

# Multiple mechanisms of salidroside on anti-tumor effects

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**Abstract.** – Salidroside, a kind of natural herb, has the advantages of a wide range of anti-tumor activities with low toxicity and high efficiency. A large number of studies have shown that salidroside can inhibit the proliferation of tumors in different ways and achieve the goal of treating tumors. After summary and analysis of the recent research on anti-tumor mechanisms of salidroside, it can be concluded that salidroside could suppress cancer proliferation by blocking cell cycle, promoting cell differentiation, inducing cell apoptosis or autophagy, and regulating the signal pathways of cancer cells.

*Key Words:*

Salidroside, Tumor, Cell cycle, Apoptosis, Autophagy, Differentiation.

## Introduction

Research showed that the cancer incidence rate in China accounts for 22%, while the mortality rate accounts for 27% of global cancer<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, trying to find effective and low toxicity anti-tumor drugs has become an important field in basic and clinical research. Salidroside is the main effective component of the Chinese Tibetan herb, *Rhodiola sachalinensis*. It owns the functions of improving blood circulation and invigorating health effectively. The research showed that salidroside possesses the effects of immunity enhancement, hypoxia inhibition, and tumor treatment<sup>2-4</sup>. In recent years, with the advancement of molecular biology techniques, it is found that salidroside indeed plays multiple active roles in the treatment of tumors. Therefore, the following anti-tumor mechanisms of salidroside are summarized to provide a better basis for further investigation of cancer treatment.

### Arresting Cancer Cell Cycle

The normal cells must have a complete cell cycle to proliferate. The cell cycle usually accompa-

nies the downregulation of cyclin-dependent kinase 4 (CDK4), cyclin D1, and the upregulation of p27 (Kip1) and p21 (Cip1). These molecules participate in the regulation of G1-S-G2-M progression<sup>5,6</sup>. However, when some stimulators interfere with cell division, the cell could not pass through the G1/S and G2/M checkpoints. The cell proliferation has to be terminated<sup>7,8</sup>.

Cancer cell growth also depends on the continuous progression of the cell cycle. During this process, cyclins and CDK are the most important key checkpoints<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, arresting the cell cycle is an important way to suppress cancer cell growth. The study found that salidroside inhibited the proliferation of gastric cancer SGC-7901 in the G2/M checkpoints by down-regulating the expression of cyclin B1<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, salidroside could suppress the growth of breast cancer cell lines MDA-MB-435 and MCF-7. The expression of cyclin B1 and Cdc2 was downregulated in the G1 phase, and the cell cycle was blocked in the G2 phase. The proliferation of breast cancer cells was inhibited<sup>11</sup>. Besides, salidroside can block the liver cancer cell cycle in the G0/G1 phase and demonstrate the effective anti-cancer function<sup>12</sup>.

### Inducing Apoptosis of Cancer Cells

Tumor growth depends on the ratio between cell proliferation and cell death. In addition to the roles of tumor oncogenes and anti-oncogenes, apoptosis-regulating genes also play important roles in the progression of tumors. Therefore, the imbalance of apoptosis is one of the mechanisms for tumor development<sup>13-17</sup>. The process of tumor cell apoptosis is the result of activating a series of genes. These apoptosis-regulating genes regulate and interact with each other. For example, caspases, a kind of apoptotic protease, can inhibit cell division and form apoptotic bodies. Then the apoptotic bodies are recognized and phagocytized finally by adjacent phagocytes or other cells. The process leads to the complete elimination of abnormal or dam-

aged cells in the end. Anti-apoptosis genes, such as Bcl-2, mutant p53, both can inhibit apoptosis and promote the growth of tumor cells. On the contrary, the pro-apoptotic gene Bax participates in the process of tumor cell apoptosis. The research found that salidroside could induce apoptosis of adenoma cells by upregulating the expression of pro-apoptotic genes caspase-3 and caspase-8<sup>18</sup>. The study also showed that salidroside was able to inhibit the expression of anti-apoptosis gene Bcl-2 and increase the expression of caspase 3, caspase 8, and Bax in hepatocellular carcinoma. Salidroside induced apoptosis of cancer cells and suppressed the growth of liver cancer<sup>19</sup>.

### ***Inducing Differentiation of Cancer Cells***

Inducing the differentiation of cancer cells does not directly kill cancer cells but prevents them from progression. Under the function of some differentiation inducers, cancer cells could be induced to develop into normal cells. At present, retinoic acid (RA) is the most widely used differentiation inducer in clinical practice. RA is used in the treatment of a variety of malignant tumors, such as acute leukemia, thyroid cancer, and breast cancer<sup>20,21</sup>. The studies showed that the initiation of cell differentiation was regulated by oncogenes, such as c-myc and p53<sup>22,23</sup>. As an oncogene, c-myc participates in the process of cancer proliferation, invasion, and migration. In transformed cells, the expression of c-myc gene is increasing, while in differentiated cells, the expression of c-myc gene is decreasing, and the ability of cell proliferation would be weakened. The research found that salidroside could cooperate with RA to downregulate c-myc expression, promote apoptosis of gastric cancer cells, and inhibit the growth of gastric cancer<sup>24</sup>. When hepatocellular cells were treated with different concentrations of salidroside, the cell DNA content was lower than that in the control group. Meanwhile, the expression of c-myc decreased with the increasing salidroside concentration. Morphological observation also showed that the volume of the hepatocellular cancer cells increased significantly with high expression of c-myc, especially for the enlarged and hyperchromatic nuclei. However, after treated with salidroside, the expression of c-myc was decreased, and the differentiation of HCC cells got better<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, salidroside can inhibit the expression of oncogene c-myc, and promote cancer cells to differentiate into normal cells, which could indeed induce differentiation of cancer cells.

### ***Autophagy of Cancer Cells Induced by Salidroside***

Autophagy refers to the process that cells phagocytize their own cytoplasm or organelles after receiving some stimulation. The process usually forms autophagy bodies via membrane encapsulation, and then autophagy bodies combine with lysosomes to form autophagic lysosomes. Finally, autophagic lysosomes complete their degradation under the reaction of proteolytic enzymes<sup>26-28</sup>. Autophagy activity occurs in a variety of human tumor cells. In recent years, many studies have shown that autophagy plays an important role in the development and progression of tumors<sup>26-28</sup>. Inducing or suppressing autophagy is likely to become an effective anti-cancer strategy. Autophagy is regulated by a series of autophagy-related genes (ATG)<sup>29</sup>. Beclin 1 and LC3 are involved in the formation of autophagy, and their expression level is closely related to autophagy ability<sup>30</sup>. LC3 exists in the cytoplasm by way of unactivated form, LC3-I. When autophagy occurs, LC3-I would be transformed into LC3-II and combine with a lysosome to form an autophagic lysosome until it is degraded by lysosomal enzymes. Therefore, the expression of LC3-II can reflect the level of autophagy in cells. The study found that salidroside could induce autophagy in SW1353 cells by upregulating LC3-II and downregulating p62 expression<sup>31</sup>. Salidroside can also induce autophagy in colon cancer cells, possibly by increasing the expression of LC3-II and beclin 1<sup>32</sup>.

### ***Regulating Cancer Cells Through Signaling Pathways***

Salidroside can also inhibit cancer by regulating multiple signaling pathways<sup>33-37</sup>. The study showed that salidroside decreased MMP2 expression by downregulating the EGFR/JAK2/STAT3 signal transduction pathways in breast cancer cells, MDA-MB 231. Therefore, the migration, invasion, and angiogenesis of the breast cancer cells were suppressed<sup>38</sup>. Salidroside induced apoptosis of human colon cancer cells by inhibiting PI3K/Akt/mTOR pathway and promoted the expression of LC3-II and beclin 1 to induce autophagy<sup>39</sup>. The research found that salidroside could inhibit the proliferation, migration, and invasion of colon cancer cell SW116. The mechanism is likely to be related to the downregulation of VEGF, VEGFR-2, MMP-2, and MMP-9 expression<sup>40</sup>. Salidroside also suppressed the proliferation, migration, and invasion of gastric cancer BGC-

823 cells by downregulating the activation of ROS-mediated Src-related signal pathways and decreasing the expression of HSP70<sup>41</sup>.

signal pathways (Figure 1, Table I). Nevertheless, the detailed mechanisms for salidroside still need further investigation.

## Conclusions

Salidroside, as a kind of traditional herb, possesses the advantages of low toxicity and multiple anti-cancer effects. Salidroside plays an important role by way of a variety of mechanisms, that is, inducing autophagy of cancer cells, inducing cancer cells to differentiate into normal cells, enhancing immune reaction to kill cancer, and blocking the cancer cell cycle to inhibit their proliferation. Recent studies further verified that salidroside suppressed the growth of cancers by regulating

## Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

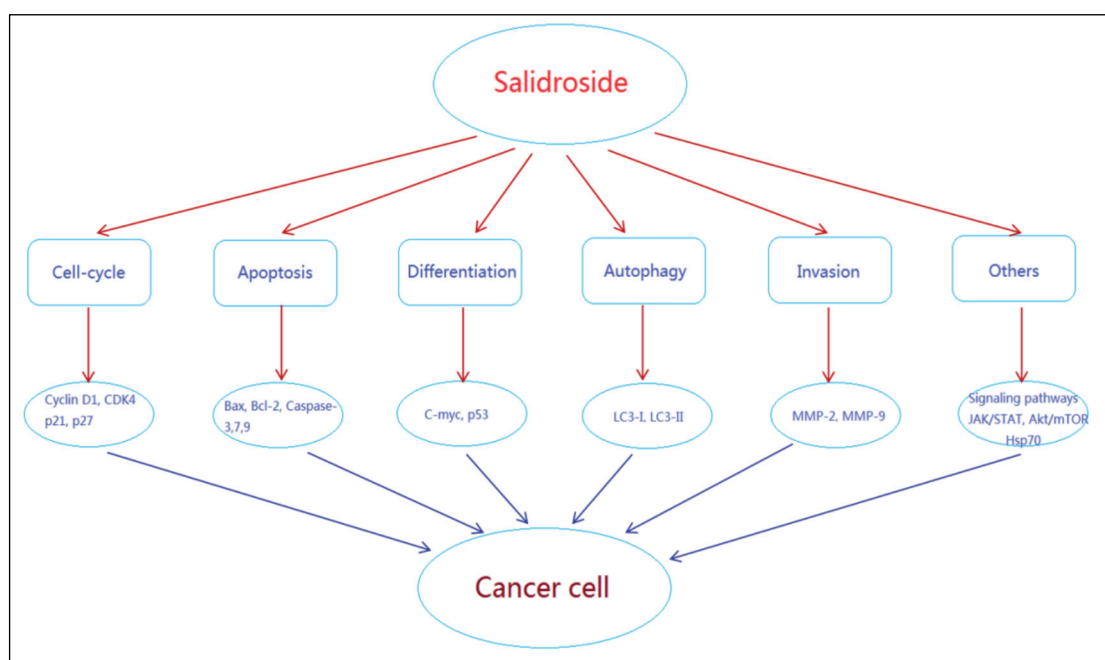
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**Table I.** Mechanisms of salidroside against different cancers<sup>10-58</sup>.

Cancer types	Mechanisms
Liver cancer	Decreases the expression of Notch1 genes, MMP and Bcl-2 mRNA Increases the expression of BAX and caspase-3 mRNA
Gastric cancer	Decreases the expression of ROS-mediated signaling pathway, HSP70 and PKC- $\alpha$
Colorectal cancer	Decreases the expression of PI3K/Akt/mTOR signaling, JAK2/STAT3 signaling, VEGF/VEGFR-2, MMP-2 and MMP-9 Increases the expression of LC3B and Becline-1
Lung cancer	Decreases the expression of HIF-1 $\alpha$ , Foxp3, TGF- $\beta$ 1, MEK, ERK1/2 signaling and the ratio of CD4+ CD25+ regulatory T cells
Breast cancer	Decreases the expression of CDK4, STAT3 signaling and Bcl-2 Increases the expression of p27Kip1, p21Cip1 and caspase-9
Ovarian cancer	Increases the expression of p53, p21Cip1/Waf1 and p16INK4a, BAX and BAD Decreases the expression of Bcl-2 and XIAP Enhances activity of macrophages and T/B lymphocytes
Cervical cancer	Decreases the expression of Eag1 and IMP3 Increases the expression of caspase-9/-3
Renal cancer	Decreases the expression of JAK2/STAT3 signaling
Bladder cancer	Inhibits the expression of mTOR pathway and 4EBP1 phosphorylation Enhances AMPK- $\alpha$ phosphorylation, BAX and caspase-9/-3 expression
Skin cancer	Inhibits the expression of NF- $\kappa$ B signaling and TNF- $\alpha$ , IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-18, IL-6, COX2 and TGF- $\beta$ 1 release
Gliomas	Decreases the expression of Wnt/ $\beta$ -chain signaling pathway and enhances anti-oxidative stress response
Fibrosarcomas	Increases the expression of TIMP-2, E-cadherin and PKC Decreases the expression of $\beta$ 1-integrin from connexins

Notes: AMPK, adenosine monophosphate-activated protein kinase; BAD, B-cell lymphoma-2-associated death promoter protein; BAX, B-cell lymphoma-2-associated X protein; Bcl-2, B-cell lymphoma-2; CDK 4, cyclin-dependent protein kinase 4; COX 2, cyclooxygenase 2; Eag1, ether-a-go-go potassium channel 1; 4EBP1, 4E-binding protein 1; ERK1/2, extracellular signal-regulated protein kinase1/2; HIF-1 $\alpha$ , Hypoxia-inducible factor-1 $\alpha$ ; HSP70, heat-shock protein 70; IL, interleukin; IMP3, insulin-like growth factor II mRNA-binding protein; JAK2, Janus kinase 2; LC3B, microtubule-associated protein 1A/1B light chain 3 B; MEK, mitogen-activated extracellular signal-regulated protein kinase; MMP, matrix metalloproteinase; mTOR, mammalian target of rapamycin; NF- $\kappa$ B, nuclear factor-kappa B; PKC- $\alpha$ , protein kinase C- $\alpha$ ; ROS, reactive oxygen species; STAT 3, signal transducers and activators of transcription 3; TGF- $\beta$ 1, transforming growth factor- $\beta$ 1; TIMP-2, tissue inhibitor of metalloproteinases-2; TNF- $\alpha$ , tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$ ; VEGF, vascular endothelial growth factor; VEGFR-2, vascular endothelial growth factor receptor 2; XIAP, X-linked inhibitor of apoptosis protein.



**Figure 1.** Mechanisms of salidroside against tumor. Salidroside plays multiple roles in inhibiting the proliferation of cancer cells, including inducing autophagy of cancer cells, inducing cancer cells to differentiate into normal cells, enhancing immunity to kill cancer cells, and blocking the cancer cell cycle. It is verified that the anti-cancer mechanism of salidroside involved the regulation of the signal pathways.

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