

Chromatin Remodeling Complexes in Tumor Progression: From SWI/SNF Dysfunction to Precision Oncology

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Abstract

Chromatin remodeling complexes are fundamental regulators of genome accessibility, transcriptional plasticity, DNA repair, and epigenetic homeostasis. Among these, the SWI/SNF (Switch/Sucrose Non-Fermentable) family has emerged as one of the most frequently altered chromatin remodeling systems in human malignancies. Accumulating evidence demonstrates that mutations, deletions, and epigenetic dysregulation of SWI/SNF subunits contribute substantially to tumor initiation, progression, metastatic dissemination, and therapeutic resistance. Dysfunction of key components including ARID1A, SMARCB1, SMARCA4, and PBRM1 reshapes chromatin architecture, perturbs enhancer activity, and promotes oncogenic transcriptional programs across diverse cancer types. Recent advances in next-generation sequencing, epigenomic profiling, and precision oncology have further elucidated the intricate interplay between chromatin remodeling defects and tumor microenvironment dynamics, immune evasion, and lineage plasticity. Importantly, the therapeutic vulnerability associated with SWI/SNF deficiency has stimulated the development of targeted interventions, including EZH2 inhibitors, bromodomain inhibitors, synthetic lethality-based approaches, and immunotherapeutic strategies. This review provides an overview of the molecular architecture of chromatin remodeling complexes, with particular emphasis on SWI/SNF dysfunction in cancer biology and its emerging translational relevance in precision oncology.

1. Introduction

The eukaryotic genome is intricately packaged into chromatin, a highly dynamic nucleoprotein structure that regulates DNA accessibility and transcriptional fidelity. Chromatin organization is not static; rather, it undergoes continuous structural remodeling mediated by ATP-

dependent chromatin remodeling complexes and epigenetic modifiers that collectively orchestrate gene expression, DNA replication, and genomic stability [1,2]. Aberrations in these regulatory systems have emerged as pivotal drivers of tumorigenesis, contributing to uncontrolled proliferation, impaired differentiation, and

therapeutic resistance across numerous malignancies [3].

Among the major ATP-dependent chromatin remodeling families, the SWI/SNF complex has attracted substantial attention owing to its recurrent genetic alterations in approximately 20–25% of human cancers [4]. Originally identified in yeast as regulators of mating type switching and sucrose fermentation, mammalian SWI/SNF complexes comprise multiple evolutionarily conserved subunits that function cooperatively to reposition nucleosomes and regulate enhancer accessibility [5]. These complexes are broadly categorized into canonical BAF (cBAF), polybromo-associated BAF (PBAF), and non-canonical BAF (ncBAF) assemblies, each possessing distinct structural compositions and biological functions [6].

Genomic studies have identified frequent mutations in core SWI/SNF subunits including ARID1A, SMARCB1, SMARCA4, ARID2, and PBRM1 in diverse tumor types such as ovarian clear cell carcinoma, renal cell carcinoma, hepatocellular carcinoma, rhabdoid tumors, and lung cancer [7,8]. Loss-of-function alterations in these genes disrupt chromatin accessibility landscapes and facilitate oncogenic transcriptional reprogramming. For instance, ARID1A deficiency has been associated with impaired DNA damage repair, inflammatory signaling dysregulation, and enhanced sensitivity to synthetic lethal therapeutic strategies [9]. Similarly, SMARCB1 inactivation represents a hallmark event in malignant rhabdoid tumors and epithelioid sarcomas, underscoring the tumor suppressive role of SWI/SNF complexes [10] (Figure 1).

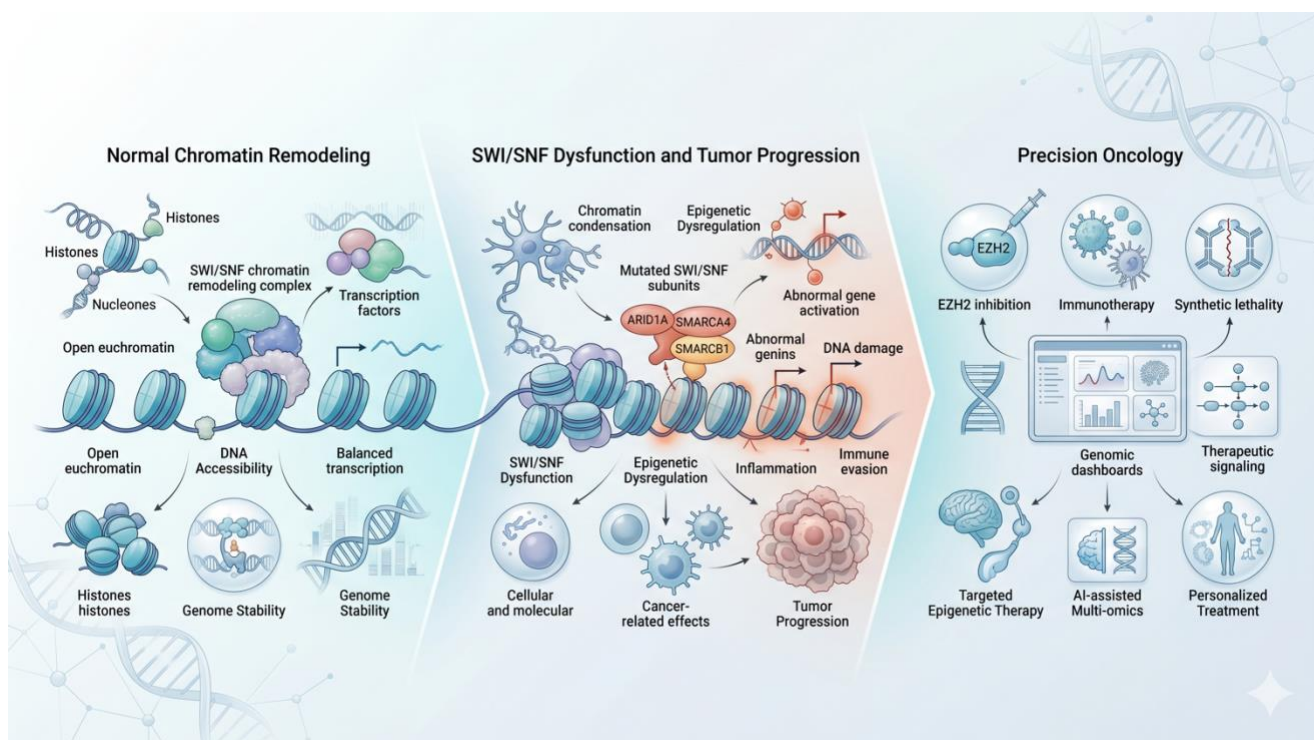


Figure 1: Schematic overview of the role of SWI/SNF chromatin remodeling complexes in tumor progression and precision oncology. The left panel illustrates physiological chromatin remodeling mediated by functional SWI/SNF complexes, which maintain chromatin accessibility, transcriptional regulation, DNA repair, and genomic stability. The central panel depicts the consequences of SWI/SNF dysfunction, including mutations or loss of key subunits such as ARID1A, SMARCA4, and SMARCB1, leading to epigenetic dysregulation, aberrant transcriptional programs, genomic instability, immune evasion, and tumor progression. The right panel highlights emerging precision oncology strategies targeting SWI/SNF-deficient malignancies, including EZH2 inhibition, synthetic lethality-based therapies, immunotherapy, and multi-omics-guided personalized treatment approaches.

Recent advances in epigenomics and single-cell sequencing technologies have expanded the

understanding of chromatin remodeling dysfunction beyond classical tumor suppressor paradigms. Emerging evidence suggests that

SWI/SNF aberrations contribute to intratumoral heterogeneity, immune evasion, metabolic rewiring, and lineage plasticity during cancer evolution [11]. Furthermore, antagonistic interactions between SWI/SNF complexes and Polycomb Repressive Complex 2 (PRC2), particularly through enhancer of zeste homolog 2 (EZH2), have generated considerable interest in epigenetic-targeted therapeutics [12]. The clinical success of EZH2 inhibitors in SWI/SNF-deficient malignancies exemplifies the growing translational significance of chromatin remodeling biology in precision oncology [13].

In parallel, integrative multi-omics approaches incorporating genomics, transcriptomics, epigenomics, and proteomics are reshaping the landscape of cancer classification and therapeutic stratification [14]. The identification of chromatin remodeling-associated biomarkers now offers opportunities for personalized therapeutic interventions, including synthetic lethality-based treatments, immune checkpoint blockade combinations, and targeted epigenetic modulation [15].

Collectively, chromatin remodeling complexes occupy a central position at the intersection of epigenetic regulation and cancer biology. Understanding the mechanistic consequences of SWI/SNF dysfunction is therefore essential for elucidating tumor progression pathways and advancing precision oncology strategies.

2. Methodology

This review was conducted through a comprehensive literature survey of peer-reviewed articles indexed in PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases. Relevant studies published primarily between 2000 and 2026 were identified using combinations of keywords including “chromatin remodeling”, “SWI/SNF”, “BAF complex”, “epigenetics”, “tumor progression”, “ARID1A”, “SMARCA4”, “SMARCB1”, and “precision oncology”. Original research articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and landmark mechanistic studies focusing on chromatin remodeling dysfunction in cancer were prioritised. Additional emphasis was placed on

studies investigating translational applications, therapeutic vulnerabilities, and emerging epigenetic-targeted interventions in SWI/SNF-deficient malignancies. Relevant references cited within selected articles were also manually screened to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic.

3. Molecular Architecture and Biological Functions of SWI/SNF Complexes

ATP-dependent chromatin remodeling complexes regulate chromatin accessibility through nucleosome repositioning, eviction, and restructuring, thereby modulating transcriptional activity and genome stability [16]. Among these complexes, the SWI/SNF family constitutes one of the most evolutionarily conserved chromatin remodeling systems and plays indispensable roles in cellular differentiation, lineage specification, DNA repair, and tumor suppression [17]. Mammalian SWI/SNF complexes are structurally heterogeneous multiprotein assemblies composed of approximately 12–15 subunits organized into distinct functional modules [18]. Based on subunit composition, these complexes are classified into canonical BAF (cBAF), polybromo-associated BAF (PBAF), and non-canonical BAF (ncBAF/GBAF) complexes [19]. Central ATPase activity is mediated by mutually exclusive catalytic subunits SMARCA4 (BRG1) or SMARCA2 (BRM), which hydrolyze ATP to reposition nucleosomes and facilitate chromatin accessibility [20].

The functional specificity of SWI/SNF complexes is largely determined by accessory subunits such as ARID1A, ARID1B, PBRM1, DPF2, BRD7, and BRD9 [21]. These components guide chromatin targeting, enhancer selection, and transcription factor interactions. Importantly, tissue-specific subunit configurations allow SWI/SNF complexes to coordinate context-dependent transcriptional programs during embryogenesis and tissue homeostasis [22]. SWI/SNF complexes frequently antagonize Polycomb Repressive Complex 2 (PRC2), which mediates transcriptional repression through histone H3 lysine 27 trimethylation (H3K27me3) [23]. This epigenetic antagonism maintains balanced chromatin states required for cellular differentiation and genome integrity.

Consequently, disruption of SWI/SNF activity results in aberrant chromatin compaction, transcriptional dysregulation, and oncogenic transformation [24].

4. SWI/SNF Dysfunction in Human Cancers

Genomic sequencing studies have revealed that mutations in the SWI/SNF complex occur in approximately one-quarter of all human malignancies, placing these complexes among the most frequently altered epigenetic regulators in cancer [25]. Alterations include missense mutations, frameshift mutations, deletions, and epigenetic silencing events affecting both catalytic and accessory subunits.

4.1 ARID1A Mutations and Oncogenic Reprogramming

ARID1A is one of the most commonly mutated SWI/SNF subunits in cancer, particularly in ovarian clear cell carcinoma, gastric cancer, hepatocellular carcinoma, colorectal carcinoma, and endometrial carcinoma [26]. Loss of ARID1A disrupts enhancer accessibility and impairs transcriptional regulation of tumor suppressive pathways [27]. Mechanistically, ARID1A deficiency contributes to defective DNA damage repair through impaired homologous recombination and mismatch repair signaling [28]. In addition, ARID1A-mutant tumors frequently exhibit increased inflammatory signaling, altered cytokine production, and enhanced immune checkpoint expression [29]. These molecular changes create therapeutic vulnerabilities that may be exploited using PARP inhibitors, EZH2 inhibitors, and immune checkpoint blockade strategies [30]. Emerging evidence also indicates that ARID1A loss promotes metabolic reprogramming and oxidative stress adaptation, facilitating tumor cell survival within hypoxic tumor microenvironments [31].

4.2 SMARCB1 Deficiency in Aggressive Malignancies

SMARCB1 (INI1/SNF5) functions as a core tumor suppressor subunit within SWI/SNF complexes [32]. Biallelic inactivation of SMARCB1 represents a defining molecular feature of malignant rhabdoid tumors, epithelioid sarcoma, and renal medullary

carcinoma [33]. Loss of SMARCB1 results in widespread epigenetic dysregulation, aberrant MYC activation, and uncontrolled cellular proliferation [34]. Furthermore, SMARCB1-deficient tumors exhibit profound dependency on EZH2-mediated transcriptional repression, establishing the biological rationale for EZH2-targeted therapies [35]. The FDA approval of the EZH2 inhibitor tazemetostat for epithelioid sarcoma highlights the translational significance of targeting epigenetic vulnerabilities associated with SWI/SNF deficiency [36].

4.3 SMARCA4 and Tumor Plasticity

SMARCA4 mutations are prevalent in thoracic malignancies, ovarian small cell carcinoma of hypercalcemic type, and subsets of lung adenocarcinoma [37]. Loss of SMARCA4 disrupts enhancer regulation and promotes lineage plasticity, epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition (EMT), and metastatic dissemination [38]. SMARCA4-deficient tumors are frequently associated with aggressive clinical behavior and poor prognosis [39]. Recent studies have demonstrated increased sensitivity of these tumors to bromodomain inhibitors, oxidative phosphorylation inhibitors, and immunotherapy combinations [40].

5. Chromatin Remodeling and Tumor Microenvironment Interactions

Beyond intrinsic tumor cell regulation, SWI/SNF complexes influence tumor progression through modulation of the tumor microenvironment (TME) [41]. Chromatin remodeling abnormalities alter cytokine secretion profiles, immune cell recruitment, antigen presentation pathways, and interferon signaling networks [42]. ARID1A-deficient tumors frequently display increased tumor mutational burden and enhanced PD-L1 expression, potentially sensitizing these cancers to immune checkpoint inhibitors [43]. Similarly, PBRM1 mutations in renal cell carcinoma have been associated with improved responses to immunotherapy [44]. Recent single-cell epigenomic studies further suggest that chromatin remodeling dysfunction contributes to immune evasion through suppression of antigen processing machinery and

induction of exhausted T-cell phenotypes [45]. These findings position SWI/SNF-deficient tumors as promising candidates for combined epigenetic-immunotherapeutic approaches.

6. Synthetic Lethality and Therapeutic Vulnerabilities

Synthetic lethality has emerged as one of the most promising therapeutic paradigms for targeting SWI/SNF-deficient cancers [46]. Because chromatin remodeling complexes operate within interconnected epigenetic networks, loss of one component frequently creates dependency on compensatory pathways. The antagonistic relationship between SWI/SNF complexes and PRC2 has generated considerable interest in EZH2 inhibition [47]. Preclinical studies demonstrated selective sensitivity of ARID1A- and SMARCB1-deficient tumors to EZH2 inhibitors, findings that

transcriptomics, epigenomics, proteomics, and metabolomics now allow comprehensive characterization of SWI/SNF-deficient tumor states [53]. Single-cell sequencing technologies have further uncovered substantial intratumoral heterogeneity driven by chromatin remodeling defects [54]. These approaches reveal dynamic transitions between transcriptional states associated with metastasis, drug resistance, and immune escape.

Artificial intelligence-assisted bioinformatics platforms are increasingly applied to identify chromatin remodeling-associated biomarkers and therapeutic signatures [55]. Such strategies are expected to enhance patient stratification and facilitate personalized therapeutic interventions in precision oncology. Despite substantial progress, important challenges remain regarding resistance mechanisms, tumor context specificity, and long-term therapeutic efficacy [56]. Continued integration of epigenomics, functional genomics, and translational oncology will therefore be essential for optimizing future chromatin-targeted therapies.

8. Conclusion

subsequently translated into clinical applications [48].

Additional synthetic lethal interactions include dependencies involving ATR, PARP, CDK4/6, BRD9, and DNA damage repair pathways [49]. Bromodomain-containing proteins such as BRD9 and BRD4 are increasingly recognized as therapeutic targets in SWI/SNF-mutant malignancies [50]. Furthermore, CRISPR-based functional genomic screens continue to identify novel epigenetic dependencies that may expand therapeutic opportunities in precision oncology [51].

7. Emerging Role of Multi-Omics and Precision Oncology

Recent advances in multi-omics technologies have revolutionized the understanding of chromatin remodeling abnormalities in cancer biology [52]. Integrative analyses combining genomics,

Chromatin remodeling complexes represent central regulators of genome organization and transcriptional plasticity in both physiological and pathological contexts. Dysregulation of SWI/SNF complexes profoundly alters chromatin accessibility landscapes, driving oncogenic transformation, tumor progression, immune evasion, and therapeutic resistance. Advances in molecular oncology have significantly expanded the understanding of SWI/SNF biology, revealing multiple translational vulnerabilities exploitable through synthetic lethality-based approaches and epigenetic therapies. The emergence of precision oncology and multi-omics technologies further highlights the clinical relevance of chromatin remodeling dysfunction in cancer management. Future investigations integrating epigenomics, immunotherapy, and functional genomics are expected to accelerate the development of individualized therapeutic strategies for SWI/SNF-deficient malignancies.

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