Emerging biomarkers in cancer: molecular pathology perspectives on diagnosis and prognosis.

Michael Garcia*

School of Medicine and Surgery, University of Milano, Italy

Introduction

Cancer remains one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide, with complex molecular mechanisms driving its onset, progression, and resistance to therapy. In recent years, molecular pathology has revolutionized cancer diagnosis and prognosis through the discovery and application of biomarkers. These biomarkers, derived from genes, proteins, or metabolic pathways, provide critical insights into tumor biology, aiding in early detection, risk assessment, therapeutic decision-making, and monitoring of treatment responses. This article explores emerging biomarkers in cancer, their molecular basis, and their significance in advancing precision medicine [1].

Biomarkers are measurable indicators of biological processes, pathogenic conditions, or pharmacological responses to therapy. In cancer, biomarkers can be classified into diagnostic, prognostic, and predictive categories. Diagnostic biomarkers help identify the presence of cancer, prognostic biomarkers predict disease outcomes, and predictive biomarkers guide treatment choices. Advances in high-throughput sequencing technologies, proteomics, and bioinformatics have significantly expanded the repertoire of cancer biomarkers [2].

Genomic biomarkers, such as mutations in *TP53*, *KRAS*, and *EGFR*, have reshaped cancer diagnosis and targeted therapy. For example, *EGFR* mutations in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) predict responsiveness to tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs). Similarly, BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations serve as both diagnostic and predictive biomarkers in breast and ovarian cancers, indicating susceptibility to PARP inhibitors. Liquid biopsies, analyzing circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA), have enabled non-invasive monitoring of these mutations [3].

Epigenetic changes, including DNA methylation and histone modifications, play a crucial role in gene expression regulation and cancer progression. Hypermethylation of tumor suppressor genes, such as *CDKN2A* and *MLH1*, serves as a biomarker for various cancers, including colorectal and gastric cancer. Recent advances in methylation-based liquid biopsy assays have demonstrated high sensitivity in detecting early-stage cancers [4].

Proteins remain vital biomarkers due to their direct involvement in cellular functions and signaling pathways. Overexpression of proteins such as HER2 in breast cancer and PD-L1 in multiple malignancies has paved the way for targeted therapies, including monoclonal antibodies and immune checkpoint inhibitors. Proteomic technologies, including mass spectrometry and protein microarrays, are enabling the discovery of novel protein biomarkers with diagnostic and prognostic value [5].

Immune-related biomarkers, including PD-L1 expression, tumor mutational burden (TMB), and microsatellite instability (MSI), are transforming cancer treatment paradigms. For instance, high PD-L1 expression predicts responses to immune checkpoint inhibitors such as pembrolizumab. Similarly, MSI-high status in colorectal cancer serves as both a diagnostic and predictive biomarker for immunotherapy [6].

Liquid biopsy, involving the analysis of circulating tumor cells (CTCs), ctDNA, and exosomes from blood samples, represents a breakthrough in cancer biomarker research. It enables real-time monitoring of tumor dynamics, assessment of minimal residual disease, and early detection of therapy resistance. Technologies such as droplet digital PCR and next-generation sequencing (NGS) are improving the sensitivity and specificity of liquid biopsies [7].

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are short non-coding RNA molecules that regulate gene expression. Dysregulated miRNA expression profiles have been associated with various cancers. For example, miR-21 overexpression is linked to poor prognosis in multiple cancers, while miR-34a has tumor-suppressive functions. miRNA-based panels are emerging as promising tools for cancer diagnosis and risk stratification [8].

Cancer cells exhibit altered metabolism, including increased glycolysis (Warburg effect) and changes in amino acid and lipid metabolism. Metabolomic profiling allows the identification of metabolic biomarkers such as lactate, citrate, and specific amino acids that differentiate cancerous from non-cancerous tissues. These biomarkers hold promise for early cancer detection and therapeutic targeting [9].

Despite significant progress, challenges persist in biomarker discovery, validation, and clinical implementation. Tumor heterogeneity, dynamic biomarker expression, and lack of standardized assay methodologies hinder the reproducibility and reliability of biomarker-based diagnostics. Large-scale, multicenter validation studies are essential to establish clinical utility and regulatory approval [10].

***Correspondence to:** Michael Garcia, School of Medicine and Surgery, University of Milano, Italy. E-mail: michael.garcia@unimib.it

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Conclusion

Emerging cancer biomarkers are revolutionizing the landscape of oncology, offering powerful tools for early detection, accurate diagnosis, risk assessment, and personalized treatment. Advances in molecular pathology, coupled with cutting-edge technologies such as liquid biopsy, AI, and multi-omics analysis, are addressing existing challenges and driving innovations in cancer care. As research continues to uncover novel biomarkers, their integration into routine clinical practice will significantly improve patient outcomes and contribute to the era of precision medicine.

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