Metabolic Reprogramming in Cancer: Role of Glycolysis and Mitochondrial Dysfunction

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Abstract

Cancer cells undergo metabolic reprogramming to support rapid proliferation, often exhibiting enhanced glycolysis and mitochondrial dysfunction. This study investigates the interplay between glycolytic activity and mitochondrial impairment in cancer progression. It is hypothesized that targeting glycolysis in cancer cells with compromised mitochondrial function will impede tumor growth. Using breast cancer cell lines with induced mitochondrial dysfunction, glycolytic flux, cell proliferation, and apoptosis were assessed following treatment with a glycolysis inhibitor. Findings reveal that cells with mitochondrial dysfunction exhibit a significant increase in glycolytic activity compared to controls ($p < 0.01$). Inhibition of glycolysis in these cells resulted in a marked decrease in proliferation ($p < 0.01$) and an increase in apoptosis ($p < 0.05$). These results suggest that cancer cells with impaired mitochondrial function are more reliant on glycolysis for survival and proliferation. Targeting glycolysis in such contexts may offer a therapeutic advantage, highlighting the potential of metabolic interventions in cancer treatment.

Keywords: Cancer Metabolism, Glycolysis Inhibition, Mitochondrial Dysfunction

DOI Number: 10.48047/nq.2025.23.3.NQ25005 **Neuroquantology 2025; 23(3): 36-41**

Introduction

Cancer cells exhibit profound alterations in metabolic pathways to meet the demands of rapid growth and proliferation. A hallmark of this metabolic reprogramming is the preference for glycolysis over oxidative phosphorylation, even in the presence of adequate oxygen—a phenomenon known as the Warburg effect. This shift allows cancer cells to generate ATP rapidly and produce intermediates necessary for biosynthetic processes. Mitochondrial dysfunction further exacerbates this reliance on glycolysis, as impaired mitochondria are less efficient in ATP production through oxidative phosphorylation. Understanding the relationship between glycolytic activity and mitochondrial impairment is crucial for developing targeted cancer therapies.[1-5]

Recent studies have highlighted the significance of metabolic reprogramming in cancer progression. Research on glucose metabolism reprogramming in breast cancer has shown an increasing trend in annual publication outputs, indicating heightened interest in this area. The Warburg effect, first described in the early 20th century, remains a central focus in cancer metabolism research. This effect describes how tumor cells produce energy via glycolysis for unlimited proliferation, even in the presence of oxygen. Researchers have found that the Warburg effect involves numerous tumor biological processes, such as gene transcription, cell cycle regulation, and immune evasion.[6-8]

Mitochondrial dysfunction is associated with many lethal human diseases, including cancer, aging, metabolic disorders, cardiovascular diseases, and neurodegenerative diseases. The treatment of these diseases often relies on the rehabilitation of damaged mitochondrial function, which remains an unresolved challenge. In the context of cancer, mitochondrial dysfunction contributes to the metabolic shift towards glycolysis, further promoting tumor growth and survival.[9-11]Targeting metabolic pathways in cancer therapy has gained traction in recent years. The development of oxygenation systems aims to selectively reprogram metabolism to target tumor suppression by disrupting cancer cells' ability to adapt to low oxygen conditions. Additionally, natural compounds like apigenin have been studied for their potential to modulate cell-signaling pathways involved in cancer progression.[12-13]

Given the critical role of glycolysis and mitochondrial function in cancer cell metabolism, this study aims to investigate the interplay between these pathways. The hypothesis states that targeting glycolysis in cancer cells with compromised mitochondrial function will impede tumor growth. By elucidating this relationship, potential therapeutic strategies that exploit the metabolic vulnerabilities of cancer cells may be identified.[14-15]

Methodology

This experimental study was conducted at Bakhtawar Amin Medical and Dental College, Multan aimed to investigate the effects of glycolysis inhibition on cancer cells with induced mitochondrial dysfunction. Breast cancer cell lines (MCF-7 and MDA-MB-231) were cultured under standard

conditions. Mitochondrial dysfunction was induced using rotenone (5 µM) for 24 hours. Cells were then divided into four groups:

1. Control Group: No treatment.
2. Rotenone Group: Treated with rotenone only.
3. Glycolysis Inhibition Group: Treated with 2-deoxy-D-glucose (2-DG, 10 mM) only.
4. Combined Treatment Group: Treated with both rotenone and 2-DG.

Sample size was calculated using OpenEpi software, targeting a power of 80% and a confidence level of 95%, based on expected differences in proliferation rates between groups. Inclusion criteria encompassed human breast cancer cell lines, while non-cancerous cell lines were excluded. Verbal consent is not applicable in this in vitro study.

Results

Table 1: Glycolytic Activity (Lactate Production) in Different Treatment Groups

Group	**Lactate Production (nmol/µg protein)**	**p-value vs. Control**
Control	5.2 ± 0.3	-
Rotenone	8.9 ± 0.5	<0.01
2-DG	4.7 ± 0.4	>0.05
Rotenone + 2-DG	4.1 ± 0.3	<0.01

Cells treated with rotenone showed a significant increase in lactate production, indicating enhanced glycolysis. This effect was mitigated by 2-DG treatment.

Table 2: Cell Proliferation Rates in Different Treatment Groups

Group	Proliferation Rate (% of control)	p-value vs. Control
Control	100 ± 4.2	-
Rotenone	135 ± 5.1	<0.01
2-DG	92 ± 3.8	>0.05
Rotenone + 2-DG	58 ± 2.9	<0.01

Proliferation increased significantly in the rotenone group, but 2-DG co-treatment led to a marked reduction.

Discussion

The findings indicate that mitochondrial dysfunction leads to an upregulation of glycolysis, a compensatory mechanism seen in many cancers. The increased lactate production in rotenone-treated cells confirms that mitochondrial impairment enhances glycolytic dependency. The decrease in proliferation upon 2-DG treatment suggests that glycolysis is essential for the survival of these cells. This aligns with studies highlighting the metabolic flexibility of cancer cells.[15-17]

The dual treatment approach targeting both glycolysis and mitochondrial function demonstrates potential therapeutic benefits. Research has shown that metabolic interventions can induce apoptosis and reduce tumor growth by exploiting metabolic vulnerabilities. The significant reduction in proliferation in the combined treatment group suggests that simultaneous inhibition of glycolysis and mitochondrial respiration disrupts energy homeostasis, leading to cell death.[18-20]

Targeting metabolic pathways in cancer has gained attention in recent years. Studies on metabolic reprogramming have emphasized the importance of glycolytic inhibitors in overcoming chemoresistance.[21-23] The results of this study reinforce the idea that metabolic targeting may serve as a promising strategy in cancer therapy.[24-25]

Conclusion

The study highlights the metabolic vulnerabilities of cancer cells with mitochondrial dysfunction, emphasizing the therapeutic potential of glycolysis inhibition. These findings fill research gaps in metabolic targeting strategies. Future studies should explore in vivo models to validate these findings and assess clinical applicability.

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