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Targeting Apoptosis and Autophagy in Cancer: Molecular Mechanisms, Therapeutic Modulators, Clinical Advances, and Future Perspectives

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Abstract:

Cancer is a leading cause of mortality globally. Apoptosis, a highly selective and natural mechanism of programmed cell death, and autophagy, a physiological state at the cellular level that eliminates misfolded proteins and aberrant organelles, are both related. Apoptotic cell death occurs through caspase activation, DNA and protein degradation, and phagocytosis. That is why apoptosis, particularly modulators, is a lucrative target for the development of anticancer drugs due to the intrinsic and extrinsic pathways. Overexpression of antiapoptotic proteins and underexpression of proapoptotic proteins are two standard mechanisms by which cancer cells inhibit apoptosis. However, autophagy is activated through the process of autophagosomes, where autophagic modulators play a dual role, both in promoting and suppressing tumor progression. The therapeutic potential of modulators, including autophagy-related gene (ATG) regulators, mTOR inhibitors, caspase activators, and Bcl-2 inhibitors, is currently being investigated. A promising strategy for overcoming medication resistance and improving treatment outcomes is to combine apoptosis and autophagy modulators with immunotherapy, radiotherapy, or chemotherapy. In this paper, we will discuss the mechanisms of apoptosis and autophagy, including their modulators in carcinogenesis, their crosstalk in cancerous cells, and their roles in cancer treatment.

Keywords: Apoptosis, Autophagy, Modulators, Carcinogenesis, Cancer Therapeutics.

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1. Introduction

Programmed cell death is a fundamental biological process that maintains tissue homeostasis, regulates embryonic development, and eliminates damaged, infected, or potentially malignant cells. Among the various forms of programmed cell death, apoptosis represents the most extensively characterized and evolutionarily conserved mechanism. It functions as a critical tumor-suppressive process by removing cells harboring irreparable genetic damage, thereby preventing the accumulation of oncogenic mutations and malignant transformation. Apoptosis can be triggered by a wide range of physiological and pathological stimuli, including DNA damage, oxidative stress, infection, tissue injury, cytotoxic drugs, and radiation therapy[1,2].

A hallmark of apoptotic cell death is the orderly dismantling of cellular components accompanied by rapid recognition and clearance by neighboring cells and professional phagocytes. Various cell types, including macrophages, dendritic cells, fibroblasts, endothelial cells, myocytes, Sertoli cells, mesangial cells, and Paneth cells, participate in the phagocytic removal of apoptotic bodies, thereby preventing inflammatory responses and preserving tissue integrity[3].

Despite being a mechanism for eliminating malignant cells, apoptosis occurs extensively within many aggressive tumors. Rapidly proliferating malignancies often exhibit substantial rates of spontaneous cell death that coexist with high proliferative activity. For example, Burkitt lymphoma, one of the fastest-growing human cancers, demonstrates a cell loss rate approaching 70% of its cellular production rate, contributing to its characteristic “starry-sky” histological appearance[4–6]. Similarly, significant apoptotic activity has been observed in glioblastoma and several other highly aggressive cancers[7].

The disruption of apoptotic signaling pathways is a hallmark of cancer and contributes directly to tumor initiation, progression, metastasis, and therapeutic resistance. Defects occurring at multiple levels of apoptotic regulation may enable malignant cells to evade programmed cell death, thereby promoting uncontrolled proliferation and resistance to chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and targeted therapies[8]. Cell types across different species exhibit remarkably conserved morphological and biochemical features during apoptosis, including chromatin condensation, nuclear fragmentation, membrane blebbing, and formation of apoptotic bodies. The duration of apoptosis varies depending on cell type, stimulus, and molecular pathway involved, but the process is generally completed within several hours[9,10].

Failure of apoptotic regulation extends cellular lifespan and allows the accumulation of additional genetic and epigenetic alterations that enhance tumor aggressiveness, angiogenesis, invasion, metastasis, and therapeutic resistance. Consequently, restoration of apoptotic signaling has emerged as a major strategy in modern cancer therapy, leading to the development of several apoptosis-targeting agents, including BH3 mimetics and death receptor agonists[11].

Alongside apoptosis, autophagy has emerged as another critical cellular process involved in cancer development and progression. Autophagy is a highly conserved lysosomal degradation pathway responsible for the sequestration, degradation, and recycling of intracellular proteins,

damaged organelles, and other cytoplasmic components. This process plays an essential role in maintaining metabolic homeostasis, particularly under conditions of nutrient deprivation, hypoxia, oxidative stress, and other cellular stressors[12].

Recent evidence has highlighted the complex and context-dependent role of autophagy in cancer. Depending on tumor type, genetic background, and disease stage, autophagy can function either as a tumor suppressor or as a mechanism that promotes tumor survival and progression. During early carcinogenesis, autophagy prevents malignant transformation by eliminating damaged organelles, reducing reactive oxygen species (ROS) accumulation, and maintaining genomic stability. In contrast, established tumors frequently exploit autophagy as an adaptive survival mechanism that supports growth under metabolic stress and therapeutic pressure[13].

Three major forms of autophagy have been identified: macroautophagy, microautophagy, and chaperone-mediated autophagy (CMA). Although these pathways differ mechanistically, all ultimately deliver intracellular cargo to lysosomes for degradation. Basal autophagy functions as a critical quality-control system by removing damaged proteins and organelles while working in concert with the ubiquitin–proteasome system to prevent the accumulation of toxic protein aggregates[14,15].

The role of autophagy in cancer metastasis is particularly complex. During the early stages of tumor development, autophagy suppresses metastatic progression by limiting inflammation, necrosis, and genomic instability. However, in advanced malignancies, autophagy often supports cancer cell survival, invasion, and metastatic dissemination by providing nutrients and energy during unfavorable microenvironmental conditions[16,17]. Furthermore, autophagy enables tumor cells to adapt to hypoxia, nutrient deprivation, and therapeutic stress, thereby contributing to treatment resistance and disease recurrence[18,19].

Autophagy may occur as either non-selective (bulk) autophagy or selective autophagy. While bulk autophagy indiscriminately degrades cytoplasmic components, selective autophagy specifically targets damaged mitochondria, protein aggregates, intracellular pathogens, lipid droplets, and other cellular structures. Increasing evidence suggests that dysregulated autophagy contributes to genomic instability, metabolic dysfunction, oxidative stress, and cancer progression[20]. Recent studies have also demonstrated that hypoxic conditions activate autophagic pathways that help cancer cells counteract oxidative stress and maintain survival[21].

The regulation of autophagy is influenced by numerous intracellular and extracellular factors, including nutrient availability, cellular energy status, hormonal signaling, endoplasmic reticulum stress, and pharmacological agents. Depending on the cellular context and stage of carcinogenesis, autophagy may exert either protective or detrimental effects. Chronic dysregulation of autophagic activity can lead to the accumulation of toxic cellular products, contributing to a wide range of pathological conditions, including obesity, diabetes, neurodegenerative disorders, pulmonary diseases, and cancer[20,21].

Given its dual role in cancer biology, autophagy has become an attractive therapeutic target. Inhibition of autophagy may deprive cancer cells of essential metabolic substrates and sensitize

them to chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and targeted therapies. Several autophagy inhibitors, including the antimalarial agents chloroquine (CQ) and hydroxychloroquine (HCQ), have demonstrated promising preclinical and clinical activity either as monotherapies or in combination with standard anticancer treatments. Notably, these repurposed agents have progressed more rapidly into clinical evaluation than many newly developed autophagy-targeting compounds[22].

In addition to its cytoprotective role, excessive autophagic activity can trigger a distinct form of regulated cell death known as autophagy-dependent cell death (ADCD), which is characterized by enhanced autophagic flux, increased LC3 lipidation, and extensive degradation of intracellular substrates. Defective autophagy results in the accumulation of damaged organelles, protein aggregates, and lipid droplets, leading to oxidative stress, metabolic dysfunction, and increased susceptibility to various diseases, including cancer and neurodegenerative disorders[23–25].

Given the intricate interplay between apoptosis and autophagy in regulating cancer cell fate, understanding the molecular mechanisms governing these pathways has become increasingly important for the development of innovative therapeutic strategies. This review comprehensively discusses the mechanisms of apoptosis and autophagy, their crosstalk in cancer biology, emerging modulators targeting these pathways, and their potential applications in precision oncology.

2. Mechanism of Apoptosis Modulators in Cancer Therapy

Apoptosis is a tightly regulated form of programmed cell death that plays a critical role in maintaining tissue homeostasis and eliminating damaged, infected, or malignant cells. Dysregulation of apoptotic signaling is a hallmark of cancer and contributes to tumor progression, therapeutic resistance, and immune evasion. Consequently, modulation of apoptotic pathways has emerged as an important therapeutic strategy in cancer treatment[26].

A defining feature of apoptosis is the activation of caspases, a family of cysteine-dependent aspartate-specific proteases that orchestrate the cellular dismantling process. Once activated, caspases cleave numerous structural, regulatory, and repair proteins, leading to chromatin condensation, DNA fragmentation, cytoskeletal breakdown, membrane blebbing, and eventual cell death. Caspase activation also stimulates endonucleases responsible for the degradation of nuclear DNA. Collectively, apoptosis is characterized by three major biochemical events: (i) activation of caspases, (ii) degradation of proteins and DNA, and (iii) membrane alterations that facilitate recognition and clearance by phagocytic cells[26,27].

Caspases are broadly categorized into initiator caspases (caspase-2, -8, -9, and -10) and executioner caspases (caspase-3, -6, and -7). Initiator caspases respond to apoptotic signals and subsequently activate executioner caspases, which cleave hundreds of intracellular substrates and drive the terminal stages of apoptosis. Because of the irreversible nature of this process, apoptotic signaling pathways are tightly controlled to prevent inappropriate cell death[29].

Three principal pathways contribute to caspase activation and apoptotic signaling: the intrinsic mitochondrial pathway, the extrinsic death receptor pathway, and the intrinsic endoplasmic reticulum (ER)-stress pathway. Although these pathways are initiated by distinct stimuli, they ultimately converge on the activation of executioner caspases and the induction of programmed cell death[28].

2.1 Intrinsic Mitochondrial Pathway

The intrinsic or mitochondrial pathway is activated in response to intracellular stress signals such as oxidative stress, hypoxia, DNA damage, growth factor deprivation, elevated intracellular calcium levels, and exposure to cytotoxic agents. These stimuli induce mitochondrial dysfunction and increased permeability of the outer mitochondrial membrane, resulting in the release of pro-apoptotic factors into the cytoplasm[30,31].

Regulation of this pathway is primarily controlled by the B-cell lymphoma-2 (BCL-2) family of proteins, which consists of both anti-apoptotic and pro-apoptotic members. Anti-apoptotic proteins include BCL-2, BCL-XL, BCL-W, BFL-1, and MCL-1, whereas pro-apoptotic proteins include BAX, BAK, BAD, BID, BIM, BIK, BCL-XS, and HRK[32–34].

Upon apoptotic stimulation, BH3-only proteins are activated and antagonize anti-apoptotic BCL-2 family proteins, thereby allowing activation of BAX and BAK. Activated BAX and BAK oligomerize within the outer mitochondrial membrane, causing mitochondrial outer membrane permeabilization (MOMP), a critical and irreversible event often regarded as the point of no return in intrinsic apoptosis[37,38].

MOMP facilitates the release of several pro-apoptotic proteins from the mitochondrial intermembrane space, including cytochrome c, second mitochondria-derived activator of caspases (SMAC/DIABLO), apoptosis-inducing factor (AIF), and Omi/HtrA2. Following release into the cytoplasm, cytochrome c associates with apoptotic protease activating factor-1 (Apaf-1), deoxyadenosine triphosphate (dATP), and procaspase-9 to form the apoptosome complex. This multiprotein structure promotes activation of caspase-9, which subsequently activates executioner caspases-3 and -7, initiating the apoptotic cascade[30,35].

SMAC/DIABLO and Omi/HtrA2 further amplify apoptotic signaling by neutralizing inhibitor of apoptosis proteins (IAPs), including X-linked inhibitor of apoptosis protein (XIAP), thereby preventing inhibition of caspase activity. This coordinated activation of caspases ensures efficient execution of programmed cell death[36,37].

The tumor suppressor protein p53 serves as an important regulator of intrinsic apoptosis by transcriptionally activating BAX and several BH3-only proteins in response to genomic stress. Consequently, p53-mediated apoptosis represents a major barrier against malignant transformation and tumor progression[39].

The extrinsic apoptotic pathway is initiated by the binding of extracellular death ligands to their corresponding cell-surface death receptors. Major death ligands include Fas ligand (FasL), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and TNF-related apoptosis-inducing ligand (TRAIL).

Interaction of these ligands with receptors such as Fas (CD95), TNFR1, DR4, and DR5 triggers receptor trimerization and recruitment of adaptor proteins, including Fas-associated death domain (FADD) and TNF receptor-associated death domain (TRADD)[35,41,42].

These interactions facilitate assembly of the death-inducing signaling complex (DISC), which recruits procaspase-8 and procaspase-10. Subsequent activation of these initiator caspases leads to activation of executioner caspases-3, -6, and -7, resulting in proteolytic degradation of critical cellular proteins and induction of apoptosis[43,44].

The activity of DISC is regulated by cellular FLICE-inhibitory protein (c-FLIP), a catalytically inactive homolog of caspase-8 that competes for binding within the DISC complex. Elevated expression of c-FLIP is frequently observed in malignancies and contributes to resistance against death receptor-mediated apoptosis[44].

The endoplasmic reticulum (ER)-mediated apoptotic pathway represents a third mechanism of programmed cell death that is activated under conditions of prolonged ER stress. Factors such as hypoxia, oxidative stress, glucose deprivation, calcium dysregulation, and accumulation of unfolded proteins disrupt ER homeostasis and trigger the unfolded protein response (UPR)[45].

When ER stress becomes severe or persistent, adaptive UPR signaling transitions into pro-apoptotic signaling. In this process, TNF receptor-associated factor 2 (TRAF2) dissociates from procaspase-12, promoting activation of caspase-12 and subsequent downstream apoptotic signaling pathways. Although the exact role of caspase-12 differs between species, ER stress-induced apoptosis remains an important contributor to cancer cell death and therapeutic responses[45,46].

Targeting apoptotic pathways has become a major focus of anticancer drug development. Therapeutic strategies include inhibition of anti-apoptotic proteins such as BCL-2, activation of death receptor signaling, restoration of p53 function, and direct activation of caspases. BH3 mimetics, including venetoclax, have demonstrated remarkable clinical success by selectively inhibiting anti-apoptotic BCL-2 proteins and restoring apoptosis in malignant cells. Understanding the molecular mechanisms governing intrinsic, extrinsic, and ER-mediated apoptosis is therefore essential for the development of next-generation cancer therapeutics and personalized treatment strategies.

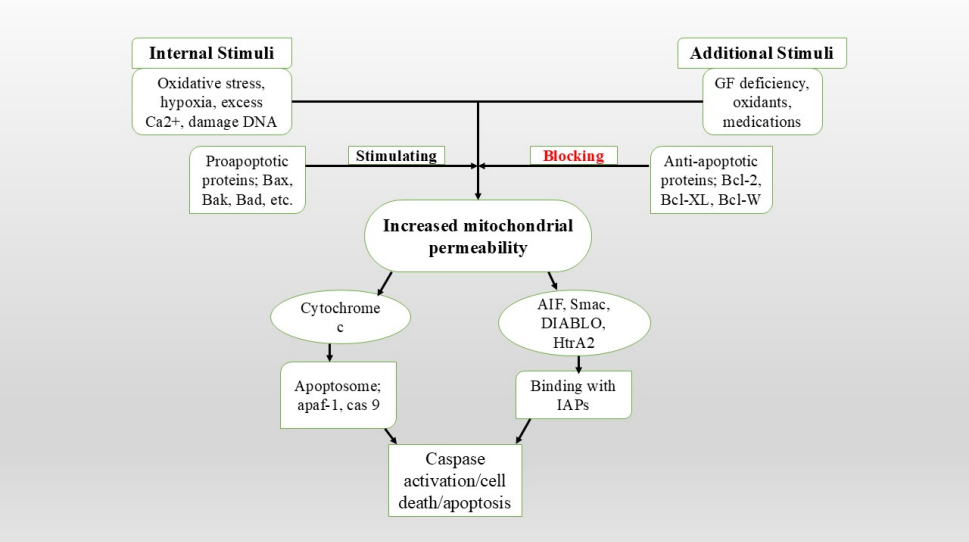

Figure 1. The mechanism of the intrinsic mitochondrial pathway in apoptosis:

Various internal stimuli increase mitochondrial permeability, where several proapoptotic proteins stimulate the process and anti-apoptotic molecules prevent that, then release cytochrome c, AIF, Smac, DIABLO, and HtrA2. All these factors activate caspases, leading to natural cell death.

2.2 Extrinsic Death Receptor Pathway

The extrinsic apoptotic pathway is initiated through the interaction of extracellular death ligands with their corresponding cell surface death receptors. Major death ligands involved in this pathway include Fas ligand (FasL), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and TNF-related apoptosis-inducing ligand (TRAIL). Binding of these ligands to their respective receptors, such as Fas (CD95), TNF receptor-1 (TNFR1), and TRAIL receptors (DR4 and DR5), induces receptor trimerization and recruitment of adaptor proteins containing death domains. Key adaptor molecules involved in this process include Fas-associated death domain (FADD) and TNF receptor-associated death domain (TRADD), which facilitate the assembly of downstream signaling complexes[35,41,42].

Formation of the death-inducing signaling complex (DISC) subsequently recruits procaspase-8 and procaspase-10, leading to their proteolytic activation. Activated caspase-8 serves as the initiator caspase of the extrinsic pathway and directly activates executioner caspases, including caspase-3, caspase-6, and caspase-7. These effector caspases mediate the cleavage of structural and regulatory cellular proteins, ultimately resulting in characteristic apoptotic events such as chromatin condensation, DNA fragmentation, membrane blebbing, and cell death[43,44].

The activity of DISC is tightly regulated by cellular FLICE-like inhibitory protein (c-FLIP), a catalytically inactive homolog of caspase-8. c-FLIP competes with procaspase-8 for binding to DISC, thereby modulating caspase activation and controlling cellular sensitivity to death receptor-mediated apoptosis. Dysregulation of c-FLIP expression is frequently observed in cancer and contributes to resistance against apoptosis-inducing therapies[44].

2.2.1 Intrinsic (Mitochondrial) Apoptotic Pathway

The intrinsic or mitochondrial pathway is activated in response to intracellular stress signals, including DNA damage, oxidative stress, oncogene activation, hypoxia, and nutrient deprivation. These stimuli disrupt mitochondrial membrane integrity, leading to mitochondrial outer membrane permeabilization (MOMP) and the release of pro-apoptotic factors into the cytoplasm. Central regulators of this process include members of the B-cell lymphoma-2 (BCL-2) protein family, which coordinate the balance between pro-survival and pro-apoptotic signaling[33,37].

Following mitochondrial permeabilization, cytochrome c is released into the cytosol, where it associates with apoptotic protease activating factor-1 (Apaf-1) and procaspase-9 to form a multiprotein complex known as the apoptosome. Within this complex, procaspase-9 undergoes activation to caspase-9, which subsequently activates the downstream executioner caspases-3 and -7. Activation of these caspases initiates an irreversible proteolytic cascade that culminates in programmed cell death[33,39].

Additional mitochondrial proteins further amplify apoptotic signaling. Second mitochondria-derived activator of caspases (SMAC/DIABLO) is released into the cytoplasm during apoptosis and neutralizes inhibitor of apoptosis proteins (IAPs), thereby preventing suppression of caspase activity. Similarly, Omi/HtrA2 antagonizes X-linked inhibitor of apoptosis protein (XIAP), enhancing caspase activation and ensuring efficient execution of apoptosis. These regulatory mechanisms collectively reinforce mitochondrial apoptotic signaling and promote effective elimination of damaged or malignant cells[37,40].

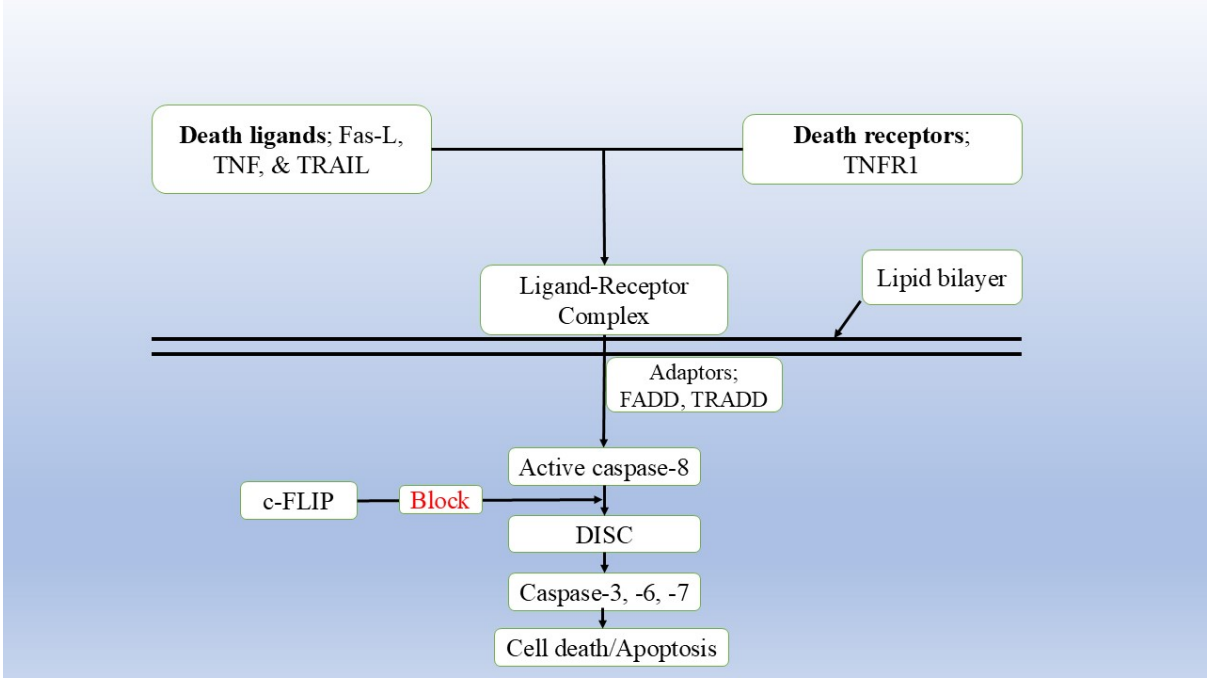

Figure 2. The mechanism of the extrinsic death receptor pathway in apoptosis: Death ligands combine with receptors, enter into the cytoplasm via the lipid bilayer with adaptors that activate pro-caspase 8, which stimulates DISC, then trigger the caspase family, leading to cell death.

2.3 Intrinsic Endoplasmic Reticulum Pathway

The intrinsic endoplasmic reticulum (ER)-mediated apoptotic pathway represents a distinct mechanism of programmed cell death that is activated in response to severe ER stress and disruption of protein homeostasis. Unlike the extrinsic and mitochondrial pathways, this pathway is primarily associated with prolonged unfolded protein response (UPR) signaling and has been linked to caspase-12 activation in experimental models. Cellular stressors including hypoxia, oxidative stress, calcium imbalance, and glucose deprivation induce the accumulation of misfolded and unfolded proteins within the ER lumen, thereby triggering ER stress responses. Under persistent stress conditions, adaptor proteins such as tumor necrosis factor receptor-associated factor 2 (TRAF2) dissociate from procaspase-12, leading to its activation and subsequent initiation of apoptotic signaling cascades[45,46].

3. Mechanisms of Autophagy in Cancer: Macroautophagy, Selective Autophagy, Microautophagy, and Chaperone-Mediated Autophagy

Autophagy is a highly conserved intracellular degradation process that maintains cellular homeostasis through the recycling of damaged organelles, misfolded proteins, and other cytoplasmic components. In cancer, autophagy exhibits a dual role, functioning as both a tumor-suppressive and tumor-promoting mechanism depending on the stage of disease progression and cellular context. During early tumorigenesis, autophagy eliminates damaged mitochondria and protein aggregates, thereby reducing oxidative stress, genomic instability, and malignant transformation. Conversely, established tumors frequently exploit autophagy to survive under conditions of hypoxia, nutrient deprivation, oncogenic stress, and therapeutic intervention[47].

3.1 Macroautophagy

Macroautophagy, commonly referred to as autophagy, is the most extensively studied form of autophagic degradation. The process is initiated through activation of the ULK1/ULK2 kinase complex following suppression of mammalian target of rapamycin complex 1 (mTORC1) signaling or activation of AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK). Activated ULK complexes subsequently stimulate the class III phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase (PI3K) complex containing VPS34 and Beclin-1, resulting in the formation of an isolation membrane known as the phagophore[48].

Expansion and maturation of the phagophore are mediated by autophagy-related (ATG) proteins, including ATG7, ATG3, and the ATG12–ATG5–ATG16L1 conjugation system. During this process, microtubule-associated protein light chain 3 (LC3-I) undergoes lipidation to form LC3-II, which becomes incorporated into the autophagosomal membrane and facilitates cargo sequestration. Following enclosure of cytoplasmic material, the mature double-membraned autophagosome fuses with lysosomes to form autolysosomes, where enzymatic degradation and recycling occur. In cancer cells, oncogenic signaling pathways such as RAS–MAPK frequently enhance autophagic flux to sustain cellular metabolism, redox homeostasis, and survival. Excessive or prolonged autophagy, however, may induce autophagy-dependent cell death under certain conditions[48].

3.2 Selective Autophagy

Selective autophagy enables the targeted degradation of specific cellular components through specialized cargo-recognition mechanisms. This process is mediated by adaptor proteins including p62/SQSTM1, NBR1, OPTN, and NDP52, which recognize ubiquitinated substrates and facilitate their interaction with LC3-positive autophagosomes. Several forms of selective autophagy have been identified, including mitophagy (mitochondria), ER-phagy (endoplasmic reticulum), lipophagy (lipid droplets), nucleophagy (nuclear components), and ferritinophagy (ferritin degradation)[49].

In cancer, selective autophagy contributes to metabolic adaptation, maintenance of redox balance, and regulation of intracellular signaling pathways. Mitophagy eliminates dysfunctional mitochondria and reduces reactive oxygen species (ROS) accumulation, whereas lipophagy provides fatty acids for energy production during metabolic stress. Emerging evidence also indicates that selective autophagy influences antitumor immunity by regulating the degradation of immune-related molecules and modifying tumor–immune interactions[49].

3.3 Microautophagy

Microautophagy differs fundamentally from macroautophagy in that cytoplasmic cargo is directly engulfed by invagination or protrusion of the lysosomal or late endosomal membrane without formation of autophagosomes. A specialized form known as endosomal microautophagy (eMI) utilizes the endosomal sorting complex required for transport (ESCRT) machinery to generate intraluminal vesicles that sequester cytosolic substrates. Certain proteins containing KFERQ-like motifs can be recognized by heat shock cognate protein 70 (HSC70), establishing mechanistic overlap between microautophagy and chaperone-mediated autophagy[50].

Recent studies have demonstrated that both ATG proteins and ESCRT components regulate multiple microautophagic pathways in mammalian cells. In cancer, microautophagy has been implicated in receptor turnover, membrane remodeling, nutrient adaptation, and cellular stress responses, although its precise roles remain under active investigation[50].

3.4 Chaperone-Mediated Autophagy (CMA)

Chaperone-mediated autophagy (CMA) is a highly selective lysosomal degradation pathway that targets individual soluble proteins containing KFERQ-like pentapeptide motifs. In this process, HSC70 recognizes and binds substrate proteins, directing them to lysosome-associated membrane protein type 2A (LAMP-2A) located on the lysosomal membrane. Following substrate recognition, LAMP-2A multimerizes to facilitate unfolding and direct translocation of target proteins into the lysosomal lumen for degradation, without requiring vesicle formation[51].

The role of CMA in cancer is highly context-dependent. Elevated CMA activity has been shown to support tumor growth, metabolic reprogramming, and metastatic progression by maintaining glycolytic pathways and oncogenic signaling networks. For example, CMA-

mediated regulation of hexokinase-2 (HK2) contributes to metabolic adaptation in breast cancer. Conversely, impaired CMA function can disrupt cellular homeostasis and promote oncogenic transformation. Consequently, CMA has emerged as a potential therapeutic target, either through inhibition in tumor-promoting contexts or restoration in situations where its tumor-suppressive functions are compromised[51].

3.5 Autophagy and Cancer Progression

The functional significance of autophagy evolves during cancer development. In premalignant lesions, autophagy predominantly acts as a tumor suppressor by eliminating damaged organelles, reducing oxidative stress, and maintaining genomic integrity. However, in advanced malignancies, autophagy primarily serves as a cytoprotective mechanism that enables tumor cells to survive metabolic stress and therapeutic insults. Processes such as mitophagy support mitochondrial function and sustain ATP production, while therapy-induced autophagy contributes to resistance against targeted therapies, including MAPK inhibitors and KRAS G12C inhibitors. Consequently, considerable attention has focused on developing therapeutic strategies targeting ULK1/2 kinases and lysosomal function to overcome autophagy-mediated treatment resistance and improve clinical outcomes[52].

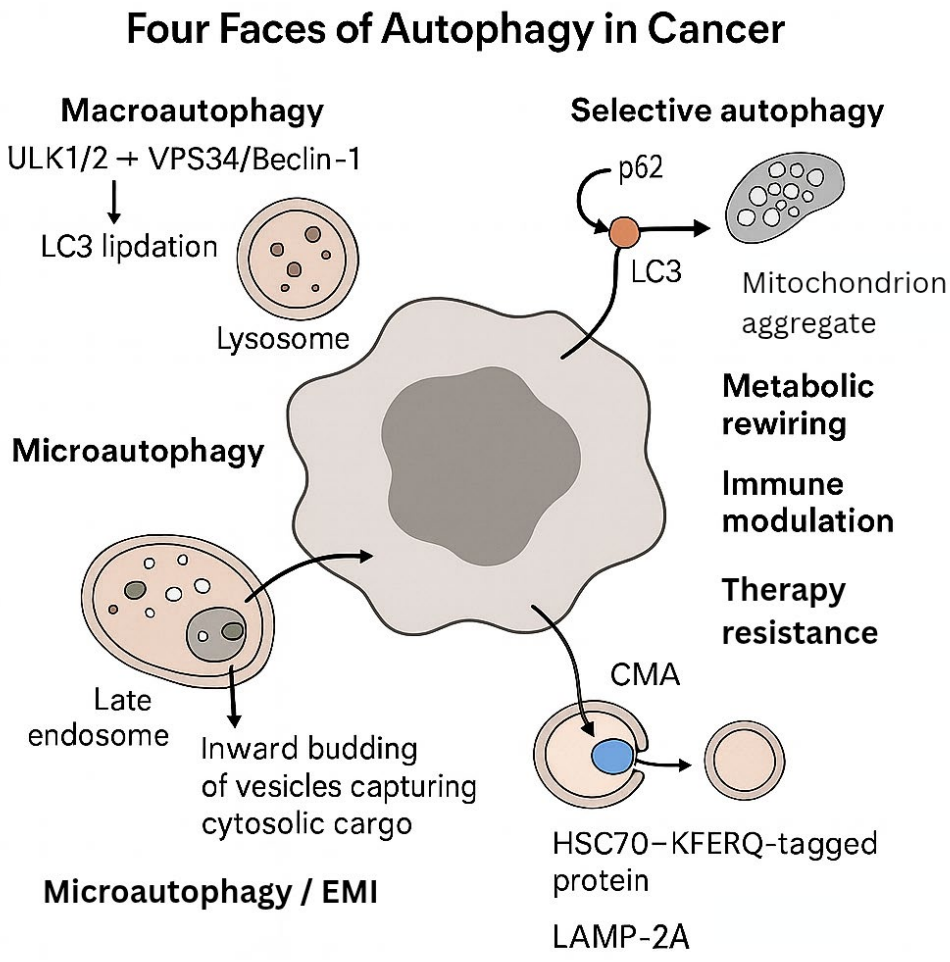

Figure 3. Schematic representation of the four major types of autophagy in cancer: macroautophagy, selective autophagy, microautophagy, and chaperone-mediated autophagy

(CMA): illustrating their key molecular components and roles in metabolic rewiring, immune modulation, and therapy resistance. *Created with BioRender.com*

4. Autophagy Inhibitors and Activators in Cancer Therapy

Autophagy has emerged as an attractive therapeutic target in oncology due to its context-dependent role in tumor progression and treatment response. Many cancers exploit autophagy as a survival mechanism to withstand metabolic stress, hypoxia, and anticancer therapies. Consequently, autophagy inhibition has been extensively investigated as a strategy to sensitize tumors to chemotherapy, targeted therapy, radiotherapy, and immunotherapy. Conversely, under specific biological conditions, autophagy activation may induce autophagy-dependent cell death, enhance immunogenic responses, or facilitate the clearance of toxic intracellular components. Therefore, the therapeutic value of autophagy modulation depends on tumor type, disease stage, genetic background, and the nature of combination therapies employed[54].

4.1 Autophagy Inhibitors

4.1.1 Early-Stage Autophagy Inhibitors

Targeting the initiation phase of autophagy has gained considerable attention as a means of preventing tumor cells from activating adaptive survival pathways. Among these approaches, ULK1 and ULK2 inhibitors represent the most clinically advanced class of autophagy-targeting agents. Inlexisertib (DCC-3116) is an orally administered, selective ULK1/2 inhibitor currently undergoing Phase I and II clinical evaluation. It is frequently combined with inhibitors of the KRAS/MAPK signaling pathway, including sotorasib and trametinib, to suppress therapy-induced autophagy. The rationale for this strategy stems from the dependence of KRAS-driven tumors on both basal and stress-induced autophagic activity for survival and therapeutic resistance. By inhibiting ULK1/2, DCC-3116 effectively blocks this adaptive escape mechanism and enhances antitumor efficacy[52].

Additional early-stage autophagy targets include VPS34 and Beclin-1, both of which play essential roles in autophagosome formation. Although several VPS34 and Beclin-1 inhibitors have demonstrated promising preclinical activity, their clinical development remains relatively limited compared with ULK1/2-directed therapies and lysosomal inhibitors. These agents primarily function by suppressing autophagosome biogenesis and disrupting autophagic flux at its earliest stages[55].

4.1.2 Late-Stage Autophagy Inhibitors: Lysosomal Targeting

The most extensively studied autophagy inhibitors in clinical oncology are lysosomotropic agents that interfere with autophagosome degradation. Chloroquine (CQ) and hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) increase lysosomal pH, thereby preventing the fusion of autophagosomes with lysosomes and inhibiting the degradation of autophagic cargo. These compounds have been evaluated in numerous clinical trials across multiple cancer types, frequently in combination with chemotherapy, radiotherapy, targeted therapies, or immunotherapeutic agents[55].

To overcome the limited potency of first-generation lysosomal inhibitors, several next-generation compounds have been developed. Among these, Lys05 and ROC-325 have demonstrated superior autophagy blockade and enhanced antitumor activity in preclinical studies. These agents exhibit improved pharmacological properties and are currently advancing toward clinical evaluation, representing promising alternatives to conventional HCQ-based strategies[55].

4.2 Cancer-Specific Applications of Autophagy Inhibition

4.2.1 Pancreatic Ductal Adenocarcinoma (PDAC)

Pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma is characterized by constitutively active KRAS signaling and exceptionally high basal autophagic activity. Consequently, PDAC has become one of the principal malignancies investigated for autophagy-targeted therapy. Clinical studies evaluating HCQ in combination with gemcitabine and nab-paclitaxel have reported improved pathological response rates in neoadjuvant settings. However, randomized Phase II studies assessing overall survival have produced mixed outcomes. These findings suggest that patient selection, biomarker-guided treatment strategies, and earlier intervention may be critical determinants of therapeutic success[56].

4.2.2 Melanoma and Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer

In melanoma and lung cancers harboring RAS/MAPK pathway alterations, targeted therapies frequently induce protective autophagy that contributes to treatment resistance. As a result, combinations involving MAPK inhibitors and ULK1/2 inhibitors have emerged as a promising therapeutic strategy. Preclinical and early clinical evidence suggests that simultaneous blockade of oncogenic signaling and autophagic adaptation may enhance treatment efficacy and delay resistance development[52].

4.2.3 Glioblastoma

Glioblastoma represents another malignancy in which autophagy inhibition has shown potential therapeutic benefit. Clinical studies evaluating CQ or HCQ in combination with radiotherapy and temozolomide have demonstrated feasibility and acceptable tolerability. However, treatment-related toxicities, including retinal complications, gastrointestinal adverse effects, and QTc interval prolongation, limit dose escalation. Furthermore, survival benefits have remained inconsistent across studies, highlighting the need for improved patient stratification and biomarker development[57].

4.2.4 Hematological Malignancies

Emerging evidence indicates that autophagy inhibition may enhance the efficacy of hypomethylating agents, venetoclax, and other targeted therapies in hematological cancers. Although preliminary studies have reported encouraging findings, standardized clinical approaches and definitive evidence supporting routine implementation remain lacking[58].

4.3 Autophagy Activators

In contrast to inhibition strategies, activation of autophagy may be therapeutically advantageous in specific contexts. The induction of autophagy can promote autophagy-dependent cell death, facilitate the removal of toxic protein aggregates, and enhance cellular stress responses that ultimately contribute to tumor suppression. However, autophagy activation may also support tumor survival under certain conditions, underscoring the importance of context-dependent therapeutic application[59].

4.3.1 mTOR Inhibitors

The mechanistic target of rapamycin (mTOR) pathway serves as a central negative regulator of autophagy. Pharmacological inhibition of mTOR using rapamycin analogs (rapalogs) or dual mTORC1/mTORC2 inhibitors activates autophagic processes by relieving mTOR-mediated suppression of the ULK1 complex. Depending on tumor biology and treatment context, mTOR inhibition may:

(i) induce autophagy-dependent cell death;
(ii) promote degradation of toxic intracellular components; or
(iii) enhance tumor adaptation to cellular stress.

To maximize therapeutic benefit, mTOR inhibitors are frequently combined with BH3 mimetics, DNA-damaging agents, targeted therapies, or immunotherapies to direct autophagy toward pro-death rather than cytoprotective outcomes[59].

4.3.2 AMPK Activators and Metabolic Stress Inducers

Additional autophagy-inducing strategies include activation of AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK), administration of calorie-restriction mimetics, and induction of endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress. These approaches stimulate autophagy through metabolic and stress-responsive pathways and have demonstrated promising antitumor activity in preclinical studies. Nevertheless, because autophagy activation may also support tumor cell survival, these agents require careful therapeutic pairing and patient selection before widespread clinical application[60].

4.3.3 Therapeutic Perspective

Current evidence suggests that autophagy inhibition is particularly beneficial in KRAS-driven malignancies and cancers characterized by therapy-induced autophagy, including pancreatic cancer, melanoma, and non-small cell lung cancer. In these settings, targeting ULK1/2 signaling or lysosomal degradation pathways may effectively disrupt adaptive survival

mechanisms. Conversely, in selected hematological malignancies, indolent tumors, and specific stress-dependent cancer subtypes, controlled activation of autophagy through mTOR inhibition or metabolic modulation may enhance cytotoxic responses and improve therapeutic outcomes. Consequently, the future of autophagy-targeted therapy will likely depend on precision medicine approaches that integrate molecular profiling, biomarker-guided patient selection, and rational combination strategies to maximize clinical benefit while minimizing unintended tumor-promoting effects[52,54,60].

5. Epigenetic Regulation and microRNA-Mediated Control of Autophagy and Apoptosis in Cancer

Epigenetic regulation refers to heritable and reversible alterations in gene expression that occur without changes in the underlying DNA sequence. These modifications include DNA methylation, histone modifications, chromatin remodeling, and regulation by non-coding RNAs. Among non-coding RNAs, microRNAs (miRNAs) have emerged as critical post-transcriptional regulators that influence numerous cellular processes involved in cancer development and progression[61].

MicroRNAs are small endogenous non-coding RNA molecules approximately 22 nucleotides in length that regulate gene expression through translational repression or degradation of target messenger RNAs (mRNAs). By binding to complementary sequences within target transcripts, miRNAs fine-tune the expression of genes involved in cell proliferation, differentiation, survival, apoptosis, autophagy, metastasis, and therapeutic resistance. Aberrant miRNA expression profiles are frequently associated with tumor initiation, progression, metastatic dissemination, and response to anticancer therapies[62].

6. Clinical Outcomes of Autophagy and Apoptosis Modulators in Cancer

Clinical investigations targeting autophagy have primarily focused on lysosomal inhibitors, particularly hydroxychloroquine (HCQ), in combination with conventional anticancer therapies. In pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDAC), a randomized neoadjuvant trial demonstrated that the addition of HCQ to gemcitabine and nab-paclitaxel improved pathological response rates compared with chemotherapy alone. Although several studies have suggested potential improvements in long-term survival outcomes, these findings have not been consistently reproduced across larger patient cohorts. The safety profile of HCQ-based regimens is generally manageable and includes gastrointestinal disturbances, hematological toxicities, and the need for monitoring retinal toxicity and QTc interval prolongation[56].

In glioblastoma, chloroquine (CQ) and HCQ have been evaluated in combination with radiotherapy and temozolomide. Clinical studies demonstrated acceptable feasibility; however, the maximum tolerated dose of CQ was approximately 200 mg/day due to dose-limiting retinal and cardiac toxicities. Therapeutic efficacy has remained variable, with small studies reporting median overall survival values of approximately 16 months[57]. Across multiple solid tumor types, systematic reviews indicate that autophagy inhibition is generally well tolerated, but

consistent survival benefits have yet to be established. Consequently, the identification of predictive biomarkers, including autophagic flux signatures and KRAS mutation status, remains essential for optimizing patient selection and therapeutic efficacy[71].

6.1 ULK1/2 Inhibitors

Targeting the autophagy-initiation complex through ULK1 and ULK2 inhibition has emerged as a promising therapeutic strategy. DCC-3116 (inlexisertib), a selective ULK1/2 inhibitor, is currently undergoing Phase I and Phase II clinical evaluation as monotherapy and in combination with KRAS and MAPK pathway inhibitors, including sotorasib, trametinib, and ripretinib. The rationale for these studies is based on the ability of DCC-3116 to suppress therapy-induced autophagy, a key mechanism underlying resistance to targeted therapies. Preliminary preclinical and early clinical findings have demonstrated encouraging antitumor activity and an acceptable safety profile; however, comprehensive efficacy and toxicity data remain forthcoming[52].

6.2 Next-Generation Lysosomotropic Autophagy Inhibitors

Several second-generation lysosomal inhibitors have been developed to overcome the limitations of HCQ and CQ. Among these, Lys05 and ROC-325 exhibit substantially greater potency in blocking autophagic flux and inducing antitumor responses in preclinical cancer models. ROC-325 has advanced toward clinical development, highlighting the growing interest in more effective lysosomotropic agents. Future clinical trials will likely focus on monitoring lysosomal dysfunction, ocular toxicity, and hematological adverse effects while establishing optimal dosing regimens[72].

6.3 Apoptosis Modulators: BH3 Mimetics

The most successful apoptosis-targeting therapies to date are BH3 mimetics, particularly venetoclax, a selective BCL-2 inhibitor. In the landmark VIALE-A trial involving newly diagnosed acute myeloid leukemia (AML) patients who were ineligible for intensive chemotherapy, venetoclax combined with azacitidine significantly improved complete remission rates and complete remission with incomplete hematologic recovery (CR/CRi), achieving approximately 66% compared with 28% in the azacitidine-alone group. Furthermore, median overall survival increased from 9.6 months to 14.7 months, establishing venetoclax-based therapy as a new standard of care in this patient population. Despite these benefits, severe myelosuppression, neutropenia, febrile neutropenia, and infectious complications remain significant concerns, necessitating careful monitoring and supportive care strategies[73].

6.4 Navitoclax (BCL-xL/BCL-2 Inhibitor)

Navitoclax, a dual inhibitor of BCL-xL and BCL-2, has demonstrated promising activity in early-phase clinical studies involving solid tumors, particularly when combined with MAPK pathway inhibitors such as trametinib or sorafenib. However, its clinical utility has been limited by dose-dependent thrombocytopenia resulting from on-target inhibition of BCL-xL in

platelets. Additional adverse events include gastrointestinal disturbances, fatigue, and elevated hepatic transaminases[74].

Autophagy inhibition represents a promising therapeutic strategy in KRAS-driven malignancies and cancers that rely on therapy-induced autophagy for survival, including pancreatic cancer, non-small cell lung cancer, and melanoma. Nevertheless, definitive evidence supporting broad survival benefits remains limited, emphasizing the importance of optimizing treatment combinations, therapeutic scheduling, and biomarker-guided patient selection. In contrast, apoptosis activation through BH3 mimetics has already achieved substantial clinical success in hematological malignancies such as AML and chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL). Current efforts are focused on extending these benefits to solid tumors through rational combination strategies involving targeted therapies, immunotherapies, and improved dosing approaches that minimize hematological toxicity while maximizing antitumor efficacy[73].

Table 1. Selected clinical trials: outcomes and adverse events (illustrative, not exhaustive)

Modality	Setting (phase)	Key outcome(s)	Common/Key AEs
HCQ + gemcitabine/nab-paclitaxel	PDAC, pre-op (Randomized Phase II)	Improved pathological response vs chemo alone; survival signals mixed; needs biomarker-guided validation.	GI upset, cytopenias; HCQ-related QTc prolongation/ocular concerns 56
CQ/HCQ + RT/TMZ	Glioblastoma (Phase I/IB)	Feasible; median OS ~16 mo in small cohort; MTD ~200 mg CQ due to toxicity; efficacy not definitive.	QTc, irreversible blurred vision, nausea; dose-limiting at higher CQ doses 57
DCC-3116 (± targeted agents)	KRAS/MAPK-driven solid tumours (Phase 1/2)	Early-phase signals; designed to block therapy-induced autophagy; outcome readouts pending.	Early safety appears manageable; class-specific pattern evolving 52
Venetoclax + azacitidine	AML, unfit (Phase III VIALE-A)	CRc ~66% vs 28%; OS ~14.7 vs 9.6 mo; new SOC.	Neutropenia, febrile neutropenia, infections (AML>CLL); monitor and prophylaxis 73
Navitoclax + trametinib or sorafenib	RAS-pathway solid tumours (Early phase)	Responses in subsets; development ongoing.	Thrombocytopenia (on-target), diarrhoea, ↑AST/ALT, rash 74

7. Emerging Technologies in the Design, Discovery, and Testing of Apoptosis and Autophagy Modulators in Cancer

Recent advances in cancer research have transformed the discovery and evaluation of modulators targeting apoptosis and autophagy pathways. Innovative platforms, including patient-derived organoids (PDOs), organ-on-a-chip systems, CRISPR-based genome editing technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), and three-dimensional (3D) bioprinting, have significantly enhanced the precision and translational relevance of preclinical drug development. These technologies enable the recreation of complex tumor microenvironments, facilitate high-throughput screening, and support personalized therapeutic strategies, thereby accelerating the clinical translation of novel anticancer agents[75–78].

7.1 Organoid Models: A Paradigm Shift in Drug Discovery

Patient-derived tumor organoids (PDOs) are three-dimensional culture systems established directly from patient tumor tissues. Unlike conventional two-dimensional cell cultures, PDOs preserve cellular heterogeneity, tissue architecture, genetic characteristics, and treatment responsiveness of the original tumor. The incorporation of extracellular matrix components supports cell polarity, cell-cell communication, and tissue-specific organization, allowing faithful recapitulation of in vivo tumor biology[75].

One of the most significant applications of PDO technology is the establishment of tumor biobanks containing organoids derived from diverse cancer subtypes, stages, and patient populations. These biobanks capture both interpatient and intratumoral heterogeneity, providing powerful platforms for functional precision medicine and personalized drug screening[76].

Numerous studies have demonstrated strong concordance between therapeutic responses observed in PDOs and actual clinical outcomes, highlighting their value as predictive tools for individualized treatment selection. Furthermore, integration of artificial intelligence and deep-learning algorithms with organoid platforms has enabled automated, real-time phenotypic analysis through high-content imaging and time-lapse monitoring, thereby improving drug efficacy prediction and screening accuracy[77].

Recent developments have led to the generation of “organoid avatars,” which combine PDOs with patient-derived xenograft (PDX) models to create complementary in vitro and in vivo validation systems. These integrated platforms bridge rapid organoid-based screening with physiological validation in animal models, facilitating precision oncology. Notably, organoid-xenograft avatars have successfully predicted therapeutic responses in metastatic breast cancer and guided personalized clinical decision-making[78].

7.2 Animal Models: In Vivo Validation Platforms

Although organoid models provide valuable mechanistic insights, animal models remain indispensable for evaluating drug efficacy, pharmacokinetics, biodistribution, toxicity, and systemic therapeutic responses. Patient-derived xenograft (PDX) models are generated through

implantation of human tumor tissues into immunocompromised mice, preserving the native tumor architecture, stromal interactions, and cellular heterogeneity characteristic of human malignancies[79].

Genetically engineered mouse models (GEMMs) offer additional advantages by enabling investigation of apoptosis and autophagy modulators within the context of an intact immune system. While GEMMs may not fully capture the complexity of human tumor heterogeneity, they provide critical insights into immune-mediated mechanisms and therapeutic responses[79].

The combination of PDOs, PDXs, and GEMMs establishes a comprehensive tumor-avatar workflow in which promising candidates identified through high-throughput organoid screening can subsequently undergo in vivo validation for efficacy and safety assessment, thereby strengthening translational drug development[78].

7.3 Organoid-on-a-Chip and Cancer-on-a-Chip Platforms

The integration of patient-derived organoids with microfluidic technologies has led to the emergence of organoid-on-a-chip systems, representing a significant advancement in preclinical cancer modeling. These platforms recreate tissue architecture, physiological flow conditions, and multicellular interactions within highly controlled microenvironments[76,80].

Microfluidic channels and chambers can simulate nutrient gradients, vascular perfusion, tissue-tissue interfaces, and mechanical stimuli, enabling detailed investigation of apoptosis and autophagy regulation under physiologically relevant conditions[80].

Cancer-on-a-chip platforms further extend this concept by incorporating multiple interconnected organotypic compartments, such as tumor-liver or tumor-heart systems, within a single microfluidic network. For example, doxorubicin-testing chips integrating liver, cardiac, and tumor organoids allow simultaneous monitoring of anticancer efficacy and off-target toxicity in real time[80].

These advanced systems have the potential to reduce dependence on animal experimentation and improve predictive accuracy during drug development. Although challenges related to standardization, scalability, and regulatory acceptance remain, ongoing integration with AI-driven analytics and 3D bioprinting technologies is paving the way toward next-generation personalized cancer therapeutics[81].

8. Challenges in Designing and Discovering Modulators of Apoptosis and Autophagy in Cancer

Despite substantial technological progress, several limitations continue to hinder the efficient translation of apoptosis- and autophagy-targeting therapeutics into clinical practice. Current experimental models often fail to fully replicate the complexity of the tumor microenvironment, while issues related to reproducibility, scalability, cost, and biological relevance remain significant barriers. Standardized and physiologically relevant platforms are therefore essential for accelerating translational cancer research.

8.1 Organoid Models: Limited Complexity and Reproducibility

8.1.1 Tumor Microenvironment Limitations

Although PDOs closely resemble patient tumors, they frequently lack critical microenvironmental components such as vascular networks, immune cells, and stromal elements. Consequently, key biological processes including reactive oxygen species (ROS)-mediated apoptosis, immune regulation, and autophagy signaling cannot be fully reproduced[53,82].

8.1.2 Variability and Scalability Challenges

Organoid cultures often exhibit variability in morphology, growth kinetics, and size due to donor-specific factors, extracellular matrix composition, and differences in tissue processing protocols. Such variability can compromise reproducibility and large-scale implementation in drug discovery programs[53,83].

8.1.3 Long-Term Culture Instability

Extended cultivation of organoids may result in genetic drift, epigenetic alterations, and gradual loss of original tumor characteristics, potentially affecting the reliability of long-term therapeutic studies and resistance investigations[84].

8.2 Animal Models: Time, Cost, and Translational Limitations

8.2.1 Resource-Intensive Nature of PDX Models

Although PDX models accurately preserve tumor heterogeneity and architecture, their establishment requires substantial financial resources and prolonged experimental timelines, often extending over several months[83,84].

8.2.2 Genetic Drift and Selection Bias

Repeated passaging in PDX systems may induce mouse-specific adaptations and reduce subclonal diversity, leading to selection bias and diminished representation of the original patient tumor[84].

8.2.3 Limited Immune Modeling

Because PDX models rely on immunodeficient hosts, they are less suitable for investigating immune-mediated apoptosis, autophagy, and therapeutic responses, particularly in the context of cancer immunotherapy[85].

8.3 Integrative Platforms: Organ-on-Chip and Hybrid Systems

8.3.1 Material-Related Limitations

Commonly used microfluidic materials, such as polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS), may non-specifically absorb hydrophobic drugs, resulting in altered drug concentrations and reduced experimental accuracy[86].

8.3.2 Incomplete Microenvironment Recreation

Although organ-on-chip systems successfully mimic specific physiological parameters such as fluid flow and mechanical stimulation, many platforms still fail to incorporate the complete spectrum of immune, stromal, vascular, and extracellular matrix interactions required for accurate modeling of apoptotic and autophagic responses[86, 87].

9. Conclusion

Apoptosis and autophagy are two tightly regulated and interconnected cellular processes that play fundamental roles in cancer initiation, progression, metastasis, and therapeutic response. Dysregulation of these pathways enables tumor cells to evade programmed cell death, sustain uncontrolled proliferation, and develop resistance to anticancer therapies. Therapeutic modulation of apoptosis through targeting caspases, BCL-2 family proteins, and death receptors aims to restore programmed cell death in malignant cells, whereas autophagy modulators either inhibit cytoprotective autophagy or promote autophagy-dependent cell death.

Recent advances in molecular oncology have demonstrated that balanced regulation of apoptosis and autophagy can overcome drug resistance and substantially enhance therapeutic efficacy. Combination strategies involving autophagy inhibitors and apoptosis inducers have shown considerable promise for improving treatment outcomes across multiple cancer types. However, because autophagy exhibits both tumor-suppressive and tumor-promoting functions, therapeutic interventions must be carefully tailored according to tumor type, molecular profile, disease stage, and treatment context.

In summary, understanding the intricate crosstalk between autophagy and apoptosis provides a strong foundation for the development of innovative and more effective cancer therapies. Future research should focus on elucidating the molecular mechanisms governing these pathways, identifying reliable predictive biomarkers, and designing rational combination regimens capable of maximizing therapeutic benefit while minimizing resistance and toxicity.

10. Directions for Further Research

Future research on apoptosis and autophagy modulation should emphasize precision oncology approaches tailored to individual patient characteristics and tumor biology. A deeper understanding of the molecular mechanisms regulating these pathways and their crosstalk will facilitate the discovery of highly selective therapeutic agents capable of targeting malignant cells while sparing normal tissues. Integration of multi-omics technologies, including

genomics, proteomics, transcriptomics, and metabolomics, will further improve biomarker discovery and enable identification of tumor-specific vulnerabilities.

Emerging technologies combining artificial intelligence with high-throughput organoid screening hold substantial promise for accelerating drug discovery and personalized treatment selection. Machine-learning algorithms can analyze imaging, molecular, and phenotypic datasets generated from organoid platforms to identify optimal therapeutic combinations and dosing strategies. AI-driven virtual tumor models may also improve prediction of tumor heterogeneity, nutrient gradients, mechanical stresses, and therapeutic responses. Integration of real-time biosensors capable of monitoring autophagic flux, caspase activation, and metabolic changes will further enhance understanding of treatment efficacy and toxicity.

CRISPR-Cas genome-editing technologies will continue to play a pivotal role in identifying novel regulators of apoptosis and autophagy. Large-scale functional screening in organoids, xenografts, and advanced in vivo models can uncover new therapeutic targets, reveal resistance mechanisms, and validate synergistic drug combinations.

Given the context-dependent dual role of autophagy in promoting either survival or cell death, future studies should focus on defining the biological contexts in which autophagy inhibition or activation is therapeutically advantageous. Comprehensive molecular profiling before and after treatment may help identify these contexts and guide rational combinations involving autophagy modulators, apoptosis inducers, targeted therapies, and immune checkpoint inhibitors.

The development of robust biomarkers for monitoring apoptosis and autophagy remains another major research priority. Biomarkers such as LC3-II accumulation, p62 degradation, caspase-cleavage patterns, and circulating cell-death markers may provide early indicators of therapeutic response. In addition, liquid-biopsy approaches capable of detecting apoptosis- and autophagy-related molecular signatures offer promising non-invasive strategies for disease monitoring and treatment optimization.

Overall, continued integration of systems biology, artificial intelligence, organoid technologies, genome editing, and precision medicine approaches will accelerate the development of next-generation apoptosis and autophagy modulators. These advances have the potential to generate more durable, effective, and personalized cancer therapies for future clinical practice.

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