Why do some tissues resist oncogenesis, even with mutations?

Written by The Life Science Feed Editorial Team · Published 12 August 2026 · Edited by Mara Voss

> Oncogenic mutations are well-documented drivers of cancer, but their tissue-specific effects often remain a puzzle, largely attributed to genetic factors. A new study published in eLife challenges this long-held view, demonstrating that biophysical interactions between transformed and wild-type cells are critical in determining tumor fate. This research uncovers a mechanical basis for why the same mutation can lead to vastly different outcomes in different epithelial tissues.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Pivot: Tissue-specific oncogenesis is not solely a genetic phenomenon; mechanical interactions at the interface of mutant and wild-type cells play a decisive role.
- The Data: HRasV12 mutants in mammary epithelium form kinetically arrested, jammed clusters, while in bronchial epithelium, they persistently spread, forming long protrusions.
- The Action: Clinicians should consider the biophysical microenvironment as a factor influencing tumor initiation and progression, potentially opening new avenues for early intervention.

The question of why a specific oncogenic mutation drives tumor formation in some tissues but not others has long vexed oncologists. While genetic factors have dominated the explanation, the biophysical aspects of this phenomenon have remained largely unexplored. This new work shifts the focus, highlighting that the mechanical interactions between newly transformed cells and their wild-type neighbors are a determinant of whether a tumor takes hold or is eliminated, with the stake being tumor fate.1

Researchers investigated the survival and growth of HRasV12 mutants in human mammary and bronchial epithelia, two tissues known for distinct oncogenic susceptibilities. They used both isolated mutant cells and mutant cell groups to observe their behavior in a controlled environment. The study aimed to understand the fundamental differences in how these two epithelial types respond to the presence of oncogenic cells.1

Distinct Fates in Different Tissues

The outcomes for HRasV12 mutants in mammary and bronchial epithelia were starkly contrasting. In mammary epithelium, isolated mutant cells were extruded, a process typical of epithelial defense against cancer, effectively eliminating them from the tissue. But when mutant cells formed groups, they became spatially confined in kinetically arrested, jammed clusters. These clusters were characterized by a distinct actomyosin belt at the interface between the mutant and wild-type cells, suggesting a mechanical boundary.1

Bronchial epithelium, by contrast, permitted the persistent spreading of the HRasV12 mutants. These mutant cells formed

long protrusions, irrespective of their colony size, indicating an unrestricted expansion. This difference in behavior, from elimination or confinement in mammary tissue to unhindered spreading in bronchial tissue, points to a fundamental biophysical distinction between the two epithelial environments.1

The researchers further detailed the biophysical properties of these oncogenic clusters in both tissues. They observed significant variations in cell shapes, intracellular pressure, cell-cell tension, and cellular motility. Mammary epithelial mutant clusters exhibited more rounded cell shapes and higher intracellular pressure, contributing to their jammed state. Bronchial epithelial mutants, however, displayed elongated shapes and lower cell-cell tension, facilitating their invasive spreading. These distinct mechanical signatures highlight the tissue-specific nature of early oncogenesis.1

The Role of Interfacial Tension

To understand the underlying mechanics, the investigators employed a cell shape-tension coupled bi-disperse vertex model. This computational model allowed them to simulate and predict how interfacial tension at the mutant-wild-type boundaries influences the fate of mutant clusters. The model revealed that this heterotypic interfacial tension is the primary determinant of whether mutants are eliminated, restrained, or allowed to expand.1

Modulating this heterotypic interfacial tension experimentally confirmed the model's predictions. When the tension was altered, the fate of the mutant clusters changed accordingly. For instance, increasing interfacial tension in bronchial epithelium could induce a more confined, mammary-like behavior in the mutants, while reducing it in mammary epithelium could promote spreading. This direct manipulation of mechanical forces provides compelling evidence for their causal role in oncogenesis.1

The actomyosin belt observed at the interface of mammary epithelial mutant clusters is a key structural component contributing to the high interfacial tension. This belt acts as a physical barrier, preventing the mutant cells from invading the surrounding wild-type tissue. The absence or weakness of such a structure in bronchial epithelium allows for the unhindered expansion of oncogenic cells. Understanding these structural differences offers potential targets for intervention.1

Implications for Early Detection and Intervention

This study provides a mechanical basis for tissue-specific oncogenesis, moving beyond purely genetic explanations. It highlights how interfacial mechanics between mutant and wild-type populations regulate tumor initiation and progression. The findings suggest that the physical properties of the cellular microenvironment are not merely permissive but actively instructive in determining cancer development.1

The implications extend to understanding why certain tissues are more susceptible to specific oncogenic mutations. For example, HRasV12 mutations are known to drive aggressive lung cancers but are less commonly associated with mammary tumors in humans, a paradox partially explained by these mechanical differences. The bronchial epithelium's inherent mechanical properties appear to favor the survival and spread of these particular mutant cells, while the mammary epithelium actively resists them.1

The research also opens avenues for therapeutic strategies that target the mechanical properties of tissues. Instead of solely focusing on genetic pathways, clinicians might one day consider interventions that modulate interfacial tension or enhance the mechanical defense mechanisms of healthy tissues. This could involve drugs that alter cell-cell adhesion, cytoskeletal dynamics, or extracellular matrix properties. For a deeper dive into the cellular mechanisms of cancer, the

Oxford Handbook of Oncology (4th ed) offers a comprehensive reference.1

But the study was conducted in vitro using human cell lines, which, while powerful for mechanistic dissection, do not fully replicate the complexity of a living organism. The intricate relationship of immune cells, stromal components, and systemic factors present in vivo could modify these mechanical responses. Translating these findings to animal models and eventually to human clinical settings will require careful consideration of these additional variables.1

Still, the use of a bi-disperse vertex model provides a robust theoretical framework that aligns with experimental observations. This computational approach allows for predictive modeling, which can accelerate the identification of key mechanical parameters influencing oncogenesis. The ability to modulate heterotypic interfacial tension and observe altered mutant cluster fates provides strong evidence for causality, not just correlation.1

The specific HRasV12 mutation was chosen for its well-established oncogenic potential, but whether these mechanical principles apply broadly to other oncogenic drivers and different epithelial tissues remains an open question. Future research will need to explore a wider range of mutations and tissue types to establish the generalizability of these findings. This will be of high importance for developing therapies that target mechanical vulnerabilities across various cancers.1

The study did not investigate the long-term consequences of these early mechanical interactions, such as metastatic potential or response to conventional therapies. While it provides a compelling explanation for tumor initiation, the role of interfacial tension in later stages of cancer progression, including invasion and metastasis, warrants further investigation. Understanding these later stages could reveal additional therapeutic targets.1

The precise molecular mechanisms linking oncogenic signaling pathways to the observed changes in cell shape, intracellular pressure, and cell-cell tension also require further elucidation. While the study identifies the mechanical consequences, the upstream signaling events that orchestrate these biophysical changes are still being mapped. This will be a critical area for future research to connect the genetic and mechanical aspects of cancer.1

This work fundamentally challenges the prevailing genetic-centric view of cancer initiation. It provides a compelling argument that the physical environment, specifically the mechanical tension at the boundary between healthy and transformed cells, is a powerful and independent determinant of tumor fate. The next step involves validating these mechanisms in more complex in vivo models and exploring pharmacological or physical interventions that can exploit these mechanical vulnerabilities.1

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

This research offers a compelling reframe for how clinicians might think about early oncogenesis. The idea that a tumor's fate is not solely dictated by its genetic mutations, but by the physical push and pull with its neighbors, introduces a new layer of complexity and potential intervention. It means that even with a known oncogenic driver, the tissue microenvironment can either suppress or promote its progression.

For general practitioners and specialists, this suggests that tissue-specific mechanical properties could one day be considered in risk stratification or even early detection. Imagine a future where biophysical markers, perhaps related to tissue stiffness or cell-cell adhesion, could indicate a predisposition to tumor formation in certain organs, even before significant genetic changes manifest or become clinically apparent. This moves beyond the traditional biopsy and genetic sequencing.

The pharmaceutical industry, typically focused on molecular targets, now has a new frontier. Developing

> therapies that modulate interfacial tension or enhance the mechanical resilience of healthy tissue could offer a novel approach to cancer prevention or early intervention. This could involve drugs that stiffen the extracellular matrix in susceptible tissues or strengthen cell-cell junctions to promote extrusion of mutant cells, effectively leveraging the body's natural defense mechanisms.
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> But the translation from in vitro cell models to human patients is a significant leap. While the mechanistic insights are profound, the practical application of modulating tissue mechanics in a targeted, safe, and effective manner remains a distant goal. The challenge lies in identifying specific, druggable targets within these mechanical pathways that do not disrupt normal tissue function.

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