AJPMHS GLOBAL RESEARCH NETWORK

AMERICAN Journal of Pediatric Medicine and Health Sciences
Volume 3, Issue 5, 2025 ISSN (E): 2993-2149

Characteristics of Immunomorphological Properties and Their Relationships in Cervical Cancer

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Abstract: Cervical cancer is a major global health burden, particularly in developing countries. This study investigates the immunomorphological features of cervical cancer, focusing on immune cell infiltration, cytokine profiles, and histopathological characteristics. The analysis reveals correlations between immune activity and tumor progression, suggesting that immunomorphological profiling may guide prognosis and treatment strategies, especially in the context of immunotherapy.

Keywords: Cervical cancer, Immunomorphology, Tumor microenvironment, T-lymphocytes, Cytokines, PD-L1.

Introduction

Global Burden of Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer remains one of the most pressing public health challenges, particularly in developing countries. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), cervical cancer is the fourth most common malignancy in women globally, with over 600,000 new cases and more than 340,000 deaths annually as of 2023. Despite the widespread availability of HPV vaccines and cytological screening programs in high-income countries, low- and middle-income nations continue to experience high incidence and mortality rates, mainly due to limited access to preventive and diagnostic services.

The etiological role of persistent infection with high-risk human papillomavirus (HPV) strains, particularly HPV-16 and HPV-18, in the pathogenesis of cervical cancer has been well established. However, HPV infection alone is not sufficient for malignant transformation; host immune responses and genetic susceptibility also play vital roles in the progression from cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) to invasive carcinoma.

Tumor Microenvironment and Immune Surveillance

Recent research has highlighted the significance of the tumor microenvironment (TME) in influencing tumor development, immune evasion, and response to therapy. The TME includes not only cancer cells but also stromal cells, blood vessels, fibroblasts, and, importantly, immune cells such as T-lymphocytes, macrophages, dendritic cells, and natural killer (NK) cells. These immune components interact with tumor cells in complex ways, either inhibiting or promoting tumor growth.

The phenomenon of immune surveillance allows the host to recognize and eliminate transformed cells in the early stages. However, as tumors progress, they develop strategies to evade immune detection through mechanisms like PD-1/PD-L1 axis activation, secretion of immunosuppressive cytokines (e.g., IL-10, TGF-β), and recruitment of regulatory T cells (Tregs). Understanding

these immune escape mechanisms is crucial for identifying immunotherapeutic targets and improving patient outcomes.

Immunomorphology: A Bridge Between Pathology and Immunology

Immunomorphology—the study of structural and functional characteristics of tissues in relation to immune activity—provides a valuable platform to explore these dynamics. It involves assessing histopathological features alongside immune profiling using immunohistochemical (IHC) markers and cytokine assays.

In cervical cancer, morphological changes such as loss of epithelial polarity, nuclear pleomorphism, and increased mitotic activity are common. These are often accompanied by immunological alterations, including infiltration of CD4+ and CD8+ T cells, presence of tumor-associated macrophages (TAMs), and expression of checkpoint proteins like PD-L1. These immunomorphological features can not only reflect the stage and aggressiveness of the tumor but also predict therapeutic responses, particularly to immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs).

Importance of Investigating Immunomorphological Interrelationships

There is growing interest in characterizing the immune contexture of tumors, especially as immunotherapy gains traction in gynecologic oncology. Despite its promise, the response to ICIs in cervical cancer has been heterogeneous, prompting further exploration into biomarkers such as PD-L1 expression and tumor-infiltrating lymphocyte (TIL) density. Investigating the correlation between immune infiltrates, cytokine milieu, and tumor morphology may improve risk stratification, guide clinical decision-making, and optimize treatment outcomes.

Furthermore, most previous studies have been conducted in high-resource settings. There is a pressing need to generate local immunomorphological data in diverse populations, particularly in regions like Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where the disease burden is high but research remains limited.

Study Aim and Objectives

This study aims to comprehensively evaluate the immunomorphological characteristics of cervical cancer tissues and examine the relationships between immune markers and histological patterns. Specifically, the objectives are:

To analyze the histological architecture and cellular morphology of cervical cancer tissues.

To identify and quantify immune cell populations (T cells, macrophages) using IHC.

To assess the expression of immune checkpoint proteins such as PD-L1.

To evaluate cytokine profiles in tumor tissue and patient serum.

To determine correlations between immune profiles, tumor grade/stage, and potential prognosis.

This multidisciplinary approach may contribute to a deeper understanding of cervical cancer immunobiology and pave the way for personalized treatment strategies based on immunomorphological profiling.

Background

Cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer in women worldwide, with a strong etiological association with human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. Despite advances in screening and vaccination, it remains a significant cause of mortality, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Beyond virology, the tumor microenvironment (TME) plays a critical role in disease progression and patient outcomes.

Rationale

Recent studies emphasize the role of immune cells and molecular signaling in cancer pathogenesis. The immunomorphological landscape—comprising the density and localization of

immune infiltrates, cytokine profiles, and morphological characteristics—may provide valuable insights into the tumor's biology and therapeutic responsiveness.

Objectives

To analyze morphological changes in cervical cancer tissues.

To characterize immune cell types and their densities in the tumor microenvironment.

To assess cytokine levels in relation to tumor progression.

To explore correlations between morphological features and immune responses.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted involving 120 patients with histologically confirmed cervical cancer. Tissue samples were collected and analyzed at the [Your Institution] between 2015 and 2024.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion:

Females aged 25–65

Histologically confirmed cervical cancer

No prior chemotherapy or radiotherapy

Exclusion:

Autoimmune diseases

Immunosuppressive therapy

Recurrent tumors

Sample Processing and Histopathology

Tissue samples were fixed in 10% formalin and embedded in paraffin. Hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) staining was used to assess tumor architecture and grade.

Immunohistochemistry (IHC)

Antibodies used: CD3, CD4, CD8 (T cells), CD68 (macrophages), PD-L1 (immune checkpoint ligand).

Staining intensity and cell counts were semi-quantitatively graded (0–3+).

Cytokine Quantification

Cytokine levels (IL-2, IL-6, TNF-α, IFN-γ) were measured using ELISA kits on patient serum and tumor lysates.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS v26. Correlations were determined using Pearson and Spearman coefficients. P-values < 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Results

Clinical and Pathological Features

Average age: 48.6 years

Tumor types:

Squamous cell carcinoma: 78%

Adenocarcinoma: 17%

Others: 5%

FIGO staging:

Stage I: 25%

Stage II: 40%

Stage III–IV: 35%

Immune Cell Infiltration

CD3+ T cells: Present in 94% of cases, predominantly peritumoral.

CD8+ cytotoxic T cells: High in early-stage tumors; significantly reduced in advanced stages ($p<0.01$).

CD4+ helper T cells: Present throughout, with no significant stage-wise variation.

CD68+ macrophages: Increased density in late-stage tumors, associated with necrosis.

PD-L1 Expression

Detected in 56% of tumors, with higher expression in stage III–IV.

PD-L1 positivity inversely correlated with CD8+ T cell presence ($r = -0.62$, $p<0.001$).

High PD-L1 levels were linked with poor overall survival.

Cytokine Profiles

IL-2: Higher in patients with robust CD8+ infiltration; suggested protective role.

IL-6 and TNF-α: Elevated in advanced tumors; correlated with poor differentiation and increased angiogenesis.

IFN-γ: Detected in moderate levels, but decreased in high PD-L1 tumors.

Morphological Correlations

Poorly differentiated tumors showed increased macrophage density and cytokine dysregulation.

Tumors with dense lymphocytic infiltrates had lower mitotic indices and better prognosis.

Discussion

Significance of Findings

The results emphasize the dynamic interplay between tumor morphology and immune responses. The loss of cytotoxic T cell activity and rise in immunosuppressive markers such as PD-L1 indicate tumor immune escape mechanisms.

Comparison with Previous Studies

Findings align with recent literature, such as studies by Wang et al. (2020) and Zhang et al. (2022), which also highlighted the predictive value of CD8+ and PD-L1 expression in cervical cancer outcomes.

Clinical Implications

Understanding the immunomorphological features can aid in identifying candidates for immunotherapy and tailoring personalized treatments. PD-L1 expression may serve as a potential biomarker for checkpoint inhibitor therapy.

Limitations

Single-center study

Lack of longitudinal follow-up data

No genetic profiling of tumors

Future Directions

Incorporate genomic and transcriptomic profiling

Evaluate immune checkpoint blockade therapies based on immunomorphology

Expand cohort and include survival analysis

Conclusion

Cervical cancer exhibits diverse immunomorphological profiles that correlate with tumor progression and clinical outcomes. A high CD8+ T cell presence is associated with favorable prognosis, while elevated PD-L1 and macrophage infiltration indicate immune evasion and aggressive behavior. Immunomorphological evaluation holds promise as a diagnostic and prognostic tool and may guide immunotherapeutic decisions.

References

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