

## Biomarkers of aging

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Received January 19, 2023; accepted February 27, 2023; published online April 11, 2023

Aging biomarkers are a combination of biological parameters to (i) assess age-related changes, (ii) track the physiological aging process, and (iii) predict the transition into a pathological status. Although a broad spectrum of aging biomarkers has been developed, their potential uses and limitations remain poorly characterized. An immediate goal of biomarkers is to help us answer the following three fundamental questions in aging research: How old are we? Why do we get old? And how can we age slower? This review aims to address this need. Here, we summarize our current knowledge of biomarkers developed for cellular, organ, and organismal levels of aging, comprising six pillars: physiological characteristics, medical imaging, histological features, cellular alterations, molecular changes, and secretory factors. To fulfill all these requisites, we propose that aging biomarkers should qualify for being specific, systemic, and clinically relevant.

### aging, senescence, biomarker, clock

**Citation:** Aging Biomarker Consortium, Bao, H., Cao, J., Chen, M., Chen, M., Chen, W., Chen, X., Chen, Y., Chen, Y., Chen, Y., et al. (2023). Biomarkers of aging. *Sci China Life Sci* 66, 893–1066. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11427-023-2305-0>

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## Introduction

Do we truly know how old we are biologically, that is, more accurately describing the status of our body than our chronological ages? Are some people at higher risk of certain types of age-related diseases, i.e., cardiovascular disorders or neurodegenerative diseases, and how can they be identified? Or how do we know if any of the claimed geroprotective treatments are effective? To answer these questions, we need to establish biomarkers for aging. In a broad aspect, these biomarkers are defined as scientifically measured parameters of the physiological aging process, to measure age-related changes and to predict the transition into a pathological status.

As a biological measurement to qualify aging, a biomarker must be specific, systemic, and serviceable. (i) Specific: aging is such a heterogeneous process that it proceeds at different rates in different individuals and varies in different organs, even in the same individual. Therefore, it is impossible to have one biomarker for the entire organism but different ones or even different sets of biomarkers for different organs for evaluation; *vice versa*, each biomarker should be able to capture a unique aging signal of the relevant organ. Moreover, aging biomarkers should be predictive of the risk of disease development, which requires a specific threshold for the transition from physiological aging to pathological disorder. (ii) Systemic: aging involves almost

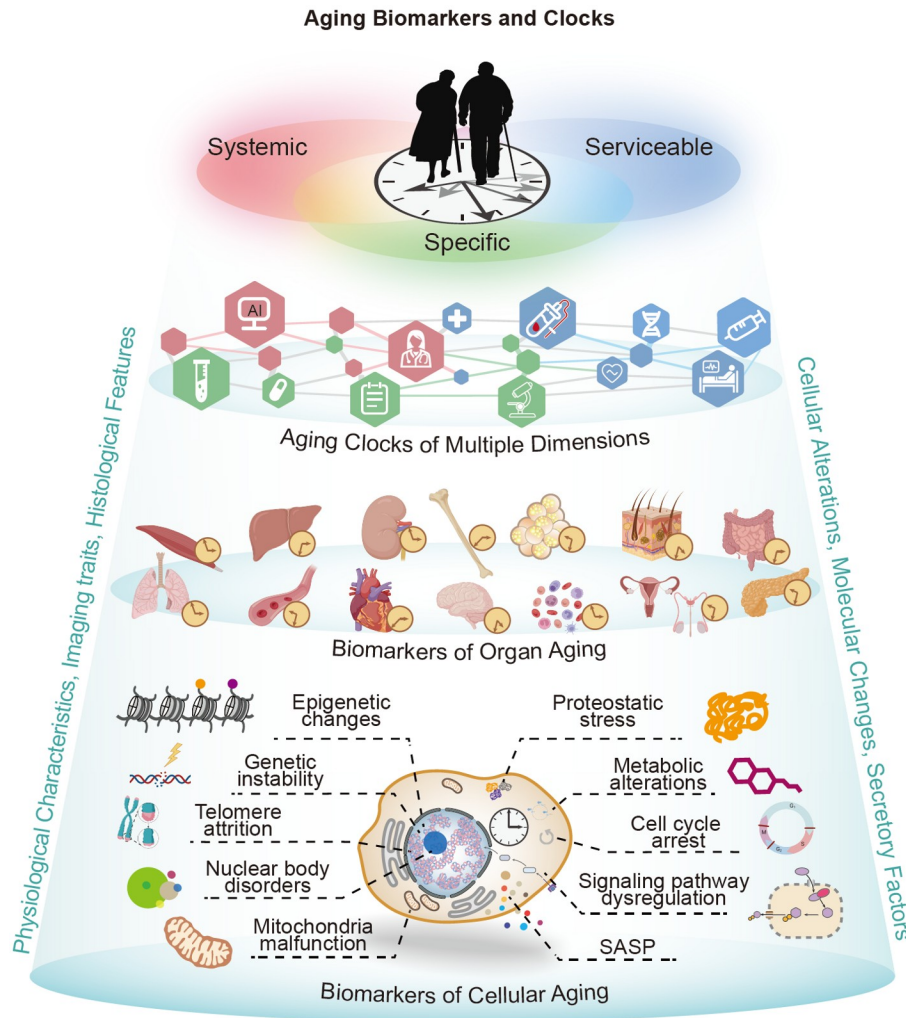
every organ system, comprising numerous interconnected biological processes. Moreover, changes in one organ may elicit compensatory mechanisms or systemic feedback across the body. Therefore, biomarkers should be able to reflect such systemic changes with age, and a collection of biomarkers from multiple dimensions is required for this aspect. (iii) Serviceable: biomarkers collected through non-invasive or minimally invasive methods are particularly suited for translation into clinical practice. As aging is a gradually deteriorating process over time, longitudinal studies are needed, and again, non-invasive measurements are preferred. In larger cohort studies, cost and convenience should be considered when choosing biomarkers. In all, being specific, systemic, and serviceable are as critical to the broad spectrum of aging biomarkers as the three primary colors.

Over the years, various data types and modeling techniques have been used to develop a broad spectrum of aging biomarkers. Based on the nature of these parameters used for aging biomarkers, the collection of alterations with age can be categorized into 6 classes, or 6 pillars, although biomarkers in different categories are often interconnected with each other. There are higher-order types of changes that reflect physiological and functional changes, such as physiological characteristics, imaging traits, and histological features. Additionally, there are more causal or mechanistic driver types of biomarkers, such as cellular alterations and molecular changes. Finally, there are biomarkers serving in between, such as hormones and secretory factors that are detectable in body fluids, such as blood, urine, saliva, and cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), among which those act in a paracrine manner are of particular interest. The latter three types, as they may also serve as hallmarks or drivers of aging, may be targeted to intervene in the aging process.

However, the predictions of biological ages based on different variables are often inconsistent. In certain cases, a thoughtful set of aging biomarkers could be more reliable and useful to solve this problem. To clarify these confusions, we compile current knowledge of aging biomarkers to provide a comprehensive reference for researchers in academia and industry and medical practitioners in geriatrics and gerontology. We cover biomarkers across the dimensions of cellular, organ, organismal and population aging, each organized according to the 6 pillars of classification. Additionally, we demonstrate how this broad spectrum of biomarkers is utilized in various prediction models, or aging clocks, and applied in cohort studies. Finally, we discuss an important aspect of aging studies, that is, the ethical and social implications of aging biomarkers (Figure 1).

## Biomarkers of cellular aging

At the foundation of the hierarchy of aging biomarkers are



**Figure 1** Aging biomarkers reflect biological ages at the cellular, organ, and organismal levels. Three criteria, i.e., being specific, systemic, and serviceable, determine the spectrum of biomarkers as three primary colors. The complex collection of aging biomarkers is supported by six pillars: physiological characteristics, imaging traits, histological features, cellular alterations, molecular changes, and secretory factors. Abbreviation: SASP, senescence-associated secretory phenotype.

those for cellular aging. Cells are the building blocks of organs and organisms, and cellular aging serves as the driving force of organ and organismal aging. Thus, biomarkers at this level not only monitor a basic cellular process underlying the aging process, but may also exert impacts higher up on the entire organ or organism. However, there are only a few widely accepted biomarkers of cellular aging, such as senescence-associated beta-galactosidase (SA- $\beta$ -gal) activity, although their functions are still not well understood. We propose the following ten aspects of cellular aging biomarkers: epigenetic changes, genetic instability, telomere shortening, nuclear body disorders, cell cycle arrest, mitochondrial malfunction, proteostatic stress, metabolic alterations, signaling pathway rerouting, and senescence-associated secretory phenotype (SASP). We cover each aspect in a separate section. In particular, we will introduce these biomarkers for how they reflect changes associated

with age and how they drive aging as well. Therefore, these biomarkers will broaden our understanding of the basic mechanism of aging and may serve as potential targets for aging interventions.

### Epigenetic alterations

Over the past decades, great efforts have been made to categorize molecular hallmarks of aging, many of which also qualify as aging biomarkers (López-Otín et al., 2013; López-Otín et al., 2023). Epigenetics is defined as reversible heritable mechanisms that occur without alterations in the DNA sequence (Jaenisch and Bird, 2003), and epigenetic alterations have been reported to be crucial in aging and age-related diseases. These aging-associated epigenetic biomarkers include altered genomic DNA methylation, aberrant histone modifications, loss of heterochromatin, reorganized

three-dimensional (3D) genome architecture, and deregulated RNA modifications. They lead to altered local accessibility to genetic material, aberrant transcription such as retrotransposon elements, and genomic instability, thereby contributing to aging and age-related diseases (Li et al., 2019d; Pal and Tyler, 2016; Wang et al., 2022a; Zhang et al., 2020d) (Figure 2). Therefore, understanding epigenetic biomarkers in aging will help to address the fundamental questions—“how old are we?” and “why do we age?”, which provides new avenues to develop strategies to delay aging.

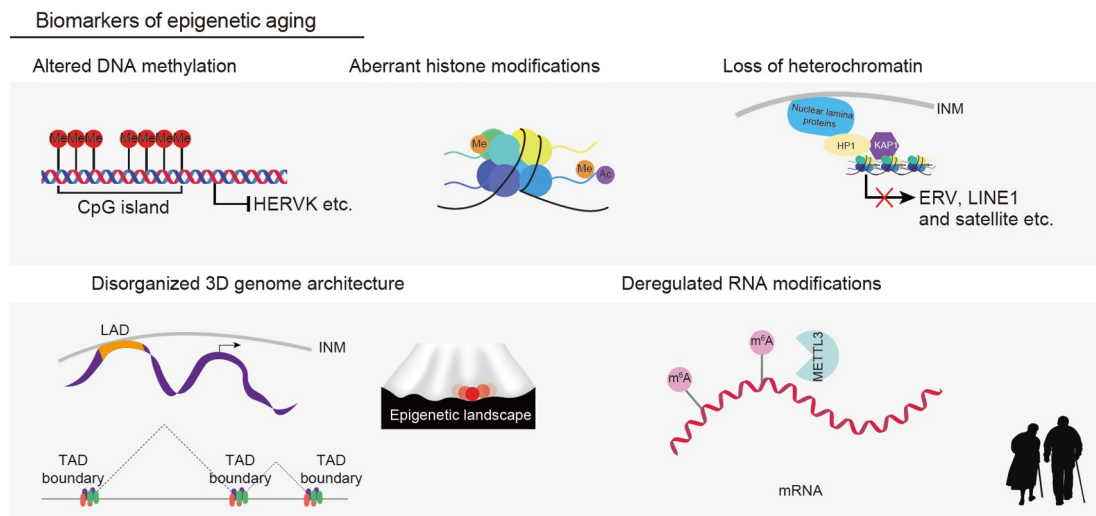
### Altered DNA methylation

Global and local DNA methylation changes in the genome during aging are among the most extensively studied and best characterized epigenetic biomarkers during aging (Field et al., 2018; Horvath and Raj, 2018). Hypermethylation of CpG islands within promoters leads to transcriptional repression; conversely, hypomethylation allows gene expression (Horvath, 2013; Salameh et al., 2020). A global decrease in DNA methylation is observed during aging in a variety of species, which may be attributed to the progressive decline in levels of the DNA methyltransferase 1 (DNMT1) (Jung and Pfeifer, 2015). In contrast, *de novo* methylation increases with age due to the upregulation of other DNMTs, such as DNMT3A and DNMT3B (Yagi et al., 2020), suggesting that changes in DNA methylation patterns during aging can be a good indicator of aging. Using machine learning methods and based on DNA methylation patterns at certain CpG sites, Horvath (2013) and Hannum et al. (2013) developed the first-generation epigenetic biomarker of aging, DNAmAge, also known as the “epigenetic clock”, which is able to estimate the age of most tissues and cell types, and predict outcomes of aging, including mortality

risk and age-related diseases. Since then, multiple epigenetic clocks have been reported with greater accuracy, precision, and broader application prospects in aging research. For example, by combining multiple clinical biomarkers, PhenoAge can predict a variety of aging outcomes, including all-cause mortality, cancers, healthspan, physical functioning, and Alzheimer’s disease (AD) (Levine et al., 2018). GrimAge, a more predictive epigenetic clock for identifying clinical phenotypes, is based on seven DNA methylation surrogates and a DNA methylation-based estimator of smoking pack-years (Lu et al., 2019; McCrory et al., 2021). A single-cell age clock (scAge) has recently developed using single-cell methylation data, which is able to discriminate the age of cells in heterogeneous tissues and recapitulate the chronological age of tissues in mice (Trapp et al., 2021). Consequently, the altered methylation pattern contributes to the deregulation of aging-associated genes (Field et al., 2018; Li et al., 2022h; Zhang et al., 2020d). Recently, Liu et al. showed that reduced DNA methylation levels of human endogenous retrovirus (HERV) elements are associated with the resurrection of endogenous retroviruses during aging, which acts as both biomarkers and drivers of aging in multiple aging cell models, as well as various organs and species (Dasgupta and Adams, 2023; Liu et al., 2023b; Thuault, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023; Zlotorynski, 2023). In summary, these epigenetic clocks are promising models using aging biomarkers for predicting biological age and assessing the efficacy of aging interventions.

### Aberrant histone modifications

Changes in histone modifications such as methylation and acetylation are widely studied during cellular senescence (Pal and Tyler, 2016; Wang et al., 2022a; Zhang et al.,



**Figure 2** Biomarkers of epigenetic aging. Epigenetic biomarkers include altered genomic DNA methylation, aberrant histone modifications, loss of heterochromatin, reorganized 3D genome architecture, and deregulated RNA modifications. Abbreviations: LINE1, long interspersed nuclear element 1; INM, inner nuclear membrane; LAD, lamina-associated domain; TAD, topologically associating domains; Me, methylation; Ac, acetylation; ERV, endogenous retrovirus; HERVK, human endogenous retrovirus type K.

2020d). H3K4me3, a marker associated with active transcription, has also been shown to increase with age in yeast, *C. elegans*, and a mouse model of AD but decrease in aged human hematopoietic stem cells (HSCs) and neurons (Adelman et al., 2019; Cao et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2010; Cruz et al., 2018; Pu et al., 2018). Reduced H3K27me3 was observed in prematurely aged cells from Hutchinson-Gilford progeria syndrome (HGPS, *LMNA*<sup>G608G/+</sup>) patients and in aged *C. elegans* (Guillermo et al., 2021; McCord et al., 2013). Global loss of H3K9me3 has been reported in aged *Drosophila* intestinal stem cells (ISCs), in aged nematode somatic tissues, as well as in various human mesenchymal progenitor cells (hMPCs), including those with pathogenic mutations of Werner syndrome (WS, *WRN*<sup>-/-</sup>) (Jeon et al., 2018; Zhai et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2015). Reduced expression of the H3K9me3 methyltransferase SUV39H1 was observed in senescent cells, and inactivation of SUV39H1 in wild-type hMPCs led to a reduction in overall H3K9me3 and induction of cellular senescence (Zhang et al., 2015).

Similar to changes in histone methylations observed during aging, decreased levels of H3K56ac and increased levels of H4K16ac are also associated with replicative aging in yeast and human fibroblasts (Dang et al., 2009; O'Sullivan et al., 2010). Sirtuin family members, evolutionarily conserved nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide (NAD<sup>+</sup>)-dependent histone deacetylases, have been implicated in aging and age-related diseases (Bi et al., 2020; Diao et al., 2021; Simon et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2020a). Impaired deacetylation of H3K56 upon Sirt6 deletion promoted HSC proliferation through aberrant activation of Wnt signaling (Wang et al., 2016a). Ectopic expression of Sirt7 alleviated prematurely senescent phenotypes and extended the lifespan in a Hutchinson-Gilford progeria mouse model (Sun et al., 2020a). It has also been reported that global histone hypoacetylation, particularly a decrease in H4K12ac, occurs in repetitive DNA elements in aged mouse brains (Peleg et al., 2010). Furthermore, via genome-wide CRISPR/Cas9-based loss-of-function screens, Wang et al. (2021e) identified KAT7, a histone acetyltransferase, as a senescence driver in both HGPS and WS hMPCs. Inactivation of KAT7 decreased H3K14ac levels in the promoter region of p15<sup>INK4b</sup>, a cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor that mediates cell cycle arrest, leading to suppression of p15<sup>INK4b</sup> transcription and ultimately alleviating cellular senescence. Thus, substantial changes in histone modifications occur during aging and age-related diseases, providing new insights into the development of aging intervention strategies. In the future, more research is needed to refine the regulatory mechanisms between these modifications and aging.

#### Loss of heterochromatin

Heterochromatin domains tightly pack DNA into an inaccessible and transcriptionally inactivated structure (Dixon

et al., 2012). Heterochromatin is associated with specific proteins, such as heterochromatin protein 1 (HP1), and specific histone modifications, such as H3K9me3 (Becker et al., 2016; Maison and Almouzni, 2004). Accompanied by global reduction of H3K9me3, loss of heterochromatin has been reported to be associated with cellular senescence from yeast to humans and with the onset of age-related diseases (Pal and Tyler, 2016; Tsurumi and Li, 2012; Villeponteau, 1997). Loss of heterochromatic mating-type loci or ribosomal DNA (rDNA) leads to genomic instability, sterility, and aging in yeast (Kennedy et al., 1997; Kobayashi, 2011; Sinclair and Guarente, 1997). Diminished heterochromatin-associated inner nuclear membrane (INM) proteins LAP2 and LBR and reduced heterochromatin structure underneath the nuclear envelope were also observed in HGPS patients, stem cell models of Werner syndrome, and prematurely senescent stem cells with deficiency of zinc finger protein with KRAB and SCAN domains 3 (ZKSCAN3), Ddb1- and Cul4-associated factor 11 (Dcaf11), DiGeorge syndrome critical region gene (DGCR8, a protein critical for microRNA (miRNA) biogenesis), SIRT3 and SIRT7, as well as circadian locomotor output cycles protein kaput (CLOCK) and brain and muscle arnt-like 1 (BMAL1, two core components of the molecular circadian clock machinery) (Bi et al., 2020; Deng et al., 2019; Diao et al., 2021; Goldman et al., 2004; Hu et al., 2020; Le et al., 2021; Liang et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2021; Scaffidi and Misteli, 2006; Zhang et al., 2015). Recently, Zhao et al. (2022a) found that apolipoprotein E (APOE), a component of lipoprotein particles that function in the homeostasis of cholesterol and other lipids, participated in autophagy-lysosomal pathway-mediated degradation of nuclear lamina proteins and a heterochromatin-associated protein KRAB-associated protein 1 (KAP1), thereby destabilizing heterochromatin and driving senescence. Knockdown of HP1 promoted cellular senescence, whereas replenishment of HP1 rescued premature senescent phenotypes (Bi et al., 2020; Deng et al., 2019; Diao et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2015). As an intrinsic feature of cellular senescence, heterochromatin erosion leads to the derepression of repetitive sequences such as ERV, long interspersed nuclear element 1 (LINE1) and satellite repeats, and activation of innate immune signaling via the cyclic guanosine monophosphate (GMP)-adenosine monophosphate (AMP) synthase (cGAS)-stimulator of interferon genes (STING) pathway (Bi et al., 2020; De Cecco et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2021; Simon et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2015). Treatment of senescent hMPCs with reverse transcriptase inhibitors, vitamin C, gallic acid (GA), or low-dose chloroquine (CQ) increased the levels of heterochromatin-associated marks, including H3K9me3 and HP1, leading to rejuvenation of cellular and tissue senescence (Bi et al., 2020; De Cecco et al., 2019; Geng et al., 2019; Li et al.,



2022e; Li et al., 2016a; Shan et al., 2022; Simon et al., 2019). In addition, by probing chromatin accessibility at single-cell resolution in the brains of young, middle-aged, and old mice, Zhang et al. (2022e) revealed increased chromatin accessibility within specific heterochromatin domains and activated expression of LINE1 elements in excitatory neurons of old mice. Taken together, the loss of constitutive heterochromatin has frequently been recognized as a biomarker of tissue and cellular aging.

#### *Disorganized 3D genome architecture*

Advances in various high-throughput sequencing technologies, such as high-throughput chromosome conformation capture (Hi-C), DNA adenine methyltransferase identification (DamID), and assay for transposase-accessible chromatin with high-throughput sequencing (ATAC-seq), enable mapping of epigenetic changes during senescence at higher-order structural levels, such as 3D genome architecture and chromatin accessibility (Bonev and Cavalli, 2016; Dixon et al., 2012; Kempfer and Pombo, 2020). Using prematurely senescent hMPC models, Liu et al. revealed an overall increase in chromatin entropy and epigenetic instability with aging (Liu et al., 2022b; Liu et al., 2022c; Zhao and Chen, 2022). Decompartmentalization, which is characterized by decreased DamID signals in lamina-associated domains (LADs) but increased signals in inter-LADs (iLADs) and the switch of topologically associating domains (TADs) from compacted and transcriptionally silenced (B) to open and transcriptionally active (A) compartments, especially in boundary regions, was observed in senescent hMPCs, which led to heterochromatin loss and activation of repressive compartments (Liu et al., 2022b; Liu et al., 2022c). In addition, a gain of A-B interactions was also observed in replicatively senescent human fibroblasts (Sati et al., 2020). Using a system called “ICE” (inducible changes to the epigenome), Yang et al. (2023) found that the act of faithful DNA repair led to erosion of the epigenetic landscape, deregulation of cellular function, and promotion of aging in mice, which can be reversed by OSK-mediated epigenetic reprogramming. Collectively, the reorganized 3D genome architecture is manifested as an increase in entropy, of which the extent may serve as a potential biomarker for aging, although there is still a long way for such measurement to be employed in clinical practice.

#### *Deregulated RNA modifications*

More than 170 types of RNA modifications have been identified, among which N<sup>6</sup>-methyladenosine (m<sup>6</sup>A) messenger RNA (mRNA) methylation is a well-known epitranscriptional regulatory mechanism that regulates mRNA metabolism, thereby affecting central biological processes (Deng et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2020b; Zhao et al., 2017).

The promoted translation of cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor (CDKI) p21<sup>CDKN1A</sup> via the methyltransferases (known as “writers”) METTL3/METTL14-mediated m<sup>6</sup>A methylation has been reported in H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>-induced cellular senescence of TP53-deficient human colon carcinoma cells (HCT116) (Li et al., 2017b). A global reduction in RNA m<sup>6</sup>A abundance was detected in sulforaphane (SFN)-induced senescence of cancer cells, and human peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) from aged cohorts (Lewinska et al., 2017; Min et al., 2018). Knockdown of METTL3 or METTL14 accelerated cellular senescence by destabilizing *AGO2* mRNA in human fibroblasts and reduced the production of miR-34a-5p in tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  (TNF $\alpha$ ) induced cellular senescence of human nucleus pulposus cells (NPCs) (Min et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2021a). Wu et al. demonstrated that METTL3 was reduced in prematurely senescent hMPCs, and knockout of METTL3 also accelerated hMPC senescence, resulting from markedly reduced m<sup>6</sup>A modifications and destabilized *MIS12* mRNA, a key regulator of cell proliferation (Wu et al., 2020c; Wu et al., 2022b). Another study showed that knockdown of METTL3 led to accelerated senescence by upregulating the expression of polo-like kinase 1 (PLK1), a critical cell cycle modulator, in an m<sup>6</sup>A-dependent manner (Luo et al., 2021). Moreover, knockout of obesity-associated protein (FTO), one of the “erasers” of m<sup>6</sup>A, also accelerated hMPC senescence, and downregulation of FTO led to increased overall m<sup>6</sup>A levels during ovarian aging in mice (Jiang et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022c). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that deregulation of m<sup>6</sup>A modification represents a novel epi-transcriptional biomarker in aging, and more investigation of m<sup>6</sup>A dynamics at the genome-wide scale is required to reveal its potential impact on aging.

#### *Summary and perspectives*

In summary, although great progress has been made in identifying epigenetic biomarkers to predict biological age, it is important to highlight that there is still prediction bias due to the small number of sample sets. In the future, combining multiple layers of epigenetic biomarkers using large-scale datasets from different cells, tissues, populations, species, and diseases will be demanded to provide a more precise prediction of biological age and to evaluate the outcomes of clinical aging interventions.

#### **Genetic instability**

Genetic instability is one of the fundamental biomarkers of aging. DNA, as the carrier of genetic information, undergoes various types of alterations with increasing age and further negatively affects normal cellular activities and tissue homeostasis, both of which are closely linked to biological aging. Many aspects of DNA-associated alterations con-

tribute to genetic instability, including but not limited to changes in DNA damage, DNA damage response (DDR) and repair, mutations, replication stress, transposition, chromosome aberrations, telomere shortening, micronuclei, and DNA fragments. Many of the aforementioned aspects have been demonstrated to serve as biomarkers of aging, which can be employed to reflect or predict cellular biological status. Here, we will briefly summarize the research progress on the following biomarkers of genetic instability and their relations with aging.

#### *DNA damage and repair*

According to the DNA damage theory of aging (Gensler and Bernstein, 1981), DNA lesions are recognized as the primary cause of aging. Supporting this idea, increased DNA damage in senescent cells, progeria cells, and aged individuals have been reported by a great number of studies (d'Adda di Fagagna et al., 2003; Liu et al., 2005; Sedelnikova et al., 2008; Sedelnikova et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2020b), making DNA damage a universal biomarker of aging. The frequency of  $\gamma$ H2AX foci, a well-known biomarker of double-strand breaks, is upregulated in senescent mouse embryonic fibroblasts and multiple organs, including liver, lung, dermis, crypt of the small intestine, and spleen lymphocytes, in aged mice (Wang et al., 2009).  $\gamma$ H2AX and 53BP1 foci, which commonly colocalize with each other, are also found in replicative senescent cells (d'Adda di Fagagna et al., 2003). The incidence of  $\gamma$ H2AX foci increases with age in human lymphocytes, and a higher level of  $\gamma$ H2AX foci is detected in fibroblasts derived from Werner syndrome patients (Sedelnikova et al., 2008).

Impaired DNA repair is one of the causes of DNA damage accumulation in aged cells, evidenced by reduced expression (Chen et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2020b; Ju et al., 2006; Redwood et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2020b) or delayed recruitment kinetics of DNA repair factors (Liu et al., 2005; Redwood et al., 2011; Sedelnikova et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2020b) and a decline in repair fidelity (Li et al., 2016b; Vaidya et al., 2014). Normally,  $\gamma$ H2AX foci are cleared upon completion of the repair process. However, a study delineated that senescence-associated  $\gamma$ H2AX foci might represent unreparable DNA lesions (Sedelnikova et al., 2004). Moreover, a kind of large and persistent DNA damage foci containing  $\gamma$ H2AX, 53BP1, MDC1, NBS1, MRE11 and phosphorylated ataxia telangiectasia-mutated (ATM) and CHK2, namely, DNA segments with chromatin alterations reinforcing senescence (DNA-SCARS), is observed in senescent cells and irradiated mouse tissues and found to be critical for maintaining senescence-associated phenotypes (Rodier et al., 2011).

In addition to double-strand breaks, the levels of oxidative DNA damage, measured by the amount of 8-hydroxy-2'-deoxyguanosine (8-OHdG), also significantly increase with

age in the liver, kidney, intestine, brain, and testes of rats (Fraga et al., 1990), in accordance with the oxidative stress theory of aging (Harman, 1956). Moreover, the levels of repair products of oxidative damage show an age-related decline in urine, suggesting impaired excision repair in aged rats (Fraga et al., 1990). Employing a plasmid reactivation assay, the capacity of base excision repair, which is responsible for mending oxidative DNA damage, has also been found to decline with increasing age in mesenchymal stem cells and skin fibroblasts (Xu et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2020b). Intriguingly, the alteration of DNA repair during the process of aging seems to be tissue type- and cell type-specific, which has been discussed in another review article (Chen et al., 2020c). Elucidating the age-related, context-dependent regulatory mechanisms of DNA repair with the aid of *in vivo* research models (Chen et al., 2022; Kass et al., 2016; Vaidya et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2020a) is still an important subject in the future.

The presence of large amounts of unrepaired or mis-repaired DNA damage also contributes to other biomarkers of aging. DNA damage has been reported to be one of the major causes of apoptosis (Wang, 2001), which underlies the age-related loss of tissue homeostasis (Park et al., 2008). In addition, independent of the state of cell cycle arrest, persistent DNA damage induces the secretion of inflammatory factors, such as interleukin-6 (IL-6) (Rodier et al., 2009), which is one of the components of the SASP, modulating the microenvironment in aged individuals. Although DNA damage and repair play a profound role in aging, whether targeting DNA repair can prevent age-related diseases and contribute to longevity requires further investigation.

#### *DNA damage response*

The DNA damage response is a molecular cascade mastering the cellular responsive activities once DNA damage occurs. The DNA damage response activates cell cycle checkpoints, initiates DNA repair, and determines the fate of damaged cells. Due to the failure to fix damaged DNA, factors involved in the DNA damage response are often overactivated in aged cells (Bartek et al., 2001; d'Adda di Fagagna et al., 2003; Kang et al., 2017; Park et al., 2015; Park et al., 2017), which can possibly be understood as a compensatory mechanism. DNA damage, particularly double-strand breaks, causes the phosphorylation and activation of CHK2, eventually leading to checkpoint activation and cell cycle arrest (Bartek et al., 2001). The phosphorylation of CHK2 and its upstream kinase, ATM, increases in senescent cells (Kang et al., 2017). Enhanced ATM and ATR activation have also been reported in ISCs in the aged *Drosophila* (Park et al., 2015). Moreover, increased DNA damage activates DNA-PKcs in the aged skeletal muscle (Park et al., 2017). In addition, telomere uncapping, another senescence-associated event, triggers the DNA damage response, including acti-

vation of CHK1 and CHK2 (d'Adda di Fagagna et al., 2003). Notably, CHK2 activation has also been found to play a role in replicative senescence (Gire et al., 2004).

Apart from DNA repair regulation, several moonlighting functions of DNA damage response factors have been reported. ATM regulates V-ATPase assembly to control lysosomal pH and influences the normal function of the lysosome/autophagy system, leading to impaired removal of dysfunctional mitochondria, elevated reactive oxygen species (ROS) levels and nuclear disorganization (Kang et al., 2017). Inhibition of ATM alleviates senescence through reacidification of the lysosome/autophagy system and metabolic reprogramming (Kang et al., 2017). DNA-PKcs regulates the inflammatory responses in dendritic cells (DCs), mediating the development of airway diseases (Mishra et al., 2015a), and also regulates AMPK through inhibiting the chaperone function of heat shock protein 90 (HSP90) alpha, ultimately driving the metabolic and fitness decline in aged skeletal muscle (Park et al., 2017). Further efforts are clearly required to better understand the role of the overactivated DNA damage response, one of the important biomarkers of aging, in the onset of organ dysfunction and individual aging.

### *Mutations*

Mutation is another broadly reported biomarker of aging. The frequency of spontaneous mutation, which has been determined with the LacZ transgenic mice, increases almost linearly with age in the spleen (Ono et al., 1995). Another independent study also reports that the spontaneous mutation exhibits an age-related increase in the liver, while in the brain, only an increase during early life is observed (Dollé et al., 1997), which has also been confirmed by another study (Stuart et al., 2000). In contrast to these two studies, another group reported age-dependent accumulation of spontaneous mutations in multiple tissues, including the brain, while the rates of increase differ among tissues (Ono et al., 2000).

Age-related changes in mutations are tissue-type specific. Mutation frequencies in the heart and small intestine both increase with increasing age, while the mutation spectra exhibit a striking difference between these two organs. Moreover, the mutation frequency is significantly higher in the small intestine than in the heart (Dollé et al., 2000). Another study showed that approximately 40 novel mutations per year are acquired in adult stem cells of the small intestine, colon, and liver, although a tissue-specific mutational signature was observed (Blokzijl et al., 2016). A study in 2021 showed that, in contrast to the accumulated mutations examined in the intestine, liver, and lung of naturally aged mice, no age-related increase in mutations is evident in the heart (De Majo et al., 2021), implicating an efficient cardiac DNA repair system throughout life. Although the tissue-specific mutational frequency and signature have been

reported, knowledge is lacking about whether there exists a cell type-specific feature of mutations with age. Given that the cellular composition varies among tissues, there is a pressing need for uncovering age-related alterations in mutations at single-cell resolution in the future with the aid of single-cell omics technologies.

The difference in mutation between germline and soma is another interesting topic. The mutation frequency in a mixed population of seminiferous tubule cells derived from young adult mice is significantly lower than that of somatic cells, and there is a decrease in mutation frequency during spermatogenesis, both indicating a protected state of germ cells in young mice (Walter et al., 1998). However, in old mice, the mutation frequency significantly increases in spermatogenic cells, and the mutation frequency has also been found to be elevated during the process of spermatogenesis, suggesting a deprotected state of the germ line in old mice (Walter et al., 1998).

Impaired DNA repair is believed to cause mutations, and genomic instability plays a vital role in the development of premature aging. Nevertheless, accumulation of mutations has not been reported in short-lived mice with defects in transcription-related repair (Dollé et al., 2006), assayed with a lacZ reporter system (Boerrieger et al., 1995). Although the phenomenon may arise from the non-transcribed lacZ-reporter gene being insensitive to impaired transcription-related repair, there exists a possibility that DNA repair deficiency may contribute to aging phenotypes independently of inducing deleterious mutations, at least in some contexts.

### *Chromosome aberrations*

Chromosome aberration, which refers to changes in the number or structure of chromosomes, is another well-known biomarker of aging and age-related diseases, such as cancer, in both animal models and humans.

Translocations and insertions have been reported to be increased with age in mouse peripheral blood lymphocytes, while there is no significant change in the frequencies of dicentrics and acentric fragments (Walter et al., 1998). In human blood cells, both megabase-range and small-scale structural variants display a positive correlation with age (Forsberg et al., 2012). Moreover, the frequency of chromosome nondisjunction increases with age in both sexes (Wojda et al., 2007). A study demonstrated that the frequency of mosaic chromosomal abnormalities, including aneuploidy and copy-neutral loss of heterozygosity, shows an age-related increase by approximately 8-fold, in human blood and buccal samples collected from 75–79-year-old individuals compared with that from individuals younger than 50 years old (Jacobs et al., 2012). The frequencies of duplications, deletions, and uniparental disomy have also been reported to rapidly rise in the elderly (Laurie et al., 2012).

Different chromosomes may exhibit different susceptibilities to age-related chromosome aberrations. A longitudinal human study showed that both numerical and structural chromosome aberrations exist in aged skin fibroblasts (Mukherjee and Thomas, 1997). Intriguingly, the aneuploidy of chromosomes 1, 4, 6, 8, and 10, the majority of which harbor senescence-associated genes, are more frequently affected by age than the other chromosomes analyzed (Mukherjee and Thomas, 1997). The chromosome-specific fashion of aneuploidy has also been reported by another study, in which chromosomes 7, 18, and Y are the most severely affected by age in non-neuronal nuclei of the cortex in mice (Busuttill et al., 2004). Female mosaic X events also increase with age (Machiela et al., 2016). Interestingly, the frequency of chromosome nondisjunction involving chromosome X or Y reaches a peak in male centenarians, while the frequency of X-containing chromosome nondisjunction markedly decreases in female centenarians (Wojda et al., 2007), implicating a sex specificity in chromosome aberrations during the process of aging.

Notably, compared with cancer-free individuals, clonal mosaicism is at least 27 times more commonly detectable in individuals whose DNA is collected at least one year prior to being diagnosed with hematological cancers, indicating a strong link between chromosome aberrations and increased susceptibility to cancer in aged people (Jacobs et al., 2012). Consistently, mosaic loss of chromosome Y is also linked with higher cancer risk (Forsberg et al., 2014). Several studies have also uncovered that mosaic loss of the Y chromosome in the blood contributes to cardiac failure (Sano et al., 2022), solid tumors (Forsberg et al., 2014), and AD (Dumanski et al., 2016), suggesting that chromosome aberrations in blood cells might serve as a profound biomarker of multiple human age-related diseases.

#### *Micronuclei*

Micronuclei are small, membrane-bound, DNA-containing compartments that originate due to errors during mitosis (Ohsugi et al., 2008). Micronuclei have long been recognized as biomarkers of a suite of human diseases (Fenech et al., 2020). Given that the formation of micronuclei depends on cell division (Ohsugi et al., 2008), whether and how micronuclei are regulated during cellular aging requires further investigation. It has been shown that the frequency of micronuclei increases with age from newborns to 40 years old but decreases in older individuals in a Yugoslavian population, possibly due to a gradually declining cellular proliferating capacity with age (Milosevic-Djordjevic et al., 2002). Micronuclei frequencies have also been reported by two other studies to exhibit a biphasic character with increasing age in humans (Orta and Günebakan, 2012; Wojda et al., 2007), although one of the studies found no significant change in proliferative indexes with age (Orta and Güne-

bakan, 2012).

As we reviewed above, the loss of sex chromosomes is frequently reported as an age-related event of aneuploidy. Interestingly, the sex chromosomes are documented to be excluded from the nucleus and be incorporated into the micronuclei (Guttenbach et al., 1994; Hando et al., 1994). In lymphocytes, the frequency of X-bearing or Y-bearing micronuclei in aged individuals is twice as high as that in young individuals (Guttenbach et al., 1994). Another study also found that the frequency of autosome-containing micronuclei is not significantly changed in aged human males, while the percentage of Y chromosome-containing micronuclei is markedly increased in lymphocytes with age (Catalán et al., 1998). The causes and biological consequences of sex chromosome exclusion into micronuclei in aged individuals remain to be addressed.

#### *DNA fragments*

Senescent cells also extrude DNA fragments, which are lamin A/C negative but strongly  $\gamma$ H2AX positive and H3K27me3 positive, into the cytoplasm (Ivanov et al., 2013). This kind of cytosolic DNA, termed cytoplasmic chromatin fragments (CCFs), is apparently different from micronuclei, which are encapsulated by the nuclear envelope. Lamin B depletion in senescent cells (Shimi et al., 2011) is associated with nuclear-to-cytoplasm chromatin blebbing and the formation of CCFs (Ivanov et al., 2013). Extracellular double-strand DNA accumulation has also been reported in cells derived from patients with ataxia-telangiectasia syndrome and Hutchinson-Gilford progeria syndrome (Lan et al., 2019), both of which are severe premature aging disorders. CCFs can activate the cGAS-STING pathway, mediating pro-inflammatory responses in senescent cells (Dou et al., 2017; Han et al., 2020c; Yang et al., 2017) and further promoting paracrine senescence (Glück et al., 2017). Since increased cytoplasmic DNA burden leads to senescence and inflammation, targeted removal of extracellular DNA holds great potential in alleviating innate immune responses and senescence-associated phenotypes (Lan et al., 2019). Interestingly, a defect in DNA-degrading activity is partially responsible for DNA fragment-mediated senescence, and activation of autophagy with metformin or rapamycin reduces CCFs and represses senescence (Han et al., 2020c).

#### *Summary and perspectives*

As we mentioned above, multiple cellular alterations associated with genomic instability have been reported as biomarkers of aging, although many of them are not absolutely universal and are regulated in a cell type-, tissue type- or sex-specific manner, of which the underlying mechanisms thus far remain ambiguous. Most of the biomarkers we reviewed here are related to changes in nuclear DNA. However, mi-

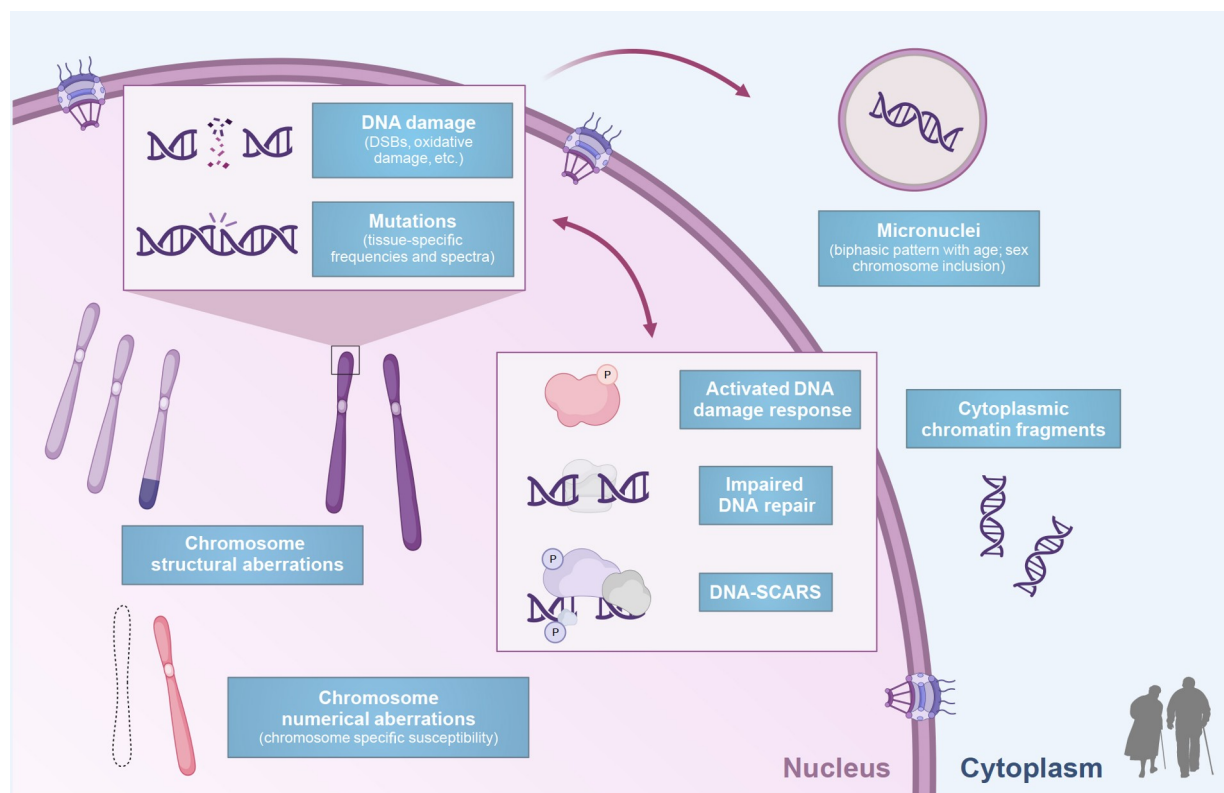
tochondrial DNA alterations are also tightly connected to aging (Kujoth et al., 2005; Ross et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2016). A recent study also showed that mitochondrial DNA replication defects have deleterious effects on nuclear genomic stability (Hämäläinen et al., 2019), providing an unexpected association between the nucleus and mitochondria, which has been neglected for a long time. Moreover, whether these genetic instability-related biomarkers mentioned above can be used for measuring the process of aging, predicting disease susceptibility, and directing personalized treatment for age-associated diseases warrants further study (Figure 3).

### Telomere attrition

Among many biological processes related to aging, telomeres stand out because they follow a simple and important path: they shorten during aging. In eukaryotes, telomeres are nucleoprotein complexes at the linear chromosome ends that play a vital role in protecting the integrity of the genome from nucleolytic degradation, DNA damage response, and unnecessary DNA recombination. The basic composition of

telomeres is tens of kilobases of G-rich tandem repeat DNA sequences ending with a 50- to 400-nt single-stranded 3' overhang and organized in a peculiar chromatin structure. In humans, the chromatin structure of telomeres involves the shelterin protein complex and the noncoding RNA TERRA (de Lange, 2005; Gilson and Géli, 2007). The shelterin complex comprises six proteins, including telomeric repeat-binding factor 1 (TRF1, encoded by the *TERF1* gene), telomeric repeat-binding factor 2 (TRF2), TPP1 (or ACD, recruiting telomerase), protection of telomeres 1 (POT1, encoded by *POT1*), TRF1 interacting nuclear factor 2 (TIN2, encoded by *TINF2*), and TRF2 interacting protein (RAP1 or TERF2IP). They carry out multiple functions, including telomere replication regulation, telomere capping, and higher-order structure determination of telomeric chromatin.

Uncapping shelterin complexes from telomeres leads to the activation of the DNA damage response and unwanted DNA repair at telomeres (Mendez-Bermudez et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2014). Thus, shelterin deficiency leads to telomere uncapping and even telomere collapse. TRF2 suppresses ATM phosphorylation at telomeres (Denchi and de Lange, 2007) and allows replication through telomeric chromatin



**Figure 3** Biomarkers of age-related genetic instability. Destabilization of the genome represents a universal biomarker of aging. Increased DNA damage, mutations, and chromosome aberrations (both structural and numerical) are frequently reported in senescent cells and aged individuals, and impaired DNA repair might be a possible causal factor. Accumulation of DNA lesions leads to persistent activation of the DNA damage response. Unrepaired damaged DNA and activated damage response factors together constitute the damage-associated nuclear substructure, namely, DNA-SCARS. Damaged nuclear DNA is also present in the cytoplasm in the form of micronuclei or cytoplasmic chromatin fragments, both of which are altered during the process of aging. Notably, many of the biomarkers are regulated in a context-dependent way, and the underlying mechanisms thus far remain elusive. Abbreviations: DSBs, double-strand breaks; DNA-SCARS, DNA segments with chromatin alterations reinforcing senescence.

(Ye et al., 2010). Inactivation of TPP1/POT1 activates the Ataxia telangiectasia and Rad3-related (ATR) signaling pathway (Jones et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2011; Xin et al., 2007). TRF1 removal activates ATR kinase (Zimmermann et al., 2014). RAP1 and TRF2 form a heterodimer and repress the homology-directed repair pathway and non-homologous end joining (NHEJ) (Chen et al., 2007b; Ghilain et al., 2021; Lototska et al., 2020; Rai et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019d). TIN2 deletion produces a complex response that involves ATM kinase signaling and c-NHEJ, which are partly due to the loss of TRF2 from telomeres (Jones et al., 2014; Takai et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2011; Xin et al., 2007). Several loss-of-function models for shelterin components indicate a decline in tissue regenerative capacity and accelerated aging (Alder et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2019; Uryga et al., 2021; Ying et al., 2022).

#### *Telomere DNA length*

Human telomeres consist of short tandem repeats (5'-TTAGGG-3') that range from 8 to 15 kb at birth. Due to end replication problems, telomeres shorten after each replication cycle. During early development, telomere DNA is elongated by telomerase to counteract dramatic telomere shortening by approximately 50–200 nucleotides after each replication cycle due to high cellular proliferation (Anifandis et al., 2021). However, the embryonic development stage ended with telomerase inactivation in most somatic cells, and telomere DNA length (TL) can be seen as a counting machine for the number of cellular divisions. When programmed telomere shortening leads to a critically short TL stage (the Hayflick limit), it induces a permanent DDR, triggering irreversible cell cycle arrest, known as replicative senescence. Therefore, TL can be considered a biomarker to gauge aging (Chakravarti et al., 2021).

Many studies indicate that the dynamics of TLs are not only a mitotic clock at the cellular level but also at the level of individual aging. As humans age, the average TL in most tissues declines with age (Daniali et al., 2013). This occurs in high-proliferative tissues such as the skin, gastrointestinal tract, and hematopoietic system, as well as in low-proliferative tissues such as the heart, brain, and fat (Blackburn et al., 2015). Since telomere shortening is intrinsically linked to cell division and non-proliferative tissues are mainly composed of long-lived post-mitotic cells (LLPMC), the mechanism of age-related telomere changes in non-proliferative tissues is still elusive (Jacome Burbano and Gilson, 2020). Mitochondrial dysfunction and ROS accumulate in these tissues. Due to its G-richness, telomeric DNA is particularly sensitive to oxidation by ROS, which incurs telomere damage, possibly causing telomere attrition and uncapping over decades (Robin et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2017). These data suggest that telomere structural changes are associated with proliferative and non-proliferative tissue

aging.

Since the dynamics of TL are a potential marker of various types of tissue aging, numerous clinical and epidemiological studies have addressed the question of whether TL shortening in blood cells can reflect tissue aging or even individual aging. Indeed, TL shortening in peripheral leukocytes or PBMCs reflects systemic influences on TL distribution across human tissues (Demanelis et al., 2020). The average TL loss in PBMCs ranges from approximately 1,000 bp per year during birth and 1 year of age to approximately 100 bp per year during childhood and approximately 50 bp per year in adulthood, suggesting that TLs in PBMCs are an aging-predicting marker (Aubert et al., 2012).

At the organismal level, the dynamics of TL are influenced by genetic variants and nongenetic parameters throughout the human lifespan. Heritability contributes to human TL variation ranging from 30% to 80%. TL homeostasis responds to lifestyle (Epel and Prather, 2018) and social factors or environmental changes (Garrett-Bakelman et al., 2019). Even pathogen infection, for example, by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), can cause significant telomere shortening (Mongelli et al., 2021), suggesting that the degree of telomere attrition is a sensitive biomarker to account for the accumulation of stress exposure. Therefore, TL as a general aging biomarker represents an exciting opportunity to predict and track frailty, loss of resilience and age-related diseases early. For instance, regarding lifestyle, social and environmental stress are major contributors to aging heterogeneity, and individual TL variation may indicate a danger of aging acceleration. Recent studies have compared TL variation and the methylation clock in PBMCs to track chronological age. Interestingly, they can be complementary in aging evaluation since they appear to reflect different biological mechanisms determining the aging trajectory (Franzago et al., 2022; Pearce et al., 2022) (Table S1 in Supporting Information).

#### *The methods to detect telomere*

The above examples support the use of TL as a relevant biomarker for an early prediction of aging. A reproducible TL measurement will be important for future clinical applications. Many methods exist, including quantitative polymerase chain reaction (Q-PCR), terminal restriction fragment (TRF) analysis, a variety of quantitative fluorescence *in situ* hybridization (Q-FISH) methods, single telomere length analysis (STELA), telomere shortest length assay (TeSLA), peptide nucleic acid hybridization analysis of single telomere (PHAST) assay and single-molecule real-time (SMRT) sequencing. Although these methods have been improved in recent decades, there are still major technical impediments in clinical settings, including accuracy, reproducibility, timing and technical difficulty. Moreover, a relevant biological assessment of telomere status requires

information beyond the classical average TL to allow the prediction and prognosis of age-related diseases. For example, TL distribution is emerging as a more potent biomarker than just the median or average TL, since the shortest TL at individual chromosome ends, not the average TL, can trigger senescence (Abdallah et al., 2009; Kaul et al., 2011). The longest telomeres are used as a signature of adult stem cell compartments (Kim et al., 2013), but it remains difficult to accurately detect telomeres longer than 20 kb. Metaphase images with abnormal telomere phenotypes can provide compelling evidence to reveal the status of telomere dysfunction, for example, telomere fusion with normal TL distribution.

A real-time Q-PCR-based TL measurement is a rapid method with small amounts of sample (~20 ng), providing an average of total TL normalized to a single copy gene, but it does not provide information about the telomere length distribution (Cawthon, 2002). Moreover, this method is poorly standardized across laboratories due to the use of various normalization methods. Q-PCR is also inaccurate for quantifying TL in cancer studies because of the common occurrence of aneuploidy and mutation of the gene used for standardization. Several methods have been developed based on Q-PCR, such as  $\Omega$ -qPCR (Xiong and Frasci, 2021) and the single telomere absolute-length rapid (STAR) assay (Luo et al., 2020). These methods can determine the absolute TL. Moreover, the STAR assay can quantify individual telomere molecules at a relatively broad spectrum, from the shortest telomere to longer ones of hundreds of kb in individual cells, and can be applied for tumor TL detection. It is a promising method of TL detection in the future both in the clinic and in fundamental studies.

The TRF assay is considered the gold standard for telomere analysis. The TRF assay requires a Southern blot procedure to separate telomere fragments after restriction enzyme digestion. As it is a laborious process and requires a large amount of starting genomic DNA, this assay is not suitable for clinical applications (Harley et al., 1990). STELA and its modified approach (Universal STELA (U-STE- LA) and TeSLA) were developed based on the TRF assay, which combines Southern blot and PCR amplification after adapter ligation to measure the TL of individual chromosome ends and provide valuable information about TL distribution (Baird et al., 2003; Bendix et al., 2010; Lai et al., 2017). These approaches are capable of detecting the shortest telomeres. As many studies on telomere biology have revealed that critically short telomeres, rather than average telomere lengths, are causative of age-related pathologies, STELA or U-STE- LA and TeSLA are crucial for clinics to predict pathological aging early. However, these assays are too labor-consuming for routine clinical and large population studies.

The Q-FISH method hybridizes the fluorescently labeled

(CCCTAA)<sub>3</sub> peptide nucleic acid (PNA) probe to fixed interphase cells or various tissue biopsies and quantifies TL by counting the number and intensity of the fluorescence signals to determine the TL (Lansdorp et al., 1996). The distinct disadvantage of Q-FISH is that the fluorescence signals of telomeres, also called “telomere spots”, are dependent on the aggregation of higher-order telomere structures, which leads to a reduction in the overall telomere count that could result in the incorrect estimation of TL distribution. Metaphase Q-FISH can detect TL distribution and the abnormal phenotype of individual chromosome ends but can only be performed on actively dividing cells (Lansdorp et al., 1996). Based on a similar principle to Q-FISH but modified for the flow cytometry technique, flow FISH measures the median TL in individual cells in suspension after hybridization with telomeric PNA probes. Combined with different flow cytometry methods, flow FISH can be adapted for higher throughput and enhanced reproducibility, and it is the first TL method to have been validated for clinical diagnostic purposes (Baerlocher et al., 2006). Another advantage of flow FISH is measuring the distinct cell populations by antibody staining (specific cell populations can be cell sorted prior to flow FISH); for example, flow FISH is currently the fastest and most sensitive method available to measure the average TL in subgroups of human blood cells. The disadvantage of this technique is that PNA probes may bind non-specifically due to the fixation and hybridization efficiency in various labs.

The PHAST assay is designed to pull down PNA probes that are hybridized to the telomere sequence and pass through a microfluidic channel for analysis by light-sheet fluorescence (Luo et al., 2020). PHAST requires very specialized equipment and is not suitable for measuring telomere lengths longer than 15 kb.

Recently, SMRT sequencing developed a high throughput TL measurement at nucleotide resolution using the PacBio high fidelity (HiFi) sequencing platform on purified genomic DNA containing telomeric sequence after hybridizing and ligating the telomeric single-stranded G-rich overhangs at the 3' ends of chromosomes (Tham et al., 2023). This assay not only provides a high-throughput and accurate assay to detect TL at a high resolution but also reveals the presence of telomeric variant sequences (TVSs) interspersed within the long tracts of canonical telomeric repeat regions, which will provide more information for the clinic and research of telomere biology.

To conclude, all the methods above for detecting TL distribution have advantages and disadvantages. The strengths and limitations of the major methods developed to measure TL in cells and tissues are presented in Table S1 in Supporting Information. With the development of the technique for fundamental study and the requirement of large clinical studies, a single-cell approach is highly pre-

ferable to identify cells with aberrantly long or short telomeres in the future.

#### *Telomere as an aging biomarker*

Telomere shortening, being a marker of biological aging, could be used as a sentinel to intercept individuals at risk of developing age-related diseases. Indeed, the level of telomere attrition is associated with the incidence and mortality of diabetes, cardiovascular disease (CVD), depression, and cognitive decline (Blackburn et al., 2015). Telomere shortening also has the potential to predict the prognosis of various cancers independent of chronological age (Hampton, 2011; Mender et al., 2020; Tamura et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2019). The severity of telomere attrition is a risk factor for age-related diseases. It predicts poor immune function and fragility (Cohen et al., 2013). Patients within the higher percentiles of short telomeres have a higher risk of developing severe COVID-19 pathologies (Sanchez-Vazquez et al., 2021).

TINF2 mutations are the second most common genetic cause of dyskeratosis congenita (DKC), a congenital disease of human premature aging syndrome, and affect approximately 15% of DKC patients, suggesting that TIN2 function is crucial to act against pathological aging. Although few studies have detected shelterin levels during human aging, published data have shown that TRF2 (telomeric repeat-binding factor 2) declines with tissue aging in clinical biopsies (Robin et al., 2020; Tian et al., 2019) and that TRF2 expression is abnormally elevated in cancer biopsies (Biraccio et al., 2013; Cherfils-Vicini et al., 2019). All these results suggest that TRF2 is a potential marker for the aging trajectory. Further studies are required to understand the expression level of TRF2 as well as other shelterin members in normal and pathological aging in a large epidemiological cohort or clinical samples from patients with age-related diseases.

A telomere dysfunction assay that is useful for DNA damage studies is TIF analysis (telomere dysfunctional induced foci). This method is based on PNA-telomere probe Q-FISH generally conducted on interphase cells *in vitro* or in tissue sections and involves an antibody that recognizes the DNA damage response, such as  $\gamma$ H2AX or 53BP1. The co-localization of telomeres with DDR antibody signals suggests damage at many telomeres. Although this assay does not provide information about TL, it is useful as a biomarker to detect the number of cells with telomere dysfunction (short or uncapped) that appear damaged, which is a crucial marker to predict the tendency to cause cell senescence or malignant proliferation. An increase in TIF, dissociated from TL variation, is characteristic of early stages of B-cell chronic lymphocytic leukemia (B-CLL) (Augereau et al., 2011), indicating that TIFs can be interesting TL-independent biomarkers of some age-related diseases.

#### *Summary and perspectives*

Here, we have summarized the possible telomere-related biomarkers related to the aging trajectory and age-related diseases. We highlighted the underlying cause of telomere dysfunction, either in the form of telomere shortening, telomere DNA damage, or telomere-specific protein depletion, to characterize the aging trajectory. This provides the groundwork to develop important biomarkers for aging interventions not only for predicting the early risk of developing age-related diseases but also to promote healthy aging. Carefully designed clinical studies should be conducted in the future to test and validate telomere biomarkers and targets as useful tools in the fight against the adverse consequences of aging.

#### **Nuclear body disorders**

Nuclear bodies are macromolecular condensates within the nucleus of eukaryotic cells. These dot-like structures further compartmentalize the nuclear space and perform specialized functions similar to organelles (Sabari et al., 2020). However, unlike membranous organelles such as the Golgi apparatus and lysosomes, nuclear bodies are usually formed through liquid-liquid phase separation (LLPS) of their protein or nucleic acid components without lipid membranes via a nucleation mechanism (Brangwynne et al., 2009; Shimobayashi et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021a). Thus, nuclear bodies are also considered membraneless organelles (MLOs) with the nucleus (Lyon et al., 2021). To date, at least 18 nuclear bodies have been documented in human cells, including nucleoli, Cajal bodies, promyelocytic leukemia (PML) bodies, nuclear speckles, paraspeckles, nuclear gems (Sabari et al., 2020). Nuclear bodies show diverse functions but cooperate in a series of biological processes, such as gene expression regulation, RNA processing, and maturation (Hirose et al., 2022). Similar to the alteration of nuclear architecture during normal aging (Haithcock et al., 2005), some nuclear bodies, such as the nucleolus, have been implicated in the aging process and become potential biomarkers of aging (Buchwalter and Hetzer, 2017; Kasselimi et al., 2022; Papandreou et al., 2022; Ren et al., 2017; Ren et al., 2019; Tiku et al., 2017).

#### *Architecture of nuclear bodies*

Nuclear bodies are usually composed of proteins and nucleic acids represented by various RNAs (Hirose et al., 2022). Many proteins in nuclear bodies contain intrinsically disordered regions (IDRs), such as RNA-binding proteins, which enrich charged and aromatic amino acid residues to interact with other proteins or RNAs (Shin and Brangwynne, 2017). In addition, some folded domains, such as small ubiquitin-like modifier (SUMO) and SUMO interacting motif (SIM), also contribute to multivalent interactions for



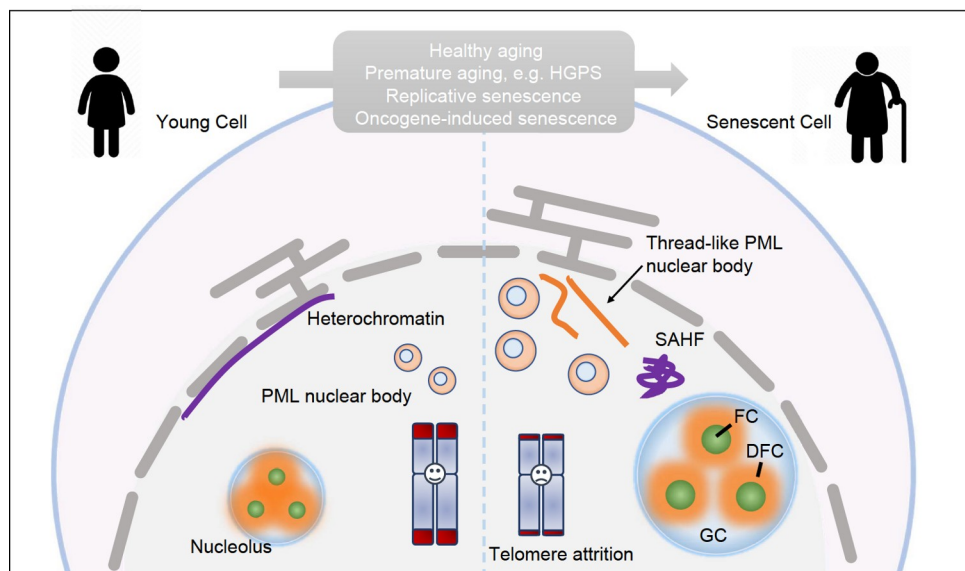
the formation of LLPS (Shen et al., 2006), suggesting that nuclear bodies can be organized by multiple mechanisms.

Compartmentalization is the main function of nuclear bodies. To further separate distinct biological processes or reactions, most nuclear bodies contain substructures. The “scaffold and client theory” is now widely accepted as a model for the organization of a nuclear body (Banani et al., 2016). Scaffold proteins are prone to undergo LLPS and are essential for nuclear body formation, while client proteins cannot undergo LLPS and are usually adaptor proteins or enzymes for the specific functions of nuclear bodies (Banani et al., 2017).

The nucleolus is the first discovered nuclear body and acts as a central hub for nuclear functions, including ribosome biogenesis, genome organization, stress response, and telomere maintenance (Brown and Gurdon, 1964; Iarovaia et al., 2019). As the largest condensate in the nucleus, the nucleolus shows a three-layer substructure from core to shell: a fibrillar center (FC) containing rDNA genes, a dense fibrillar compartment (DFC) for pre-rRNA processing after rDNA transcription at the FC-DFC border (Yao et al., 2019), and a granular compartment (GC) for late pre-rRNA processing and ribosomal protein assembly (Lafontaine et al., 2021). Recent studies suggest that the nucleolus also functions as a quality control compartment for misfolded proteins (Frottin et al., 2019). Given that the loss of proteostasis is one hallmark of aging (López-Otín et al., 2013), the role of the nucleolus in the aging process can also be linked from the perspective of proteostasis.

PML body (also known as ND10) is named after its concentrated PML protein (Ishov et al., 1999). SUMOylated PML interacts with its associated proteins that have SIM through SUMO-SIM multivalent interactions (Shen et al., 2006). PML and its direct interactors constitute the outer cage-like structure, which surrounds an inner core with various client proteins (Lallemand-Breitenbach and de Thé, 2018). The core region of the PML body concentrates proteins including enzymes for biochemical processes such as SUMOylation and chromatin regulation (Lallemand-Breitenbach and de Thé, 2018). Cells utilizing alternative lengthening of telomeres (ALT) have a special PML nuclear body (ALT-associated PML body, APB) containing PML protein, telomere DNA and some telomere binding proteins (Yeager et al., 1999). Since telomere attrition is another hallmark of aging (López-Otín et al., 2013), the PML nuclear body might be associated with the aging process by regulating telomere stability.

Senescent cells often undergo dramatic alterations to chromatin organization (Criscione et al., 2016b). Senescence-associated heterochromatin foci (SAHF) were first discovered in oncogene-induced senescence (OIS) of human fibroblasts (Narita et al., 2003) (Figure 4). These heterochromatic domains contain chromatin-repressive proteins, such as HP1, high-mobility group A (HMGA) proteins (Narita et al., 2006), the histone variant macroH2A (Zhang et al., 2005b) and trimethylated histone H3 Lys9 (H3K9me3) (Zhang et al., 2007). Senescence-specific spatial clustering of heterochromatin contributes to the formation of SAHF



**Figure 4** Changes in nuclear bodies as biomarkers of aging. Some nuclear bodies are changed during cell senescence. The nucleolus is the largest nuclear body and has a three-layer structure including the FC, DFC and GC. The nucleoli become larger in the fibroblasts from HGPS patients and healthy old individuals. In oncogene-induced senescence of human fibroblasts, both the number per cell and the size of PML nuclear bodies are increased. Some of the classical dot-like PML nuclear bodies also changed into thread-like structures in the fibroblasts from HGPS patients. The PML nuclear body is also required for p53-PML-p300 complex formation, which promotes the induction of replicative cell senescence. In some senescent cells, such as oncogene-induced senescence of human fibroblasts, heterochromatin is detached from the nuclear membrane and organized into SAHF. Telomeres are also regarded as nuclear bodies. Telomere attrition is a hallmark of cell senescence and aging.

(Chandra et al., 2015). However, SAHF is not a universal biomarker for all types of senescent cells (Di Micco et al., 2021).

#### *Morphology of nuclear bodies*

As a subcellular structure mainly formed by the mechanism of LLPS, nuclear bodies often show a round or dot-like morphology (Brangwynne et al., 2009). However, this is not always the case. For example, nuclear speckles and paraspeckles have irregular shapes, such as small granules or distorted spheres (Galganski et al., 2017; Wang and Chen, 2020), which are consistent with their names as speckles. The size of nuclear bodies also varies within a range from 0.2–2  $\mu\text{m}$  for diameters (Hirose et al., 2022). The nucleolus is the largest round nuclear body, ranging from 1–10  $\mu\text{m}$  in different cell types and growth states (Lafontaine et al., 2021). Cajal bodies, nuclear gems, PML nuclear bodies, and histone locus bodies are quite similar round structures, all approximately 0.2–1  $\mu\text{m}$  in size (Hirose et al., 2022).

The nucleolus undergoes morphological changes with the senescence onset (Kasselimi et al., 2022). And its size inversely correlates with longevity in animals, including nematodes, fruit flies and mice (Tiku et al., 2017). Primary fibroblasts from pre-maturely aged patients with HGPS (Eriksson et al., 2003), as well as from old healthy individuals, have expanded nucleoli, indicating that nucleolar size is an aging biomarker (Buchwalter and Hetzer, 2017). In the fibroblasts from HGPS patients, the classical dot-like PML nuclear bodies are reorganized into thread-like structures, suggesting that the morphological alteration of PML nuclear bodies might be a biomarker for late senescence (Wang et al., 2020c) (Figure 4).

#### *Function of nuclear bodies*

The core function of nuclear bodies is compartmentalization. By sequestering or excluding specific factors, nuclear bodies cooperate to realize the flow of genetic information based on Central Dogma. Because the nucleus is vital for the biogenesis of various RNAs, most nuclear bodies are associated with chromatin and function in gene transcription as well as RNA maturation (Hirose et al., 2022). For example, the nucleolus transcribed pre-rRNA from rDNA loci within its FC-DFC interface and further processing for mature rRNA occurs in DFCs (Yao et al., 2019). The Cajal body associates with U snRNA gene loci (Smith et al., 1995) with the assistance of nascent snRNA (Frey and Matera, 2001), thus reinforcing snRNA transcription and producing small nuclear ribonucleoproteins (snRNP) for the spliceosome (Wang et al., 2016b). In addition, Cajal bodies also have a role in snoRNA (Meier, 2017) and histone gene expression (Wang et al., 2016b). The histone locus body associates with the replication-dependent histone gene and recruits factors for efficient histone mRNA biogenesis (Tatomer et al., 2016).

The PML nuclear body interacts with specific chromatin regions, such as telomeres, and contains chromatin regulators, thereby affecting gene transcription via chromatin remodeling (Corpet et al., 2020). Nuclear speckle plays important roles in both gene transcription and pre-mRNA processing by accumulating transcription regulators and splicing factors (Galganski et al., 2017).

Dysregulation of nuclear bodies has been implicated in aging. In the nucleolus, CpG hypermethylation of ribosomal DNA is an evolutionarily conserved marker of aging across mammalian species from humans to dogs, providing a useful concept of the “rDNA clock” to gauge individual age (Wang and Lemos, 2019). Oncogenic and replicative stress lead to defects in ribosome biogenesis in nucleoli, which induces RPL11-mediated p53 activation and cellular senescence (Nishimura et al., 2015). Oncogene-induced stable p53-PML-p300 complex formation depends on the PML nuclear body, which mediates p53 acetylation and promotes the induction of replicative senescence (Pearson et al., 2000) (Figure 4).

#### *Numbers of nuclear bodies*

To date, at least 18 nuclear condensates have been documented, some of which are common among cell types, including the nucleolus, Cajal body, PML body, nuclear speckle (Sabari et al., 2020). Some nuclear bodies are cell-type specific, such as paraspeckles, which are common in cancer cells but absent in embryonic stem cells (Chen and Carmichael, 2009).

The number of each nuclear body varies greatly among cell types and under specific stress conditions. For example, there are an average of 3 nucleoli in each nucleus of HeLa, MCF10A, and CHO cells (Farley et al., 2015). Usually, 10–20 paraspeckles are detected in human cells (Fox et al., 2002). In hyperproliferating cells such as cancer cells, RNA biogenesis and processing are very vigorous. Therefore, the number and size of nuclear bodies in cancer cells are usually greater than those in normal somatic cells. In addition, because of the dynamic nature of LLPS, nuclear bodies are prone to be affected by environmental stimuli, such as osmosis and heat shock (Mahl et al., 1989). During cell senescence, the number of some nuclear bodies is altered. Overexpression of the oncogene RasV12 in human fibroblast WI38 cells increases both the number and size of PML nuclear bodies from  $12.1 \pm 3.6$  bodies per nucleus of  $(229 \pm 50.9)$  nm diameter to  $30 \pm 10$  bodies per nucleus of  $(601.7 \pm 124.4)$  nm diameter (Pearson et al., 2000). Therefore, the number of certain nuclear bodies in the cell might be an ideal biomarker for cell senescence (Figure 4).

#### *Locations of nuclear bodies*

As the largest membranous organelle, the nucleus can be divided into several subdomains, including the nuclear en-

velope, nuclear lamina, chromatin, and nucleoplasm. As the largest nuclear body and easily seen in phase-contrast microscopy, the nucleolus is often considered a special sub-region in the nucleus (Lafontaine et al., 2021). Most nuclear bodies scatter in the nucleoplasm, and some of them, such as the Cajal body, PML nuclear body, and histone locus body, are associated with the chromatin (Banani et al., 2017). One of the PML isoforms, PML-II, can localize to the nuclear envelope, linking to the nuclear lipid droplet formation (Ohsaki et al., 2016).

#### *Nuclear body-related diseases*

The PML body is involved in the ubiquitin-mediated proteolytic system, and its dysfunction leads to acute promyelocytic leukemia, neurodegenerative disease and antiviral defects (Lallemand-Breitenbach and de Thé, 2018; Scherer and Stamminger, 2016). Spinal muscular atrophy disease gene product (SMN) is one of the key protein components of nuclear Gems, which promote the maturation of snRNP (Liu et al., 1997). Mutation of SMN causes a neurological disease of spinal muscular atrophy (Lefebvre et al., 1995). Malfunctions of other nuclear bodies, such as the Cajal body, nucleolus, and paraspeckle, have been well documented in cancer and neurodegenerative diseases (Hirose et al., 2022). Nevertheless, more pathological aging-related phenotypes of nuclear bodies require further investigation.

#### *Summary and perspectives*

Although the study of nuclear bodies has made great progress in recent years, more types of nuclear bodies need to be identified. In addition, the following questions need to be answered in the future. Are there any new nuclear bodies related to aging and diseases? How do these nuclear bodies communicate in young and old cells? Is there any “nuclear body grammar” that specific protein or nuclear acid sequence is important for macromolecules targeting to a specific nuclear body? Can some nuclear bodies be used as biomarkers or therapeutic targets? The answers to these questions will benefit the study of cell senescence and healthy aging research.

#### **Cell cycle arrest**

The cell cycle is the series of events that drive proliferation-competent cells to divide into two new daughter cells. The typical cell cycle is composed of G1, S, G2, and M phases (Panagopoulos and Altmeyer, 2021). Cell cycle progression is regulated by cyclins and CDKs, CDKIs, and retinoblastoma tumor suppressor protein (RB). Three major cell cycle checkpoints exist, including the G1/S and G2/M transition checkpoints and the spindle assembly checkpoint (SAC), to ensure a proper cell cycle progression (Barnum and O’Connell, 2014; Satyanarayana and Kaldis, 2009).

Cyclins (such as cyclins D and E) and CDKs (such as CDK2, 4 and 6) can form cyclin-CDK complexes and phosphorylate RB, which leads to the release of transcription factor E2F from the RB-E2F complex and subsequent translocation to the nucleus, thereby transcriptionally activating downstream target genes involved in DNA replication and thus positively driving cell cycle progression from G1 to S phase transition. In contrast, CDKIs such as p21<sup>CIP1</sup> and p16<sup>INK4a</sup> can inhibit CDK activity; therefore, RB cannot be phosphorylated and remains in its hypophosphorylated state, which leads to sequestration of E2F in the RB-E2F complex, thereby repressing E2F target gene transcription, blocking the cell cycle in G1 phase and inhibiting entry into S phase (Hume et al., 2020). Hence, proper cell cycle progression requires precise coordination between the cyclin-CDK complex and CDKI.

Regardless of diverse intracellular and extracellular senescence stimuli, one of the most defining hallmarks of cellular senescence is a stable cell cycle arrest in the G1 or possibly G2 phase, which blocks the damaged cells from proliferation (Gire and Dulić, 2015; Salama et al., 2014). Cell cycle arrest in cellular senescence is mainly regulated by the p53/p21<sup>CIP1</sup> and p16<sup>INK4a</sup>/RB pathways (Beauséjour et al., 2003; Shay et al., 1991). Under senescence stressors, p53 is activated via DDR-dependent or DDR-independent pathways and then upregulates the expression of its downstream target gene p21<sup>CIP1</sup>. As a CDKI, p21<sup>CIP1</sup> suppresses the formation of cyclin E-CDK2 and cyclin A-CDK2 complexes to halt the cell cycle and initiate senescence. Then, p16<sup>INK4a</sup> is induced to repress the formation of the cyclin D-CDK4/6 complex. When p21<sup>CIP1</sup> and p16<sup>INK4a</sup> are chronically activated to coordinately inhibit CDK activity, E2F target gene transcription is inhibited, and the cell cycle is blocked in G1 phase (Roger et al., 2021). Prolonged overexpression of p53, p21<sup>CIP1</sup>, p16<sup>INK4a</sup>, or RB is sufficient to induce cellular senescence (Coppé et al., 2011; Li et al., 2022f; McConnell et al., 1998). In contrast, the inactivation or depletion of these CDKIs can lead to the bypass of cellular senescence (Bond et al., 2004; Brown et al., 1997; Noh et al., 2019; Reyes et al., 2018). Evidence suggests that p21<sup>CIP1</sup> is mainly activated early during the induction of senescence, whereas p16<sup>INK4a</sup> is induced later and maintains cellular senescence (Gil and Peters, 2006). Both pathways also crosstalk (Yamakoshi et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2006).

#### *p53/p21<sup>CIP1</sup> pathway in cellular senescence*

p53 plays a critical role in the modulation of cellular senescence via multiple mechanisms (Kastenhuber and Lowe, 2017). Constitutive DDR signaling caused by telomere attrition and oxidative or oncogenic stress activates p53 and its downstream effector p21<sup>CIP1</sup>, which induces cellular senescence. Inactivation of p53-mediated signaling disrupts the onset of cellular senescence (Beauséjour et al., 2003; Brown et al., 1997; Reyes et al., 2018).

The expression level and activity of p53 are tightly regulated at different levels by different factors. At the post-transcriptional level, noncoding RNAs, including miRNAs and long noncoding RNAs (lncRNAs), can regulate p53 abundance and activity. For example, miR-504 reduces p53 mRNA stability, thereby decreasing its protein level and activity (Hu et al., 2010). Inactivation of the Gld2/miR-122/CPEB/Gld4 pathway enhances p53 mRNA translation and promotes cellular senescence (Burns et al., 2011). In addition, various post-translational modifications, such as ubiquitination, phosphorylation, acetylation, sumoylation, and neddylation, also play important roles in regulating p53 levels and activity (Kruse and Gu, 2009). For example, the E3 ubiquitin ligase MDM2 regulates p53 ubiquitination and promotes protein degradation in collaboration with murine double minute X (MDMX) (Wade et al., 2010). Conversely, miR-605 reduces MDM2 mRNA stability and its protein level, thereby triggering p53-mediated senescence (Xiao et al., 2011). p53 phosphorylation at serine-15 by ATM kinase promotes its protein stability and is the common change during replicative senescence or DNA damage-induced senescence (Webley et al., 2000). Forkhead box O4 (FOXO4) can maintain senescent cell viability by binding p53 and inhibiting p53-mediated apoptosis in favor of p21<sup>CIP1</sup>-induced cell cycle arrest, and disruption of the FOXO4-p53 interaction causes senescent cell-intrinsic apoptosis (Baar et al., 2017).

p21<sup>CIP1</sup> is the first identified transcriptional target of p53 (el-Deiry et al., 1993). p21<sup>CIP1</sup> is encoded by the *CDKN1A* gene and is required for p53-induced cell cycle arrest at either G1/S or G2/M checkpoints (Al Bitar and Gali-Muhtasib, 2019; Rufini et al., 2013). p21<sup>CIP1</sup> suppresses cyclin E-CDK2 and cyclin A-CDK2 complex formation, thereby inhibiting RB phosphorylation and preventing subsequent E2F dissociation and formation of the dimerization partner, RB-like, E2F and multi-vulval class B (DREAM) complex, which ultimately leads to cell cycle arrest in G1 phase (Gomatou et al., 2021; McConnell et al., 1998). The p53-dependent induction of p21<sup>CIP1</sup> is crucial for the initiation of cellular senescence (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2017). p21<sup>CIP1</sup> can also be activated by transforming growth factor (TGF)- $\beta$ /SMAD and phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase (PI3K)/FOXO signaling pathways in a p53-independent manner and plays a key role in developmental senescence, a transient programmed cellular senescence that occurs during mammalian embryonic development (Muñoz-Espin et al., 2013; Storer et al., 2013).

The expression level of p21<sup>CIP1</sup> is also regulated by divergent mechanisms. The transcription factor Sp1 can activate p21<sup>CIP1</sup> transcription (Huang et al., 2006), whereas c-Myc, ID1, CTIP-2, CUT, and retinoid X receptor suppress p21<sup>CIP1</sup> transcription (Jung et al., 2010). miRNAs such as miR-17-92, miR-106a-363, and miR-106b-25 or RNA-

binding proteins such as HuD, HuR, RBM28, Msi-1, PCBP1/CP1/hnRNP E1, TAX, and AUF1 modulate p21<sup>CIP1</sup> mRNA stability and protein levels at the post-transcriptional level (Borgdorff et al., 2010). Diverse post-translational modifications of the p21<sup>CIP1</sup> protein, such as phosphorylation by Akt1/PKB, PKA, PKC, PIM-1, and GSK $\beta$  and ubiquitination by E3 ubiquitin ligases, also modulate p21<sup>CIP1</sup> expression levels (Al-Khalaf and Aboussekhra, 2013; Jung et al., 2010).

#### *p16<sup>INK4a</sup>/RB pathway in cellular senescence*

The *INK4a/ARF/INK4b* gene cluster encodes p16<sup>INK4a</sup>, p14<sup>ARF</sup> (or p19<sup>Arf</sup> in mice), and p15<sup>INK4b</sup>, respectively (Gil and Peters, 2006). p16<sup>INK4a</sup> and p15<sup>INK4b</sup> are CDKIs and block cell cycle progression by inhibiting CDK4/6 activity (Gil and Peters, 2006; Kim and Sharpless, 2006; Kotake et al., 2011). p16<sup>INK4a</sup> is often used as a unique and specific biomarker for senescence *in vitro* and *in vivo* (Baker et al., 2011; Burd et al., 2013).

In most primary cells, the *INK4a/ARF/INK4b* locus is tightly regulated at multiple levels. At the transcriptional level, transcription factors such as Sp1, Ets, AP1 (JunB subunit), PPAR $\gamma$ , HBP-1, CTCF, and FOXA1 activate p16<sup>INK4a</sup> expression (Gan et al., 2008; Li et al., 2013; Ohtani et al., 2001; Passequé and Wagner, 2000; Salama et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2007), whereas ITSE (INK4a transcription silencing element), YB1, ID1, and AP-1 (c-Jun subunit) transcriptionally repress p16<sup>INK4a</sup> expression in various stimuli-induced cellular senescence (Huang et al., 2011; Kotake et al., 2013; Li et al., 2011a). Additionally, in oxidative stress-induced cellular senescence, the extracellular signal-regulated kinases ERK1/2 and the stress-activated protein kinases p38 also upregulate p16<sup>INK4a</sup> expression (Jenkins et al., 2011; Shin et al., 2013). At the post-transcriptional level, the RNA-binding proteins hnRNP A1 and A2 promote p16<sup>INK4a</sup> mRNA stability (Zhu et al., 2002), while AUF1 enhances p16<sup>INK4a</sup> mRNA turnover (Guo et al., 2010). The lncRNA VAD inhibits the incorporation of the repressive histone variant H2A.Z at *INK4* gene promoters to promote p16<sup>INK4a</sup> expression in RAF-induced senescence (Lazorthes et al., 2015). The lncRNA UCA1 disrupts the hnRNP A1-p16<sup>INK4a</sup> mRNA interaction, thereby promoting p16<sup>INK4a</sup> mRNA stability and protein levels (Kumar et al., 2014). miR-24 suppresses p16<sup>INK4a</sup> expression at the post-transcriptional level (Lal et al., 2008). At the translational level, p16<sup>INK4a</sup> mRNA 5'-UTR contains a cellular internal ribosome entry site (IRES) that can enhance mRNA translation efficiency, in part through YBX1 (Bisio et al., 2015). p16<sup>INK4a</sup> protein is also subjected to various post-translational modifications; for example, phosphorylation at serine-140 and methylation at arginine-138 alter the affinity of p16<sup>INK4a</sup> for CDK4 (Lu et al., 2017), and its N-terminal ubiquitination promotes p16<sup>INK4a</sup> protein degradation (Ben-Saadon et al., 2004).

The epigenetic regulation of *INK4a/ARF/INK4b* locus transcription also plays a key role in the regulation of p16<sup>INK4a</sup> expression. The p16<sup>INK4a</sup> promoter is methylated by the methyl-transferase DNMT3b to silence its expression, while DNMT1 maintains existing methylation (Velicescu et al., 2002). DNMT1 inhibitors cause demethylation of the p16<sup>INK4a</sup> promoter and a senescence-like phenotype (Pan et al., 2013; Venturelli et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2017). The repressive histone variant macroH2A1 is enriched in the inactive p16<sup>INK4a</sup> locus but replaced by H2A.Z in the active p16<sup>INK4a</sup> locus (Barzily-Rokni et al., 2011). In most primary cells, the *INK4a/ARF/INK4b* locus is tightly regulated by Polycomb group (PcG) proteins that function as epigenetic modifiers and transcriptional repressors (Li et al., 2011a). PcG proteins form two distinct protein complexes called Polycomb Repressive Complex 1 (PRC1) and 2 (PRC2). During cellular senescence, many PcG proteins, such as BMI1, MEL18, CBX4, CBX7, CBX8, EZH1/2, and SUZ12, are down-regulated, leading to the loss of H3K27me3 at the *INK4a/ARF/INK4b* locus, which results in the upregulation of p16<sup>INK4a</sup>. On the other hand, ectopic expression of these PcG proteins delays or bypasses the onset of cellular senescence (Agherbi et al., 2009; Bracken et al., 2007; Dietrich et al., 2007; Gil et al., 2004; Kotake et al., 2007; Luis et al., 2011; Maertens et al., 2009). The antisense lncRNA for p16<sup>INK4a</sup>, ANRIL, is required to recruit PRC1 and PRC2 complexes to the p16<sup>INK4a</sup> promoter to repress its transcription (Yap et al., 2010). Histone H3K27me3 site-specific demethylase JMJD3 has the opposite effect to PcG proteins, which can bind to the *INK4a/ARF/INK4b* locus and specifically catalyze H3K27me3 demethylation, thus releasing the inhibition of PRC complexes on *INK4a/ARF/INK4b* gene cluster transcription and promoting cellular senescence (Agger et al., 2009; Barradas et al., 2009). Other epigenetic regulators, such as ZRF and MLL1, also regulate *INK4a/ARF/INK4b* locus expression at the epigenetic level (Kotake et al., 2009; Ribeiro et al., 2013).

PcG proteins themselves are also subjected to diverse regulation. At the post-transcriptional level, miRNAs, including miR-26b, 181a, 210, and 424, downregulate the PcG proteins CBX7, EED, EZH2, and SUZ12, leading to p16<sup>INK4a</sup> upregulation and promotion of cellular senescence (Puvvula et al., 2014). In proliferating cells, the lncRNA PANDA recruits PRC complexes to repress p16<sup>INK4a</sup> transcription. Conversely, the loss of PANDA promotes cellular senescence (Puvvula et al., 2014). In addition, various post-translational modifications of PcG proteins also affect PRC complex function. For example, the ubiquitin-specific proteases USP7 and USP11 de-ubiquitinate BMI1 and MEL18 to enhance their protein stability, thereby downregulating p16<sup>INK4a</sup> transcription to delay cellular senescence (Maertens et al., 2010). EZH2 can be phosphorylated by CDK1, Akt, and AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK), leading to al-

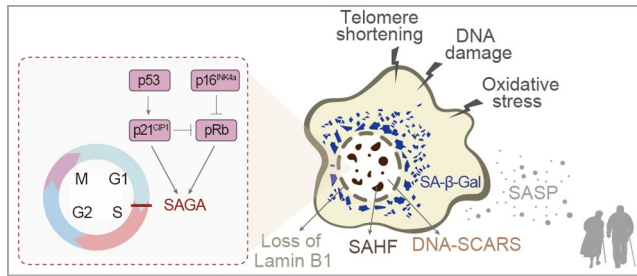
terations in PRC complex stability and enzymatic activity, thereby affecting target gene transcription (Chen et al., 2010; Kaneko et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2012b; Wan et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2011). The phosphorylation of CBX2, CBX7, CBX8, BMI1, and MEL18 by various protein kinases also affects PRC complex function and p16<sup>INK4a</sup> transcription, thereby playing an important role in regulating cellular senescence (Elderkin et al., 2007; Kawaguchi et al., 2017; Voncken et al., 2005; Wu et al., 2013; Zhan et al., 2018).

#### Summary and perspectives

In summary, stable cell cycle arrest mediated by p53/p21<sup>CIP1</sup> and p16<sup>INK4a</sup>/RB pathways is one of the most defining hallmarks of cellular senescence. Both pathways are complex, as they involve many upstream regulators and downstream effectors (Figure 5). In humans, senescent cells accumulate in multiple tissues during aging. And a widely accepted biomarker for cellular senescence, SA-β-gal activity has been explored to monitor cellular aging in living mice (Sun et al., 2022a). p16<sup>INK4a</sup> is also the most widely used biomarker of cellular senescence *in vivo* (Idda et al., 2020). p21<sup>CIP1</sup> can also be useful in the detection of senescent cells in tissues. However, p53 and RB activation also occur in other forms of cell cycle arrest (Rodier and Campisi, 2011). p21<sup>CIP1</sup> is not usually maintained once the senescence program has been established (Stein et al., 1999). Even p16<sup>INK4a</sup> is not expressed by all senescent cells (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2018) and is also expressed in certain non-senescent cells (Sharpless and Sherr, 2015). Therefore, multiple biomarkers are required to precisely identify senescent cells *in vitro* and *in vivo*, such as the cell cycle regulators p53/p21<sup>CIP1</sup> and p16<sup>INK4a</sup>/RB, DNA replication markers EdU or BrdU, cell proliferation markers Ki-67 or PCNA, colony formation assay or cell growth curve, SA-β-gal staining, DNA damage marker γH2AX, Lamin B1, and/or the SASP (Gorgoulis et al., 2019).

#### Mitochondrial malfunction

Mitochondria are important intracellular organelles that play essential roles in multiple cellular activities, including energy supply, calcium homeostasis, cell signaling, apoptosis regulation, and many biosynthetic pathways. Mitochondria contain their own genome, termed mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), encoding 37 genes, including 13 genes coding for proteins, 2 genes coding for ribosomal RNAs (16S and 12S rRNAs), and 22 genes coding for transfer RNAs. ROS, which are primarily generated at complexes I and III of the mitochondrial respiratory chain, cause oxidative damage to mtDNA. The resulting mtDNA mutations produce defective respiratory chain components and thus generate more ROS, which leads to the vicious cycle of ROS and the accumulation of mtDNA mutations. The cell damage caused by



**Figure 5** Cell cycle arrest as a biomarker of aging. Various internal or external senescence stressors, such as telomere shortening, DNA damage, oxidative stress, oncogene activation, tumor suppressor gene inactivation, chemotherapeutic drugs, UV light, radiation, and viral infections, activate the p53/p21<sup>CIP1</sup> and/or p16<sup>INK4a</sup>/RB pathways to block the cell cycle in G1 phase and inhibit entry into S phase, therefore achieving senescence-associated stable cell cycle arrest. Abbreviations: SAGA, senescence-associated growth arrest.

ROS and mtDNA mutations finally accelerates the aging process by compromising mitochondrial functions (Alexeyev, 2009), which is regarded as one of the hallmarks of aging (Ross et al., 2013). Oxidative damage theory is one of the main theories of the aging mechanism (Harman, 1972; Miquel et al., 1980). In general, age-related abnormalities of mitochondria, including increased ROS generation, accumulated mtDNA mutations and content, altered mitochondrial dynamics, decreased mitochondrial unfolded protein response (UPR<sup>mt</sup>), and reduced activity of the respiratory chain, have been linked to aging (Li et al., 2022b).

### ROS

Increased oxidative stress has been reported to be associated with aging (Kokoszka et al., 2001; Kurosu et al., 2005) and shown to reduce the lifespan of *C. elegans* (Dilberger et al., 2019). Moreover, increased ROS production is regarded as a biomarker of aging in monocytes (Jacinto et al., 2018). Spontaneous bursts of mitochondrial flash (mitoflash) frequency have been negatively correlated with and validated as a powerful predictor of the lifespan of *C. elegans* (Shen et al., 2014). Notably, the activated mitoflash can dramatically enhance the reprogramming of these cells from old individuals (Ying et al., 2016).

### mtDNA mutations

The accumulation of mtDNA mutations has been considered to be an important contributor to aging and age-related diseases (Kong et al., 2022; Larsson, 2010; Linnane et al., 1989; Payne and Chinnery, 2015). mtDNA mutations have been reported to induce the aging of multiple organs in mice, such as the ovary, heart, and liver (Giorgi et al., 2018; Kaupilla et al., 2017; Kujoth et al., 2005; Niemann et al., 2017; Trifunovic et al., 2004; Yang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018a). Especially for some tissues with strong energy demand, including heart, liver and skin tissues, excessive mtDNA mutations result in mitochondrial dysfunction by compromising

oxidative phosphorylation and accelerating aging phenotypes (Herbst et al., 2007). During the aging process, the accumulation of mtDNA mutations has been observed in aged rodent and human tissues (Baines et al., 2014; Cortopassi and Arnhem, 1990; Greaves et al., 2012; Greaves et al., 2006; Lob and Hugonnaud, 1978; Pikó et al., 1988; Taylor et al., 2003). Moreover, a larger number and higher frequency of mtDNA mutations, including point, deletion, and insertion mutations, have been identified in aged tissues (Corral-Debrinski et al., 1992; Fayet et al., 2002; Larsson, 2010; Yen et al., 1991). Notably, low-frequency (less than 0.5%) mtDNA point mutations accumulate in human oocytes during aging, which is linked with impaired blastocyst formation (Yang et al., 2020). The accumulation of mtDNA mutations has been shown to decrease fertility by reducing the amount of NADH in oocytes. Therefore, low-frequency mtDNA point mutations may be used as a potential biomarker of oocyte aging. In addition to mtDNA mutations, mitochondrial content (Tao et al., 2017; Vyas et al., 2020; Welle et al., 2003) is also altered in aged individuals. Different mtDNA copy numbers have been observed in different tissues during the aging process (Ding et al., 2015; He et al., 2014b; Knez et al., 2016; Mengel-From et al., 2014; van Leeuwen et al., 2014), implying that mtDNA copy number is tissue-specific for aging.

### Mitochondrial dynamics

Mitochondrial dynamics, including mitochondrial fission, fusion, transport, biogenesis, and mitophagy, maintain the metabolic function and mtDNA integrity as well as their regulatory roles in mitochondrial turnover and many signaling pathways. Several studies have shown that mitochondrial dynamics are required for lifespan extension in different long-lived conditions (Burkewitz et al., 2015; Weir et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2019e), demonstrating their important roles in the aging process. Indeed, altered mitochondrial dynamics, such as defective mitochondrial fission, have been linked with cellular senescence (Yu et al., 2020a). Due to direct regulation by mitochondrial fusion-fission dynamics, changes in mitochondrial morphology have also been reported to be associated with aging. The enlargement of mitochondria has been observed in aged *Drosophila* heart muscle (Sohal, 1970). Abnormal, fragmented mitochondrial networks are implicated in age-related diseases such as Parkinson's disease (PD), AD, and Huntington's disease (HD) (Manczak and Reddy, 2012; Rappold et al., 2014; Shirendeb et al., 2012), and are also observed in healthy aged hearts (Stotland and Gottlieb, 2016). In addition, mitochondrial morphology differs across muscle fiber types or tissues during aging (Mishra et al., 2015b; Navarro and Boveris, 2004; Wyckelsma et al., 2017). For example, the oxidative soleus muscle contains mitochondrial fragmentation, while the glycolytic white gastrocnemius is fea-

tured by mitochondrial elongation in aged rats (Faitg et al., 2019). In brief, the impact of aging on mitochondrial dynamics is tissue-specific.

#### Mitophagy

Mitophagy is a specific form of autophagy that regulates the turnover of dysfunctional or damaged mitochondria, thus maintaining a healthy mitochondrial population for producing energy. The compromise of mitophagy results in mitochondrial dysfunction and proteostasis imbalance and thus exacerbates aging (Babbar et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2019; Fang et al., 2014; Fivenson et al., 2017; Onishi et al., 2021). During the aging process, compromised mitophagy has been observed in aged tissues such as the ovary and heart (Jin et al., 2022; Stotland and Gottlieb, 2016). In *C. elegans*, the inhibition of mitophagy leads to the accumulation of mitochondria in neurons, muscles, and the small intestine during aging (Palikaras et al., 2015). In addition, it has been shown that mitophagy regulates the aging process of *Drosophila* and mice via the modulation of the morphology and quantity of the mitochondria (Koehler et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2021a). As such, compromised mitophagy could also be considered a biomarker for aging.

#### Mitochondrial unfolded protein response (UPR<sup>mt</sup>)

UPR<sup>mt</sup> is triggered by mitochondrial dysfunction. The activation of UPR<sup>mt</sup> has often been proposed as an important pathway in lifespan extension induced by mitochondrial disruption (Houtkooper et al., 2013). For instance, the mitochondrial chaperone HSP60 and mitochondrial protease lon peptidase 1 (LONP1), two components of the UPR<sup>mt</sup>, have been found to be upregulated in long-lived mouse models (Ozkurede and Miller, 2019), showing a correlation between lifespan extension and UPR<sup>mt</sup> activation. During physiological aging, UPR<sup>mt</sup> has been reported to decline with age. Lower LONP1 activity has been shown in old rat livers, demonstrating an impaired UPR<sup>mt</sup> during aging (Bakala et al., 2003). *LONP1* expression has also been reported to decrease with age in mouse skeletal muscle (Bota et al., 2002), which could be restored by caloric restriction that extends mouse lifespan (Lee et al., 1999). Likewise, the expression of the UPR<sup>mt</sup> genes *Hsp60* and *Hsp10* decreased in muscle stem cells from old mice (Yokoyama et al., 2002). These studies point to a causal effect of UPR<sup>mt</sup> decline on aging, and UPR<sup>mt</sup> decline could thus be regarded as a biomarker for aging.

#### Mitochondrial respiratory function

Disorders of mitochondrial respiratory function, such as defective electron transport chain and decreased mitochondrial membrane potential ( $\Delta\psi_m$ ), have been associated with aging (Conley et al., 2000; Migliavacca et al., 2019; Petersen et al., 2003). The respiration rate declines with age in mouse

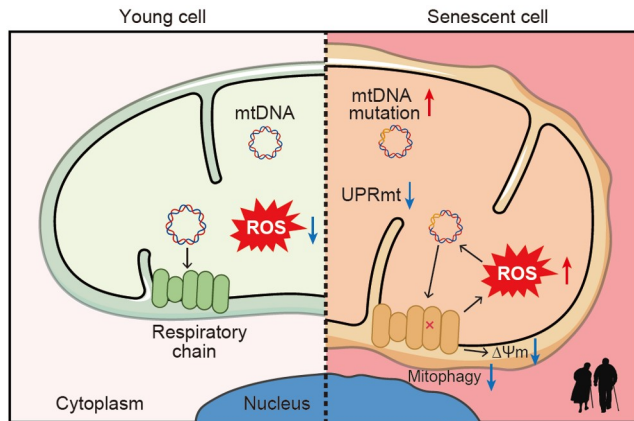
spleen lymphocytes (Rottenberg and Wu, 1997). Furthermore, the enzymatic activities of mitochondrial complexes are also decreased in aging rats (Navarro and Boveris, 2004).  $\Delta\psi_m$  is controlled by electron transport and proton leaks and determines the synthesis rate of ATP and ROS. A lower level of  $\Delta\psi_m$  was observed in aged mouse lymphocytes (Rottenberg and Wu, 1997) and p53-induced senescence (Sugrue et al., 1999). In addition, higher heterogeneity of  $\Delta\psi_m$ , showing an increased ratio of cells with lower  $\Delta\psi_m$ , has been observed in hepatocytes of old rats (Hagen et al., 1997). Therefore, a lower  $\Delta\psi_m$  may be considered a biomarker for aging. Due to the possible effect of accumulated oxidative damage and mitochondrial dysfunction, alterations in mitochondrial ultrastructure were observed in mice and *Drosophila* during aging (Brandt et al., 2017). Mitochondrial respiratory function decreases during the aging process, providing another biomarker for aging.

Taken together, all of the above referred mitochondrial biomarkers of aging and their corresponding test methods are summarized in Figure 6 and Table S2 in Supporting Information.

#### Loss of proteostasis

The maintenance of proteostasis is pivotal for the proper function of cells and organisms (Costa-Mattioli and Walter, 2020). A progressive decline in proteostasis with aging increases the risk of abnormal protein aggregate accumulation (Sala and Morimoto, 2022). Loss of proteostasis is recognized as a hallmark of aging and various age-related diseases (López-Otín et al., 2013; López-Otín et al., 2023). The proteostasis network, which includes the following core members, contributes to proteostasis: (i) molecular chaperones and cochaperones promote efficient protein folding and assembly and prevent the aggregation of misfolded proteins; and (ii) the autophagy-lysosomal system and the ubiquitin-proteasome system are two major quality control pathways that are critical to proteostasis (Dikic, 2017) and collaborate to ensure protein homeostasis (Hipp et al., 2019). In general, large aggregates can be degraded in the lysosome as mediated through autophagy, and terminally misfolded substrates can be degraded by the proteasome (Hartl et al., 2011). (iii) Stress response pathways, such as the heat shock response (HSR) and UPR of the endoplasmic reticulum (UPR<sup>ER</sup>) and mitochondria (UPR<sup>mito</sup>), are activated by protein misfolding (Labbadia and Morimoto, 2015).

Recently increasing evidence indicates that proteostasis is closely associated with aging and longevity. A single-nucleus transcriptome atlas of primate hippocampal aging shows that loss of proteostasis is an obvious characteristic of aging (Zhang et al., 2021e). A severe proteome imbalance develops during *C. elegans* aging, and in the long-lived *daf-2* mutant, this proteome imbalance is reduced, whereas in the



**Figure 6** Mitochondrial biomarkers of aging. Several mitochondrial biomarkers are changed during aging. The red cross in the respiratory chain indicates the disorder of the respiratory chain.

short-lived *daf-16* mutant, this proteome imbalance is enhanced (Walther et al., 2015). The relative size of organismal chaperone networks has been reported to be directly linked to species longevity. The shortest-lived vertebrate (*Northobranchius furzeri*) carries few chaperones and is therefore widely used for establishing fragile protein homeostasis models (Draceni and Pechmann, 2019). Moreover, the longest-lived rodent (the naked mole-rat) is characterized by an above-average number of chaperones and shows the distinct ability to maintain proteostasis via proteasome-mediated degradation and autophagy during aging (Draceni and Pechmann, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2016). In addition, the  $UPR^{ER}$  rate is decreased in aged *C. elegans* (Ben-Zvi et al., 2009), whereas an increased  $UPR^{mito}$  rate extends worm lifespan (Li et al., 2022g). All these results suggest that chaperone status, the activities of the autophagy-lysosomal system, the ubiquitin-proteasome system, and the functionality of  $UPR^{ER}$  and  $UPR^{mito}$  can be used as biomarkers of aging.

#### Regulation of proteostasis by PTMs

Post-translational protein modifications (PTMs) increase the functional diversity of the proteome and are essential for all eukaryotic organisms. Enzymatic and nonenzymatic PTMs in aging are key regulatory mechanisms in the decline of proteostasis; these PTMs are mainly phosphorylation, ubiquitination, SUMOylation, acetylation, carbonylation, and oxidative posttranslational modifications (OxiPTMs) of cysteine residues. Examples of PTM targets involved in the loss of proteostasis in aging or age-related diseases are listed in Table S3 in Supporting Information.

(1) Protein phosphorylation. Protein phosphorylation affects proteostasis in aging by activating or inactivating a protein and/or the tendency of a protein to misfold and aggregate. The study on osteoarthritis in young and old cynomolgus monkeys demonstrated that phosphorylated IRE1

alpha was increased due to the loss of molecular chaperone expression with aging. Dephosphorylation at the Thr172 residue of AMPK $\alpha$  disrupted the maintenance of efficient cellular homeostasis and accelerated the aging process (Salminen et al., 2016).  $\alpha$ -Synuclein is the key protein implicated in PD and other synucleinopathies, and phosphorylation at serine 129 (pS129) is a pathological hallmark of PD and a principal component in Lewy bodies (Chen and Feany, 2005). Acinus is a multifunctional nuclear protein that plays a role in the regulation of basal, starvation-independent autophagy. Phosphorylation of acinus at conserved serine 437 enhances protein stability, extending the lifespans of flies by elevating levels of basal autophagy (Nandi and Krämer, 2018).

(2) Protein ubiquitination and SUMOylation. Ubiquitination is the process of attaching ubiquitin (76-amino acid protein), a small functional regulatory protein, to a targeted molecule (Swatek and Komander, 2016). Ubiquitin ligase CHIP is a key regulator of proteostasis. CHIP deficiency leads to decreased ubiquitination levels of the insulin receptor (INSR) and a reduced lifespan of worms and flies (Tawo et al., 2017). Enhancing K63-linked ubiquitination of beclin 1 by small molecules restored proteostasis by activating autophagy in cells in which mutant tau,  $\alpha$ -synuclein, or huntingtin had accumulated (Xu et al., 2020).

Protein SUMOylation is a widespread posttranslational modification by which a SUMO is covalently attached to target proteins. Increasing the SUMOylation rate of the germline protein CAR-1 disrupted proteostasis and shortened the lifespan in *C. elegans*, indicating that CAR-1 SUMOylation may be used as an aging biomarker of the germline (Moll et al., 2018). The disruption of lamin A (LMNA) SUMOylation may be related to the loss of nuclear proteostasis and may cause early aging in laminopathies (Ghosh et al., 2022a).

(3) Protein acetylation. Lysine acetylation is a normal and versatile protein posttranslational modification. Lysine acetyltransferase and lysine deacetylase catalyze the addition or removal of acetyl groups on histone and nonhistone targets, respectively (Shvedunova and Akhtar, 2022). HDAC6, a cytosolic histone deacetylase, is a suppressor of age-dependent ectopic fat accumulation (EFA). Loss of HDAC6 led to EFA and reduced animal longevity on a high-fat diet (Yan et al., 2017). Human positive cofactor 4 (PC4) accumulates and is activated during aging and accelerates the aging process by disrupting proteostasis, with PC4 interacting with the Sin3-HDAC complex and inhibiting the deacetylation activity of this complex to regulate the mTOR signaling pathway (Chen et al., 2021b). Clinical research has revealed significant acetylated tau pathology in the distribution pattern of AD and other major tauopathies. The acetylation of tau at lysine 280 may contribute to tau-mediated neurodegeneration (Irwin et al., 2012). Heat shock factor 1 (HSF1) is



central to heat shock regulation and plays a pivotal role in guarding proteostasis. The HSF1 acetylation rate is increased in aged mice and impairs the cellular stress response (Jurivich et al., 2020).

(4) Protein carbonylation. Protein carbonylation is a major hallmark of oxidative damage to proteins and an important process in the context of proteostasis. Proteins are oxidatively modified by a large number of reactive species, including reactive oxygen species, lipid peroxidation-derived aldehydes, and reducing sugars (Fedorova et al., 2014). Protein carbonylation is significantly increased in rat kidneys with aging (Goto et al., 1999). Muscle stem cell replication and differentiation are compromised with age due to the accumulation of oxidized proteins, which contribute to sarcopenia. A modified proteomic analysis showed that proteins involved in protein quality control and glycolytic enzymes are the main targets of carbonylation (Baraibar et al., 2016).

#### *OxiPTMs*

Common OxiPTMs of cysteine thiols (-SH) include *S*-nitrosylation (-SNO), *S*-glutathionylation (-SSG), *S*-sulphydration (-SSH), *S*-sulphenylation (-SOH), *S*-sulfinylation (-SO<sub>2</sub>H) and *S*-sulfonylation (-SO<sub>3</sub>H) (Shi and Carroll, 2020).

(1) *S*-Nitrosylation. *S*-nitrosylation or *S*-nitrosation is a reversible posttranslational modification of protein cysteine thiols by nitric oxide (NO) or its derivatives (Zhang et al., 2012). Many aspects of proteostasis are specifically regulated by *S*-nitrosation. For instance, the increase in *S*-nitrosation of the pivotal ER sulfhydryl oxidase Ero1 $\alpha$  leads to decreased activity and accelerates senescence that is accompanied by disrupted proteostasis and a compromised UPR<sup>ER</sup> (Qiao et al., 2022). *S*-nitrosoglutathione reductase (GSNOR) deficiency promotes excessive *S*-nitrosylation of Drp1 and Parkin, thereby impairing mitochondrial dynamics and mitophagy and driving cell senescence (Rizza et al., 2018). hmtThrRS *S*-nitrosation decreases its aminoacylation and editing activities, thereby regulating protein synthesis (Zheng et al., 2020). *S*-nitrosation of ATG4B (a core autophagy protein) resulted in attenuation of autophagy in the hippocampus of diabetic Goto-Kakizaki (GK) rats and caused neurotoxicity (Li et al., 2017c).

(2) *S*-sulphydration. *S*-sulphydration (protein persulfidation) is a posttranslational modification of cysteine thiols mediated by hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S), which is an essential regulatory signaling molecule (Gupta et al., 2022; Zivanovic et al., 2019). It has been reported that *S*-sulphydration of the HMG-CoA reductase degradation protein (Hrd1, an E3 ubiquitin ligase) played an important role in regulating lipid droplet formation in the context of diabetes (Yu et al., 2020b). *S*-Sulphydration of ubiquitin-specific peptidase (USP8) enhances the deubiquitination of Parkin and promotes mitophagy (Sun et al., 2020b). Interventions based on diet or pharmacology to increase persulfidation are linked

with increased longevity (Zivanovic et al., 2019).

In addition to PTMs, the cellular redox balance provides a stable microenvironment for various intracellular biomacromolecules to perform normal functions and is thus another key factor in the regulation of proteostasis in aging and age-related diseases. The accumulation of protein aggregates in cells is considered a feature of cellular senescence that can be induced by oxidative proteostasis (Höhn et al., 2017). It has been reported that the decline in redox-stress response capacity (RRC) is a dynamic characteristic of aging; i.e., it affects the ability of cells to generate appropriate reactive oxygen species and thus activate cell signaling pathways, to maintain redox homeostasis, and to degrade damaged proteins, i.e., to maintain proteostasis (Meng et al., 2017). In a promising finding, increasing the redox-stress signaling threshold (RST, identified as the maximum level below which redox stress shows benefits) by starvation, exercise or heat stress during development improved RRC to maintain protein homeostasis and delay aging (Meng et al., 2022). Another study showed that reduction stress in the ER is an important driving force of cellular senescence, since under reductive stress conditions, protein synthesis, protein folding, and UPR<sup>ER</sup> activity are all disrupted. Specific elevation in the degree of ER oxidation successfully delays cellular aging (Qiao et al., 2022). Notably, it has been proposed that precision redox is the key for antioxidant pharmacology, and the avenue to precision redox medicine is opening (Meng et al., 2021; Sies et al., 2022). Therefore, RRC, and RST and precision redox status effectively reflect proteostatic status and are therefore effective biomarkers of aging.

#### *Summary and perspectives*

Overwhelming evidence supports the loss of proteostasis as one of the key characteristics in aging and as an effective biomarker of aging, and proteostasis failure contributes to the development of aging and age-related diseases. Protein PTMs are involved in proteostasis in aging by regulating protein activity, localization or interaction with other cellular molecules and are also therefore necessary for cellular homeostasis. oxiPTMs competing for specific protein thiol groups are important to protein stability, and the roles of oxiPTMs depend on the cellular redox state, which is either optimal or stressful. Enlargement of RST is a way to maintain proteostasis by increasing the redox-stress signaling threshold. The ability to maintain proteostasis in RRC is a dynamic characteristic of aging. The methods and indices for quantitatively assessing the relationship between biomarkers of proteostasis (PTMs levels, RRC, and RST) and aging progression need to be established in future studies.

#### **Metabolic dysregulation**

Cellular metabolism, a fundamental activity to sustain life, is

deeply intertwined with most, if not all, biological processes, including aging and senescence (Amorim et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022g; Wei et al., 2023). Aging has been characterized with a number of hallmarks, among which quite a few roots from abnormal metabolic activities (López-Otín et al., 2023). For example, while nutrient-sensing and mitochondrial function are primarily an intrinsic part of cell metabolism, others have a more complicated and close relationship with cellular metabolism, such as the cause of DNA damage by the imbalance of redox metabolism, alteration of mTORC activity (a conserved signaling pathway in aging) with amino acids and glucose (Liu and Sabatini, 2020), and most recently, creation of aging intervention environment through cell-cell metabolite exchange (Correia-Melo et al., 2023). Since cellular metabolism elicits a profound influence on the aging process, metabolites are naturally thought to be good biomarkers for aging. Indeed, much effort has been paid to measure the difference of metabolites between humans with distinct ages, and a database named MetaboAge compiles manually curated human aging-related metabolome studies (Bucaciuc Mracica et al., 2020). At present, a handful of metabolites have been consistently reported to change the aging process (Table S4 in Supporting Information), thus they are the promising biomarker candidates for aging. In the following sections, we summarize the metabolic pathway, aging-related functions, and potentials as aging biomarkers of these metabolites.

The level of hundreds of metabolites have been documented to change with age (Bucaciuc Mracica et al., 2020; López-Otín et al., 2016; Panyard et al., 2022), and dozens of them are able to promote or resist the aging process (Amorim et al., 2022; Finkel, 2015). However, due to the metabolic heterogeneity of individuals and different metabolite assays between studies, only a small number of metabolic features has been consistently validated in multiple studies. Among them, seven metabolites are strongly associated with age and/or elicit the geroprotective effects across species, therefore can be considered as the candidates of metabolic biomarkers for aging.

### *NAD<sup>+</sup>*

NAD<sup>+</sup> is one of star molecules that strongly affect the aging process in different model organisms. Besides the inter-conversion with NADH, NAD<sup>+</sup> is mainly synthesized from precursors through the salvage pathway, the Preiss-Handler pathway, and the *de novo* pathway in the mammalian cells, and is catabolized through a number of NAD<sup>+</sup>-consuming enzymes such as Poly (ADP-ribose) polymerase (PARP), SIRT, and CD38 (Chini et al., 2021). NAD<sup>+</sup> regulates the aging process via several mechanisms (Covarrubias et al., 2021). At first, as a core enzyme I, NAD<sup>+</sup> is involved in more than a hundred redox reactions and hence NAD<sup>+</sup> deficiency can lead to metabolic dysfunction and aging. Furthermore,

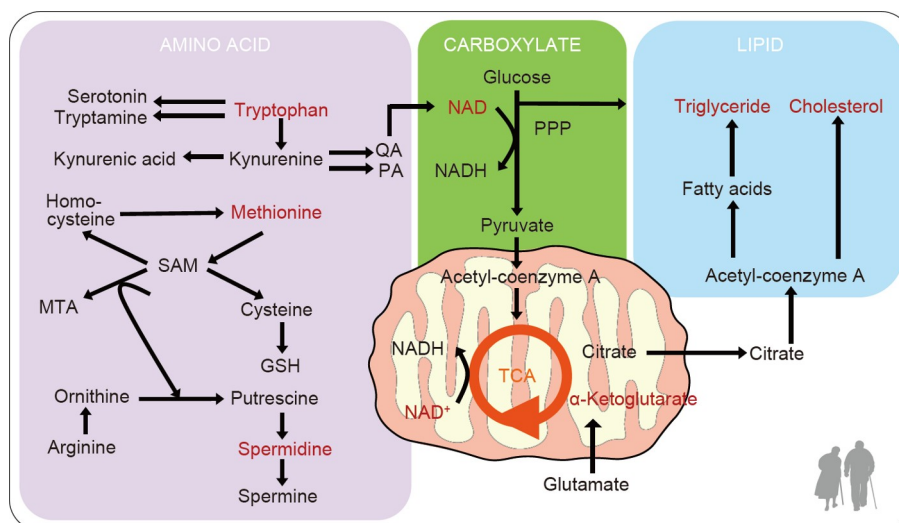
NAD<sup>+</sup> plays an important role in macrophage activation and neuronal survival, and NAD<sup>+</sup> depletion promotes the functional decline of innate immunity and causes neurodegenerative diseases, including AD and Parkinson's disease. In addition, replenishment of NAD<sup>+</sup> in aging mice may improve health by maintaining the homeostasis of stem cell pools (Zhang et al., 2016). However, a study showed that an increase of NAD<sup>+</sup> level in oncogene-induced senescent cells might enhance the senescence-associated secretory phenotype (Nacarelli et al., 2019). Thus, more effort should be made to understand the function of NAD<sup>+</sup> in cellular aging (senescence) beyond organismal aging. NAD<sup>+</sup> is compartmentalized in cells with a typical concentration of 50–300  $\mu\text{mol L}^{-1}$  while its abundance in blood is much low. A decrease in NAD<sup>+</sup> is consistently associated with age (Zou et al., 2020), thus making it a promising biomarker for aging.

### *Alpha-Ketoglutarate*

Alpha-Ketoglutarate is a key intermediate metabolite of the tricarboxylic acid cycle. It can be synthesized from glutamate through reversible conversion in mitochondrial by glutamate hydrogenase or transamination reactions in both cytosol and mitochondria (Figure 7). Alpha-Ketoglutarate can extend the health span in several model organisms including worms (Chin et al., 2014), fruit flies (Su et al., 2019), and mice (Asadi Shahmirzadi et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021j). In worms, this metabolite can bind to the ATP synthase, which is also known as the complex V of mitochondrial electron transport chain, and partial inhibition of mitochondrial respiratory activity can decrease the aging rate. In addition, the intervention geroprotective effect of  $\alpha$ -ketoglutarate may be mediated by TOR signaling (Chin et al., 2014; Su et al., 2019). Although the geroprotective effect of  $\alpha$ -ketoglutarate is consistently observed, the level of  $\alpha$ -ketoglutarate during aging and cellular senescence appears to be dependent on the biological contexts. Some studies indicated that the  $\alpha$ -ketoglutarate abundance increased in chemical-induced senescence (Fernandez-Rebollo et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2017), and others reported that it declined in the blood and follicular fluid of aged mice (Wang et al., 2020e; Zhang et al., 2021j).

### *Tryptophan*

Tryptophan is one of the essential amino acids in human. While a small fraction of free tryptophan is used for the biosynthesis of proteins, such as the important neurotransmitter serotonin and neuromodulator tryptamine, the majority is catabolized into kynurenine via indoleamine-2,3-dioxygenase, tryptophan-2,3-dioxygenase, and a recently identified enzyme, IL4I1 (Figure 7). Kynurenine and its derivatives are key regulators of immune cells, such as macrophages, dendritic cells, T cells, and innate lymphoid cells, and they can be further catabolized into quinolinic acid,



**Figure 7** Altered metabolic pathways as biomarkers of aging. Seven metabolites that have consistent effects on the aging process across species are colored in red. They can be divided into four groups, including amino acids and derivatives, core coenzymes in central carbon metabolism, lipids, and intermediate metabolites in tricarboxylic acid cycle. Abbreviation: QA, quinolinic acid; PA, picolinic acid; SAM, *S*-adenosyl-methionine; MTA, *S*-methyl-thioadenosine; GSH, glutathione;  $\text{NAD}^+$ , oxidative nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide; NADH, reduced nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide; PPP, pentose phosphate pathway; TCA, tricarboxylic acid cycle.

a precursor of  $\text{NAD}^+$ . The immunological effect of kynurenine and its derivatives contributes to the decrease of immune function and neurodegeneration with aging, but it remains unknown if other underlying mechanisms link the tryptophan metabolism with aging (Salminen, 2022; van der Goot and Nollen, 2013). The tryptophan abundance decreases in the blood (Panyard et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2012).

#### Methionine

Methionine is an essential amino acid necessary for the initiation of mRNA translation into proteins. As a common sulfur-containing amino acid, methionine is interconverted into homocysteine through the methionine cycle, and homocysteine synthesizes cysteine via the transsulfuration pathway (Figure 7). In addition, methionine is involved in the biosynthesis of polyamines. Just as caloric restriction being a promising approach to achieving longevity across phylogenetically diverse species, methionine restriction can also delay the progress of aging from yeast to mice (Bárcena et al., 2019; Bárcena et al., 2018). Although the exact reason is not yet fully understood, a few mechanisms have been proposed, such as reduction of translation rate, modulation of autophagy, and antioxidant defense (Bárcena et al., 2019; Parkhitko et al., 2019). In aged mice, the methionine decreases in serum but increases in brain compared with young mice (Ding et al., 2021a; Houtkooper et al., 2011).

#### Spermidine

Polyamines include three related metabolites, putrescine, spermidine, and spermine, which contain two or more amine groups. All of them are catabolic product of arginine (Figure 7). Polyamines have been known to exhibit a geroprotective

effect for a long time (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Nutritional supplementation of spermidine brings about the protective effect on cardiovascular and immune cells in mice and rats (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Puleston et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2019a). Recent studies show that the polyamines levels declined with age (Liu et al., 2022d; Panyard et al., 2022).

#### Triglycerides

Triglycerides are primary forms of fatty acid storage in organisms, mainly in adipocytes and hepatocytes. Triglycerides are made by esterifying a glycerol with three fatty acids, and under energy-demanding conditions, they are degraded into fatty acids which are translocated into mitochondria to be oxidized through the  $\beta$ -oxidation pathway and release energy. The level of triglycerides is generally elevated with age (Auro et al., 2014; Bucaciuc Mracica et al., 2020). However, this elevation might not be specific to aging, because higher triglyceride level is often associated with obesity, metabolic syndrome, and cardiovascular conditions (Wishart et al., 2018).

#### Cholesterol

As fatty acids, cholesterol is taken from diet or synthesized from acetyl coenzyme A with NADPH providing the reducing power. Cholesterol is consumed as one of the major constituents of the cell membrane and a precursor of steroid hormones. The cholesterol concentration in blood often raises with age, but it is also strongly associated with other factors such as exercise, nutrient conditions and genetic polymorphisms, for example, cholesterol is more abundant in serum of familial hypercholesterolemia patients (Bucaciuc Mracica et al., 2020; Wishart et al., 2018).

## Aberrant signaling pathways

Cellular senescence is a cell fate program that limits the proliferation of impaired cells by enforcing stable cell cycle arrest (Tchkonia et al., 2013). Senescence can be triggered by diverse forms of stress stimuli, including DNA damage signals, chronic oxidative stress, and telomere dysfunction (Correia-Melo et al., 2014; Herbig et al., 2004; Sahin et al., 2011; von Zglinicki et al., 2005). Senescent cells can secrete a wide range of cytokines and chemokines, known as the SASP (Coppe et al., 2008; Freund et al., 2010; Kuilman et al., 2008; Kuilman and Peeper, 2009). Cytokines, such as TNF $\alpha$ , can in turn initiate, promote or sustain senescence (Acosta et al., 2013; Acosta et al., 2008; Kandhaya-Pillai et al., 2017; Kuilman et al., 2008; Li et al., 2017a; Orjalo et al., 2009). Engagement of senescence requires integration of multiple signaling pathways. To date, experimental evidence collectively suggests that although many stimuli can induce senescence response, they converge on two main pathways, p53 pathway and pRb pathway (Campisi, 2005). However, this could be just the tip of the iceberg. Gene expression profile reveals that the characteristics of the replicative senescence response are highly cell-type specific (Shelton et al., 1999), suggesting multiple pathways to induce cellular senescence. Among these pathways, TNF $\alpha$  signaling has been strongly linked to senescence (Kandhaya-Pillai et al., 2017; Li et al., 2017a). TNF $\alpha$  is a pleiotropic pro-inflammatory cytokine known to mediate a broad range of biological functions. It stimulates the proliferation of normal cells, exerts cytolytic activity against tumor cells, and causes inflammatory and immunoregulatory effects (Aggarwal, 2003). TNF $\alpha$  acts as a potent inducer of inflammatory responses and plays a crucial role in the pathogenesis of numerous chronic inflammatory diseases and age-related diseases (Holtmann and Neurath, 2004). In addition, persistent presence of low-level circulating TNF $\alpha$  can lead to chronic activation of the immune system, called inflammaging (Frasca and Blomberg, 2016). In this section, we will discuss signaling pathways induced by TNF $\alpha$  as biomarkers for cellular senescence.

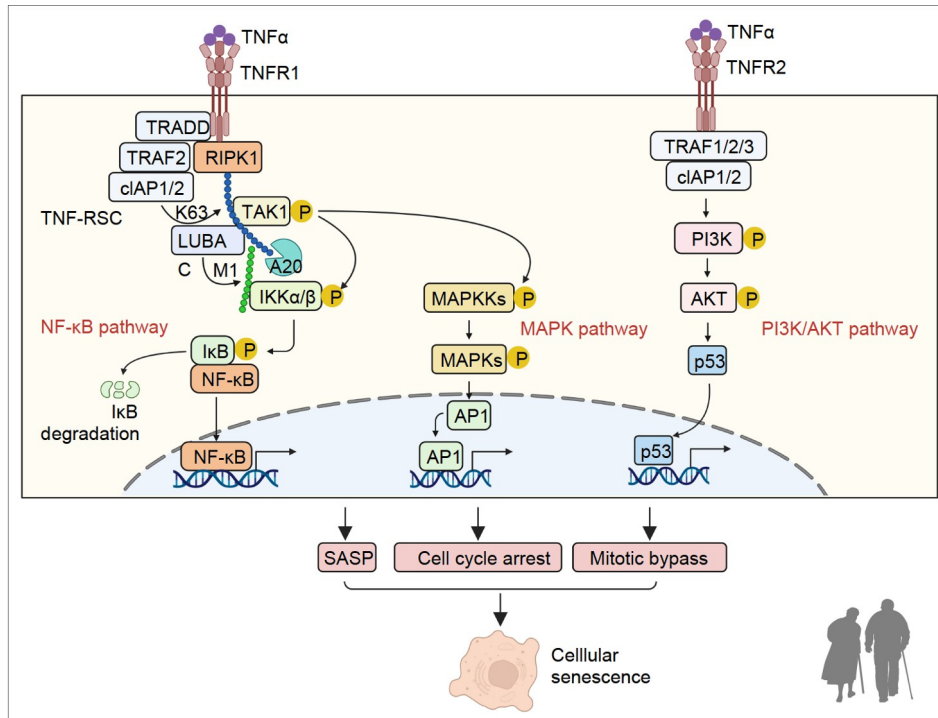
### TNF $\alpha$ signaling

The biological effects of TNF $\alpha$  are mediated by two distinct cell surface receptors, TNFR1 and TNFR2 (Rothe et al., 1992; Sreaton and Xu, 2000; Vandenabeele et al., 1995). Both receptors have significant homology in their extracellular domains but differ structurally in their cytoplasmic domains. TNFR1 contains a death domain (DD), whereas TNFR2 lacks DD. The cytoplasmic DD of TNFR1 is critical for signal transduction of TNF $\alpha$ , which can recruit other DD-containing molecules. Upon ligation of TNF $\alpha$ , TNFR1 undergoes trimerization and induces association of the receptors DD and subsequent recruitment of two DD-

containing proteins, TNF receptor-associated death domain (TRADD) and receptor-interacting serine/threonine-protein kinase 1 (RIPK1), to form a transient membrane signaling complex named TNFR1 signaling complex (TNF-RSC) or complex I (Micheau and Tschopp, 2003; Yang et al., 2022b) (Figure 8). In TNF-RSC, TRADD recruits the E3 ubiquitin ligases cIAPs via the adaptor protein TRAF2, which in turn induces K63-linked ubiquitination on RIPK1 (Bertrand et al., 2008; Hsu et al., 1996). The linear ubiquitination assembly complex (LUBAC), which is recruited by binding with K63-linked ubiquitin chains in TNF-RSC, leads to M1-linked ubiquitination on RIPK1 (Gerlach et al., 2011; Ikeda et al., 2011; Tokunaga et al., 2011). The K63-linked ubiquitin chains on RIPK1 facilitate the recruitment of TAK1 complex (TAB2/TAB3/TAK1) (Bertrand et al., 2008), while the M1-linked ubiquitin chains on RIPK1 promote the recruitment of IKK complex (NEMO/IKK $\alpha$ /IKK $\beta$ ) (Ikeda et al., 2011). Subsequently, activated TAK1 phosphorylates and activates IKK $\alpha$ /IKK $\beta$ , which further phosphorylates I $\kappa$ B to induce its proteasomal degradation and thus promotes the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B signaling (Hayden and Ghosh, 2012). In addition, activated TAK1 also phosphorylates mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPKKs) to mediate the activation of MAPK signaling (Sabio and Davis, 2014) (Figure 8). The M1-linked ubiquitin chains also recruit A20 to TNF-RSC, which is a suppressor of NF- $\kappa$ B and MAPK activation by deubiquitinating K63-linked ubiquitin chains on RIPK1 to terminate the signaling (Wertz et al., 2004) (Figure 8).

### Activation of NF- $\kappa$ B pathway

The senescence program involves a complex interplay between cell-intrinsic and cell-extrinsic processes that influence the senescence-associated cell cycle arrest, and the surveillance of senescent cells by the immune system (Kuilman and Peeper, 2009). Emerging evidence indicates that the SASP can reinforce the senescence arrest and mediate cross-talk between senescent cells and immune cells within their microenvironment (Acosta et al., 2008; Krizhanovsky et al., 2008; Krtolica et al., 2001; Kuilman et al., 2008). NF- $\kappa$ B activation has been proposed as a master regulator in senescence that is required for SASP production and contributes to cell cycle arrest (Chien et al., 2011; Mongi-Bragato et al., 2020; Salminen et al., 2012b). NF- $\kappa$ B transcription factors contain both the Rel family proteins (RelA/p65, c-Rel and RelB) and NF- $\kappa$ B components (p50/p105 and p52/p100), which are dimerized with each other in the cytoplasm and inhibited by binding to I $\kappa$ B proteins (Hoffmann and Baltimore, 2006). After activation, the NF- $\kappa$ B complexes translocate into the nucleus and transactivate the expression of special sets of target genes. p65 subunit of NF- $\kappa$ B complex has been found more significantly enriched into the chromatin of senescent fibroblasts as compared to the young counterparts. Phosphorylation of p65 Ser536 re-



**Figure 8** Activation of TNF $\alpha$  signaling pathway as a biomarker of cellular senescence. TNF $\alpha$  can activate different pathways in cellular senescence, including NF- $\kappa$ B activation by RIPK1, MAPKs-dependent kinase cascade, and PI3K-AKT kinase cascade. Together, these signaling events contribute to cellular senescence and their activation may represent biomarkers of cellular senescence. Abbreviations: TNFR1, TNF receptor 1; TRADD, TNFR1-associated death domain protein; RIPK1, receptor-interacting protein kinase 1; TRAF1/2/3, TNF receptor-associated factor 1/2/3; cIAP1/2, cellular inhibitors of apoptosis 1 and 2; TAK1, transforming growth factor  $\beta$ -activated kinase 1; IKK $\alpha/\beta$ , I $\kappa$ B kinase  $\alpha/\beta$ ; I $\kappa$ B, inhibitor of NF- $\kappa$ B; NF- $\kappa$ B, nuclear factor- $\kappa$ B; MAPKs, mitogen-activated protein kinases; AP-1, activator protein 1; PI3K, phosphoinositide 3-kinase; AKT, protein kinase B (PKB), also known as AKT; p53, tumor protein p53.

side, a transactivating modification of p65, is correlated with increased expression and secretion of SASP in senescence (Chien et al., 2011). In cultured fibroblasts, NF- $\kappa$ B suppression causes escape from immune recognition by natural killer (NK) cells and cooperates with p53 inactivation to bypass senescence. In a mouse lymphoma model, NF- $\kappa$ B inhibition bypasses treatment-induced senescence (Chien et al., 2011). Interestingly, inhibition of NF- $\kappa$ B signaling could overcome the growth arrest induced by p53-p21<sup>CIP1</sup> pathway (Rovillain et al., 2011). Thus, NF- $\kappa$ B pathway has a causative role in the induction of SASP and its activation may represent a biomarker of cellular senescence.

Evidence further supporting the role of NF- $\kappa$ B pathway in senescence is that many TNF-RSC components are involved in senescence. For example, A20 has been shown to play an important role in TNF $\alpha$ -induced senescence, which is a ubiquitin-editing enzyme that restricts NF- $\kappa$ B signaling (Wertz et al., 2004). A20 prevents the occurrence of multiple inflammatory diseases. Interestingly, A20 also has a self-protective effect on the senescence of nucleus pulposus cells induced by TNF $\alpha$  (Peng et al., 2020). Downregulation of A20 in nucleus pulposus cells exacerbated the senescence phenotype, including increased senescence-associated beta-galactosidase activity, increased expression of senescence-

associated proteins, increased synthesis of extracellular matrix (ECM), and G1 cycle arrest (Peng et al., 2020). NEMO is a key activator of TNF $\alpha$ -induced NF- $\kappa$ B signaling and apoptosis (Liu et al., 2017b). NEMO also plays an important role in radiation-induced senescence (Dong et al., 2015). Irradiation caused vascular endothelial cells to gain a senescence-like phenotype through the NEMO/NF- $\kappa$ B pathway, suggesting that NEMO may be a critical switch that regulates cellular senescence and apoptosis caused by exposure to radiation. TNF-RSC components may also regulate senescence in a TNF $\alpha$  signaling-independent manner. TRADD is a central adaptor in the TNF-RSC, which mediates both cell death and pro-inflammatory signals (Aggarwal, 2003). Although TRADD is usually considered a cytoplasmic protein, it may also have a function in the nucleus (Morgan et al., 2002; Wesemann et al., 2004). Indeed, dynamic TRADD shuttling from the cytoplasm into the nucleus regulates the interaction of p19<sup>Arf</sup> with the ubiquitin ligase for ARF (Chio et al., 2012). p19<sup>Arf</sup> is an instrumental mediator of cellular senescence (Yetil et al., 2015). Primary cells lacking TRADD were less susceptible to HRas-induced senescence and showed a reduced level of accumulation of the p19<sup>Arf</sup> protein that is independent of TNF $\alpha$  signaling (Chio et al., 2012).

### Activation of MAPK pathway

In addition to NF- $\kappa$ B pathway, activation of MAPK pathway is another outcome of TNF $\alpha$  signaling. MAPKs are capable of sensing changes in diverse cellular conditions, and in turn elicit adaptive responses including senescence (Anerillas et al., 2020). MAPKs modulate the levels and function of many proteins in the senescence-regulatory axes, including factors in the p21<sup>CIP1</sup>/p53 and p16<sup>INK4a</sup>/RB pathways (Anerillas et al., 2020; Debacq-Chainiaux et al., 2010; Deschênes-Simard et al., 2013; Freund et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2018a). Through these actions, MAPKs implement key traits of senescence, including growth arrest, cell survival, and SASP (Debacq-Chainiaux et al., 2010; Deschênes-Simard et al., 2013; Freund et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2018a). Although MAPKs encompass a large number of kinases, the best-known MAPKs that are mostly linked to cellular senescence are ERKs (ERK1 and ERK2), p38s (p38 $\alpha$ , p38 $\beta$ , p38 $\gamma$ , and p38 $\delta$ ), and JNKs (JNK1, JNK2, and JNK3) (Debacq-Chainiaux et al., 2010; Deschênes-Simard et al., 2013; Freund et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2010; Sun et al., 2018a; Vizioli et al., 2020). In senescence, multiple MAPK pathways are activated by various stress signaling. MAPKs regulate senescence by either regulating the transcription of senescence-associated genes or controlling gene expression programs post-transcriptionally by phosphorylation and thereby modulating the activity of RNA-binding proteins implicated in senescence (Lafarga et al., 2009; Ziaei et al., 2012). In addition, the MAPK substrate MK2 is involved in the translation of SASP factors and links MAPK pathway with mTOR pathway, which is also activated in senescent cells (Herranz et al., 2015). MAPKs also cooperate with NF- $\kappa$ B pathway to regulate senescence. It is well known that p38 MAPK activates MSK1/2, which can phosphorylate the p65 subunit of the NF- $\kappa$ B complex and thus potentiate NF- $\kappa$ B signaling (Kefaloyianni et al., 2006; Vermeulen et al., 2003). p38 MAPK has been shown to control SASP via the transcriptional activation of NF- $\kappa$ B signaling. Depletion of p65 subunit of NF- $\kappa$ B complex significantly reduces the secretion of pro-inflammatory cytokines induced by p38 MAPK activity in senescence (Alimbetov et al., 2016; Freund et al., 2011; Rodier et al., 2009). Thus, MAPK signaling governs both transcriptional and translational programs in senescent cells and activation of MAPKs may also represent an important biomarker of cellular senescence.

### Activation of PI3K/AKT pathway

In addition to NF- $\kappa$ B activation, the interaction of TNF $\alpha$  with TNFR2 also activates the reciprocal PI3K/AKT signaling pathway (Fu et al., 2021; Takahashi et al., 2022) (Figure 8). The PI3K/AKT oncogenic signaling modules are frequently mutated in sporadic human cancer. Although this pathway has been shown to play critical roles in driving tumor growth and proliferation, multiple lines of evidence indicate that its

activation in normal human cells can also promote cellular senescence (Alimonti et al., 2010b; Astle et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2019b). Loss of PTEN, the major negative regulator of the PI3K/AKT pathway, induces senescence in mouse embryonic fibroblasts and mouse prostate epithelium (Chen et al., 2005; Jung et al., 2019b). Constitutively activation of AKT induces senescence in human endothelial cells, mouse embryonic fibroblasts, and mouse primary keratinocytes (Alimonti et al., 2010a; Chen et al., 2005; Nogueira et al., 2008). PI3K/AKT pathway activation-induced senescence requires mTORC1-dependent accumulation of p53, which involves increased p53 synthesis and stabilization mediated by inactivation of MDM2 (Astle et al., 2012). Transcriptomic and metabolomic profilings revealed that there were numerous escape routes beyond p53 pathway in AKT-induced senescence. NF1-mediated suppression of RAS-ERK signaling maintains AKT-induced senescence, which is a unique hallmark for AKT-induced senescence (Chan et al., 2020). Thus, activation of PI3K/AKT activity induces senescence in both p53-dependent and independent manners, which may represent a biomarker of cellular senescence.

### Activation of cGAS-STING pathway

Studies on cellular senescence have revealed that although the causes of and phenotypes generated by cellular senescence were manifold, persistent genotoxic stress, particularly DNA damage was thought to be the common mechanism critical for the establishment and maintenance of senescence phenotypes (d'Adda di Fagagna, 2008). DNA damage can trigger the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B, MAPK, and PI3K-AKT pathways during senescence. However, the link between DNA and these pathways was not clear. cGAS is a DNA sensor that triggers innate immune responses through the production of the second messenger cyclic GMP-AMP (cGAMP), which binds and activates the adaptor protein STING. Several studies have provided strong evidence that cGAS-STING pathway also has an essential role in promoting cellular senescence (Bi et al., 2020; Dou et al., 2017; Glück et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2023b; Yang et al., 2017). Mechanistically, cGAS senses micronuclei as the result of genomic DNA damage to promote senescent phenotypes by producing a range of cytokines and chemokines, such as IFN- $\beta$ , IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, and IL-8, which are known to feedback to the secreting cells to reinforce senescence signaling. Given that the cGAS-STING pathway provides a critical paracrine signal that is necessary for sustaining cellular senescence, activation of this pathway may also represent a biomarker of cellular senescence.

### Summary and perspectives

Emerging studies indicate that activation of TNF $\alpha$  signaling, including NF- $\kappa$ B pathway, MAPK pathway, and PI3K-AKT pathway, controls the cellular phenotypes of senescence,

including generation of SASP, cell cycle arrest, and mitotic bypass (Figure 8). In response to stimuli capable of triggering cellular senescence, NF- $\kappa$ B, MAPKs, and PI3K-AKT pathways function as sensors to identify the extent of damage, and help to determine whether the response ought to be cell proliferation, apoptosis, senescence, or others. If cells adopt a senescence response, these pathways participate directly in the various traits of cellular senescence by either contributing to implementing the gene expression programs that enable growth arrest and production and secretion of SASP factors transcriptionally and post-transcriptionally, or counteracting the apoptotic phenotype to ensure the long-term survival of senescent cells.

## SASP

Cellular senescence represents a special cell state implicated in a number of pathophysiological processes and an array of age-related disorders. Due to the discovery of contribution of senescent cells to human morbidity, clinical interest in therapeutically targeting senescence to achieve healthy aging and prevent or ameliorate age-related diseases, including but not limited to senotherapy, continues to grow. Appropriate identification and accurate detection of senescent cells, both *in vitro* and *in vivo*, is theoretically essential, albeit technically challenging. Several biomarkers of cellular senescence have been identified, including SA- $\beta$ -gal, p16<sup>INK4a</sup>, and p21<sup>CIP1</sup>, but very few markers have high sensitivity and specificity (Huang et al., 2022c).

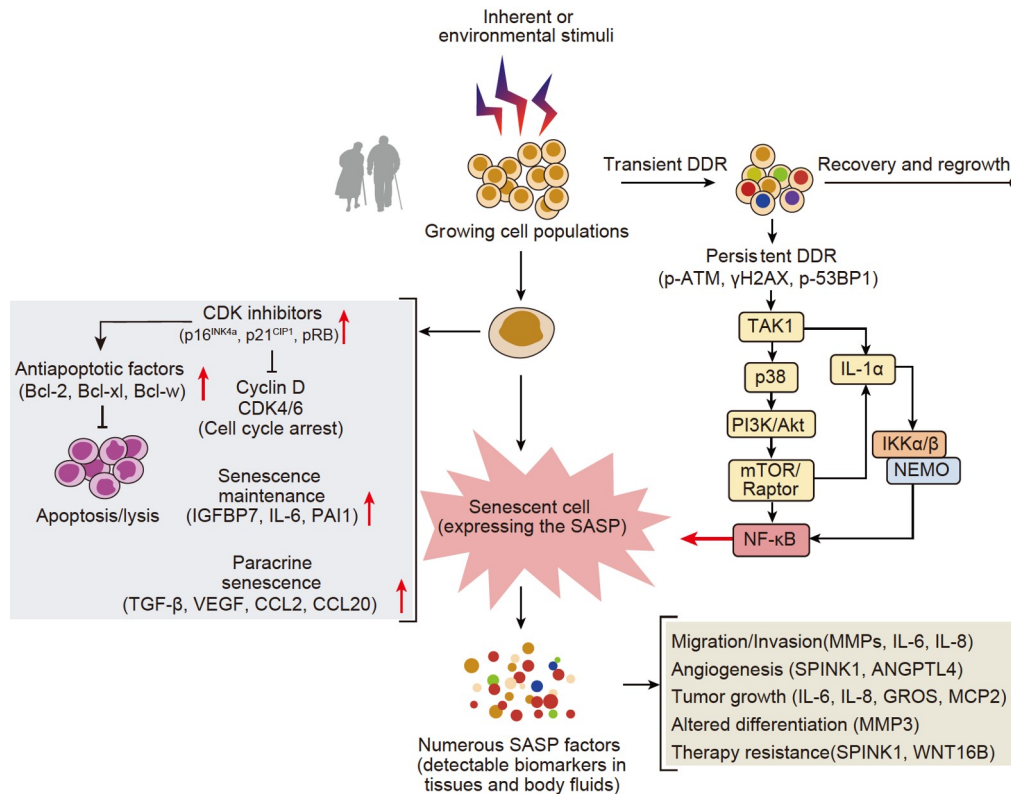
### *The SASP and its intracellular regulation*

Senescent cells actively synthesize and secrete a plethora of soluble factors, including pro-inflammatory cytokines, chemokines, angiogenic factors, growth modulators, and matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs), collectively termed the SASP, or alternatively, senescence messaging secretome (SMS) (Figure 9) (Acosta et al., 2008; Cai et al., 2022d; Coppe et al., 2008; Kuilman and Peeper, 2009). To date, it is well established that the SASP constitutes a typical hallmark of senescent cells and mediates the vast majority of their *in vivo* effects, particularly in mammals. The SASP can reinforce senescence in autocrine and paracrine manners (Acosta et al., 2013), and trigger immune responses to eliminate senescent cells in tissue microenvironments (Krizhanovsky et al., 2008; Muñoz-Espín and Serrano, 2014). Although SASP factors are physiologically essential in mediating developmental senescence, wound healing, cellular reprogramming, and tissue plasticity (Demaria et al., 2014; Mosteiro et al., 2016; Muñoz-Espín et al., 2013; Storer et al., 2013), they cause persistent and chronic inflammation in diverse tissues and organs, a phenomenon known as inflammaging (Franceschi and Campisi, 2014), explaining an array of senescence-caused deleterious and

pro-aging consequences.

Interestingly, the SASP composition and strength can vary substantially, with the overall profile depending on the duration of senescence, nature of the senescence stimulus, specific cell type and duration after senescence initiation (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2017). Although senescence-associated markers result from altered transcription of cells exposed to stress, the senescence phenotype is variable and dynamic, changing at varying intervals after senescence induction, with methodologies for readily identifying senescent cells largely lacking. The heterogeneity of the SASP, or even the senescence program, can be technically exemplified by characterizing numerous whole-transcriptome datasets that are publicly available, while transcriptomic signatures associated with specific senescence-inducing stresses or senescent cell types have been identified. Identification of novel transcriptomic signatures to detect specific subtypes of senescent cells or to discriminate among diverse senescence-driving programs represents an attractive strategy to determine the individual biological roles of senescent cells and to develop optimal drug targets for interventions in translational and clinical medicine.

The complexity of the SASP, typically appraised by a list of secreted proteins, has been largely underestimated, as a small handful of factors cannot explain this varying phenotype. In fact, many studies reported that expression of the SASP is subject to regulation by an intricate but well-ordered signaling network, which comprises but is not limited to ATM,  $\gamma$ H2AX, Zscan4, TAK1, p38, MAPK, mTOR, IL-1 $\alpha$ , NF- $\kappa$ B, c/EBP $\beta$ , JAK2/STAT3 and GATA4 (Borghesan et al., 2020; Hernandez-Segura et al., 2018; Song et al., 2020a; Song et al., 2020b; Sun et al., 2018b; Sun et al., 2022b). Despite these advances, increasing lines of data suggest that SASP regulation is indeed multilayered, including contributions from pre-transcriptional signaling cascades such as the cGAS-STING pathway, epigenetic factors governing DNA and histone modifications as well as the super-enhancer landscape in senescent cells (Criscione et al., 2016a; Glück et al., 2017; Sati et al., 2020; Tasdemir et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021a). Continued inputs into the SASP biology are being generated, such as those contributed by the SASP Atlas, a comprehensive proteomic database of soluble factors and exosome-delivered SASP cargoes derived from multiple cell types exposed to various senescence inducers (Basisty et al., 2020). Some candidate biomarkers that coincidentally overlap with aging markers in human plasma, including growth differentiation factor 15 (GDF15), stanniocalcin 1 (STC1), and serine protease inhibitors (SERPINS), which largely correlate with age, were identified in a human cohort of the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging (BLSA) (Basisty et al., 2020). Furthermore, pathogen-related factors, such as lipopolysaccharide (LPS) or SARS-CoV-2 S1 antigen, can remarkably amplify the



**Figure 9** The SASP as a biomarker of aging. Cellular senescence is a cell state triggered by stressful insults and certain physiological signals, usually characterized by a prolonged and irreversible cell cycle arrest with a highly secretory capacity, macromolecular damage (DNAs, proteins and lipids) and an altered metabolic landscape. In the full-spectrum of the SASP, a few secreted factors function in a cell-autonomous manner, such as IGFBP7, IL-6, and PAI1, which maintain and reinforce the senescent state through a positive feedback loop sustaining the DDR, while others (TGF-β, VEGF, CCL2, CCL20) cause paracrine senescence of neighboring cells. Once released into the tissue microenvironment, a handful of SASP components can mediate loss of tissue homeostasis and organ dysfunction, thus accelerating organismal aging and contributing to incidence of age-related pathologies. As a technical challenge, detecting a senescence-associated cell-cycle arrest and the SASP requires quantification of multiple factors and special features. Abbreviations: BCL2, B-cell leukemia/lymphoma-2; IGFBP7, insulin-like growth factor binding protein 7; PAI1, plasminogen activator inhibitor-1; TNF-β, tumor necrosis factor β; VEGF, vascular endothelial growth factor; CCL2, C-C motif chemokine ligand 2; IL-1β, interleukin-1β; ATM, the ataxia telangiectasia mutated; mTOR, mammalian target of rapamycin; NEMO, NF-κB essential modulator; MMP3, matrix metalloproteinases; MCP2, monocyte chemoattractant protein 2; SPINK1, serine peptidase inhibitor kazal type 1.

SASP cascade of senescent cells, thus increasing risks of the cytokine storm and enhancing clinical mortality in the elderly and those with chronic or fundamental pathologies associated with a high burden of senescent cells in the case of COVID-19, a pandemic currently causing unprecedented public health concerns worldwide (Camell et al., 2021; O'Driscoll et al., 2021).

#### Understanding of the distinctive heterogeneity of the SASP

Appropriate understanding of the temporal and spatial regulation of the SASP allows further insights into the mechanisms supporting SASP heterogeneity and exploration of targets that may be exploited to modulate the SASP composition. A recent study, which took advantage of single-cell isolation and a nanofluidic PCR platform to determine the contributions of single individual cells to the overall expression profile of senescent human fibroblast populations, disclosed substantial intercellular variability of SASP expression (Wiley et al., 2017). Many genes encoding SASP

factors show remarkable variability, despite the presence of a subset of highly induced genes that account for the increased expression observed at the population level. Of note, inflammatory genes in clustered genomic loci display a higher correlation with senescence compared to non-clustered loci, suggesting co-regulation of these genes by genomic location (Wiley et al., 2017). Thus, the data provide several lines of new clues regarding how genes are regulated in senescent cells and imply that single markers are insufficient to identify senescent cells, especially *in vivo*.

Alternatively, another study demonstrated that the transition from the early transforming TGF-β-dependent secretome to a pro-inflammatory secretome is subject to modulation by Notch1 activity fluctuations, while the changing composition of the SASP can determine the beneficial and/or detrimental properties of senescence programs, tipping the balance toward either an immunosuppressive environment or a pro-inflammatory state (Ito et al., 2017). Moreover, the interferon type 1 (IFN-I) response arises as a



relatively late event and is driven partially by the de-repression of LINE-1 (abbreviated as L1) retrotransposable elements (De Cecco et al., 2019). Triggered by cytoplasmic L1 cDNA but subject to downregulation by inhibitors of the L1 reverse transcriptase, the IFN-I response is a phenotype of late senescence and contributes to the long-term maintenance of the SASP (De Cecco et al., 2019). The authors further proposed that activation of retrotransposons was an important contributor to sterile inflammation, a hallmark of aging, and that L1 reverse transcriptase was a relevant target for future intervention of age-related diseases. In addition, senescent cells communicate with their surrounding micro-environment via juxtacrine NOTCH/JAG1 signaling, release of ROS, cytoplasmic bridges, and extracellular vesicles (EVs) (Biran et al., 2017; Han et al., 2020b; Ito et al., 2017; Kuilman et al., 2010; Takasugi et al., 2017), supporting that a thorough characterization of the senescent secretome in diverse biological contexts may help identify senescence, more specifically, the SASP-associated molecular signatures.

#### *Factors that hold the potential to serve as biomarkers of the SASP*

Identifying secreted factors produced by senescent cells with the potential to be developed as biomarkers indicative of the SASP appears to be a challenging task, since the profile of secreted factors is usually determined by a number of elements. The comprehensive soluble SASP atlases of human senescent fibroblasts induced by ionizing radiation, oncogenic HRAS or Atazanavir, a protease inhibitor of HIV, and radiation-induced renal senescent epithelial cells suggested that total 17 soluble SASP factors were commonly shared by these senescent cells, whereas a few other factors varied depending on the tissue type and insult nature (Basisty et al., 2020). An unbiased analysis based on liquid chromatography-tandem mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) proteome assessment and Gene Ontology (GO) evaluated the secretomes of senescent bone marrow and adipose mesenchymal stromal cells (MSC) exposed to different stimuli and found that they exhibited uniform senescent phenotypes featured by four subcategories of SASP components: ECM and cytoskeleton and/or cell junctions, metabolic activities, redox factors as well as gene expression regulators (Özcan et al., 2016). Together with seven proteins exclusively expressed in all the analyzed senescent phenotypes, three key signaling paths including MMP2/TIMP2, IGFBP3/PAI-1 and Peroxiredoxin 6/ERP46/PARK7/Cathepsin D, were identified, while these paths were likely involved in the paracrine circuit inducing senescence of adjacent cells and might confer apoptosis resistance on senescent cells. A recent study based on stable isotope labeling with amino acids (SILACs) disclosed 343 SASP factors secreted by senescent human fibroblasts at two-fold or higher levels compared with their quiescent counterparts, with 44 of these proteins involved in

hemostasis, a process rarely linked with senescence (Wiley et al., 2019).

Though the SASP components fulfill diverse *in vivo* functions, many of them are indeed associated with the chronic inflammation, a phenomenon frequently observed in the course of organismal aging (Guerrero et al., 2021; Tchkonina et al., 2021). Several constituents of the SASP are immunomodulatory, such as IL-1 $\alpha$ , IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, IL-7, IL-8, macrophage colony stimulating factor (M-CSF), granulocyte colony stimulating factor (G-CSF), granulocyte-macrophage colony stimulating factor (GM-CSF) and TNF $\alpha$ , which, once released into the extracellular space, will actively recruit various immune cells including macrophages, granulocyte, neutrophils, and T lymphocytes (Kale et al., 2020) (Table S5 in Supporting Information). Several SASP factors can modulate the cellular response to therapies. The SASP components C-X-C motif chemokine ligand 1 (CXCL1), CXCL2, IL-1 $\alpha$ , IL-6, and TGF- $\beta$ , released by human fibroblasts upon OIS can reinforce senescence in an autocrine manner and also induce senescence of neighboring cells via a paracrine mechanism (Acosta et al., 2013; Acosta et al., 2008; Faget et al., 2019). Of note, similar paracrine signaling pathways can be mediated by small EVs of the SASP (ev-SASP) released by human fibroblasts displaying OIS, and in MCF7 mammary cancer cells after treatment with the CDK4/6 inhibitor palbociclib (Borghesan et al., 2019). The single-cell RNA-seq (scRNA-seq) data presented at the National Cancer Institute Workshop on Radiation, Senescence, and Cancer (August 10–11, 2020, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, MD) demonstrated that cells in the case of therapy-induced senescence (TIS) in culture and those isolated from kidneys of aged mice can display different characteristics, and only a small number of p16<sup>INK4a+</sup> senescent cells in the kidney are responsible for the production of SASP factors of profibrotic activities (Prasanna et al., 2021).

#### *Summary and perspectives*

Identifying novel and distinct transcriptomic signatures to detect specific types of senescent cells is an attractive strategy for the evaluation of diverse biological roles of senescent cells and the development of effective drug targets. At the core of senescence and SASP heterogeneity, the characterization of whole-transcriptome datasets has rendered a fingerprint of 55 senescence-associated gene transcriptomes in human fibroblasts, allowing specific targeting of senescent cells that are either tumorigenic, immune-suppressive, or potentially implicated in other age-related conditions (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2017). However, limitations still remain, particularly for studies involving biospecimens, mainly due to the absence of specific markers. To this end, a multi-marker approach was recently proposed (Gorgoulis et al., 2019), which may be employed to assess the efficacy of

senolysis, an emerging and promising therapeutic approach currently entering clinical trials for the intervention of various age-related pathologies.

Given the distinct heterogeneity of SASP, the National Institutes of Health has recently identified five broad areas to advance senescence-related studies, including identification and characterization of senescent cells, establishment of senescence atlases, development of biomarkers, optimization of model systems, and design of imaging tools (Roy et al., 2020). However, there remain several open questions, which together pose a major challenge in this field. Biomarkers, model systems, and imaging techniques all need validation projects, in which pathways of cellular homeostasis are perturbed to induce, modulate and fine-tune senescence, while assessment of the impact of those perturbations on SASP development and on the physiological integrity of diverse tissues and organs is essential to address the pathological factors responsible for chronological aging. Advances in these aspects may help discover more accurate senescence-associated signatures to address key questions: what initiates and regulates the SASP? What phenotypes do deep senescent cells acquire? What is the best timepoint to target the SASP during cellular senescence? Answers to these intriguing questions will help develop new panels of markers for subtypes of both senescence and the SASP and guide the evolving field of senotherapy, thus allowing to surf in the next wave of tides in the current epoch of precision medicine.

## Biomarkers of organ aging

Aging comprises many biological processes that may not change in concert. This is the case at the cellular level, as described in the previous chapter, and likely also be true higher up in the hierarchy of aging dimensions, i.e., at the organ level. In this chapter, we dive into individual organs with their own aging biomarkers (Figure 10), with each organized in a framework highlighting the six pillars of aging biomarkers: physiological characteristics, imaging traits, histological features, cellular alterations, molecular changes, and secretory factors. In addition to being specific to the organ of interest, some of these biomarkers are commonly shared by several organs or interconnected via compensatory mechanisms, system feedbacks, and peripheral immune functions involving the gut and circulating immune cells. Ideally, the aging biomarkers should be accessible for measurement over the entire lifespan. Therefore, we propose that good organ aging biomarkers should be specific, systemic, and serviceable.

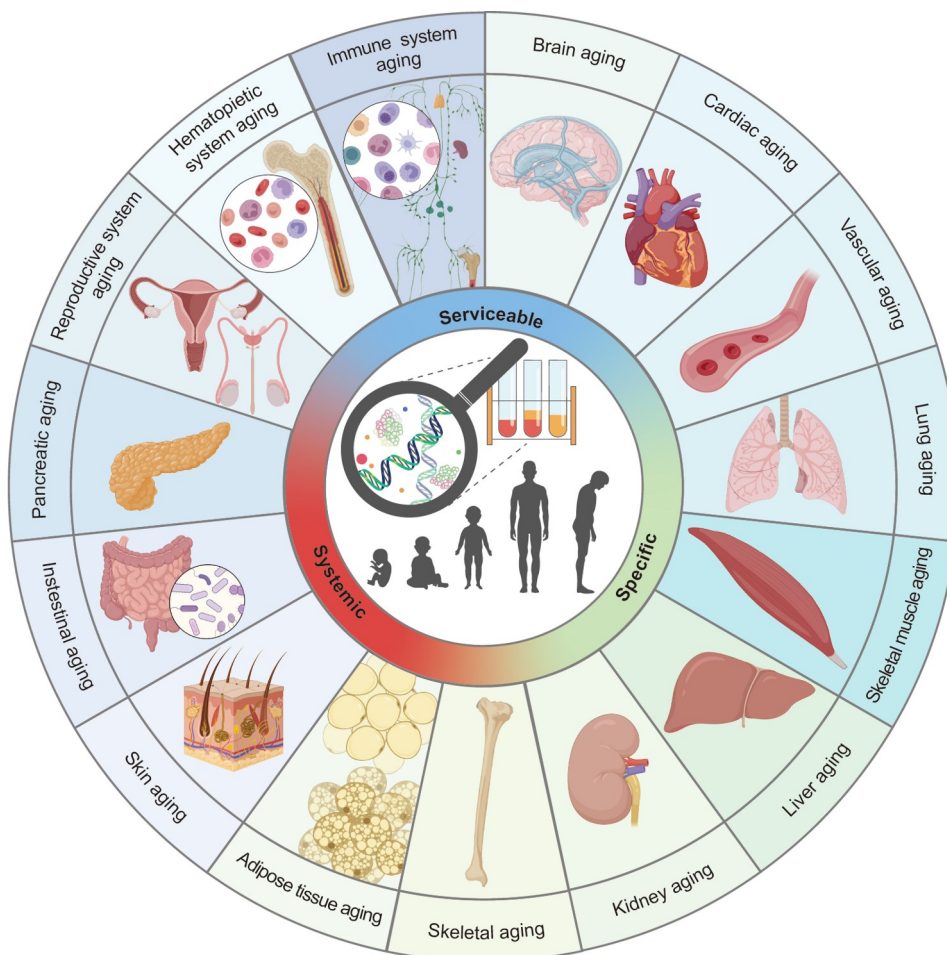
### Brain aging

The human brain, a three-pound organ, contains the most

recently evolved structure, the neocortex, which greatly enhances cognitive function and separates homo sapiens from the rest of the animal kingdom. Through sensory, motor, and autonomic nervous systems, the brain serves as a supreme commanding center of the human body. The central nervous system (CNS), through the peripheral nervous system, tracks blood vessels and innervates all organs. Therefore, like blood supplies, neural control is also everywhere. The brain is an organ prone to aging, which increases the risks of a range of neurodegenerative diseases. During the aging process, the brain changes at biochemical, cellular, structural, and functional levels, and some of the characteristic changes can be used as biomarkers to reflect and evaluate the aging process of the brain. This section focuses on those markers (Table S6 in Supporting Information).

#### *Physiological characteristics*

Along the aging trajectory, progressive functional decline occurs in multiple organs including the brain. At the cellular and molecular level, ten hallmarks of brain aging have been postulated (Mattson and Arumugam, 2018): mitochondrial dysfunction, intracellular accumulation of oxidatively damaged molecules, dysregulated energy metabolism, impaired cellular “waste disposal” mechanisms, impaired adaptive stress response signaling, compromised DNA repair, aberrant neuronal network activity, dysregulated neuronal calcium homeostasis, stem cell exhaustion, and inflammation. In recent years, several promising molecular biomarkers indicative of brain aging have been identified, e.g., DNA and histone methylation markers, proteomic markers, which will be discussed below. Moreover, these hallmarks of brain aging are interconnected, causing alterations of brain structures and functions. Clinically, brain aging is manifested by changes in brain morphology, pathological accumulation of abnormal proteins, and altered physiological functions, which display enormous changes in human lifespan and could be used as better indicators for future risk assessment of experience-based age-associated health issues, e.g., neurodegeneration, disability, and poor quality of life. Brain morphological changes during aging demonstrated by neuroimaging, primarily consisting of loss in brain volume, gray and white matter degradation, enlargement of cerebral ventricles, or cortical thinning due to shrinking of neuronal cells, dendritic degeneration, demyelination, metabolic deficit, microglial activation, and formation of white matter lesions, resulting from small vessel diseases (Blinkouskaya et al., 2021). Although accumulation of pathological deposition of Amyloid-beta ( $A\beta$ ), tau, and  $\alpha$ -synuclein in the brain has been considered as markers of neurodegenerative diseases including Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases, as well as physiological markers of brain aging (Sengupta and Kaye, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021k). At the phenotypical and functional levels, brain aging is characterized by a decline in



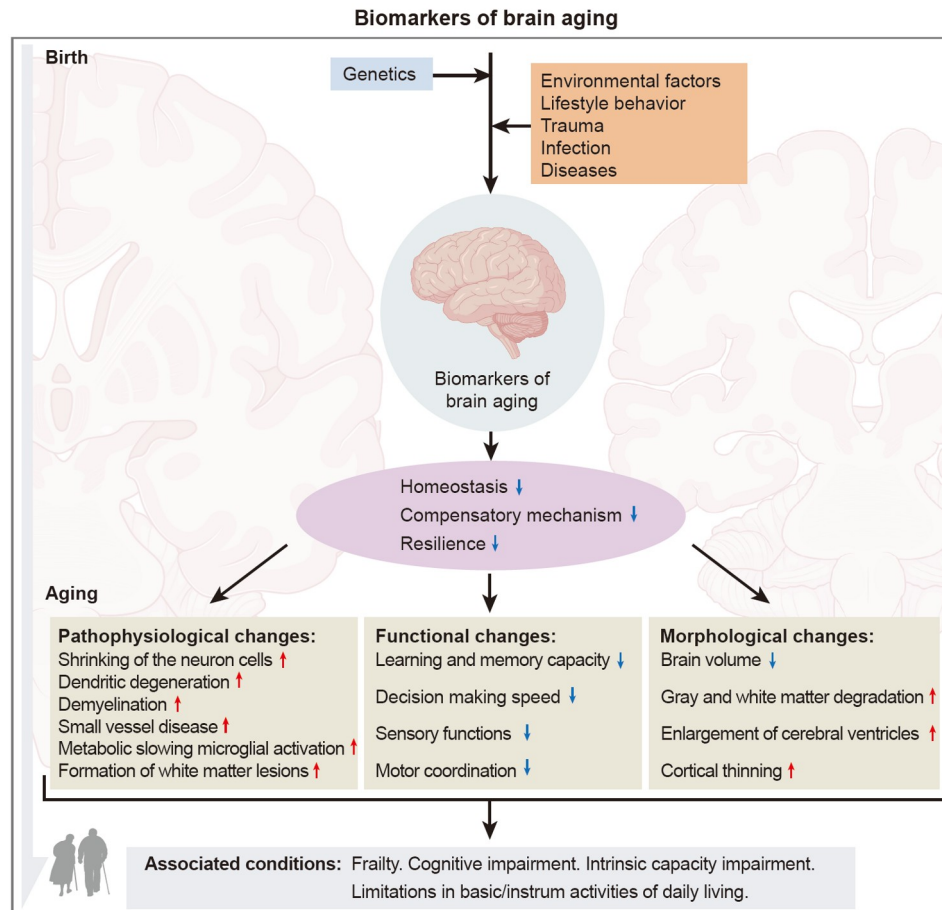
**Figure 10** Biomarkers of organ aging. On the rim of the circle, aging of the 15 organs or organ systems across the body reviewed here is presented; while in the center, aging biomarkers are depicted as biological measurements that can evaluate the aging of these organs, and they should fulfill the three criteria: being specific, systemic, and pragmatic.

learning and memory, decision-making speed, sensory functions, and motor coordinations. All of these aging-associated changes have a huge impact on the basic activities of individuals' daily life and contribute to geriatric syndromes such as frailty (Xue, 2011). A recently introduced concept of “intrinsic capacity” by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Chhetri et al., 2021), considers individual's capacities in locomotion, cognition, sensory, psychology, as well as vitality, and could be utilized to measure chronological aging as well as brain aging at functional levels.

Whilst signs of age-related neurodegeneration may appear beyond the fifth decade of life, the rate of brain aging like any other organs varies among individuals. Environmental factors (e.g., stress, diet, socioeconomic status, smoking, and alcohol intake) an individual experienced throughout earlier life can impact cognitive function later in life. People with genetic risk factors (e.g., APOE4) or environmental risk exposures may have a higher rate of brain aging than others. Similarly, exposure to severe trauma or acute infection may also accelerate the process of brain aging. The aging process,

including brain aging, involves a vicious chain of events (concomitantly influenced by environmental factors), from molecular to cellular and physiological levels, ultimately impacting the function of an individual. These changes could be largely indistinguishable initially, due to homeostatic or compensatory mechanisms of the resilient central nervous system. Ultimately, the system's ability to maintain homeostasis reaches the threshold, signs of brain aging would manifest. Nonetheless, some of the biological changes are detectable early and may serve as reliable markers to predict brain aging (Figure 11).

Similar to generic aging biomarkers, brain aging biomarkers should be able to predict the rate of brain aging (should provide information on the brain age status at any given time), monitor the aging process, and also distinguish between physiological and pathological brain aging. Those markers should allow for repeated testings without causing harm, and ideally work both in humans and animals (for prior validation). Moreover, these markers should be compatible for clinical practice to screen people with high risks for



**Figure 11** Biomarkers of brain aging at the level of physiological characteristics. Brain aging is not only exacerbated by the hallmark changes, but it is also influenced by a combination of genetics, environment, lifestyle, trauma, and diseases. The decline in homeostasis, compensatory mechanisms, and resilience can result in various pathophysiological, functional, and morphological changes in the brain, which can serve as potential biomarkers for brain aging. Frailty, cognitive decline, reduced intrinsic capacity, or limitations in activities of daily living and instrumental activities of daily living are some conditions associated with brain aging and the aging process as a whole, as they are the result of the interplay among multiple organ systems, including the brain.

timely interventions. Besides, it should also be noted that a group of biomarkers, in combination, may be needed to capture brain aging more effectively, as there is a heterogeneity in the aging process, thus, a single biomarker may not have high enough sensitivity or specificity to predict brain aging. Relevant clinical data from the central nervous system and the periphery- due to interactions between organ systems, regulated by the blood-brain-barrier (e.g., proteins, metabolites, and cells from blood or CSF) has been suggested to successfully capture brain aging (Higgins-Chen et al., 2021). Such composite biomarkers will enable us to understand the mechanism and markers of the brain from a holistic, systemic, and multidimensional perspective.

In the following sections, we will discuss potential biomarkers for brain aging, with a focus on neuroimaging, histological features, cellular alterations, molecular changes, and secretory factors.

#### *Imaging traits*

(1) Structural MRI. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) has

been widely used to show age-related structural changes of the brain *in vivo*. Accumulating evidence indicated that the combination of several structural imaging markers, including brain atrophy, microvascular alterations, microbleeds, white matter lesions (WMLs), and impaired white matter integrity, can predict brain aging and neurodegenerative diseases (Beaman et al., 2022; Erten-Lyons et al., 2013; Grajauskas et al., 2019; Jung et al., 2021; Kavcic et al., 2008).

Brain atrophy is one of the most common changes in aged brain, which affects both grey and white matter. Atrophy can be seen across the entire brain, with the greatest decline in frontal lobe volumes during normal aging (DeCarli et al., 2005; Fox and Schott, 2004). While shrinkage is often localized, with differential atrophy patterns occurring in different neurodegenerative diseases, e.g., medial temporal lobe atrophy on MRI is a hallmark for AD (Scheltens et al., 2021). MRI-based microbleeds are estimated to range from 8.8% to 35%, with prevalence rate increasing with age (Barnaure et al., 2017; Poels et al., 2010; Romero et al., 2014). Microbleeds caused by hypertensive angiopathy is usually seen in

basal ganglia, thalamus, brainstem and cerebellum. Microbleeds caused by cerebral amyloid angiopathy (CAA) is distributed in the cerebral cortex (Ding et al., 2017; Haller et al., 2018; Park et al., 2013). Increasing loads of microbleeds might predict further cognitive decline due to disruptions of connections between different brain regions (Heringa et al., 2014; Werring et al., 2004).

WMLs refer to patches of hyperintensity on T2-weighted imaging (T2WI) in the white matter, linking to microvascular alterations and ischemia in aged brain. WHLs commonly occur in the aging population, and increase with age (Habes et al., 2018; Sundaresan et al., 2019). WHLs have been stratified into two forms, i.e., periventricular white matter lesions (distributed around the ventricles) and deep white matter lesions (first in the frontal lobe, then in other cortical regions), with different underlying pathogenesis (Jung et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2020). For the role of white matter integrity in aging, decreased fornix fractional anisotropy (FA) derived from diffusion tensor imaging (DTI) is one of the earliest MRI abnormalities, which predicted the decline in memory function, observed in elderly individuals with increased risks for AD (Kantarci et al., 2014).

(2) Functional MRI. Functional MRI (fMRI) can provide information on neuronal activity and vascular physiology, which is well suited for *in vivo* observations of brain pathophysiology at an early stage. Large amounts of studies showed decreased cerebral blood flow (CBF) with age in elderly, both regionally and globally, which is relevant to the cognitive decline, and declined in cerebrovascular health (Chen et al., 2011; De Vis et al., 2018; Tarumi et al., 2014). The spatial-temporal pattern of CBF decreased from the precuneus, posterior cingulate and temporal-parietal regions to broader areas with progression from health control to mild cognitive impairment (MCI) to AD, supporting the incorporation of CBF into the AD research framework (Zhang et al., 2021f). Oxygen extraction fraction (OEF) and cerebral metabolic rate of oxygen (CMRO<sub>2</sub>) are markers of cerebral oxygen homeostasis and metabolism that may offer insights into abnormal changes in brain aging (Lin et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2014). Resting CMRO<sub>2</sub> based on blood oxygen level-dependent (BOLD) is found to be decreased in the parietotemporal and precuneus regions in elderly with AD (Lajoie et al., 2017).

In addition to well-documented changes in brain structure and function, normal aging and age-related neurodegenerative diseases are related to alterations of functional brain networks. Functional brain networks are commonly measured from resting state fMRI. Using a graph theoretical approach, decreased connectivity within and increased connectivity between functional brain systems were prominent in the elderly (Chan et al., 2014). Most studies show decreased functional connectivity between regions of the default mode network (DMN) in the elderly with memory

decline, specifically between posterior cingulate cortex and parietal areas, compared with non-decliners, indicating that functional networks could be as an early marker of cognitive decline during aging and to guide early interventions of AD (Bernard et al., 2015; Sperling et al., 2009). Task state fMRI is needed to concurrently measure cognitive function in the elderly, through which changes may be much more easily detected than resting state MRI to distinguish normal elderly from MCI. Emerging studies showed decreased anterior-to-posterior functional connectivities and increased local efficiency in the cognitive task state between normal elderly and MCI, with no significant difference in the resting state (Wang et al., 2013a). This indicates task can amplify the sensitivity of detection, which could be an early biomarker to assess the risk of AD.

(3) PET. Positron emission tomography (PET) with multiple radiotracers can help to deeply understand age-related pathophysiological changes, especially abnormal neural activity, synaptic loss, A $\beta$  deposition and tau accumulation, as well as the relationship between these changes and age-related cognitive decline.

<sup>18</sup>F-fluorodeoxyglucose (FDG) PET imaging measures cerebral glucose metabolism, which is sensitive to neural activity alteration and synaptic dysfunction. Decreased <sup>18</sup>F-FDG uptake has been predominately reported in frontal, cingulate, and temporal lobes during normal aging, which suggests that these brain regions are vulnerable to aging (Bonte et al., 2017; Yoshizawa et al., 2014). Compared with normal elderly individuals, those with cognitive decline showed greater hypometabolism in these brain aging, indicating <sup>18</sup>F-FDG PET imaging could predict cognition progression during aging and risks to convert into AD (Apostolova et al., 2010). Posterior cingulate and temporoparietal hypometabolism on <sup>18</sup>F-FDG PET is a hallmark for AD (Frisoni et al., 2017; Scheltens et al., 2021). Moreover, <sup>18</sup>F-FDG PET imaging can identify the involvement of specific brain regions in various cognitive domains to help clarify the neural mechanisms of the age-related cognitive changes in brain aging study (Brugnolo et al., 2014).

A $\beta$  amyloid plaque and neurofibrillary tangles composed of hyperphosphorylated tau are considered as neuropathological hallmarks of AD, leading to cognitive impairment in AD. These two proteins also appear in brains of the elderly with normal cognition, indicating a latent period of 10–25 years for AD (Masters et al., 2015). A $\beta$  and Tau PET imaging can help to clarify the role of these aggregated proteins in age-related cognitive decline as well as AD onset and progression. Large prospective studies could provide answers regarding the clinical impact and utility of A $\beta$  and tau imaging. Studies indicate that A $\beta$  deposition occurs before the onset of cognitive impairment and reaches a plateau in the symptomatic stage of dementia (Hanseeuw et al., 2019; Jack et al., 2013). A $\beta$  PET imaging in the elderly with

normal cognition revealed a significant association between A $\beta$  and cognitive functions, especially in episodic memory (Vogel et al., 2017). A $\beta$  deposition in normal elderly can lead to cognitive impairment, which is related to reduced cortical thickness (Vemuri et al., 2019), altered white matter integrity (Caballero et al., 2020) and decreased DMN functional connectivity (Lim et al., 2014).

Tau-PET imaging has characterized tau tracer retention *in vivo*, in keeping with Braak stages (Cho et al., 2016; Pascoal et al., 2021; Schwarz et al., 2016). Tau-PET imaging has revealed that tau pathology begins focally at the perirhinal cortex in cognitively unimpaired elderly, which influences memory performance by disrupting medial temporal lobe-cortical functional connectivity, independent of A $\beta$  (Berron et al., 2020; Berron et al., 2021; Sanchez et al., 2021). When tau interacts with A $\beta$  directly at the inferior temporal gyrus, tau deposits spreads catastrophically into neocortical regions (Lee et al., 2022c). Longitudinal tau-PET studies could track the progression of AD, which correlates with cognitive deficits and best predicts cognitive decline (Bucci et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 2019).

(4) Other imaging modalities. Developments in PET tracers for synaptic density, neuroinflammation, and  $\alpha$ -synuclein have opened new ways to explore brain aging (Chen et al., 2018a; Meyer et al., 2020; Seibyl, 2022). Future longitudinal studies using multi-radiotracer PET imaging combined with other neuroimaging modalities, such as MRI morphometry, task-based fMRI, functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS), and magnetoencephalography, are essential to elucidate the neuropathological underpinnings and interactions in brain aging. In the near future, development of automated image analysis, multimodal analysis, and hybrid PET-MR imaging, as well as artificial intelligence into brain aging study will be highly demanded.

### *Histologic features*

The histological architecture of the brain is complex but generally can be classified into two structures: grey matter and white matter. The grey matter consists of neuronal cell bodies, dendrites, unmyelinated axons, various glial cells, and some blood capillaries as well as microglia. The white matter is mainly composed of myelinated axons that form nerve fibers and oligodendrocytes that form myelin, as well as astrocytes and microglia. During aging, the brain is subjected to alternations at multiple levels. Primary morphological changes with aging include brain volume loss, gray and white matter atrophy, cortical thinning, gyrification loss, and ventricular enlargement (Blinkouskaya et al., 2021; Blinkouskaya and Weickenmeier, 2021). Herein, we briefly summarize histological changes in the brain during normal aging.

(1) Whole brain weight loss and atrophy. In early studies by measuring brain weight, it is found that the human brain

weight increases mostly during the first 3 years of life, remains relatively stable at adolescent and young adult age, and then starts to decline at about 45–50 years of age (DeKaban, 1978). Some later studies suggest that brain weight decline accelerates after the age of 70, with an annual rate of weight loss between 2% and 5% (Ho et al., 1980; Svennerholm et al., 1997; Teissier et al., 2020).

The brain volume loss with aging has been determined by multiple neuroimaging studies. Hedman et al. (2012) compared 56 longitudinal MRI work and suggested that after 35 years of age, the brain volume started to lose at an annual rate 0.2%, which accelerated and increased to 0.5% by the age of 60, and kept a steady loss of more than 0.5% after that age. Although different studies report the change rates with substantial deviations, they consistently suggest that the brain volume declines with aging and brain atrophy accelerates along with advanced aging (Blinkouskaya et al., 2021; Resnick et al., 2003).

Initial studies by Brody concluded that about 50% of neurons are lost with aging and thus suggested that the progressive brain atrophy with aging was attributed to neuronal loss (Brody, 1955). However, Haug suggested that there was no significant loss of neurons in the human brain during aging (Haug et al., 1984). Indeed, later studies have also shown that neuron numbers in multiple brain regions are relatively stable over the entire human life span (Gómez-Isla et al., 1997; Peters, 1993; West et al., 1994). Now a decline of neuronal volumes (rather than their number or density) and a decrease in neuronal dendritic and axonal arborizations have been proposed as a major reason for brain atrophy with aging (Dickstein et al., 2007; Teissier et al., 2020).

(2) Grey matter atrophy. The global grey matter volume also decreases during aging (Good et al., 2001; Hedman et al., 2012; Resnick et al., 2003; Taki et al., 2011). One longitudinal MRI study estimated the annual rate of gray matter volume decline to be 0.424% in males and 0.298% in females (Taki et al., 2011).

Human brain surface folds to form multiple gyri. This gyrification increases human brain surface areas. A major part of gray matter distributes near the surface area of the brain and forms the cortex. Therefore, whole brain and grey matter atrophy would affect cortical thickness and gyrification. Indeed, multiple studies have shown global cortical thinning and decreased in degrees of gyrification during aging (Fjell et al., 2014; Lamballais et al., 2020; Lemaitre et al., 2012; Madan, 2021; Storsve et al., 2014). For example, Storsve et al. (2014) reported a mean cortical thickness decrease at a rate of 0.35 mm/year during aging. Madan (2021) determined a gyrification decreasing slope of 0.04291 per decade.

Same to global brain atrophy, grey matter atrophy during aging is likely caused by neuronal shrinkage and extensive dendritic regression rather than cell loss (Dickstein et al.,

2007; Fjell and Walhovd, 2010).

(3) White matter atrophy. The white matter volume also decreases during aging but has a late onset compared to that of gray matter (Blinkouskaya et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2017a; Resnick et al., 2003). The white matter volume keeps increasing in early and middle adulthood but then starts to decrease more rapidly than gray matter volume loss in later stages of life, with an estimated annual rate of 0.77% per year in the chronological age of 70s (Blinkouskaya et al., 2021; Driscoll et al., 2009; Salat et al., 2005). Moreover, multiple studies using DTI have demonstrated age-related decline in the composition of integrity of white matter (Bennett and Madden, 2014).

Myelinated nerve fibers in the white matter are also affected by normal aging but demonstrate complicated changes. Many myelinated nerve fibers are lost and thus causes disconnections of some parts of the brain. On the other hand, after losing the myelin sheath, some axons can be remyelinated (though incompletely) by oligodendrocytes, whose number increases during aging (Peters et al., 2008). Nevertheless, remyelinated nerve fibers may have shorter internodes segment as well as reduced conduction velocity, thereby compromising the integrity and function of neural circuits. Moreover, the sheath thickness of some intact nerve fibers is even increased with aging, probably due to sustained oligodendrocyte activity (Peters, 2009).

(4) Ventricle. The brain ventricular system is essential for the circulation of cerebrospinal fluid to supply nutrients to and drain wastes out of the brain. Multiple MRI-based studies have identified ventricle expansion with aging (Fjell and Walhovd, 2010; Resnick et al., 2003; Shook et al., 2014); and the increase of ventricular volume is believed to result from the shrinkage of the brain and grey matter (Pfefferbaum et al., 1994). By using both longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses, Resnick et al. (2000) find that the ventricular volume increases at a rate of 1.3–1.5 cm<sup>3</sup>/year.

(5) Cerebrovascular changes. An arterial network covers the brain surface and penetrates into the brain parenchyma in the form of capillaries. This cerebrovascular system is affected by aging: a majority of studies in humans and rats show that the vascular density declines with age (Brown and Thore, 2011; Riddle et al., 2003). Moreover, the arterioles supplying the deep white matter have the longest course throughout the brain and often become tortuous during aging, though the biological meaning of these tortuous arterioles is unknown (Brown and Thore, 2011).

(6) Neurogenesis. Neurogenesis is a process of generation of new neurons from neural stem cells (Isaev et al., 2019). Proper neurogenesis requires support from all cells in the neurogenesis niches. Neurogenesis has been identified in the olfactory bulb, the hippocampus, and the sub-ventricular zone in the mammalian brain; and can partially compensate neuronal death in these regions (Galvan and Jin, 2007; Isaev

et al., 2019). Neurogenesis is significantly impaired with aging, due to age-dependent stem cell exhaustion, though the detailed biological significance of this decline has yet to be specified (Ahlenius et al., 2009; Enwere et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2021e).

#### *Cellular alterations*

Neurons, glial cells and endothelial cells are the basic building blocks of brain. Physiological brain aging is associated with changes in brain size, vasculature, neuronal connections and networks. It is well established that neuronal functions decline with aging. At cellular level, hallmarks of brain aging include loss of synapses, mitochondrial dysfunction, increased oxidative stress and damage, metabolic alterations, autophagy dysfunction, and dysregulated stress and inflammatory responses (Mattson and Arumugam, 2018). Senescence is a central hallmark of aging, a process in which cells cease to divide and undergo distinct phenotypic alterations, including profound chromatin and secretome changes, as well as tumor-suppressor activation (van Deursen, 2014). When senescence is triggered, cells increase in size and granularity. The levels of cell cycle inhibitors p21<sup>CIP1</sup> and p16<sup>INK4a</sup>, are increased. The SA-β-gal, a lysosomal enzyme, becomes more active, serving as a marker for senescence characterization (Beauséjour et al., 2003; Dimri et al., 1995; Sikora et al., 2021). Neurons are post-mitotic cells. Neuronal senescence is likely regulated in a different manner from that of proliferating cells. Nevertheless, increased detection of SA-β-gal is also found in aged mouse, hippocampus and monkey, as well as in long-term cultured neurons, suggesting that neurons undergo senescence by increasing levels of SA-β-gal. Aging also changes neuronal morphology, particularly synaptic structures. In general, synaptic numbers are reduced in aged brains compared to young brains (Peters, 2006). The aged prefrontal cortex tends to lose more thin spines that confer neural plasticity. In contrast, the aging hippocampus tends to lose large, complex (perforated mushroom) synapses that help control established memories and learning circuits. Again, this suggests that there could be some differences in line of maturing thin versus mushroom spines with different classes of neurons. Alterations in mitochondrial morphology and mitochondrial function have long been considered hallmarks and potential drivers of aging. During the process of neuronal aging, mitochondrial function is reduced with the accumulation of damaged mitochondria and ROS in neurons (Chakrabarti et al., 2011). Meanwhile, the load of mtDNA mutations is increased. All these results in mitochondrial dysfunction, reduced ATP supply and increased ROS production, eventually leading to functional impairment of neurons and further damage of the brain. Mitochondrial dynamic proteins are regulated in an age-dependent manner. Phosphorylation of Drp1<sup>S616</sup> is downregulated in aged brains (Han et al., 2020a).

Brain aging is also correlated with increased neuroinflammation (Lynch, 2010). Inflammatory cytokine IL-6 levels are increased in brain of healthy aged animals. IL-6 in the brain has been suggested to reduce food intake, inhibit memory and learning, and cause neurodegeneration. Remarkably, increased expression of IL-6 correlated with neuron-specific upregulation of neuronal senescence marker REST protein (Sunderland et al., 2020), implying a role of IL-6 in brain aging.

In the past, most research into age-related alterations in the brain focused on neurons. Nonetheless, non-neuronal glial cells are the first cells responding to “stress” in the CNS. The major types of glial cells in the CNS are astrocytes, microglia, and oligodendrocytes. The diverse and important functions of different types of glial cells situate them in a position to be affected by brain aging. Indeed, a transcriptional study from human aged brain showed that glial cells, but not neurons, displayed robust changes in gene expression during aging. Studies showed that cellular senescence in glia cells (such as telomere shortening), might also interfere with their physiological function. Microglia, constituting 10% of brain cells, are actually immune cells of the brain (Crotti and Ransohoff, 2016). Microglia alterations under different brain conditions were more dramatic than those observed in other glial cells. In the process of aging, microglia are uniformly enlarged, accumulating non-degraded inclusion materials and with cytoplasmic disruptions (Streit and Xue, 2010). Aged human microglia become dystrophic manifested by abnormal cytoplasmic structures with beaded and fragmented processes (Streit, 2006; Streit et al., 2004). Consequently, these morphological changes are accompanied with alterations in their physiological functions, including enhanced pro-inflammatory responses, impaired motility, and compromised immune responses. Intrinsic and extrinsic aging risk factors can induce aberrant microglia activation. This activation results in increased neuroinflammation and synaptic pruning, leading to eventual neural circuit impairment and neurodegeneration. Therefore, aberrant microglia activation is associated with aging at certain conditions. Enlargement and accumulation of lysosomes are characteristic of aberrant microglia activation. Astrocytes, like neurons, are present in the brain throughout life. They are not replenished, nor do they divide except in the case of injury. Thus, they are particularly susceptible to age associated disturbances such as accumulation of a lifetime of stress. Glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) is a biomarker for astrocyte reactivation. Levels of GFAP mRNA and protein were increased with age in hippocampus of human, rhesus monkey, rat, and mouse (David et al., 1997; Diniz et al., 2010; Nichols et al., 1993; Rodríguez et al., 2014). Transcriptomic profiles of astrocytes show increased expression of complement pathway and neuroinflammatory genes in all brain regions of mice (Boisvert et al., 2018; Clarke et al.,

2018). In human, astrocyte gene expression profiles change across different ages and brain regions, particularly hippocampus and substantial nigra (Soreq et al., 2017). Remarkably, these two regions are predominantly affected by AD and PD, the top two most studied neurodegenerative diseases of the CNS. Single cell sequencing revealed the presence of an AD-associated astrocyte cluster in hippocampal astrocytes of aging mouse and human (Habib et al., 2020). Roles of oligodendrocytes are not well defined. In aged brains, myelination is decreased. Shorter internodes are formed. Myelin debris are aberrantly released. Results suggest a functional abnormality of oligodendrocyte.

In summary, characterization of cellular changes in aged brain is rather complex. Cell morphology and changes of cell organelles may vary in different brain regions. A combination of cellular and molecular analyses may prove to be eminent.

### *Molecular changes*

As with other organs, brain also ages, and quantifying brain aging is critical to understand the mechanisms of brain aging and related diseases. Over the past decades, many molecular features have been identified and used as molecular biomarkers associated with or indicative of brain aging. Here, we provide an overview of those measurements that have been studied the most in the context of brain aging: DNA methylation marks, histone marks, non-coding RNAs (ncRNAs), as well as proteomic markers, and present how these biomarkers are related to the underlying brain aging processes. The mechanistic understanding of these biomarkers may help us to effectively intervene brain aging process or treat age-related diseases.

(1) DNA Methylation. The methylation of 5-position of cytosine base (5mC) is one of the most studied epigenetic marks. Global 5mC level shows an age-dependent increase in mouse brains (Chouliaras et al., 2012). DNA hydroxymethylation (5-hmC), a more recently discovered DNA modification and highly enriched in the brain (Li and Liu, 2011), also shows an increase with age in the hippocampus of mouse brains (Chouliaras et al., 2012). Methylation of cytosine is catalyzed by DNMTs, including DNMT1, DNMT3a, and DNMT3b. DNMT3a shows an age-related increase in the hippocampus of the mouse brain (Chouliaras et al., 2012). These findings suggest that global DNA methylation is increased with age in the brain and DNA methylation measurements are shown to be an age prediction tool.

Alterations of DNA methylation have been proposed as risk markers for age-related diseases, such as AD (Herdy et al., 2022; Kim-Ha and Kim, 2016). Increased methylation of senescence gene promoters is observed in neurons derived from AD patients (Herdy et al., 2022). The findings of these studies suggest that DNA methylation could serve as a new



diagnostic biomarker for brain aging and age-related diseases.

(2) Histone modification. Histone modifications are involved in brain aging by regulating chromatin plasticity (Peleg et al., 2010). An increase in repressive histone marks of H3K9me2, H3K9me3 and H3K27me3 and a decrease in activating histone marks of H3K36me3 and H3K27ac have been reported in cerebral cortex and hippocampus of aged mice (Akbarian et al., 2013). Aged mice display a specific deregulation of H4K12ac, thus fail to initiate gene expression program associated with memory consolidation, suggesting that reduction in H4K12ac may serve as an early biomarker of brain aging (Peleg et al., 2010). In addition to histone acetylation, changes in histone methylation marks were reported in the brain of aged mice, including decreased methylation in H3K27me3, H3R2me2, H3K79me3, and H4K20me2 (Gong et al., 2015). These findings support that both types of histone marks are deeply involved in brain aging and age-related cognitive functions (Geng et al., 2021). It should be emphasized that two recent separate studies demonstrated that downregulation of H3K9me3 and transcriptional de-repression of LINE1 are important features of brain aging in mice and monkeys (Zhang et al., 2021e; Zhang et al., 2022e). This may constitute one of the drivers for the upregulation of neuroinflammation associated with aging.

(3) ncRNAs. ncRNAs, comprising lncRNAs, miRNAs, transfer RNA-derived small RNAs (tsRNAs), and piwi-interacting RNAs (piRNAs), are highly expressed in the brain and play a regulatory role in brain aging (Danka Mohammed et al., 2017; Mao et al., 2019; Marttila et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2021). Recent studies identify 336 differentially expressed lncRNAs in aged human brains, 80 differentially expressed miRNAs in mouse brains, and 8 differentially expressed tsRNAs in senescence-accelerated mouse models (Danka Mohammed et al., 2017; Marttila et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019c). Transcriptome-wide piRNA profiling identifies a total of 9,453 piRNAs, that are differentially expressed in the prefrontal cortex of human brains. Among them, seven intergenic and one intronic piRNAs are positively associated with brain aging, and two intronic piRNAs are negatively associated with brain aging (Mao et al., 2019). These findings suggest that dysregulated ncRNAs contribute to brain aging and could serve as potential diagnostic biomarkers for brain aging, although their regulatory functions in brain aging remain largely elusive.

(4) Proteomics. Large-scale proteomic analysis of human brains identifies 579 proteins associated with brain aging (Wingo et al., 2019). Similarly, proteomic analysis on mouse brain also identifies 390 proteins associated with hippocampal aging and 258 proteins associated with cortical aging in mouse brains (Li et al., 2020d). Bioinformatic analysis indicates that these dysregulated proteins are highly involved in a diverse range of functions, including synapses (SYT12,

GLUR2), mitochondrial functions (FIS1, DRP1), oxidative stress (PRDX6, GSTP1, and GSTM1), transcriptional regulation, ribosome (RPL4, RPS3), cytoskeletal integrity, and GTPase function (Li et al., 2020d). Such changes predictably lead to functional decline of brain by decreasing ATP content, increasing DNA oxidative damage, and deteriorating synaptic function. Taken together, these systemic changes in protein levels are associated with brain aging, suggesting that proteomic markers could serve as molecular biomarkers for brain aging.

As we discussed above, epigenetic factors and proteomic markers are deeply involved in brain aging. An in-depth and mechanistic understanding toward these age-related changes is required in order to take advantage of these systemic changes to effectively intervene brain aging process and treat age-related diseases.

#### *Secretory factors detectable in biofluids*

Humoral biomarkers present in biological fluids such as plasma, urine, and cerebrospinal fluid, could be used as clinical indicators to reflect physiological and/or pathogenic processes including brain aging. Due to their natures of being non- or minimal-invasive, highly sensitive, and easily measurable with accuracy, measurement of secretory factors in the realm of IVD (*in vitro* diagnosis) is also an indispensable means for quantitatively detecting the aging process. Changes in brain homeostasis could be reflected in circulating fluids in a timely manner, because of the highly active communications between the CNS and the periphery. Biomarkers in body fluid have been actively pursued in the field of early detection of neurodegenerative diseases. Interestingly, although highly correlated with age, dementia is not necessarily an inevitable consequence of old age (Arosio et al., 2017), making normal brain aging markers still distinguishable from markers for neurodegeneration such as in the case of AD or PD. In this section, we briefly discuss how humoral markers can be used to monitor physiological and pathological brain aging.

(1) Hormonal homeostasis. At the early stage of human life cycle, growth hormone (GH) and insulin-like growth factor 1 (IGF-1) gradually increase their levels in the plasma, which are crucial for development and growth of the body. GH and IGF-1 began to decline with age, yet surprisingly, when people get older, plasma levels of GH and IGF-1 became positively correlated with brain aging (Duran-Ortiz et al., 2021). High plasma IGF-1 levels in elderly populations have been linked to dementia (Coschigano et al., 2000; Zhang et al., 2020f). In a study of centenarians, it was found that high plasma concentrations of the IGF-1 receptors, IGFBP2 and IGFBP6, perhaps reflecting low concentrations of the ligand, were related to longevity (Sebastiani et al., 2021). In addition, GH inhibition was also found to improve insulin sensitivity (Vijayakumar et al., 2010). Various experimental

models have confirmed that insulin has a positive effect on balancing brain energy supplies. Therefore, heightened insulin resistance could be viewed as an indicator for brain aging. Other hormones, including gastrin, prolactin, leptin, starch cellulose and adiponectin, regulate appetite and energy homeostasis, and are also potential markers of brain aging (Cunnane et al., 2020).

(2) Metabolic homeostasis.  $\text{NAD}^+$  is a coenzyme used for redox reaction and is the core of energy metabolism. The aging process of the body is accompanied by a decrease of blood  $\text{NAD}^+$  levels or  $\text{NAD}^+/\text{NADH}$  ratio. More and more evidence demonstrated that  $\text{NAD}^+$  was the main metabolite for maintaining a healthy nervous system (Covarrubias et al., 2021). Chronic low-grade inflammation has been considered a key driver of brain aging and related diseases, and those inflammatory processes are  $\text{NAD}^+$ -dependent. Abnormal and continuously activated innate immunity as well as reduced adaptive immune responses consume a large amount of  $\text{NAD}^+$ . Increased levels of CD38 in circulating immune cells are indicative of large consumptions of  $\text{NAD}^+$  (Chatterjee et al., 2018; Covarrubias et al., 2020), and are somehow also closely related to brain aging. Not surprisingly, SASP also depends on the level of  $\text{NAD}^+$ . Therefore,  $\text{NAD}^+$  as a brain aging marker needs to be considered in conjunction with inflammatory backgrounds.

(3) Protein factors and lipid markers. Through the parabiosis experiment, it is observed that young blood can elicit an aging-reversal process, while aged blood can accelerate aging. Under this condition, several humoral markers related to brain aging were also discovered. High levels of CCL11 and  $\beta 2$ -microglobulin in blood and CSF are associated with decreased levels of neurogenesis (Shi et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2015; Villeda et al., 2011). Metalloproteinase inhibitor TIMP2 is related to the recovery of hippocampal neural activities (Castellano et al., 2017). Cytokine GDF11 is also associated with brain aging, and high expression of which can enhance brain vitality as well as adult neurogenesis of the ependymal/subependymal zones surrounding the lateral ventricles (Frohlich and Vinciguerra, 2020; Katsimpardi et al., 2014). Protein composition in human CSF changes during the aging process. Protein levels of a immune signal hub gene TREM2 have been detected to increase gradually in the CSF with increasing age, which reflects the function of microglia and is also related to AD (Deczkowska et al., 2020). Moreover, Fgf17 in the CSF of young individuals can promote the rejuvenation of the nervous system of elderly individuals (Iram et al., 2022). Interestingly, people are increasingly aware of the role of “exercise” as a “drug” to promote brain rejuvenation. Tony Wyss-Coray group found that the blood produced anti-inflammatory factors as well as complement signal inhibitory factors such as Clusterin (CLU), factor H (FH), glycoprotein pigment epithelium-derived factor (PEDF), and leukemia inhibitory factor receptor

(LIFE), all increase their levels in the plasma after exercise (De Miguel et al., 2021), which could be beneficial against brain aging. And the effect of long-term exercise on the brain itself is demonstrated by another study as evidenced by the increased thickness of the cortex and reduced inflammation in the entire CNS in aged mice (Sun et al., 2023).

With recent advancement in research, it is gradually recognized that elimination of aged cells may be crucial to anti-tissue aging process, whereas accumulation of aged cells is related to brain aging. The biomarkers released from the lysis of aged cells into the body fluids may also become specific biomarkers for brain aging. Aged cells can synthesize a large amount of oxidized lipids, which are bioactive metabolites produced by the oxidation of polyunsaturated fatty acids, e.g., Dihomo-15d-PGJ2 is found to be unique to aged cells. This molecule accumulates in aged cells and is released when cells die, which can be detected in both the blood and the urine (Wiley et al., 2021).

(4) Markers found in neurodegenerative diseases. By studying 391 cognitively normal subjects aged between 23 and 91 years from many countries, Lue et al. (2019) described the relationship between age and three plasma and CSF core biomarkers of AD ( $\text{A}\beta 40$ ,  $\text{A}\beta 42$  and t-Tau), provided the normal range of  $\text{A}\beta$  and t-Tau in plasma, and clarified the dynamic changes of these biomarkers during normal development. In addition, research showed that uric acid (UA) played an antioxidant role in oxidative stress, and the dynamic decline in serum is positively correlated with cognitive impairment. In populations with high level of sUA,  $\text{A}\beta 42$  no longer correlates with tau pathology and the link between  $\text{A}\beta 42$ -Tau and cognitive impairment is also disrupted (Butterfield and Halliwell, 2019; Huang et al., 2022b), suggesting sUA might be neuroprotective. In another study, Cofilin 2, a serum marker was found to be able to distinguish AD from healthy subjects, as well as AD from vascular dementia (Sun et al., 2019).

#### *Summary and perspectives*

It is well known that brain aging is the biggest risk factor for various neurodegenerative diseases including AD and PD, which brings tremendous burden to families and society, and also represents a huge public health challenge. It is worth mentioning that even in the case of familial AD or PD, where individuals do carry disease-causing genetic mutations, and the mutant genes are expressed in the brain, people usually do not manifest pathology at young age, suggesting that in order for the disease gene to elicit obvious pathological changes, something else age-related need to corroborate with the disease gene. Therefore, perhaps a major common strategy for disease prevention or delaying disease onset is to intervene in brain aging. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to discover biomarkers for brain aging, which is specific, systemic, and pragmatic. Humoral biomarkers, physiological

and medical imaging biomarkers are particularly easily applicable for longitudinal studies with large populations. From the above review, it is obvious that cellular, molecular and histological biomarkers may be reflected at humoral, physiological and medical imaging levels. According to the Chinese Taoism script, Tao-Te-Ching, it is said that “tao generates one, one generates two, two generates three, and three generates all things”, we therefore propose the “Three-Elements” for brain aging biomarkers, coming from Physiological, Medical Imaging, and Humoral measurements, to monitor brain aging and also serve as reliable outcome measures for future anti-brain aging interventions.

### Cardiac aging

Age is widely accepted as an independent risk factor for CVD (Obas and Vasan, 2018). It is critical to understand the normal structural remodeling and functional changes that accompany cardiac aging in the atria, ventricles, valves, pericardium, the cardiac conduction system, and vasculature (Tracy et al., 2020) (Figure 12A; Table S7 in Supporting Information).

#### *Physiological characteristics*

With regard to the vasculature, aging is associated with a decrease in elastic fibers, an increase in fractured fibers (Komutrattananont et al., 2019), collagen deposition (Klee-feldt et al., 2019), and the calcification and thickening of the arterial wall (Jakovljevic, 2018). These changes are linked to impairment of atrial conduction and function, such as atrial compliance and active atrial contraction, which are associated with hypertension and increased mortality risk.

Due to increased oxidative stress, the number of cardiomyocytes would decrease and the fibroblasts would senesce with age in the left ventricle (LV). Hence, the remaining cells undergo compensatory hypertrophy, and the wall thickens. The major age-associated structural change in the LV is concentric hypertrophy, including increased wall thickness and LV mass and decreased LV cavity size (Nakayama et al., 2016; Yoneyama et al., 2017). These changes lead to a less compliant ventricle, resulting in ventricular diastolic dysfunction with age, both of which are age-associated contributors to heart failure with preserved ejection fraction (Pagel et al., 2021).

LV systolic dysfunction is not affected by age, at least in rest situations. However, ventricular contractile function declines in older participants when faced with a high demand of cardiac output or when using more sensitive indicators of cardiac function, such as LV longitudinal strain and strain rate (Støylen et al., 2020). The major age-related morphological changes in cardiac valves are stenosis and regurgitation. Older valves have increased deposits of calcium and connective component and declining sulfated glycosaminoglycan content, which contribute to valvular stiffness,

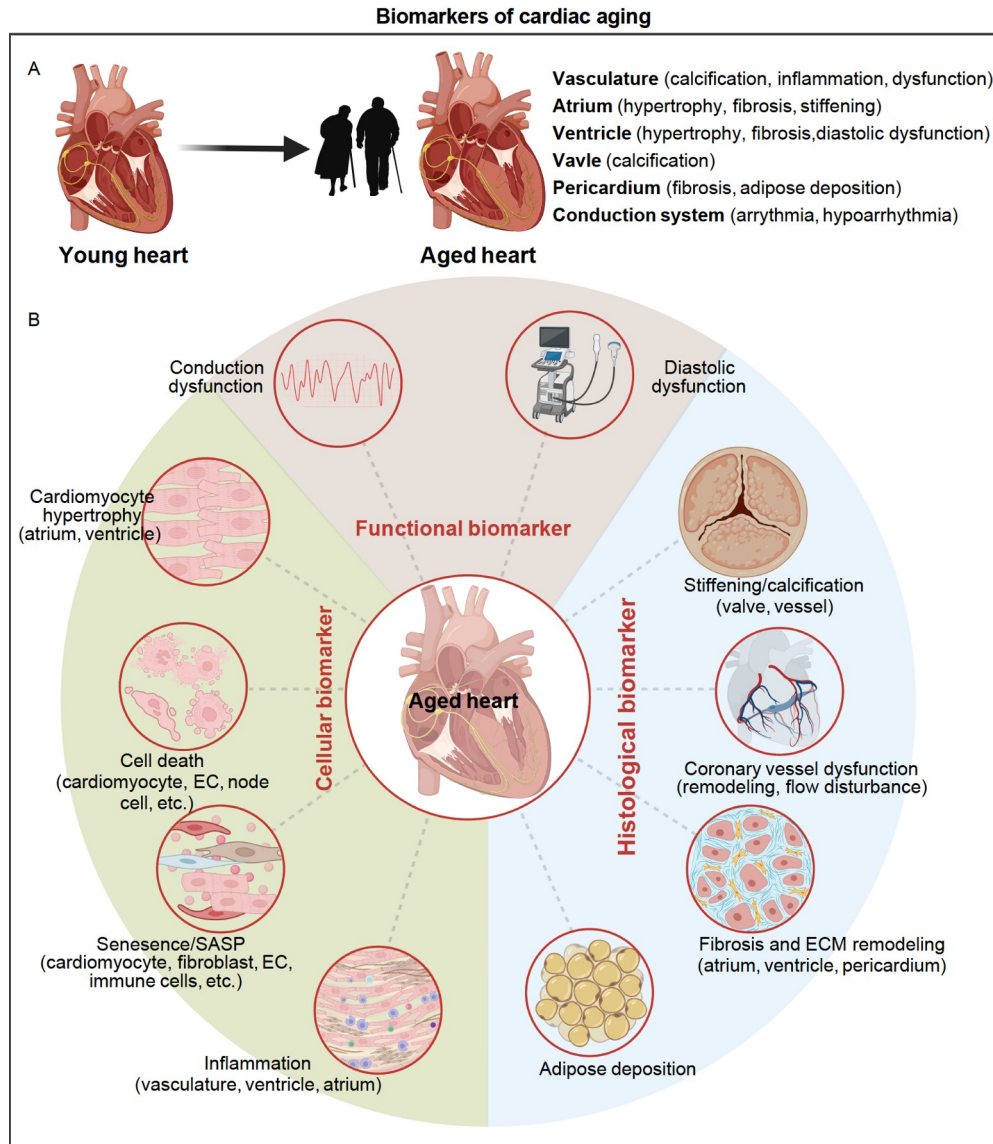
progressing into valve stenosis (Coffey et al., 2021). The age-associated changes in the pericardium include increased fibrosis and deposition of pericardial adipose tissue (AT). The adipose tissue synthesizes and secretes proinflammatory adipokines which may be related to atrial fibrosis and conduction abnormalities in the old people (Bernasochi et al., 2017). As age progresses, the release of noradrenaline and adrenaline from tissues into the circulation system increases, while the clearance rate of catecholamines decreases. The sympathetic nervous system is activated during senescence. This activation is enlarged in the heart failure situation, with a nearly 50-fold increase of noradrenaline releasing in the sinus node and LV, which may be associated to the arrhythmia and cardiac structural remodeling (Toledo et al., 2019). Due to the dysfunction of the sinoatrial (SA) node, atrioventricular node, and the his-purkinje system, the prevalence of cardiac conduction system related diseases increases with age, resulting in bradycardia, palpitations, dizziness, syncope, fatigue, and sudden cardiac death.

#### *Imaging traits*

With the advancement of age, echocardiographic indicators of atrial function, such as the left atrial expansion index, peak systolic strain, strain rate, and left atrial emptying fraction (LAEF) decrease and left atrial stiffness index and atrial conduction time (PA-TDI) increase (Abou et al., 2017; Olsen et al., 2021). Color Doppler imaging studies have determined that the average early-diastolic velocity (EDV) decreases and the late-diastolic velocity (LDV) increases as age progresses, leading to the decline of EDV/LDV ratio, an indicator of cardiac diastolic function (Seo et al., 2020). Cardiac magnetic resonance (CMR) is a specialized application of MRI which produces high-quality images of cardiovascular system to assess cardiac function and structure. The T2 relaxation time of a quantitative MRI-based T2-mapping decreases significantly in aged hearts (Lee et al., 2022b). As LV compliance reduces with aging, the early radial displacement, radial velocity, and circumferential strain rate decrease, while the late circumferential strain rate increases (Lin et al., 2021).

#### *Histologic features*

A key feature of aged hearts is histological alternation, which also serves as the structural basis of deregulated heart function homeostasis and as the obstructive factor for post-injury myocardial repair. As previously mentioned, the aged hearts show increased stiffness, loss of cardiomyocytes, hypertrophic growth, chronic inflammation, and fibrosis (Figure 12B), as well as valvular stiffening, which is the most common age-related heart disease and is associated with a decline in proliferation and extensibility and an increase in collagen deposition, calcium deposition, and stenosis. Besides, amyloid deposits and lipofuscin accumu-



**Figure 12** Biomarkers of cardiac aging. A, Aging-associated changes in structures of the heart. B, Functional, histological, and cellular biomarkers of cardiac aging. Abbreviations: EC, endothelial cell.

lation are also important features of cardiac aging. The direct results of these pathological hallmarks of aged hearts are impaired autonomic control and arrhythmias, the functional hallmarks of cardiac aging.

The self-renewal rate of cardiomyocytes in adult hearts is very low. When the cardiomyocytes undergo death (apoptosis, pyroptosis, necroptosis, ferroptosis) during aging, no other newly generated cardiomyocytes can be added to take over the functions of the lost ones. On one hand, the myocardial tissues undergo hypertrophic growth to support heart function, and on the other hand, fibroblasts and inflammatory cells proliferate to form scars for structure repair. Thus, myocardial hypertrophy and fibrosis are two typical features of aged hearts across species. In aged hearts, the heart rate is influenced not only by the loss of cells in the sinoatrial node but also by structural changes in the heart,

including fibrosis and hypertrophy. This functional decline would slow the propagation of electric impulses throughout the heart, and impairs the conduction (Curtis et al., 2018). Additionally, the aged hearts also respond differently to cardiac injury compared with the young ones. For instance, aging reduces the clearance of dead cells and the inflammatory cells and fibroblasts are duller in response to ischemic injury, which leads to the formation of weak/loose scars and sensitivity to subsequent cardiac events, such as heart failure (Tracy et al., 2020). The vascular vessels within the myocardial tissue, namely coronary vessels, undergo remodeling and dysfunction. Coronary dysfunction is a key feature of aged hearts and is related to heart failure with preserved ejection fraction (Mishra and Kass, 2021). The deposition of lipids within the coronary vessels also leads to atherosclerosis and myocardial infarction (Tracy et al.,

2020). Aging also reduces the angiogenesis capability of vascular endothelial cells (Das et al., 2018), which is one of the mechanisms underlying reduced myocardial repair post-ischemia in aged hearts.

#### *Cellular alterations*

The cellular components or fractions in aged hearts are significantly different compared with the young ones, which is well elucidated by recent single-cell studies (Ma et al., 2021; Schaum et al., 2020). In addition to the loss of cardiomyocytes in the myocardial tissues of the aged hearts as discussed above, the enrichment of immune cells such as macrophages, neutrophils, dendritic cells, and T cells is also influenced by aging. For instance, it has been reported the crucial roles of dendritic cells and macrophages in aged hearts in humans and rodents. These immune cells can secrete chemokines and cytokines, such as thymus and activation-regulated chemokine (TARC/CCL17) to facilitate cardiac aging via regulating T helper cells (Zhang et al., 2022f). Many cells within aged myocardial tissues show senescent signatures. Fibroblasts and endothelial cells expressed and secreted typical SASP such as IL-6, plasminogen activator inhibitor 1 (PAI-1), TNF $\alpha$ , CXCLs and MMPs (Mehdizadeh et al., 2022). Senescent vascular endothelial cells undergo an endothelial-to-mesenchymal transition (EndoMT) and fibrogenesis of the aged hearts, which is regulated by cytokines such as TGF- $\beta$ , endothelin-1 (EDN1) and IL-1 (Piera-Velazquez and Jimenez, 2019). Cardiomyocytes also show senescence, but their hallmarks of senescence are much different from those of proliferative cells such as endothelial cells. In aged hearts, the senescent cardiomyocytes show hallmarks of DNA damage, endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, hypertrophic growth, and atypical SASP (e.g., TGF- $\beta$ 2, growth-dependent factor 15 (GDF15) and EDN3), and contractile dysfunction (Tang et al., 2020). Besides, the accumulation of somatic mutations in cardiomyocytes during aging suggests age-associated DNA damage and widespread oxidative genotoxicity. This age-related accumulation of cardiac mutations provides an explanation of the influence of aging on cardiac dysfunction (Choudhury et al., 2022). Depletion of senescent cells reduces aging features of the heart, such as hypertrophy and fibrosis, and prolongs the lifespan of mice (Baker et al., 2016).

The cell changes are largely regulated by the related organelles and the crosstalk among the organelles and nucleus. Mitochondria are the key organelles for the homeostasis of myocardial cells. Cardiomyocytes have a high demand for energy, which evolutionarily results in a high number of mitochondria within cardiomyocytes (Picca et al., 2018). Although endothelial cells have low numbers of mitochondria compared with cardiomyocytes, mitochondria in endothelial cells also regulate endothelial functions such as

angiogenesis and paracrine (angiocrine) functions in a crucial manner (Li et al., 2019e). Mitochondria regulate myocardial function not only via supporting energy and regulating oxidative stress but also modulate protein and histone post-translational modifications by supporting donors such as acyl-CoA. For instance, the deregulation of mitochondrial crotonyl-CoA caused by the Enoyl-CoA hydratase, short chain 1 (ECHS1) mutation is a key mechanism underlying aging-related cardiac hypertrophy and fibrosis (Cai et al., 2022b; Tang et al., 2021). The changes in mitochondrial structure and function are observed in the cells (cardiomyocyte, endothelial cell, fibroblast) of aged hearts. In the cells of young hearts, the mitochondria undergo fusion and fission to maintain homeostasis, which is important for normal cell function. The imbalance of these mitochondrial dynamics (fusion and fission) accelerates mitochondrial senescence in cardiac cells and is an important biomarker of cardiac aging and diseases (Picca et al., 2018; Song et al., 2017).

#### *Molecular changes*

Elucidation of the molecular pathways involved in cardiac aging helps understand the mechanism of cardiac aging and facilitates the prognosis and diagnosis of aging-related cardiovascular diseases. A variety of important molecular signaling pathways change during heart aging, such as oxidative stress and autophagy. In addition, several recent single-cell transcriptome studies provide important references for revealing the molecular mechanisms of cardiac aging (Choudhury et al., 2022; Emechebe et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022g).

ROS accumulates in the aged heart, leading to higher mitochondrial protein carbonylation along with increased mitochondrial DNA mutations and deletions, which is indicative of mitochondrial oxidative damage in the heart with age (Dai et al., 2012). In addition, as the elevation of ROS can cause oxidative DNA damage, single-cardiomyocyte sequencing has revealed the accumulation of somatic single-nucleotide variants (sSNVs) in aged human hearts, with a higher rate than those in neurons and lymphocytes, pointing to a higher age-related somatic mutation load in the heart (Choudhury et al., 2022). On the contrary, autophagy decreases with age in the heart (Taneike et al., 2010). As mTOR is a key regulator of autophagy (Marín-Aguilar et al., 2020), it is also considered as a critical driver of cardiac aging. For instance, mTOR phosphorylation increases with age in mouse hearts (Hua et al., 2011), whereas the inhibition of mTOR extends lifespan and ameliorates age-related cardiac diseases by promoting autophagy in mice (Dai et al., 2014; Flynn et al., 2013; Harrison et al., 2009). Likewise, sirtuins, a conserved family of NAD<sup>+</sup>-dependent deacetylases, have been widely implicated in cardiac aging; the protein expression of multiple sirtuins, including SIRT1, SIRT2 and

SIRT3, has been found to decrease in the heart with age (Li et al., 2018b; Sakamoto et al., 2004; Tang et al., 2017).

In addition to the studies on individual molecular pathways, a variety of potential new biomarkers for cardiac aging have been recently identified with the development and application of single-cell or single-nucleus transcriptomic sequencing techniques. For instance, single-nucleus transcriptomic sequencing of primate ventricles has revealed that the inflammatory factor IL-7 increases during cardiac aging (Ma et al., 2021). Besides, single-nucleus transcriptomic sequencing analysis of primate hearts of different ages has identified forkhead box protein 1 (FOXP1) and forkhead box protein 2 (FOXP2) as key age-downregulated transcriptional regulators whose target genes are associated with various heart diseases (Ma et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022g). Consistently, FOXP1-deficient cardiomyocytes derived from human embryonic stem cells exhibit multiple cardiac aging phenotypes, including cellular hypertrophy and senescence (Zhang et al., 2022g). Furthermore, single-cell transcriptome analysis of endothelial cells sorted from mouse hearts at 3 months and 24 months of age has revealed increased expression of spectrin repeat containing nuclear envelope 2 (Syne2) and decreased expression of nestin (Nes) with age (Emechebe et al., 2021).

#### *Secretory factors detectable in biofluids*

Aging is strongly associated with an increased risk of various cardiac diseases. Secretory factors detectable in the biofluids such as blood and urine are potentially powerful tools as measurable and quantifiable biomarkers in the diagnosis, prognosis, and surveillance of cardiac aging and related diseases.

Several secretory factors detectable in the blood have been linked with cardiac aging. For example, the level of serum B-type natriuretic peptide (BNP) has been found to increase in aged individuals, while age-related impairment of left atrial strain positively correlates with even higher BNP levels as an independent factor (Yoshida et al., 2019). Likewise, the level of plasma high-sensitivity cardiac troponin T (hs-cTnT) also increases with age, and is often higher in men than women (de Lemos et al., 2010; Saunders et al., 2011). In addition, the levels of serum IL6 and C-reactive protein (CRP) are higher in elderly populations (Puzianowska-Kuźnicka et al., 2016). Consistent with the notion that age is a major contributing factor to the incidence of cardiovascular diseases, the evaluation of circulating secretory factors from individuals without prevalent cardiovascular diseases has revealed that all of the aforementioned biomarkers are positively correlated with increased risks of aging-related cardiovascular diseases (de Lemos et al., 2017; Kuh et al., 2019; Markousis-Mavrogenis et al., 2019; Saeed et al., 2018). Besides, a cohort study revealed that the circulating ceramide- and phospholipid-based risk score is positively correlated with

the incidence of cardiovascular diseases (Hilvo et al., 2020).

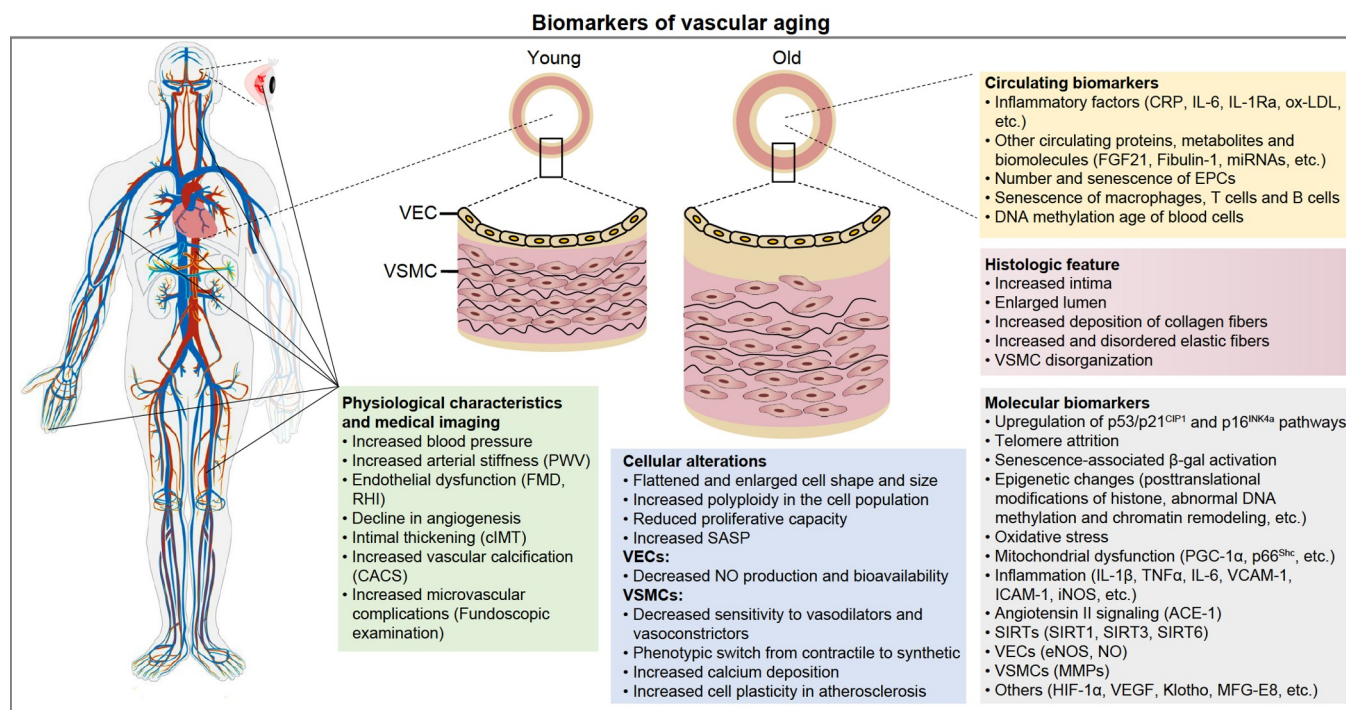
Compared with the other types of biofluids, urine is the easiest to collect, the least invasive to the patients, and generally more stable, making it highly feasible for biomarker identification and application. As tested in the blood, increased urinary BNP is also associated with higher aging-related CVD risks (Campbell et al., 2020). Increased urinary fibrinopeptide A (FPA) is also associated with angina pectoris and myocardial ischemia (Sonel et al., 2000). In addition, hundreds of proteins and peptides have been identified in urine samples from the patients as putative biomarkers of coronary artery diseases, including CD14, alpha-1-antitrypsin (AAT), collagen types 1 and 3, granin-like neuroendocrine peptide precursor (ProSAAS), membrane-associated progesterone receptor component 1 (PGRMC1), sodium/potassium-transporting ATPase gamma chain (FXVD2) and fibrinogen-alpha chain (FGA) (Delles et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2015).

#### *Summary and perspectives*

The aging heart shows changes in function, structure, and cellular/extracellular components. The typical biomarkers of cardiac aging are summarized above and many molecular pathways (Sirtuin, mTOR, AMPK, and FOXO) are involved in cardiac aging. Some outstanding questions remain in the field of cardiac aging. First, some potential hallmarks of cardiomyocyte senescence have been summarized before (Tang et al., 2020), but it is still hard to define and detect cardiomyocyte senescence *in vivo*. Second, many biomarkers of cardiac aging overlap with the pathological characteristics of cardiac diseases in young adults. Further efforts are needed to define biomarkers of physiological aging of the heart in humans. Recent studies have reported that the loss of epigenetic information is a cause of the aging of mammalian tissues, including the heart (Liu et al., 2023b; Yang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022g). It remains unknown what epigenetic marks contribute significantly to cardiac aging and can be used as the biomarker of cardiac aging. Finally, many strategies targeting aging biomarkers have been used to delay aging and disease. Depletion of senescent cells has been used to extend lifespan and reduce aging-related cardiac remodeling in mice (Baker et al., 2016). Further studies in large animals such as monkeys and pigs may promote clinical and translational science (Zou et al., 2022).

#### **Vascular aging**

Aging is the main risk factor for vascular disease and the related cardiovascular and cerebrovascular complications, which account for the majority of deaths worldwide (Hameczyk et al., 2020). In a rapidly aging society, biomarkers allowing early detection of individuals who are at high risk of developing vascular disease need to be devel-



**Figure 13** Biomarkers of vascular aging. Abbreviations: SIRT, sirtuin. ACE-1, angiotensin-converting enzyme-1; CACS, Coronary artery calcium scores; cIMT, carotid intima-media thickness; CRP, C-reactive protein; CT, computed tomography; eNOS, endothelial NO synthase; EPC, endothelial progenitor cell; FGF21, fibroblast growth factor 21; FMD, flow-mediated dilation; HIF-1 $\alpha$ , hypoxia-inducible factor-1 $\alpha$ ; ICAM-1, intercellular adhesion molecule-1; IL-1 $\beta$ , interleukin-1 $\beta$ ; IL-1Ra, IL-1 receptor antagonist; IL-6, interleukin-6; iNOS, inducible nitric oxide synthase; MFG-E8, milk fat globule epidermal growth factor 8; MMP, matrix metalloproteinase; NO, nitric oxide; ox-LDL, oxidized low-density lipoprotein; PGC-1 $\alpha$ , peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor-gamma coactivator-1 $\alpha$ ; PWV, pulse wave velocity; RHI, reactive hyperemia index; SASP, senescence-associated secretory phenotype; SIRT, sirtuin; TNF $\alpha$ , tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$ ; VCAM-1, vascular adhesion molecule-1; VEC, Vascular endothelial cells; VEGF, vascular endothelial growth factor; VSMC, vascular smooth muscle cells.

oped to improve primary prevention and reduce the health care and socioeconomic burdens associated with aging. (Figure 13; Table S8 in Supporting Information)

#### Physiological characteristics

Functionally, aging blood vessels show increased stiffness, decreased sensitivity to vasodilators and vasoconstrictors, and decreased angiogenesis (Ding et al., 2022; Zhang and Tao, 2018). The gold standard for measuring arterial stiffness is the carotid-femoral pulse wave velocity (PWV), the velocity at which the blood pressure wave moves from the carotid to the femoral, whereas the brachial-ankle and heart-ankle PWV are also popular in the clinic (Townsend et al., 2015; Van Bortel et al., 2012). An increase in PWV correlates with chronological age and is associated with an increased risk of CVD and all-cause mortality (Laurent et al., 2001; Mitchell et al., 2010). Elevated blood pressure is also a common feature of aging and the leading contributor to cardiovascular events and mortality (Poulter et al., 2015). Hypertension is often preceded and aggravated by arterial stiffening, whereas it also promotes arterial stiffening, indicating the existence of a positive feedback loop between them (Humphrey et al., 2016).

Vascular endothelial cells (VECs) sense and respond to

stimuli from the blood system and regulate vascular smooth muscle cells (VSMCs), by producing NO (vasodilator) or angiotensin II (Ang II, vasoconstrictor) (Tian and Li, 2014; Ungvari et al., 2018). Endothelial health and function is a central mechanism of vascular aging and pathologies. For example, the age-related decrease in endothelium-dependent dilator responses contributes to the decline in angiogenesis, another main characteristic of vascular aging (Ungvari et al., 2018). Endothelial dysfunction also increases susceptibility to atherosclerosis, which is characterized by lipid-rich and inflammatory plaques accumulating in the subintimal space of medium and large arteries (Libby et al., 2019). Impaired endothelial function and disrupted endothelial integrity are considered as the major drivers and early events of atherosclerosis (Libby et al., 2019; Tian and Li, 2014). Endothelial dysfunction can be measured non-invasively by ultrasound using the flow-mediated dilation (FMD) technique (Celermajer et al., 1992; Thijssen et al., 2019). After transient vasoocclusion, brachial artery flow changes after infusion of vasoactive substances modulating nitric oxide release are measured. Whereas FMD examines the macrovascular endothelial function of the conduit brachial artery, peripheral arterial tonometry (PAT) may represent a measure of the function of the peripheral resistance of finger microvessels

after the natural logarithmic transformation of the reactive hyperemia index (RHI) (Kuvin et al., 2003; Thijssen et al., 2019). Several prospective studies have demonstrated that FMD and RHI are both independent predictors of future cardiovascular events (Matsuzawa et al., 2015), but these two methods are not closely related, suggesting that they reflect distinct aspects of vascular function (Hamburg et al., 2011). FMD decreases during aging and is an independent predictor of CVD outcomes (Skaug et al., 2013; Thijssen et al., 2019). RHI is associated with the coronary atherosclerotic burden (Heffernan et al., 2012), but may not reflect age-associated reductions in large artery endothelial function assessed via brachial artery FMD (Babcock et al., 2021).

### *Imaging traits*

With age, carotid intima-media thickness (cIMT) increases (Homma et al., 2001) and is associated with the prevalence, morbidity, and mortality of CVD (Lorenz et al., 2007). It is possible to use ultrasound to measure cIMT in the vascular system as an estimate of the burden of subclinical atherosclerosis in major arteries (Bauer et al., 2012; de Groot et al., 2004). Even measured once (at baseline), cIMT is predictive of future CVD events in the general population after adjusting for a wide range of established CVD risk factors (Lorenz et al., 2007). However, increased cIMT can also reflect nonatherosclerotic processes (Homma et al., 2001; Inaba et al., 2012). In clinical trials, cIMT has been frequently used as a secondary outcome. In this context, absolute or annual cIMT progression is used instead of measuring cIMT on a single occasion based on at least two ultrasound scans over a year (Lorenz et al., 2015). More advanced atherosclerosis stages can be evaluated by quantifying various carotid plaque parameters, such as plaque presence, number, thickness, area, and volume (Naqvi and Lee, 2014), which outperform carotid IMT as a predictor of future CAD events (Inaba et al., 2012).

Vascular aging is also often accompanied by the active deposition of calcium phosphate crystals in both the intima (also called atherosclerotic intima calcification) and the media (also called Mönckeberg sclerosis) layers of blood vessels (Lanzer et al., 2014). Calcifications of both types often occur simultaneously, and imaging techniques sometimes have difficulty distinguishing between them (Kockelkoren et al., 2017). Coronary artery calcium scores (CACS) can be determined using computed tomography (CT), which is considered to be the gold standard technique (Wang et al., 2018c). Despite the fact that CACS could be frequently affected by medial calcification, it is often used for the assessment of atherosclerosis due to its good correlation with coronary plaque burden (Sangiorgi et al., 1998). CACS is highly correlated with chronological age (McClelland et al., 2006) and is the most important predictor of coronary heart disease and all atherosclerotic CVD outcomes combined

(Ambale-Venkatesh et al., 2017; Raggi et al., 2008).

Fundoscopic examination is a physical examination technique that allows the visualization of the retina by using only a fundoscope and the naked eye (Gupta et al., 2017). It is recommended to detect diabetic retinopathy for the diagnosis and prevention of visual impairment in diabetic patients (Eppley et al., 2019; Song et al., 2022a). It also allows for the non-invasive identification of increased ocular microvascular abnormalities such as arterial and venous occlusive disease, retinal arteriolar macroaneurysm formation, and embolic events for the prevention and management of both the ocular and systemic complications of hypertension (DellaCroce and Vitale, 2008). In this context, fundoscopic examination could potentially be used for enhanced prognostication and risk reclassification of vascular aging through the assessment of microvascular complications that are tightly associated with vascular stiffness and atherosclerosis (Antonopoulos et al., 2021; Lovshin et al., 2018).

Age-related vasculature alteration is a prominent risk factor for various vascular diseases, including abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) and aortic dissection (Bossone and Eagle, 2021). AAA is conventionally defined as the dilation or widening of the aorta to greater than 3.0 cm, with most AAAs being asymptomatic until rupture, which leads to death in 65% of patients (Sakalihan et al., 2005). The pathophysiological development of AAA involves various processes, including apoptosis and aging of VSMCs, inflammatory infiltration and oxidative stress in the vascular wall, and proteolytic fragmentation of the cellular ECM (Meng et al., 2023). Clinically, AAA is typically monitored with imaging tests (ultrasound or CT scan) over time to ensure that the aneurysm is not growing (Baman and Eskandari, 2022). Aortic dissection is a life-threatening event, during which a primary tear propagates along the aorta, causing catastrophic delamination of the inner (intima with most of the media) from the outer layers (leftover media with adventitia), with an increased susceptibility in elderly individuals (Bossone and Eagle, 2021; Horný et al., 2022). The delamination strength of the human aorta significantly decreases with age (Horný et al., 2022). CT is the gold standard for detecting aortic dissection and may show a dissection flap or aortic dilation; MRI may also be used as an alternative; transesophageal echocardiography (TEE) can be rapidly performed in emergency situations (Shi and Babu, 2021).

### *Histologic features*

Vascular aging can be defined as morphological and functional alterations of the vasculature (Hamczyk et al., 2020; Zhang and Tao, 2018). Morphologically, aging blood vessels exhibit increased deposition of collagen fibers, increased and disordered elastic fibers, disorganized arrangement of VSMCs, enlarged lumens, increased intima, and eventually progressive calcification of the medial layer of the vascular



wall (Ding et al., 2022; Zhang and Tao, 2018).

### Cellular alterations

Numerous senescence-associated morphological alterations and functional adaptations occur in constituent cells of the vasculature during aging. For example, most senescent VECs and VSMCs exhibit reduced proliferative capacity, become flattened and enlarged at cellular shape and size, and exhibit increased polyploidy in the cell population and increased SASP (Tian and Li, 2014; Yang et al., 2007). The integrity and functionality of the endothelium are crucial for vascular homeostasis; therefore, VEC senescence contributes to the onset of aging in the vasculature. Both basal and shear stress-stimulated NO production and endothelial NO synthase (eNOS) activity are reduced in senescent VECs (Sato et al., 1993). NO bioavailability is also reduced due to oxidative stress in senescent VECs (Zhang and Gao, 2021). NO can activate telomerase and delay the onset of senescence (Vasa et al., 2000). Senescent VECs attract monocytes to the endothelium and promote the proliferation and migration of VSMCs (Csiszar et al., 2012; Urbanek et al., 2016).

The responses of VSMCs to contractile and relaxation factors, including NO and  $\beta$ -adrenoreceptor agonists, are also decreased in aging (Ding et al., 2022). Another main characteristic of VSMC senescence is the phenotypic switch from contractile to synthetic. Senescent VSMCs secrete proinflammatory cytokines and MMPs. These SASP factors promote the chemotaxis of monocytes/macrophages and stimulate adjacent non-senescent VSMCs or VECs to release cytokines and express adhesion molecules, thus participating in or driving chronic vascular inflammation and diseases (Gardner et al., 2015). Senescent VSMCs also increase calcium deposition and promote the expression of calcification regulatory factors, leading to the mineralization of VSMCs and the calcification of blood vessels (Fakhry et al., 2017; Nakano-Kurimoto et al., 2009). In addition, the production of elastase in VSMCs and fibronectin in VECs contributes to fibrosis in vascular aging (Johnson, 2007; Leon and Zuckerman, 2005). In atherosclerosis, VSMCs are more plastic and can adopt alternative phenotypes, including phenotypes resembling foam cells, macrophages, mesenchymal stem cells, and osteochondrogenic cells, which could contribute both positively and negatively to disease progression (Basatemur et al., 2019).

### Molecular changes

As aging includes various biological processes, it is difficult to attribute vascular aging to one or a few molecules. Similar to other types of cells, upregulation of the p53/p21<sup>CIP1</sup> and p16<sup>INK4a</sup> pathways, telomere attrition, and SA- $\beta$ -gal activation are observed in VECs and VSMCs during aging (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2018; Minamino and Komuro, 2007;

Wang et al., 2021c). These are identified as classical biomarkers of cellular senescence in the vasculature. Vascular aging could be pre-determined genetically. For example, a mutation at the LMNA or WRN locus could cause Hutchinson-Gilford progeria syndrome in children or Werner's syndrome in adults, respectively. Both syndromes are associated with premature death due to accelerated vascular aging and cardiovascular events (Burtner and Kennedy, 2010; Lebel and Monnat, 2018). Emerging evidence has also demonstrated that epigenetic changes during aging, including altered posttranslational acetylation and methylation of histones, abnormal DNA methylation, and chromatin remodeling, are closely associated with vascular aging (Wang et al., 2022a; Wang et al., 2021c; Wu et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2018b). In addition, oxidative stress, which induces DNA damage and telomere shortening, is also a senescence biomarker (Kubben et al., 2016; Kurz et al., 2004). As a major source of ROS, mitochondrial integrity and function decline with aging, and several mitochondria-related molecules were found to be potential biomarkers of vascular aging, including peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor- $\gamma$  coactivator (PGC)-1 $\alpha$ , p66<sup>Shc</sup> and SIRT3 (Liberale et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021c).

Another process involved in vascular aging is inflammation. The NF- $\kappa$ B pathway and immune cells are major players in this process. NF- $\kappa$ B activation upregulates the expression of inflammatory cytokines and cellular adhesion molecules, including IL-1 $\beta$ , TNF $\alpha$ , IL-6, vascular adhesion molecule-1 (VCAM-1), intercellular adhesion molecule-1 (ICAM-1), inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS), monocyte chemo-attractant protein-1 (MCP-1), and cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) (Wang et al., 2021c). Angiotensin II signaling, which regulates many of the stimuli and signals that govern vascular aging, activates the NF- $\kappa$ B and p53/p21<sup>CIP1</sup> pathways (Kunieda et al., 2006; Miyauchi et al., 2004). The activity and expression of angiotensin-converting enzyme-1 (ACE-1) are obviously increased during aging (Wang et al., 2003). SIRT proteins constitute a class of proteins involved in vascular aging, especially SIRT1, SIRT3, and SIRT6. Their activity declines in VECs and VSMCs during aging, and their overexpression counteracts vascular aging (Grootaert and Bennett, 2022). Furthermore, with cutting-edge technologies, a series of molecules have been found to be associated with or functionally contribute to vascular aging, including hypoxia-inducible factor-1 $\alpha$  (HIF-1 $\alpha$ ), vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), Klotho, FOXO1A, FOXO3A, adrenoceptor beta 2 (ADRB2), milk fat globule epidermal growth factor 8 (MFG-E8), natriuretic peptide receptor A (NPRA), and APOE (Cai et al., 2022d; Long et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021c; Zhang et al., 2020e).

### Secretory factors detectable in biofluids

Aging affects the levels of proteins, metabolites, and other

biomolecules in the blood. As inflammation is highly associated with vascular aging, the protein levels of inflammatory factors in circulation, such as circulating CRP, IL-6, IL-1 receptor antagonist (IL-1Ra), and oxidized low-density lipoprotein (ox-LDL), are potential biomarkers of vascular aging (Durham et al., 2018; Gopcevic et al., 2021; Ishigaki et al., 2009). The circulating fibroblast growth factor 21 (cFGF21) concentration is positively correlated with age (Yang et al., 2022a), and high levels of cFGF21 are closely associated with an increased risk of CVDs (Zhang et al., 2021h). Circulating fibulin-1 is positively correlated with brachial-ankle PWV and is an independent risk factor for arterial stiffness (Luo et al., 2022a). Other circulating factors, including oxidative stress and miRNAs, have also been reported as potential biomarkers of vascular aging (Du et al., 2021; Gopcevic et al., 2021).

Aging also causes changes in the cells and in the blood. One of the well-identified factors that indicates vascular aging in the circulation is bone marrow-derived endothelial progenitor cells (EPCs). EPCs are known to participate in postnatal neovascularization and vascular repair. Aging reduces the number and promotes the senescence of EPCs, resulting in a decline in angiogenesis and vascular healing (Buffa et al., 2019). Moreover, the senescence of macrophages, T cells, and B cells is also associated with vascular aging. Downregulation of ATP-binding cassette transporter A1 (ABCA1) and abnormal polarization are characteristics of senescent macrophages (Sene et al., 2013). Senescent macrophages impair cholesterol efflux, increase cytokine expression and premature monocyte recruitment, and promote extracellular matrix degradation (Childs et al., 2016; Sene et al., 2013). The increase in the CD8<sup>+</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup> T-cell proportion within the circulating CD8 subset is one of the most prominent changes during aging and T-cell senescence in humans (Weng et al., 2009). Senescent T cells are highly proinflammatory and release a large amount of interferon- $\gamma$  (Franceschi et al., 2000; Leon and Zuckerman, 2005). It also induces direct lysis of ECs and VSMCs by releasing high levels of perforin and granzymes (Johnson, 2007). A major effect of aging on B cells is a significant decrease in the percentage of switched memory B cells (IgD<sup>+</sup>CD27<sup>+</sup>) and a significant increase in the percentage of naïve (IgD<sup>+</sup>CD27<sup>-</sup>) and double-negative memory (IgD<sup>-</sup>CD27<sup>-</sup>) B cells in the blood (Frasca et al., 2020). Senescent B cells display an enhanced ability to take up, process, and present antigens to T cells and contribute to local inflammation by secreting proinflammatory factors (Sage et al., 2019). In addition, by identifying the specific CpG sites undergoing age-related changes in methylation, the calculated DNA methylation age (DNAmAges, also called epigenetic clocks) of blood cells could be a good predictor of all-cause and CVD mortality (Hameczyk et al., 2020; Marioni et al., 2015).

## Lung aging

The main function of the lung, with the largest surface area, is to exchange gas with the outside environment. And lung tissue homeostasis is critical for life and health. Accumulating evidence shows that lung function is facing progressive impairment with age, marked by physical, mechanical and structural changes that hamper gas exchange (Bowdish, 2019; Roman et al., 2016). The characteristics of aging lung are weakening of respiratory muscles (particularly the diaphragm), and stiffening of the chest wall (Schuliga et al., 2021). With the outbreak and prevalence of COVID-19, pneumonia-induced acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), particularly in elderly people, results in global healthcare crises and severely strains health resources.

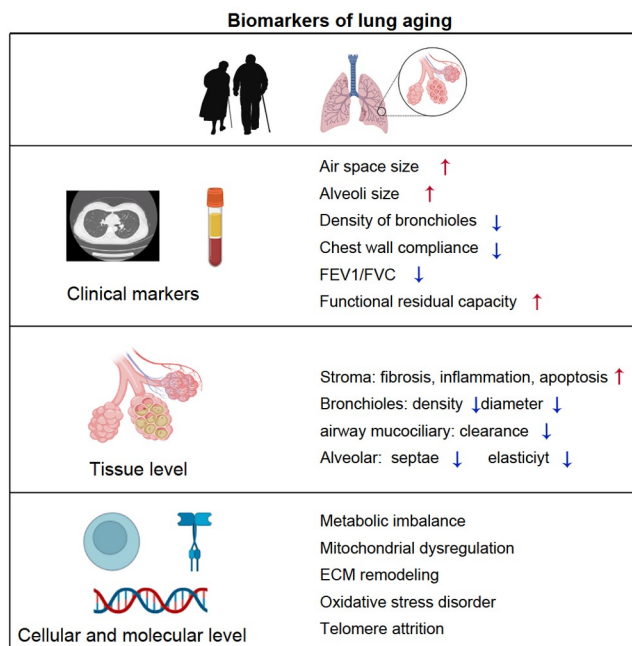
The lung is a complex and multicellular organ, including alveolar epithelial cells, vascular endothelial cells, airway epitheliums, fibroblasts, macrophages, platelets, neutrophils. The cellular and molecular regulatory processes of lung undergo changes over a lifetime. Gaining more insight into the lung-intrinsic changes that occur with aging is crucial for development of high effective clinical treatment.

Aging causes lung susceptibility to various respiratory diseases, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), ARDS, interstitial pulmonary fibrosis (IPF), and pneumonia (Crook et al., 2021).

Advanced age is the main risk factor for chronic respiratory diseases. It is proved by the data that the mortality rate caused by COVID-19 is 20 times higher for the elderly people over 80 years old compared with people in their 50s (Strangfeld et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2020). However, the fundamental mechanisms driving the aging process in the lung remain poorly understood. Here we mainly discuss the cellular alterations and molecular changes in the lung with advancing age (Figure 14; Table S9 in Supporting Information).

### *Physiological characteristics*

On the whole, with the growth of age, lung function will deteriorate significantly (Skloot, 2017; Vaz Fragoso and Lee, 2012). Due to the weakening of chest wall function and respiratory muscle strength, the ability of aging lungs to clear mucus and foreign matters is impaired, which causes the elderly to be more susceptible to pneumonia. The ribs harden with age, and the shape of the thorax changes accordingly, affecting the normal implementation of lung function (Topley et al., 1995). The curvature of the spine can reduce the volume of the thoracic cavity in the elderly. Although the elastic recoil force decreases with age due to the reduction of respiratory intensity and chest wall compliance, the total vital capacity does not change significantly with age (Enright et al., 1994; Sharma and Goodwin, 2006). According to statistics, lung function has declined since the age of 35.



**Figure 14** Biomarkers of lung aging. During the aging process of lung tissue, the molecular level, cell level and tissue level have changed in varying degrees. Understanding these alterations can help us to develop more efficient treatment methods for elderly lung tissue.

Forced expiratory volume (FEV<sub>1</sub>) decreases by 30 mL per year and forced vital capacity (FVC) declines by about 20 mL per year (Stam et al., 1994; Verbeken et al., 1992; Xu et al., 1995). Due to the heterogeneity and high variability of the lung in the aging population, the current standard for lung function in the elderly still needs to be further clarified.

#### Imaging traits

Recognition of the lung CT characteristics of “normal” aging is more important to differentiate from clinically significant disease. Compared with young people, the prevalence of lung and airway cysts, reticular structures, air trapping, bronchiectasis and bronchial wall thickening in the elderly increased. The chest imaging features related to aging show vascular curvature and calcification, mediastinal lipomatosis, diaphragmatic bulge and protrusion, and musculoskeletal features, such as chest osteophyte and costal cartilage calcification (Copley, 2016; Ensor et al., 1983).

#### Histological features

Aging of lung is associated with mechanical, structural and physiological alterations that compromise lung function. The organization, concentration and form of ECM protein in the lung will change with age. Disordered and excessive ECM destroys the normal architecture of the lung. In the elderly lung, the number of alveolar attachments does not change, but the size of the alveoli and the surface of alveolar-capillary marked increase. Changes in alveolar depth and acinar

airway lumen are related to advanced age (Quirk et al., 2016; Schuliga and Bartlett, 2019).

The fundamental mechanisms driving the aging process in the lung remains poorly understood. Here we mainly discuss the cellular alteration and molecular changes in the lung with advancing age.

#### Cellular alterations

Development of single-cell transcriptomic and *in vivo* lineage tracing technology provides a more comprehensive perspective for understanding the complexity of cellular in the lung (Schupp et al., 2021; Travaglini et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021d). 144 cell subtypes have been identified during lung development through the integrated analysis of multiple omics (He et al., 2022). Although technological advances have made some progression in the study of lung tissue, the changes of cells in the process of aging are not completely clear. Pulmonary function would decrease with age in the absence of illness. So, it is fundamental to understand the cellular alteration in the aging process of lung tissue.

Aging results in increased transcriptional noise, suggesting deregulated epigenetic control. Single-cell transcriptional analysis showed that chronological aging would increase the gene characteristics related to cholesterol biosynthesis in type 2 alveolar epithelial cells (AT2) cells and lipid fibroblasts, leading to the increase of neutral lipid content in epithelium and fibroblasts with age (Angelidis et al., 2019). Compared with young mouse lung, ciliated cell marker gene signature is immensely upregulation in aged mouse. The increase of ciliated cells leads to the altered frequency of club to ciliated cells in aged mouse airways (Schneider et al., 2021). One of the key features of aging is the exhaustion or dysfunction of stem/progenitor cells. AT2 is the lung tissue resident progenitor cell with the potential to differentiate into AT1 after injury (Choi et al., 2020; Desai et al., 2014; Salahudeen et al., 2020). Some studies show the number of AT2 does not change with age, but the capacity of self-renew and differentiation reduces (Watson et al., 2020b). The number of basal cells and club cells decreases with age (Ortega-Martínez et al., 2016; Wansleben et al., 2014). By clearing the senescent cells in the tissue microenvironment, the lung function of the aged mice can be improved to a certain extent (Childs et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2018b).

The human respiratory system is a crucial immune interface to respond to different stimuli from the outside environment. Chronic antigen stimulation and continuous accumulation of oxidative free radicals can lead to the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines during aging. Alveolar macrophages (AMs), the largest proportion of resident immune cells in lung tissue, play a key role in recognition, initiation and elimination of the host defense against external microbes (Baasch et al., 2021; Gorki et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021i). Single-cell transcriptome data and experimental

result demonstrate that the lung environment drives an age-associated resistance of AMs to proliferation that persisted during influenza A viral infection. This change is caused by the increase of hyaluronan in the extracellular matrix in the lung tissue of aged mice (McQuattie-Pimentel et al., 2021). The phagocytic capacity of AMs is age-related, resulting in impaired or delayed clearance of pulmonary pathogens (Li et al., 2017d; Wong et al., 2017). Neutrophil extracellular traps (NETs) play a fundamental role in immune regulation, pathogen clearance and disease pathology (Castanheira and Kubes, 2019; Hidalgo et al., 2022; Papayannopoulos, 2018). NETs-mediated pathogen destruction and age-related changes further lead to impaired bacterial clearance and may increase the susceptibility of the elderly to infection (Brinkmann and Zychlinsky, 2007). In healthy elderly people, the proportion of neutrophils in bronchoalveolar lavage fluid (BAL) increased and the percentage of macrophages decreased (Corberand et al., 1981). The reduction of CD4<sup>+</sup> and CD8<sup>+</sup> T cells in the elderly can damage the immunity to influenza vaccination and the cytotoxicity to influenza virus (Zhou and McElhaney, 2011).

#### *Molecular changes*

Moloney murine leukemia virus 1 (PIM1) and its target nuclear factor of activated T cells-1 (NFATc1) is identified as putative driving factors of sustained profibrotic gene signatures in IPF damaged aging fibroblasts (Pham et al., 2022). Microarray results demonstrate multiple genes undergo changes during age, such as IGF and TGF $\beta$  signalling pathways related to proliferation and differentiation (Watson et al., 2020b). With the increase of age, the clearance rate of mucociliary in respiratory system slows down, which determined by ciliary beat frequency. Increased oxidative stress activates protein kinase C $\epsilon$  (PKC $\epsilon$ ) signaling, thereby reducing ciliary beat frequency (Bailey et al., 2018).

After injury, vascular endothelial cells (ECs) play an active role in regulating lung stem cells by secreting angiocrine factors. Aging leads to reprogram of transcriptional signature in endothelial cells, which reduces the regeneration ability of aging lung after same insult as young mouse. Endothelial cells derived neuropilin-1 (NRP1)/hypoxia-inducible-factor 2 $\alpha$  (HIF2 $\alpha$ ) suppresses anti-inflammatory and anti-thrombotic endothelial protein C receptor (EPCR) pathway. Blockade of NRP1 or HIF2 $\alpha$  in ECs is able to restore regenerative capacity of aging organs (Chen et al., 2021d). Age-related alteration in endothelial vasodilation is attributed to diminishment of eNOS activity and NO production (Cho and Stout-Delgado, 2020). Persistent injury of lung results in suppression of CXCR7 expression and recruitment of endothelial growth factor receptor 1 (VEGFR1)-expressing macrophages. This recruitment activates Wnt/ $\beta$ -catenin-dependent persistent upregulation of Notch ligand Jagged1 in pulmonary capillary endothelial cells (PCECs), which in

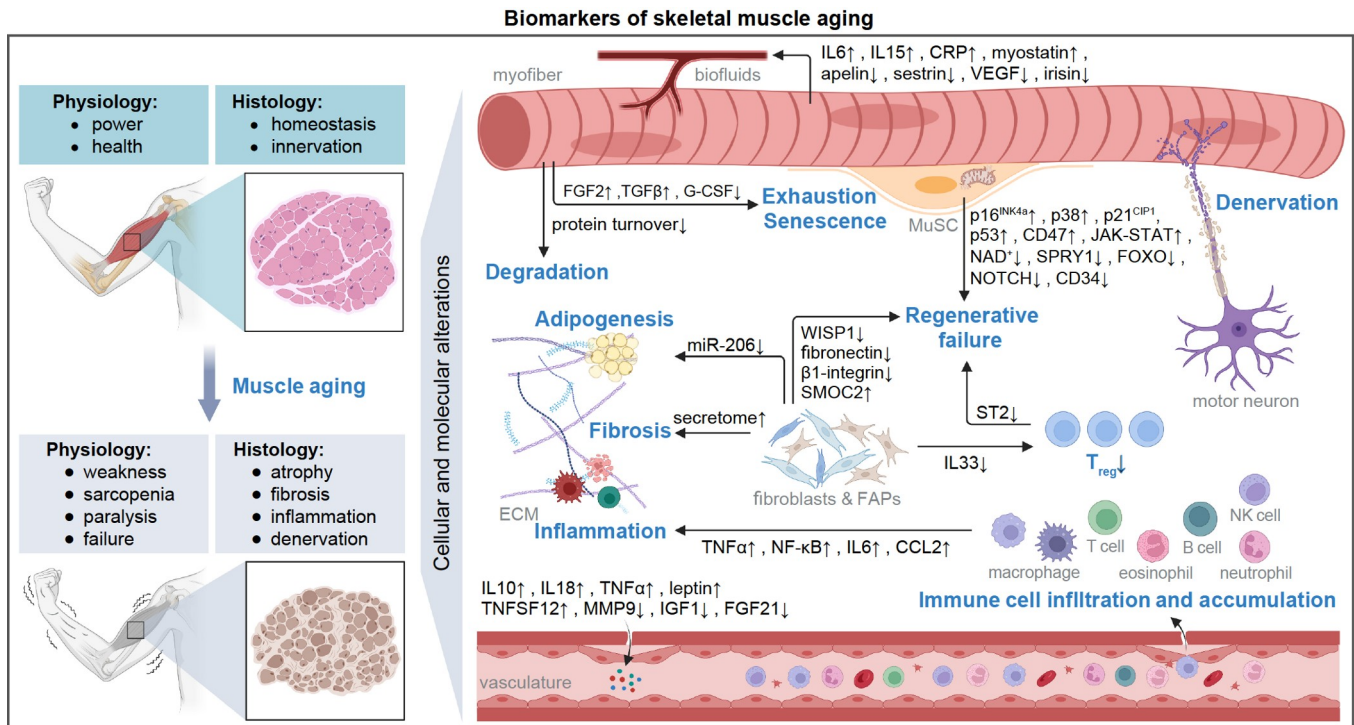
turn initiates exuberant Notch signaling in perivascular fibroblasts and aggravate fibrosis (Cao et al., 2016).

#### *Secretory factors detectable in biofluids*

Normal and accelerated aging would cause considerable differences in the outcomes of some chronic diseases, the later often represent higher mortality (Justice et al., 2018). How the pathological process related to aging drives the development of lung related diseases is not completely clear, the correlation between age-related biomarkers and the severity of IPF has been confirmed. The shorter length of leukocyte telomere, the lower the survival rate of patients with IPF (Stuart et al., 2014; Townsley et al., 2016). Some studies assess the relationship between aging biomarkers and interstitial lung abnormalities (ILAs). The results show the increasing plasma concentration of GDF15, IL-6, TNF $\alpha$  and CRP is associated with increased odds of ILA presence (Oldham, 2021; Sanders et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2019d). The concentration of Krebs von den lungen-6 (KL-6) produced by damaged or regenerating alveolar type II pneumocytes in serum is significantly related to the prognosis of patients with COVID-19 (d'Alessandro et al., 2020). The severity of COVID-19 is positively correlated with the plasma myeloperoxidase (MPO)-DNA complexes concentration (Middleton et al., 2020).

#### **Skeletal muscle aging**

Skeletal muscle is the largest tissue by mass in the body and has a pivotal role in regulating posture, movements, respiration, and metabolism. Healthy muscle possesses the unique ability to regenerate and can fully recover its functions following routine damage or acute injuries, largely owing to the existence of muscle stem cells (MuSCs, also known as muscle satellite cells) (Sousa-Victor et al., 2022). Peaking in early adulthood, muscle mass and strength gradually decline after the age of 40 years, followed by a more prominent decline afterward with a faster decrease in strength (Dodds et al., 2014; Lang et al., 2010; McGregor et al., 2014), largely due to more substantial muscle fiber atrophy and loss (Wilkinson et al., 2018). Skeletal muscle aging is characterized by the loss of not only muscle mass but also muscle function, commonly referred to as age-related sarcopenia (Cruz-Jentoft and Sayer, 2019; Dennison et al., 2017). Sarcopenia leads to a variety of adverse outcomes that are highly associated with morbidity and healthcare costs (Dennison et al., 2017). It is anticipated that the prevalence of sarcopenia will become a major public health problem in the years to come. However, the progression of age-related sarcopenia is influenced by complex interactions between genetic and environmental lifestyle factors (Dennison et al., 2017). The development of sensitive and specific biomarkers for aging-related sarcopenia has been a daunting challenge



**Figure 15** Biomarkers of skeletal muscle aging. Functional decline of skeletal muscle in aging results from the synergistic derangement of myofiber, MuSCs, fibroblasts and FAPs, vasculature, extramyofibrillar matrix (or ECM), as well as immune and neuron systems. Decreases of myofiber size and number due to aberrant protein turnover, impairment of innervation of motor neurons to myofibers, and MuSC exhaustion- or senescence-dependent failure of regeneration, are the main causal factors of aging-related muscle atrophy. MuSC senescence can be triggered by intrinsic molecular signaling dysregulations and mitochondrial dysfunction as well as disruption of extrinsic cellular interactions involving myofibers, FAPs, macrophages, regulatory T cells, etc. Aged skeletal muscle is also often accompanied by fibrosis and adipose deposition, mainly due to elevated matrix secretome and increased adipogenic conversion of FAPs. Aging-related alterations in ECM can induce chronic inflammation featured by pro-inflammatory cytokines accumulation, which putatively stems from recruitment of both tissue-resident immune cells and those infiltrated from circulation. In addition, aging-associated dynamic changes of various secretory factors either from myofibers or from other types of cells, particularly those detectable in the biofluids, in sarcopenic patients and mouse models, can be potentially employed for accurately monitoring aging-induced myopathies. Abbreviations: TNFSF12, TNF superfamily member 12; MMP9, matrix metalloproteinase 9; IGF1, insulin like growth factor 1; FGF2, fibroblast growth factor 2; Spry1, sprouty RTK signaling antagonist 1; FOXO, forkhead box, sub-group O; Notch, notch receptor; CD34, CD34 molecule; WISP1, WNT1 inducible signaling pathway protein 1; SMOC2, SPARC-related modular calcium binding 2; ST2, suppression of tumorigenicity 2.

(Calvani et al., 2015), given the poorly understood molecular and cellular mechanisms that involve a myriad of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in driving skeletal muscle aging (Tie-land et al., 2018). Hence, it is of critical importance to unravel the molecular and cellular biomarkers of skeletal muscle aging for more accurately defining and monitoring sarcopenic states, ultimately offering new opportunities to translate our understanding of its pathophysiology into improved diagnosis, effective treatment, and preventive strategies for healthy muscle aging (Figure 15; Table S10 in Supporting Information).

#### Physiological characteristics

Advanced aging of skeletal muscle results in sarcopenia, meaning “loss of flesh” in the Greek phrase, which was first described as an age-associated decline in lean body mass (Rosenberg, 1997). Despite the ongoing debate on the best approach for defining sarcopenia, it is currently viewed as a progressive skeletal muscle disorder with accelerated loss of

muscle mass and function (Cruz-Jentoft and Sayer, 2019; Sayer and Cruz-Jentoft, 2022). The clinical criteria for the diagnosis of sarcopenia follow the guidelines of the Asian Working Group for Sarcopenia (AWGS), European Working Group on Sarcopenia in Older People (EWGSOP2), International Working Group on Sarcopenia, and the Society of Sarcopenia, Cachexia and Wasting Disorders (SSCWD). The main features of sarcopenia include loss of muscle mass and strength, alterations in cellular composition and innervation, infiltration of ectopic fat (i.e., myosteatosis) with fibrotic signatures, along with declining regenerative capacity arising from the degenerative aging of MuSCs (Sousa-Victor and Muñoz-Cánoves, 2016). Consequently, sarcopenia is associated with deterioration of muscle quality, impairment of mobility, and poor physical performance (Correa-de-Araujo et al., 2017), which leads to many adverse health outcomes including falls, fractures, frailty, and even mortality in the elderly (Cruz-Jentoft et al., 2019). Among these, the physiological phenotypes of frailty in association with

muscle aging can be assessed based upon the following parameters: weak grip strength, slow gait speed, low-level physical activity, self-reported low energy level, and unintentional body weight loss (Fried et al., 2001). Conceivably, a combination of multiple biomarkers at molecular, cellular, and tissue levels will be necessary to precisely and collectively reflect the aging-dependent pathological changes of muscle that underlie these functional declines in physical performance.

#### *Imaging traits*

The diagnosis of muscle aging, or sarcopenia, requires measurement of both muscle mass and muscle strength, along with an evaluation of physical performance. Several imaging techniques have been available for estimating muscle mass and quality, including dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry (DXA), CT, MRI, and ultrasound (US) (Albano et al., 2020; Boutin et al., 2022; Chianca et al., 2022). With the advantage of being accurate, DXA is the only radiological tool that is most commonly used in clinics with accepted cutoff values for the diagnosis of sarcopenia (Cruz-Jentoft et al., 2019). As the reference standards, CT and MRI can be used for evaluating muscle quality and fatty infiltration, but the lack of consensus cutoff values for identifying sarcopenia has limited their application merely to research purposes (Csapo et al., 2014; Lenchik and Boutin, 2018). While the current application of US in sarcopenia is limited, all these imaging modalities can provide quantitative results and are reproducible and comparable over time. However, more advancements in imaging technologies based on new biomarkers of muscle aging are needed to overcome the major limitations of the current imaging approaches, e.g., variability in the results and inconsistent use of cutoff points, particularly in the assessment of muscle quality and function in relation to physical performance.

#### *Histologic features*

In parallel to the loss of muscle mass and function, the most apparent histological feature of muscle aging is the gradual decline of myofibers in both size and number, with type II (fast-twitch and glycolytic) myofibers deteriorating utmost, which has been considered as one of the prominent contributors to aging-induced sarcopenia (Frontera et al., 2000; Larsson et al., 1978; Lexell, 1995; Lexell et al., 1988). This is perhaps due to both aberrant protein turnover (protein synthesis, degradation, and sarcomere protein folding) (Murgia et al., 2017) and selective reductions of MuSCs (Verdijk et al., 2007) residing along type II myofibers. Another cause of muscle atrophy is the degeneration of the motor unit governing muscle contraction. In homeostatic young muscle, motor neurons directly interact with myofibers at a specialized central region called the neuromuscular junction (NMJ) (Li et al., 2018a; Pannérec et al., 2016;

Tintignac et al., 2015). With aging, this interface becomes broken (Courtney and Steinbach, 1981; Jones et al., 2017; Larsson et al., 2019). Investigations into muscle degradation have provided clues suggesting that myofibers play directing roles in maintaining NMJ physiology in aging (Carnio et al., 2014; Li et al., 2011c; Masiero et al., 2009). However, it is as yet unknown whether NMJ degeneration is a causal factor of muscle aging or *vice versa*.

In the extramyofibril matrix, a robust aging-related alteration is the infiltration of adipose and connective tissue (Delmonico et al., 2009; Kragstrup et al., 2011). Overt fibrogenic activation of fibro-adipogenic progenitors (FAPs) (Brack et al., 2007; Brunet et al., 2023) and the failure of immune defense and clearance towards fibrogenic activity (Heredia et al., 2013) are the main causal factors, which ultimately lead to fibrosis. Besides, the vascular system, the intramuscular compartment in supporting and nourishing, undergoes significant changes during aging. For instance, microvasculature capillaries are in close proximity with MuSCs (Christov et al., 2007), providing factors to maintain MuSC stemness (Verma et al., 2018). While in aging, blood vessels in cardiac vasculature suffer increased permeability, tend to be stiff, and risk calcification and atherosclerosis (Harvey et al., 2016; Lacolley et al., 2018; Lacolley et al., 2017). It remains to be explored whether similar changes occur in aging skeletal muscle.

#### *Cellular alterations*

Apart from the syncytial myofibers, skeletal muscle contains various types of mononucleated cells. These populations undergo distinct fate decisions that exacerbate muscle weakness with aging (Almada and Wagers, 2016).

MuSCs are prerequisite precursors for muscle regeneration. Aging is accompanied by a dramatic decline of MuSCs, both in quantity and quality (Bengal et al., 2017; Sousa-Victor et al., 2022). Studies based on human and mouse models have revealed numerous hallmarks accompanying or driving MuSC senescence. Intrinsically, increased p16<sup>INK4a</sup> and deep quiescence (Sousa-Victor et al., 2014), increased p38 MAPK and reduced self-renewal (Bernet et al., 2014), decreased NAD<sup>+</sup> (Zhang et al., 2016) and mitochondrial fragmentation (Baker et al., 2022; Tezze et al., 2017), reduced autophagy (García-Prat et al., 2016) and functional heterogeneity (Tierney et al., 2018), loss of ciliation (Palla et al., 2022), decreased CD34 (García-Prat et al., 2020), FOXO (García-Prat et al., 2020; Jing et al., 2022) and Notch (Carlson et al., 2008; Conboy et al., 2003) signaling, elevated activation of CD47 (Porgiglia et al., 2022) and JAK-STAT signaling (Price et al., 2014; Tierney et al., 2014), have all been proven to be the prominent detriments to MuSC stemness and cause regenerative failure. Aging in the MuSC niche contributes another core source releasing secreted factors that drive MuSC senescence. Increased secretion of

FGF2 (Chakkalakal et al., 2012) and TGF- $\beta$  (Carlson et al., 2008) from aged myofiber, together with loss of fibronectin (Lukjanenko et al., 2016) and  $\beta$ 1-integrin (Roza et al., 2016) in the niche, prohibits MuSC quiescence and leads to stem cell pool exhaustion. Notably, many of the above-mentioned regulators have been investigated as therapeutic targets in treating aging- or pathogen-induced myopathy in mouse models, and a few of them have been translated into human clinical trials (Elhassan et al., 2019).

Similar to many other organs, aged muscle accumulates increased adipose and connective tissue (Csapo et al., 2014; Zoico et al., 2010), a final outcome of fibrosis (Mann et al., 2011; Wynn, 2008). In young skeletal muscle, FAPs are indispensable intermediates promoting MuSC differentiation and muscle regeneration (Heredia et al., 2013; Joe et al., 2010; Uezumi et al., 2010; Wosczyzna et al., 2019). During aging, however, FAPs become dysregulated, produce elevated matrix proteins, and tend to be the major cell type inducing fibrosis (Schüler et al., 2021). With the induction of matrix alterations, MuSCs initiate fibrogenic conversion in both morphology and the fibrotic gene program (Brack et al., 2007; Stearns-Reider et al., 2017). Importantly, aged FAPs gain increased adipogenic potential (Uezumi et al., 2011; Wosczyzna et al., 2021), serving as the main source of adipose deposition, which hampers muscle regeneration and induces prolonged inflammation.

Aging-related chronic inflammation is predominantly driven by accumulated pro-inflammatory chemokines/cytokines, as well as their activating regulators such as IL-6, TNF $\alpha$  and NF- $\kappa$ B (Degens, 2010; Merritt et al., 2013; Peake et al., 2010; Schaap et al., 2006). Notably, both innate and adaptive immune cells are privileged in promoting muscle regeneration after injury (Arnold et al., 2007; Burzyn et al., 2013; Heredia et al., 2013; Ziemkiewicz et al., 2021). During aging, however, due to adipose infiltration and fibrosis in the extramyofibril matrix (Dennison et al., 2017; Kalinkovich and Livshits, 2017), as well as muscle cell disturbance (Wang et al., 2018d), myeloid cells (Wang et al., 2018d), especially macrophages (Chazaud, 2020; Wynn and Barron, 2010) and T cells (Kuswanto et al., 2016), exhibit prolonged and altered immune defense, ultimately leading to chronic inflammation and muscle fibrosis.

While plenty of elaborate mechanisms have been revealed towards understanding the cellular aging of muscle, it is still a narrow horizon for capturing the overall hallmarks. In the past ten years, the advanced single-cell transcriptomics analyses have enabled systemically dissecting and monitoring all cell type heterogeneity and their aging dynamics both in human (Barruet et al., 2020; De Micheli et al., 2020; Perez et al., 2022; Rubenstein et al., 2020) and model organisms (Dos Santos et al., 2020; Jing et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2020b; Petraný et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022d). With mammalian aging, skeletal muscle exhibits decrease in MuSCs, Schwann

cells, and vascular cells but infiltration of various immune cells and fibroblasts (Kedlian et al., 2022), in parallel with physiological dysfunction and chronic inflammation. In addition, together with spatial transcriptomics (Wang et al., 2022f), new hallmarks of muscle aging driven by pro-inflammatory cytokines such as CCL2 (Kedlian et al., 2022; Moiseeva et al., 2023) may be defined.

#### *Molecular changes*

Numerous molecular changes have been uncovered during skeletal muscle aging, gaining mechanistic insights into the functional decline of MuSCs in their regenerative potential and ability to give rise to differentiated myocytes, as well as the decreased myofiber size resulting from the imbalance between anabolism and catabolism of muscular proteins. Elucidation of the molecular signatures of these dynamic processes may provide representative molecular biomarkers that can more accurately trace and monitor the progression of muscle aging.

MuSCs comprise a heterogeneous population. Specific subpopulations of MuSCs selectively decrease or increase during aging. It was reported that the Pax7<sup>Hi</sup> subpopulation of MuSCs is dramatically reduced in aged mice. Mechanistically, myofiber-secreted granulocyte colony-stimulating factor (G-CSF) is decreased during aging, which in turn compromises the asymmetric division of MuSCs and leads to the loss of the Pax7<sup>Hi</sup> subpopulation (Li et al., 2019c). A CD47<sup>Hi</sup> subpopulation of MuSCs has also been identified, which is increased in aged mice and found to impair muscle regeneration via thrombospondin-1/CD47 signaling (Kania et al., 1995; Porpiglia et al., 2022). Except for the subpopulation changes, MuSC quiescence is generally disrupted, and their self-renewal capabilities are remarkably compromised during aging. Active p16<sup>INK4a</sup>/Rb axis in aging switches MuSCs from a reversible quiescent state into an irreversible cell cycle arrest (Sousa-Victor et al., 2014). The increased epigenetic marker H3K27me3 in aging might contribute to the disruption of MuSC quiescence (Liu et al., 2013). The elevated level of FGF2 produced by aged myofibers was shown to induce quiescent MuSCs into active cell division, which is responsible for reducing MuSC quiescence in homeostatic conditions and results in a state of persistent activation, leading to MuSC pool depletion (Chakkalakal et al., 2012). Notch signaling downregulated in aged MuSCs can stimulate their spontaneous differentiation and result in the depletion of MuSCs from the stem cell pool (Bjornson et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2018b).

Myofiber atrophy occurs during aging as a result of decreased anabolism and increased catabolism of proteins (Fealy et al., 2021). The ubiquitin proteasome system is one of the major pathways that regulate muscle protein degradation, and it plays a central role in controlling myofiber size by elevating protein catabolism via induced expression of mus-

cle specific E3 ubiquitin ligase TRIM63 (MuRF1) and F-box protein 32 (Fbxo32) with advanced age (Gumucio and Mendias, 2013). Dkk3 was reported to induce nuclear import of  $\beta$ -catenin and enhance its interaction with FoxO3, which in turn activates the transcription of E3 ubiquitin ligases Fbxo32 and Trim63, thereby driving muscle atrophy (Yin et al., 2018). Muscle contraction-induced apelin, a so-called exercise, was shown to promote mitochondrial biogenesis and protein synthesis via activating AMPK, AKT and p70S6K in aged myofibers (Vinel et al., 2018). In addition, inhibition of 15-PGDH, a prostaglandin-degrading enzyme, leads to alterations in multiple pathways to improve aged muscle functions, including decreased proteolysis (Palla et al., 2021).

Because skeletal muscle tissue comprises multiple cell types and a complex extracellular matrix, many aging-related changes have been found to impact the MuSC crosstalk with the muscle niche. Among these, aging impairs the function of FAPs in mice. Decreased WISPI secretion by FAPs significantly affects MuSC expansion during muscle regeneration (Lukjanenko et al., 2019). The reduced extracellular matrix component fibronectin contributes to the loss of adhesion with MuSCs during aging, eliciting detrimental consequences for the function and maintenance of the MuSC pool (Lukjanenko et al., 2016). Decreased Sprouty1 expression also disrupts MuSC quiescence (Chakkalakal et al., 2012). Given the chronic inflammatory state of aging muscle, it would be of great significance to unravel age-related molecular signatures of intramuscular immune cells (Duggal et al., 2019), providing novel immunosenescence biomarkers for muscle aging. In addition, further in-depth investigations of cellular organelle stress responses, such as the UPR, in the regulation of age-dependent proteostasis and muscle regeneration (Cai et al., 2022d; He et al., 2021; Kaushik and Cuervo, 2015) may provide more valuable molecular biomarkers of muscle aging.

#### *Secretory factors detectable in biofluids*

Skeletal muscle is a secretory organ that secretes various hormone-like molecules called myokines (Whitham and Febbraio, 2016). Myokines are important for skeletal muscle health and can be potential biomarkers for muscle aging. Apelin, an exercise-induced myokine that is a ligand of the G-protein-coupled receptor APJ, has been observed to be lower in the skeletal muscle of old mice and elderly human serum (Alizadeh Pahlavani, 2022; Rai et al., 2017). Furthermore, several other myokines have been found to be decreased in the serum of elderly human subjects compared to young adults, including Sestrin1/Sestrin2 (Kwon et al., 2020; Rai et al., 2018), IGF-1 (Bando et al., 1991; Haden et al., 2000), Irisin (Huh et al., 2014; Miyamoto-Mikami et al., 2015) and VEGF (Ryan et al., 2006). Interestingly, higher serum levels of IL-6 (Haden et al., 2000; Hager et al., 1994; Palmeri et al., 2012; Wei et al., 1992) and Myostatin (Yar-

asheski et al., 2002) have been found in elderly human subjects, while higher serum levels of leptin have been observed in old rats (Mooradian and Chehade, 2000). All these myokines might be potential biofluid markers for muscular disorders associated with skeletal muscle aging.

Potential molecular biomarkers of sarcopenia have also been identified in the blood of older adults and sarcopenic patients. These include IL-15 (Yalcin et al., 2018), IL-6 (Rong et al., 2018; Rossi et al., 2019; Schaap et al., 2006; Volpato et al., 2014), CRP (Schaap et al., 2006; Volpato et al., 2014), Myostatin (Yarasheski et al., 2002), IL-10 (Rong et al., 2018), IL-18 (Li et al., 2019a), TNF- $\alpha$  (Volpato et al., 2014) and Leptin (Li et al., 2019a), which exhibit higher serum levels. Conversely, lower serum levels of MMP9 (Suzan et al., 2021), Irisin (Chang et al., 2017), IGF-1 (Naranjo et al., 2017; Volpato et al., 2014) and FGF21 (Li et al., 2019a) have been observed in sarcopenia patients.

#### *Summary and perspectives*

Prospectively, the integration of advanced single-cell genomics with mechanistic studies would provide broader avenues to identify molecular and cellular biomarkers in studying muscle aging and related diseases, paving the way to pre-clinical applications for healthy muscle aging. Facilitated by multi-omics approaches and lifestyle interventions like exercise, more extensive and careful investigations will be required to search for more aging-related biomarkers in body fluids, including not only myokines/cytokines, but also short peptides, small-molecule metabolites, or other entities. Ultimately, this will enable us to pinpoint genuine biomarkers from blood, urine, or muscle tissues, which can be collectively employed to accurately monitor the aging states of skeletal muscle for future translational applications.

#### **Liver aging**

##### *Physiological characteristics*

Similar to other organs, the liver undergoes a series of degenerative changes, including morphological structure and function, as the body ages (Maeso-Diaz and Gracia-Sancho, 2020; Sheedfar et al., 2013). The physiological features of aging include reduced liver volume, decreased perfusion, and functional atrophy (Wang, 2021). The relationship between the liver and aging was first explored by Popper in 1986, who reported that the typical features of the aged liver are browning and atrophy, mainly due to lipofuscin accumulation in hepatocytes (Popper, 1986). Wynne et al. (1989) recruited 65 subjects between the ages of 24 and 91 years and found that age was negatively correlated with liver volume, apparent liver blood flow, and liver perfusion. Morphologically, the livers of older people are not smaller than those of younger people. Instead, older people have fewer and larger hepatocytes (Wakabayashi et al., 2002; Watanabe and Ta-



naka, 1982). It has been reported that in healthy aged animal livers, a slight alteration in the hepatic sinusoidal cell phenotype causes a moderate increase in hepatic vascular resistance and thus reduces effective hepatic perfusion (Wakabayashi et al., 2002). Although the liver in elderly individuals exhibits some morphological changes, unlike other organs that age, the liver still exhibits normal functional reserve (Anantharaju et al., 2002; Kitani, 1992). However, the liver's regenerative capacity is significantly reduced in elderly individuals compared to young individuals (Furrer et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2018a; Pibiri, 2018). In addition, macrophage accumulation is reported in the normally aging liver (Blommer and Moyer, 2021; Mohammed et al., 2021). Aging-related impairment of macrophage autophagy leads to proinflammatory cytokines, especially IL-6, which may be associated with age-related physiological dysfunction (Blommer and Moyer, 2021). In addition, the expression of necrosis markers in hepatocytes and hepatic macrophages of senescent mice increases along with elevated levels of proinflammatory factors, whereas necrostatin-1s treatment decreases the expression of proinflammatory factors and slows cellular senescence in hepatic macrophages of senescent mice (Mohammed et al., 2021). Additionally, chronic liver inflammation drives liver fibrosis, and total collagen content, a marker of fibrosis severity, is significantly increased in the livers of aging mice relative to young mice (Mohammed et al., 2021; Noureddin et al., 2013; Shen et al., 2022). There is no doubt that aging not only predisposes patients to the development of liver fibrosis but also increases the risk of poor prognosis in various liver diseases and leads to increased mortality (Floreani, 2007; Mahrouf-Yorgov et al., 2011; Sheedfar et al., 2013) (Figure 16; Table S11 in Supporting Information).

#### Imaging traits

Autopsy studies show that aging is often accompanied by a decrease in liver weight, and this is confirmed by *in vivo* imaging studies (Meier et al., 2007; Tauchi et al., 1994; Wakabayashi et al., 2002). As determined by an ultrasound technique, compared to younger people, older adults have approximately 20%–40% less liver volume and 35%–50% less blood flow (Vollmar et al., 2002; Wynne et al., 1989). Wynne et al. (1989) selected 65 healthy volunteers aged 24–91 years to study age-related changes in liver volume and found a significant negative correlation between liver volume and age, with liver volumes of approximately  $23.6 \text{ mm}^3 \text{ kg}^{-1}$  body weight at age 24 years and approximately  $14.0 \text{ mm}^3 \text{ kg}^{-1}$  body weight at age 91 years. Pulsed echo Doppler showed a significant decrease in portal blood flow in elderly subjects (especially those  $\geq 75$  years old) (Wang, 2021). Zoli et al. (1999) selected healthy subjects of different ages to measure total hepatic flow (THF) and functional hepatic flow (FHF) by Doppler ultrasound and

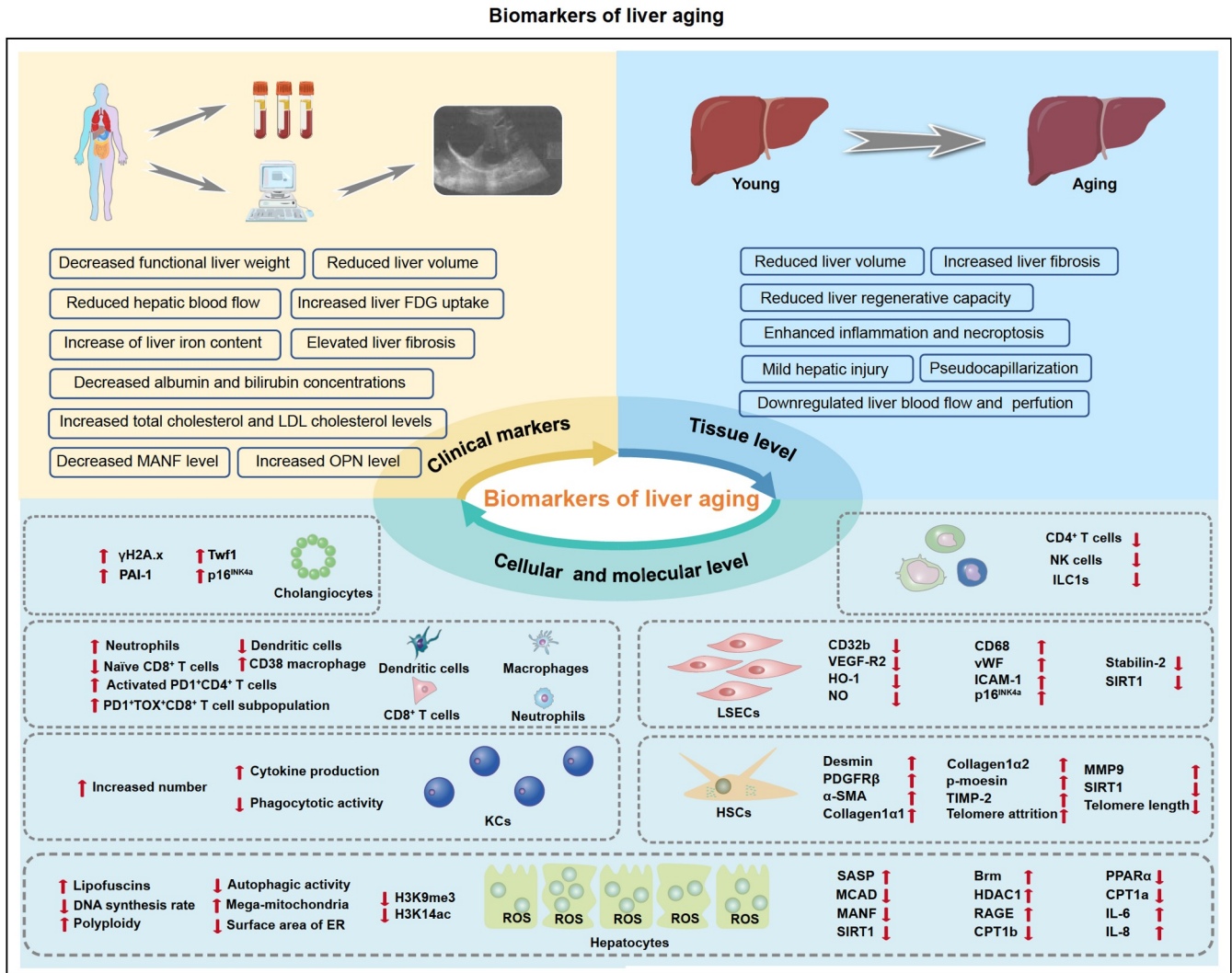
showed that THF and FHF were significantly negatively correlated with age, especially after 75 years. In addition,  $^{18}\text{F}$ -FDG PET imaging has shown that liver FDG uptake increases with aging (Cao et al., 2021b; Wang, 2021). However, the reason for increased FDG uptake in the liver of elderly individuals has not been fully elucidated, which may be due to cumulative inflammatory changes in the liver caused by the long-term handling of various toxins (Cao et al., 2021b; Keramida and Peters, 2020; Wang, 2021). In both men and women, MRI T2\* imaging shows that age is also associated with hepatic iron overload (Wang, 2021). Liver iron levels continue to increase until the age of 40 compared to adolescents, while from 40–70, liver iron levels remain stable or increase mildly (Sheng et al., 2020; Wang, 2021; Zacharski et al., 2000). However, the relationship between lipid accumulation in hepatocytes and aging is controversial. For instance, it has been reported that the lipid droplet content in hepatocytes is significantly higher in elderly individuals than in young individuals, leading to excessive steatosis and fibrosis, which in turn inhibit liver function (Chen et al., 2020a; Kuk et al., 2009). In contrast, Bedogni et al. (2005) showed an inverse relationship between age and fatty liver. Instead, liver fat accumulation appears to be more associated with obesity than age (Bedogni et al., 2005; Fan et al., 2005).

#### Histologic features

Although studies in general found preserved tissue architecture in aged livers (Jansen, 2002; Popper, 1986), features suggesting mild hepatic injury were observed in aged rats, including cytoplasmic vacuolation, nuclear pyknosis, cytoplasmic hypereosinophilia, diminished intercellular borders, and increased lipid accumulation (Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018).

Importantly, ultrastructural analysis of aged livers has revealed the most significant structural changes in the sinusoidal endothelium, which have been broadly documented in mice, rats, nonhuman primates, and humans (Cogger et al., 2014; Cogger et al., 2003; Ito et al., 2007; Le Couteur et al., 2001; Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2003; Warren et al., 2005). The change in the sinusoidal endothelium is generally referred to as “pseudocapillarized”, characterized by a reduction in the number and porosity of fenestrations, endothelium thickening, and deposition of perisinusoidal basal lamina and collagen. Pseudocapillarization consequently reduces the vasodilatory and angiocrine capacity of the sinusoidal endothelium, leading to increased hepatic vascular resistance and portal venous pressure. In addition, both secretion of von Willebrand factor (vWF) and expression of ICAM-1 are elevated in sinusoidal cells, resulting in the recruitment of more neutrophils and  $\text{CD68}^+$  macrophages in the sinusoidal area (Ito et al., 2007; Licastro et al., 2005; Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018; Miyachi et al., 2017).

Liver endothelium fenestrations are important portals for



**Figure 16** Biomarkers of liver aging. Abbreviations:  $\alpha$ -SMA, actin alpha 2, smooth muscle, aorta; CD32b, Fc gamma receptor IIb; CPT1a, carnitine palmitoyltransferase 1A; H3K9me3, histone 3 Lys-9 trimethylation; H3K14ac, histone 3 lysine 14 acetylation; HDAC1, histone deacetylase 1; HO-1, heme oxygenase 1; MCAD, cadherin 15; OPN, steopontin; PDGFR $\beta$ , platelet derived growth factor receptor beta; PPAR $\alpha$ , peroxisome proliferator activated receptor alpha; TIMP-2, TIMP metalloproteinase inhibitor 2; Twf1, Twinfilin-1; VEGF-R2, vascular endothelial growth factor receptor 2.

the uptake of lipoproteins, insulin, and carbohydrates. Loss of fenestrations in the aged liver can cause hyperlipidemia (e.g., increased plasma cholesterol and low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol) and hepatic insulin resistance (Maeso-Diaz et al., 2018; Mohamad et al., 2016), rendering a high susceptibility to cardiometabolic disease. In addition, aged hepatic endothelium is also the major reason for significantly worse effects after acute liver damage in comparison to young endothelium (Hide et al., 2020). These studies together highlight the vulnerability of liver sinusoidal cells to aging.

#### Cellular alterations

Liver tissue comprises several cell types, including hepatocytes, liver sinusoidal endothelial cells (LSECs), hepatic stellate cells (HSCs), and immune cells. The relative number

of hepatocytes is decreased in aged liver, whereas polyploidy hepatocytes increase from less than 15% to approximately 42% (Kudryavtsev et al., 1993). Morphologically, in aged hepatocytes, the surface area of the endoplasmic reticulum is markedly reduced, which correlates with a decline in hepatic microsomal protein synthesis activity (Schmucker et al., 1990). In addition, mitochondria appear enlarged (“mega-mitochondria”) with age-associated structural changes in the cristae and inner membrane (Sastre et al., 1996), accompanied by a reduced number and decreased function of mitochondria in hepatocytes (Daum et al., 2013; Hagen et al., 1997; Navarro and Boveris, 2004). Autophagic activity is also significantly impaired in aged hepatocytes (Uddin et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2013), resulting in elevated levels of protein misfolding, loss of proteostasis (Schneider et al., 2015; Zhang and Cuervo, 2008), and consequently, the formation

of protein aggregates such as lipofuscins (Le Couteur et al., 2001; Swanlund et al., 2008).

Aged hepatocytes also have reduced rates of DNA synthesis and repair, displaying higher genomic instability (Basso et al., 1998). Consistently, senescent hepatocytes increase with age (Aravinthan and Alexander, 2016) and have more lipid accumulation and production of reactive oxygen species (Basso et al., 1998; Ogrodnik et al., 2017). In addition, senescent hepatocytes release cytokines such as IL-6, TNF $\alpha$ , and IL-8, contributing to age-associated inflammation (Lasry and Ben-Neriah, 2015).

As mentioned above, due to the pseudocapillarization of the sinusoidal endothelium in aged livers, aged LSECs are dedifferentiated with less vasodilatory and angiocrine capacity, as evidenced by reduced NO bioavailability; decreased levels of cyclic guanosine monophosphate; and reduced expression of endothelial NO synthase protein, heme oxygenase-1, and several angiocrine receptors (stabilin-2, CD32b, and VEGF-R2) (Ito et al., 2007; Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018). In addition, aged LSECs exhibit a moderately proinflammatory state with increased CD68-positive cells and secretion of vWF and ICAM-1 (Ito et al., 2007; Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018). Some LSECs also become senescent with upregulation of p16<sup>INK4a</sup> and downregulation of SIRT1 (Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018). Interestingly, as the main carriers of the mannose receptor (MRC1) in the liver, the number of Mrc1-expressing LSECs increases with age, suggesting age-associated changes in the tissue immune response carried out by LSECs (Tabula Muris, 2020).

The number of HSCs in the aged liver is increased, as evidenced by enhanced desmin expression and a significant increase in the proliferative HSC-related growth factor PDGFR $\beta$  (Warren et al., 2011). In addition, aged HSCs display a moderately activated status, with increases in the expression of different activation markers, including  $\alpha$ -SMA, collagen1 $\alpha$ 1, collagen1 $\alpha$ 2, and p-moesin, as well as changes in matrix remodeling genes, such as TIMP-2 and MMP9 (Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018). In contrast to HSC activation in liver diseases, HSC activation in aged livers is accompanied by an increased number and size of intracellular lipid droplets (Warren et al., 2011). Moreover, aged HSCs also have elevated patatin-like phospholipase domain-containing protein 3 and decreased cellular retinol-binding protein I expression, suggesting alterations in vitamin A metabolism (Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018). Some HSCs also become senescent, with telomere attrition in aged human liver tissues being reported (Verma et al., 2012).

Aging is also associated with significant alterations in immune cells. The number of liver Kupffer cells (KCs) increases with aging, and these cells display a basally activated status (Hilmer et al., 2007). These aged KCs show deficits in mitochondrial function (Salminen et al., 2012a), reduced phagocytotic activity, and increased cytokine production

(Hilmer et al., 2007; Linehan et al., 2014; Partridge et al., 2018). In addition, aged KCs in elderly rodent livers exhibit a redistribution into the lymphoid collections (Singh et al., 2008; Stahl et al., 2018). Interestingly, proinflammatory M1-like macrophages accumulate in aged livers, together with high expression of the NAD-consuming enzyme CD38, which can be induced by the inflammatory cytokines secreted by senescent cells in aged tissues (Chini et al., 2020; Covarrubias et al., 2020). Additionally, the number of neutrophils is increased in the aged liver, whereas the number of dendritic cells is decreased (Mogilenko et al., 2021).

The abundance of naïve CD8<sup>+</sup> T cells is decreased; however, there exists a distinct age-associated PD1<sup>+</sup>TOX<sup>+</sup> CD8<sup>+</sup> T-cell subpopulation across multiple tissues in aging, including the liver. These age-associated CD8<sup>+</sup> T cells constitute up to 60% of all CD8<sup>+</sup> T cells in these tissues, which exhibit a T-cell exhaustion phenotype (Blank et al., 2019) and produce a distinct set of proinflammatory cytokines upon TCR stimulation (Mogilenko et al., 2021). Activated PD1<sup>+</sup>CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells also accumulate in the aged liver. However, both NK cells and group 1 innate lymphoid cells (ILC1s) are reduced in abundance in the aged liver (Mogilenko et al., 2021). Remarkably, communications between endothelial cells and various immune cell types (e.g., macrophages and T cells) are significantly altered in the aged liver (Ma et al., 2020), another indication of the importance of endothelial cells in the age-associated immune response.

### *Molecular changes*

Hepatocytes are parenchymal cells that can comprise up to 70%–80% of the liver's total mass and are responsible for the majority of hepatic functions. With aging, there are various molecular alterations that occur in hepatocytes. Increased expression of markers commonly associated with cellular senescence, such as SA- $\beta$ -gal activity, and p21<sup>CIP1</sup>, p16<sup>INK4a</sup>, and  $\gamma$ -H2AX, have been observed in aging hepatocytes (Irvine et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014b), accompanied with the occurrence of SASP (Irvine et al., 2014). Studies of the aging phenotype have revealed several significant epigenetic changes involving liver pathophysiology. One such change is the increased expression of chromatin remodeling proteins Brm and HDAC1, which constitute the C/EBP $\alpha$ -Brm or HDAC1-C/EBP $\alpha$ -Brm complex with C/EBP $\alpha$ . The complex occupies and silences E2F-dependent promoters, leading to an age-dependent loss of liver regenerative potential (Iakova et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2008). In contrast with the upregulation of Brm and HDAC1, SIRT1 is downregulated in aging hepatocytes, potentially leading to aggravated alcoholic liver injury in older mice (Gong et al., 2014; Ramirez et al., 2017). A hepatic bivalent combination, marked as an H3K9me3/H3K14ac modification, was also found to be decreased in aging hepatocytes (Price et al., 2020). In addi-

tion, high circadian global protein acetylation was found to be lost in aged hepatocytes, while caloric restriction could rescue this aging-dependent decline by upregulating the NAD<sup>+</sup>-SIRT1-AceCS1 pathway (Sato et al., 2017). In addition to the molecular changes at the epigenetic level, aging is generally accompanied by deregulated metabolic function, such as hepatic steatosis. Aging induces an aberrant advanced glycation end product receptor (RAGE)/PPAR $\alpha$  axis in hepatocytes, which includes the upregulation of RAGE and downregulation of the fatty acid  $\beta$ -oxidation genes PPAR $\alpha$ , carnitine palmitoyltransferase 1A (CPT1a), CPT1b, and Medium chain acyl-CoA dehydrogenase (MCAD), eventually leading to aging-associated hepatosteatosis (Wan et al., 2020). Moreover, a recent study also identified mesencephalic-astrocyte-derived neurotrophic factor (MANF) as experiencing aging correlated decline in flies, mice, and humans, while reduced expression in hepatocytes is associated with hepatosteatosis. Liver rejuvenation by heterochronic parabiosis in mice is dependent on MANF, whereas MANF supplementation ameliorates several hallmarks of liver aging, prevents diet-induced hepatosteatosis, and improves aging-related metabolic dysfunction (Sousa-Victor et al., 2019).

Compared with studies involving molecular changes in liver parenchymal cells, relatively little is known about the aging-related molecular alterations in liver nonparenchymal cells, such as LSECs, KCs, HSCs, and cholangiocytes. Aging results in the downregulation of the eNOS-NO-cGMP vasodilatory pathway, together with reduced angiocrine and antioxidant molecules (Stabilin-2, CD32b, VEGF-R2, HGF, Wnt2, and HO-1) in LSECs (Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018). A recent study suggests that there is an increased population of immune checkpoint protein programmed death-ligand 1 (PD-L1<sup>+</sup>) cells in LSECs from aged mice, and PD-L1 expression correlates with higher levels of SASP (Wang et al., 2022d). Similarly, aging also affects HSCs in that increased expression of HSC activation markers, such as  $\alpha$ -SMA, collagen1 $\alpha$ 1, collagen1 $\alpha$ 2, PDGFR $\beta$ , phosphorylated moesin, desmin, TIMP-2 and MMP9, has been described in aged rats (Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018). A study analyzing the lengths of telomeres in human donors demonstrated that age-related telomere length decrease is restricted to HSCs and KCs, while aging cholangiocytes and hepatocytes are able to resist telomere shortening (Verma et al., 2012). In addition to the decreased expression of SIRT1 in aging hepatocytes, the downregulation of SIRT1 is also present in the HSCs of older livers, which contributes to age-related alcoholic liver injury and fibrosis (Ramirez et al., 2017). Few studies have reported aging-related molecular changes in KCs. In addition to age-related telomere shortening in the KCs of the human liver (Wan et al., 2020), a recent study revealed an increase in the RNA expression of the inflammatory cytokine IL-6 in KCs of older rats. However, there were no age-related

changes in the expression of other KC markers, including TNF $\alpha$ , Mrc1, Arg1, and IL-10 (Wang et al., 2008). The aging of cholangiocytes is generally seen in primary biliary cholangitis, primary sclerosing cholangitis, and other chronic liver diseases (Ferreira-Gonzalez et al., 2021). Aging cholangiocytes are characterized by increased expression of senescence markers (p16<sup>INK4a</sup> and  $\gamma$ H2A.x), and SASP (IL6, IL8, CCL2, and PAI-1 secretion) (Tabibian et al., 2014). Twinfilin-1 (Twf1) is a cytosolic protein sequestering large amounts of actin monomers, which has recently been identified as a target of age-related microRNAs (miR-1a, miR-20a and miR30e) and is thus a mediator of the aging process in cholangiocytes (Maroni et al., 2019).

#### *Secretory factors detectable in biofluids*

Aging, at the serum level, is associated with a slight decrease in albumin and bilirubin concentrations and no or minimal changes in aminotransferase levels. The metabolism of cholesterol in the liver also decreases, leading to overall increases in total blood cholesterol and LDL cholesterol levels over time (Maeso-Díaz et al., 2018; Tietz et al., 1992). Recent investigations have also suggested that serum levels of osteopontin (OPN), a senescence-associated secretory phenotype factor, are elevated while, in contrast, serum MANF levels decline with liver aging (Gómez-Santos et al., 2020; Sousa-Victor et al., 2019).

### **Kidney aging**

#### *Physiological characteristics*

(1) Functional changes. Renal function, shown as glomerular filtration rate (GFR), decreases progressively with age. A systematic review of 9 cross-sectional studies and 3 cohort studies found that in healthy individuals, the average annual decrease in estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) ranged from 0.4 to 2.6 mL min<sup>-1</sup> (Bolognani et al., 2014). After age 35, GFR declines by approximately 5%–10% per decade (Schmitt and Melk, 2017). Age-related decline in renal function may result in impaired renal functional reserve in the elderly, thereby increases susceptibility to acute kidney injury (AKI) (James et al., 2010) and chronic kidney disease (CKD) (Nitta et al., 2013).

In addition, the concentrating and diluting function of the renal tubules decreases during renal aging (O'Sullivan et al., 2017). It was found that the maximum urinary osmolality decreased by approximately 20% in the 60–79 age group compared to the 20–39 age group (Rowe et al., 1976). At the same time, the ability of aging kidneys to reabsorb sodium and excrete potassium is significantly reduced, leading to a predisposition to water-electrolyte disorders in the elderly (McGreevy et al., 2008; Mimran et al., 1992).

(2) Structural changes. On the macroscopic scale, renal aging manifests as increased volume, surface roughness,

focal scarring, and the appearance of simple renal cysts (Hommos et al., 2017). A study that evaluated kidney volume by MRI in 1,852 adults prior to kidney donation found that kidney volume decreased by approximately 16 cm<sup>3</sup> per decade after age 60 years (Roseman et al., 2017). In addition, Wang et al. (2014c) evaluated 1,344 potential kidney donors by contrast-enhanced CT imaging and found that cortical volume gradually decreased with age, while medullary volume increased before age 50 and gradually decreased after age 50. It was also found that the decrease in renal cortical volume was associated with an age-related decrease in GFR.

#### *Histologic features and cellular alterations*

The most prominent histologic change in the aging kidney is nephrosclerosis which is defined as the presence of two or more of the following histologic changes: glomerulosclerosis, tubular atrophy, interstitial fibrosis >5%, and arteriosclerosis. The prevalence of nephrosclerosis increases from 2.7% in patients aged 18–29 years to 73% in patients aged 70–77 years (Rule et al., 2010).

(1) Glomerulosclerosis. Aging causes glomerulosclerosis, which is often accompanied by enlargement of the surrounding glomeruli. A study of healthy kidney donors showed that the oldest age group, 70–75 years, had a 48% decrease in the number of non-sclerotic glomeruli compared to the youngest subgroup, 18–29 years (Denic et al., 2017).

Podocyte loss is a major determinant of glomerulosclerosis. A study of 89 normal kidney samples found that podocyte nuclear density decreased with age (Hodgin et al., 2015). Podocytes are terminally differentiated cells and no longer renewed during aging. Therefore, the loss of senescent podocytes is often accompanied by hypertrophy of the adjacent podocytes (Wang et al., 2014c). The hypertrophy of the remaining glomeruli eventually causes podocyte detachment, and overall glomerulosclerosis (Schmitt and Melk, 2017).

(2) Renal tubular atrophy and interstitial fibrosis. Studies of age-related morphologic changes in renal tubules have shown a decrease in the number of tubules, a decrease in tubular volume, and an increase in tubular atrophy with increasing age (Martin and Sheaff, 2007). The atrophy of renal tubules is accompanied by a marked increase in interstitial fibrosis. Proteomic analysis revealed age-related increases in the structural components of the interstitium, such as collagen VI, fibrillin-1 and fibronectin, and the matrix regulators TIMP3 and ADAMTS5. Moreover, alterations in interstitial composition preceded the apparent structural changes (Randles et al., 2021).

(3) Arteriosclerosis and sparse capillaries. Arterial changes in the aging kidney include small arteriosclerosis, fibrous intimal hyperplasia, and hyaline small arteriosclerosis (Martin and Sheaff, 2007). 3D reconstruction techniques

reveal marked intimal thickening and narrowing of the interlobular artery veins accompanied by sclerotic glomeruli in aging kidneys (Uesugi et al., 2016). In addition, the number of peritubular capillaries decreases during renal aging (Uesugi et al., 2016), which may be due to a decrease in pericytes (Stefanska et al., 2015). Studies related to CKD have found a strong relationship between peritubular capillary thinning and tubular atrophy and interstitial fibrosis (Kida et al., 2014). However, a causal relationship between these two has not been established.

#### *Molecular changes*

Overall, the biology of kidney aging is complex, involving diverse changes to cells, tissues, organs, and the surrounding microenvironment. We will focus on the molecular changes of the cellular senescence, autophagy, and inflammation during kidney aging, but the readers should appreciate that this list is not exhaustive.

(1) Cellular senescence. Renal functional recovery after AKI is significantly worse in elderly patients. This decreased regenerative potential, which is a hallmark of the aging process, may be caused by cellular senescence. Halloran et al. (1999) hypothesize that the accumulation of senescent cells may be responsible for the insufficient repair capacity and functional loss in older kidneys. In support, recent study showed that constant removal of senescent cells attenuated age-related deterioration of renal function and glomerulosclerosis (Baker et al., 2016). Accumulation of senescent cells could also explain the increased prevalence of kidney diseases with aging. As comprehensively reviewed by Huang et al., the cellular senescence of virtually all renal cell types is involved in the pathogenesis of AKI and CKD (Huang et al., 2022c).

The common molecular changes of cellular senescence have also been identified in aging kidney, including upregulation of cell-cycle inhibitors (including p16<sup>INK4a</sup>, p21<sup>CIP1</sup> and p53), SA-β-gal activity, telomere shortening, and SASP. Klotho is an aging intervention protein that is highly expressed in kidney tubular epithelia, and plays a role in phosphate hemostasis with implications for vascular calcification, hypoxia, cellular regeneration, and senescence (Mencke et al., 2017). Downregulation of α-Klotho is specific for kidney aging. Klotho knockout mice show arteriosclerosis and vascular changes as part of their aging phenotype (Kuro-o et al., 1997). Thus, developing reliable assays to monitor Klotho levels may help to predict the decline of renal function and the progression of CKD.

(2) Autophagy. Autophagy has been intensively studied in aging and in different disease models in the kidney (Lenoir et al., 2016). It was suggested that because of their longevity, podocytes, as well as tubular cells, might be particularly dependent on autophagy for effective “self-cleaning” from protein aggregates and defective organelles during the life-

span. Indeed, podocytes show a high rate of baseline autophagy; and podocyte-specific deletion of Atg5, a key component of the autophagy machinery, triggered an aging phenotype with accumulation of lipofuscin, oxidized proteins, and sequestosome 1-positive protein aggregates (Hartleben et al., 2010). Similar observations have been made when Atg5 was selectively ablated in tubular cells, resulting in impaired kidney function with a pro-aging phenotype (Liu et al., 2012a). Based on these data, age-associated disturbance of normal autophagy in podocytes or tubular cells would be expected to act as a pro-aging mechanism (Denic et al., 2016).

(3) Inflammation. Aging is associated with a subclinical systemic chronic inflammatory status called inflammaging (Franceschi et al., 2018), one of the most important traits of immunosenescence as reviewed everywhere (Sato and Yanagita, 2019). Immunosenescence involves a series of aging-induced alterations in the immune system and is characterized by two opposing hallmarks: defective immune responses and increased systemic inflammation. In the kidney, resident macrophages and fibroblasts are continuously exposed to components of the external environment, and the effects of cellular reprogramming induced by local immune responses, which accumulate with age, might have a role in the increased susceptibility to kidney disease among elderly individuals. Immunosenescence might be the mechanism of increased susceptibility to various kidney diseases (Couser, 2017; Jennette and Nachman, 2017) in the elderly.

#### *Secretory factors detectable in biofluids*

For over 70 years, eGFR has remained the primary index for detection and monitoring renal function. However, it does not accurately reflect renal tubular and interstitial lesions (Ix and Shlipak, 2021), and is not sensitive enough for identifying early-stage injury (Yan et al., 2021). Therefore, researchers have been working to find more early, comprehensive, and non-invasive biomarkers to reflect the extent of tubulointerstitial fibrosis and the progression of renal dysfunction. The following discussion will describe some of the biomarkers found so far.

(1) Tubule Injury and dysfunction markers. Tubular injury/atrophy is a very important aspect in the aging process of the kidney. Several biomarkers have been found to assess tubular injury. Kidney injury molecule-1 (KIM-1), a transmembrane glycoprotein released into the urine by injured proximal tubular cells (Han et al., 2002). It was found that urinary KIM-1 levels were positively correlated with decreased eGFR and histological changes of interstitial fibrosis and tubular atrophy (Malhotra et al., 2020). Studies in patients with diabetes have found that plasma KIM-1 is associated with progression of diabetic nephropathy and poor renal outcomes (Coca et al., 2017; Gutiérrez et al., 2022).  $\alpha$ -1 microglobulin (AIM) is a low molecular weight protein

freely filtered at the glomerulus and reabsorbed by proximal tubular epithelial cells (Åkerström et al., 2000; Weber and Verwiebe, 1992). Elevated urinary AIM was associated with decreased eGFR, the degree of interstitial fibrosis and tubular atrophy in patients with drug-induced interstitial nephritis and renal transplant recipients (Amer et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2010). In addition to proximal tubules, there are corresponding biomarkers for other types of renal tubules. Uromodulin (UMOD), produced exclusively in the thick ascending limb, is a biomarker of kidney tubular health. A prospective study looking at 2,652 patients with CKD found that lower serum urinary regulatory protein levels were independently associated with a higher risk of developing ESKD, even after adjustment for baseline eGFR, which remained significant (Lv et al., 2018). Meanwhile, urinary UMOD levels were negatively associated with the rate of decline in eGFR and the risk of eventual progression to CKD in patients after AKI (Puthumana et al., 2021). A novel marker of distal tubular function is epidermal growth factor (EGF), which is selectively expressed in distal renal tubular cells and critical for cell differentiation and regeneration in the repair process after renal tubular injury (Gesualdo et al., 1996; Lechner et al., 2007). The amount of EGF protein in urine (uEGF) showed significant correlation with interstitial fibrosis/tubular atrophy, eGFR, and rate of eGFR loss (Ju et al., 2015; Torres et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2020a). Addition of uEGF to standard clinical parameters improved the prediction of disease events in diverse CKD populations (Ju et al., 2015). Noteworthy, lower uEGF levels are associated with increased risk of rapid eGFR loss and incident of CKD in the general population (Norvik et al., 2021).

MMP-7, a secreted zinc- and calcium-dependent endopeptidase (Tan and Liu, 2012), has been reported to be involved in renal tubular injury as well as interstitial fibrosis through the activation of  $\beta$ -catenin signaling. It was found that urinary MMP-7 levels in CKD patients were strongly correlated with renal fibrosis scores (Zhou et al., 2017). Also, studies in patients with IgA nephropathy (IgAN) and diabetic nephropathy have found that circulating MMP-7 levels are strongly associated with GFR loss and renal interstitial fibrosis (Ihara et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2017a). Additionally, Wang et al. (2017a) have discovered that urinary fibrinogen levels are significantly elevated in patients with proteinuric nephropathy. Higher urinary fibrinogen levels are associated with more severe interstitial fibrosis and renal tubular atrophy in patients. For the prediction of new-onset end-stage renal disease (ESRD), the addition of urinary fibrinogen to the traditional combination of urinary protein, blood pressure and baseline eGFR increased the area under the receiver operating curve from 0.73 to 0.76.

(2) Inflammatory biomarkers. Many inflammation-associated biomarkers in the circulation are also strongly associated with renal dysfunction and fibrosis. Tumor necrosis

factor receptors (TNFRs) are activated by TNF $\alpha$ , which has a significant role in inflammatory processes (Al-Lamki and Mayadas, 2015). Upon activation, TNFRs are shed from the cell surface into a soluble form (sTNFR) in the blood (Bell et al., 2007). Plasma sTNFR-1 and sTNFR-2 have been reported to be associated with decreased tubulointerstitial and glomerular lesions, and eGFR in patients with CKD and diabetic nephropathy (Coca et al., 2017; Gutiérrez et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2021). YKL-40, also known as chitinase 3-like 1 (CHI3L1), is a glycoprotein produced by macrophages, neutrophils, and other locally inflammatory cells (Schmidt et al., 2013). YKL-40 is an important mediator of inflammation after ischemic or reperfusion injury and activates pro-fibrotic signaling pathways in the context of ongoing injury and maladaptive repair (Coca et al., 2017). Patients with diabetic nephropathy who have higher plasma YKL-40 are at greater risk for kidney disease progression and eventual development of ESRD (Gutiérrez et al., 2022; Schrauben et al., 2021). Meanwhile, higher plasma YKL-40 levels in patients with CKD and ESRD are positively correlated with mortality (Lorenz et al., 2018; Srivastava et al., 2021).

MCP-1, also called CCL2, is expressed by endothelial cells, macrophages and fibroblasts and acts as a chemoattractant protein in response to tissue injury (Chow et al., 2006; Ix et al., 2017). In a multicenter, prospective cohort study including 1,538 hospitalized CKD patients with a median follow-up of 4.3 years, urinary MCP-1 levels at 3 months after hospitalization were associated with greater eGFR decline and increased incidence of the composite renal outcome (Puthumana et al., 2021). In a prospective, observational cohort study including 523 patients with diverse kidney disease, plasma MCP-1 levels were correlated with tubulointerstitial and glomerular lesions. Each doubling of plasma MCP-1 concentration was associated with increased risks of kidney disease progression and death (Srivastava et al., 2021).

Circulating soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor (suPAR), a soluble form of urokinase-type fibrinogen activator receptor, is expressed primarily on immune cells and endothelial cells and released into the circulation during inflammation (Mahdi et al., 2001). In a prospective cohort of adults with cardiovascular disease, higher levels of plasma suPAR were found to be associated with lower basal eGFR levels and subsequent decreases in eGFR (Hayek et al., 2015).

Activation of complement system plays an important role in the progression of renal disease (Thurman, 2015). Wendt et al. (2021) detected complement fragments in urine to observe their relationship with renal disease progression. Twenty-three different urinary peptides derived from complement proteins were identified, most of which C3-derived peptides were negatively correlated with eGFR. Also, this study revealed that using a combination of multiple complement peptide fragments in urine to assess kidney function

was a better predictor than a single molecule.

(3) Other renal injury biomarkers. Besides various protein molecules have been used as biomarkers, accumulating studies show the power of metabolites in the plasma or urine to predict the decline of renal function. In a study of 1,921 subjects without CKD with a median follow-up of 19.6 years, the serum concentration of two metabolites, creatine and 3-indolyl sulfate, is significantly correlated with the decline of eGFR. Meanwhile, higher levels of 5-oxoproline and 1,5-anhydroglucitol (1,5-AG) were significantly associated with a lower risk of CKD (Yu et al., 2014). Recent studies have found that exosomes play a very important role in the development of renal fibrosis, and CKD as messenger cargoes for intercellular communication (Mahtal et al., 2022). Feng et al. (2018) reported a correlation between exosomal CCL2 and tubulointerstitial inflammation, C3 deposition and eGFR in IgAN. High CCL2 levels at the time of renal biopsy were associated with subsequent deterioration in renal function. In addition, mRNA, miRNA and protein in exosomes may be non-invasive biomarkers for chronic kidney disease (Eissa et al., 2016; Feng et al., 2018; Rossi et al., 2017). However, these findings need to be further investigated by large-scale cohort studies and randomized trials.

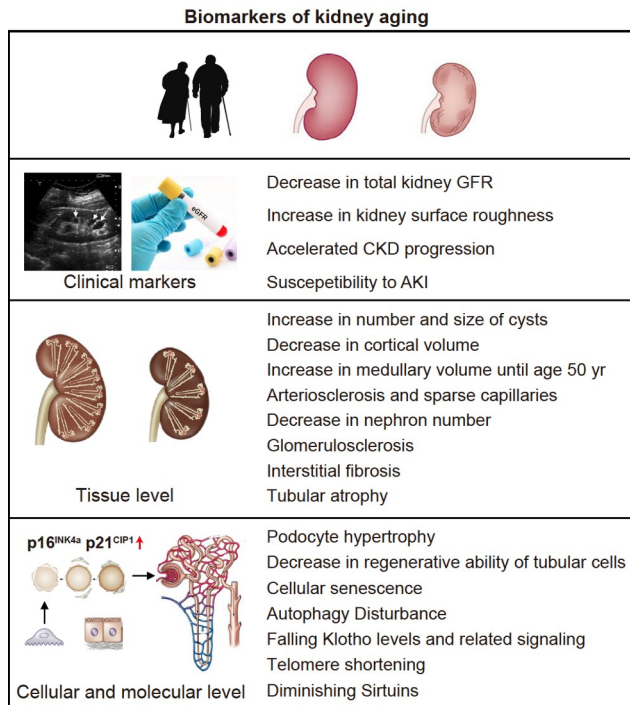
### *Summary and perspectives*

So far, accumulating biomarkers have been identified to reflect various aspects of renal functional and structural changes in kidney diseases. However, more multi-center large-scale studies are needed to further verify their efficacy. Secondly, accumulating studies indicate that single biomarkers are hardly able to meet the criteria of comprehensive risk identification or diagnostic utility. More studies are needed to determine the optimal biomarkers combinations to monitor renal function, improve risk assessment for kidney outcomes, and reduce the burden of kidney disease (Figure 17; Table S12 in Supporting Information). Third, so far, Klotho is the only well-proved specific biomarker for both physiological and pathological kidney aging. Other commonly used biomarkers for aging, such as p16<sup>INK4a</sup>, p21<sup>CIP1</sup>, telomere-related biomarkers, also reflect the kidney aging, but not organ specific. CKD has been recognized as accelerated aging caused by various etiologies, therefore, biomarkers to predict renal dysfunction are different. Similarly, various factors contribute to the progression of physiological kidney aging by different mechanisms. The biomarkers found for kidney diseases could improve our understanding the etiology of nature kidney aging.

### **Skeletal aging**

#### *Physiological characteristics*

Skeleton is involved in endocrine regulation and serves as an



**Figure 17** Biomarkers of kidney aging.

important repository for minerals, like 99% of total body calcium, which flow to and from skeleton is neutral, about five mmol is turned over a day (Song, 2017). Derangement of calcium leads to hypercalcemia and hypocalcemia, as risk factors for health (Song, 2017). Collagens can also be damaged by accumulation of advanced glycation end-products, another general feature of the aging process, causing osteoarthritis (OA), a disease in articular cartilage (Daneault et al., 2017; Rahmati et al., 2017). Skeleton material composition properties are monitored by parameters like mineral/matrix ratio, mineral maturity/crystallinity (MMC), nanoporosity, glycosaminoglycan (GAG) content, lipid content and pyridinoline content (Paschalis et al., 2016). Among these parameters, pyridinoline content shows the greatest deviation between healthy aging and postmenopausal osteoporosis.

The endocrine activity of skeleton forms a central component of a comprehensive biological system that mediates calcium-phosphate balance, energy metabolism and bone mineralization in response to dynamic and volatile physiological requirements. Endocrinological regulation of bone metabolism is highly influenced and tightly controlled by sub-categories of growth, gonadal and calcitropic hormones (Almeida et al., 2017; Brandhorst et al., 2015; Chotiyarnwong and McCloskey, 2020; Gallagher and LeRoith, 2011; Lowery and Rosen, 2018; Mazziotti et al., 2022; Mills et al., 2016; Quarles, 2012; Young et al., 2021) (Table S13 in Supporting Information). Hormonal activity begins to decline following the establishment of peak bone mass, as bone

formation and resorption shifts from net formation during ontogeny, to equilibrium during early-to-middle adulthood, and net resorption during advanced age.

Beside the changes of minerals, extracellular matrix and hormones, aged bone marrow displays a signature of suppressed fatty-acids oxidation, like accumulation of free fatty acids (FFAs), polyunsaturated fatty-acids (PUFAs) and long-chain fatty-acids (LCFAs), and reduced acyl-carnitines (Connor et al., 2018). Elevated FFAs and decreased carnitine-conjugates are supposed to be resulted from suppressed  $\beta$ -oxidation which might activate oxidative phosphorylation pathway (Yu et al., 2017). The old bone marrow also shows a significant reduction in amino acid and nucleic acid pool (Connor et al., 2018; Navik et al., 2021). A diminished amino acids pool in old bone marrow could be the result of reduced synthesis of non-essential amino acids or from lowered autophagy. And downregulated nucleic acids may be a result of lipid peroxidation, which has been shown to generate hydroperoxides that undergo fragmentation to produce a broad range of intermediates (Kujoth et al., 2005).

#### Imaging traits

With aging, bone resorption increases due to a higher bone turnover rate, resulting in bone loss and decreased bone mineral density (BMD) (JafariNasabian et al., 2017). In Europe, it is estimated that 5.5 million men and 22 million women are suffering from osteoporosis (Hernlund et al., 2013). In the United States, an estimated 10 million people have osteoporosis, and this number is continuing to increase (Burge et al., 2007). At the same time, there are more than 8.9 million patients with osteoporotic fractures worldwide each year (Kimmel et al., 2022). Osteoporosis is characterized by systemic damage to bone mass, microstructure and strength, which increases fracture propensity and poses a significant economic threat to medicine and society (NIH Consensus Development Panel on Osteoporosis Prevention, Diagnosis, and Therapy, 2001). Several risk factors should be taken into account by screening, such as age, previous fragility fractures, low body mass index (BMI), glucocorticoid use, family history of fractures, and active smoking (Kanis, 2002). Measurement of BMD by double DXA is an effective method to diagnose osteoporosis, with T-score-2.5 or more below the average for young adults. N-terminal propeptide of type I procollagen (PINP) and C-telopeptide of type I collagen (CTX-I) are clinically recommended biomarkers of bone formation and bone resorption, which can be measured multiple times in a single person with high accuracy. In osteoporosis patients, PINP and CTX-I can be used to assess anabolic response and indicate possible secondary osteoporosis (Eastell and Szulc, 2017).

Imaging such as CT, MRI, FTIR also plays a vital role in the measurement of BMD and is also essential in the analysis of osteoporosis and OA.



### *Histologic features*

Bone histomorphometry plays a vital role in studying the microstructure, morphology, and lesion characteristics and processes of the bone (Varela and Jolette, 2018). Histomorphometry has shown that bone formation rates decrease significantly with age (Kiebzak, 1991), as observed in both human and animal models. Age-related osteoporosis is characterized by a decrease in bone trabeculae quantity, average width, and their separation from each other. The average bone wall thickness and the number of cells in the bone marrow are also decreased, while the adipose tissue is increased (Singh et al., 2016). The rates of bone mineral deposition and osteoid deposition are consistent, and there is no significant decrease in peri-osteoclastic minerals (Liao and Cao, 2013). In a study of 43 healthy men between the ages of 20–80 years, it was found that the static histomorphometric parameters, such as cancellous bone volume and osteoblast-bone like interface, decreased by 40.0% and 19.2%, respectively, and the dynamic histomorphometric parameters, double and single labeled osteoid also decreased by 18.6% and 18.0%, respectively (Clarke et al., 1996). In addition, another histomorphometric analysis of rats has shown that the number of osteoclasts, the activity and number of osteoblasts that express type I collagen mRNA, were reduced in older rats (Ikeda, 1995). In cancellous bone, aging altered the relationship between osteoclasts and osteoblasts, manifesting significantly increased matrix/osteoblast-induced osteoclast formation and expansion of the osteoblast precursor pool (Cao et al., 2005). The periosteum contains undifferentiated mesenchymal stem cells with the potential for cartilage formation during fracture healing and cartilage repair. Analysis of rabbit animal model revealed that the chondrogenic potential of the periosteum decreases apparently with increasing age (O'Driscoll et al., 2001).

For OA, articular cartilage degeneration is the central pathological change. In the early phase after injury, chondrocytes proliferate and form clusters, as well as produce matrix remodeling enzymes (Varela-Eirin et al., 2018). When OA progresses, osteoarthritic chondrocytes show larger cell morphology and decreased proliferative ability, with reduced chondrogenic commitment (Singh et al., 2019). Chondrocytes in OA exhibit high levels of cellular senescence (Guo et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022c). In aging cartilage, chondrocytes have a fibroblast-like shape, larger diameter, larger spreading areas (Sasazaki et al., 2008), and lower cytoskeletal protein renewal rate (Dominice et al., 1986), which can lead to cartilage degeneration.

### *Cellular alterations*

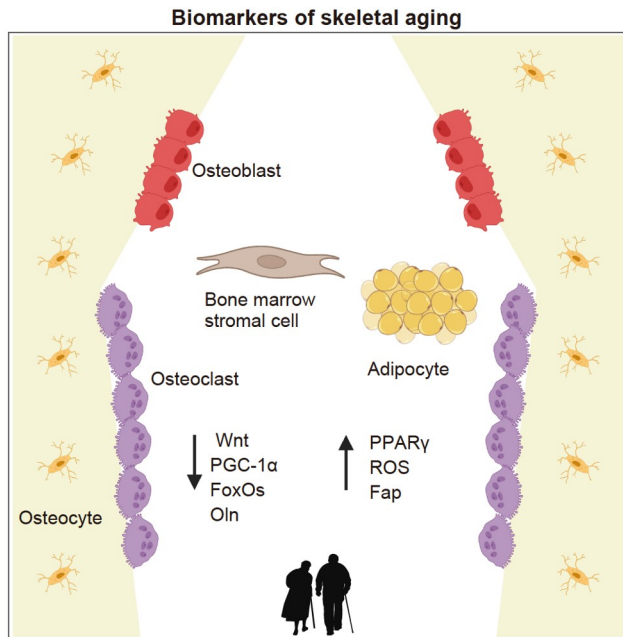
Some aspects of aging clearly root in cell-intrinsic alterations, such as genomic instability, epigenetic alterations. All normal skeletal cells have a limited lifespan, which is con-

trolled by the genomic stability and telomere length. Alterations in the methylation of DNA or acetylation and methylation of histones, like loss of H3K9me and H3K27me3, can induce epigenetic changes that contribute to aging process. Recent study has found that Lysine (K)-specific demethylase 4B (KDM4B), a H3K9me3 demethylase, whose ablation impaired skeletal stem/progenitor cell (SSPC) self-renewal and promotes stem cell exhaustion by inducing senescence-associated heterochromatin foci formation (Deng et al., 2021).

By means of fluorescence activated cell separation (FACS) and single-cell RNA sequencing multiple types of SSPCs originating from different skeletal sites, such as bone marrow, growth plate or periosteum were identified (Ambrosi et al., 2019). Although SSPCs from different sites have similar features with respect to cell surface markers, they are not identical, like differentiation capacity (Ambrosi et al., 2019). Recent studies have identified a hSSPC (Feng et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022b), and found that loss of SIRT1 expression but reactivation by trans-resveratrol or a small molecule compound restore the differentiation potential of aged hSSCs *in vitro* (Ambrosi et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2018). In the elderly, a progressive accumulation of senescent cells leads to elevated levels of pro-inflammatory mediator, a process known as “inflammaging”. A low-grade anti-inflammatory drug can reverse a functional aging-associated decline of SSPCs (Josephson et al., 2019). Moreover, immune cells, including neutrophils and macrophages, secrete Granulocyte Colony-Stimulating Factor (G-CSF) to drive aging-related bone degeneration (Li et al., 2021a; Peng et al., 2022). In addition to aging environment affected by immune cells, aging SSPCs have been found to secrete colony stimulating factor 1 (CSF1) to promote the formation of osteoclasts and generate an inflammatory degenerative niche (Ambrosi et al., 2021).

### *Molecular changes*

ROS is a typical aging hallmark of the skeletal system (Chandra and Rajawat, 2021), which is responsible for the elevated osteoclastic activity and reduced osteoblastic activity (Zhou et al., 2016). In contrast, FoxO transcription factors that promote ROS clearance show decreased expression with age (Alvarez-Garcia et al., 2017). Canonical Wnt signaling is a critical regulator of bone formation, the activity of which decreases in aged skeletal tissues (Almeida et al., 2007). The shift of bone marrow stromal cells (BMSCs) from osteogenic to adipogenic fate is also a striking characteristic during skeletal aging (Sebo et al., 2019). Expression of PPAR $\gamma$ , a transcription factor that is essential for adipogenic differentiation, is upregulated in BMSCs with age (Lecka-Czernik et al., 2010). PPAR $\gamma^{+/-}$  mice show increased bone mass, while PPAR $\gamma^{+/+}$  BMSCs show enhanced osteogenesis at the expense of adipogenesis (Akune et al., 2004). PGC-1 $\alpha$ , an adipogenic inhibitor, shows



**Figure 18** Biomarkers of skeletal aging. In aged skeletons, PPAR $\gamma$ , ROS and Fap are significantly increased, while canonical Wnt signaling, PGC-1 $\alpha$ , FoxOs and Oln are decreased. Abbreviations: PPAR $\gamma$ , peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor  $\gamma$ .

decreased expression with age in human and mouse skeletal stem cells (Yu et al., 2018). Fibroblast activation protein (Fap) is a serine protease whose activity significantly increases during aging (Wei et al., 2020). Genetic or pharmacological inhibition of Fap promotes bone formation and inhibits bone resorption by activating canonical Wnt signaling and dampening NF- $\kappa$ B signaling, respectively (Wei et al., 2020). Clec11a/Osteolectin (Oln) is a bone growth factor that inhibits Fap activity (Wei et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2016). In contrast to Fap, the plasma level of Oln significantly decreases with age, and Oln<sup>-/-</sup> mice show significantly decreased bone formation and premature osteoporosis (Wei et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2016) (Figure 18). Interestingly, Fap is also significantly increased in the synovium of knee joints during aging, which contributes to OA progression by degrading type II collagen of the articular cartilage (Fan et al., 2023). In contrast, Oln forms a protective layer in the superficial zone of articular cartilage to inhibit Fap activity, and significantly decreases during OA progression (Fan et al., 2023).

#### Secretory factors detectable in biofluids

Bone is not only a structural scaffold to support the body, but also an important endocrine organ (Guntur and Rosen, 2012). Senescent skeletal cells secrete factors such as cytokines, chemokines, growth factors and proteases, which are known as SASPs (Pignolo et al., 2021). GH stimulates the production of IGF-1 to promote bone growth and development (Junnila et al., 2013). In humans, systemic and skeletal

IGF-1 decline substantially with age (Bennett et al., 1984; Boonen et al., 1997). Systemic IGF-1 is also decreased in aged mice (Young et al., 2021). Conditional deletion of *Igf1* from BMSCs or megakaryocytes/platelets causes bone loss and defective fracture repair in the adult skeleton (Wang et al., 2023). Osteoclasts are responsible for resorbing the bone matrix and play important roles in bone remodeling. Macrophage-colony stimulating factor (M-CSF) secreted by BMSCs/osteoblasts promotes the proliferation of osteoclast precursors (macrophages). Differentiation of osteoclasts also requires the engagement of osteoblast-derived RANKL with its cognate receptor RANK (Boyle et al., 2003). Osteoprotegerin (OPG) is also secreted by osteoblasts, which functions as a decoy receptor of RANKL to negatively regulate its activity (Lacey et al., 1998). Aged skeletons show increased expression of M-CSF, RANKL and decreased expression of OPG, leading to enhanced osteoclast-mediated bone resorption (Chung et al., 2014). Decreased of bone formation markers such as Procollagen type I N-terminal propeptide (PINP) and Osteocalcins (OCN), and increase of bone resorption marker, such as carboxy-terminal collagen cross-links (CTX), amino-terminal cross-linking telopeptide of type I collagen (NTx), deoxypyridinoline (DPD) and Tartrate-resistant acid phosphatase 5b (TRAcP5b) are typical hallmarks of skeletal aging (Kikuchi et al., 2021; Ryan and Elahi, 1998; Shahnazari et al., 2012; Takahashi et al., 1999; Tokida et al., 2021). Sclerostin (SOST) and Dickkopf-related protein 1 (DKK1) are secreted by osteocytes, both of which show increased expression with age and impair osteoblast formation by inhibiting Wnt signaling (Shahnazari et al., 2012). Aging and bone remodeling are also associated with dynamic change of circulating cytokines and proinflammatory factors (Michaud et al., 2013). For example, elevated levels of CRP, IL-1, IL-6, and TNF $\alpha$  can be detected in osteoporotic women (Koh et al., 2005; Zheng et al., 1997) (Table S13 in Supporting Information).

#### Summary and perspectives

The skeleton plays an important role in providing mechanical support and maintaining calcium ion homeostasis. New insights of the regulators controlling skeletal aging, like findings of cell-extrinsic and cell-intrinsic factors, pinpoint the pathways that could be targeted to reverse these aging-dependent changes. Additionally, large-scale omics profiling, particularly at the single-cell level, is uncovering clinically actionable conditions and novel molecular pathways for treating aging-related skeletal diseases. At the same time, it can be more easily to detect and identify more precise biomarkers of bone aging as technology evolves, facilitating an improved understanding of age-related skeletal changes and suggesting more effective targets for prevention.

## Adipose tissue aging

### *Physiological characteristics*

AT, commonly refers to as fat, are a highly flexible and heterogeneous organ composed of mature adipocytes, pre-adipocytes, progenitor cells, vascular endothelial cells and immune cells (Sakers et al., 2022). Though originally considered as an inert energy repository, AT is now well recognized as a metabolically active endocrine organ vital for whole-body energy balance, food intake, lipid and glycemic homeostasis, thermogenesis and immune responses.

There are three types of AT characterized of distinct anatomic location, morphology and function. In mice, the major function of white adipose tissues (WAT) is to store energy as triglyceride. The interscapular brown adipose tissues (BAT) and the subcutaneous WAT (sWAT)-dispersing beige fat dissipate energy as heat (Cohen and Kajimura, 2021). Adult humans possess various WAT depots, as well as functional BAT and beige fat in areas including ventral neck and supraclavicular area (Nedergaard et al., 2007; van Marken Lichtenbelt et al., 2009; Virtanen et al., 2009; Zwick et al., 2018). White adipocytes feature single lipid droplets and low mitochondria numbers, while brown adipocytes contain multilocular lipid droplets, high mitochondria content that endow its brownish color, and express high levels of heat-producing uncoupling protein 1 (UCP-1). Beige adipocytes, which reside in dispersed fashion in sWAT and are indistinguishable with white adipocytes in basal state, adopt brown adipocyte-like features via a process called “browning” under stimulation conditions such as cold exposure,  $\beta$ 3-adrenergic signal input, mild hyperthermia, and exercise. This inducible thermogenic capacity of beige adipocytes bestows a great potential in increasing energy expenditure, thus emerging as a valuable therapeutic target for metabolic diseases (Harms and Seale, 2013).

### *Imaging traits*

In clinic, BMI, skinfold anthropometry and bioelectrical impedance are used as indirect methods for assessing body fat content. To understand the characteristics and heterogeneity of fat depots, medical imaging to visualize body fat has been actively developed. Dual-energy DXA has weak ionizing radiation and measures whole-body or regional body composition in both rodents and humans, but cannot detect overlapping fat compartments or ectopic fat in organs like liver or muscle (Wang et al., 2014a). CT is a volumetric technique that is excellent for measuring regional adiposity, i.e., visceral AT and fat content in liver and muscles (Goodpaster et al., 2000; Kramer et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2014a). However, this technique has a drawback in potential exposure of significant radiation (Brenner and Hall, 2007). MRI and magnetic resonance spectroscopy (MRS) exploit the difference in the magnetic properties of hydrogen nuclei

in water and fat to quantify the signal fat-fraction and/or the proton density fat-fraction in tissues (Reeder et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2020b). MRI/MRS can detect visceral fat and subcutaneous fat, as well as intramyocellular and intrahepatic lipids noninvasively with excellent reproducibility and better visibility of anatomical details without overt radioactivity (Addison et al., 2014; Sivam et al., 2012). However, complicated data analysis and high cost limit the routine use of this equipment in clinic (Ponti et al., 2019). Whilst CT and MRI/MRS are extremely informative in quantifying fat in depots and within organs, PET/CT provides vital information on metabolic activity of fat depots. Notably,  $^{18}\text{F}$ -FDG PET/CT, which could reveal the existence of functional, aging-associated, and cold-activated BAT in adult human (Yone-shiro et al., 2011), is the current gold standard for BAT imaging study (Chen et al., 2016b). The downside of the  $^{18}\text{F}$ -FDG PET/CT usage is its relatively complicated procedure and large dose of radiation due to  $^{18}\text{F}$ -FDG intake (Law et al., 2018). Infrared thermography (IRT) collects thermal radiation from infrared radiation and converts it into false-color thermal images. Utilizing the heat-generating properties of thermogenic fat, IRT, i.e., infrared camera, has been widely used for its non-invasive and low-cost feature to assess thermogenesis under different stimulations including cold, hyperthermia, glucocorticoids or caffeine exposure (Li et al., 2022i; Ramage et al., 2016; Symonds et al., 2012; Velickovic et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2022). Though controversy remains, a close correlation between IRT measurement and the accumulation of  $^{18}\text{F}$ -FDG in mice and humans has been confirmed (Carter et al., 2011; Law et al., 2018), suggesting that IRT may be an easy and promising method for detecting brown and beige fat activation.

### *Histologic features*

Fat mass increases with age but declines after approximately 60 years of age (Raguso et al., 2006). Fat redistributes from sWAT depots to intra-abdominal visceral WAT (vWAT) depots during and after middle age (DeNino et al., 2001; Hughes et al., 2004), while the quantity and functionality of brown and beige fat decline with age (Gohlke et al., 2019; Sellayah and Sikder, 2014). sWAT is associated with many of the metabolic benefits and vWAT adiposity leads to chronic inflammation and higher risks of various comorbidities (Mtintsilana et al., 2019; Siervo et al., 2016). Meanwhile, dysfunctional thermogenic AT may lead to impaired energy expenditure and energy substrates (glucose and free fatty acids) clearance. These histological changes of fat depots may contribute to the age-related metabolic diseases and underlie the deteriorating metabolic status and aggravating thermal dysregulation in the elderly, thus highlighting the importance of AT homeostasis in metabolic health and longevity (Berry et al., 2017; Cypess et al., 2009).

The abundant loose connective tissues around adipocytes

called stromal vascular fraction (SVF) harbor heterogeneous cell populations including adipose stem and progenitor cells (ASPCs), preadipocytes (PreAs) and adipogenesis-regulatory cells (Aregs). ASPCs is multipotent for adipogenic differentiation and cell renewal (Zuk et al., 2001). Lineage commitment of PreAs from ASPCs undergo growth arrest and differentiation into mature adipocytes (Gupta et al., 2010). Aregs regulate adipogenesis by blocking the adipogenic capacity of ASPCs (Schwale et al., 2018). During aging, the replication potential and the capacity to differentiate into lipogenic lineages of ASPCs decrease gradually, damaging AT homeostasis (Schipper et al., 2008; Zhu et al., 2009). SVF contains heterogeneous cell populations such as mesenchymal progenitor/stem cells, endothelial cells, pericytes, and immune cells such as T cells and macrophages, which may produce inflammatory factors under pathophysiological conditions such as obesity and aging. Indeed, aging is characterized of a persistent low-grade, sterile and chronic pro-inflammatory status, a phenomenon refer to as inflammaging (Campisi et al., 2019). Increased infiltration of inflammatory immune cells is observed in WAT during aging, which accumulates in crown-like clusters in perivascular spaces and secretes pro-inflammatory cytokines and chemokines, contributing to WAT inflammaging. Furthermore, aging is associated with excess release, accumulation and modification of ECM components, including the production and secretion of multiple MMP proteins and fibronectin, which leads to AT fibrosis (De Luca et al., 2021).

### Cellular alterations

Cell senescence is defined as an irreversible proliferative arrest driven by various mechanisms, such as telomere shortening, DNA damage and ROS, which cause cell cycle inhibition via p16<sup>INK4</sup> or cell cycle arrest via activation of p53/p21<sup>CIP1</sup>. During aging, senescent cells accumulate in AT and secrete SASP-related factors consisting of cytokines, chemokines, proteases and growth factors, which impair AT function and dysregulate adipogenesis, leading to inflammation, fibrosis and insulin resistance (Campisi et al., 2019; Milanovic et al., 2018; Wiley et al., 2016).

Mitochondria are core to brown and beige adipocytes in maintaining intracellular glucose and lipid metabolism and heat generation. During aging, thermogenic fat exhibits mitochondrial dysfunction that manifests as accumulation of mtDNA mutations and deletion, oxidation of mitochondrial proteins, instability of macromolecular organization of the respiratory chain complex, changes in mitochondrial membrane lipid composition, alterations in mitochondrial dynamics, and defective mitochondrial autophagy (López-Otín et al., 2013), leading to a constitutive decline in mitochondrial oxidative phosphorylation (Hu et al., 2021). The mitochondrial free radical theory of aging proposes that the progressive mitochondrial dysfunction increases ROS pro-

duction, which in turn causes further mitochondrial deterioration and global cellular damage.

The decline in tissue regenerative potential is pronounced characteristic of aging. AT expands to store excessive energy, which relies on ASPCs proliferation and differentiation to generate new adipocytes (Ghaben and Scherer, 2019). ASPCs isolated from old individuals show cellular senescence and loss of adipogenic potential due to telomere shortening and DNA damages (López-Otín et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2019; Tchkonina et al., 2010). By scRNA-seq analysis of changes in different SVF populations during aging, an aging-dependent regulatory cell (ARC) population controlled by transcription factor Pu.1. was detected specifically in sWAT, which inhibited differentiation and proliferation of neighboring adipogenic precursors by secreting cytokines (Nguyen et al., 2021).

The crosstalk between immune cells and adipocytes is vital for AT function and systemic metabolism. Macrophages are the most abundant cell type in AT. Though total numbers of proinflammatory M1 macrophages and anti-inflammatory M2 macrophages in fat remains stable during aging, the ratio between M1 and M2 macrophages increases modulated by NF-κB, long-chain saturated fatty acids and hypoxia (Ou et al., 2022). T and B lymphocytes constitute the second most abundant immune cell population in AT. Aging induces a significant increase in inflammatory CD4<sup>+</sup> and CD8<sup>+</sup> T cells with enhanced pro-inflammatory cytokines such as IFN-γ, TNFα and IL-17, contributing to increased inflammaging (Lumeng et al., 2011). Furthermore, it is revealed that transition of CD73<sup>hi</sup>ST2<sup>lo</sup> into CD73<sup>lo</sup>ST2<sup>hi</sup> fat-resident Treg subsets (fTreg) and memory T cells (γδT) are increased during aging (Carrasco et al., 2022). Besides, B cells also increase in WAT with aging, which promoted antigen presentation and pro-inflammatory cytokines and pathogenic antibody secretion, overall result in inflammaging and aggravated insulin resistance (Zamboni et al., 2021).

AT fibrosis also underlies increased inflammation during aging (Eckel-Mahan et al., 2020). Recent scRNA-seq studies have identified a functionally distinct subpopulation of ASPCs, PDGFRβ<sup>+</sup>LY6C<sup>+</sup> in mouse vWAT that lacks inherent adipogenic capacity but exhibits fibrogenic and pro-inflammatory characteristic, thus are potentially predisposed to drive fibrosis and subsequent inflammaging (Hepler et al., 2018).

### Molecular changes

Age-associated senescence of beige progenitor cells leads to impaired beige adipocyte differentiation and reduced browning upon cold stimulation. Targeting the p38/MAPK-p16<sup>INK4a</sup> pathway rejuvenates beige progenitors and restores browning (Berry et al., 2017), indicating anti-senescence modalities as a promising strategy inducing beiging and improving metabolic health in aging humans. Aside from p16<sup>INK4a</sup>, SREBP1c may play a key role in senescence in

adipocytes by modulating DNA-damage responses via interaction with PARP1, independent of its lipogenic regulatory function. Genetic depletion of SREBP1c accelerates adipocyte senescence, leading to adipose tissue inflammation and insulin resistance (Lee et al., 2022a).

Aging leads to increased fat deposition and programmed loss of brown and beige adipocytes contributed by changes in core thermogenic regulators. For example, aging regulates Forkhead box factor A3 (Foxa3) levels by glucocorticoid signaling, consequently cooperates with C/EBPs for PPAR $\gamma$  transcription and lipid storage, while competing with CREB on *Pgc1 $\alpha$*  promoter to inhibit its transcription and reduced thermogenic and mitochondrial functions, overall reduced energy expenditure (Ma et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2016). Meanwhile, aging leads to impaired epigenetic regulation such as enhanced 273 phosphorylation of Ppar $\gamma$  and caused insulin resistance (Xu et al., 2018a). Aged adipocytes also feature an increase in autophagic activity. Genetic ablation of Rubicon in adipocytes exacerbates metabolic disorders by promoting excess autophagic degradation of PPAR $\gamma$  coactivators SRC-1 and TIF2, highlighting a critical involvement of autophagy during aging (Yamamuro et al., 2020).

Impaired protein and metabolite secretion impact AT homeostasis during aging. For example, FGF21 has been proposed to be an aging intervention hormone, which induces browning of white fat, while FGF6 is shown to act as a proliferative factor for ASPC hyperplasia and prevents fibrosis and maintain AT homeostasis during aging (Liu et al., 2023a). Meanwhile, exercise-induced myokine Irisin promotes browning and improves age-associated metabolic dysfunction while its level declines under sarcopenia (Bostrom et al., 2012; Guo et al., 2023). On the other hand, cold exposure leads to increased hepatic acylcarnitine production and thermogenesis, which is impaired in aged mice (Simcox et al., 2017). Besides, mitochondrial proteomics analysis shows that mitochondrial lipoylation is disproportionately reduced in aged BAT, and enhancing mitochondrial lipoylation by  $\alpha$ -lipoic acid supplementation effectively restores BAT function in old mice, thereby preventing age-associated obesity and glucose intolerance (Tajima et al., 2019).

It is noted that though detailed molecular changes may not be identical, obesity, which represents all major characteristics of age-associated impairment in AT homeostasis, is proposed as a state of accelerated aging and is itself a major risk factor for worsened age-associated metabolic diseases. The intervention strategies against obesity, such as caloric restriction and metformin, are also effective in preventing aging (Geng et al., 2022; Ou et al., 2022).

#### *Secretory factors detectable in biofluids*

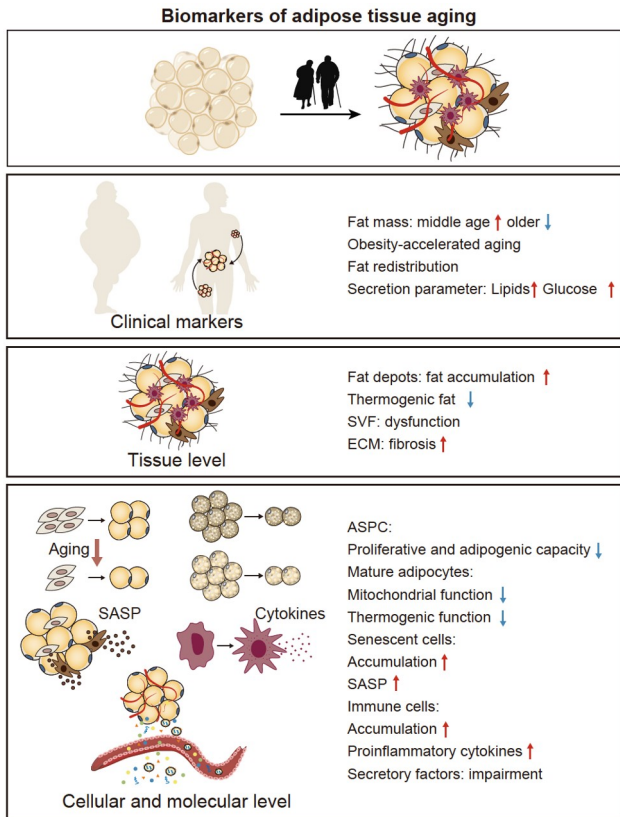
Senescent cells express SASP factors that link their accretion with metabolic disorders. During aging, adipocytes chronologically accumulate lipids and pro-inflammatory factors

such as IL-6, MCP-1 and TNF $\alpha$  under NF- $\kappa$ B signaling (Ahmed and Si, 2021). In addition to classic SASP factors, other forms of SASP were discovered. For example, aged sWAT shows a significant increase in pregnancy-associated plasma protein-A (PAPP-A) levels, which are also highly enriched on the surface of extracellular vesicles secreted by senescent pre-adipocytes (Conover and Bale, 2022).

AT, which synthesizes and secretes numerous bioactive molecules termed adipokines, has now been well recognized as an endocrine organ that regulates whole-body energy homeostasis (Fasshauer and Blüher, 2015). Dysregulated adipokine biosynthesis and secretion are regarded as a key feature of obesity and aging associated diseases (Arai et al., 2019; Tilg and Moschen, 2006). Leptin is a well-established adipokine that communicates with central nervous system to regulate appetite, satiety and energy expenditure. Leptin is associated with a reduced incidence of dementia and AD and with cerebral brain volume in asymptomatic older adults close to 80 years of age (Lieb et al., 2009). The functional decline of responsiveness to leptin in central nerve system with age may lead to negative consequences for cognitive function (Irving and Harvey, 2021), suggesting a pro-cognitive effect of leptin. Adiponectin, on the other hand, is associated with reduced inflammation and improved metabolic status in the elderly, which is positively correlated with longevity (Arai et al., 2019) by blocking NF- $\kappa$ B activation and inhibiting proinflammatory cytokine synthesis. Adiponectin also improves neuronal metabolism, muscle function and cardiovascular health that are highly related to aging, possibly via adiponectin receptors in these systems (Yamauchi and Kadowaki, 2013).

In aged animals, the differentiation of precursor cells of the metabolically beneficial beige adipocytes is impaired and transited toward an alternatively fibrogenic profile, which correlated with reduced adipocyte expression of PRDM16. PRDM16-expressing adipose cells secrete  $\beta$ -hydroxybutyrate (BHB), which blocks precursor fibrogenesis and facilitates beige adipogenesis. Dietary BHB supplementation in aged animals reduces adipose fibrosis and promoted beige fat formation (Wang et al., 2019). Moreover, sphingolipids, such as ceramides, accumulate and mediate metabolic impairment of thermogenic adipocytes during aging. Blocking ceramide synthesis in thermogenic adipocytes improves adipose biology and function (Chaurasia et al., 2021), suggesting that adipocyte-secreted metabolites may control beige fat remodeling.

AT from Ames dwarf (df/df) mice, an exceptionally long-lived animal model, provides additional information. Previous studies showed that miR-146a-5p increases during aging and this increase is not observed in long-living df/df mice. Intraperitoneal injections with miR-146a-5p mimetic increases cellular senescence and inflammation but decreases pro-apoptotic factors in vWAT of df/df mice, which is



**Figure 19** Biomarkers of adipose tissue aging. Fat mass increases with age but declines at older stages. Besides, aging is associated with fat redistribution from subcutaneous AT depots to intra-abdominal visceral depots, accompanied with hyperlipidemia and hyperglycemia, which is accelerated by obesity. Fat depots remodel during aging with fat accumulation, loss of thermogenic fat, dysfunction in stromal vascular fraction, and excessive accumulation of extracellular matrix. At the cellular level, aging leads to exhaustion and functional decline of adipose stem and progenitor cells, reduction in brown and beige adipocytes, accumulation of senescent cells producing SASP, dysregulation of immune cells, enhanced inflammation and fibrosis, and impaired secretory factors.

recapitulated in 3T3-L1 cells, indicating that miR-146a-5p can be a marker for cellular senescence (Nunes et al., 2022). Furthermore, 5-hydroxyeicosapentaenoic acid (5-HEPE), an  $\omega$ -3 fatty acid metabolite, is increased in BAT and circulation of dwarf mice, which correlates with increased thermogenesis and insulin sensitivity. The levels of 5-HEPE are positively correlated with BAT activation and negatively correlated with body weight, insulin resistance and triglyceride levels in humans, thus represent a novel lipid secretory signature of AT in a mouse model of extreme longevity (Darcy et al., 2020) (Figure 19).

### Skin aging

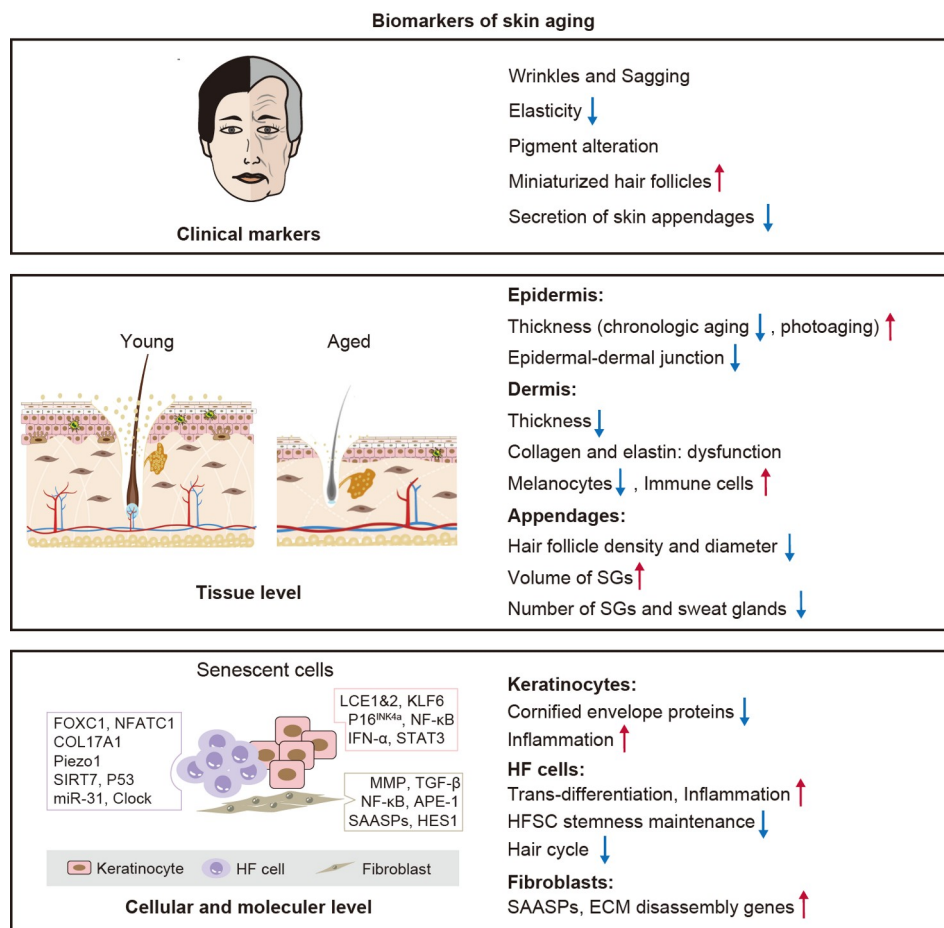
Skin aging is the most recognizable outcome of aging, which also directly reflects the degree of whole-body aging to some extent. Skin aging is a sophisticated, multifactorial process involving multiple steps in which chronologic aging and

photoaging are closely intertwined (Kohl et al., 2011). The aged skin manifests structural, functional, cellular, and molecular changes as well as an accumulation of senescent cells (Franco et al., 2022). More importantly, these cells are accompanied by SASP, which induces senescence in adjacent cells through a process called paracrine senescence in the skin, further triggering age-related dysfunction of other tissues (Franco et al., 2022) (Figure 20).

### Physiological characteristics

Like other tissues, the structural stability and physiological function of the skin are affected by aging. The most obvious sign is the appearance of wrinkles (Zhao et al., 2020a). Skin elasticity shows the clinical ravages of time, and the aged skin sags in the direction of gravity, resulting in bags under the eyes, etc. (Blair et al., 2020; Panwar et al., 2015). In addition, skin aging is accompanied by alterations in pigmentation, such as lighter color in unexposed areas due to reduced pigment synthesis, and colored patches in exposed areas due to increased pigment synthesis as a result of sunlight and ultraviolet (UV) rays (Kang et al., 2021). In addition, the irregular proliferation of epidermal keratinocytes leads to the occurrence of papules and maculopapules (seborrheic keratosis). Vascular changes are also common features of skin aging. Vascular proliferation in non-exposed areas forms senility angiomas, while exposed areas exhibit cutaneous vasodilation and reticuloarteriosclerosis, which is particularly prominent in highland populations (Kajiya et al., 2011). Hair follicle (HF) aging is another phenotypic trait of skin aging, usually manifesting as diffuse thinning, softening, graying, and gradual loss of luster (Fernandez-Flores et al., 2019). Moreover, there is a decrease in the secretion of sebaceous gland (SG) and sweat gland, usually resulting in xerosis (Ahmed et al., 2022).

The skin provides a barrier against the environment. However, it is more than just a barrier; it is also involved in physiological functions, including the maintenance of hydration and secretion, thermoregulation, immunological surveillance (Gravitz, 2018). It has been demonstrated that the aged skin had a reduced ability to transport water, hydrogen peroxide, drugs, and other substances due to impaired hydration (Ferreira et al., 2020). With age, impaired secretion of sweat glands along with reduced vasodilation of dermal arterioles and the loss of subcutaneous fat led to thermoregulation disorders (Ding et al., 2021b; Lazarus et al., 2019). Repair processes of collagen remodeling, cell proliferation, and wound metabolism in the elderly were shown to be delayed (Kenney et al., 2021; Mistry et al., 2021). Furthermore, a more pronounced inflammatory phenotype has been uncovered in aged skin wounds, featured by the persistence of neutrophils and a higher abundance of inflammatory macrophage subsets compared to younger counterparts (Kenney et al., 2021; Vu et al., 2022). Recent



**Figure 20** Biomarkers of skin aging. The skin mainly comprises epidermis, dermis, and skin appendages. Skin aging can be roughly divided into chronologic aging caused by intrinsic factors and photoaging caused by environmental factors. Aged skin is featured by the development of wrinkles and sagging, accompanied by decreased skin elasticity, which is due to a flattening of epidermal-dermal junction and a decrease/degradation of dermal collagen and elastin. Alterations in skin appendages, such as the increased miniaturized hair follicles and the reduced secretion of skin appendages, are common features during aging. Moreover, the amount and activity of melanocytes and immune cells in skin are dysregulated, resulting in uneven pigmentation and impaired immunological surveillance. Simultaneously, senescent cells accumulate in the skin with age. These cells exhibit the loss of proliferative potential, and several other markers for specific cell types, such as reduced cornified envelope proteins in keratinocytes, hampered stemness and delayed hair cycle in HF cells, as well as elevated ECM disassembly genes in fibroblasts. Notably, SASP from these senescent skin cells further triggers senescence in adjacent cells. This crosstalk among different cells eventually results in an aging phenotype. Abbreviations: FOXC1, forkhead box C1; COL17A, collagen type XVII; LCE1&2, late cornified envelope group I & 2; KLF6, krüppel-like factor 6; STAT3, signal transducer and activator of transcription 3; HES1, hairy and enhancer of split 1.

studies have also revealed an increase in immuno-suppressive activity in the aging process of the skin (Salminen, 2020; Salminen et al., 2022).

#### Imaging traits

The skin changes caused by aging can be detected by optical and ultrasonic imaging. Reflectance confocal microscopy (RCM) observes that skin thickness decreases and epidermal grooves increase; meanwhile, coarse collagen fibers and coiled collagen in the dermis increase (Segurado-Miravalles et al., 2018). Optical coherence tomography (OCT) shows uneven epidermal surface, significant light attenuation, and reduced papillary layer in the dermis (collagen degeneration) during aging (Mamalis et al., 2015). Dermatoscopic features of skin aging include severe xerosis, surface irregularity,

atrophy, uneven pigmentation, telangiectasia, miniaturized HFs, and hair graying (Hu et al., 2019a; Ye et al., 2021). As observed by high-frequency ultrasound imaging, the echogenicity of the aged skin is diminished and its thickness decreases; besides, the aged dermis shows more irregularities in the subdermal interface (Vergilio et al., 2021).

#### Histologic features

There are differences between chronologic aging and photoaging in histological changes. During chronologic aging, one of the first alterations is thinning of the epidermal layer associated with the loss of epidermal rete ridges (Blume-Peytavi et al., 2016; Branchet et al., 1990; Czekalla et al., 2019; Lintzeri et al., 2022; Lock-Andersen et al., 1997), accompanied by a reduced count of melanocytes and Lan-

gerhans cells (Bhushan et al., 2002; Lavker, 1979), and acanthosis atrophy (El-Domyati et al., 2002; Lavker, 1979). The reduced epidermal-dermal junction is another major feature of skin aging (Lavker et al., 1986; Lavker et al., 1987). The dermis also thins gradually, mainly due to the reduction of dermal collagen fibers and elastin. There is an additional change in the dermis namely less compacted collagen bundles in the reticular dermis (Braverman and Fonferko, 1982; Lovell et al., 1987; Uitto, 2008). In addition, the number of dermal micro-vessels decreases (Toyoda et al., 2001), as well as the skin appendages (including HF, SG, and sweat gland) (Montagna and Carlisle, 1990), however, the volume of SGs increases. The aged skin is also accompanied by thinner subcutaneous tissue with fewer blood vessels and fat.

The skin epidermis of photoaging is characterized by irregularly thickened, which may be due to the irregular proliferation, differentiation and apoptosis of keratinocytes (Kanaki et al., 2016). However, studies have shown that severe photodamage can lead to epidermal atrophy (Bhawan et al., 1995; Fu et al., 2016). The changes of the dermis are the most pronounced of the photoaged skin, mainly including the deformation, thickening, and bifurcation of elastic fiber, the reduction of collagen fibers, and the cleavage of hyaluronic acid and other mucopolysaccharide components in the matrix (Fisher et al., 2002; Hughes et al., 2011; Lavker, 1979; Uitto, 2008), ultimately resulting in dry, loose, inelastic skin. Photoaging skin shows a decrease in the density of dermal micro-vessels, accompanied by an increase in the thickness of the vessel walls (Toyoda et al., 2001). In addition, the subcutaneous blood vessels in photoaged skin become varicose and dilated, increasing the vulnerability of the blood vessels.

#### *Cellular alterations*

The skin epithelium contains inter-follicular epidermis (IFE), HF, SG and sweat glands (Franco et al., 2022). It is a constantly self-renewing tissue mainly made by keratinocytes. The IFE is a stratified epithelium composed by basal, spinous, granular, and cornified layers. In aged human IFE, the normal stratified structure is maintained, but shows reduced epithelial extensions into dermis and/or overall thickness (Giangreco et al., 2010; Zou et al., 2021). In the basal layer, overall cell density and the abundance of IFE stem cells (IFESCs) expressing high MCSP and  $\beta 1$  integrin are reduced (Giangreco et al., 2010). Interestingly, overall cell proliferation in aged human IFE is not necessarily reduced (Giangreco et al., 2010), but may become further confined to the basal layer (Thuringer and Katzberg, 1959). Increased  $p16^{\text{INK4a}}$  senescent cells may be mostly melanocytes (Victorelli et al., 2019; Zou et al., 2021). Clonal expansion of IFESCs is prevalent during skin aging (Liu et al., 2019; Martincorena et al., 2015), reminiscent to that of

clonal hematopoiesis (CH).

HF is a cyclic regenerating mini-organ driven by hair follicle stem cells (HFSCs). In late-stage HF aging, HFSCs are depleted through trans-differentiation or apoptosis, leading to HF miniaturization (Dries et al., 2021; Matsumura et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2022). In early-stage HF aging, HFSCs are maintained but with blunted regeneration responsiveness (Doles et al., 2012; Ge et al., 2020; Giangreco et al., 2008; Keyes et al., 2013; Zhao et al., 2022b). Hair graying is caused by loss of HF melanocytes and their stem cells (Arck et al., 2006; Nishimura et al., 2005), and is also associated with depletion of hair progenitors in human scalp HFs (Wu et al., 2022a). HF aging is also accompanied by changes in the distribution of nearby sensory neurons (Ge et al., 2020) and atrophy or dysfunction of SGs (Giangreco et al., 2008; Hou et al., 2022).

The skin dermis is mainly made by dermal fibroblasts and their ECM products (Lynch and Watt, 2018). The dermal fibroblasts are mostly non-proliferative during normal homeostasis and are gradually lost during aging (Marsh et al., 2018), leading to dermal atrophy with decreased tissue density, altered ECM composition, decreased contact between the cells and collagen fibers, and accumulation of  $p16^{\text{INK4a}}$  senescent cells (Farage et al., 2013; Haydont et al., 2019; Ogata et al., 2021; Quan et al., 2013; Zou et al., 2021).

Different types of immune cells in the skin undergo different changes during aging. In naturally aged IFE, Langerhans cells and their ability to migrate are reduced, the proportion of  $CD4^+/CD8^+$  T cells is increased, and the proliferative capacity of monocytes is reduced, accompanied by impaired immune responsiveness and wound healing ability (Keyes et al., 2016; Koguchi-Yoshioka et al., 2021; Nestle et al., 2009). In HF aging, increased immune cell infiltration into HF and activation of inflammatory signaling pathways in HFSCs are observed (Doles et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2022a). In the dermis, increased infiltration of macrophages, T cells, and mast cells are also observed during photoaging (Bosset et al., 2003).

#### *Molecular changes*

Aged skin epidermis shows reduced levels of several calcium controlled cornified envelope proteins, such as loricrin, filaggrin and LCE1&2, implicating deregulated calcium gradient in IFE (Rinnerthaler et al., 2013). Aged epidermal keratinocytes also have reduced pro-growth transcription factor (TF) KLF6 and elevated  $p16^{\text{INK4a}}$  (Adamus et al., 2014; Zou et al., 2021), implicating reduced growth potency. Several inflammatory signaling pathways, such as NF- $\kappa$ B and interferon- $\alpha$  pathways, are upregulated in aged IFE under normal homeostasis (Zou et al., 2021), consistent with the common theme of chronic inflammation (inflammaging) in other tissues. That said, aged epidermal keratinocytes are inefficient at activating STAT3 or up-regulating Skints under



wounding conditions, leading to reduced inflammatory response and delayed wound healing in aged skin (Keyes et al., 2016).

Aged HFs show sophisticated molecular changes depending on their hair cycle and aging status. Aging HFs at miniaturizing stage have reduced level of several key genes involved in HFSC maintenance, including *FOXCI*, *NFATC1* and *COL17A1*, leading to HFSC trans-differentiation and elimination (Matsumura et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2021b). In aging HFs with hair shaft shrinkage, activated Piezo1 induces apoptosis via a calcium-TNF $\alpha$  pathway in HFSCs (Xie et al., 2022). In aging murine HFs with intact structure, HFSCs displays inflammaging feature mediated by JAK/STAT activation, along with upregulated *NFATC1* expression and downregulated *SIRT7* expression, leading to hampered hair cycle activation (Doles et al., 2012; Keyes et al., 2013; Li et al., 2020b). In human scalp HF, activation of P53 and inflammatory pathways are found in HFSCs and hair progenitors at early stage of hair graying (Wu et al., 2022a). Aging HFSCs also upregulate miR-31, which downregulates Clock to activate MAPK/ERK signaling to inhibit hair cycle activation and drive HFSC trans-epidermal elimination (Yu et al., 2021). Notably, miR-31 is also a pro-inflammatory microRNA that is up-regulated in IFE aging (Yan et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2021).

Aged dermis shows degradation of the dermal collagen network and elastin fibers, due to upregulation of MMP activity and downregulation of TGF- $\beta$  signaling (Haydont et al., 2019; He et al., 2014a; Parkinson et al., 2015; Qin et al., 2017). These can be attributed to NF- $\kappa$ B and AP-1 activation induced by ROS, which is a key driver of dermal aging (Chiang et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2019; Vicentini et al., 2011). The fibroblasts of aged dermis also show increased senescence and production of skin aging-associated secreted proteins (SAASPs), which overlap with classical SASPs in matrix degradation and pro-inflammatory categories (Waldner Lupa et al., 2015). Single-cell transcriptional analysis confirms that aged dermis has elevated ECM disassembly genes and decreased growth control genes, with HES1 as potential core regulatory TF (Zou et al., 2021).

#### *Secretory factors detectable in biofluids*

Few studies have reported that specific biomarkers of skin aging can be detected in body fluids. Interestingly, patients with premature hair graying have higher serum levels of oxidative stress compared to healthy controls, even if they are of similar age (Acer et al., 2020). Similarly, signal pathways related to cytokines and growth factors play a driving role in skin photoaging (Fitsiou et al., 2021). Moreover, aging-related epidermal dysfunction partially increases cytokines in blood circulation, including TNF $\alpha$ , IL, EGF, and FGF (Hu et al., 2017).

In addition to circulation, the level of many age-related

markers also changes in the skin wash fluid. This was mainly manifested by decreased markers involved in collagen synthesis (EGF and FGF), epidermal proliferation and wound healing (keratin-6), anti-inflammatory (IL-1Ra), and innate immunity (interferon alpha-2, IFN- $\alpha$ 2) (Kinn et al., 2015). Additionally, age-associated upregulation of cortisol is also observed in the skin wash fluid (Kinn et al., 2015).

#### **Intestinal aging**

The intestine is the main digestive organ and the largest immune organ in the body, which absorbs nutrients and acts as a protective barrier against the external environment (Calleja-Conde et al., 2021). Aging induces significant shifts in the body, with decreased immune function and damage to the intestinal barrier, where harmful molecules, such as pathogens, escape the immune barrier and sneak into the bloodstream, causing serious damage to other organs (Bosco and Noti, 2021). Therefore, an in-depth understanding of the markers associated with aging-related intestinal failure would be beneficial for targeted prevention or treatment, reducing the occurrence of aging diseases and improving the quality of life for elderly people. Based on previous studies, we will describe the biomarkers of aging-related intestinal failure from different aspects, such as physiological characteristics, histologic features, and cellular and molecular levels.

#### *Physiological characteristics*

In terms of physiological characteristics, intestinal barrier failure has been described as a pathological hallmark of aging in both animal and human studies (Funk et al., 2020; Parrish, 2017). The function of intestinal digestion and absorption decreases during aging, and this physiological change significantly alters the intestinal flora structure (DeJong et al., 2020), such as a decrease in *Akkermansia muciniphila* (Akk) and short-chain fatty acid (SCFA)-producing bacteria, and a marked increase of potentially proinflammatory commensal microbes (Ragonnaud and Biragyn, 2021). Akk is a bacterium that degrades mucins and provides energy to beneficial microbes, as well as protects the integrity of the intestinal epithelium by activating epithelial cells and producing mucus. Its decrease in the gut of aging mice and, possibly, elderly people leads to leaky gut, which in turn leads to low levels of systemic inflammation, also known as “inflammaging” (Ragonnaud and Biragyn, 2021). In conclusion, during intestinal aging, changes in the physiological characteristics include a reduction in the diversity of the intestinal flora and a decrease in beneficial bacteria such as Akk bacteria, and a reduction in intestinal permeability, which triggers a range of health problems, including irregular intestinal transit, decreased appetite, leaky gut, intestinal inflammation and premature death of elderly

people (An et al., 2018; Nagpal et al., 2018).

#### *Histologic features*

Histologic features associated with intestinal aging include increased microbial metabolites, thinning of the mucus layer and an increase in villus length. In the intestine of healthy young people, beneficial commensal bacterial members of *Firmicutes* produce SCFAs. SCFAs (e.g., butyrate, propionate and acetate) have physiological functions such as providing energy to commensal microbes and colonocytes, inducing production of mucus, maintaining intestinal integrity, regulating the differentiation of CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells and the activation of CD8<sup>+</sup> T cells (Arpaia et al., 2013; Trompette et al., 2018). In aged mouse and human intestine, SCFAs levels are generally reduced and this reduction favors the survival of bacteria capable of degrading mucins in the intestine (Nagpal et al., 2018). In aged mice, decreased mucins lead to a thin, discontinuous mucus layer that allows direct interaction between microbes and intestinal epithelium, which triggers an inflammatory response (Elderman et al., 2017). Another study shows an increase in the length of intestinal villi in aged mice (Suzuki et al., 2022).

#### *Cellular alterations*

At the cellular level, physiological changes in aging-related intestinal failure are associated with deterioration in the function of ISCs. Upon aging, ISCs suffer from an accumulation of cellular and DNA damage (Liu and Rando, 2011). Thus, ISCs are highly prone to stem cell exhaustion, which is an integrative hallmark of aging (López-Otín et al., 2013). Abnormal proliferation of ISCs in *Drosophila* is associated with aging (Jasper, 2020). The expression of the ISC marker *Lgr5* decreases in aged mice. Upon aging, the number of crypts where ISCs are located decreases, while the size of intestinal crypts, the number of Paneth cells and goblet cells increase in aged mice (Nalapareddy et al., 2017; Nalapareddy et al., 2022). There is a significant aging-induced reduction in the organoid-forming capacity of colonic crypts derived from biopsies of healthy human donors, which indicates a reduction in ISC function (Pentimikko et al., 2019).

#### *Molecular changes*

Aging-induced aberrant proliferation of ISCs is associated with alterations in multiple signaling pathways, including different endogenous and exogenous signals such as Wnt, Notch and Sirt1/mTORC1. During aging in mice and humans, canonical Wnt signaling is reduced in ISCs, Paneth cells, and mesenchyme, which leads to decreased ISC regenerative potential upon aging. Addition of exogenous Wnt such as *Wnt3a in vitro* improves regeneration of aging ISCs (Nalapareddy et al., 2017). In addition to Wnt signaling, the expression levels of Notch1 receptor and target *Olfactome-*

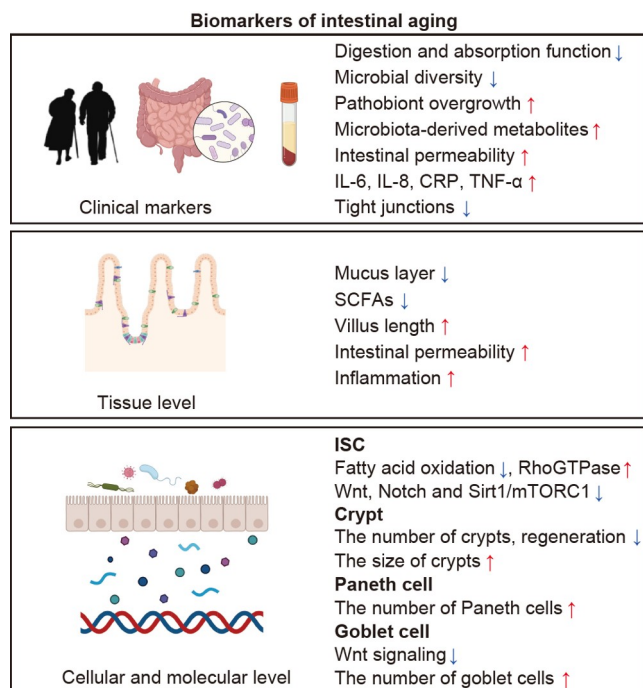
*din-4 (Olfm4)* gene in the Notch signaling pathway are reduced in the ISCs of aging mice (VanDussen et al., 2012). Upon aging, levels of Sirt1 and activity of mTORC1 also decline, and the treatment with the NAD<sup>+</sup> precursor nicotinamide riboside rejuvenates ISCs from aged mice and reverses an impaired ability to repair gut damage (Igarashi et al., 2019). Aging leads to a reduction in the number and function of ISCs in mice, which is associated with decreased fatty acid oxidation (FAO). Pharmacological activation of FAO or addition of FAO substrates (e.g., palmitate) enhances aging ISC organoid formation capacity (Mihaylova et al., 2018). *Cdc42*, a small RhoGTPase, has increased activity in proliferating TA cells and ISCs in aged mice, and inhibition of *Cdc42* activity enhances ISC regeneration after radiation-induced injury and organoid formation in aging crypts and ISCs (Nalapareddy et al., 2021). The discovery of these markers strongly supports that the function of aging ISCs can be reversed by targeted mechanisms and also improves the understanding of the molecular alterations in the extrinsic physiology and intrinsic signaling of aging intestinal failure (Figure 21; Table S14 in Supporting Information).

#### *Secretory factors detectable in biofluids*

Clinically, aging-related secretory factors are detectable in body fluids, such as serum, plasma. Increased LPS can be detected in the plasma of elderly people. LPS is produced by the increased production of gram-negative bacteria in the gut and enters the blood circulation through the intestines, leading to the activation of chronic inflammatory factors (Bosco and Noti, 2021; Nagpal et al., 2018; Stevens et al., 2018). As a result, the elderly population tends to have high concentrations of inflammatory factors such as IL-6, IL-8, CRP and TNF $\alpha$  in their serum (Chambers and Akbar, 2020; Espinoza and Walston, 2005). High expression of inflammatory cytokines can reduce the expression of tight junction proteins in aged mouse and human intestine (e.g., Zonulin and Claudin), which increases intestinal permeability and induces long-term inflammation (An et al., 2018; DeJong et al., 2020; Mabbott, 2015). In addition, indole levels have been reported to decrease, while kynurenine increased in aged mouse and human fecal samples and mouse serum (Hohman and Osborne, 2022). Kynurenine, an alternative tryptophan-derived product, is a primary driver of the aging process and is associated with high mortality in humans (Kim et al., 2020a). Overall, an increase in bacterial metabolites and inflammatory factors, as well as a decrease in tight junction proteins, can be detected in the blood during aging.

#### *Summary and perspectives*

In this section, we review biomarkers of intestinal aging at the physiological characteristics, histologic features, cellular and molecular levels. Upon aging, the reduced intestinal



**Figure 21** Biomarkers of intestinal aging. Abbreviations: mTORC1, mammalian target of rapamycin complex 1.

barrier integrity facilitates the entry of microbes/metabolites into the circulation, which promotes inflammation and induces disease. With the improvement of ISC organoid culture technology and maturation of single-cell sequencing technology, quantifying the phenotype and function of intestinal epithelial cells in the elderly and finding more biomarkers of intestinal aging will be the key to future research. These biomarkers could provide new intervention strategies to improve the quality of life and increase life expectancy in the global aging population.

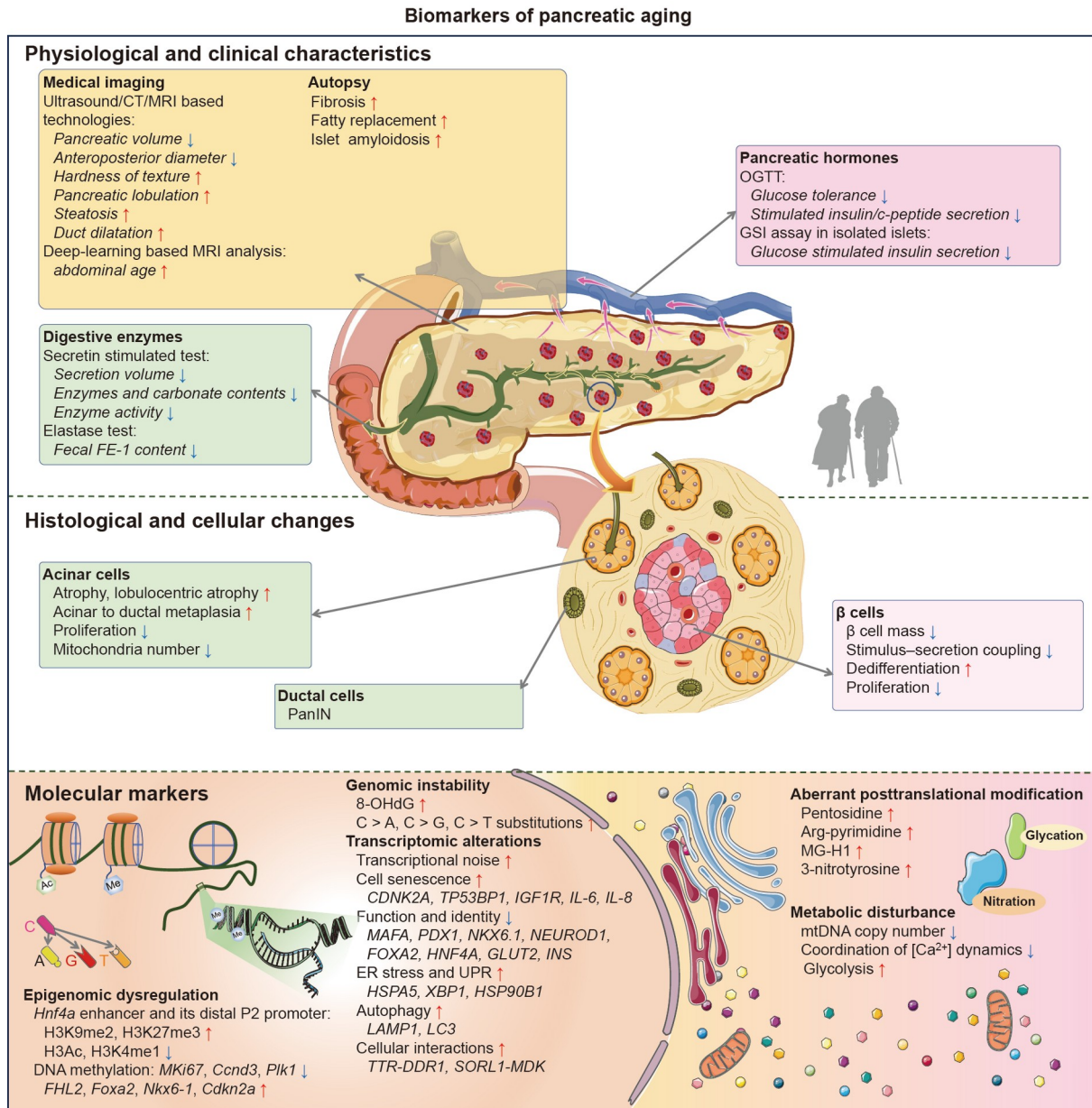
### Pancreatic aging

The pancreas lies in the upper abdomen behind the stomach and has a complex histology, with endocrine and exocrine cells coexisting in the same organ. It belongs to the gastrointestinal system that produces and secretes digestive enzymes into the intestine and is also an endocrine organ that makes and secretes critical metabolism-regulating hormones (Gyr et al., 1985). Exocrine pancreas, which comprises more than 95% of the pancreatic mass, primarily includes acinar and duct cells, with associated connective tissue, vessels, and nerves (Longnecker, 2014). Acinar cells make up about 85% of the pancreas and are arranged in acini, which empty into ducts and are functional units for digestive enzyme synthesis, storage, and secretion, including lipase, amylase, trypsin, chymotrypsin, and elastase (Longnecker, 2014; Madole et al., 2016). The centroacinar cells are an extension of the most peripheral of duct cells and partially cover the apical surface

of each acinus. Downstream of the centroacinar cells are the intercalated ducts, which converge and form the intralobular ducts, then the interlobular ducts, and eventually drain into the main pancreatic duct (Figure 22). Endocrine pancreas, which comprises 1%–2% of pancreatic mass, is also called the islet of Langerhans (Figure 22), consists of  $\alpha$  cells,  $\beta$  cells, delta cells, PP cells, and epsilon cells that make and secrete insulin, glucagon, somatostatin, and pancreatic polypeptide into the blood, respectively (Longnecker, 2014). Of these,  $\beta$  cells make up 60%–80% of the islet cell population and their dysfunction may cause diabetes mellitus (Noguchi and Huisin, 2019).

### Physiological characteristics

Both the exocrine and endocrine parts of the pancreas undergo aging (Figure 22; Table S15 in Supporting Information). Pancreatic exocrine function deteriorates with age, manifested as pancreatic exocrine insufficiency (Herzig et al., 2011), which may lead to maldigestion and malnutrition (Feibusch and Holt, 1982; L  hr et al., 2018). Secretin stimulation test (SST), or secretin test, is a standard test for pancreas exocrine function, measuring the pancreatic secretory volume, bicarbonate output, and pancreatic enzymes output (Dossin, 2011; Steer et al., 1995). Studies based on this test document that duodenal aspirates from elderly individuals contain significantly reduced volume of pancreatic secretions (Fikry, 1968; Matsumoto et al., 1989), reduced concentrations of pancreatic enzymes and bicarbonate (Matsumoto et al., 1989; Tiscornia et al., 1986; Vellas et al., 1988), as well as reduced activity of amylase and trypsin (Fikry, 1968). Fecal elastase test (FET) is to determine the elastase-1 (FE-1, an enzyme secreted by pancreas) content in feces, a highly sensitive marker in the diagnosis of severe and moderate exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (Herzig et al., 2011; L  th et al., 2001). 10%–21.6% of the elderly have pancreatic exocrine insufficiency (EPI, with FE-1 <200  $\mu\text{g}\cdot\text{g}^{-1}$ ) and 5% of them have serious pancreatic exocrine insufficiency (SEPI, with FE-1 <100  $\mu\text{g}\cdot\text{g}^{-1}$ ), indicating that the incidence of EPI and SEPI increases significantly with age (Herzig et al., 2011; L  th et al., 2001; Piciocchi et al., 2015). For pancreatic endocrine, its function is mainly reflected by glycemia control, glucose tolerance, and fasting or stimulated insulin/c-peptide secretion. Glycated hemoglobin test (Hemoglobin A1c, HbA1c) is a clinical test for glycemia control, reflecting the blood glucose fluctuation in the past 2–3 months (Sherwani et al., 2016). A couple of studies in different populations reported that the HbA1c level is higher in the elderly than that in the younger individuals (Ametz et al., 1982; Yang et al., 1997). Especially for the elderly with type 2 diabetes (T2D), a less stringent HbA1c standard is suggested to maximize the treatment benefits and minimize harm (Lipska et al., 2016). Glucose tolerance and insulin secretion are usually measured through oral glucose



**Figure 22** Biomarkers of pancreatic aging. The aged pancreases exhibit decreased pancreatic volume, hardened texture, increased lobulation, steatosis, and duct dilatation, which can be detected by ultrasound/CT/MRI-based medical imaging technologies. Exocrine functional decay during aging can be detected by secretin stimulation test and fecal elastase test. Islet dysfunction during aging is reflected by decreased insulin secretion and impaired glucose tolerance during OGTT *in vivo*. At the histological level, increased prevalence of fibrosis, atrophy, lobulocentric atrophy, ADM, PanIN, and fatty replacement was observed in exocrine pancreas; and increased fibrosis, amyloidosis, decreased vascular density, and reduced β cell mass were observed in endocrine islet during aging. At the molecular level, markers indicating genomic instability, epigenomic dysregulation, transcriptomic alterations, aberrant posttranslational modification and metabolic disturbance are identified. Abbreviations: IGF1R, insulin like growth factor 1 receptor; HSP90B1, heat shock protein 90 beta family member 1.

tolerance test (OGTT). In humans, glucose tolerance gradually declines with age (Chang and Halter, 2003; Coordt et al., 1995). This age-related glucose intolerance is frequently accompanied by insulin resistance; meanwhile, a decline of glucose- or meal-stimulated insulin/c-peptide secretion with age also indicates β cell dysfunction in the elderly (Basu et al., 2003; Chang et al., 2006; Chen et al., 1985; Fritsche et al., 2002; Gumbiner et al., 1989; Kahn et al., 1990; Muller et

al., 1996). Insulin secretion in isolated human islets also showed a declined glucose stimulation index (GSI) *in vitro*, compromised coordination of  $[Ca^{2+}]$  dynamics, and impaired insulin secretion dynamics in the elderly (Barker et al., 2015; Westacott et al., 2017). These assays act with the value as minimally invasive and promising biomarkers for diagnosis of metabolic diseases and assessment of the health status and aging of pancreas.

### *Imaging traits*

Medical imaging is a promising source for biomarker development as it provides a macroscopic view of tissues of interest (O'Connor et al., 2017) and has advantages of non-invasiveness, readily availability in clinical care, and repeatability (Lambin et al., 2017; Morin et al., 2018). CT (Caglar et al., 2012), MRI (Sato et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2021b), ultrasonography (Glaser and Stienecker, 2000), endoscopic ultrasonography (EUS) (Rajan et al., 2005), endoscopic ultrasound elastography (EUS-elastography) (Janssen and Papavassiliou, 2014), and endoscopic retrocholangiography (ERCP) (Anand et al., 1989; Hastier et al., 1998), etc., have been commonly used to assess the age-related morphological changes of the human pancreas. Reduction of pancreatic volume, hardening of texture, and dilatation of the pancreatic ducts, as well as pancreatic lobulation (Sato et al., 2012) and pancreatic steatosis (Begovatz et al., 2015) are the main findings from these studies associated with aging, which are potential biomarkers for the macroscopic changes of pancreatic aging (Table S15 in Supporting Information).

Pancreatic atrophy is considered to be one of the characteristics of pancreatic aging. MRI analysis shows the pancreatic anteroposterior (AP) diameter reaches maximum values at the age of 30–39 years, followed by a gradual decrease, especially in the tail of the pancreas (Sato et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2021b). Accordingly, studies showed that the pancreatic volumes gradually increased to peak during the ages ranging from 20–49 years, and gradually decreased after 60 years of age by CT/MRI examinations (Caglar et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2021b; Yoon et al., 2020). Janssen and Papavassiliou (2014) found that the average strain values of pancreases were 110.2 in the young and middle-aged group and 80.0 in the elderly group by semi-quantitative EUS-elastography, indicating that the pancreas becomes significantly harder during aging. As regards dilatation of the pancreatic ducts, Glaser and Stienecker (2000) analyzed the results of pancreatic duct diameters measured by ultrasonography, and found that the mean diameter of the pancreatic duct was 1.5, 1.9 and 2.3 mm for the 18–29, 40–49 and  $\geq 80$  years old groups, respectively. Using ERCP, Anand et al. (1989) found that the mean diameter of the main pancreatic duct of the pancreatic body in those two groups was 2.36 and 2.86 mm in the two groups of people aged  $< 40$  and  $\geq 40$ , respectively, indicating a significant broadening of the main pancreatic duct with age.

The development of deep-learning-based image segmentation facilitates analyzing medical images automatically and identifying pancreas changes, such as volumetric differences, at the pixel level among large populations, thus has been widely used in various medical imaging tasks (Cai et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2021c). For example, the deep-learning-based identification of CT biomarkers facilitates the diag-

nosis of T2D, such as measurements of pancreatic CT attenuation and visceral fat (Tallam et al., 2022). A 3D dual-contrast nnU-Net aided segmentation of pancreas on Dixon MRI images automates the assessment of pancreatic fat distribution with high reliability (Lin et al., 2023). In terms of pancreatic aging, a recent study by Le Goallec et al. (2022) built an abdominal age predictor by training convolutional neural networks to predict abdominal age from liver MRIs and pancreas MRIs, which is driven by both liver and pancreas anatomical features, as well as surrounding organs and tissues. They found that the accelerated abdominal aging is associated with biomarkers such as body impedance and blood pressure, clinical phenotypes such as chest pain, diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, and even environmental and socioeconomic factors (Le Goallec et al., 2022). It is foreseeable that deep learning (DL) technology has promising potential in the development of aging clocks by taking advantage of the availability of mass medical imaging data.

### *Histological features*

Taking advantage of pancreas autopsies or pancreas tissue from organ donors, a mass of histological studies on pancreatic aging have been conducted, allowing the identification of microscopic histological changes during pancreatic aging.

In the exocrine pancreas, the aging-associated histological alterations mainly include increased fibrosis, fatty replacement, lobulocentric atrophy (LCA), presence of low-grade pancreatic intraepithelial neoplasia (PanIN). Pancreatic fibrosis can be caused by cell death, inflammation, or ductal obstruction, via cytokine-triggered transition of resident fibroblasts/pancreatic stellate cells to myofibroblasts and subsequent extracellular matrix production and deposition (Klöppel et al., 2003). The pattern of fibrosis in the aged pancreas was found to be multifocal and predominantly intralobular, termed patchy lobular fibrosis in the elderly (PLFE) (Detlefsen et al., 2005), which is present in 50% of those older than 60 years (Matsuda et al., 2017). Increased fibrosis is not only present in exocrine tissue, but also within or around islets, peri-vasculatures, and peri-ducts in the elderly (Chen et al., 2021a; Gupta and Kumar, 2018; Hastier et al., 1998; Li et al., 2011b). Pancreatic fatty replacement, also known as lipomatosis, is describing the partial replacement of the acinar parenchyma by adipose tissue. The proportion of fat in pancreas increases progressively with age in both rodents and human beings (Murakami et al., 2017; Walters, 1966). LCA represents a change that affects the center of the pancreatic lobules, which is a common phenomenon in the aging pancreas (Detlefsen et al., 2005). LCA often co-occurs with other important age-related alterations, such as fibrosis, acinar to ductal metaplasia (ADM) (Esposito and Häberle, 2022), and PanIN (Matsuda et al., 2017). Among them, the frequency of PanIN, a precursor of pancreatic ductal ade-

nocarcinoma is closely correlated with age, as low-grade PanINs are uncommon in patients younger than 40 years but become more obvious after 40 years of age (Matsuda et al., 2015).

In the endocrine islets, amyloidosis (Su et al., 2012) and reduced vasculature density (Chen et al., 2021a) have been reported as age-associated histological changes. Islet amyloidosis, or amyloid deposit, which mainly occurs in the pancreas of T2D patients and is strongly associated with islet dysfunction, affects 6% of non-diabetic individuals after 80 years of age (Su et al., 2012). Both the prevalence of islet amyloidosis and the frequency of affected islets increase with age (Cornwell and Westermarck, 1980; Su et al., 2012). In addition, the instantaneous and dynamic hormone output of islets also relies on rich vascularization (Ballian and Brunicardi, 2007; Gorczyca et al., 2010). By comparing adult and aged mice, the decreased number of capillaries and arterioles, but not in perivascular cells, is also observed in the aged pancreas (Chen et al., 2021a). Chen et al. (2021a) also discovered a distinct age-dependent subset of endothelial cells, which supports  $\beta$  cell expansion but declines during aging. Due to the invasiveness of obtaining pancreas biopsies, these microscopic alterations can only be assessed as aging biomarkers in research so far. Luckily, some of the above alterations can be partially reflected by the measurements from medical imaging. For instance, pancreas atrophy can be reflected by the pancreas volume measurements from CT/MRI/US (Caglar et al., 2012; Sato et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2021b; Yoon et al., 2020), fibrosis by pancreas hardness measurements from EUS- elastography (Janssen and Pappavassiliou, 2014), and fatty replacement by steatosis measurements from CT (Meier et al., 2007) or MRI (Li et al., 2011b; Sato et al., 2012).

### Cellular alterations

Cellular alterations of each cell type in the pancreas are shown in detail (Table S15 in Supporting Information). Generally, the cellular proliferation rate in the pancreas decreases with aging, not only in the endocrine and exocrine cells but also endothelial cells and stellate cells (Chen et al., 2021a; Chen et al., 2009; Fitzner et al., 2012; Reers et al., 2009; Takahashi et al., 2012). Here, cell type-specific age-related characteristics which have been extensively documented are introduced (Figure 22; Table S15 in Supporting Information).

(1) Exocrine cells. A critical alteration of exocrine pancreatic aging is acinar atrophy, which is commonly accompanied by ADM, a critical contributor to lobulocentric atrophy and ductal cell hyperplasia (Detlefsen et al., 2005; Matsuda et al., 2017). Metaplasia between different cell types occurs through multiple mechanisms, including dominant proliferation or loss of one cell type, transdifferentiation or dedifferentiation of specific cells, and abnormal

activation of progenitor cells (Tosh and Slack, 2002). Similarly, ADM is a process that acinar cells reprogram into ductal-like cells with ductal cell characteristics (Jiang et al., 2022; Pour et al., 1982). Early ADM cells express both ductal (e.g., CK19) and acinar markers (e.g., trypsin, amylase) and established ADM cells only express ductal markers, indicating a transdifferentiating process (Esposito and Häberle, 2022). Besides, the proliferation rate and mitochondria number in acinar cells were also found to decrease with age in mouse studies (Nagata, 2012; Oates and Morgan, 1986; Takahashi et al., 2012). In ductal cells, a key age-related pathological change is oncogenic transformation, which occurs possibly via the accumulation of gene mutations, epigenetic dysregulation, telomere dysfunction, or an altered stromal milieu (Arai and Takubo, 2007; DePinho, 2000; Risques and Kennedy, 2018). Pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDAC) is the most common and lethal form of pancreatic cancer, and one of its key risk factors is aging (Jentzsch et al., 2020; Matsuda, 2019). Except for the aforementioned PanIN, another main precursor of PDAC is intraductal papillary mucinous neoplasms (IPMN). The median ages at the time of diagnosis for IPMN and PDAC were both over 70 years (Khan et al., 2010; Latenstein et al., 2020).

(2) Endocrine cells. Different from age-related carcinogenesis in ductal cells, the neoplasms in islet endocrine cells are rarely associated with age. In contrast, the aging-related change in islet cells accounts for the strong association of T2D incidence with age (Halter, 2010). T2D represents 90 percent of diabetes cases and is generally associated with insulin resistance and compensatory hyperinsulinemia, which are early indicators of metabolic dysfunction. When the insulin secretion from islet  $\beta$  cells fails to compensate for the insulin resistance, hyperglycemia occurs and  $\beta$  cell dysfunction accelerates (Weir et al., 2020). Clinical studies have shown that insulin secretion in the elderly is impaired, which might contribute to the increasing incidence of diabetes with age. The aging-related cellular changes in  $\beta$  cells include the following aspects. (i) Decreased  $\beta$  cell mass and restricted proliferation rate. Some reports have indicated a modest age-associated reduction in  $\beta$  cell mass in non-diabetic subjects (Mizukami et al., 2014; Rahier et al., 2008; Saisho et al., 2013), which is possibly due to the restricted  $\beta$  cell proliferation rate and increase of senescent  $\beta$  cell in the elderly (Chen et al., 2009; Desgraz et al., 2011; Reers et al., 2009). The clearance of these senescent cells by senolytics is demonstrated to improve insulin secretion in aged mice (Aguayo-Mazzucato et al., 2019). (ii)  $\beta$  cell identity alterations.  $\beta$  cell dedifferentiation is a critical mechanism for  $\beta$  cell failure in type 2 diabetes (Talchai et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2020b), manifested with a decrease or loss of maturity-related genes and obtaining of progenitor gene expressions, as well as compromised  $\beta$  cell function. Recently, Song et al.

(2022b) found an almost 2-fold increase in the proportion of dedifferentiated cells in the elderly and middle-aged groups versus the young group. Earlier studies also reported that  $\beta$  cell maturity and identity genes such as PDX1 had lower expression in the elderly than in the younger individuals (Avrahami et al., 2015; Mizukami et al., 2014; Reers et al., 2009), supporting the notion of increased dedifferentiation level during aging. Single-cell sequencing analyses in human islets or non-human primates also revealed the age-associated increase of transcription noise and compromised  $\beta$  cell identity along with increased oxidative stress, increased unfolding protein response and ER stress, downregulated transcription factor expressions, and impaired proteostasis (Enge et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021b; Shrestha et al., 2022). Similar to the histological alterations, these aging-related cellular changes also need to acquire the pancreas tissue, therefore their application is restricted to aging biomarkers research. Developing non-invasive or minimally invasive biomarkers for pancreatic aging and establishing the association between these biomarkers with the histological and cellular alterations during aging are urgent for pancreatic aging prediction.

#### Molecular changes

Driven by intrinsic and external factors, pancreatic aging is caused by interlinked molecular changes over time. In recent years, with the aid of cutting-edge technologies, especially those based on omics (genomics, epigenomics, transcriptomics, proteomics and metabolomics), novel biomarkers of pancreatic aging have been identified (Table S15 in Supporting Information). More importantly, these approaches provide the potential for identifying previously unknown interconnections among different biomarkers associated with pancreatic aging.

(1) Genomic instability. Mutational loads are considered to be positively correlated with pancreatic aging. Cells harboring DNA sequence rearrangements, which accumulated in aged pancreas, led to an increased mutation frequency (Wiktor-Brown et al., 2006). The most common method to study somatic mutations is to perform whole genome sequencing or whole exome sequencing, which hinders the discovery of rare mutations. However, single-cell genomic sequencing or DNA sequencing of many cells originating from the same clone *in vitro* is capable of uncovering rare mutations but costly. Enge et al. (2017) developed a computational method for determining genetic variation associated with aging using scRNA-seq data collected from pancreata with donors spanning six decades of life. This identified genome instability as a novel age-dependent signature in endocrine cells, characterized by high rates of C>A, C>G and C>T substitutions for the transcribed strand related to oxidative stress in aged cells. This mutational signature may serve as a candidate biomarker of pancreatic aging.

Consistently, 8-OHdG (Reiter et al., 1999; Shi et al., 2004), a major oxidative DNA damage marker, has been observed to be higher in aged rodent pancreas. Additionally, the free base of 8-OHdG, namely 8-hydroxyguanine (8-OHG), was detected to be elevated in plasma samples from diabetic patients and positively correlated with endocrine dysfunction (Shin et al., 2001). This may indicate the potential of 8-OHG as a plasma biomarker of pancreatic aging.

(2) Epigenomic dysregulation. Epigenomic changes are also of great predictive or diagnostic value in pancreatic aging and related diseases, as extensive studies have linked the dysregulation in histone modification or DNA methylation to pancreatic aging (Avrahami et al., 2015; Bacos et al., 2016; Horvath, 2013; Li et al., 2019b; Sandovici et al., 2011). For example, *Hnf4a*, a transcription factor involved in regulating insulin secretion, was epigenetically silenced with age (Sandovici et al., 2011). In aged rat islets, the *Hnf4a* enhancer and its distal P2 promoter were enriched with repressive marks H3K9me2 and H3K27me3, while lacking active marks H3Ac and H3K4me1, thus causing impaired promoter-enhancer interaction and its gene expression (Sandovici et al., 2011). Additionally, in mice, aging-associated methylation changes explained the decline in proliferative capacity and enhanced insulin secretion in  $\beta$  cells of old mice (16–20 months) (Avrahami et al., 2015). Promoters of genes involved in cell-cycle, such as *Ki-67* (*Mki67*), cyclin D3 (*Ccnd3*), and *Plkl1*, became *de novo* methylated, and their expression was decreased during  $\beta$  cell aging. Whereas, the differentially methylated regions associated with genes involved in  $\beta$  cell function, such as *Foxa2* and NK6 homeobox 1 (*Nkx6-1*), and cell cycle inhibitor *Cdkn2a* became demethylated with age, and their expression was increased (Avrahami et al., 2015). And the methylation level of the aging-associated differentially methylated promoters could be partially reversed via rejuvenation strategies (Chondronasiou et al., 2022). A cohort study of genome-wide analysis for DNA methylation in islets from donors aged 26–74 years identified loci with elevated DNA methylation levels with age (Bacos et al., 2016). Some age-associated DNA methylation changes in blood can mirror the changes in islets. For example, the methylation level of CpG sites located in promoter regions of four and a half LIM domains 2 (*FHL2*) was increased with age both in islets and blood (Bacos et al., 2016). The increased methylation hindered binding of repressive transcription factors, thereby enhancing *FHL2* expression (Bacos et al., 2016). Interestingly, high expression level of *FHL2* was closely correlated with high blood HbA1c level (Fadista et al., 2014; Krus et al., 2014; Taneera et al., 2012) and its level was much higher in blood samples of T2D patients compared to that of the healthy donors (Solimena et al., 2018). Accordingly, *FHL2* deficiency improved a series of pancreatic functions, such as insulin secretory capacity of pancreatic islets and glucose

tolerance, further indicating the potential of *FHL2* methylation as a biomarker and target for therapeutic interventions on pancreatic aging (Habibe et al., 2022).

(3) Transcriptomic alterations. Increasing efforts have been devoted to characterize the aging-associated transcriptomic changes in pancreas, including (i) increased transcriptional noise. Single-cell transcriptomic analyses identified pancreatic  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  cells from older individuals with increased transcriptional noise in both human and non-human primates, implying the aggravated heterogeneity of aged pancreatic cells (Enge et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021b; Shrestha et al., 2022). (ii) Increased expression of cellular senescence markers. Extensive studies measured the mRNA and protein levels of *CDKN2A*, DNA damage response factor (*TP53BP1*), transmembrane tyrosine kinase (*IGF1R*), and the genes encoding SASP factors such as *IL-6* and *IL-8* to indicate the senescent state of aged pancreatic cells (Aguayo-Mazzucato et al., 2019; Arda et al., 2016; El-Far et al., 2020; Enge et al., 2017; Helman et al., 2016). (iii) Decreased expression of cellular function and identity genes. Decreased expression of key  $\beta$  cell transcription factors such as MAF bZIP transcription factor A (*MAFA*), pancreatic and duodenal homeobox 1 (*PDX1*), *NKX-6.1*, neuronal differentiation 1 (*NEUROD1*), *FOXA2* and hepatocyte nuclear factor 4 alpha (*HNF4A*), solute carrier family 2 member 2 (*GLUT2*), and insulin (*INS*) in aged mammalian  $\beta$  cells, is associated with the dedifferentiation of  $\beta$  cells that probably contributes to diabetic  $\beta$  cell failure (Aguayo-Mazzucato et al., 2019; Ihm et al., 2007; Odom et al., 2004; Shrestha et al., 2022; Talchai et al., 2012). (iv) Increased ER stress and unfolded protein response. In senescent  $\beta$  cells, protein synthesis was increased to meet the higher demand for glucose metabolism, which overloads the ER and triggers ER stress response and UPR pathways (Gonzalez-Teuber et al., 2019; Iwawaki et al., 2004; Kalwat et al., 2021; Lee and Lee, 2022). In aged human islets, a chronic state of ER stress was observed, which contributed to  $\beta$  cell secretory dysfunction and/or death (Shrestha et al., 2022). *HSPA5* and X-box binding protein-1 (*XBP-1*), encoding key regulators of ER stress and UPR, and *HSP90B1*, encoding a molecular chaperon, were transcriptionally increased in aged  $\beta$  cells when early adaptive events were present (Li et al., 2021b; Shrestha et al., 2022). The  $\beta$  cell-specific age-related upregulation of *HSP90B1*, verified to be a key insulin secretion regulator, may serve as a potential biomarker for  $\beta$  cell aging. (v) Increased autophagy. Autophagy-associated genes like lysosome-associated membrane protein 1 (*LAMP1*, lysosome marker) were transcriptionally increased in human and rat aged  $\beta$  cells, together with elevated *LAMP1* and microtubule associated protein 1 light chain 3 alpha/beta (*LC3A/B*, autophagosome marker) protein levels, indicating that the extent of pancreatic autophagy is positively correlated with age (Shrestha et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2013b). (vi) Enhanced

cellular interaction. Cell-cell communications were shown to be enhanced in aged islets, especially the interaction between the ligand transthyretin (*TTR*) expressed by  $\alpha$  cells and its receptor discoidin domain receptor tyrosine kinase 1 (*DDR1*), or that between sortilin related receptor 1 (*SORL1*) upregulated in aged  $\beta$  cells and its ligand midkine (*MDK*) highly expressed in all four kinds of aged islet cells, implying that the altered microenvironments in aged pancreatic islets might give rise to disruption of proteostasis and activated UPR in aged  $\beta$  cells (Li et al., 2021b).

(4) Aberrant posttranslational modification. PTMs are increasingly being recognized as important markers of organ aging. Glycated and nitrated proteins, the non-enzymatically modified proteins, accumulated in aged pancreatic islets. Kehm et al. (2018) observed an accumulation of advanced glycation end products (AGEs), such as pentosidine, argpyrimidine and MG-H1, and nitrated proteins (3-nitrotyrosine, 3-NT) in the islet vascular system of old mice. Since the formation of AGEs has been reported to be associated with  $\beta$  cell aging and contributed to the decline in insulin secretory capacity of  $\beta$  cells, thereby rendering them potentially valuable protein biomarkers of pancreatic islet aging (Coughlan et al., 2011; Lim et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2009). Moreover, other modifications, such as SUMOylation and *O*-GlcNAcylation have also been identified to play crucial roles in regulation of  $\beta$  cell function and viability during pathological processes (Akimoto et al., 2007; Li et al., 2020c). For instance, Akimoto et al. (2007) found a global increase in *O*-GlcNAcylated proteins in the diabetic rat model, which was accompanied by impeded glucose-stimulated insulin secretion. Despite these important discoveries, further research is warranted to uncover the roles of these PTMs in the physiological aging of the pancreas, with the goal of defining biomarkers and potential therapeutic targets for pancreatic aging.

(5) Metabolic disturbance. During aging, the endocrine pancreas undergoes metabolic changes, contributing to a deregulated glucose homeostasis. Mitochondria play essential roles in stimulus-secretion coupling in  $\beta$  cells. Depletion of mtDNA copy number is associated with impaired insulin secretion in pancreatic  $\beta$  cell lines (Wollheim, 2000). In isolated human islets, there was a negative correlation between mtDNA copy number and islet donor age, suggesting decline in mtDNA copy number might be an age-related characteristic of  $\beta$  cell (Cree et al., 2008). Meantime, in  $\beta$  cells, elevated mitochondrial respiration subsequently induced  $[Ca^{2+}]$  influx through cell membrane localized voltage-gated  $[Ca^{2+}]$  channels and consequently triggering insulin exocytosis (Westacott et al., 2017; Wollheim and Maechler, 2002). By examining  $\beta$  cell  $[Ca^{2+}]$  and electrical communication during aging in mouse and human islets, Westacott et al. (2017) found that there was a decline in the coordination of  $[Ca^{2+}]$  dynamics, gap junction coupling, and



insulin secretion dynamics with age, indicating an age-related decay in stimulus-secretion coupling in  $\beta$  cell. In addition, aged mouse islets show increased glycolysis and altered cytosolic NAD metabolism, affecting  $\beta$  cell function and identity, similar to that seen in diabetic islets (Murao et al., 2022). Metabolite profiling identified 1,5-AG, 5'-methylthioadenosine (5'-MTA), X-11315 as potential biomarkers of pancreatic aging and T2D in human serum, saliva, and urine samples (Mook-Kanamori et al., 2017; Pramodkumar et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017e; Zhang et al., 2021c). It is worth mentioning that, for people aged 65 and over, via the ultra-performance liquid chromatography-tandem mass spectrometer (UPLC-MS/MS) approach, the abundance of 5'-MTA was 34 percent higher in the urine of late-onset diabetic subjects, which therefore may be a promising biomarker of pancreatic aging and T2D in human urine (Tam et al., 2017).

Expanding molecular signatures of pancreatic aging have been identified across a number of species and different cell types. These studies have yielded important predictive and diagnostic biomarkers, and have laid the groundwork for the development of therapies for pancreatic aging and its associated diseases.

#### *Summary and perspectives*

The question of how to accurately evaluate pancreatic aging and predict the risk of associated diseases continues to fuel research efforts. Given the advancements in the development of non-invasive detection technologies, and the gradually deepening understanding of pancreatic aging, more and more diagnostic methods and biomarkers hold great potential for clinical utility to evaluate pancreatic aging. Nevertheless, efficient biomarkers to enable better judgement of the degree of pancreas degeneration and the development of effective intervention strategies are still needed. Additionally, combining existing evaluation methods to develop diagnostic panels could provide an efficient alternative to discovering new pancreatic aging biomarkers. As research progresses, we believe that imaging examinations, clinical biochemical assays, biomarker tests and other novel methods for understanding pancreatic aging will provide a wealth of beneficial opportunities for the global population.

#### **Reproductive system aging**

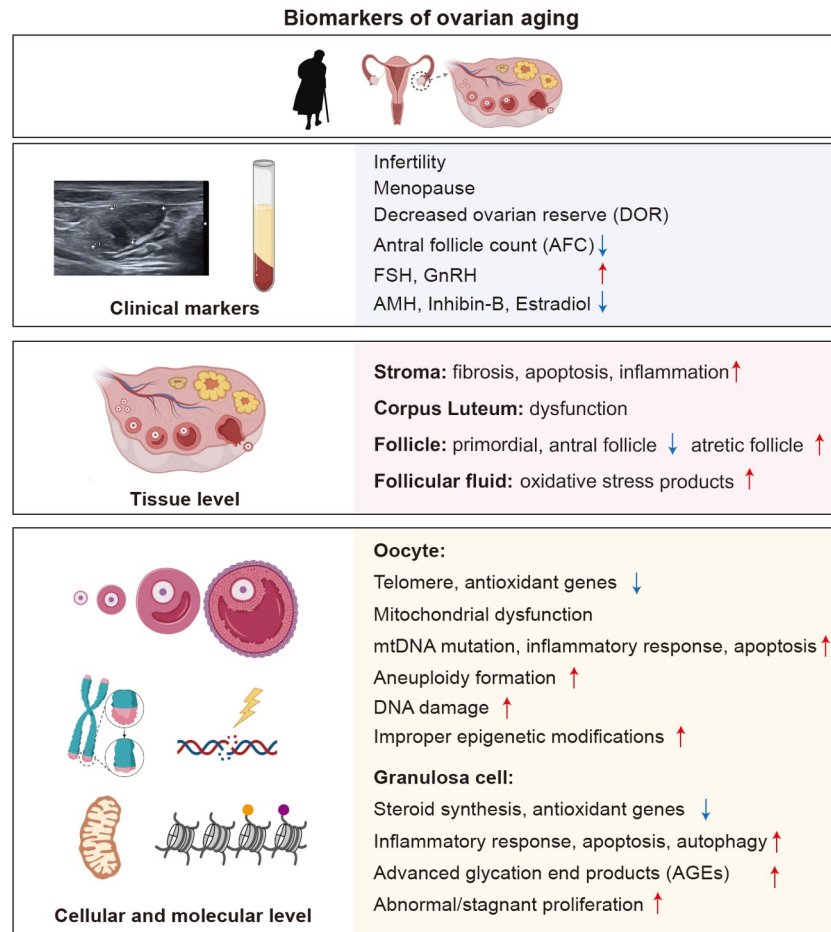
Aging is characterized by progressive physiological changes and a decline in function of organisms during adulthood (López-Otín et al., 2023). As one of the major functional systems, reproductive system aging not only compromises the fertility but also dampens the functions of other organs, leading to an array of age-associated diseases. Subfertility is one of the earliest clinical signs related to reproductive aging. Reproductive life span of women (age at natural

menopause (ANM)) remains constant (50–52 years). A later age at ANM is associated with a higher risk of cardiovascular and other reproductive aging-associated chronic diseases (Yureneva et al., 2021). Women's fecundity starts to decline gradually after the mid-20s and becomes more pronounced after 35 years of age (Ahmed et al., 2020; Broekmans et al., 2009; Kasapoğlu and Seli, 2020). In women aged  $\geq 35$  years, the incidences of infertility, aneuploidy, and birth defects dramatically increase. Since ovary plays a dominant role in the female reproductive system, reduction of female fertility over time is considered the natural consequence of ovarian aging (Busnelli et al., 2021). Although the male reproductive system ages more slowly, age-related decline in male fertility is also a hallmark of male reproductive aging (Bhasin et al., 2000). Other accompanying symptoms include a loss of libido, erectile dysfunction, as well as decreases in muscle mass and bone density, which are caused by sex hormone dyshomeostasis and known as late-onset hypogonadism (LOH) (Snyder, 2022). Moreover, the incidence of benign prostatic hyperplasia and prostate cancer also increases with age and reduces the quality of life in older men (Kaufman et al., 2019). Here, we summarize our latest understanding of the biomarkers of reproductive system aging, in particular of ovary and testis, two critical reproductive organs in female and male, respectively, which are expected to play a certain role in the diagnosis and intervention of female and male reproductive aging (Figure 23; Table S16 in Supporting Information).

#### *Biomarkers of ovarian aging*

(1) Physiological characteristics. Ovarian aging manifests as reproductive decline until menopause, accompanied by endocrine dysfunction and menstrual cycle irregularities. Subfertility is one of the earliest clinical signs in the cascade of events associated with reproductive aging. In addition, ovarian aging leads to declined secretion of estrogen and inhibin-B and elevated level of follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), which can be easily assessed by blood test, although these alterations do not become prominent until menopause. Anti-Müllerian hormone (AMH) is produced by granulosa cells of small antral follicles, not controlled by the hypothalamus or gonadotropins, and independent of the menstrual cycle. AMH and antral follicle count (AFC) represent direct and accurate measurements of the ovarian reserve (Broer et al., 2014; Practice, 2015).

(2) Imaging traits. The ovarian aging process is dominated by decline in both the quantity and the quality of oocytes or follicle reserve (Broekmans et al., 2009; Li et al., 2012; Llárena and Hine, 2021; May-Panloup et al., 2016; Qiao et al., 2014; te Velde and Pearson, 2002). The nongrowing follicles (NGFs) are considered to represent the ovarian reserve. But direct measures of ovarian NGFs in women are relatively rare due to the technical challenges, given histo-



**Figure 23** Biomarkers of ovarian aging. Clinical markers include age-associated infertility, menopause, and decreased ovarian reserve as shown by decreased antral follicle count revealed by 3D ultrasound imaging and serum AMH levels. Elevated serum FSH and reduced estradiol and inhibin-B levels can be found in peri-menopause to menopause. On the ovarian tissue level, elevated inflammation, fibrosis and apoptosis in the microenvironment, dysfunction corpus luteum, reduced number of primordial and antral follicles and elevated atretic follicles and oxidative stress products in the follicular fluid can be considered as major biomarkers indicative of ovarian aging. At the cellular and molecular levels, oocytes exhibit age-associated aneuploidy, reduced cohesin, reduced DNA damage repair, increased DNA damage, altered epigenetic modifications, shorter telomeres, reduced expression of antioxidant genes, elevated mtDNA mutation and mitochondria dysfunction, inflammatory response and apoptosis. Reduced steroid synthesis and expression of antioxidant genes, elevated inflammatory response, apoptosis, autophagy, and advanced glycation end products in granulosa cells surrounding the oocytes within the follicles or in follicular fluid provide convenient non-invasive biomarkers to indicate oocyte quality with increasing maternal age.

logical examination is invasive and time-intensive (Hansen, 2013). Antral follicle (2–10 mm diameter) count, visualized by transvaginal ultrasonography, is one of the most affordable and easy-to-perform diagnostic methods to measure ovarian reserve (Yureneva et al., 2021). An age-related decline in the AFC can be assessed by 3D ultrasound (Kupesic and Kurjak, 2002; Maheshwari et al., 2006; Scheffer et al., 1999). The number of visualized follicles has been correlated with ovarian reserve with histologic confirmation (Hansen et al., 2011), and AFC is considered as a marker of ovarian reserve (Hansen, 2013). Moreover, AFC is considered to be the best marker of ovarian response to stimulation in *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) cycles (Wang et al., 2021f). However, the accuracy of counting antral follicles depends on the experience level of the ultrasonographer.

(3) Histological features. The ovary consists of the germ-

inal epithelium layer, the nonvascularized and thick fibrous-rich layer, the cortex containing ovarian follicles, and the medulla containing loose connective tissue and blood vessels. As women enter the perimenopausal period from the reproductive period, the ovary exhibits notable morphological and structural degeneration. Ovarian shrinkage, fibrosis and stiffness increase with age (Amargant et al., 2020).

Ovarian follicles are structural and functional units of the ovary, most primordial follicles (PMFs) undergo degeneration or atresia at any stage of ovarian folliculogenesis and approximately 300,000–400,000 PMFs are retained at menarche. By the age of 33 on average, approximately 90% of the ovarian NGFs are depleted (Hansen, 2013). Only 400–500 follicles reach the ovulatory phase during the reproductive span. At the age of about 51 years, the number of follicles decreases to 750–1,000 when menopause ensues

(Zhu et al., 2022c). Ovarian biopsies are not an adequate technique for the assessment of ovarian reserve due to the irregular distribution of ovarian NGFs within the ovarian cortex (Lass, 2004). Additionally, the depletion rate of NGFs accelerates in reproductive older women compared with younger women (Gougeon et al., 1994). Recently, a quantitative morphometric analysis using modern stereology techniques has been employed to define the ovarian reserve in the primate monkey (Tu et al., 2022).

(4) Cellular alterations. Unlike most somatic cell organs, germline stem cells have not been found in adult ovaries (Hainaut and Clarke, 2021). Absence of germline stem cells directly affects ovarian tissue homeostasis and function. Exhaustion and no-replenishment of oocytes due to the absence of neo-oogenesis result in depletion of follicle reserve and thus, menopause inevitably ensues. Therefore, depletion of the PMF pool caused by massive follicular atresia and periodic ovulation is the fundamental cause of ovarian aging.

The age-related decline in female fertility is also attributable to the oocyte quality (Bentov et al., 2011; Broekmans et al., 2009; Keefe et al., 2015; Navot et al., 1991). Many factors significantly contribute to the poor oocyte quality associated with maternal aging. Among them, mitochondrial dysfunction, ROS, recombination failure, cohesin deterioration and spindle assembly checkpoint dysregulation are the leading causes of oocyte aneuploidy (Charalambous et al., 2023; Mikwar et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2022c).

Decreased mitochondrial biogenesis, impaired mitochondrial homeostasis, and free radical imbalance play critical roles in ovarian aging (Wang et al., 2017c). Mitochondrial genome, lacking of protective histones, is particularly susceptible to oxygen free radicals attack and to somatic mutation development (Busnelli et al., 2021). MtDNA mutation exacerbates female reproductive aging via impairment of the NADH/NAD<sup>+</sup> redox (Yang et al., 2020). Women aged ≥35 years with a poorer ovarian response are often characterized by a higher incidence of 4,977 bp deletion and a lower mtDNA copy number (Chan et al., 2005). Moreover, mtDNA T414G mutation of the human oocytes increases in an age-dependent manner (Barritt et al., 2000). Also, granulosa cells from women older than 38 years have been reported to contain higher levels of mtDNA deletions and damaged mitochondria (Busnelli et al., 2021), which results in a reduced capacity for steroid hormone biosynthesis and an increasing ROS generation (Liu et al., 2017c; Tatone et al., 2011).

Age-related increased ROS levels in the oocyte and other cells in the ovary and decreased antioxidant capacity result in oxidative stress, which decreases the oocyte quality and significantly accelerates the ovarian aging process (Hamatani et al., 2004; Lim and Luderer, 2011; Ntostis et al., 2021; Steuerwald et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2020d), supporting a rationale for antioxidant therapy to delay ovarian aging (Yan

et al., 2022). Autophagy is also linked to oxidative stress-driven pathologies in the aging oocyte and surrounding ovarian environment (Peters et al., 2020). The link between accumulating ROS and mtDNA damage is well-known with age (Loeb et al., 2005). The mtDNA content of cumulus cells may be considered as a biomarker for IVF outcomes with age (Yang et al., 2021). Moreover, a single-cell transcriptomic atlas of young and aged non-human primate (NHP) ovaries reveals declined expression of GPX1 and GSR in early-stage oocytes or reduced expression levels of IDH1, PRDX4 and NDUFB10, for oxidoreductase activity, in granulosa cells that could provide specific molecular biomarkers to characterize oocyte quality and indicate ovarian aging in primates (Wang et al., 2020d).

Human oocyte aneuploidy is attributed to inherent meiotic spindle instability, increased merotelic attachments, and age-related changes in kinetochore and chromosome architecture (Das and Destouni, 2023). Age-related spindle abnormality and chromosome misalignment reduce the oocyte quality and contribute to the higher prevalence of aneuploidy in women with advanced age (Battaglia et al., 1996; Broekmans et al., 2009; Capalbo et al., 2013; Charalambous et al., 2023; Hunt and Hassold, 2008; Keefe et al., 2015). Meanwhile, actin cytoskeleton organization that supports the oocyte spindle is also notably downregulated in oocytes with age (Gou et al., 2022). Premature separation of sister chromatids and misaligned chromosomes detected in cytogenetic studies of human oocytes are associated with the age-related reduction of cohesin proteins, including Rec8, SA3, and SMC1β, which are not replenished with age (Charalambous et al., 2023; Chiang et al., 2010; Duncan et al., 2012; Jessberger, 2010; Liu and Keefe, 2008; Xu et al., 2005). Spindle abnormalities in human oocytes can be detected non-invasively using polarized light microscopy (Keefe et al., 2003). Moreover, biopsies of polar bodies from the oocytes of women undergoing IVF demonstrate high rates of premature sister chromatid separation with age (Capalbo et al., 2013; Christopikou et al., 2013).

Intercellular communications between oocytes and surrounding granulosa cells or cumulus cells (CCs) are critical for folliculogenesis in development as well as in maintaining ovarian function. Granulosa cells provide nutrients and mechanical support for oocytes and follicle development and homeostasis (Eppig, 1991; Wigglesworth et al., 2013). Senescence of granulosa cells, CCs and stromal cells can lead to inflammation and fibrosis (Secomandi et al., 2022; Tu et al., 2022). Moreover, ovulation is an intensely inflammatory process that generates ROS and leads to oxidative damage (Duffy et al., 2019). A unique population of macrophage-derived multinucleated giant cells, found in reproductively old mouse ovaries, is considered as functional drivers of inflammation and fibrosis in ovarian aging (Foley et al., 2021; Umehara et al., 2022). Additionally, the age-associated

increase in collagen and decrease in hyaluronan are conserved in the human ovary (Amargant et al., 2020). Also, accumulation of AGEs products at the level of the ovarian follicle might trigger early ovarian aging (Li et al., 2012; Pertynska-Marczewska and Diamanti-Kandarakis, 2017; Stensen et al., 2014; Tatone and Amicarelli, 2013; Tatone et al., 2008). Measurement of AGEs in granulosa cells or on the surface of follicular fluid-derived cells may be used as a biomarker of ovarian aging.

(5) Molecular changes. Early oocytes despite in a dormant state are particularly susceptible to DNA damage due to long exposure to chronic inflammation and oxidative stress in the ovarian microenvironment. The DDR pathway to guard the genome stability may represent the unifying link between oocyte quality and age (Das and Destouni, 2023). DDR has been identified to be the key regulator of ANM by genome-wide association studies (Stolk et al., 2012). Recently, 290 genetic determinants of ovarian aging are identified, and assessed using normal variation in ANM. Women in the top 1% of genetic susceptibility have an equivalent risk of premature ovarian insufficiency (POI) to those carrying monogenic *FMRI* pre-mutations. The identified loci implicate a broad range of DDR processes across the life-course to shape the ovarian reserve and its rate of depletion (Ruth et al., 2021). Earlier, genomic markers such as *FMRI* pre-mutation can be regularly used to predict ovarian reserve (Wood and Rajkovic, 2013). Through whole-exome sequencing in a cohort of 1,030 patients with POI, another study detected 195 pathogenic/likely pathogenic variants in 59 known POI-causative genes and identified 20 novel POI-associated genes with a significantly higher burden of loss-of-function variants (Ke et al., 2023). Quantification of increased DNA oxidation (8-OHdG-positive) and damage ( $\gamma$ H2AX-positive granulosa cells) by immunofluorescence microscopy also serve as biomarkers of ovarian aging (Wang et al., 2020d).

Progressive telomere shortening is associated with the age-related decrease in the quality of oocytes (Keefe et al., 2006). With human age, aneuploid embryonic cells possess significantly less telomere DNA than euploid embryonic cells at the cleavage stage (Treff et al., 2011). Polar body (PB) DNA is remarkably similar to that of the oocyte, PB telomere content thus provides a promising biomarker of oocyte aging (Keefe et al., 2015). Also, shortened telomere length and diminished telomerase activity are associated with biochemical primary ovarian insufficiency (Xu et al., 2017). Measurement of telomere length in peripheral blood leukocytes or granulosa cells could serve as biomarkers of ovarian aging and POI.

(6) Secretory factors detectable in biofluids. Markers of ovarian reserve include hormone levels and sonographically measured features of the ovaries. These markers can be useful as predictors of oocyte yield following controlled ovarian stimulation and oocyte retrieval.

AMH is a dimeric glycoprotein produced by granulosa cells of preantral (primary and secondary) and small antral follicles with a diameter of about 4 mm and regulates recruitment and maturation of follicles from the primordial follicle pool (PFP) (Broekmans et al., 2009; Visser et al., 2006). AMH prevents PFP depletion by reducing phosphorylation and maintaining activation of FOXO3a (Llarena and Hine, 2021). AMH levels are relatively stable across the menstrual cycle and no seasonal difference in AMH levels is observed (Long et al., 2018). With the decrease in the number of preantral follicles and small antral follicles, AMH serum levels become diminished and will invariably become undetectable near menopause, therefore, serum AMH levels are the best available biomarker of a woman's ovarian reserve and may provide an index of age at menopause (Birch Petersen et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 2012; Tehrani et al., 2022; Toner and Seifer, 2013). Similarly, serum AMH levels appear to be high in monkeys from young to middle reproductive age, but noticeably declined from middle (from the age of 11 or 12 years) to old age (Long et al., 2018; Tu et al., 2022). Nevertheless, AMH may not reflect oocyte health or chances for conception, age is thus the only current marker of oocyte quality in determining success rates with fertility treatments (Bishop et al., 2017; Cedars, 2022; Ulrich and Marsh, 2019). However, low serum AMH levels are associated with increased risk of embryo aneuploidy in women of advanced age (Jiang et al., 2018).

Elevated serum FSH levels at relatively late reproductive age and the cycle-specific nature of its measurement highlight its limitations as a marker of true ovarian reserve (Hansen, 2013). Clinical manifestations of subfertility as well as values of  $\text{FSH} > 10 \text{ mIU mL}^{-1}$  or  $\text{AMH} < 1.0 \text{ ng mL}^{-1}$  can serve as the criteria for diagnosing decreased ovarian reserve (DOR). The nature of DOR can be physiological when a woman is over 40 years old (Yureneva et al., 2021). An estimated 10% of the general female population will experience an accelerated loss of ovarian reserve, presumably from a more rapid rate of follicular atresia, leading to a loss of fertility in the mid-30s and early menopause by age 45 (Bishop et al., 2017; Ulrich and Marsh, 2019).

BMP15, GDF9, and c-KIT play critical roles in folliculogenesis through interaction between oocytes and cumulus cells (Gilchrist et al., 2008). Ovarian expressions of BMP15, GDF9, and c-KIT decrease with age (Park et al., 2020), and their expression levels in cumulus granulosa cells could serve as potential biomarkers of ovarian aging and predicting oocyte developmental potential (Li et al., 2014).

Follicular fluid (FF) is easily available during oocyte pickup and may represent an optimal source on non-invasive biochemical predictors of oocyte quality. Evaluating levels of biochemical biomarkers in FF may be a noninvasive approach than extrapolating data from invasive methods like embryo biopsy (Molka et al., 2022). FF concentrations of

IGF1, GH and IL-6 are notably higher in women less than 35 years old with higher pregnancy than those of more than 35 years old with bad prognosis (Molka et al., 2022). Also, exosomes and exosomal miRNAs in ovarian follicle fluid may be potential biomarkers for evaluating oocyte quality associated with maternal age (Revelli et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2021d). ROS levels from FF of women undergoing IVF correlate with chronological age, which may be associated with the down-regulated expression of antioxidant genes in granulosa cells, hence can be employed as a simple, non-invasive biomarker to assess ovarian aging (Wang et al., 2020d).

### *Biomarkers of testicular aging*

(1) Physiological characteristics. The testis is a critical male reproductive organ that serves as the source of sperm and a major supplier of the sex hormone, indispensable processes for both male fertility maintenance and physiological homeostasis (Mäkelä et al., 2019). However, testicular function declines gradually as men age (Salonia et al., 2019). Previous studies have shown that aging is negatively correlated with sperm concentration, motility, normal morphological changes, and reproductive outcomes (Johnson et al., 2015; Matzkin et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2015). In addition, the sperm of elderly men are more likely to bear genetic and epigenetic defects, leading to an elevated risk of pregnancy loss and birth defects in offspring (Laurentino et al., 2020; Potabattula et al., 2020). Aging also impairs testosterone production and causes male hypogonadism, which is characterized by low libido, erectile dysfunction, infertility, obesity, muscle weakness, osteoporosis, depressed mood, impaired cognition, and other symptoms (Kaufman et al., 2019; Mularoni et al., 2020; Xia et al., 2020a). Testicular aging therefore affects not only men's reproductive functions, but also their overall health status and quality of life (Matzkin et al., 2021).

Previous studies have shown that aging testes undergo profound alterations of germ cells and somatic cells, leading to reduced functionality, which also provide potential biomarkers for age-related male reproductive diseases (Jiang et al., 2014a; Santiago et al., 2019) (Figure 24).

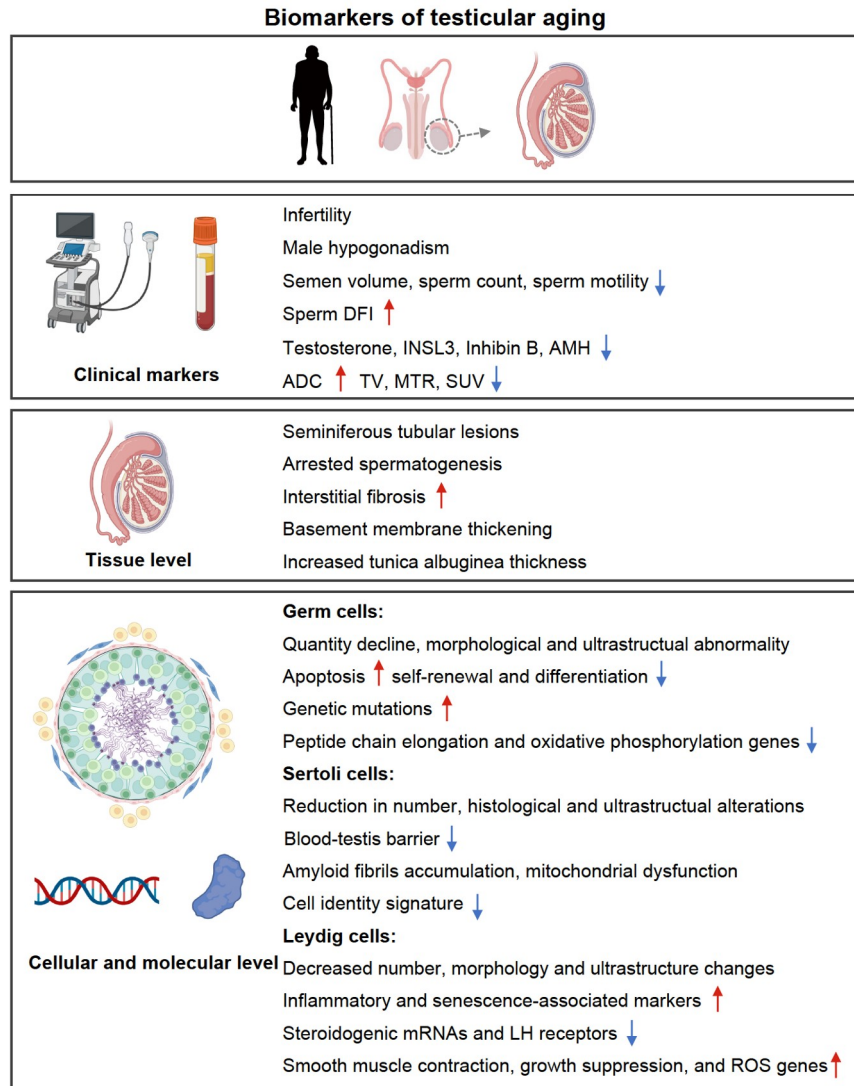
(2) Imaging traits. Structural imaging methodologies including US, MRI and PET mainly provide evidence of morphological and functional changes of testes related to the aging process. Different studies have shown that testicular volume decline with advancing age in middle-aged and elderly men (Mahmoud et al., 2003; Well et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2011). Ultrasound, as the first choice for morphological evaluation of male genitalia, is often used to evaluate testicular volume. In addition to evaluating the changes of testicular morphology with age, MRI can be used to evaluate spermatogenic function. Wang et al. (2018a) report that younger men had significantly lower apparent diffusion

coefficient and higher magnetization transfer ratio than those of older men, which may be explained by the age-related reduction in testicular spermatogenesis function and testosterone level. Besides, 2-deoxy-2-[<sup>18</sup>F] FDG-PET can indirectly reflect hormone production and spermatogenesis, two important testicular functions, by providing data of glycolytic activity. In elderly men, the standardized uptake value of FDG decreases with age, consistent with the testicular function decline in aging (Kitajima et al., 2007; Well et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2011).

(3) Histological Features. The most common histologic pattern of human testicular aging is a mosaic of seminiferous tubular lesions ranging from complete spermatogenesis to complete sclerosis of the seminiferous epithelium (Perheentupa and Huhtaniemi, 2009). Other features include narrowing of tubular diameter, thickening of basal membrane associated with arrested spermatogenesis, interstitial fibrosis (Perheentupa and Huhtaniemi, 2009), and basement membrane and tunica albuginea thickening (Dakouane et al., 2005; Johnson, 1989; Johnson et al., 1984a). Further changes in the seminiferous tubules include thinning of the seminiferous epithelium and eventual obliteration of the seminiferous tubules (Regadera et al., 1985; Sasano and Ichijo, 1969). In addition to humans, similar alterations are also reported in monkey, such as fibrosis in the interstitium and increased thickness of the basement membrane in aged testes (Huang et al., 2022a). Compared with young mice, older mice have smaller testes (Gosden et al., 1982; Wolf et al., 2000) and thicker basement membrane (Gosden et al., 1982).

(4) Cellular alterations. (i) Germ cells. In most mammals, germ cell numbers decrease with increasing age, resulting in a reduced diameter of seminiferous tubules and epithelium vacuolization (Kimura et al., 2003; Paniagua et al., 1987). The loss of germ cells usually begins with the spermatids, but gradually affects less mature spermatocytes or spermatogonia until a completely sclerosed tubule forms (Jiang et al., 2014a; Kimura et al., 2003). However, there have been inconsistent findings about spermatogonia numbers during aging, significantly decreased (Nistal et al., 1987) or remained unchanged (Johnson et al., 1987). Morphological changes like multinucleated spermatocytes and spermatids due to the fusion of cell membranes of neighboring spermatocytes or spermatids in aged human testes have been reported (Miething, 1993; Nistal et al., 1986). In the ultrastructural level, intra-nuclear inclusions are seen in spermatocytes and spermatogonia, as well as spirals of endoplasmic reticulum in cytoplasm (Paniagua et al., 1987). Age-related alterations in spermatids include acrosome malformation, redundant nuclear membranes, intra-nuclear inclusions, excessive droplets in the cytoplasm, and irregular configuration of the nuclei (Paniagua et al., 1987).

(ii) Sertoli cells. Multiple alterations associated with aging



**Figure 24** Biomarkers of testicular aging. Abbreviations: ADC, apparent diffusion coefficient; TV, testicular volume; MTR, magnetization transfer ratio; SUV, standardized uptake value; LH, luteotropic hormone.

have been observed in the Sertoli cell of different mammalian species. It has been consistently reported that the number of Sertoli cells declined with age in rat, monkey, and human (Huang et al., 2022a; Johnson et al., 1984b; Santiago et al., 2019). Moreover, Sertoli cells of aged individuals show multiple ultrastructural and histological alterations, such as irregularly shaped nuclei, lost typical localization, enlarged vesicles, mitochondrial metaplasia, loose and vesiculated endoplasmic reticulum, and irregular lysosomes (Bohl et al., 1991; Paniagua et al., 1987). Other Sertoli cell abnormalities such as dedifferentiation and multinucleation are also reported in aging males (Santiago et al., 2019). The cell junctions of aged Sertoli cells also lose characteristic appearance and degenerate, suggesting the presence of a damaged blood-testis barrier in the old individuals (Huang et al., 2022a; Jiang et al., 2014a).

(iii) Leydig Cells. Compared to other types of cells in the

testes, there have been more contradictory findings about Leydig cells populations during aging. Some investigations show that the number of Leydig cells was decreased in aged testes (Mularoni et al., 2020; Neaves et al., 1985; Neaves et al., 1984), while others present the opposite results (Honoré, 1978; Ichihara et al., 1993). It is generally accepted that the capacity of Leydig cells to secrete testosterone is declined during aging (Jiang et al., 2014b; Wang et al., 2017d). Many age-related changes in morphology and ultrastructure are observed in aged Leydig cells, such as cellular atrophy, multinucleation, intranuclear Reinke crystals, multiple vacuoles, as well as the accumulation of lipofuscin and lipid droplets (Paniagua et al., 1991). These cells also develop signs of dedifferentiation and a decreasing quantity of smooth endoplasmic reticulum and mitochondria during aging (Matzkin et al., 2021; Paniagua et al., 1991).

(5) Molecular changes. (i) Germ cells. The decreased

number of germ cells in aged testes is accompanied by increased apoptotic cells with age (Barnes et al., 1999). Age-related transcriptional signatures reveals imbalance of self-renewal and differentiation in aged spermatogonia (Huang et al., 2022a). Further analysis in older elongated spermatids reveals that upregulated genes are enriched in categories for protein targeting, whereas downregulated genes were enriched categories for peptide chain elongation and oxidative phosphorylation (Nie et al., 2022b). Despite being one of the cells with the lowest spontaneous mutation rates in all human tissues, germ cells show signs of genetic mutations with advancing age (Crow, 2000). It has been identified that the spermatogonia clusters displayed elongated DNA replication time and higher risks for replication errors (Aitken et al., 2020). Similar results have been observed in aging spermatocytes, such as DNA damage and defects in DNA methylation-related molecules (DNMT1 and Np95) (Selvaratnam et al., 2015; Takada et al., 2021).

(ii) Sertoli cells. It has been reported that aging could induce molecular changes of Sertoli cells. Due to the accumulation of amyloid fibrils and damaged mitochondria, Sertoli cells in aged testes develop high ROS levels (Desai et al., 2010). Sertoli cells in aged human testes show major metabolic changes, including dysregulation in lipid metabolic pathway as well as the decline of precursor metabolites and energy production (Nie et al., 2022b; Wang et al., 2022e). In accordance with disruption of the blood-testis barrier, the expression of junction components proteins such as ZO-1, Claudin 11, Jam2, Ocln and Ctnna are reduced in aged Sertoli cells (Huang et al., 2022a; Paniagua et al., 1985; Paul and Robaire, 2013). Moreover, single-nucleus transcriptomic profiling of young and aged NHP testes reveals decreased WT1 causes misregulation of inter-Sertoli cell contacts and a compromised cell identity signature (Huang et al., 2022a). Additionally, age-associated alterations in the cytoskeletal components of Sertoli cells have been observed, including F-actin, vimentin, and cytokeratin (Tanemura et al., 1994).

(iii) Leydig cells. Aged Leydig cells display dysregulation in signaling, function, and developmental identity. The expression of inflammatory marker cyclooxygenase-2 (COX2) and senescence-associated markers (p53, p21<sup>CIP1</sup>) increase in aged Leydig cells (Chen et al., 2007a; Wang et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2020a). Aging induces ROS production in Leydig cells, concomitant with upregulation of multiple genes, including *PRDX6*, *SOD2*, *MT2A*, *MTIX*, *NAMPT*, and *HIF1A* (Nie et al., 2022b). Consistent with the declined capacity of testosterone secretion, the age-related alterations of Leydig cells that have been reported include decreased expression of steroidogenic mRNAs (*Star*, *Cyp17a1*, *Cyp11a1*, *Hsd3b6*, *Hsd17b3*) and LH receptors (Amador et al., 1985; Curley et al., 2019). Aged Leydig cells also upregulate *PTEN*, *RHOB*, and *ROCK1/2*, which suppress cell survival

and proliferation (Nie et al., 2022b). Additionally, the up-regulated genes in older Leydig cells are associated with smooth muscle contraction (*ACTA2*, *MYH11*, *TPM1/2*, *MYL9*, and *FLNA*), indicating that aged Leydig cells acquire transcriptome features of peritubular myoid cells (Nie et al., 2022b).

(6) Secretory factors detectable in biofluids. Testicular function changes in aging processes can be assayed in blood and semen.

(i) Blood. It has been reported that serum total testosterone decreases by 0.4% per annum and serum free testosterone declines by 1.3% per annum (Wu et al., 2008). LC-MS/MS represents the gold standard and most accurate method for testosterone evaluation; however, standardized automated platform immuno-assay also works for total testosterone assessment (Huhtaniemi et al., 2012). LC-MS/MS remains the standard method for free testosterone determination. Alternatively, free testosterone can be derived from specific mathematical calculations, taking into account serum sex hormone binding globulin (SHBG) and albumin levels (<http://www.issam.ch/freetesto.htm>) (Vermeulen et al., 1999).

In addition, Insulin-like peptide 3 (INSL3) is a peptide hormone produced uniquely by the Leydig cells of the testes (Ivell and Anand-Ivell, 2009). And from 30–40 years onwards, serum INSL3 concentration in the blood appears to decline at approximately 15% per decade, serving as an accurate reflection of the reduced number and differentiation status of the Leydig cell population and hence also of their functional capacity to produce testosterone (Ivell et al., 2013; Toppari, 2021). INSL3 can be assessed by specific time-resolved fluorescent immunoassay (Ivell and Anand-Ivell, 2009; Ivell et al., 2022). This well-established and validated assay yields essentially identical values to a new LC-MS/MS procedure (Albrethsen et al., 2018). Inhibin B is a hormonal glycoprotein secreted by Sertoli cells. This hormone is often used as a marker for the impairment of spermatogenesis and can be detected by immunoassay (Chong et al., 2017). In men, older individuals present significantly lower serum Inhibin B already at the age of 40 (Haji et al., 1994). AMH is a dimeric glycoprotein, which is also secreted by the Sertoli cells and has the main role in male sexual differentiation (Xu et al., 2021). Men exhibit declining serum AMH levels with age after sexual maturity, as detected by immunoassay (Chong et al., 2017; Ramezani Tehrani et al., 2017).

(ii) Semen. Adverse alterations gradually appear in semen volume, sperm motility, and sperm function with advancing age. Daily sperm production is negatively correlated with male age and decreases by more than 30% in men older than 50 years (Neaves et al., 1984). One study found that men's semen volume decreases by 0.22 mL for every 5 years of age (Begueria et al., 2014) and that the sperm count begins to decrease significantly from the age of 41 years (Pino et al.,

2020; Verón et al., 2018). Similarly, sperm total motility and forward motility decrease with increasing male age (Johnson et al., 2015; Verón et al., 2018). Specifically, sperm motility decreases by 1.2% every 5 years (Begueria et al., 2014), and progressive motility is two-fold lower in men aged 50 years or older compared with those aged 40–50 years (Pino et al., 2020).

Sperm DNA fragmentation index (DFI) is a common parameter used to assess the quality of semen samples (Agarwal et al., 2020). Many studies have found that DFI increases with age (Evenson et al., 2020; Rosiak-Gill et al., 2019). Men over 45 years of age exhibit higher DFI and lower DNA stability (Deenadayal Mettler et al., 2020), and the DFI of 60-year-old men is more than double that of 20-year-old men (Chianese et al., 2014).

Semen analysis has been standardized by the WHO and disseminated by publication of the most updated version of the WHO Laboratory Manual for the Examination and Processing of Human Semen (WHO, 2021).

#### *Summary and perspectives*

In this section, we review the biomarkers for ovarian and testicular aging on clinical, tissue, cellular and molecular levels. Given that many aging biomarkers vary widely in accuracy, reliability, and invasiveness, combining multiple biomarkers of aging that meet comprehensive criteria can provide a more accurate assessment of aging. The emergence of new technologies, such as single-cell sequencing, spatial transcriptomics, bioinformatics, and artificial intelligence used for training of age prediction models (Zhang et al., 2022b), allows us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the age-related changes in reproductive system, which helps identify more novel and precise sets of biomarkers and facilitate the development of early and accurate diagnosis of reproductive system aging in clinical practice. Yet, the final predictive relation among such sets of markers may only be derived from long-term follow-up studies.

#### **Hematopoietic system aging**

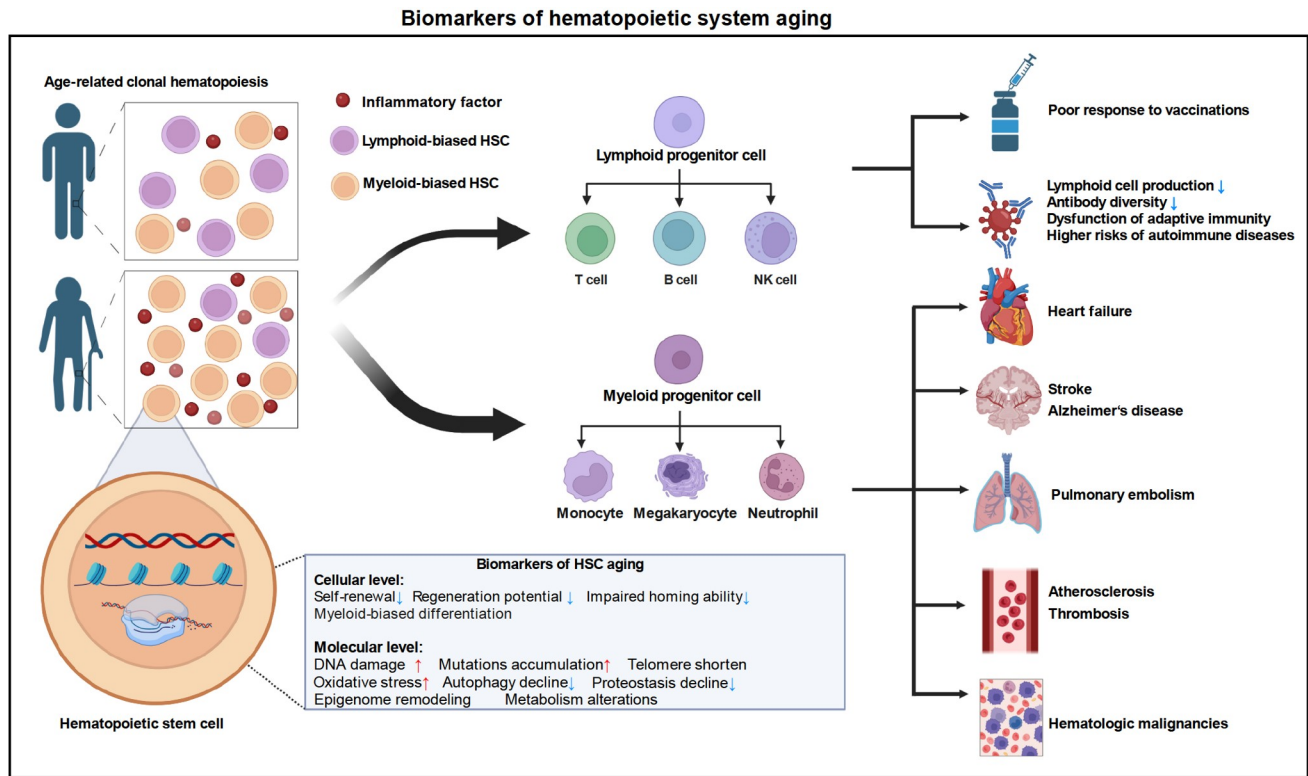
Aging of hematopoietic system contributes to a number of clinically significant pathologies, that include: clonal hematopoiesis (CH), increased incidence of hematological malignancies, elevated frequency of age-related chronic anemia, and dysfunction of immune system (Beerman et al., 2010). All cells of hematopoietic system arise from the most primitive hematopoietic stem cells (HSCs), therefore, the age-dependent cellular and molecular changes within this compartment contributes greatly to the functional decline of hematopoietic system (de Haan and Lazare, 2018; Morrison et al., 1996). CH, which most likely occurs at HSC level, is commonly seen in human aging and has been associated with hematopoietic disorders, cardiovascular diseases and overall

mortality (Jaiswal and Ebert, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2022). Here, we mainly focus on the recent findings that implicate the biomarkers of HSC aging, the intrinsic and extrinsic factors associated with HSC aging, and the consequences of HSC aging in hematopoietic system (Figure 25).

#### *Physiological characteristics*

Hematopoietic system aging is characterized by a gradual disruption of hematopoietic homeostasis, leading to numerous changes including reduced production of red blood cells and lymphocytes as well as a relative increase in the production of myeloid cells (Konieczny and Arranz, 2018). These changes are associated with anemia, an increased risk of infection, poor response to vaccinations, increased risk of bone marrow failure and the development of hematological malignancies in older people (Belyavsky et al., 2021; Pang et al., 2011; Yamashita and Iwama, 2022). Defects in the function of HSCs during aging are considered to be the pivotal factor underlying this complex process (Groarke and Young, 2019). Most HSCs are at quiescent or dormant in a steady-state environment, which is conducive to maintaining their function and youthful stemness, while proliferations will lead to depletion. Old bone marrow contains an increased myeloid-dominant HSCs with a lower output of mature blood cells per HSC, while competitive transplantation assays have revealed a reduced self-renewal, regeneration potential as well as impaired homing ability for aged HSCs (Cho et al., 2020; Dykstra and de Haan, 2008; Wilkinson et al., 2020). The most common hematologic disease among elderly people is anemia, which is caused by deficiencies of iron, folate, and vitamin B12, as well as chronic inflammation. The cause of anemia has not been identified in one-third of cases, including patients with idiopathic cytopenia of undetermined significance (ICUS). 30% of ICUS patients have been found clonal expansion of HSCs with somatic mutations (Fujino et al., 2022). All cells of the immune system are derived from HSCs and immune aging stems from HSC aging (Shaw et al., 2010). Immunosenescence, the age-associated alterations in the immune system, has been considered to be involved in the vulnerability to infections among elderly people. The decline in B cell production as well as its antibody diversity may be the reason why the elderly is less effective when vaccinated and are more likely to develop autoimmune diseases (Hagen and Derudder, 2020; Kim et al., 2003). Naive CD4 and CD 8 T cells gradually decrease upon aging leading to dysfunction of adaptive immunity and a subsequent predisposition to cancers (Denkinger et al., 2015; Naylor et al., 2005; Qi et al., 2014). The number of NK cells is increased, but the cytotoxicity is weakened and cytokine secretion is reduced (Mocchegiani et al., 2009). Monocytes are important components of innate immunity and function by differentiating into antigen-presenting cells such as macrophages





**Figure 25** Biomarkers of hematopoietic system aging. Aged HSCs exhibit broad changes at cellular and molecular levels. The acquisition and accumulation of driver mutations in HSCs during aging lead to CH, which enhances myeloid cells output that is associated with an increased risk of hematological malignancies and diseases in several organs.

and dendritic cells. During hematopoietic aging, the number of circulating neutrophils and monocytes increases but their function decreases. It is manifested by a decrease in the migration of neutrophils to stimuli and a decrease in the phagocytic activity of macrophages, which affects the innate immune system (Mogilenko et al., 2022). A recent study defines pluripotent HSCs with platelet bias, where age-related platelet count decline and functional changes are critical for thrombotic diseases (Frisch et al., 2019; Jones, 2016).

#### Clonal hematopoiesis

HSCs undergo multiple divisions to sustain lifelong hematopoiesis, they are susceptible to accumulate mutations, which likely confer a survival advantage, resulting in higher chance of malignancy (Groarke and Young, 2019). Mutation in HSC and microenvironment aging lead to the imbalance of HSC expansion and downstream blood cell differentiation, that is, CH. DNA damage or DNA replication errors cause somatic mutations in HSCs, driving HSCs dysfunction (Li et al., 2022d). CH expanded stem cells usually have somatic mutations in genes of epigenetic regulators, which are also considered to be the driving mechanism of stem cell clonal dominance (Buscarlet et al., 2017; Xie et al., 2014). CH increases the risk of malignancy and is used as a biomarker of aging and cancer prognosis (Genovese et al., 2014; Jan et

al., 2017). Transmitted through downstream blood lineages, CH leads to abnormal circulation, which is shown to be an independent risk factor for atherosclerotic cardiovascular diseases and affects the function of distant tissues (Jaiswal, 2020; Misaka et al., 2023; Sidlow et al., 2020). A series of large-scale population-based studies have found that CH increases with age, and the proportion of CH in older people is as high as 31% (Genovese et al., 2014; Gillis et al., 2017; Razavi et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2014). The most common mutated genes include epigenetic regulators (*DNMT3A*, *TET2*, *ASXL1*), RNA splicing factors (*SF3B1*, *SRSF2*, *U2AF1*, *PRPF8*), DNA repair and cell cycle regulatory genes (*PPM1D*, *TP53*). Recent population-wide genome analysis demonstrated that the GWAS signal of CH is enriched in the open chromatin region of hematopoietic stem and progenitor cells (HSPCs) and discovered novel locus fields associated with DNA damage repair (*PARP1*, *ATM*, *CHEK2*), HSCs migration/homing (*CD164*), and bone marrow tumorigenesis (*SETBP1*) (Kar et al., 2022), further illustrating the importance of CH as a marker of hematopoietic aging. Although CH is observed with increasing frequency with age, the vast majority of individuals with CH will not develop MDS or other hematologic malignancies. To distinguish cancer mutation-associated non-malignant CH clearly from other forms of CH, such as ICUS and clonal cytopenia of undetermined significance (CCUS), the concept of CH with

indeterminate potential (clonal hematopoiesis of indeterminate potential, CHIP) was introduced. Defined as at least 4% cancer-related clonal mutations are present in nucleated blood cells of individuals without obvious tumors (the variant allele fraction (VAF) threshold is set to 2%), CHIP can be used as an independent age-related risk factor for diseases such as cardiovascular and leukemia (Jaiswal, 2020). As bone marrow has a good correlation with VAF values in peripheral blood, the condition of HSCs in bone marrow can be reflected by measuring VAF values in peripheral blood (Hwang et al., 2018). Since the fitness effect of each mutation is specific, VAF can not only be used as an indicator to measure the size of the clone, but also can determine the fitness brought by a gene mutation to HSC (Venkataram et al., 2016) and the fitness effect of each mutation can be quantified by CH developmental models (Watson et al., 2020a). Without other hematologic abnormalities, people over 70 years old are prone to appear CHIP in peripheral blood with genetic mutations such as DNMT3A, TET2, ASXL1, PPM1D and JAK2. A WGS study on newborns to the elderly of HSCs has found that some older adults also show signs of clonal expansion without known driver gene mutations. The hematopoietic function of adults under 65 years of age is polyclonal and has high clonal diversity, while coming forth a sudden and general loss of clonal diversity after the age of 75, which proposes a new theory of human aging. The study concluded that clonal amplification after the age of 70 was more common than the statistical results of existing studies. Clones with more than 1% VAF are ubiquitous. The number of clone amplifications can reach to 10–20 per person accounting for 30%–60% of the entire hematopoiesis rather than just 3%–5%. These mutations are carried early in life (Mitchell et al., 2022). A GWAS and ExWAS study involving 27,331 CHIP mutation carriers revealed common and rare variants (mCA, mLOX, mLOY, and telomere length) in CH phenotypes, further illustrating that CHIP represents a complex set of phenotypes with common and unique germline genetic causes and different clinical significance (Kessler et al., 2022). We know that loss of HSCs diversity is associated with positive selection for clonal proliferation carrying driver mutations. Studies of oligoclonal competition in CH have found that although DNMT3A is the most common gene to drive clonal amplification preferentially initiated early in life (Huang et al., 2022f), the most common mutated gene after age 85 is not DNMT3A but TET2 (Buscarlet et al., 2017). Even the DNMT3A R882 hotspot mutation does not affect its amplification rate. On the contrary, U2AF1 and SRSF2-P95H mutations, although only initiated late in life, are the fastest drivers of CH and are considered risk factors for AML progression (Fabre et al., 2022). The emerging evidence suggests that mutations that drive faster clonal growth are associated with a higher risk of malignant progression.

### *Cellular alterations*

HSCs maintain self-renewal and differentiation potential over lifetime in order to preserve the homeostasis of the hematopoietic system (Mejia-Ramirez and Florian, 2020). Young HSCs divide mainly asymmetrically, while aged HSCs undergo symmetrical division (Florian et al., 2018). This may explain the phenomenon that HSCs expand by 2 to 10 fold in both murine and human during aging (Geiger et al., 2013; Pang et al., 2011). The expanded aged HSC compartment partially compensates the functional decline of reconstitution capacity at the population level as measured by total bone marrow transplantation assay (Harrison, 1983). While on a per cell basis, aged individual HSC exhibits impaired self-renewal in serial competitive transplantation assay (Dykstra et al., 2011). Similarly, HSCs from older donors show reduced reconstitution capacity when assayed by xenotransplantation in immunodeficient mice (Pang et al., 2011). In clinic, the age of the donor is a strong factor that limits the source of HSC for transplantation, as transplantation of HSCs from old donors always associates with worse survival of recipients (Wang et al., 2014d; Xu et al., 2019). Aged HSCs also display a biased differentiation capacity towards myeloid lineages with reduced lymphocyte output, which is strongly associated with CH (Zink et al., 2017). Aged HSCs highly express megakaryocyte-related genes, including *Selp*, *Vwf* and *CD41* (Flohr Svendsen et al., 2021; Frisch et al., 2019; Gekas and Graf, 2013; Grover et al., 2016). High level of CD61 is also associated with myeloid-biased differentiation in aged HSCs (Mann et al., 2018). In addition to the aforementioned characteristics, HSCs from aged mice also show deficiency in their homing to and engrafting the bone marrow of recipient mice (Morrison et al., 1996).

As mentioned above, HSCs reside mostly in a non-cycling state, termed as “quiescent”, and they need to enter cell cycle in order to either give rise to downstream progenitors or to self-renew for repopulation (Biermann and Reya, 2022). However, HSCs can only self-renew for a limited time (Bernitz et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2008). Recent studies indicate that HSC functions are inversely correlated with the cell divisional history. In the 5-FU-induced myeloablative chemotherapy model, HSCs proliferate extensively and show reduced reconstitution capacity (Lerner and Harrison, 1990). After extended serial transplantation, young HSCs exhibit a strong feature of aging phenotype, which phenocopy the aged HSCs (Dykstra et al., 2011). Likewise, young HSCs that are processed with repeated inflammatory challenges also showed several reduced functional properties, which are usually considered as the markers of aged HSCs (Bogeska et al., 2022). The functional decline of HSCs with cell divisions also occurs under homeostatic conditions (Bernitz et al., 2016; Qiu et al., 2014). A study based on the H2B-GFP mouse model (H2B-GFP is diluted with each cell

division) has reported that HSCs lose their reconstitution potential gradually along with cell division (Bernitz et al., 2016). Of note, HSCs may never return back to its identical state even if they return to quiescence phase after cell division, but rather replicate and give rise to the HSCs with impaired functionality (Qiu et al., 2014). The exact signaling underlying this phenomenon is unclear but it is strongly associated with the changes in transcription and metabolism during cell division (Hinge et al., 2020; Qiu et al., 2014; Umemoto et al., 2018). It seems plausible that cumulative stresses enforce HSCs to enter excessive replication during aging, however, they only self-renew phenotypically as they lose self-renewal potential along with each cell division. As a consequence, the aged HSC compartment expands but the function of individual stem cells is impaired.

### *Molecular changes*

The aging process of HSCs is modulated by both transcriptional changes and epigenetic alterations, thus far known to be involved in a wide variety of physiological or pathological events including, DNA damage, mutations accumulation, telomere shorting, oxidative stress, proteostasis decline, metabolism and epigenome remodeling (Ju et al., 2007; Mejia-Ramirez and Florian, 2020; Raaijmakers, 2019). Aged HSCs have high level of DNA damage accumulation, as demonstrated by a significant increase in  $\gamma$ H2AX foci and a higher tail moment in the comet assay (Beerman et al., 2014; Rossi et al., 2007; Rube et al., 2011). Increase in DNA damage may result in elevated DNA mutations in aged HSCs. Indeed, recent studies uncover that mutations associated with CH are accumulated in aged HSCs in both healthy murine and human, and consequently increase the myelopoiesis and age-related diseases in other organs (Ahmad et al., 2023; Chin et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2022). Transcriptional analyses reveal that aged HSC are distinct from young HSCs at transcriptomic level. The expression of genes involved in inflammation, protein quality control and stress response are enriched in aged HSCs, while genes associated with DNA repair and chromatin remodeling are down-regulated in aged HSCs (Chambers et al., 2007). Aged HSCs also exhibit up-regulated myeloid genes and down-regulated lymphopoiesis-related genes, which correspond to myeloid-biased differentiation capacity of aged HSCs (Sun et al., 2014).

The genomic alterations that occur in HSCs during aging have been extensively studied. Recent emerging evidence highlights that loss of epigenetic regulations may drive HSC aging and strongly contribute to neoplastic transformation in hematopoietic system (Zhang et al., 2020d). Studies have uncovered the functional importance of epigenetic regulation in HSC aging at several levels, including DNA methylation, histone modification, and changes in chromatin accessibility. The DNA methylome is generally stable in HSC during aging, however, DNA methylation is enriched specifically at

the promoter regions of lymphoid-related genes, while genes responsible for myeloid output show reduced DNA methylation (Beerman et al., 2013). Interestingly, experimental evidence shows that a higher proliferative rate leads to DNA hypermethylation in HSCs, suggesting that the cell proliferation and DNA methylation are coordinated in modulation of HSC aging process (Beerman et al., 2013). Alterations of histone modifications also occur in HSC during aging. H3K4me3 peaks are more widespread in aged HSCs and are more enriched in genes associated with HSC identity (Sun et al., 2014). This change is correlated with the enforced self-renewal of aged HSCs (Sun et al., 2014). Upon aging, H4K16ac peaks are reduced and exhibit a loss of epipolarity redistribution, which is correlated with the functional decline of aged HSCs (Grigoryan et al., 2018). More recently, an integrated analysis of transcriptome and chromatin accessibility reveals that differentially open accessible regions (open DARs) in aged HSCs are preferably enriched in the regions that are activated in response to external stresses (Itokawa et al., 2022). However, an acute inflammatory stress in young HSCs does not exhibit the same persistent modulation of chromatin accessibility changes as that observed in the aged HSCs. This finding puts forward a conjecture that the signals generated following stress exposure may be epigenetically inscribed in HSCs during aging, thus endowing aged HSC to be more responsive to external stimuli (Itokawa et al., 2022). A previous study showed that HSCs gain long term epigenetic modifications in accessibility of specific myeloid lineage enhancers, that allows them to respond to secondary infections more efficiently (de Laval et al., 2020). This “epigenetic memory” mechanism endows young HSCs with enhanced function to rapidly differentiate in order to meet the need for more myeloid cells in the context of inflammation. However, the increased responsiveness of aged HSCs to external stimuli by the trained “epigenetic memory” may lead to reduced stemness and eventually cause HSC exhaustion. HSCs in human also undergo an age-associated epigenetic reprogramming (Adelman et al., 2019). Of note, the changes in epigenetic modifications and their targeting pathways in aged human HSCs are comparably altered in AML patients, indicating the epigenetic reprogramming of aged human HSCs may directly promote cancer formation in hematopoietic system (Adelman et al., 2019).

The genome is hierarchically organized in the nucleus and higher-order of chromatin structure including, chromosome territories, A/B compartments, topologically associating domains (TADs) and enhancer-promoter loops are involved in gene regulation (Szabo et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2016c; Zheng and Xie, 2019). The impact of epigenetic modifications of DNA and histone on HSC aging has been thoroughly investigated, the role of higher-order chromatin structure in regulating HSC aging still needs to be uncovered. Under-

standing the role of higher-order epigenome organization and how it interacts with gene regulation in HSCs during aging would facilitate the discovery of novel targets to control blood cancer formation.

#### *Secretory factors detectable in biofluids*

Increase in chronic inflammation is a driving force accelerating HSC and hematopoietic system aging (Caiado et al., 2023; Caiado et al., 2021). Recent studies have highlighted the emerging role of inflammation signals, particularly the secretory factors in both bone marrow microenvironment and the systemic circumstance on shaping the hematopoietic system. Upon aging, hematopoietic stem and progenitor cells niches undergo degeneration and remodeling. In aged mice, HSC-supporting niche cells close to the bone, including arterioles, transition zone vessels (TZV) and nestin-expressing MSC, are reduced (Ho et al., 2019; Raaijmakers, 2019). Whereas the niches distant from the bone, such as capillaries and nestin-positive stromal cells, are expanded (Ho et al., 2019; Raaijmakers, 2019). The increase in the sympathetic noradrenergic fibers triggers IL-6 secretion of MSCs and results in megakaryopoiesis of aged HSCs (Ho et al., 2019). In addition, the number of LepR<sup>+</sup> Osteoclastin<sup>+</sup> osteogenic progenitors is lower in aged bone marrow niche. This results in reduced stem cell factor (SCF) secretion and contributes to reduction of common lymphoid progenitor (CLP) as well as impaired lymphopoiesis of aged mice (Shen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the accumulation of adipocytes and altered expression of extracellular vesicles in aged bone marrow also accelerates HSC aging and disturbs hematopoiesis (Ambrosi et al., 2017; Goldberg, 2021). Microbiota alterations are strongly associated with increased inflammation during aging (O'Toole and Jeffery, 2015; Trowbridge and Starczynowski, 2021). A recent study discovers that a microbiome-IL-1 axis functions as a self-sustaining driver of HSC aging (Kovtonyuk et al., 2022). Targeting IL-1 or antibiotic administration can reverse the myeloid-biased differentiation phenotype of aged HSC (Kovtonyuk et al., 2022).

Apart from changes in secretory factors originating from HSC bone marrow micro- and the systemic environment, HSPCs also secrete inflammatory factors in response to inflammatory stimuli (Zhao et al., 2014). For instance, HSPCs produce IL-6 in response to TLRs signaling activation, which acts on the adjacent HSPCs in a paracrine manner to promote HSPCs differentiation in order to meet the acute need of blood cell generation (Zhao et al., 2014). As aged HSCs exhibit higher responsiveness to inflammation, intrinsic changes in aged HSCs may also contribute greatly to the enlarged pool of secretory factors during aging (Chen et al., 2019b; Mann et al., 2018). Furthermore, the increased number of myeloid cells originated from aged HSCs due to the CH boosts the systemic inflammatory cytokine secretion,

and may in turn negatively affect the aged hematopoietic system (Jaiswal and Libby, 2020; Yura et al., 2020).

The aging-associated hematological disorders are also strongly connected to increased level of inflammatory factors during aging. Several studies have shown the relationships between elevated chronic inflammation signals and CH. The age-dependent elevation of secretory factors, such as IFN- $\gamma$  and TNF $\alpha$ , promote DNMT3a-mutant HSC expansion and leads to CH (Hormaechea-Agulla et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2022). Consistent with this finding, another study reveals that aging drives Tet2<sup>+/-</sup> CH via IL-1 signaling in aged mice (Caiado et al., 2023). Together, these observations point out the translational value of targeting secretory factors to treat age-dependent myeloid malignancies.

Based on the cognition of significance of inflammatory factors on hematopoietic system aging, interventions that could potentially reduce the inflammatory signals, including caloric restriction, changing the blood-borne factors via heterochronic parabiosis and senescent cell clearance, have been implicated to delay hematopoietic system aging. Caloric restriction has been known to attenuate chronic inflammatory diseases via reducing circulating monocytes and pro-growth factors (Jordan et al., 2019). Study has showed that prolonged fasting, refeeding cycles or reduced food intake by 30% could reduce circulating IGF-1 levels, which promotes HSC self-renew capacity in aged mice (Cheng et al., 2014; Tang et al., 2016). Heterochronic parabiosis, the pairing of a young and an aged mouse, has been widely used in aging research to evaluate the contribution of systemic factors that influence the aging processes (Ashapkin et al., 2020). The rejuvenating factors from the young systemic circulatory milieu alleviated age-associated lymphopoiesis decline in old mice after heterochronic parabiosis (Ma et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022b). In line with this finding, another study also indicates that HSCs are one of the cell types showing high responsiveness to heterochronic parabiosis (Pálovics et al., 2022). Clearing of senescent cells via genetic modifications or senolytic drugs holds great promise to enhance regeneration potential and extend a healthy life span in aged mice (Baker et al., 2016; Baker et al., 2011; Chaib et al., 2022). Combating hematopoietic system aging by targeting senescent HSCs has been tested in mice. It will be interesting to know whether this approach could be applied to human to ameliorate aging-related hematopoietic changes (Chang et al., 2016). Although HSC aging is uncoupled from p16<sup>INK4a</sup>-mediated senescence (Attema et al., 2009), pharmacological depletion of senescent cells in aged bone marrow and the whole body may decrease the secreted factors that have impacts on HSC function negatively.

#### *Summary and perspectives*

Here, we have summarized the aging-related disorders in the hematopoietic system, the biomarkers of HSC aging, and the

causal factors that contribute to HSC aging. Extensive efforts have been made in deciphering the mechanism underlying hematopoietic system aging, however, the possible approaches that potentially relieve aging-associated hematopoietic disorders are still limited. As many of the hematological pathologies are strongly associated with HSC aging, interventions that target HSC aging will be clinically important. Considering the role of CH in hematopoietic malignancies and in non-malignant aging-associated diseases, a deep understanding of the occurrence and development of CH will be beneficial for healthy aging.

## Immune system aging

### *Physiological characteristics*

Aging of the immune system is inevitable with physiological or pathologically induced aging, characterized by biomarkers denoting the degradation of immune organs and changes in the proportion and function of immune cells (Figure 26; Table S17 in Supporting Information). Aging disrupts the physiological balance of antigen recognition by the immune system. On the one hand, the immune response to foreign antigens, including pathogenic microorganisms and tumor antigens, is weakened with age, leading to a high incidence of cancer and a high mortality rate from viral infection. On the other hand, aging elevates the recognition of self-antigens, which contributes to the development of inflammation. It was recently reported that elderly people have an increased risk of developing and dying from viral infections, especially COVID-19, mainly caused by immune senescence (Chen et al., 2021c; Huang et al., 2020a). During aging, the efficiency of antigen presentation by DCs decreases, inhibiting the adaptive T-cell response and antibody response. Macrophages and neutrophils infiltrate infected tissues more severely, leading to destructive inflammation (Wong et al., 2022). Respiratory failure owing to severe lung injury is the major factor contributing to the clinical death of COVID-19 patients. The lung tissues of elderly patients with COVID-19 show a more serious senescent state, specifically characterized by the upregulation of cell aging markers, SASP expression, and DNA oxidative damage. In addition, the expression of the SARS-CoV-2 receptor ACE2 increases gradually with age, and virus invasion also induces the upregulation of ACE2 expression. As a consequence, the lung cells of elderly people are more vulnerable to SARS-CoV-2 infection, accelerating lung failure (Wang et al., 2021d).

### *Imaging traits*

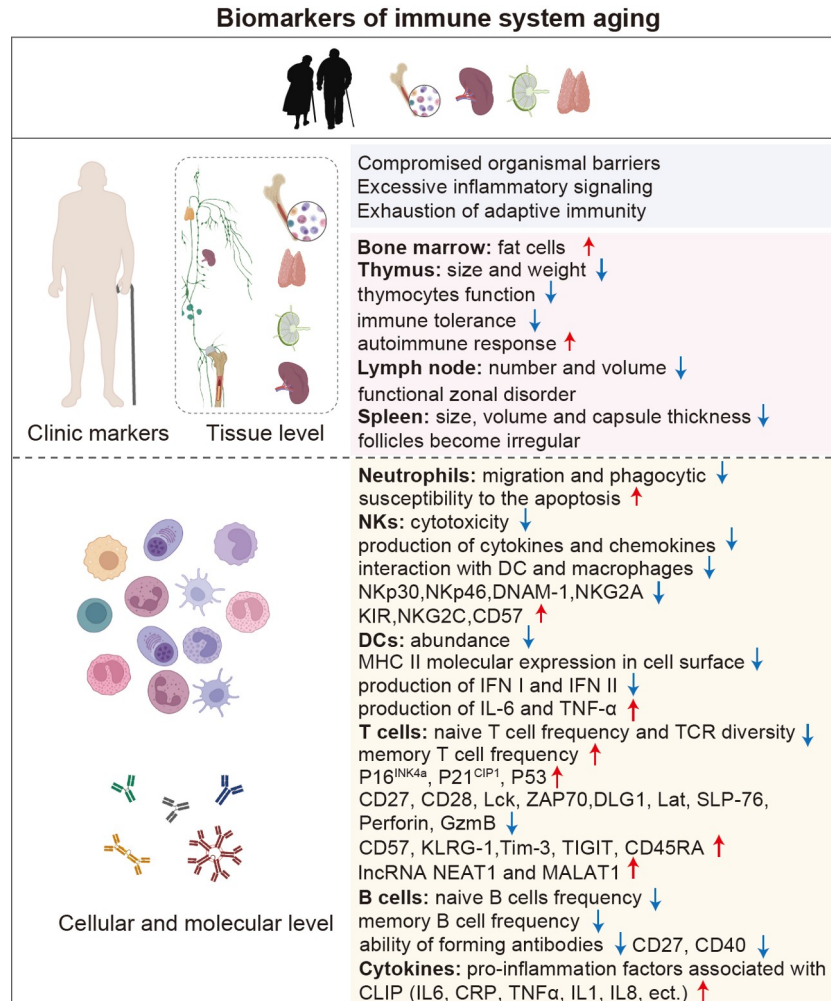
Medical imaging techniques like MRI and FDG-PET can assess changes in the structure and function of immune organs that occur with aging. Bone marrow produces various immune cells with distinct developmental stages and other stromal cells. Bone marrow includes both red marrow

(containing 40% fat cells and 60% hematopoietic cells) and yellow marrow (containing about 95% fat cells and 5% non-fat cells) according to structural differences (Krishnaraj, 1997). The MRI technology used in bone marrow assessment relies on the ratio of fat cells to non-fat cells, which directly affects the signal intensity. The MRI results imply that the percentage of fat cells increases and a large part of red bone marrow is replaced by yellow bone marrow during aging (Blebea et al., 2007). These changes may contribute to physiological and histologic aspects of immune senescence.

### *Histological features*

One of the most important hallmarks of the aging of the human immune system is the degeneration of the thymus. The human thymus weighs 10–15 grams at birth and develops during puberty to 30–40 grams. Thereafter, the cortex and medulla of the thymus begin to be replaced by adipose tissue, and at an old age, the entire thymus dwindles to roughly 10 grams (Kendall et al., 1980). Aging-related degeneration of the human thymus includes the deconstruction of its histological structure, reduction in thymus size and weight, and decrease in the number of thymocytes (Mittelbrunn and Kroemer, 2021). The thymus is one of the major organs for T-cell development, and functional degeneration of the thymus by aging could directly lead to a decline in naïve T-cell production, compensatory clonal expansion of memory T cells, and a reduction in the diversity of peripheral T cells. Thymus degeneration could also cause decreased functional activity of T cells, which in turn leads to a decline in immunity, with a possible deficiency in immune tolerance and enhancement of the autoimmune response.

The human body contains 300–500 lymph nodes, which weigh around 100 grams in total (Cakala-Jakimowicz et al., 2021). Through human aging, the number and volume of lymph nodes both gradually decrease, and age-related functional degeneration of lymph nodes starts to appear, e.g., fibrosis, vitrification, lipomatosis, reduction in the number of postcapillary vessels, and morphological and functional alteration of the venous capillary endothelial cell linings (Murakami, 2004). As degenerative changes accumulate, the functional zonal structure and composition of lymph nodes are gradually disordered: the number of lymphoid tissues in the cortex and medulla of lymph nodes decreases, the number and sizes of lymphoid follicle germinal centers decline, the number of follicular dendritic cells reduces (Phan et al., 2007; Szakal et al., 2002; Turner and Mabbott, 2017b), and the level of lymph node homeostasis-associated chemokines (e.g., CCL19, CCL21, and IL7) drops (Becklund et al., 2016; Chai et al., 2013; Masters et al., 2019; Textor et al., 2016). Eventually, these aging-induced structural and functional defects in lymph nodes ultimately lead to impaired cellular homeostasis of T and B cells, a reduced capability of antigen recognition by immune cells, and decreased humoral



**Figure 26** Biomarkers of immune system aging. Immunosenescence leads to compromised organismal barriers and the elevated susceptibility to infection and chronic diseases. The aged immune system is characterized by the degeneration of thymus, spleen and lymph node, the declined function of the innate and adaptive immune cells, and excessive inflammatory signaling. Abbreviations: NKp30, natural cytotoxicity receptor in natural killer cells; DNAM-1, DNAX accessory molecule-1 (CD266); KIR, killer cell immunoglobulin like receptor; TCR, T-cell receptor; Lck, lymphocyte cell-specific protein-tyrosine kinase; ZAP70, zeta chain of T cell receptor associated protein kinase 70; DLG1, discs large homolog 1; SLP-76, SH2 domain-containing leukocyte protein of 76 kD; KLRG-1, lectin-like receptor subfamily G; TIGIT, T cell immunoreceptor with Ig and ITIM domains; NEAT1, nuclear paraspeckle assembly transcript 1; MALAT1, metastasis associated lung adenocarcinoma transcript 1.

immune responses.

Aging also causes a reduction in the size and volume of the human spleen. Structurally, the thickness of the spleen capsule is affected by age: the capsule thickness develops to its peak from birth to puberty and then starts thinning slowly (Alex et al., 2015). In addition, follicles become irregular, and somatic hypermutation in the germinal center of the spleen also decreases with age (Alex et al., 2015; Banerjee et al., 2002; Turner and Mabbott, 2017a).

#### *Cellular alterations and molecular changes*

In the aging process, many immune cell subsets in both the innate and the adaptive immune systems are altered. The major alterations in the immune cell populations and the relative molecular changes in aging subjects are discussed in this section.

Macrophages engulf and digest pathogens and act as tissue sentinels in the innate immune system, influencing adaptive immune responses and exerting tissue repair functions. Macrophages consist of a heterogeneous cell population that may differ in phenotype and behavior (Kohut et al., 2004), and the reported age-related alterations in macrophage functions differ according to the site (Mogilenko et al., 2022; van Beek et al., 2019).

With their ability to quickly capture and kill invading pathogenic microorganisms, neutrophils form a paramount part of the innate immune system. During aging, neutrophils display low migration and phagocytic ability and are more susceptible to apoptosis when activated, which reduces their recruitment to infection sites and phagocytosis of pathogens (Brubaker et al., 2013). Moreover, the persistence of inflammatory neutrophils may impede the resolution of in-

flammation, causing tissue lesions (Sendama, 2020; Stout-Delgado et al., 2009). Furthermore, the residencies of neutrophils in some organs increase with age, but the mechanisms and physiological function of higher neutrophil infiltration remain unclear.

DCs are important antigen-presenting cells that build a bridge between innate immunity and adaptive immunity. Elderly individuals have low circulating DCs (Agrawal and Gupta, 2011; Jing et al., 2009; Stervbo et al., 2015), and functional disturbance has also been demonstrated in aged dendritic cells, including decreased production of IFN I and II, increased production of IL-6 and TNF $\alpha$ , and lower MHC II molecular expression on the cell surface (Gupta, 2014; Jing et al., 2009), all of which are associated with compromised antiviral responses, pro-inflammatory bias and weakened activation of T cells (Agrawal and Gupta, 2011; Jing et al., 2009). Excessive NF- $\kappa$ B stimulation contributes to dendritic cell alteration during aging (Agrawal et al., 2009; Panda et al., 2010).

NK cells are a group of innate immune cells with cytotoxic properties. Age-related NK cells are characterized by compromised abilities in cytotoxicity, including the production of cytokines and chemokines and interactions with DCs and macrophages. Alterations in the expression of activation receptors, such as NKp30, NKp46, and DNAM-1, may impair the immune monitoring function of NK cells in the elderly (Campos et al., 2015; Campos et al., 2014). These changes probably result in an increased risk of morbidity and mortality in elderly individuals (Krishnaraj, 1997).

Immune senescence also results in the exhaustion of adaptive immunity, and the number of naïve T cells dramatically declines, while the number of memory T cells is increased. TCR diversity declines with age, and the reduced expressions of Lck, ZAP70, DLG1, Lat, and SLP-76 have been reported to be involved in the TCR signaling mechanism (Rodier et al., 2009; Zhao et al., 2020b). Senescent T cells present decreased SA- $\beta$ -galactosidase and cytotoxic activity, low proliferative capacity, upregulation of the expression of cell cycle arrest genes such as p16<sup>INK4</sup> and p21<sup>CIP1</sup> and immune checkpoint-related molecules such as Tigit, Tim3, and CTLA-4, and decreased expression of functional molecules such as Perforin and GzmB. These changes may be associated with increased pro-inflammatory cytokine secretion and decreased new antigen recognition (Larbi et al., 2008; Mittelbrunn and Kroemer, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021g; Zhang et al., 2020g). The surface markers also change during aging, and senescent T cells lose the expression of the costimulatory molecules CD27 and CD28 but increase the expression of killer cell lectin-like receptor subfamily G (KLRG-1) and CD57 (Huff et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020g), so CD27<sup>-</sup>CD28<sup>-</sup>CD57<sup>+</sup>KLRG-1<sup>+</sup> T cells can be used as an indicator of immunosenescence. Correspondingly, the naïve B-cell frequency and B-cell activation are impaired, and the

ability to form antibodies and antibody affinity are reduced in elderly people, while memory B cells accumulate owing to increased antigen stimulation (Johnson et al., 2002; Pinti et al., 2016). The expression of costimulatory molecules (CD27, CD40) is reduced in senescent B cells (El-Naseery et al., 2020). Antibodies produced by B cells aimed at pathogenic microorganisms are important to resist bacterial and viral infections. Therefore, a decline in B-cell functions might contribute to weak anti-infection immunity in elderly individuals.

Secretory factors are detectable in body fluids such as blood, urine, and CSF. Peripheral blood is a common body fluid in which aging biomarkers are identified. Aging-related secretory factors in the blood are often linked to the chronic low-grade inflammatory phenotype (CLIP), which was first described by Krabbe et al. (2004). In contrast to classical acute inflammation, CLIP is characterized by a persistent low-grade inflammatory state, which typically develops during aging. CLIP is manifested by elevated levels (2 to 4-fold increase) of inflammatory cytokines in blood serum. In addition to the classical IL-6 and CRP, an increasing number of proinflammatory factors have been identified to be associated with CLIP initiation and development, including (i) cytokines and the corresponding soluble receptors or related molecules (e.g., IL-1, IL-8, IFN, and TNF); (ii) chemokines (e.g., CCL2, CCL3, and CCL5); (iii) adhesion molecules (e.g., VCAM-1, ICAM-1, and E-selectin); and (iv) acute phase reactants of inflammation (e.g., serum amyloid A and fibrinogen), many of which are also associated with SASP (Chen et al., 2019a). The accumulation of lncRNAs and miRNAs in peripheral blood was also found to be associated with immune aging (Table S17 in Supporting Information). Single-cell transcriptome analysis has revealed overexpression of lncRNA NEAT1 and MALAT1 by exhausted T cells and frailty-specific monocytes during aging (Luo et al., 2022b).

In addition to peripheral blood, urine samples are also commonly used for laboratory tests on age-related immune functions. A number of urinary or fecal measurements, including 8-OHdG, cell-free mitochondrial DNA, glucocorticoid metabolites, urinary C-peptide of insulin, thyroid hormones and neopterin, have been shown to be plausible biomarkers for inflammaging (Behringer et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2022; Sacco et al., 2021; Svoboda et al., 2008). EVs from urine and CSF have also been proven insightful for reflecting parental cell properties and remote cell-cell communication status. A study showed that SASP cytokines and immune defense factors could be identified in urinary EVs but not in urinary solutions. SASP-associated factors (e.g., IL-8, IP-10, GRO, and MCP-1) were detected at significantly higher levels in urinary EVs from old individuals (age >60) than young adults (Yeh et al., 2021).

The meninges and CSF surrounding the brain encompass immune cells and systems tightly regulated to respond to brain antigens under pathological conditions (Louveau et al., 2016). Several inflammaging cytokines and metabolic components have been found to change with age (Hu et al., 2019b; Huber et al., 2018; Solvang et al., 2022). Studies have revealed immunological changes in CSF in the pathological events of age-related neurodegenerative disorders such as AD and Lewy body dementia (Gate et al., 2020; Gate et al., 2021). More recently, aging-related single-cell transcriptome analysis has uncovered the upregulation of lipid transport genes (e.g., APOE, APOC2 and APOBR) in non-classical monocytes within the CSF of elderly healthy individuals, which highlights the critical role of lipid metabolism in innate immunity and immunoregulation of the age-related CSF system (Piehl et al., 2022).

#### *Summary and perspectives*

In this section, we summarize the biomarkers of immune system aging that are characterized by the degeneration of the thymus, spleen, and lymph nodes, decreased innate and adaptive immune responses, and the excessive inflammatory signaling. The aging of the immune system exhibits changes in function, structure, and cellular/extracellular components. Immunosenescence results in compromised organismal barriers and elevated susceptibility to infection and chronic diseases. Understanding these processes is required for developing more efficient interventions to modulate the senescence process and minimize the negative influence of immunosenescence.

### **Aging clocks and their applications**

Beyond the cellular and organ levels, the heterogeneity of aging is also reflected at the organismal and population levels. Composite measures should be used to evaluate aging at these system levels, but it is not an easy task to decide which combination of biomarkers to use. Using various modeling techniques, especially with the application of artificial intelligence, biomarkers measured in large cohort studies have generated diverse prediction models of biological age, or aging clocks. In this chapter, we introduce aging clocks and their applications based on the nature of biomarkers used in these models, and delve into the challenges and complexities in interpreting these models, which are areas for further innovation.

#### **Phenotypic clocks**

The definition of aging phenotypes is broad and can be roughly divided into physical characteristics (e.g., facial, skin, and brain imaging) and functional capacities (e.g.,

cognitive and psychological evaluation scores) for building phenotypic aging clocks.

PhotoAgeClock is developed to predict chronological age using images of eye corners with deep neural network (DNN) and achieve the mean absolute error (MAE) of 2.3 years (Bobrov et al., 2018). Chen et al. (2015) first find human 3D facial imaging features could be as reliable aging markers, based on which a linear regression model had the MAE of around 6.1 years. Later with a larger cohort, Xia et al. (2020b) build a convolutional neural network (CNN) age predictor and reported an error between chronological/perceived age and predicted age of only  $\pm 2.79/2.90$  years, and uncovered that heterogeneity of the aging rate reached its peak in middle age. Brain structural MRI data could also be applied to age prediction with the MAE of 4.16 years (Cole et al., 2017). More recently, a 3D CNN model (Yin et al., 2023) has been introduced with a more accurate MAE of 2.3 years. Their model can reveal neurocognitive trajectories in adults with MCI and AD and may serve as early indicators for AD.

Psychological function changes occurring throughout the human lifespan have been overlooked as a phenotypic biomarker. Zhavoronkov et al. (2020) trained a deep learning age predictor based on social and behavioral data from a large-scale study and obtained the MAE of 6.7 years for chronological age prediction, which contained actionable features that can be modified using interventions (Table S18 in Supporting Information).

#### **Epigenomic clocks**

In 1942, Waddington introduced the concept of epigenetics by describing the influence of the environment on the developmental process of the embryo (Waddington, 2012). In simple terms, epigenetics refers to all reversible, heritable processes that do not alter the sequence of the genome but are capable of regulating the expression of genes and causing changes in the phenotype. Living organisms are constantly influenced by the environment, which is reflected at the cellular level, and external influences constantly alter the intracellular phenotype. Aging is a process accompanied by the continuous accumulation of epigenetic changes that eventually lead to cellular, tissue, and organ degeneration (López-Otín et al., 2023). In turn, the features of the epiphenomena also change continuously with the aging process (Zhang et al., 2020d). Given that, it becomes possible to predict biological age by measuring the level of apparent epigenetic changes. Such a method of using epigenetic markers to predict biological age is also known as the “epigenetic clock”.

Epigenetic modifications include many processes, such as DNA methylation and histone modifications. In this section, we will mainly focus on the changes in DNA methylation in



the aging process. DNA methylation refers to adding methyl groups to the cytosine at the fifth position or the adenine at the sixth position of the DNA. Methyl groups can be actively demethylated by ten-eleven translocation (TET) enzymes, thymine DNA glycosylase (TDG), and base excision repair (BER) (Moore et al., 2013). In eukaryotes, 5-methylcytosine is the most common form of methylation and usually occurs on a cytosine located in front of guanine, hence named “CpG sites” (Smith and Meissner, 2013). In mammals, approximately 75% of CpG sites are methylated (Tost, 2010). Genome-wide DNA methylation is erased and re-established during early embryonic development. Following embryonic implantation, tissue-specific DNA methylation is gradually established and remains stable for a considerable time (Cedar and Bergman, 2012). This suggests that DNA methylation plays a key role in maintaining cell fate determination and programmed embryonic development.

Age-related changes in DNA methylation have been observed in various species and tissues for decades. In 1967, Berdyshev et al. (1967) found that the level of DNA methylation gradually decreased with age in salmon. Later, similar changes in DNA methylation with age were found in mice, rats, and humans (Vanyushin et al., 1973; Wilson and Jones, 1983; Wilson et al., 1987). In rats, DNA methylation decreases in the brain, heart, and spleen, with no changes in the liver and lungs but a slight increase in the kidneys (Vanyushin et al., 1973). In mice, loss of DNA methylation sites was observed at a speed of approximately  $4.7 \times 10^4$  per month (Wilson et al., 1987). A similar trend can also be observed in experimental primary cell models. DNA methylation is significantly reduced in mouse, hamster, and human fibroblasts. However, DNA methylation is relatively more stable in immortalized cells (Wilson and Jones, 1983). These observations indicate that DNA methylation changes along with the aging process in animal or cell models. A recent study found that some methylation sites that change along with aging are conserved across mammalian species by analyzing changes in methylation levels in more than 59 tissues from 128 mammalian species (Lu et al., 2021). One study on human twins found that epigenetic heterogeneity among twins increases with age (Talens et al., 2012). As we age, epigenetic modifications of DNA methylation tend to occur at some conserved loci (Bollati et al., 2009; Christensen et al., 2009; Rakan et al., 2010). This suggests that it is possible to discover conserved DNA methylation sites and use them as a model to predict aging. And this epigenetic model is referred to as the DNA methylation-based epigenetic clock.

Early epigenetic clocks were generated from only a few samples and a small number of CpG loci with limited accuracy (Bocklandt et al., 2011; Koch et al., 2012; Koch and Wagner, 2011). Advanced epigenetic clocks emerged in recent years; these clocks incorporated data from a large number of tissues and organs, leading to the discovery of

different epigenetic clocks, such as multi-tissue, tissue- or disease-specific, single CpG site prediction models. In 2013, Horvath discovered the first multi-tissue epigenetic clock (Horvath, 2013; Horvath, 2015). The Horvath clock was generated from 8,000 samples from 51 tissues and cell types. A total of 353 CpG sites were found to be strongly associated with aging, with a 0.96 correlation and a 3.6-year error. In the Horvath clock, different tissues show different aging rates. However, limitations are also evident. For example, it cannot be applied to cultured cells (Horvath et al., 2019; Horvath et al., 2018). Therefore, Horvath developed the Skin & Blood Clock, which is based on human fibroblasts, keratinocytes, buccal cells, endothelial cells, lymphoblastoid cells, skin, blood, and saliva samples (Horvath et al., 2018). The Skin & Blood Clock contains 391 CpGs. It can effectively predict the age of *in vitro* cultured neuron, glia, brain, liver, and even bone samples. An epigenetic clock developed by Zhang et al. (2019b) using blood and saliva as samples can also accurately predict age with samples from the mammary gland, liver, fat, and muscle. In addition to multi-tissue clocks, many tissue-specific clocks have been generated. In 2013, Hannum et al. (2013) collected blood samples from 656 individuals ranging in age from 19 to 101 and found 71 CpG loci highly correlated with aging. Weidner et al. (2014) identified 102 CpG loci from blood samples. From 508 human skin samples, Boroni et al. (2020) identified 2,266 CpG loci that are capable of accurately predicting age for both cultured skin cells and primary human skin tissue samples. To improve the accuracy of prediction in the young population, McEwen et al. (2020) developed the Pediatric Buccal Epigenetic Clock (PebBE) using buccal swab samples from the young population aged 0–20 years. To date, most epigenetic clocks are based on Illumina Infinium arrays. Their high price makes them unsuitable for large-scale clinical drug trials. Weidner et al. (2014) developed the 3-CpG clock based on blood samples that contain fewer CpG loci. For forensic purposes, Zbieć-Piekarska et al. (2015) used the less expensive pyrosequencing method to identify the five CpG loci that are most relevant to age (*ELOVL2*, *Clorf132*, *TRIM59*, *KLF14*, and *FHL2*) as prediction models. The 5-CpG clock was able to predict age with high accuracy for 300 samples ( $R(2)=0.94$ , standard error of estimate=4.5 years). CpG clock based on these five genes was validated in multiple tissues (Cho et al., 2017; Dias et al., 2020; Jung et al., 2019a). It has been shown that even three of the five CpG loci (*ELOVL2*, *FHL2*, and *Clorf132*) are sufficient to predict effective age (Dias et al., 2020).

New training models were developed in order to generate more explainable epigenetic clocks that directly reflect biological phenotypes of the aging process. A series of studies (Horvath et al., 2014; Horvath et al., 2016; Levine et al., 2018) have classified traits such as BMI, obesity, physical fitness, Huntington’s disease, sleep, and smoking as pro-

aging factors. Other studies have also linked the epigenetic clock to the mortality risk (Levine et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017c). Zhang et al. (2017c) analyzed DNA methylation in a population group with up to 14 years of follow-up and identified 10 CpG loci that were highly associated with mortality factors. Levine et al. (2018) combined chronological age and multiple clinical factors associated with mortality risk as a biological age score. They identified 513 CpG markers to develop the model PhenoAge. PhenoAge can effectively predict a variety of age-related phenotypes, including all-cause mortality, cancer, health span, and physical function, while Lu et al. (2019) developed GrimAge by combining the effects of smoking and age-related serum protein levels, which can effectively predict mortality risk and multiple age-related diseases.

Animal models play a key role in revealing the mechanisms of epigenetic changes with aging and the effects of intervention modalities on aging. Therefore, an accurate assessment of the epigenetic clock in non-human animal experimental models is needed. Stubbs et al. (2017) collected mouse liver, lung, heart, and brain samples from newborn up to 41 weeks and identified 329 unique CpG loci, thus constructing a model that could accurately assess DNA methylation age with a median absolute error of 3.33 weeks. Meer et al. (2018) collected multiple tissues from mice at 6, 10, 12, 20, and 30 months of age and derived a clock with 435 CpG loci. In addition to the multi-tissue clocks, tissue-specific clocks based on blood (Petkovich et al., 2017) and liver (Koch and Wagner, 2011) have also been developed in mice. DNA methylation clocks have also been established for a variety of model animals, including naked mole rats (Horvath et al., 2022), dogs, wolves (Thompson et al., 2017), humpback whales (Polanowski et al., 2014), and chimpanzees (Guevara et al., 2020).

Since there is a strong correlation between DNA methylation and aging, it is necessary to elucidate the underlying mechanisms of how epigenetic changes and the aging process interact reciprocally. Recently, Kabacik et al. (2022) provided a detailed analysis of the relationship between DNA methylation and the hallmarks of aging in human cells. Using the Skin & Blood Clock to measure the degree of epigenetic aging in primary cells across several human cell types, they found that nutrient sensing, mitochondrial function, stem cell exhaustion, and cell-cell communication affect epigenetic aging, while cell senescence, telomere attrition, and genomic instability do not. Lu et al. (2021) obtained an unprecedentedly large dataset from 121 eutherian species and 7 marsupial species to characterize senescence-associated CpG loci. They found that genes close to these senescence-associated CpG loci are also involved in developmental processes, such as HOX and PAX. This suggests that development and aging may share important yet unrevealed mechanisms throughout the life course of the

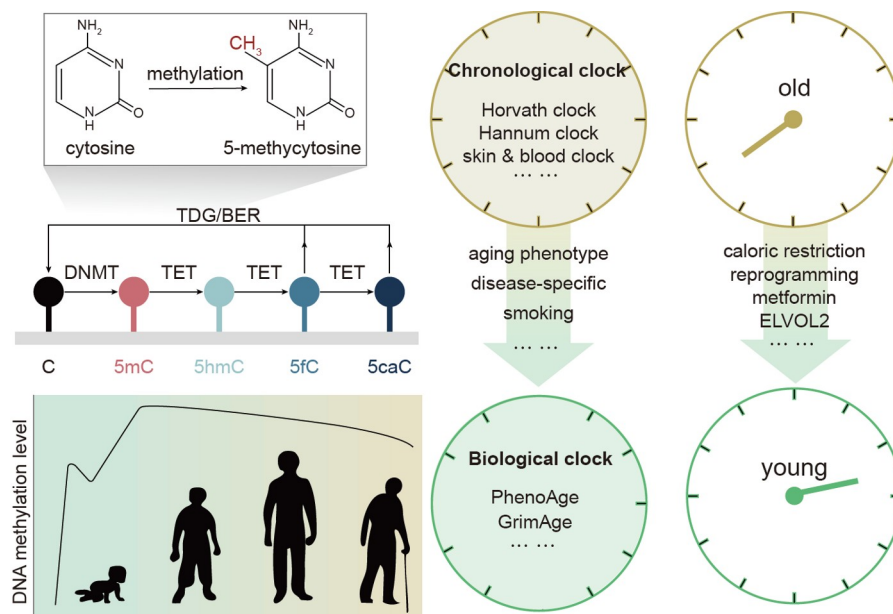
organism.

Undoubtedly, the aging process is accompanied by epigenetic changes in DNA methylation, but whether and how epigenetic interventions affect the aging process remain unclear. Cellular reprogramming changes the apparent state of the entire cell. Ocampo et al. (2016) reported that short-term reprogramming cycles delay aging-related alterations, remodel the epigenetic status, and enhance regeneration in mice. This phenotypic remodeling is a shift from an aged state to a youthful state (Lu et al., 2020). Manipulating some key DNA methylation clock-related genes can also affect the aging process. For example, the *ELVOL2* gene, which functions as a long-chain fatty acid elongation catalyst, has a strong correlation with aging among DNA methylation clock-related genes (Zbieć-Piekarska et al., 2015). Recently, Li et al. (2022h) reported that DNA methylation caused impairment of *ELVOL2*, leading to lipid synthesis dysfunction, which in turn increased ER stress and mitochondrial dysfunction, ultimately leading to the appearance of aging-related symptoms. In contrast, back-compensation of *ELVOL2* restores mitochondrial function and attenuates the onset of age-related macular degeneration. These findings demonstrate that interventions on either the overall appearance or key epigenetic factors associated with aging can be used as interventions for aging (Figure 27). These studies indicate that DNA methylation, an important factor of the epigenetic clock, could not only be a marker of the aging process but also a direct regulator of it.

### Transcriptomic clocks

Using gene expression levels to build aging clocks can link the aging process more directly to gene functions, making these clocks more interpretable. Transcriptomic data from multiple organs have been used to build aging clocks. Peters et al. (2015) performed a linear regression on peripheral blood mononuclear cell gene expression array data in several large cohorts, and obtained a model with the MAE of 7.8 years. This transcriptomic clock was found to have associations with some biomarkers and risk factors, including smoking status. In 2018, Fleischer et al. (2018) derived a clock using human dermal fibroblast RNA-seq data with a Median Absolute Error (MedAE) of 4.0 years. In order to reduce the noisiness of transcriptomic data, this study combined multiple linear discriminant analysis classifiers which could also be applied in detecting progeria samples. In the same year, Mamoshina et al. (2018) tested several supervised machine learning models, including neural networks, on human skeletal muscle transcriptome data for age prediction and obtained the MAE of 6.24 years.

Previous work mostly suffered from considerable variation between transcriptomic data, while Meyer and Schumacher (2021) demonstrated that a simple binarization and relative



**Figure 27** The DNA methylation clock theory of aging. In mammal, DNA can undergo reversible methylation or demethylation processes. Aging is accompanied by global DNA hypomethylation. Based on chronological age or biological age, different DNA methylation clocks are established by analyzing the methylation changes with age. These clocks are further used to predict the rate of aging. The methylation sites associated with aging can be altered by methods such as reprogramming in order to slow down or reverse the aging process.

age scaling of transcriptomic data to define a gene set could denoise the data and improve age prediction in *C. elegans*. Additionally, they demonstrated, using human fibroblast data from Fleischer et al. (2018) that an elastic net-based clock derived from binarized transcriptomic data improved age prediction to the MAE of 6.63 years. Holzschek et al. (2021) constructed an artificial deep neural network according to well-described biological pathways, allowing the prediction of age from human epidermal skin transcriptome data with a MeAE of 4.71 years. Their model increased the interpretability of aging clocks and responded in expected ways to known perturbations of biological age in silico. Moreover, Xia et al. (2020b) predicted age with PBMC ribonucleic acid (RNA)-seq data using linear partial least squares regression (PLSR) which had the MAE of 5.68 years.

The recent development of the scRNA-seq method enables the characterization of transcriptomic data at the individual cell level and provides a new method for constructing aging clocks. Lu et al. (2022) developed a mixed-effect elastic net model to predict the age of individual CD8<sup>+</sup> T cells from three cohorts and showed a strong correlation with chronological age in cross-validation. Buckley et al. (2023) trained cell-type-specific aging clocks using single-cell transcriptomes from mice subventricular zone neurogenic region with high resolution and reached MAE ranging from 2.3 to 4.6 months across all cell types. Additionally, they reported that heterochronic parabiosis and exercise of these two interventions could reverse aging clocks in neurogenic regions, indicating the ability of their model to quantify transcriptomic rejuvenation (Table S19 in Supporting Informa-

tion).

### Proteomic clocks

Compared with DNA methylation or transcriptomic studies, the proteomic approach has been well recognized as a powerful technique which provides more insights into phenotypic traits changes across human aging (Bathke et al., 2019; Diz et al., 2012; Haider and Pal, 2013). In different biological fluids (i.e., plasma (Lehallier et al., 2019; Tanaka et al., 2018), serum (Di Narzo et al., 2017), saliva (Wang et al., 2018b), urine (Bakun et al., 2014), cerebrospinal fluid (Baird et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2005a)) and tissues (i.e., skeletal muscle (Staunton et al., 2012), liver (Heinze et al., 2018)), thousands of proteins which dynamically vary along with age may directly regulate both of age-related health and disease biology. It is noteworthy that the generation of multiple proteomic datasets of human or animal lifespan during the past few years may hold a strong translational potential in aging research.

Since Zhang et al. (2005a) carried out the pioneering study to characterize proteomic signature in the cerebrospinal fluid of elderly and young individuals, increasing studies have been performed to map proteome alterations during aging. In the literature research led by Johnson et al. (2020), the authors investigated 36 proteomic analyses performed in different matrices. The results showed that a total of 1,128 proteins were reported by at least two or more analyses. Among them, a set of 32 proteins changing with age in five or more studies might show strong evidence of age asso-

ciation. As indicated in the enrichment analysis, the most common proteins were mainly involved in immune signaling, extracellular matrix organization, complement and coagulation cascades and metabolic signaling. Notably, in an analogous review conducted by Moaddel et al. (2021), the authors also summarized the findings of aging proteomes in multiple matrices and different species from 33 independent studies. It turned out that a list of 232 proteins was identified to be significantly associated with age across at least two studies and matrices. It is noteworthy that the most remarkable pathways with significant connection with age were essentially in accordance with those discovered in the previous review. Both two studies proposed important aging protein subsets in the plasma, which is an ideal source for aging biomarkers discovery largely owing to its high sensitivity to organ or cell function. Nevertheless, the robustness, reproducibility, as well as selectivity and sensitivity of these proteins remain to be validated. Besides, substantial biological work is still in great need to comprehensively elucidate the underlying mechanisms of aging.

On the basis of the age-associated proteomic datasets, a couple of aging clocks have been constructed. Tanaka et al. (2018) developed an aging clock based on circulating plasma proteins highly relevant to chronological age. The proteomic signature of 76 proteins was eventually identified to be possessed with favorable age prediction. Among them, Growth differentiation factor 15 (GDF15) demonstrated the strongest age association. Johnson et al. (2020) also established several novel proteomic clocks from 2019 to 2021. The first clock comprised of protein lists determined through literature searching among multiple analyses, which is capable of accurately predicting human age in an independent patient cohort derived from 3,301 subjects. Based on the first study, the second clock composing 491 proteins was developed by further data mining of the previous protein panel. The new clock denotes high-quality aging intervention protein targets with ultra-predictability (Pearson correlation  $\geq 0.9$ ) in 3 independent human cohorts (Johnson et al., 2021; Lehallier et al., 2020). There is a notable point that fewer protein inputs with more significant changes with age may provide the clock model with better predictability. It is encouraging that the established proteomic clocks settled for capturing the complex organismal mechanisms may have potential applications beyond measuring accelerated biological aging. Mostly, they can be used for enhancing the surveillance of multiple age-related diseases (Grassmann et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021) and promoting the development of aging intervention drug candidates (Fahy et al., 2019; Schultz et al., 2020). So far, with close relevance to aging in liver and kidney pathophysiology, immune dysfunction, metabolic disorder and neurodegenerative diseases, several multiplex protein panels have revealed great application value in the clinical settings (Ganz et al., 2016; Kearney et

al., 2018; Rutledge et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2019).

In spite of many remarkable achievements made in proteome-based aging clocks, there remain a few limitations. Firstly, the integrated proteomic datasets used for model development were usually generated from different proteomic platforms (Johnson et al., 2020; Moaddel et al., 2021). The measurements mainly include mass spectrometry (MS)-based platform, SomaLogic aptamer (SOMAscan)-based platform, and proximity extension assay (PEA, O-Link). Apart from the MS-based approach, the other two technologies are not possible to be tailored for quantifying the entire proteome. Thus, in-depth unbiased MS-based analysis pipelines (i.e., data-independent acquisition (DIA) methods (Bilbao et al., 2015)) which allow for reliable protein detection and quantification in large-scale cohorts are urgently needed. Another advantage of MS-based technology is that it may precisely identify the post-translational modifications of proteins, which also show significant alterations during the aging process (Baldensperger et al., 2020; Krištić et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2018; Santos and Lindner, 2017). Secondly, besides chronological age, the clocks need to be further improved through incorporating other specific age-related molecular functions (Rutledge et al., 2022). With more inclusive insights into the biological features throughout aging progression, this will definitely enhance the accuracy and predictability of the existing models to a large extent. An interesting example is that in a recent study, Sayed et al. (2021) developed an inflammatory aging clock by tracking the patterns of predominant phenotypes of systemic inflammation like multimorbidity and immunosenescence. And they eventually proposed CXCL9 as a key biomarker for the early detection of immune system changes in the aging process. Thirdly, future well-constructed multi-center proteomic studies in aging research are required for more model validation to avoid any sex- or race-based differences, as well as inter- or intra-individual variabilities (Rivero-Segura et al., 2020). Lastly, it should be clearly realized that the widespread application of the models can be limited with relatively fixed protein panels as single indicators. On one hand, protein markers need to be further evaluated and continually updated in consideration of different stages of lifespan or aging disease progression. On the other hand, the integration of proteins with various signatures derived from other omics layers will create new possibilities for exploring to what extent the multi-omics markers can shed light on effective biomarkers or targets relevant to aging (Rivero-Segura et al., 2020; Rutledge et al., 2022).

Despite the gap between lab discovery and clinical application, protein-based aging clocks have distinctive advantages as they exert direct effects on multiple biological processes and form the vast majority of aging intervention drug targets. Committed efforts in the development and

improvement of realistic proteomic clocks will pave the way of outlining the roadmap to effective aging-associated interventions in the clinical practice.

### Metabolomic clocks

Metabolism has strong associations with aging and the abundances of some metabolites are shown to be correlated with age (Chaleckis et al., 2016; Panyard et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2012), suggesting the potential to use these components to assess biological age. The first metabolomic age predictor was established based on the large-scale urine metabolite profiling using proton nuclear magnetic resonance (<sup>1</sup>H-NMR) spectroscopy, named the metabolic score, by applying a non-linear regression method (Table S20 in Supporting Information) (Hertel et al., 2016). The metabolic score was validated in two independent cohorts and was prognostic for weight loss in individuals who received bariatric surgery. Another study trained a metabolic age clock model based on the blood metabolome data from a larger cohort (van den Akker et al., 2020). Their results suggested that the blood metabolic age was associated with the risk of cardiovascular disease, mortality, and functionality in individuals with advanced age.

Robinson et al. (2020) measured metabolites in both urine and serum samples generated from different platforms, based on which the metabolic clock models were built. This study also demonstrated that the prediction performance of metabolic clocks was relatively stable across populations from different areas. Efforts have also been made to compare the performance of age prediction powers of metabolites from blood and urine samples. Rist et al. (2017) collected the metabolomic data from 301 healthy individuals aged 18–80 years, which were generated from multiple platforms. Metabolic clocks were built based on the blood and urine datasets both separately and in combined using different algorithms. The authors found that the overall performance of blood metabolic age predictors was superior to those based on urine metabolic data. A recent investigative study with a relatively small sample size shows the potential of CSF metabolites to predict age (Hwangbo et al., 2022). The authors subjected the prediction model based on healthy individuals to age-match patients with AD and Parkinson's Disease, which showed more significant prediction errors compared to the control, indicating that the association between the CSF metabolome and age differs with the neurodegenerative diseases.

The metabolic data also shows the ability to predict age-related diseases and mortality (Deelen et al., 2019; Fischer et al., 2014), which further underscores the potential utility of the metabolic clock in health monitoring. Future investigation on the development of stable targeted metabolic analysis methods on those metabolites being identified to be highly

correlated with age in different studies might further promote the application of metabolomic clock into clinical use.

### Circadian clocks

Nearly all physiological and behavioral activities, including sleep-wake cycles, body temperature, energy metabolism, hormone secretion and locomotor activity, are oscillated to be near 24 hours by an internal self-sustained circadian clock in the vast majority of living organisms (Panda et al., 2002). In mammals, the suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN) of the hypothalamus serves as a master pacemaker that coordinates the endogenous circadian clocks across the body to the external environment (Hastings et al., 2018). Light is a predominant environmental cue, called *Zeitgeber*, that entrains the central clock in the SCN; SCN then synchronizes subsidiary oscillators in the peripheral via systemic cues like feeding activity, body temperature and hormones (Dibner et al., 2010; Mohawk et al., 2012). At the molecular level, the circadian oscillator is composed of a transcription- and translation-based negative feedback loop, wherein a heterodimer of CLOCK and BMAL1 promotes the transcription of Period (PER) and Cryptochrome (CRY) (Bunger et al., 2000; DeBruyne et al., 2007; Gekakis et al., 1998; Kume et al., 1999; Reick et al., 2001; Takahashi et al., 2008; van der Horst et al., 1999). PER and CRY dimerize to drive their own oscillation and rhythmic expression of genes involved in key cellular functions (Patke et al., 2020; Takahashi, 2017).

Aging is a gradual decline of physiological function, and the circadian clock is not an exempt. Disruption of circadian rhythmicity often leads to diseases, including metabolic disorders, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancers (Acosta-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Bass and Lazar, 2016; Hood and Amir, 2017; Tabibzadeh, 2021). In humans, the most reliable observation of circadian disruption is the wakening activity and retiring to bed in elderlies which show a tendency to be earlier compared with younger adults (morning chronotype) (Carrier et al., 1997; Horne and Ostberg, 1976; Roenneberg et al., 2007). This is attributable to the loss of rhythmicity of biosynthesis and release of hormones, which regulate feeding and sleep activity, and oscillated the expression of clock genes in peripheral tissues (Gamble et al., 2014). Among these hormones, melatonin release is under the control of the SCN and plays an important role in regulating sleep onsets and core body temperature. Melatonin rhythmicity reduction is observed in old individuals (Kennaway et al., 1999; Reiter et al., 1980; Touitou et al., 1981; Zhao et al., 2002). The phase advance of melatonin rhythms also contributes to the earlier chronotype of the circadian sleep-wake cycle during aging. Their capacity to adapt to light/dark schedule changes (shift work or jet lag) is also impaired in old individuals (Monk et al., 2000; Monk et al., 1993). Analysis of the expression pattern of core clock genes in the orbitofrontal cortex reveals

dampened oscillation of *PER1*, *PER2* and *CRY1* in elderlies (Chen et al., 2016a). Aging also downregulates *BMAL1* transcripts in the peripheral blood cells in healthy women (Ando et al., 2010). Age-associated changes in core clock gene expression are also observed in nonhuman species (Bonaconsa et al., 2014; Kolker et al., 2003; Kolker et al., 2004; Yamazaki et al., 2002).

How aging perturbs the function of internal circadian clocks remains an open question. Transplant experiments suggest that the SCN is a critical regulator of diseases, aging and longevity (Li and Satinoff, 1998; Swaab et al., 1985). Studies have found a reduction in SCN volume in aged people compared with younger adults (Zhou and Swaab, 1999). The expression of two key neuropeptides, arginine vasopressin (AVP) and vasoactive intestinal polypeptide (VIP), is consistently reduced in the SCN of aged humans and rodents (Cayetanot et al., 2005; Chee et al., 1988; Hofman and Swaab, 1994; Roozendaal et al., 1987; Zhou et al., 1995). The *ex vivo* bioluminescent imaging of cultured SCN slices of *PER2::luciferase* knock-in (*PER2::LUC*) mice reveals the reduced amplitude of *PER2::LUC* rhythms and a lengthening of the circadian period in aged mice under constant darkness condition (Nakamura et al., 2015). The most reliable change observed in aged SCN is loss of coherence in SCN neuronal network activity in old animals (Nakamura et al., 2011; Watanabe et al., 1995), which may contribute to the deterioration of daily rhythms of physiology and behavior. Aging affects the synchrony between the central pacemaker and peripheral oscillators (Sellix et al., 2012). Following 6-h phase advance of the light/dark schedule, the peripheral clocks of old mice showed slower rates of re-entrainment. By contrast, a more rapid SCN response is observed in aged mice compared to younger mice, suggesting a major consequence of aging is weakened control by the master clock over peripheral oscillators. Cellular senescence is a biomarker of aging and contributes to age-related diseases (Cai et al., 2022d; Guo et al., 2022). *BMAL1* and *CLOCK* facilitate heterochromatin stabilization and prevent the senescence of mesenchymal stem cells (Liang et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2021). A recent study reveals that exercise can restore dysregulated circadian machinery in different cell types across tissues in aged mice (Sun et al., 2023). Particularly, the transcription of *Bmal1* is downregulated in various endothelial cells during aging, which was rescued by prolonged exercise, while overexpression of *Bmal1* delays the senescence of cardiac endothelial cells. Thus, small molecules that activate endogenous clocks are potential drugs for delaying age-related diseases (Chen et al., 2018b).

Chronotype varies owing to individual genetic predisposition, age and sex. Integrating the chronotype, circadian drug pharmacokinetics, age and sex could provide optimal interventions to promote healthy aging. Additionally, manipulating feeding time (time-restricted feeding) in the at-

tempt to modulate the circadian clock shows powerful effects on mitigating age-related chronic diseases, though specific mechanisms are still far from being fully understood. Whether feeding behavior may serve as a potential biomarker of aging requires further investigation.

### Longevity clocks

The heterogeneity of aging leads to differences in life expectancy and health state in different individuals of the same age. Almost all people want to know how many years of “good health” they have left. With this in mind, researchers have proposed the concept of biological age (Andrews et al., 2017), which is imperfectly associated with chronological age but can indicate individual health and longevity. If a person has a biological age younger than their chronological age, they are more likely to exhibit good health; conversely, those with a biological age older than their chronological age are more likely to show poor physical health or underlying chronic disease. Extensive efforts have been made over several decades to identify biomarkers and develop corresponding biological clocks to predict biological age, thus representing individual health and longevity potential.

#### *Prediction of longevity by biological clocks*

One challenge in establishing an accurate biological clock is to identify biomarkers/indices associated with biological age. At present, most biological clocks for health and longevity prediction are derivations of the aging clock, as most biological age related biomarkers/indices vary roughly linearly with chronological age. For example, frailty, measured by the frailty index (FI), reflects a state of increased risk of age-related negative health outcomes (e.g., physical disability, cognitive decline, and hospitalization). Several studies have shown that the FI-based biological clock can be utilized as a predictor of health and lifespan (Kim et al., 2017; Schultz et al., 2020). Research has also shown that the number of senescent cells (which accumulate with age and can be marked by p16<sup>INK4a</sup>) in some tissues can reflect human biological age, with fewer p16<sup>INK4a</sup>-positive cells representing a propensity for longevity in middle-aged individuals (Waaijer et al., 2012). Furthermore, various studies have suggested that blood biochemical markers (e.g., albumin and glucose) and cell counts can be used to construct a biological clock and quantify biological age (Putin et al., 2016; Pyrkov et al., 2021). Higher serum dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate (DHRAS) levels, which decrease with age, are considered a predictor of longevity in men (Enomoto et al., 2008). At the molecular level, TL (i.e., telomere length) declines progressively with age, and is thus considered a biomarker of chronological age (López-Otín et al., 2013). Coupled with evidence linking shorter TL with increased incidence of age-related diseases (e.g., cardiovascular disease, cancer) and

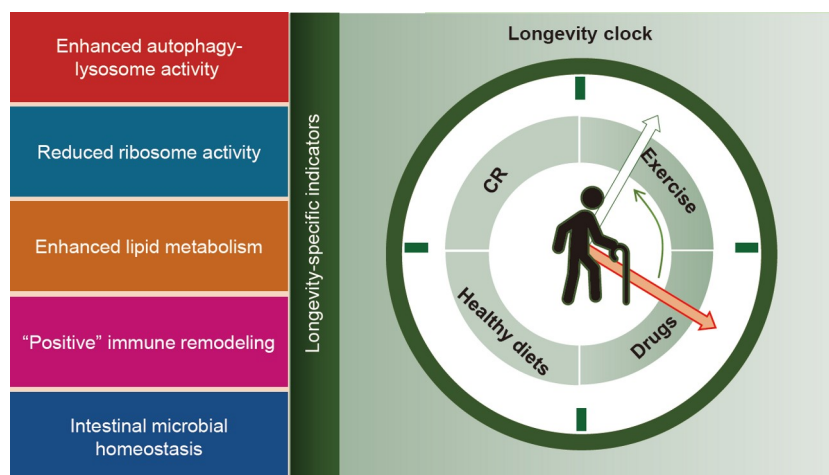
limited life expectancy (Barthel et al., 2017; Haycock et al., 2014; Heidinger et al., 2012), TL has been used to construct a biological clock to estimate the biological age and to predict longevity (Vaiserman and Krasniakov, 2020; Zhang et al., 2014). Importantly, advances in multi-omics technologies in recent years have increased potential molecular biomarkers associated with chronological age as well as biological age and longevity. As a well-known epigenetic modification, DNA methylation has been widely used in the construction of aging clocks, represented by the epigenetic clocks of Horvath and Hannum based on tens to hundreds of age-related methylation sites (Hannum et al., 2013; Horvath, 2013). Studies have also suggested that epigenetic age is an indicator of biological age or a potential predictor of health and longevity, with epigenetic age (or biological age) minus chronological age (Xiao et al., 2018a; Xiao et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017c). Likewise, informative biomarkers extracted from transcriptomes, proteomes, and metabolomes have been applied to construct various aging clocks that can track individual biological age and assess longevity potential (Fleischer et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2019; Tanaka et al., 2020). In addition, several attempts have been made to explore health- and longevity-related biomarkers based on the gut microbiota, given its close relationship with aging and age-related diseases (Claesson et al., 2012; Ghosh et al., 2022b). For instance, *Bacteroides* depletion is an important characteristic of healthy aging and a predictor of extended survival in older individuals (Wilmanski et al., 2021). Thus, these studies suggest that different types of biological clocks based on various molecular signatures have the potential to predict human longevity.

#### *Training new efficient biological (or longevity) clocks: insights from longevous cohorts*

Despite considerable advances in the construction of biolo-

gical clocks, the biological functions of most current biomarkers in healthy human aging and longevity are poorly understood. The accuracy of biological clocks in predicting individual longevity potential also needs to be improved. As such, researchers have been driven to screen more representative causal and functional biomarkers to optimize longevity prediction and intervention guidance. Longevous people (e.g., centenarians) serve as paradigms of successful and extraordinary aging, living much longer than “normal” and managing to delay or even escape common age-related diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, neurodegenerative disease, and cancer (Atzmon et al., 2004; Engberg et al., 2009; Hitt et al., 1999). Therefore, long-lived people present an opportunity to search for reliable and causal molecular/biological indicators of biological age, health, and longevity potential.

Initial studies focused on identifying longevity-associated genetic mutations in long-lived cohorts that could serve as potential indicators of longevity. For example, several variations within the *FOXO3A* gene (e.g., rs13217795 (C), rs2802292 (G)) are highly prevalent in longevous cohorts and increase longevity potential by decreasing IGF-1 signaling (Willcox et al., 2008); and *vice versa*, some long-lived individuals display a depletion in the AD-susceptibility factor  $\epsilon 4$  allele (i.e., rs7412 (C) + rs429358 (C)) of the *APOE* gene, thus achieving longevity by decreasing the risk of AD (Sebastiani et al., 2019). These findings indicate that genetic variations associated with longevity and age-related diseases may facilitate the construction of a biological clock that predicts health and longevity. Consistent with this, a recent predictive model based on longevity- and disease-related genetic markers successfully partitioned components of longevity and non-longevity (AUC=0.767) and predicted lifespan (explaining 8% of the variance in lifespan), with predictive ability improving (AUC=0.86 for longevity clas-



**Figure 28** The clock that regulates longevity. Longevity indicators identified from longevous cohorts to guide construction of new “longevity clocks”, and their application in assessing rejuvenation interventions (e.g., CR) may rewind the clock. Abbreviations: CR, caloric restriction.

sification, explaining 19.8% of the variance in lifespan) when information on disease status and lifestyles was included (Liu et al., 2021b).

Given the limited heritability (15%–35%) of longevity (Gögele et al., 2011), extensive work has attempted to characterize potential biomarkers (or indicators) of healthy human aging and longevity in long-lived cohorts at other molecular levels, including gene expression, protein expression, DNA methylation, and metabolism (Figure 28). Accumulating evidence suggests that the longevity advantage of centenarians is reflected in their younger epigenetic age (i.e., biological age) relative to their chronological age (Daunay et al., 2022). Transcriptomic evidence from long-lived individuals and functional experiments has also shown that increased autophagy-lysosome activity and decreased ribosome activity are two important indicators of healthy aging and longevity in humans (Xiao et al., 2018b; Xiao et al., 2022). Long-lived individuals also tend to exhibit a favorable lipid profile, which may be partly associated with the enhanced lipid metabolism activity found in long-lived individuals (Barzilai et al., 2003; Gonzalez-Covarrubias et al., 2013; Li et al., 2022a). A serum proteome study of centenarian families also identified several proteins associated with abundance and human survival (Sebastiani et al., 2021). In addition, progressive decline in immune function with advanced age is a major risk factor of age-related diseases (e.g., cancer and infection) in older individuals. A recent single-cell RNA sequencing study of centenarian families revealed a “positive” immune remodeling process in centenarians, marked by increased numbers and functional reinforcement of cytotoxic T cells that kill cancer cells (Dong et al., 2022; Weigelin et al., 2021). Aging is also characterized by persistent low-grade systematic inflammation. A recent study suggests that long-lived individuals however have relatively lower inflammation levels (e.g., *IL6*, *TNF $\alpha$* ), which likely result from the upregulation of activating transcription factor 7 (*ATF7*) (Huang et al., 2022d). In addition, several studies on the gut microbiome have revealed unique signatures in centenarians (Biagi et al., 2016; Kong et al., 2016; Sato et al., 2021). For example, some centenarians harbor abundant strains of *Odoribacteraceae* that can generate unique secondary bile acids and protect against enteropathogenic infection (Sato et al., 2021). Taken together, these studies suggest that longevous cohorts can facilitate the identification of longevity-specific indicators and/or biomarkers associated with healthy human aging, but non-linearly associated with age, for the construction of more efficient longevity clocks.

#### *Rewinding the biological (or longevity) clocks by interventions*

Unlike chronological age, individual biological age can be delayed, or healthspan/lifespan can be extended, by inter-

vention strategies such as healthy lifestyle, dietary therapy, and drug therapy (Figure 28). For instance, moderate exercise and excessive sedentary behavior can markedly improve and impair physical health, respectively. Several studies have shown that people who exercise regularly have a younger biological age compared to those who are sedentary (Rea, 2017; Sellami et al., 2021). Likewise, a healthy diet is also beneficial in reducing chronic diseases and lowering biological age (Kresovich et al., 2022). Evidence has also shown that multiple longevity-promoting strategies can delay or reverse the biological clock and may serve as good indicators for assessing intervention efficacy. Among them, caloric restriction is one of the most natural and effective dietary therapies for improving health and promoting longevity (Huang et al., 2022e). Results from various studies have shown that caloric restriction can delay age-related methylation drift in diverse species (e.g., mice and rhesus monkeys), resulting in younger DNA methylation-based biological age (Maegawa et al., 2017; Petkovich et al., 2017). Dietary rapamycin, another prevalent intervention strategy, can promote longevity by inhibiting the mTOR signaling pathway and reducing biological age (Wang et al., 2017b). Similar results have been observed in interventions with other longevity drugs, such as metformin (Li et al., 2022c). These findings indicate that biological clocks can help evaluate different longevity interventions, in part by resolving issues that are time consuming and costly.

#### *Summary and perspectives*

In conclusion, extensive efforts over several decades have successfully constructed multiple types of biological clocks (e.g., epigenetic and metabolic clocks) that can be used to predict a person's health and longevity potential. Evidence also suggests that these clocks can be utilized to assess the efficacy of various longevity interventions. However, despite tremendous advances, most current biological age related biomarkers have been identified based on the principle of chronological age correlation. In other words, many biological age related biomarkers may be a consequence of aging rather than a cause, or their biological functions have not yet been elucidated, resulting in limited accuracy and sensitivity of the corresponding biological clocks as significant predictors of longevity. Therefore, novel longevity- and health-specific molecular and biological biomarkers are required, and their application to non-linear systems with deep learning methods may facilitate the construction of more efficient longevity clocks.

#### **Aging clocks at single-cell resolution**

With the development and innovation of the latest high-throughput omics technology of single-cell sequencing, a lot of studies are devoted to age-related diseases and extending a



healthy lifespan (Leng and Pawelec, 2022; Tabula Muris, 2020; Wen and Tang, 2022; Wu et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022a; Zhou et al., 2022). Numerous biomarkers have been proposed to understand and measure these processes. Aging clocks, estimators of chronological age, can integrate and predict various measures of biological aging utilizing multiple omics and phenotypic data across tissues, aiming to evaluate or predict the biological age and aging speed of the body at molecular resolution (Bell et al., 2019; Palmer, 2022).

In the past decade, a series of aging clocks based on epigenomics (Bocklandt et al., 2011; Hannum et al., 2013; Horvath, 2013; Levine et al., 2018; Weidner et al., 2014), transcriptomics (Fleischer et al., 2018; Holzschek et al., 2021; Meyer and Schumacher, 2021; Peters et al., 2015), proteomics (Lehallier et al., 2019; Tanaka et al., 2020; Tanaka et al., 2018), and metabolomics (Robinson et al., 2020; van den Akker et al., 2020) data of bulk samples have been established by machine learning methods and achieved meaningful results in animal models and human cohort studies. One of these aging clocks with excellent properties is the epigenetic clock, where cytosine methylation in CpG dinucleotides (CpG methylation) changes during aging that can be detected by microarray, genome-wide, or targeted detected by sequencing (Bocklandt et al., 2011; Horvath, 2013). Despite the strong complexity and heterogeneity of aging between and within individuals, epigenetic clocks accurately predict tissue age across a broad range of human tissue types, suggesting shared cellular senescence signals across different cell types (Horvath et al., 2018). However, bulk sequencing data could not provide insights into the molecular changes that occur in specific cell types.

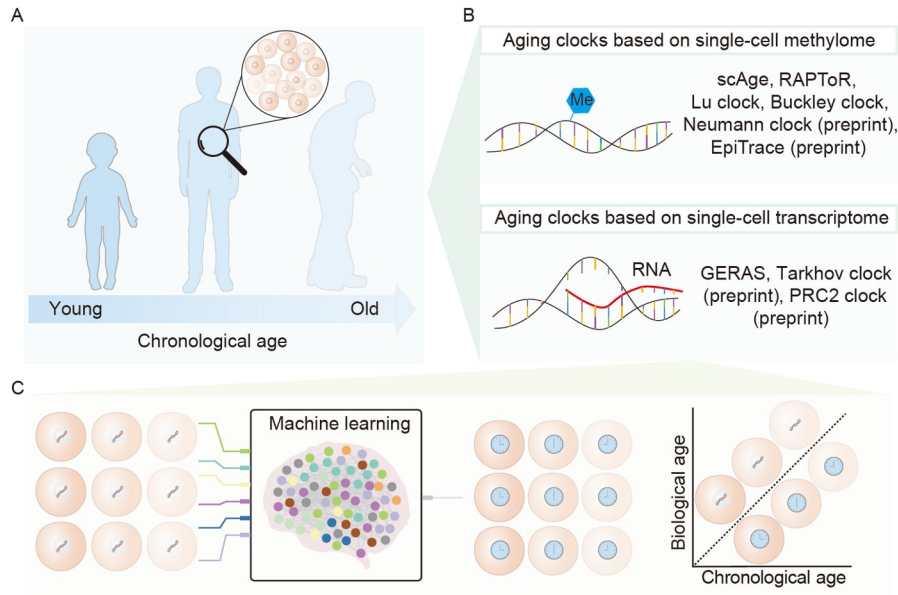
It is worth exploring how the phenotypic characteristics of individual or tissue aging are affected by changes in cell type composition or cell age, and how to quantitatively assess the contribution of molecular level changes in specific cell types to individual or tissue aging, which would be a challenging but promising research field (Figure 29A). Limited by the development of single-cell omics sequencing technology, the current aging clock at single-cell resolution mainly focuses on the use of single-cell epigenome and single-cell transcriptome (Figure 29B) (Lähnemann et al., 2020). A common approach is to use machine learning methods to predict the biological age of individual cells (Figure 29C). With the development of single-cell multi-omics sequencing technology, the new aging clock is expected to achieve more precise performance. It is believed that aging clocks based on single-cell omics will completely revolutionize our understanding of aging clocks in the near future (Table S21 in Supporting Information).

#### *Aging clocks based on single-cell epigenome*

Epigenetic alteration is an important hallmark of aging,

especially at CpG sites. Over the past decade, several aging clocks have been developed to profile epigenetic age (Belsky et al., 2022; Horvath et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2016; McEwen et al., 2020; Shireby et al., 2020; Vidal-Bralo et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019b), which suggests the homogeneity of underlying cellular senescence and masks the epigenetic heterogeneity between individual cells. Epigenetic clocks have revolutionized the study of aging and a series of studies in peripheral blood or saliva hint at its broad application prospects (Bocklandt et al., 2011; Hannum et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2016; Vidal-Bralo et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2017c). Advances in epigenome sequencing methods enable assessment of single-cell epigenetic profiles, including single-cell reduced-representation bisulfite sequencing (scRRBS) (Guo et al., 2013), single-cell bisulfite sequencing (scBS-seq/scWGBS) (Smallwood et al., 2014), single-cell sequencing assay for transposase-accessible chromatin (scATAC-seq) (Buenrostro et al., 2015), single-cell chromatin immunoprecipitation sequencing (scChIP-seq) (Rotem et al., 2015), and single-cell extended-representation bisulfite sequencing (scXRBS) (Shareef et al., 2021) and so on. The application of these sequencing technologies in the field of aging research has greatly advanced our understanding of molecular changes in aging at an unprecedented single-cell resolution, which puts forward higher requirements and new challenges for the aging clock.

Most previous research on epigenetic clocks of bulk samples has focused on the level of DNA methylation, such as the Hannum clock (71-CpG clock) (Hannum et al., 2013), Horvath clock (353-CpG clock) (Horvath, 2013), DmAM (8-CpG clock) (Vidal-Bralo et al., 2016) and DunedinPACE (Belsky et al., 2022), and the accurate prediction and performance of the DNA methylation clock further motivate the development of more aging clocks at the single-cell level. Recently, Trapp et al. (2021) developed a novel single-cell epigenetic clock framework scAge, which provided a solution for the complex challenges of sparse and binarized methylation profiles in single cells. The scAge is the first epigenetic clock to characterize age-associated CpG methylation changes in single cells of mammals relying on bulk DNA methylation data for calibration, which recapitulates the chronological age of hepatocytes, muscle stem cells, and embryonic stem cells. In addition, two additional models, PRC2 clock (Moqri et al., 2022) and Tarkhov clock (Tarkhov et al., 2022), would be officially released soon as predictors of cell age leveraging single-cell DNA methylation data of mice, which would continue to enrich aging prediction methods at single-cell resolution. It is worth mentioning that all these methods also use bulk samples as a reference to ensure the robustness of the algorithm or calculation results. However, the solution to predict chronological age using single-cell methylation data from blood samples remains to explore, which would greatly advance their potential value as



**Figure 29** Aging clocks at single-cell resolution. A, Cellular senescence accompanies the whole process of individual aging. B, Current aging clocks based on single-cell omics data. C, A general flow chart for biological age prediction based on single-cell omics data.

clinically applicable biomarkers.

In the field of aging clocks, methylation clocks have been reported extensively, but the mysteries of chromatin structure, conformation, and other changes at the epigenome level during aging remain unclear. Chromatin accessibility is an important indicator for assessing the degree of aging based on the “loss of heterochromatin” theory (Liu et al., 2022a; Pal and Tyler, 2016; Wang et al., 2022a; Wu et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2020d; Zhang et al., 2022e). Some novel chromatin accessibility-based aging clocks using bulk samples remain to be developed (Rechsteiner et al., 2022). The rapid progress of scATAC-seq sequencing technology has opened up a new era for the aging clock based on single-cell big data. Recently, a promising method, EpiTrace, was actively tried on scATAC-seq data of human adult CD34<sup>+</sup> hematopoietic stem cells to determine cell age and perform lineage tracing (Rechsteiner et al., 2022). Current evidence suggests that methylation clocks hold the most promise for development and application.

#### *Aging clocks based on single-cell transcriptome*

Changes in RNA expression levels both in single cells or bulk tissues during aging have been widely reported in various common model organisms across tissues, and a large number of data resources and databases have been developed (Aging Atlas, 2021; Kang et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2023; Tabula Muris, 2020; Yan et al., 2023). The association between genes with aging makes it possible to predict the rate of aging or lifespan based on transcriptome data. There are already several aging transcriptome clocks that leverage bulk RNA-seq data to predict individual aging based on linear regression or machine

learning methods (Fleischer et al., 2018; Holzscheck et al., 2021; Meyer and Schumacher, 2021; Peters et al., 2015). Single-cell resolution data could provide new perspectives on aging clocks.

Machine learning-based methods have shown robust capabilities in predicting cell age and are gaining popularity (Bulteau and Francesconi, 2022; Lu et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2018). Singh et al. (2018) established GERAS in 2018, a machine learning-based framework capable of assigning individual pancreatic cells to chronological stages based on the transcriptomes of zebrafish and human. They leverage a supervised deep learning classifier based on neural networks to classify the cell age stages which achieved an overall accuracy of 91%, while the multinomial logistic regression model only displayed an overall accuracy of 64%. In addition, Buckley et al. (2023) trained single-cell-based regression models to predict chronological age and biological age leveraging scRNA-seq data in neurogenic regions of the mice brain. Lu et al. (2022) developed a machine-learning model capable of predicting the age of individual cells in human T cell subpopulations based on their transcriptomic features, which are closely associated with their differentiation and mutation burden. All of these approaches are well-established paradigms for the study of single-cell aging clocks in different animal or cell-type models.

More aging clocks based on single-cell transcriptome data are trying to predict the biological age of cells in a wider range. Neumann et al. (2023) utilized mouse scRNA-seq data to train molecular aging clocks that distinguish between cells of young and old mice using two models: a first model trained specifically to predict the age of B cells and a second one predicting age across 70 cell types from 14 tissues. In

addition, RAPToR was developed to estimate age both during development or aging in most common animal models and humans, from bulk or single-cell expression profiles (Bulteau and Francesconi, 2022). To be noted that some studies have not been peer-reviewed and published yet, it can be predicted that these methods will help us better understand cellular senescence.

Although there is a lack of scRNA-seq data from large population cohorts, all these methods show highly predictive transcriptional features of single cells that can be used to accurately estimate cell age. Machine learning, an approach to artificial intelligence, is rapidly revolutionizing the research paradigm of aging clocks. Given the noise of the data sets and the bias of sequencing technology, one issue is to integrate large-scale single-cell data sets to evaluate the cell age and the contribution of each cell type to organisms aging across tissues.

### The application of medical imaging techniques in aging clocks

The word “aging clock” vividly demonstrates the change of aging biomarkers during the process of aging. Accompanied by the revolutionary development of physical science and computer technology, abundant imaging modalities have been applied in preclinical and clinical medicine. Multiple imaging modalities, such as CT, MRI, ultrasound, optical imaging systems, single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) and PET, are available to provide molecular, functional and structural information of aging clock from microscale to macroscale (Tian et al., 2021). In this part, we will discuss the application of medical imaging techniques in the aging clock (Table S22 in Supporting Information), which would shed light on the purpose of clinical translation of the aging clock in managing and treating aging-induced diseases, such as neurodegenerative diseases and cardiovascular diseases.

#### PET/CT and PET/MRI

Medical imaging could be divided into structural, functional and molecular modalities. Functional and molecular imaging modalities provide functional and molecular alterations occurred at the early phase or stage of diseases. Hybrid PET/CT and PET/MRI imaging have been regarded as the vital modality in the clinical practice to detect early abnormalities underlying diseases (Zhang et al., 2020c). The core part of PET/CT and PET/MRI is PET, which is based on specific recognition of targets that existed in the human body. Due to the characteristics of PET, PET/CT and PET/MRI have the potential in revealing the alterations of aging biomarkers in the aging clock, which could achieve observation from DNA damages to phenotypes of organs (Table S23 in Supporting Information) (Jack et al., 2017).

For DNA damages, *in vivo* activity of PARP could be visualized by using  $^{18}\text{F}$ -FluorThanatrace ( $^{18}\text{F}$ -FTT) or  $^{18}\text{F}$ -PARPi PET/CT imaging, which could indicate the responsiveness to PARP inhibitor treatment in patients with cancer (Pantel et al., 2022; Schöder et al., 2020). Besides,  $\gamma\text{H2AX}$  (a phosphorylated DNA damage repair protein) activity could be visualized by using  $^{89}\text{Zr}$ -anti- $\gamma\text{H2AX}$ -TAT radio-immunoconjugates to indicate the repairment of DNA double-strand breaks (Knight et al., 2017). Meanwhile, HDACs involved in histone modification could also be observed by using radionuclides.  $^{18}\text{F}$ -suberoylanilide hydroxamic acid ( $^{18}\text{F}$ -SAHA) achieved *in vivo* evaluation of HDACs by labeling SAHA (a broad spectrum HDAC inhibitor), while failed to demonstrate HDAC expression in the brain (Hendricks et al., 2011). Recently,  $^{11}\text{C}$ -Martinostat successfully revealed that reduced HDAC I level in the brain of patients with AD was associated with AD pathophysiology, which compensates for the application of HDAC radiotracers (Pascoal et al., 2022). Telomeres, as a tandem repetitive sequence that protected the ends of the chromosome from progressive degradation, are closely associated with aging. Telomerase reverse transcriptase (TERT), a main part of telomerase, could be noninvasively reported by hyperpolarized [U- $^{13}\text{C}$ , U- $^2\text{H}$ ]-glucose metabolism (Viswanath et al., 2021).

As for phenotypes of organs affected by the aging clock, PET/CT and PET/MRI have their unique superiority (dynamic, real-time and noninvasive) to investigate these alterations in the whole body.  $\text{A}\beta$  peptide and tau protein are admitted pathological alterations in the brain of patients with AD (Busche and Hyman, 2020).  $^{11}\text{C}$ -Pittsburgh compound B ( $^{11}\text{C}$ -PiB) is one of the most widely applied radiotracers in the clinic for  $\text{A}\beta$  plaques visualization (Hatashita and Wakebe, 2020). Apart from  $^{11}\text{C}$ -labelled ligands, three  $^{18}\text{F}$ -labelled amyloid PET ligands ( $^{18}\text{F}$ -florbetapir,  $^{18}\text{F}$ -flutemetamol and  $^{18}\text{F}$ -florbetaben) are also approved by USA and applied in the clinic. For tau PET imaging,  $^{18}\text{F}$ -AV1451 ( $^{18}\text{F}$ -flortaucipir) is the most widely used tau-specific PET radiotracer, and its distribution is in accordance with Braak staging of tau pathology (Maass et al., 2018). Advancing age induced oxidative stress and inflammatory factors accumulation has been linked with cardiovascular aging, which usually develops cardiovascular diseases in the elderly (López-Otín et al., 2023).  $^{18}\text{F}$ -tetraphenylphosphonium ( $^{18}\text{F}$ -TPP $^+$ ) was used to indicate the mitochondrial membrane potential in both animals and patients showing the potential applications in myocardial imaging (Pelletier-Galarneau et al., 2021). Combined with fluorescent material,  $^{18}\text{F}$ -5MEF (a dual-modal probe) was synthesized and achieved mitochondria-targeting myocardial dual-modal imaging (Zheng et al., 2022). Besides,  $^{18}\text{F}$ -sodium fluoride ( $^{18}\text{F}$ -NaF) showed promising use in characterizing culprit atherosclerotic plaques in the carotid circulation (Kaczynski et al., 2022).

However, it is worth noting that PET/CT and PET/MRI just play part of their roles in investigating the aging clock as integrated CT and MRI make part use. Thus, future studies are required to make full use of each component of PET/CT and PET/MRI for a better understanding of variations of the aging clock.

### MRI

MRI is a medical imaging technique that is extensively used in clinical practice to capture anatomic and functional information of the body. Its numerous scanning sequences could offer different information about the tissues and organs. Compared with PET, MRI has better contrast of soft tissues, especially the brain and abdomen. Therefore, the application of MRI in the aging clock mainly focuses on brain aging.

The intuitive change of brain aging is the loss of brain volume. T1-weighted structural MRI could be applied in evaluating brain volume and revealed that the brain volume declined about 7% of their volume between the 20s and 60s (Hedman et al., 2012). While T2-weighted structural MRI images showed that the T2 signal increased in most brain regions as a result of increased water content (Kumar et al., 2012). Diffusion imaging is a well-established MRI technique for investigating the directionality of water self-diffusion. A recent study indicated the white-matter microstructural organization during aging processes by using diffusion MRI and showed that age-related brain alterations began earlier in males than females (Toschi et al., 2020). Another important MRI scanning method without contrast agents is the BOLD technique, which linked the change of cerebral oxidative metabolism with neuronal activity. By using BOLD fMRI scanning, the shape of hemodynamic response function (HRF) was found different between young and old individuals, and elevated time-to-peak and decreased peak amplitude were discovered in old individuals (West et al., 2019).

Another important component of MRI technique is enhanced scanning based on fMRI techniques. The basic fMRI technique is based on a widely used contrast agent that is gadolinium-DTPA (Gd-DTPA). With the administration of Gd-DTPA, dynamic susceptibility-contrast perfusion imaging could reflect the real-time cerebral blood flow (Barker et al., 2013). Arterial spin labeling (ASL) techniques depend on endogenous contrast produced by blood water. Several studies have demonstrated the decrease of parenchymal CBF in old individuals (Zhang et al., 2017b). Meanwhile, different brain regions showed diverse patterns in the aged population. Superior temporal and orbitofrontal regions performed decreased perfusion, while caudate, posterior cingulate and amygdala showed increased perfusion (Lee et al., 2009). In recent decades, resting-state fMRI was used to indicate the functional connectivity in the brain. Gonneaud et al. (2021)

predicted chronological age across the lifespan by using resting-state fMRI data and assessed the possibility of individual developed AD. Though MRI technique has been extensively used in clinic practice, it mainly indirectly reflects the alterations of the brain induced by the aging clock. More specific contrast agents are required to enhance the ability of MRI to image aging biomarkers.

### Ultrasound

Medical ultrasound is a medical imaging technique by using sound waves with frequencies over 20,000 Hz. Since its appearance in the 1940s, medical ultrasound has been widely accepted in the clinical practice as it is flexible, convenient and economic. Medical ultrasound has various imaging mode, including amplitude mode, brightness mode, motion mode, doppler sonography and harmonic imaging. Based on these imaging modes, most of organs in the body, such as vasculature, heart, skin and kidneys, could be evaluated by medical ultrasound.

Vascular assessment is an essential content of ultrasound daily examination. Atherosclerosis is one of the obvious phenotypes of vascular aging. Ultrasound imaging was proven to have the ability of vascular assessment (Johri et al., 2016). Three-dimensional vascular ultrasound (3DVUS) revealed and quantified higher plaque burden in males with advancing age, and plaque burden was closely related with cardiovascular risk factors (López-Melgar et al., 2017). Meanwhile, a Northern Manhattan study indicated that markers of carotid atherosclerosis (such as carotid intima-media thickness) provided by ultrasound were associated with cognitive status (Gardener et al., 2017). Contrast-enhanced ultrasound achieved *in vivo* visualizing of plaque neovascularization which is a biomarker of carotid plaque vulnerability (Camps-Renom et al., 2020). Besides, ultrasound realized molecular imaging of atherosclerosis by using nanoparticles. Punjabi et al. (2019) developed a microbubble targeted to human VCAM-1 and successfully characterized the expression of VCAM-1 in the human plaques.

Ultrasound could also assess the function of the heart during aging from multiple perspectives. The function of the heart is decreased associated with advancing age. Regular cardiac ultrasound images could provide precise information for characterizing the diastolic function of the left ventricle (LV) (Omar et al., 2017). Echocardiography is a kind of medical imaging for the heart, which is dependent on standard ultrasound or Doppler ultrasound. By using echocardiography, aging was revealed to be associated with decreased left atrial (LA) reservoir function and delayed P-wave dispersion and total atrial conduction time (Abou et al., 2017). Besides, echocardiography indicated that global longitudinal strain was an independent and incremental prognostic factor for long-term risk of cardiovascular morbidity and mortality (Biering-Sørensen et al., 2017).

### *Photoacoustic imaging and near-infrared (NIR) fluorescence imaging*

Photoacoustic imaging (PAI) is a recently developed medical imaging with the characteristics of real-time, noninvasiveness and nonionizing radiation. Based on the heat induced by non-ionizing laser pulses, transient thermoelastic expansion could be produced and lead to wideband ultrasonic emission which could be translated into images by ultrasonic transducers (Attia et al., 2019). Due to its image-forming principle, PAI owns the benefits of optical resolution and acoustic depth of penetration. Generally, PAI systems could be divided into several groups, such as PA microscopy (PAM), PA endoscopy (PAE) and PA computed tomography (PACT) (Liu et al., 2016). Based on these unparalleled advantages, PAI demonstrates a wide range of preclinical and clinical applications in aging clock, mainly focused on superficial organs. Quantitative evaluation of skin aging was achieved according to the signals from both sectioned and nonsectioned porcine skin by using PA microscopy (Murata et al., 2017). Besides, PAI system has also been extensively used in breast imaging. Breast cancer is a heterogeneous age-associated malignancy, and about 80% of breast cancers happened in females over age 50 (Benz, 2008). A PAI system called PA the Twente Photoacoustic Mammoscope succeed to detect about 97% of lesions in patients with breast cancer (Heijblom et al., 2016). Multispectral optoacoustic tomography (MSOT) was applied in visualizing pilosebaceous units which are the hair follicle structure (Ford et al., 2016). Mesoscopic and microscopic configurations of the PAI system are also applicable to demonstrate microvascular networks (Taruttis et al., 2016).

NIR fluorescence imaging is a type of medical imaging technique based on the optical signal emitted by fluorophores or endogenous molecules with the excitation of light (Frangioni, 2003). According to the emission wavelengths, NIR fluorescence imaging can be classified into fluorescence imaging within the first NIR window (NIR-I) around 150–900 nm and fluorescence imaging within the second NIR window (NIR-II) near 900–1,700 nm (Welscher et al., 2011). In the past decade, more attention has been paid to the NIR-II fluorescence imaging due to its deeper penetration. With the aid of NIR-II fluorescence molecule, NIR-II fluorescence imaging achieved dynamic vascular imaging. Li et al. (2020a) reported an organic NIR-II molecule (LZ-1105) with a long blood half-life and used it for real-time monitoring for dynamic vascular processes, such as thrombolysis in carotid artery. Similarly, another NIR-II nanoparticle based on aggregation-induced emission (AIE) strategy was conducted for multiscale vasculature visualization in animal models (Li et al., 2021d). Additionally, brain is no longer the forbidden area of NIR-II fluorescence imaging. By using neutrophils (NEs) as the carrier, 2TT-oC6B succeed in penetrating the blood-brain barrier and visualiz-

ing deeply located brain inflammation (Liu et al., 2020). Though rapidly increased number of NIR-II nanoparticles were developed in recent years, few of them were approved in the clinic. More effort is required to boost this medical imaging technique into clinical practice.

### *Summary and perspectives*

Medical imaging techniques play an irreplaceable role in monitoring the aging process and provide a powerful tool of dynamic, real-time and noninvasive visualization of aging biomarkers. While each imaging technique has its own limitations, the combined use of different imaging methods is necessarily required for acquiring full-scale information of the aging clock. Meanwhile, with the development of basic techniques, much more imaging techniques and the reconstructed algorithm will be established to reveal the correlation between aging biomarkers and aging-induced diseases *in vivo*.

## **AI application in aging clocks**

### *Advances in artificial intelligence*

Artificial intelligence, also known as AI, refers to the field of computer science and engineering that is dedicated to the development of intelligent systems. These systems are characterized by their ability to make decisions, judgments, and predictions without the need for explicit programming. AI has demonstrated remarkable potential in a range of applications, including natural language processing, computer vision, and protein structure prediction. For example, more than 98.5% of the three-dimensional structures of human proteins can be predicted by artificial intelligence (Jumper et al., 2021).

AI has its origins in statistical methods and has evolved to encompass a diverse set of machine learning-based algorithms. These algorithms are designed to perform tasks such as classification, regression, clustering, and decomposition. Since 2013, deep structured learning, also called DL systems have surpassed human performance in multiple applications. In healthcare, DL systems outperformed human dermatologists, ophthalmologists, and radiologists in various tasks. DL also demonstrated significant improvement over conventional ML methods in biomedical data analysis (Aliper et al., 2016; Mamoshina et al., 2016). DL comprises a set of methods that rely on deep architectures with cascades of multiple layers, and include architectures such as DNNs, generative adversarial networks (GANs), deep reinforcement learning (RL), and others.

One of the most recent and impactful developments within AI is deep learning, which is characterized by the use of DNNs. DNNs are architectures that stack multiple neural network structures in order to form a “deep” network with hidden layers, which improves the prediction performance. With the increased computational power and the availability

of large public datasets, DL architectures have evolved to include thousands of layers and have been applied to a wide range of biological systems and drug development.

Furthermore, another example of these DL methods is Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), which are powerful generative models that can produce new data points with a similar distribution to that of real data. GANs are composed of two models, a generator and a discriminator, which work together to produce synthetic data points that are indistinguishable from real data. GANs have already been applied in various fields, including making predictions of compound properties or for molecular structure generation (Kadurin et al., 2017a; Kadurin et al., 2017b; Putin et al., 2018a; Putin et al., 2018b).

RL is a subset of machine learning that is concerned with the design of goal-oriented algorithms that can learn to optimize a complex objective or maximize a particular dimension over many steps (Kulkarni, 2017). One of the defining characteristics of RL algorithms is that they operate in an environment where the relationship between actions and outcomes is not immediately apparent, and the effects of actions may not be fully realized until several time steps have passed. To address this challenge, RL algorithms aim to establish a correlation between immediate actions and the delayed returns they produce. Therefore, reinforcement learning is usually applied to pathway design, such as compound reverse synthesis analysis and metabolite biosynthesis prediction (Segler et al., 2018).

#### *AI facilitated development of aging clocks*

Aging is a complex and multi-factorial process that is affected by genetic, epigenetic and environmental factors at the molecular, cellular, organ and whole body levels (Khan et al., 2017). Molecular and cellular mechanisms of aging have been studied extensively, which has led to the identification of numerous “hallmarks of aging”: telomere attrition, epigenetic dysregulation, genome instability, shifts in gene expression patterns and metabolic profiles (López-Otin et al., 2013). Longitudinal studies of aging have collected a plethora of “aging biomarkers”, which are used to assess “biological age” and potentially predict healthspan and lifespan for an individual (Galkin et al., 2020). Quantifying aging at the individual level by biomarkers led to the development of “aging clocks”, which lead to a deeper understanding of underlying mechanisms during aging, and thus develop preventive and therapeutic restorative interventions that can increase lifespan and healthspan by reversing the biological clocks back to the young, healthy state.

Current aging clocks are mainly based on statistical models of a series of biological features. These features include clinical indicators (Jylhävä et al., 2017; Tzemah-Shahar et al., 2022), instrumental parameters (di Giuseppe et al., 2012; Russoniello et al., 2013), and molecular genetic

measures (Hannum et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2014). The methods commonly used are based on univariate or multivariate regression methods (Gialluisi et al., 2019), such as principle component analysis (PCA) (Nakamura and Miyao, 2007), multilayer perceptron (MLP) (Bae et al., 2008), and the Klemera and Doubal method (KDM) (Klemera and Doubal, 2006).

Although these classical methods perform well in predicting adverse aging outcomes, they have limitations in processing multidimensional data, especially when the shape of the distribution is not suited for parametric methods (Cao et al., 2021a), and recognizing the actual interactions between the biomarkers and outcomes (Jin et al., 2020), as some significant biomarkers were proved to be nonlinear (Klemera and Doubal, 2006). While recently, the increasing availability of large-scale molecular biological data from high-throughput experiments, in parallel with technological advancements in machine learning and bioinformatics, have greatly accelerated the discovery of biomarkers and fueled the use of computational modeling to unravel complex biological phenomena by discovering multivariate relationships (Jordan and Mitchell, 2015). Since then, numerous age clocks based on DL models have been developed and have shown considerable accuracy and efficiency in age prediction (Bobrov et al., 2018; Putin et al., 2016). DL-based aging clocks may also differ through training and validation protocols. Moreover, the concept of “aging clock” expanded to further levels of biological data, using medical data include not only images (Bobrov et al., 2018), but a wide range of genomic, epigenetic, transcriptomic, proteomic, and metabolic features (Fleischer et al., 2018; Hannum et al., 2013; Hertel et al., 2016; Holly et al., 2013; Horvath, 2013; Mamoshina et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2015; Tanaka et al., 2018).

#### *Summary and perspectives*

AI enables the analysis of cross-sectional and longitudinal data related to large human populations and facilitates the development of aging biomarkers which offer a tool to assess health, quantify the effect of interventions, and produce personalized medical reports. AI allows for enhanced precision in creating panels of actionable biomarkers, enables rapid assessment, and facilitates preventive measures (Zhu et al., 2022a). Future research using DL is still evolving to achieve better performance. On one hand, aging clocks will continue to evolve as new biomarkers and integrate multiple biomarkers. Also, increasing the sample size for training by aggregating public or private datasets could further improve the model’s performance. On the other hand, new DL modeling architectures (with careful modeling of parameters), could be designed and explored further to get great promise in age estimation.

For pharmaceutical companies, multimodal aging clocks enable the integration of multiple data types and provide

deeper insights into biological data management. Deep aging clocks are excellent tools for a pharmaceutical company to evaluate which type of data is affected by a drug or intervention, leading to a clearer understanding of which data are most important in a clinical trial. Aging clocks can also help to evaluate the quality of the data as well as their impact both on the prediction accuracy and on the importance of specific features. Another interesting challenge and potential extension of this work are to study how the aging clock can be used as a tool for general health monitoring, including early-onset disease identification. For instance, an inflammatory aging clock (iAge) based on deep learning made early diagnosis of inflammatory conditions and immune system decline and further identified CXCL9 as a key contributor to iAge (Sayed et al., 2021).

Although DL models seem promising applications in integrating and identifying meaningful patterns from medical profiles, experts fear that, due to the design architecture, DL models appear to be “black boxes”, without showing details of inner working to reach from raw images for disease predictions (Kelly et al., 2019). Nevertheless, efforts have been made in improving the interpretability of DL in healthcare (Richards et al., 2019). It is expected that by combining modeling approaches with medical expertise, more age-related pathways and targets can be revealed, which may further boost target identification and drug discovery (Figure 30). Furthermore, many computational approaches are being developed using various kinds of techniques in the computational drug repurposing, a highly active field of pharmacology (Lamb et al., 2006; Zhu et al., 2021b).

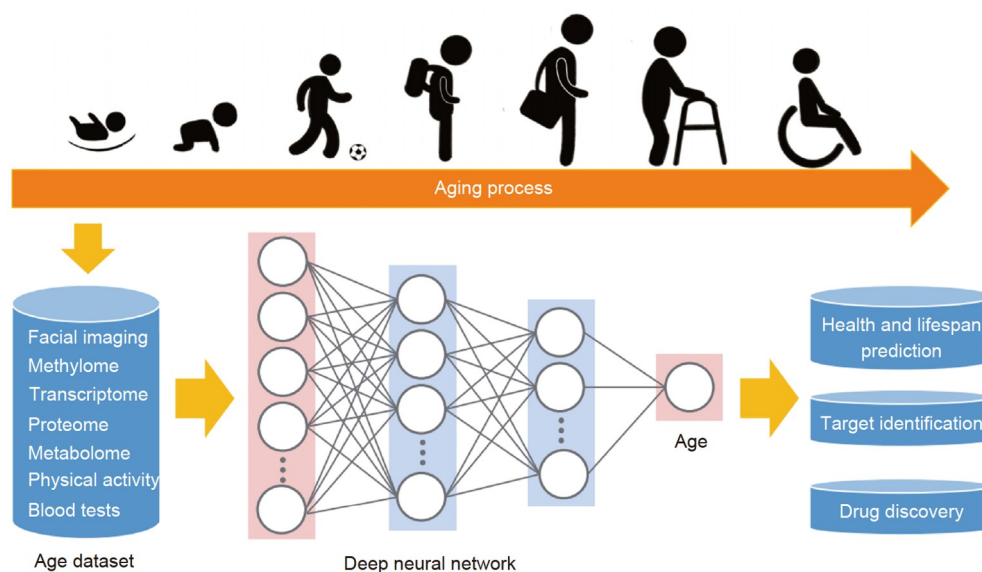
### Composite clocks

As demonstrated in the previous sections, aging clocks based

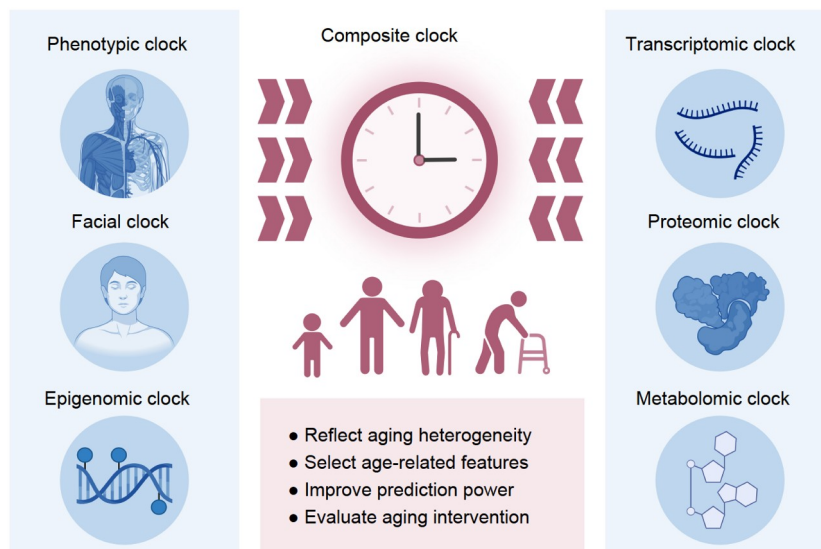
on different omics data have been proposed in the past decade. These findings suggest that biological age is indeed measurable, although it sometimes remains unclear exactly how these measured variables relate to the aging-associated decline in biological function. Moreover, aging is a complex process that coordinately influences nearly all tissues and organs at multiple physiological levels, thus it is urgent to surpass aging clocks that only evaluate limited aspects of aging and constitute composite markers of aging that reflect hostile characterization of aging (Figure 31).

Nowadays, only limited studies have tried to build a composite clock to evaluate biological aging. Recently, a study conducted a longitudinal study of 106 healthy individuals aged 29–75 years, and obtained multi-omics measurements, covering transcripts, proteins, metabolites, cytokines, microbes, and clinical laboratory values for these individuals (Ahadi et al., 2020). Based on these measurements, the authors defined different aging patterns across individuals, termed “ageotypes”, and highlighted the heterogeneity of the aging pace between individuals (Ahadi et al., 2020). This study divided the aging trajectories into different classes with omics datasets, implying the potential to establish an integrative aging clock. In addition, another study collected data on immune characteristics in different modalities, including cell subset phenotyping, functional responses of the cell to cytokine stimulations, and whole-blood gene expression from peripheral blood samples of 135 healthy individuals (Alpert et al., 2019). By integrating these data, the immune aging (IMM-AGE) score was defined, which was shown to have better performance in predicting mortality in older adults than the epigenetic clock. This study mainly focuses on quantifying immune aging, but not the hostile characterization of aging.

A pioneering study computed a composite index by sum-



**Figure 30** AI application in aging clocks. A generalized conceptual framework for applying artificial intelligence to aging clocks.



**Figure 31** Composite aging clocks. A conceptual diagram showing the components of the composite clock and its advantages in evaluation of aging process.

ming five scaled biological aging indicators and found that the composite index displayed a higher correlation with health determinants than the other clocks (Jansen et al., 2021). The study measured telomere length, profiled whole-blood DNA methylation and transcriptome, serum proteome, and plasma metabolome from a single cohort, and compared their ability in predicting chronological age. Among these features, DNA methylation has the best performance in predicting age, followed by the proteomics and metabolomics data, and the telomere clock showed the worst performance. A more recent work collected biomedical information from 4,066 individuals from 20 to 45 years old, identified age-dependent changes in multi-omics variants, and established clocks indicating the biological age of different tissues/organs, such as cardiovascular age, renal age, liver age, as well as sex hormone age and gut microbiome age (Nie et al., 2022a).

Collectively, an aging clock composed of information from multiple data modalities might help to identify the key age-related features shared in different omics layers and provide a more comprehensive view of aging. Further analysis of these valuable omics datasets to establish a composite aging clock might elucidate whether incorporating more data modalities could improve prediction power. Moreover, experimental validations on these features can facilitate finding their causal effects on aging and the development of aging intervention strategies.

### Ethical and social implications regarding the research of aging biomarkers

As mentioned in previous chapters, the field of aging bio-

marker research is rapidly evolving and has led to several breakthroughs. The advancement has demonstrated its potential to play an essential role in the diagnosis, treatment, or prevention of age-related diseases. However, aging biomarker research and its clinical translation, which often involve human beings and animals as subjects, also present a range of potential ethical, legal, and social risks. These issues should receive considerable attention from design to execution in every study and in the field of aging research.

In this chapter, we carefully explore the ethical, legal, and social risks associated with aging biomarker research and its clinical translation, and summarize them into four categories: (i) Potential scientific considerations, including difficult clinical efficacy and safety verification and limited predictive value. (ii) Informed consent issues, involving fully informed consent, informed consent capacity, and family informed consent. (iii) Disclosure of assessment or diagnostic results, as a highly complex process but lacks disclosure standards. (iv) Other specific ethical and social concerns, involving personal privacy, health insurance, and patient selection. We believe that these issues should be addressed in every study, and an ethical framework for aging biomarker research should be established to provide guidance to researchers, physicians, policy makers, and consumers to advance and safeguard the long-term development of the field.

#### Potential scientific considerations

The complexity and heterogeneity of aging make the study of aging biomarkers extremely complicated and expensive, far beyond the capacity of a single researcher. In this context, the clinical validity of aging biomarkers is often questioned. On



the one hand, environmental differences between preclinical studies and clinical trials of aging biomarkers (Porteri et al., 2017), such as differences in motivation, risk tolerance and psychological performance of participants/subjects, make it possible that their results may differ (Ketchum et al., 2022), and their clinical effectiveness needs further demonstration. On the other hand, the clinical application requires evidence of clinical efficacy and safety of aging biomarkers and relevant criteria. However, the time-consuming nature of data collection and the lack of collection criteria have greatly increased the difficulty of discovering and validating aging biomarkers, which makes it much harder to establish criteria for the effectiveness and safety of aging marker applications (OECD, 2011).

Currently, existing studies on aging biomarkers target a relatively homogeneous population. Larger and more diverse cohort studies are urgently needed to obtain more generalized safety and prognostic evidence. Moreover, the lack of ongoing risk follow-up has led to limited data on the associated risks, making it more difficult to analyze their efficacy and safety (Ketchum et al., 2022). The lack of effective corresponding treatments or precise prognostic assessments of aging biomarkers in the clinical setting also makes it more difficult to verify their clinical effectiveness (Bunnik et al., 2018). In addition, the predictive nature of aging biomarkers studies and the uncertainty of the associated results detract somewhat from their predictive value. Based on these potentially biased test results, it is difficult for clinicians to make a definitive diagnosis. For example, in amyloid-positive individuals, it is difficult to use aging biomarkers to determine whether and when they develop symptoms associated with AD (Vanderschaeghe, 2018).

### The challenges of informed consent

The above-mentioned scientific uncertainty and incompleteness make it a great challenge to seek the informed consent of research participants/subjects. Particularly, how to fully inform participants/subjects of the potential benefits, risks and uncertainty of aging biomarkers testing in a comprehensive and understandable way is one of the challenges that researchers/clinicians have to face when conducting relevant research. Meanwhile, the process of informed consent is also challenged by the ability of research participants/subjects to give informed consent. For example, for those whose underlying pathology or physiological changes that may never result in symptoms, they could better understand the potential benefits and risks of biomarkers of aging and make more appropriate decisions (Walter and Covinsky, 2001). By contrast, for those with mild cognitive impairment, such as those with AD, their ability to understand the risks is relatively limited, and obtaining their consent and safeguarding their best interests would be more difficult

(Milne et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is some controversy about whether informed consent should take into account family involvement (Porteri and Frisoni, 2014).

### Disclosure of assessment or diagnostic results

Aging biomarkers research and its clinical trials also face the question of whether relevant results should be disclosed to research participants/subjects (Molinuevo et al., 2016). To some extent, the assessment of aging biomarkers or the disclosure of diagnostic results is two-sided. On the one hand, it may provide participants/subjects with opportunities for early management of age-related diseases or life planning as a way to enhance their life quality (Rostamzadeh et al., 2021). On the other hand, the limited options for aging interventions make it possible for relevant disclosures to cause specific psychosocial distress that affects the life quality of participants/subjects and alters their social environment (Paulsen et al., 2013). For example, for those at higher risk for assessment or diagnosis of biomarkers of aging, they often fear stigmatization, discrimination, disruption of family relationships or life plans (Gaille et al., 2020; Vanderschaeghe et al., 2018), and the possibility of suffering from ongoing anxiety, high stress, depression and even suicidal tendencies (Draper et al., 2010). In this sense, the potential benefits of aging biomarkers research and its clinical trials are closely linked to the attitudes, beliefs, expectations, life quality, family support, and social environment of the research participants/subjects as individuals. Considered in conjunction with the heterogeneity of researchers/clinicians, the disclosure of relevant risks becomes a complex process of ongoing communication between participants/subjects and researchers/clinicians (Rostamzadeh et al., 2021).

As can be seen, the disclosure of aging biomarkers assessment or diagnostic results has become a complex and challenging task that requires specific training and the ability to convey uncertainty (Molinuevo et al., 2016). Should researchers/clinicians inform participants/subjects of the results of the aging biomarkers assessment or diagnosis? If necessary, what should and should not be told, whether relevant results should be disclosed or shared with family members, and whether different disclosure mechanisms should be adopted depending on the differences between basic research and clinical trials? All of these questions face great difficulties due to individual differences in participants/subjects and differences between preclinical studies and clinical trials (Molinuevo et al., 2016).

More importantly, despite attempts to standardize the disclosure or consultation of aging biomarkers assessments or diagnostic results, consistent standards or systems of disclosure and consultation guidance have not been established (Alpinar-Sencan and Schicktanz, 2020; Karlawish,

2011; Roberts et al., 2013), which has also left the practice of disclosure or consultation in an unregulated or even confusing state. In practice, there have been some instances of clinicians being dishonest or withholding diagnostic information from patients, which may lead to a loss of trust, thereby affecting not only the physician-patient relationship but also the patient's family relationship (Cornett and Hall, 2008).

### Other specific ethical and social concerns

Aging biomarkers research and its clinical trials may also have significant implications for research participants/subjects at the individual or social level. At the individual level, the disclosure of aging biomarkers assessment or diagnosis results and the associated data information involve the protection of personal privacy. Considering the potential stigmatization of relevant results, breaches of data information due to inadequate protection may have a negative impact on the employment and insurance of research participants/subjects (Cornett and Hall, 2008). Allowing disclosure of information about aging biomarkers to insurance companies may also make it more difficult or costly for those whose aging biomarkers indicate a shorter or more painful life span, and could even widen the gap between them and healthy individuals (Davis, 2010). At the societal level, the future clinical application of aging biomarkers may make the fair and equitable distribution of diagnostic resources or insurance coverage problematic. For example, whether aging biomarkers tests are primarily used for therapeutic or predictive needs (Rostamzadeh et al., 2021), whether they are targeted to patients or the general population, and whether the associated costs are self-imposed or covered by health insurance, pose challenges to the current health care system. This affects not only equitable access to aging biomarkers testing, but also insurance coverage for other diseases in other groups. In the long run, these issues could undermine the principle of solidarity in social security and health care systems, change the future direction of national health care systems and social security systems, and even create new health care equality issues (Gaille et al., 2020).

Not surprisingly, aging biomarkers research and its clinical trials involve the recruitment of research participants/subjects, but the recruitment criteria are controversial. For example, should the study and its clinical trials recruit young people in a healthy state, should research include those who pass the optimal treatment window (Molinuevo et al., 2016), or should research target only healthy older adults? Issues such as these are difficult to solve. In fact, current aging biomarkers studies and their clinical trials often have different recruitment sources (Ketchum et al., 2022), but there are differences in target populations, such as those with a family history of age-related diseases versus the general

population (Gooblar et al., 2015), people of color versus whites (Wikler et al., 2013), and disadvantaged groups. It is equally difficult to consider the principle of diverse recruitment to ensure fair and equitable recruitment to aging biomarkers research and its clinical trials. In addition, aging biomarkers research may infringe on the welfare of experimental animals through their use. These issues also need to be addressed.

### Summary and perspectives

In sum, to obtain high scientific standards for early warning and aging interventions, measurable, sensitive, reliable, and operable biomarkers based on data and scientific evidence must be determined. These studies are developing rapidly. Aging biomarker research has broad health, ethical, societal, and regulatory implications while advancing aging research as a whole. To realize the potential benefits of aging research, it has become necessary to establish an ethical framework for aging marker research to help guide researchers, physicians, policy makers, and consumers.

### Epilogue

Aging biomarkers are critical to answer the three major questions in the field of aging: how old are we? Why do we get old? And how can we age slower? In this comprehensive review, we provided an encyclopedia summary of aging biomarkers covering a hierarchy of dimensions at cellular, organ, organismal and populational aging levels, along with associated ethical and social implications. We hope this review serves as a resource for readers in academia, industry and medical practice, broadening our understanding of not only what biomarkers can be used to monitor aging, but also how to use them to assess novel therapies to slow, modify or even reverse aging. As such, we can accelerate the journey of basic science discoveries in the aging field from bench to bedside.

A broad spectrum of aging biomarkers has been developed via diverse data types and modeling techniques. With these rich resources, it becomes more important to know when to use which set of biomarkers. Throughout this review, we stick to the three criteria for the selection of aging biomarkers: specific, systemic and serviceable. Thus, we do not tend to suggest a single best biomarker; rather, we provide a reliable collection of biomarkers from multiple dimensions for the prediction of the biological age and certain disease risks of a specific organ, which are practical for translation into clinical practice. They are organized according to the 6 pillars of classification: physiological characteristics, imaging traits, histologic features, cellular alteration, molecular changes, and secretory factors.

Owing to the successive release of new aging studies, especially those based on large cohorts, for example, the new initiative of the “1000 people aging research project”, and the ever-expanding power of machine learning approaches, aging biomarkers and models of application are quickly evolving. Moreover, aging biomarkers in different species of animals may not be consistent or even contradictory under certain circumstances. Thus, translation into clinical practice requires the development of biomarkers applicable or specific for the assessment of aging and early warning of age-related diseases. Therefore, we tend to update this manual for aging biomarkers and their usage in the years to come to reflect our most up-to-date understanding of aging. The identification of specific, sensitive, and serviceable biomarkers of aging is the premise and basis for achieving aging interventions through various strategies (Cai et al., 2022c; Campisi et al., 2019; Chaib et al., 2022; Di Micco et al., 2021; Gasek et al., 2021; Longo and Anderson, 2022; Rando and Jones, 2021; Sun et al., 2022b). Although there is still much to learn about aging biomarkers, it is foreseeable that as the theory and application of aging biomarkers gradually advance, our understanding of the laws of aging and the prevention and treatment of aging-related diseases will usher into a new era.

**Compliance and ethics** *The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.*

**Acknowledgements** *Due to space constraints, it is unavoidable that certain important works on aging biomarkers are not cited, and we offer our sincere apologies. We would like to express our sincerest gratitude to the members of the expert panel of the Major Program on Organ Aging and Degeneration. We thank all the members of the Aging Biomarker Consortium for their valuable input and suggestions. This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (31730036, 31871380, 31871382, 31930055, 31930058, 32000500, 32022034, 32030033, 32070730, 32130046, 3217050247, 32150005, 32200595, 32222024, 81730019, 81730022, 81830014, 81921006, 81925005, 81970426, 81971301, 81971312, 82030041, 82061160495, 82070805, 82071595, 82090020, 82100841, 82120108009, 82122024, 82125002, 82125011, 82125012, 82130045, 82171284, 82173061, 82173398, 82225007, 82225015, 82225017, 82225018, 82230047, 82230088, 82271600, 91949106, 91949201, 92049116, 92049302, 92049304, 92149303, 92149306, 92157202, 92168201, 92169102, 92249301, 92268201), the National Key Research and Development Program of China (2018YFA0800700, 2018YFC2000100, 2018YFC2000102, 2018YFC2002003, 2019YFA0110900, 2019YFA0801703, 2019YFA0801903, 2019YFA0802202, 2019YFA0904800, 2020YFA0113400, 2020YFA0803401, 2020YFA0804000, 2020YFC2002900, 2020YFC2008000, 2020YFE0202200, 2021YFA0804900, 2021YFA1100103, 2021YFA1100900, 2021YFE0114200, 2021ZD0202400, 2022YFA0806001, 2022YFA0806002, 2022YFA0806600, 2022YFA1103200, 2022YFA1103601, 2022YFA1103701, 2022YFA1103800, 2022YFA1103801, 2022YFA1104100, 2022YFA1104904, 2022YFA1303000, 2022YFC2009900, 2022YFC2502401, 2022YFC3602400, 2022YFE0118000, 2022ZD0213200), the Strategic Priority Research Program of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (XDA16030302, XDB39000000, XDB39030600), the Youth Innovation Promotion Association of Chinese Academy of Sciences (2020085, 2021080), CAS Project for Young Scientists in Basic Research (YSBR-076),*

*the Program of the Beijing Natural Science Foundation (JQ20031), Clinical Research Operating Fund of Central High level hospitals (2022-PUMCH-E-001), CAMS Innovation Fund for Medical Sciences (CIFMS) (2022-I2M-1-004), Talent Program of the Chinese Academy of Medical Science (2022-RC310-10), Research Funds from Health@InnoHK Program launched by Innovation Technology Commission of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Guangdong Basic and Applied Basic Research Foundation (2020B1515020044), Guangzhou Planned Project of Science and Technology (202002020039), the Major Technology Innovation of Hubei Province (2019ACA141), the Science and Technology Major Project of Hunan Provincial Science and Technology Department (2021SK1010), Shanghai Municipal Science and Technology Major Project (2017SHZDZX01), the Natural Science Foundation of Sichuan Province (2023NSFSC0003), Yunnan Fundamental Research Project (202201AS070080) and the State Key Laboratory of Membrane Biology.*

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