Estrogen Receptor Expression in Glial Tumors of Iranian Patients: A Single Center Experience

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ABSTRACT

Background & Objective: Gliomas are the most common type of primary intracranial tumors in adults. The expression of estrogen receptors varies in different grades of glial tumors, and some studies have suggested that this expression might have a prognostic value. It seems that estrogen receptor expression negatively correlates with the histological grade of gliomas. In the present study, we aimed to determine the expression of estrogen receptor in different glial tumors in Iranian patients and to find a possible correlation between its expression and the grade of glial tumors

Methods: The brain tumors pathology reports from 2014 to 2017 in the Pathology Department of Shohadaye-Tajrish Hospital in Tehran, Iran were evaluated and 104 different gliomas: 79 cases of astrocytoma and 25 cases of oligodendroglioma were selected. All the samples were re-evaluated by a neuropathologist in order to accurately determine the tumor grade. The immunohistochemistry was carried out to detect the expression of estrogen receptor alpha and beta on brain tumors.

Results: None of the samples expressed estrogen receptor alpha. In the case of estrogen receptor beta (ERβ), all samples showed various degrees of positivity: 9% weak, 40% moderate, and 51% strong expressions. The level of ERβ expression was found to be conversely correlated with tumor grade.

Conclusion: Our study demonstrated that ERβ is expressed in the majority (if not all) of the glial tumors and its expression was conversely related to the tumor grade. Because of well-tolerability and acceptable adverse effects, ER agonists might be considered as therapeutic agents for the patients with glial tumors.

Introduction

Gliomas are the most common type of primary intracranial tumors in adults. They originate from supportive cells of the brain, called glial cells (1,2). While some hereditary disorders such as Li-Fraumeni syndrome, tuberous sclerosis, and neurofibromatosis are known to increase the risk of their development, the expression of estrogen receptors varies in different grades of glial tumors. In the present study, we aimed to determine the expression of estrogen receptor in different glial tumors in Iranian patients and to find a possible correlation between its expression and the grade of glial tumors.

Conclusion: Our study demonstrated that ERβ is expressed in the majority (if not all) of the glial tumors and its expression was conversely related to the tumor grade. Because of well-tolerability and acceptable adverse effects, ER agonists might be considered as therapeutic agents for the patients with glial tumors.

While low-grade tumors generally have a favorable outcome, high-grade tumors (especially grade IV) usually have a dismal prognosis despite using multimodality treatments including surgery, radiotherapy, and chemotherapy (3,5). Estrogen hormone, which regulates many functions in the human body, mediates its effects by two main estrogen receptors that are distributed throughout the body including glial cells: estrogen receptor alpha (ERα) and estrogen receptor beta (ERβ).
ERα and ERβ bind to the different ligands and studies have shown that ERα can enhance the proliferation of cancer cells, while ERβ has a potential role as a tumor suppressor. Several studies have demonstrated that high-grade gliomas are frequently associated with loss of ERβ expression, which results in a poor clinical outcome (6,7).

Observation of tumor regression using anti-estrogen medications in the patients with meningioma has made this hypothesis that these drugs might have a similar effect in other types of brain tumors. In-vitro effectiveness of hormonal treatments has been reported in the literature (8-11). The expression of estrogen receptors varies in different grades of glial tumors, and some studies have suggested that this expression might have a prognostic value.

While generally low-grade astrocytomas highly express estrogen receptors, their expression in high-grade gliomas is quite low and it seems that estrogen receptor (especially ERβ) expression negatively correlates with the histological malignancy of gliomas (12).

In the current study, we aimed to evaluate the expression of estrogen receptors in Iranian patients with glial tumors and to find a possible correlation between its expression and the grade of glial tumors.

Materials and Methods

In this cross-sectional study, we evaluated the expression of two variants of ER receptors; estrogen receptor alpha (ERα) and estrogen receptor beta (ERβ) on glial tumors.

All paraffin-embedded blocks of reported glial tumors from 2014 to 2017 were obtained from the Department of Pathology in Shohaday-e Tajrish Hospital in Tehran, Iran. A total number of 104 gliomas (Astrocytomas NOS, grade I to III, glioblastoma NOS, and oligodendrogliomas NOS grade II and III) that contained adequate amounts of tumoral tissue for complimentary pathological examinations were selected.

At first, all the samples were re-evaluated by a neuropathologist in order to re-confirm the initial diagnosis and to accurately determine the tumor grades based on the 2016 WHO classification of tumors of central nervous system. Tissue samples were analyzed by immunohistochemistry for determination of the estrogen receptor expression status by EnVision System kit from Dako (Denmark). Thin cut sections (4 μm) were prepared, de-waxed in xylene and re-hydrated by alcohols. All the samples were buffered and microwaved twice. After 10 minutes of incubation with 0.03% H2O2, they were incubated for 1 hour by primary antibody (ER alpha and beta). After washing with PBS solution cut sections were incubated by EnVision kit (DAKO) for 1 hour. After washing hematoxylin Harris staining was used for 2 minutes for background staining. Breast cancer tissue was used as control for the ER expression. This pathologic evaluation was performed by a blinded pathologist who was unaware of the other clinical data.

The results of IHC assessment were reported in four levels (1) (Figure 1):

Negative expression (less than 10% of the cells show nuclear staining), weak expression (weak nuclear staining intensity or 10-50% of the cells show nuclear staining), moderate expression (moderate nuclear staining intensity and more than 50% of the cells show nuclear staining), strong expression (strong nuclear intensity and more than 50% of the cells show nuclear staining).

Fig. 1. Different patterns of estrogen receptor expression
The SPSS 21 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA) was used for the statistical analysis. For the comparison and description of variables, T-test and χ2 test were used, and P-value<0.05 was considered statistically significant.

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences (ethical code: IR.SBMU.MSP.REC.1395.6).

**Results**

In 104 cases, 64 (61.5%) were men and 40 (38.5%) were women. The median age at the diagnosis was 46.7±15.8 years (range 8 to 81 years old). The majority of the samples (80 cases, 76%) were obtained by open surgery and 20 cases (24%) by stereotactic biopsy. From the samples, 79 cases (76%) were astrocytoma and 25 cases (24%) were oligodendroglioma.

All of the samples were negative for ERα but positive for ERβ in different degrees: 10 (9%) samples showed weak expression, 41 (40%) moderate expression and 53 (51%) strong expression (Figure 2, Table 1).

Based on our results, increase in the median age was associated with higher-grade tumors (P<0.0001). Besides, the patients with moderate and strong ERβ expression had a higher mean age, but this difference was not statistically significant.

The difference in the pattern of ERβ expression in males and females were marginally significant (P=0.058) and women showed more cases of strong expression compared to men.

As shown in Table 1, the cases with weak ERβ expression were mainly high-grade tumors (90% grade III and IV), while this figure dropped to 54.7% in samples that showed strong ERβ. This difference was statistically significant (P<0.001).

In cases with the diagnosis of oligodendroglia, no weak ERβ expression was detected. Majority of the grade II cases showed strong ERβ expression, while the majority of the grade III cases demonstrated moderate expression. However, this difference was not statistically significant (Figure 3).

![Fig. 2. The percentage of various levels of ERβ expression in all 104 cases](image1)

![Fig. 3. ERβ expression in various grades of oligodendroglia](image2)
In our study, astrocytomas mainly showed moderate or strong levels of expression and weak expression was rare. This finding was in contrast to the findings of Batistato et al., who reported that half of their astrocytic tumoral cases demonstrated weak or no ERβ expression (1).

Seventy percent of oligodendroglial tumors in our study showed no or weak ERβ expression and similar to the previous studies (14), we did not find any correlation between oligodendroglioma grade and expression of estrogen receptors.

### Conclusion

Our study demonstrated that while there was no ERα expression detection, ERβ is probably expressed in the majority (if not all) of the glial tumors and its expression is inversely correlated with tumor grade. Previous and ongoing clinical trials have shown that ERβ agonists are well tolerated with acceptable side effects. Further trials are needed to clarify the potential role of ERβ agonists as a therapeutic option to enhance survival and quality of life of the patients with glial tumors.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declared that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

### References


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12. How to Cite This Article