ISSN: 3029-0732

Short Communication

Journal of Cardiovascular and Cardiology

NK Cell Therapy: A New Era of "Off-the-Shelf" Cellular Immunotherapy for Cancer

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Received: April 29, 2026; **Accepted:** May 04, 2026; **Published:** May 15, 2026

ABSTRACT

Natural killer (NK) cells have emerged as a promising platform for cancer immunotherapy due to their intrinsic ability to recognize and eliminate malignant cells without prior sensitization. Unlike T-cell based therapies, NK cells can be developed as "off-the-shelf" products, enabling rapid availability and reduced risk of graft-versus-host disease. Recent advances in genetic engineering, cytokine activation, and ex vivo expansion have significantly improved the cytotoxic potential and persistence of NK cell products. This review summarizes the biological foundations of NK cell function, current engineering strategies including CAR-NK approaches, clinical progress, and key challenges in translating NK cell therapy into routine oncological practice.

Keywords: Nk Cells, Immunotherapy, Car-Nk, Cancer, Adoptive Cell Therapy, Off-The-Shelf Therapy

Introduction

Cancer immunotherapy has undergone a major transformation over the past decade, particularly with the success of immune checkpoint inhibitors and CAR-T cell therapy. However, limitations such as manufacturing complexity, high cost, and severe toxicities have motivated the search for alternative effector cell platforms.

Natural killer (NK) cells represent a unique subset of innate lymphoid cells capable of recognizing stressed, infected, or transformed cells without antigen-specific priming. Their ability to mediate cytotoxicity without HLA restriction makes them highly attractive for allogeneic, off-the-shelf therapeutic applications.

Biology of NK Cells

NK cells are defined by the expression of CD56 and absence of CD3. They are broadly classified into:

- **CD56^bright NK cells** – primarily cytokine producers
- **CD56^dim NK cells** – highly cytotoxic effector cells

NK cell activation depends on the balance between activating and inhibitory receptors:

- Activating: NKG2D, NKp30, NKp44, NKp46
- Inhibitory: KIRs (Killer-cell Immunoglobulin-like Receptors), NKG2A

Tumor cells often downregulate MHC class I molecules ("missing self" hypothesis), making them vulnerable to NK-mediated killing.

Mechanisms of NK Cell Cytotoxicity

NK cells eliminate target cells through three primary mechanisms:

1. Perforin–granzyme pathway
2. Death receptor pathways (Fasel, TRAIL)
3. Antibody-dependent cellular cytotoxicity (ADCC) via CD16 (FcγRIIIa)

These mechanisms allow NK cells to act independently of tumor antigen specificity.

"Off-the-Shelf" NK Cell Platforms

One of the most important advantages of NK therapy is the possibility of allogeneic use.

Sources of NK cells:

- Peripheral blood-derived NK cells
- Cord blood NK cells
- Induced pluripotent stem cell (iPSC)-derived NK cells

Citation: Eugene Zadorin. NK Cell Therapy: A New Era of "Off-the-Shelf" Cellular Immunotherapy for Cancer. J Cardiovas Cardiol. 2026. 4(2): 1-2.
DOI: doi.org/10.61440/JCC.2026.v4.63

- NK cell lines (e.g., NK-92)

iPSC-derived NK cells are particularly promising due to scalability and genetic engineering flexibility.

CAR-NK Cell Therapy

Chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) technology has been adapted from T cells to NK cells.

CAR-NK advantages over CAR-T:

- Lower risk of cytokine release syndrome (CRS)
- Reduced neurotoxicity
- Potential for allogeneic "off-the-shelf" use
- Multiple killing mechanisms retained

Common CAR targets include:

- CD19 (B-cell malignancies)
- HER2
- EGFR
- BCMA (multiple myeloma)

Cytokine Enhancement and Persistence

NK cells have relatively short in vivo persistence, which is a major limitation. Strategies to improve survival include:

- IL-2 stimulation (historical but toxic in vivo)
- IL-15 and IL-15 super agonists
- Membrane-bound cytokine engineering
- Co-stimulatory receptor modification

IL-15-based approaches have shown the most promise in maintaining NK activity without severe systemic toxicity.

Clinical Progress

Several early-phase clinical trials have demonstrated safety and preliminary efficacy of NK-based therapies.

Observed outcomes include:

- Reduced tumor burden in hematologic malignancies
- Minimal graft-versus-host disease
- Low incidence of severe CRS compared to CAR-T

However, responses in solid tumors remain limited due to:

- Tumor microenvironment suppression
- Poor infiltration
- Immunosuppressive cytokines (TGF-β, IL-10)

Challenges

Despite progress, several barriers remain:

- Limited in vivo persistence
- Suppressive tumor microenvironment
- Manufacturing scalability and standardization
- Variable donor-to-donor activity
- Limited efficacy in solid tumors

Future Directions

The future of NK cell therapy is likely to involve:

- Multiplex gene editing (CRISPR-engineered NK cells)
- Combination therapies with checkpoint inhibitors
- Metabolic reprogramming of NK cells
- Synthetic biology approaches to enhance tumor homing
- Universal iPSC-derived NK cell banks

Conclusion

NK cell therapy represents a rapidly evolving field with the potential to complement or even surpass current T-cell based immunotherapies in specific indications. The development of off-the-shelf NK cell products, especially CAR-NK platforms, may redefine accessibility and scalability of cellular immunotherapy in oncology. Continued advances in engineering and tumor microenvironment modulation will be essential for achieving durable clinical responses.