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Prognostic association of *PTGS2* (COX-2) over-expression according to *BRAF* mutation status in colorectal cancer: results from two prospective cohorts and CALGB 89803 (Alliance) trial

Keisuke Kosumi[#1,2], **Tsuyoshi Hamada**[#1], **Sui Zhang**[#3], **Li Liu**[#1,4,5], **Annacarolina da Silva**[1], **Hideo Koh**[1,6], **Tyler S. Twombly**[1], **Kosuke Mima**[1,2], **Teppei Morikawa**[7], **Mingyang Song**[4,8,9], **Jonathan A. Nowak**[10], **Reiko Nishihara**[1,4,10,11,12], **Leonard B. Saltz**[13], **Donna Niedzwiecki**[14], **Fang-Shu Ou**[15], **Tyler Zemla**[15], **Robert J. Mayer**[3], **Hideo Baba**[2], **Kimmie Ng**[3], **Marios Giannakis**[3,16,17], **Xuehong Zhang**[18], **Kana Wu**[4,11,18], **Edward L. Giovannucci**[4,11,18], **Andrew T. Chan**[#8,9,16,18,19], **Charles S. Fuchs**[#20,21,22], **Jeffrey A. Meyerhardt**[#3], and **Shuji Ogino**[#1,10,11,16]

[1]Department of Oncologic Pathology, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

[2]Department of Gastroenterological Surgery, Graduate School of Medical Science, Kumamoto University, Kumamoto, Japan

[3]Department of Medical Oncology, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

[4]Department of Nutrition, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA

[5]Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, and the Ministry of Education Key Lab of Environment and Health, School of Public Health, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, P.R. China

[6]Department of Hematology, Graduate School of Medicine, Osaka City University, Osaka, Japan

[7]Department of Pathology, Graduate School of Medicine, The University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan

[8]Clinical and Translational Epidemiology Unit, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

[9]Division of Gastroenterology, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA, USA

Corresponding author: Shuji Ogino, MD, PhD, MS, Program in MPE Molecular Pathological Epidemiology, Department of Pathology, Brigham and Women's Hospital, 450 Brookline Ave., Room SM1036, Boston, MA 02215, USA, Tel: +1-617-582-9526, Fax: +1-617-582-8558, shuji_ogino@dfci.harvard.edu.

Conflict of interest statement

A.T.C. previously served as a consultant for Bayer Healthcare, and Pfizer Inc. for areas unrelated to this research. K.N. has participated in an advisory board for Bayer. No other conflict of interest exists. The other authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Use of standardised official symbols: We use HUGO (Human Genome Organisation)-approved official symbols (or root symbols) for genes, gene products, and gene families, including BRAF, CD274, KRAS, MAPK, MIR21, NFKB, PDCD1, PIK3CA, PTGS2, RAF, STAT3, and WNT; all of which are described at www.genenames.org. The official symbols are italicised to differentiate from non-italicised colloquial names that are used along with the official symbols. This format enables readers to familiarise the official symbols for genes and gene products together with common colloquial names.

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[10]Program in MPE Molecular Pathological Epidemiology, Department of Pathology, Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

[11]Department of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA

[12]Department of Biostatistics, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA

[13]Department of Medicine, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY, USA

[14]Alliance Statistics and Data Center and Department of Biostatistics and Bioinformatics, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

[15]Alliance Statistics and Data Center, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN, USA

[16]Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Cambridge, MA, USA

[17]Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

[18]Channing Division of Network Medicine, Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

[19]Department of Immunology and Infectious Diseases, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA

[20]Yale Cancer Center, New Haven, CT, USA

[21]Department of Medicine, Yale School of Medicine, New Haven, CT, USA

[22]Smilow Cancer Hospital, New Haven, CT, USA.

[#] These authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract

Background: Prostaglandin-endoperoxide synthase 2 (*PTGS2*, cyclooxygenase-2, COX-2)-prostaglandin E_2 (PGE_2) pathway promotes tumour progression. Considering evidence suggesting increased PGE_2 synthesis by *BRAF* mutation in tumour cells, we hypothesised that the association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression with colorectal cancer mortality might be stronger in *BRAF*-mutated tumours than in *BRAF*-wild-type tumours.

Methods: Using 1,708 patients, including 1,200 stage I-IV colorectal carcinoma cases in the Nurses' Health Study (NHS) and the Health Professionals Follow-up Study (HPFS) and 508 stage III colon cancer cases in a National Cancer Institute-sponsored randomised controlled trial of adjuvant therapy (CALGB/Alliance 89803), we evaluated tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression status using immunohistochemistry. We examined the prognostic association of *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression in strata of *BRAF* mutation status by multivariable Cox proportional hazards regression models to adjust for potential confounders, including disease stage, tumour differentiation, microsatellite instability status, and *KRAS* and *PIK3CA* mutations.

Results: In NHS and HPFS, the association of *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression with colorectal cancer-specific survival differed by *BRAF* mutation status ($P_{interaction}$ = 0.0005); compared with *PTGS2* (COX-2)-negative/low carcinomas, the multivariable-adjusted hazard ratios for *PTGS2* (COX-2)-high carcinomas were 2.44 (95% confidence interval, 1.39–4.28) in *BRAF*-mutated

cases and 0.82 (95% confidence interval, 0.65–1.04) in *BRAF*-wild-type cases. Differential prognostic associations of *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression in strata of *BRAF* mutation status were similarly observed in CALGB/Alliance 89803 trial ($P_{interaction}$ = 0.03).

Conclusions: The association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression with colorectal cancer mortality is stronger in *BRAF*-mutated tumours than in *BRAF*-wild-type tumours, supporting interactive roles of *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression and *BRAF* mutation statuses in prognostication of patients with colorectal cancer; ClinicalTrials.gov Identifier, NCT00003835.

Keywords

adenocarcinoma; clinical outcome; colorectal neoplasm; immunity; immunology; inflammation; inflammatory mediator; molecular pathological epidemiology; precision medicine; prostaglandin; PTGS; RAF

1. Introduction

Prostaglandin-endoperoxide synthase 2 (*PTGS2*, cyclooxygenase-2, COX-2) regulates the synthesis of prostaglandin E_2 (PGE_2), which provokes chronic inflammation and plays important roles in the development of colorectal cancer.[1–4] Epidemiological studies have shown that regular use of the PTGS (COX) inhibitor aspirin is associated with lower colorectal cancer incidence and mortality.[5–10] Evidence has reinforced the theory that the *PTGS2* (COX-2)-PGE_2 pathway plays a critical role in suppression of anti-tumour immunity in the tumour microenvironment.[11–16] Our incomplete knowledge of the interactions between the immune system and cancer proves that there is a significant need for transdisciplinary integrated analyses of cancer and immunity.[17–19]

Colon and rectal cancers consist of heterogeneous diseases with tumour cells possessing varying sets of genetic and epigenetic alterations,[20] influenced by host-tumour interactions.[21] A mutation in *BRAF* is present in approximately 10% to 15% of colorectal cancers.[22–24] *BRAF* mutation in colorectal cancer is associated with high-level CpG island methylator phenotype (CIMP) which is associated with microsatellite instability (MSI).[25] Considering the association between *BRAF* mutation and worse clinical outcome in colorectal cancer patients,[26,27] further developments of effective treatment strategies are required for *BRAF*-mutated colorectal cancer patients.[23] Emerging evidence indicates that upregulation of the *RAF-MAPK* pathway by *BRAF* mutation may activate *PTGS2* (COX-2) in tumour cells to increase the production of PGE_2.[28,29] Therefore, we hypothesised that the association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression with colorectal cancer mortality might be stronger in *BRAF*-mutated tumours than in *BRAF*-wild-type tumours.

To test this hypothesis, we utilised molecular pathological epidemiology databases of 1,708 patients, including 1,200 stage I-IV colorectal cancer cases in two large U.S. prospective cohort studies and 508 stage III colon cancer cases in a randomised controlled trial of adjuvant therapy.

2. Methods

2.1. Study population

We utilised the database on colorectal cancer cases within two prospective cohort studies in the U.S.: the Nurses' Health Study (NHS, 121,701 women aged 30–55 years followed since 1976) and the Health Professionals Follow-up Study (HPFS, 51,529 men aged 40–75 years followed since 1986).[6] Every two years, study participants have been sent follow-up questionnaires to collect information on lifestyle factors and medical history, including physician-confirmed diseases. The National Death Index was used to confirm deaths of study participants and to identify unreported lethal colorectal cancer cases. Participating physicians reviewed medical records to confirm diagnoses of colorectal cancer, record tumour characteristics [e.g., size, location, and the American Joint Committee on Cancer tumour, node, and metastases (TNM) classification], and record causes of deaths for participants who died. Formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded (FFPE) tissue blocks were collected from hospitals where participants diagnosed with colorectal cancer underwent tumour resection. For this analysis, we included 1,200 patients with available data on tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression and *BRAF* mutation status. We included both colon and rectal cancers based on the colorectal continuum model.[30] Patients were followed until death or the end of follow-up (January 1, 2014 for the HPFS; June 30, 2014 for the NHS), whichever came first. Written informed consent was obtained from all study participants. This study was approved by the institutional review boards at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Brigham and Women's Hospital (Boston, MA, USA).

As a validation set, we used 508 stage III colon cancer patients with available data on tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression and *BRAF* mutation status within Cancer and Leukemia Group B (CALGB) 89803 trial. CALGB is now part of the Alliance for Clinical Trials in Oncology. CALGB/Alliance 89803 (ClinicalTrials.gov NCT000038350) is a National Cancer Institute-sponsored adjuvant therapy trial for stage III colon cancer, comparing weekly 5-fluorouracil and leucovorin (FU/LV) and weekly irinotecan, 5-fluorouracil, and leucovorin (IFL).[26] Between April 1999 and April 2001, 1,264 patients were enrolled in the treatment trial. The details of this study have been described elsewhere.[26] Data collection and statistical analyses were conducted by the Alliance Statistics and Data Center at Duke University Medical Center and Mayo Clinic. Data quality was ensured by review of data by the Alliance Statistics and Data Center. All analyses were based on the study database frozen on November 9, 2009. Written informed consent was obtained from all patients. This study was approved by the institutional review board at each institution.

In NHS, HPFS, and CALGB/Alliance 89803 trial, a single pathologist (S.O.), who was unaware of other data, conducted a centralised review of hematoxylin and eosin-stained tissue sections of all colorectal cancer cases. Tumour differentiation was categorised as well to moderate or poor (> 50% vs. ≤ 50% glandular area, respectively).

2.2. Immunohistochemistry for PTGS2 (COX-2) expression

We constructed tissue microarrays that included up to four cores from colorectal cancer blocks and up to two cores from normal tissue blocks from the NHS and HPFS cohorts.[5]

Immunohistochemistry for *PTGS2* (COX-2) was performed using an anti-*PTGS2* (COX-2) antibody (dilution 1:300; Cayman Chemical, Ann Arbor, MI, USA).[5] We used whole tissue sections for immunohistochemical analysis in the CALGB/Alliance 89803 set. Tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression level, compared with adjacent normal colonic epithelium, was evaluated by a single pathologist (S.O.) and categorised as negative/low or high. A selected sample of 124 tumours was examined by a second pathologist (T.M.); concordance between the two observers was 0.85 (κ = 0.69).[7]

2.3. Analyses of microsatellite Instability (MSI) and KRAS, BRAF, and PIK3CA mutations

DNA was extracted from archival FFPE tissue blocks using QIAamp DNA FFPE Tissue Kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany). MSI status[25,26] and mutation statuses for *KRAS*,[26,30] *BRAF*,[26,30] and *PIK3CA*[26,30] were determined.

2.4. Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics of patient clinical features were presented according to dichotomised *BRAF* status for categorical variables, or mean and standard deviation for continuous variables. Our primary hypothesis testing focused on the assessment of a statistical interaction (using the Wald test on the cross-product) between tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression (negative/low vs. high) and *BRAF* mutation (mutant vs. wild-type) in the Cox proportional hazards regression model for colorectal cancer-specific survival. We also estimated the hazard ratios (HRs) for *PTGS2* (COX-2)-high vs. *PTGS2* (COX-2)-negative/low cases in strata of *BRAF* mutation status using a re-parameterization of the interaction term in a single regression model. All other analyses, including evaluation of individual HR estimates, represent secondary analyses. We used the two-sided α level of 0.005 for our primary hypothesis testing on new discovery.[31] To account for the multiple hypothesis testing in secondary analyses, we interpreted the results of our secondary analyses conservatively. All statistical analyses were performed using SAS software (version 9.4; SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA), and all *P* values were two-sided. The authors had access to the study data, and had reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

In NHS and HPFS, survival time was defined as the period from colorectal cancer diagnosis to death or the end of follow-up. For analyses of colorectal cancer-specific survival, participants who died from other causes were censored at the time of death. In CALGB/Alliance 89803, the definitions of survival time were: (i) colorectal cancer-specific survival, defined as the time from study enrollment to death from the primary colon cancer; (ii) recurrence-free survival, defined as the time from study enrollment to tumour recurrence or occurrence of the new primary colon tumour; (iii) disease-free survival, defined as the time from study enrollment to tumour recurrence, occurrence of the new primary colon tumour, or death from any cause; and (iv) overall survival, defined as the time from study enrollment to death from any cause.[26] For recurrence-free survival, patients who died without known tumour recurrence were censored at the last documented evaluation by a treating provider.

In NHS and HPFS, the multivariable Cox proportional hazards regression models initially included sex, age at diagnosis (continuous), year of diagnosis (continuous), family history of colorectal cancer in any first-degree relative (present vs. absent), tumour location (proximal

colon vs. distal colon vs. rectum), tumour differentiation (well/moderate vs. poor), disease stage (I-II vs. III-IV), MSI status (high vs. non-high), *KRAS* (mutant vs. wild-type), and *PIK3CA* (mutant vs. wild-type). In CALGB/Alliance 89803, the multivariable Cox model initially included sex, age at diagnosis (continuous), year of diagnosis (continuous), family history of colorectal cancer in any first-degree relative (present vs. absent), tumour location (proximal colon vs. distal colon), tumour differentiation (well/moderate vs. poor), pT stage (T1 vs. T2 vs. T3 vs. T4), pN stage (N1 vs. N2), treatment arm (FU/LV vs. IFL), Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group (ECOG) performance status (0 vs. 1–2), obstruction or perforation (present vs. absent), MSI status (high vs. non-high), *KRAS* (mutant vs. wild-type), and *PIK3CA* (mutant vs. wild-type). A backward elimination was conducted with a threshold $P = 0.05$ to select variables for the final models. Cases with missing data were included in the majority category of a given categorical covariate to avoid excluding patients with missing data (Supplementary Table S1). For cases with missing information on *PIK3CA* mutation in CALGB/Alliance 89803, since the missing percentage is higher (15%), we assigned a separate missing indicator variable. We confirmed that excluding cases with missing information in any of the covariates did not substantially alter results (data not shown). The assumption of proportional hazards was satisfied using the assessment of a time-varying covariate; i.e., the cross-product of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression and survival time in strata of *BRAF* mutation status ($P > 0.12$). The Kaplan-Meier method was used to describe the distribution of colorectal cancer-specific survival, and the log-rank test was used to compare survival probabilities across *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression status.

3. Results

We included 1,200 patients with colorectal cancer in NHS and HPFS (Table 1). During the median follow-up time of 15.8 years (interquartile range, 12.0 to 19.0 years) for all censored patients, there were 745 all-cause deaths, including 352 colorectal cancer-specific deaths.

In the combined NHS and HPFS cohort, we examined the prognostic association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression status in strata of *BRAF* mutation status. In Kaplan-Meier survival analyses, tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression was associated with shorter colorectal cancer-specific survival in *BRAF*-mutated cases, but not in *BRAF*-wild-type cases (Figure 1A). In our primary hypothesis testing using Cox regression analysis, we observed a statistically significant interaction between tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression and *BRAF* mutation status in colorectal cancer-specific survival analysis ($P_{interaction} = 0.0005$; Table 2 and Supplementary Table S2). After adjustment for potentially prognostic factors, high tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression was significantly associated with shorter colorectal cancer-specific survival in *BRAF*-mutated tumours [multivariable HR, 2.44; 95% confidence interval (CI), 1.39–4.28], but not in *BRAF*-wild-type tumours (multivariable HR, 0.82; 95% CI, 0.65–1.04). These interactive associations between *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression and *BRAF* mutation status in colorectal cancer survival were observed in both the NHS and HPFS cohorts when examined separately, although statistical power was limited for cohort-specific analyses (Table 2 and Supplementary Figure S1).

In analyses limited to patients with stage I-III colorectal cancer, a similar differential prognostic association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression by *BRAF* mutation status was observed, although statistical power was limited (Supplementary Table S3).

We validated our findings using an independent cohort of 508 patients with stage III colon cancer in CALGB/Alliance 89803 (Table 1). The median age was 59.9 years, 46% were women, and 76% were performance status (ECOG) 0. During the median follow-up time of 7.6 years (interquartile range, 7.1 to 8.0 years) for all censored patients, there were 159 all-cause deaths, including 140 colon cancer-specific deaths. The multivariable HR for colorectal cancer-specific survival for *PTGS2* (COX-2)-high cases compared to *PTGS2* (COX-2)-negative/low cases was higher in the *BRAF*-mutated group (multivariable HR, 1.85; 95% CI, 0.88–3.88) than in the *BRAF*-wild-type group (multivariable HR, 0.74; 95% CI, 0.49–1.12; $P_{\text{interaction}} = 0.03$; Table 3 and Supplementary Table S4). Similar differential survival association were observed for recurrence-free survival ($P_{\text{interaction}} = 0.005$; Figure 1B) and disease-free survival ($P_{\text{interaction}} = 0.006$).

4. Discussion

To test our hypothesis that the association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression with colorectal cancer mortality might be stronger in *BRAF*-mutated tumours than in *BRAF*-wild-type tumours, we conducted this study utilising the two U.S. prospective cohort studies and the randomised controlled trial. We observed a differential prognostic association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression in strata of *BRAF* mutation status.

The *PTGS2* (COX-2)-PGE_2 pathway plays key roles in tumour progression in a variety of tumour types, including colorectal cancer.[1,2] Evidence indicates that PGE_2 overproduction may enable tumour cells to evade host immune surveillance mechanisms through accumulation of myeloid-derived suppressor cells, suppression of dendritic cells, and evasion of the T cell-mediated anti-tumour immune response.[12–14,32] Considering that the immunomodulatory effect by PGE_2 inhibition can synergise with immune checkpoint blockade therapies targeting *PDCD1* (programmed cell death 1, PD-1) or *CD274* (*PDCD1* ligand 1, PD-L1) in various cancer types,[12,33,34] a better understanding of the roles of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression in the context of tumour-immune interactions would have considerable clinical implications.[35]

Gain-of-function *BRAF* mutation leads to accelerated production and activity of a number of critical cellular substrates involved in cell proliferation and survival through phosphorylation of the *MAPK* kinases.[23,24] Studies indicate that *BRAF* mutation has been associated with high-level CIMP and worse clinical outcomes in colorectal cancer.[22–27,36,37] Evidence suggests that *BRAF* mutation may increase microRNA *MIR21* (miR-21) expression level through the activation of the *MAPK* and *STAT3* signalling pathways.[28,29,38] Given that *MIR21* increases local levels of PGE_2 by suppressing PGE_2 degradation,[29,38,39] the prognostic association of *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression might be especially pronounced in *BRAF*-mutated colorectal cancer. Overall, increased synthesis of PGE_2 resulting from *BRAF* mutation and heightened *PTGS2* (COX-2) activity may serve as one possible

pathway through which the survival of colorectal cancer patients with this combination is affected.

We acknowledge limitations in our study. Data on cancer recurrence were unavailable in NHS and HPFS. However, colorectal cancer-specific survival can be considered a reasonable cancer-specific outcome in a population-based study with long-term follow-up, because median survival for recurrent (metastatic) colorectal cancer was approximately 10 to 20 months during the time period of this study. Moreover, we found the association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression with recurrence-free survival and disease-free survival stratified by *BRAF* mutation status remained consistent in the validation set of CALGB/Alliance 89803. Data on cancer treatment were also limited in the NHS and HPFS cohorts. However, the decision to undergo chemotherapy and the specific regimen utilised would be unlikely to differ substantially according to tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression in resected specimens, as these data were not available to treating physicians. We also recognise another limitation that the current study is an observational cohort study, not an intervention trial such as a randomized controlled trial using aspirin and/or *BRAF* inhibitor. Therefore, we cannot conclude that inhibiting *PTGS2* (COX-2) in *BRAF*-mutated colorectal cancer is an effective therapeutic strategy. In the current study, we certainly observed that the association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression with colorectal cancer mortality is stronger in *BRAF*-mutated tumours than in *BRAF*-wild-type tumours, and further research is warranted to investigate the therapeutic roles of *BRAF* and *PTGS2* (COX-2) inhibitors in patients with this malignancy.

A major strength of this study is utilisation of a molecular pathological epidemiology database of rectal and colon cancer cases from the two large U.S. prospective cohort studies, [40] which integrates clinicopathologic features, long-term survival data, and tumour molecular features. This population-based colorectal cancer database enabled us to rigorously examine the interactive prognostic association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression and *BRAF* mutation status while controlling for potential confounders. Use of the randomised controlled trial as a validation set was another significant strength of this study. The colorectal cancer patient data in our study were derived from a large number of hospitals from diverse locations within the U.S., which adds greatly to the generalisability of our findings.

In conclusion, we found a stronger association of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression with colorectal cancer mortality in *BRAF*-mutated tumours than in *BRAF*-wild-type tumours. Our population-based data suggest the potential of tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression status as a prognostic biomarker in patients with *BRAF*-mutated colorectal cancer.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Abbreviations:

CALGB	Cancer and Leukemia Group B (now part of Alliance for Clinical Trials in Oncology)
CI	confidence interval
CIMP	CpG island methylator phenotype
ECOG	Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group
FFPE	formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded
FU/LV	5-fluorouracil and leucovorin
HPFS	Health Professionals Follow-up Study
HR	hazard ratio
IFL	irinotecan, 5-fluorouracil, and leucovorin
MSI	microsatellite instability
NHS	Nurses' Health Study
PGE_2	prostaglandin E_2

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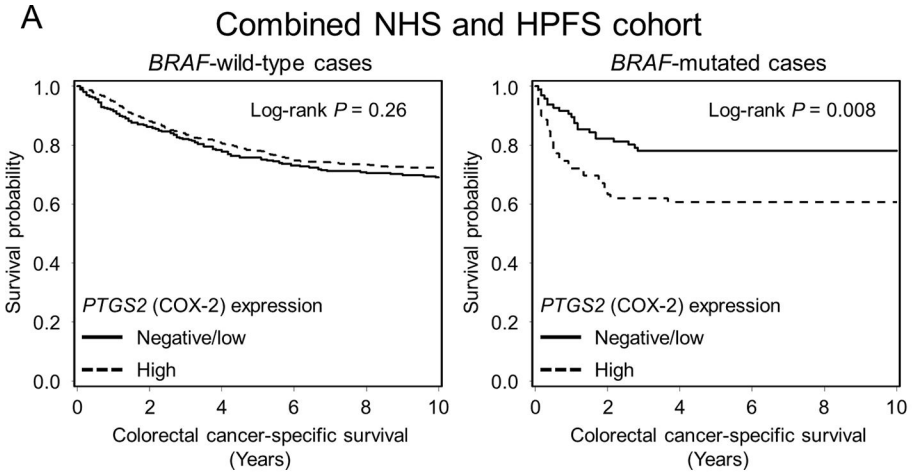
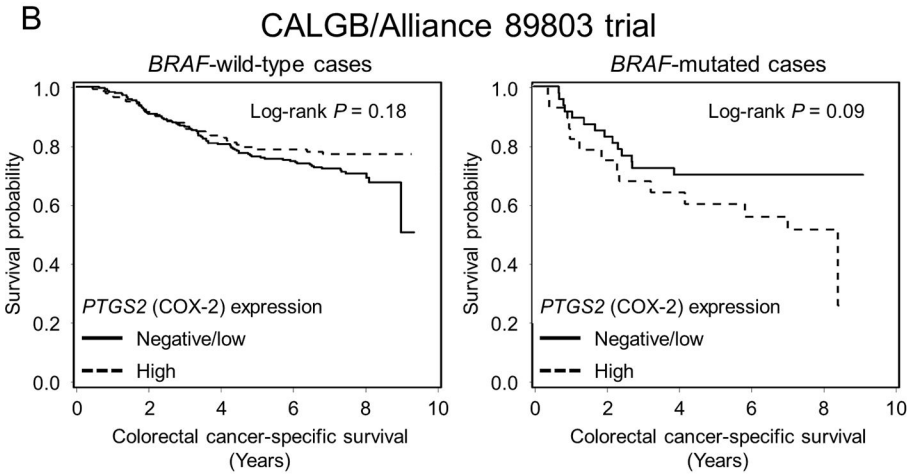


Number at risk

PTGS2 (COX-2) expression	Years					
	0	2	4	6	8	10
Negative/low	366	309	269	243	210	173
High	659	567	505	444	400	349

Number at risk

PTGS2 (COX-2) expression	Years					
	0	2	4	6	8	10
Negative/low	96	79	71	65	56	49
High	79	50	48	46	40	32



Number at risk

PTGS2 (COX-2) expression	Years					
	0	2	4	6	8	10
Negative/low	290	254	217	182	46	0
High	143	128	109	97	27	0

Number at risk

PTGS2 (COX-2) expression	Years					
	0	2	4	6	8	10
Negative/low	47	39	31	27	11	0
High	28	21	16	13	6	0

Figure 1.

Kaplan-Meier analysis of colorectal cancer-specific survival according to tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression status in strata of *BRAF* mutation status. A, Combined Nurses' Health Study (NHS) and Health Professionals Follow-up Study (HPFS) cohort; B, CALGB/Alliance 89803 trial. *P* values were calculated by the log-rank test (two-sided).
HPFS, Health Professionals Follow-up Study; NHS, Nurses' Health Study.

Table 1.

Characteristics of colorectal cancer cases according to *BRAF* mutation status in the Nurses' Health Study (NHS), Health Professionals Follow-up Study (HPFS), and CALGB/Alliance 89803 trial

	NHS			HPFS			CALGB/Alliance 89803 trial		
		BRAF mutation status			*BRAF* mutation status			*BRAF* mutation status	
Characteristic[a]	**All cases (*N* = 676)**	**Wild-type (*N* = 542)**	**Mutant (*N* = 134)**	**All cases (*N* = 524)**	**Wild-type (*N* = 483)**	**Mutant (*N* = 41)**	**All cases (*N* = 508)**	**Wild-type (*N* = 433)**	**Mutant (*N* = 75)**
Mean age ± SD (years)	66.4 ± 8.2	65.8 ± 8.3	68.9 ± 7.3	70.7 ± 8.8	70.6 ± 8.7	71.3 ± 9.6	59.9 ± 11.5	58.7 ± 11.6	66.5 ± 8.0
Sex									
Male	-	-	-	524	483	41	276 (54%)	247 (57%)	29 (39%)
Female	676	542	134	-	-	-	232 (46%)	186 (43%)	46 (61%)
Year of diagnosis									
1995 or before	249 (37%)	211 (39%)	38 (28%)	212 (40%)	198 (41%)	14 (34%)	-	-	-
1996–2000	240 (36%)	191 (35%)	49 (37%)	162 (31%)	147 (30%)	15 (37%)	345 (68%)	290 (67%)	55 (73%)
2001–2008	187 (28%)	140 (26%)	47 (35%)	150 (29%)	138 (29%)	12 (29%)	163 (32%)	143 (33%)	20 (27%)
Family history of colorectal cancer in first-degree relative(s)									
Absent	534 (79%)	429 (80%)	105 (78%)	421 (80%)	388 (80%)	33 (80%)	421 (84%)	363 (85%)	58 (77%)
Present	138 (21%)	109 (20%)	29 (22%)	102 (20%)	94 (20%)	8 (20%)	82 (16%)	65 (15%)	17 (23%)
Tumour location									
Cecum	99 (15%)	82 (15%)	17 (13%)	109 (21%)	101 (21%)	8 (20%)	127 (25%)	104 (24%)	23 (31%)
Ascending to transverse	233 (35%)	139 (26%)	94 (71%)	125 (24%)	100 (21%)	25 (61%)	162 (32%)	117 (27%)	45 (61%)
Descending to sigmoid	201 (30%)	184 (34%)	17 (13%)	169 (32%)	163 (34%)	6 (15%)	214 (43%)	208 (48%)	6 (8.1%)
Rectum	141 (21%)	136 (25%)	5 (3.8%)	119 (23%)	117 (24%)	2 (4.9%)	-	-	-
Tumour differentiation									
Well to moderate	592 (88%)	498 (92%)	94 (70%)	486 (93%)	458 (95%)	28 (68%)	381 (76%)	342 (79%)	39 (53%)
Poor	81 (12%)	41 (7.6%)	40 (30%)	35 (6.7%)	22 (4.6%)	13 (32%)	123 (24%)	89 (21%)	34 (47%)
pT stage (depth of tumour invasion)									
pT1 (submucosa)	71 (11%)	61 (12%)	10 (7.6%)	55 (12%)	54 (13%)	1 (2.7%)	12 (2.4%)	12 (2.8%)	0 (0%)
pT2 (muscularis propria)	112 (18%)	97 (19%)	15 (11%)	113 (24%)	106 (25%)	7 (19%)	45 (9.0%)	37 (8.6%)	8 (11%)
pT3 (subserosa)	410 (64%)	313 (62%)	97 (73%)	281 (60%)	256 (60%)	25 (68%)	412 (82%)	354 (83%)	58 (78%)
pT4 (serosa or other organs)	43 (6.8%)	33 (6.6%)	10 (7.6%)	18 (3.9%)	14 (3.3%)	4 (11%)	33 (6.6%)	25 (5.8%)	8 (11%)

Characteristic[a]	NHS			HPFS			CALGB/Alliance 89803 trial		
		BRAF mutation status			*BRAF* mutation status			*BRAF* mutation status	
	All cases (*N* = 676)	Wild-type (*N* = 542)	Mutant (*N* = 134)	All cases (*N* = 524)	Wild-type (*N* = 483)	Mutant (*N* = 41)	All cases (*N* = 508)	Wild-type (*N* = 433)	Mutant (*N* = 75)
pN stage (number of positive lymph nodes)									
pN0 (0)	377 (62%)	298 (61%)	79 (63%)	293 (65%)	269 (65%)	24 (67%)	-	-	-
pN1 (1–3)	140 (23%)	115 (24%)	25 (20%)	104 (23%)	96 (23%)	8 (22%)	319 (63%)	278 (65%)	41 (55%)
pN2 (≥ 4)	94 (15%)	72 (15%)	22 (17%)	55 (12%)	51 (12%)	4 (11%)	186 (37%)	153 (35%)	33 (45%)
AJCC disease stage									
I	147 (23%)	126 (25%)	21 (16%)	128 (28%)	121 (29%)	7 (18%)	-	-	-
II	209 (33%)	155 (31%)	54 (41%)	144 (31%)	128 (30%)	16 (40%)	-	-	-
III	186 (29%)	156 (31%)	30 (23%)	129 (28%)	120 (29%)	9 (23%)	508	433	75
IV	97 (15%)	71 (14%)	26 (20%)	59 (13%)	51 (12%)	8 (20%)	-	-	-
MSI status									
MSI-high	126 (19%)	52 (10%)	74 (56%)	58 (11%)	36 (7.6%)	22 (54%)	86 (17%)	53 (12%)	33 (44%)
Non-MSI-high	534 (81%)	476 (90%)	58 (44%)	457 (89%)	438 (92%)	19 (46%)	421 (83%)	379 (88%)	42 (56%)
KRAS mutation									
Wild-type	424 (64%)	296 (55%)	128 (96%)	285 (55%)	246 (52%)	39 (95%)	322 (64%)	248 (58%)	74 (99%)
Mutant	243 (36%)	238 (45%)	5 (3.8%)	232 (45%)	230 (48%)	2 (4.9%)	180 (36%)	179 (42%)	1 (1.3%)
PIK3CA mutation									
Wild-type	524 (86%)	414 (85%)	110 (88%)	403 (83%)	373 (83%)	30 (75%)	378 (88%)	318 (87%)	60 (92%)
Mutant	87 (14%)	72 (15%)	15 (12%)	85 (17%)	75 (17%)	10 (25%)	54 (13%)	49 (13%)	5 (7.6%)
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression									
Negative/low	260 (38%)	186 (34%)	74 (55%)	202 (39%)	180 (37%)	22 (54%)	337 (66%)	290 (67%)	47 (63%)
High	416 (62%)	356 (66%)	60 (45%)	322 (61%)	303 (63%)	19 (46%)	171 (34%)	143 (33%)	28 (37%)
Performance status (ECOG)[b]									
0	-	-	-	-	-	-	384 (76%)	333 (77%)	51 (69%)
1–2	-	-	-	-	-	-	120 (24%)	97 (23%)	23 (31%)
Treatment arm									
FU/LV	-	-	-	-	-	-	266 (52%)	233 (54%)	33 (44%)
IFL	-	-	-	-	-	-	242 (48%)	200 (46%)	42 (56%)

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Characteristic[a]	NHS			HPFS			CALGB/Alliance 89803 trial		
		BRAF mutation status			*BRAF* mutation status			*BRAF* mutation status	
	All cases (*N* = 676)	Wild-type (*N* = 542)	Mutant (*N* = 134)	All cases (*N* = 524)	Wild-type (*N* = 483)	Mutant (*N* = 41)	All cases (*N* = 508)	Wild-type (*N* = 433)	Mutant (*N* = 75)
Clinical bowel perforation or obstruction									
Absent	-	-	-	-	-	-	384 (76%)	328 (76%)	56 (75%)
Present	-	-	-	-	-	-	124 (24%)	105 (24%)	19 (25%)

[a] Percentage indicates the proportion of patients with a specific clinical, pathologic, or molecular characteristic among all patients or in strata of *BRAF* mutation status within each cohort.

[b] Definition of performance status (ECOG): 0, fully active, able to carry on all pre-disease performance without restriction; 1, restricted in physically strenuous activity but ambulatory and able to carry out work of a light or sedentary nature; 2, ambulatory and capable of all selfcare but unable to carry out any work activities (up and about more than 50% of waking hours).

Abbreviations: AJCC, American Joint Committee on Cancer; ECOG, Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group; FU/LV, 5-fluorouracil and leucovorin; HPFS, Health Professionals Follow-up Study; IFL, irinotecan, 5-fluorouracil and leucovorin; MSI, microsatellite instability; NHS, Nurses' Health Study; SD, standard deviation.

Table 2.

Tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression and colorectal cancer survival according to *BRAF* mutation status in the Nurses' Health Study (NHS) and Health Professionals Follow-up Study (HPFS)

		Colorectal cancer-specific survival			Overall survival		
	No. of cases	No. of events	Univariable HR (95% CI)	Multivariable HR (95% CI)[a]	No. of events	Univariable HR (95% CI)	Multivariable HR (95% CI)[a]
Combined NHS and HPFS cohort							
All cases							
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression							
Negative/low	462	134	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	288	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	738	218	1.01 (0.81–1.25)	0.97 (0.77–1.21)	457	0.94 (0.81–1.09)	0.98 (0.84–1.14)
BRAF-wild-type							
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression							
Negative/low	366	113	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	231	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	659	187	0.89 (0.71–1.13)	0.82 (0.65–1.04)	401	0.89 (0.76–1.05)	0.91 (0.77–1.07)
BRAF-mutant							
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression							
Negative/low	96	21	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	57	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	79	31	2.16 (1.24–3.76)	2.44 (1.39–4.28)	56	1.42 (0.98–2.05)	1.45 (1.00–2.11)
$P_{interaction}$[b]			0.004	0.0005		0.02	0.02
NHS							
All cases							
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression							
Negative/low	260	79	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	157	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	416	130	1.03 (0.78–1.36)	0.97 (0.72–1.30)	242	0.93 (0.76–1.14)	0.97 (0.79–1.19)
BRAF-wild-type							
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression							
Negative/low	186	64	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	118	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	356	107	0.85 (0.63–1.16)	0.78 (0.57–1.07)	199	0.82 (0.65–1.03)	0.84 (0.67–1.06)
BRAF-mutant							
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression							

		Colorectal cancer-specific survival			Overall survival		
	No. of cases	No. of events	Univariable HR (95% CI)	Multivariable HR (95% CI)[a]	No. of events	Univariable HR (95% CI)	Multivariable HR (95% CI)[a]
Negative/low	74	15	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	39	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	60	23	2.23 (1.16–4.28)	2.42 (1.24–4.72)	43	1.70 (1.10–2.63)	1.55 (1.00–2.40)
$P_{interaction}$[b]			0.009	0.003		0.004	0.02
HPFS							
All cases							
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression							
Negative/low	202	55	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	131	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	322	88	0.98 (0.70–1.37)	0.96 (0.68–1.35)	215	0.94 (0.76–1.17)	1.02 (0.82–1.28)
BRAF-wild-type							
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression							
Negative/low	180	49	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	113	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	303	80	0.94 (0.66–1.34)	0.88 (0.61–1.26)	202	0.98 (0.78–1.23)	1.00 (0.80–1.27)
BRAF-mutant							
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression							
Negative/low	22	6	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	18	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	19	8	1.92 (0.66–5.54)	2.20 (0.71–6.81)	13	0.77 (0.38–1.58)	1.22 (0.58–2.57)
$P_{interaction}$[b]			0.21	0.13		0.54	0.62

[a]The initial multivariable Cox regression model initially included sex, age, year of diagnosis, family history of colorectal cancer, tumour location, tumour differentiation, disease stage, microsatellite instability, and *KRAS, BRAF* (except for *BRAF*-stratified analyses), and *PIK3CA* mutations. A backward elimination with a threshold *P* of 0.05 was used to select variables for the final models. The variables which remained in the final models are shown in Supplementary Table S2.

[b]$P_{interaction}$ (two-sided) was calculated by the Wald test on the cross-product term of *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression (negative/low vs. high) and *BRAF* mutation (wild-type vs. mutant) in the Cox regression model.

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; HR, hazard ratio; HPFS, Health Professionals Follow-up Study; NHS, Nurses' Health Study.

Table 3.

Tumour *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression and colorectal cancer survival according to *BRAF* mutation status in CALGB/Alliance 89803 trial

		Colorectal cancer-specific survival			Recurrence-free survival			Disease-free survival			Overall survival		
			HR (95% CI)			HR (95% CI)			HR (95% CI)			HR (95% CI)	
	No. of cases	No. of events	Univariable	Multivariable[a]	No. of events	Univariable	Multivariable[a]	No. of events	Univariable	Multivariable[a]	No. of events	Univariable	Multivariable[a]
All cases													
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression													
Negative/low	337	95	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	128	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	141	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	108	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	171	45	0.93 (0.65–1.33)	0.88 (0.61–1.25)	54	0.82 (0.60–1.13)	0.78 (0.57–1.07)	60	0.82 (0.61–1.11)	0.79 (0.58–1.07)	51	0.93 (0.67–1.30)	0.87 (0.62–1.22)
BRAF-wild-type													
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression													
Negative/low	290	81	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	113	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	123	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	91	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	143	31	0.76 (0.50–1.14)	0.74 (0.49–1.12)	39	0.66 (0.46–0.95)	0.64 (0.44–0.92)	44	0.68 (0.48–0.96)	0.67 (0.48–0.95)	36	0.78 (0.53–1.15)	0.79 (0.53–1.16)
BRAF-mutant													
PTGS2 (COX-2) expression													
Negative/low	47	14	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	15	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	18	1 (referent)	1 (referent)	17	1 (referent)	1 (referent)
High	28	14	1.93 (0.92–4.04)	1.85 (0.88–3.88)	15	2.11 (1.03–4.32)	2.04 (0.98–4.21)	16	1.90 (0.97–3.72)	1.96 (0.99–3.87)	15	1.71 (0.85–3.42)	1.43 (0.71–2.89)
$P_{\text{interaction}}$[b]			0.03	0.03		0.005	0.005		0.008	0.006		0.05	0.15

[a] The initial multivariable Cox regression model initially included sex, age, year of diagnosis, family history of colorectal cancer, tumour location, tumour differentiation, pT stage, pN stage, treatment arm, performance status, perforation or obstruction, microsatellite instability, and *KRAS, BRAF* (except for *BRAF*-stratified analyses), and *PIK3CA* mutations. A backward elimination with a threshold *P* of 0.05 was used to select variables for the final models. The variables which remained in the final models are shown in Supplementary Table S4.

[b] $P_{\text{interaction}}$ (two-sided) was calculated by the Wald test on the cross-product term of *PTGS2* (COX-2) expression (negative/low vs. high) and *BRAF* mutation (wild-type vs. mutant) in the Cox regression model.

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; HR, hazard ratio.