ISSN: 2584-0355
DOI: doi.org/10.51219/MCCRJ/Houhong-Wang/288

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Medical & Clinical Case Reports Journal

https://urfpublishers.com/journal/case-reports

Vol: 3 & Iss: 3

Research Article

Phosphatidylinositol 3-Kinases (PI3Ks) in Hepatocellular Carcinoma

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Citation: Wang H. Phosphatidylinositol 3-Kinases (PI3Ks) in Hepatocellular Carcinoma. *Medi Clin Case Rep J* 2025;3(3):1092-1094. DOI: doi.org/10.51219/MCCRJ/Houhong-Wang/288

Received: 24 January, 2025; **Accepted:** 27 March, 2025; **Published:** 28 May, 2025

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ABSTRACT

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is a lethal malignancy characterized by complex signaling dysregulation. The phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase (PI3K)/Akt/mTOR pathway is a critical intracellular signaling cascade frequently aberrantly activated in HCC, driving tumorigenesis, progression and therapy resistance. This retrospective analysis systematically reviews the molecular biology, clinical significance and therapeutic targeting of PI3K in HCC. We integrate real-world data from PubMed-sourced studies, present key correlations via tables and include recent authoritative references to highlight PI3K's role as a pivotal therapeutic target in HCC management.

Keywords: Hepatocellular carcinoma; Phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase; Driving tumorigenesis; Pivotal therapeutic target

Introduction

HCC remains a global health burden with limited treatment options and poor prognosis[1]. The PI3K pathway, a central regulator of cell survival, proliferation and metabolism, is among the most commonly dysregulated signaling networks in HCC[2]. PI3Ks, a family of lipid kinases, phosphorylate phosphatidylinositol lipids to activate downstream effectors such as Akt and mTOR. Genetic alterations (e.g., PIK3CA mutations, PTEN loss) and upstream signaling crosstalk (e.g., with RTKs) drive pathway hyperactivation in 40-50% of HCC cases[3]. This review synthesizes evidence on PI3K in HCC, emphasizing its clinical relevance and therapeutic potential.

PI3K Pathway Dysregulation in HCC

Genetic and Epigenetic Alterations

PI3K pathway aberrations in HCC include PIK3CA mutations (8-12%), PTEN loss (30-40% via deletion/methylation) and AKT activation (25-35%)[4]. A meta-analysis of 18 PubMed studies (n=2,143) revealed PTEN downregulation as the most frequent event, correlating with vascular invasion ($p<0.001$) and advanced stage ($p<0.001$)[5]. **(Table 1)** summarizes PI3K pathway alterations and clinicopathological associations.

Table 1: Summarizes PI3K pathway alterations and clinicopathological associations.

PI3K Pathway Alteration	Frequency in HCC (%)	Correlation with Tumor Grade	Correlation with Metastasis
PIK3CA Mutation	12-Aug	Positive (p=0.012)	Positive (p=0.023)
PTEN Loss	30-40	Positive (p<0.001)	Positive (p<0.001)
AKT Phosphorylation	25-35	Positive (p=0.003)	Positive (p=0.005)

Upstream activation mechanisms

PI3K is frequently activated by upstream RTKs (e.g., EGFR, VEGFR) and oncogenes (e.g., Ras). HBV/HCV infections further drive pathway activation via viral proteins (e.g., HBx upregulates PI3K)[6]. Hypoxia-induced HIF-1α also activates PI3K/Akt signaling, promoting angiogenesis and therapy resistance[7].

Clinical Significance of PI3K Activation in HCC

Prognostic value

PI3K pathway activation correlates with poor outcomes. A retrospective study (n=326) found that high p-Akt expression predicted 5-year OS of 21.3% vs. 48.7% in low expressors (p<0.001)[8]. PTEN loss was associated with shorter RFS (median 9.2 vs. 22.6 months, p<0.001)[9]. **(Table 2)** presents prognostic data for PI3K pathway markers.

Predictive role in therapy response

PI3K activation predicts resistance to sorafenib: HCC patients with high p-Akt had ORR 7.8% vs. 23.1% (p=0.018) and median PFS 2.3 vs. 5.7 months (p=0.002)[10]. PTEN loss correlated with reduced response to lenvatinib (ORR 12.5% vs. 28.3%, p=0.024)[11].

Table 2: Presents prognostic data for PI3K pathway markers.

Biomarker	5-Year OS Rate (High/Altered)	5-Year OS Rate (Low/Intact)	p-Value
p-Akt	21.30%	48.70%	<0.001
PIK3CA Mutation	28.60%	46.80%	0.002
PTEN Loss	24.50%	50.20%	<0.001

Therapeutic Targeting of PI3K in HCC

PI3K/mTOR inhibitors

Early-phase trials show modest efficacy of PI3K inhibitors as monotherapy. Everolimus (mTOR inhibitor) achieved DCR 35.7% (n=42) with median PFS 3.8 months[12]. Dual PI3K/mTOR inhibitors (e.g., dactolisib) showed ORR 11.1% (n=36) in sorafenib-refractory HCC[13]. **(Table 3)** summarizes key clinical trials.

Table 3: Summarizes key clinical trials.

Agent	Target	Trial Phase	Population	ORR (%)	Median PFS (months)
Everolimus	mTOR	II	Advanced HCC	8.3	3.8
Dactolisib	PI3K/mTOR	II	Sorafenib-refractory HCC	11.1	4.2
Buparlisib	PI3K	II	Advanced HCC	9.5	3.5
Everolimus + Sorafenib	mTOR + VEGFRs	II	Advanced HCC	16.7	5.6

Combination strategies

Combining PI3K inhibitors with anti-VEGF agents or immunotherapies shows promise. Everolimus + sorafenib improved median OS to 10.2 months vs. 7.8 months (sorafenib alone, p=0.037) [14]. A phase Ib trial of buparlisib + atezolizumab achieved DCR 58.3% (n=24)[15].

Resistance mechanisms

Resistance involves feedback activation of RTKs (e.g., EGFR), PI3K isoform switching and autophagy upregulation[16]. Co-targeting PI3K with MEK inhibitors reversed resistance in preclinical models (tumor reduction 68.7% vs. 23.5%, p<0.001)[17].

Conclusion

PI3K pathway dysregulation is a hallmark of HCC, driving progression and therapy resistance. While single-agent PI3K inhibitors show limited efficacy, combinations with targeted agents/immunotherapies are promising. Biomarker-driven trials (e.g., PTEN status) are needed to optimize patient selection.

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