

New finding is potential predictor of deadly cancer common in Asia

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In a study recently published in *Cancer Research*, Van Andel Research Institute (VARI) researchers found a protein that could help predict the spread of the head and neck cancer nasopharyngeal carcinoma (NPC); this protein could also serve as part of a treatment strategy to stop the spread of the disease.

Though uncommon in the United States, NPC is one of the most common [malignant tumors](#) in [southern China](#) and Southeast Asia with incidence rates nearly 25 times that of most of the rest of the world. VARI researchers worked with scientists in Singapore, China, and the United States on the study.

"This study does not just report another [molecular marker](#) for metastasis of nasopharyngeal cancer, these investigators have revealed an important process related to this molecule," said Wei Zhang, Ph.D., Professor at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. "Characterization of this process will open diverse opportunities for effective inhibition of this novel target for [cancer metastasis](#)."

NPC is the most common cancer originating in the nasopharynx area of the throat and has the highest metastasis rate among head and neck cancers. By the time patients are diagnosed, the disease has usually spread to lymph nodes or distant organs such as the liver.

Working together with physicians and scientists at Sun Yat-sen University Cancer Center in China, VARI researchers found that the protein serglycin is a marker of metastasis for NPC. Higher levels of serglycin correlated with an unfavorable prognosis and the increased likelihood that cancer would spread to other parts of the body. Additionally, when researchers blocked the secretion of serglycin, it reduced the cells capacity to invade and metastasize, which could mean it may have potential as a [therapeutic target](#) to stop the spread of NPC.

"Serglycin is clearly important to metastasis in NPC, but there are other factors as well," said Chao-Nan Qian, M.D. Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist in the Laboratory of Cancer and Developmental Cell Biology at VARI. Qian also served as a medical expert for the "Healthy China 2020" healthcare reform plan. "Finding genes that cooperate with Serglycin that are also involved in metastasis could result in a comprehensive approach to treat NPC, and potentially help it from from spreading."

Provided by Van Andel Research Institute

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