

Expression of interleukin-33 is correlated with poor prognosis of patients with squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue

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Abstract: Objective: The aim of this study was to clarify the role of IL-33 in tumor progression.

Methods: Surgical specimens from 81 patients with squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue were studied using immunohistochemistry. Primary tumor sections were analyzed for IL-33 and ST2 expression. To examine the influence of IL-33 on the microenvironment of the tumor, we determined the mast cell density (MCD) and microvessel density of the stroma.

Results: Patients with high IL-33 expression had a significantly worse prognosis ($p = 0.004$). IL-33 expression was significantly elevated in patients with local and nodal recurrence ($p = 0.014$ and $p = 0.019$). ST2 expression was also associated with a worse prognosis ($p = 0.024$) and was significantly elevated in patients with nodal recurrence ($p = 0.004$). MCD was associated with worse prognosis ($p = 0.038$) and correlated significantly with IL-33 expression ($r = 0.626$, $p < 0.001$). Microvessels in the stroma were significantly increased in the high IL-33 group ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: These data suggest that the IL-33/ST2 axis contributes to tumor aggressiveness and affects the tumor microenvironment. Immunohistochemical evaluation of IL-33 and ST2 is useful for identifying patients at a high risk for poor prognosis.

June 10, 2014

Ken-ichi Nibu,

Editor-in-Chief, *Auris Nasus Larynx*

Dear Professor Nibu

We are grateful for the opportunity to revise our paper ‘ANL-D-14-00096’ entitled “Expression of interleukin-33 is correlated with poor prognosis in patients with squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue” and the valuable comments of the two reviewers.

We have revised the manuscript according to the comments from reviewers. We added the information for ethical aspect in materials and methods part and altered an equivocal expression about specimens to clearer one. We also examined the relationship of the prognosis of the high IL-33 patients with postoperative adjuvant therapy.

We attach here our revised manuscript, as well as a point-by-point response to the reviewers’ comments.

We now hope that our paper will be suitable for publication in *Auris Nasus Larynx* and look forward to hearing from you concerning your editorial decision.

Yours sincerely,

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Response to the reviewers' comments

We would like to thank all reviewers for their encouraging and constructive comments that have helped us improve the manuscript. We have modified our manuscript 'ANL-D-14-00096' along the lines suggested. Our point-by-point responses are listed below.

Reviewer #1:

This is an interesting, well written report investigating the role of IL-33/ST2 axis in oral cancer. The authors indicate that immunohistochemical evaluation of IL-33/ST2 is useful for identifying patients at a high risk for poor prognosis. The study is well designed and the basic (immunohistochemical) analyses appear to be well done. Although preliminary and does not indicate a direct effect in oral carcinogenesis, the conclusion seems to be sufficient to understand that IL33expression is an useful prognostic marker.

I only have minor comments.

Response

We really appreciate that this reviewer finds our data interesting. We addressed her/his two issues as requested.

1. This study includes immunohistochemical analysis of tissue samples of patients. Therefore, it is to be desired that authors should describe some comments with regard to the ethical aspect.

We agree with the reviewer' opinion. We added the information for ethical aspect to line 105, 106 in materials and methods part.

2. A multivariant analysis is desired to confirm that IL33 expression is an independent prognostic factor.

A cox proportional hazards regression analysis of clinical factors, including sex, age, histologic type, T classification, N classification, expression of IL-33, expression of ST2 and MCD was performed. Univariate analyses were done initially, and then clinical factors that were identified as significantly associated with the disease-free survival rate were included in a multivariate analysis.

The univariate analysis demonstrated that IL-33, ST2, and MCD were significant predictors for prognosis. However, there was no significant predictor in the multivariate analysis. We consider that this is because IL-33 expression correlated with ST2 expression and IL-33 expression also correlated with MCD.

A cox proportional hazards regression analysis of prognostic factors associated with the disease-free survival rate

Prognostic factor	<i>p</i> value	RR	95% CI
Univariate analysis			
Sex (male versus female)	0.155	0.589	0.284-1.222
Age (≤ 60 versus >60)	0.331	1.443	0.689-3.024
Histologic type (WD versus MD/PD)	0.508	1.385	0.528-3.634
T classification (T1+2 versus T3+4)	0.749	1.160	0.467-2.880
N classification (pN0 versus pN1-3)	0.568	1.282	0.547-3.008
Expression of IL-33 (high versus low)	0.007 *	3.241	1.383-7.596
Expression of ST2 (high versus low)	0.030 *	2.473	1.094-5.593
MCD (high versus low)	0.045 *	2.242	1.020-4.931
Multivariate analysis			
Expression of IL-33 (high versus low)	0.084	2.499	0.884-7.069
Expression of ST2 (high versus low)	0.608	1.320	0.457-3.811
MCD (high versus low)	0.691	1.219	0.458-3.246

Abbreviations: RR, relative risk; WD, well differentiated; MD, moderately differentiated; PD, poorly differentiated

* Significance

Reviewer #2:

Several biomarkers which correlate with prognosis of SCC have been reported in the head and neck region. The authors reported expression of IL-33 in the tongue SCC and its potentials for predicting prognosis of the patients. This information may shed light to this area and is worthy for publication.

Response

We thank the reviewer for this excellent suggestion and finding our data convincing. We answered the questions that were found in reviewer' text.

1. "2.2. Immunohistochemical analysis

The specimens, including the primary tumors, were fixed in 10% formalin solution and embedded in paraffin."

This sentence means that all specimens were not primary lesions, that is tongue carcinoma. If so, were other specimens obtained from lymph node? Show us percentages of specimens from primary lesion. In addition, was there any difference between primary and metastatic lesion?

Sorry for our sentence which caused misunderstanding. We meant that all specimens were the primary tumors. We didn't evaluate the other specimens like lymph node.

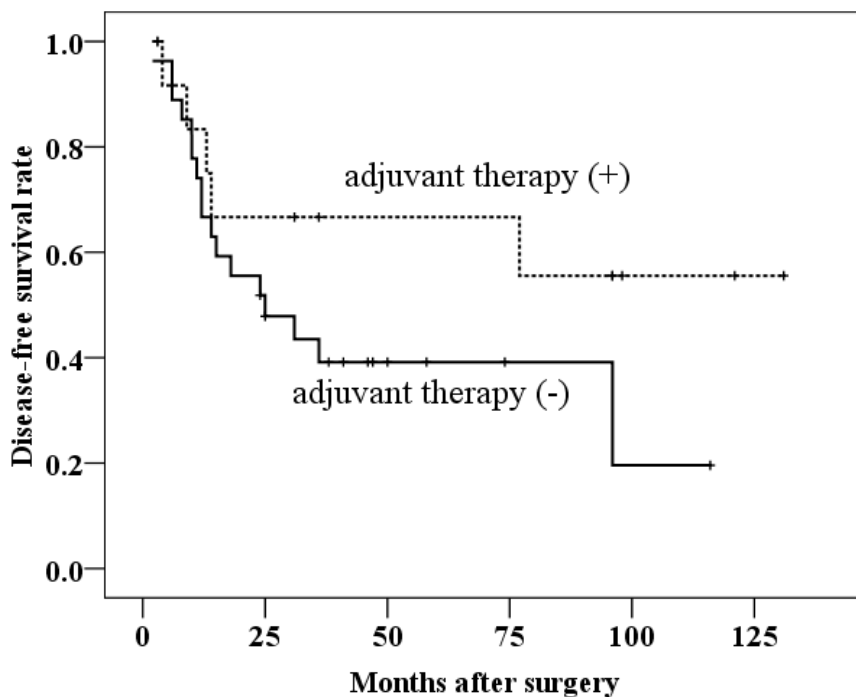
We have corrected the sentence at line 121 intelligibly.

2. Concerning LN metastasis, did you estimate an extranodal extension? If so, was that related to high IL-33?

This is a very good point. Although an extranodal extension also weighs on our mind, we did not estimate it in this study. However, most of IL-33 positive patients developed regional LN recurrences or residual diseases. So, we speculate IL-33 might have contributed to extracapsular invasion.

3. Is there any different prognosis among the high IL-33 patients with/ without postoperative adjuvant therapy?

To examine the relationship of the prognosis of the high IL-33 patients with postoperative adjuvant therapy, Kaplan–Meier survival analysis was performed and differences between curves were analyzed using the log-rank test. Of the 41 patients assigned to the high IL-33 group, 14 patients underwent postoperative treatment. Although the patients with postoperative treatment tended to have better prognosis than those without postoperative treatment, there was no significant difference between the two ($p = 0.145$).



Expression of interleukin-33 is correlated with poor prognosis in patients with squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue

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Key words: interleukin-33, ST2, tongue squamous cell carcinoma, inflammation, mast cell, malignant potential

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2 **squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue**

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26 **Abstract**

27 *Objective:* The aim of this study was to clarify the role of IL-33 in tumor progression.

28 *Methods:* Surgical specimens from 81 patients with squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue
29 were studied using immunohistochemistry. Primary tumor sections were analyzed for IL-33
30 and ST2 expression. To examine the influence of IL-33 on the microenvironment of the
31 tumor, we determined the mast cell density (MCD) and microvessel density of the stroma.

32 *Results:* Patients with high IL-33 expression had a significantly worse prognosis ($p = 0.004$).
33 IL-33 expression was significantly elevated in patients with local and nodal recurrence ($p =$
34 0.014 and $p = 0.019$). ST2 expression was also associated with a worse prognosis ($p = 0.024$)
35 and was significantly elevated in patients with nodal recurrence ($p = 0.004$). MCD was
36 associated with worse prognosis ($p = 0.038$) and correlated significantly with IL-33
37 expression ($r = 0.626, p < 0.001$). Microvessels in the stroma were significantly increased in
38 the high IL-33 group ($p < 0.001$).

39 *Conclusion:* These data suggest that the IL-33/ST2 axis contributes to tumor aggressiveness
40 and affects the tumor microenvironment. Immunohistochemical evaluation of IL-33 and ST2
41 is useful for identifying patients at a high risk for poor prognosis.

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44 **Key words:** interleukin-33, ST2, tongue squamous cell carcinoma, inflammation, mast cell,
45 malignant potential

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51 **1. Introduction**

52

53 Tongue squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) is one of the most common head and neck
54 cancers. Prognosis is associated with clinical stage, particularly nodal status. Therefore, the
55 expression of metastasis-related factors such as matrix metalloproteinases, syndecans, and
56 vascular endothelial growth factor predicts the treatment outcome of patients with tongue
57 SCC [1-4]. Tongue SCC is associated with inflammation in the oral cavity, which is mediated
58 by chronic trauma such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and periodontal disease and is
59 associated with oral carcinogenesis [5]. Moreover, inflammation promotes cancer
60 development and progression through its effects on the tumor microenvironment [6].
61 Inflammatory mediators and specific cell types influence the migration, invasion, and
62 metastasis of tumor cells [6]. Therefore, efficacious therapies must be developed for targeting
63 inflammation in patients with cancer.

64 Interleukin (IL)-33 is a member of the IL-1 family and functions as a ligand for ST2,
65 which is a member of the IL-1 receptor family. IL-33 is expressed by many cell types,
66 including epithelial cells, endothelial cells, smooth muscle cells, fibroblasts, and activated
67 macrophages [7]. In contrast, mast cells (MCs), Th2 cells, eosinophils, basophils, epithelial
68 cells, and endothelial cells express ST2 [8-12]. Unlike other members of the IL-1 family, the
69 cleavage site for caspases is located within the IL-1-like domain of IL-33, and the cleavage
70 products are biologically inactive.

71 Biologically active, full-length IL-33 is released when cells sense inflammatory signals or
72 undergo necrosis. Therefore, IL-33 acts as an endogenous danger signal or “alarmin”
73 [8,13,14]. Binding of extracellular IL-33 to ST2 preferentially induces Th2-type immune
74 responses with concomitant expression of Th2-associated cytokines [7]. It is clear that the
75 potency of IL-33 for activating several immunocytes probably impacts inflammation. For

76 example, IL-33 is expressed by patients with chronic gastritis, chronic hepatitis, and
77 inflammatory bowel disease [15-17]. Inflammatory diseases increase the risk of developing
78 cancer, suggesting that IL-33 may play an important role in cancer pathogenesis [18,19].

79 IL-33 affects the phenotype of cell types that express the transmembrane isoform of ST2.
80 The inflammatory component of a neoplasm may include a diverse leukocyte population, and
81 ST2 is expressed on many of these inflammatory cells, including MCs, macrophages,
82 dendritic cells, eosinophils, and neutrophils [8,20]. Among the inflammatory cells in the
83 stroma of the tumor, MCs are important because they secrete cytokines and chemokines, and
84 influence the phenotypes of other cells through these soluble mediators as well as through
85 cell–cell interaction. Moreover, MCs reside in the connective tissue surrounding tumors, and
86 the accumulation of MCs is often associated with poor prognosis [21,22]. IL-33 is a potent
87 activator of MCs and induces their degranulation and maturation, promotes survival, and
88 induces the production of several proinflammatory cytokines [9,23]. Therefore, it is
89 reasonable to assume that IL-33 contributes significantly to the malignant potential of tumor
90 cells through the formation of an inflammatory tumor microenvironment.

91 We reported the carcinogenic role of activation-induced cytidine deaminase (AID), which
92 is induced by an inflammatory environment [24]. However, the expression of AID does not
93 correlate with the progression of tongue SCC, which diverted our attention to IL-33.
94 Inflammation mediated by tobacco smoking, which is associated with tongue SCC, induces
95 the expression of IL-33/ST2 in mice [25]. In the present study, we determined the expression
96 of IL-33 in patients with tongue SCC using immunohistochemistry and assessed the
97 relationship between the expression of IL-33 and prognosis of tongue SCC. Furthermore, to
98 evaluate the influence of IL-33 on the tumor microenvironment, we determined the density of
99 MCs in the stroma surrounding the tumor.

100

101 **2. Materials and methods**

102

103 *2.1. Patients and specimens*

104

105 This study included 81 patients who were diagnosed with tongue SCC. **Informed consent**
106 **was obtained from all patients in accordance with our institutional guidelines.** The patient
107 characteristics are presented in Table 1. Their clinical status was determined according to the
108 TNM classification system of the Union Internationale Contre le Cancer [26]. All patients
109 underwent surgery at the Division of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery, Kanazawa
110 University Hospital between 1982 and 2007. Resection of the primary tongue tumor was
111 performed in all patients, and neck dissection was performed in 53 patients with clinically
112 positive nodes or tumors that were more advanced than stage T2. The 22 patients with
113 positive margins or pathologically positive lymph node metastasis underwent postoperative
114 treatment, including radiotherapy. The mean follow-up period was 50.7 months (median, 41
115 months; range, 1–131 months). Disease-free survival was calculated from the date of
116 treatment until the time of local recurrence or the detection of metastases, including
117 recurrence in the neck lymph nodes.

118

119 *2.2. Immunohistochemical analysis*

120

121 **All specimens were the primary tumors. They** were fixed in 10% formalin solution and
122 embedded in paraffin. Serial 3- μ m-thick sections were cut from each block, dewaxed, and
123 rehydrated. Antigen retrieval was performed by heating slides for 30 min in citrate buffer (pH
124 6.0) at 90°C, cooling for 20 min, and washing. Endogenous peroxidase was quenched with
125 methanol and 3% H₂O₂ for 10 min, followed by incubation with Protein Block Serum

126 (DakoCytomation, Glostrup, Denmark) to decrease nonspecific binding. Then, the sections
127 were incubated overnight at 4°C with primary antibodies against IL-33 (diluted 1:100, rabbit
128 polyclonal, Medical & Biological Laboratories, Nagoya, Japan), ST2 (diluted 1:100, mouse
129 monoclonal, Medical & Biological Laboratories), mast cell tryptase (diluted 1:1000, mouse
130 monoclonal, Dako), and CD34 (diluted 1:50, mouse monoclonal, Dako). The sections were
131 incubated with secondary antibodies conjugated to a peroxidase-labeled polymer
132 (EnVision™+ system, Dako) at room temperature for 30 min. Immune complexes were
133 detected using 3,3'-diaminobenzidine tetrahydrochloride, and the sections were
134 counterstained with hematoxylin. The specificities of the staining reactions were confirmed
135 using nonimmune serum instead of the primary antibody.

136

137 *2.3. IL-33 and ST2 expression and mast cell density (MCD)*

138

139 Two investigators with no prior knowledge of the clinical data assessed the microvessel
140 counts and expression of IL-33, ST2, and tryptase.

141 Staining results for IL-33 and ST2 were classified by estimating the percentage of tumor
142 cells showing specific immunoreactivity. Two areas with a high density of stained cells were
143 selected in a 40× field, following which the number of immunoreactive cells and the total
144 number of tumor cells were counted in two areas in a 200× field. The percentage of positive
145 cells calculated as an average of two counts was used as the expression score. The antibody
146 against tryptase was used to determine MCD in the stroma surrounding the tumor and was
147 classified by estimating the percentage of tryptase-positive cells in the stroma. The two areas
148 with the highest MCD were identified in a 200× field. Then, the number of tryptase-positive
149 cells and the total number of stromal cells were counted in these areas in a 400× field. To

150 correlate these results with prognosis, the expression scores and MCD values were divided
151 into high and low groups using median scores as cutoff values.

152

153 *2.4. Microvessel density (MVD)*

154

155 MVD was calculated by counting the number of vessels stained with CD-34 according to
156 Weidner et al [27]. Three areas with the highest MVD were selected in a 40× to 100× field.
157 Then, microvessels were counted in the three areas in a 200× field. MVD was calculated as
158 the average of three counts. Any brownish-staining endothelial cell or endothelial cell cluster
159 was considered as a single microvessel.

160

161 *2.5. Statistical analysis*

162

163 IBM SPSS Statistics version 19 (IBM, Armonk, New York, USA) was used for data
164 analysis. The clinical characteristics of patients in terms of IL-33 and ST2 expression and
165 MCD were analyzed using Fisher's exact test and the chi-square test. The relationship
166 between IL-33 and ST2 expression and MCD was evaluated using Spearman's rank
167 correlation coefficient. Survival curves were evaluated using the Kaplan–Meier method, and
168 differences between curves were analyzed using the log-rank test. IL-33 expression in
169 relation to MVD was analyzed using the Mann–Whitney U test. A *p* value of <0.05 was
170 considered statistically significant.

171

172 **3. Results**

173

174 *3.1. IL-33 and ST2 expression*

175

176 IL-33 was detected only in the nuclei of normal epithelial cells, and ST2 was observed
177 most frequently, but faintly, in the membrane and cytoplasm of cells in the prickle cell to
178 horny layers (Fig. 1A and 1B). In contrast, IL-33 was detected in the nuclei and cytoplasm of
179 SCC cells (Fig. 1C). ST2 expression was most prominent in the membrane and cytoplasm of
180 the tumor cells (Fig. 1D). IL-33 and ST2 expression were observed in 100% and 95.1% of the
181 samples, respectively. The mean expression scores for IL-33 and ST2 in the tumor cells were
182 $41.59\% \pm 23.89\%$ and $22.14\% \pm 19.29\%$, respectively.

183

184 3.2. MCD

185

186 MCs were detected by staining with the anti-tryptase antibody in all samples, and they
187 were located in the stroma at the margins of the tumors (Fig. 1E). The mean MCD was
188 $12.54\% \pm 11.60\%$.

189

190 3.3. Correlation of IL-33 and ST2 expression with MCD

191

192 IL-33 expression correlated significantly with ST2 expression ($r = 0.558$, $p < 0.001$, Fig.
193 2A). IL-33 expression also correlated with MCD ($r = 0.626$, $p < 0.001$, Fig. 2B).

194

195 3.4. Association of IL-33 and ST2 expression and MCD with disease-free survival

196

197 To evaluate the prognostic value of IL-33 and ST2 expression and MCD in patients with
198 tongue SCC, patients were stratified into high and low groups as described in Methods. The
199 median expression scores for IL-33 and ST2 were 46% and 14%, respectively, and 9% for

200 MCD. These scores were used as cutoff values. Of the 81 specimens, 41 were assigned to the
201 high group. Kaplan–Meier survival analysis revealed that the prognosis was poorer for the
202 high IL-33 and ST2 groups than for the low IL-33 and ST2 groups ($p = 0.004$ and 0.024 ,
203 respectively, Fig. 3A and 3B). Similarly, the disease-free survival rate was significantly
204 lower in the high MCD group than in the low MCD group ($p = 0.038$, Fig. 3C).

205 Furthermore, to examine the relationship of the prognosis of the high IL-33 patients with
206 postoperative adjuvant therapy, Kaplan–Meier survival analysis was performed. Of the 41
207 patients assigned to the high IL-33 group, 14 patients underwent postoperative radiotherapy.
208 Although the patients with postoperative treatment tended to have better prognosis than those
209 without postoperative treatment, there was no significant difference between the two ($p =$
210 0.145 data not shown).

211

212 *3.5. Relationship between clinicopathological features and expression of IL-33, ST2, and* 213 *MCD*

214

215 The relationship between immunohistochemical data and clinicopathological factors of the
216 81 patients, including age, sex, T classification, N classification, clinical stage, local
217 recurrence, nodal recurrence, and distant metastatic recurrence, was evaluated using Fisher’s
218 exact test and the chi-square test (Table 1). Local recurrence was significantly more frequent
219 among patients in the high IL-33 group than among those in the low IL-33 group. IL-33 and
220 ST2 expression and MCD were significantly associated with nodal recurrence. A higher
221 frequency of nodal recurrence associated significantly with the high IL-33, ST2, and MCD
222 groups, but not with the low groups. There were no other significant differences in
223 clinicopathological features between the low and high IL-33, ST2, and MCD groups.

224

225 3.6. Relationship between IL-33 expression and MVD

226

227 Vascular endothelial cells reacted specifically with the antibody against CD34. The
228 microvessels were detected as scattered structures in the stroma of the tumor (Fig. 1F).
229 MVDs in all patients ranged from 7 to 75 (mean, 34.41 ± 16.46). The correlation between IL-
230 33 expression and MVD is shown in Table 2. MVD was significantly higher in the high IL-
231 33 group than in the low IL-33 group ($p < 0.001$).

232

233 **Discussion**

234

235 Little is known about the role of IL-33 in the pathogenesis and progression of carcinomas
236 [18,19]. This is the first study, to our knowledge, that demonstrates IL-33 expression in
237 tongue SCC and suggests its role in the progression of this tumor. We detected the expression
238 of IL-33 and ST2 in patients with tongue SCC by immunohistochemistry and found that the
239 expression of IL-33 was significantly correlated with poor prognosis.

240 We do not go further for the molecular mechanism which is attributable to the prognostic
241 value of IL-33 in this study, however, one of possible mechanism for IL-33-mediated
242 malignant progression could be an activation of ST2 downstream signal transduction such as
243 nuclear factor- κ B (NF- κ B). The IL-33/ST2 axis leads to activation of NF- κ B [8,20,28],
244 which is a key inducer of innate immunity and inflammation and has emerged as an
245 important endogenous tumor promoter [6,29]. NF- κ B activates the expression of genes
246 encoding inflammatory cytokines, adhesion molecules, enzymes of the prostaglandin-
247 synthesis pathway, inducible nitric oxide synthase, and angiogenic factors. Thus, activation
248 of NF- κ B through the IL-33 signaling pathway may cause cancer progression.

249 Th2-type responses induced by IL-33 may contribute to tumor progression. An induction
250 of IL-33 enhances Th2 immune response and polarizes naïve T cells to produce IL-5 and IL-
251 13 independently of IL-4 [8,20]. High levels of Th2 cytokines are observed in the tumor
252 microenvironment and peripheral blood of patients with certain cancers [30]. Moreover,
253 analysis of ST2-deficient mice demonstrates that the Th2-associated immune response is
254 inhibited in the absence of IL-33/ST2 signaling, leading to delayed induction of mammary
255 tumors and slower tumor growth and progression [31,32].

256 In addition, IL-33 induces angiogenesis and vasopermeability [33]. Our present study
257 reveals that IL-33 expression strongly correlated with MVD and was significantly associated
258 with local and nodal recurrence, but not clinical stage. These results suggest that IL-33
259 influences the malignant potential of the tumor through the promotion of angiogenesis and
260 activation of ST2 signaling.

261 We also demonstrate that IL-33 expression significantly correlated with MCD, suggesting
262 that IL-33 contributes to tumor progression by activating MCs. An induction of IL-33
263 potently activates the innate immune system by inducing pro-inflammatory cytokines and
264 chemokine production through the activation of MCs. It also induces the degranulation of
265 IgE-primed MCs and enhances their maturation and survival [8,20]. The MCD generally
266 correlates with poor outcome in patients with tongue SCC [34,35]. Furthermore, other studies
267 reveal that IL-33 activates macrophages, dendritic cells, eosinophils, and neutrophils [8,20].
268 These cells play important roles in enhancing an inflammatory environment that promotes
269 tumor growth in the surrounding tissue [6]. IL-33 may recruit these inflammatory cells to the
270 stroma of the tumor, subsequently enhancing tumor aggressiveness.

271 In conclusion, the high expression level of IL-33 is a risk factor for poor prognosis in
272 patients with tongue SCC. **In the high IL-33 patients, postoperative radiotherapy tended to**
273 **improve the prognosis. Those patients received postoperative radiotherapy were likely to**

274 have poor prognosis. Therefore, this result suggests that postoperative radiotherapy may be
275 effective in the treatment of the high IL-33 patients with positive margins or pathologically
276 positive lymph node metastasis.

277 IL-33 and ST2 may represent therapeutic targets for tongue SCC. Although it remains
278 unclear how IL-33/ST2 axis contributes to tumor progression, our findings indicate that the
279 IL-33/ST2 axis promotes the malignant potential of tumor by affecting the tumor as well as
280 its microenvironment. Further investigation is needed to define the role of IL-33 in malignant
281 potential.

282

283 **Acknowledgement**

284

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287

288 **Conflict of interest statement**

289 None.

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398 **Figure legends**

399

400 Figure 1. Immunohistochemical analysis of IL-33 and ST2 expression in normal epithelial
401 and tumor cells (A–D) and tryptase (E) and CD34 (F) expression. (original magnification
402 ×200)

403 A: IL-33 is detected in the nuclei of normal epithelial cells.

404 B: ST2 is faintly detected in the membrane and cytoplasm of normal epithelial cells.

405 C: IL-33 is detected in the nuclei and cytoplasm of tumor cells.

406 D: Intense staining of ST2 in the membrane and cytoplasm of tumor cells.

407 E: MCs were detected as dark-brown stained cells using an anti-tryptase antibody. They were
408 also located in the stroma at the tumor margins.

409 F: CD34 expression in vascular endothelial cells (stained dark brown) in the stroma of the
410 tumor.

411

412 Figure 2. Correlation between IL-33 and ST2 expression and MCD in tongue SCC.

413 A: Correlation between IL-33 and ST2 expression. IL-33 expression correlated significantly
414 with ST2 expression (Spearman's rank correlation coefficient).

415 B: Correlation between IL-33 expression and MCD. IL-33 expression correlated significantly
416 with MCD.

417

418 Figure 3. Kaplan–Meier analysis of disease-free survival rates.

419 Differences between the curves were analyzed using the log-rank test. Disease-free survival
420 rates in relation to IL-33 expression (A), ST2 expression (B), and MCD (C).

Expression of interleukin-33 is correlated with poor prognosis in patients with squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue

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Abstract

Objective: The aim of this study was to clarify the role of IL-33 in tumor progression.

Methods: Surgical specimens from 81 patients with squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue were studied using immunohistochemistry. Primary tumor sections were analyzed for IL-33 and ST2 expression. To examine the influence of IL-33 on the microenvironment of the tumor, we determined the mast cell density (MCD) and microvessel density of the stroma.

Results: Patients with high IL-33 expression had a significantly worse prognosis ($p = 0.004$). IL-33 expression was significantly elevated in patients with local and nodal recurrence ($p = 0.014$ and $p = 0.019$). ST2 expression was also associated with a worse prognosis ($p = 0.024$) and was significantly elevated in patients with nodal recurrence ($p = 0.004$). MCD was associated with worse prognosis ($p = 0.038$) and correlated significantly with IL-33 expression ($r = 0.626, p < 0.001$). Microvessels in the stroma were significantly increased in the high IL-33 group ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: These data suggest that the IL-33/ST2 axis contributes to tumor aggressiveness and affects the tumor microenvironment. Immunohistochemical evaluation of IL-33 and ST2 is useful for identifying patients at a high risk for poor prognosis.

Key words: interleukin-33, ST2, tongue squamous cell carcinoma, inflammation, mast cell, malignant potential

1. Introduction

Tongue squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) is one of the most common head and neck cancers. Prognosis is associated with clinical stage, particularly nodal status. Therefore, the expression of metastasis-related factors such as matrix metalloproteinases, syndecans, and vascular endothelial growth factor predicts the treatment outcome of patients with tongue SCC [1-4]. Tongue SCC is associated with inflammation in the oral cavity, which is mediated by chronic trauma such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and periodontal disease and is associated with oral carcinogenesis [5]. Moreover, inflammation promotes cancer development and progression through its effects on the tumor microenvironment [6]. Inflammatory mediators and specific cell types influence the migration, invasion, and metastasis of tumor cells [6]. Therefore, efficacious therapies must be developed for targeting inflammation in patients with cancer.

Interleukin (IL)-33 is a member of the IL-1 family and functions as a ligand for ST2, which is a member of the IL-1 receptor family. IL-33 is expressed by many cell types, including epithelial cells, endothelial cells, smooth muscle cells, fibroblasts, and activated macrophages [7]. In contrast, mast cells (MCs), Th2 cells, eosinophils, basophils, epithelial cells, and endothelial cells express ST2 [8-12]. Unlike other members of the IL-1 family, the cleavage site for caspases is located within the IL-1-like domain of IL-33, and the cleavage products are biologically inactive.

Biologically active, full-length IL-33 is released when cells sense inflammatory signals or undergo necrosis. Therefore, IL-33 acts as an endogenous danger signal or “alarmin” [8,13,14]. Binding of extracellular IL-33 to ST2 preferentially induces Th2-type immune responses with concomitant expression of Th2-associated cytokines [7]. It is clear that the potency of IL-33 for activating several immunocytes probably impacts inflammation. For

example, IL-33 is expressed by patients with chronic gastritis, chronic hepatitis, and inflammatory bowel disease [15-17]. Inflammatory diseases increase the risk of developing cancer, suggesting that IL-33 may play an important role in cancer pathogenesis [18,19].

IL-33 affects the phenotype of cell types that express the transmembrane isoform of ST2. The inflammatory component of a neoplasm may include a diverse leukocyte population, and ST2 is expressed on many of these inflammatory cells, including MCs, macrophages, dendritic cells, eosinophils, and neutrophils [8,20]. Among the inflammatory cells in the stroma of the tumor, MCs are important because they secrete cytokines and chemokines, and influence the phenotypes of other cells through these soluble mediators as well as through cell–cell interaction. Moreover, MCs reside in the connective tissue surrounding tumors, and the accumulation of MCs is often associated with poor prognosis [21,22]. IL-33 is a potent activator of MCs and induces their degranulation and maturation, promotes survival, and induces the production of several proinflammatory cytokines [9,23]. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that IL-33 contributes significantly to the malignant potential of tumor cells through the formation of an inflammatory tumor microenvironment.

We reported the carcinogenic role of activation-induced cytidine deaminase (AID), which is induced by an inflammatory environment [24]. However, the expression of AID does not correlate with the progression of tongue SCC, which diverted our attention to IL-33. Inflammation mediated by tobacco smoking, which is associated with tongue SCC, induces the expression of IL-33/ST2 in mice [25]. In the present study, we determined the expression of IL-33 in patients with tongue SCC using immunohistochemistry and assessed the relationship between the expression of IL-33 and prognosis of tongue SCC. Furthermore, to evaluate the influence of IL-33 on the tumor microenvironment, we determined the density of MCs in the stroma surrounding the tumor.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Patients and specimens

This study included 81 patients who were diagnosed with tongue SCC. Informed consent was obtained from all patients in accordance with our institutional guidelines. The patient characteristics are presented in Table 1. Their clinical status was determined according to the TNM classification system of the Union Internationale Contre le Cancer [26]. All patients underwent surgery at the Division of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery, Kanazawa University Hospital between 1982 and 2007. Resection of the primary tongue tumor was performed in all patients, and neck dissection was performed in 53 patients with clinically positive nodes or tumors that were more advanced than stage T2. The 22 patients with positive margins or pathologically positive lymph node metastasis underwent postoperative treatment, including radiotherapy. The mean follow-up period was 50.7 months (median, 41 months; range, 1–131 months). Disease-free survival was calculated from the date of treatment until the time of local recurrence or the detection of metastases, including recurrence in the neck lymph nodes.

2.2. Immunohistochemical analysis

All specimens were the primary tumors. They were fixed in 10% formalin solution and embedded in paraffin. Serial 3- μ m-thick sections were cut from each block, dewaxed, and rehydrated. Antigen retrieval was performed by heating slides for 30 min in citrate buffer (pH 6.0) at 90°C, cooling for 20 min, and washing. Endogenous peroxidase was quenched with methanol and 3% H₂O₂ for 10 min, followed by incubation with Protein Block Serum

(DakoCytomation, Glostrup, Denmark) to decrease nonspecific binding. Then, the sections were incubated overnight at 4°C with primary antibodies against IL-33 (diluted 1:100, rabbit polyclonal, Medical & Biological Laboratories, Nagoya, Japan), ST2 (diluted 1:100, mouse monoclonal, Medical & Biological Laboratories), mast cell tryptase (diluted 1:1000, mouse monoclonal, Dako), and CD34 (diluted 1:50, mouse monoclonal, Dako). The sections were incubated with secondary antibodies conjugated to a peroxidase-labeled polymer (EnVision™+ system, Dako) at room temperature for 30 min. Immune complexes were detected using 3,3'-diaminobenzidine tetrahydrochloride, and the sections were counterstained with hematoxylin. The specificities of the staining reactions were confirmed using nonimmune serum instead of the primary antibody.

2.3. IL-33 and ST2 expression and mast cell density (MCD)

Two investigators with no prior knowledge of the clinical data assessed the microvessel counts and expression of IL-33, ST2, and tryptase.

Staining results for IL-33 and ST2 were classified by estimating the percentage of tumor cells showing specific immunoreactivity. Two areas with a high density of stained cells were selected in a 40× field, following which the number of immunoreactive cells and the total number of tumor cells were counted in two areas in a 200× field. The percentage of positive cells calculated as an average of two counts was used as the expression score. The antibody against tryptase was used to determine MCD in the stroma surrounding the tumor and was classified by estimating the percentage of tryptase-positive cells in the stroma. The two areas with the highest MCD were identified in a 200× field. Then, the number of tryptase-positive cells and the total number of stromal cells were counted in these areas in a 400× field. To

correlate these results with prognosis, the expression scores and MCD values were divided into high and low groups using median scores as cutoff values.

2.4. Microvessel density (MVD)

MVD was calculated by counting the number of vessels stained with CD-34 according to Weidner et al [27]. Three areas with the highest MVD were selected in a 40× to 100× field. Then, microvessels were counted in the three areas in a 200× field. MVD was calculated as the average of three counts. Any brownish-staining endothelial cell or endothelial cell cluster was considered as a single microvessel.

2.5. Statistical analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics version 19 (IBM, Armonk, New York, USA) was used for data analysis. The clinical characteristics of patients in terms of IL-33 and ST2 expression and MCD were analyzed using Fisher's exact test and the chi-square test. The relationship between IL-33 and ST2 expression and MCD was evaluated using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. Survival curves were evaluated using the Kaplan–Meier method, and differences between curves were analyzed using the log-rank test. IL-33 expression in relation to MVD was analyzed using the Mann–Whitney U test. A *p* value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

3. Results

3.1. IL-33 and ST2 expression

IL-33 was detected only in the nuclei of normal epithelial cells, and ST2 was observed most frequently, but faintly, in the membrane and cytoplasm of cells in the prickle cell to horny layers (Fig. 1A and 1B). In contrast, IL-33 was detected in the nuclei and cytoplasm of SCC cells (Fig. 1C). ST2 expression was most prominent in the membrane and cytoplasm of the tumor cells (Fig. 1D). IL-33 and ST2 expression were observed in 100% and 95.1% of the samples, respectively. The mean expression scores for IL-33 and ST2 in the tumor cells were $41.59\% \pm 23.89\%$ and $22.14\% \pm 19.29\%$, respectively.

3.2. MCD

MCs were detected by staining with the anti-tryptase antibody in all samples, and they were located in the stroma at the margins of the tumors (Fig. 1E). The mean MCD was $12.54\% \pm 11.60\%$.

3.3. Correlation of IL-33 and ST2 expression with MCD

IL-33 expression correlated significantly with ST2 expression ($r = 0.558$, $p < 0.001$, Fig. 2A). IL-33 expression also correlated with MCD ($r = 0.626$, $p < 0.001$, Fig. 2B).

3.4. Association of IL-33 and ST2 expression and MCD with disease-free survival

To evaluate the prognostic value of IL-33 and ST2 expression and MCD in patients with tongue SCC, patients were stratified into high and low groups as described in Methods. The median expression scores for IL-33 and ST2 were 46% and 14%, respectively, and 9% for

MCD. These scores were used as cutoff values. Of the 81 specimens, 41 were assigned to the high group. Kaplan–Meier survival analysis revealed that the prognosis was poorer for the high IL-33 and ST2 groups than for the low IL-33 and ST2 groups ($p = 0.004$ and 0.024 , respectively, Fig. 3A and 3B). Similarly, the disease-free survival rate was significantly lower in the high MCD group than in the low MCD group ($p = 0.038$, Fig. 3C).

Furthermore, to examine the relationship of the prognosis of the high IL-33 patients with postoperative adjuvant therapy, Kaplan–Meier survival analysis was performed. Of the 41 patients assigned to the high IL-33 group, 14 patients underwent postoperative radiotherapy. Although the patients with postoperative treatment tended to have better prognosis than those without postoperative treatment, there was no significant difference between the two ($p = 0.145$ data not shown).

3.5. Relationship between clinicopathological features and expression of IL-33, ST2, and MCD

The relationship between immunohistochemical data and clinicopathological factors of the 81 patients, including age, sex, T classification, N classification, clinical stage, local recurrence, nodal recurrence, and distant metastatic recurrence, was evaluated using Fisher's exact test and the chi-square test (Table 1). Local recurrence was significantly more frequent among patients in the high IL-33 group than among those in the low IL-33 group. IL-33 and ST2 expression and MCD were significantly associated with nodal recurrence. A higher frequency of nodal recurrence associated significantly with the high IL-33, ST2, and MCD groups, but not with the low groups. There were no other significant differences in clinicopathological features between the low and high IL-33, ST2, and MCD groups.

3.6. Relationship between IL-33 expression and MVD

Vascular endothelial cells reacted specifically with the antibody against CD34. The microvessels were detected as scattered structures in the stroma of the tumor (Fig. 1F). MVDs in all patients ranged from 7 to 75 (mean, 34.41 ± 16.46). The correlation between IL-33 expression and MVD is shown in Table 2. MVD was significantly higher in the high IL-33 group than in the low IL-33 group ($p < 0.001$).

Discussion

Little is known about the role of IL-33 in the pathogenesis and progression of carcinomas [18,19]. This is the first study, to our knowledge, that demonstrates IL-33 expression in tongue SCC and suggests its role in the progression of this tumor. We detected the expression of IL-33 and ST2 in patients with tongue SCC by immunohistochemistry and found that the expression of IL-33 was significantly correlated with poor prognosis.

We do not go further for the molecular mechanism which is attributable to the prognostic value of IL-33 in this study, however, one of possible mechanism for IL-33-mediated malignant progression could be an activation of ST2 downstream signal transduction such as nuclear factor- κ B (NF- κ B). The IL-33/ST2 axis leads to activation of NF- κ B [8,20,28], which is a key inducer of innate immunity and inflammation and has emerged as an important endogenous tumor promoter [6,29]. NF- κ B activates the expression of genes encoding inflammatory cytokines, adhesion molecules, enzymes of the prostaglandin-synthesis pathway, inducible nitric oxide synthase, and angiogenic factors. Thus, activation of NF- κ B through the IL-33 signaling pathway may cause cancer progression.

Th2-type responses induced by IL-33 may contribute to tumor progression. An induction of IL-33 enhances Th2 immune response and polarizes naïve T cells to produce IL-5 and IL-13 independently of IL-4 [8,20]. High levels of Th2 cytokines are observed in the tumor microenvironment and peripheral blood of patients with certain cancers [30]. Moreover, analysis of ST2-deficient mice demonstrates that the Th2-associated immune response is inhibited in the absence of IL-33/ST2 signaling, leading to delayed induction of mammary tumors and slower tumor growth and progression [31,32].

In addition, IL-33 induces angiogenesis and vasopermeability [33]. Our present study reveals that IL-33 expression strongly correlated with MVD and was significantly associated with local and nodal recurrence, but not clinical stage. These results suggest that IL-33 influences the malignant potential of the tumor through the promotion of angiogenesis and activation of ST2 signaling.

We also demonstrate that IL-33 expression significantly correlated with MCD, suggesting that IL-33 contributes to tumor progression by activating MCs. An induction of IL-33 potently activates the innate immune system by inducing pro-inflammatory cytokines and chemokine production through the activation of MCs. It also induces the degranulation of IgE-primed MCs and enhances their maturation and survival [8,20]. The MCD generally correlates with poor outcome in patients with tongue SCC [34,35]. Furthermore, other studies reveal that IL-33 activates macrophages, dendritic cells, eosinophils, and neutrophils [8,20]. These cells play important roles in enhancing an inflammatory environment that promotes tumor growth in the surrounding tissue [6]. IL-33 may recruit these inflammatory cells to the stroma of the tumor, subsequently enhancing tumor aggressiveness.

In conclusion, the high expression level of IL-33 is a risk factor for poor prognosis in patients with tongue SCC. In the high IL-33 patients, postoperative radiotherapy tended to improve the prognosis. Those patients received postoperative radiotherapy were likely to

have poor prognosis. Therefore, this result suggests that postoperative radiotherapy may be effective in the treatment of the high IL-33 patients with positive margins or pathologically positive lymph node metastasis.

IL-33 and ST2 may represent therapeutic targets for tongue SCC. Although it remains unclear how IL-33/ST2 axis contributes to tumor progression, our findings indicate that the IL-33/ST2 axis promotes the malignant potential of tumor by affecting the tumor as well as its microenvironment. Further investigation is needed to define the role of IL-33 in malignant potential.

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Conflict of interest statement

None.

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Figure legends

Figure 1. Immunohistochemical analysis of IL-33 and ST2 expression in normal epithelial and tumor cells (A–D) and tryptase (E) and CD34 (F) expression. (original magnification $\times 200$)

A: IL-33 is detected in the nuclei of normal epithelial cells.

B: ST2 is faintly detected in the membrane and cytoplasm of normal epithelial cells.

C: IL-33 is detected in the nuclei and cytoplasm of tumor cells.

D: Intense staining of ST2 in the membrane and cytoplasm of tumor cells.

E: MCs were detected as dark-brown stained cells using an anti-tryptase antibody. They were also located in the stroma at the tumor margins.

F: CD34 expression in vascular endothelial cells (stained dark brown) in the stroma of the tumor.

Figure 2. Correlation between IL-33 and ST2 expression and MCD in tongue SCC.

A: Correlation between IL-33 and ST2 expression. IL-33 expression correlated significantly with ST2 expression (Spearman's rank correlation coefficient).

B: Correlation between IL-33 expression and MCD. IL-33 expression correlated significantly with MCD.

Figure 3. Kaplan–Meier analysis of disease-free survival rates.

Differences between the curves were analyzed using the log-rank test. Disease-free survival rates in relation to IL-33 expression (A), ST2 expression (B), and MCD (C).

Table 1
Relationship between clinicopathological features and expression of IL-33, ST2, and MCD

Characteristic		Samples	Number of high IL-33 expression (%)	<i>p</i>	Number of high ST2 expression (%)	<i>p</i>	Number of high MCD (%)	<i>p</i>
Sex	Male	50	24 (48.0)	0.550	25 (50.0)	0.888	25 (50.0)	0.888
	Femal	31	17 (54.8)		16 (51.6)			
Age	≤60	40	17 (42.5)	0.149	20 (50.0)	0.913	21 (52.5)	0.738
	>60	41	24 (58.5)		21 (51.2)			
Histologic type	WD	70	37 (52.9)	0.349	37 (52.9)	0.349	36 (51.4)	0.756
	MD/PD	11	4 (36.4)		4 (36.4)			
T classification	T1+T2	67	32 (47.8)	0.379	32 (47.8)	0.379	32 (47.8)	0.379
	T3+T4	14	9 (64.3)		9 (64.3)			
N classification	pN0	62	32 (51.6)	0.798	34 (54.8)	0.198	35 (56.5)	0.070
	pN1-3	19	9 (47.4)		7 (36.8)			
Stage	I + II	55	25 (45.5)	0.176	26 (47.3)	0.381	27 (49.1)	0.689
	III+IV	26	16 (61.5)		15 (57.7)			
Local recurrence	negative	71	32 (45.1)	0.014 *	34 (47.9)	0.312	35 (49.3)	0.737
	positive	10	9 (90.0)		7 (70.0)			
Nodal recurrence	negative	61	26 (42.6)	0.019 *	25 (41.0)	0.004 *	25 (41.0)	0.004 *
	positive	20	15 (75.0)		16 (80.0)			
Distant metastatic recurrence	negative	78	38 (48.7)	0.241	40 (51.3)	0.616	39 (50.0)	1.000
	positive	3	3 (100.0)		1 (33.3)		2 (66.7)	

Abbreviations: WD, well differentiated; MD, moderately differentiated; PD, poorly differentiated

* Significance

Table 2

Relationship between IL-33 expression and MVD

		Number of patients	MVD (mean \pm SD)	<i>p</i>
IL-33	High	41	43.46 \pm 15.694	< 0.001 *
	Low	40	25.13 \pm 11.346	

* Significance

Figure 1
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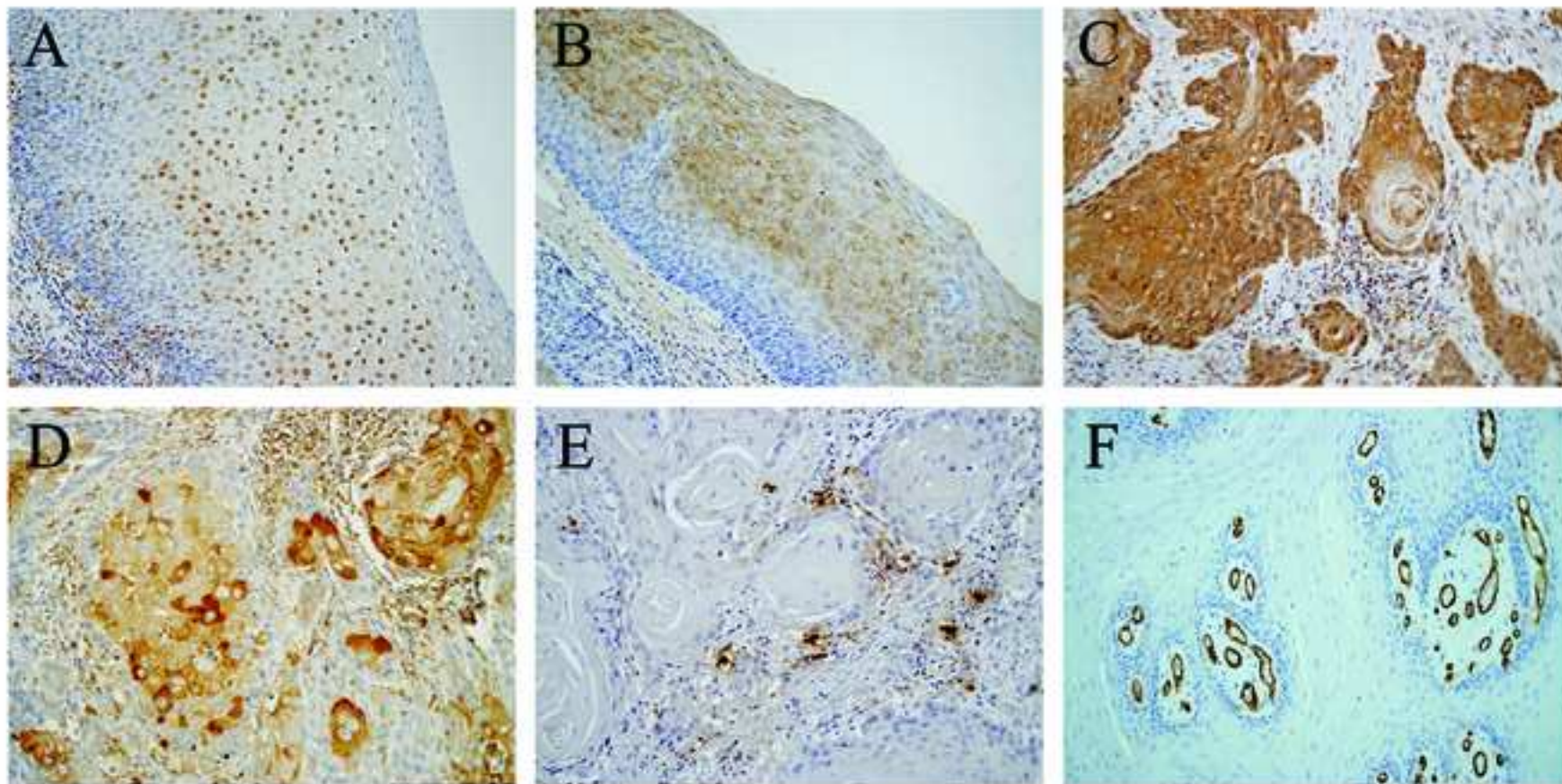


Figure 2

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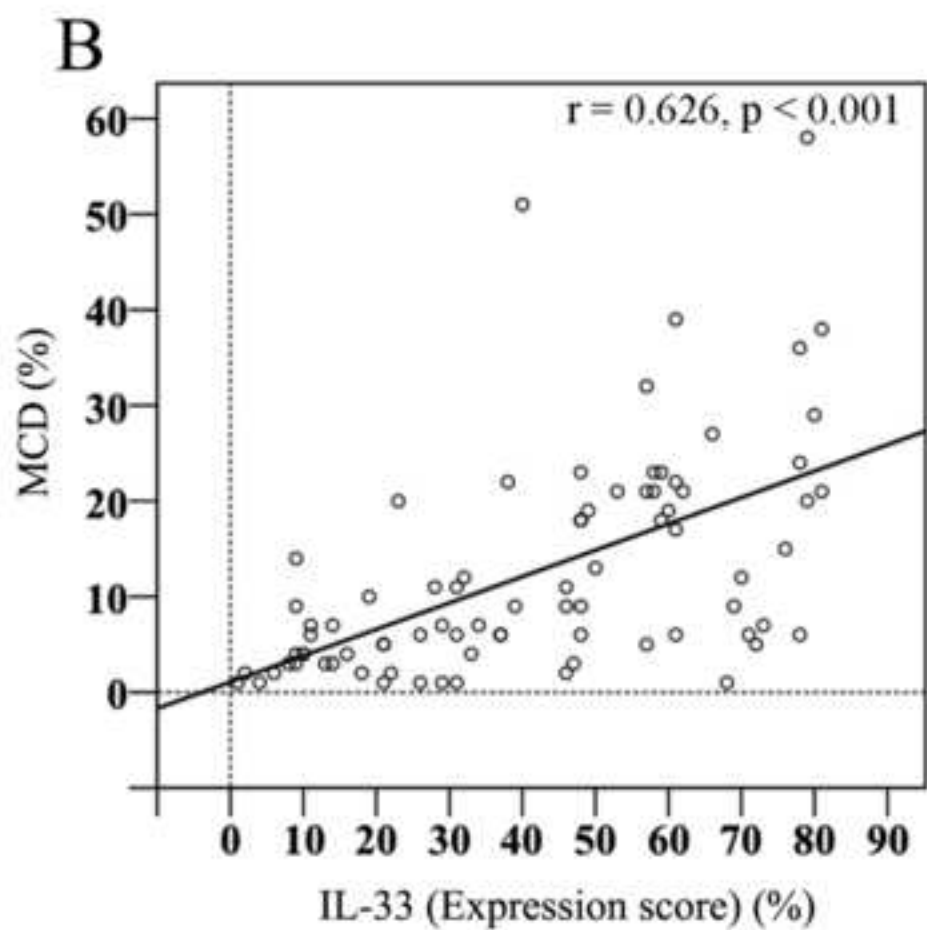
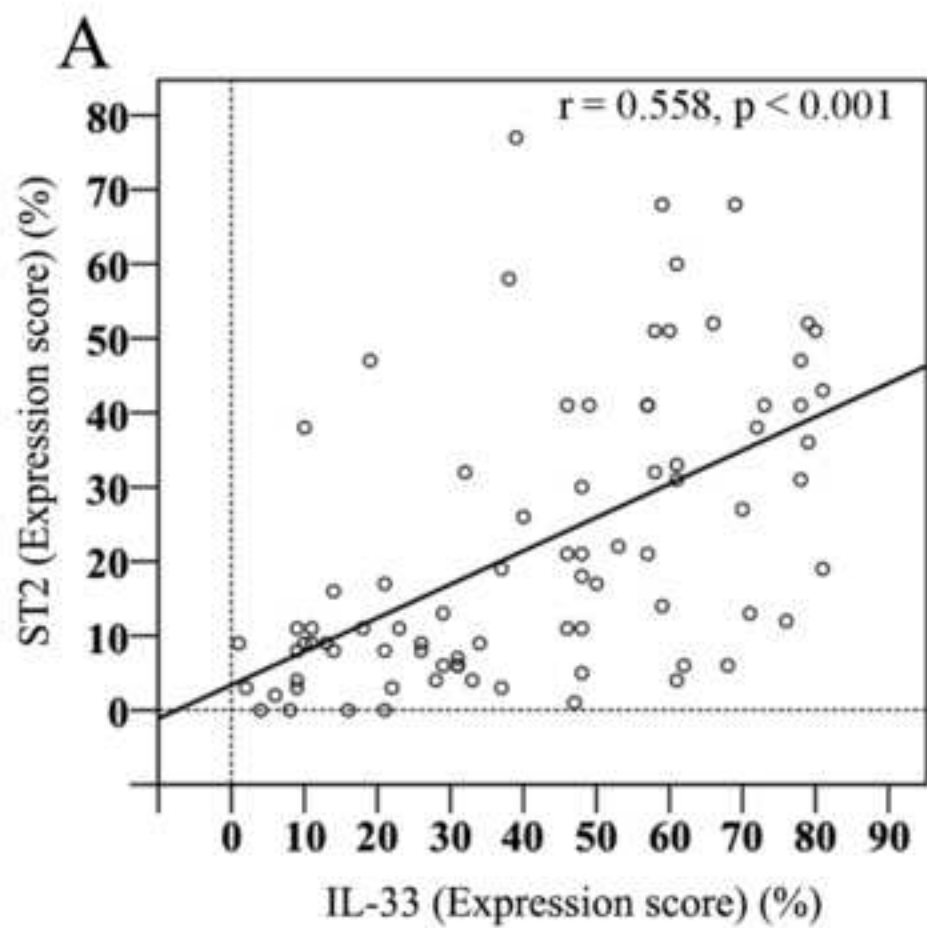


Figure 3
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