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Perioperative immunotherapy for esophageal squamous cell carcinoma: Now and future

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Abstract

Esophageal cancer (EC) ranks among the most prevalent malignant tumors affecting the digestive tract. Esophageal squamous cell carcinoma (ESCC) stands as the prevailing pathological subtype, encompassing approximately 90% of all EC patients. In clinically staged II-IVA locally advanced ESCC cases, the primary approach to treatment involves a combination of neoadjuvant therapy and surgical resection. Despite concerted efforts, the long-term outcomes for ESCC patients remain unsatisfactory, with dismal prognoses. However, recent years have witnessed remarkable strides in immunotherapy, particularly in the 2nd and 1st-line treatment of advanced or metastatic ESCC, with the development of monoclonal antibodies that inhibit programmed death 1 or programmed death ligand 1 demonstrating encouraging responses and perioperative clinical benefits for various malignancies, including ESCC. This comprehensive review aims to present the current landscape of perioperative immunotherapy for resectable ESCC, focusing specifically on the role of immune checkpoint inhibitors during the perioperative period. Additionally, the review will explore promising biomarkers and offer insights into future prospects.

Key Words: Esophageal squamous cell carcinoma; Immune checkpoint inhibitors; Immunotherapy; Neoadjuvant; Randomized clinical trial

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Core Tip: Esophageal cancer ranks among the most prevalent malignant tumors affecting the digestive tract. In locally advanced esophageal squamous cell carcinoma (ESCC), the mainstay of treatment involves neoadjuvant

therapy in conjunction with surgical resection. Notably, immunotherapy has achieved significant breakthroughs in the 2nd and 1st-line treatment of advanced or metastatic ESCC. This review focuses on the current landscape of perioperative immunotherapy for resectable ESCC and discusses promising biomarkers and future perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

²⁸ Esophageal cancer (EC), one of the most prevalent malignancies affecting the digestive tract, originates from the epithelial lining of the esophagus. According to the International Agency for Research on Cancer's latest ³ update on the global cancer burden, based on the GLOBOCAN 2020 projections of cancer incidence and mortality, EC ³¹ ranks seventh in terms of cancer incidence worldwide and sixth in cancer-related mortality^[1]. The incidence of EC varies significantly across countries and regions, with East Asia having the highest disease occurrence, being twice the global average (12.2/1000). EC can be classified into two histological subtypes: ¹⁵ esophageal squamous cell carcinoma (ESCC) and esophageal adenocarcinoma (EAC). EAC is the predominant pathological type in relatively low-incidence areas such as Europe and America. However, globally, ESCC accounts for approximately 90% of all EC cases^[2], and more than half of the ESCC cases occur in China^[3].

For many years, surgery has served as the primary treatment for early-stage ESCC. High-grade dysplasia and very early-stage tumors are amenable to local therapies such as endoscopic resection, ablation, or surgery. Surgery can improve the five-year survival rate to 60%-85% in patients with early-stage disease^[4]. However, ²⁷ due to the subtle nature of early symptoms, many patients present with advanced or metastatic disease at the time of diagnosis. For locally advanced disease, surgery alone has not yielded satisfactory results, with a median survival time of 12 to 18 mo and a five-year survival

rate of 15%-39%^[5,6]. Furthermore, local or systemic recurrence is common, with recurrence reported in 35%-50% of patients who undergo surgery alone^[7].

Neoadjuvant therapy combined with surgery stands as a cornerstone in the treatment of locally advanced ESCC, typically encompassing clinical stage II to IVA^[8]. The medical community widely acknowledges the value of neoadjuvant therapy due to its efficiency compared to postoperative adjuvant therapy. Moreover, it leads to reductions in tumor and lymph node (LN) volumes, improves the R0 resection rate, and enhances long-term survival rates^[9-11]. Additionally, neoadjuvant therapy allows for the evaluation of patient response using resected specimens^[12]. Numerous randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have indicated that preoperative or neoadjuvant chemoradiotherapy (nCRT) may result in longer overall survival (OS) compared to surgery alone^[13-15]. The CROSS trial established nCRT as the first-line therapeutic choice for resectable locally advanced ESCC, combining radiotherapy with a chemotherapy regimen containing carboplatin and paclitaxel^[16]. The NEOCRTEC5010 phase III, multi-center, open-label RCT confirmed the findings of the CROSS trial for ESCC^[9]. However, ²⁹ the optimal neoadjuvant therapy for resectable locally advanced ESCC remains a topic of debate. Neoadjuvant chemotherapy showed improved OS over surgery alone only for EAC, whereas nCRT demonstrated considerably better OS than surgery alone for both EAC and ESCC, according to the NewEC study^[17]. Several subsequent meta-analyses also supported the utility of preoperative nCRT, showing improved OS ²³ compared to other treatment modalities, including surgery alone, neoadjuvant chemotherapy, and neoadjuvant radiotherapy, albeit with increased postoperative mortality^[18,19]. Postoperative morbidity was similar between the nCRT and S (surgery) groups ¹² (55.6% vs 52.8%; $P = 0.720$), while in-hospital postoperative mortality

was significantly higher in the CRT group (11.1% vs 3.4%; $P = 0.049$)^[20]. A Japanese study^[21] examined late complications, revealing Grade 2 anastomotic stricture as the most common event, occurring in 30% of the 33 patients. A total of 12 events of Grade 3 or worse complications were observed in 10 patients, including gastric tube ulcer, cardiac complications, and pulmonary complications. The 5-year incidence rate was 22%, and three patients succumbed to the late complications. A clear advantage of nCRT over neoadjuvant chemotherapy was not established.

Presently, both the National Comprehensive Cancer Network and the Chinese Society of Clinical Oncology guidelines recommend chemoradiotherapy (CRT) as the standard approach for locally advanced ESCC^[22-24]. Despite significant efforts made by the medical community, the expected long-term outcomes for ESCC patients have seen limited improvement, remaining poor. The five-year OS in patients undergoing nCRT and surgery is approximately 50%, and the incidence of local recurrence or distant metastasis remains high^[25]. Relapse after nCRT is common and constitutes a major hurdle to overcome^[26].

Immunotherapy is a therapeutic approach that involves the use of substances to stimulate or suppress the immune system, aiding the body in combating cancer, infections, and other diseases. It encompasses biologic/targeted agents that aim to enhance and restore the immune system's ability to recognize and eliminate cancer cells by modifying and/or blocking costimulatory signals^[27,28]. Over the past few years, immunotherapy has achieved remarkable progress in cancer treatment, particularly with the advent of immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs)^[29]. The development of ICIs, which inhibit programmed death 1 (PD-1) or programmed death ligand 1 (PD-L1), has shown convincing responses and clinical benefits across various malignancies, including ESCC^[30,31].

21
In the study "KEYNOTE-181", Pembrolizumab demonstrated superior OS, a higher objective response rate, and a lower incidence of grade 3-5 treatment-related adverse events (trAEs) compared to chemotherapy in the second-line setting^[32]. Grade 3-5 trAEs occurred in 18.2% of patients with Pembrolizumab *vs* 40.9% in the chemotherapy group. Other trials such as "RATIONALE-302"^[33], "ATTRACTION-3"^[34], and "ESCORT"^[35] have also reported positive outcomes. In these trials, immunotherapy showed lower rates of grade 3-5 trAEs compared to chemotherapy, with percentages of 18.8% *vs* 55.8% in "RATIONALE-302"^[33], 18% *vs* 63% in "ATTRACTION-3"^[34] and 19% *vs* 39% in "ESCORT"^[35].

It is important to note that in studies like "JUPITER-06"^[36], "CheckMate-648"^[37], "ORIENT-15"^[38], "ESCORT-1st"^[39] and "KEYNOTE-590"^[40], treating patients with advanced EC using PD-1 inhibitors in combination with chemotherapy as first-line therapy resulted in significantly longer OS and progression-free survival (PFS) compared to chemotherapy alone. The occurrence rates of grade 3-5 trAEs in these trials were relatively comparable.

1
Neoadjuvant immunotherapy has been explored in various other malignancies, such as lung cancer^[41,42], melanoma^[43], bladder cancer^[44], colon cancer^[45], and glioblastoma^[46]. In a clinical trial (NCT02259621) investigating neoadjuvant Nivolumab, surgery was not delayed, and 45% of resected tumors showed a major pathological response (MPR). In the NADIM trial^[42], patients were treated with a neoadjuvant regimen consisting of paclitaxel and carboplatin in combination with Nivolumab. Out of the initial 51 patients deemed eligible, 46 patients received neoadjuvant treatment and subsequently underwent surgery. At the 24-mo mark, the PFS rate was observed to be 77.1%. Among the 27 patients who had melanoma, 8 of them experienced either a complete response or an MPR after receiving a single dose of the anti-PD-1 drug, Pembrolizumab. Importantly, all 8 of these

patients remained free from the disease^[43]. In a single-arm phase II study exploring ¹⁶ Atezolizumab before cystectomy in 95 patients with muscle-invasive urothelial cancer (NCT02662309), the pathological complete response (pCR) rate was 31%^[44]. In the exploratory NICHE study (NCT03026140)^[45], patients with early-stage colon cancers, categorized as mismatch repair-deficient (dMMR) or mismatch repair-proficient (²⁰ pMMR) tumors, received a single dose of Ipilimumab and two doses of Nivolumab before surgery. Among dMMR tumors, 20 out of 20 displayed a pathological response, with 19 MPRs and 12 pCRs. In pMMR tumors, 4 out of 15 ³ showed pathological responses, with 3 MPRs and 1 partial response. In a single-arm phase II clinical trial (NCT02550249)^[46], ¹⁸ a presurgical dose of Nivolumab followed by postsurgical Nivolumab until disease progression or unacceptable toxicity was tested in 30 patients. However, ¹⁴ no significant clinical benefit was observed following salvage surgery, although two out of the three patients treated with Nivolumab before and after primary surgery remained alive 33 and 28 mo later.

¹⁰ Based on this background, this review aims to depict the current scenario in the field of perioperative immunotherapy for resectable ESCC, focusing in particular on an overview of the role of ICIs in this field, alongside a discussion of the promising biomarkers and future perspectives is forecasted.

PERIOPERATIVE IMMUNOTHERAPY OF ESCC

Drugs for immunotherapy of ESC

⁸ Cancer cells have the ability to evade immune surveillance by disrupting the balance of the tumor microenvironment (TME). This disruption can lead to tumor development by blocking apoptosis, promoting angiogenesis, proliferation, distant metastasis, and evading immune detection^[47]. CD8(+) T cells, also known as cytotoxic T lymphocytes, play a crucial role in ² killing

tumor cells, and their presence in the TME is associated with improved cancer prognosis^[48]. For CD8(+) T cells to effectively kill tumor cells, two signals are essential: the recognition of antigens presented by major histocompatibility complexes^[49], and the stimulation or suppression of T cell activation². The second signal, acting as a co-stimulatory or co-inhibitory signal, is often referred to as an "immune checkpoint" for CD8(+) T cell function⁵. Immune checkpoints help maintain the balance of T-cell activation, immune tolerance, and immune-mediated tissue damage^[50]. Both co-stimulatory and co-inhibitory ligands and their receptors are present on T cells and antigen-presenting cells². Inhibitory checkpoint molecules displayed by CD8(+) T cells can respond to and aid the tumor in evading the immune system^[51].

There are four main ICIs named after the corresponding Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved monoclonal antibody therapies: cytotoxic T lymphocyte antigen-4 (CTLA-4), PD-1, PD-L1/L2, and lymphocyte activation gene-3 (LAG-3)^[52]. CTLA-4 and PD-1 are members of the CD28 receptor family expressed on T-cells, which bind to their corresponding targets of the B7 family^[53]. CTLA-4 is an intracellular protein often found on regulatory T cells, inhibiting CD8(+) T cell activity. Ipilimumab, approved by the FDA in 2011, targets CTLA-4^[54]. PD-1 is a transmembrane protein upregulated by repeated stimulation of T cells. PD-1 has two ligands, PD-L1 and PD-L2, which are cell surface proteins expressed on tumor cells and some immune cells within the TME. When PD-1 binds to these ligands, T cell function is inhibited³. Overexpression of PD-L1 is associated with tumor progression, as cancer cells exploit the PD-1/PD-L1 and PD-1/PD-L2 pathways to create an immunosuppressive environment^[55]. nivolumab and Pembrolizumab are ICIs that target the PD-1 molecule, both FDA approved in 2014. In 2018 and 2021, Cemiplimab and Dostarlimab were also approved, respectively^[56,57]. Atezolizumab, Avelumab, and Durvalumab are FDA-approved PD-L1

inhibitors^[58-60]. ²LAG-3 is a transmembrane receptor expressed on CD8(+) T cells, further upregulated by T cell activation. Relatlimab is the only FDA-approved LAG-3 inhibitor^[61].

In recent years, several domestic anti-PD-1 monoclonal antibodies have been approved as drugs for various tumors by the China National Medical Product Administration. Notably, Camrelizumab, Sintilimab, Toripalimab, and Tislelizumab are representative drugs that are currently undergoing in-depth research. Camrelizumab, a humanized anti-PD-1 monoclonal antibody developed in China, has shown promising activity and manageable toxicity when combined with Apatinib, an anti-angiogenic drug. This combination may serve as a potential second-line treatment option for patients with advanced ESCC^[62] or patients with recurrent or metastatic ESCC^[63].

Neoadjuvant immunotherapy of ESCC

As previously mentioned, ICI immunotherapy has demonstrated improved outcomes in terms of OS and disease-free survival (DFS) for both second-line and first-line treatments of ESCC. In the context of locally advanced resectable ESCC, there has been a growing interest in peri-operative immunotherapy combined with chemotherapy or radiotherapy, representing a key research direction for this disease. Pre-operative neoadjuvant immunotherapy aims to ¹activate the patient's immune system, leading to the formation of immune memory cells, thereby enabling the immune system to assume an immune surveillance role^[64,65]. This review will summarize the current status of neoadjuvant immunotherapy as a treatment for ESCC.

Completed and reported clinical studies of neoadjuvant immunotherapy

Numerous clinical studies have investigated ¹ the efficacy and safety of immunotherapy for resectable ESCC in the neoadjuvant setting, as detailed in Table 1. Most neoadjuvant immunotherapy trials are conducted in conjunction with chemotherapy or CRT. Given the high incidence of this disease in China, numerous clinical trials on this subject are carried out in the country. Specifically, six ICIs targeting PD-1/PD-L1, namely Pembrolizumab (4 studies), Camrelizumab (10 studies), Sintilimab (4 studies), Toripalimab (5 studies), and Tislelizumab (1 study), have been studied as neoadjuvant therapy. Additionally, there is an ongoing drug-based neoadjuvant therapy RCT involving Nivolumab, the first ICI used in adjuvant immunotherapy in the CheckMate-577 study^[66]. The results of this trial, known as the FRONTIER study (NCT03914443), are eagerly anticipated^[67]. In Table 1, four reports were retrospective in nature, while the other 21 reports were prospective, with 20 of them being single-arm trials. Only three studies employed neoadjuvant immunotherapy in combination with concurrent CRT as an intervention. In studies involving neoadjuvant immunotherapy combined with chemotherapy, the chemotherapy drugs used included 5-fluorouracil (5-FU), cisplatin (DDP), carboplatin (CBP), nedaplatin (NDP), paclitaxel (PTX), docetaxel (DTX), albumin-bound paclitaxel (nab-PTX), and PTX liposomes. Over the past few years, the use and dosages of these chemotherapy drugs have demonstrated efficacy for ESCC treatment in clinical settings. Most surgeons have chosen an interval time of 4-6 wk from the end of neoadjuvant therapy to surgery. The primary outcomes of utmost concern to doctors are safety, feasibility, and pCR, while MPR and R0 resection rate are commonly selected as primary or secondary outcomes.

Ensuring the safety of participants is of utmost importance in clinical trials, and the occurrence of trAEs is a key indicator in assessing the safety of neoadjuvant immunotherapy^[68]. When ICIs are combined with other anti-

cancer therapies, such as chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy, or radiotherapy, the incidence of trAEs is significantly higher compared to the use of ICIs alone^[69]. These trAEs can affect various organs, with the most common being endocrine (hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism), gastrointestinal (diarrhea and colitis), pulmonary (pneumonitis), dermatological (rash and pruritus), and hepatic (elevated liver enzymes) complications^[70,71]. The majority of trAEs (grades 1-2) are self-limiting or can be managed with immunosuppressive therapy, such as corticosteroids. However, persistent trAEs that do not respond to corticosteroids require close monitoring and appropriate treatment. Fatal trAEs are extremely rare for anti-PD-1 antibodies, with an incidence of less than 0.5% in a meta-analysis of ICI monotherapy studies across various cancer types, most commonly associated with pneumonitis^[71]. The incidence of serious trAEs (grade ≥ 3) in neoadjuvant ICI plus chemotherapy ranged from 0% to 36.7% in the studies presented in Table 1. Notably, the combination of chemotherapy with Camrelizumab and Apatinib resulted in the highest incidence of patients experiencing serious trAEs (36.7%). In another meta-analysis comparing the efficacy and safety of various ICIs for patients with advanced or metastatic ESCC, Camrelizumab and Nivolumab were found to have a lower incidence of serious trAEs in the first-line and refractory settings, respectively^[72]. Close monitoring and early recognition of relevant symptoms and signs are essential to ensure appropriate management.

Feasibility can be assessed by comparing the completion rate of the trial. In this pooled analysis, the rates of completion of neoadjuvant therapy and surgery ranged from 49.4% (Camrelizumab + nab-PTX + NDP) to 100% (Sintilimab + PTX liposome, DDP, and S-1). Failures in the study were mainly attributed to trAEs^[73,74], patient decisions^[75-77], or disease progression^[78]. As

most trials achieved a treatment completion rate of over 60%, interpreting the data in the conference abstract (ChiCTR2000039170) is challenging.

The definition of pCR is the absence of any signs of cancer on a histological resection specimen. The pCR rate is a crucial efficacy-related parameter reported in all studies, with some studies choosing it as a secondary outcome. In a meta-analysis of 7 clinical trials involving 815 patients, ³ the pooled pCR rate was 32.4% (95%CI: 28.2%-36.8%)^[79]. Data from Table 1 shows that the pCR rate ranges from 6.7% to 46.1%. ¹ The definition of MPR is the presence of less than 10% of the remaining viable tumor cells in the resected primary tumor. In ³ the aforementioned meta-analysis, the pooled MPR rate was 49.4% (95%CI: 42.1%-56.7%)^[79]. MPR rate was chosen as a primary outcome in four studies and seemed to be a second primary outcome in the main studies verified in Table 1, with reported rates ranging from 42% to 72.3%^[73,76,77,80-83]. ¹ The R0 resection rate is defined as a complete resection of the tumor with a negative microscopic edge, indicating no residual tumor. It is another crucial indicator to evaluate the effectiveness of neoadjuvant therapy. The R0 resection rate in Table 1 ranged from 80.4% to 100%, which indicates positive outcomes.

Ongoing clinical trials in neoadjuvant immunotherapy

This period marks a surge in clinical trials focused on neoadjuvant immunotherapy, particularly for perioperative ESCC, with a significant number of ongoing RCTs, especially led by Chinese investigators (Table 2). Eight ICIs are currently under investigation, with dozens of trials in progress. PD-1 is the primary target in seven of these trials, while Adebrelimab targets PD-L1. Camrelizumab is the most extensively studied ICI, participating in 10 clinical trials, followed by Toripalimab with seven trials. Among these trials,

there are 23 single-arm studies, 11²⁵ two-arm studies, 2 three-arm studies, and 1 four-arm study.

An array of combinations of new adjuvant therapies for ESCC are constantly emerging. Most ICIs are being utilized as neoadjuvant adjuncts, combined with chemotherapy in 13 trials or CRT in 18 trials. Adebrelimab, a PD-L1-targeting ICI, is used alone in one trial (NCT04215471), as is Nivolumab in another (NCT03987815). Camrelizumab, on the other hand, is being¹ combined with radiotherapy (NCT05176002, NCT03200691), or paired with multitargeted small molecule inhibitors and CRT or chemotherapy (NCT04666090), or further combined with both CRT and an anti-EGFR antibody (NCT05355168).

Several large medical centers are now conducting Phase II and III clinical studies based on promising results from Phase I and II studies. Examples include PALACE-2 (NCT04435197)^[84], an advancement of PALACE-1 (NCT03792347)^[85], and KEYSTONE-002 (NCT04807673)^[86], another advancement based on Keystone-001 (NCT04389177)^[80]. Although Pembrolizumab is the ICI being studied in both series of trials, the PALACE trials are designed as neoadjuvant immunotherapy combined with chemotherapy, while the Keystone trials are designed as neoadjuvant combined with chemotherapy and adjuvant immunotherapy. Most chemotherapy regimens include taxols and platinum, with 5-FU being chosen in only two trials. The mainstream radiotherapy method utilizes 41.4 GY divided into 23 fractions, and the interval between neoadjuvant therapy and surgery ranges from 2 to 12 wk, with 4-6 wk being the most common choice. The primary outcome sought by most ongoing trials is pCR.

Ongoing clinical trials of adjuvant immunotherapy

Despite the benefits of neoadjuvant chemoradiation in improving survival compared to surgery alone, achieving a pCR remains challenging, with persistent disease in LNs leading to decreased survival^[66]. An RCT involving 346 patients with ESCC compared preoperative and perioperative chemotherapy. Both groups¹¹ received two cycles of paclitaxel, cisplatin, and 5-fluorouracil before surgery, but only half¹¹ received two cycles after surgery. The group receiving adjuvant chemotherapy showed an estimated 16% improvement in 5-year survival^[87].

In contrast to neoadjuvant methods, adjuvant immunotherapy has received relatively little attention. The global CheckMate-577²⁶ trial, a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled phase III trial, demonstrated the DFS benefit of Nivolumab for ESCC (29.7 *vs* 11.0 mo)^[66]. Despite the promising results of CheckMate-577 for adjuvant immunotherapy after surgery, there are currently only three ongoing trials in this area. One trial is investigating the effectiveness of Toripalimab (NCT04437212) in both neoadjuvant and adjuvant settings. The other two RCTs are assessing post-operative adjuvant therapy with Tislelizumab, with one in phase II as a single-arm study and the other in phase III with two-arm trials. The phase II trial involves adjuvant immunotherapy combined with CRT, while the phase III trial is combined with chemotherapy (Table 3). Further details and results from these ongoing trials are eagerly awaited.

ISSUES SHOULD BE CONCERNED IN FUTURE

The majority of neoadjuvant immunotherapy trials in ESCC are currently single-arm, phase II clinical trials. These trials explore various combinations of different drugs and different methods of other therapies, leading to a continuous emergence of new clinical trials in this field. However, it is

important to acknowledge that progress in some cases has been slow or stagnant.

Ethical conduct should be a primary concern in the development of new therapies. As the development of immunotherapy is often driven by related industries, methodological, legal, and ethical frameworks can sometimes be overlooked. Currently, a significant portion of scientific research in immunotherapy is industry-driven, with various pharmaceutical companies involved in registering RCTs. Despite the existence of international research registries aimed at improving the transparency of medical research, there are still uncertainties and "not applicable" rules and regulations. Consequently, there may be a lack of control over data mining and publication bias. Even if there are significant differences between the research protocol and the reported results, most trial outcomes are still published. To ensure the reliability, quality, and expected clinical benefits of ongoing and future trials in this field, the medical community and relevant stakeholders should focus on curbing the significant increase in "feasibility" trials with unclear expected benefits. Emphasizing a few multi-center Phase III trials, conducted by leading centers in ESCC research, could be a crucial approach to prevent unclear or contradictory results and uphold the integrity of the research.

The second issue of concern in clinical trials is safety, which should be carefully considered throughout the perioperative treatment for ESCC. One of the major safety risks is the occurrence of trAEs, especially immune-related adverse events. Perioperative immunotherapy trials for ESCC typically consist of three parts: preoperative neoadjuvant therapy, surgery, and post-operative adjuvant therapy. Different immunotherapy drugs are administered at varying intervals: Pembrolizumab, Tislelizumab, Atilizumab, Toripalimab, and Sintilimab are usually given at 3-wk intervals, while Nivolumab, Camrelizumab, and Durvalumab are given at 2-wk intervals. The

treatment cycles generally involve 2-4 cycles, and multiple factors such as treatment efficacy, surgical timing, economic considerations, and patient compliance are taken into account. Since most RCTs in this field are single-arm or two-arm studies within phase I or II, the safety data obtained may be limited and not fully comprehensive. This might result in an underestimation of the occurrence and severity of trAEs, especially those of grade 3 or above. Additionally, the introduction of new emerging drugs into clinical trials adds uncertain factors that could impact the results. Therefore, researchers should be attentive to the incidence and severity of trAEs, even when they are below grade 2. In cases where the trAEs are of grade 3 or higher in severity, special attention should be given to the subjects to avoid fatal consequences. Furthermore, if three or more anti-cancer therapies, including immunotherapy, are administered to a subject simultaneously, researchers should exercise caution due to the higher risk of trAEs for the patient. Vigilance and thorough monitoring are essential to ensure the safety of subjects throughout the course of treatment.

Neoadjuvant immunotherapy presents a dual challenge, aiming to achieve better treatment outcomes while minimizing harm to normal organs caused by immunotherapy. The impact of trAEs during preoperative therapy on surgery must be carefully considered. In the trial "KEEP-G 03"^[88], 36.7% (11/30) of patients experienced Grade 3-4 TRAEs, but fortunately, these did not result in any surgical delays. However, in another ¹ multicenter, single-arm, phase II trial using Camrelizumab and chemotherapy as neoadjuvant treatment for locally advanced ESCC^[74], ⁹ 34 patients (56.7%) experienced adverse events of Grade 3 or worse, with one patient (1.7%) experiencing a fatal Grade 5 adverse event due to pneumonia and acute respiratory failure. The risk of increased surgical complications after immunotherapy is a concern, emphasizing the importance of forming a multidisciplinary team to

address TRAEs and conduct comprehensive evaluations during immunotherapy. Early detection and management of TRAEs can minimize the impact on subsequent treatment and related complications. Additionally, exploring biomarkers related to TRAEs is crucial in the research field.

Surgery itself poses another safety concern. ESCC radical resection is a complex procedure with a high incidence of complications, and surgical team experience significantly influences the rate of complications. Patients undergoing neoadjuvant treatment may face unexpected surgical challenges. High-volume medical units with stable and mature treatment processes, including neoadjuvant therapy and operations, generally have lower complication and mortality rates^[89]. Therefore, RCTs involving neoadjuvant treatment should preferably be conducted in high-volume centers to reduce surgical risks and avoid any adverse impacts. Even in multi-center clinical trials, it is advisable to select larger surgical units or include surgeons with significant experience in performing over 100 operations on ESCC, both open and minimally invasive surgeries. Such measures ensure optimal surgical outcomes and minimize potential complications.

The third issue pertains to how we can accurately assess the efficacy of chosen drugs or treatments. Imaging is a crucial tool for preoperative efficacy assessment. Circulating tumor DNA (ct-DNA) has shown promise as an effective predictive method^[90]. Positron emission tomography (PET) also has reference value as an assessment method^[91,92]. Typically, pCR and MPR rates are used to predict efficacy, based on the examination of residual tumor cells in post-operative pathology. However, this method has certain limitations^[93,94]. Firstly, accurately assessing the pathological conditions of ESCC before immunotherapy, especially in cases of LN metastasis, is challenging. Detection can only be done in resected specimens after neoadjuvant immunotherapy, leading to an inability to make accurate

comparisons with pathological specimens before surgery. Secondly, there is currently no universal standard for evaluating pathological response in ESCC after neoadjuvant immunotherapy. Pathologists are relied upon for positioning, measuring, sampling, slicing, and labeling, introducing variability. The different patterns of resection after neoadjuvant treatment, involving thoracic surgeons and pathologists, may also impact ESCC prognosis^[95]. Thus, there is a need for a highly sensitive, specific, and preferably repeatable, simple, and feasible biomarker to predict efficacy in clinical practice.

PET is an integral part of the standard staging for ESCC. Its utility and acceptance in initial staging and recurrence detection have led to the hypothesis that PET could be used to differentiate responders from non-responders during neoadjuvant treatment. However, the precise PET parameters with the best predictive values are still a subject of debate. Several traditional PET parameters, such as the maximum and mean standardized uptake value (SUVmax and SUVmean), metabolic tumor volume (MTV), and total lesion glycolysis (TLG)^[96], have been studied to correlate with pathological response. In a study of 31 patients with resectable ESCC or EAC, PET was used prospectively during treatment with trimodality therapy, and it was found that baseline TLG and post-chemoradiotherapy TLG were associated with OS^[97]. More recently, efforts have been made to develop radiomic signatures and more robust predictive models. Simoni *et al*^[98] investigated multiple traditional PET parameters and identified several radiomic features, as well as tumor regression grade, which correlated with pathological response in a retrospective analysis^[98]. However, further research is necessary to develop more reliable predictive models and to validate them in prospective randomized trials. The credibility of PET evaluations in the era of immunotherapy remains largely unknown. Although

PET has shown promise in predicting efficacy, especially with regards to OS, its applicability to immunotherapy response assessment is not fully understood. If sufficient high-quality CT or PET data, correlating with pathological response in ESCC, can be obtained, machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) may emerge as new methods for evaluating neoadjuvant immunotherapy in ESCC. Such advancements could potentially enhance our ability to predict treatment outcomes and optimize patient care.

As of the current writing, specific biomarkers that can precisely determine the efficacy or predict perioperative surgery outcomes of ESCC have not been identified. However, several biomarkers have been explored mainly based on immunological and genetic criteria, including PD-L1 expression, intertumoral lymphoid infiltrates, dMMR/microsatellite instable (MSI), tumor mutation burden (TMB)/tumor neoantigen burden (TNB), and human leukocyte antigen (HLA)^[99]. Among these biomarkers, PD-L1 expression is one of the best characterized for anti-PD-1/PD-L1 therapy. It is assessed using immunohistochemistry (IHC) staining and evaluated by the combined positive score (CPS) or tumor proportional score (TPS). CPS is determined by dividing the number of PD-L1-positive cells (tumor cells and other lymphocytes) by the total number of tumor cells^[100], while TPS is calculated by dividing the number of PD-L1-positive tumor cells by the total number of tumor cells. In general, high PD-L1 expression usually correlates with an improved objective response to anti-PD-1/PD-L1 therapy^[101]. However, some clinical studies have failed to consistently demonstrate this correlation, showing that patients with tumors showing high PD-L1 expression do not always respond to PD-1/PD-L1 blockade^[102]. The relationship between PD-L1 expression and clinical outcome in ESCC remains a topic of controversy^[103]. While some studies have shown that PD-L1 overexpression is associated with poor clinical outcomes^[104], others have indicated a favorable prognosis^[105].

Studies have also shown that ⁴ circulating tumor cells (CTCs) and ct-DNA have a predictive role in evaluating the treatment efficacy of PD-1/PD-L1 inhibition^[106,107]. CTCs have been found to be associated with a poor response rate to ³² PD-L1 inhibitors in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC)^[106]. Similarly, ct-DNA minimal residual disease (ct-DNA MRD) is an important indicator for monitoring the efficacy of treating NSCLC^[108]. Therefore, it is worth exploring whether CTCs and ct-DNA can be introduced into the long-term follow-up of ESCC to help assess treatment response and predict patient outcomes. However, further research is needed to validate the predictive value of these biomarkers in ESCC and determine their potential role in guiding treatment decisions for patients undergoing perioperative immunotherapy.

The fourth issue pertains to the long-term benefits of perioperative immunotherapy. Many clinical trials on perioperative immunotherapy have focused on short-term or mid-term outcomes, such as safety, feasibility, and pCR. However, the true primary outcomes that need to be concerned with are long-term OS and PFS, regardless of the type of immunological drugs selected or the combination with other anti-cancer therapies. For neoadjuvant anti-PD-1 therapy in resectable NSCLC, a trial with a median follow-up of 63 mo (NCT02259621) reported promising long-term outcomes. ³⁰ The 5-year recurrence-free survival (RFS) and OS rates were 60% and 80%, respectively^[109]. Similarly, a study evaluating neoadjuvant anti-PD-1 treatment for localized dMMR colorectal cancer (CRC) also reported positive long-term follow-up data. Among patients who underwent surgery or achieved complete response, the 2-year tumor-specific disease-free and OS rates were both 100%^[110].

In the context of locally advanced resectable ESCC, neoadjuvant chemotherapy and nCRT remain the standard treatments before surgery. While immune checkpoint-based therapy shows promise, it currently benefits

only a small proportion of ESCC patients. Therefore, perioperative immunotherapy should be strictly monitored with ethical confirmation and preferably conducted within clinical trials. Patients must be fully informed about the potential benefits and risks and give informed consent before participating. Accurate screening of target populations and appropriate choice of combination therapy will be crucial for future research in this field. The importance of monitoring and managing trAEs, especially when combining immunotherapies with other anti-cancer therapies, cannot be ignored. Robust predictive and prognostic biomarkers or comprehensive biomarkers need to be identified to optimize treatment strategies and ensure the most effective therapy for patients. The development of clinical consensus or guidelines based on research findings will also be necessary to ensure that patients receive the most applicable and effective immunotherapy treatments.

CONCLUSION

The utilization of immunotherapy is progressively transitioning from a second-line approach for advanced or metastatic cases to a perioperative strategy for locally resectable advanced ESCC. Despite the current results lacking comprehensiveness and robustness, substantial advancements in perioperative immunotherapy for ESCC are evident. With the assurance derived from existing outcomes, numerous EC centers are now engaged in conducting multicenter, multi-arm RCTs. These RCTs hold the promise of providing further insights into the value of perioperative immunotherapy. It is plausible that in the near future, perioperative immunotherapy will emerge as a pivotal component of comprehensive treatment for locally advanced resectable ESCC. However, the determination of the optimal drug or the most effective combination of therapies, as well as the potential role of AI as an assistant, will require further observation and investigation.

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