

# Frontiers in Clinical Drug Research (Anti-Cancer Agents)



Editor:  
**Atta-ur-Rahman, *FRS***

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*(Volume 6)*

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# CONTENTS

PREFACE .....	i
LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS .....	ii
<b>CHAPTER 1 IMMUNOMODULATING AGENTS IN THE TREATMENT OF ACUTE MYELOID LEUKEMIA: A COMBINATORIAL IMMUNOTHERAPEUTIC APPROACH</b> .....	1
<i>Shazia Ali, Dil Afroze, Javid Rasool, Bilal Rah and Khurshid I. Andrabi</i>	
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	2
Chemotherapeutic Drugs Used in the Treatment of AML .....	2
AML Relapse .....	3
PI3K/mTOR Pathway .....	3
mTOR Pathway in AML .....	8
TORC1 Targeted Therapy in mTOR .....	9
Novel Therapies in the Treatment of AML .....	10
FLT3 Mutation in AML as a Therapeutic Target .....	10
Targeting Isocitrate Dehydrogenase [IDH] Mutations in AML .....	11
Immunologic Approaches for the Treatment of AML .....	13
The Use of Inhibitors in the Treatment of AML and Concluding Remarks .....	13
<b>FUNDING</b> .....	15
<b>CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION</b> .....	15
<b>CONFLICT OF INTEREST</b> .....	15
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	15
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	15
<b>CHAPTER 2 POTENTIAL NATURAL PRODUCTS FOR PROSTATE CANCER MANAGEMENT: PROSPECTS FOR CASTRATION-RESISTANT PATIENTS</b> .....	23
<i>Thaise G. Araújo, Lara Vecchi, Danilo S. Costa, Sara T. S. Mota, Paula M. A. P. Lima, Igor M. Campos, Mariana A. P. Zóia, Douglas C. Brandão, Gabriela S Guimaraes, Matheus A. Ribeiro and Ademar A. da Silva Filho</i>	
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	24
<b>OVERVIEW OF PROSTATE CANCER</b> .....	24
Epidemiology and Etiopathology .....	24
Diagnosis Strategies and Current Treatments .....	29
Biomarkers .....	31
Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA) .....	32
Pro-PSA .....	33
BPH-related PSA (BPSA) .....	34
Prostate Cancer Antigen 3 (PCA3) .....	34
TMPRSS2: ERG Fusion .....	35
Urokinase-Type Plasminogen Activator (Upa) and its Receptor (Upar) .....	37
Prostate-Specific Membrane Antigen (PSMA) .....	37
<b>ANDROGEN RECEPTOR: FROM CURABLE TO LETHAL DISEASE</b> .....	38
Hallmarks of CRPC .....	40
Signaling Pathways Involved in CRPC .....	43
TGF- $\beta$ .....	45
Tyrosine Kinase Receptors .....	46
Il-6 Signaling .....	47
Wnt/frizzled/ $\beta$ -Catenin .....	48
NF $\kappa$ B .....	49
Approved Treatments for CRPC .....	49

<b>CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD TO TREAT CRPC: NATURAL PRODUCTS AS ANTICANCER AGENTS</b> .....	51
Terpenes .....	53
<i>Betulinic Acid</i> .....	53
<i>Glycyrrhetic Acid</i> .....	54
<i>Ursolic Acid</i> .....	55
<i>Ganoderic Acids</i> .....	55
<i>Lupeol</i> .....	56
<i>Oridonin</i> .....	57
<i>Artemisinin</i> .....	57
<i>Lycopene</i> .....	58
<i>Physachenolide D</i> .....	59
Flavonoids .....	59
<i>Luteolin</i> .....	59
<i>Apigenin</i> .....	60
<i>Quercetin</i> .....	61
<i>Genistein and other Soy Isoflavones</i> .....	62
<i>Silibinin</i> .....	63
<i>Baicalin and Baicalein</i> .....	64
Alkaloids and Anthraquinones .....	65
<i>Sanguinarine</i> .....	65
<i>Emodin</i> .....	65
Other Phenolic and Miscellaneous Compounds .....	66
<i>Resveratrol</i> .....	66
<i>Honokiol</i> .....	67
<i>Curcumin</i> .....	68
<i>Capsaicin and Derivatives</i> .....	68
<i>Wedelolactone</i> .....	69
<i>(-)-Epigallocatechin- 3-Gallate and other Polyphenols Form Green Tea</i> .....	70
<i>Gossypol</i> .....	70
<i>Phenethyl-Isothiocyanate</i> .....	71
<i>Ellagic Acid</i> .....	72
<i>Thymoquinone</i> .....	72
<i>Atracic Acid</i> .....	73
<i>Diindolylmethane</i> .....	73
<i>Sulforaphane</i> .....	74
<b>CONCLUDING REMARKS</b> .....	74
<b>CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION</b> .....	76
<b>CONFLICT OF INTEREST</b> .....	76
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	76
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	76
<b>CHAPTER 3 INHIBITION OF KEY PROTEIN-PROTEIN INTERACTIONS BY SMALL MOLECULES FOR CANCER DRUG DESIGN</b> .....	109
<i>Aykut Özgür, Lütfi Tutar, Mehmet Gümüş, İrfan Koca, Servet Tunoğlu, Ezgi Nurdan Yenilmez Tunoğlu and Yusuf Tutar</i>	
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	110
<b>P53-MDM2 INTERACTION</b> .....	111
Small-Molecule Inhibitors of the p53–MDM2 Interaction .....	112
<b>C-MYC-MAX INTERACTION</b> .....	116
Small-Molecule Inhibitors of the c-Myc-Max Interaction .....	116

<b>BCL-2/BCL-XL INTERACTION</b> .....	120
Small-Molecule Inhibitors of Bcl-2/Bcl-xL Interaction .....	121
<b>HSP90/HSP70 INTERACTION</b> .....	124
Small-Molecule Inhibitors of the Hsp70/Hsp90 Interaction .....	125
<b>B-CATENIN/TCF4 INTERACTION</b> .....	128
Small-Molecule Inhibitors of the $\beta$ -Catenin/TCF4 Interaction .....	130
<b>MENIN/MLL INTERACTION</b> .....	132
Small-Molecule Inhibitors of the Menin-MLL Interaction .....	133
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	134
<b>CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION</b> .....	134
<b>CONFLICT OF INTEREST</b> .....	134
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	134
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	135
<b>CHAPTER 4 EFFICACY OF HEPATIC ARTERIAL INFUSION CHEMOTHERAPY (HAIC) FOR ADVANCED HEPATOCELLULAR CARCINOMA</b> .....	142
<i>Kei Moriya, Tadashi Namisaki and Hitoshi Yoshiji</i>	
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	143
The Best Choice for Managing Advanced Hepatocellular Carcinoma .....	143
What is Hepatic Arterial Infusion Chemotherapy (HAIC)? .....	146
One-shot HAIC and its Clinical Outcome for HCC .....	148
Reservoir Systems for Chemotherapy .....	150
<i>Setting of Reservoir Systems</i> .....	150
<i>Management of Reservoir System and its Related Adverse Events</i> .....	151
<i>Reservoir HAIC Regimen and Clinical Outcome for HCC</i> .....	151
Evaluation of the Curative Effect of HAIC and its Prognostic Value .....	153
Which Type of HAIC Would be Useful? .....	154
When to use HAIC Combination Therapy with Molecularly Targeted Drugs or Surgical Resection for Advanced HCC with Major Ductal Invasions .....	154
A New Derivation of Modified HAIC .....	157
Which is Better, HAIC, or Molecularly Targeted Agents? .....	158
<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	160
<b>CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION</b> .....	161
<b>CONFLICT OF INTEREST</b> .....	161
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	161
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	161
<b>CHAPTER 5 TARGETING CANCER STEM CELLS: IMPLICATIONS IN HEALTH AND DISEASE</b> .....	170
<i>Roshia Ali, Hilal Ahmad Mir, Rabia Hamid, Sahar Saleem Bhat and Firdous A Khanday</i>	
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	171
<b>STEM CELLS</b> .....	171
<b>CANCER STEM CELLS</b> .....	173
<b>CSC NICHE - CROSS TALK BETWEEN CSC AND TUMOR MICROENVIRONMENT</b> .....	176
<b>CSC BIOMARKERS</b> .....	179
CD133 .....	180
CD24 .....	181
CD44 .....	181
ALDH .....	182
<b>CSCS IN TUMORIGENIC PROCESS</b> .....	183



<b>THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES TO TARGET CSCS - PRECLINICAL AND CLINICAL</b>	
<b>ROUTE</b> .....	184
Targeting Cellular Surface CSC Markers .....	185
Immunotherapeutic Approaches to Targeting CSCs .....	187
Targeting CSC Metabolism .....	188
Targeting Key Signal Pathways .....	189
<b>CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES</b> .....	191
<b>AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS</b> .....	191
<b>CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION</b> .....	191
<b>CONFLICT OF INTEREST</b> .....	191
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	191
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	191
<b>SUBJECT INDEX</b> .....	208

## PREFACE

*Frontiers in Clinical Drug Research - Anti-Cancer Agents* presents recent developments in various therapeutic approaches against different types of cancer. The book is a valuable resource for pharmaceutical scientists, postgraduate students, and researchers seeking updated and critical information for developing clinical trials and devising research plans in anti-cancer research.

The five chapters in this volume are written by eminent authorities in the field. Chapter 1 deals with the role of the PI3K/AKT/mTOR pathway in the survival of malignant cells as a potential target to combat relapse in AML patients. It also covers therapeutic agents involving a new class of inhibitors for plausible approaches to treat patients with relapsed or refractory AML diseases. Chapter 2 discusses the role of some natural products as potential novel anti-tumor agents treat CRPC patients. Chapter 3 presents an overview of key proteins and their coordinating and/or cooperating partner proteins in protein pathways which can be useful to design innovative chemotherapeutics. Chapter 4 deals with the effectiveness of Hepatic Arterial Infusion Chemotherapy (HAIC) for advanced hepatocellular carcinoma. Chapter 5 summarizes the current strategies and discusses lead molecules which have found their way to preclinical and clinical studies for targeting cancer stem cells.

I hope that the readers will find these reviews valuable and thought-provoking so that they may trigger further research in the quest for new and novel therapies against cancers.

I am grateful for the timely efforts made by the editorial personnel, especially Mr. Mahmood Alam (Director Publications) and Mrs. Salma Sarfaraz (Senior Manager Publications) at Bentham Science Publishers.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Immunomodulating Agents in the Treatment of Acute Myeloid Leukemia: A Combinatorial Immunotherapeutic Approach

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**Abstract:** Regardless of the diverse modes of treatment, the prognosis and clinical response of AML (Acute myeloid leukemia) remain low as the conventional modes of treatment, including cytarabine and anthracycline have their limitations. Moreover, chemotherapy-induced cytotoxicity triggers the remission, thus most of AML patients succumb to relapse. The monotherapy is also not helping much due to the rapid growth of AML, while an insufficient period of time is a major barrier in immunotherapy. Therefore, the current focus has been on combination therapy, with different agents, possibly because chemotherapy for AML is associated with infection, inflammation and could be rather toxic when combined with immunotherapy. Thus, there is the utmost need for developing a new approach and treatment for AML. Recent therapies focus on various novel signaling pathways and proteins that promote the survival of cancer cells in AML patients. This single or combinatorial approach may be more effective with less harmful effects. In this context, here we are discussing the role of PI3K/AKT/mTOR pathway in the survival of malignant cells as a potential target to combat relapse in AML patients. Accordingly, the therapeutic agents with a new class of inhibitors for plausible approaches to treat the patients with relapsed or refractory AML diseases could be advocated.

**Keywords:** Acute myeloid leukemia, Inhibitors, Kinase, Rapamycin, Signaling, TORC1.

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## INTRODUCTION

Acute myeloid leukemia [AML] is a dysregulated proliferation of myeloid precursor cells leading to genomic instability. AML generally affects the people of older age and rarely occurs before the age of 45 and is thus a disease of later adulthood. 174,250 people were diagnosed with AML, in 2018, in the US alone. The overall incidence rate per 100,000 populations was reported in 2017 for leukemia based on age. 9.5 percent of the deaths was reported to be due to cancer in 2018, based on the predicted total of 609,640 cancer deaths [1, 2] The reckless progression of AML is fatal within a week or two if left untreated [3]. It is a multi-clonal disease involving the expansion of aberrant cells resulting in the impairment of the hematopoietic process, eventually leading to clinical relapse and death. The clonal heterogeneity in a large number of these patients intrigues different outcomes to chemotherapy in various individuals with AML.

Leukemogenesis is a multifactorial phenomenon involving genetic disposition, physical, chemical, or radiation exposure and chemotherapy. Many genetic aberrations have been associated with hyperproliferation and undifferentiated clonal populations in patients with AML. The distinct pattern of clonal cytogenetic abnormalities gives rise to acute myelogenous leukemia. Thus, the characterization of such clonal population and chromosomal aberrations will provide insights to understand the origin and development of leukemia. The mutations in epigenetic and transcriptional regulators represent one of the hallmarks of AML. There are numerous mutated genes present in AML, *e.g.*, FLT-3, fms-like tyrosine kinase-3, and IDH, isocitrate dehydrogenase associated with the sub-clonal population, which are difficult to analyze by an advanced technique like flow cytometry. It cannot be differentiated as to which sub-clone has refractory/ relapse properties. The mutations could be evaluated only after remission induction therapy in these patients for 5-7 days, which kills leukemic and normal blood marrow cells giving us an assessment of the improvement for the erased mutation after induction. Such trials can lead to identifying sub-clones having relapse markers by different techniques like cytogenetics, sequencing [4].

### **Chemotherapeutic Drugs Used in the Treatment of AML**

Most of the patients can respond to the initial cytotoxic induction therapy; the common cause of death is the relapse of disease. The various chemotherapeutic regimes used for the treatment of AML are cytarabine, anthracycline, daunorubicin. Some of them are mentioned in Table 1. The other option for treatment is aggressive therapy to provide a path to an allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplant [alloHSCT], which is the promising option for patients with refractory or relapsed AML [RR-AML]. Patients should have at least a complete

response before undergoing alloHSCT and fewer side effects with a suitable donor and in good health condition. The standard chemotherapy regimens do not help eliminate leukemia in patients showing relapse. It is due to the activation of various signaling cascades in leukemia stem cells and early leukemic precursors actively help in stimulating their survival. These signaling pathways are further targeted by several targeted agents. Some of the targeted agents are mentioned in Table 2, along with new combinational approaches of immunotherapeutic agents studied in clinical trials mentioned in Table 3. Such agents provide a potential therapeutic output and different signaling pathways like PI3K, mTOR can be targeted for the treatment of leukemia. New strategies and methods for treating AML individuals are being executed like a gene test variant of a patient, which helps in designing a drug and predicting the exact drug working for a specific patient [5].

The clinical relapse occurs due to three main sources; disease was chemosensitive with partial treatment and reoccurred with multiple mutations, a subclone originated from an initial clone at low frequency, but after treatment clone gets benefitted due to the decreased chemotherapy sensitiveness and a denovo generation of AML because of side effects from treatment. AML is treated with chemotherapy at the initial stage with an additional hematopoietic stem cell transplant depending on the patient's response [6].

### **AML Relapse**

The relapse in AML occurs at any stage of the treatment or after completion of treatment. The standard recommendations by world health organization include monitoring blood counts for platelets every 1 to 3 months for the first two years and every 3 to 6 months thereafter for another three years [7]. The general practice of clinicians for treatment includes enrollment in a clinical trial, the reintroduction of a similar induction regimen if a relapse happens at a later stage [ $>12$  months], or with a salvage regimen followed by allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplant. The relapse factor depends on age, pre-treatment cytogenetics, and chemotherapeutic drugs required for the first complete response. The prognosis factor is one of the important factors to be kept in mind at the time of relapse of disease. Relapse is one of the leading causes of death in such patients. The prognostic factor will help in facilitating appropriate chemotherapeutic agents for the successful treatment of disease [8, 9].

### **PI3K/mTOR Pathway**

PI3K/mTOR, a mechanistic target of Rapamycin pathway is one of the main regulatory signaling cascades in mammals maintaining activities of a cellular system by regulating the transcription of genes encoding pro-oncogenic proteins

## CHAPTER 2

## Potential Natural Products For Prostate Cancer Management: Prospects For Castration-Resistant Patients

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**Abstract:** Prostate Cancer (PCa) is a major global health burden with alarming epidemiological indices. Research advances in this area have revealed complex molecular aspects associated with the disease, thus necessitating the novel development of diagnostic methods and therapeutic strategies. The main molecular target is the androgen receptor (AR), which is involved in both normal development and malignant transformation. However, many patients become resistant to conventional treatments, and the disease progresses to a castration-resistant stage (CRPC) in which tumor aggressiveness is driven by a constitutive activation of AR signaling. Tremendous effort has been made for elucidating CRPC and chemoresistance. In fact, multiple signaling pathways are related to the insurgence and maintenance of CRPC, highlighting the need for continuously updating such a complex scenario. Different drugs have been tested and used for CRPC treatment, facing unfavorable heterogeneity and leading to substantial morbidity and mortality. Thus, the clinical impact of advanced PCa with poorer outcomes still underscores the need for new compounds. The discovery and current use of natural products has given way to promising possibilities, offering alternative tools that aim to control the disease and to better manage patients. These natural products are versatile and effective molecules with different mechanisms of action and structures. In the present chapter, we explore the challenges of PCa and describe recent scientific contributions in this field, with special attention devoted to CRPC. We also discuss and suggest natural products as potential novel anti-tumor agents to overcome clinical limits and to treat and cure CRPC patients.

---

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**Keywords:** Castration-Resistant, Chemotherapy, Phytochemicals, Prostate Cancer, Treatment.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Prostate cancer (PCa) is a hormonally-driven tumor that ranks fourth in incidence among human cancers and caused 358, 989 deaths worldwide in 2018 [1, 2]. When PCa is localized to the prostate and surrounding tissues, the overall survival (OS) rates are significantly high since these patients are efficiently treated with surgery and radiotherapy [3]. However, over 20% of patients evolve to a lethal treatment-refractory stage of the disease with OS ranging from 26% to 30% at 5 years [4].

Advanced PCa is treated with chemotherapy and, mainly, associated with androgen deprivation therapy (ADT) [5]. In chemotherapy, cytotoxic drugs are introduced to control or cure the disease, targeting circulating tumor cells. However, it also affects normal cells, which results in undesirable side effects [6]. In some PCa patients, it is not possible to reach a complete abrogation of the androgen receptor (AR)-mediated functions through ADT. Such a scenario is due to the ability of PCa cells to elicit aberrant AR signaling that sustains tumor progression towards castration-resistant PCa (CRPC) [7].

Current chemical therapies often fail to control PCa, especially CRPC [3]. Notably, the fact that Natural Products (NPs) present fewer side effects and greater efficacy, together with their ability to act on several cellular mechanisms, makes them particularly promising in the treatment of tumors. The ability of NPs to inhibit PCa has already been described and, owing to their low toxicity, they confer clear advantages over synthetic compounds used to control CRPC [6]. Herein, we discuss general aspects of PCa, focusing on CRPC. Considering that CRPC is characterized biochemically by increasing levels of AR-targeted genes, blocking the receptor-dependent transcriptional programmers is of particular interest. Hereafter, we describe the mechanisms of action of different NPs and their potential application for the management of advanced PCa, especially for modulating AR signaling.

## **OVERVIEW OF PROSTATE CANCER**

### **Epidemiology and Etiopathology**

The development of the human body is a complex and highly regulated process that needs a molecular equilibrium in order to carry out its essential functions [8]. Such an equilibrium is lost in the tumorigenesis process during which normal cells progressively evolve towards a neoplastic state. There are six hallmark traits

that enable cells to become malignant, including sustained proliferative signaling, growth suppression evasion, cell death resistance, replicative immortality, sustained angiogenesis, and tissue invasion and metastasis. Such characteristics are also associated with genomic instability, reprogramming of energy metabolism, inflammation processes and evasion from immune destruction, which are responsible for the promotion and progression of cancer [9 - 11].

The progressive colonization of several sites of the body is the main cause of cancer-induced morbidity and relies on the capacity of cancer cells to invade tissues. During invasion, the extracellular matrix (ECM) is degraded and cancer cells survive in the lymphatic and vascular systems [12 - 15]. Epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) is at the center of the metastatic process since it confers to cancer cells a more aggressive potential and allows the generation and accumulation of cancer stem cells (CSCs) in a highly dynamic and heterogeneous tumor microenvironment [14, 16].

Despite the notable advances in treatment methods and in detection of malignant neoplasms, cancer remains a major public health problem. Its epidemiological indexes are alarming, including its high incidence and mortality [17, 18]. The incidence of cancer in Brazil and in the world is growing at an accelerated pace, following the aging of the population (due to the increase in life expectancy) and the change in global lifestyles [19]. In 2017, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), there were 8.8 million cancer deaths worldwide with the vast majority in developing countries. About 12 million deaths are predicted by the year 2030 [17].

PCa, in absolute global values, is the fourth most common type and has the second highest incidence among men [17]. In 2018, 1.3 million new cases of PCa were registered worldwide with 358,989 deaths. The highest incidence of the disease was in Europe (449,761 - 35.2%), followed by Asia (297,215 - 23.3%), North America (234,278 - 18.4%), Latin America and the Caribbean (190,385 - 14.9%), Africa (80,971 - 6.3%) and Oceania (23,496 - 1.8%). Regarding the number of deaths, the continents were ranked as follows: Asia (118,427 - 33%), Europe (107,315 - 29.9%), Latin America and the Caribbean (53,798 - 15%), Africa (42,298 - 11.8%), North America (32,686 - 9.1%) and Oceania (4,465 - 1.2%) [2]. According to the American Cancer Society, 174,650 new cases of PCa were diagnosed in American men in 2019, with 31,620 deaths from the disease [17].

PCa is considered a malignant tumor of the elderly, since about three quarters of cases worldwide occur after age 65 [20]. In Brazil, according to the estimates of the National Cancer Institute (INCA), about 65,840 new cases will be identified in

## CHAPTER 3

## Inhibition of Key Protein-Protein Interactions by Small Molecules for Cancer Drug Design

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**Abstract:** Human genome sequencing has revealed the complex nature of the human proteome. Researchers have been focused on mapping the proteome to find the right target for drug design. Inhibition of target proteins may be complemented by redundant forms of the proteins in the pathogenesis of diseases. Therefore, it is important to determine key proteins and their coordinating and/or cooperating partner proteins in protein pathways to design innovative chemotherapeutics. Computational and experimental studies indicated that approximately 200.000 protein-protein interactions (PPIs) have been predicted, with only about 8% identified in humans. PPIs play key roles in many important cellular processes, and especially their up-regulation is closely associated with each step of the tumorigenesis in cancer cells. Therefore, the identification of protein interactions helps researchers to design drugs for target specific cancer treatment. To understand the relations between tumorigenesis and p53-MDM2, c-MYC-MAX, Bcl-2/Bcl-xL, Hsp90-Hsp70,  $\beta$ -catenin-TCF4, and Menin-MLL interactions are an important approach to design specific chemotherapeutics for

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the treatment of individuals with cancer. This work focuses on key protein interactions on protein signaling pathways and designed inhibitors at these specific junctions in the literature.

**Keywords:** Apoptosis, Cancer, Drug design, Oncology, Protein-protein interactions.

## INTRODUCTION

PPIs control essential cellular processes that are involved in several biochemical events such as receptor-ligand interactions, down-stream cell signaling cascade, and DNA transcription initiation [1, 2]. Interestingly, protein isoforms or their family members can display adverse effects from pro-apoptotic to anti-apoptotic response. This diverse function may be performed by coordinating with different partner proteins. Further, isoform or other members of the protein family may complement inhibited target protein function [3, 4]. These escape strategies provide an opportunity for cancer cells to bypass a metabolic barrier. Shortcuts and bypass mechanisms of metabolic diseases have yet to be elucidated, but key interactions must be targeted. However, current strategies focus on specific PPIs where the function is explicitly defined, and inhibition of the sites block desired metabolic event. Since several functions involve PPI complexes, inhibition of this process has gleaned interest in drug design of several human diseases. Genomics and proteomics studies revealed key PPIs targets for metabolic processes: c-My-Max, p53-MDM2, Bcl-2/Bcl-xL,  $\beta$ -Catenin/TCF4, Hsp90-Hsp70, and MENIN-MLL. The interaction networks reorganize in different diseases, and further, mutations that inhibit protein function may impact PPI networks [5 - 10]. Pharmaceutical studies to decipher PPI networks have been extensively searched by the pharmaceutical industry and research groups.

During the past century, many PPIs inhibitors have been clinically successful in the treatment of autoimmune diseases (abatacept, belatacept, and belimumab) and cancer (ipilimumab, nivolumab, pembrolizumab, atezolizumab, durvalumab, and avelumab) [11]. Designing small molecules to inhibit PPIs is a difficult task since many limitations are present to design target specific PPIs inhibitors. PPIs are stabilized by large interfaces, and further, these interfaces have a variety of binding sites. Allosteric changes help PPI, and perturbation of allosteric changes by a small molecule leads to loss of interaction with a partner protein. However, many inhibitors have not been reported yet [12, 13]. Mutational analysis of protein interfaces indicated that some critical residues (hot spots) at the PPI interface play vital roles in the binding of small inhibitors. These residues show a tendency to localization at the center of the interface, to be hydrophobic, and to

show conformational adaptivity. Most of the clinical-stage inhibitors are designed that target PPI where the hot spot residues are clustered in a small binding site. Therefore, experimental assays have been developed to analyze critical residues in PPIs-based drug design studies [14, 15]. Critical residues at the PPIs interface can be detected by the alanine scanning approach in which target residue is converted to functionally “inert” amino acid alanine. Alanine scanning technique monitors the effect of interfacial residue mutations, and alterations of key residues may have major destabilizing effects. These hot spots may also be detected by *in silico* analysis, and the sites are critical in drug design [16, 17].

In this study, we focus on the biological activities of the significant PPIs and therapeutic activities of small inhibitors of the PPIs in target specific cancer drug discovery.

### **P53-MDM2 INTERACTION**

Transcription factor p53 controls a major cellular pathway and prevents cancer development as a tumor suppressor. p53 is activated upon oncogenic stress and plays vital roles in the regulation of apoptosis, DNA repair, and cell cycle-related genes. Activation of p53 leads to cell cycle arrest, and this function plays an essential role in cancer protection. The arrest provides enough time for the repair mechanism to complete its function, and then cells are pushed to mitosis and replication. p53 also participates in the DNA repair mechanism, and if DNA cannot be repaired then, p53 drives the cell to apoptosis. Thus, this prevents potentially carcinogenic damaged DNA expansion. Since p53 is a tumor suppressor, it is inactivated in most cancer types. Modulating p53 activation by interfering with its regulation by mouse double minute (MDM2) is a potentially neat strategy for drug design research [18 - 20].

At the normal state of cells, MDM2 protein negatively regulates p53 protein. If p53 level increases, MDM2 binds to p53 and inhibits its transactivation domain activity. Further, MDM2 is an E3 ligase and targets p53-ubiquitin dependent degradation (Fig. 1). MDM2 regulates p53 stability and activity, and several human cancer cells overproduce MDM2. The MDM2-p53 feedback loop is deregulated in cancer cells overexpressing MDM2 that leads to inefficient growth arrest and/or apoptosis. Therefore, blocking p53-MDM2 interaction releases p53 and restores its cell cycle arrest and pro-apoptotic activity [21 - 23]. Small molecule designs to perturb this interaction have drawn the attention of the pharmaceutical industry.

## Efficacy of Hepatic Arterial Infusion Chemotherapy (HAIC) for Advanced Hepatocellular Carcinoma

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**Abstract:** As per the latest data of the International Agency for Research on Cancer, more than 8 million individuals die annually owing to the exacerbation of a given neoplasm, and the total number of annual deaths due to hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is 0.78 million, the second-highest of all cancer-related deaths. HCC has a very poor prognosis, reflected by the fact that the incidence-to-mortality ratio of HCC has been estimated to be more than 90%. Liver cancer is generally diagnosed only in the advanced clinical stage because HCC tends to be clinically silent during the early stages. With regard to HCC management, transarterial chemoembolization (TACE) and hepatic arterial infusion chemotherapy (HAIC), as well as molecularly targeted agents such as sorafenib and lenvatinib, have shown promising benefits for advanced HCC. However, even though the Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer staging system has been widely accepted, controversies still exist regarding the best choice for the management of HCC in individual cases. In this chapter, we infer that HAIC treatment is not inferior to molecularly targeted therapies for the treatment of advanced HCC—particularly in case of intravascular invasion in both compensated and decompensated cirrhotic patients. Furthermore, the rate of adverse events leading to discontinuation of antitumor treatment appears relatively low. Given the hepatic function reserve preservation afforded by HAIC chemotherapy, we suggest that HAIC should be considered as an alternative strategy even for advanced-HCC patients with decompensated cirrhosis, who do not respond to TACE.

**Keywords:** 5-fluorouracil, Advanced stage, Chemotherapy, Child–Pugh classification, Cisplatin, Hepatic arterial infusion, Hepatic functional reserve, Hepatocellular carcinoma, Lenvatinib, Molecularly targeted therapies, Overall survival, Portal invasion, Progression-free survival, Reservoir, Sorafenib.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Liver cancer is the sixth most commonly diagnosed cancer and the fourth leading cause of cancer-related death in the world [1]. In 2015, there were approximately 854,000 new liver cancer cases and compared with an estimated 810,000 liver cancer-related deaths annually, the ratio between incidence and the annual number of deaths is the second highest of all cancer-related deaths [2]. Hence, liver cancer is a highly fatal disease, with an incidence-to-mortality ratio approaching 1 [3]. Recent advances in diagnostic imaging techniques and various treatment methods have steadily improved the prognosis of patients with hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) [4 - 7]; however, at the same time, these various options make the treatment of HCC difficult for clinicians to understand. This might be due to the complexity of various factors preempting a simple classification of the disease.

In this chapter, I would like to explain the advantages as well as the cautions in the case of selecting HAIC as a treatment of HCC. Additionally, HAIC combination therapy with molecularly targeted drugs or surgical resection and new derivation of modified HAIC are also described.

### **The Best Choice for Managing Advanced Hepatocellular Carcinoma**

The major histology underlying primary liver cancer is HCC, the incidence of which remains highest in Asian countries (specifically in the East and southeast Asia) and in Italy [8]. Japan and Italy, for example, both have an aging population, and relatively many patients with HCC have comorbidities such as diabetes mellitus, hypertension, cardiac disease, cerebrovascular disease, chronic renal failure, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Therefore, when choosing the most appropriate treatment for an individual case from among the various treatment options available, it is necessary to first evaluate the comorbidities and performance status of the patient, followed by an assessment of hepatic functional reserve (HFR). In general, many diabetic patients with cirrhosis have reduced hepatic insulin sensitivity and often require insulin due to marked postprandial hyperglycemia. Patients with long-lasting and/or poorly controlled diabetes mellitus are more likely to develop cardiovascular problems such as heart disease and cerebrovascular disease, as well as chronic renal failure. The degree of tumor progression is assessed only after these evaluations. With the exception of patients previously treated for HCC followed by subsequent routine imaging, it is not uncommon for patients with HCC to have advanced HCC by the time they visit a medical institution due to the general lack of symptoms in the initial stage [3].

HCC with vascular invasion is relatively common [9], and since HCC with portal vein invasion (Vp) is associated with a relatively high rate of distant metastases [10], it is necessary to identify any distant metastases in these cases. In addition,

whether the HCC is affecting both lobes or is confined to only one of these may be a criterion for considering surgical treatment. The degree of Vp may also be a criterion for considering arterial embolization.

The Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer (BCLC) classification, which has been widely applied to evaluating the extent of tumor progression in HCC, has been included in the HCC treatment guidelines developed by the European Association for the Study of the Liver and the American Association for the Study of the Liver Disease [11, 12]. According to this classification, patients with Vp-HCC are classified as advanced-stage HCC (stage C) and are recommended to receive molecularly targeted therapies such as sorafenib and lenvatinib. On the other hand, no randomized study comparing hepatic arterial infusion chemotherapy (HAIC) with the standard of care or no medical treatment has been published, and so no evidence of its benefit or issues with side effects specific to the reservoir system (*e.g.*, vasculitis, peptic ulcers due to arterial occlusion, reservoir infections, and reservoir obstruction) has been reported to date. Subsequently, there has been no recommendation of HAIC to a patient with Vp-HCC as a standard of care in these guidelines. In addition, HAIC is not considered the standard of care in the consensus guidelines of the Asia-Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver (APASL) [13]. On the other hand, according to the treatment algorithm included in the clinical practice guidelines for HCC 2017 proposed by the Japanese Society of Hepatology, transarterial chemoembolization (TACE), hepatic resection, HAIC, and molecularly targeted therapies are recommended for advanced-HCC cases in patients with Child-Pugh class A of the HFR and vascular involvement, but without distant metastasis [14].

It is generally difficult to detect pathological vascular invasion (Vp1) using diagnostic imaging such as computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and it is likely that in some cases where very large numbers of HCCs are identified in the liver, at least some of them will exhibit Vp1. In fact, treatment guidelines based on the BCLC classification state that the treatment strategy for “four or more and up to Vp1-HCC” is transcatheter arterial chemoembolization (TACE), molecularly targeted therapies, or best supportive care (BSC), and this strategy diverges significantly from the strategy applied in Japan, which is based on consensus-based HCC treatment algorithms. In fact, the indications for TACE are wide, and if the tumor is sufficiently hypervascular, treatment can be performed, as long as the vessels nourishing the tumor can be sorted out manually, and TACE can be used to treat portal vein tumor thrombi as small as Vp1 without any problems. That is why no clear criteria for the indications for TACE have been provided regarding upper treatment limits for tumor size or the number of tumors, and current guidelines in Western and Asian countries, including Japan, place TACE as the standard of care for intrahepatic



## Targeting Cancer Stem Cells: Implications in Health and Disease

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**Abstract:** Cancer is a serious global health concern as it accounts for about 9.6 million deaths worldwide. Despite striking breakthroughs made in understanding, prevention, and treatment of cancer, the mortality rate is still high and no permanent cure has been found. The major concern is the lack of effective therapies against advanced metastasis. Thus, there is a dire need to implement new treatment approaches to combat this dreadful disease. Cancer stem cells (CSCs), being critical players of tumors can be the potential target for therapy. Currently, cancer stem cell therapy is gaining much attention from researchers because of its ability to target the CSCs, which are responsible for tumor initiation, progression, metastasis, therapeutic resistance, and recurrence. While most conventional treatment strategies target fast-growing tumor cells, CSCs may remain in the latent stage for extended periods thereby escaping the traditional therapies and leading to treatment resistance. Hence, specific targeting of the tumor-initiating cells has become the heart of cancer research, aiming at the complete elimination of malignancies. Major strategies against CSCs include targeting surface CSC biomarkers, blockage of self-renewal signaling pathways (Wnt, Nanog, Hippo/YAP, Notch, PTEN, Hedgehog, and/or STAT3), genetic targeting of CSCs, cell therapy, RNA interference utilizing miRNAs. Based on this concept, the present chapter summarizes the current strategies and the lead molecules which have found their route to preclinical and clinical studies. Since the evolution of clinical trials targeting CSCs holds a sanguine promise of affecting cancer medicine. This chapter will further throw light on rapid advancement made in this field, shortcomings faced in targeting CSCs, and several critical issues that are yet to be resolved.

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**Keywords:** Apoptosis, Angiogenesis, Cancer recurrence, Cancer stem cells, CSC biomarkers, CSC niche, CSC origin, Differentiation, Immunotherapy, Metastasis, Mutation, Oncogenic signaling, Plasticity, Self renewal, Stemness, Targeted therapy, Transformation, Treatment resistance, Tumorigenesis, VSELs.

## INTRODUCTION

Cancer remains one of the major public health concerns, with approximately 18.1 million cases and 9.6 million cancer-related deaths worldwide [1]. Despite substantial advancements in the diagnosis and therapeutics, metastatic dissemination, cancer recurrence, and drug resistance continues to be a major clinical concern. Cancer stem cells (CSCs) are immortal tumor-initiating cells characterized by exclusive abilities of self-renewal and multi-lineage differentiation that drive tumor growth and heterogeneity [2]. The stemness phenotype of these CSCs is a consequence of genetic mutations or abnormal epigenetic changes. The exact origin of CSC has been abstruse and cell of origin for tumor initiation varies across different cancer types. The cell of origin of CSC may arise from somatic cells, partially differentiated progenitors, or differentiated cells that acquire self-renewal and differentiation properties through various mechanisms [3, 4]. CSCs may also arise from normal noncancerous stem cells that acquire malignant phenotype over time through transformation and reprogramming [5]. CSCs are known to reside in a specialized microenvironment referred to as the niche, which is composed of diverse cell types that promote CSC survival and ameliorate their stemness phenotype. CSCs are considered to be a major cause of cancer therapy failure due to their resistance to current conventional therapeutics, resulting in tumor relapse and eventually metastasis [6]. Moreover, in recent times CSC based targeted therapies have proven to be beneficial in suppressing tumor development in various pre-clinical and clinical studies [7]. A thorough understanding of the CSC biology is crucial for developing novel cancer diagnostic and therapeutic strategies. CSC based therapeutics are aimed at interfering with the functions of surface markers, drug efflux transporters, stemness pathways, epigenetic regulators and oncogenic signaling pathways. Besides, immunotherapeutics and differentiation therapies have also been established to target CSCs. In this chapter, we have summarized the biological characteristics of CSCs, the role of the niche in CSCs, current therapeutic approaches to target CSCs, and the lead molecules that have found their route to preclinical and clinical studies.

## STEM CELLS

Stem cells are a small subset of undetermined cells in the human body

characterized by remarkable self-renewal capability with perpetual multilineage potential [8]. These non-specialized cells strikingly differ in their capacity to differentiate into different cell lineages and based on their multilineage potential they can be hierarchically classified into totipotent, pluripotent, multipotent and unipotent. Totipotent stem cells are most versatile, having the highest differentiation potential. The embryonic totipotent cells differentiate into pluripotent embryonic stem cells which further differentiate into multipotent adult stem cells. However, with each differentiation the potency and phenotypic plasticity of embryonic stem cells gets restricted. Embryonic stem cells (ESCs) are pluripotent cell lines derived from the undifferentiated inner cell mass of blastocyst-stage early mammalian embryo. ESCs are unique in their ability to renew themselves indefinitely in a pluripotent state and retain the extraordinary potential to differentiate virtually into all the cell types of an adult organism, thereby, producing a diverse range of specialized cell types with varying phenotypes. These peculiar features make them a promising source of cells for regenerative and transplantation medicine, cell replacement therapy, basic biological research, compound screening for drug development, and in understanding developmental biology and gene function in adult organism [9 - 11]. Although ESCs offer enormous potential and hope for new innovative therapies in the treatment of a variety of diseases and debilities, however, the clinical application of these cells raises numerous ethical and safety concerns that limit their exploitation in cell-based therapeutics and research. In addition to ESCs, the tissues of our body are known to harbor diverse stem cell populations that have gradually evolved from ESCs and migrated to different organs or tissues during the course of development with the definite purpose to recoup tissue repair and homeostasis. These specialized stem cells are referred to as Adult stem cells or tissue-specific stem cells. In contrast to ESCs, adult stem cells are multipotent cells having the capacity to generate only several differentiated lineages for the specific tissues wherein they reside. Stem cells are known to interact with the dynamic physiological system that primarily governs the outcome of developmental morphogenetic events and organismal stress, as these cells have a crucial role in tissue generation, maintenance and repair. The stem cell niche is the specialized anatomic location where stem cells both reside and receive stimuli that provide an idiosyncratic microenvironment for the stem cell functioning as well as determine their fate. The behavior of stem cells in the niche is stringently regulated by a milieu of biochemical factors that ensure proper stem cell functioning [12 - 15]. Thus, stem cell niche is a basic unit of tissue physiology, having great anatomical as well as functional importance, integrating signals that orchestrate response of stem cells to the needs of organisms. The cell-cell and cell-matrix interaction of stem cells stimulate diverse signaling pathways that activate and/or repress transcription programs that maintain stem cells either in a

## SUBJECT INDEX

### A

- Ability 24, 43, 46, 55, 58, 71, 73, 170, 172, 182, 183, 184  
 metastatic 184
- Abnormalities 2, 33  
 clonal cytogenetic 2
- Acid 7, 31, 52, 53, 55, 56, 72, 73, 181, 182, 188  
 atraric 73  
 betulinic 53  
 chiquimic 52  
 ellagic 72  
 ganoderic 55, 56  
 hyaluronic 181, 182  
 natural benzoic 73  
 nucleic 188  
 retinoic 31  
 suberoylanilide hydroxamic 7  
 synthesis, retinoic 182  
 ursolic 55
- Action 52, 58  
 chemopreventive 58  
 therapeutic 52
- Activation 3, 4, 9, 36, 37, 40, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 67, 111  
 inhibiting 9  
 ligand-independent 47  
 pathway 36  
 plasmin 37
- Activity 8, 35, 42, 47, 52, 54, 68, 73, 74, 111, 112, 113, 114, 124  
 antiandrogenic 73  
 anti-inflammatory 68  
 antileukemic 8  
 beta-galactosidase 73  
 proteasome 74  
 transactivation domain 111  
 tyrosine kinase 47
- Acute myelogenous leukemia (AML) 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 115, 185, 186, 187  
 refractory 4
- Adaptive immune systems 178
- Adenomatous polyposis coli (APC) 129
- Advanced haematological malignancies 12
- Agents 3, 6, 7, 10, 14, 28, 51, 59, 145, 146, 148, 149  
 anticancer 51, 148  
 antioxidant 59  
 antitumor 146  
 calcium mimetic 51  
 carcinogenic 28  
 chemotherapeutic 3, 14, 145  
 cytotoxic 146  
 embolic 149  
 hypomethylating 7, 10  
 immunotherapeutic 3, 7  
 mTOR inhibitory 6
- Agglutinin-reactive fraction 153
- Alanine scanning 111  
 approach 111  
 technique monitors 111
- AML disease 8
- Androgens 23, 24, 26, 30, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 56, 66, 67, 73, 74, 75  
 binding domain 41  
 biosynthesis 40  
 deprivation therapy (ADT) 24, 30, 31, 35, 36, 40, 49, 74  
 receptor (AR) 23, 24, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 46, 47, 48, 50, 56, 66, 67, 73, 75  
 responsive elements (AREs) 38, 39, 75  
 serum 40  
 signaling activation 51  
 synthesis 50
- Angiogenesis 25, 28, 33, 35, 36, 38, 45, 47, 53, 55, 58, 171, 177, 178, 181, 184  
 gene-mediated 184  
 promoting 178  
 suppressing 71  
 sustained 25
- Antiapoptotic proteins 72, 120

overexpress 120  
Anticancer drug 146, 147  
  platinum 147  
Antigens 33, 179, 187  
  embryonic 179  
  epithelial-specific 179  
Anti-proliferative activities 131  
Antitumor treatment 142  
Apoptosis 35, 36, 42, 43, 45, 50, 53, 54, 55,  
  57, 61, 62, 64, 69, 72, 111, 120, 121,  
  181  
  caspase-dependent 69  
  caspase-mediated 72  
  induced 61, 64  
  inhibition 42, 120  
  proteins 43  
AR expression 50, 67, 68, 69, 71, 75  
  downregulate 75  
  downregulated 67, 71  
AR gene 38, 40, 41, 44  
  amplification 40, 44  
AR-independent mechanisms 74  
Artemisinin treatment 58  
Autophagy-regulated pathways 71

**B**

BAK-dependent apoptosis in murine 122  
Barcelona clinic liver cancer (BCLC) 142,  
  144  
Bax, pro-apoptotic protein 62  
Benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) 27, 28,  
  29, 33, 34, 45  
Bone marrow progenitors 182  
BPH-associated PSA (BPSA) 33, 34  
Brain metastasis 187, 190  
  progressive 190  
Breast cancer(s) 54, 69, 127, 131, 177, 178,  
  179, 182, 183, 184, 188  
  stem cells 131, 179  
Burkitt's lymphoma cells 118

**C**

CAFs stemness properties in colon cells 177  
Cancer 25, 29, 36, 40, 41, 42, 43, 47, 52, 53,  
  54, 65, 66, 69, 109, 110, 113, 111, 115,  
  128, 130, 133, 134, 160, 170, 171, 173,  
  176, 177, 178, 179, 181, 182, 184, 186,  
  188  
  associated fibroblast (CAFs) 176, 177  
  brain 115, 179  
  cell growth 177, 181  
  cell proliferation 115, 130, 133, 176, 178  
  cervical 69  
  colorectal 113, 128, 160  
  gastric 182, 186  
  progression 36, 42, 43, 47, 184, 188  
  protection 111  
  treatment 109, 113, 130, 134  
*Capsicum* 68  
  *annuum* 68  
  *frutescence* 68  
Carcinogenesis 61, 70, 157, 189  
  inhibited prostatic 61  
Cardiovascular problems 143  
*Cassia obtusifolia* 65  
Castration-resistant prostate cancer (CRPC)  
  23, 24, 40, 42, 43, 44, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50,  
  51, 52, 53, 76  
*Celastrus paniculatus* 56  
Cell 56, 62, 64  
  cytotoxicity 56  
  growth inhibition 64  
  migration inhibition 62  
Cell death 35, 43, 67, 69, 71, 120  
  autophagic 71  
  autophagy-mediated 67  
  epoxide-induced 69  
  programmed 43, 120  
Cell growth 29, 40, 46, 72, 120  
  blocks cancer 120  
Cell migration 35, 47, 58  
  endothelial 58  
Cell proliferation 42, 45, 47, 48, 54, 61, 64,  
  65, 69, 72, 118, 120, 123, 128, 133, 177

- block cancer 128
  - blocked cancer 133
  - inhibited 118
  - tumorigenesis exacerbating cancer 177
  - Cell signaling 44, 52, 110
    - cascade, down-stream 110
    - pathways 44, 52
  - Cell survival 10, 38, 44, 46, 61, 120, 182, 184
    - compromised tumor 61
  - Cell therapy 170
    - cancer stem 170
  - Cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) 183
  - Chemotherapy, intensive 12
  - Chicken embryo fibroblast cells 116
  - Chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML) 9, 186
  - Cirrhosis 143, 151
  - Colon 177, 188
    - cancer 188
    - tumorigenesis 177
  - Colorectal cancer cells 128
  - Columnar secretory luminal cells 26
  - Computed tomography (CT) 29, 144, 151
  - Curcuma longa* 68
  - Cytokine-induced NFkB activation 60
  - Cytokines 4, 29, 51, 63, 175, 177, 178, 182, 184
    - chemotactic 178
    - growth-suppressive 4
    - proinflammatory 175, 177
  - Cytotoxic effects 67, 70, 146, 148
    - concentration-dependent 148
  - Cytotoxicity 1, 67
    - chemotherapy-induced 1
- D**
- Dendritic cell(s) (DCs) 51, 187
    - vaccine 51
  - Diabetes mellitus 143
  - Digital rectal examination (DRE) 29, 30, 33, 35
  - Disease 2, 3, 14, 28, 34, 36, 110, 143, 151
    - autoimmune 110
    - cardiac 143
    - cerebrovascular 143
    - chronic obstructive pulmonary 143
    - fatal 143
    - heart 143
    - leukemic 14
    - malignant 28
    - malignant prostate 34
    - metabolic 110
    - relapse of 2, 3, 36
    - vascular 151
  - DNA 14, 28, 38, 41, 42, 46, 50, 56, 110, 111, 116, 117, 118, 130, 176
    - binding domain (DBD) 38, 41, 46
    - binding of c-Myc 117, 118
    - binding proteins 42
    - repair 28, 111
      - mechanism 111
      - repair systems 56
      - replication 176
      - transcription initiation 110
  - DNA synthesis 63, 157
    - enhanced 157
  - Drug resistance mechanisms 174
  - Dynamic physiological system 172
  - Dysregulated proliferation 2
  - Dysregulation 28, 131, 174
    - hormonal 28
- E**
- EGCG, lyophilized 70
  - Electrophoretic mobility shift assay (EMSA) 119
  - ELISA technique 130
  - Embryonic stem cells (ESCs) 172
  - Emodin's mechanism 66
  - Endopeptidases 45
  - Endothelial cells, tumor-associated 176, 177
  - Energy metabolism, mitochondrial 189
  - Epidermal growth factor (EGF) 37, 43, 45, 46, 51, 53, 54, 178
    - receptor (EGFR) 37, 43, 46, 54
  - Epithelial cells 26, 27, 28, 32, 36, 37, 43, 184
    - proliferative 28

prostatic 32  
Epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) 25,  
41, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 182, 184  
Epithelial-specific antigen (ESA) 179, 180  
European association of urology (EAU) 31  
Expression 34, 35, 38, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 62,  
64, 65, 71, 72, 130, 177, 181, 183, 188  
glycolytic enzyme 188  
inhibited 130  
oncogene 62  
regulated 183  
transgenic 181  
Extracellular signal regulated kinase (ERK) 8,  
37, 44, 45, 52, 53, 67

## F

FAK inhibition 190  
Fatal toxic epidermal necrolysis 186  
Fatty acid synthase 62  
FDA-approved drugs 115  
Fibroblast growth factor (FGF) 37, 45, 53  
Fluorescence resonance energy transfer  
(FRET) 118  
Food drug and administration (FDA) 4, 33,  
35, 50, 51, 134, 185, 190  
FRET assays 118

## G

Gastroduodenal artery coil method 150  
Gene amplifications 28  
Gene expression 26, 39, 187  
profiles, distinct 187  
regulating 39  
Genomics and proteomics studies 110  
Growth 31, 69  
hormone 31  
inhibitory activity 69  
Growth factors (GFs) 4, 35, 37, 44, 45, 46, 51,  
52, 53, 153, 176, 177, 178, 182  
epidermal 45, 53, 178  
fibroblast 37, 45, 53  
hepatocyte 45, 47, 53, 177

keratinocyte 45, 51, 53  
platelet-derived 177  
vascular endothelial 35, 45, 53, 153, 177

## H

HAIC 142, 146, 149, 158, 160  
therapy 146  
treatment 142, 146, 149, 158, 160  
HDM2 protein 115  
Heat shock cognate protein 128  
Hematological 11, 121  
cancers, dependent 121  
malignancies 11  
Heparin solution 151  
Hepatic arterial infusion 142  
Hepatic 142, 143, 145, 146, 147, 149, 150,  
154, 155, 160  
functional reserve (HFR) 142, 143, 145,  
146, 147, 149, 150, 154, 155, 160  
ischemia 150  
Hepatocellular carcinoma 142, 143, 177, 181,  
188  
Hepatocyte growth factor (HGF) 45, 47, 53,  
63, 177  
Hereditary prostate cancer 28  
Homeostasis 37, 43, 172, 173  
coagulation system disrupts 37  
tissue 173  
Human 33, 53, 60, 109, 182  
genome sequencing 109  
isozymes 182  
kallikrein enzymes 33  
malignancies 60  
melanoma cancer 53

## I

Immune suppressive cells 177  
Immunotherapy 1, 51, 171, 187  
cellular 51  
Infections 1, 27, 28, 33, 66, 151  
transmitted 28  
urinary tract 27

wound 151  
 Inflammation-related urinary bladder cancer 183  
 Inflammatory 28  
   atrophies 28  
   injury, initial 28  
 Infusion 8, 148, 151, 152, 154  
   donor lymphocyte 8  
   selective high-concentration 148  
 Inhibiting 59, 61, 75, 146  
   AR activation 75  
   DNA synthesis 146  
   nuclear translocation 61  
   PSA expression 59  
 Inhibition 42, 43, 54, 56, 60, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 110, 116, 129  
   competitive 56  
   luteonin-induced 60  
 Inhibition 63, 109  
   downregulates 63  
   of target proteins 109  
 Inhibitors 1, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 33, 75, 112, 113, 114, 115, 189, 190  
   aminopeptidase 7  
   hydroxamic acid 7  
   proteasome 7  
   selective ATP-catalytic 13  
   serum protease 33  
 Intracellular DNA strands 146  
 Iron 157, 158  
   chelators, artificial 158  
   metabolism 157  
 Isocitrate dehydrogenase 2, 11

**K**

Keratinocyte growth factor (KGF) 45, 51, 53

**L**

Leucine-rich repeat-containing G-protein 179  
 Leukemia 2, 3, 8, 9, 114, 115, 117, 133, 179, 180, 182, 185, 186  
   acute myelogenous 2, 8, 115

chronic myelogenous 186  
 cells, human promyelocytic 117  
 CSCs 180  
   stem cells (LSCs) 3, 179, 185  
 Leukemogenesis 2  
 LFP therapy 152  
 Ligand-binding domain (LBD) 38, 41, 46  
 Lipid metabolism 40  
 Liver 64, 67, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 150, 153, 154, 155, 158, 179, 180, 185  
   cancer 142, 143  
   cirrhotic 154  
   disease 144  
   failure 155  
 Long term myelosuppression 8  
 Lung 60, 182, 188  
   cancer 160, 188  
   carcinomas 182  
 Luteinizing hormone releasing hormone (LHRH) 30

**M**

Macrophages 28, 37, 176, 178  
   tumor-associated 176  
   tumor-infiltrating 178  
 Macrophage scavenger receptor 28  
 Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) 144  
*Magnolia officinalis* 67  
 Malignancies 11, 13, 29, 35, 113, 170, 182  
   hematologic 11, 113  
   hematopoietic 182  
 Malignant neoplasm 25, 28  
 Matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs) 37  
 MDM2 111, 112, 113, 114  
   inhibitor 113, 114  
   Interaction 112  
   p53 inhibitors 112  
   protein 111, 112  
 Median survival time (MST) 148, 149, 152, 154, 155, 156  
 Medicine 51, 57, 172  
   traditional Chinese 57  
   transplantation 172



Menin-MLL protein-protein interaction 134  
Merck Sharp & Dohme corp 115  
Mesenchymal 43, 176, 177, 178, 183, 184  
  markers 43  
  phenotype 43  
  invasive 43  
  stromal cells (MSCs) 176, 177, 178, 183, 184  
Metastasis 30, 31, 42, 43, 49, 50, 61, 127, 143, 144, 153, 154, 160, 170, 171, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 180, 183  
  blocked tumor 61  
  bone 127  
  distant 143, 144  
  extrahepatic 153, 154, 160  
  lymph nodal 183  
Metastatic 47, 51, 174, 190  
  basal cell carcinoma 190  
  disease 47, 51, 174  
Microorganisms, pathogenic 66  
Microscopic analysis 30  
Migration 47, 71, 182  
  restrain 71  
  suppressing 71  
Mitogen Activated protein kinase (MAPK) 10, 37, 44, 45, 46, 47, 52, 53  
Molecularly targeted 154, 158  
  agents 158  
  drugs 154  
Monoclonal antibodies 189  
Monotherapy 1, 177  
  anti-VEGF 177  
Morbidity, cancer-induced 25  
Mortality rate 170  
Multifunctional cytokine 45  
Multilineage 172  
  perpetual 172  
Multipotent stromal cells 177  
Murine embryonic fibroblasts (MEFs) 122  
Mutational analysis of protein interfaces 110  
Myeloid 2, 176, 178  
  derived suppressor cells (MDSCs) 176, 178  
  precursor cells 2

**N**

Neck cancers 182  
Neutrophil: lymphocyte ratio (NLR) 153, 154  
Next-generation sequencing technologies 32  
NK cell population 186  
Non-stem cancer cells (NSCCs) 175  
Non-transferrin-bound iron (NTBI) 157  
Nuclear localization signal (NLS) 49

**O**

Oncogenic 8, 11, 14, 111, 126, 171  
  mutation 11  
  pathways 126  
  proteins 8  
  proteins cell proliferation 14  
  signaling 171  
  stress 111  
  transformation 36  
One-shot arterial infusion approach 146  
Organ's histopathology 26  
Osteoblasts 51  
Osteoclastogenesis 63, 69  
  cancer-induced 69  
Osteopontin 182  
Ovarian cancer 28, 57, 188  
Overexpression 34, 40, 42, 116, 128, 180  
Oxidative damage 183  
Oxidative stress 29, 53, 69, 182  
  inducing 69

**P**

Pathways 4, 8, 26, 28, 31, 37, 42, 43, 44, 46, 52, 54, 56, 62, 72, 75, 76, 130, 171, 175, 179, 183, 188  
  angiogenic 54  
  anti-apoptotic 130  
  autophagic 62  
  cancer signaling 56  
  caspase-dependent 72  
  cellular signaling 42  
  glucose metabolism 188

- glycolytic 183
- intracellular signaling 53
- oncogenic signaling 171
- signal transduction 179
- Peptic ulcers 144
- Peptidase 32, 33
  - kallikrein-related 32
- Peptide 33, 187
  - antigenic 187
- Phenotypes 32, 43, 44, 48, 51, 52, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 177, 178, 180, 188, 191
  - aggressive 43, 48
  - cancer cell 177
  - castration-resistant 51
  - drug-resistant 174
  - malignant 171, 175
  - of CSC markers 180
  - plasticity 172
  - intrinsic 173
- PI3K/AKT 1, 4, 8
  - mTOR pathway 1, 4, 8
  - mTOR signaling cascade pathway 4
- PI3K-Akt signaling pathways 181
- Piperidine moiety 133
- Piperidinone scaffold 115
- Plasminogen 36, 37
- Polycomb protein levels 175
- Polymerase 57, 67
- Positron emission tomography (PET) 31
- Post-progression survival (PPS) 160
- PPIs inhibitors 110, 134
  - effective 134
- Preliminary structure-activity relationships 59
- Process 2, 14, 25, 36, 37, 38, 40, 43, 44, 47, 48, 110, 183, 184, 188
  - carcinogenic 36
  - clonal expansion 40
  - coagulation 37
  - healing 37
  - hematopoietic 2
  - metabolic 110
  - metastatic 25
  - morphogenesis 48
  - stem cell reprogramming 188
  - tumorigenic 183, 184
- Prognosis 1, 3, 13, 31, 32, 35, 154, 155, 158
  - factor 3
  - poor 13
- Proliferative inflammatory atrophy (PIA) 28
- Properties 45, 50, 53, 54, 58, 60, 66, 118, 174, 176, 182, 183, 184
  - agonistic 50
  - anti-cancer 53
  - anti-inflammatory 53
  - anti-tumor 54
  - antitumoral 58
  - malignant 183
  - pro-oxidant 60
  - suppressive immunomodulatory 174
- Prostate 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 40, 44, 45, 52, 54, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 69, 75, 179, 180, 182
  - activity 26
  - cancer, castration-resistant 44, 52
  - intraepithelial neoplasia (PIN) 28, 45
  - normal 40, 54
  - specific antigen (PSA) 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 60, 62, 63, 64, 66, 69, 75
  - specific membrane antigen (PSMA) 31, 37, 38
  - tumor cells 182
  - tumorigenesis 62
- Prostate cells 36, 38
  - malignant 36
- Prostate tumors 28, 42
  - metastatic 42
- Prostatic acini* 26
- Proteases 32, 34, 36
  - serine-linked transmembrane 36
- Proteinases 37
- Protein(s) 3, 9, 28, 31, 32, 35, 36, 38, 40, 42, 43, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 54, 56, 62, 63, 66, 67, 75, 109, 110, 111, 120, 124, 125, 126, 128, 132, 134, 174, 176
  - anti-apoptotic 174
  - cancer cells overexpress Hsp 124
  - drug efflux 50
  - extracellular matrix 176
  - fold substrate 124
  - fusion 132

- genes encoding pro-oncogenic 3
- heat shock 38, 75
- metastasis-associated 66
- oncogenic client 126, 128
- overexpressing anti apoptotic heat shock 124
- proapoptotic 120
- programmed cell death 67
- prostatic acid phosphatase fusion 51
- protein interactions (PPIs) 109, 110, 111, 134
- regulatory 49
- retinoblastoma 43, 63
- ribosomal 9
- supply secretory 40
- synthesis 47
- tumor-suppressor 42
- tumor suppressors 49
- tyrosine kinases 62
- Proteolysis 37
- Proteolytic 34, 120
  - cascade 120
  - environment 34
- Proteome 109, 187
- PSMA 37, 51
  - activity 37
  - expression 51
- PTEN 4, 36, 42, 43, 45, 52, 53, 66, 75, 170
  - cleaves 42
  - mutation 4
  - tumor suppressor protein 42
- R**
- Randomized control trial (RCTs) 146, 150, 156
- Reactive oxygen species (ROS) 56, 157, 182
- Receptor 10, 23, 24, 32, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 53, 60, 67, 75, 179, 181
  - adhesion 181
  - androgen 23, 24, 38, 39, 41, 42, 44, 75
  - chemokines 179
  - cytokine 10
  - dependent transcriptional programmers 24
  - frizzled class 60
  - nuclear 38, 42
  - serine/threonine 45
  - tyrosine kinase 44, 46, 47, 53
- Regulation 32, 36, 39, 41, 46, 48, 54, 111, 120, 128, 157, 188, 189
  - aberrant 128
  - iron level 157
- Regulators 32, 121, 129, 171
  - epigenetic 171
  - key apoptosis 121
  - upstream 129
- Relapse 1, 2, 3, 8, 13, 31, 189
  - combat 1
  - properties 2
- Release cyctocrome 120
- Renal 4, 157
  - cancer 4
  - dysfunction 157
- Renal failure 27, 29, 143
  - chronic 143
- Repression 41, 68
- Repress transcription programs 172
- Resection 143, 144, 145, 147, 155, 156, 160
  - gross curative 156
  - hepatic 144, 156
  - surgical 143, 147, 155, 156, 160
- Reservoir 144, 150
  - infections 144
  - obstruction 144
  - systems for chemotherapy 150
- Resistance 25, 40, 42, 48, 50, 51, 120, 121, 170, 174, 177, 183, 184, 187, 189, 191
  - cancer immunotherapy 177
  - cell death 25
  - therapeutic 170, 174
- Response 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 28, 44, 110, 112, 148, 150, 172, 176, 177, 178, 181, 182, 183, 188, 189
  - anti-apoptotic 110
  - anti-leukemic 10
  - cellular 44, 112
  - chemotherapeutic 9
  - focal hyperproliferative 28
  - immune 178

orchestrate 172  
Ribonuclease L (RNAseL) 28  
RNAi-based modifier screening method 130  
RNA 116, 170  
    interference 170  
    polymerase 116  
ROS 71, 183  
    generation and protein degradation 71  
    induced oxidative stress 183  
RTK downstream signaling pathway 47

## S

Semisynthetic taxane 50  
Sensitivity, reduced hepatic insulin 143  
Serum PSA 33  
    levels 33  
    values 33  
Serum transferrin 154  
Signals 62, 120, 172  
    activated apoptotic 62  
    propagate death 120  
Silico assays 126  
Small molecule inhibitors 11, 123, 125, 131  
    designed 125  
    inhibitors and mutations 11  
    library 131  
    optimized 123  
Solid tumors 11, 113, 114, 115, 177, 179, 186,  
    190  
    advanced 11, 113, 114, 115, 190  
Sorafenib 147, 149  
    monotherapy 149  
    treatment 147  
Sore-operated calcium entry (SOCE) 67  
Stem cells 10, 26, 171, 172, 173, 175, 176,  
    177, 188, 190  
    chemoresistant tumor 177  
    embryonic 172  
    glioblastoma brain 190  
    glioma 178  
    hematopoietic 10  
    pluripotent 176  
    somatic 175, 176

totipotent 172  
Stemness 171, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178,  
    179, 181, 182, 183, 184, 188  
    microenvironmental factors modulate 175  
    pathways 171  
    phenotype 171, 174, 175, 176, 179, 188  
    support tumor 178  
Stimuli, inflammatory 44  
Suppression 35, 42, 45, 60, 61, 63, 68, 69, 71,  
    178  
    cyclin D1 expression 69  
    immune 178  
    immune system 45  
Symptoms 26, 27, 32, 143  
    lower urinary tract 27  
    malignant 32  
    urinary 26  
Synthesis 11, 38, 62  
    oncometabolite's 11  
    prostaglandin 62

## T

Targeted therapies 10, 11, 142, 144, 145, 146,  
    155, 156, 157, 159, 160, 190  
Target genes 38, 39, 57, 130, 131  
    down-regulated 131  
    downstream 130  
Targeting 11, 189  
    isocitrate dehydrogenase 11  
    key signal pathways 189  
T-cell, suppressing 178  
Telomerase reverse transcriptase 35  
Therapeutic(s) 1, 10, 32, 51, 53, 61, 159, 171,  
    172, 191  
    agents 1  
    cancer vaccine, first 51  
    cell-based 172  
    current conventional 171, 191  
    effect 61, 159  
    efficacy 32  
    landscape 53  
Therapeutic strategies 23, 171, 184, 185  
    effective 37

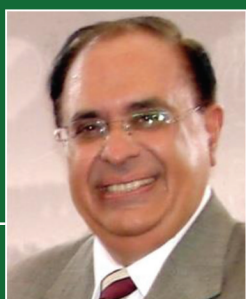
- Therapeutic targets 10, 11, 185  
  in cancer stem cells 185
- Therapies 2, 4, 24, 30, 32, 38, 40, 50, 51, 57,  
  145, 147, 155, 156, 161, 170, 184
- aggressive 2
- androgen deprivation 24
- anticancer 4
- anti-hormone 57
- antineoplastic 38
- conventional anticancer 184
- interferon 147
- TME 176, 177, 178
- immune cells infiltrate 178
- promoting immunosuppressive 177
- Toll-like receptor (TLRs) 44, 53
- Toxicity 51, 52, 61, 71, 157, 191
- iron 157
- reduced 61
- relatively lower systemic 51
- Transcription 3, 8, 36, 38, 42, 44, 45, 46, 47,  
  48, 71, 75
- activity 42
- inhibiting Sp1-mediated 71
- signal transducer and activator of 46, 48
- Transcriptional activity 34, 42, 44, 46, 48, 69,  
  71
- c-Myc-dependent 116, 117
- inhibiting AR 74
- process 36
- proteins 46
- Transferrin 157
- Transformation 23, 31, 171, 175, 176
- malignant 23, 31
- Transgenic adenocarcinoma 61
- Transition 41, 44, 157, 173, 175, 184, 189
- epithelial-mesenchymal 41, 44, 157, 184
- rapid metabolic 189
- reversible 173
- Translation 8, 28, 63
- global protein 63
- Translation of oncogenic proteins 14
- Treg cells 176
- Tumor(s) 23, 24, 25, 29, 30, 32, 33, 40, 42,  
  57, 58, 60, 71, 72, 74, 131, 144, 145,  
  146, 149, 153, 155, 156, 171, 177, 178,  
  179, 181, 182, 183, 184, 186, 187
- activity 155
- aggressiveness 23, 40
- angiogenesis 72, 177, 178, 184
- growth, controlled 71
- necrosis 153
- prognosis 181
- recurrence 131
- relapse 42, 171
- retrogression 187
- aggressive 33
- colon 60
- expressing metastatic 186
- hepatic 146
- initiation and progression of 183
- malignant 25
- Tumor-associated 176, 178
- blood vasculature 176
- macrophages (TAMs) 176, 178
- Tumor cells 24, 37, 40, 45, 47, 51, 54, 176,  
  177, 178, 179, 181, 183
- converting naïve 177
- death 51
- proliferation 181
- targeting circulating 24
- Tumorigenesis 24, 109, 112, 126, 128, 131,  
  134, 171, 174, 175, 176, 179, 182, 183
- process 24
- Tumorigenicity 56, 173, 181, 183
- Tumor suppressor 31, 111, 112, 129
- adenomatous polyposis coli 129
- Tumor-suppressor genes 41, 43
- repress 41
- Tyrosine kinase inhibitors 10, 186
- U**
- Ubiquitin-proteasome 44, 54
- system 44
- Urokinase-type plasminogen activator 37

## **V**

Vascular 35, 37, 45, 47, 53, 55, 71, 151, 153,  
177  
  damage 151  
  endothelial growth factor (VEGF) 35, 37,  
  45, 47, 53, 55, 71, 153, 177  
Vascular invasion 143, 144, 145, 146, 148,  
153, 154, 155, 156, 159, 160  
  pathological 144  
VEGF 47, 72, 184  
  activating 184  
  expression 47  
  repressing 72

## **W**

Wnt 128, 130, 177, 181  
  and Notch pathways 177  
  signaling pathway 128, 130, 177, 181  
World health organization (WHO) 3, 15, 25



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