Journal of Liver: Disease & Transplantation

Commentary A SCITECHNOL JOURNAL

Advancements in Serological Biomarkers for Hepatic Cancer Diagnosis

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Received date: 27 May, 2024, Manuscript No. JLDT-24-146992;

Editor assigned date: 30 May, 2024, PreQC No. JLDT-24-146992 (PQ);

Reviewed date: 13 June, 2024, QC No. JLDT-24-146992;

Revised date: 21 June, 2024, Manuscript No. JLDT-24-146992 (R);

Published date: 28 June, 2024, DOI: 10.4172/2325-9612.1000269

Description

Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC) is the most common primary liver cancer and a major cause of cancer-related mortality worldwide. Early detection is important for improving prognosis, as advanced stages of HCC are often resistant to conventional therapies. Serological markers have emerged as for the early detection of HCC, allowing non-invasive screening and monitoring. Serological markers are found in the blood that can indicate the presence of certain diseases, including cancer. In the context of HCC, these markers are typically proteins, enzymes, or other molecules produced by tumor cells or as a response to the tumor. The ideal serological marker should be highly sensitive and specific, allowing for the accurate detection of HCC even in its early stages. Alpha-Fetoprotein (AFP) is one of the most extensively studied serological markers for HCC. AFP is a glycoprotein produced by the fetal liver and its levels decrease after birth. However, elevated AFP levels can be indicative of HCC, as well as other liver diseases such as hepatitis and cirrhosis. AFP is widely used in clinical practice for HCC screening, particularly in high-risk populations, such as patients with chronic hepatitis B or C and cirrhosis. Despite its broader use, AFP has limitations in sensitivity and specificity.

Elevated AFP levels can also occur in non-malignant liver conditions and some HCC patients may not exhibit elevated AFP levels, especially in the early stages. As a result, AFP alone is not sufficient for definitive diagnosis and its use is often combined with imaging techniques or other serological markers. Des-Gamma-Carboxy Prothrombin (DCP), also known as protein induced by vitamin K absence or antagonist-II (PIVKA-II), is another serological marker used in HCC detection. DCP is an abnormal prothrombin produced by malignant liver cells due to a defect in the vitamin K-dependent carboxylation pathway. Elevated levels of DCP have been associated with HCC and are particularly useful in detecting AFP-negative HCC cases. DCP can distinguish HCC from other liver diseases and in identifying patients at risk of developing HCC. However, like AFP, DCP is not perfect and may yield false positives in patients with vitamin K deficiency or those on anticoagulant therapy. Therefore, DCP is often used in conjunction with other diagnostic methods to improve accuracy.

Glypican-3 (GPC3) is a cell surface proteoglycan highly expressed in HCC but not in normal adult liver tissue. It is involved in cell proliferation and differentiation, making it a potential biomarker for HCC. Elevated serum levels of GPC3 have been observed in HCC patients, particularly those with early-stage disease. GPC3 has demonstrated higher specificity for HCC compared to AFP, making it a valuable addition to the diagnostic panel. GPC3's potential as a serological marker for HCC is still being investigated and it is not yet widely used in clinical practice. However, its ability to detect early-stage HCC and its specificity make it a promising candidate for future diagnostic applications. To improve the accuracy of HCC detection, combining multiple serological markers has become a common approach. For example, the combination of AFP, DCP and GPC3 can enhance sensitivity and specificity, providing a more stable diagnostic tool.

Conclusion

The early detection of hepatocellular carcinoma is essential for effective treatment and improved patient outcomes. Serological markers, including AFP, DCP and GPC3, play a vital role in the non-invasive detection of HCC. While each marker has its limitations, their combined use, along with imaging techniques, can enhance diagnostic accuracy. Ongoing study and advancements in biomarker discovery hold promise for the development of more sensitive and specific markers, ultimately leading to better screening strategies and earlier intervention for patients at risk of HCC.

Citation: *Esgar J (2024) Advancements in Serological Biomarkers for Hepatic Cancer Diagnosis. J Liver Disease Transplant 13:2.*