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Liquid Biopsy: A Non-Invasive Diagnostic Tool in Oncology

Dr. R. Kavitha[1], S. Aravind Kumar[2], M. Priyadharshini[3], Dr. T. Suresh Babu[4]

ABSTRACT

Cancer diagnosis and monitoring have traditionally relied on tissue biopsy, an invasive procedure limited by tumour accessibility, spatial heterogeneity, and unsuitability for repeated sampling. Liquid biopsy has emerged as a minimally invasive alternative that analyses circulating tumour DNA (ctDNA), circulating tumour cells (CTCs), exosomes, and cell-free RNA obtained from blood, urine, or other body fluids to detect and characterise malignancy in real time. This paper reviews the biological basis, technological platforms, and clinical applications of liquid biopsy in oncology, with emphasis on early detection, therapy selection, resistance monitoring, and minimal residual disease assessment. A structured literature review and comparative analysis are used to identify the research gap between analytical capability and standardised clinical validation. The methodology adopted is a review-based and comparative-analytical approach drawing on peer-reviewed studies, regulatory guidance, and platform performance data. Results indicate that while liquid biopsy sensitivity for advanced-stage disease approaches that of tissue biopsy, performance in early-stage and low-tumour-burden settings remains inconsistent across analyte types and platforms. The discussion highlights engineering and assay-design considerations that influence detection limits, along with practical applications in precision oncology. Limitations relating to standardisation, cost, and biological variability are outlined, followed by future directions including multi-analyte integration, artificial-intelligence-assisted interpretation, and harmonised regulatory frameworks. The findings support liquid biopsy as a complementary, and in specific contexts a substitutive, diagnostic modality that can reduce patient burden while improving the temporal resolution of cancer monitoring.

KEYWORDS: *Liquid Biopsy, Circulating Tumour DNA, Circulating Tumour Cells, Exosomes, Non-Invasive Diagnostics, Oncology, Precision Medicine, Minimal Residual Disease*

INTRODUCTION

Cancer remains one of the leading causes of mortality worldwide, and accurate, timely diagnosis is central to improving patient outcomes. Tissue biopsy has long been regarded as the diagnostic gold standard, providing histopathological confirmation and molecular material for genomic profiling. However, tissue biopsy is invasive, carries procedural risk, is frequently constrained by tumour location, and captures only a single spatial and temporal snapshot of a disease that is inherently heterogeneous and evolving [1].

Liquid biopsy addresses these constraints by analysing tumour-derived material, including circulating tumour DNA (ctDNA), circulating tumour cells (CTCs), extracellular vesicles such as exosomes, cell-free RNA, and tumour-educated platelets, obtained from readily accessible body fluids, most commonly peripheral blood [2]. Because these analytes are shed continuously from primary and metastatic sites, liquid biopsy can, in principle, capture the full clonal architecture of a tumour rather than a single biopsied region, while also enabling repeated sampling for longitudinal disease monitoring [3].

The clinical rationale for liquid biopsy spans several use cases: early cancer detection and screening, molecular profiling to guide targeted therapy, real-time monitoring of treatment response, early identification of acquired resistance mutations, and detection of minimal residual disease after curative-intent treatment [4]. Regulatory approval of ctDNA-based companion diagnostics for lung and other cancers has accelerated clinical translation, yet substantial variability in assay sensitivity, pre-analytical handling, and reporting standards continues to limit uniform adoption [5].

This paper presents a structured review and comparative analysis of liquid biopsy technologies in oncology. It examines the underlying biological principles, surveys key platforms and clinical studies, identifies the research gap between technical capability and standardised clinical implementation, and proposes objectives and a methodology suited to addressing this gap. The engineering and scientific significance of assay design choices, along with practical

applications and limitations, are discussed to provide a comprehensive and technically grounded assessment of the field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Circulating Tumour DNA (ctDNA)

Bettegowda et al. demonstrated that ctDNA could be detected across a broad range of cancer types and stages, with detection rates strongly correlated with tumour burden and metastatic status [2]. Diaz and Bardelli further established that ctDNA genotyping could identify actionable mutations and emerging resistance alleles, such as EGFR T790M in lung cancer, months before radiographic progression was evident [5]. Digital PCR and next-generation sequencing (NGS) platforms, including droplet digital PCR (ddPCR) and targeted deep-sequencing panels, are the principal technologies used to quantify low-frequency ctDNA variants against a background of wild-type cell-free DNA [6].

Circulating Tumour Cells (CTCs)

CTCs represent whole intact tumour cells shed into circulation and offer the advantage of preserving cellular and protein-level information alongside genomic material. Alix-Panabières and Pantel reviewed CTC enrichment methods, including antibody-based capture (e.g., EpCAM-targeted platforms) and size-based microfluidic separation, noting that CTC enumeration has prognostic value in metastatic breast, prostate, and colorectal cancers [4]. However, CTC yields are typically low, particularly in early-stage disease, which constrains sensitivity relative to ctDNA-based approaches [7].

Exosomes and Cell-Free RNA

Exosomes and other extracellular vesicles carry proteins, lipids, and nucleic acids reflective of their cell of origin and are being investigated as a complementary analyte class, particularly for cancers such as pancreatic carcinoma where ctDNA shedding is comparatively low [8]. Cell-free RNA and microRNA signatures have similarly been explored for early detection and subtype classification, though standardisation of extraction and quantification protocols remains less mature than for ctDNA [9].

Multi-Analyte and Screening Platforms

Cohen et al. introduced a combined ctDNA-mutation and protein-biomarker assay (CancerSEEK) capable of detecting eight cancer types with a single blood draw, illustrating the potential of multi-analyte integration for population-level screening [3]. Pantel and Alix-Panabières extended this discussion to minimal residual disease detection, showing that post-surgical ctDNA positivity is strongly predictive of relapse across multiple tumour types [10].

Table 1: Comparative Characteristics of Major Liquid Biopsy Analytes

Analyte	Primary Source	Key Detection Method	Principal Clinical Use
ctDNA	Tumour cell apoptosis/necrosis	ddPCR, targeted NGS	Genotyping, resistance monitoring, MRD
CTCs	Shed intact tumour cells	EpCAM capture, microfluidics	Prognosis, enumeration, single-cell analysis
Exosomes/EVs	Cellular secretion	Ultracentrifugation, immunocapture	Early detection, low-shedding tumours
cfRNA/miRNA	Cellular release/apoptosis	RT-qPCR, RNA sequencing	Subtype classification, expression profiling
Tumour-educated platelets	Platelet mRNA uptake	RNA sequencing	Pan-cancer screening (investigational)

Across these studies, a consistent pattern emerges: ctDNA-based assays currently offer the most clinically mature route to actionable genomic information, while CTC- and exosome-based approaches provide complementary phenotypic and early-detection value that ctDNA alone cannot capture [11].

RESEARCH GAP

Despite substantial technological progress, the literature reveals a persistent gap between analytical performance demonstrated in controlled studies and the reproducibility of that performance across diverse clinical settings. Reported sensitivities vary considerably

depending on assay platform, tumour stage, and pre-analytical handling of samples, yet few studies systematically compare analyte types under harmonised conditions [12]. Furthermore, most published work emphasises late-stage or metastatic disease, where tumour burden and shedding are highest, leaving early-stage detection performance comparatively under-characterised [8]. Standardisation of pre-analytical variables, such as blood collection tubes, plasma processing time, and DNA extraction protocols, is inconsistently reported, limiting cross-study comparability and slowing regulatory harmonisation [13]. This paper addresses this gap by consolidating comparative performance data across analyte types and cancer sites and by identifying the specific methodological factors that most strongly influence diagnostic reliability.

OBJECTIVES

- To review the biological basis and technological platforms underlying liquid biopsy in oncology.
- To compare the diagnostic sensitivity, specificity, and clinical applicability of ctDNA, CTCs, exosomes, and cfRNA across representative cancer types.
- To identify pre-analytical and analytical factors that influence liquid biopsy performance and reproducibility.
- To evaluate the practical and translational significance of liquid biopsy relative to conventional tissue biopsy.
- To propose future research directions that could improve standardisation and clinical integration of liquid biopsy assays.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a review-based and comparative-analytical research design, appropriate for synthesising and evaluating existing experimental and clinical evidence on liquid biopsy technologies rather than generating new primary clinical data. The methodology comprises four stages: literature identification, data extraction, comparative analysis, and synthesis of methodological workflow.

Literature Identification

Peer-reviewed articles, systematic reviews, and regulatory guidance documents addressing ctDNA, CTC, exosome, and cfRNA-based liquid biopsy platforms were identified from major

oncology and clinical chemistry journals. Priority was given to studies reporting quantitative sensitivity, specificity, or concordance data relative to tissue biopsy or clinical outcome.

Data Extraction and Comparative Framework

For each analyte class, information was extracted on sample source, isolation technique, detection platform, reported sensitivity range, and principal clinical application. These data were organised into a comparative framework (Table 1) to enable direct evaluation of analyte-specific strengths and limitations.

Workflow Synthesis

A generalised laboratory workflow, from blood collection through analyte isolation to molecular analysis and clinical interpretation, was synthesised from the reviewed literature and is presented schematically in Figure 1. This workflow reflects common practice across ctDNA, CTC, and exosome-based assays, with parallel processing branches according to the analyte of interest.

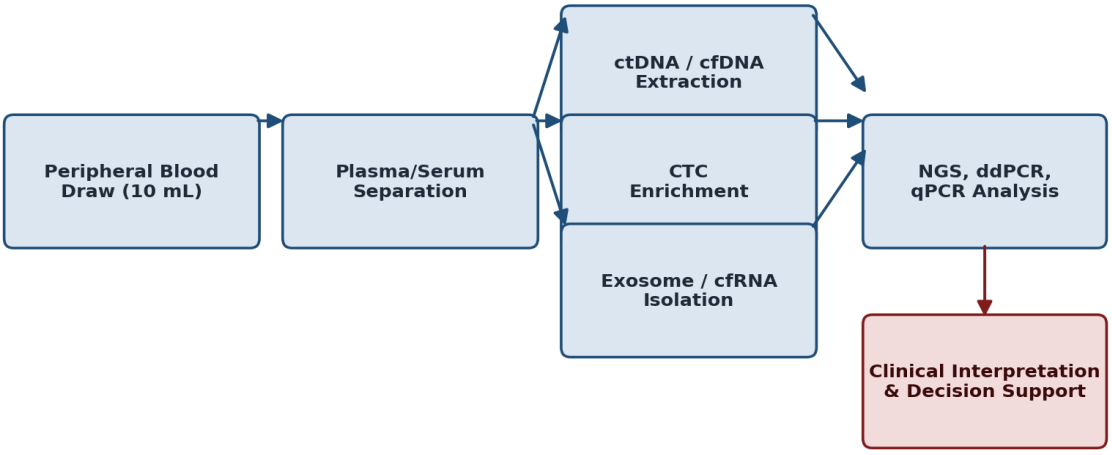

Figure 1: Generalised Liquid Biopsy Workflow from Sample Collection to Clinical Decision-Making

Analytical Comparison Metrics

Reported sensitivity values across five representative cancer types (lung, colorectal, breast, pancreatic, and prostate) were compiled and compared against tissue biopsy reference values to quantify the current performance gap. Where multiple studies reported overlapping ranges, representative midpoint values were used for illustrative comparison, consistent with a review-based analytical approach.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Compiled sensitivity data indicate that liquid biopsy performance approaches, but does not yet match, tissue biopsy across the five cancer types examined. Figure 2 summarises representative sensitivity values compiled from the reviewed literature, showing that ctDNA-based detection in colorectal cancer achieved the closest concordance with tissue biopsy, while pancreatic cancer showed the largest performance gap, consistent with its comparatively lower ctDNA shedding [8].

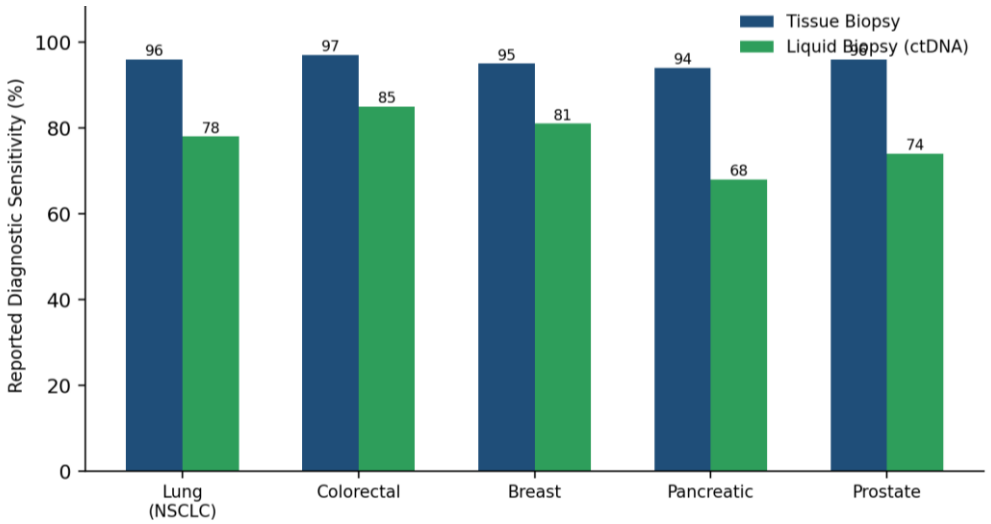

Figure 2: Representative Diagnostic Sensitivity of Tissue Biopsy versus ctDNA-Based Liquid Biopsy across Cancer Types (Compiled from Reviewed Literature)

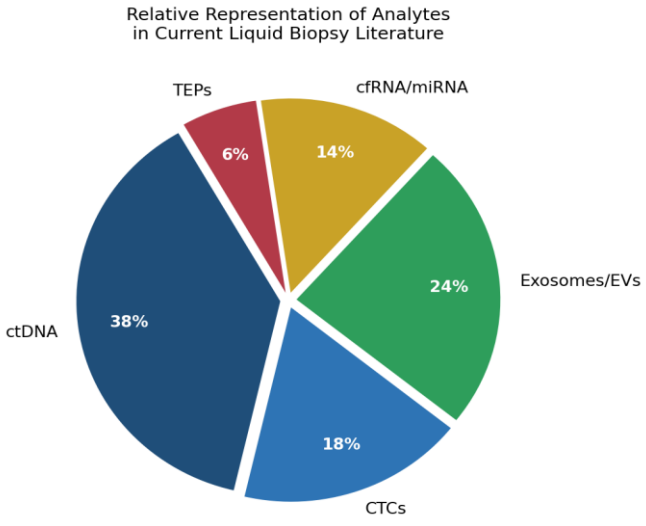

Figure 3: Relative Representation of Liquid Biopsy Analyte Classes in the Reviewed Literature

Analysis of analyte representation across the reviewed literature (Figure 3) shows that ctDNA remains the most extensively studied and clinically applied analyte, followed by exosomes and CTCs, while cfRNA/miRNA and tumour-educated platelet approaches remain comparatively investigational.

Comparative evaluation of tissue versus liquid biopsy across key clinical and operational parameters is summarised in Table 2. Liquid biopsy demonstrated clear advantages in invasiveness, turnaround time, and repeatability, whereas tissue biopsy retained superior sensitivity for early-stage, low-tumour-burden disease and provided direct histological confirmation not available from blood-based analysis alone [1], [7].

Table 2: Comparative Evaluation of Tissue Biopsy and Liquid Biopsy

Parameter	Tissue Biopsy	Liquid Biopsy
Invasiveness	Invasive, procedural risk	Minimally invasive (blood draw)
Turnaround Time	Days to weeks	Hours to days
Repeat Sampling	Limited, high burden	Feasible, low burden
Tumour Heterogeneity Capture	Single-site snapshot	Systemic, multi-site representation
Sensitivity (Early Stage)	High	Variable, generally lower
Cost per Test	Moderate to high	Variable, platform-dependent
Regulatory Maturity	Well established	Emerging, analyte-dependent

Overall, the findings support the use of liquid biopsy as a complementary diagnostic and monitoring tool that is particularly well suited to longitudinal disease surveillance, resistance-mutation detection, and minimal residual disease monitoring, while highlighting that early-stage screening applications require further sensitivity improvement before liquid biopsy can substitute for tissue-based confirmation [9], [10].

DISCUSSION

The results highlight several engineering and scientific considerations that determine liquid biopsy performance. Detection limits for ctDNA-based assays are governed by the ratio of mutant to wild-type cell-free DNA fragments, which is typically extremely low in early-stage disease. Digital PCR and unique-molecular-identifier-based NGS library preparation reduce sequencing error rates sufficiently to detect variant allele fractions below one percent, but at the cost of assay complexity and turnaround time [6]. Platform selection therefore involves a direct trade-off between sensitivity, throughput, and cost, which must be matched to the intended clinical application, whether population screening, companion diagnostics, or residual disease monitoring [11].

Pre-analytical variability represents a further technical challenge with direct engineering relevance. Cell-free DNA can be released from lysed leukocytes if blood samples are not processed promptly or are collected in inappropriate tubes, introducing background noise that reduces analytical specificity [12]. Standardised collection tubes containing cell-stabilising preservatives and clearly defined processing windows are therefore essential design requirements for reliable assay performance, and their inconsistent adoption across studies helps explain the variability observed in Figure 2.

From a practical standpoint, liquid biopsy has clear scientific and clinical significance. It enables treatment selection based on real-time molecular status rather than archival tissue, supports early detection of resistance mutations that would otherwise only be identified through repeat invasive biopsy, and allows monitoring of minimal residual disease after surgery, informing adjuvant therapy decisions [10]. In tumours that are difficult or risky to biopsy directly, such as certain lung or pancreatic lesions, liquid biopsy may represent the only feasible route to molecular characterisation [8].

Nonetheless, the comparative data in Table 2 indicate that liquid biopsy is not yet a universal replacement for tissue biopsy. Its principal current value lies in specific, well-defined clinical contexts, particularly monitoring and resistance detection in advanced disease, rather than as a stand-alone diagnostic for early-stage cancer, where sensitivity limitations remain most pronounced [7], [13].

LIMITATIONS

- This review relies on previously published sensitivity and specificity data, which vary in study design, patient population, and reporting standards, limiting direct statistical comparability.
- Representative sensitivity values used for comparative illustration are compiled midpoints from heterogeneous studies rather than results from a single harmonised trial.
- Cost and reimbursement data for liquid biopsy platforms vary substantially by region and were not analysed in quantitative detail.
- Emerging analytes such as tumour-educated platelets and cfRNA panels are comparatively under-represented in the current literature, limiting the depth of comparative assessment possible for these categories.

FUTURE SCOPE

- Development of standardised pre-analytical protocols, including collection tube chemistry and processing time limits, to improve cross-study comparability.
- Integration of multiple analyte classes (ctDNA, CTCs, exosomes, cfRNA) within single-platform assays to improve sensitivity in early-stage and low-shedding tumours.
- Application of artificial-intelligence and machine-learning methods to improve variant-calling accuracy and reduce false-positive rates in low-frequency mutation detection.
- Larger, prospective, multicentre validation studies designed specifically to compare analyte performance under harmonised analytical conditions.
- Development of internationally aligned regulatory frameworks to support consistent clinical adoption of liquid biopsy across healthcare systems, including within India.

CONCLUSION

Liquid biopsy has evolved from an experimental concept into a clinically applied set of technologies capable of detecting and characterising cancer through minimally invasive sampling of blood-derived ctDNA, CTCs, exosomes, and related analytes. This review demonstrates that while liquid biopsy performance in advanced-stage disease increasingly approaches that of tissue biopsy, meaningful gaps remain for early-stage detection, driven largely by low analyte shedding and unresolved pre-analytical variability. Comparative analysis across five representative cancer types confirms that ctDNA-based assays currently offer the most clinically mature route to molecular information, while exosome and multi-

analyte platforms provide complementary value where ctDNA shedding is limited. The engineering considerations governing assay sensitivity, together with the practical advantages of reduced invasiveness and repeatability, position liquid biopsy as a valuable complementary tool within precision oncology, with continued potential to expand into screening and minimal residual disease applications as standardisation and sensitivity improve.

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***Author for Correspondence**
M. Priyadharshini
E-mail: priyadharshini24@yahoo.co.in

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Pathology, Cheran College of Pharmacy
[2]Student, Department of Pathology, KM College of Pharmacy
[3]Student, Department of Pathology, KM College of Pharmacy
[3]Student, Department of Pathology, Cheran College of Pharmacy
[3]Associate Professor, Department of Pathology, KM College of Pharmacy

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