

Chromatin Regulator SPEN/SHARP in Cancer

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Enzymes, such as histone methyltransferases and demethylases, histone acetyltransferases and deacetylases, and DNA methyltransferases are known as epigenetic modifiers that are often implicated in tumorigenesis and disease. One of the best-studied chromatin-based mechanism is X chromosome inactivation (XCI), a process that establishes facultative heterochromatin on only one X chromosome in females and establishes the right dosage of gene expression. The specificity factor for this process is the long non-coding RNA Xist, which is upregulated from one X chromosome in female cells. Subsequently, Xist is bound by the corepressor SHARP/SPEN, recruiting and/or activating histone deacetylases (HDACs), leading to the loss of active chromatin marks such as H3K27ac. In addition, polycomb complexes PRC1 and PRC2 establish wide-spread accumulation of H3K27me3 and H2AK119ub1 chromatin marks. The lack of active marks and establishment of repressive marks set the stage for DNA methyltransferases (DNMTs) to stably silence the X chromosome.

XCI

SHARP

Spen

NCoR

HDAC

polycomb

DNA methylation

transcription

silencing

repression

1. Long Non-Coding RNAs and Cancer

Less than 2% of the genome is transcribed in protein-encoding mRNAs; however, most of it is actively transcribed, which suggests that a fraction produces non-coding RNAs (ncRNAs). ncRNAs are classified based on their size in small ncRNAs (<200 bp) and long ncRNAs (>200 bp, also referred to as lncRNAs) [\[1\]\[2\]](#). In this review, we focus on lncRNAs.

lncRNAs can be classified based on their genomic localization [\[3\]](#) as well as on their cellular distribution [\[4\]](#). It is proposed that lncRNAs are organized in secondary and tertiary structures [\[5\]](#) that may offer binding surfaces for proteins containing RNA-recognition motives (RRMs). lncRNAs are capable of interacting with coactivators or corepressors of transcription, recruiting them to specific genes or genomic regions [\[6\]\[7\]\[8\]\[9\]](#). In addition, lncRNAs are also able to regulate alternative splicing events by interacting with splicing factors [\[6\]\[10\]](#).

Several lncRNAs have been associated with variety of diseases. *Metastasis-associated lung adenocarcinoma transcript 1 (MALAT1)* was found to be upregulated in renal cell carcinoma (RCC), gastric cancer (GC), gallbladder cancer (GBC), colorectal cancer (CRC), multiple myeloma, clear cell renal cell carcinoma (ccRCC), and glioma, as well as in osteosarcoma [\[11\]\[12\]\[13\]\[14\]\[15\]\[16\]\[17\]\[18\]](#), and it has been proposed as a molecular marker therein [\[14\]\[15\]\[16\]\[19\]](#). The lncRNA imprinted *H19* gene is maternally expressed and strongly downregulated directly after birth [\[20\]\[21\]](#).

[22]. It was shown that *H19* is strongly upregulated in gastric cancer [23][24][25], similarly to several other lncRNAs, such as *PVT1* oncogene (*PVT1*), *gastric carcinoma high expressed transcript 1* (*GHET1*), *antisense ncRNA in the INK4 locus* (*ANRIL*), *SPRY4 intronic transcript 1* (*SPRY4-IT1*), and the already mentioned *MALAT1* [18][26][27][28][29][30]. *H19* is also upregulated in other cancer types, such as esophageal cancer, CRC and lung cancer [25]. Another example is represented by *homeobox (HOX) transcript antisense RNA* (*HOTAIR*), which is upregulated in hepatocellular carcinoma [31], in colorectal cancer [32], in gastric cancer [33], and pancreatic cancer [34].

In this review, we will focus our attention on *X inactive specific transcript* (*Xist*; *XIST* in human), a lncRNA whose main function is to inactivate one X chromosome in female cells to achieve dosage compensation between males (XY) and females (XX) (see below). Recent studies highlighted its frequent deregulation in cancer. *XIST* is responsible for silencing several genes, and the observation that the X-linked oncogenes *ARAF-1* and *ETS-like 1* (*ELK-1*) are overexpressed in tumors with multiple active X chromosomes [35] suggests that the deregulation of *XIST* may be associated with cancer. Several studies observed defective X chromosome inactivation (XCI) in breast and basal-like cancer and linked the deregulation of the X chromosome to breast cancer (BC) [36][37][38][39][40][41][42], to ovarian cancer [43], as well as to cancers in patients affected by Klinefelter syndrome [44]. This deregulation is usually given by a loss of *XIST* as result of disappearance of the inactive X chromosome (Xi) and amplification of the active one (Xa) [37][38][40][43][44].

The gathered knowledge of these studies suggest that lncRNAs are important mediators of pathological conditions and they may, in the future, serve as potential therapeutic targets.

XCI serves as a powerful paradigm to study chromatin dynamics at a chromosomal scale. XCI co-evolved with the mammalian sex chromosomes as a mechanism to equalize the dosage of X-encoded genes between male XY and female XX cells. The central player in this process is *Xist*, which was discovered as the first functional lncRNA in mammals, being upregulated from the future Xi, coating the Xi in cis, thereby recruiting chromatin remodelers directly and indirectly rendering the X chromosome inactive. *Xist* is located on the X chromosome and it is surrounded by several other lncRNA-encoding genes, including *Tsix*, *just proximal to Xist* (*Jpx*), and *five prime to Xist* (*Ftx*), which, in mouse, have been shown to be involved in *Xist* regulation through different mechanisms, including transcriptional interference, RNA-mediated recruitment of chromatin remodelers, and through transcription co-activation [45][46][47][48]. *Xist* encodes a 17 kb lncRNA (19 kb in human) that contains six repeat structures that play a crucial, sometimes redundant, role in *Xist*-mediated silencing as well as localization [49]. So far, most of the functional studies have been performed in mouse where deletions of the most 5' located repeat A led to a silencing phenotype despite the fact that *Xist* spreading was unaffected. Several studies indicated that SHARP [SMRT (silencing mediator for retinoid or thyroid hormone receptors) and HDACs (histone deacetylases)-associated repressor protein], encoded by the *SPEN* (*split ends*) gene [also called *SHARP* or *Mint* (*Msx2-interacting nuclear target protein*)], is a crucial factor in the X inactivation process through interacting with the A repeat sequence and recruitment of several repressor complex members, such as nuclear receptor corepressor (NCoR), SMRT, and nucleosome remodeling deacetylase (NuRD) complexes [50][51][52][53][54][55] (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Proteins and complexes involved in the regulation of X chromosome inactivation (XCI). The “Disease(s)” column indicates diseases caused by mutations in the XCI related genes/proteins described in this table. The functional link between these mutations and XCI remains to be investigated.

Protein/Complex	Subunits	Function(s) in XCI	Disease(s)	References
DNMT3B	-	DNA methyltransferase	AML, FSHD, HD, ICF, PR	[56][57][58][59][60][61][62][63][64]
hnRNPk	-	Bridging protein between <i>Xist</i> and ncPRC1	AKS, AML, KLS, KS, MF, OS	[65][66][67][68][69][70][71][72][73][74][75]
ncPRC1	PCGF3/5 RING1A/B RYBP/YAF	E3 ubiquitin ligase	MDS	[65][76][77][78]
NCoR1/2 *	GPS2 HDAC3 NCoR1/2 * TBL1 TBLR1	Deacetylase	ASDs, BC, CC, HCC, ID, MB, NDDs, OMZL, PS, SCZ	[79][80][81][82][83][84][85][86][87][88][89][90][91][92][93][94][95]
PRC1	CBX2/4/6/7/8 PCGF1-6 PHC1-3 RING1A/B SCMH1/L2	E3 ubiquitin ligase/Recognition of histone methylation	BC, DD, DSD, ESCC, GC, MCL, MDS, OSS, PM	[76][78][96][97][98][99][100][101][102][103][104][105]

Protein/Complex	Subunits	Function(s) in XCI	Disease(s)	References
PRC2	AEBP2	Methyltransferase	AML, DS-AMKL, DLBCL, ETP-ALL, FL, HCC, MDS, MPN, T-ALL, T-PLL	[76][106][107][108][109][110] [111][112][113][114][115][116] [117][118][119][120][121][122] [123][124][125][126][127]
	EZH2 **			
	EED			
	JARID2			
	RBBP4/7			
	SUZ12			
SHARP	-	Adaptor protein that recruits the HDAC3-containing NCoR1/2 complexes	ACC, BC, DLBCL, MCL, NDDs, PASC, SMZL	[51][52][53][54][55][128][129] [130][131][132][133][134][135] [136][137][138][139]

DNA methyltransferase 3B; DS-AMKL: Acute megakaryoblastic leukemia associated with Down syndrome; DSD: Disorders of sex development; EED: Embryonic ectoderm development; ESCC: Esophageal squamous cell carcinoma; ETP-ALL: Early T-cell precursor acute lymphoblastic leukaemia Early T-cell precursor acute lymphoblastic leukaemia; EZH2: Enhancer of zeste 2; FL: Follicular lymphoma; FSHD: Facioscapulohumeral dystrophy; GC: Gastric cancer; GPS2: G-protein pathway suppressor 2; HCC: Hepatocellular carcinoma; HD: Hirschsprung disease; HDAC3: Histone deacetylase 3; hnRNPK: Heterogeneous nuclear ribonucleoprotein K; ICF: Immunodeficiency, centromeric instability and facial anomalies; ID: Intellectual disability; JARID2: Jumanji and AT-rich interaction domain-containing 2; KLS: Kabuki-like syndrome; KS: Kabuki syndrome; MB: Medulloblastoma; MCL: Mantle cell lymphoma; MDS: Myelodysplastic syndromes; MF: Mycosis fungoides; MPN: myeloproliferative neoplasm; NCoR1/2: Nuclear receptor corepressor; ncPRC1: non-canonical PRC1 complex; NDDs: Neurodevelopmental disorders; OMZL: Ocular marginal zone lymphoma; OS: Okamoto syndrome; OSS: Osteosarcoma; PASC: Pancreatic adenosquamous carcinoma; PCGF1-6: PcG ring finger 1-6; PCGF3/5: PcG ring finger 3/5; PHC1-3: Polyhomeotic homolog 1-3; PM: Primary microcephaly; PR: Prostate cancer; PRC1: Polycomb repressive complex 1; PRC2: Polycomb repressive complex 2; PS: Pierpont syndrome; RBBP4/7: Retinoblastoma binding protein 4/7; RING1A/B: Really interesting new gene 1A/B; RYBP/YAF: RING1 And YY1 Binding Protein/YY1-associated factor; SCM1/L2: Sex comb on midleg homolog 1/L2; SCZ: Schizophrenia; SHARP: SMRT (silencing mediator for retinoid or thyroid hormone receptors) and HDACs (histone deacetylases)-associated repressor protein; SMZL: Splenic marginal zone lymphoma; SUZ12: Suppressor of zeste 12; T-ALL: T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia; T-PLL: T-cell prolymphocytic leukemia; TBL1: Transducin β -like protein 1; TBLR1: Transducing β -like 1 (TBL1)-related protein; XCI: X chromosome inactivation; *Xist*: *X inactive specific transcript*; * NCoR2 is also known as SMRT (silencing mediator for retinoid or thyroid hormone receptors); ** EZH2 is also known as KMT6A (lysine (K) methyltransferase 6A).

SHARP is transiently enriched at the promoters and enhancers of genes that are subject to XCI and it recruits NCoR/SMRT complexes that contain HDACs, leading to histone deacetylation [55]. SHARP localization also shows overlap with NuRD complex members predominantly at promoters, and its action is only required during the initiation phase of XCI, as removal of SHARP after Xi is established has no effect [55][140]. As a consequence of the action of SHARP and its associated protein complexes, promoters and enhancers are deacetylated in a stepwise manner, paving the way for the action of the polycomb group (PcG) protein repressive complexes PRC1 and PRC2 that play a crucial role in the establishment and maintenance of the silent state of the Xi. PRC1 is a large multi-protein complex that is recruited to *Xist* through heterogeneous nuclear ribonucleoprotein K (hnRNPK) that acts as a bridge between PRC1 and *Xist* Repeat B and, to a lesser extent, Repeat C [65][66][77]. PRC1-directed deposition of monoubiquitination of K119 of histone H2A (H2A119ub1) is mediated by the core PRC1 complex member really interesting new gene 1 isoform A or B (RING1A/B) and, in turn, is recognized by PRC2 subunit jumanji and AT-rich interaction domain-containing 2 (JARID2) facilitating trimethylation on K27 of histone H3 (H3K27me3) by the enhancer of zeste 2/lysine (K) methyltransferase 6A (EZH2/KMT6A) [141][142][143]. Subsequently, PRC1 and PRC2 recruitment is re-enforced through the recruitment of PRC1 that recognizes the trimethylation of K27 of histone H3 (H3K27me3) through chromobox-containing protein (CBX), which further promotes H2AK119ub1 deposition, facilitating the spreading of silencing [144][145][146]. At a later stage of the XCI process, *de novo* DNA methyltransferases (DNMTs) are recruited to lock in the silent state through the deposition of DNA methylation at promoters and CpG islands (CGI). These studies highlight the concerted action of chromatin readers and writers directing the right order of epigenetic events required to establish the Xi that is propagated through a near infinite number of cell divisions.

2. The Inactive X Chromosome Status in Cancer

The complete loss or alteration of the Xi is frequently observed in breast and ovarian cancers, amongst other types of cancer [147][148]. Initial studies showed that *Xist/XIST* RNA is essential for the initiation and establishment of XCI during development, but dispensable to maintain the Xi in female somatic cells [149][150]. Even so, more recent studies making use of more sensitive techniques detect the reactivation of X-linked genes upon nearly complete or partial *Xist/XIST* depletion. The human X chromosome codes for more than 900 coding genes [151], including several tumor suppressor genes and oncogenes [152][153]. Thus, gene dosage changes that are caused by potential reactivation or silencing of X-linked genes could be detrimental. So far, only one well documented study in mice revealed a clear causal relationship between *Xist* deletion in the hematopoietic lineage and high penetrance hematopoietic cancer [154].

In human, the absence of the Xi (Barr body) in female cancer cells and presence of multiple Xa's have been frequently associated with different forms of cancer, such as breast cancer [38][40][44]. However, these events are primarily attributed to the loss of the Xi and duplication of the Xa due to chromosome segregation errors (see [Figure 1](#)) [38][40][44].

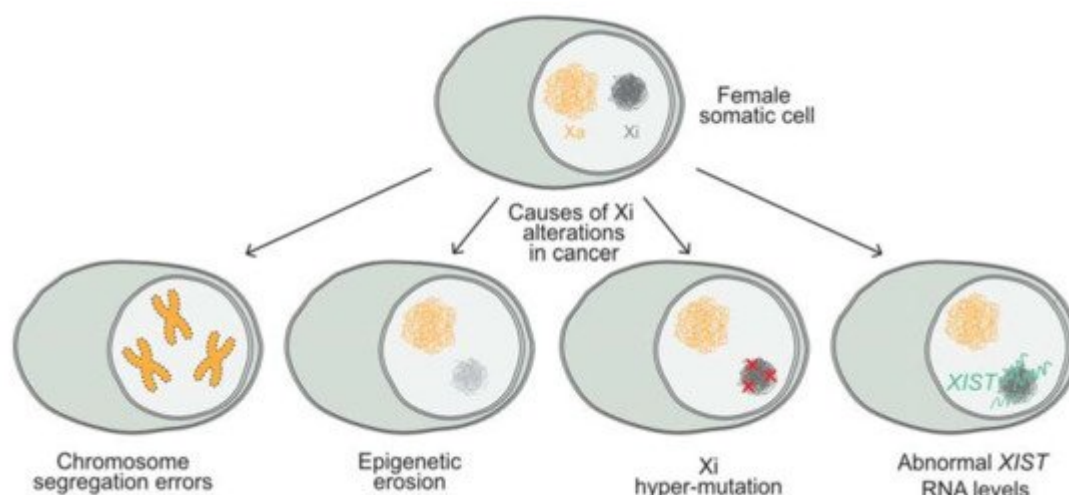


Figure 1. Possible causes of alteration of the Xi in cancer. Female somatic cells have one active and one inactive X chromosome, alterations of the Xi, often observed in cancer. These alterations can be caused by chromosome segregation errors, often leading to loss of the Xi and duplication of the Xa. Epigenetic erosion can lead to reactivation of X-linked genes. Mutations in the Xi happen more often than in other chromosomes. Abnormal *Xist* RNA levels are also observed in cancer. Xa = Active X chromosome, Xi = Inactive X chromosome.

Epigenetic alterations that are caused by epigenetic erosion of the Xi have also been described. These erosion events affect histone modification, deposition, and DNA methylation, leading to the reactivation of X-linked genes in breast cancer cell lines and primary tumors [155]. Moreover, the Xi in female cancer genomes has been shown to accumulate more mutations than the autosomes in various cancer types, including medulloblastoma, breast cancer, glioblastoma, and acute myeloid leukemia (AML) [156]. Interestingly, recent studies suggest that high *XIST* expression levels correlate with a poor survival in various types of cancer [157]. Some of these studies propose that *XIST* acts as a competing endogenous RNA (ceRNA) [158][159], by depleting microRNAs. As a consequence, specific RNA targets cannot be degraded, which may lead to the dysregulation of downstream genes [160][161]. So far, both epigenetic and genetic changes have been observed in relation to the Xi of cancer cells, but whether these alterations are driving events that give a selective advantage to cancer cells is under debate. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that the Xi epigenetic status and *XIST* expression levels are potential cancer biomarkers as a readout for genomic instability or epigenomic changes. Therefore, understanding the factors and mechanisms that render and maintain the X chromosome inactive, both during embryonic development and in somatic cells during the maintenance phase of XCI, is of crucial importance.

3. Chromatin Modifiers That Act in XCI

The regulation of the X chromosome is controlled by chromatin modifiers that build up heterochromatin formation by deacetylating and methylating histone tails, finally leading to the DNA methylation of regulatory CpG islands (see [Figure 2](#)).

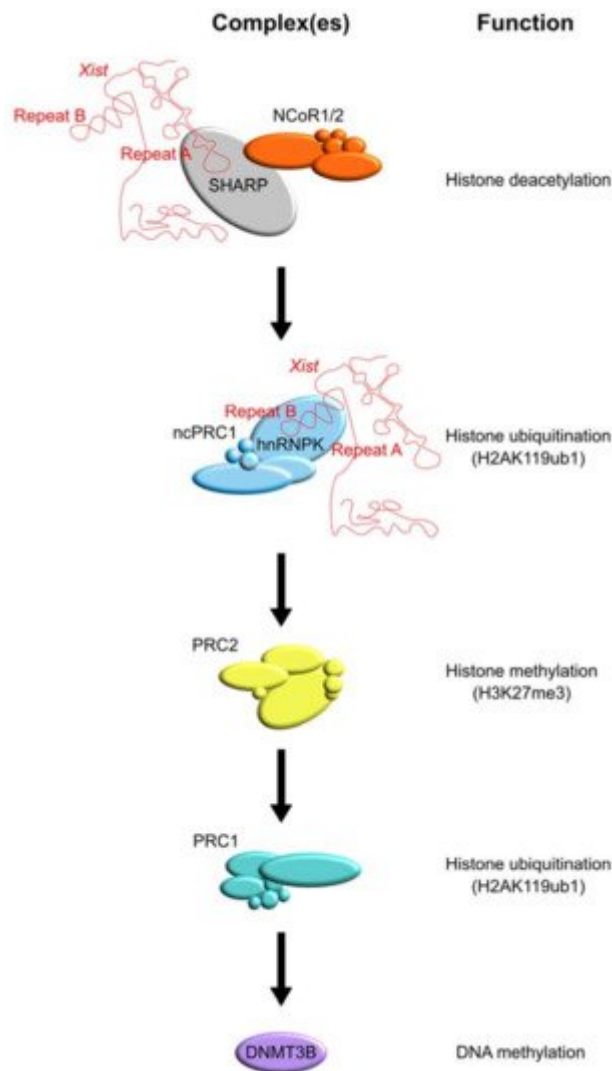


Figure 2. Proposed model for the silencing of the future inactive X chromosome (Xi) in female cells. The lncRNA *Xist* recruits SHARP [SMRT (silencing mediator for retinoid or thyroid hormone receptors) and HDACs (histone deacetylases)-associated repressor protein] to the X chromosome upon initiation of X chromosome inactivation (XCI). On one side, SHARP interacts with *Xist* through its RRM (RNA recognition motif) domains while on the other side it recruits chromatin modifiers through its highly conserved SPOC (Spen paralog and ortholog C-terminal) domain. One of the SPOC interactors is the multisubunit NCoR1/2 (nuclear receptor corepressor) complex that promotes histone deacetylation through its subunit HDAC3. As a next step, *Xist* interacts with hnRNP K (heterogeneous nuclear ribonucleoprotein K) recruiting the non-canonical PRC1 complex (ncPRC1) that writes H2AK119ub1 through RING1A/B (really interesting new gene 1 isoform A/B). Subsequently, H2AK119ub1 is recognized by JARID2 (jumanji and AT-rich interaction domain-containing 2), subunit of the PRC2 complex that writes H3K27me3 through EZH2/KMT6A [enhancer of zeste 2/lysine (K) methyltransferase 6A]. H3K27me3 is read by canonical PRC1 through its subunit CBX (chromobox-containing protein) and H2AK119ub1 is further established on the chromatin. Finally, silencing is achieved due to the activity of DNA methyltransferase 3B (DNMT3B) that methylates position 5 of cytosines (5 mC) within the DNA.

Specific enzymes that play a central role in XCI are HDACs, the PRC1 and PRC2 complexes, and DNMTs (see [Table 1](#)). Recently, the SHARP protein has been identified as a direct *Xist* interactor. This protein bridges *Xist* to HDACs allowing for histone deacetylation at the X chromosome.

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