Journal of Cancer Therapy and Research

Genesis-JCTR-5(1)-47
Volume 5 | Issue 1
Open Access
ISSN: 2583-6552

Endoplasmic Reticulum Stress in Hepatocellular Carcinoma

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Citation : Wang H. Endoplasmic Reticulum Stress in Hepatocellular Carcinoma. J Can Ther Res. 5(1):1-5.

Received: June 10, 2025 | **Published**: October 10, 2025

Abstract

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is characterized by aberrant protein homeostasis and metabolic stress, with endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress emerging as a critical regulator of tumor progression. ER stress activates the unfolded protein response (UPR) through three primary pathways—PERK, IRE1α, and ATF6—thereby influencing cancer cell survival, angiogenesis, and immune evasion. This retrospective analysis synthesizes evidence from 29 recent studies (PubMed, 2020–2025) to dissect the roles of ER stress in HCC pathogenesis, diagnosis, and therapy. Key findings include dysregulated UPR components (e.g., p-PERK, spliced XBP1, CHOP) associated with aggressive tumor phenotypes and therapeutic resistance. Clinically, ER stress signatures demonstrate prognostic value, and targeting UPR pathways shows promising preclinical efficacy. This review highlights ER stress as a pivotal target for developing precision medicine strategies in HCC.

Keywords

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

Introduction

As the most common primary liver cancer, HCC arises from chronic liver injury, viral infection, and metabolic disorders. The endoplasmic reticulum (ER), a vital organelle for protein folding and calcium homeostasis, experiences significant stress in HCC due to oncogenic protein overload, nutrient deficiency, or oxidative stress. The unfolded protein response (UPR) mitigates ER stress through three conserved signalling axes: protein kinase RNA-like ER kinase (PERK), inositol-requiring enzyme 1α (IRE1α), and

activating transcription factor 6 (ATF6). However, dysregulated UPR in HCC promotes adaptive survival under stress while enabling immune evasion and drug resistance, positioning ER stress as a critical therapeutic target.

Methods

Literature search

A systematic PubMed search was conducted using the following keyword combination:

Inclusion criteria: English-language studies (2020–2025) reporting mechanistic, clinical, or therapeutic data on ER stress in HCC. Exclusion criteria: review articles, non-clinical studies, or research not focusing on HCC.

Data synthesis

Studies were categorized by UPR pathway (PERK/eIF2α, IRE1α/XBP1, ATF6/CHOP), clinical relevance (diagnosis, prognosis), and therapeutic interventions. Quantitative data including gene expression levels, survival outcomes, and treatment efficacy were extracted and tabulated according to standardized methods.

Results

Dysregulation of ER stress pathways in HCC

I. PERK/eIF2α axis

- **p-PERK**: Phosphorylated PERK (p-PERK) was overexpressed in 72% of HCC tissues, with protein levels at 2.35±0.89 (vs. 1.00±0.23 in normal liver, $p<0.001$, Table 1), leading to increased eIF2α phosphorylation (1.80±0.65 vs. normal, $p=0.003$).
- **ATF4**: Downstream transcription factor ATF4 showed a 2.1-fold mRNA upregulation in HCC, positively correlating with amino acid metabolism and antioxidant gene expression (e.g., *GCLC*, [1]).

II. IRE1α/XBP1 Axis

- **IRE1α**: IRE1α protein levels increased in 65% of HCC tissues (1.92±0.65 vs. normal, $p=0.005$), with spliced XBP1 (sXBP1) mRNA upregulated 1.9-fold, strongly correlating with *VEGFA* expression ($r=0.62$, $p<0.001$),[2]).
- **TRAF2**: The IRE1α-binding protein TRAF2 was highly expressed in metastatic lesions, activating the NF-κB pathway to promote inflammation (GSEA NES=1.8, $p=0.015$), [3]).

III. ATF6/CHOP axis

- **ATF6**: Cleaved ATF6, the activated form, increased in 58% of HCC tissues, inducing GRP78 expression (2.25±0.75 vs. normal, $p<0.001$).
- **CHOP**: The pro-apoptotic factor CHOP was downregulated in advanced HCC (0.68±0.25 vs. normal, $p=0.008$), negatively correlating with miR-21 overexpression ($p=0.012$), [4]).

Marker	HCC (n=180)	Normal Liver (n=60)	Fold Change	*p*-value
p-PERK	2.35±0.89	1.00±0.23	2.35x	<0.001
IRE1α	1.92±0.65	1.00±0.18	1.92x	0.005

DOI: https://doi.org/10.52793/JCTR.2025.5(1)-47

sXBP1	1.85±0.58	1.00±0.20	1.85x	0.003
CHOP	0.68±0.25	1.00±0.20	0.68x	0.008
Note: Data from Western blot/qRT-PCR; fold change relative to normal liver.				

Table 1: Key ER Stress Marker Expression in HCC Tissues.

Molecular Mechanisms of ER Stress in HCC

I. **PERK/eIF2α-mediated survival:** PERK phosphorylation of eIF2α suppressed global protein translation but selectively enhanced ATF4 translation, upregulating amino acid transporters (e.g., ASNS) and antioxidant genes to support tumor cell survival under nutrient stress [5]. ATF4 knockdown in HCC cells reduced glutathione levels by 30% and increased chemosensitivity by 40%.

II. **IRE1α/XBP1-driven angiogenesis:** IRE1α-mediated XBP1 splicing promoted VEGFA transcription, with sXBP1 strongly correlating with microvessel density in HCC tissues ($r=0.55$, $p<0.001$). sXBP1 inhibition reduced tumor angiogenesis by 50% and suppressed tumor growth by 35% in mouse models [6].

III. **ATF6/CHOP-balanced cell fate:** Activated ATF6 induced ER chaperones (e.g., GRP78) to reduce protein toxicity, while prolonged ER stress activated CHOP to induce apoptosis. CHOP downregulation in HCC inhibited BIM expression, allowing tumor cells to evade ER stress-induced cell death [7].

Clinical Relevance of ER Stress Signatures

I. Diagnostic and prognostic biomarkers

- **ER Stress Score (ERS)**: A 4-gene panel (p-PERK, sXBP1, ATF6, CHOP) achieved an AUC-ROC of 0.87 for distinguishing HCC from cirrhosis (n=250, $p<0.001$, Table 2).
- **Prognostic Value**: Patients with high ERS had a median overall survival (OS) of 15 months, significantly shorter than 27 months in low ERS patients (HR=2.4, 95% CI: 1.6–3.7, $p<0.001$). High p-eIF2α expression was associated with a 2.1-fold increased risk of postoperative recurrence ($p=0.028$).

Therapeutic interventions

II. UPR inhibitors

- **PERK Inhibitor GSK2606414**: Combined with sorafenib, GSK2606414 reduced HCC cell IC50 by 40%, inhibited tumor growth by 55% in vivo, and decreased ATF4 protein levels by 60% ([1], Table 3).
- **IRE1α Inhibitor STF-083010**: STF-083010 blocked XBP1 splicing, reducing tumor cell migration by 60% and lung metastases by 45% [8].

DOI: https://doi.org/10.52793/JCTR.2025.5(1)-47

III. ER stress inducers

- **Tunicamycin**: Induced ER stress and activated CHOP, increasing HCC cell apoptosis to 60% (vs. 20% in controls, $p<0.001$, [7]).
- **Thapsigargin**: Depleted ER calcium stores, activated ATF6, and inhibited tumor angiogenesis by 30% [6].

Biomarker	Diagnostic AUC-ROC	Median OS (Months)	HR (95% CI)	*p*-value
4-gene ERS	0.87	15 vs. 27	2.4 (1.6–3.7)	<0.001
High p-eIF2α	–	18 vs. 24	1.9 (1.2–3.1)	0.028

Table 2: ER Stress Signature for HCC Diagnosis and Prognosis.

Agent	Model	In Vitro Viability Inhibition (%)	In Vivo Tumor Growth Reduction (%)	Key Molecular Change
GSK2606414 + Sorafenib	HepG2	65±5 (72 h)	55±7	↓ATF4 by 60%
STF-083010	Huh7	55±6 (96 h)	40±6	↓sXBP1 by 50%
Tunicamycin	Primary HCC Cells	60±4 (48 h)	45±8 (Orthotopic Model)	↑CHOP by 3.5x

Table 3: Therapeutic Efficacy of ER Stress-targeted Agents.

Discussion

ER stress in HCC exerts dual effects: adaptive UPR promotes tumor cell survival under metabolic stress, while excessive stress triggers apoptosis. Dysregulated PERK/eIF2α and IRE1α/XBP1 pathways drive oncogenic metabolism and angiogenesis, whereas ATF6/CHOP imbalance facilitates immune evasion. Clinical ER stress signatures provide robust diagnostic and prognostic value, particularly in risk stratification and treatment response prediction.

Therapeutic strategies targeting UPR components show promise, but challenges include pathway-specific toxicity and distinguishing adaptive vs. pro-apoptotic signalling. Future research should focus on developing context-specific UPR modulators, exploring combinations with immunotherapies, and investigating crosstalk between ER stress and autophagy/oxidative stress pathways.

Conclusion

ER stress and its associated UPR pathways are central to HCC pathogenesis, offering actionable targets for precision therapy. Translating these findings into clinical applications has the potential to improve patient stratification and treatment outcomes, especially for advanced and therapy-resistant HCC.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.52793/JCTR.2025.5(1)-47

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