DOI: 10.53992/njns.v11i3.349 NUST Journal of Natural Sciences, Vol. 11, Issue 3, 2026

**Review Article**

# Deciphering the role of Krüppel-like factors (KLFs) polymorphisms in hepatocellular carcinoma: A narrative review

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## Abstract

The liver cancer especially the hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is a significant health burden worldwide as it is a disease with high incidence, late diagnosis, and poor prognosis. Hepatitis B and C infection, cirrhosis, and metabolic disorders are chronic liver diseases that play a major role in the development of HCC. Recent developments in the field of molecular biology have emphasized the significance of genetic and epigenetic changes in the pathogenesis of HCC. These include Krüppel-like factors (KLFs), a family of zinc finger transcription factors that have been found to be important regulators of cellular processes such as proliferation, apoptosis, differentiation, and metabolism. This review is conferred to KLF polymorphisms, especially KLF6 and KLF15, and their role in the molecular pathogenesis of liver cancer. It has been indicated that KLF expression and activity changes aid tumour initiation, progression, and metastasis by affecting key signalling pathways including Wnt/ 2 -catenin, TERT, and TP53. KLF polymorphisms can disrupt the regulatory functions of KLF leading to enhanced growth, reduction in death and metastasis. In addition, these genetic mutations have potential applications as early diagnostic, prognostic, and risk markers for HCC. The study also reviews therapeutic strategies targeting the KLF pathway using approaches such as gene therapy, CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing, and drug targeting. While the findings are encouraging, there are some remaining issues, including conflicting study findings, lack of functional analyses, and genetic diversity. In general, knowledge of the role of KLF polymorphisms can offer useful information on the biology of liver cancer and some new opportunities in the field of personalized diagnosis and targeted treatment, which may lead to better clinical outcomes in patients with HCC.

**Keywords:** Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC), Krüppel-Like Factors (Klfs), KLF-15, KLF-6, Biomarker, Gene Regulation.

**Article History**: **Received:** 14 May 2026, **Revised:** 15 Jul 2026, **Accepted**: 31 Jul 2026, **Published:** 23 Oct 2026.
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## Introduction

### Liver cancer

Cancer has always been a threat to human race as it is the second leading cause of death around the globe. According to the data published by American Cancer Society's cancer statistics, the new number of cases tolls up to 1,958,310 and deaths 609,820 in the year 2023. Cancerous cells occur due to mutations in the DNA which affect the structure and function of the protein causing alteration in the cellular functions [1].

The liver is the sixth most frequent site for primary cancer in people and often develops when there are cirrhosis and inflammation. Hepatic fibrogenesis is a result of chronic liver injury and is characterized by an abnormal accumulation of proteins in the extracellular matrix. Hepatocytes, which are the main functional cells of the liver, interact with other types of cells such as hepatic stellate cells, sinusoidal endothelial cells, and immune cells (both resident and invading) during the complex process of fibrosis [2]. Additionally, due to the liver's physical position and architecture, as well as its distinct metabolic milieu and immunosuppressive environment, metastases from malignancies of other organs (especially the colon) typically infiltrate it [3].

### Epidemiology

HCC poses a great burden and is the fourth most common cancer-related cause of death worldwide [4]. Significant geographical disparities in the incidence and mortality of HCC exist secondary to late diagnosis, exposure to infectious risk factors, and unavailability of healthcare resources [5]. It has been reported that >80% of primary liver cancers are HCC[6].

Middle-resource countries are risked more to HCC amounting 85% of cases, mostly reported in Eastern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Early diagnosis is significant as it will help to lower the increasing burden of liver cancer worldwide, while other major cancers decrease over time. It has been recorded between 2005 and 2015 liver cancer was the second most common cause of death worldwide with 4.6% increase in absolute years lost. (95% CI - 1.6% to 15.4%) [7].

According to ASIRs, there has been a slow but gradual increase in liver cancer since the late 1900s, owing to ageing and overpopulation [8]. There would have been 8% lesser cases if the population age structure and size were same in 2015 as they were in 2005. Since 1900, ASIRs have increased in countries with high sociodemographic indices. In America, the incidence rates of HCC have increased two to three times over the last thirty years [9].

Liver cancer stands as one of the most prevalent lethal malignancies on a global scale; however, within the United States, it holds the fifth position in terms of incidence [6]. A frequent challenge in managing liver cancer is the late-stage diagnosis that often ensues, which contributes to its unfavourable prognosis [10]. Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) constitutes more than 90% of all liver cancer cases, with chemotherapy and immunotherapy serving as the primary therapeutic options [11]. Given the critical need for enhanced treatment modalities for liver cancer patients, there is a pressing requirement to explore novel avenues. The utilization of natural compounds in conjunction with nanotechnology presents a promising avenue that holds the potential to deliver improved patient outcomes while mitigating systemic toxicity and minimizing adverse effects [12]. The pursuit of advanced treatments could herald a brighter outlook for liver cancer patients, ultimately resulting in more favourable prognoses. Chronic hepatitis B and C

(HBV/HCV) infections are responsible for a sizable share of liver malignancies. If effective measures, such as immunization, can be applied on a wide scale, liver cancer may become the second most prevalent cancer after cervical cancer [13].

**Biomarkers**

Biomarkers play a crucial role in the effective clinical management of cancer patients, significantly contributing to enhanced survival rates and the optimization of medical interventions (refer to Figure 2). Within the context of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), there is an urgent demand for biomarkers in the following clinical domains: (1) the categorization of risk and early detection of HCC, (2) the prediction of prognosis, and (3) the anticipation of systemic therapy response. Conversely, in cholangiocarcinoma (CCA), several unmet requirements persist, including: (1) improved diagnosis of CCA, particularly in individuals with primary sclerosing cholangitis; (2) enhanced prognostic capabilities post-curative treatment to guide adjuvant therapy; and (3) the identification of biomarkers that can predict responses and resistance to first and second-line systemic treatments [14].

**KLF family**

The KLFs where first discovered in fruit flies, *Drosophila melanogaster*. These belong to the DNA binding proteins, family of zinc finger DNA binding proteins. Mutations were observed in Krüppel like factors by Nüsslein-Volhard and Wieschaus which affected the initial stages of embryogenesis by altering the pattern of anterior and posterior segmentation [15]. In humans, the first member of Krüppel like factor identified was EKLF also known as KLF1, it has a crucial role in development and maturation of erythroid [16].

KLFs are zinc finger containing transcription factors, functions in regulating various processes like apoptosis, differentiation, proliferation, and development. Changes in the gene of KLF causes altered function and patho-biology of different diseases in humans such as, cancer, metabolic diseases, and cardio-vascular diseases [17].

KLF6 gene is positioned on the short arm of chromosome 10 (10p15). The gene consists of four exons. There are portions in the gene of KLF6 which are highly conserved which includes three repeats of Cys2-His2 (C2H2), these are present in the C-terminal of the gene [18]. The KLF6 gene influences with different sets of proteins such as co-repressors, activators, chromatin-modifying enzymes, and transcriptional factors.

**Liver cancer and KLF polymorphism**

The liver serves as a focal point and regulates a number of crucial physiological functions, including metabolism and xenobiotic detoxification. These pleiotropic effects are made possible at the cellular level via hepatocyte transcriptional regulation. Hepatic disorders emerge as a result of defects in hepatocyte function and its transcriptional regulatory mechanisms, which have a negative impact on liver health [19]. This study [20] covers the role that Krüppel-like factors (KLF), members of the zinc finger family of transcription factors, play in physiological hepatocyte functions as well as their role in the beginning and progression of hepatic disorders.

Fork head box protein O1 and insulin-targeting SREBP1c moreover inhibited TWIST2 expression, but dexamethasone-targeting Krüppel-like factor 15 increased it through direct interactions with the Twist2 promoter DNA. Moreover, TWIST2 plays a critical role and regulates hepatic homeostasis by reducing steatosis, inflammation, and oxidative stress via the

NF-B-FGF21 or SREBP1c-FGF21 pathway, which may offer a novel treatment option for non-alcoholic fatty liver disease [21]. Through transcriptional regulation of important metabolic processes, glucocorticoids can coordinate systemic metabolic balance by targeting the transcription factor KLF15 [22]. KLF15 expression in adipose tissue was decreased in obese patients, and KLF15 is linked to an elevated body mass index in obesity [23]. The glucocorticoid receptor downstream is well known to be mediated by KLF15. KLF15 affects the supply of gluconeogenic carbon substrates from skeletal muscle as well as their usage in the liver. This includes both direct control of hepatic gluconeogenic enzymes and indirect control of these processes [24]. The metabolism of the liver is significantly impacted by KLF15. Deletion of the KLF15 gene in mice fed a high-fat diet (HFD) has no effect on endoplasmic reticulum stress, insulin resistance, or hepatic inflammatory response. Animals on a high-fat diet show improvements in indices of endoplasmic reticulum stress, even if the deletion of the KLF15 gene in mice has no impact on endoplasmic reticulum stress or the inflammatory response in the liver connected with insulin resistance. The liver responds well from KLF15's anti-apoptotic properties. Treating ALI brought on by LPS or DGaIN using exogenous KLF15 Moreover, KLF15 can lower ALI by blocking the p38MAPK/ERK1/2 signalling pathway and so lowering of sepsis-induced inflammation [24]. Teneligliptin, a mechanism mediated by phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase (PI3K)/AKT/Krüppel-like factor 15 (KLF15), clearly affected the expression of the BA synthesis inhibitory factor Fgf15. KLF15's inhibition neutralised this impact. Teneligliptin increases BA generation, hence improving the treatment of metabolic diseases [24 - 25].

KLF6 polymorphism has been involved in directly affecting HCC primarily by providing protection against apoptosis and promoting proliferation. It has been observed that KLF6 mRNA and protein are expressed in HCC at higher concentrations. If KLF6 is silenced, the cells enter G1 phase, which reduces proliferation and causes apoptosis of the cells via Rb, p53 and Bcl-xL [26]. Polymorphic KLF6 has been reported to enhance p21 expression which induces increased liver mass and supports completion of cell cycle [27]. The objective of this review is to evaluate how KLF6 and KLF15 polymorphisms contribute to the molecular pathogenesis of HCC. Understanding the polymorphism KLF family has on HCC will further help us to develop better therapeutic approaches against this deadly disease.

The major KLF variants studied thus far, the populations studied, and the functional implications reported in HCC are summarized in Table 1. The most studied modification is the KLF6-SV1 splice variant which has been shown to be associated with high-ratio in HCV-related HCC and in mouse models of hepatocarcinogenesis.

## Molecular pathogenesis of liver cancer

The molecular pathogenesis of liver cancer starts with cellular damage and inflammation. The death of hepatocyte causes enhanced cell proliferation by recruiting inflammatory cells, stimulating growth factors and selecting mutant clones. Mutations are further accumulated through the production of reactive oxygen from necrotic hepatocytes which causes telomeric dysfunction and DNA lesions [32]. HBV, HCV, alcohol, NAFLD causes disruption in the process of signalling that results in chronic inflammation and directly has an impact on the epigenetic gene expression. Chronic liver disease starts to worsen when methylation changes, mRNA begins dysregulating and progressive loss of allele causing clonal expansion [33].

Continuous chronic injury to the liver causes myofibroblasts and hepatic stellate cells to create septa by depositing extracellular matrix, the septa separate vasculature and parenchyma. If the condition of the liver remains unchanged, hyperplasic and dysplastic nodules form. These nodular regeneration and clonal expansion lead to HCC [34]. Genomic instability increases causing rise in chromosomal abnormalities, mutations and allelic loss. This causes failed DNA repair resulting in cellular stress [35]. The microenvironment changes causing stiffed matrix, hypoxia and promotion of epithelial-mesenchymal switch via TGF- β and cells with survival advantages are selected [36]. Repetitive injuries and mutations cause activation of oncogenic activation and loss of tumour suppressors. The most common mutations include of Wnt/β-catenin signalling and inactivation or methylation of p53 and RB pathway; p16INK4a.

Table 1: Summary of KLF gene variants relevant to hepatocellular carcinoma.

| .**Gene** | **Population/Model Studied** | **Association with HCC** | **Functional Consequence** | **Ref** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| KLF6 | HCV-related HCC patient tumor samples; mouse hepatocarcinogenesis models | Increased SV1/KLF6 ratio correlates with more advanced, aggressive HCC | SV1 antagonizes wild-type KLF6's induction of p21(WAF1/CIP1); in mice, raising the SV1/KLF6 ratio (via SV1 increase, KLF6 decrease, or both) accelerates hepatic carcinogenesis | [28] |
| KLF6 | Cross-tumor synthesis (HCC, prostate, lung, others) | Confirms SV1 overexpression as a recurring oncogenic event across malignancies, including HCC | HGF/PI3K/Akt and Ras/PI3K/Akt signaling both drive increased SV1 splicing, shifting the full-length-KLF6:SV1 ratio toward increased hepatocyte proliferation | [29] |
| KLF6 | HCC and other gastrointestinal tumors | KLF6 established as a tumor-suppressor gene in liver, frequently downregulated in HCC | Reduced KLF6 activity removes restraint on proliferative signaling in hepatocytes | [30] |
| KLF15 locus; intergenic variant near *KLF15* on chromosome 3, GRCh37 position 126,095,012 | European-ancestry GWAS meta-analysis of nine cohorts, comprising 3,748 HCC cases and 1,861,536 controls; follow-up attempted in the Million Veteran Program cohort. | Unknown. | In tumour, elevated KLF15 partially suppresses proliferation via CDKN1A/p21 and CDKN1C/p57; in CRC, the lncRNA TTN-AS1 sponges miR-376a-3p, upregulating KLF15 and driving invasion/proliferation via the TTN-AS1/miR-376a-3p/KLF15 axis | [31] |

This alteration causes uncontrolled proliferation of hepatocytes [37].Telomerase reactivates inducing cellular proliferation of preneoplastic clones that have escaped senescence [38]. Angiogenesis and neovascularization start in the cirrhotic milieu, chronic inflammation continues to provide pro-survival signals and ROS, promoting malignant progression in cirrhosis liver disease [39].

The most common genetic mechanisms in understanding liver cancer includes TERT, TP53 and Wnt/ β-catenin.

**TERT**

HCC is driven by regulator-dependent and genetic mechanisms and has canonical telomerase and noncanonical transcriptional roles that promote oncogenic programs. In HCC TERT promotor gene is mutated resulting in increased production of TERT telomerase activity, causing continuous activation of TERT expression. β-catenin/CTNNB1 also binds to TERT promoter, that leads to activation of Wnt pathway-driven TERT induction [40]. RBFOX3 and AP-2β are upstream promoters for hTERT, increasing its transcriptional activity resulting in HCC cell growth [41]. DKK1 an extrinsic modulator has been reported to enhance the expression of hTERT in specified HCC cell lines. This upregulated expression links the microenvironmental signals and Wnt modulators to TERT level 3 [42]. Hepatocarcinogenesis in models have been reported due to simultaneous activation of TERT and β-catenin. These are the drivers of Wnt induced oncogenic transcriptional programs [43].

**Wnt beta-catenin cascade**

This cascade is a driver of different oncogenic pathways including proliferation and stem cell features in HCC. The relevant downstream target in HCC includes signal transduction; the ligands of Wnt interact with LRP/ 6 receptors/ frizzled which further activates dishevelled (DVL) and deactivate β-catenin destruction complex (AXIN/APC/GSK3β), causing nuclear tranlocation and stabilization of the protein. The localized β-catenin interacts with TCF to initiate canonical targets such as CCND1 and MYC[44]. Wnt pathway secretes DKK1 which induces paradoxical effects in HCC by enhancing the production of MYC, CCND1, hTERT and lowers the secretion of P21, TP53 while invading via TGF- β1 signalling [42]. In HCC the β catenin protein is stabilized by CTNNB1 activating mutations, starting a ligand-independent pathway activation in approximately 30% of the cases [45]. DVL1 expression is upregulated when RELA is lost, this directly causes nuclear translocation of β-catenin linking inflammatory regulation to Wnt pathway activation in TP53 mutant contexts [46]. MYC and CCND1 induction promote proliferation of cells by continuously making the cells enter the cell cycle. Dedifferentiation in HCC is associated when Wnt interacts with SOX9 and other progenitor factors[ 47].

**TP53 roles in HCC**

Alterations in TP53 effects non-cell-autonomous tumor suppression and cell-autonomous microenvironmental states. TP53 mutations is a common oncogenic gene in HCC causing genomic instability and cell cycle progression [48]. p53 can be paradoxically activated in HCC via loss of MDM2, increasing apoptosis, inflammation, senescence associated secretory phenotype (SASP), non-cell-autonomous tumorigenesis, production of hepatic progenitor cells; in mouse models the p53 gene was deleted and all these phenotypic changes were reversed, hinting towards a complex effect of TP53 in HCC [48]. In cell models it was observed that DDK1 enhances MDM2 and lowers P21 and TP53 [49]. TP53 is interconnected to different dedifferentiation and proliferative

stress genes including LIN28B, CTNNB1, SMARCA4, SOX9, and MYC [50].

Mutated TP53 modulates the interplay between NF-κB and Wnt signaling pathways by knocking down RELA resulting in enhanced tumor progression and metastasis augumented with Wnt signalling; enhanced DVL1 and β-catenin nuclear localization [51]; whether TP53 is lost or mutated it helps in proliferation of cell cycle and favours tumorigenesis and interplays with Wnt/TERT deriven programmes.

Therefore, it is believed that loss of KLF6 tumor suppressor activity removes a brake on the cell-cycle arrest at the point of hepatocarcinogenesis, where TERT promoter reactivation and CTNNB1-stabilized β-catenin drive proliferation, indicating that KLF6 inactivation and activation of the Wnt pathway may converge on overlapping cell-cycle checkpoints rather than through completely separate mechanisms. Likewise, the functions of KLF6 (loss, the onset of genomic instability and uncontrolled proliferation) and KLF15 (loss, the loss of metabolic homeostasis in liver function) suggest a potential connection with the other events linked to hepatocarcinogenesis driven by TERT (the epithelial and metabolic reprogramming). The conclusions made at these intersections are highly speculative and there is a need for direct mechanistic confirmation, which is discussed in more detail in Section 6.

**Molecular pathogenesis integrated with KLF-related mechanisms**

Normal liver development and homeostasis is best understood to explain the role of KLF6 and KLF15 in HCC pathogenesis. In the developmental model, both KLF6 and KLF15 are needed to promote early hepatic differentiation, as KLF6 knockout results in a decrease in hepatocyte outgrowth and expression of hepatocyte markers (Hnf3β, Gata4, Sox17, CxCr4), and KLF15 overexpression is sufficient to accelerate maturation in hepatocyte-like cells derived from hepatoblasts into hepatocyte markers (Tat, Cps1, Cyp1a2, Cyp2e1) [52]. Loss or dys-regulation of KLF6/KLF15 in adults, on differentiated hepatocyte identity, is a plausible mechanism by which KLF loss may cause the dedifferentiation observed in HCC.

Regulatory: KLF6 and KLF15 are silenced in tumours by at least two convergent mechanisms that are relevant to hepatocarcinogenesis. First, promoter hypermethylation negatively regulates KLF15 expression in colorectal cancer, as well as in triple-negative breast cancer [53], a mechanism that is also consistent with the other epigenetic silencing mechanisms described in Section 3 as promoting progression in chronic liver disease to HCC. Second, the loss of KLF6 and KLF15 may not be independent events in the context of post-transcriptional repression, as the miR-181a-5p directly and simultaneously targets KLF6 and KLF15 simultaneously[54], downregulating both making it seem that KLF6 and KLF15 loss coordinate in the context of the HCC. KLF15 loss removes an anti-apoptotic, anti-inflammatory brake mediated by the p38MAPK/ERK1/2 pathway and the PI3K/AKT/KLF15-dependent regulation of Fgf15[55]; while the induction of TWIST2 by KLF15 normally inhibits inflammation and oxidative stress via the NF-κB–FGF21/SREBP1c–FGF21 pathway [56]. Loss of this regulatory node removes one control point of the chronic inflammatory and oxidative-stress milieu that is described in Section 3 as an early driver in hepatocarcinogenesis, and links KLF15 dysregulation mechanistically to the full molecular hepatocarcinogenesis described above.

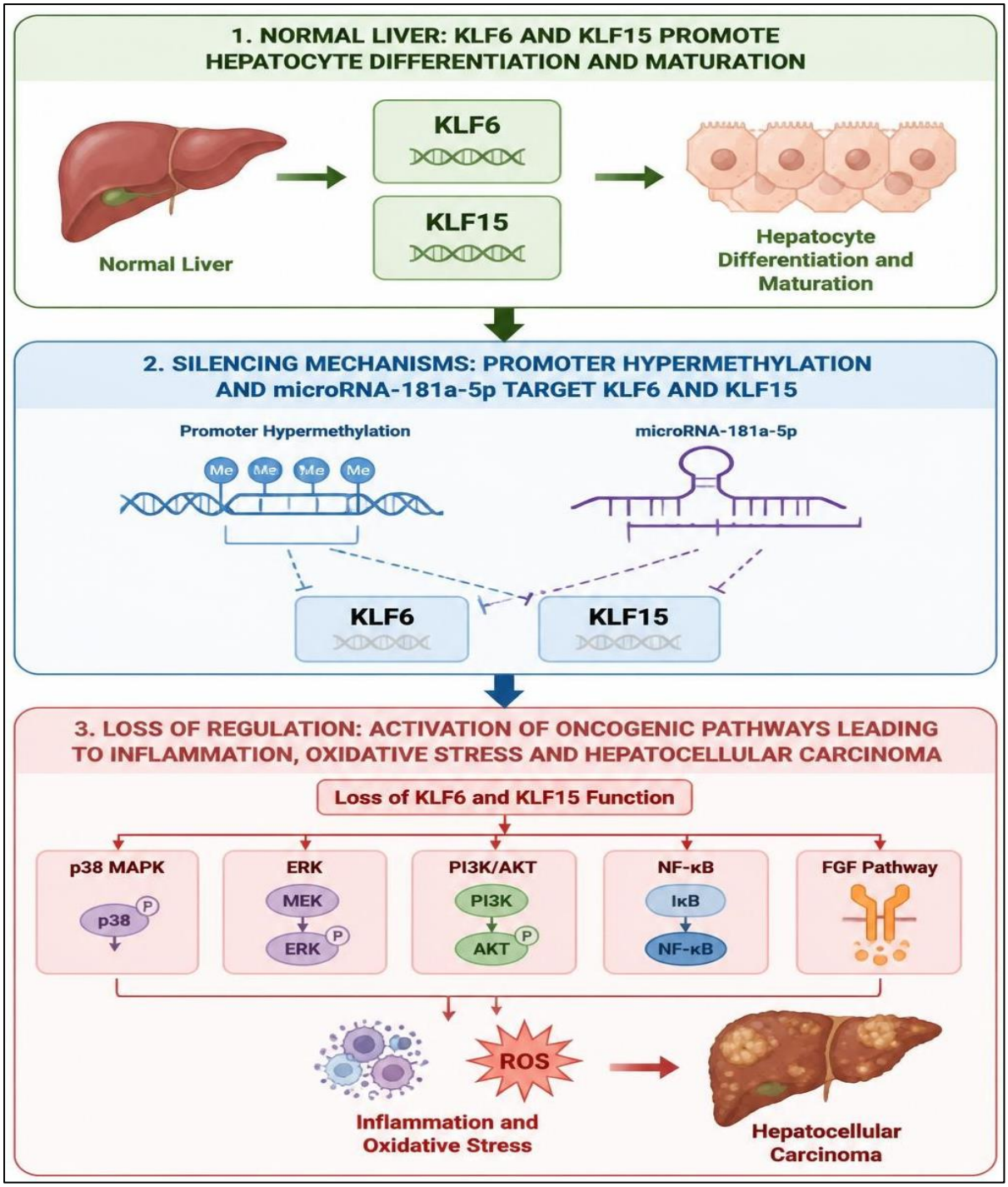



Figure 1: The schematic diagram shows **(Top panel)** KLF6 and KLF15 promote normal growth of the liver. **(Middle panel)** shows that tumor-associated silencing occurs via simultaneous mechanisms: promoter hypermethylation of KLF15 and post-transcriptional repression via microRNA-181a-5p. **(Bottom panel)** Loss of KLF15 removes critical anti-apoptotic and anti-inflammatory regulatory brakes, leading to dysregulation of various signaling pathways including p38 mitogen-activated protein kinase/extracellular signal-regulated kinase 1/2, phosphoinositide 3-kinase/protein kinase B-dependent fibroblast growth factor 15 regulation [55] and Twist-related protein 2-mediated inhibition via nuclear factor kappa B–fibroblast growth factor 21/sterol regulatory element-binding protein 1c–fibroblast growth factor 21 pathways [56]. This dysregulation promotes chronic inflammation, oxidative stress, and hepatocyte dedifferentiation, ultimately driving hepatocellular carcinoma development.

**KLF Polymorphisms in Cancer**

**Evidence from studies**

Gastric cancer tissues have significantly lower KLF15 expression levels than the nearby normal tissues. Additionally, there was a bad correlation between KLF15 expression and clinical stage, lymphatic metastasis, and distant metastasis. Additionally, in GC patients, KLF15 expression may be able to predict prognosis. In addition, KLF15 overexpression may also partially inhibit cell growth by regulating CDKN1A/p21 and CDKN1C/p57 [57]. In conclusion, TTN-AS1 promoted CRC invasion and proliferation by targeting the miR-376a-3p/KLF15. This study [58] suggested TTN-AS1 may be a potential target for the treatment of CRC. The KLF family contains KLF15, which has been reported to be involved in cancer. Moreover, KLF15 was dysregulated in lung cancer, and promoted in vitro cell growth and invasion [59]. In the present study, KLF15 was predicted as a target of miR-376a-3p by bioinformatics analysis. This was then verified by a luciferase test. The most common mechanism of action for lncRNA is as a sponge for target miRNAs; this results in the up-regulation of the target genes of the miRNAs. Furthermore, lncRNA CRNDE was an oncogene in pancreatic cancer through regulating the miR-384/IRS1 axis, KLF15 was found to be associated with TTN-AS1 and be upregulated in CRC samples. Subsequently, TTN-AS1 positively regulated KLF15 by sponging miR-376a-3p, which may be the key mechanism of TTN-AS1-induced CRC progression. Thus, TTN-AS1 was discovered for the first time as a biomarker of CRC and blocking the TTN-AS1/miR-376a-3p/KLF15 axis might be a novel therapeutic target in CRC [60].

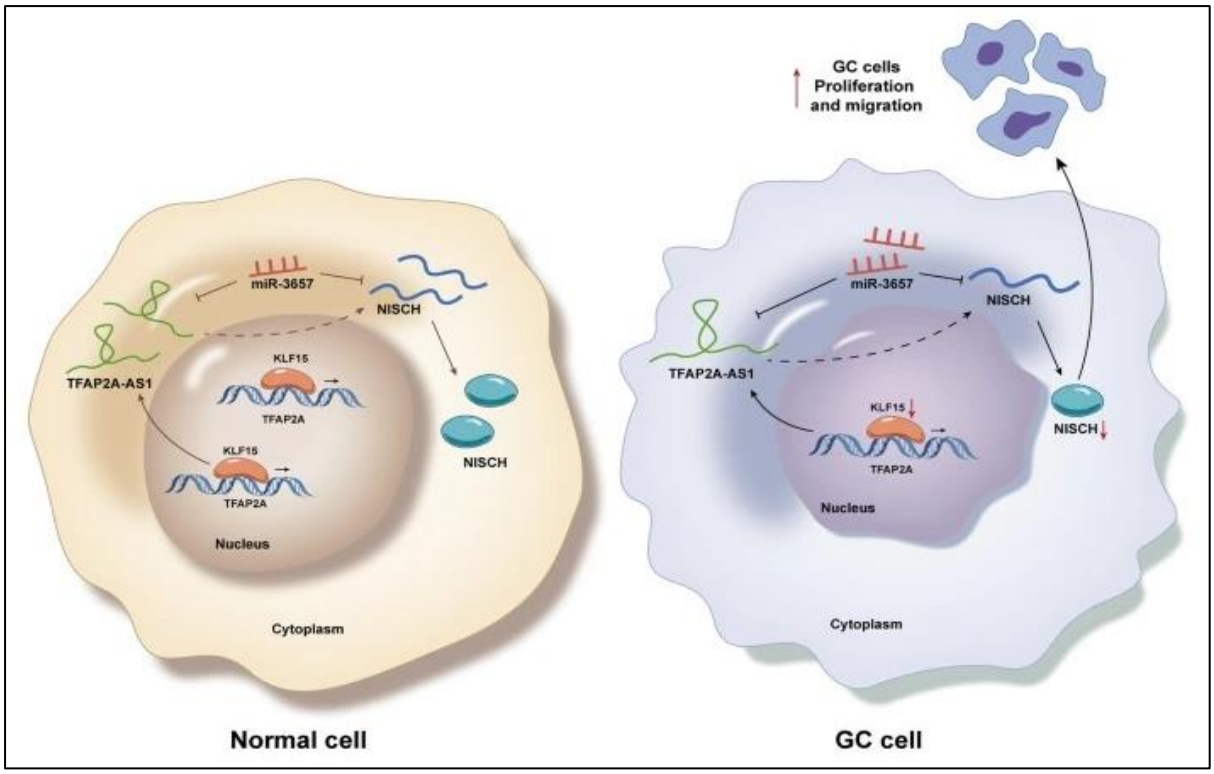



Figure 2: The proliferation and migration of GC cells are inhibited by TFAP2A-AS1. MiR-3657 was identified as TFAP2A-AS1's downstream gene, and NISCH as its target in the downstream regulation pathway. Additionally, NISCH reduces GC cell migration and proliferation. Transcriptional factor KLF15 favorably mediates TFAP2A-AS1 to inhibit GC cell proliferation and migration in the upstream regulatory process [61].

A study by Yoda, McNamara [62] indicated that KLF15 may act as a potential tumour suppressor in BrCa; however, the specific anti-tumour mechanism remains to be fully elucidated [53]. The findings of Liu, Cheng [63] underscore the significance of the LUCAT1/miR-181a-5p axis as a pivotal regulatory mechanism in breast cancer (BC), where LUCAT1 functions as a tumour promoter and miR-181a-5p acts as a tumour suppressor. This established a direct interaction between LUCAT1 and miR-181a-5p. Furthermore, we have identified the downregulation of KLF6 and KLF15 as integral components in the regulation of miR-181a-5p in BC. Overall, the LUCAT1/miR-181a-5p axis represents a promising and viable therapeutic target for the treatment of BC [63].

Epithelial to mesenchymal transition occurs when the epithelial cells start to act like mesenchymal cells. They do this by losing cell polarity and cell-to-cell adhesion; due to loss of E-cadherins, they acquire invasive and migratory properties. E-cadherin proteins can be downregulated by certain known factors such as Slug, snail, RhoB, TGF- β, TWIST1, IGF-1, and FGF. It has been estimated that KLFs are involved in EMT during breast cancer. KLF6 has a splice variant known as KLF6-SV. This variant is known to enhance the epithelial-mesenchymal transition by increasing the transcription level of TWIST1 [28]. It has been evident that the breast cancer metastasis was increased in mouse models, hence, lower chances of survival. The extracellular matrix needs to be broken down during the process of metastasis, and this degradation is done by Matrix metalloproteinases. MMPs are regulated by KLFs; for instance, KLF6 causes upregulation of Tissue factor pathway inhibitor-2 (TFPI-2) [64]; it is a matrix-associated Kunitz inhibitor that causes downregulation of MMPs, specifically of zymogen matrix metalloproteinases, resulting in sustained EM and no metastasis. It has been observed that KLFs play an important role in invasion, but no data on KLF6 have been reported. In this complex cascade of molecular interactions, the interplay of KLF6 splice variants and KLF15 loss with other important oncogenic pathways in hepatocarcinogenesis is systematically displayed in Figure 3. This visual scheme describes the bidirectional effects of cell cycle evasion and metabolic-inflammatory reprogramming of liver cancer progression by KLF and identifies therapeutic nodes for intervention.

## Clinical implications of KLF polymorphisms

### Risk Stratification and prognosis in liver cancer: The Role of KLF polymorphisms

The mechanistic relationships outlined in Sections 3 and 4 are mostly cell-line and mouse-model systems and are only potentially validated clinical biomarkers and have not been validated in prospective patient cohorts. Moreover, Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), a primary liver cancer, represents a significant global health burden, particularly in individuals with chronic liver diseases such as hepatitis B or C infections, cirrhosis, and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) [65].

Early diagnosis, risk assessment and individualized disease prediction are important for the management of HCC and may inform treatment decisions to enhance patient outcomes. A recent focus has been on the involvement of Krüppel-like factors (KLFs), a group of proteins that play a role in various cell processes, in the development of liver cancer [52]. KLF polymorphisms, or genetic mutations in the KLF genes, may be useful markers to identify high-risk individuals for HCC or to predict disease outcomes. KLFs, especially KLF4, KLF2 and KLF6, have been shown to play roles in cell proliferation, differentiation, apoptosis and

inflammation, which are essential for cancer development [66]. These transcription factors have been reported to be altered in cancers, including HCC. For example, KLF4 is known to inhibit the proliferation of hepatoma cells [67], whereas KLF6 is a tumour suppressor gene in the liver [68]. Conversely, KLF2 plays a role in immune response and inflammation, which are key factors in the development of liver disease [69]. Variations in KLF genes may impact their activity, resulting in changes in gene expression and signalling pathways that contribute to cancer development. Variants in KLF genes could affect an individual's risk of developing HCC by regulating cell responses to liver damage, inflammation or viral infection [70]. For instance, a variant of KLF4 might affect its role in regulating the cell cycle, leading to dysregulated cell proliferation and transformation of hepatocytes. Likewise, KLF6 polymorphisms might decrease its tumor-suppressive function, promoting malignant transformation in liver cells.

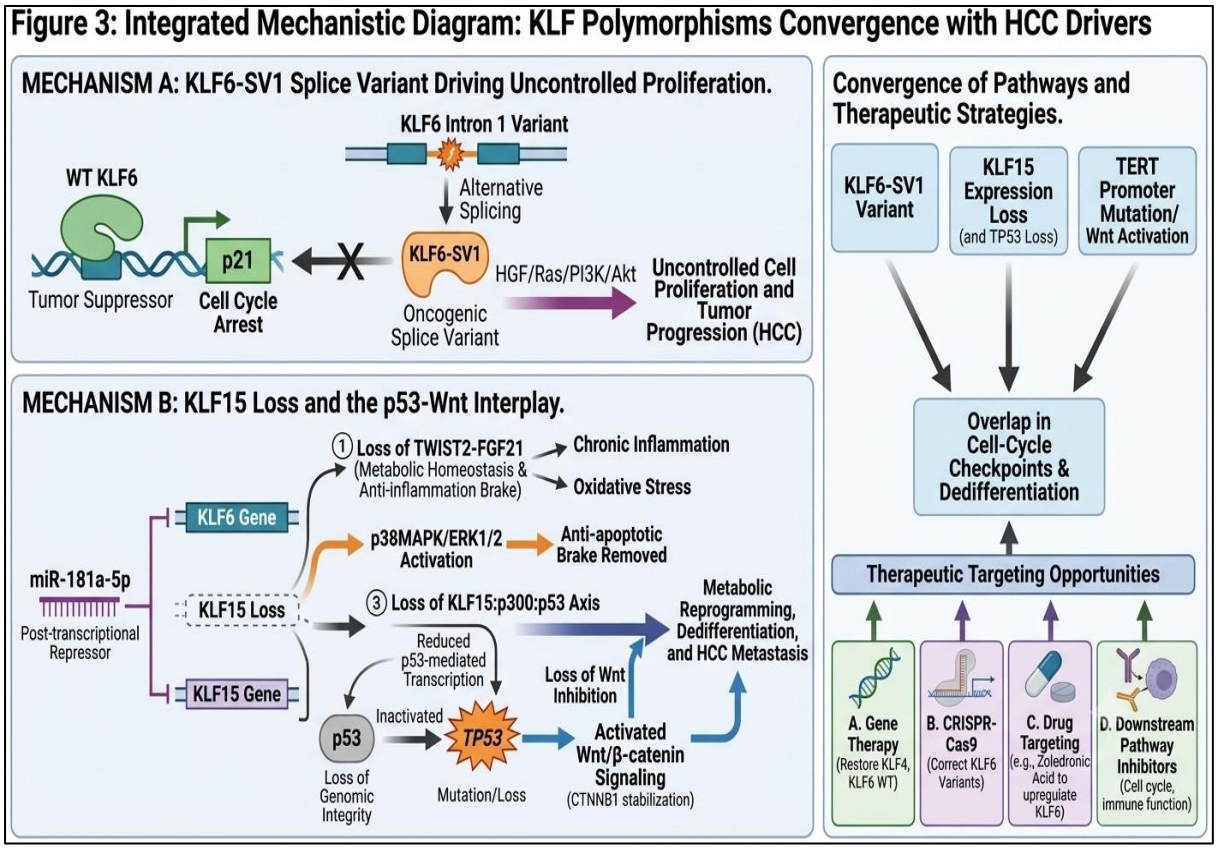



Figure 3: Proposed molecular mechanisms of Krüppel-like factors (KLFs) dysregulation and convergence of polymorphisms in hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). Mechanism A shows how the KLF6 intron-1 variant can induce the alternative splicing of the KLF6 gene into the oncogenic KLF6-SV1 variant, which inhibits the induction of p21 by wild-type KLF6 and is able to effect cell proliferation through Ras/PI3K/Akt signalling. Mechanism B is the consequences of KLF15 loss and the effects of miR-181a-5p targeting: (1) loss of TWIST2-FGF21 signalling and subsequent chronic inflammation/oxidative stress; (2) activation of the p38MAPK/ERK1/2 pathway resulting in the removal of anti-apoptotic brakes; and (3) disruption of the axis of KLF15: p300:p53, which in addition to TP53 mutations triggers nuclear beta-catenin translocation and activation of the Wnt pathway. Right Panel outlines the translation of these pathways into therapeutic interventions such as gene therapy, CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing, drug targeting (e.g., upregulation of KLF6 with zoledronic acid) and pathway inhibitors downstream.

In clinical practice, patients with certain KLF polymorphisms could be identified to predict the likelihood of developing HCC in those with chronic liver diseases. Individuals at risk, such as those with hepatitis infections B or C (HBV or HCV), cirrhosis, or NAFLD could be subjected to more vigilant screening for early detection of liver cancer, which may enhance the success of early detection. In addition, certain KLF polymorphisms may be linked to a worse prognosis, suggesting the need for more intensive therapy. Therefore, KLF polymorphisms may be useful as genetic markers for risk assessment and prognosis of liver cancer.

**Therapeutic implications: targeting KLF pathways in liver cancer**

As KLFs are emerging as key players in HCC development, modulation of KLF pathways may offer new opportunities to prevent or treat liver cancer. Targeting transcription factors such as KLFs is an attractive concept, but as transcription factors, KLFs often interact with a wide range of proteins to exert their effects. But there are a number of approaches that can be taken to regulate KLF function and enhance patient survival [66]. For instance, a strategy to restore the tumor-suppressive roles of KLFs like KLF4 and KLF6, which are frequently silenced in liver cancer, could be explored. Restoration of the normal activities of these KLFs through therapeutic intervention could prevent HCC or delay its onset. For instance, gene therapy could be used to introduce functional KLF genes into liver cells, or small molecules could be identified to activate KLF pathways [71]. These strategies could re-establish normal growth regulation, promote apoptosis of cancer cells and suppress inflammation, all of which are essential to prevent progression of HCC.

Alternatively, the effects of KLF polymorphisms that increase the risk of HCC could be corrected. Polymorphisms that lead to decreased KLF expression or altered KLF protein function might be corrected using gene editing tools like CRISPR/Cas9 [72]. By targeted correction of the genetic mutation that leads to the changed KLF function, it might be possible to re-establish the balance between cell proliferation and cell death and prevent liver cancer development. For example, correction of KLF6 gene variants, could restore the tumor-suppressive function of KLF6 in liver cells, thereby reducing the risk of HCC in those with the KLF6 polymorphism [73]. Apart from gene therapy and CRISPR, other therapeutic approaches could target the downstream pathways regulated by KLFs. For instance, therapeutic agents that regulate KLF-related target genes, such as those regulating the cell cycle and immune functions, could be targeted to lower the risk of HCC or enhance treatment responses [74].

KLF6 can be upregulated by the use of Zoledronic acid, as this increases KLF6, it also causes cancer cells (MCF7) to die, the KLF2 is also upregulated [75]. Moreover, combination treatments, which simultaneously target the KLF pathway and other molecular pathways associated with liver cancer (such as inflammation, immune evasion, or angiogenesis) may offer a more effective therapeutic strategy. These approaches are still in the early stages of development but have the potential to improve outcomes for HCC. By tailoring treatment based on individual genetic factors, such as KLF polymorphisms, it may be possible to develop more effective strategies to reduce the burden of liver cancer-related death and disability.

The discovery of KLF polymorphisms as potential risk factors and prognostic markers for liver cancer is an exciting prospect in the world of hepatology and oncology. Through the use of genetic profiling, it may be possible to detect

individuals at high risk for developing liver cancer and develop therapeutic strategies to delay the development of HCC. And strategies targeting KLF pathways hold the potential for new therapies for liver cancer. This new knowledge could make KLF-based strategies an important component of personalized therapy for liver cancer. KLFs can be a potent target for treating cancer.

**KLF Polymorphisms and impact on Wnt/β-catenin and TERT and TP53 signaling**

The best mechanistic connection between KLF signaling and the central HCC drivers outlined in Section 3 is the KLF15–p300–p53 pathway. In tissue, higher levels of KLF15 bind the transcriptional coactivator p300 to metabolic genes, whereas lower levels of KLF15 allow p300 to co-activate pro-hypertrophic factors, including GATA4 and MEF2 [76]. Because p300 is also a critical coactivator of p53-mediated transcription, this same KLF15–p300 relationship has a plausible mechanism by which loss of KLF15 may indirectly impact p53 transcription in hepatocytes, which is consistent with, but not yet directly demonstrated in, HCC [60].

In terms of Wnt/β-catenin signaling, direct evidence from experimental models relating KLF6/KLF15 polymorphisms to specific activity of the Wnt pathway in HCC is limited; evidence supporting the crosstalk between TP53 and Wnt pathway exists more broadly, suggesting that loss of TP53 results in up-regulation of Wnt pathway target genes, such as DVL1, and in nuclear translocation of β-catenin [77]. Since the loss of KLF6 correlates with the inactivation of TP53, which in turn allows genomic instability, it is likely that the loss of KLF6 may also lead to an indirect potentiation of Wnt/β-catenin activation via a similar TP53-dependent pathway, though this is speculative and needs to be directly confirmed.

In the literature reviewed, there are no mechanistic data available for the KLF6/KLF15 pathway, and the statement of pathway convergence is the most relevant evidence available, so we mark the KLF–TERT pathway relationship as an open question for future mechanistic studies, but not as an established pathway.

**Challenges and limitations**

**Current gaps in knowledge: Understanding KLF polymorphisms in liver cancer**

Although Krüppel-like factors (KLFs) have emerged as potential markers and targets for liver cancer (HCC), the understanding of the role of KLFs, including the impact of KLF polymorphisms, is still limited. There are several areas of uncertainty that need to be addressed to enable clinical applications of KLF-based strategies. To begin with, the findings of research on KLF polymorphisms in liver cancer have been conflicting. Some studies have indicated that some KLF gene variants may be linked to an increased risk of HCC, while others have not been able to duplicate these results or have presented conflicting findings [69, 73, 78].The reasons for this lack of consensus are likely the complexity of the variations and the interaction of genetic variation with other factors like alcohol consumption, viral infection, etc., and underlying liver disease. Furthermore, a few reports show correlation between KLF polymorphisms and prognosis of HCC, but there is no report reporting significant correlation. The inconsistencies of the results limit the use of KLF polymorphisms as clinical markers for prognosis and/or risk stratification.

One of the most important unmet needs is the lack of understanding of the effect of certain KLF polymorphisms on the function of the gene product. Several variants of a KLF gene have been found to change the expression or activity of that

protein; however, the exact molecular mechanisms by which these changes lead to liver cancer remain unclear. KLFs are implicated in many different cellular events, and the specific mechanisms by which the failure of KLFs contributes to tumorigenesis are not defined. The mechanisms will be important to understanding how to move the KLF polymorphism data to clinical use.

Also, the role of other genetic and environmental factors that can affect the pathogenesis of HCC in combination with KLF polymorphisms remains poorly understood. Most studies have investigated one genetic variant at a time, but HCC is a multifactorial disease, which is affected by many genetic predispositions, epigenetic changes and environmental factors. These factors are inter-dependent and make the identification of genetic markers of HCC more complicated, and additional studies will be required to explore the interaction of KLF polymorphisms with other molecular and environmental risk factors.

**Technological and methodological challenges**

Technology and methodology challenges to detect and validate KLF polymorphisms in clinical settings. A big challenge is finding high throughput genetic testing techniques that are able to detect a variety of KLF variants in different populations. Next-generation sequencing (NGS) technologies now allow the sequencing of the whole genome, which is important for achieving complete and accurate identification of KLF polymorphisms [79], but this can be challenging. Variants in KLF genes could be rare or in regions of the genome that are hard to get the sequence right, leading to false negatives or incomplete information.

In addition, it is also difficult to validate the functional polymorphisms of KLFs. Although several variants have been suggested to be associated with liver cancer using genome-wide association studies (GWAS)Trépo, Caruso [80], establishing causality will require detailed experimental studies to establish the exact biological mechanisms of the polymorphisms. Functional significance of KLF variants can be investigated using cell-based assays, animal models and organoid cultures; however, these tools can be time-consuming and resource intensive.

In addition, integration of genetic data into clinical outcomes is a great challenge. Studies in the clinic have problems correlating the results of genetic variations with the clinical phenotypes [81], because patients are heterogeneous, that there is not enough clinical data, and that there are no consistent methods for assessing disease progression and/or response to treatment. Such a discrepancy makes it hard to identify unambiguous associations between KLF polymorphisms and liver cancer risk or prognosis in clinical situations.

**Ethnic and population-specific variations**

Another crucial consideration is the potential for ethnic and population-specific variations in the effects of KLF polymorphisms. The genetic diversity across different populations means that certain KLF variants may have varying effects depending on ethnic background, genetic background, or environmental exposures [82]. For instance, polymorphisms in KLF genes that may be associated with HCC risk in one population may not have the same effect in another population due to differences in the frequency of the polymorphism [83], the presence of other genetic risk factors, or environmental conditions.

The lack of diversity in many genetic studies on liver cancer is a significant limitation. Much of the research conducted on KLF polymorphisms has predominantly focused on populations of European or East

Asian descent, leaving a gap in understanding how these genetic variations affect individuals from other ethnic groups. To better understand the role of KLF polymorphisms in HCC, future studies must include diverse cohorts that reflect the global distribution of liver cancer, ensuring that the findings are broadly applicable and that potential ethnic differences in genetic risk can be addressed.

## Conclusion

Improved understanding of liver cancer risk and treatment will require addressing gaps in knowledge about liver KLF polymorphisms, overhauling the technological challenges of liver genetic testing, and ensuring that liver cancer research will include diverse populations. Addressing these challenges will unlock the potential of KLFs as biomarkers and therapeutic targets, leading to improvements in diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment of HCC in a variety of patient populations. To increase the understanding of liver cancer risks and treatment, several knowledge gaps need to be addressed: increased knowledge of liver KLF polymorphisms, transformation of the technological challenges of liver genetic testing, and inclusion of diverse population in liver cancer research. Overcoming these challenges will open the door to the use of KLFs as biomarkers and therapeutic targets for the diagnosis, prognosis and treatment of HCC across numerous patient populations.

Three directions of future research should be a priority. First, dedicated case-control genotyping studies are required to determine whether germline variants of KLF15 (rather than expression changes alone) are associated with HCC risk, an association that is currently not described and is of growing mechanistic interest [84]. Second, validation of the prognostic value of KLF6-SV1 is needed in larger cohorts of HCC patients beyond those with HCV-related HCC [28 - 29]. Third, although KLF15 has been implicated in hepatocellular carcinoma, there is insufficient evidence linking specific KLF15 polymorphisms to HCC progression. The reported GWAS meta-analysis depicted that KLF15-locus variant rs7628416 was associated with HCC susceptibility but lacked independent replication, and its functional effect on KLF15 expression. A gap remains whether KLF15 genetic variants influence progression, recurrence, treatment response, or survival in HCC [31].

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Here is your references list fully verified, cleaned of metadata abbreviations (such as truncated database names mixed into author lists or journal titles), and formatted accurately in the **Vancouver style** as required for the *NUST Journal of Natural Sciences (NJNS)*:


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