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Local Therapies for Colorectal Cancer Oligometastases to the Lung

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Abstract

Purpose of Review There is a growing consensus that oligometastatic disease-directed treatment is associated with improved oncologic outcomes in patients with colorectal cancer; however, the optimal local management of pulmonary oligometastases remains controversial.

Recent Findings While surgery has traditionally been recognized as the gold standard local treatment for pulmonary metastases, there is no prospective data supporting a significant benefit of pulmonary metastasectomy (PME) compared to other local treatment modalities, such as stereotactic ablative radiotherapy (SABR) or radiofrequency ablation (RFA). There has been increasing utilization of SABR for pulmonary oligometastases—particularly for patients who are not candidates for PME, with comparable survival, local control, and toxicity observed.

Summary There remains an unmet need for high-quality prospective data to optimally guide patient selection for local treatment modalities of pulmonary oligometastases. Given the evolving complexity of oligometastatic disease states and multitude of local and systemic treatment factors, multidisciplinary clinical discussion is essential.

Keywords Colorectal cancer · Oligometastasis · SABR · SBRT · Pulmonary metastasectomy · RFA

Introduction

Colorectal cancer (CRC) is the third most common cancer worldwide, with 1.8 million diagnoses in 2018 alone [1]. At the time of diagnosis, nearly one fourth of patients with CRC harbor metastatic disease, while more than half will develop metastases over their lifetime—most commonly to the liver and lung [2, 3]. Notably, 10–15% of all CRC patients will develop pulmonary metastases, while CRC remains the second most common cause of pulmonary secondary tumors

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overall [4, 5], highlighting the clinical need for effective therapeutic strategies in this setting.

Historically, the standard treatment for metastatic disease has been systemic therapy [6]. However, CRC often presents with solitary metastases or oligometastatic disease, and there is now growing evidence to support aggressive local management with improvement in oncological outcomes in patients with these disease states [7-10]. Further, compared to other distant metastatic sites, lung metastases from CRC may be associated with improved survival [11].

While complete surgical excision (pulmonary metastasectomy (PME)) has generally been acknowledged as a standard upfront treatment for patients with oligometastatic disease [12], more recently, non-invasive techniques have emerged as safe and efficacious strategies for patients with pulmonary oligometastases, including stereotactic body radiotherapy (SBRT)—also known as stereotactic ablative radiotherapy (SABR)—and radiofrequency ablation (RFA) [13, 14], which have been gaining popularity in use. In this review, we will discuss local management options for CRC with pulmonary oligometastases, including a review of recent literature on PME, local ablative techniques including SABR and RFA, as well as the role of perioperative (or periablative) chemotherapy and the sequence of therapy.

Classification of Metastases

Classically, lung metastases have been classified as synchronous (discovered during the initial diagnostic work-up) or metachronous (discovered after diagnostic examinations). Further, lung metastases can be defined as "isolated" or "non-isolated," depending on whether it is accompanied by additional extra-pulmonary metastases. Notably, one fourth of patients present initially with synchronous metastases, while 25% subsequently develop metachronous metastases, and only 2% present with isolated lung metastases [4]. "Initial" versus "non-initial" lung metastasis refers to the sequence of metastatic spread where the lungs are the first site of metastasis—with initial accounting for 74.4% of all CRC lung metastases [15]. Of these patients, 37.7–44.5% have isolated lung metastases, of which only 21.1–32.5% are PME candidates [16].

In current practice, we often assess whether disease is "oligometastatic." Notably, oligometastatic disease was first described by Hellman and Weichselbaum as a distinct cancer clinical state between locoregional and widespread metastatic disease-which has classically been defined as fewer than five lesions in three or less metastatic sites [17]. More recently, European Society for Radiotherapy and Oncology (ESTRO) and American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO) consensus guidelines have been introduced that define oligometastatic disease as 1-5 metastatic lesions, a controlled primary tumor being optional, where all metastatic sites can safely be treated with curative intent metastasis-directed therapy. The authors further acknowledge that there is no biological evidence to support the maximum number or size of metastases to confer clinical benefit with metastasis-directed therapy, and there was consensus that the maximum number of lesions that can safely be treated can vary on a case-by-case basis, with no specific limitation number of lesions [18•]. Moreover, ESTRO and the European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) further nuanced this nomenclature and classification to propose several oligometastatic disease states in a consensus statement. The first stratification (induced vs genuine metastatic disease) is based on the presence or absence of a history of polymetastatic disease. Genuine oligometastatic disease was further sub-classified into repeat and de-novo oligometastatic disease, while de novo could be further divided into synchronous and metachronous states. Lastly, oligorecurrence, oligoprogresssion, and oligoresistance was defined based on whether oligometastatic disease was diagnosed during a treatment-free interval, during active systemic therapy, or whether radiographically progressing [19•]. Importantly, this classification model awaits prospective validation and assessment before routine clinical implementation.

Pulmonary Metastectomy

Surgery has traditionally been recognized as the most effective local treatment for pulmonary metastases and is an established treatment option for metastatic CRC. Patients undergoing PME have reported 5-year survival rates ranging from 40 to 68% [20]—however, this data is largely based on retrospective case series. Moreover, this improvement in survival is commonly attributed to advances in surgical technique, increased availability of pulmonary metastectomy, multimodality treatment strategies, and the introduction of novel ablative therapies such as SABR and radiofrequency ablation [21–24]. Generally, the first choice for resection of lung metastases is a sublobar resection, such as a wedge resection or segmental resection of the lung. Additionally, several criteria should be met before patients are considered for this treatment: a complete (R0) resection is technically feasible, patients can functionally tolerate pulmonary resection, the primary tumor is controlled, and the absence of other extra-thoracic metastases (except for resectable liver metastases) [25-27].

It has been reported that postoperative mortality rates for PME are between 0 and 2% and overall complication rates range between 0 and 23%, with the most common postoperative complications being infection, pneumonia, air leakage, and atelectasis [28–30]. Given this, it is important to determine which patients will benefit the most from surgery. Several risk factors have been identified that predict for poor survival following PME: short disease-free interval between colorectal cancer and lung metastases, multiple (>2 or more) lung metastases, thoracic mediastinal/hilar lymph node involvement, and elevated pre-operative CEA level [31]. These criteria should be considered pre-operatively and discussed in a multidisciplinary setting to assess if a patient is a good candidate for PME.

While retrospective studies have demonstrated that PME is associated with longer survival compared to chemotherapy alone, with reported 5-year survival rates ranging from 41 to 68% versus 20% [20, 32]—to date, there have been no prospective data to support this theory. Moreover, several systematic reviews and meta-analyses have failed to demonstrate the effectiveness of PME on oncological outcomes [33, 34]. In a systematic review that included 50 studies published in 2010, the authors were unable to identify any meaningful conclusions of the effectiveness of surgical metastectomy, mainly due to the poor quality of evidence identified. Indeed, all studies were single arm with no controlled trials. Similarly, another 2013 systematic review of 25 studies was also unable to confirm the benefit of surgical resection, also due to lack of high-quality evidence [35].

To address this issue, the Pulmonary Metastasectomy in Colorectal Cancer (PulMiCC) trial was performed. This trial was a prospective multicenter study that randomized 65 patients between 2010 and 2016 to surgical metastasectomy or active clinical monitoring. However, the study ended early due to poor accrual and was underpowered. Notably, there was no significant difference in 5-year survival (38% vs. 29% respectively, HR 0.82, 95% CI: 0.43-1.56) in patients treated with metastasectomy or active clinical monitoring [36•]. The PulMiCC trial published an update in 2020, including 93 patients and reporting similar results with median survival following metastasectomy of 3.5 (95% CI: 3.1-6.6) years compared with 3.8 (95% CI: 3.1-4.6) years for controls with hazard ratio for death within 5 years of 0.93 (95% CI: 0.56–1.56) [37•]. Thus, the benefit of PME remains unclear in the absence of an adequately powered randomized trial. Additionally, the long survival of patients treated with active monitoring in this study suggests that CRC survival is indeed multifactorial and further investigations are needed to determine which patients with oligometastatic disease will benefit the most from aggressive local therapy [38].

Stereotactic Ablative Radiotherapy

Over the last decade, the use of stereotactic ablative radiotherapy (SABR) in patients with pulmonary metastases has been shown to be safe, effective [13, 14], and associated with improved survival and oncological outcomes [7–9]. As a result, there has been increasing utilization of SABR as a local treatment modality for pulmonary oligometastases [39]—particularly for patients who are not candidates for metastasectomy due to tumor location and/or tumor size. Compared to surgery, SABR has several advantages, including convenience, lower morbidity, good immediate tolerance, ability to treat central lesions, and no need for general anesthesia [40].

In a 2018 meta-analysis of 15 studies and 686 pulmonary metastases treated with SABR, local control (LC), which was defined as absence of growth within the irradiated site, was 81% at 1 year, 66% at 2 years, and 60% at 3 years. Three-year overall survival and progression-free survival rates were 52% and 13%, respectively. Radiation doses ranged from 30 to 60 Gy delivered in 1–8 fractions. Furthermore, there were no periprocedural mortalities and low incidence of severe toxicities with grade 3 toxicities ranging from 1.5 to 2.3%. The most common morbidities included fatigue, chest pain, and pneumonitis [41•].

There is now growing evidence that pulmonary metastases with colorectal origin have lower local control when treated with SABR compared to other tumor histologies [42, 43]. In the same 2018 meta-analysis, they reported LC was significantly worse for CRC pulmonary metastases compared to non-colorectal histologies (HR, 2.93; 95% confidence interval (CI), 1.93–4.45; P < 0.001). Additionally, gene expression analyses suggest that colorectal pulmonary metastases have intrinsic radioresistance and increased doses of SABR may be needed to achieve LC [44, 45]. However, despite worse LC, OS for CRC pulmonary metastases was higher compared to non-colorectal histologies [41•].

Several prognostic factors have been identified that help predict outcomes following SBRT for pulmonary metastases. Tanadini-Lang et al. developed a nomogram that found that survival after SBRT was influenced by size of the pulmonary lesion, whether synchronous metastases were present, and whether the primary lesion was controlled [46]. Other studies have also demonstrated the lesion size and the presence of synchronous metastases are important prognostic factors. Additional factors that predict for higher local recurrence following SABR include increased number of lesions and lower SABR dosage [47–49]. In fact, multiple studies have demonstrated that higher SABR dose (including biological effective dose (BED)) is associated with improved oncologic outcomes.

A 2019 single-institution retrospective review of 118 patients with 202 pulmonary oligometastases treated with SABR demonstrated 3- and 5-year LC rates of 81% and 77%, with 3- and 5-year OS rates of 55% and 36%, respectively. Furthermore, the authors reported that higher SABR dose $(BED_{10} > 100 \text{ Gy vs. } BED_{10} < 100 \text{ Gy})$ was associated with improved LC and OS-5-year LC 84% vs. 57% and 5-year OS 38% vs. 25%, respectively [50•]. Consistent with the above series, the impact of BED has been observed at the meta-analysis and multi-institutional level. A 2018 metaanalysis of 8 studies including 478 patients found improved LC with $BED_{10} > 100$ Gy (OR 0.16, 95% CI: 0.09–0.28, P < 0.001 [51•]. Additionally, in one of the largest series to date, a 2020 multicenter retrospective review of 330 patients with 371 pulmonary oligometastases from CRC treated with SABR, 3-year LC, 3-year PFS, and 3-year OS were 64.9%, 34.9%, and 63.4%, respectively. In this study, Yamamoto et al. stratified SABR dose into three subgroups, $BED_{10} < 106 \text{ Gy}, BED_{10} 106 - 150 \text{ Gy}, \text{ and } BED_{10} > 150 \text{ Gy},$ with 3-year LC of 57.0%, 65.3%, and 77.7%, respectively. In their MVA, $BED_{10} \ge 115$ Gy was associated with improved LC (HR: 0.55, 95% CI: 0.30–0.98, P = 0.04), RFS (HR: 0.67, 95% CI: 0.47–0.97, P=0.03, and OS (HR: 0.48, 95%) CI: 0.27–0.86), P = 0.01 [52•]. Furthermore, limited toxicity was seen even at these escalated doses with \geq grade 2 and > grade 3 toxicities of 10% and 1.5%, respectively.

Importantly, most data in the setting of SABR for CRC pulmonary metastases are retrospective series except for a few phase II studies investigating lung oligometastases [53, 54]. Notably, the 2020 the Stereotactic Ablative

Radiotherapy for the Comprehensive Treatment of Oligometastatic Cancers (SABR-COMET) multicenter phase II study was the first randomized trial to assess SABR for oligometastatic disease. In this trial, 18/99 patients had CRC primary tumors and with 89/191 metastatic lesions arising from the lung. The trial found an increase in median OS from 28 months with standard of care systemic therapy to 41 months with standard of care with SABR to all metastatic lesions [55].

Additionally, until recently, there has been no high-level evidence or consensus on the optimal dose and fractionation schedule for SABR in oligometastatic disease. The recently published Single-Fraction vs. Multifraction Stereotactic Ablative Body Radiotherapy for Pulmonary Oligometastases (SAFRON II) tested whether single-fraction or multifraction SABR is more effective for the treatment of patients with pulmonary oligometastases from any non-hematologic tumor located away from the central airways. This was a phase II trial that randomized 87 patients (47% with CRC primary) with 133 pulmonary oligometastases to receive a single fraction of 28 Gy or 4 fractions of 12 Gy to each oligometastasis. There was no significant difference observed between the arms for freedom-from local failure at 1 year (95% vs 93%) and 3 years (80% vs 64%), OS at 1 year (93% vs 95%) and 3 years (67% vs 81%), or grade 3 or higher treatment-related adverse events [56•].

Evidence for PME vs SABR

Systematic reviews, consensus statements, and clinical practice guidelines have supported pulmonary PME as the firstchoice treatment for patients with CRC pulmonary metastases as PME has been associated with improvements in DFS and OS [20, 32, 33]. However, most of this evidence is based on retrospective and non-randomized data. By contrast, SABR has been traditionally reserved for patients with CRC and pulmonary metastases who are not candidates for surgical treatment and is considered an effective and less invasive alternative to surgery. However, there is now increasing evidence that SABR can provide similar outcomes to surgery, with high local control and comparable toxicity profiles.

Studies comparing PME vs. SABR are rare, and largely retrospective, single-institution data subject to selection bias—as patients treated with SABR often represent older patients with poorer performance status, reduced pulmonary function, increased comorbidities, and higher metastatic burdens compared to patients who undergo surgery [57]. In Widder et al., the authors compared metastasectomy vs. SABR for 110 patients with CRC pulmonary metastases [40]. Surgery was the treatment of choice and patients with favorable prognoses were offered metastasectomy, while SABR was reserved for those who were not offered or declined surgery. Despite this, OS was comparable between the two groups with 1-, 3-, and 5-year OS rates of 87%, 62%, and 41% for metastasectomy, and 98%, 60%, and 49% for SABR, respectively. In another single-institution retrospective review published in 2016, 170 patients with CRC pulmonary oligometastases, the 2-year OS was 82% following surgery and 77% following SBRT [57].

More recently, in a 2018 retrospective review of 51 patients with 1-3 pulmonary metastases who underwent PME vs SABR, there was no difference in survival with 1-year OS and 2-year OS of 95.0 vs 79.5% and 81.8 vs 68.2% for PME and SABR, respectively [58•]. PFS was significantly longer with PME compared to SABR (2-year PFS 46.0% vs 11.9%). However, this PFS improvement has several caveats: the median tumor size in the SABR group was double the PME group (2.5 vs 1.25 cm) and patents with synchronous metastases (known negative prognostic factor) were more likely to be treated with SABR. Furthermore, the PME group was more likely to receive adjuvant systemic treatment. Lastly, there was no difference in local control between the two groups with 1-year LC and 2-year LC of 96.6% vs 83.5% and 91.5% vs 75.2% for PME and SABR, respectively. On multivariate analysis, tumor size was the most significant prognostic factor.

Radiofrequency Ablation

Radiofrequency ablation (RFA) has recently emerged as a non-surgical strategy for the management of pulmonary metastases [59]. RFA is a minimally invasive procedure that involves a high-frequency electric current delivered through an electrode that heats the area of the lung parenchyma and subsequently causes focal necrosis of tumor tissue. The advantages of RFA are its minimally invasive nature with exceedingly low mortality rate of 0-0.4%. However, complications are not uncommon-with the most common toxicities including pneumothorax (33-66% of all cases) [60]. Less commonly, bleeding, hemoptysis, pleural effusion, and infection can occur, although grade 3 or greater toxicities are exceedingly rare at 0-1% [61]. Tumor size is a limitation for RFA with data suggesting that local control is worse tumors > 3 cm. In a single-institution retrospective series of 153 patients, 2-year LC for tumors \leq 3 cm and > 3 cm was 64% vs 25%, respectively [62]. In another retrospective multicenter study of 87 patients, local recurrence was 11.5% at 1 year, 18.3% at 2 years, and 21.1% at 3 years [63]. Tumor size was the only significant factor associated with a local failure rate, with tumors > 2 cm in size being approximately 3 times more likely to recur.

While no randomized data exists to compare surgery or SABR to RFA for CRC lung metastases, survival, and local control appear comparable. In one of the largest series to date, a 2015 retrospective review of 566 patients who underwent RFA from 2002 to 2010, 3-year OS was 67.7% and the 5-year OS was 51.5%. Max tumor size was 4 cm and the median tumor diameter was 1.5 cm, with 70% of patients with tumors ≤ 2 cm. Local tumor progression rates were 11% at 4 years. Additionally, the authors noted that tumor size > 2 cm was associated with worse OS (HR 2.10, P = 0.003). Postprocedural complications were common, with pneumothorax occurring in 67% of cases, of which 50% required chest tube placement [59].

Recently, a prospective multicenter study published in 2020 that included 70 patients with 100 lesions all < 3 cm, treated with RFA from 2008 to 2014 in Japan, reported a 3-year OS of 84% and 3-year local progression of 9%. The 30-day mortality was 1.4%, where 1 of 88 patients died due to a large hemothorax. Pneumothorax was common (43%), of which 60% required treatment with chest tube placement. Factors found to be associated with worse survival included rectal rather than colon location, positive CEA, and absence of previous chemotherapy [64•]. Although these 3-year results are promising and comparable to PME and SABR, the data regarding RFA is largely limited to retrospective review with limited randomized controlled trials.

Role of Perioperative Chemotherapy

International and National Comprehensive Cancer Network NCCN guidelines state that in patients with CRC with resectable oligometastases, systemic therapy remains standard of care and should be considered as the initial treatment strategy regardless of local treatment modality and favor a course of systemic therapy totaling a perioperative treatment time of 6 months [65] that can occur before, between, or after resections. Significant improvements in survival outcomes have been demonstrated with perioperative chemotherapy in CRC patients receiving PME via metaanalyses [66]. If PME occurs first, adjuvant chemotherapy for 6 months (fluoropyrimidine and oxaliplatin) confers a survival advantage as well after resection of metastases from CRC [67]. The advantages of such an approach with perioperative chemotherapy is multifold: to facilitate earlier treatment of micrometastatic disease, to allow assessment of disease biology or responsiveness to therapy for prognostication, and to avoid local therapy in those with early disease progression. Specifically, it can help determine whether the disease reflects an induced oligometastatic state vs oligoprogressive or oligo-resistant disease [19•]. The choice of regimens has included both doublet combinations of either fluoropyrimidine and oxaliplatin or irinotecan, but in select patients, a triplet of all three (FOLFOXIRI) is acceptableparticularly in those with permissible performance status and for whom a more aggressive tumor response would be beneficial [65].

Although the evidence for systemic chemotherapy in CRC patients with lung metastases has historically reflected patients undergoing PME, evidence has been accumulating to support the benefit of systemic chemotherapy with non-surgical locoregional therapies such as SABR and RFA [68•]. Here, in patients with oligometastases treated with standard combination cytotoxic therapy, patients who received locoregional therapy with curative intent during first-line chemotherapy reported longer PFS (23.9 versus 10.6 months; HR: 0.41, 95% CI: 0.31–0.53, P < 0.001) and OS (52.6 versus 28.0 months; HR: 0.34, 95% CI: 0.24–0.48; P < 0.001) compared with those who did not. Additionally, patients with oligometastatic CRC and low tumor burden who received non-curative intent locoregional therapy during first-line chemotherapy also experienced longer OS.

Importantly, however, it remains unclear whether local ablative therapy should be offered upfront proceeding systemic therapy or as consolidative therapy following initial systemic therapy. Upfront local therapy may prevent further metastatic seeding from initial oligometastatic sites. However, local consolidative therapy allows for response and disease biology assessment before consideration of additional localized treatment, but can be more challenging to deliver if there is significant response to systemic therapy making the tumor more difficult to target [69]. Indeed, most published series regarding the timing of local therapy is derived from the non-small cell lung cancer oligometastatic setting and demonstrate both upfront and consolidative local therapy appear to be safe and efficacious, however, future RCTs directly comparing upfront vs. consolidative therapy are needed.

Although further study is warranted on SABR or RFA in oligometastatic disease-directed treatment in CRC, locoregional therapies should be highly considered in these patients, not only during first-line systemic therapy for advanced CRC, but also at later stages of treatment history in select patients. Most importantly, decisions on perioperative chemotherapy and locoregional therapy for CRC with oligometastases to the lung or elsewhere should always take place in the context of multidisciplinary discussion.

Conclusion

There is a growing consensus that aggressive local therapy for CRC patients with oligometastases can improve oncologic outcomes; however, the optimal management of pulmonary oligometastases remains controversial. While PME remains first-line therapy, no studies have been powered to demonstrate a significant benefit of PME vs other local treatment modalities. Notably, patients who are not suitable for PME have comparable survival and local control following SABR, with very low risk of periprocedural toxicity. And while RFA has emerged as a promising option, long-term follow-up data is still limited. Thus, there remains an unmet need for high-quality prospective data to optimally guide appropriate patient selection for these treatment modalities as well as further investigate potential synergy and toxicity with targeted and immune therapies in the context of specific oligometastatic disease states. Additionally, given the evolving complexity of oligometastatic disease states combined with the multitude of patient and treatment factors that may impact outcomes, it is essential that clinical management be discussed in a robust multidisciplinary setting.

Declarations

Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

Conflict of Interest Eric M. Chung, Jun Gong, Karen Zaghiyan, and Mitchell Kamrava each declare no potential conflicts of interest. Katelyn M. Atkins has received honorarium from OncLive.

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