
Alterations of p53 are common in early stage prostate cancer

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Introduction: Mutations in the p53 tumor suppressor gene are generally believed to be a late event in the progression of prostate cancer, and are associated with androgen-independence, increased angiogenesis, metastasis, recurrence, and a worse prognosis. In this review, we examine the current literature available on p53 mutations found in prostate cancer and focus on stages A (T1) and B (T2) of the disease. The alteration of genes involved in p53 regulation are also examined, as well as animal models that support an early role for p53 in the initiation and development of prostate cancer.

Results: We report here that p53 mutations occur in approximately one third of early stage prostate cancers and that expression of HPV E6 or over-expression of

mdm2 contributes to loss of p53 function in an additional 25% of organ-confined disease. High levels of p53 mutation are found in normal prostate tissue of prostate cancer patients and in the precursor lesion, prostatic intraepithelial neoplasia, further implicating p53 mutation or loss as an early event in prostate tumorigenesis.

Conclusions: In contrast to popular opinion, p53 mutations are a common event in early stage, organ-confined prostate cancer and although more studies are needed, the loss of p53 function through expression of viral or cellular oncoproteins also appears quite common. Evidence from animal models of prostate cancer further supports the notion that loss of p53 function plays a critical role in the development of prostate cancer.

Key Words: p53, prostate cancer, tumor progression, tumor suppressor

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The authors would like to note a previously published manuscript on p53 mutations in early stage prostate cancer that discussed difficulties with current methodologies for the detection of p53 mutations, contained a more limited review of the available data (*Urologic Oncology* 2001; 6:103-110).

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Background

The importance of p53 as a tumor suppressor gene is highlighted by the observation that it is mutated in a large proportion of diverse cancers.¹ An enormous amount of investigation into the structure and function of p53 has been performed and reviewed extensively.²⁻⁴ The main role of p53 appears to be mediation of the cellular response to agents that induce DNA damage, thereby preventing the replication and inheritance of mutations. In this

capacity, p53 has been termed “the guardian of the genome”,⁵ and it accomplishes this role through the regulation of transcription, initiation of cell death, induction of DNA repair, and maintenance of the diploid state, all of which can contribute to growth arrest via G₁ and G₂/M checkpoints, apoptosis, differentiation, or senescence of the cell.⁶⁻⁸

As with many other cancers, mutations in the p53 tumor suppressor gene are a frequent genetic event in prostate cancer (CaP), and can be detected in up to 94% of cases.⁹ In cancer as a whole, six codons within p53 (codons 175, 245, 248, 249, 273, and 282) are more likely to be mutated than any other codon and are defined as “hotspots”. Unlike other tumors, in which “hotspot” residues account for approximately one-half of the reported p53 mutations,¹⁰ “hotspot” mutations account for less than twenty percent of p53 mutations in CaP and a prostate-specific mutation has not been identified Figure 1. A key question remaining is to address at what stage of CaP progression do p53 mutations occur? Are they an early event associated with indolent disease or localized tumors, or are they a much later event associated with more aggressive disease involving androgen-independence and metastasis? Given the role of p53 in protecting cells from DNA damage, the answer to this question has important implications for clinicians because the presence of either a functional or functionally defective p53 protein in CaP could have major consequences for a tumor’s response to current modes of therapy, which involve treating prostate cancer cells with DNA damaging drugs or radiation.

In contrast to the prevailing view of recent years,

in this review, we shall present evidence that p53 mutations are not restricted to being a late event in the progression of CaP. This conclusion is supported by several lines of evidence from both the analysis of tumor samples, as well as data from experimental systems including: the presence of p53 mutations in early stage disease (stages A/T1 and B/T2) and premalignant prostate; loss of heterozygosity of the p53 gene in CaP; studies reporting the presence of cellular and viral proteins in CaP that inhibit wild type p53 function; the generation of prostate cancer cell lines; and studies of animal models that mimic prostate cancer progression.

Results

Are p53 mutations a common event in early stage, organ-confined prostate cancer?

Until recently, conclusions based on immunohistochemical and molecular analysis indicated that mutations in p53 were a late event in the progression of prostate cancer and associated with metastasis and androgen-independence.¹¹⁻¹² However, more recently, evidence has been accumulating which suggests that p53 mutations might be present at a much earlier stage of the disease. This subject was first addressed by Heidenberg et al, who reviewed p53 mutations in CaP, and demonstrated that for primary, organ-confined CaP, the incidence of p53 mutations reached 80% in some cases.⁹ In this study, we have chosen to examine stages A (T1) and B (T2) of CaP, because these stages are defined by the tumor being localized to the prostate, with no sign of capsular invasion or metastasis.¹³

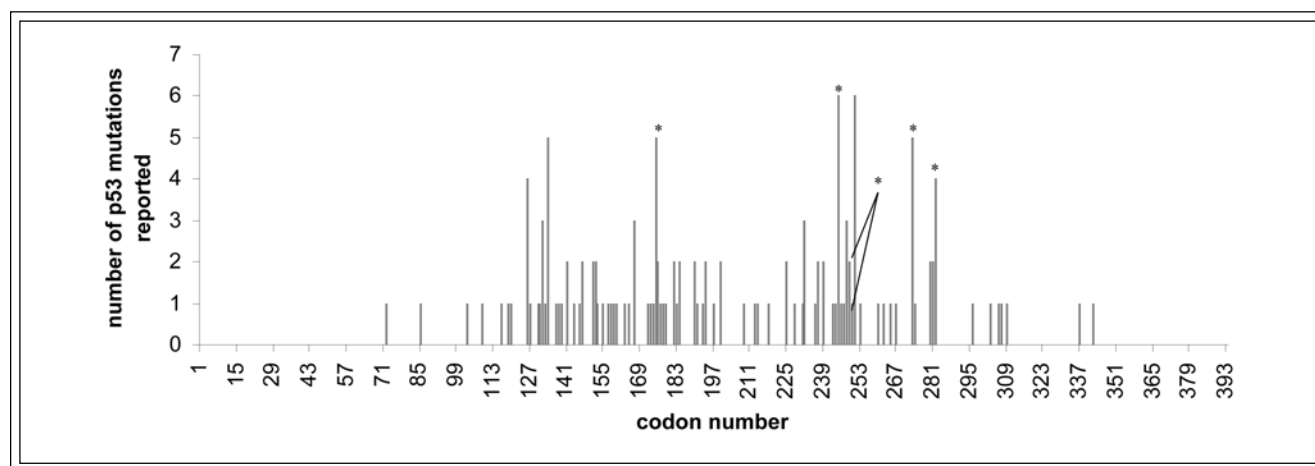


Figure 1. Spectrum of p53 gene mutations in carcinoma of the prostate. Data was compiled from papers reporting specific p53 mutations in prostate.^{14,15,17,20,21,23-25,31,37,52,53,100,103,121-132} Care was taken to ensure that mutations from the same specimen reported in more than one article were only reported once in the figure. “Hotspot” mutations account for approximately 15% of the p53 mutations found in CaP.

Table 1 summarizes available data concerning the nature of p53 mutations in studies in which stages A and B CaP were clearly identified, together with the method used for analysis. Of a total of 32 studies, 29 found p53 mutations in the samples examined, with a range from 0% of cases [for example 14] to 100% of cases¹⁵ and an overall incidence of approximately 30%. Interestingly, in contrast to the vast majority of reports, a study of Japanese prostate cancers by Wanatabe et

al.¹⁶ found no p53 mutations in stage A and only 4% in stage B tumors by single-strand conformation polymorphism (SSCP). Whilst these values are some of the lowest reported for early stage CaP, the authors found mutations in each of the coding exons (exons 2-11) and noted that in Japanese men, mutations were mostly transversions, unlike Western mutations that are mostly transitions.¹⁷ This report highlights the need for examination of all coding exons of p53 (exons

TABLE 1. Detection of p53 mutations in early prostate cancer

Author (ref)	Technique	Stage A or T1	Stage B or T2	Combined Stages (%)
Fox 1993 ¹⁹	IHC (PAb240, PAb1801, CM-1 & DO-7)	6/45		6/45 (13)
Van Veldhuizen 1993 ¹⁸	IHC (PAb240 & PAb1801)	0/1	23/27	23/28 (82)
Navone 1993 ²⁰	IHC (CM-1)			(0)
Uchida 1993 ²¹	SSCP (exons 5-8)		1/3	1/3 (33)
Chi 1994 ¹⁷	SSCP (exons 4-11)		8/69	8/16 (50)
Ittmann 1994 ²²	SSCP (exons 5-8), IHC (CM-1) & LOH			
Massenkeil 1994 ²³	LOH (17p13.1)		1/5	
	SSCP (exons 5-8)		0/9	1/9 (11)
Eastham 1995 ¹⁴	IHC (DO-7 & CM-1)			0/18 (0)
Hall 1995 ²⁴	IHC (PAb1801 & CM-1)			1/26 (4)
Konishi 1995 ²⁵	LOH (codon 72) & IHC (BP53-12)		2/5	2/5 (40)
Bauer 1995 ²⁶	IHC (Signet Labs)		28/57	28/57 (49)
Moyret-Lalle 1995 ²⁷	IHC (PAb1801, CM-1 & DO-7) & SSCP (exons 2,4 & 5-9)		1/3	1/62/9 (22)
Zhang 1996 ²⁸	IHC (DO-1)		0/1	0/1 (0)
Ittmann 1996 ²⁹	LOH (17p)		2/26	2/26
Bauer 1996 ³⁰	IHC (Signet Labs, Cat #8640)	10/25	103/149	113/174 (65)
Wertz 1996 ³¹	SSCP (exons 4-10)		4/7	
	IHC (PAb1801, CM-1, DO-7 & DO-1)		4/7	4/7 (57)
Yang 1996 ³²	IHC (DO-7)			17/49 (35)
Moul 1996 ³³	IHC (Signet Labs)	1/3	37/59	38/62 (61)
Stattin 1996 ³⁴	IHC (DO-1)	4/32	6/57	10/89 (11)
Wanatabe 1997 ¹⁶	SSCP (exons 2-11)	0/5	1/25	1/30 (3)
Theodorescu 1997 ³⁵	IHC (DO-1)	?/16	?/55	20/71 (28)
Schlechte 1997 ³⁶	TGGE (exons 5-8)	0/3	1/4	1/7 (14)
Mottaz 1997 ³⁷	IHC (DO-1 & PAb1801)			1/67
	SSCP (exons 5-8)			0/67 (1)
Gumerlock 1997 ¹⁵	SSCP (exons 4-10)		9/9	9/9 (100)
Byrne 1997 ³⁸	IHC (DO-7)	2/10	3/5	5/15 (33)
Grignon 1997 ³⁹	IHC (DO-7)		10/34	10/34 (29)
Ruijter 1998 ⁴⁰	IHC (DO-1 & DO-7)		1/30	1/30 (3)
Osman 1999 ⁴¹	IHC (PAb1801)			3/51 (6)
Scherr 1999 ⁴²	IHC (DO-7)			17/49 (35)
Brewster 1999 ⁴³	IHC (DO-7)		40/62 (65)	
Stackhouse 1999 ⁴⁴	IHC (PAb1801)			132/199 (66)
Leite 2001 ⁴⁵	IHC (DO-7)		16/69	16/69 (23)
Average		17%	36%	30%

Abbreviations: %, percentage; SSCP, single strand conformation polymorphism; IHC, immunohistochemistry; LOH, loss of heterozygosity; TGGE, temperature gradient gel electrophoresis

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2-11) for mutations, not just the conserved regions of exons 5-8, where most researchers have focused their attention. The values reported in the study by Wanatabe, although low, demonstrate that p53 mutations are more readily detected in stage B cancers than in stage A. As can be seen in Table 1, the levels of p53 mutations in CaP increase drastically from 17% in stage A to 36% in stage B. This may be due to better sampling of a larger tumor or an increase in the number of cells harboring a p53 mutation. This increase in p53 alteration across stages was best demonstrated by Van Veldhuizen et al, who found that 0% of stage A2 tumors (although they only examined 1 sample), 100% of stage B1, and 75% of stage B2 stained positive for p53.¹⁸ Overall, they found that 83% of tumors with a Gleason score of less than 4 were positive for p53 immunostaining. Chi et al found that 50% of stage B cancers of Gleason Score 3-8 contained a p53 mutation by SSCP of exons 4-11.¹⁷ They also found that 50% of normal prostatic tissue from patients with stage B cancer contained a p53 mutation and that this value was 43% for CaP patients over all stages of the disease. It would be beneficial to determine if the cancers in those patients, whose normal prostate tissue harbored a p53 mutation, carried the same mutation. This would allow for a determination of whether or not p53 mutation is a tumorigenic event in CaP development.

p53 mutations in "normal" prostate and PIN

Table 2 summarizes the occurrence of p53 mutations in normal prostatic tissue and prostatic intraepithelial neoplasia (PIN). Given its essential role in

maintaining genomic integrity, alterations of p53 in non-malignant tissue would be rare, and few studies have directly examined "normal" prostate tissue. However, there are two reports in which normal prostate was examined in CaP patients. These studies indicated that nearly one third of CaP patients harbored a p53 mutation in their normal prostatic epithelium.^{17,46} In addition, Stattin et al reported that 6% of T0 cases were also positive for p53 immunoreactivity.³⁴ These findings suggest that p53 mutations may be acquired early, before phenotypic malignant changes have occurred, at least in a subgroup of prostate cancers.

PIN is widely held to be a premalignant condition that can give rise to CaP, and genetic changes that occur within PIN have often been considered to be initiating events for the development of prostate cancer. Mutations in p53 have been reported in 5%-70% of PIN cases Table 2.⁴⁶⁻⁵⁰ It was also found that PIN associated with stage C prostate cancer contained high levels of mutant p53.⁵¹ Since mutations were found concomitantly in both CaP and PIN, it may be concluded that p53 mutations enhance the development of CaP from PIN. It would be of interest to determine if the PIN and CaP lesions contained an identical p53 mutation as it has been reported that metastatic deposits of CaP carry the same p53 mutations as the primary tumor and that cells containing the mutation are selected for in the metastases.^{52,53}

Inactivation without mutation – other mechanisms involved in loss of p53 function

Thus far, the studies discussed have used mutation

TABLE 2. Detection of p53 mutations in "normal" prostate and PIN

Author (ref)	Technique	"Normal" (%)	PIN (%)
Chi 1994 ¹⁷	SSCP (exons 4-11)	5/10 (stage B) 1/4 (stage C) (43)	
Yaman 1997 ⁴⁸	IHC (CM-1)		2/11 (CaP) (18)
Salem 1997 ⁵¹	IHC (PAb1801 & BP53-12)		6/6 (stage C) (100)
Cheng 1999 ⁴⁷	IHC (DO-7)		19/28 (CaP) (68)
Tamboli 1998 ⁴⁶	IHC (DO-7)	(CaP) (20)	(CaP) (56)
Johnson 1998 ⁴⁹	IHC		(CaP) (5)
Yasunaga 1998 ⁵⁰	SSCP		3/22 (CaP) (14)
Incognito 2000 ⁵⁴	SSCP (exons 5-9)	0/5 (0)	
Average		21%	44%

All of the "normal" prostate and PIN specimens were from patients that also had CaP.

Abbreviations: %, percentage; PIN, prostatic intraepithelial neoplasia; SSCP, single strand conformation polymorphism; IHC, immunohistochemistry; CaP, carcinoma of the prostate (stage unknown); TGGE, temperature gradient gel electrophoresis

TABLE 3. Abnormal expression of genes involved in p53 regulation during early stage CaP

Author	Abnormality	Technique	Number of cases (%)
Ittman ²²	Mdm2 gene amplification	Southern blot	0/29 (0)
Moyret-Lalle ¹⁹⁹⁵ ⁸⁸	HPV-16/18 E6	PCR & ISH	3/7 (43)
Suzuki 1996 ⁸⁷	HPV-16 E6	PCR	5/29 (17)
Osman 1999 ⁴¹	Mdm2	IHC	11/51 (22)
Leite 2001 ⁴⁵	Mdm2	IHC	23/69 (33)

Abbreviations: %, percentage; PCR, polymerase chain reaction; ISH, in situ hybridization; IHC, immunohistochemistry; HPV, human papilloma virus

as a marker for loss of p53 function in CaP, however, reports have shown that other modes of p53 loss exist in the development of tumors, for example: methylation of the p53 promoter, loss of p19^{ARF} activity either through mutations or loss of expression (LOE), over-expression of the mdm-2 oncogene, and inhibition of p53 activity due to binding of viral oncogenes or exclusion from the nucleus.⁵⁵⁻⁶¹ Except for methylation of the p53 promoter, all of these modes of p53 loss have been examined in prostate cancer Table 3 and will be discussed.

Mdm-2 is a p53-responsive gene that serves as a negative feedback regulator of p53 activity.⁵⁶ The role of mdm-2 in this regulatory mechanism is to bind and inactivate p53 and to shuttle p53 out of the nucleus, where it is then ubiquitinated and degraded.⁶²⁻⁶⁶ Once released from p53, mdm-2 relocates to the nucleus to continue cytoplasmic translocation of p53. Thus over-expression of mdm-2 by gene amplification can result in a loss of p53 function in the absence of mutations and this occurs in several cancers Figure 2a.⁶⁷⁻⁷⁰ There does not appear to be any amplification of the mdm-2 gene itself in stage B CaP,²² however, mdm-2 protein has been shown to be over-expressed, by IHC, in as many as 32.5% of radical prostatectomy specimens,⁷¹ including one third of stage B tumors,⁴⁵ suggesting that there may be multiple pathways to CaP progression involving the loss of p53 function. Given that very few studies have examined the expression pattern of mdm-2 in the normal prostate and in CaP thus far, more research is required. The degradation of p53 by mdm2 is inhibited by p19^{ARF} Figure 2b,^{59,60} thus adding another regulatory level to the control of p53 activity within the cell, and loss of p19^{ARF} may allow for improper degradation of p53 by mdm2. Two studies have examined alterations in the ARF gene in prostate cancer specimens. Park et al found no mutations in p19^{ARF}⁷² while Nguyen et al found hypermethylation in exon 2 in 73% of prostate cancers.⁷³ Individual stages of CaP could not be

determined from the manuscripts, however, the findings support the notion of multiple pathways to loss of p53 function in prostate cancer.

Several viral proteins can inhibit the function of wild type p53 by a manner analogous to that used by mdm-2, for example, the E6 protein of the human papilloma virus (HPV).⁷⁴ Infection by HPV is a major factor in the development of cervical cancer,⁷⁵ and the presence of HPV in prostatic tissue has been examined to determine a possible link with the development of a subset of CaP, with the presence of HPV reported in

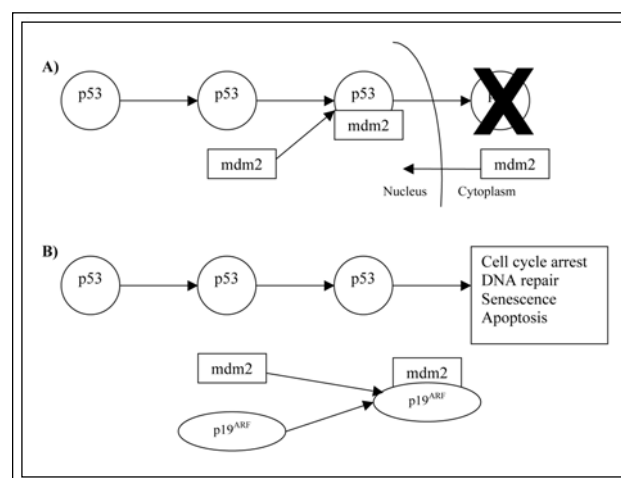


Figure 2. Regulation of p53 activity. Mdm2 binds to p53 resulting in nuclear export, ubiquitination, and eventual degradation of the p53 protein. Once released from p53, mdm2 is free to shuttle back into the nucleus to continue translocation of p53 into the cytoplasm (a). Viral oncoproteins, such as E6, act in a similar fashion to mdm2. The degradation of p53 by mdm2 can be inhibited by the p19^{ARF} protein (b). This allows p53 to remain in the nucleus and accumulate. Over-expression of mdm2, or the loss of p19^{ARF} expression, results in loss of p53 function due to reduced protein levels.

prostatic tissue ranging from 0%-100% of cases.⁷⁶⁻⁸² One suggested explanation for these varying levels of HPV has been proposed by Terris and Peehl, who found that the levels of detected HPV varied between 0%-14% in normal prostate tissue, 0%-25% in adenocarcinomas, and from 0%-18% in CaP when using different primer sets on the same tissue samples.⁸³ Although the levels of HPV reported in CaP vary greatly, the majority of reports place the levels at 10%-50%⁸⁴⁻⁸⁶ with high levels being reported in both adenomas and stage B CaP,^{87,88} and no mutations of p53 found in these cancers.⁸⁸ The absence of p53 mutations in these tumors suggests that p53 function may have been abrogated, and that there is no longer a selective pressure for the acquisition of p53 mutations. While some reports found high levels of HPV in CaP, there is still debate over the possibility that HPV directly contributes to CaP initiation and progression, or rather that the prostate merely serves as a reservoir for the sexual transmission of HPV.⁸⁹⁻⁹¹ However, the presence of HPV can result in an increased risk of developing CaP and may be able to predict the development of metastasis to bone.^{92,93} Experimental evidence to support the notion that inhibition of p53 function by viral proteins can lead to the development of CaP has come from studies using prostate epithelial cells immortalised with HPV or SV40.⁹⁴⁻⁹⁹

Studies examining other modes of inhibiting p53 function, including LOH, and nuclear exclusion are very limited. Most, if not all, studies which examined p53 staining by IHC only counted cells as positive, if the nucleus stained positive or if the nucleus stained more intensely than the cytoplasm.¹⁰⁰ Nuclear localization is necessary for most p53 functions, thus if excluded from the nucleus, these functions cannot be performed.¹⁰¹ It has also been suggested that prostate cells may inhibit p53 function by localizing p53 to the nucleolus.¹⁰² Of several reports examining LOH of 17p or the p53 locus itself, LOH was found in 8%-11% of stage B CaP,^{22,29} and 32% of biopsies and prostatectomy specimens.¹⁰³ LOH can result in the retention of one wild type allele, however, there does appear to be a gene dosage affect with p53, and simply reducing the level of wild type p53 within a cell can increase susceptibility to tumorigenesis.¹⁰⁴

Lessons to be learned from animal models

Transgenic animals offer a unique opportunity for the study of prostate cancer. Models have been developed that mimic CaP progression in humans

from PIN through to metastatic disease, and the advantages and disadvantages of each model have been reviewed extensively.¹⁰⁵⁻¹⁰⁷ Animal models that do not address p53 will not be discussed here as they are beyond the scope of this review and to-date we know of no animal model that directly refutes the involvement of p53 mutations in the development of prostate cancer.

Several models indirectly support the hypothesis that p53 mutation, or inactivation, is an early and necessary event in the development and progression of CaP because they all use simian virus (SV) 40 large T antigen (TAg) under the control of a prostate specific promoter to inactivate p53 function in prostate cells,¹⁰⁸⁻¹¹⁴ and the transgenic mice generated develop CaP in the absence of functional p53. Several of these models appear to mimic the course of CaP in humans because the animals develop PIN and progress to CaP^{109-111,115} with two of the models also developing metastatic disease.^{109,110} As a side note, several of these models also strengthen the link between metastatic and androgen-independent disease, and p53 inactivation.^{110-112,116,117}

SV40 large TAg can also inhibit the function of the retinoblastoma (Rb) protein,¹¹⁴ so it is not clear if inactivation of both Rb and p53 is required for CaP development in the above transgenic models. However, other animal models specifically implicate loss of p53 function. The 'reconstitution model' involves introduction of oncogenic *ras* and *myc* into the developing urogenital sinus of p53 knockout animals.¹¹⁸ All p53^{-/-} mice developed CaP, and those p53^{+/-} animals that did develop CaP had lost the remaining wild type p53 allele. The loss of the wild type p53 allele in the heterozygous animals is crucial because wild type p53 can suppress *ras* mediated transformation even in the presence of *myc*.^{119,120} The absence of the p53 gene also allowed establishment of a prostate cancer cell line derived from a p53 knockout mouse.⁸⁷

The above models provide strong evidence that a loss of normal p53 function through viral proteins or allelic loss can result in the initiation and progression of prostate cancer. Furthermore, these models also describe the development of metastasis and androgen independence in the absence of p53. The importance of these processes to the development of prostate cancer in humans remains to be clearly determined, however, it should be emphasized that LOH has been found in up to one third of CaP specimens,^{103,121} and human papilloma virus (HPV) has been found in approximately one fifth of prostate cancer specimens.^{84,87}

Conclusions

Mutations in the p53 tumor suppressor gene occur at a much higher frequency in early stage prostate cancer than previously thought. However, mutation is not the only route to loss of function, and altered expression of cellular or viral oncoproteins also contributes to the loss of p53 function in early CaP. Further evidence in support of an early loss of p53 in CaP comes from studies that show a high rate of p53 mutation in PIN and animal models that mimic the development of prostate cancer. While more studies are warranted to examine the specific role alterations in p53 may play in prostate cancer initiation and progression, it is clear that p53 mutations are associated with increased microvessel density, androgen-independence, and metastasis in CaP. This raises the possibility that tumorigenesis and acquisition of metastatic ability may occur simultaneously, and not sequentially, in CaP. At a clinical level, knowing if a particular patient harbored a p53 mutation in the early stages of CaP could allow for the application of more appropriate treatment strategies specifically designed to enhance a patient's chances of being more effectively treated. □

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