Mechanisms of metastasis: How cancer spreads beyond the primary tumor.

Michael Wolf*

Department of Urology, Tokushima University, Japan

Introduction

Cancer metastasis is the process by which malignant cells spread from the primary tumor to distant organs, leading to disease progression and significantly reducing the chances of successful treatment. Metastasis is responsible for the majority of cancer-related deaths, making it a critical area of study in oncology. Understanding the mechanisms underlying this complex process is essential for developing new therapeutic strategies to prevent or slow metastatic progression [1].

Metastasis is a multi-step process that involves local invasion, intravasation, circulation, extravasation, and colonization. Each of these stages requires cancer cells to adapt and overcome biological barriers. Local invasion occurs when cancer cells break away from the primary tumor and invade surrounding tissues. This is followed by intravasation, where cells enter the bloodstream or lymphatic system, allowing them to travel to distant sites. Once in circulation, these cells must survive immune surveillance and shear forces before exiting blood vessels (extravasation) and forming secondary tumors in new tissues [2].

One of the key processes that enable metastasis is epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition (EMT), where epithelial cancer cells lose their adhesive properties and acquire a more mobile, mesenchymal phenotype. This transformation allows them to detach from the primary tumor and invade surrounding tissues. EMT is regulated by various signaling pathways, including TGF-β, Wnt/β-catenin, and Notch, which drive changes in gene expression and promote cancer cell plasticity [3].

The tumor microenvironment (TME) plays a crucial role in facilitating metastasis. The TME consists of cancer-associated fibroblasts, immune cells, extracellular matrix components, and signaling molecules that support tumor progression. For example, hypoxia (low oxygen levels) in the tumor promotes angiogenesis and enhances the invasive potential of cancer cells. Additionally, immune cells, such as tumor-associated macrophages (TAMs), secrete growth factors and cytokines that aid in cancer cell migration and survival [4].

Angiogenesis, the formation of new blood vessels, is essential for tumor growth and metastasis. Cancer cells secrete pro-angiogenic factors such as vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) to stimulate the formation of new blood vessels. These vessels provide cancer cells with access to the bloodstream, enabling them to disseminate to distant organs. Anti-angiogenic therapies, such as VEGF inhibitors, have been developed to target this process, although resistance remains a challenge [5].

Once in circulation, cancer cells, known as circulating tumor cells (CTCs), must evade immune detection and survive in a hostile environment. Many CTCs are destroyed by immune cells or mechanical forces in the bloodstream. However, some manage to escape immune surveillance by forming clusters with platelets or undergoing immune suppression through the expression of immune checkpoint molecules like PD-L1. These strategies help cancer cells survive long enough to reach a secondary site [6].

Extravasation is the process by which cancer cells exit the bloodstream and invade distant tissues. This step is influenced by interactions between tumor cells and endothelial cells lining blood vessels. Some cancer cells exhibit organotropism, a preference for certain organs due to specific molecular interactions. For example, breast cancer cells often metastasize to the bones, lungs, and liver, while prostate cancer frequently spreads to the bones. These preferences are influenced by chemokine signaling and adhesion molecules expressed in target tissues [7].

After reaching a distant organ, some cancer cells enter a dormant state, where they remain inactive for months or even years before forming detectable metastases. This dormancy is regulated by the local microenvironment and immune system. When conditions become favorable, dormant cells can reactivate, leading to metastatic tumor growth. Understanding dormancy mechanisms is crucial for preventing late-stage recurrence in cancer patients [8].

Metastasis is driven by genetic and epigenetic alterations that enable cancer cells to adapt to different environments. Oncogenes such as MYC and RAS promote metastatic potential, while tumor suppressor genes like TP53, which normally prevent cancer progression, are often mutated in metastatic tumors. Additionally, epigenetic changes, including DNA methylation and histone modifications, regulate gene expression patterns that contribute to metastasis [9].

Despite advances in cancer treatment, metastasis remains a major challenge. Current therapies focus on inhibiting key steps in the metastatic process, such as angiogenesis inhibitors, EMT blockers, and immune checkpoint inhibitors. Researchers are also exploring novel strategies like targeting

***Correspondence to:** Michael Wolf, Department of Urology, Tokushima University, Japan. E-mail: m.wolf@hotmail.com

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cancer stem cells, using nanotechnology for drug delivery, and developing personalized medicine approaches to tailor treatments based on a patient's genetic profile [10].

Conclusion

Metastasis is a highly complex and dynamic process that involves multiple cellular and molecular mechanisms. While significant progress has been made in understanding how cancer spreads, more research is needed to develop effective treatments that prevent or eliminate metastatic disease. Future advances in precision medicine, immunotherapy, and targeted therapies hold promise for improving patient outcomes and ultimately reducing the burden of metastatic cancer.

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