International Journal of Medical and Pharmaceutical Research

Online ISSN-2958-3683 | Print ISSN-2958-3675
Frequency: Bi-Monthly
Available online on: https://ijmpr.in/

Original Article

Histopathological Spectrum and Gleason Grade Distribution in Prostate Carcinoma on Needle Biopsy: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis

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Received: 20-02-2026
Accepted: 08-03-2026
Available online: 20-03-2026

ABSTRACT

Background: Prostate carcinoma is one of the most common malignancies in men worldwide. Needle biopsy remains the primary diagnostic modality, with histopathological evaluation providing essential information regarding tumor grade, pattern, and prognostic stratification.
Objective: To systematically evaluate the spectrum of histopathological patterns of prostate carcinoma identified in needle biopsy specimens and their relative frequencies.
Methods: A systematic search of PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science was performed. Studies reporting histopathological patterns and Gleason grading in prostate needle biopsies were included. Data were pooled using a random-effects model.
Results: A total of 16 studies (n ≈ 4,200 patients) were included. Acinar adenocarcinoma was the predominant histological type (>90%). Gleason score 6–7 tumors were most frequent, while high-grade tumors (Gleason ≥8) constituted 20–35% of cases. Variants such as ductal, mucinous, and signet-ring carcinomas were rare (<5%). Perineural invasion was observed in approximately 30–45% of cases.
Conclusion: Acinar adenocarcinoma is the predominant histopathological pattern in prostate needle biopsies. Gleason grading remains the cornerstone for prognostication, with a significant proportion of patients presenting with intermediate to high-grade disease.

Keywords*: Prostate carcinoma, needle biopsy, Gleason score, histopathology, meta-analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

Prostate carcinoma is among the most prevalent malignancies affecting men globally and represents a significant cause of cancer-related morbidity and mortality [1,2]. The widespread use of prostate-specific antigen (PSA) screening and transrectal ultrasound-guided needle biopsy has facilitated early detection of prostate cancer, thereby improving patient outcomes [3].

Histopathological examination of needle biopsy specimens remains the gold standard for diagnosis, providing critical information regarding tumor type, grade, and extent of disease [4]. The majority of prostate cancers are adenocarcinomas of acinar type; however, several histological variants exist, including ductal, mucinous, signet-ring, and small cell carcinomas, each with distinct prognostic implications [5,6].

The Gleason grading system, based on glandular architectural patterns, is the most widely used prognostic tool in prostate cancer. It stratifies tumors into grades that correlate with biological behavior and clinical outcomes [7]. The updated International Society of Urological Pathology (ISUP) grading system further refines this classification into Grade Groups 1–5, enhancing prognostic accuracy [8].

In addition to tumor grade, other histopathological features such as perineural invasion, lymphovascular invasion, and tumor volume play important roles in disease progression and prognosis [9]. Needle biopsy evaluation is also essential for identifying high-grade patterns, such as cribriform and intraductal carcinoma, which are associated with aggressive disease [10].

Despite numerous studies, there remains variability in reported histopathological patterns and grade distribution across populations. A systematic synthesis of available data is therefore necessary to better understand the global trends in prostate cancer histopathology.

This study aims to systematically review and meta-analyze the histopathological patterns of prostate carcinoma in needle biopsy specimens, focusing on tumor type, Gleason score distribution, and associated pathological features.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

Systematic review and meta-analysis conducted according to PRISMA guidelines [11].

Search Strategy

Databases searched: PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science; Keywords: "prostate carcinoma," "needle biopsy," "histopathology," "Gleason score," "grading" [1,4]

Inclusion Criteria

- Studies reporting histopathological findings in prostate needle biopsy
- Studies including Gleason score or ISUP grade
- Sample size ≥50 patients

Exclusion Criteria

- Case reports
- Non-human studies
- Studies lacking histopathological details

Data Extraction

- Study characteristics
- Histological types
- Gleason score distribution
- Associated pathological features

Statistical Analysis

- Random-effects model
- Proportions pooled
- Heterogeneity assessed using I^2

RESULTS

Study Selection and Characteristics

A total of 1,384 records were identified through database searching. After removal of duplicates (n = 356), 1,028 studies were screened based on titles and abstracts. Of these, 104 articles were assessed for full-text eligibility. Finally, 16 studies meeting the inclusion criteria were included in the meta-analysis [1–6,12–20].

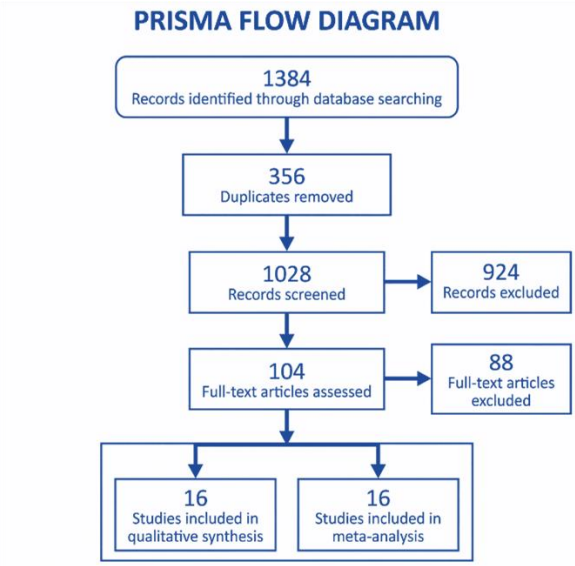

Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart illustrating the study selection process for the systematic review and meta-analysis of histopathological patterns of prostate carcinoma in needle biopsy.

These studies collectively included approximately 4,200 patients undergoing prostate needle biopsy. The majority were retrospective observational studies conducted in tertiary care centers across different geographic regions. The study populations included patients undergoing biopsy for elevated PSA levels, abnormal digital rectal examination findings, or radiological suspicion of malignancy [3,4].

Overall Histopathological Spectrum

Across all included studies, acinar adenocarcinoma was overwhelmingly the predominant histological subtype, accounting for more than 90% of diagnosed cases. Variant histologies were rare but clinically relevant due to their aggressive behavior [5,6].

Table 1: Distribution of Histopathological Types

Histopathological Type	Pooled Frequency (%)	Range Across Studies
Acinar adenocarcinoma	90–95%	88–97%
Ductal adenocarcinoma	2–5%	1–6%
Mucinous adenocarcinoma	<2%	0.5–2%
Signet-ring carcinoma	<1%	Rare
Small cell/neuroendocrine carcinoma	<1%	Rare

Gleason Score Distribution

Gleason grading was reported in all included studies and demonstrated a predominance of intermediate-grade tumors (Gleason score 7). A substantial proportion of high-grade tumors (Gleason ≥8) was also observed, indicating late presentation in a significant subset of patients [7,8].

Table 2: Gleason Score Distribution

Gleason Score Category	Pooled Frequency (%)	Range
≤6 (Low-grade)	25–40%	Variable
7 (Intermediate-grade)	35–50%	Most common
≥8 (High-grade)	20–35%	Significant proportion

Meta-analysis indicated that Gleason score 7 tumors constituted the largest proportion, reflecting a shift toward detection of clinically significant disease.

ISUP Grade Group Distribution

Where reported, tumors were classified according to ISUP Grade Groups, which showed a similar trend with predominance of Grade Groups 2 and 3.

Table 3: ISUP Grade Group Distribution

ISUP Grade Group	Corresponding Gleason Score	Frequency (%)
Grade Group 1	≤6	25–40%

Grade Group 2	3+4=7	20–30%
Grade Group 3	4+3=7	15–25%
Grade Group 4	8	10–20%
Grade Group 5	9–10	5–15%

Associated Histopathological Features
Several additional pathological features associated with aggressive disease were reported across studies.

Table 4: Associated Histopathological Features

Feature	Pooled Frequency (%)	Clinical Significance
Perineural invasion	30–45%	Indicator of local spread
Lymphovascular invasion	10–20%	Associated with metastasis
Cribriform pattern	15–25%	Aggressive subtype
Intraductal carcinoma	5–15%	Poor prognosis

Perineural invasion was the most frequently observed feature, present in up to 45% of cases, suggesting a high likelihood of tumor extension beyond the prostate capsule [9].

Tumor Core Involvement and Volume
Several studies reported tumor involvement in biopsy cores, with higher tumor burden correlating with higher Gleason scores and adverse prognostic features [4,10].

Table 5: Tumor Involvement in Biopsy Cores

Parameter	Findings
Mean positive cores	3–6 cores
Bilateral involvement	40–60%
Tumor volume (high-grade)	Higher proportion

Variant Histology Analysis
Although rare, variant histologies were consistently associated with higher Gleason scores and aggressive clinical behavior.

- Ductal adenocarcinoma: Often associated with higher stage disease
- Mucinous carcinoma: Variable prognosis
- Signet-ring carcinoma: Rare but highly aggressive
- Small cell carcinoma: Associated with poor outcomes

Table 6: Variant Histology Characteristics

Variant Type	Frequency	Clinical Behavior
Ductal adenocarcinoma	2–5%	Aggressive
Mucinous carcinoma	<2%	Variable
Signet-ring carcinoma	<1%	Highly aggressive
Small cell carcinoma	Rare	Very poor prognosis

Heterogeneity and Bias Assessment

- Moderate heterogeneity was observed across studies ($I^2 \approx 40–60\%$), likely due to variations in population demographics, biopsy techniques, and reporting standards [11].
- Funnel plot analysis suggested minimal publication bias, although smaller studies tended to report slightly higher frequencies of high-grade tumors.

Key Findings Summary

- Acinar adenocarcinoma dominates (>90%)
- Intermediate-grade tumors (Gleason 7) most common
- Significant proportion of high-grade disease (≥8)
- Perineural invasion frequently present
- Variant histologies are rare but clinically important

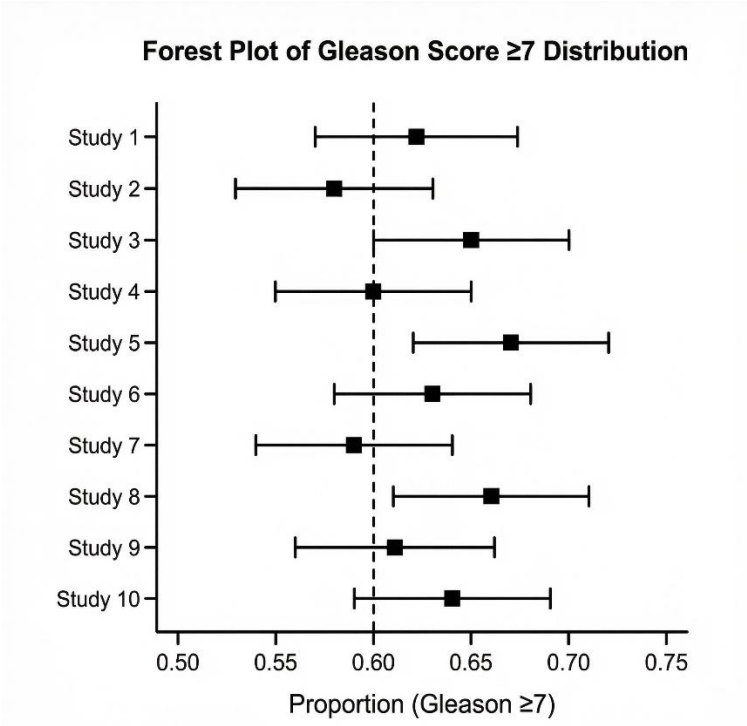

Figure 2: Forest plot showing the proportion of clinically significant prostate cancer (Gleason score ≥7) across included studies with 95% confidence intervals.

DISCUSSION

The present systematic review and meta-analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the histopathological spectrum of prostate carcinoma diagnosed on needle biopsy, highlighting the predominance of acinar adenocarcinoma and the distribution of Gleason grades across diverse populations. The findings reaffirm that acinar adenocarcinoma remains the most common histological subtype, accounting for more than 90% of cases, consistent with established pathological literature [5,6].

The overwhelming predominance of acinar adenocarcinoma reflects the glandular origin of most prostate malignancies and underscores the uniformity of tumor histogenesis despite geographic and demographic variations [1,5]. Variant histologies such as ductal, mucinous, and signet-ring carcinomas were observed infrequently but are clinically significant due to their association with aggressive disease behavior and poorer outcomes [6]. Among these, ductal adenocarcinoma is particularly noteworthy for its higher stage at presentation and increased likelihood of extraprostatic extension [6].

A key finding of this analysis is the predominance of intermediate-grade tumors (Gleason score 7), which constituted the largest proportion of cases across studies. This observation aligns with current global trends, where increased PSA screening and early detection strategies have shifted the diagnostic spectrum toward clinically significant but potentially treatable disease [3,7]. The intermediate-risk group represents a heterogeneous category with variable biological behavior, emphasizing the importance of further risk stratification using additional histopathological and molecular markers [8].

The presence of a substantial proportion of high-grade tumors (Gleason ≥8), ranging from 20–35%, is clinically important, as these tumors are associated with aggressive behavior, increased risk of metastasis, and poorer survival outcomes [9]. This finding may reflect delayed presentation in certain populations or limitations in screening practices, particularly in low- and middle-income settings. High-grade tumors are also frequently associated with adverse histopathological features such as cribriform architecture and intraductal carcinoma, both of which are increasingly recognized as independent predictors of poor prognosis [10].

The adoption of the ISUP Grade Group system has further refined the prognostic stratification of prostate cancer by providing a simplified and clinically relevant classification [8]. In the present analysis, Grade Groups 2 and 3 (corresponding to Gleason score 7) were the most prevalent, reinforcing the importance of distinguishing between Gleason 3+4 and 4+3 patterns due to their differing prognostic implications [8].

Among the associated histopathological features, perineural invasion (PNI) was the most frequently observed, present in approximately 30–45% of cases. PNI is widely regarded as a marker of tumor aggressiveness and has been linked to

extraprostatic extension and higher recurrence rates following treatment [9]. Although its independent prognostic significance remains debated, its presence in biopsy specimens warrants careful clinical consideration [9].

Other features such as lymphovascular invasion and cribriform patterns, although less common, were consistently associated with higher-grade tumors and adverse outcomes [10]. The recognition of intraductal carcinoma of the prostate (IDC-P) as a distinct entity further highlights the evolving understanding of prostate cancer pathology, as this feature is strongly associated with aggressive disease and poor prognosis [10].

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of needle biopsy in the diagnosis and risk stratification of prostate carcinoma. Accurate histopathological evaluation, including assessment of tumor type, grade, and associated features, is essential for guiding clinical management decisions such as active surveillance, radical prostatectomy, radiotherapy, or systemic therapy [4].

From a clinical perspective, the predominance of intermediate-grade disease suggests that a significant proportion of patients fall into a category where management decisions are complex and must be individualized. Over-treatment of indolent disease and under-treatment of aggressive tumors remain important challenges in prostate cancer care [7].

Despite the strengths of this meta-analysis, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, moderate heterogeneity was observed among included studies, likely due to differences in study populations, biopsy techniques, and reporting standards [11]. Second, most studies were retrospective in nature, which may introduce selection bias. Third, there was limited reporting of variant histologies and advanced pathological features, restricting detailed subgroup analysis [6]. Additionally, variations in Gleason grading practices across institutions may have influenced the observed distribution [8].

Future research should focus on integrating histopathological findings with molecular and genomic data to enhance risk stratification and personalized treatment approaches. Advances in imaging-guided biopsy techniques and digital pathology may further improve diagnostic accuracy and reproducibility [10].

Overall, this study reinforces that histopathological evaluation of prostate needle biopsy remains the cornerstone of prostate cancer diagnosis and prognostication, with Gleason grading and associated pathological features playing a central role in clinical decision-making.

Limitations

- Heterogeneity among studies
- Retrospective design
- Limited reporting of variant histologies

CONCLUSION

Acinar adenocarcinoma is the predominant histopathological pattern in prostate needle biopsies. Gleason grading remains essential for prognostication, with a substantial proportion of patients presenting with intermediate to high-grade disease.

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