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### Review article

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### **Experimental animal models of osteonecrosis**

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#### **Abstract**

**The objective** was to analyze experimental animal models of osteonecrosis (ON) using the femoral head, show advantages and disadvantages, capacity to translate the findings for adult and pediatric orthopaedics, potential model modifications for orthopaedic and rheumatology research. **Material and methods** The original literature search was conducted on key resources including PubMed, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, E-library, and the Springer databank. Literature searches included Russian, English, and Italian studies. The research covered studies of 1980 to 2021 and included important landmarks of laboratory experiments with animal models. **Results and discussion** Although there was no ON model with ideal conditions found for it, the choice of a model could be based on the researcher's goal reproducing ON as a type of "osteochondropathy" to explore the results applicable to pediatric orthopaedics or classical ON in adults. Animals with long-term open growth plates, intensive blood circulation in the bone and rapid regeneration being characteristic of juvenile models of rats, rabbits and pigs could be appropriate for the experiment. Dogs, sheep, pigs and emus, in particular, were practical for reproducing ON in adults. Non-traumatic models of ON in adults were reversible and consistent with early stages of the condition. **Conclusion** The need for ON simulation increased due to progressing orthobiological techniques (PRP-therapy, BMCs technologies, etc.) in the treatment of ON. Application of orthobiological treatment resulted in heterogeneous, scattered outcomes being statistically unreliable and necessitating the search for optimal animal models and assessment of treatment methods for ON in modern orthopaedics.

**Keywords:** femoral head osteonecrosis, osteochondropathy, animal model, experiment, orthobiologics

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## INTRODUCTION

Osteonecrosis (ON) is a group of pathological conditions of unknown etiology and is characterized by impaired metabolism of bone, cartilage and microcirculation in the nidus, development of secondary osteoarthritis of the adjacent joint [1-4]. ON commonly affects the head and condyles of the femur, epicondyle of the tibia, the head of the shoulder and the talus [5]. ON of childhood and adolescence is classified as a group of so-called "osteochondropathy" with a frequency of 0.4-20.9:100,000 in Legg-Calve-Perthes disease (LCPD) [6]. Important manifestation of ON include: early onset (5-14 years and 30-45 years, 3♂ : 1♀); lack of treatment in the early stages that leads to deformity of the articular surfaces in 80 % of cases; the risk of high instability of total joint replacement as a method of treatment – up to 40 % of cases in the first 10-15 years; early disability and limited mobility [6-9]. Etiopathogenetic causes of ON development include idiopathic (possibly hormonal overload) spasm of microvasculature and transition

to ischemic stasis and local bone infarction due to increased cellular hypoxia [6, 10]. Most methods of treating ON in clinical practice are reduced to eliminating the mechanical collapse of the bone tissue in the affected area (rotational osteotomies, auto- and alloplasty with bone grafts, tunnel decompression) and the methods show obscure results at a long term [4, 5]. There is a need of new treatment protocols that can be developed and tested at preclinical trials [11]. Early and late stages of ON are perfectly reproduced on the animal model, which must meet the following criteria: it should reflect the whole of the etiological factors of the process; reflect all stages of development of the osteonecrotic process, including repair [5]. The objective was to analyze experimental animal models of osteonecrosis (ON) using the femoral head, show advantages and disadvantages, capacity to translate the findings for adult and pediatric orthopaedics, potential model modifications for orthopaedic and rheumatology research.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The original literature search was conducted on key resources including PubMed, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, E-library, and the Springer databank using keywords: osteonecrosis, experimental model, in vivo/in vitro experiments, laboratory animals. Literature searches included Russian, English, and

Italian studies. The research covered studies of 1980 to 2021 and included important landmarks of laboratory experiments with animal models. The inclusion criteria included: review articles, multicentre studies, controlled cohort studies, uncontrolled cohort studies, case-control studies in animals with reproducible ON.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The set of experimental models is presented in Figure 1 with the description, advantages and disadvantages to be presented in our review.

### Animal model of ON caused by trauma

Traumatically induced ON can be divided into three large groups according to the mechanism of reproduction: 1) ON caused by surgical vascular deprivation; 2) ON caused by physical factors; 3) ON caused by chemical factors. Physically and chemically induced ON can cause changes similar to bone infarction and potentially lead to subchondral bone collapse. The model of ON caused by vascular deprivation can capacitate study of microcirculatory disorders in detail as a link in the pathogenesis of multifactorial pathology. In Russia, Prof. G.S. Kilchevsky offered a method for modeling avascular necrosis of the femoral head in 1963 [12]. The method suggested an intracapsular circular section of the synovial membrane performed at the base of the neck and ligation of the round ligament of the femoral head. M. Nishino et al. [13] explored the model in adult dogs reproducing ON by dislocating the femoral head and ligating the medial and lateral circumferential arteries and veins. MRI showed extensive areas of subchondral necrosis of the femoral head in 80 % of the animals at 2 and 4 weeks, however, the animals were not followed up.

J.G. Hofstaetter et al. [14] reproduced ON in adult rabbit models. They created a model by complex surgical removal of the joint capsule, catheterization and sealing of the periosteal vessels, ligation of the round ligament of the femoral head, and destruction of the bone marrow through a narrow channel along the posterior wall of the femoral head to interrupt intramedullary blood flow. CT and histological examination indicated to ON in 2 out of 15 (13.3 %) animals at 6 and 12 months, and zones of osteolysis and subchondral fractures were seen in the remaining rabbits. This might be due to the reversibility

of ON, in four-legged animals, in particular, as well as the long period of observation in the rabbit model, which had an increased blood flow even in adulthood.

Many studies [15–20] reported simulated ON in rat models, where the condition was reproduced by dislocation of the femoral head, transection of the round ligament, double dissection of the capsule and periosteum. Some researchers recorded ON, bone neoformation without collapse (decrease in head height) at 42 days [15–17]. The predominance of osteoporosis and osteoarthritis over ON was reported [19–20]. The piglet model was another popular model of ON with vascular deprivation [21–24] and used ligation of the femoral head and transection of the ligamentum teres. J.G. Hofstaetter et al. [24] reported gross radiological and morphological necrotic changes similar to the initial stage of LCPD with delayed epiphyseal growth at 4 weeks and severe flattening of the head at 8 weeks. M.F. Swiontkowski et al. [25] demonstrated a different model of ON in a piglet using an iatrogenic fracture of the femoral neck and internal fixation of the head with a metal construct. Histological examination showed ON foci in all animals with disoriented trabeculae and mechanical collapse of the subchondral zones at 8 weeks and similar results were recorded by J.G. Seiler et al. [26] on 12-week-old piglets, reproducing the protocol of the Swiontkowski experiment. In 2004, a team of authors together with Prof. I.V. Kirgizova offered a method for creating a model of osteochondropathy of the femoral head in the experiment. Changes in the bone structure characteristic of ON were achieved by increasing the intraosseous pressure. The study was conducted on 10 outbred dogs aged 4–6 months. A sterile stainless metal clamp was placed around the femur and tightened for periosteal compression [27]. The authors reported the method as reliable and received histological evidence of ON at 4–6 weeks.

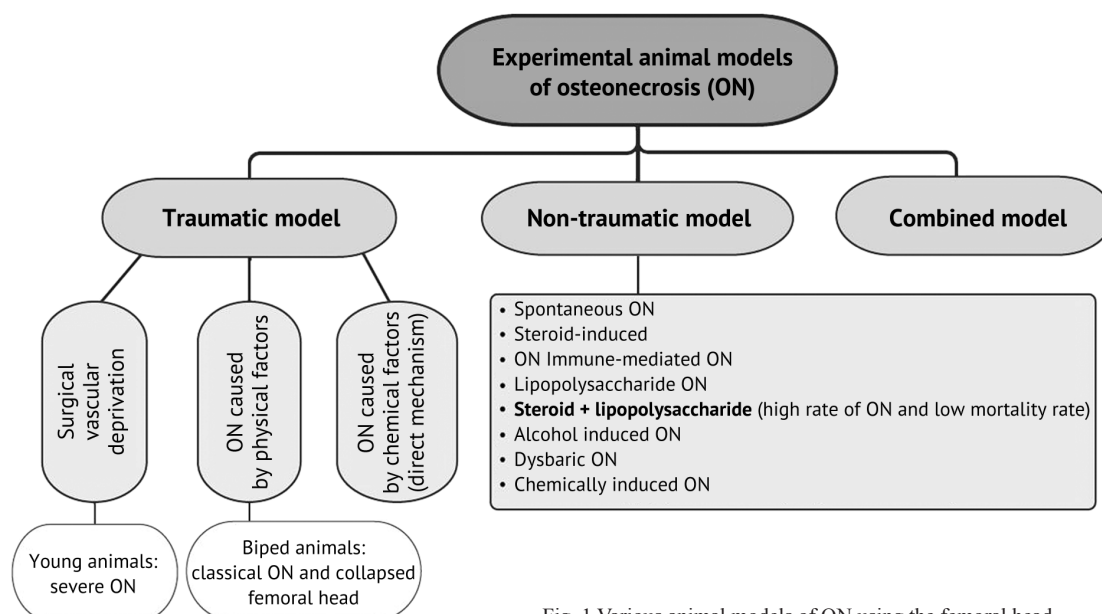


Fig. 1 Various animal models of ON using the femoral head

**Animal model of ON caused by physical factors**

Cryogenic and thermal physical factors are successfully used to provoke the development of ON. Despite the fact that the ON caused by the factors is not of a natural nature, the staging of the process corresponds to classical changes [28-30]. The cryodestruction causes cellular and vascular destruction. Local hyperthermia at 43-45°C with a constant effect on paraarticular tissues for a certain period indirectly induces cell apoptosis due to overheating of the cell fluid and cytostructures including DNA [31]. V.A. Filippenko et al. offered a method for modeling the ON of the femoral head using direct exposure to liquid nitrogen on the upper pole of the experimental femur of an animal (rabbit/dog) twice with a cryoprobe at a temperature of -100 °C at the border of the cartilaginous cover of the head for 5 minutes with an interval of 4 weeks. The authors reported the positive results with the method reported [32]. Other authors simulated ON in horses by deep freezing with a cryoprobe and exfoliation of the periosteum from the neck and intertrochanteric zone, but the result was poor: an incomplete defect of the femoral head was obtained without signs of collapse, and the staging of the process did not correspond to the classical grading [33]. M.G. Conzemius et al. [34] modeled ON on emu ostriches by local injection of liquid nitrogen on the femoral head near the transition to the neck and additional ligature ligation of the vessels. This experiment showed very good results with the changes reflecting stages of necrosis. Gait disturbance in the form of lameness was noted in 16 of 19 birds, cartilage fragmentation and loss of the shape of the articular end noted in 13 of 19 birds and a subcapital fracture seen in 4 birds [34]. Other authors reported a similar model of ON in sheep, having obtained histological verification of the process at 6-12 weeks with no decrease in the height of the femoral head [35]. There is a well-known model of ON in rabbits, caused by microwave heat with a temperature effect on the femoral head at 55 °C for 10 minutes [30]. The authors reported large areas of damage thin a short period of time (up to 4 weeks) with symptoms of osteoporosis, degenerative cysts, and spontaneous ON repair at 6-8 weeks, and 69 % of the animals lost their normal configuration of the femoral head due to collapse at 12 weeks. There are works describing simulated ON using X-ray focus therapy [36-39], however, the experiments were accompanied by technical difficulties and suffering of animals, and the results of most of them were rated as poor with no staging and collapse in ON.

**Animal model of ON caused by chemical factors**

J. Manggold et al. [40] induced ON in sheep by intraosseous administration of ethanol obtaining histologically verified partial necrosis in the animals

at 12 weeks. One animal died at the time of injection and a subcapital fracture was seen in another animal at 6 weeks. Some authors suggested blowing talc into the joint cavity and injecting the coal tar preparation subperiosteally (in dogs). The method was supplemented by alcoholization of the sacral plexus with 96° alcohol. The authors reported grade I AVN at 2 months, grade II AVN at 3 months, and grade III AVN at 4.5 months [41], however, access to the joint was required for the experiment which could result in inflammatory complications. In 2006 A.S. Boyko published a dissertation study and described a method for ON modeling with a thrombovar introduced into the subepiphyseal zone of the femur of an experimental animal (dog). The syndrome of local hypercoagulation with impaired venous outflow from the proximal femoral epimetaphysis was shown to be one of the main links in the pathogenesis of AVN of the femoral head based on the experimental model [42].

**Animal model of ON caused by non-traumatic factors**

Non-traumatic ON can be divided into three major groups according to the mechanism of reproduction: 1) steroid-induced, 2) lipopolysaccharide-induced, and 3) mediated chemically-induced (horse serum, alcohol, baric factor, etc.). Some authors reported the so-called spontaneous ON in laboratory animals with negligible results [43, 44].

**Steroid-induced ON in an animal model**

The targeted intake of corticosteroids is one of the proven and direct factors in the development of ON in humans [45]. There are many reports in the literature describing an experimental model of steroid-induced ON, however, the interpretation of the results is important for orthopaedic surgeon treating the adult population, with few cases of steroid-induced ON in the pediatric population. Many studies describe the formation of an ON model in rabbits by the schematic administration of methylprednisolone intramuscularly [46, 47]. In one study, rabbits were injected intramuscularly with metipred at a rate of 20 mg/kg once, and signs of necrosis were recorded in 83 % of the animals; the diagnosis was histologically verified 3 weeks after injection [48]. Other authors, using similar models, obtained 70 % of ON with histological verification of the diagnosis after 4 weeks with 20 % mortality from injection [49] or a preclinical stage of bone marrow edema without transition to ON [50]. X Zhang et al. [51] described steroid-induced ON in rats with the administration of metipred at a rate of 21 mg/kg/daily/4 weeks in 80 % of animals with osteochondropathy (i.e., with preservation of trabecular osteoblasts). Other authors [52] published the results of an experiment on a chicken model with intramuscular administration of metipred 3 mg/kg/during a week, and received ON

with repair in 4 out of 12 chickens at 24 weeks with 48 % of the birds died. A. Xavier et al. [53] performed a systematic review of works published between 2011 and 2021, studied 284 full-text studies and statistically analyzed 53 protocols for creating a model of ON and osteoporosis using steroids. The authors obtained the following results: 1) the most popular animal models were rats (66 % of works) and mice (32 %), rabbits and sheep accounted for no more than 1 %, piglets/horses/dogs, etc. were used in 1 % of works; 2) dexamethasone was used in 49 % of studies, prednisolone in 22 %, and metipred in 14 % of cases intramuscularly and in 22 % of cases and 14 % orally; 3) dosages of prednisolone for rats ranged from 0.1 mg/kg/daily/60 days or 25 mg/kg/2 times a week/6 weeks; for mice, prednisolone was administered at 0.8 mg/kg/daily/3 weeks or 4 mg/kg/daily/3 weeks; rabbits and sheep were given dexamethasone 3 mg/kg/twice a week/12 weeks and prednisolone 0.6 mg/kg/5 times a week/7 months. Unfortunately, direct comparison between studies on model efficacy has been difficult due to heterogeneity of information regarding dose, route of administration, duration, and type of bioavailability in animals.

#### **Lipopolysaccharide-induced ON**

There are a number of studies devoted to the study of ON obtained by this method. A group of authors [54] reported ON obtained on a rabbit model by a single intravenous injection of lipopolysaccharide (10 µg/kg) and fixed in 77 % of cases in a multifocal form at 4 weeks (4 out of 35 rabbits died after the administration of the drug). ON developed similarly to the Schwartzman reaction due to the organization of microthrombi in the microvasculature of the subchondral bone; necrosis in the epiphysis was achieved only in 9 % of the animals. A. Sakaguchi et al. [55] reported daily administration of lipopolysaccharide to male rats (n = 5) resulted in histologically verified ON in all animals at 4 week despite the parallel administration of bisphosphonates.

#### **Mediated chemically induced OH**

##### **(horse serum, alcohol, baric factor, etc.)**

ON can be caused by the introduction of various immune preparations. Some authors [56] simulated the process in rabbits by intravenously injecting sterile inactivated horse serum 10 ml/kg twice for 3 weeks and obtained signs of an early stage of necrosis in 64 % of the animals by the third week of the experiment without subchondral collapse. There are numerous works reporting modeling of ON by a combined administration of steroids and lipopolysaccharides [57-59] or horse serum [60], however, the results cannot be interpreted due to the small number of animals, the absence of severe stages of ON and the high mortality of animals.

The model of alcohol-associated ON is popular in Asian countries, in China, in particular [45]. A protocol

for modeling ON in mice was developed with alcohol (20 ml/kg, 46 % ethanol solution) being injected into the stomach and ON with decreased height of the femoral head and epiphysis developed at 6 months [61]. C. Jaffre et al. [62] analyzed a number of studies investigating the association of daily alcohol intake in rats/rabbits for 4-6 weeks with the onset of ON and concluded that the results are difficult to interpret based on the current understanding of the effects of alcohol on bone metabolism, and there are problems related to protocol including dose, duration, and possible alcohol withdrawal in animals. Some authors demonstrated the simulation of ON by pressure. For example, C.E. Lehner et al. [63] reported dysbaric ON in adult sheep 12-13 and 24 hours after exposure to compressed air (2.6-2.9 atmospheres) for 2 months, however, only small areas of osteolysis were histologically obtained.

There is an interest in creating a biological model of ON with etiopathogenetic considerations and pathophysiological stages of the process. The technique is essential due to the widespread introduction of minimally invasive orthobiological techniques in the treatment of orthopaedic pathology [64, 65]. We came to the conclusion that a model with ideal conditions for it does not exist, however, given the initial goals and desired results, the choice is still possible. The cost of acquisition and care, availability, tolerance to captivity and ease of maintenance, adaptability in the group, low operating costs, resistance to infections and diseases, uniformity of animals, similarity to humans in biological characteristics, tolerability of surgical interventions are the main factors in the choice of animals. The lifespan of the species should be appropriate for the duration of the study [66]. Rats, rabbits and dogs are optimal models. Despite the fact that many authors [67, 68] have studied the differences in the composition, density, and quality of bones in different species (humans, dogs, sheep, pigs, cows, chickens) and have come to the conclusion that the bone tissue of dogs and pigs is more similar to human, this may not be a fundamental point for modeling ON, since the bone tissue is of the same type in terms of anatomical and pathomorphological nature. The type of animal does not matter, since there is a pathogenetic effect on bone tissue in the methods proposed [69]. The division is due to the researcher's goal of reproducing ON by the type of "osteochondropathy" to study the results applicable to pediatric orthopaedics or classical ON of an adult. Animals with long-term open growth plates, intensive blood circulation in the bone and rapid regeneration are practical for osteochondropathy, which are characteristic to the rat, rabbit and pig models [64]. With the multifactorial nature of ON in children and the minimality of the traumatic agent, it is preferable to use non-traumatic models of ON (Fig. 1) with minimal



surgical or chemical exposure to foreign substances, i.e., a combination of steroid-induced ON with low vascular deprivation [12-27]. The pathophysiological model offered by I.I. Kuzhelevsky et al. [70], who developed a model using paraarticular norepinephrine in combination with exercise can be more promising. Reproducing ON in adults, preference is given to dogs, sheep, pigs and emus, in particular. Bipodal emus demonstrated excellent results of ON staging, taking into

account clinical manifestations [34]. The disadvantage with the model is slow growth and costly maintenance. Traumatic models of pathology with the advantage of focal necrosis of the femoral head, staging up to the complete collapse of the head and a decrease in the height are excellent for an adult ON. Non-traumatic models of ON in adults showed less remarkable data with necrosis being often reversible or consistent with early stages.

## CONCLUSION

There is a need to search for animal models to reproduce avascular necrosis as a common pathological process in orthopaedics with catastrophic consequences for the individual. The need for ON modeling has increased due to the progress of orthobiological techniques (PRP-therapy, BMCs-technologies, etc.) in the treatment of early stages

of the disease with diagnosis being available in clinical practice. However, the results of the treatment methods are heterogeneous, scattered, statistically relative and are subject of discussion. The search for optimal animal models and assessment of methods for the treatment of ON in modern orthopaedics is a necessity.

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