

Body Mass Index and Serum Markers Associated with Progression Free Survival in Lung Cancer Patients Treated with Immune Checkpoint Inhibitors

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Research Article

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Abstract

Background: ICIs have remarkably affected the treatment strategies for numerous malignancies, including lung cancer. However, only a fraction of patients experiences durable responses to ICIs, thus there is an urgent need to identify the parameters related to ICIs therapeutic effect. In this study, we investigated nutritional status surrogates and several serum markers to estimate the efficacy of ICIs.

Materials and methods: The records of 66 patients with stage I/II lung cancer who received ICIs were retrospectively analyzed. Features of patients' clinical pathology, including age, sex, histology, line of treatment, BMI, serum albumin, serum creatinine, and serum inflammatory markers such as LMR and PLR, were examined. Progression-free survival was primary endpoints. Relationships among categorical variables were assessed by the chi-squared test. Survival analysis was performed using Kaplan–Meier method followed by log-rank test. Cox multivariate analysis was performed to analyze the association between each variable and the survival time of patients.

Results: The patients with $BMI \geq 25(\text{kg}/\text{m}^2) \wedge \text{serum ALB} \geq 37(\text{g}/\text{dL}) \wedge \text{serum creatinine} \geq 61.8(\mu\text{mol}/\text{L})$, $LMR \geq 2.12$ had a significantly prolonged PFS in comparison with $BMI < 25(\text{kg}/\text{m}^2) \wedge \text{ALB} < 37(\text{g}/\text{dL}) \wedge \text{creatinine} < 61.8(\mu\text{mol}/\text{L}) \wedge LMR < 2.12$ ($p < 0.05$). No statistically significant difference was detected between patients with $PLR < 135$ and $PLR \geq 135$ ($p=0.612$). The multivariate analysis revealed that $\text{ALB} \geq 37(\text{g}/\text{dL})$ and $\text{creatinine} \geq 61.8(\mu\text{mol}/\text{L})$ were associated with prolonged PFS, while statistical significance was not achieved in BMI groups.

Conclusions: The current results indicated that high BMI is related to longer PFS in lung cancer patients treated with ICIs, which may be correlated with high levels of serum albumin and creatinine.

1. Introduction

Lung cancer is the world's leading cause of cancer morbidity and mortality [1]. Immune checkpoint inhibitors, such as anti-PD-1/PD-L1 antibodies, have remarkably affected the therapeutic strategies for a variety of malignancies, including lung cancer, could inhibit the tumor for a long time and even cure it [2,3]. However, only a fraction of patients experiences durable responses to ICIs, and there is an urgent need to identify the parameters related to ICIs therapeutic effect.

Up to now, for the response of checkpoint inhibitors, the most researched predictive biomarkers including tumor mutation burden, PD-1 expression, CD4/CD8 lymphocyte ratio, the percentage of tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes, and several methods of establishing immune scores [4,5,6].

Lately, a few demographic features of patients are being studied to appraise the influence on ICIs [7]. One of such feature, body mass index (BMI) or obesity, encountered a lot of attentions. In addition, serum markers, such as albumin, creatinine, lymphocyte-to-monocyte ratio (LMR), and platelet-to-lymphocyte ratio (PLR), can be easily assessed because they can be measured from routine clinical laboratory tests.

Historically, BMI is regarded as the major substitute for nutritional status, but its association with clinical outcomes of patients with advanced stage tumors remains indeterminacy [8,9,10,11]. A meta-analysis indicated that higher BMI level before treatment of ICIs was remarkably correlated with improvement in OS and PFS in tumor patients treated with ICIs, regardless of whether there were differences in the comparison models of BMI classifications [12]. However, one recent study showed that the 287 melanoma patients who received ICIs, BMI were not related to clinical benefit or toxicity [13].

Serum albumin (ALB) level is also often considered an indicator for patients' nutritional condition in clinical environment. Cachexia and sarcopenia are negative prognostic factors [14,15]. Creatinine is usually used as a surrogate marker for sarcopenia, thus we chose creatinine as a decisive variable. Using serum creatinine level as an indirect assessment of skeletal muscle mass is an easy alternative when kidney function is accounted for [16,17,18]. Patients' nutritional condition might be influenced with the tumor microenvironment. The occurrence and progression of tumor are strongly associated with inflammatory response, as inflammatory cells stimulate tumor cell multiplication, angiogenesis promotion, favor tumor invasion, and even affect some anticancer drugs' efficacy [19].

In the retrospective research, we assessed the effect of BMI, ALB, serum creatinine and serum inflammatory markers such as LMR and PLR on survival outcomes in lung cancer patients receiving ICIs treatments.

2. Materials And Methods

2.1 Patients selection

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Liaoning Cancer Institute and Hospital. A retrospective review of 66 patients with stage Ⅲ/Ⅳ lung cancer between June 2018 and March 2021 in the Liaoning Cancer Hospital & Institute the first ward of thoracic oncology who received at least 1 dose of ICIs therapy. The staging of lung cancer was based on the seventh or eighth edition TNM stage classification. Features of patients' clinical pathology, including age, sex, histology, line of treatment, BMI (kg/m^2), serum ALB (g/dL), serum creatinine ($\mu\text{mol}/\text{L}$), and serum inflammatory markers such as LMR and PLR, were examined. The above indicators were determined at the time of ICIs therapy initiation. BMI was calculated according to the formula of weight/height² (kilograms per square meter) and classified base on the WHO categories. For the purpose of this study, we use BMI $</\geq 25$ as the binomial cut-off. All patients were divided into two groups, non-overweight(BMI<25) and overweight/obese (BMI ≥ 25), for the final analysis. At the same time, we included underweight patients in the non-overweight group. Progression-free survival (PFS) were determined by investigator on the basis of review of electronic medical records, and defined as time of treatment start to progression. RECIST V.1.1 was used to define objective response.

2.2 Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics or contingency tables were used to summarize the demographics and baseline characteristics of patients. The cutoff value for LMR was 2.12 based on previous studies [20], and the cutoff value for PLR was 135[21]. According to peripheral laboratory reference range, the binomial cut-off for Alb </≥ 37g/dL was used. The cutoff value for serum creatinine was 61.8 μ mol/L(approximately equal to 0.7mg/dl)[22]. Relationships among categorical variables were assessed by the chi-squared test. Survival analysis was performed by Kaplan–Meier method followed by log-rank test. Cox multivariate analysis was performed to analyze the association between each variable and the survival time of patients. $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant. All statistical analysis were carried out by SPSS v24.0 (SPSS, Inc.).

3. Results

3.1 Patient characteristics

66 patients with lung cancer were included in the research, and their clinical features were listed in Table 1. There were 19 women (28.8%) and 47 men (71.2%). There were 23 patients (34.8%) with age≥65 years and 43 patients(65.2%) with age≤65 years. 52 patients (78.8%) were treated by anti-PD-1 agent, and 14 patients (21.2%) were treated by anti-PD-L1 agent. ICIs were administered as first-line treatment in 29 patients (43.9%) and second or higher treatment in 37 patients (56.1%). According to the classification of histology type, non-small cell was accounted for 77.3%, while small cell was accounted for 22.7%. For the study purpose, 44 patients (66.7%) were divided into non-overweight group and 22 patients (33.3%) in overweight/obese group. There were no significant differences between BMI, any serum marker group and age, sex, treatment line or immune checkpoint inhibitors type. However, a statistically significant difference was found between PLR and histology($p=0.013$).

3.2 Association of high and low BMI with PFS time

In the study, all 66 patients were classified into non-overweight and overweight/obese groups based on the BMI cutoff value. Statistical analysis on the PFS time of patients was performed for different BMI groups. The mean PFS time of non-overweight and overweight/obese groups respectively were 3.81months (95%CI 2.606-5.019months) and 6.25months (95%CI 4.446-8.054months), and the difference was statistical significance($p=0.04$) (Figure1).

3.3 Association of serum ALB with PFS time

Patients with baseline serum ALB≥37g/dL had a longer PFS than those with ALB≤37g/dL(the mean PFS was 5.32 months [95%CI:4.120-6.519] vs. 1.85 months [95%CI: 0.675-3.017]), and we found the difference is significant ($p≤0.001$).

3.4 Association of serum creatinine with PFS time

There were also differences in PFS in patients with baseline creatinine over 61.8 μ mol/L when compared with under 61.8 μ mol/L as Figure3 reveals. Mean PFS in the first group was 5.99months (95%CI: 4.181-7.806) vs. 3.51months (95%CI: 2.501-4.526), $p=0.024$.

3.5 Association of serum markers with PFS time

Patients with baseline LMR \geq 2.12 had a longer PFS than those with LMR <2.12 (mean PFS was 5.15months [95%CI: 3.938-6.356] vs. 2.33months [95%CI: 1.168-3.499]), $p=0.011$ (Figure4). However, no significant difference was found between patients with PLR <135 (mean PFS was 5.05months [95%CI: 3.187-6.903]) and PLR ≥135 (mean PFS was 4.40months [95%CI: 3.177-5.615]), P value was 0.612 (Figure5).

In addition, association of each variable with PFS time, using the Kaplan–Meier method with the log-rank test, was summarized to the table2.

3.6 Association between PFS and clinical factors in lung cancer patients treated with ICIs therapy

Subsequently, we researched the relationships between PFS and clinical factors in lung cancer patients who were treated with anti-PD-L1 or anti-PD-1 therapy. According to multivariate analyses including sex, age, histology, treatment line, ICIs type, serum ALB, BMI and creatinine, the results showed that serum ALB and creatinine were independent influence factors for PFS, while sex, age, histology, treatment line, ICIs type and BMI were not significantly related to PFS (Table 3).

4. Discussion

A large retrospective research supported that melanoma patients with a BMI of 18.5–24.9 had a significantly shorter PFS than those with a BMI of 25.0–29.9 or ≥ 30 after therapy with pembrolizumab, nivolumab, or atezolizumab (median PFS: 19.9 vs. 27.2 or 28.8 months) [23]. However, one recent study showed that among 287 melanoma patients treated by ICIs, BMI was not related to clinical benefit or toxicity [13]. Another retrospective research indicated that solid malignant tumor patients, including NSCLC, melanoma, and renal cell carcinoma, with a BMI of ≥ 25.0 had a significantly longer PFS after ICIs treatment, compared with a BMI of <25.0 (11.7 vs. 3.7 months; HR: 0.46; 95% CI: 0.39–0.54; $p < 0.0001$) [24]. So far, it remains to be seen whether BMI was related to clinical benefit in lung cancer patients who had received ICIs. In this study, we found that lung cancer patients with a BMI of ≥ 25 had a longer PFS compared with a BMI of <25 . There was a positive association with overweight and better clinical outcomes with ICIs.

Overweight and obese patients have improved survival outcomes when comparing with patients with a normal body weight, which is known as “obesity paradox” [9]. At present, the mechanism of the influence of BMI on survival outcomes after ICIs therapy is just beginning to be understood. Obesity causes

dysregulation of the immune response by promoting the formation of a systemic meta-inflammation may be the potential interpretation. A recent research indicated that adipose cells in the human obese subcutaneous adipose tissues could secrete a few of pro-inflammatory cytokines and chemokines, which contribute to establish and maintain inflammation, and consequence may enhance influence on immune checkpoint inhibitors [25]. Furthermore, part of the explanation of how BMI impact the efficacy of ICIs is that obesity increases T cell aging leading to higher PD-1 expression and dysfunction or the PD-1-mediated T cell dysfunction in obesity significantly leaves tumors markedly more responsive to ICIs according to basic experimental study [26].

Body composition is complicated, only BMI may not be enough to fully reflect it. BMI is not an accurate indicator of lean figure or adiposity [27]. In clinical practice, serum albumin level is usually chosen as an indicator for patients' nutritional status. One retrospective study was pointed out that serum albumin level was not an independent predictable marker for overall response, but it was an important predictive and prognostic marker for anti-PD-1 treatment with NSCLC patients [20]. In our research, we found that the PFS of high ALB group was much longer than that of low ALB group, and the difference was significant. When renal function is considered, selecting serum creatinine as an indirect assessment of skeletal muscle mass represents a simple selection [16,17,18]. Cancers are highly proliferating and energy-demanding tissues. Especially in advanced malignant tumor, the increasing metabolic needs result in nutrient mobilization from skeletal muscle [28]. Low level of serum creatinine (< 0.7 mg/dL) is an indicator for weakness and sarcopenia especially for the older people; it is a powerful predictor of mortality in patients with chronic diseases who has a normal BMI [22]. Cachexia and sarcopenia are negative prognostic factors [14,15]. Our results also confirm this point, it showed that PFS time of low creatinine group was shorter than that of high creatinine group, and the difference was statistically significant. Low muscle mass is related to poor immunologic function, because skeletal muscle provides essential nutrients for the function of lymphocytes and monocytes [29,30,31] which probably related to the setting of immunotherapy based on checkpoint [32].

According to multivariate analyses including sex, age, histology, treatment line, ICIs type, serum ALB, BMI and creatinine, the results showed that serum ALB and creatinine were independent on influence factors for PFS, while sex, age, histology, treatment line, ICIs type and BMI were not significantly related to PFS. We suspect that the effects of BMI on PFS may be related to levels of serum albumin and creatinine. The above results indicated that nutritional status may be an important predictor of immunotherapy for the lung cancer patients. Nutrition is regarded as an important determining factor of immunoreaction, and dystrophy is the most common reason of immunodeficiency. The nutritional status of patients may influence the tumor microenvironment.

Myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs) are a marker of tumor-related inflammation and mediate the inhibition of T cell responses in lymphoma [33]. MDSCs are viewed as a heterogeneous population of cells at different differentiation stages. MDSCs can be differentiated into polymorphonuclear and monocyte MDSCs, which are respectively similar in morphologically and phenotypically to neutrophils and

monocytes [34]. Studies showed that accumulate monocyte MDSCs resulted in reduced tumor infiltrating lymphocytes and increased tumorigenicity, aggravating immunosuppression [35]. Additionally, increasing evidence shows that there is a negative correlation between raised lymphocyte counts and tumor proliferation and invasion [36]. Platelets induce the migration of circulating cancer cells from epithelium to mesenchyme and promote the extravasation and metastasis of tumor cells [37,38]. It was found that PLR was significantly connected with the appearance of irAEs in NSCLC [39]. Thus, we evaluated the influence of LMR and PLR on overall survival in lung cancer patients with ICIs therapy. The results suggest that patients with baseline $\text{LMR} \geq 2.12$ had a longer PFS than those with $\text{LMR} < 2.12$, while no significant difference was found between patients with $\text{PLR} < 135$ and $\text{PLR} \geq 135$. LMR could serve as predictive biomarker for the efficacy of anti-PD-1 therapy to advanced lung cancer.

At present, one of the 'hottest topic' is about the complex relationship between body composition and immune reaction, and some studies have attempted to explain that point [40]. The biological basis remains indistinct, therefore further researches are needed to illustrate these mechanisms. Furthermore, we consider that in prospective randomized research with non-ICIs control arm, BMI should be regarded as a stratification factor to better define its role in the treatment of checkpoint inhibitors. At the same time, further subgroup analysis is needed to confirm whether the impact of BMI on ICIs therapeutic effect is determined by serum albumin and creatinine levels.

This study is a real-word clinical study. Of course, there are several shortcomings in this study. As a retrospective study, there are inevitable selection bias. What's more, a total of 66 patients were enrolled in the study, and small sample sizes may lead to the deviation of results. Further prospective researches on larger queues are needed to verify these results.

Abbreviations

ICIs: immune checkpoint inhibitors;

BMI: body mass index;

ALB: albumin;

LMR: lymphocyte-to-monocyte ratio

PLR: platelet-to-lymphocyte ratio

PFS: progression-free survival

OS: overall survival

NSCLC: non-small cell lung cancer

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate It was a retrospective study. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Liaoning Cancer Institute and Hospital. The data are anonymous, and the requirement for informed consent was therefore waived. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (as revised in 2013).

Consent for publication Not Applicable.

Availability of data and material All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article and its supplementary information files.

Competing interests There was no financial or non-financial competing interests.

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Authors' contributions Authors' contributions: ZL is the first author, and design of the work, analysis, interpretation, have drafted the work. YD made contribution to acquisition. XL is the corresponding author.

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Tables

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Figures

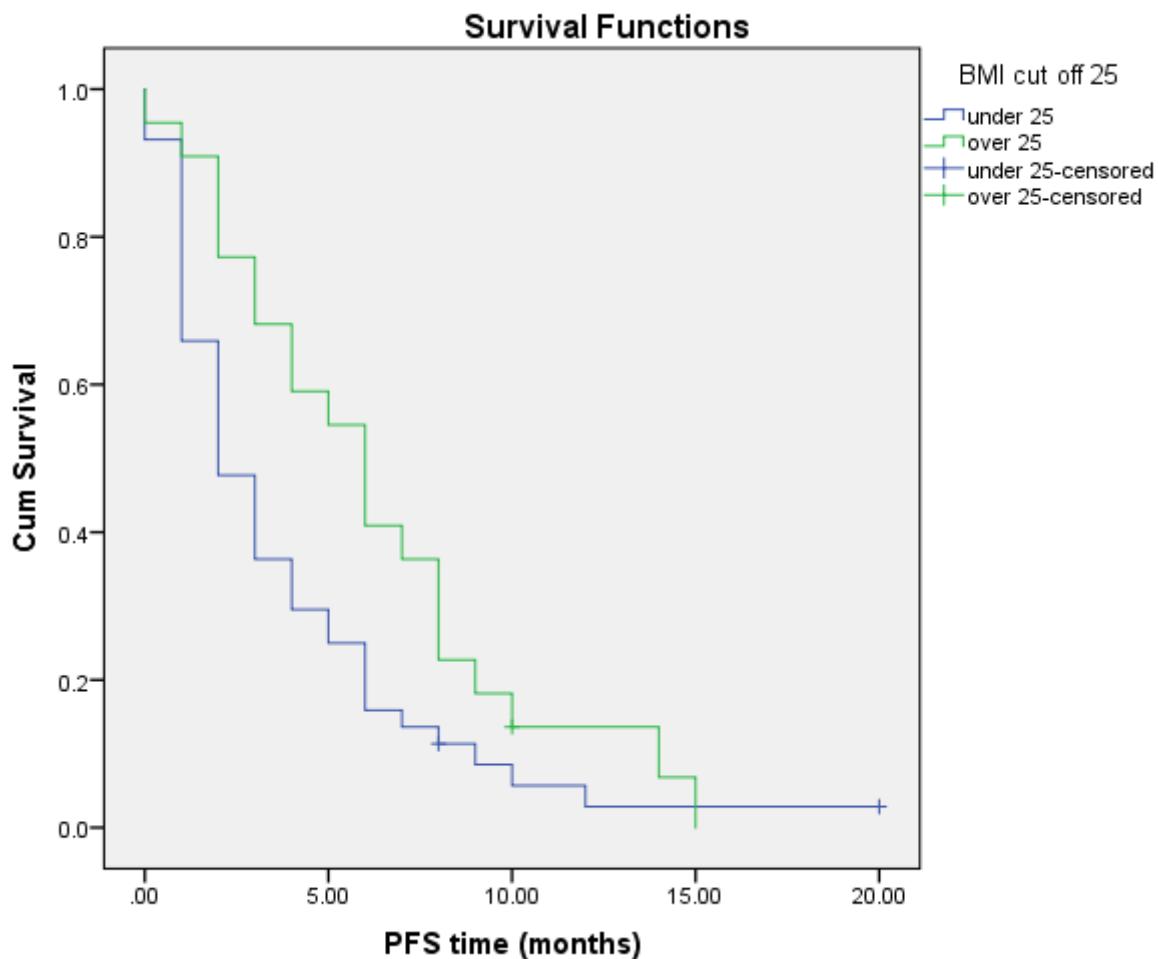


Figure 1

Progression-free survival in the non-overweight and overweight/obese groups.

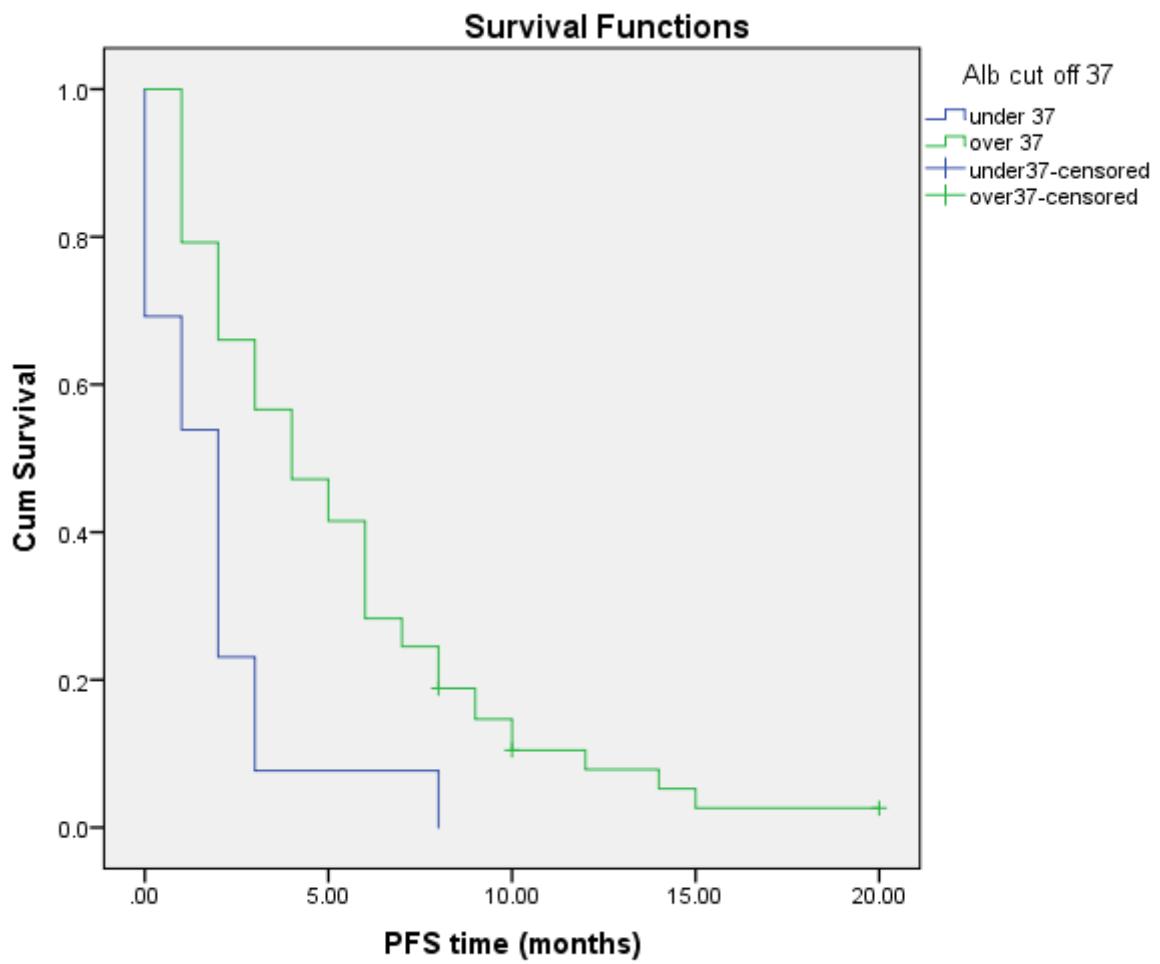


Figure 2

Progression-free survival in the high and low serum albumin (ALB) groups.

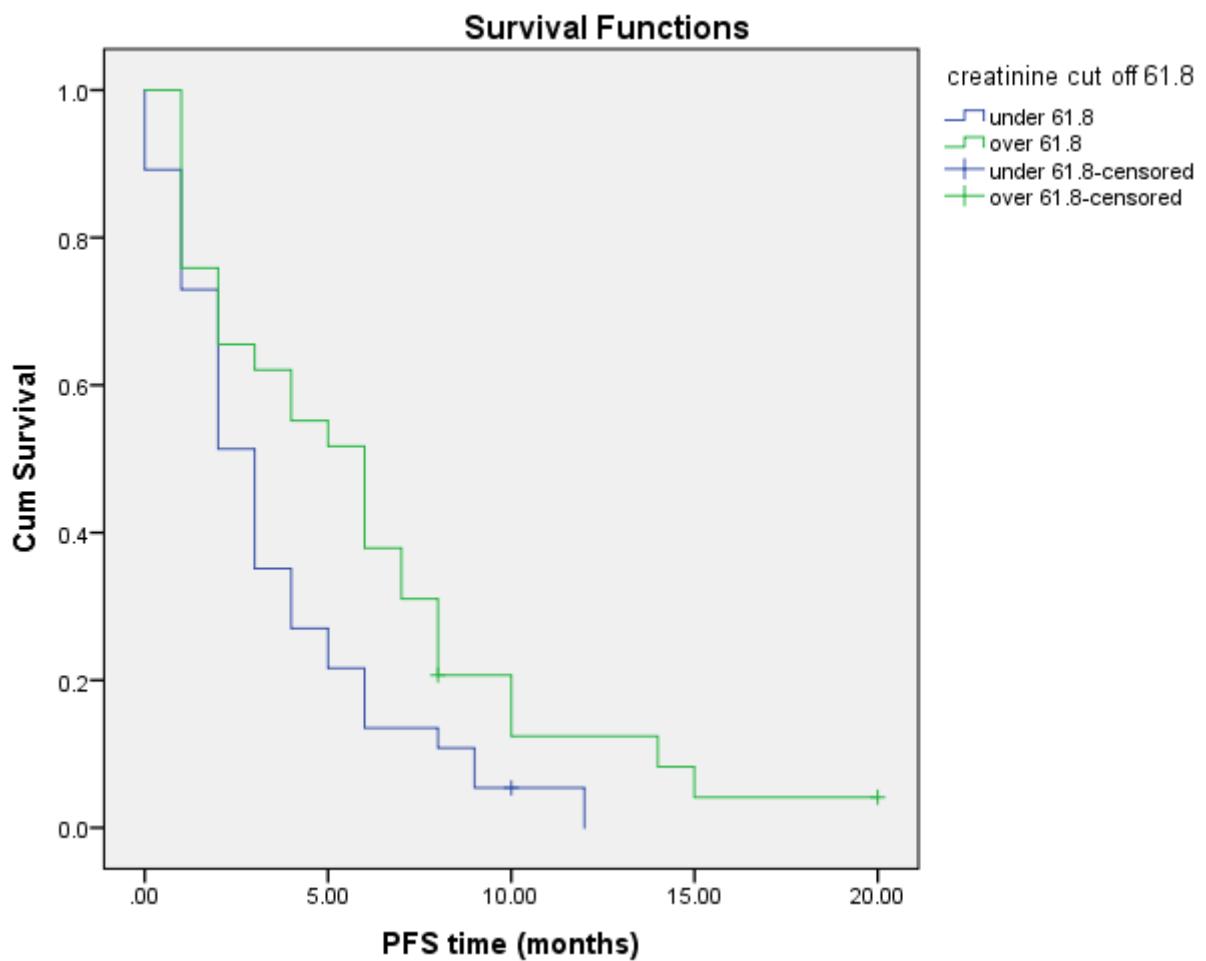


Figure 3

Progression-free survival in the high and low serum creatinine groups.

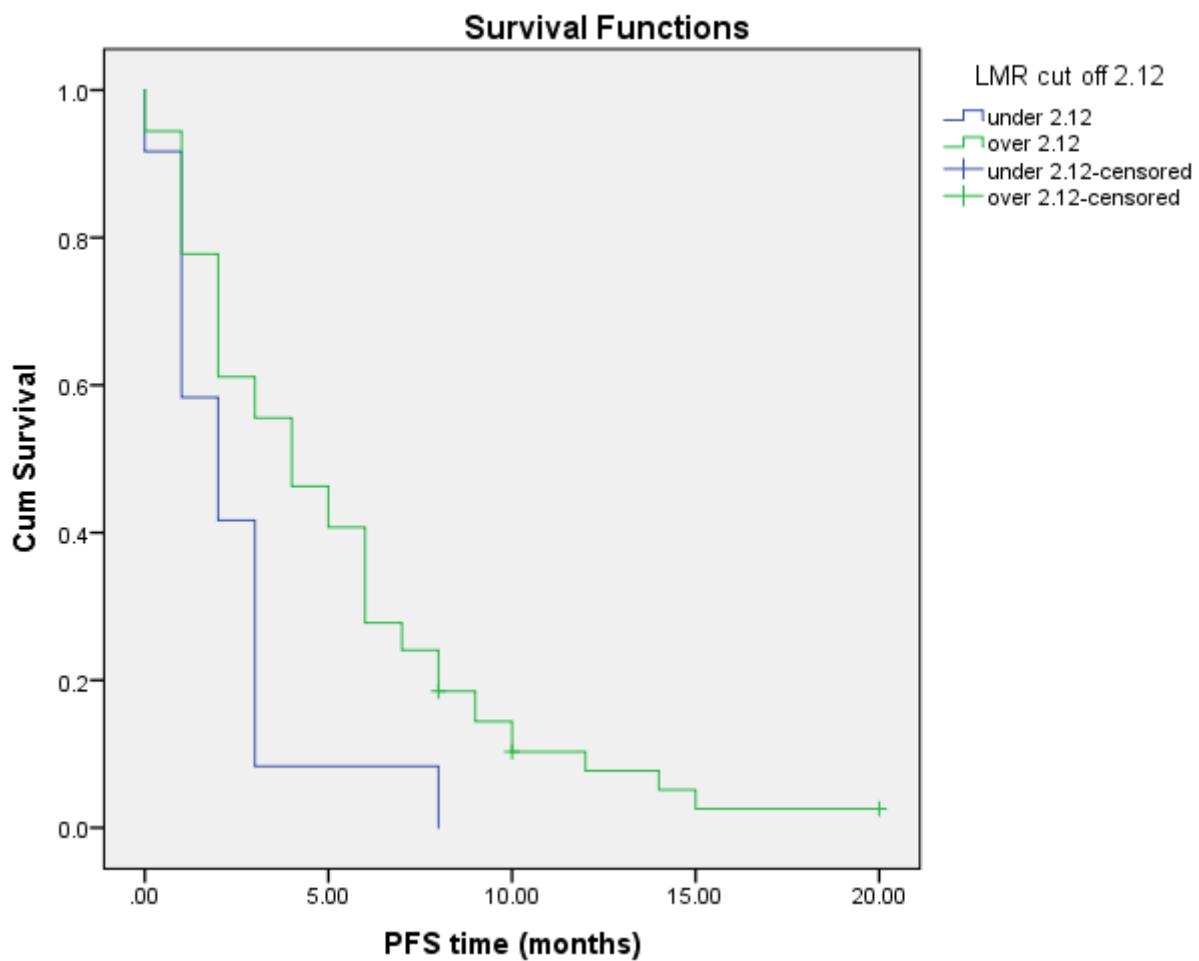


Figure 4

Progression-free survival in the high and low LMR groups.

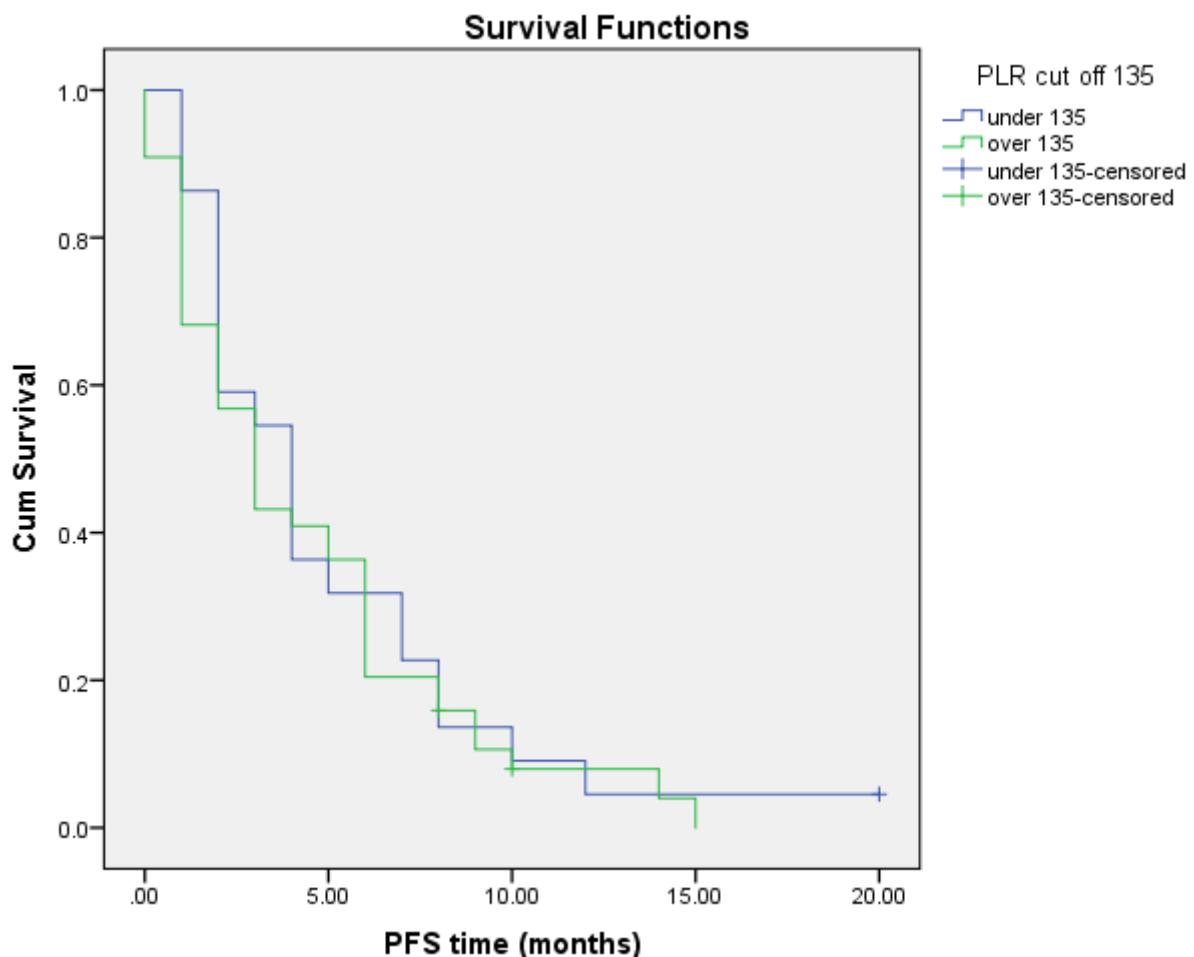


Figure 5

Progression-free survival in the high and low PLR groups. No significant difference was found between patients with $\text{PLR} < 135$ and $\text{PLR} \geq 135$, $p=0.612$.

Supplementary Files

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