OPEN ACCESS Freely available online

Advancements in Genetic Engineering

ISSN: 2169-0111

Commentary

Cell-Free Fetal DNA and its Significance in Prenatal Diagnosis

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DESCRIPTION

The field of prenatal diagnosis has revolutionized the way we perceive and manage the pregnancy. The traditional methods such as ultrasound, amniocentesis, and chorionic villus sampling have been the gold standard for decades. However, these methods are invasive and carry a risk of fetal loss, making them a less desirable choice for some women. The discovery of cell-free fetal DNA (cffDNA) in maternal plasma has opened up new possibilities for non-invasive prenatal diagnosis. CffDNA is the small fraction of DNA that originates from the fetus and circulates in the maternal blood. During pregnancy, the fetus sheds its DNA into the maternal bloodstream through the placenta, which is then detectable in the maternal plasma. This DNA is present in very low concentrations and constitutes only 3%-13% of the total cell-free DNA in the maternal plasma. However, with the advent of advanced technologies, it is now possible to detect and analyze cffDNA in maternal blood samples.

The detection of cffDNA in maternal plasma has several potential applications in prenatal diagnosis. One of the most common uses of cffDNA is For Non-Invasive Prenatal Testing (NIPT) to screen for common fetal chromosomal abnormalities such as Down syndrome, Edwards syndrome, and Patau syndrome. NIPT is a simple blood test that can be performed as early as ten weeks of pregnancy and has a very high detection rate for these chromosomal abnormalities. CffDNA can also be used for fetal sex determination, which is helpful in cases of X-linked genetic disorders. This test is particularly useful for families with a history of X-linked disorders or for those who wish to avoid invasive prenatal testing.

In addition, cffDNA can be used for prenatal diagnosis of single gene disorders. This is achieved by analyzing the cffDNA for mutations associated with a specific genetic disorder. This method is still in the experimental stage and requires further validation. One of the biggest advantages of cffDNA testing is that it is non-invasive and carries no risk of fetal loss. Traditional prenatal diagnosis methods such as amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling are invasive and carry a small risk of fetal loss. This can be a significant source of anxiety for pregnant women and their families. CffDNA testing offers a safer alternative that can provide accurate information about the fetus's health without the added risk. CffDNA testing is also more accurate than traditional prenatal screening tests such as the first-trimester combined test. The detection rates for common chromosomal abnormalities such as Down syndrome are higher with cffDNA testing than with traditional screening tests.

Limitations of cffDNA testing is not without its limitations. One of the most significant limitations is the high cost of the test, which can be a barrier for many families. In addition, cffDNA testing is not a diagnostic test, and a positive result must be confirmed with invasive prenatal diagnosis methods. Another limitation is the fact that cffDNA testing is not 100% accurate. False positives and false negatives can occur, although the rate of false positives is lower than with traditional screening tests. False negatives are more likely to occur when the concentration of cffDNA is low, such as in early pregnancy or in cases of fetal mosaicism.

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Received: 13-Mar-2023, Manuscript No. MAGE-23-23863; **Editor assigned:** 17-Mar-2023, Pre QC No. MAGE-23-23863 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 31-Mar-2023, QC No. MAGE-23-23863; **Revised:** 07-Apr-2023, Manuscript No. MAGE-23-23863 (R); **Published:** 14-Apr-2023, DOI: 10.35248/2169-0111.23.12.219

Citation: Mallet E (2023) Cell-Free Fetal DNA and its Significance in Prenatal Diagnosis. Advac Genet Eng. 12:219.