Quantitative MHC class-I/-II expression levels in *CDK12* mutated prostate cancer pa-
tients reveal intratumorally T cell adaptive immune response in tumors

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Abstract

Treatment of advanced prostate cancer (PCa) remains a therapeutic challenge. The
promising improvements provided by new immune-checkpoint blockade (ICB) therapies have
shown only modest benefits in a minority of PCa patients. *CDK12* defective-PCa is a recently
described immune active class of advanced PCa with an elevated mutational burden, high in-
flammatory levels, and increased immune cell infiltrate. *CDK12* has been proposed as a pre-
dictive biomarker of treatment response to ICB since partial response treatment has been found
among *CDK12* PCa patients treated with ICB. This study was designed to investigate potential
molecular causes of alterations to immune response among patient tumors with defects of
CDK12 in primary (TCGA-PRAD, $n = 48$) and metastatic (mCRPC-SU2C, $n = 10$) PCa. We
hypothesize that the expression of the MHC-I and -II genes would differ in the *CDK12* defec-
tive tumors, which would explain the lack of response in some patients treated with ICB. Using
RNA-seq data, we were able to distinguish two groups of tumors with *CDK12* defective tumors
based on differential MHC expression. Tumors with increased MHC levels showed the activa-
tion of several pathways associated with the immune system and elevated *PD-L1*, *IDO1*, and
TIM3 expression. There was also increased composition of CD8+ T cells, B cells, γδ T cells,
and M1 Macrophages in tumors with elevated MHC levels. These data suggest that MHC ex-
pression and associated immune response pathways may provide new biomarkers for ICB ther-
apeutic response in *CDK12*-defective PCa.

Introduction

Treatment of advanced prostate cancer (PCa) remains a therapeutic challenge. The life
expectancy of diagnosed patients largely depends on the tumor grade and an early diagnosis.

Men with distant metastases at diagnosis have the worst overall survival (OS), with only 30%

of patients surviving > 5 years (Rebello et al., 2021). For recurrent disease, acquired resistance

to Androgen Deprivation Therapy (ADT) and chemotherapy remains a significant cause of

death (Wong et al., 2016). While immune-checkpoint blockade (ICB) therapies, such as PD-L1

inhibition, have shown significant benefits in only a minority of patients (Binnewies et al.,

2018). Thus, it is necessary to discover and characterize the genetic pathways and molecular

signatures that could help to predict the best treatments for advanced PCa.

The tumor mutation burden affects the infiltration of immune cells in the TME, which

sets tumors with impaired DNA damage repair (DDR) as a target for immune therapies (Schu-

macher & Schreiber, 2015). The biallelic inactivation of Cyclin-dependent Kinase 12, *CDK12*,

was recently described as a novel immune active class of advanced PCa with a high mutation

burden, an inflammatory phenotype and immune cell infiltrate distinct from other defective

molecular subtypes (Nguyen et al., 2020; Rescigno et al., 2021; Sokol et al., 2019; Y. M. Wu

et al., 2018). In a retrospective multi-center study, Antonarakis *et al.* found that *CDK12*-altered

advanced PCa is a more aggressive subtype with poor outcomes to first-line therapy (Anto-

narakis et al., 2020). In the same work, nine men received PD-1 inhibition therapy (pembroli-

zumab and nivolumab); 33% of the patients had a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) response and

increased progression-free survival of 5.4 months. Additionally, Schweizer *et al.* investigate

the differences between standard treatments and ICB in *CDK12* metastatic castration-resistant

prostate cancer (mCRPC) (Schweizer et al., 2020). In this study, nineteen mCRPC received

ICB; eleven out of nineteen (59%) of the patients had a decline in PSA, with two patients (11%)

having a 100% PSA decline. Therefore, despite having *CDK12* alterations, some patients from

this molecular subgroup were non-responsive to ICB treatment, and the causes of this re-

sistance were poorly understood.

Tumor cells may develop various types of escape mechanisms that allow them to avoid

recognition and destruction by the immune system. For example, the expression of checkpoint

proteins (PD-1/PD-L1, CTLA-4, LAG3) (Spranger & Gajewski, 2018) by tumors may increase

pro-tumorigenic immune cell infiltration (Tregs, M2 Macrophages) (Horton et al., 2019). Tu-

mors may also develop intrinsic cancer-cell signaling that can suppress the activity of infiltrat-

ing immune cells (WNT/β-catenin) (Li et al., 2019). Another mechanism exploited by tumors

to avoid the recognition of cytotoxic T cells (CD8+) and antigen-presenting cells (APCs) is

through loss of major histocompatibility complex class-I or class-II (MHC-I and MHC-II)

(McGranahan et al., 2017).

The loss of MHC-I and MHC-II may occur reversibly or irreversibly, and change has
been linked to tumor progression, poor prognosis, and reduced response to ICB in different
malignancies (Dhatchinamoorthy et al., 2021; Thibodeau et al., 2012). As classified by Garrido
et al., the alteration in the MHC expression is divided into two major groups: "Soft" alterations,
those capable of recovering or upregulating MHC antigens after cytokine exposure (e.g., reg-
ulatory abnormalities); "Hard" alterations, those that cannot recover MHC expression (e.g.,
structural defects) (Garrido & Aptsiauri, 2019). During tumor evolution, the infiltration of cy-
totoxic lymphocytes eliminates highly immunogenic tumor clones causing a selection of sur-
viving cell populations that have acquired MHC alterations (Algarra et al., 2021). The low
expression of MHC-I in colorectal cancer has been associated with a poor prognosis (Watson
et al., 2006). In melanoma patients, loss of expression of MHC-I and MHC-II was associated
with resistance to anti-CTLA-4, and anti-PD-1, respectively (Rodig et al., 2018). The enhanced
response to ICB in melanoma and Hodgkin lymphoma is thought to be due to the expression
of MHC-II and PD-L1 in both tumors (Johnson et al., 2018; Roemer et al., 2018). In PCa there
is presently limited information on the role of MHC-I and MHC-II expression and ICB re-
sponse.

In prostate cancer, *CDK12* inactivation is known to increase the immunogenicity of
tumor cells but the relationship between *CDK12* loss and MHC expression has not been inves-
tigated. Changes in expression of MHC-I and -II are known to be involved in tumor immune
evasion in various types of cancer. There is also evidence that anti-cancer T cell immune ac-
tivity contributes to the selection of tumor cells with lower levels of MHC expression. How-
ever, the molecular mechanisms responsible for reducing MHC expression are poorly under-
stood. Hence, we hypothesize that the expression of the MHC-I and -II genes would differ in
the *CDK12* defective tumors and could provide predictive information on pathways mediating
ICB response. Thus, the implementation of a combined measure between *CDK12* mutation and
the presence of MHC expression may better predict outcomes for prostate cancer tumors clas-
sified as eligible for ICB treatment based on *CDK12*-subtype and normal antigen presentation
function.

Material and Methods

Cohort

We used The CbioPortal for Cancer Genomics (Gao et al., 2013) to search primary
(pPCa) and metastatic (mCRPC) prostate tumor cohorts, including *CDK12* defective samples,

and to download clinical information from patients. The classification of samples having

CDK12 loss-of-function followed previous reports and was based on the Onco Query Language

pattern (OQL) (CDK12: MUT, CDK12: HETLOSS, CDK12: HOMDEL, CDK12: AMP)

(Nguyen et al., 2020; Rescigno et al., 2021; Sokol et al., 2019). Only cohorts containing *CDK12*

altered-RNA-seq samples data were selected in the Genotypes and Phenotypes (dbGaP) data-

base and applied for access under project ID 29255 (**Figure S1**, **Table-S1**).

RNA-Seq data analysis

For the pPCa, we used the package recount2 to download summarized experiments

objects containing the transcription-level RNA-Seq abundance matrix from the TCGA-Prostate

Adenocarcinoma (TCGA-PRAD) (Abeshouse et al., 2015; Imada et al., 2019). Additionally,

for the mCRPC, we download SRA Paired-End (PE) reads using the SRAToolkit

(https://github.com/ncbi/sra-tools). The quality of the raw reads was then measured using the

FASTQC program (https://www.bioinformatics.babraham.ac.uk/projects/fastqc/). We quanti-

fied the expression of transcripts using the software Salmon v1.6.0 (Patro et al., 2017) in the

human transcriptome. The transcriptome index was built using the reference GRCh38 version

of   the   human   genome   (http://ftp.ensembl.org/pub/release-105/fasta/homo_sapi-

ens/dna/Homo_sapiens.GRCh38.dna.primary_assembly.fa.gz)   and   transcriptome

(https://ftp.ebi.ac.uk/pub/databases/gencode/Gencode_human/release_39/gencode.v39.tran-

scripts.fa.gz), downloaded from ENSEMBL and GENCODE, following the instruction man-

ual. We used then used the Tximport v1.22.0 package to import the transcription-level abun-

dance and estimate raw counts derived from the quantification step (Soneson et al., 2015). The

count data normalization, expression levels, and differential gene expression (DEG) analysis

for both pPCa and mCRPC cohorts were executed using the DESeq2 v1.34.0 (Love et al., 2014;

Zhu et al., 2019). We used the clusterProfiler v4.2.1 and enrichR (https://maayanlab.cloud/En-

richr/) to implement equally over-representation (ORA) enrichment analysis and gene set en-

richment analysis (GSEA) of the DEGs and the whole transcriptome profile, respectively, us-

ing the Gene Ontology (GO) and Molecular Signatures Database (MSigDB) (Carbon et al.,

2019; Khatri et al., 2012; Liberzon et al., 2015; Subramanian et al., 2005; T. Wu et al., 2021)

(**Figure S1**).

MHC expression

We performed hierarchical clustering analysis using a representative subset of MHC

genes (Schaafsma et al., 2021), and we observed two groups of *CDK12* defective tumors

regarding MHC expression as shown in Figure S2. We used an arbitrary cutoff of quartile to

divide the *CDK12* defective tumors into "High" and "Low" expressed MHC-I and -II groups

(Koopman et al., 2000). For the quartile quantification, we used the normalized expression

values of the classical genes that composed each MHC class (e.g., MHC-I, *HLA-A*, *HLA-B*,

HLA-C; MHC-II, *HLA-DPA1*, *HLA-DPB1*, *HLA-DQA1*, *HLA-DQA1*, *HLA-DQB1*, *HLA-*

DQB2, *HLA-DRA*, *HLA-DQB1*, *HLA-DRB5*, *HLA-DRB6*) (Schaafsma et al., 2021). We dichot-

omized expression levels to be below or above the first quartile for each gene, we then used

this classification to generate the final logical values regarding the patient's MHC status

('High' or 'Low' expressed) (**Fig. S2**). Samples were classified as having MHC 'Low' expres-

sion when at least one gene composing each class was expressed at a low level. In mCRPC

CDK12- defective, all tumors classified as MHC-High presented similar high expression of

both MHC-I and -II (henceforth, mCRPC *CDK12* defective MHC High), thus we called these

tumors just MHC High. The summary values used to classify the tumors are shown in table S2.

The final logical values for the pPCa and mCRPC are shown in S3, S4, S5, and S6.

Digital cytometry

To investigate and quantify the immune cell composition in the TME of tumors having

CDK12 defects, we used the bulk tissue gene expression profiles (GEP) from RNA-seq data

from both pPCa and mCRPC with the digital cytometry CIBERSORTx (https://cibersortx.stan-

ford.edu) (Chen et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2015). Briefly, this program uses bulk tissue GEP,

compares the data with prior knowledge of expression profiles from purified leukocytes, and

estimates a relative immune abundance composition in the tumor. We used the 'signature ma-

trix' containing a validated leukocyte GEP of 22 human hematopoietic cell phenotypes, LM22,

to estimate the immune cell composition from the TME (**Fig. S1**).

Computational and statistical analysis

We used a GNU/Linux environment to perform the quality control and quantify the raw

reads to the human transcriptome. Subsequently, the processed data was used in the down-

stream analysis in RStudio software (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, R v4.1.2), and

all results were plotted either by ViDGER v1.14.0 or ggplot2 (McDermaid et al., 2019; Wick-

ham et al., 2016) (Fig. S1). Pearson Correlation was used to perform a correlation analysis of

the normalized expression levels (coef. level = 0.95). A gene was considered differentially

expressed when log2 foldchange > 1 expressed from the reference group with a *p*-adjusted

value < 0.05. For the enrichment analysis, we used a cutoff value of 0.05.

Results

Transcriptomics

Since immune evasion by cancer cells is associated with altered MHC, we expected

that the expression of the MHC-I and -II genes would differ among the *CDK12* defective tu-

mors. It follows that downstream altered pathways could provide predictive information on

poor ICB responses in this molecular subtype of prostate cancer. To investigate MHC expres-

sion levels in PCa further, we compared the transcriptomics of *CDK12* defective (*CDK12* de-

fective) prostate tumors classified as "MHC High" (top 75% quartile) to the transcriptomics of

CDK12 deficient tumors classified as having a low expression of MHC genes (bottom 25%

quartile).

CDK12 defective MHC-I/-II High-expression tumors showed distinct transcriptome profiles

with upregulation of IFN-γ-responsive genes and an inflamed TME

We first compared the transcriptome of *CDK12* defective PCa classified as MHC-High

and compared to *CDK12* defective tumors MHC-Low groups in pPCa and mCRPC (Figure S2,

Figure 1A-B,). The pPCa *CDK12* defective MHC-I High showed 1319 upregulated and 2153

downregulated genes (**Table-S7, Table-S8**). Three clusters of gene expression were apparent

in our comparison (**Figure 1A**). The upper cluster (I) has *IGHV* and *IGLV* over-expressed

genes linked to *CDK12* MHC I high. The middle cluster (II) has four HLA genes overexpressed

in the MHC I high group, which supports our classification based on *CDK12* defective MHC

expression and upregulation of many genes related to antigen presentation and CD8+ T cell

activity (e.g., *HLA-A*, *HLA-B*, *HLA-C*, *B2M*, *GZMB*, *PSMB9, LCK, SOCS1*) (**Figure 1B**). The

lower cluster (III) has 14 downregulated genes when MHC I is highly expressed. Likewise,

CDK12 defective MHC-II High exhibited 1129 upregulated and 580 downregulated genes (**Ta-**

ble-S7, Table-S9). Two clusters were apparent in our comparison (**Figure 1B**). The upper

cluster showed the upregulation of genes related to cytotoxicity, immune cell migration, and

immune suppression (e.g., *GZMA*, *IL12RB1*, *CD27*, *CD48*, *PRF1*, *CD8A*, *TNFRSF9*, *VCAM1*,

IL32, *CD22*, *CD74,* and *TIGIT*) (**Figure 1B**). Second, the mCRPC *CDK12* defective MHC-

High 230 upregulated and 46 downregulated genes (**Table-S7, Table-S10**). The combined

MHC I and II showed two distinct clusters (**Figure 1C**). The lower cluster showed the upreg-

ulation of genes linked to innate and adaptative immune response and CD4+ and CD8+ T cell

activity (e.g., *DEFA1*, *CD79B*, *CD3* (*e*, *d*, *g*), *TRBC2*, *KLRK1*, *CD27*, *NKG7*, *IL18RAP*,

IL2RG, *BLK*, *CD5*, *CD8* (*a*, *b*), *IL12RB1*, *ICOS*, *PRF1*, *CD96*, *CD247*) (**Figure 1C**). In

conclusion, for both pPCa and mCRPC, *CDK12* defective MHC high gene expression is asso-

ciated with transcriptomic changes that are indicative of a general pattern of activation of IFN-

γ-responsive and cytotoxic activity genes. The next step was to perform enrichment analysis to

identify potential functional associations of expression changes associated with *CDK12* defec-

tive MHC High/Low clusters.

To better understand the transcriptional alterations in *CDK12* defective tumors classi-

fied as MHC-I/-II high-expressed, we used ORA and GSEA analysis to investigate the func-

tional activity of the gene expression changes of both cohorts. In pPCa, patient tumors with

CDK12 defective MHC-I high-expressed showed activation of interferon-γ-response, activa-

tion of immune cells, and antigen presentation by MHC-I pathways (**Figure 1D**, **Table-S8**). In

pPCa with *CDK12* defective MHC-II high-expressed also showed high pathways activity of

antigen presentation through MHC-II, as expected (**Figure 1E, Table-S9**). Next, mCRPC

CDK12 defective MHC high-expressed exhibited activation of cytotoxicity and adaptative cy-

totoxicity immune response (**Figure 1F, Table-S10**). Furthermore, GSEA analysis showed ac-

tivation of many Hallmarks pathways in *CDK12* defective MHC-I high-expressed (e.g., Epi-

thelial-Mesenchymal Transition, Inflammatory Response, Interferon Gamma Response, Inter-

feron Alpha Response, TNFA Signaling via NFKB, P53, and IL2/STAT5 Signaling (**Figure**

3A, Table-S8). In addition, the *CDK12* defective MHC-II High group had similar pathway

activation, but with the addition of Allograft Rejection (**Figure 3B, Table-S9**). Likewise,

mCRPC *CDK12* defective MHC high showed activation of various Hallmarks and Reactome

pathways (e.g., Allograft Rejection, Interferon Gamma Response, Inflammatory Response, In-

terferon Alpha Response, IL2/STAT5 Signaling, Apoptosis, TCR Signaling, Interleukin 10

Signaling, Constitutive Signaling by Aberrant PI3K in Cancer, and the suppressive PD1 Sig-

naling pathway (**Figure 3C-D, Table-S10**). Collectively, our transcriptomic analysis suggests

that *CDK12* defective PCa with high MHC expression displays the activation of various path-

ways associated with the immune system.

CDK12 defective MHC-I/-II High groups exhibited tumor microenvironment with high ex-

pression of chemokines and immunomodulatory genes in both cohorts.

To elucidate the underlying immunologic signature in TME of *CDK12* defective MHC

high expression groups, we investigate the difference between chemokines and immunomod-

ulatory genes expression between conditions. In pPCa, the *CDK12* defective MHC-I High ex-

hibited upregulation of many chemokines linked to APCs and effector T cell migration (e.g.,

CCL2, CCL7, CCL19, CCL21, CXCL1, CXCL2, CXCL5, CXCL8, CXCL10, CXCL12,

CXCL13, CXCL16, CX3CL1) (**Figure S3)** and the immunomodulatory genes *HAVCR2* (*TIM3*)

and *IDO1*. (**Figure 2A-B**). Also, *CDK12* defective MHC-II High presented increased expres-

sion of chemokines related to Natural killer, T effector cell, and B cell infiltration (e.g., *CCL8,*

CCL19, CCL22, CXCL13) (**Figure S3**), and the immunomodulatory genes *CD274* (*PD-L1*),

HAVCR2 (*TIM3*), and *IDO1* (**Figure 2C-E**). Based on Pearson Correlation analysis, we ob-

served a significant positive correlation within MHC-I complex genes and with *IDO1* but with

no other investigated gene (**Figure S6A**). Interestingly, among the MHC-II genes, correlation

analysis showed a significant positive association between the expression of the MHC-II com-

plex and the immunomodulatory genes, *CD274* (*PD-L1*), *IDO1*, and *HAVCR2*(*TIM3*) (**Figure**

S6B). In mCRPC with *CDK12* defective MHC high-expressed, we detected a high expression

of chemokines *CCL4, CCL5, CXCL9, CXCL12* (**Figure S4**), and the immunomodulatory gene

CD274 (*PD-L1*) (**Figure 2F**). Furthermore, we observed a significant positive association be-

tween the immunomodulatory genes *HAVCR2*(*TIM3*) and *CTLA4, LAG3*, and the expression

of MHC-I and -II genes (**Figure S6C-D**). As shown, MHC high-expression *CDK12* defective

tumors had a pattern of high chemokine expression and upregulation of inhibitory mechanisms.

Immune cell composition

Our transcriptomics analysis predicts that *CDK12* defective MHC-I/-II High expressing

tumors will display enrichment of immune cells with high effector and cytotoxic activity, and

the co-inhibitory expression of inhibitory pathways by tumor cells. To test this hypothesis, we

used *in silico* cytometry (CIBERSORTx, https://cibersortx.stanford.edu) algorithm to estimate

the immune cell composition in the TME of pPCa and mCRPC CDK12 defective with MHC

high-expressed.

CDK12 defective MHC-I/-II High CDK12 loss-of-function tumors showed distinct immune

cell infiltrate in the TME.

We investigated whether MHC-I and -II high expression would affect the variation in

immune cell composition in *CDK12* defective tumors in both cohorts. We found that *CDK12*

defective MHC high-expressed tumors displayed ongoing increased APCs and effector lym-

phocytes traffic in their TME (**Figure 4**). In pPCa, *CDK12* defective MHC-I high-expressed

pPCa showed a significant increase in the composition of Naïve B cells, CD8+ T cells, and γδ

T cells, while the reduced composition of Mastocytes (**Figure 4A**). In comparison, the *CDK12*

defective MHC-II high-expressed exhibited an increase of γδ T cells and reduced composition

of Plasma cells and M0 macrophages (**Figure 4B**). Additionally, in mCRPC, *CDK12*-Mut

MHC high-expressed showed a significative increased composition of CD8+ T cell and M1

Macrophages. (**Figure 4C**).

Discussion

In prostate cancer, *CDK12* inactivation is known to increase the immunogenicity of

tumor cells (Lotan & Antonarakis, 2021). Changes in MHC-I and -II expression are involved

in tumor immune evasion in various types of cancer. Using RNA-seq data, we observed two

groups of *CDK12* defective tumors regarding MHC expression. MHC high-expressed groups

showed the activation of various pathways associated with the immune system and signifi-

cantly high *PD-L1*, *IDO1*, and *TIM3* expression and increased CD8+ T cells, B cells, γδ T cells,

and M1 composition Macrophages in *CDK12* defective classified as MHC High.

Our clinical analysis showed that MHC-I High and MHC High in pPCa and mCRPC,

respectively, exhibited a trend towards better overall survival when compared to the MHC

lower expression group ($p > 0.05$, **Figure S7**). Several studies have similarly found that the

expression of the MHC-I and -II genes are associated with better clinical outcomes and differ-

ent resistance mechanisms (Park et al., 2017; Rodig et al., 2018; Roemer et al., 2018). Rodig

et al. showed that the lack of MHC-I expression in melanoma was linked to higher odds of

progressive disease and resistance to anti-CTLA4, but not to anti-PD1. In the same study, ex-

pression of MHC-II in tumors was associated with tumors that were more likely to respond to

anti-PD1 ICB treatment. In Hodgkin Lymphoma treated with nivolumab (anti-PD1), analysis

of malignant Hodgkin Reed-Sternberg cells showed MHC-II expression, but not MHC-I, was

predictive of complete remission and longer PFS in (Roemer et al., 2018). Park et al. showed

that MHC-II positivity in tumor cells was associated with better disease-free survival in pa-

tients with lymph node metastasis (Park et al., 2017). From a practical standpoint, these results

suggest that analysis of MHC-I and -II expression levels could be used to determine whether

CDK12 defective prostate cancer tumors are more likely to respond to ICB treatments. Further

study of downstream MHC-dependent immunomodulatory signals may also provide insights

into other pathways leading to immunotherapy failure.

Transcriptomic signatures associated with MHC expression variation have been de-

scribed in different tumor types and they appear to capture the activity of genes and biological

pathways related to clinical responses to ICB (Ayers et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2016, 2018;

Rodig et al., 2018; Schaafsma et al., 2021). Ayers *et al.* proposed a gene expression profile

with the composition of eighteen genes relevant to predicting the clinical outcome of anti-PD1.

This IFN-γ gene signature in pretreatment tumor biopsies was associated with better outcomes

in melanoma, head-and-neck squamous cell carcinoma, and gastric cancer treated with pem-

brolizumab (Ayers et al., 2017). In our study, the *CDK12* patient tumors classified as MHC

High showed the presence of several genes previously described as IFN-γ-responsive and cy-

totoxic activity and associated with response to anti-PD1 therapy (**Figure S8**). Our results also

showed the activation of pathways related to IFN-γ response and production in both the pPCA

and mCRPC cohorts (**Figure 1 B, D, F**). Gene Set Enrichment Analysis showed that *CDK12*

defective tumors demonstrate signatures of "Allograft rejection" and "IL2_STAT5 signaling"

(**Figure 3 B, D, Figure 4 B-C**). Interestingly, only the mCRPC *CDK12* MHC High showed

the signature of "PD-1 signaling", but pPCa *CDK12* MHC-II and mCRPC *CDK12* MHC High

showed significantly higher expression of *CD274* (*PD-L1*) (**Figure 2**). These results suggest

that the intrinsic inflammatory signal from *CDK12* defective tumors classified as 'MHC High'

may potentiate these tumor cells to upregulate the expression of MHC-I and MHC-II and pre-

sent endogenous peptides to CD8+ and CD4+ T Helper cells, matching higher *PD-L1* expres-

sion on tumor cells (Younger et al., 2008).

Alternative immunomodulatory mechanisms promote adaptive resistance to thera-

peutic anti-PD1(Koyama et al., 2016). We identified the upregulation of immunomodulatory

molecules, such as *IDO1* and *TIM3* in both MHC-I and -II *CDK12* defective pPCa (**Figure 2**).

Also, in pPCa, we found a positive correlation of MHC-I genes with IDO1 and MHC-II genes

with *PDCD1* (*PD-1*), *CD274* (*PD-L1*), *LAG3*, *IDO1*, and *HAVCR2*(*TIM3*) (**Figure S6 A-B**).

In mCRPC, we found a positive correlation of MHC-I and -II genes expression with

HAVCR2(*TIM3*) and *CTLA4*, *LAG3* (**Figure S6 C-D**). Our findings may indicate the presence

of an acquired resistance mechanism in a subset of *CDK12* defective prostate cancer tumors

classified as MHC High (i.e., upregulation of immunomodulatory molecules). These results

suggest that the measure of the basal expression of MHC genes could be developed as a bi-

omarker to characterize *CDK12* patient samples with a previously inflamed environment and

the expression of immunomodulatory genes linked to resistance to anti-PD1 (i.e., upregulation

of *IDO1* and *TIM3*)

The expression of MHC molecules plays a pivotal role in providing the signals neces-

sary to recognize and activate the immune system against tumor neoantigens and is essential

to controlling tumor growth through cytotoxic activity (Qin et al., 2005; Schreiber et al., 2011).

We found a higher abundance of CD8+ T cells in both *CDK12* defective pPCa MHC-I and

mCRPC MHC. Interestingly, only in the CDK12 pPCa were we able to find increased levels

of γδ T cells. This result may either indicate the dependence of CD8+ T cells in MHC-I antigen

presentation or suggest that enhanced CD4+ Th infiltrate could support the continued accumulation of CD8+ CTLs in the tumor microenvironment (Johnson et al., 2016). Also, the basal effector immune cell population such as γδ T cells, in pPCa, may be responsible, in part, for IFN-γ, and may indicate the dependence of the MHC-unrestricted recognition role of γδ T cells and its presence in the TME (Born et al., 2006; Rodig et al., 2018).

Interestingly, we found a link between *IGHV* and *IGLV* over-expressed genes to *CDK12* defective pPCa MHC-I high-expressed (upper cluster I, **Figure 1A**). The production of Ig by tumors cells (cancer-derived Ig) is described in a variety of tumors, as well as in prostate cancer (Cui et al., 2021; Li et al., 2011; Pan et al., 2013; C. Qin et al., 2020). Also, cancer-derived Ig may act as checkpoint proteins and inhibit the function of effector T cells and NK cells (Li et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, the upregulation of cancer-specific Ig may reflect a parallel immune escape mechanism in *CDK12* MHC-I high-expressed in response to MHC-I/CD8+ T cell antigen recognition.

Importantly, this study did not address the molecular mechanism underlying the alteration of MHC genes expression in *CDK12* defective prostate cancer samples. The loss of MHC expression could be derived from two different mechanisms of disruption (Garrido et al., 2010). First, regulatory abnormalities downregulate the expression of MHC genes through mechanisms that do not affect the genomic structure of HLA genes, and the MHC expression can be recovered by specific T-cell mediated response (e.g., IFN-γ signaling). Second, during tumor evolution, the infiltration of cytotoxic lymphocytes eliminates tumor clones high immunogenic causing a selection of clones that may present structural alteration, or "Hard" lesions, in the MHC loci or other genomic regions (e.g., *B2M*, *IFN*, *STAT*) distinct from the derived clone (Zaretsky et al., 2016). After selection, these clones will be invisible to the immune system and the lesion will progress (Algarra et al., 2021). However, further studies approaching the causes of MHC disruption and how altered expression in *CDK12* defective prostate cancer are needed. Furthermore, because the non-tumor cell content was not defined in this study, we were unable to establish a limit for the contribution of the *CDK12* defective tumor cells since the RNA-seq relies on data from bulk tissue, and the DEGs analysis of a varying mixture of immune and tumor cells may not give precise results (van den Berge et al., 2019).

Using RNA-seq data, we observed two groups of *CDK12* defective tumors based on variation in MHC expression levels. Our data suggest that *CDK12* defective MHC high-expressing PCa would have an active and inflamed tumor microenvironment with elevated immunomodulatory pathway expression and increased presence of effector T cells. More extensive *in vitro* and *in vivo* investigations are required to relate this molecular subtype to potential

372 actionable immunomodulatory mechanisms or possible therapeutic targets in PCa. These find-

373 ings also provide support for investigations into the clinical use of MHC expression levels in

374 *CDK12* defective prostate cancer to identify tumors likely to respond to ICB treatment.

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Figures Legends

Figure 1. MHC-I/-II high expression in CDK12 defective prostate cancer showed
distinct transcriptome activity. (A) Transcriptome heatmap exhibiting clustering of top
50 DEGs in pPCa CDK12-Mut MHC-I High group ($n = 30$). The upper cluster (I) has
IGHV and IGLV over-expressed genes linked to *CDK12* MHC I high. The middle cluster
(II) has four HLA genes overexpressed in MHC I high group, which supports our classi-
fication based on *CDK12* mutated MHC expression. The lower cluster (III) has 14 down-
regulated genes when MHC I is highly expressed. **(B)** Transcriptome heatmap exhibiting
clustering of top 50 DEGs in the pPCa CDK12-Mut MHC-II High group ($n = 23$). The
upper cluster (I) has upregulation of genes related to cytotoxicity, immune cell migration,
and immune suppression. We could not observe clinical features associated with clusters
of either MHC I or II. **(C)** Transcriptome heatmap exhibiting clustering of top 50 DEGs
in the mCRPC CDK12-Mut MHC High group ($n = 6$). The combined MHC I and II
showed two distinct clusters. The lower cluster showed the upregulation of genes linked
to innate and adaptative immune response and CD4+ and CD8+ T cell activity **(D)** En-
riched GO (BP) pathways of the upregulated genes from pPCa CDK12-Mut MHC-I. **(E)**
Enriched GO (BP) pathways of the upregulated genes from pPCa CDK12-Mut MHC-II
High group. **(F)** Enriched GO (BP) pathways of the upregulated genes from the mCRPC
CDK12-Mut High group. The DEGs are relative to the CDK12-Mut 'Low' group. Clinical
information is displayed on top of the heatmap for each patient. The color scale in the
heatmap represents the Z-score of the normalized read counts for each gene, where the
red scale color indicates upregulated, and blue low expressed genes. Enrichment analyses
were performed using *clusterProfiler* and *p*-adjusted value = 0.05 as the cutoff. Bar plots
show the top 20 most significant Gene Ontology (BP) terms.

Figure 2. MHC high expressed CDK12 defective prostate cancer showed enhanced
expression of immunomodulatory genes. RNA-sequencing expression level of im-
munomodulatory genes **(A)** *IDO1* ($p < 0.018$), **(B)** *HAVCR2* (*TIM3*) ($p < 0.0022$) in
CDK12-Mut MHC-I High. $n = 48$; **(C)** *CD274* (*PD-L1*) ($p < 0.0028$), **(D)** *HAVCR2* (*TIM3*)
($p < 0.00012$), **(E)** *IDO1* ($p < 0.001$) in *CDK12-Mut* MHC-II High. $n = 48$; **(F)** *CD274*

(*PD-L1*) (*p* < 0.0095). *n* = 10; *: *p*-value < 0.05; **: *p*-value < 0.01, by Mann-Whitney
test. *IDO1*, Indoleamine 2,3-Dioxygenase 1; *HAVCR3* (*TIM3*), T-Cell Immunoglobulin
Mucin Receptor 3; *CD274* (*PD-L1*), Programmed Cell Death 1 Ligand 1.
Figure 3. MHC high expressed *CDK12* defective prostate tumors are associated with
activation of immune-related pathways. (A) Gene Set Enrichment Analysis of Hall-
mark's pathways in pPCa *CDK12-Mut* MHC-I High (*n* = 30). **(B)** Gene Set Enrichment
Analysis of Hallmark pathways in pPCa *CDK12-Mut* MHC-II High (*n* = 23). **(C-D)** Gene
Set Enrichment Analysis of Hallmarks and Reactome pathways in mCRPC *CDK12-Mut*
MHC High (*n* = 10). A normalized enrichment score indicates each factor's positive or
negative association with the condition of interest, which means activation or suppression
of the pathway. Enrichment analyses were performed using *clusterProfiler* and *p*-adjusted
value = 0.05 as the cutoff.
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Figure 4. MHC high expressed *CDK12* defective are associated with enhanced T cell
recruitment in primary and advanced prostate tumors. (A) CIBERSORT-derived im-
mune cell abundance of 22 distinct cell subsets based on *CDK12* defective MHC-I High
pPCa (*n* = 30). **(B)** CIBERSORT-derived immune cell abundance of 22 distinct cell sub-
sets based on *CDK12* defective MHC-II High pPCa (*n* = 23). **(C)** CIBERSORT-derived
immune cell abundance of 22 distinct cell subsets based on *CDK12* defective MHC High
mCRPC (*n* = 10). *: *p*-value < 0.05; **: *p*-value < 0.01, by Mann-Whitney test.
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A)

B)

C)

D)

A) TCGA_PRAD_CDK12_MHC_I

B) TCGA_PRAD_CDK12_MHC_II

C) mCRPC_CDK12_MHC