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REVIEW ARTICLE

Restoring p53 Function in Sarcomas Using MDM2 Inhibitors

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ABSTRACT: MDM2 is an E3 ubiquitin ligase and the principal negative regulator of the tumor suppressor gene TP53, maintaining cellular homeostasis through a tightly controlled feedback loop in which p53 transcriptionally activates *MDM2*, and MDM2, in turn, ubiquitinates p53 for degradation. In several sarcomas, particularly well-differentiated and dedifferentiated liposarcomas, *MDM2* amplification at chromosome 12q15 suppresses p53 activity despite retention of a wild-type TP53 gene. This makes the p53-binding pocket of MDM2 an attractive therapeutic target in these tumors. Over the past two decades, eight small-molecule MDM2 inhibitors have entered clinical trials, including RG7112, idasanutlin, SAR405838, HDM201, APG-115, navtemadlin, milademetan, and BI-907828, with seven advancing to later-stage evaluation. Although none have yet received regulatory approval, early-phase studies have demonstrated pharmacodynamic proof of concept, evidenced by p53 stabilization, induction of downstream targets such as p21, and tumor growth arrest in MDM2-amplified models and patients. This study compares the effectiveness of these inhibitors in the context of MDM2-amplified sarcomas, where excessive MDM2 expression suppresses wild-type TP53 activity. Pharmacologic blockade of the p53–MDM2 interaction can release p53 from inhibition, thereby restoring its tumor-suppressive functions and inducing cell-cycle arrest or apoptosis in cancer cells.

KEYWORDS: p53 Activation, MDM2 Inhibitor, Liposarcoma, Sarcoma Therapeutics, TP53 Regulation.

Introduction

The tumor suppressor protein p53, encoded by the TP53 gene, plays a crucial role in protecting the genome from damage. Often referred to as the 'guardian of the genome,' p53 halts the cell cycle and induces apoptosis (programmed cell death) or senescence (irreversible growth arrest) in response to DNA damage or cellular stress. In this way, p53 prevents the proliferation of potentially cancerous cells and helps maintain genomic stability.[1]

Under normal conditions, p53 activity is tightly regulated by MDM2 through an autoregulatory negative feedback loop.[2]

In several cancers, particularly well-differentiated and dedifferentiated liposarcomas (WDLPS/DDLPS), MDM2 is amplified at the 12q15 chromosomal locus, leading to excessive degradation of p53. Notably, many of these tumors retain wild-type (non-mutated) p53, which makes them particularly sensitive to MDM2 inhibition strategies.[3]

The therapeutic rationale for MDM2 inhibition is to disrupt the MDM2–p53 interaction and thereby restore p53's tumor-suppressive functions. This can reactivate p53 signaling in cancers with wild-type p53, resulting in cell cycle arrest or apoptosis.[4]

This review examines the therapeutic implications of MDM2 inhibition in sarcomas, with a focus on the evolution from Nutlin-3 to advanced clinical compounds, including RG7112, Idasanutlin, and Milademetan. Special attention is given to the underlying mechanisms of action, resistance, and combination strategies to improve treatment outcomes in liposarcoma patients.

Methods

Tumor suppressor gene (TP53):

The tumor suppressor gene TP53 encodes the protein p53, which regulates a multitude of genes to maintain homeostasis in the body. The transcription factor p53 (encoded by the TP53 gene) is often called the "guardian of the genome" because it plays a key role in maintaining genomic stability. TP53 regulates cellular stress responses through both transcriptional activation and repression of downstream target genes, depending on cellular context and damage signals.

Under normal (unstressed) conditions, p53 protein levels remain low due to continuous breakdown by the cell's protein recycling machinery. When cells experience stress such as DNA damage, low oxygen (hypoxia), or abnormal oncogene activation, p53 becomes stabilized and switched on. Once active, p53 turns on a set of target genes (Figure 1) that:

- Pause the cell cycle to allow DNA repair
- Trigger apoptosis (programmed cell death)
- Induce senescence (permanent cell-cycle arrest) if the damage is beyond repair

Canonical TP53 target genes include *CDKN1A* (p21), which mediates cell-cycle arrest; pro-apoptotic genes such as *BAX*, *PUMA*, and *NOXA*; and feedback regulators such as *MDM2*.

This protective process is so important that loss of p53 function happens in roughly half of all human cancers.[2] In tumors that have a normal (wild-type) *TP53* gene, p53 can still be inactivated indirectly by changes in its regulators.[5]

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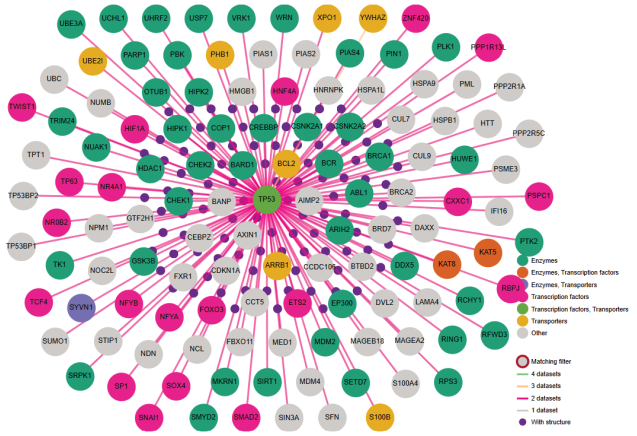

Figure 1: Interaction network of TP53 showing key transcriptional targets and regulatory partners involved in cell cycle control, apoptosis, and stress response (Human Protein Atlas). The above diagram was accessed from the Structure & Interaction resource of 'The Human Protein Atlas'. The Human Protein Atlas is a Global Core Biodata Resource in life sciences, based at SciLifeLab.

This network illustrates how TP53 integrates multiple cellular pathways, emphasizing its central role in maintaining genomic stability and its frequent disruption in cancer.

MDM2 as a negative regulator of TP53:

A primary negative regulator of p53 is MDM2 (Mouse Double Minute 2), an E3 ubiquitin ligase and proto-oncogene. MDM2 binds to the N-terminal transactivation domain of p53, blocking its transcriptional activity and adding ubiquitin tags that mark p53 for proteasomal degradation. MDM2 also transports p53 from the nucleus to the cytoplasm, promoting its degradation. This continuous surveillance maintains low basal p53 levels in unstressed cells. MDM2 itself is a transcriptional target of p53, creating an autoregulatory negative feedback loop as indicated in Figure 2: p53 activation induces MDM2 expression, and MDM2 then degrades p53 to restore homeostasis. This feedback ensures p53 is restrained under normal growth, but can rise rapidly under stress.[6] Under DNA damage or oncogenic stress, activation of ATM/ATR and downstream checkpoint kinases leads to phosphorylation of TP53 and MDM2, reducing their binding affinity and preventing ubiquitin-mediated degradation of p53.

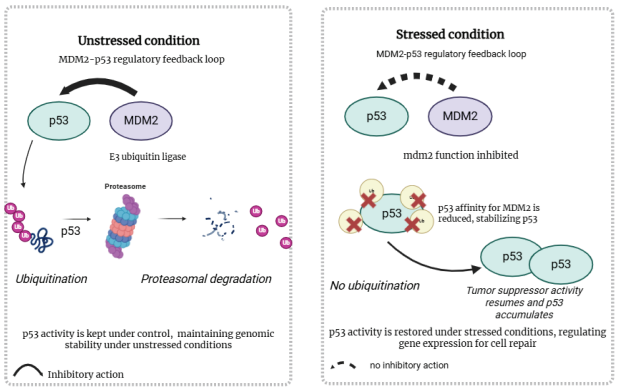

Figure 2a - Figure 2b: Regulation of p53 by MDM2 under homeostasis and stressed conditions. Under normal conditions, MDM2 ubiquitinates p53, maintaining low basal levels and preventing unnecessary cell-cycle arrest. Under stress, MDM2 inhibition stabilizes p53, enabling a rapid tumor-suppressive response through cell-cycle arrest or apoptosis.

Role of MDM2 in sarcomas:

MDM2 is a protein that plays a significant role in several types of sarcomas, which are malignant tumors that originate from mesenchymal tissues such as bone, fat, muscle, and cartilage.[7] These tumors include well-differentiated and dedifferentiated liposarcoma, a subtype arising from adipocytic (fat) tissue that frequently shows high-level amplification.[8] MDM2 amplification is a defining hallmark of such sarcomas, and its interaction with the tumor suppressor p53 has emerged as an actionable therapeutic target.[9]

In certain sarcomas, particularly well-differentiated and dedifferentiated liposarcomas (WDLPS/DDLPS), the regulatory axis between MDM2 and p53 is hijacked by MDM2 gene amplification at chromosome 12q13–158 (Figure 3). A majority of these tumors retain wild-type TP53, meaning that p53's inherent tumor-suppressive function is not lost to mutation. Instead, p53 is rendered inactive upstream by MDM2 overactivity. Alternative splicing of *MDM2* has been reported in high–mutational-burden sarcomas, though current inhibitors largely target conserved N-terminal binding sites; data on variant-specific drug sensitivity remain limited.

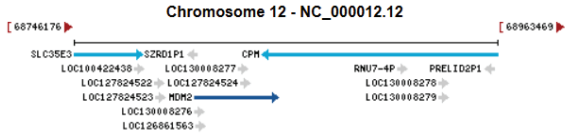

Figure 3: Location of the human *MDM2* gene on chromosome 12 (GRCh38/hg38 assembly) and corresponding nucleotide coordinates. This genomic map highlights the placement of *MDM2* within the 12q15 region, a locus frequently amplified in sarcomas, particularly well-differentiated and dedifferentiated liposarcomas. Such amplification drives oncogenesis by increasing MDM2 expression, which in turn suppresses p53 activity and promotes tumor growth. Source: NCBI Gene [Gene ID: 4193], National Center for Biotechnology Information. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/gene/4193/

For patients with advanced soft tissue sarcomas, treatment options remain limited, particularly once the disease recurs or metastasizes. Standard chemotherapy often produces short-lived responses, and durable disease control is uncommon. This therapeutic gap has driven interest in molecularly targeted approaches, especially in sarcoma subtypes where well-defined genetic alterations, such as *MDM2* amplification in TP53–wild-type tumors, provide a clear biological rationale for intervention.

■ Results

Clinical Development of MDM2 Inhibitors:

Building on the biological framework described above, MDM2 inhibitors have been developed to therapeutically exploit p53 suppression in MDM2-amplified sarcomas.

Well-differentiated and dedifferentiated liposarcomas are among the sarcoma subtypes most closely linked to MDM2 dysregulation. These tumors frequently harbor high-level MDM2 amplification while retaining wild-type TP53, creating a setting in which p53 function is suppressed rather than genetically lost. As a result, pharmacologic disruption of the MDM2–p53 interaction offers a direct means of restoring tumor-suppressive signaling. This genetic alignment has made

liposarcoma a primary clinical focus for the development and evaluation of MDM2 inhibitors.

Following the proof-of-concept with Nutlin-3, successive generations of small-molecule inhibitors have been developed and evaluated in preclinical and clinical settings. These key compounds and their effects *in vivo* and *in vitro* are reviewed in Table 1 below.

Across MDM2 inhibitors evaluated in sarcoma, efficacy reporting has been heterogeneous, with formal survival metrics such as median PFS, OS, and hazard ratios available only for select agents, most notably milademetan.

Table 1: The list of MDM2 inhibitors and their effects.

Compound	Unique Feature or Strategy	Key Preclinical Findings	Clinical Findings / Status	Reference
Nutlin-3	First-in-class; revealed proteotoxic stress and combination opportunities	Strong p53 activation; synergizes with chemotherapy and ferroptosis inducers	Proof-of-concept only; not clinically developed	Vassilev *et al.*[9]
RG7112	First clinical-stage oral Nutlin-based inhibitor	Stabilizes p53; tumor growth inhibition in MDM2-amplified models	Limited to disease stabilization; high hematologic toxicity	Ray-Coquard[3]
Idasanutlin (RG7388)	Improved potency; synergy with kinase and proteasome inhibitors	Potent p53 reactivation and tumor regression	AML Phase III failure; limited sarcoma data	Khurana *et al.*[10]
Milademetan (RAIN-32)	Intermittent dosing (3/14) reduces hematologic toxicity	Potent p53 induction; tumor growth suppression	Phase III in liposarcoma showed comparable efficacy to chemotherapy with better safety	Gounder *et al.*[11]
ALRN-6924	Stapled peptide; dual MDM2/MDMX inhibition; less myelosuppression	Effective dual inhibition; overcomes MDMX-driven resistance	Disease control with minimal hematologic toxicity	Saleh *et al.*[12]
Navtemadlin (KRT-232)	Highly potent; radiosensitising properties	Enhances radiation-induced tumor cell death	Ongoing sarcoma+radiation combo trials; Phase III in myelofibrosis	Hanna *et al.*[13]
MI-77301 (SAR405838)	Spirooxindole scaffold; apoptosis inducer	Induces apoptosis in preclinical DDLPS models	Early clinical activity was limited; further development slowed	Bill *et al.*[14]
BI-907828	Long-acting oral spirooxindole analog; sustained p53 activation	Complete regressions in DDLPS patient-derived xenografts	Promising early clinical results in sarcoma	Boehringer Ingelheim,[15]
Siremadlin (HDM201)	Selective 2nd-gen; synergizes with DNA-damaging chemotherapy	Tumor regression with combination approaches	Encouraging early-phase data with intermittent dosing	Novartis Pharmaceuticals[16]
APG-115	Immunomodulatory effects; enhances PD-1 (programmed cell death protein 1) blockade synergy	Activates antitumor immunity	Early signs of durable disease control in solid tumors	Fang *et al.*[17]

This table highlights the evolution of MDM2 inhibitors from the prototype Nutlin-3 to advanced clinical candidates. While Nutlin-3 provided proof of the therapeutic principle by stabilizing p53 and revealing stress-related vulnerabilities, subsequent molecules such as RG7112, MI-77301, BI-907828, and siremadlin (HDM201) demonstrated improved potency and clinical translatability.

Nutlin-3 (p53-MDM2 inhibitor):

Nutlin-3 is a landmark small-molecule inhibitor from the cis-imidazoline chemical series.[9] By occupying the p53-binding site on MDM2, it releases and stabilizes p53, rapidly reactivating its tumor suppressor functions (Figure 4a). At the sequence level, the specific amino acid residues involved in Nutlin binding can be visualized through Figure 4b.

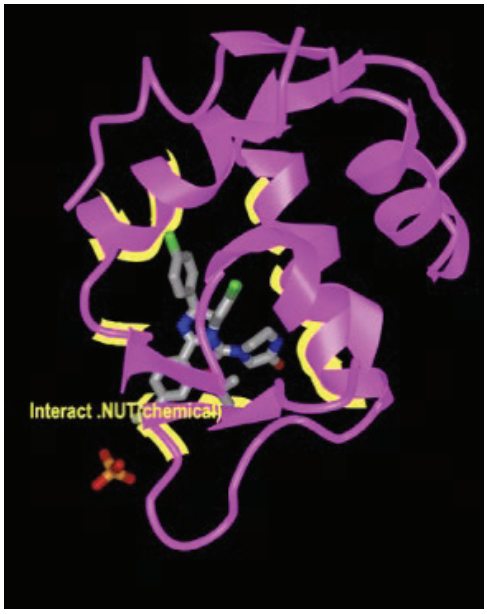

Figure 4a: Crystal structure of MDM2 bound to Nutlin-3a (PDB ID: 4HG7). The MDM2 protein is shown in ribbon format (magenta), and the Nutlin molecule is shown interacting at 11 residues, highlighted in yellow.

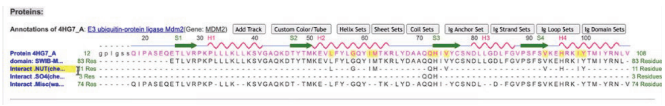

Figure 4b: Protein sequence annotation of MDM2 (UniProt: Q00987), displaying the structural features and positions of Nutlin-interacting residues. Source: These figures were generated using iCn3D ("I see in 3D"), a WebGL-based viewer developed by NCBI for interactive visualization of three-dimensional macromolecular structures and their chemical interactions.

In sarcoma models with wild-type TP53 and MDM2 overexpression, including Ewing sarcoma and osteosarcoma cell lines, Nutlin-3 strongly stimulated p53-dependent gene expression (notably p21and PUMA), resulting in cell-cycle arrest and apoptosis.[19] Significantly, Nutlin-3 induced robust tumor regressions in sarcoma xenograft models.[20] Beyond reactivating canonical p53 programs, Nutlin-3 also exposes new cellular vulnerabilities that can be exploited therapeutically:

Proteotoxic stress: Nutlin-3 treatment was shown to increase the production and breakdown of proteins inside liposarcoma cells, a process involving the proteasome.[21] This cellular com-

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plex degrades unwanted or damaged proteins. This surge in protein turnover creates proteotoxic stress; the cell accumulates misfolded proteins that overwhelm its quality-control systems. This stress activates a pathway involving ATF4 and CHOP, two transcription factors normally turned on during endoplasmic reticulum stress (a cellular alarm triggered by protein overload). When researchers knocked out these genes using CRISPR, Nutlin-3-induced cell death was reduced, proving that this stress pathway contributes to Nutlin's cytotoxicity. A genome-wide CRISPR screen also highlighted PSMD9, a component of the proteasome, as a key factor in Nutlin sensitivity; cells lacking PSMD9 were resistant to Nutlin-3, indicating that an active proteasome is necessary for the drug's full effect.

These findings led to rational combination strategies. Pairing Nutlin-3 with carfilzomib (a proteasome inhibitor) amplified cell death: by further weakening the proteasome, carfilzomib heightened the stress caused by Nutlin-3, boosting pro-apoptotic signals like CHOP and NOXA and causing dramatic apoptosis in sarcoma models.

Ferroptosis sensitivity: In preclinical model systems, Nutlin-3 has been shown to sensitize certain p53–wild-type tumor cell lines to ferroptosis, an iron-dependent form of cell death caused by lipid peroxidation. p53 activation by Nutlin-3 represses the cystine transporter SLC7A11, lowering the cell's antioxidant defenses and making it more vulnerable to ferroptosis inducers such as erastin. Pre-treating cells with Nutlin-3 followed by erastin led to markedly increased lipid ROS and cell death compared to either drug alone.[22]

DNA damage and extrinsic apoptosis pathways: Nutlin-3 also synergizes with chemotherapies such as doxorubicin. In breast cancer models, Nutlin-3 enhanced doxorubicin-induced apoptosis by boosting p53 activity.[23] Interestingly, Nutlin-3 can also engage the related p73 tumor suppressor pathway: in some p53-mutant cancers, Nutlin-3 triggers apoptosis via p73 activation.[24] This suggests that MDM2 inhibitors may retain partial activity even when p53 is mutated, expanding their potential therapeutic reach.

These vulnerabilities are beneficial in therapy design: they reveal stress points that combination drugs (e.g., proteasome inhibitors or ferroptosis inducers) can exploit to achieve stronger tumor killing than Nutlin-3 alone.

Despite strong preclinical activity, Nutlin-3 was unsuitable for clinical use due to its poor pharmacokinetic properties: high doses for effect, low oral bioavailability, rapidly cleared from the body.[25] These issues prompted the development of next-generation MDM2 inhibitors (e.g., RG7112, idasanutlin, milademetan) with improved drug-like properties.

RG7112:

RG7112 was the first clinical-stage, orally bioavailable MDM2 antagonist to enter human trials, derived directly from the Nutlin scaffold but optimized for improved binding and solubility. In preclinical studies, RG7112 bound to MDM2 with nanomolar affinity, reactivated p53 signaling in MDM2-amplified models, and induced tumor growth inhibition.[3]

A landmark Phase I trial tested RG7112 as a neoadjuvant therapy in patients with MDM2-amplified well- or dedifferentiated liposarcoma (WDLPS/DDLPS).[3] It clearly demonstrated increased intratumoral expression of p53 and p21, as well as reduced tumor proliferation. Most patients experienced disease stabilization, meaning tumor growth was halted rather than reversed. This study provided pharmacodynamic proof that p53 can be reactivated in MDM2-amplified sarcomas.

However, clinical utility was hindered by frequent hematologic side effects (notably thrombocytopenia and neutropenia) that necessitated dose interruptions. High-dose requirements and variable oral absorption also limited the long-term use of RG7112, so more potent and better-tolerated compounds succeeded it.

Idasanutlin:

Idasanutlin (RG7388) is a more potent, pyrrolidine-core MDM2 inhibitor with high oral bioavailability. Unlike Nutlin-derived molecules, idasanutlin features a pyrrolidine core that improves its fit within the MDM2 binding pocket and enhances its drug-like properties.[26] This structural innovation results in ~10-fold greater potency than RG7112 in cellular assays, with a reported MDM2 binding IC_{50} of ~6 nM.[26] (IC_{50} is the concentration of drug needed to inhibit 50% of its target activity; single-digit nanomolar values indicate extremely high potency, whereas earlier Nutlin compounds typically had IC_{50} values in the tens of nanomolar range.)

Idasanutlin also exhibits markedly better oral bioavailability, allowing for shorter and more convenient dosing regimens. Most clinical protocols use five consecutive days of treatment in a 28-day cycle, rather than the prolonged schedules required for RG7112.

Notably, idasanutlin demonstrated favorable combinations with proteasome inhibitors and FGFR/CDK4 inhibitors (reflecting key resistance escape mechanisms in liposarcoma). Clinically, most data are from AML trials (~25% CR with cytarabine), but early-phase sarcoma data show stable disease and occasional regressions. Hematologic side effects persisted but were less frequent/severe with intermittent dosing.[27]

One example is pairing idasanutlin with carfilzomib, a drug that blocks the proteasome (the cell's protein-degrading system). This combination created high levels of proteotoxic stress and triggered much stronger apoptosis than either drug alone. Another promising approach is combining idasanutlin with inhibitors of the fibroblast growth factor receptor (FGFR) pathway. FGFR signaling is often upregulated in DDLPS, providing tumor cells with an alternate survival route even when p53 is reactivated. In preclinical studies, combining idasanutlin with the FGFR inhibitor erdafitinib suppressed proliferation and induced apoptosis far more effectively than either drug alone, often achieving tumor regressions.[28] This synergy likely works as blocking FGFR removes one of the key pathways tumor cells use to resist p53-mediated stress.

Milademetan:

Milademetan is a third-generation oral MDM2 inhibitor specifically optimized for increased potency and tolerability in MDM2-amplified sarcomas. Its primary innovation is an intermittent dosing strategy (3 days on, 11 days off: "3/14"), developed to allow periods of p53 activation for antitumor effect while reducing sustained toxicity, particularly to the bone marrow. This schedule was shown in clinical trials to dramatically lower the risk and severity of side effects such as low platelets and neutropenia compared to continuous exposures seen with earlier MDM2 inhibitors.

In a Phase I study focusing on patients with advanced solid tumors, including a large dedifferentiated liposarcoma (DDLPS) expansion cohort, milademetan demonstrated meaningful clinical activity.[11] The overall disease control rate in DDLPS was as high as 58–62%, with a median progression-free survival nearing 7 months. Several patients experienced durable stable disease, and modest tumor shrinkages were observed, even if objective response rates remained low, consistent with the primarily cytostatic nature of p53 monotherapy in these tumors. Side effect profiles were manageable, with the majority of adverse events being mild and the intermittent schedule notably decreasing the frequency of more serious treatment-related cytopenias.

The subsequent Phase III MANTRA trial, comparing milademetan against trabectedin in advanced DDLPS, confirmed that oral intermittent MDM2 inhibition was as effective as standard chemotherapy in delaying tumor progression, but with fewer drug-related discontinuations and no treatment-related deaths. However, milademetan was not superior for progression-free survival or tumor response rates, so further development as a single agent for liposarcoma has been deprioritized.[29]

Although objective response rates were limited, the observed median progression-free survival of approximately 7 months in the DDLPS cohort exceeds historical outcomes with conventional chemotherapy, indicating that MDM2 inhibition primarily confers clinically meaningful disease stabilization rather than tumor regression.

Other MDM2 Inhibitors and Future Directions:

Beyond Nutlin-3, RG7112, idasanutlin, and milademetan, several additional MDM2-targeted therapies and related strategies are under development. These compounds either refine the Nutlin-class mechanism or expand into dual inhibition of *MDM2* and its homolog *MDMX* (also known as MDM4).

Together, they represent the next wave of attempts to fully reactivate wild-type p53 in cancers where MDM2 overexpression drives tumorigenesis.

MI-77301 (SAR405838):

MI-77301 (SAR202) is a spirooxindole-based MDM2 inhibitor designed for increased potency and selectivity compared to earlier compounds. It achieves tumor regression by restoring the p53 transcriptional program, effectively inducing apoptosis in models of dedifferentiated liposarcoma (DDLPS) that retain wild-type TP53 and have MDM2 amplification. Its efficacy is dependent on the presence of intact p53, making patient selection critical. Despite promising preclinical results, clinical progression has been limited, and development slowed to focus on more advanced analogs.[30]

BI-907828:

BI-907828 is an optimized, long-acting oral derivative of MI-77301. It has induced complete tumor regressions in DDLPS patient-derived xenograft models and has demonstrated promising clinical activity in early-phase sarcoma trials. This compound represents an advanced candidate for combination therapies aimed at improving clinical outcomes in sarcomas harboring MDM2 amplification.[31]

Navtemadlin (KRT-232 / AMG-232):

Navtemadlin (KRT-232) is an oral MDM2 inhibitor originally developed by Amgen (as AMG-232)[18] and now advanced by Kartos Therapeutics. It is one of the most potent MDM2 antagonists reported to date, showing substantially higher activity in biochemical and cellular assays compared to RG7112 or idasanutlin. In preclinical studies, navtemadlin induced rapid p53 stabilization, cell-cycle arrest, and apoptosis across multiple MDM2-amplified tumor models. It is currently in a Phase III trial for myelofibrosis, where the therapeutic goal is to eradicate malignant hematopoietic progenitor cells through p53 reactivation selectively. Navtemadlin is also being studied in combination with radiation therapy for soft tissue sarcomas (NRG-DT001) to determine whether MDM2 inhibition can radiosensitise these tumors, paralleling the synergy seen with Nutlin-3 in preclinical systems.[32]

ALRN-6924 (Sulanemadlin):

Tumors often upregulate MDMX as an escape mechanism under selective pressure from Nutlin-class drugs. ALRN-6924 (sulanemadlin) is a stapled peptide that mimics the alpha-helical region of p53 that interacts with both MDM2 and MDMX, thereby displacing p53 from both inhibitors simultaneously. In a Phase I trial in wild-type p53 solid tumors, ALRN-6924 demonstrated favorable tolerability, with notably lower rates of thrombocytopenia than small-molecule MDM2 inhibitors. The trial reported a 59% disease control rate, including some complete and partial responses. Although ALRN-6924's development pivoted toward chemoprotection, exploiting its ability to activate p53 in healthy tissues to shield them from chemotoxicity, its dual-targeting concept remains highly relevant for overcoming resistance in MDM2-amplified cancers.[12]

Siremadlin (HDM201):

Siremadlin (HDM201) is a second-generation oral MDM2 inhibitor with high selectivity and potency, designed to minimise off-target effects. In MDM2-amplified sarcoma preclinical models, siremadlin activated p53 signalling, upregulated p21, and caused growth arrest or apoptosis. Its combination with DNA-damaging chemotherapy showed synergistic effects.

In Phase I/II studies, siremadlin produced early signs of activity in MDM2-amplified sarcomas using intermittent

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dosing schedules to manage cytopenias. It is being evaluated in both solid and hematologic malignancies.[33]

APG-115:

APG-115 is a selective oral MDM2 inhibitor that not only restores p53 activity but also exerts immunomodulatory effects. "Preclinical studies indicate that APG-115 can enhance antitumor immune responses, particularly in combination with PD-1 blockade. Trials in patients with solid tumors, including sarcomas, have shown tolerable safety and preliminary evidence of durable disease control, especially when used in combination with immunotherapy.[34]

Resistance to MDM2 inhibitors:

Drug resistance is a major clinical challenge for MDM2 inhibitor therapy in sarcoma. One predominant mechanism is the emergence of TP53 mutations during treatment: prolonged exposure to Nutlin-class inhibitors often leads to selection of new missense mutations within the p53 DNA-binding domain, thereby inactivating its transcriptional and apoptotic functions and rendering MDM2 inhibition ineffective.[9] Laboratory studies have repeatedly demonstrated the evolution of such p53 mutations following Nutlin-3 adaptation, highlighting the need either to deliver combination or time-limited therapies that prevent this evolutionary escape, or to target mutant p53 directly with agents like APR-246.[21]

A second escape route is *MDMX* (*MDM4*) upregulation: as Nutlin-class drugs only break the p53-MDM2 interaction, many tumors rapidly increase *MDMX* expression to continue suppressing p53 even when MDM2 is blocked.[12] Dual MDM2/MDMX antagonists, such as ALRN-6924, are now in trials specifically to circumvent this bypass.

Resistance can also arise from shifts in the apoptotic threshold. As p53-driven apoptosis increases, tumor cells respond by upregulating anti-apoptotic proteins such as BCL-2 and BCL-XL. Combining MDM2 inhibitors with BH3 mimetics (such as venetoclax or navitoclax) can block these survival pathways and restore apoptotic death.[14]

Oncogenic signaling crosstalk also facilitates therapeutic escape. In liposarcomas bearing CDK4 amplification or elevated FGFR activity, additional pathway activation makes tumor cells less reliant on the MDM2–p53 axis. Rational combinations with CDK4/6 inhibitors (e.g., palbociclib) or FGFR inhibitors (e.g., erdafitinib) have shown resensitization in preclinical models.

Finally, the dosing schedule is key: continuous MDM2 inhibitor exposure accelerates the selection of resistant clones, while intermittent dosing, such as the 3/14 milademetan protocol, preserves efficacy and delays resistance. These resistance mechanisms and their therapeutic implications are summarized schematically in Figure 5.

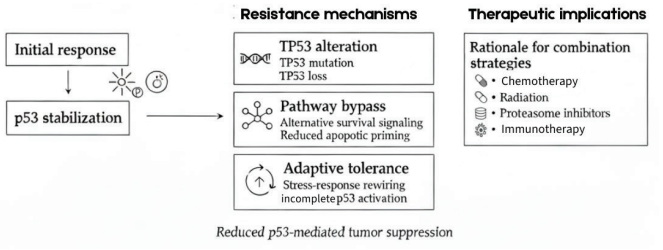

Figure 5: Conceptual overview of resistance mechanisms to MDM2 inhibition.

Evolving Strategies:

Emerging strategies for resistance include dual MDM2/MDMX inhibition by new-generation molecules, which block both arms of p53 repression and may preempt the most frequent bypass. Temporal sequencing and dynamic (primed or pulse) combination regimens are now utilized to heighten tumor vulnerability, for example, by first using an MDM2 inhibitor to synchronise sarcoma cells, then applying a targeted or cytotoxic second agent.

Beyond apoptosis, leveraging sensitization to extrinsic death via p53-driven upregulation of death receptors like TRAIL-R2, in combination with TRAIL agonists or immune modulators, is an active area of preclinical research.[3] Similarly, combining MDM2 inhibition with immunotherapy (e.g., PD-1/PD-L1 blockade) takes advantage of p53's role in fostering a pro-immunogenic tumor environment, and such approaches have entered clinical trials.

Finally, alternative cell death pathways, such as ferroptosis, are being targeted. Nutlin-class compounds sensitize cells to ferroptosis inducers (e.g., erastin), providing another tactic against apoptosis-resistant or heavily pretreated tumors. Adaptive, patient-specific therapy regimens shaped by real-time molecular monitoring are under development to further individualize and prolong MDM2 pathway responses. These are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Mechanisms of resistance to MDM2 inhibition and strategies to overcome them.

Cause of resistance	Mechanism	Impact on Therapy	Potential Strategies
New TP53 mutation	Mutations in p53's DNA-binding domain during treatment	Prevents p53 activation; the drug becomes ineffective	Shorten exposure; target mutant p53 (e.g., APR-246)
Upregulated MDMX expression	Overexpression of MDMX replaces MDM2's role	Still blocks p53 despite MDM2 drug	Use dual MDM2/MDMX inhibitors (e.g., ALRN-6924)
Higher anti-apoptotic proteins	Increased BCL-2/BCL-XL proteins block p53's apoptotic signal	Limits cell death despite p53 activation	Combine with pro-apoptotic drugs (e.g., venetoclax, navitoclax)
Alternate survival pathways	FGFR, CDK4, PI3K pathways activated	Cancer growth bypasses p53 dependency	Add pathway-specific inhibitors
Continuous dosing	Constant exposure favors resistant clones	Resistance appears faster	Use intermittent dosing schedules (e.g., milademetan 3/14 schedule)

This table emphasizes that newly acquired TP53 mutations are a critical resistance mechanism, rendering MDM2 inhibitors ineffective by abolishing p53's transcriptional activity. Importantly, it highlights how therapeutic strategies such as shortening exposure windows or targeting mutant p53 may help circumvent this resistance and extend the utility of MDM2 inhibitors.

Beyond biological resistance, several broader limitations have shaped the clinical trajectory of MDM2 inhibitors in sarcoma. Dose-limiting hematologic toxicities, particularly thrombocytopenia, have constrained continuous dosing strategies and limited therapeutic windows. In addition, objective tumor regressions remain uncommon with monotherapy, with clinical benefit often manifesting as disease stabilization rather than durable responses. Finally, variability in trial design and endpoints across studies complicates cross-agent comparison and has slowed regulatory progress in sarcoma indications.

Conclusion

The evolution from Nutlin-3 to second-generation idasanutlin and third-generation milademetan has firmly established the principle of pharmacologic p53 reactivation in cancer therapy. In MDM2-amplified sarcomas such as liposarcoma, where TP53 remains wild-type, these drugs exploit a unique vulnerability: the tumor's dependence on MDM2 overexpression to suppress p53.

Preclinical models have even demonstrated complete tumor regression with potent p53 reactivation, while clinical trials have shown prolonged disease stabilization in a subset of patients. However, consistent tumor shrinkage with monotherapy remains uncommon. Therapeutic challenges include the intrinsic p53–MDM2 (and MDMX) feedback loop, alternative tumor survival pathways, and on-target toxicities, particularly dose-limiting thrombocytopenia from p53 activation in normal tissues. Intermittent dosing, as with milademetan, has shown that efficacy and tolerability can be balanced, as confirmed by its Phase III trial, which demonstrated comparable activity but better safety than standard chemotherapy.

Future progress will rely on combination strategies that amplify p53-driven stress, such as pairing MDM2 inhibitors with proteasome inhibitors, ferroptosis inducers, TRAIL-receptor agonists, BH3 mimetics, or targeted kinase inhibitors. Dual MDM2/MDMX inhibitors may overcome resistance mediated by *MDMX* upregulation, and biomarker-guided patient selection, focusing on high MDM2 amplification, low MDMX expression, and intact p53, will be essential for maximizing benefit.

Next-generation agents like BI-907828 and navtemadlin promise greater potency, improved pharmacokinetics,[34] and potential synergy with immune checkpoint blockade, enabling p53 reactivation to work in concert with immune-mediated tumor clearance. With these refinements, the field is moving toward liberating the guardian of the genome into durable clinical benefit for sarcoma patients.

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