

# Expression and significance of RRBPI in esophageal carcinoma

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**Objective:** This study was to investigate the expression and clinical significance of RRBPI in esophageal carcinoma.

**Materials and methods:** RRBPI expression was detected in 120 esophageal carcinoma and matched adjacent normal tissues, and the relationship of RRBPI with clinicopathological characteristics and prognosis was analyzed.

**Results:** RRBPI was highly expressed in esophageal carcinoma tissues compared with matched adjacent normal tissues ( $P < 0.05$ ). Moreover, RRBPI expression was associated with T stage, lymph node metastasis, and TNM stage in esophageal carcinoma ( $P < 0.05$ ). Survival analysis revealed that RRBPI, T stage, lymph node metastasis, and TNM stage were significantly associated with patients' prognosis.

**Conclusion:** RRBPI is highly expressed in esophageal carcinoma and can serve as a potential biomarker to predict patients' prognosis.

**Keywords:** RRBPI, prognosis, esophageal carcinoma, survival analysis

## Introduction

Esophageal carcinoma is one of the most common malignant tumors in China, which accounts for the sixth most common cause of cancer-related death in the world.<sup>1,2</sup> Surgical resection is the main treatment for esophageal cancer patients; however, the 5-year survival rate of esophageal cancer patients after surgery is still less than 25%.<sup>3,4</sup> Currently, the incidence of esophageal carcinoma is still increasing in China.<sup>1,5,6</sup> The early diagnosis of esophageal carcinoma is a tough challenge.<sup>7,8</sup> Thus, it would be meaningful to explore novel molecular biomarkers associated with the early diagnosis and prognosis of esophageal cancer.

RRBPI is an endoplasmic reticulum membrane protein, which plays a critical role in the transportation and secretion of nascent proteins.<sup>9</sup> Recently, RRBPI over-expression has been frequently observed in lung cancer, breast cancer, and colorectal cancer.<sup>10-12</sup> Moreover, RRBPI correlates with shorter survival and can serve as a valuable prognostic factor in Her-2-positive breast cancer patients.<sup>13</sup> RRBPI over-expression contributes to the progression of colorectal cancer and is useful for predicting patients' prognosis.<sup>14</sup> Thus, this evidence suggests that RRBPI may be a key oncogene involved in tumor formation and progression. However, the expression and clinical significance of RRBPI have never been reported in esophageal carcinoma.

In this study, we detected the expression of RRBPI in 120 cases of esophageal carcinoma and matched adjacent normal tissues, and analyzed the correlation between RRBPI

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expression and clinicopathological features. Moreover, whether RRBPI could be a potential prognostic biomarker in patients with esophageal carcinoma was further assessed.

## Materials and methods

### Patients and samples

One hundred and twenty esophageal carcinoma (without chemotherapy and radiotherapy before surgery) specimens were collected from patients presenting to Cangzhou Central Hospital during 2010–2014. Matched adjacent normal tissues were collected 3 cm from esophageal carcinoma tissue. Patients included 57 males and 63 females with a mean age of 58 years (range, 32–74 years). Clinical pathological characteristics including age, gender, history of smoking, tumor location, T stage, lymph node metastasis, and TNM stage were obtained from hospital records. Follow-up time was from the day of surgery. No patient was lost during follow-up and the follow-up duration ranged from 1 to 65 months (mean, 38.1 months). All the samples were diagnosed as squamous cell carcinoma. The pathological diagnosis was confirmed by two pathologists in Cangzhou Central Hospital.

### Quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction (q-RT-PCR)

All tissues were frozen in liquid nitrogen. RNA was extracted by RNAisoTM PLUS (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA) and reverse transcribed into cDNA by cDNA Synthesis Kit (TaKaRa Corp, Dalian, China). Quantitative analysis of RRBPI was performed using 7500 SYBR Green Fast Real-Time PCR System (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The reaction conditions were 95°C for 10 min, followed 95°C for 15 s for 40 cycles and 60°C for 60 s. The primer sequences of RRBPI were 5'-TGAATCCTCCAAAGACCACA-3' and 5'-CTTTCCTCTCGCGTCTCT-3'. The primer sequences of GAPDH were 5'-CTGAACGGGAAGCTCACTGG-3' and 5'-TGAGGTCCACCACCCTGTTG-3'. The experiments were repeated three times under the same conditions.

### Western blot analysis

All tissues were frozen in liquid nitrogen. Proteins were extracted by protease inhibitors and quantified by the Pierce BCA Protein Assay Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific). An amount of 50 µg per sample was resolved on 5% sodium dodecyl sulfate polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis and transferred onto polyvinylidene fluoride membranes. After blocking in 5% fat-free milk at room temperature, membranes were incubated with RRBPI (Epitomics, Inc., Burlingame, CA, USA) (diluted 1:1000) and GAPDH (Zhongshan Corp, Beijing,

China) (diluted 1:1000) antibodies overnight at 4°C. Then, membranes were incubated with horseradish peroxidase-conjugated secondary antibodies for 1 h. The signals were measured by enhanced chemiluminescence detection reagents.

### Immunohistochemical (IHC) staining

Sections (2 µm thick) were deparaffinized with xylene and rehydrated in graded ethanol. Endogenous peroxidase was wiped off with 3% hydrogen peroxide and antigenicity was repaired by 0.01 mol/L sodium citrate buffer (pH 6.0). All sections were incubated with rabbit monoclonal RRBPI antibody (Epitomics, Inc.) (diluted 1:200) at room temperature for 2 h. After incubation with secondary biotinylated antibody, sections were stained with diaminobenzidine (DAB) and hematoxylin.

The staining of RRBPI was analyzed by semi-quantitative method. The staining intensity was scored as blank (0), weak (1), moderate (2), and strong (3). The percentage of positive cells was scored as <5% (0), ≥5% –<25% (1), 25% –50% (2), and >50% (3). The scores were calculated by multiplying these two values (ranging from 0 to 9). These scores (≥4) were defined as RRBPI high-expression, and others were defined as RRBPI low-expression (<4). All IHC scores were assessed by two pathologists independently without the clinical information.

### Statistical analysis

All data were analyzed with SPSS software (version 19.0; IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA). IHC results were analyzed by chi-square test. Survival analysis was performed by the Kaplan–Meier method and log-rank test. Multivariate analysis was assessed by Cox's proportional hazards model. The comparison of two-sample mean was evaluated using independent samples *t*-test. *P*-value of <0.05 was defined as statistically significant.

### Ethics statement

This study was approved by the Cangzhou Central Hospital Ethics Committee. All patients signed informed consent and agreed to the use of their tissue samples in this study.

## Results

### RRBPI is highly expressed in esophageal carcinoma

First, we detected the expression of RRBPI in 120 esophageal carcinoma specimens and matched adjacent normal tissues by qRT-PCR and Western blot assays. qRT-PCR results indicated that RRBPI mRNA level was significantly higher in esophageal carcinoma tissues compared with matched adjacent

normal tissues (Figure 1A,  $P=0.000$ ). Meanwhile, Western blot results revealed that RRBPI protein was highly expressed in esophageal carcinoma tissues compared with matched adjacent normal tissues (Figure 1B,  $P=0.000$ ). These data indicated that RRBPI was highly expressed in esophageal carcinoma.

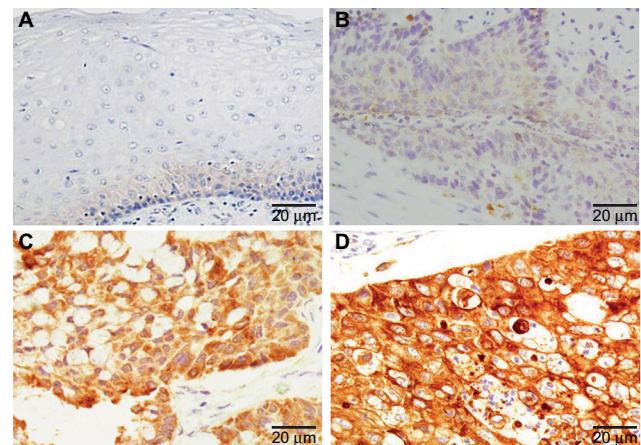
## RRBP1 expression correlates with clinical pathological characteristics in esophageal carcinoma

Subsequently, we detected the expression of RRBPI in 120 esophageal carcinoma specimens and matched adjacent normal tissues by IHC. As shown in Figure 2, positive expression of RRBPI was located in cell cytoplasm and easily observed in esophageal carcinoma tissues, but was hardly detected in normal esophageal tissues. The high-expression rates of RRBPI in esophageal carcinoma and normal esophageal tissues were 59.2% and 11.7%, respectively, and the difference was statistically significant (Table 1,  $P=0.000$ ). Moreover, RRBPI expression was associated with T stage, lymph node metastasis, and TNM stage in esophageal carcinoma (Table 2,  $P<0.05$ ), but was not associated with age, gender, history of smoking, and tumor location (Table 2,  $P>0.05$ ).

## High-expression of RRBPI predicts an unfavorable survival rate in esophageal carcinoma patients

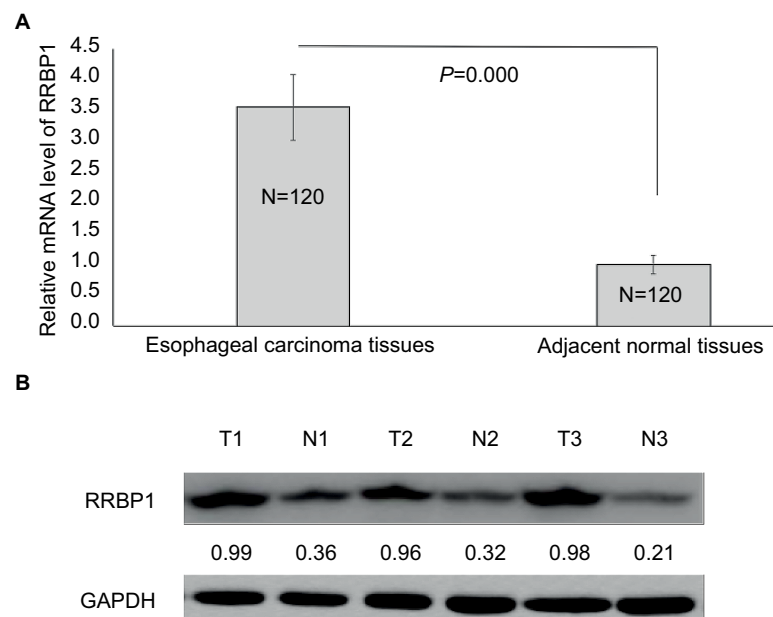
Then, we further analyzed the correlation between RRBPI expression and patients' survival by Kaplan–Meier method

and Cox's proportional hazards model. Kaplan–Meier analysis revealed that the median survival time of patients with RRBPI high-expression was 43 months, which was significantly shorter compared with those with RRBPI low-expression (56 months) (Table 3, Figure 3A,  $P=0.006$ ). Moreover, T stage, lymph node metastasis, and TNM stage rather than age, gender, and history of smoking were confirmed to be associated with patients' survival (Table 3, Figure 3B–D,  $P<0.05$ ). Furthermore, multivariate Cox regression analysis showed RRBPI high-expression was significantly associated



**Figure 2** RRBPI expression was detected in esophageal carcinoma and matched adjacent normal tissues by immunohistochemical staining.

**Notes:** (A) Adjacent normal tissues; (B) weak staining of RRBPI in esophageal carcinoma; (C) moderate staining of RRBPI in esophageal carcinoma; (D) strong staining of RRBPI in esophageal carcinoma.



**Figure 1** RRBPI expression.

**Notes:** The expression of RRBPI was detected in esophageal carcinoma and matched adjacent normal tissues by qRT-PCR (A) and Western blot (B). T, esophageal carcinoma tissue; N, matched adjacent normal esophageal tissue.

**Table 1** RRBPI expression in esophageal carcinoma and normal esophageal tissues by immunohistochemical staining

Types	N	RRBPI		P-value
		Low-expression (%)	High-expression (%)	
Esophageal carcinoma tissues	120	49 (40.8)	71 (59.2)	0.000
Normal esophageal tissues	120	106 (88.3)	14 (11.7)	

**Table 2** RRBPI expression correlation with clinicopathological characteristics in esophageal carcinoma

Clinicopathological characteristics	N	RRBPI		P-value
		Low-expression	High-expression	
Age (years)				0.266
≤58	58	27	31	
>58	62	22	40	
Gender				0.714
Male	57	24	33	
Female	63	25	38	
History of smoking				0.853
Negative	55	20	35	
Positive	65	29	36	
Tumor location				0.14
Upper esophagus	56	27	29	
Middle-lower esophagus	64	22	42	
T stage				0.000
T1–T2	37	30	7	
T3–T4	83	19	64	
Lymph node metastasis				0.001
Negative	83	42	41	
Positive	37	7	30	
TNM stages				0.000
I–II	37	30	7	
III–IV	83	19	64	

with unfavorable survival rate in esophageal carcinoma. Except for age, gender, history of smoking and tumor location, T stage, lymph node metastasis and TNM stage were also confirmed to be correlated with patients' survival (Table 4,  $P < 0.05$ ).

## Discussion

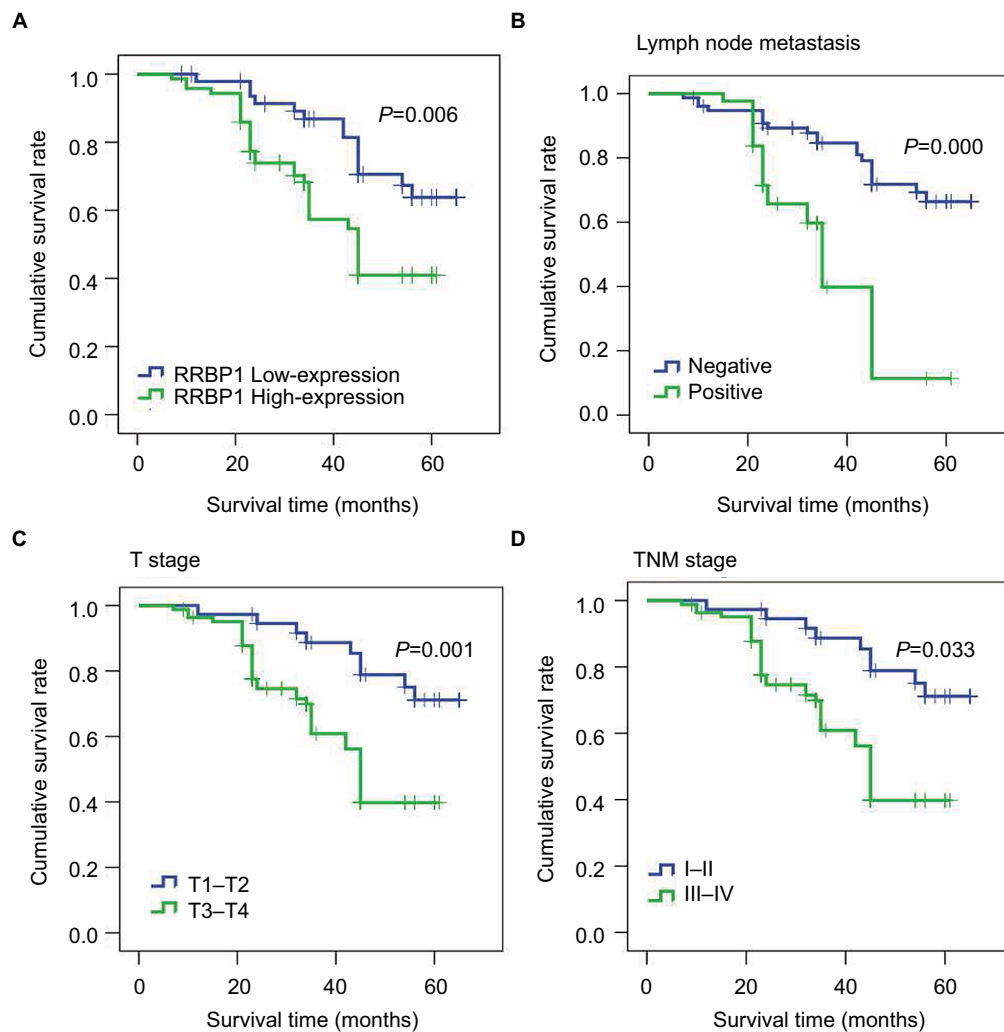
RRBPI, an endoplasmic reticulum membrane protein, is mainly located on the endoplasmic reticulum membrane and plays an important role in the transportation and secretion of nascent proteins.<sup>9,11,15</sup> Moreover, RRBPI is crucial for the terminal differentiation of secretory tissues and the procollagen biosynthesis of secretory tissues.<sup>16–19</sup> Recently, RRBPI has been reported to be connected to the regulation of unfolded protein response signaling molecules and the accumulation of perinuclear autophagosomes of cancer cells.<sup>10,20,21</sup> In addition, RRBPI was confirmed as an oncogene highly expressed in lung cancer, breast cancer, and colorectal cancer.<sup>10–12</sup>

**Table 3** Patient survival: Kaplan–Meier survival analysis

Variables	N	Survival time (months, 95% CI)	P-value
RRBPI			0.006
Low-expression	49	56 (51–60)	
High-expression	71	43 (39–48)	
Gender			0.323
Male	57	51 (47–56)	
Female	63	47 (42–52)	
Age (years)			0.963
≤58	58	50 (45–55)	
>58	62	50 (45–54)	
History of smoking			0.845
Negative	55	49 (44–55)	
Positive	65	50 (45–54)	
Tumor location			0.213
Upper esophagus	56	50 (45–53)	
Middle-lower esophagus	64	49 (45–54)	
T stage			0.001
T1–T2	37	58 (53–62)	
T3–T4	83	43 (39–48)	
Lymph node metastasis			0.000
Negative	83	55 (51–59)	
Positive	37	36 (31–41)	
TNM stages			0.033
I–II	37	58 (53–62)	
III–IV	83	43 (39–46)	

RRBPI over-expression predicts unfavorable survival rates in colorectal cancer patients.<sup>14</sup> However, the expression and clinical significance of RRBPI have never been reported in esophageal carcinoma.

In this study, in order to investigate the clinical significance of RRBPI in esophageal carcinoma, we detected the expression of RRBPI in 120 cases of esophageal carcinoma and matched adjacent normal tissues by qRT-PCR, Western blot, and IHC assays. qRT-PCR and Western blot results both showed that RRBPI was highly expressed in esophageal carcinoma tissues compared to matched adjacent normal tissues, suggesting that RRBPI high-expression might contribute to the occurrence of esophageal carcinoma. Meanwhile, IHC results showed that RRBPI high-expression was observed in 59.2% esophageal carcinoma, but only in 11.7% matched adjacent normal tissues. Thus, IHC results were consistent



**Figure 3** Kaplan-Meier survival analysis.

**Notes:** Results indicated that RRBPI expression (A), lymph node metastasis (B), T stage (C), and TNM (D) stage were associated with patients' prognosis.

**Table 4** Patients' survival evaluation by multivariate Cox regression analysis

Variables	Hazard ratio	95% CI	P-value
RRBP1 (high-expression vs low-expression)	2.441	1.267–4.702	0.008
Gender (male vs female)	1.329	0.736–2.400	0.346
Age ( $\leq 58$ vs $>58$ years)	0.994	0.516–1.916	0.987
History of smoking (positive vs negative)	0.963	0.498–1.862	0.912
Tumor location (upper vs middle-lower)	0.929	0.538–1.629	0.921
T stage (T3–T4 vs T1–T2)	3.054	1.453–6.421	0.003
Lymph node metastasis (positive vs negative)	4.024	2.180–7.424	0.000
TNM stage (III–IV vs I–II)	3.054	1.452–6.421	0.003

with qRT-PCR and Western blot results, which further supported that RRBPI high-expression was correlated with the occurrence of esophageal carcinoma. In addition, our

data revealed that RRBPI expression was associated with T stage, lymph node metastasis, and TNM stage in esophageal carcinoma, which suggested that RRBPI expression might be connected to the progression of esophageal carcinoma. Survival analysis showed that patients with RRBPI high-expression presented shorter survival rates compared with those with RRBPI low-expression, indicating that RRBPI might serve as a prognostic biomarker in esophageal carcinoma. It is well-known that T stage, lymph node metastasis, and TNM stage are key factors associated with the progression of esophageal carcinoma and patients' survival.<sup>22–28</sup> In the present study, our data also indicated that T stage, lymph node metastasis, and TNM stage were independent prognostic factors in esophageal carcinoma. Thus, our data suggested that RRBPI high-expression might contribute to the progression of esophageal carcinoma, which results in a poorer prognosis. In addition, Liang et al reported that RRBPI was a valuable prognostic factor in Her-2-positive breast cancer patients.<sup>13</sup>



Pan et al reported that RRBPI promoted the progression of colorectal cancer and predicted prognosis.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper is the first to report that RRBPI is an oncogene highly expressed in esophageal carcinoma. Additionally, our data indicate that RRBPI may be connected with the occurrence and progression of esophageal carcinoma, and serve as an independent prognostic factor to predict patients' prognosis. Of course, further investigations are needed to validate our findings.

## Acknowledgment

Thanks to all patients who agreed to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

All authors contributed toward data analysis, drafting and revising the paper and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

## Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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