Refining Endometrial Cancer Prognosis: When POLE Mutations Truly Matter

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Endometrial carcinoma (EC) classification has evolved significantly, moving beyond traditional histology to integrate molecular subtypes. This shift, driven by frameworks like The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) and ProMisE, has reshaped prognostic counseling and adjuvant therapy decisions for patients with EC. However, critical questions regarding the precise prognostic implications of specific molecular alterations in real-world settings have remained.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Pivot: Only canonical, pathogenic POLE exonuclease-domain mutations confer an exceptional survival benefit in endometrial cancer; variants of uncertain significance do not.
- The Data: Canonical pathogenic POLE mutations showed markedly elevated tumor mutational burden (median 138.7 mut/Mb in MSK; 247.4 in TCGA), while POLE variants of uncertain significance (VUS) did not (median 29.0 and 15.0, respectively; p The Action: Immunotherapy eligibility based on dMMR status is supported regardless of the specific MMR gene altered, but POLE-ultramutated classification requires variant-level pathogenicity assessment.

Evolving Endometrial Cancer Classification

Endometrial carcinoma (EC) is the most common gynecologic malignancy, and its classification has undergone a significant transformation. Historically, EC was primarily stratified by histological features. However, the 2020 World Health Organization (WHO) Classification of Female Genital Tumors, 5th edition, now recognizes four molecular subtypes: POLE-ultramutated, mismatch repair-deficient (dMMR), TP53-mutant/copy-number-high (CNH), and "no specific molecular profile" (NSMP)1,2. This molecular framework, inspired by The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) and the Proactive Molecular Risk Classifier for Endometrial Cancer (ProMisE), has become central to prognostic assessment and guiding adjuvant therapy decisions2. The 2020 WHO classification prioritizes POLE mutations in its diagnostic algorithm, and the 2023 Federation of International Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) staging system also incorporates molecular alterations alongside histological type and grade2.

Study Design and Methodology

A recent dual-cohort genomic analysis aimed to address several outstanding questions regarding the practical application of this molecular classification in real-world patient populations1. Researchers pooled data from 2901 patients: 2372 from the MSK-IMPACT 50K Clinical Sequencing Cohort (discovery cohort) and 529 from the TCGA UCEC PanCancer Atlas (validation cohort)1. This represents the largest dual-cohort genomic analysis of EC to date. The study investigated whether all four mismatch repair (MMR) genes confer an equivalent favorable prognosis, if all POLE alterations carry

the same survival benefit, and whether molecular subtypes retain prognostic value after adjusting for histology and tumor burden1.

The methodology included individual MMR gene and combined dMMR survival stratification, multivariable Cox regression adjusted for age, histology, and sample type, and a pathogenicity-aware sensitivity analysis for POLE variants. Tumor mutational burden (TMB) was also compared across subgroups to correlate with molecular findings1.

Key Findings: Mismatch Repair Genes and Prognosis

The analysis confirmed that all four MMR gene-mutant subgroups (MLH1, MSH2, MSH6, PMS2) conferred an equivalently favorable overall survival (OS) across both cohorts (six-group log-rank p = 7.66 × 10-12 in discovery; p = 6.78 × 10-3 in validation)1. This finding supports dMMR as a class-level prognostic designation, independent of which specific MMR gene is altered. However, multivariable Cox regression revealed that the favorable prognostic effect of dMMR was largely accounted for by histological context after adjustment for age, histology, and sample type1.

Key Findings: POLE Mutations and Tumor Mutational Burden

Crucially, the study found that the exceptional survival benefit associated with POLE-ultramutated status is confined to canonical exonuclease-domain hotspot mutations (event rate 0.9% in MSK)1. POLE variants of uncertain significance (VUS) behaved indistinguishably from NSMP-like tumors, suggesting they do not confer the same favorable prognosis. Consistent with this, TMB was markedly elevated in canonical pathogenic POLE cases (median 138.7 mut/Mb in MSK; 247.4 in TCGA) but not in POLE-VUS-only cases (median 29.0 and 15.0, respectively; p 1. This confirms that the ultramutator phenotype, and its associated favorable prognosis, is specific to canonical pathogenic POLE variants1.

The study also characterized Uterine Clear Cell Carcinoma as a distinct histological entity (n = 73; 3.0%) and identified a POLE + TP53 co-mutant group (n = 90; 3.8%)1.

Clinical Implications and Future Directions

These findings offer important refinements to the molecular classification of EC. They support class-level immunotherapy eligibility based on dMMR status, irrespective of the specific MMR gene altered, which simplifies treatment decisions for dMMR patients. However, for POLE-ultramutated classification, a variant-level pathogenicity assessment is essential, as not all POLE alterations confer the same prognostic benefit1.

Why this matters for clinical practice today: The nuanced understanding of POLE mutations is critical. Clinicians should ensure that POLE testing distinguishes between canonical pathogenic variants and variants of uncertain significance, as only the former indicates the highly favorable prognosis and potential for immune checkpoint inhibitor response. This precision avoids misclassifying patients and ensures appropriate prognostic counseling and treatment stratification. Furthermore, the identification of TP53-mutant/CNH patients as a population with urgent unmet therapeutic needs highlights a critical area for ongoing research and targeted therapy development.

Limitations and Next Steps

While this study represents the largest dual-cohort genomic analysis of EC to date, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The retrospective nature of the analysis, relying on existing cohorts, means that certain clinical data points or treatment details may not have been uniformly collected. Future prospective studies could further validate these findings and explore the clinical utility of variant-level POLE assessment in guiding treatment decisions. Continued research into the TP53-mutant/CNH subgroup is also crucial to identify effective therapeutic strategies for this high-risk population1.

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