SJIF Impact Factor (2023): 8.574| ISI I.F. Value: 1.241| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2016 ISSN: 2455-7838(Online)
EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD)
Volume: 8 | Issue: 12 | December 2023 - Peer Reviewed Journal

TARGETING EPIDERMAL GROWTH FACTOR RECEPTOR FOR CANCER TREATMENT

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra15285
DOI No: 10.36713/epra15285

ABSTRACT
The Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) is a pivotal player in cellular signalling pathways and its dysregulation is implicated in various cancers. Targeting EGFR has emerged as a promising strategy for cancer treatment. This abstract provides Comprehensive analysis of EGFR-targeted therapies, including small molecule tyrosine kinase inhibitors and monoclonal antibodies, reveals their efficacy in suppressing aberrant signalling cascades associated with tumor growth. Mechanisms of resistance, biomarkers for patient stratification, and ongoing clinical trials are discussed to highlight the evolving landscape of EGFR-targeted cancer therapies. The multifaceted nature of EGFR signaling necessitates a personalized approach, emphasizing the need for precision medicine to optimize therapeutic outcomes. This abstract encapsulates the significance and challenges of targeting EGFR for cancer treatment, providing a foundation for further research and clinical advancements in the field.

KEYWORDS: *Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR), Cancer Treatment, Tyrosine Kinase Inhibitors, Monoclonal Antibodies, Biomarkers, Precision Medicine*

INTRODUCTION:[1-5]

The Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR), a member of the ErbB family, is a pivotal transmembrane receptor tyrosine kinase regulating cell proliferation, survival, and differentiation. Ligand binding induces receptor dimerization, activating downstream pathways crucial for cellular processes. The receptor's structure encompasses ligand-binding, transmembrane, and intracellular tyrosine kinase domains. Dysregulation of EGFR contributes to various cancers, necessitating targeted therapeutic interventions.

EGFR Dysregulation in Cancer

EGFR dysregulation, manifested in overexpression and mutations, underlies numerous cancers. Notable instances include Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer (NSCLC), Colorectal Cancer (CRC), Breast Cancer, Head and Neck Squamous Cell Carcinoma (HNSCC), and Glioblastoma Multiforme (GBM). Mechanisms include gene amplification, activating mutations, and autocrine signalling, fostering uncontrolled cell growth and tumorigenesis.

Significance of Targeting EGFR

EGFR's significance as a therapeutic target is underscored by its aberrant activation in cancer, broad applicability across multiple cancer types, and its role as a prognostic indicator. Targeted therapies, such as Tyrosine Kinase Inhibitors (TKIs) like gefitinib and erlotinib, and Monoclonal Antibodies such as cetuximab and panitumumab, have been developed to counter EGFR dysregulation. Combination therapies, integrating EGFR inhibitors with other agents, are explored to optimize treatment outcomes.

MOLECULAR STRUCTURE AND SIGNALING PATHWAYS OF EGFR[6,7]

1. Extracellular Ligand-Binding Domain:
   The N-terminal extracellular domain of EGFR comprises four subdomains (I-IV) and a cysteine-rich region. Ligand-binding primarily occurs in subdomains I and III, where ligands like EGF and TGF-α bind. Conformational changes upon ligand binding promote receptor dimerization, facilitated by disulfide bonds formed by cysteine residues.
2. Transmembrane Domain:
   The hydrophobic transmembrane domain spans the lipid bilayer of the cell membrane, composed of hydrophobic amino acids that anchor the receptor. It plays a crucial role in transmitting signals from the extracellular ligand-binding domain to the intracellular tyrosine kinase domain.
3. Intracellular Tyrosine Kinase Domain:

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The C-terminal intracellular domain houses the tyrosine kinase domain responsible for phosphorylating tyrosine residues on the receptor and downstream signalling proteins. Ligand-induced receptor dimerization leads to autophosphorylation of specific tyrosine residues, serving as docking sites for various signalling proteins.

4. Activation Mechanism:
   Ligand binding induces a conformational change, promoting receptor dimerization. This brings the intracellular tyrosine kinase domains into proximity, facilitating transphosphorylation. Autophosphorylation of tyrosine residues in the intracellular domain activates the kinase, initiating downstream signalling.

OVERVIEW OF DOWNSTREAM SIGNALING PATHWAYS ACTIVATED BY EGFR[8,9,10]

- MAPK (Mitogen-Activated Protein Kinase) Pathway
- PI3K (Phosphoinositide 3-Kinase)/AKT Pathway
- JAK/STAT (Janus Kinase/Signal Transducer and Activator of Transcription) Pathway
- PLCγ (Phospholipase C gamma) Pathway
- Cross-Talk and Integration of Signalling
- Dysregulation in Cancer and Therapeutic Implications

EGFR OVEREXPRESSION MECHANISMS IN CANCER[11,12]

1. Gene Amplification:
   Gene amplification leads to an increased copy number of the EGFR gene, resulting in elevated EGFR protein production. This mechanism is frequently observed in various tumors, including lung, breast, and glioblastoma.
2. Mutation in EGFR Gene:
   Mutations, especially in the tyrosine kinase domain, lead to constitutive activation of the receptor, promoting continuous signalling that drives cell proliferation and survival. EGFR mutations are prevalent in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and enhance sensitivity to EGFR-targeted therapies.
3. Promoter Hypomethylation:
   Epigenetic changes, such as hypomethylation of the EGFR promoter, increase transcription and expression of EGFR. This phenomenon is associated with several cancers, including glioblastoma and head and neck squamous cell carcinoma.
4. Transcriptional Factors:
   Transcriptional factors like STAT3 and AP-1 can enhance EGFR expression in response to various stimuli. Dysregulation of these factors contributes to sustained EGFR expression in cancer cells.
5. Post-transcriptional and Post-translational Modification:
   Aberrant microRNA expression reduces degradation of EGFR mRNA, leading to overexpression. Additionally, disruptions in ubiquitin-mediated protein degradation pathways contribute to increased stability and accumulation of EGFR protein.

EPIDERMAL GROWTH FACTOR RECEPTOR OVEREXPRESSION AND MUTATION IN CANCER:[13]

EGFR overexpression is a prevalent occurrence in diverse human cancers, significantly influencing prognosis and treatment outcomes. Elevated EGFR levels correlate with unfavourable prognoses in bladder, breast, cervical, esophageal, head and neck, ovarian, and stomach cancers. Despite also being overexpressed in colorectal cancer (CRC), non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), and glioblastoma multiforme (GBM), controversies surround its prognostic significance, particularly in CRC and NSCLC.

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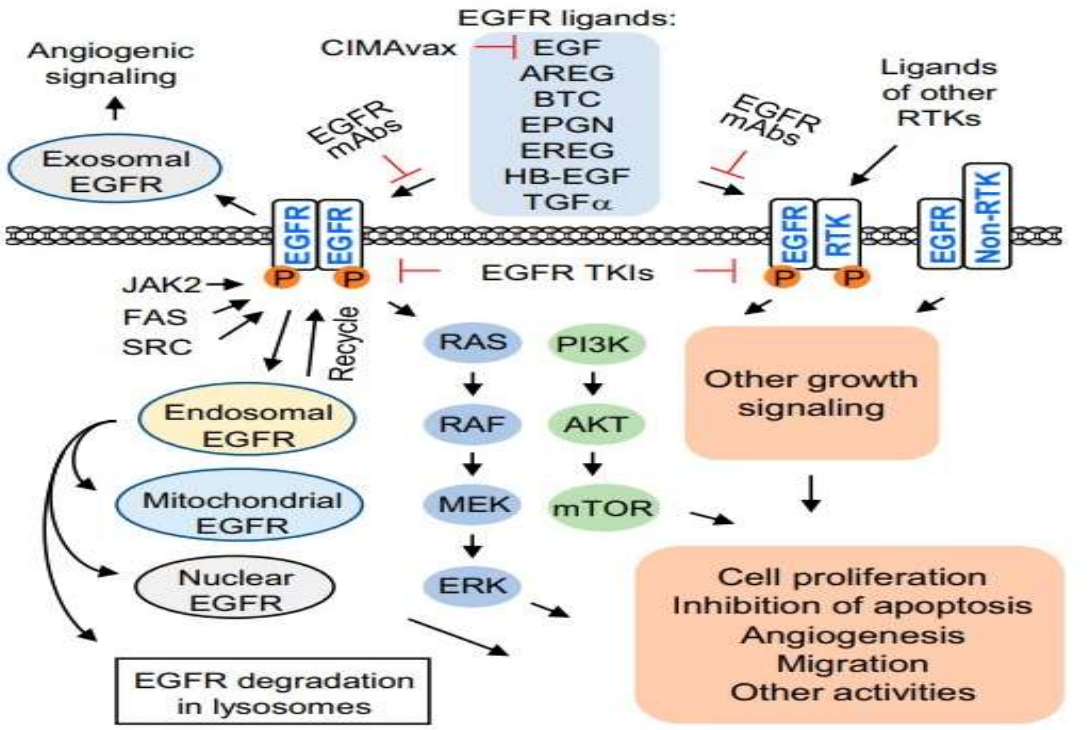

Figure EGFR signalling and trafficking and the effects of EGFR inhibitors

The mechanism driving EGFR overexpression is intricate and varies across cancer types. In GBM, gene amplification is a major driver, while in CRC and NSCLC, amplification plays a smaller role, with overexpression occurring more frequently through alternative mechanisms. In head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC), gene amplification is not the primary cause, with ligand-induced upregulation and increased protein synthesis suggested as contributing factors.

MECHANISMS OF ACTIONS AND THERAPEUTIC ACTIVITIES OF CLINICALLY USED EPIDERMAL GROWTH FACTOR RECEPTOR (EGFR) INHIBITORS[13]

Tyrosine Kinase Inhibitors (TKIs) targeting Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) have ushered in a transformative era in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) treatment. Sixteen approved EGFR TKIs, categorized as reversible (gefitinib, erlotinib) or irreversible (Osimertinib, afatinib), exhibit distinct mechanisms. Osimertinib, highly potent against various EGFR mutants, stands out for its effectiveness in overcoming resistance, a common challenge in NSCLC.

Resistance mechanisms encompass EGFR mutations or amplifications, activation of other receptor tyrosine kinases (RTKs) like AXL, HER2, IGF1R, MET, as well as mutations in KRAS and PIK3CA. Allosteric EGFR inhibitors present a promising strategy to tackle resistance, emphasizing the dynamic landscape of cancer research.

Monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) like cetuximab and panitumumab play pivotal roles in managing CRC and HNSCC. Cetuximab, an IgG1 mAb, hinders ligand-induced EGFR activation through subdomain 3 binding and elicits antibody-dependent cellular cytotoxicity (ADCC). Panitumumab, an IgG2 mAb, shares efficacy in CRC despite lacking ADCC induction. Necitumumab's efficacy, limited even with chemotherapy, highlights the challenges in mAb treatments.

The anti-EGF vaccine, CIMAvax, undergoes evaluation for NSCLC therapy. Though outcomes in the U.S. trial are pending, insights from a Cuban phase 3 trial reveal its potential to induce anti-EGF antibodies and lower serum EGF levels. The modest outcomes underscore the complexities in targeting EGFR pathways, emphasizing the need for comprehensive understanding and ongoing research.

INHIBITION OF EGFR SIGNALING PATHWAYS[14,15]

The Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) serves as a linchpin in cellular regulation, dictating processes like proliferation, survival, and differentiation. Its aberrant activation, implicated in various cancers, positions it as a prime target for cancer therapy. Inhibiting EGFR signalling pathways has emerged as a promising strategy to curtail the unbridled growth and survival of cancer cells.

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The intricate EGFR signalling cascade unfolds as a complex network, set in motion by ligand binding to the receptor. Activated EGFR propels downstream signalling through pathways such as Ras-Raf-MEK-ERK and PI3K-AKT, orchestrating the modulation of gene expression and fuelling cell growth. Dysregulation of these pathways stands out as a hallmark in numerous cancers, rendering EGFR an appealing therapeutic target. Inhibition of EGFR is achieved through diverse approaches, notably small-molecule tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) and monoclonal antibodies.

While EGFR-targeted therapies marked an initial triumph, persistent challenges have surfaced, demanding continued innovation. Resistance mechanisms pose a substantial hurdle, with tumor cells evolving secondary mutations in the EGFR gene, conferring resilience against TKIs. This necessitates a nuanced approach, exploring alternative therapeutic targets and inventive combination therapies to augment treatment efficacy.

The clinical application of EGFR inhibitors has uncovered adverse effects, notably skin rash and gastrointestinal toxicity. These side effects, while manageable, underscore the need for a balanced approach, weighing therapeutic benefits against potential drawbacks. The field actively explores strategies to mitigate these side effects, encompassing dose adjustments and supportive care measures.
The evolution of EGFR-targeted therapies reflects the dynamic nature of cancer research. Ongoing efforts strive to decipher the intricacies of EGFR signalling and address the existing challenges. A comprehensive understanding of resistance mechanisms is imperative to unveil new vulnerabilities in cancer cells, paving the way for innovative interventions.

RESISTANCE TO EGFR-TARGETED THERAPIES[16,17]

Acquired resistance to cancer therapies, encompassing targeted treatments and chemotherapy, stands as a formidable challenge within oncology. Tumors, over time, can evolve adaptive mechanisms that allow them to circumvent the impact of initially efficacious treatments. Among these mechanisms, secondary mutations in crucial cancer-related genes play a pivotal role in conferring resistance to targeted therapies. An understanding of acquired resistance and the emergence of secondary mutations is essential for developing strategies to overcome or prevent treatment failure.

Secondary mutations are genetic alterations occurring after the initiation of treatment, leading to the reactivation of oncogenic signalling pathways. Notable instances of acquired resistance involve targeted therapies against the Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML) with tyrosine kinase inhibitors. The T790M mutation in EGFR and mutations such as T315I in BCR-ABL kinase domain are examples of secondary mutations that interfere with drug binding, rendering treatments less effective.

PERSONALIZED MEDICINE AND EGFR TARGETING[18,19]

The identification of biomarkers predicting the response to Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) inhibitors is paramount for tailoring treatment strategies in cancer patients. Biomarkers serve as essential tools in discerning patients likely to derive benefits from EGFR inhibitor therapy, thereby guiding treatment decisions and enhancing overall outcomes.

1. EGFR Mutations
2. EGFR Gene Copy Number
3. EGFR Protein Expression
4. KRAS Mutations

CLINICAL SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES[20]

In Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer (NSCLC), Erlotinib and Gefitinib, EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs), have demonstrated significant success, particularly in patients with activating EGFR mutations. Clinical trials, such as IPASS, showcased improved progression-free survival and overall response rates compared to standard chemotherapy in EGFR-mutant NSCLC patients, establishing these drugs as standard first-line treatments for this subgroup. Osimertinib, a third-generation EGFR TKI, addresses the T790M resistance mutation and has proven effective in clinical trials, earning approval as the standard of care for T790M-positive NSCLC.

In Colorectal Cancer (CRC), Monoclonal antibodies Cetuximab and Panitumumab, targeting EGFR's extracellular domain, have succeeded in metastatic CRC. Combined with chemotherapy, these antibodies enhance response rates and overall survival, leading to their incorporation into standard treatment regimens for metastatic CRC. Molecular profiling further refines treatment, identifying specific subgroups that benefit most from EGFR-targeted therapies, such as RAS wild-type tumors showing a more favourable response compared to RAS-mutated tumors.

For Head and Neck Squamous Cell Carcinoma (HNSCC), Cetuximab, when combined with radiation, is approved for treating locally advanced cases. This combination demonstrates improved locoregional control and overall survival compared to radiation alone, establishing its place in the standard treatment approach for certain patients with locally advanced HNSCC.

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ADVERSE EFFECTS AND LIMITATIONS OF EGFR INHIBITORS[20]

Adverse Effects

1. Skin Toxicities
   Skin rash, particularly on the face and upper body, is a common side effect. While generally manageable, severe cases may necessitate dose reduction or interruption. The exact mechanism remains not fully elucidated but is believed to stem from the inhibition of normal EGFR functions in the skin.
2. Gastrointestinal Effects
   Diarrhea, ranging from mild to severe, is a frequent side effect associated with EGFR inhibitors. Management may involve anti-diarrheal medications or dose adjustments, reflecting the impact of EGFR inhibition on the gut epithelium.
3. Hematologic Effects
   Neutropenia, characterized by a decrease in neutrophil counts, increases infection risk. Regular monitoring of blood counts is imperative during treatment.
4. Hepatotoxicity
   Elevated liver enzymes, including transaminases, may occur with EGFR inhibitors, necessitating regular liver function tests to monitor for hepatotoxicity.
5. Ocular Toxicities
   Conjunctivitis and dry eyes are potential ocular toxicities linked to EGFR inhibitors. Supportive measures, including lubricating eye drops, may be recommended.
6. Cardiac Effects
   EGFR inhibitors may induce hypertension, necessitating close monitoring and management with antihypertensive medications.

Limitations

1. Development of Resistance
2. Patient Selection
3. Skin Rash as a Predictive Marker
4. Limited Efficacy in Some Cancers

CONCLUSION

Targeting the Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) represents a promising avenue in cancer treatment. This is synthesizing a comprehensive analysis of EGFR-targeted therapies, showcasing the efficacy of small molecule tyrosine kinase inhibitors and monoclonal antibodies in suppressing aberrant signalling cascades linked to tumor growth. The discussion on resistance mechanisms, biomarkers, and ongoing clinical trials highlights the evolving landscape of EGFR-targeted cancer therapies. Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of EGFR signalling, the abstract underscores the necessity of a personalized approach and emphasizes precision medicine to optimize therapeutic outcomes. Serving as a succinct encapsulation of the significance and challenges in targeting EGFR for cancer treatment.

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