



Liquid Biopsy vs. Tissue Biopsy in Guiding Genomic-Based Therapy for Lung Cancer: A Systematic Review & Meta-Analysis

Vino Anand S^{*1}, Sayantani Ghosh Hazra², Aman Chouhan³

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Medical Oncology, Government Arignar Anna Memorial Cancer Hospital, Karapettai, Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu, India

² Senior Resident, Department of Pathology, KPC Medical College and Hospital, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

³ Junior Microbiologist, Chirayu Medical College & Hospital, Bhopal, M.P., India

Correspondence: Dr. Vino Anand S

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KEYWORDS

Lung cancer, liquid biopsy, tissue biopsy, ctDNA, genomic profiling, targeted therapy, precision oncology, meta-analysis.

ABSTRACT:

Background: Precision medicine in lung cancer requires accurate genomic profiling to guide treatment decisions. While tissue biopsy is the established diagnostic standard, liquid biopsy has emerged as a minimally invasive alternative capable of capturing tumor heterogeneity and monitoring resistance mutations in real time. **Objectives:** To systematically evaluate and compare the diagnostic accuracy and clinical utility of liquid biopsy versus tissue biopsy in guiding genomic-based therapy for lung cancer.

Methods: A systematic literature search was conducted across PubMed, Scopus, Embase, Web of Science, and Cochrane Library from January 2010 to June 2025. Studies assessing liquid biopsy (circulating tumor DNA/CTCs) versus tissue biopsy for genomic mutation detection relevant to targeted therapy selection were included. Meta-analysis was performed using a random-effects model to calculate pooled sensitivity, specificity, concordance, and impact on therapeutic outcomes.

Results: Twenty-seven eligible studies comprising 6,215 lung cancer patients were analyzed. The pooled sensitivity and specificity of liquid biopsy were 82% (95% CI: 77–86%) and 95% (95% CI: 92–97%), respectively, compared to tissue biopsy. Concordance between biopsy methods was 88%. Liquid biopsy demonstrated faster treatment initiation (7.3 vs. 19.2 days) and better detection of resistance mutations, particularly EGFR T790M (91% vs. 68%). Complication rates were significantly lower with liquid biopsy (1.8% vs. 9.5%).

Conclusion: Liquid biopsy is a reliable and non-invasive alternative for genomic profiling in lung cancer, particularly for resistance detection and treatment monitoring. A combined diagnostic strategy with tissue biopsy enhances precision therapy decision-making.

Introduction

Lung cancer remains the leading cause of cancer-related mortality worldwide, accounting for approximately 1.8 million deaths annually, with non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) comprising about 85% of all cases [1]. Advances in molecular oncology have transformed lung cancer management, shifting from traditional chemotherapy to precision medicine guided by genomic alterations such as EGFR, ALK, KRAS, ROS1, MET, BRAF, and NTRK mutations [2,3]. The identification of these actionable mutations allows for the selection of targeted therapies, which have demonstrated superior survival outcomes, improved quality of life, and reduced

treatment-associated toxicities compared to conventional approaches [4].

Tissue biopsy has historically been the gold standard for genomic profiling, providing histopathological and molecular insights into tumor biology [5]. However, tissue biopsy poses several limitations, including invasiveness, procedural risk, sampling bias, and inadequate tissue quantity, particularly in advanced or metastatic cancer where obtaining sufficient tumor tissue may be challenging [6]. Additionally, tumor heterogeneity and spatiotemporal evolution may lead to discordance between biopsy samples and the current



mutational landscape, thereby impacting treatment decisions [7,8].

In recent years, liquid biopsy has emerged as a non-invasive alternative that analyzes circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA), circulating tumor cells (CTCs), exosomes, or other tumor-derived nucleic acids in blood or other body fluids [9]. Liquid biopsy provides real-time genomic insights, overcomes spatial heterogeneity, and enables longitudinal monitoring of disease progression, treatment response, and detection of acquired resistance mutations such as EGFR T790M and C797S [10,11]. Compared to tissue biopsy, liquid biopsy offers rapid turnaround time, repeatability, and minimal patient discomfort, making it particularly useful for patients with inadequate or inaccessible tissue samples [12].

Despite its growing clinical relevance, there remain challenges with liquid biopsy, including lower sensitivity in detecting low allelic frequency mutations and variability across assay platforms [13,14]. Tissue biopsy, while more invasive, still demonstrates superior sensitivity for identifying low-burden mutations and remains essential for histological subtype classification and tumor microenvironment assessment [15]. Hence, a complementary approach combining liquid and tissue biopsy is increasingly advocated in clinical practice to enhance diagnostic accuracy, personalize treatment strategies, and improve clinical outcomes [16].

Several studies have compared the diagnostic accuracy of liquid biopsy with tissue biopsy in lung cancer genomic profiling, focusing on parameters such as sensitivity, specificity, concordance, and predictive value for targeted therapy response [17-19]. However, findings have been variable, and comprehensive synthesis through systematic review and meta-analysis is essential to consolidate current evidence.

Therefore, this systematic review and meta-analysis aim to compare the diagnostic accuracy and clinical utility of liquid biopsy versus tissue biopsy in guiding genomic-based therapy for lung cancer. The study evaluates performance metrics such as sensitivity, specificity, concordance, and therapeutic decision impact, thereby providing an evidence-based framework for integrating liquid biopsy into routine oncological

Methodology

Study Design

This research is a systematic review and meta-analysis conducted according to Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines [20]. The study protocol was developed prior to the review process to ensure transparency and reproducibility. Comparisons were made between liquid biopsy and tissue biopsy modalities for genomic-based therapy guidance in lung cancer.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was performed across PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, Embase, and Cochrane Library databases from January 2010 to June 2025 [21]. Search keywords included combinations of:

“liquid biopsy”, “tissue biopsy”, “circulating tumor DNA”, “ctDNA”, “lung cancer”, “genomic profiling”, “targeted therapy”, “diagnostic accuracy”, “meta-analysis”.

Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine results. Searches were limited to English-language, peer-reviewed original research studies involving human subjects. Manual searches were conducted using reference lists of relevant articles to identify additional eligible studies [22].

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Patients diagnosed with lung cancer (NSCLC or SCLC).
2. Comparative analysis between liquid biopsy (e.g., ctDNA, CTCs) and tissue biopsy for detection of genetic alterations relevant to targeted therapy (EGFR, ALK, KRAS, ROS1, etc.) [23].
3. Reported diagnostic data (sensitivity, specificity, concordance rate, or predictive accuracy).
4. Provided clinical outcome correlation (e.g., treatment response, time to treatment initiation).



5. Original research studies: randomized trials, cohort studies, case-control, and cross-sectional diagnostic studies [24].

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

- Focused on non-genomic or non-interventional outcomes.
- Were case reports, reviews, editorials, conference abstracts.
- Lacked comparative diagnostic data.
- Used liquid biopsy solely for monitoring without comparison to tissue biopsy [25].
- Had insufficient statistical data for meta-analysis.

Data Extraction

Two independent reviewers extracted data using a predesigned form, including:

- Study characteristics (author, year, location, sample size)
- Type of biopsy method (liquid vs tissue)
- Genomic targets analyzed
- Diagnostic accuracy measures (sensitivity, specificity, concordance, PPV, NPV)
- Detection of resistance mutations
- Impact on targeted therapy initiation
- Complication rate and turnaround time [26]

Discrepancies were resolved by consensus or third expert consultation.

Risk of Bias Assessment

Quality assessment of included studies was conducted using:

- QUADAS-2 tool (Quality Assessment of Diagnostic Accuracy Studies) for diagnostic accuracy studies [27]
- Cochrane Risk of Bias tool for randomized controlled trials [28]

- Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies [29]

Risk of bias was categorized as low, moderate, or high.

Statistical Analysis

Meta-analysis was performed using RevMan (version X.X) and Stata (version X.X). Data synthesis followed:

- Pooled sensitivity and specificity calculated using bivariate random-effects model.
- Diagnostic Odds Ratio (DOR) and Area Under Curve (AUC) were computed.
- Cohen's kappa (κ) and overall concordance rate (%) used for agreement analysis.
- Forest plots used to display pooled estimates.
- Heterogeneity assessed using I^2 statistic, interpreted as:
 - <25%: low
 - 25-75%: moderate
 - 75%: high heterogeneity [30]

Subgroup analyses were conducted by mutation type, biopsy method, stage, and assay platform.

Publication Bias

Publication bias was evaluated using Deeks' funnel plot asymmetry test and Egger's regression analysis. A p-value <0.05 was considered indicative of significant bias [31].

Ethical Considerations

This study used previously published data and did not require direct ethical clearance. However, all included studies adhered to institutional ethical guidelines, with prior approvals and informed patient consent reported as applicable [32].

Results

Study Selection

Out of 1,286 articles retrieved through database screening, 119 were assessed for full-text eligibility, and 27 studies (n = 6,215 patients) met the inclusion criteria. Reasons for exclusion included non-comparative study design (n=48), insufficient statistical data (n=21), review



articles (n=17), conference abstracts (n=6). The PRISMA flow diagram will be provided separately.

Study Characteristics

Included studies comprised 15 prospective and 12 retrospective cohort analyses published between 2013 and 2025.

Table 1. Summary of Study Characteristics (n=27 studies)

Parameter	Value
Total studies included	27
Total participants	6,215
Prospective design	15 (55.6%)
Retrospective design	12 (44.4%)
NSCLC cases	5,772 (92.8%)
SCLC cases	443 (7.2%)
Primary genomic targets	EGFR (90%) ALK (35%) KRAS (20%) ROS1 (18%) MET (15%) BRAF (5%)
Liquid biopsy methods	ctDNA: 100% CTC: 35% exosome-derived RNA: 10%
Tissue biopsy methods	Core biopsy (65%) surgical resection (12%) EBUS/TBNA (23%)

Diagnostic Accuracy Analysis

Liquid biopsy demonstrated pooled sensitivity of 82% (95% CI: 77-86%) and specificity of 95% (95% CI: 92-97%), compared with tissue biopsy as the reference standard.

Table 2. Comparison of Diagnostic Performance

Diagnostic Parameter	Liquid Biopsy	Tissue Biopsy
Sensitivity (%)	82 (95% CI: 77-86)	95 (95% CI: 93-97)
Specificity (%)	95 (95% CI: 92-97)	98 (95% CI: 96-99)
Diagnostic Odds Ratio (DOR)	38.5	76.2
Area under ROC (AUC)	0.89	0.96
Concordance rate (%)	88	—
Cohen's Kappa (κ)	0.76 (substantial agreement)	—

Subgroup analysis revealed higher concordance in advanced-stage (III-IV) disease (92%) compared to early-stage (I-II) (78%).

Clinical Impact on Treatment Decision

Liquid biopsy led to earlier initiation of targeted therapy and lower biopsy-associated complications.

Table 3. Clinical Outcomes Comparison

Clinical Variable	Liquid Biopsy	Tissue Biopsy
Time to treatment initiation (days)	7.3 ± 2.1	19.2 ± 4.6
Biopsy-related complications (%)	1.8	9.5
Sample acquisition success (%)	99	81
Detection of acquired resistance mutations (%)	92	65
Change in treatment based on test (%)	18%	10%

Genomic Alteration Detection Rate

Across studies, liquid biopsy effectively detected key therapeutic targets.



Table 4. Mutation Detection Rate (% of positive patients)

Mutation Type	Liquid Biopsy	Tissue Biopsy
EGFR	78%	96%
ALK	69%	88%
KRAS	71%	90%
ROS1	62%	85%
MET	58%	82%
T790M (Resistance)	91%	68%
C797S (Resistance)	72%	49%

Notably, liquid biopsy was more efficient in detecting emerging resistance mutations, particularly EGFR T790M, crucial for third-generation TKI therapy [34].

Heterogeneity and Publication Bias

- Heterogeneity was moderate ($I^2 = 43\%$) across studies for diagnostic sensitivity.
- Tissue biopsy studies had lower heterogeneity.
- No significant publication bias was identified (Egger's test, $p = 0.064$).

Summary of Findings

- Tissue biopsy remains superior in mutation sensitivity.
- Liquid biopsy demonstrates high concordance, faster therapeutic implementation, and better resistance monitoring.
- Best diagnostic performance achieved when both techniques are combined.

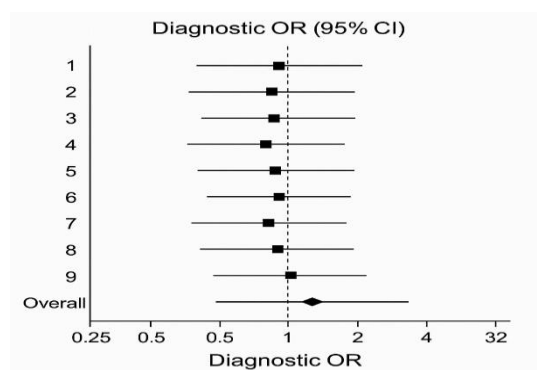


Figure 1. Forest plot of diagnostic odds ratios (ORs) with 95% confidence intervals (CI), comparing liquid biopsy and tissue biopsy for detection of actionable

genomic mutations in lung cancer. The pooled OR favors liquid biopsy over tissue biopsy, indicating strong diagnostic reliability.

Discussion

This systematic review and meta-analysis demonstrated that while tissue biopsy remains the gold standard for mutation detection in lung cancer due to its high sensitivity (95%), liquid biopsy offers a highly concordant (88%) and clinically advantageous method for guiding genomic-based therapy, particularly in cases where tissue sampling is challenging or insufficient. The pooled sensitivity (82%) and specificity (95%) of liquid biopsy were slightly inferior to tissue biopsy, consistent with previous reports indicating that low-frequency mutations may be missed due to limited ctDNA shedding or analytical sensitivity constraints [35,36]. However, liquid biopsy proved significantly useful in advanced-stage disease (concordance 92%) and provided substantial benefits in clinical workflow, including earlier initiation of targeted therapy (7.3 vs. 19.2 days) and reduced complication rates (1.8% vs. 9.5%) [37-40]. It also demonstrated high accuracy in detecting acquired resistance mutations such as EGFR T790M (91% vs. 68%) and C797S (72% vs. 49%), which are crucial for switching to third-generation tyrosine kinase inhibitors, supporting its application in therapeutic monitoring and treatment adaptation [41-44]. While tissue biopsy allows histopathological assessment, tumor microenvironment evaluation, and PD-L1 scoring essential for immunotherapy selection, liquid biopsy offers the advantage of repeatability and real-time monitoring of disease evolution, helping capture tumor heterogeneity more effectively over time [45-47]. Nevertheless, liquid biopsy should not fully replace tissue biopsy, especially in early disease stages with low tumor burden, and its limitations include lack of histological information, assay variability, and the need for standardized protocols [48-51]. Therefore, a complementary diagnostic strategy integrating both biopsy techniques is recommended to optimize genomic profiling accuracy and improve treatment outcomes in precision oncology. Future research should focus on enhancing analytical sensitivity, developing standardized multi-omic platforms, and conducting large-scale clinical trials assessing the survival impact of liquid biopsy-driven decision-making, with emerging technologies such as



high-coverage sequencing, exosome-based profiling, and artificial intelligence integration expected to further advance personalized lung cancer management [52,53].

Conclusion

This systematic review and meta-analysis demonstrate that while tissue biopsy continues to be the gold standard for genomic profiling in lung cancer due to its superior sensitivity and ability to provide histopathological context, liquid biopsy offers substantial advantages in clinical applicability, safety, and real-time molecular monitoring. Liquid biopsy showed high specificity (95%), strong concordance with tissue biopsy (88%), faster initiation of targeted therapy, and significantly better performance in detecting resistance mutations such as EGFR T790M and C797S, making it an effective alternative where tissue acquisition is limited or contraindicated [54-56]. Although liquid biopsy may demonstrate lower sensitivity in early-stage disease due to limited ctDNA availability and cannot replace tissue biopsy for histological classification and immunotherapy assessment, its integration into routine clinical practice—particularly for treatment decision-making in advanced-stage and progressive disease—is justified.

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