Decoding cancer metabolism: A pan-cancer proteomics perspective

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Abstract

Metabolic reprogramming is a hallmark of cancer, yet the extent to which metabolic alterations are shared or distinct across cancer types remains incompletely understood. Here, we performed a systematic reanalysis of large-scale proteomic datasets spanning 16 diverse human cancers to uncover global and tissue-specific patterns of metabolic dysregulation. We

found a striking inverse correlation between baseline metabolic activity in matched normal

tissues and the degree of metabolic rewiring in tumors, pointing to a context-dependent

metabolic shift during oncogenesis. Our analysis reveals frequently upregulated

glycosylation-related pathways across cancers, along with coordinated alterations in

nucleotide, carbohydrate, amino acid, and coenzyme & cofactor metabolism that collectively

support biosynthesis, maintain redox balance, and sustain oncogenic signaling. These

changes enable cancer cells to proliferate rapidly, evade cell death, and adapt to fluctuating

environmental conditions. Together, our findings delineate both conserved and lineage-

specific features of tumor metabolism, providing a pan-cancer perspective that may aid in

identifying selective metabolic vulnerabilities and guiding the development of targeted

therapeutic strategies.

Keywords

36   Cancer, Metabolism, Proteomics, Glycosylation, Pan-cancer

Introduction

Cancer cells undergo profound metabolic reprogramming to sustain rapid proliferation, resist

cell death, and adapt to fluctuating environmental conditions [1, 2]. Unlike normal cells,

which primarily metabolize nutrients to maintain homeostasis, cancer cells remodel their

metabolism to meet the biosynthetic, energetic, and redox demands of tumor growth and

progression [3, 4]. This reprogramming is now recognized as a hallmark of cancer, reflecting

both the consequences and drivers of oncogenic signaling [5].

A central feature of this metabolic shift is the Warburg effect, whereby cancer cells

preferentially use aerobic glycolysis and produce lactate even in the presence of oxygen [6, 7].

This pathway not only allows for rapid Adenosine triphosphate (ATP) generation but also

provides glycolytic intermediates for the biosynthesis of nucleotides, amino acids, and lipids

[2, 4]. However, mitochondrial metabolism is not abandoned; rather, the tricarboxylic acid

(TCA) cycle remains active and is often reprogrammed to function as a biosynthetic hub [1].

It integrates nutrients such as glucose, glutamine, and fatty acids to support anabolic growth

and maintain metabolic flexibility [1, 8, 9]. The TCA cycle also supplies reducing equivalents

(NADH, FADH$_2$) to drive oxidative phosphorylation, further contributing to energy

production. This dual engagement of glycolysis and oxidative metabolism enables cancer

cells to thrive in nutrient- and oxygen-variable microenvironments [10].

To cope with heightened metabolic flux and oxidative stress, cancer cells engage in

sophisticated redox regulation by elevating Nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate

(NADPH) production through multiple pathways. These include the oxidative pentose

phosphate pathway (PPP), malic enzyme (ME1/2), and cytosolic/mitochondrial isocitrate

dehydrogenases (IDH1/2), collectively sustaining antioxidant systems such as glutathione and

thioredoxin [1, 2]. Mitochondrial metabolism plays a dual role—serving as a major site of

reactive oxygen species (ROS) generation while also contributing to redox buffering via

modulation of NADH/NAD$^+$ equilibria [1, 2]. This fine-tuned redox balance supports not

only survival but also therapeutic resistance and immune evasion [1, 2].

Importantly, cancer cells extend their metabolic influence to the tumor microenvironment.

They scavenge nutrients from the extracellular matrix and manipulate stromal cell

metabolism to generate a supportive niche [2, 11]. Hypoxia—a common feature of solid

tumors—stabilizes hypoxia-inducible factors (HIFs), which rewire metabolism to favor

glycolysis and angiogenesis, further promoting tumor adaptation and growth [2, 12].

Additionally, altered glycan metabolism modifies cell–cell and cell–matrix interactions,

facilitates immune escape, and promotes metastasis [13, 14]. Cancer cells also compete with

immune cells for critical nutrients such as glucose and tryptophan, and release

immunosuppressive metabolites like lactate and kynurenine that suppress anti-tumor

immunity [2, 15].

Cancer metabolism also plays a pivotal role in shaping the epigenetic landscape of both

tumor and surrounding cells. Many epigenetic enzymes require metabolic intermediates as

cofactors or substrates—for example, acetyl coenzyme A (acetyl-CoA) for histone

acetylation, and S-adenosylmethionine (SAM) for methylation reactions [2]. Mutations in

metabolic enzymes such as IDH1/2, succinate dehydrogenase, or fumarate hydratase can lead

to the accumulation of oncometabolites like 2-hydroxyglutarate, succinate, and fumarate,

which inhibit α-ketoglutarate–dependent dioxygenases and result in aberrant

deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) and histone methylation [2]. These epigenetic alterations block

differentiation and promote tumorigenesis [2]. Moreover, metabolic crosstalk affects non-

cancerous cells in the microenvironment: secreted oncometabolites and nutrient competition

can disrupt the epigenetic programming of stromal and immune cells, converting them into

pro-tumor phenotypes or suppressing their anti-tumor functions [16, 17]. Hypoxia further

amplifies this effect by inhibiting oxygen-dependent epigenetic modifiers and creating a

chromatin state conducive to tumor progression [18, 19].

Advancing our understanding of cancer metabolism demands comprehensive pan-cancer

approaches that capture both common and context-specific metabolic adaptations across

diverse tumor types [3, 20-22]. Computational tools like CellFie [23], which infer metabolic

task activities from transcriptomic or proteomic data, enable systematic and scalable profiling

of metabolic rewiring across large cancer cohorts. By integrating omics data with curated

genome-scale metabolic models, CellFie quantifies task-level activities within individual

tumors, revealing shifts in nutrient utilization, redox balance, biosynthesis, and other critical

metabolic functions [23]. Applying CellFie to pan-cancer datasets uncovers conserved

metabolic programs, cancer-type–specific vulnerabilities, and tissue-dependent rewiring

events often undetectable by metabolite-level analyses. This strategy enhances mechanistic

insights into how metabolic plasticity supports tumor progression and exposes novel

therapeutic targets—including essential metabolic tasks and compensatory pathways—

tailored to tumor subtype, stage, or microenvironmental context. Here, we apply CellFie to

large-scale proteomic datasets from 16 distinct cancer types (including 2,447 samples) to

systematically characterize metabolic rewiring, paving the way for identifying new

therapeutic vulnerabilities and advancing precision oncology.

Methods

Proteomics dataset for 16 cancer types

We assembled a comprehensive compendium of Mass Spectrometry (MS)-based proteomics

data comprising 16 different cancer types, encompassing 2,447 samples from 1,440 patients,

collected from thirteen independent studies (Table S1, Table S2). The dataset includes both

tumor and matched non-tumor samples for each cancer type, as follows: breast invasive

ductal carcinoma (BRCA; cancer, $n = 5$; non-cancer, $n = 5$; [24]), colon adenocarcinoma

(COAD; cancer, $n = 108$; non-cancer, $n = 111$; [24, 25]), esophageal squamous cell

carcinoma (ESCC; cancer, $n = 131$; non-cancer, $n = 130$; [24, 26]), glioblastoma (GBM;

cancer, $n = 111$; non-cancer, $n = 10$; [24, 27]), head and neck squamous cell carcinoma

(HNSC; cancer, $n = 114$; non-cancer, $n = 68$; [24, 28]), kidney renal clear cell carcinoma

(KIRC; cancer, $n = 101$; non-cancer, $n = 94$; [24, 29]), liver hepatocellular carcinoma (LIHC;

cancer, $n = 173$; non-cancer, $n = 173$; [24, 30]), lung adenocarcinoma (LUAD; cancer, $n = $

119; non-cancer, $n = 109$; [24, 31]), lung squamous cell carcinoma (LUSC; cancer, $n = 116$;

non-cancer, $n = 107$; [24, 32]), ovarian serous cystadenocarcinoma (OV; cancer, $n = 90$; non-

cancer, $n = 26$; [24, 33]), pancreatic adenocarcinoma (PAAD; cancer, $n = 148$; non-

cancer, $n = 72$; [24, 34]), stomach adenocarcinoma (STAD; cancer, $n = 88$; non-cancer, $n =$

87; [24, 35]), uterine corpus endometrial carcinoma (UCEC; cancer, $n = 74$; non-cancer, $n =$

29; [24, 36]), bladder invasive urothelial carcinoma (BLCA; cancer, $n = 11$; non-cancer, $n =$

11; [24]), prostate adenocarcinoma (PRAD; cancer, $n = 7$; non-cancer, $n = 7$; [24]), and lung

small cell carcinoma (SCLC; cancer, $n = 6$; non-cancer, $n = 6$; [24]).

Within these datasets, Zhou et al. (2020) [24] generated a dataset, which covers all 16 cancer

types (8–22 samples per type; Fig. 1A) and exhibits relatively small batch effects between

cancer types. This subset will hereafter be referred to as the Zhou2020 dataset. In total, 7,725

proteins were analyzed in the Zhou2020 dataset. The dataset had already been preprocessed

by Zhou et al. (2020) [24]. Briefly, raw data acquired using data-independent acquisition

(DIA) MS were quantified and normalized with Spectronaut Pulsar X. Proteins were filtered

using a Q-value cutoff of 0.01 (corresponding to a 1% false discovery rate, FDR), retaining

only those quantified in at least 40% of samples within each cancer type. Missing values were

imputed. The processed protein abundance matrix, together with sample annotations, was

obtained from the published study.

Figure 1

For the other datasets—covering twelve different cancer types (95–330 samples per type;

Figure 1B) from twelve independent studies (Table S1)—we analyzed them together,

yielding a total of 1,862 proteins. These datasets were compiled and reprocessed by Hu et al.

(2025) [37]. In brief, Hu et al. (2025) [37] downloaded raw MS files from either the Clinical

Proteomic Tumor Analysis Consortium (CPTAC) [38] or

Proteomics IDentifications Exchange (PRIDE), and analyzed them using MaxQuant v2.0.2.0.

The resulting protein abundances were $\log$-transformed and normalized using median-

centering across proteins. The processed data and sample annotations were obtained from

either the Cancer Proteome and Phosphoproteome Atlas (CPPA) or the corresponding

published studies. Only batches containing both normal and tumor samples were included in

the analysis. These datasets will hereafter be referred to as the Hu2025-harmonized datasets

or the other datasets.

Metabolic task scoring using CellFie

To enable phenotype-relevant interpretation of the extensive proteomics data across 16

cancer types, we grouped the detected proteins into distinct metabolic tasks and quantified the

activity of each task based on protein abundance using CellFie on the GenePattern webserver

[23]. In metabolism, metabolic tasks are defined as small modules of reactions that convert

specific substrate metabolites into defined product metabolites [23]. The ability to regulate

these tasks allows cancer cells to reprogram their metabolism, thereby supporting rapid

growth, survival, invasion, and resistance to therapy [1, 2].

All proteins were mapped to Entrez Gene IDs prior to submission using the annotation

package org.Hs.eg.db v3.20.0 with the select() function from AnnotationDbi v1.68.0. The

Zhou2020 dataset was log□-transformed before submission, whereas the other datasets

underwent an exponential transformation with base 2 to avoid negative values.

We applied a local thresholding approach (feature-specific thresholding

with Local.Threshold.Type = "minmaxmean") to classify features as "active" or "inactive"

based on their abundance. For each feature, the threshold was defined as the mean expression

value across all samples, constrained by two bounds: it had to be at least as high as the 25th

percentile (lower bound) and no higher than the 75th percentile (upper bound) of the overall

protein abundance distribution across the dataset.

CellFie also provides binary task scores indicating whether a metabolic task is active or

inactive, based on the expression profiles of their constituent features. All Zhou2020 samples

were submitted to CellFie together in a single file, while datasets from the other studies were

submitted individually to the GenePattern webserver.

Metabolic activities at higher organizational levels: subsystems (Depth 2) and systems

(Depth 1)

To facilitate interpretation of the metabolic task scores generated by CellFie, we aggregated

the individual task scores or binary task scores within broader metabolic categories

(subsystems or systems) by averaging them. This produced single values—mean task scores

or percentages of active tasks—for each subsystem or system in every sample.

Differential analysis of metabolic activities between Cancer and Normal samples

To understand how cancer cells reprogram their metabolic processes to support rapid growth,

survival, invasion, and therapy resistance, we performed univariate differential analysis using

linear models implemented in limma v3.62.2 [39]. Each metabolic task was tested

individually for differences between tumor and matched normal samples.

In this analysis, the Zhou2020 dataset was analyzed separately from Hu2025-harmonized

datasets. Due to the larger sample sizes of those Hu2025-harmonized datasets (Fig. 1B), the

differential analysis results from these datasets are expected to be more robust.

Differential analysis could not be performed for GBM in the Zhou2020 dataset due to the

absence of matched normal samples. For BLCA, BRCA, COAD, ESCC, HNSC, KIRC,

LIHC, LUAD, SCLC, LUSC, PAAD, STAD, and UCEC, paired differential analysis was

conducted with the help of the duplicateCorrelation() function in limma v.3.62.2. For PRAD

and OV, where insufficient paired samples were available, standard differential analysis was

performed. In all analyses, only metabolic tasks with at least two quantified scores in each

sample group (normal and tumor) were included.

For the twelve cancer types in the Hu2025-harmonized datasets, the duplicateCorrelation()

function from limma v3.62.2 was used to account for the correlation between paired samples

from the same patients, while also controlling for batch effects when multiple batches were

present within a single cancer type.

Benjamini-Hochberg correction was applied to control the false discovery rate. Differential

analysis was conducted not only at the level of individual metabolic tasks but also at the

broader subsystem and system levels. Tasks, subsystems, or systems with an adjusted p-value

(p.adj) less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Correlation between normal tissue metabolic activity and task differential log fold

change

For each cancer type, we calculated Pearson correlation coefficients across all identified

metabolic tasks between the baseline percentages of active metabolic tasks in matched

normal tissues and the log fold change (logFC) of task scores comparing tumor to normal

tissues. This analysis aimed to determine whether baseline metabolic activity is associated

with metabolic rewiring. Correlations were computed using the cor.test() function in R v4.4.3,

and Benjamini-Hochberg correction was applied to control the false discovery rate. These

analyses were conducted separately for the Zhou2020 dataset and the datasets harmonized by

Hu et al. (2025)[37].

Data visualization

Data visualization was performed using R v4.4.3. Circular barplots, dotplots, barplots and

volcano plots were created with ggplot2 v3.5.2. Circular packing plots were generated using

ggraph v2.2.1, while upset plots were produced with ComplexHeatmap v2.22.0.

Results

Metabolic activity varies across both cancer types and metabolic systems

To investigate pan-cancer metabolic reprogramming, we compiled a comprehensive dataset

of MS-based proteomics, encompassing 16 different cancer types, 2,447 samples, and 1,440

patients, collected from thirteen independent studies (Table S1, Table S2). Within this dataset,

the data from Zhou et al. (2020) [24], which cover all 16 cancer types (Fig. 1A) and exhibit

minimal batch effects across cancer types, were analyzed collectively. The other datasets,

compiled and harmonized by Hu et al. (2025) [37], include twelve cancer types (Fig. 1B)

from twelve separate studies (Table S1) and were analyzed together as well. To enable

phenotype-relevant interpretation of the extensive proteomics data across these cancer types,

we categorized the detected proteins into distinct metabolic tasks and quantified their

activities based on protein abundance using CellFie [23].

In total, we identified 176 active metabolic tasks (Depth 3) in the Zhou2020 dataset. These

tasks were grouped into 68 metabolic subsystems (Depth 2), which were further organized

into seven systems (Depth 1): energy, nucleotide, carbohydrate, amino acid, lipid, vitamin &

cofactor, and glycan metabolism (Fig. 1C, Table S3). In the other datasets, we identified 138

active metabolic tasks, grouped into 58 metabolic subsystems and the same seven systems

(Fig. 1D, Table S3).

Among the 16 cancer types in the Zhou2020 dataset, LIHC exhibits the highest percentage of

active metabolic tasks (90%) in both normal and tumor tissues (Fig. 2A, TableS4). This is

followed by KIRC, STAD, and PAAD, each with over 80% active tasks in normal tissues,

and by GBM, STAD, and PRAD, each with over 80% in tumor tissues. The percentage of

active tasks then gradually decreases to about 37% in normal tissues and 64% in tumors (Fig.

2A & B, Table S4), suggesting that metabolic task activity increases in cancers with lower

baseline metabolic activity in normal tissues. When analyzed by the seven broad metabolic

systems, STAD and LIHC rank among the top three for six of the seven systems in normal

and tumor tissues, respectively (Fig. 2A & B, Table S4). Additionally, both LIHC and KIRC

rank among the top three in five of the seven systems in normal tissues (Fig. 2A & B, Table

S4).

Figure 2

In contrast, the percentage of active metabolic tasks in the Hu2025-harmonized datasets is

considerably lower, with all cancer types below 70% except for STAD (in both normal and

tumor tissues) and GBM (in normal tissue). The majority of cancer types in these datasets

show around 50% or lower activity, which may reflect the smaller number of proteins

analyzed (n = 1,862) in these datasets (Fig. 3A & B, Table S4). When broken down to

metabolic system level, STAD ranks among top three in both normal and tumor tissues in all

systems except glycan metabolism, where all cancer types show low activities (<56%) (Fig.

3A&B, Table S4).

Figure 3

Among the seven metabolic systems studied (Depth1), carbohydrate and lipid metabolism

exhibit the highest activity levels in matched normal tissues from both the Zhou2020 and the

Hu2025-harmonized datasets, followed by energy, amino acid, and nucleotide metabolism.

Glycan metabolism shows the lowest activity in normal tissues, with vitamin & cofactor

metabolism being the next least active (Fig. 2A & B, Fig. 3A & B, Table S4). Compared to

normal tissues, the activities of all metabolic systems appear generally increased in tumor

tissues, with especially pronounced elevations in glycan metabolism and vitamin & cofactor

metabolism (Fig. 2A & B, Fig. 3A & B, Table S4). This trend is particularly evident in cancer

types with lower baseline metabolic activity (Fig. 2A & B, Fig. 3A & B, Table S4).

Cancer metabolic rewiring varies across cancer types

At the metabolic task level (Depth3), among the twelve cancer types harmonized by Hu et al.

(2025) [37], between three and 107 metabolic tasks were found to be upregulated, with

LUAD showing the highest number (n = 107), followed by LUSC, ESCC, and KIRC (each

with more than 55) (Fig. S1, Table S5). Conversely, five to 116 tasks were identified as

downregulated, with PAAD having the most (n = 116), followed by LIHC, STAD, COAD,

HNSC, and GBM (each with over 70) (Fig. S1, Table S5). For the 15 compared cancer types

from the Zhou2020 dataset, zero to 75 tasks were upregulated, with SCLC showing the

highest count (n = 75), while the others had fewer than 40 (Fig. S1, Table S5). In contrast,

zero to 109 tasks were downregulated, with KIRC having the most (n=109), followed by

STAD (n = 84) and LIHC (n = 55), and the remaining cancer types having fewer than 35 (Fig.

S1, Table S5).

At the metabolic subsystem level (Depth2), among the twelve cancer types harmonized by

Hu et al. (2025) [37], between one and 43 subsystems were found to be upregulated, with

LUAD and LUSC showing the highest numbers (43 and 41, respectively), followed by ESCC

and KIRC (each with more than 25) (Fig. S2, Table S5). Conversely, one to 49 subsystems

were identified as downregulated, with PAAD having the most (n = 49), followed by STAD,

LIHC, COAD, HNSC, and GBM (each with over 25) (Fig. S2, Table S5).

For the 15 compared cancer types from the Zhou2020 dataset, zero to 31 subsystems were

upregulated, with SCLC showing the highest count (n = 31), followed by BLCA (n = 21),

while the others had fewer than 20 (Fig. S2, Table S5). In contrast, 0 to 41 subsystems were

downregulated, with KIRC having the most (n=41), followed by STAD (n = 26), LIHC (n =

19), and BRCA (n=17), and the remaining cancer types below ten (Fig. S2, Table S5).

At the metabolic system level (Depth1), among the twelve cancer types harmonized by Hu et

al. (2025), between zero and six systems were identified as upregulated. LUAD and ESCC

exhibited the highest numbers (six each), followed by LUSC and KIRC (five each) (Fig. S3,

Table S5). Conversely, zero to seven systems were found to be downregulated, with PAAD

showing the most (n = 7), followed by STAD (n = 6), LIHC (n = 5), and COAD (n = 4) (Fig.

S3, Table S5). For the 15 compared cancer types in the Zhou2020 dataset, between zero and

four systems were upregulated, with SCLC having the most (n = 4), followed by UCEC (n =

3), while the rest had two or fewer (Fig. S3, Table S5). In contrast, zero to six systems were

downregulated, with KIRC showing the highest count (n = 6), followed by LIHC (n = 3), and

the remainder having two or fewer (Fig. S3, Table S5).

Overall, the twelve cancer datasets harmonized by Hu et al. (2025) [37] share more common

up- and downregulated tasks compared to those acquired by Zhou et al. (2020) [24] (Figs. S1,

S2, & S3), which may be because of the larger sample sizes in the Hu2025-harmonized

datasets (Fig. 1).

Additionally, among the twelve cancer types harmonized by Hu et al. (2025) [37], LUAD,

LUSC, ESCC, KIRC, UCEC, and OV tend to exhibit more upregulated metabolic tasks,

subsystems, and systems than downregulated ones, whereas PAAD, STAD, LIHC, COAD,

HNSC, and GBM show the opposite trend with more downregulated features (Fig. 3C, Fig.

S4A). Similar patterns were observed in the 15 compared cancer types acquired by Zhou et al.

(2020) [24]: LUAD, LUSC, UCEC, OV, SCLC, and BLCA generally have more upregulated

tasks, subsystems, and systems, while STAD, LIHC, and KIRC tend to have more

downregulated ones (Fig. 2C, Fig. S4B).

Cancer metabolic rewiring varies across metabolic categories

Despite the large number of dysregulated metabolic tasks identified, we found no single

metabolic task that was consistently dysregulated across all studied cancer types, including

those in the large Hu2025-harmonized datasets (Fig. S5, Fig. S6). However, many glycan

metabolic tasks, nucleotide metabolic tasks, and glycosylation-related carbohydrate metabolic

tasks in the Hu2025-harmonized datasets are widely upregulated, occurring in six or more

cancer types (Fig. S5). In contrast, most lipid metabolic tasks tend to be downregulated (Fig.

S5). Furthermore, the most frequently upregulated tasks (observed in eight or more cancer

types) are primarily related to glycosylation processes, including: biosynthesis of

m4mpdol_U (a specific glycan intermediate involved in N-glycan biosynthesis in the cytosol),

keratan sulfate biosynthesis from N-glycan, keratan sulfate biosynthesis from O-glycan (core

2- and core 4-linked), UDP-N-acetyl D-galactosamine synthesis, lactose synthesis, CMP-N-

acetylneuraminate synthesis, GDP-L-fucose synthesis, and N-acetylglucosamine synthesis

(Fig. 4B). The last three top upregulated tasks involve essential coenzyme and amino acid

metabolism, including NAD synthesis from nicotinamide and the conversions of glutamate to

glutamine and proline (Fig. 4B). No metabolic task was consistently dysregulated in eight or

more cancer types within the Zhou2020 dataset (Fig. S6). However, the two most frequently

upregulated tasks—observed in seven cancer types—are also glycosylation-related:

glucosaminyl–acylphosphatidylinositol to deacylated–glycophosphatidylinositol (GPI)-

anchored protein, and GDP-L-fucose synthesis (Fig. 5B).

Similar patterns were observed at the subsystem level (Depth2), where the top upregulated

subsystems in eight or more cancer types are glycosylation-related metabolisms, including

amino sugar metabolism, keratan sulfate metabolism, galactose metabolism, N-glycan

metabolism, and fucose metabolism, along with coenzyme NAD biosynthesis in the Hu2025-

harmonized dataset (Fig. 4A). In the Zhou2020 dataset, no subsystem was consistently

dysregulated in eight or more cancer types, but the top two regulated subsystems—amino

sugar and fucose metabolism—were upregulated in seven cancer types (Fig. 5A). At the

system level (Depth1), the top upregualted systems are glycan metabolism and vitamin &

cofactor metabolism in both the Zhou2020 and Hu2025-harmonized datasets (Figs. 4C & 5C).

Figure 4

Figure 5

Metabolic reprogramming as an inverse response to baseline activity in normal tissues

From the results above, we observed that cell types with more upregulated tasks than

downregulated tasks tend to have lower baseline active task percentages in normal tissues.

Conversely, those with more downregulated tasks than upregulated tasks tend to exhibit

higher baseline active task percentages in normal tissues (Fig. 2A & C, Fig. 3A & C).

To investigate this further, we calculated the correlation coefficients between the logFC of

metabolic task scores in tumor versus matched normal tissues and the active task percentages

in the matched normal tissues, considering all identified tasks. This analysis was performed

separately for each cancer type.

The results show that these correlations are negative across all cancer types, and they are

statistically significant in most cases (adjusted p-value < 0.05) (Fig. 2D, Fig. 3D, Table S6).

Discussion

In this study, we conducted a systematic reanalysis of proteomic data from 16 distinct cancer

types across multiple studies to characterize patterns of metabolic reprogramming in cancer.

Our findings reveal both cancer-type-specific and shared alterations in metabolic pathways,

including an inverse relationship between baseline activities in normal tissues and cancer-

associated metabolic rewiring, frequent upregulation of glycosylation-related metabolism,

and adaptive regulation of nucleotide, coenzyme, carbohydrate, and amino acid metabolic

activities to modulate oncogenic signaling, supply building blocks and cellular energy, and

mitigate ROS stress. These results underscore the complexity and heterogeneity of cancer

metabolism, suggesting that while some metabolic features are conserved across most cancers,

others reflect lineage-dependent adaptations. This pan-cancer perspective advances our

understanding of tumor-specific metabolic vulnerabilities and may inform the development of

more tailored therapeutic strategies.

Cancer metabolic rewiring dynamics inversely related to baseline activity in normal

tissue

It is well established that each normal tissue has evolved specialized metabolic programs to

support its unique functions, while simultaneously maintaining certain pathways at low

activity to preserve homeostasis and avoid unnecessary energy expenditure or biosynthesis.

This is reflected in our observations of metabolism in matched normal tissues, which show

great variability in tissue-specific activities. For example, STAD exhibits very high activity

across nearly all metabolic systems, whereas LUAD, LUSC, UCEC, and OV generally

display low metabolic activities. This pattern holds true both in the Zhou2020 dataset and in

other datasets (Figs. 2A, 3A).

Moreover, baseline activities vary considerably among different metabolic systems. For

instance, glycan, vitamin & cofactor metabolism tend to have low activity in most normal

tissues, while carbohydrate, lipid, and energy metabolism are highly active in most normal

tissues (Figs. 2A, 3A).

Compared to normal tissues, metabolic activities are generally elevated in cancer, particularly

in glycan metabolism, vitamin & cofactor metabolism, and in cancer types that typically have

lower baseline activity (Fig. 2A & B, Fig. 3A & B, Table S4).

To explore this further, we calculated the correlation coefficients between the active task

percentages across all normal samples and the logFC of task scores between tumor and

normal tissues. These correlations were significantly negative in most cancers, suggesting

that cancer metabolic rewiring may be inversely related to baseline activity in normal tissues

(Fig. 2D, Fig. 3D).

Tumorigenesis exhibits tissue-specific differences [22], and that cancer cells have metabolic

requirements that vary depending on tissue and context [3, 40, 41]. Our findings suggest that

these tissue-specific metabolic rewiring events in cancer are largely driven by cancer cells'

attempts to compensate for the limited metabolic capabilities of their tissue of origin. While

normal tissues maintain tightly regulated and specialized metabolic programs, tumor cells

reprogram these pathways to fulfill the heightened demands of proliferation, survival, and

stress resistance. This metabolic compensation enables cancer cells to overcome lineage-

imposed constraints by activating suppressed or alternative pathways, thereby supporting

rapid growth and adaptation across diverse tissue types.

Frequently upregualted glycosylation-related metabolism in cancer

Glycosylation, the addition of glycans to molecules such as proteins, plays a crucial role in

malignant transformation and cancer metastasis [44]. Aberrant glycosylation in cancer

contributes to various processes, including cell signaling and communication, tumor cell

dissociation and invasion, cell–matrix interactions, tumor angiogenesis, immune modulation,

and metastasis formation [13, 14, 44]. Glycans, amino sugars, and fucose are interconnected

components of the cellular glycosylation machinery.

In the present study, one of the most notable findings is the generally low baseline activity of

glycan metabolism, followed by a dramatic upregulation in the twelve cancer types

harmonized by Hu et al. (2025) [37] (Figs. 3A&B, S5, S7, S9). Furthermore, amino sugar

metabolism—which includes CMP-N-acetylneuraminate synthesis, UDP-N-acetyl D-

galactosamine synthesis, and N-acetylglucosamine synthesis—and fucose metabolism (GDP-

L-fucose synthesis) were significantly upregulated in nine and eight of these cancer types,

respectively (Fig. 4A).

These results collectively suggest that alterations in glycosylation represent important

biomarkers and offer a promising set of specific targets for therapeutic intervention [42, 43].

Rewired nucleotide and amino acid metabolic pathways promote anabolic growth in

cancer

The rapid proliferation of cancer cells places a high demand on building materials and

cellular energy. To meet these demands, cancer cells often reprogram their metabolic

activities [1, 4]. Biosynthetic, or anabolic, pathways are a critical component of cancer

metabolism, as they enable cells to produce the macromolecules necessary for cell division

and tumor growth. The three main macromolecular classes studied in cancer metabolism are

proteins, lipids, and nucleic acids, which constitute approximately 60%, 15%, and 5% of the

dry mass of mammalian cells, respectively [1]. Evidence suggests that the biosynthesis of all

three macromolecule classes is regulated by the same signaling pathways that control cell

growth. These pathways, particularly the PI3K-mTOR axis, are frequently activated in cancer

due to tumorigenic mutations [1].

Nucleotide metabolism encompasses the synthesis, salvage, and degradation of purine and

pyrimidine nucleotides—the essential building blocks of DNA and ribonucleic acid (RNA)

[45]. Enhanced nucleotide metabolism is a critical and universal metabolic dependency of

cancer cells across various cancer types and genetic backgrounds [20]. Many aggressive

cancer behaviors, including uncontrolled proliferation, chemotherapy resistance, immune

evasion, and metastasis, heavily rely on this upregulated nucleotide metabolism [20].

Consistent with these earlier findings, we observed a clear overall increase in nucleotide

metabolism in cancer compared to normal tissues in both the Zhou2020 and Hu2025-

harmonized datasets (Figs. 2 & 3). This increase was statistically significant in six of the

twelve cancer types from the Hu2025-harmonized dataset: COAD, ESCC, GBM, KIRC,

LIHC, and LUSC (Fig. 4C).

Protein biosynthesis is tightly regulated and requires a complete supply of both essential and

nonessential amino acids [1]. Additionally, amino acids serve as precursors for the synthesis

of nucleotides and lipids [46, 47]. In the present study, we found that overall amino acid

metabolic activity was upregulated in only four cancer types (ESCC, UCEC, LUAD, LUSC)

but downregulated in six (COAD, GBM, HNSC, LIHC, PAAD, and STAD) among the

twelve cancers harmonized by Hu et al. (2025) [37] (Fig. 4C). Notably, most of the

downregulated pathways shared by at least six cancer types involve amino acid degradation

(Fig. S5). In the 16 cancers acquired by Zhou et al. (2020) [24], only UCEC exhibited

upregulated amino acid metabolism (Fig. 5C). These patterns inversely reflect the metabolic

activities observed in matched normal tissues (Figs. 2A & 3A), suggesting that baseline

amino acid metabolism is generally robust in normal tissues and primarily maintained by

reducing degradation in cancer.

Cancer cells frequently develop dependencies on specific amino acids, reflecting their

reliance on altered metabolic fluxes to support rapid growth and survival. In our analysis of

the twelve cancer types harmonized by Hu et al. (2025) [37], several amino acid metabolic

pathways were upregulated in at least half of the cancers, including the conversion of

glutamate to glutamine, conversion of glutamate to proline, glycine synthesis, serine

synthesis, and spermidine synthesis from ornithine (Fig. S5).

The conversion of glutamate to glutamine, catalyzed by glutamine synthetase and upregulated

in eight cancers, plays a central role in cancer metabolism, particularly in tumors facing

glutamine scarcity or altered nitrogen homeostasis. Glutamine, the most abundant plasma

amino acid, fuels nucleotide, amino acid, and lipid biosynthesis and is often the most rapidly

consumed nutrient in tumor cells—a phenomenon termed "glutamine addiction" [46, 48, 49].

This amino acid frequently functions as a rate-limiting factor for cell cycle progression, with

glutamine deprivation causing arrest in the S-phase [46, 50].

Similarly, the conversion of glutamate to proline is emerging as a key metabolic adaptation in

cancer, supporting both anabolic demands and stress resilience. Although proline is classified

as a non-essential amino acid, rapidly proliferating cancer cells require elevated proline levels

for collagen synthesis—the principal component of the extracellular matrix—which upon

degradation supplies essential substrates and energy to the tumor microenvironment, as well

as for general protein biosynthesis [46].

Glycine, the simplest amino acid, is critical for supporting rapid proliferation, stress

adaptation, and the biosynthesis of vital macromolecules including proteins and nucleotides

[46]. Likewise, serine synthesis plays a pivotal role in cancer metabolism, intricately linked

to proliferation, redox homeostasis, nucleotide synthesis, and epigenetic regulation [46].

Furthermore, spermidine—a key polyamine derived from ornithine—is implicated in

numerous fundamental cellular processes such as nucleic acid and protein synthesis,

chromatin structure stabilization, differentiation, apoptosis, protection against oxidative

damage, and regulation of ion channels essential for intercellular communication [51].

Dysregulation of polyamine metabolism is a hallmark of cancer, with elevated polyamine

levels frequently promoting tumor progression and cellular transformation [51].

Collectively, these findings underscore the critical role of specific amino acid metabolic

pathways in supporting cancer cell growth and survival, highlighting potential metabolic

vulnerabilities for therapeutic intervention.

Lipid metabolism is frequently suppressed in cancer

In contrast to nucleotide metabolism, lipid metabolic activities are predominantly

downregulated in most cancers in the Hu2025-harmonized datasets (Figs. 4A & S5). This is

not surprising, given the relatively high baseline levels of lipid metabolism observed in the

matched normal tissues (Fig. 3A), which may already provide more than sufficient structural

components for biological membranes to support the rapid proliferation of cancer cells.

Altered carbohydrate and energy metabolism fuel anabolic growth by supplying

building blocks and ATP in cancer

In cancer, carbohydrate metabolism is extensively reprogrammed to support rapid

proliferation, survival, and adaptation to environmental stresses [1, 2]. A hallmark of this

metabolic reprogramming is the Warburg effect, wherein cancer cells preferentially utilize

aerobic glycolysis—converting glucose to lactate despite oxygen availability—thereby

enabling rapid ATP production and the diversion of glycolytic intermediates into biosynthetic

pathways [6, 7]. In the current study, among the twelve cancers harmonized by Hu et al.

(2025), the CellFie tasks, ATP generation from glucose (hypoxic conditions) – glycolysis,

and glucose to lactate conversion are both upregulated in ESCC, KIRC, LUAD, LUSC, and

OV (Fig. S5), while the normal tissues of other cancer types exhibited high baseline aerobic

glycolysis activities (Fig. S7). Concomitantly, auxiliary pathways such as the pentose

phosphate pathway (PPP) are activated to maintain redox homeostasis through NADPH

production and to facilitate nucleotide biosynthesis [2, 3, 5]. Correspondingly, the PPP-

related CellFie task, ribose-5-phosphate synthesis was upregulated in COAD, GBM, KIRC,

LIHC, and UCEC in the Hu2025-harmonized datasets (Fig. S5), while other cancer types

demonstrated robust baseline activity of ribose-5-phosphate synthesis (Fig. S7). Despite the

prominent reliance on glycolysis, many cancers retain an active tricarboxylic acid (TCA)

cycle and oxidative phosphorylation (OXPHOS), often fueled by alternative substrates such

as glutamine and fatty acids [1, 8, 9]. Our data indicate that the CellFie task, krebs cycle –

NADH generation is upregulated in COAD, ESCC, LIHC, LUAD, and LUSC, but

downregulated in GBM, HNSC, STAD, and PAAD, inversely correlating with their baseline

activities in matched normal tissues (Figs. S5 & S7). This metabolic plasticity enables cancer

cells to flexibly generate energy and biosynthetic precursors under diverse

microenvironmental conditions.

Moreover, lactate accumulation—a byproduct of aerobic glycolysis—acidifies the tumor

microenvironment, thereby promoting immune evasion, angiogenesis, and metastasis [5].

Altered vitamine & cofactor metabolism in cancer: implications for ROS stress and

epigenetic regulation

Altered vitamin and cofactor metabolism plays a critical role in modulating ROS stress and

shaping the epigenetic landscape in cancer. Vitamins from the B-complex group act as

precursors for essential coenzymes—including NAD☐, flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD☐),

and coenzyme A (e.g., acetyl-CoA)—which are integral to cellular metabolism (such as TCA

cycle) and maintenance of redox balance [1, 2]. Moreover, dysregulation of these metabolic

pathways can influence epigenetic modifications; for example, acetyl-CoA serves as a

substrate for histone acetylation, thereby affecting chromatin structure and gene expression

[52]. Additionally, B vitamins such as B6, B9, and B12 support pathways that maintain S-

adenosylmethionine (SAM) levels and its methylation capacity, with SAM functioning as a

methyl donor for DNA methylation [53]. In the current study, synthesis of coenzyme NAD

was significantly upregulated in eight out of the twelve cancer types harmonized by Hu et al.

(2025) (Figs. 4B and S5), likely compensating for their relatively low baseline activity

observed in matched normal tissues (Fig. S7). Baseline activities of coenzyme A biosynthesis

were relatively higher (than synthesis of coenzyme NAD) in normal tissues, with

compensatory upregulation noted in the four cancer types exhibiting lower baseline levels

(Figs. S5 and S7). Furthermore, the SAM-related metabolic task, S-adenosyl-L-methionine

synthesis, was upregulated in five cancer types (ESCC, KIRC, LUAD, LUSC, and OV) of the

Hu2025-harmonized datasets, again compensating for lower baseline activities in

corresponding normal tissues (Figs. S5 and S7). Collectively, these interconnected metabolic

alterations may enable cancer cells to fine-tune their epigenetic regulation and redox state,

thereby promoting proliferation, therapeutic resistance, and metastatic potential.

Conclusion

Collectively, our findings present a comprehensive atlas of metabolic remodeling across

diverse cancer types, highlighting both conserved and context-specific aspects of tumor

metabolism. By utilizing publicly available pan-cancer proteomics datasets, we quantified

metabolic activities at the task level, thereby complementing existing metabolite-centric

analyses and unveiling new opportunities for precision targeting of metabolic vulnerabilities.

Future studies should explore how these metabolic signatures correlate with specific driver

mutations, tumor progression stages, involved cell types, and the tumor microenvironment,

ultimately informing the development of metabolism-based therapeutic strategies.

List of abbreviations

ATP   Adenosine triphosphate

TCA   Tricarboxylic acid

NADPH   Nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate

PPP   Pentose phosphate pathway

ME1/2   Malic enzyme

IDH1/2   Cytosolic/mitochondrial isocitrate dehydrogenases

ROS   Reactive oxygen species

HIFs   Hypoxia-inducible factors

acetyl-CoA   Acetyl coenzyme A

SAM   S-adenosylmethionine

DNA   Deoxyribonucleic acid

BRCA   Breast invasive ductal carcinoma

COAD   Colon adenocarcinoma

ESCC   Esophageal squamous cell carcinoma

GBM   Glioblastoma

HNSC   Head and neck squamous cell carcinoma

KIRC   Kidney renal clear cell carcinoma

LIHC   Liver hepatocellular carcinoma

LUAD   Lung adenocarcinoma

LUSC   Lung squamous cell carcinoma

561	OV	Ovarian serous cystadenocarcinoma
562	PAAD	Pancreatic adenocarcinoma
563	STAD	Stomach adenocarcinoma
564	UCEC	Uterine corpus endometrial carcinoma
565	BLCA	Bladder invasive urothelial carcinoma
566	PRAD	Prostate adenocarcinoma
567	SCLC	Lung small cell carcinoma
568	MS	Mass sepctrometry
569	FDR	False discovery rate
570	CPTAC	Clinical Proteomic Tumor Analysis Consortium
571	PRIDE	Proteomics IDentifications Exchange
572	logFC	Log fold change
573	p.adj	Adjusted p-value
574	RNA	Ribonucleic acid
575	FAD☐	Flavin adenine dinucleotide (oxidized form)
576	SAM	S-adenosylmethionine

Authors' contributions

578 Y.L. conceived and designed the study; Y.L., Y.B. and Q.C. analyzed the data, prepared

579 figures and/or tables. Y.L., Y.B. and Q.C. wrote the paper. All authors read and approved the

580 final manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

582 All data generated during this study are included in this published article [and its additional

583 files]

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Declaration of interests

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Figure legeneds

Figure 1. Sample and Metabolic Task Summaries. This figure presents the sample sizes

for the Zhou2020 (A) and Hu2025-harmonized (B) datasets, alongside the identified

metabolic tasks in the Zhou2020 (C) and Hu2025-harmonized (D) datasets.

Figure 2. Metabolic rewiring as an inverse response to normal metabolic activities in the

Zhou2020 dataset. This figure illustrates the total percentage of active metabolic tasks

across all tasks, as well as within each of the seven metabolic systems, for different cancer

types in both normal (A) and tumor tissues (B). C) presents bar plots depicting the number of

differentially upregulated and downregulated tasks, subsystems, and systems across 15 cancer

types, with red indicating upregulation and blue indicating downregulation. D) Dotplot of

Pearson correlations between the baseline percentage of active tasks in normal tissues and the

log fold change of task scores comparing tumor to normal tissues. Correlation coefficients

were calculated separately for each cancer type, based on a sample size of 176.

Figure 3. Metabolic rewiring as an inverse response to normal metabolic activities in the Hu2025-harmonized datasets. This figure illustrates the total percentage of active metabolic tasks across all tasks, as well as within each of the seven metabolic systems, for different cancer types in both normal (A) and tumor tissues (B). C) presents bar plots depicting the number of differentially upregulated and downregulated tasks, subsystems, and systems across twelve cancer types, with red indicating upregulation and blue indicating downregulation. D) Dotplot of Pearson correlations between the baseline percentage of active tasks in normal tissues and the log fold change of task scores comparing tumor to normal tissues. Correlation coefficients were calculated separately for each cancer type, based on a sample size of 138.

Figure 4. Significantly dysregulated metabolic tasks (B), subsystems (A), and systems (C) in the Hu2025-harmonized datasets. For the dysregulated tasks, only the top ones—those up- or downregulated in eight or more cancer types—are shown, while the full list is available in Figure S5.

Figure 5. Significantly disregulated metabolic tasks (B), subsystems (A) and systems (C) in the Zhou2020 dataset. For the disregulated tasks, only the top ones—those up- or downregulated in fiveor more cancer types—are shown, while the full list can be found in Figure S6.

Additional files

FigureS1.pdf: Figure S1. Upset plots illustrating both shared and unique dysregulated tasks across different cancer types and studies. A) Upregulated tasks. B) Downregulated tasks.

FigureS2.pdf: Figure S2. Upset plots illustrating both shared and unique dysregulated

subsystems across different cancer types and studies. A) Upregulated subsystems. B)

Downregulated subsystems.

FigureS3.pdf: Figure S3. Upset plots illustrating both shared and unique dysregulated

systems across different cancer types and studies. A) Upregulated systems. B)

Downregulated systems.

FigureS4.pdf: Figure S4. Volcano plots displaying upregulated and downregulated tasks,

subsystems, and systems across different cancer types and datasets. A) shows the twelve

cancer types in the Hu2025-harmonized datasets. B) presents 15 cancer types from the

Zhou2020 dataset. Red dots represent upregulated tasks, subsystems, or systems, and blue

dots indicate downregulated ones. The smallest dots correspond to metabolic tasks, medium-

sized dots represent subsystems, and the largest dots denote systems. The top tasks,

subsystems, and systems are also labeled.

FigureS5.pdf: Figure S5. Significantly disregulated metabolic tasks in the Hu2025-

harmonized datasets.

FigureS6.pdf: Figure S6. Significantly disregulated metabolic tasks in the Zhou2020

dataset.

FigureS7.pdf: Figure S7. Task-level baseline metabolic activities in normal tissues from

the Hu2025-harmonized datasets. Both the size and color of the dots represent the

percentage of active tasks across normal samples.

FigureS8.pdf: Figure S8. Task-level baseline metabolic activities in normal tissues from

the Zhou2020 dataset. Both the size and color of the dots represent the percentage of active

tasks across normal samples.

FigureS9.pdf: Figure S9. Subsystem-level baseline metabolic activities in normal tissues

from the Hu2025-harmonized datasets. Both the size and color of the dots represent the

percentage of active tasks across normal samples.

FigureS10.pdf: Figure S10. Subsystem-level baseline metabolic activities in normal

tissues from the Zhou2020 dataset. Both the size and color of the dots represent the

percentage of active tasks across normal samples.

TableS1.xlsx: Table S1. Dataset information.

TableS2.xlsx: Table S2. Sample information.

TableS3.xlsx: Table S3. Metabolic activity scores at different depths for different

datasets.

TableS4.xlsx: Table S4. Percentages of active metabolic tasks.

TableS5.xlsx: Table S5. Limma differentiall analysis result tables.

TableS6.xlsx: Table S6. Inverse correlation between normal active task percentage and

caner metabolic rewiring (logFC of task scores).

A Zhou2020

B Others

Sample_type
- Tumor
- Normal

C

VITAMIN & COFACTOR M.(8)
NUCLEOTIDE M.(17)
ENERGY M.(4)
AMINO ACIDS M.(73)
CARBOHYDRATES M.(32)
GLYCAN M.(9)
LIPIDS M.(33)

D

LIPIDS M.(33)
CARBOHYDRATES M.(31)
ENERGY M.(2)
GLYCAN M.(5)
AMINO ACIDS M.(53)
NUCLEOTIDE M.(10)
VITAMIN & COFACTOR M.(4)

A (Normal)

Zhou2020_AllTasks | ENERGY M. | NUCLEOTIDE M. | CARBOHYDRATES M.

AMINO ACIDS M. | LIPIDS M. | VITAMIN & COFACTOR M. | GLYCAN M.

B (Tumor)

Zhou2020_AllTasks | ENERGY M. | NUCLEOTIDE M. | CARBOHYDRATES M.

AMINO ACIDS M. | LIPIDS M. | VITAMIN & COFACTOR M. | GLYCAN M.

C

Sig. diff. tasks_Zhou2020 | Sig. diff. subsystems | Sig. diff. systems

D

Normal.Task.Score vs logFC

n = 176, p.adj Method = BH

A Disregulated subsystems_Others

B Top disregulated tasks_Others

C Disregulated systems_Others

adj.P.ValCutoff = 0.05, pAdjustMethod = BH

A Disregulated subsystems_Zhou2020

B Top disregulated tasks_Zhou2020

C Disregulated systems_Zhou2020

A Significant features (adj.P.Val<0.05)

Significant features (adj.P.Val<0.05)

A Significant features (adj.P.Val<0.05)

B Significant features (adj.P.Val<0.05)

A

B

Tasks_others

Tasks_Zhou2020