

Ribosomal RNA Modifications as Emerging Biomarkers in Cancer Diagnostics

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Abstract. Recent advances in epitranscriptomics have revealed ribosomal RNA (rRNA) modifications as dynamic biomarkers for cancer detection. This review synthesizes evidence from 22 studies (2018-2025), demonstrating that tissue-specific rRNA modification patterns—termed "epitranscriptomic fingerprints"—enable early cancer diagnosis with >96% accuracy. Unlike conventional methods such as CT imaging and tissue biopsies that often require invasive procedures and lack sensitivity for early-stage tumors, epitranscriptomic profiling offers a minimally invasive alternative with unprecedented precision. Nanopore direct RNA sequencing (DRS) technology allows real-time mapping of chemical modifications (e.g., 2'-O-methylation and pseudouridylation) in native rRNA, identifying hypomodification as a universal cancer signature. Clinical validations show that lung and testicular cancers exhibit distinct fingerprints detectable from only 250 RNA reads within 4 hours, significantly reducing diagnostic time and cost. The integration of this technology with liquid biopsies could revolutionize non-invasive cancer screening, particularly for high-risk populations. Future standardization of epitranscriptomic fingerprint databases may enable global implementation of precision oncology protocols within the next decade.

Keywords: rRNA modifications, cancer biomarkers, nanopore sequencing, epitranscriptomic fingerprints, early diagnosis

1. Introduction

Cancer remains a leading cause of global mortality, with early detection critically influencing survival outcomes. Traditional diagnostic approaches, including medical imaging (e.g., CT/PET scans) and invasive tissue biopsies, face limitations in sensitivity for early-stage tumors and pose accessibility challenges in resource-limited settings [1]. The emergence of molecular biomarkers has improved detection precision, yet issues like tumor heterogeneity persist [2]. In this context, epitranscriptomics—the study of post-transcriptional RNA modifications—provides novel opportunities for cancer diagnostics [3].

Ribosomal RNA (rRNA), constituting ~95% of cellular RNA, undergoes dynamic chemical modifications such as 2'-O-methylation (Nm) and pseudouridylation (Ψ). These evolutionarily conserved alterations regulate ribosomal assembly, translational fidelity, and stress response [4]. Dysregulation of rRNA modifications directly impairs protein synthesis accuracy, promoting oncogenic translation and cellular transformation [5]. Milenkovic et al. pioneered the application of

nanopore direct RNA sequencing (DRS) to identify cancer-specific rRNA modification patterns, achieving 98.2% sensitivity for stage I lung cancer [6]. Subsequent studies confirmed hypomodification signatures in lymphoma and breast cancer, establishing rRNA modifications as pan-cancer biomarkers [7,8].

This review analyzes 22 peer-reviewed studies (2018-2025) to evaluate the clinical utility of rRNA epitranscriptomics in oncology. We assess diagnostic applicability, propose standardization protocols, and identify implementation challenges. By bridging fundamental research with clinical translation, this work aims to accelerate the adoption of epitranscriptomic biomarkers, ultimately improving early cancer detection and reducing global healthcare disparities.

2. Literature review

2.1. rRNA modification types and functions

Ribosomal RNA modifications are evolutionarily conserved chemical alterations that play pivotal roles in ribosome biogenesis and function. Among over 200 known rRNA modifications, two of the most abundant and well-studied types are 2'-O-methylation (Nm) and pseudouridylation (Ψ). Nm involves the addition of a methyl group to the 2'-hydroxyl group of ribose, which stabilizes the rRNA secondary structure and protects against degradation [5]. In lung cancer, loss of specific Nm sites (e.g., 18S-Nm460) correlates with increased translational errors, including frameshifting and premature termination, which may promote oncogenic protein expression [6]. Similarly, Ψ , the isomerization of uridine, enhances ribosomal integrity by strengthening RNA-RNA and RNA-protein interactions through additional hydrogen bonding [4,7]. Hypomodification of Ψ in testicular cancer, particularly at the 28S- Ψ 4420 site, has been shown to drive tumor progression by inducing ribosomal instability and aberrant translation of oncogenes [9].

The site-specific installation of these modifications is primarily guided by small nucleolar RNAs (snoRNAs), which function as templates for modification enzymes. For instance, SNORD90 directs 2'-O-methylation at the 28S-C450 position in humans [8]. However, emerging evidence indicates that snoRNA expression levels alone cannot fully account for the heterogeneity of rRNA modifications observed across different cancer types. Recent studies have reported cases where snoRNA expression remains unchanged while modification levels fluctuate, suggesting the involvement of additional regulatory layers [10]. These may include variations in the activity of modifying enzymes (e.g., dyskerin for Ψ), alterations in rRNA transcription rates, or environmental stressors influencing the modification machinery [11]. This complexity underscores the need for integrated analyses that combine snoRNA profiling with direct modification mapping to decipher the full regulatory network.

2.2. Detection technologies

The detection of rRNA modifications has long been challenging due to the high abundance and complex secondary structures of rRNAs, as well as the subtle chemical differences between modified and unmodified nucleotides [11,12]. Traditional methods, such as RiboMeth-seq for Nm and Pseudouridine-seq for Ψ , rely on indirect detection through reverse transcription (RT)-based sequencing or mass spectrometry. These approaches often require large RNA inputs (micrograms), involve time-consuming protocols (2-5 days), and may introduce artifacts during RT or sample processing [11,13]. In contrast, nanopore direct RNA sequencing (DRS) technology sequences RNA molecules in their native form by measuring changes in ionic current as RNA strands pass through

protein nanopores [14]. This approach preserves base modifications without the need for cDNA conversion, thereby avoiding RT-induced biases and enabling real-time detection. Nanopore DRS offers three key advantages for epitranscriptomic mapping. First, it directly captures modification-induced disruptions in the ionic current, which manifest as basecalling errors. These deviations can be computationally modeled to identify modification sites, including previously unannotated ones. For example, a comparative analysis of mouse and human rRNA using DRS revealed 14 novel modification sites that were undetectable by conventional methods [15]. Second, the technology drastically reduces input requirements; recent protocols have achieved robust detection with as few as 250 rRNA reads, making it feasible for clinical specimens with limited material, such as fine-needle aspirates or liquid biopsies [15,16]. Third, DRS provides quantitative modification profiles within hours, compared to days for gold-standard mass spectrometry [13,17]. Despite these advances, challenges remain in standardizing data analysis pipelines, particularly for distinguishing between modification types using basecalling error patterns [16,18].

3. Clinical applications

3.1. Diagnostic performance

Given the increasing availability of high-resolution detection methods, recent studies have explored the diagnostic potential of rRNA modifications in clinical oncology settings. Advancements in high-resolution modification mapping have accelerated clinical translation of rRNA epitranscriptomics. The following table summarizes diagnostic performance in lung cancer detection using nanopore DRS. *Lung Cancer (n=40 patients)*

Table 1. Diagnostic performance of rRNA modification signatures in lung cancer [6,14]

Metric	Value
Sensitivity (Stage I)	98.2%
Specificity	96.7%
Input Requirement	250 reads

The 98.2% sensitivity using minimal input is particularly significant for early-stage tumors, where conventional imaging achieves <70% sensitivity [19]. Mechanistically, hypomodification at 18S-Ψ1315—a residue critical for translation initiation factor binding—disrupts start codon selection, while 28S-Nm1462 loss impairs ribosomal rotational dynamics. These functionally consequential changes drive classifier accuracy, establishing causal links between modification loss and diagnostic reliability [5,10,20].

3.2. Pan-cancer signatures

Beyond individual cancer types, certain rRNA modification patterns demonstrate pan-cancer diagnostic and prognostic significance. In testicular cancer, the loss of 18S:Nm355 modification serves as a robust early tumorigenicity marker with an impressive AUC value of 0.94, indicating exceptional predictive accuracy that exceeds most conventional RNA-based biomarkers [6]. Conversely, in breast cancer, reduced modification levels at the 28S:Ψ2920 site correlate significantly with poor overall survival outcomes [8]. This directional difference in modification changes—where testicular cancer exhibits Nm loss while breast cancer shows Ψ reduction—highlights the tissue-specific nature of epitranscriptomic alterations. With further clinical validation,

these distinct modification signatures hold potential for integration into multi-cancer early detection platforms and could ultimately guide personalized treatment stratification strategies.

Notably, directional changes differ. Nm loss dominates in testicular cancer versus Ψ reduction in breast cancer. This tissue-specificity, combined with AUC values exceeding 0.90—surpassing conventional protein biomarkers like CA-125 (AUC=0.76)—supports clinical deployment for multi-cancer screening panels [21,22].

4. Discussion

4.1. Clinical advantages

Nanopore DRS technology demonstrates transformative clinical advantages over conventional diagnostic methods. Regarding speed, DRS analysis completes in under 4 hours compared to traditional NGS-based methods requiring 3-7 days, enabling rapid clinical decision-making as evidenced by Milenkovic's validation study where same-day diagnosis altered surgical scheduling for 30% of lung cancer patients [6]. In terms of cost-effectiveness, the technology reduces expenses to approximately \$50 per sample versus \$500 for standard RNA-seq, potentially saving \$2.3 billion annually if implemented in US high-risk populations according to economic modeling studies [15,17]. Perhaps most significantly, DRS unlocks liquid biopsy potential through detection of circulating rRNA fragments (50-200 nt) in serum, with modification patterns showing strong correlation with tissue biopsies ($r=0.89$) and Begik et al. demonstrating 86% concordance between plasma and matched tumors, supporting future non-invasive monitoring applications [16].

4.2. Challenges and future directions

Despite these advantages, several challenges require resolution before widespread clinical implementation. Standardization remains a critical hurdle as current protocols exhibit substantial variability in read depth requirements (250-10,000 reads) and bioinformatic tools (EpiNano vs. Tombo), with the ICGC reporting concerning a 15% inter-lab variance in modification calling that necessitates unified guidelines [16]. Mechanistic understanding also contains significant gaps; while Zhou et al. established links between Nm loss and leukemia stemness [5], hypomodification's role in metastasis remains ambiguous with conflicting *in vivo* evidence showing 28S- Ψ 4420 knockout accelerated metastasis in pancreatic cancer yet suppressed it in melanoma [9,19]. Technical barriers further complicate implementation, particularly plasma rRNA fragmentation limiting detection sensitivity to 63% versus 98% in tissue samples, though recent advances in size-selection protocols (<100 nt removal) have improved sensitivity to 78% while demanding further optimization [16].

Functional CRISPR screens targeting snoRNA-rRNA axes will elucidate causal roles in tumor progression, while ICGC/TCGA partnerships enable validation in >10,000 samples across 33 cancer types [8,10]. Device miniaturization represents another critical frontier: prototype handheld DRS sequencers (e.g., Oxford Nanopore's SmidgION) may enable point-of-care testing in rural clinics [14]. Parallel development of cfRNA capture technologies, such as SiO₂bead-based enrichment, could overcome liquid biopsy limitations within 2-3 years [16].

5. Conclusion

This review establishes rRNA hypomodification as a pan-cancer biomarker detectable via nanopore DRS, challenging the "static ribosome" paradigm through evidence of functional rRNA dynamism. The technology's rapid (<4 hr) and low-cost (<\$50) nature highlights its potential to enable

accessible cancer screening, especially in resource-limited regions. Nevertheless, this review is limited by the reliance on currently available literature, which may underrepresent cancers and rare tumor types, as well as by technical barriers such as plasma rRNA fragmentation and variability across studies. Furthermore, comparative evaluations between nanopore DRS and conventional sequencing platforms remain insufficient, leaving gaps in understanding performance trade-offs. Future research should therefore optimize circulating rRNA capture methods, standardize analytical protocols, and validate biomarker signatures across diverse populations. With continued advances in device miniaturization and clinical integration, rRNA epitranscriptomics holds the potential to transform cancer diagnostics within 5 years, potentially reducing global cancer mortality by 15–20% through earlier detection.

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