



RELEVANCE OF HER2 AS A BIOMARKER TODAY? ASSESSMENT OF THE TRUE INCIDENCE OF HER2 POSITIVITY: INSIGHTS FROM A TERTIARY CENTER IN SOUTHERN INDIA

Oncology

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The expression of the human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2) protein in gastric and esophageal adenocarcinomas is related to worse prognosis, aggressive disease progression, and diminished chemotherapy efficacy. Patients with HER2-positive advanced gastric and gastroesophageal junction (GEJ) cancer are currently recommended to undergo trastuzumab, a monoclonal antibody that selectively targets HER2, in conjunction with chemotherapy as the revised standard of care. There are notable regional disparities in the reported prevalence of HER2 expression in gastric cancer. The objective of our research is to examine clinical features of HER2-positive gastroesophageal cancer. **Objective:** To determine the incidence of HER2 positivity among patients with newly diagnosed gastric/GEJ adenocarcinoma and evaluate the correlation between HER2 overexpression and demographic, clinicopathological, and disease parameters. **Materials And Methods:** From August 2022 to September 2024, 205 patients with gastric- esophageal cancer were prospectively assessed for the frequency of HER2 expression at a tertiary center in South India by employing Immunohistochemistry (IHC) and Fluorescence In Situ Hybridization (FISH). **Results:** Of 205 patients, 13 (6.34%) had verified HER2 overexpression. IHC results for three patients were inconclusive (2+); FISH analysis revealed a positive result for one patient. Regarding age, histological subtype, tumor site, tumor differentiation, serosal involvement, gender, and lymph node status, there were no variations in HER2 overexpression (positivity or negativity). **Conclusion:** HER2-Neu expression in gastric and GEJ adenocarcinomas has been associated to a lower survival rate and was found to be a sign of a bad prognosis, although being uncommon in our population.

KEYWORDS

FISH, IHC-HER2 marker, HER2/neu protein, Gastric cancer, Gastric adenocarcinoma, Trastuzumab

INTRODUCTION

Gastric cancer is ranked as the sixth most prevalent cancer globally. In 2022, it had been the fifth primary cause of death due to cancer. At that time, it ranked as sixth main reason of cancer-related deaths and seventh most prevalent cancer type in India (1). Multimodality therapy is most successful treatment for most localized gastroesophageal adenocarcinomas (GEAs) at stages II and III, with a 5-year survival rate of about 40%. Nevertheless, palliative care is the only available therapeutic option at advanced stages, which are characterized as unresectable, recurring, or metastatic illness, and the likelihood of a cure becomes very rare. The proto-oncogene HER2 is situated on chromosome 17. The activation of this receptor, part of EGFR family, activates signaling pathways that govern cell division, differentiation, proliferation, and anti-apoptotic mechanisms (2). Research indicates that HER2 overexpression or amplification is present in 7% to 34% of gastric tumors, demonstrating that HER2 is integral to the carcinogenesis of gastric cancer. Compared to gastric cancers, overexpression is more common in cancers at the gastroesophageal junction (GEJ) (3). It also varies by histological type, with intestinal cancers having higher rates than diffuse cancers, and by tumor differentiation, with well or moderately differentiated tumors having higher rates than poorly differentiated ones. (4). Compared to breast cancer, HER2 expression in GEA exhibits greater heterogeneity, and the immunostaining pattern is often basolateral rather than complete membrane staining (5). A 4-tiered HER2 scoring system, formed by Hoffman et al. and employed in ToGA trial, HER2 positive is defined as a minimum of five stained cells in biopsy samples or at least ten percent of marked tumor cells in resection specimens (6).

Since not all investigations have shown inconsistent evidence of correlation between HER2 overexpression and poor outcomes (6), the prognostic importance of HER2 in GEA remains unclear(8).

Despite the high prevalence of HER2-positive GEA in India, there is a

lack of comprehensive data on the clinicopathological, demographic, and clinical outcomes associated with HER2 expression. This study hopes to address and bridge the gaps that exist in the understanding of HER-2 positive gastroesophageal cancers and thus formulate effective treatment strategies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design:

Prospective observational study conducted at a tertiary center in South India

Sample Size:

Two hundred and five patients who consecutively reported to medical oncology OPD having adenocarcinoma of stomach and gastroesophageal region were included in the study.

Patient Selection:

Patients with primary stomach or GEJ adenocarcinoma were enrolled in this observational prospective analysis, which was carried out at tertiary facility in South India between August 2022 and September 2024. Patient demographics, tumor location and stage, along with treatment details (that include adjuvant and neoadjuvant therapy) had been collected. The TNM 8th Edition criteria were followed in the staging of every case. Immunohistochemistry (IHC) was used to confirm HER2 positivity, and Fluorescence In Situ Hybridization (FISH) testing was used for instances that were unclear (2+). The research goal was to assess the clinical characteristics of newly diagnosed patients experiencing HER2-positive gastric cancer or GEA. The research aimed to ascertain the prevalence of HER2 positivity in patients with newly diagnosed gastric/GEA and to determine correlation among HER2 overexpression and clinical, clinicopathological, and demographic variables. Immunohistochemistry with a monoclonal primary antibody ("polyclonal rabbit anti-human cerbB-2 oncoprotein [DAKO], diluted

1:600”) was employed to evaluate HER2 status. The Two-step Super Sensitive Polymer HRP IHC detection kit was utilized to perform IHC on 3-µm thick deparaffinized tumor sections, that include positive and negative controls in every experiment. HER2 expression was evaluated according to the CAP/ASCO consensus standards.

The IHC results were interpreted as follows:
0 or 1+: Negative, 3+: Positive, and 2+: Equivocal/borderline.
For a final classification, additional evaluation using FISH was necessary. (7)

Data from the cancer registry, telephone follow-ups, and hospital records have been utilized to gather information on overall survival and disease progression.

Inclusion Criteria:

- 1. Eligible patients of age 18 years or older
- 2. Patients with ECOG “Performance Status” (PS) of 0 to 3
- 3. Histologically or cytologically confirmed primary stomach and GEJ adenocarcinoma.
- 4. HER2 positivity by IHC and FISH in cases of IHC 2+

Exclusion Criteria:

- 1. Patients with non-adenocarcinoma or non-squamous histology.
- 2. Patients who did not give written informed consent.

Primary Outcomes: Determine the incidence of HER2 positivity among patients with newly diagnosed gastric/GEJ adenocarcinoma

Secondary Outcome: Evaluate the correlation between HER2 overexpression and demographic, clinicopathological, and disease parameters.

Ethics:

Ethical committee approval had been obtained before the study, Vide Letter Number KMIO/MEC/2022/07/PG/MO/14.

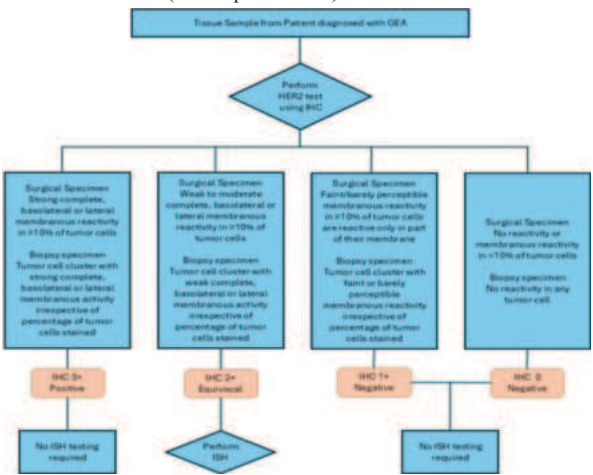
Statistical Analysis:

IBM SPSS software was utilized to analyze the data used in our investigation. The correlation among HER2 expression and clinical, pathological, and tumor differentiation features was analyzed utilizing “Pearson’s chi-square test”. Overall survival (OS) and Disease-Free Survival (DFS) had been determined by employing Kaplan–Meier analysis, with comparisons conducted using log-rank testing. Statistical significance had been established as a p-value below 0.05.

Table 1: Guidelines For IHC Interpretation

SCORING GUIDELINES FOR IHC INTERPRETATION			
Surgical Specimen-Staining Pattern	Biopsy Specimen-Staining Pattern	Score	HER2 Expression Assessment
Less than 10% of tumor cells had neither observable reactivity nor membranous reactivity.	No tumor cells have any observable reactivity or membrane reactivity.	0	Negative
10% or more of tumor cells have faint or scarcely perceptible membrane reactivity; these cells only show reactivity in certain areas of their membrane.	Regardless of the proportion of tumor cells stained, tumor cell clusters* exhibit weak or hardly perceptible membrane reactivity.	1+	Negative
10% or more of tumor cells have full, basolateral, or adjacent membrane reactivity that is insufficient to moderate.	Despite of the percentage of stained tumor cells, a tumor cell cluster has inadequate moderate complete, basolateral, or lateral membranous reactivity.	2+	Equivocal
Strong lateral, basolateral, or complete membrane sensitivity in at least 10% of tumor cells.	Irrespective of the percentage of stained tumor cells, a tumor cell cluster has a notably strong basolateral or lateral membranous reactivity.	3+	Positive

*Tumor cell cluster (≥ 5 neoplastic cells)



Flowchart 1: Algorithm For Her 2 Evaluation

RESULTS

The 205 patients with gastric or GEA that had been histologically verified with IHC and FISH. The study population's median age was 56 years (age range: 23–88). There were 140 men (68.29%) and 65 women (31.70%) in the group, yielding a male-to-female ratio of 2.15:1. Approximately 65% of the patients were over the age of 50. The predominant tumor site were distal stomach, particularly antrum, and pylorus, followed by the gastric body. Poor histological differentiation (grade 3) was observed in 56% of cases. A majority (95.6%) of patients presented with advanced T-stage disease, and 86.34% showed locoregional nodal involvement at diagnosis. Additionally, a significant proportion had metastatic disease at presentation (40.48%).

Table 2: Patient Demographics And Clinical Characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age: 56 years (23-88)		
Gender: Male: Female: 140: 65		
Site:		
Gastroesophageal	46	22.43%
Gastric cardia	19	09.26%
Gastric body	52	25.36%
Distal gastric (antrum/pylorus)	88	42.92%
Tumor differentiation:		
Grade I	16	07.80%
Grade II	71	34.63%
Grade III	118	56.56%
T Staging:		
T1 and T2	9	04.39%
T3 and T4	196	95.60%
N Staging:		
N Negative	28	13.65%
N positive	177	86.34%
M Staging:		
M0	122	59.51%
M1	83	40.48%

Table 3: Expression Profile Of Her 2 NEU In Study Cohort

IHC scoring	Frequency	Interpretation
0/1+	192	Negative
2+ FISH positive	3	Positive
3+	10	Positive

Association And Correlation Of Her 2 Status With Clinicopathological Features

HER2 Positivity Rate And Gastric Cancer Site:

Among the 13 HER2-positive patients, the most frequently affected site was the distal stomach (antrum/pylorus) with 7(53.84%) cases, followed by the gastroesophageal junction with 5 (24.39%) cases, and the gastric body with 1(7.69%) case.

HER2 Positivity Rate And Tumor Grade/differentiation:

Of the 13 patients, 11(84.61%) had tumors with grade 1 or 2 (well or moderately differentiated), while 2(15.38%) had grade 3 (poorly differentiated) tumors.

HER2 positivity rate and TNM staging:

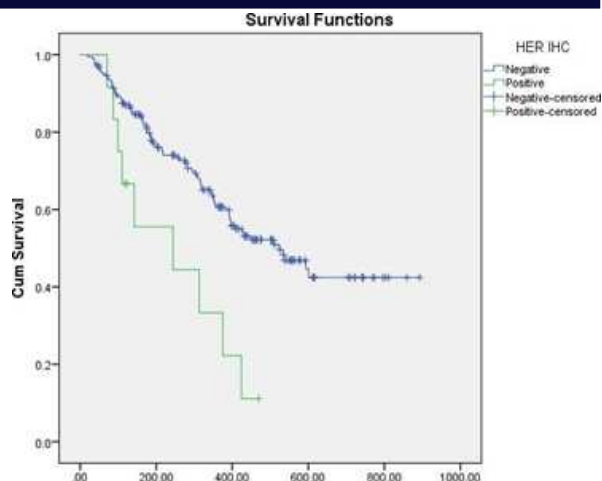
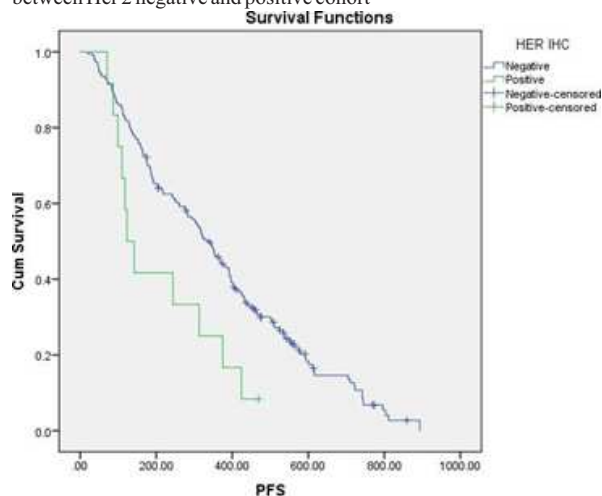
A major number of HER2-positive patients (11 out of 13) presented with T4 disease, 12 patients had nodal involvement, and 11 patients had metastatic disease at diagnosis.

Table 4: Association Between HER 2 And Clinical Parameters

			HER IHC		Total	p-value
			Negative	Positive		
AGE GROUP	<=5	Count	68	3	71	0.28
		%	95.8%	4.2%	100.0%	
	>50	Count	124	10	134	100.0%
		%	92.5%	7.5%	100.0%	
SEX	FEMALE	Count	62	3	65	0.36
		%	95.4%	4.6%	100.0%	
	MALE	Count	130	10	140	100.0%
		%	92.9%	7.1%	100.0%	
PRIMA RY	ESOPHAGUS	Count	51	4	55	0.001
		%	94.4%	5.6%	100.0%	
	STOMACH	Count	141	9	150	100.0%
		%	94.0%	6.0%	100.0%	
SUBSIT E	BODY	Count	51	1	52	0.318
		%	98.1%	1.9%	100.0%	
	DISTAL	Count	81	7	88	100.0%
		%	92.0%	8.0%	100.0%	
	PROXIMAL	Count	60	5	65	100.0%
		%	92.3%	7.7%	100.0%	
	cT	Count	8	1	9	0.212
		%	88.9%	11.1%	100.0%	
cN	2.00	Count	51	1	52	100.0%
		%	98.1%	1.9%	100.0%	
	3.00	Count	133	11	144	100.0%
		%	92.4%	7.6%	100.0%	
	cN	Count	27	1	28	0.845
		%	96.4%	3.6%	100.0%	
	1.00	Count	160	12	172	100.0%
		%	93.0%	7.0%	100.0%	
cM	2.00	Count	3	0	3	100.0%
		%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	3.00	Count	2	0	2	100.0%
		%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
cM	.00	Count	120	2	122	0.001
		%	98.4%	1.6%	100.0%	
	1.00	Count	72	11	83	100.0%
		%	86.7%	13.3%	100.0%	
STAGE	STAGE 2	Count	14	1	15	0.016
		%	93.3%	6.7%	100.0%	
	STAGE 3	Count	91	1	92	100.0%
		%	98.9%	1.1%	100.0%	
	STAGE 4	Count	87	11	98	100.0%
		%	88.8%	11.2%	100.0%	
HISTO LOGY	ADENO	Count	192	13	205	100.0%
		%	93.7%	6.3%	100.0%	
DIFFE RENTI ATION	G I	Count	15	1	16	0.003
		%	93.8%	6.3%	100.0%	
	G II	Count	61	10	71	100.0%
		%	85.9%	14.1%	100.0%	
	G III	Count	116	2	118	100.0%
		%	98.3%	1.7%	100.0%	
Total		Count	192	13	205	100.0%
		%	93.7%	6.3%	100.0%	

Table 5: Comparison Between HER2 Incidence Of Different Indian Regions

	East India 2019	South India 2015	South India 2012	North India 2015	West India 2013	Current study 2024
Sample size	68	60	52	70	43	205
Incidence	56%	26.7%	44.2%	21.4%	7%	6.34%

**Figure 1:** Kaplan-Meier curve showing overall survival comparison between Her 2 negative and positive cohort**Figure 2:** Kaplan-Meier curve illustrating progression free survival comparison between Her 2 negative and positive cohort**Survival:**

Median OS for HER2-negative disease was 17.46 months (range: 12.4–22.5 months). The median OS for HER2-positive disease 8.13 months (range: 1–17.53 months). Progression-free survival for HER2-negative disease was 11.2 months (ranging from 9.7 to 12.6 months), while for HER2-positive disease, it was 4.1 months (ranging from 1 to 5.43 months).

DISCUSSION

India has a relatively low incidence of stomach cancer when compared to other nations. Regional differences are noticeable, too, with Southern and Eastern India reporting the greatest rates. Across the Indian subcontinent, the incidence of HER2 positivity varies widely, ranging from as high as 56% in Eastern India (10) to as low as 7% in Western India(11). It is quite a paradox that despite a high prevalence of HER2 positive diseases in our country, the robust establishment of associated clinicopathological, demographic and clinical outcome data is lacking.

Our study, consistent with previous research, found that HER2 positivity is prevalent in men. In Eastern and Southern India, the antrum is frequently the primary site for HER2-positive tumors (12)(13). However, some studies from Southern India have noted a shift toward cancers occurring in the cardia or proximal stomach (14). Changes in Helicobacter pylori colonization, atrophic gastritis, obesity, dietary patterns, lifestyle, along with gastroesophageal reflux may all be contributing reasons to this trend (15). In accordance with the research performed by Gupta et al. and Panda et al. (16)(17), we identified a substantial correlation between HER2 expression and well or moderately differentiated (grades 1 and 2) adenocarcinomas.

This study is especially useful because there is a dearth of information

on survival outcomes for Indian patients experiencing HER2-positive gastric cancer. In our sample, patients experiencing HER2-positive malignancies showed lower overall and in remission survival rates than those with HER2-negative tumors. However, a significant weakness of this study is the limited usage of trastuzumab because of financial limitations.

The ToGA trial highlighted variability in HER2 staining between biopsy and surgical specimens. In the trial, 68% of tumor samples were obtained through biopsy, while 32% came from surgical specimens, with differences in staining intensities across tissue sections (3).

One of the strengths of our study is that all HER2 evaluations were performed exclusively on biopsy specimens, avoiding the variability seen in surgical samples. HER2 positivity was significantly higher in biopsy specimens (31.2%) compared to gastrectomy specimens (8.8%) ($P = 0.0003$) (18). Heterogeneous HER2 expression in surgical samples contributed to false-negative results. However, the concordance rate among biopsy and surgical specimens was 74.1%. The potential limitation of our study is lacking data on intestinal versus diffuse type tumor phenotype which is an essential prognostic marker.

CONCLUSION:

HER2-Neu expression in stomach and GEJ adenocarcinomas, albeit infrequent in our population, correlates with reduced survival rates and is acknowledged as an indicator of adverse prognosis.

Conflict Of Interest

None declared.

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Nil

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