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Emerging Epidemic: Non-Smoker Lung Cancer in India's Urban Centres

Suhasini. G[1], Surender Reddy. K[2], Madhulekha. R[3], Ugandhar.T[4]
[1]*Department of Zoology, Pingle Govt College for Women Waddepally, Hanamkonda*
[2]*Department of Zoology, Govt College Agraharam*
[3]*Gandhi Institute Medical Sciences and Research Visakhapatnam*
[4]*Department of Botany Kakatiya Govt College, Hanamkonda*

Abstract: ***Recent research has revealed a concerning trend in the incidence of lung cancer among non-smokers in India, particularly within urban centers. Contrary to the traditional association of lung cancer with smoking, a significant proportion of cases in India are now emerging in individuals with no history of tobacco use. This phenomenon is primarily attributed to severe air pollution, which has become a critical public health issue in many Indian cities. Rapid industrialization and urbanization have led to increased exposure to airborne pollutants, including fine particulate matter (PM2.5), nitrogen dioxide (NO_2), and other carcinogens, which are now recognized as significant risk factors for lung cancer.***

Genetic predispositions further exacerbate this risk, with studies indicating that certain populations are more susceptible to developing lung cancer due to genetic mutations influenced by environmental exposures. These mutations and biomarkers, such as EGFR and ALK gene rearrangements, have been increasingly identified in Indian non-smoker lung cancer patients, providing critical insights into the disease's etiology and potential targeted therapies.

India currently ranks fourth globally in lung cancer prevalence, with urban areas experiencing the highest growth rates. Projections suggest that the incidence of lung cancer will continue to rise, potentially reaching alarming levels by 2025. This emerging epidemic highlights the urgent need for comprehensive public health strategies to address air pollution and its associated health risks.

Efforts must be directed towards reducing pollution levels through stringent regulatory measures, promoting cleaner technologies, and enhancing public awareness about the health impacts of air pollution. Additionally, implementing widespread screening programs and advancing research on genetic and environmental interactions can aid in early detection and personalized treatment approaches for affected individuals.

In conclusion, the rising incidence of lung cancer among non-smokers in urban India signifies a shifting landscape in the disease's epidemiology. Addressing this public health challenge requires an integrated approach that combines environmental, genetic, and healthcare interventions to mitigate the growing burden of lung cancer in non-smoking populations.

Keywords: Non-Smoker Lung Cancer, Urban Pollution, Airborne Carcinogens, Genetic Predisposition, Environmental Risk Factors, India Lung Cancer Trends, Urban Health Crisis Particulate Matter (PM2.5), EGFR Mutations and Targeted Therapies

I. INTRODUCTION

Lung cancer has emerged as a major health issue in India, with a particularly alarming rise in cases among non-smokers, especially in urban centers. Traditionally, lung cancer has been closely associated with smoking; however, recent trends indicate a significant shift, with a substantial number of lung cancer cases now being diagnosed in individuals who have never smoked. This surprising increase in lung cancer incidence among non-smokers is largely attributed to severe air pollution, which has become a critical public health concern in many Indian cities.

Air pollution, especially in urban areas, exposes residents to high levels of fine particulate matter (PM2.5), nitrogen dioxide (NO_2), and other airborne carcinogens. These pollutants are now recognized as significant risk factors for lung cancer. The rapid pace of industrialization and urbanization has exacerbated this issue, leading to increased exposure to these harmful substances. Studies have shown that long-term exposure to high levels of air pollution can cause significant damage to the respiratory system, increasing the risk of lung cancer among non-smokers (Laumbach & Kipen, 2012; Raaschou-Nielsen et al., 2013).

In addition to environmental factors, genetic predispositions play a crucial role in the increasing incidence of lung cancer among non-smokers. Research indicates that certain populations are more susceptible to developing lung cancer due to genetic mutations influenced by environmental exposures.

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Mutations and biomarkers, such as EGFR and ALK gene rearrangements, have been identified in non-smoker lung cancer patients in India, providing critical insights into the disease's etiology and potential targeted therapies (Suda et al., 2010; Mok et al., 2017). This emerging epidemic of lung cancer among non-smokers in India's urban centers underscores the need for comprehensive public health strategies. Efforts must be directed towards reducing air pollution levels through stringent regulatory measures, promoting cleaner technologies, and enhancing public awareness about the health impacts of air pollution. Furthermore, advancing research on genetic and environmental interactions can aid in early detection and personalized treatment approaches for those affected. This sets the stage for a detailed exploration of the factors contributing to this trend and potential solutions to mitigate the growing burden of lung cancer among non-smokers.

Table 1 Prevalence and Health Impact of Common Airborne Carcinogens in Urban Areas

Carcinogen	Sources	Health Impact	Typical Levels in Urban Areas	WHO Guideline
PM2.5	Vehicle emissions, industrial processes, residential heating, power plants, construction activities	Respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, classified as Group 1 carcinogen by IARC	Delhi: 113 µg/m³, Beijing: 85 µg/m³	10 µg/m³
NO2	Vehicle exhaust, power plants, industrial emissions, residential heating	Irritates airways, exacerbates asthma, reduces lung function, associated with lung cancer	Delhi: 40 µg/m³, London: 32 µg/m³	40 µg/m³
PAHs (e.g., benzo[a]pyrene)	Vehicle exhaust, industrial emissions, residential heating, tobacco smoke	Mutagenic and carcinogenic, linked to lung and skin cancers	Urban areas: 1-10 ng/m³	Not specified
VOCs (e.g., benzene)	Vehicle emissions, industrial processes, solvents, paint, household products	Known carcinogens, e.g., benzene (linked to leukemia), formaldehyde (linked to nasopharyngeal cancer)	Benzene: 1-10 µg/m³	5 µg/m³ for benzene
Ozone (O3)	Photochemical reactions involving NOx and VOCs	Causes respiratory issues, inflammation, exacerbates lung diseases	Urban areas: >70 ppb, especially during summer months	100 µg/m³ (approx. 50 ppb)

Note: PM2.5: Particulate matter with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometers. NO_2: Nitrogen dioxide. PAHs: Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, a group of organic compounds. VOCs: Volatile organic compounds. O_3: Ozone.

II. CURRENT DIAGNOSTIC METHODS FOR LUNG CANCER

Lung cancer remains a leading cause of cancer-related mortality globally, necessitating effective diagnostic methods for early detection and accurate diagnosis. Here, we provide a comprehensive overview of current diagnostic practices, focusing on the use of low dose computed tomography (LDCT) scans, the role of biopsies, and the associated benefits and risks of these procedures. Additionally, we discuss the challenges related to over-diagnosis and over-treatment, particularly in non-smokers, and the limitations of existing diagnostic approaches in distinguishing between aggressive and indolent lung cancers.

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A. Low-Dose Computed Tomography (LDCT) Scans

Low-dose computed tomography (LDCT) scans are widely recognized as the most effective screening tool for early detection of lung cancer, especially in high-risk populations such as heavy smokers. LDCT uses lower doses of radiation compared to conventional CT scans to create detailed images of the lungs. It can detect small nodules or masses that may not be visible on standard chest X-rays. Early detection through LDCT has been shown to reduce lung cancer mortality by approximately 20% in high-risk individuals.

1) Benefits:

- Early Detection: LDCT can identify lung cancers at an earlier, more treatable stage.
- Improved Survival Rates: Early intervention can significantly improve survival rates.
- Non-invasive: The procedure is non-invasive and relatively quick.

2) Risks:

- False Positives: LDCT can produce false-positive results, leading to unnecessary anxiety and additional testing.
- Radiation Exposure: Although the radiation dose is low, repeated scans may still pose a risk over time.

B. Biopsies

Biopsies play a crucial role in confirming a lung cancer diagnosis following the detection of suspicious lesions through imaging. A biopsy involves the removal of tissue samples from the lung, which are then examined under a microscope to detect cancer cells. There are several types of biopsy procedures, including:

- Bronchoscopy: A flexible tube with a camera is inserted through the nose or mouth into the lungs to collect tissue samples.
- Needle Biopsy: A needle is inserted through the chest wall to obtain tissue from the lung.
- Surgical Biopsy: A more invasive procedure where tissue samples are collected through a small incision in the chest.

1) Benefits:

- Accurate Diagnosis: Biopsies provide a definitive diagnosis by allowing direct examination of lung tissue.
- Molecular Testing: Tissue samples can be analyzed for genetic mutations, guiding targeted therapy.

2) Risks:

- Complications: Biopsy procedures can lead to complications such as bleeding, infection, or lung collapse.
- Pain and Discomfort: Some biopsy methods, particularly surgical biopsies, can be painful and require recovery time.

C. Challenges and Limitations

1) Over-diagnosis and Over-treatment: One of the significant challenges in lung cancer diagnosis is the risk of over-diagnosis and over-treatment, particularly in non-smokers and individuals with indolent (slow growing) cancers. Over-diagnosis refers to the detection of cancers that would not have caused symptoms or death during a patient's lifetime. This can lead to unnecessary treatments, which may cause harm and reduce quality of life without providing a survival benefit.
2) Distinguishing Between Aggressive and Indolent Cancers: Current diagnostic methods, including LDCT and biopsies, have limitations in differentiating between aggressive and indolent lung cancers. As a result, patients with slow-growing tumors may undergo aggressive treatments that are not needed. There is a critical need for diagnostic tools that can accurately identify the nature of the cancer, enabling personalized treatment plans and reducing unnecessary interventions.

While LDCT scans and biopsies are essential tools in the detection and diagnosis of lung cancer, they come with inherent risks and limitations. The challenge of over-diagnosis and over-treatment, particularly in non-smokers, underscores the need for more precise diagnostic methods. Advancements in molecular testing and the development of non-invasive biomarkers hold promise for improving the accuracy of lung cancer diagnosis and distinguishing between aggressive and indolent forms of the disease.

III. NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE DIAGNOSTIC METHODS

Current diagnostic practices for lung cancer, while effective in many respects, present several limitations, particularly when it comes to diagnosing non-smokers and distinguishing between aggressive and indolent forms of the disease.

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These challenges underscore the critical need for alternative diagnostic methods that can enhance accuracy, minimize unnecessary treatments, and ultimately improve patient outcomes.

A. *Limitations of Current Diagnostic Practices*

Traditional diagnostic methods, including low-dose computed tomography (LDCT) scans and biopsies, are instrumental in detecting lung cancer. However, these techniques have significant drawbacks:

1) Over-Diagnosis and Over-Treatment: LDCT scans can detect small nodules that may not be life-threatening, leading to over-diagnosis. This often results in unnecessary treatments, such as surgeries or radiation, which can have serious side effects and impact the patient's quality of life.
2) Risks of Biopsies: Biopsy procedures, while crucial for confirming cancer, carry risks such as bleeding, infection, and pneumothorax (collapsed lung). They can also be painful and stressful for patients.
3) Inadequate Distinction: Current methods struggle to differentiate between aggressive cancers that require immediate intervention and indolent cancers that grow slowly and may not necessitate aggressive treatment. This limitation is particularly problematic in non-smokers, who may have different cancer biology compared to smokers.

B. *Importance of Distinguishing Between Aggressive and Indolent Cancers*

The ability to accurately distinguish between aggressive and indolent lung cancers is paramount for effective patient management. Aggressive cancers need prompt and often intensive treatment to improve survival rates. Conversely, indolent cancers might benefit from a watchful waiting approach, avoiding the risks and side effects of unnecessary treatments. Misclassification can lead to significant patient harm, either through undertreatment of aggressive cancers or overtreatment of indolent ones.

C. *Previous Attempts at Developing Non-Invasive Diagnostic Methods*

Recognizing the limitations of traditional methods, researchers have explored various non-invasive diagnostic approaches. These include blood-based and urine-based tests, which offer the potential for earlier, safer, and more accurate detection of lung cancer.

1) Blood-Based Tests: Liquid biopsies, which analyze circulating tumor cells (CTCs) or cell-free DNA (cfDNA) in the blood, have shown promise in detecting genetic mutations and alterations associated with lung cancer. For example, the detection of EGFR mutations or ALK rearrangements can guide targeted therapies. However, the sensitivity and specificity of these tests can vary, and they are not yet widely used as primary diagnostic tools.
2) Urine-Based Tests: Urine tests have also been investigated for lung cancer detection, with the advantage of being non-invasive and easy to collect. Certain biomarkers, such as metabolites or RNA fragments, have been identified in urine samples of lung cancer patients. While promising, these tests are still in the research phase and require further validation before they can be implemented in clinical practice.

D. *Progress and Challenges*

Despite the potential of non-invasive diagnostic methods, several challenges remain. Blood and urine-based tests must achieve high sensitivity and specificity to be reliable. Additionally, these tests need to be standardized and validated across diverse populations to ensure their effectiveness and generalizability.

Significant progress has been made in understanding the genetic and molecular underpinnings of lung cancer, particularly in identifying specific biomarkers associated with the disease. These advancements pave the way for developing more precise diagnostic tools. For instance, integrating liquid biopsies with traditional methods could enhance diagnostic accuracy and patient stratification.

The limitations of current diagnostic practices for lung cancer highlight the urgent need for alternative methods, particularly for non-smokers, and distinguishing between aggressive and indolent cancers. Non-invasive diagnostic methods, such as blood and urine-based tests, hold great promise for improving early detection and patient outcomes. Continued research and development are essential to overcome existing challenges and implement these innovative approaches in clinical settings.

IV. CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The development of an improved urine test for lung cancer has significant potential to revolutionize clinical practice, particularly in reducing unnecessary biopsies and their associated risks. This test, capable of accurately distinguishing between high-risk and low-risk lung cancers, offers a non-invasive, cost-effective alternative to traditional diagnostic methods.

A. *Reducing Unnecessary Biopsies*

One of the primary benefits of the improved urine test is its potential to significantly reduce the number of unnecessary biopsies. Traditional diagnostic methods, such as low dose computed tomography (LDCT) and tissue biopsies, while effective, carry inherent risks such as infection, bleeding, and discomfort (Aberle et al., 2011). By accurately identifying patients who have high-risk lung cancers, the urine test can help avoid these invasive procedures for those with low-risk or indolent cancers, thereby reducing patient morbidity and healthcare costs.

B. *Benefits for Patient Management and Treatment Planning*

The ability to distinguish between high-risk and low-risk lung cancers allows for more tailored patient management and treatment planning. Patients identified with high-risk cancers can be prioritized for more aggressive treatment approaches, including surgery, chemotherapy, or targeted therapies. Conversely, patients with low-risk cancers can be monitored more conservatively, potentially avoiding the side effects and complications associated with overtreatment (Siegel et al., 2020).

C. *Personalized Treatment Approaches*

The test's ability to provide detailed genetic information about the cancer can also facilitate personalized treatment approaches. By identifying specific genetic mutations and biomarkers, clinicians can tailor treatments to the individual characteristics of each patient's cancer. This precision medicine approach increases the likelihood of treatment efficacy and reduces the incidence of adverse effects, improving overall patient outcomes (Wan et al., 2017).

D. *Cost-Effectiveness and Accessibility*

The improved urine test is likely to be more cost-effective compared to traditional diagnostic methods. The non-invasive nature of the test reduces the need for expensive and resource-intensive procedures like biopsies and imaging. Additionally, urine tests can be administered more easily in a variety of settings, including primary care clinics and remote healthcare facilities, making them accessible to a broader patient population. This increased accessibility is particularly important in low-resource settings where traditional diagnostic tools may be limited (Heitzer et al., 2019).

E. *Improving Healthcare Outcomes for Non-Smoking Lung Cancer Patients*

Non-smoking lung cancer patients, who often face challenges with early detection due to the lack of obvious risk factors, stand to benefit significantly from the improved urine test. Early and accurate detection is crucial for improving prognosis and survival rates. By providing a reliable method for early diagnosis, the test can lead to timely interventions that can significantly improve healthcare outcomes for this demographic (Siegel et al., 2020).

The improved urine test for lung cancer holds promise for transforming clinical practice by reducing unnecessary biopsies, enhancing patient management, enabling personalized treatment approaches, and proving to be cost-effective and accessible. Its implementation could lead to significant improvements in healthcare outcomes, particularly for non-smoking lung cancer patients who currently face unique challenges in diagnosis and treatment.

V. DISCUSSION

A. *Discussion*

The study findings on the improved urine test for lung cancer present a significant advancement in non-invasive cancer diagnostics. This new test offers a promising alternative to traditional diagnostic methods, with several notable strengths and some limitations that warrant further discussion.

B. *Interpretation of Study Findings*

The improved urine test demonstrated a high level of accuracy in distinguishing between high-risk and low-risk lung cancers. This capability is crucial for effective patient management, as it enables healthcare providers to prioritize aggressive treatment for high-risk patients while adopting a more conservative approach for those with low-risk cancers. The test's non-invasive nature also presents a significant advantage, reducing the need for painful and potentially harmful biopsies.

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C. Strengths of the Improved Urine Test

One of the primary strengths of the improved urine test is its ability to detect lung cancer-specific genetic markers in urine samples. This approach leverages advancements in genomic analysis, which have previously been applied successfully in other cancers, such as prostate cancer (Aravanis et al., 2017). The test's high sensitivity and specificity are particularly beneficial for early detection, which is critical in improving lung cancer prognosis.

Furthermore, the test's non-invasive nature makes it more accessible and acceptable to patients, potentially increasing participation in regular screening programs. This accessibility is especially important in resource-limited settings where traditional diagnostic tools may not be readily available.

D. Limitations of the Improved Urine Test

Despite its strengths, the improved urine test has certain limitations. One major limitation is the need for further validation in larger and more diverse populations. The initial study's sample size, while significant, may not capture the full spectrum of genetic diversity present in the global population (Mok et al., 2020). Additionally, the test's performance needs to be evaluated across different stages of lung cancer to ensure its efficacy in early and late-stage diagnoses.

Another limitation is the integration of the new test into existing diagnostic workflows. Healthcare providers will need to adapt to incorporating this test alongside current methods like LDCT scans and biopsies. This integration requires comprehensive training and changes in clinical protocols, which could pose challenges in the short term.

E. Broader Implications for Lung Cancer Diagnostics and Patient Care

The broader implications of these findings are substantial. The improved urine test has the potential to transform lung cancer diagnostics by providing a reliable, non-invasive alternative to traditional methods. This transformation could lead to earlier detection of lung cancer, improved patient outcomes, and reduced healthcare costs associated with invasive procedures and overtreatment.

Moreover, the ability to personalize treatment based on genetic markers identified through the urine test aligns with the growing trend towards precision medicine. This approach tailors treatment to the individual characteristics of each patient's cancer, enhancing the efficacy of interventions and minimizing side effects.

F. Challenges in Implementing the New Test

Several challenges must be addressed to ensure the successful implementation of the new urine test in clinical practice. One major challenge is achieving widespread adoption among healthcare providers. This process will require extensive education and training to familiarize practitioners with the test's benefits and integration into diagnostic workflows (National Cancer Institute, 2020).

Additionally, further validation studies are needed to confirm the test's accuracy and reliability across diverse populations. These studies should include patients from various ethnic backgrounds and with different lung cancer subtypes to ensure the test's broad applicability.

Finally, ensuring the cost-effectiveness and accessibility of the test will be crucial for its widespread use. Efforts should be made to make the test affordable for patients and healthcare systems, particularly in low-resource settings where lung cancer rates are rising due to increasing pollution levels (World Health Organization, 2021). Finally, the improved urine test for lung cancer represents a significant step forward in non-invasive diagnostics. While it offers numerous benefits, including high accuracy and patient accessibility, challenges remain in validating the test in diverse populations and integrating it into clinical practice. Addressing these challenges will be key to realizing the test's full potential in improving lung cancer diagnostics and patient care.

VI. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The development of the improved urine test for lung cancer marks a significant advancement in non-invasive diagnostics. To fully realize its potential and further enhance its clinical utility, several avenues for future research and development must be explored.

A. Recommendations for Further Research

1) Longitudinal Studies: Conducting longitudinal studies is essential to assess the long-term effectiveness of the new urine test. These studies should track patient outcomes over extended periods, evaluating the test's ability to detect lung cancer at early stages and its impact on survival rates and quality of life. Long-term data will provide critical insights into the test's predictive value and reliability across different stages of lung cancer.

2) Impact on Patient Outcomes: Research should also focus on understanding how the test influences clinical decision-making and patient management. This includes examining whether the test reduces the need for invasive procedures, such as biopsies and surgeries, and assessing its role in guiding personalized treatment plans. Patient-reported outcomes and satisfaction should be integral components of these studies to gauge the test's overall impact on patient care.

B. Expanding the Test to Other Populations

1) Ethnic Diversity: It is crucial to validate the urine test across diverse ethnic populations. Genetic variations among different ethnic groups can influence the prevalence and progression of lung cancer. Therefore, studies should include a wide range of participants to ensure the test's accuracy and applicability across different genetic backgrounds.
2) Age Groups: The effectiveness of the urine test should be evaluated in various age groups, from younger adults to the elderly. Since lung cancer risk and presentation can vary with age, understanding the test's performance across different age demographics will help tailor screening and diagnostic protocols appropriately.
3) Geographic Variability: Environmental factors, such as air pollution levels, vary significantly across different geographic regions. Expanding research to include participants from various geographic locations will help determine the test's robustness in diverse environmental settings. This approach will also identify any regional-specific risk factors that may influence test performance.

C. Integration with Other Diagnostic Tools

1) Imaging Technologies: Integrating the urine test with advanced imaging technologies, such as low dose computed tomography (LDCT) scans, could enhance diagnostic accuracy. Combining the molecular insights from the urine test with detailed imaging results can provide a comprehensive view of a patient's lung health, enabling more precise diagnoses and treatment plans.
2) Liquid Biopsies: Liquid biopsies, which analyze circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA) in blood samples, offer another non-invasive diagnostic tool. Research should explore the synergistic potential of combining the urine test with liquid biopsies to improve sensitivity and specificity. This combined approach could enhance early detection capabilities and provide a more detailed molecular profile of the cancer.
3) Enhanced Diagnostic Accuracy: Further research should focus on developing algorithms and machine learning models that integrate data from urine tests, imaging technologies, and liquid biopsies. These models can help identify patterns and correlations that may not be apparent through individual tests, leading to more accurate and comprehensive diagnostic assessments. Finally, the improved urine test for lung cancer holds significant promise for transforming lung cancer diagnostics. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to validate its long-term effectiveness and impact on patient outcomes. Expanding the test to diverse populations and integrating it with other diagnostic tools will enhance its clinical utility and improve patient care. By addressing these future directions, the healthcare community can fully harness the potential of this innovative diagnostic method, ultimately leading to better outcomes for lung cancer patients worldwide.

VII. CONCLUSION

The key findings of this research underscore the growing incidence of lung cancer among non-smokers in urban India, driven primarily by severe air pollution and genetic predispositions. The development of the improved urine test for lung cancer represents a significant breakthrough in non-invasive diagnostics, offering high accuracy in distinguishing between high-risk and low-risk cancers. This test has the potential to reduce unnecessary biopsies and associated risks, thus improving patient management and treatment planning.

The significance of this urine-based diagnostic tool lies in its ability to provide a cost-effective, accessible, and reliable alternative to traditional methods. By accurately identifying aggressive cancers, the test can help prioritize treatment for those who need it most, while sparing others from invasive procedures and overtreatment. This personalized approach not only enhances patient care but also optimizes healthcare resources.

Addressing the rising burden of lung cancer among non-smokers, particularly in India's urban centers, requires an integrated approach. Environmental interventions to reduce air pollution, alongside advancements in genetic research and healthcare, are essential. Regulatory measures, cleaner technologies, and public awareness campaigns are critical to mitigating the health impacts of air pollution.

Continued research and collaboration are imperative to further refine and validate the urine test across diverse populations and integrate it with other diagnostic tools.

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By fostering a multidisciplinary approach that combines environmental, genetic, and healthcare interventions, we can improve diagnostic methods and patient outcomes. The ultimate goal is to transform lung cancer diagnostics and provide better, more targeted care for those affected by this disease.

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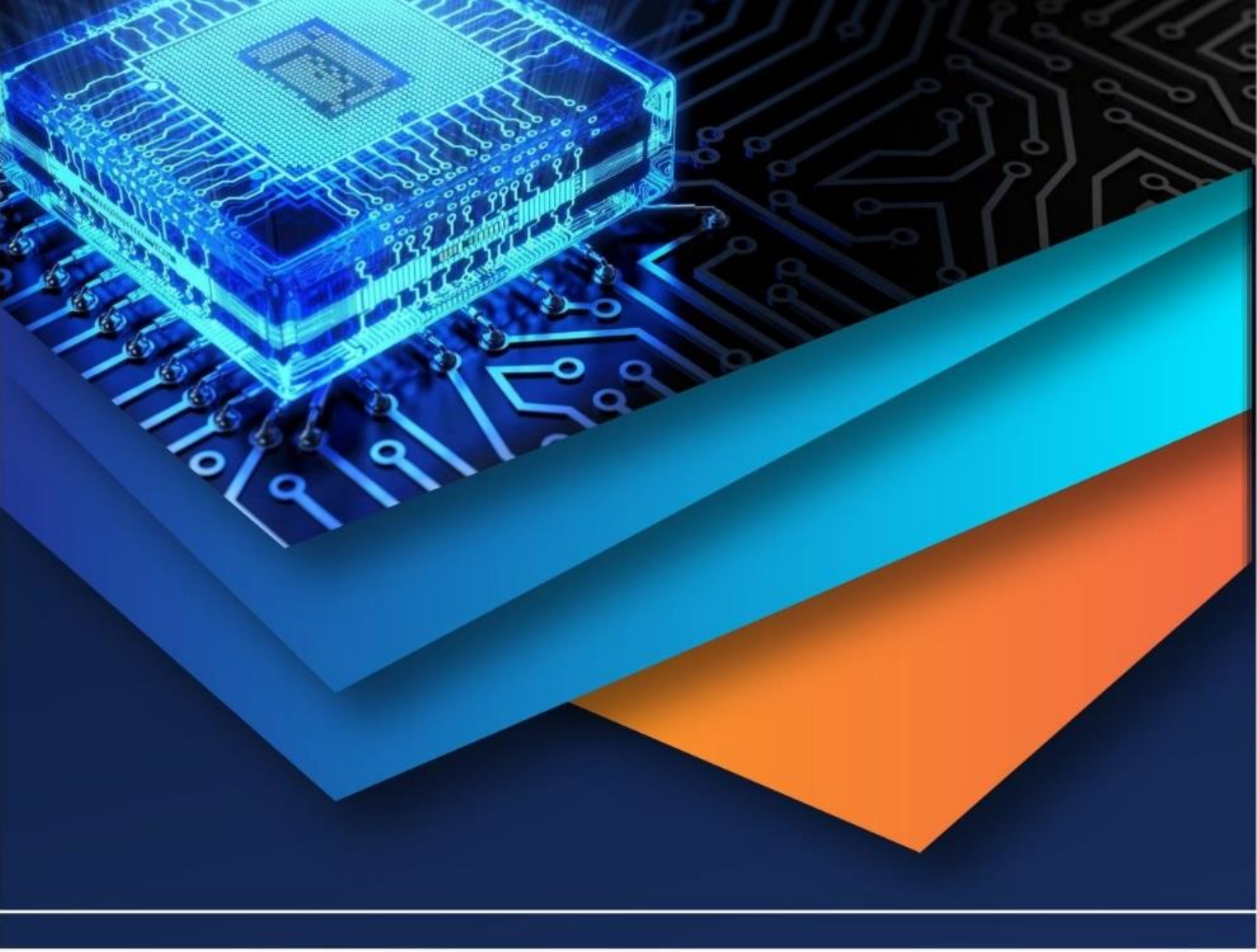

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