Journal of Cancer Therapy and Research

Genesis-JCTR-5(1)-42
Volume 5 | Issue 1
Open Access
ISSN: 2583-6552

Ferroptosis in Hepatocellular Carcinoma: A Retrospective Analysis

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Citation : Wang H. Ferroptosis in Hepatocellular Carcinoma : A Retrospective Analysis. J Can Ther Res. 5(1):1-5.

Received: June 10, 2025 | **Published**: July 20, 2025

Abstract

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is a highly aggressive malignancy with limited therapeutic options, making identification of novel regulatory mechanisms critical. Ferroptosis, a - dependent programmed cell death characterized by lipid peroxidation, has emerged as a key modulator of HCC progression. This retrospective analysis synthesizes evidence from 32 recent studies (PubMed, 2020–2025) to dissect the role of ferroptosis in HCC pathogenesis, diagnosis, and therapy. Key findings include dysregulation of ferroptosis-related genes (e.g., GPX4, SLC7A11, TFRC) associated with tumor growth, metastasis, and treatment response. Clinically, ferroptosis signatures predict prognosis and inform precision therapies, with iron chelators and ferroptosis inducers showing promise in preclinical models. This review highlights the translational potential of ferroptosis research for developing targeted strategies in HCC management.

Keywords

Hepatocellular carcinoma; Iron metabolism genes; Antioxidant System Genes; Molecular mechanisms; Oncogenic signalling crosstalk; T Cell.

Introduction

HCC accounts for 85% of primary liver cancers, with a 5-year survival rate <15% due to late diagnosis and resistance to conventional therapies. Ferroptosis, first described in 2012, is distinct from apoptosis and necrosis, driven by iron-dependent accumulation of lipid hydroperoxides. Key regulatory pathways include the glutathione peroxidase 4 (GPX4)-mediated antioxidant system, cystine/glutamate antiporter

(SLC7A11/xCT), and iron metabolism genes (TFRC, FTH1). Dysregulation of these pathways in HCC has been linked to oncogenic signalling, immune microenvironment modulation, and therapeutic resistance, making ferroptosis a promising target for intervention.

Methods

Literature search

A systematic PubMed search was performed using keywords: ("hepatocellular carcinoma" OR "HCC") AND ("ferroptosis" OR "iron-dependent cell death" OR "lipid peroxidation"). Inclusion criteria: English studies (2020–2025) reporting ferroptosis-related genes, molecular mechanisms, or clinical outcomes in HCC. Exclusion criteria: reviews, non-clinical studies, or non-HCC cancer types.

Data synthesis

Studies were categorized by molecular pathways (iron metabolism, lipid peroxidation, antioxidant systems), clinical relevance (diagnosis, prognosis), and therapeutic interventions. Quantitative data (gene expression levels, survival statistics, treatment efficacy) were extracted and tabulated.

Results

Ferroptosis-related gene dysregulation in HCC

I. Antioxidant System Genes

- **GPX4**: Downregulated in 65% of HCC tissues (mRNA: 0.68 ± 0.21 vs. normal liver 1.00 ± 0.15, $p<0.001$, (Table 1), correlated with reduced glutathione (GSH) levels and increased lipid peroxidation.
- **SLC7A11**: Overexpressed in 72% of HCC cases, protecting cancer cells from ferroptosis by enhancing cystine uptake (protein: 2.35 ± 0.89 vs. normal 1.00 ± 0.23, $p<0.001$, [1].

II. Iron metabolism genes

- **TFRC:** Upregulated in metastatic HCC, increasing iron uptake (mRNA: 1.89 ± 0.55 vs. non-metastatic 1.00 ± 0.18, $p=0.003$, (Table 1).
- **FTH1:** Ferritin heavy chain downregulated in advanced HCC, promoting labile iron accumulation (OR=2.8, 95% CI: 1.7–4.5, $p<0.001$, [2]).

Gene	HCC (n=200)	Normal Liver (n=50)	Fold Change	*p*-value
GPX4	0.68 ± 0.21	1.00 ± 0.15	0.68x	<0.001
SLC7A11	2.35 ± 0.89	1.00 ± 0.23	2.35x	<0.001
TFRC	1.89 ± 0.55	1.00 ± 0.18	1.89x	0.003
FTH1	0.72 ± 0.25	1.00 ± 0.20	0.72x	0.008
Note: Data shown as mean ± SD (qRT-PCR); fold change relative to normal liver.				

Table 1: Key Ferroptosis Gene Expression in HCC Tissues.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.52793/JCTR.2025.5(1)-42

Molecular mechanisms of ferroptosis in HCC

I. Oncogenic signaling crosstalk

- **TP53**: Mutant p53 (R249S) suppresses GPX4 expression, sensitizing HCC cells to ferroptosis (Figure 1, [3].
- **NRF2**: Hyperactivated in 55% of HCC, NRF2 upregulates SLC7A11 and GPX4, conferring ferroptosis resistance (GSEA NES=1.9, p=0.012, [4]).

II. Immune Microenvironment Regulation

- **Macrophages**: Ferroptotic HCC cells release HMGB1, recruiting M2-like macrophages via TLR4 signaling, promoting tumor growth (Table 2), [5]).
- **T Cells**: Ferroptosis induces PD-L1 expression on cancer cells, enhancing immune evasion (PD-L1+ cells: 35% vs. 15% in ferroptosis-resistant cells, p<0.01, [6]).

Cell Type	Mechanism	Functional Impact
HCC Cells	HMGB1 release → TLR4 activation in macrophages	M2 polarization, TNF-α secretion
T Cells	Ferroptosis-induced PD-L1 upregulation	T cell exhaustion
Dendritic Cells	Iron overload → DC maturation inhibition	Reduced antigen presentation

Table 2: Ferroptosis-Immune Interaction in HCC.

Clinical Relevance of Ferroptosis Signatures

I. Diagnostic and Prognostic Biomarkers

- **Ferroptosis Risk Score (FRS)**: A 5-gene panel (GPX4, SLC7A11, TFRC, FTH1, ACSL4) achieves AUC-ROC=0.87 for distinguishing HCC from cirrhosis (n=300, p<0.001), (Table 3).
- **Prognosis**: High FRS predicts poor overall survival (median OS: 14 vs. 26 months, HR=2.5, 95% CI: 1.6–3.9, p<0.001, [7]).

II. Therapeutic Interventions

Ferroptosis Inducers

- **Salidroside**: Inhibits SLC7A11, increasing lipid peroxidation and reducing HCC cell viability (IC50: 25 μM vs. control 50 μM, (Table 4), [8]).
- **Erastin**: Sensitizes sorafenib-resistant HCC cells, decreasing tumor volume by 55% in xenografts (p<0.01, [9]).

III. Iron chelators

- **Deferoxamine (DFO)**: Reduces labile iron, inhibiting HCC growth (tumor weight: 0.8 ± 0.2 g vs. control 1.5 ± 0.3 g, p=0.005, (Table 4), [10]).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.52793/JCTR.2025.5(1)-42

Biomarker	Diagnostic AUC-ROC	Median OS (Months) (High vs. Low)	HR (95% CI)	*p*-value
5-gene FRS	0.87	14 vs. 26	2.5 (1.6–3.9)	<0.001
GPX4 expression	–	18 vs. 24	1.8 (1.1–2.9)	0.028

Table 3: Diagnostic and Prognostic Performance of Ferroptosis Signatures.

Agent	Model	In Vitro Viability Inhibition (%)	In Vivo Tumor Growth Reduction (%)
Salidroside	HCC cell lines	60 ± 5 (72 h)	55 ± 8 (xenograft)
Erastin	Sorafenib-resistant	55 ± 6 (48 h)	50 ± 7 (orthotopic)
Deferoxamine	Huh7 xenograft	45 ± 4 (96 h)	40 ± 6

Table 4: Therapeutic Efficacy of Ferroptosis-targeted Agents.

Discussion

This analysis highlights the critical role of ferroptosis dysregulation in HCC, with antioxidant system genes and iron metabolism pathways emerging as key drivers of tumor progression and therapy response. Clinically, the ferroptosis risk score offers potential for non-invasive diagnosis and prognostic stratification, while targeted inducers/chelators show promise in preclinical models.

Challenges include the dual role of iron in cancer (pro-oxidant vs. pro-survival), inter-patient variability in ferroptosis pathway activation, and potential off-target effects of iron-based therapies. Future research should prioritize clinical validation of ferroptosis biomarkers, explore combination strategies (e.g., ferroptosis inducers + immunotherapy), and investigate the crosstalk between ferroptosis and other cell death modalities (apoptosis, autophagy).

Conclusion

Ferroptosis represents a novel therapeutic axis in HCC, with dysregulated iron metabolism and lipid peroxidation pathways offering actionable targets. Translating mechanistic insights into clinical applications could improve patient stratification and treatment efficacy, particularly for drug-resistant HCC subsets.

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