphosis, impaired organ development, and altered growth patterns. Because amphibian development is tightly regulated by hormonal and genetic pathways, pollutant-induced epigenetic modifications may disrupt normal gene expression, leading to long-term physiological consequences. In addition to developmental impacts, pollutants can compromise immune responses. Amphibians rely on both innate and adaptive immunity to resist pathogens such as fungi, bacteria, and viruses. Epigenetic alterations affecting immune-related genes may reduce pathogen recognition, antibody production, and inflammatory regulation. Weakened immune competence increases susceptibility to diseases, including chytridiomycosis, contributing to population declines. Understanding the link between developmental toxicity and immune deregulation is essential for evaluating ecological risk and designing effective conservation interventions.

Oxidative stress - Trans-generational effects

Oxidative stress is a common physiological consequence of exposure to environmental pollutants in amphibians. Heavy metals, pesticides, and industrial contaminants can increase the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS), overwhelming antioxidant defense systems. Elevated ROS levels damage cellular components, including lipids, proteins, and DNA, leading to impaired growth, developmental abnormalities, and reduced survival. Oxidative stress can also influence epigenetic mechanisms by altering DNA methylation patterns, histone modifications, and non-coding RNA expression, thereby disrupting normal gene regulation. Importantly, pollutant-

induced epigenetic changes associated with oxidative stress may extend beyond directly exposed individuals. Trans generational effects occur when epigenetic modifications are transmitted to subsequent generations, even in the absence of continued exposure. Such inherited changes can affect stress tolerance, immune competence, and reproductive success. Understanding the interplay between oxidative stress and trans generational epigenetic effects is crucial for assessing long-term ecological consequences and developing strategies to mitigate pollution-driven amphibian population declines.

Environmental stressors

Environmental stressors encompass a wide range of physical, chemical, and biological factors that challenge amphibian survival and homeostasis. These include chemical pollutants such as heavy metals, pesticides, and endocrine disruptors, as well as habitat degradation, temperature fluctuations, ultraviolet radiation, and pathogen exposure. Amphibians are particularly sensitive to such stressors due to their permeable skin, aquatic–terrestrial life cycle, and reliance on stable environmental conditions for development and reproduction. Exposure to multiple stressors can act synergistically, intensifying physiological strain and disrupting hormonal balance. At the molecular level, environmental stressors often trigger epigenetic modifications that alter gene expression patterns linked to development, immunity, and stress response pathways. Persistent or cumulative stress may impair adaptive capacity, reduce reproductive success, and increase disease susceptibility, thereby contributing to long-term population decline and ecological instability.

Conservation biology – ecotoxicology

Conservation biology and ecotoxicology intersect in efforts to understand and mitigate the impacts of environmental pollutants on amphibian populations. Conservation biology focuses on preserving biodiversity, maintaining genetic variation, and preventing species extinction, while ecotoxicology examines the effects of chemical contaminants on organisms and ecosystems. Integrating these disciplines provides a comprehensive framework for assessing how pollutants influence amphibian health at molecular, physiological, and population levels. Epigenetic research strengthens this integration by revealing sublethal and long-term effects of contaminants that may not be immediately visible through traditional toxicological assessments. Pollutant-induced changes in DNA methylation, histone modification, and gene expression can impair development, immune competence, and reproductive success, ultimately affecting population viability. By incorporating epigenetic biomarkers into Eco toxicological studies, conservation strategies can better identify vulnerable populations, establish safe exposure thresholds, and design targeted remediation programs. This interdisciplinary approach enhances our ability to address pollution-driven amphibian declines and promote ecosystem resilience.

Bio monitoring - habitat contamination

Bio monitoring plays a critical role in detecting and assessing habitat contamination affecting amphibian

populations. Because amphibians possess permeable skin and occupy both aquatic and terrestrial environments, they readily accumulate pollutants from water, soil, and sediment. This sensitivity makes them effective bio indicators of ecosystem health. Traditional bio monitoring approaches measure contaminant concentrations in tissues, evaluate morphological abnormalities, and assess population trends. However, these methods may overlook early molecular changes that precede visible physiological damage. Integrating epigenetic biomarkers into bio monitoring programs enhances the detection of sub lethal and chronic pollutant effects. Alterations in DNA methylation patterns, histone modifications, and gene expression profiles can serve as early-warning indicators of environmental stress and habitat degradation. Such molecular signatures provide insight into the mechanisms by which contaminants disrupt endocrine signaling, immune function, and development. Moreover, linking epigenetic changes with specific pollutants improves risk assessment and remediation planning. Comprehensive bio monitoring that combines chemical analysis, ecological surveys, and epigenetic assessment offers a powerful strategy for identifying contaminated habitats, guiding conservation actions, and supporting long-term recovery of amphibian populations.

Conclusion

Environmental pollutants represent a significant and escalating threat to amphibian populations worldwide, not only through direct toxicity but also via subtle molecular disruptions. This review highlights how contaminants such as heavy metals, pesticides, and endocrine-disrupting chemicals induce epigenetic modifications, including altered DNA methylation, histone modifications, and changes in gene expression. These molecular alterations can impair development, immune function, reproductive success, and stress tolerance, ultimately influencing population viability. Importantly, some epigenetic changes may persist across generations, amplifying long-term ecological consequences even after exposure ceases. Integrating epigenetic approaches into ecotoxicology and conservation biology provides a deeper understanding of pollutant-driven declines and reveals early biomarkers of environmental stress. Such knowledge enhances ecological risk assessment, habitat remediation planning, and conservation management strategies. Future research should focus on long-term and multigenerational studies to clarify adaptive versus maladaptive epigenetic responses. Incorporating molecular tools into monitoring frameworks will strengthen efforts to mitigate habitat contamination and promote the resilience and recovery of vulnerable amphibian species.

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