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Analysis of clinically relevant values of Ki-67 labeling index in Japanese breast cancer patients

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Abstract

Background It has become important to standardize the methods of Ki-67 evaluation in breast cancer patients, especially those used in the interpretation and scoring of immunoreactivity. Therefore, in this study, we examined the Ki-67 immunoreactivity of breast cancer surgical specimens processed and stained in the same manner in one single Japanese institution by counting nuclear immunoreactivity in the same fashion.

Methods We examined 408 Japanese breast cancers with invasive ductal carcinoma and studied the correlation between Ki-67 labeling index and ER/HER2 status and histological grade of breast cancer. We also analyzed overall survival (OS) and disease-free survival (DFS) of these patients according to individual Ki-67 labeling index.

Results There were statistically significant differences of Ki-67 labeling index between ER positive/HER2 negative and ER positive/HER2 positive, ER negative/HER2 positive or ER negative/HER2 negative, and ER positive/HER2 positive and ER negative/HER2 negative groups (all $P < 0.001$). There were also statistically significant differences of Ki-67 labeling index among each histological grade ($P < 0.001$, respectively). As for multivariate analyses, Ki-67 labeling index was strongly associated with OS (HR 39.12, $P = 0.031$) and DFS (HR 10.85, $P = 0.011$) in ER positive and HER2 negative breast cancer patients. In addition, a statistically significant difference was noted between classical luminal A group and "20 % luminal A" in DFS ($P = 0.039$) but not between classical luminal A group and "25 % luminal A" ($P = 0.105$).

Conclusions A significant positive correlation was detected between Ki-67 labeling index and ER/HER2 status and histological grades of the cases examined in our study. The suggested optimal cutoff point of Ki-67 labeling index is between 20 and 25 % in ER positive and HER2 negative breast cancer patients.

Keywords Ki-67 · Breast cancer · Cutoff point · Estrogen receptor · HER2 · Histological grade

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Introduction

Tumor proliferation fraction has become an established predictive marker for clinical outcome of breast cancer patients [1–3]. Uncontrolled cell proliferation has also been considered a hallmark of malignancy and can be assessed by various laboratory methods, including counting mitotic figures under light microscopy, flow or image cytometric evaluation of the fraction of the cells in S phase, and immunohistochemistry of various nuclear antigens associated with cell proliferation [3–5]. The proliferation antigen Ki-67 is localized in nuclei of the cells at all phase of the cell cycle except for those at G0 phase and, in particular, the Ki-67 labeling index (percentage of cells with Ki-67

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positive nuclear immunoreactivity) is considered to represent the status of tumor proliferation [1–3, 6, 7].

The statistically significant correlation between the Ki-67 labeling index of carcinoma cells and clinical outcome has been reported in human breast cancer patients [8–10]. Trihia et al. reported that a relatively higher Ki-67 labeling index within the carcinoma was significantly associated with adverse clinical outcome regardless of the subtypes of breast cancer [9, 10]. These results indicate that the Ki-67 labeling index in breast carcinoma cells may confer a higher risk of relapse and subsequently a worse overall survival in those with early breast cancer [8–10].

While results obtained using the Ki-67 labeling index of carcinoma cells resemble those obtained by the Oncotype Dx assay in ER positive and lymph node negative breast cancer patients (largely because the results of the Oncotype Dx assay are based on the status of cell proliferation genes) [11], additional information can be gained from assessing the Ki-67 labeling index within the carcinoma cells. The information obtained from such an assessment is not limited to predictions of prognosis or clinical outcome but also includes prediction of relative responsiveness or resistance to chemotherapy or endocrine therapy in adjuvant settings and the treatment efficacy in tissue specimens obtained before, during, and after neoadjuvant therapy, particularly neoadjuvant endocrine therapy [3]. Because of this additional predictive value, results of the Ki-67 labeling index in carcinoma cells have been incorporated into surgical pathology reports of breast cancer patients in an increasing number of diagnostic pathology laboratories in many countries [3].

However, as in any study utilizing immunohistochemical staining to evaluate clinical samples, it is cardinal and pivotal to standardize the method of Ki-67 measurement, including pre-analytical, analytical, interpretation, and scoring assessment [3], because otherwise results are far from reproducible and applicable in routine clinical settings. This may be particularly true of the methodology used in the stratification of early breast cancer patients into high and low proliferation groups. This stratification is markedly important in clinical settings and many attempts have been made to define the optimal cutoff value [12–14]; however, the reported value suggested to optimally distinguish these two groups of patients has been strikingly variable, from 1 to 28.6 %, thereby markedly limiting its clinical utility [3]. The 12th St. Gallen International Breast Cancer Conference 2011 recommended that patients with ER positive and HER2 negative breast cancer with a Ki-67 labeling index of 14 % or more may be recommended to receive adjuvant chemotherapy in addition to endocrine therapy [12]. The use of this cutoff point must, however, be approached with some caution as Nishimura et al. [13] recently demonstrated that the optimal cutoff of Ki-67 was

25 % in Japanese early breast cancer patients. In addition, the International Ki-67 in Breast Cancer Working Group also proposed that the direct application of specific cutoffs for decision making must be considered unreliable unless analyses were conducted in a highly experienced laboratory with its own reference data [3].

Careful and critical review of the previously reported studies of Ki-67 in human breast cancer revealed that the great majority of Ki-67 labeling index studies have not necessarily been performed under stringent conditions as described above, especially under those recommended by the International Ki-67 in Breast Cancer Working Group. Therefore, in this study, we evaluated the Ki-67 labeling index in breast cancer surgical pathology specimens processed in the same manner in a single institute, Tohoku University Hospital, Sendai, Japan and by the same observers using the same evaluation criteria. We then evaluated the correlation between the Ki-67 labeling index and ER/HER2 status and histological grade in Japanese cases of invasive ductal carcinoma. We then attempted to determine the clinical relevant cutoff value or the percentage of Ki-67 positive invasive breast carcinoma cells that could differentiate eventual clinical outcome of ER positive breast cancer cases.

Materials and methods

Carcinomas

We examined 408 Japanese patients with invasive ductal carcinomas of the breast, all of whom had undergone surgery at Tohoku University Hospital, Sendai and Nahanishi Clinic Okinawa. The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee at Tohoku University Graduate School of Medicine. The median age of the patients was 56 years (range 25–89 years). Estrogen receptor (ER) and human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2) status were reevaluated and summarized as follows: ER positive and HER2 negative, ER positive and HER2 positive, ER negative and HER2 positive, and ER negative and HER2 negative. These specimens had been first cut into 5-mm slices after carefully inking the margins, fixed in 10 % formalin for 46–48 h at room temperature, and embedded in paraffin wax.
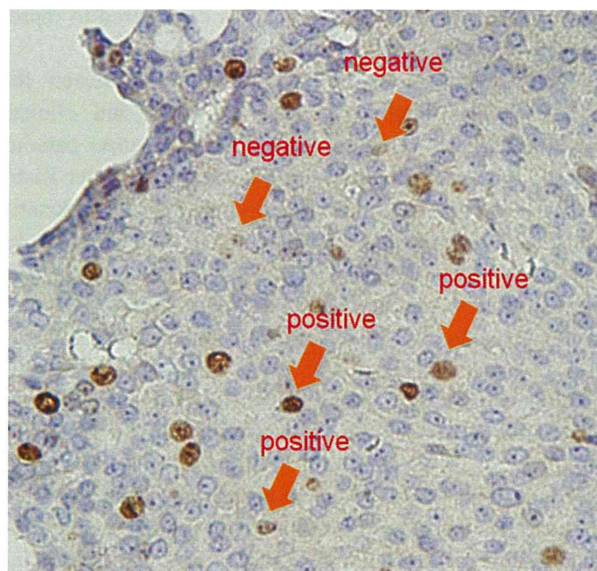
Immunohistochemistry

Immunohistochemical analyses were all performed by a single experienced histotechnician at the Department of Pathology, Tohoku University Hospital using the same protocol. All the blocks were freshly cut into 4-μm sections, placed on glue-coated glass slides (Matsunami Glass

Ind., Ltd, Osaka, Japan), and left at room temperature for 3–5 days. Sections were then deparaffinized in xylene, and hydrated with graded alcohols and distilled water at room temperature. Endogenous peroxidase activity was blocked with freshly prepared 3 % hydrogen peroxidase for 10 min at room temperature. Antigen retrieval was performed in an autoclave (Tomy SX-500 high pressure steam sterilizer, Tomy Seiko Co., Ltd., Tokyo, Japan) using citrate buffer for Ki-67 heated at 121 °C for 5 min. Sections were subsequently incubated for 30 min at room temperature in a blocking solution of 10 % rabbit serum (Nichirei Biosciences, Tokyo, Japan) for Ki-67, and then immunostained for 16 h at 4 °C with the primary antibody. The primary antibody of Ki-67 was MIB-1 mouse monoclonal antibody (code M7240; Dako, Copenhagen, Denmark) diluted at 1:300. Secondary antibody reaction for Ki-67 immunohistochemistry was performed using biotinylated rabbit anti-mouse antibody (Nichirei Bioscience) at a dilution of 1:100 for 30 min at room temperature and peroxidase-conjugated avidin (Nichirei Bioscience) was used according to the manufacture's instruction. Reacted sections were visualized using 3,3′-diaminobenzidine-tetrachloride (DAB)/ 30 % H_2O_2 in 0.05 mol/l Tris buffer (pH 7.6) and counterstained with hematoxylin for nuclear staining. We used the avidin–streptavidin immunoperoxidase method using the clone 6F11 antibody (Ventana, Tucson, AZ, USA) in an automated immunostainer (Benchmark System; Ventana) for immunohistochemistry of ER. A standardized immunohistochemistry kit (Hercep-Test for Immunoenzymatic Staining; Dako) was used for HER2 staining as previously reported [15, 16].

Histopathological analysis

Histopathological evaluations were based on the World Health Organization (WHO) histological classification of tumors of breast and *Rosen's Breast Pathology* [17, 18]. Histological grades were assessed according to the criteria of Elston and Ellis [17, 18]. The Ki-67 immunoreactivity was evaluated independently by two of the authors by first identifying the areas of the most densely stained areas in the whole tissue sections by scanning at low power fields and then counting 1000 carcinoma cells in these areas [3]. We used an Olympus BX50 (Olympus, Tokyo, Japan) and ×20 objectives for the analysis. Figure 1 represents characteristic immunohistochemical findings of Ki-67 positive and negative carcinoma cells (Fig. 1). The presence of ER was determined by distinctive nuclear immunoreactivity and was graded from 0 to 8 using the Allred score, with positivity of the cases defined as a score of 3 [19]. With regard to HER2 evaluation, membranous staining was graded as 0–1+, 2+, and 3+ [20]. The cases scored as 2+ were subjected to FISH to calculate the gene copy ratio of

Fig. 1 Representative immunohistochemical findings of Ki-67 positive and negative carcinomas. The specimens were fixed in neutral buffered 10 % formalin and sections stained for Ki-67 with MIB1 antibody (*brown stain*) and counterstained with Mayer's hematoxylin (*blue stain*) (color figure online)

HER2 to CEP17 (PathVysion HER2 DNA Probe kit; Abbott, Chicago, IL, USA), as previously reported [15, 21]. HER2 positive cases were defined as a HER2/CEP17 signal ratio (FISH score) greater than 2.2 [20].

On the basis of the values obtained in the manner above, we examined the correlation between the Ki-67 labeling index and ER/HER2 status and histological grade. We also analyzed overall survival (OS) and disease-free survival (DFS) stratified according to the Ki-67 labeling index, in order to examine the utility of various cutoff points of Ki-67 in predicting clinical outcome within various ER+ breast cancer subgroups (luminal A, luminal B). In order to do this we tentatively assigned luminal A cases as follows: "classical luminal A" as the ER positive and HER2 negative group [22]; "14 % luminal A", based upon the proposal made at the St. Gallen 2011 consensus meeting [12], with a Ki-67 labeling index of less than 14 %; "20 % cutoff luminal A" with a Ki-67 labeling index of less than 20 %; "25 % cutoff luminal A" with a Ki-67 labeling index of less than 25 %; and "30 % cutoff luminal A" with a Ki-67 labeling index of less than 30 % [14, 23]. As for luminal B, we defined "classical luminal B" as ER positive and HER2 positive [24]; "14 % luminal B", proposed at St. Gallen 2011 [12], with a Ki-67 labeling index of more than 14 %; "20 % cutoff luminal B" with a Ki-67 labeling index of more than 20 %; "25 % cutoff luminal B" with a Ki-67 labeling index of more than 25 %; and "30 % cutoff luminal B" with a Ki-67 labeling index of more than 30 % [14, 22].

Statistical analyses

Statistically analyses were performed using StatMate IV for Windows (ATMS, Tokyo, Japan). The Mann–Whitney test was used to assess the correlation between the Ki-67 labeling index and ER/HER2 status and histological grade. The Cox proportional hazards regression model was used for multivariate analyses to evaluate each factor including the Ki-67 labeling index, TNM stages, ER expression, HER2 status, and adjuvant therapy of the patients. The analyses of OS or DFS curves were performed using the Kaplan–Meier method. The results were considered significant at $P < 0.05$.

Results

Correlation between Ki-67 labeling index and ER and HER2 status

Figure 2 summarizes the Ki-67 labeling index results according to ER and HER2 status of the cases examined. The Ki-67 labeling index in carcinoma cells was 11 % (median) and 17.9 % (average) in ER positive/HER2 negative, 40 % (median) and 36.4 % (average) in ER positive/HER2 positive, 40 % (median) and 46.8 % (average) in ER negative/HER2 positive, and 60 % (median) and 56.3 % (average) in ER negative/HER2 negative groups. There were statistically significant differences of the Ki-67 labeling index between ER positive/HER2 negative and ER positive/HER2 positive, ER negative/HER2 positive or ER negative/HER2 negative, and ER positive/HER2 positive and ER negative/HER2 negative groups (all $P < 0.001$).

Correlation between Ki-67 labeling index and histological grades

Figure 3 summarizes the Ki-67 labeling results index in each histological grade of the cases examined. The Ki-67 labeling index was 6 % (median) and 8.5 % (average) in grade 1, 19 % (median) and 24.0 % (average) in grade 2, and 60 % (median) and 55.8 % (average) in grade 3. The Ki-67 labeling index was significantly different between histological grades ($P < 0.001$, respectively).

OS of luminal A and B groups according to Ki-67 labeling index

Table 1 shows the distribution of patients according to the subtypes classical luminal, 14 % luminal, 20 % luminal, 25 % luminal, and 30 % luminal. The 5-year OS rates of patients in luminal A groups were 0.949 in classical luminal A, 1.000 in "14 % luminal A", 1.000 in "20 %

luminal A", 1.000 in "25 % luminal A", and 1.000 in "30 % luminal A". There were no statistically significant differences of OS rates among these groups. The 5-year OS rates of luminal B were 1.000 in classical luminal B, 0.875 in "14 % luminal B", 0.853 in "20 % luminal B", 0.822 in "25 % luminal B", and 0.812 in "30 % luminal B". No statistically significant differences were detected among these groups.

### DFS of luminal A and B groups according to the Ki-67 labeling index

Figure 4 summarizes the DFS rates of the patients according to each subgroup determined by the Ki-67 labeling index of individual cases. The 5-year DFS rates of patients in luminal A groups were 0.956 in classical luminal A, 1.000 in "14 % luminal A", 0.993 in "20 % luminal A", 0.989 in "25 % luminal A", and 0.983 in "30 % luminal A". There were statistically significant differences between classical luminal A and "14 % luminal A" or "20 % luminal A" ($P = 0.010$ and $P = 0.039$, respectively). A similar tendency was also noted between classical luminal A and "25 % luminal A" or "30 % luminal A" ($P = 0.105$ and 0.159, respectively) but the difference did not reach statistical significance. The 5-year DFS rates of patients in luminal B groups were 0.885 in classical luminal B, 0.880 in "14 % luminal B", 0.871 in "20 % luminal B", 0.840 in "25 % luminal B" and 0.835 in "30 % luminal B". There were no statistically significant differences among these groups above.

Multivariate analyses of OS and DFS according to Ki-67 labeling index

Among the factors examined, including the Ki-67 labeling index, tumor size, nodal status, stage, and adjuvant chemotherapy status, the Ki-67 labeling index was markedly associated with OS (HR 39.12, $P = 0.031$) and DFS (HR 10.85, $P = 0.011$) in ER positive and HER2 negative breast cancer patients. However, the Ki-67 labeling index was not statistically associated with OS (HR 9.28, $P = 0.198$) and DFS (HR 5.76, $P = 0.420$) in all cases including ER positive/HER2 positive, ER negative/HER2 negative, and ER negative/HER2 positive breast cancer patients.

Determination of Ki-67 labeling index cutoff values of carcinoma cells according to the clinical outcome of ER positive breast cancer cases

We evaluated the statistical significance of cutoff values of the Ki-67 labeling index in carcinoma cells segregated by 5 %. There were no statistically significant differences in OS of the patients. A statistically significant difference was
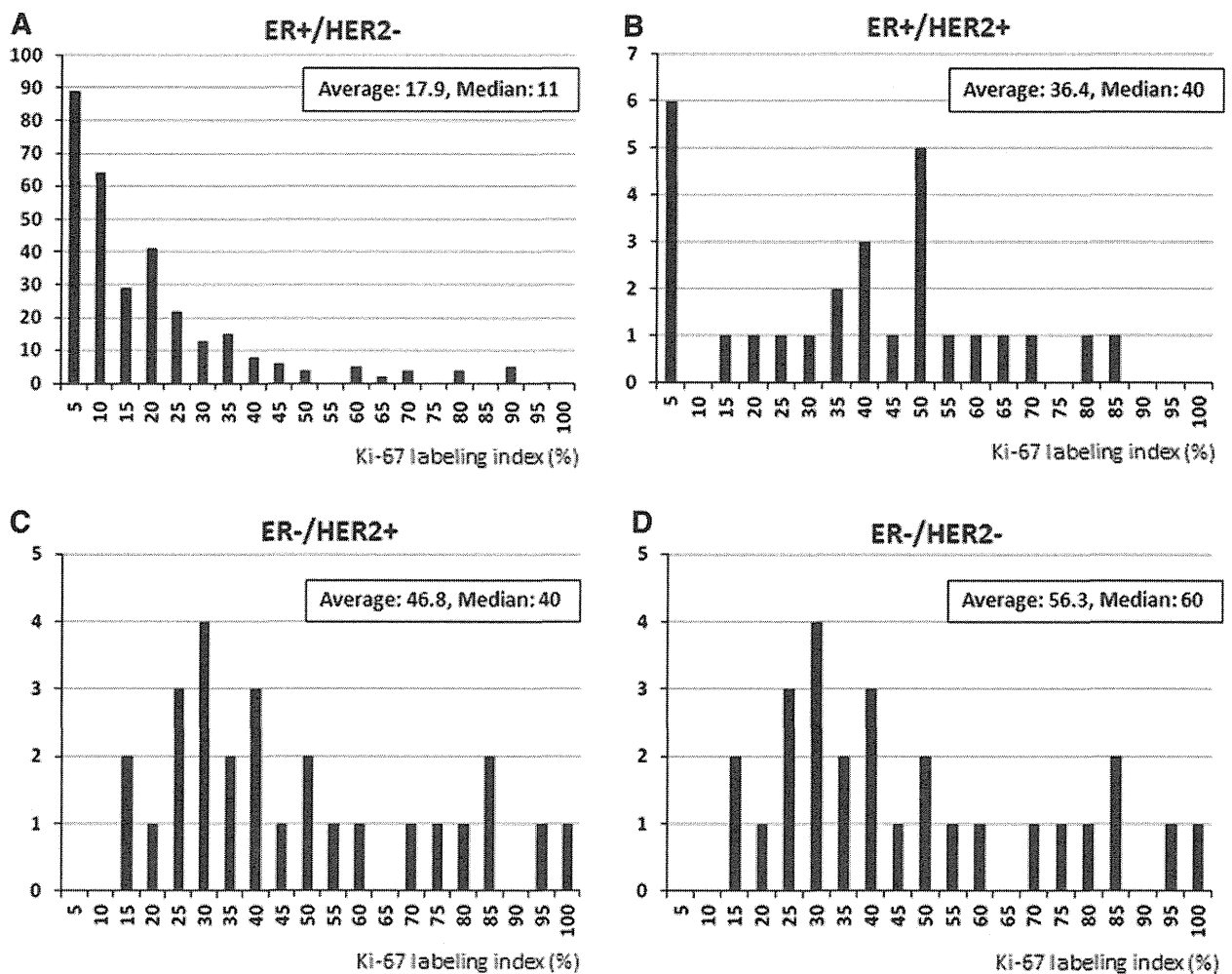
Fig. 2 Correlation between Ki-67 labeling index and ER or HER2 status. The distribution of Ki-67 labeling index in **a** ER positive and HER2 negative cases, **b** ER positive and HER2 positive cases, **c** ER negative and HER2 positive cases, **d** ER negative and HER2 negative cases

noted between classical luminal A group and "20 % luminal A" in DFS ($P = 0.039$) but not between classical luminal A group and "25 % luminal A" ($P = 0.105$). Therefore, the optimal cutoff point of the Ki-67 labeling index was suggested to be between 20 and 25 %.

Discussion

Ki-67 has been established as a well-known biomarker of cell proliferation in many human malignancies including breast cancer. The Ki-67 labeling index has been utilized to obtain both prognosis and prediction of the sensitivity to systemic therapy of breast cancer patients [2, 10, 21]. Some examples of this are the statistically significant correlation between a high Ki-67 labeling index of carcinoma cells and increased risk of cancer relapse and death in breast cancer patients [10] and the utility of mid-course evaluation of Ki-

67 labeling index, even after 2 weeks of endocrine therapy, in predicting the subsequent response to endocrine therapy in ER positive breast cancer patients [23]. In addition the group of breast cancer patients associated with a high Ki-67 labeling index studied in the Breast International Group trial (BIG) 1-98 was associated with a potential clinical benefit in selecting letrozole over tamoxifen in post-menopausal patients [2]. Despite these important aspects of Ki-67 immunohistochemistry, the necessary standardized guidelines have not been developed [12, 25].

The International Ki-67 in Breast Cancer Working Group recently recommended the fixation of the specimens with neutral buffered formalin for 4–48 h or more and the counting of at least 500 invasive carcinoma cells using MIB-1 mouse monoclonal antibody [3]. In our present study, all the specimens examined had been processed in the same manner and according to the guidelines above and the Ki-67 labeling index was also evaluated accordingly.

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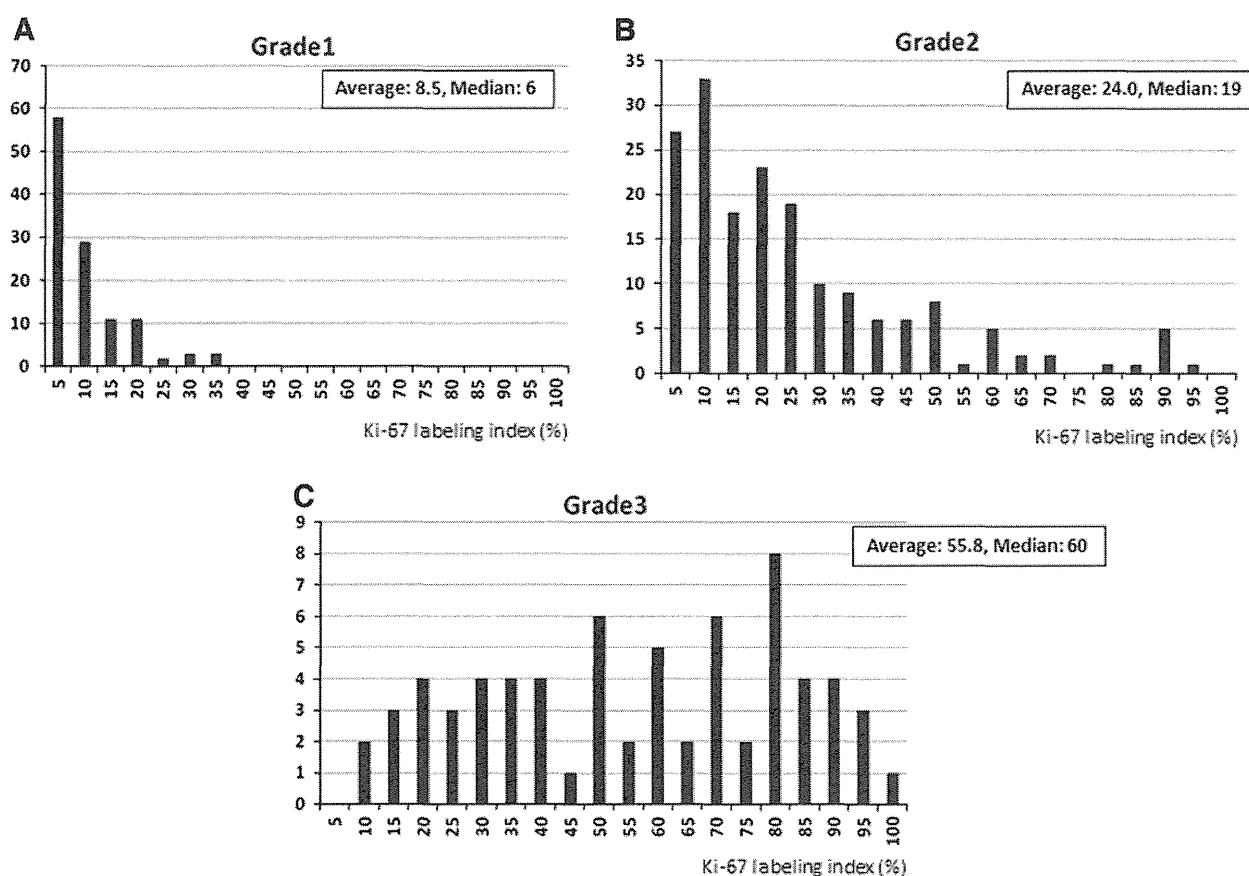
Fig. 3 Correlation between Ki-67 labeling index and histological grade of the patients. The distribution of Ki-67 labeling index in **a** grade 1, **b** grade 2, **c** grade 3 groups

Table 1 Distribution of patients according to the subtypes classical luminal, 14 % luminal, 20 % luminal, 25 % luminal, and 30 % luminal

	n	Ki-67 (median %)	Ki-67 (average %)
Classical lum A	289	11	17.9
14 % lum A	160	5	6.0
20 % lum A	186	6	7.5
25 % lum A	215	8	9.2
30 % lum A	225	9	10.1
Classical lum B	23	40	36.4
14 % lum B	152	27	33.2
20 % lum B	126	31	36.7
25 % lum B	97	35	41.1
30 % lum B	87	40	42.9

Previous studies conducted by Nishimura et al. [26–28] on Japanese breast cancer patients demonstrated that the Ki-67 value as significantly higher in triple negative cases. However, the Ki-67 labeling index was also statistically lower in ER positive/HER2 negative cases [26–28]. We therefore examined the correlation between the Ki-67

labeling index and hormone receptor, HER2 status, or histological grade using surgical pathology specimens processed in the same manner and immunostained in the same fashion by one single experienced histotechnician in one single institution.

The results of our present study demonstrated that the ER positive and HER2 negative group was associated with a significantly lower Ki-67 labeling index of carcinoma cells than in other subtypes examined. The cases with a high Ki-67 labeling index in the ER positive and HER2 negative group have been considered as potential candidates for receiving chemotherapy in addition to endocrine therapy as in the patients with a high histological grade [12–14]. In our present study, there was also a statistically significant correlation between the Ki-67 labeling index and histological grades of individual cases. Collectively our findings suggest that it may be better to review the slides when there is a significant discrepancy between the results of Ki-67 labeling index and histological grade in invasive ductal carcinoma cases. The results of our present study also demonstrated that subtyping of the tumors using immunohistochemical surrogate markers such as ER,

A

B
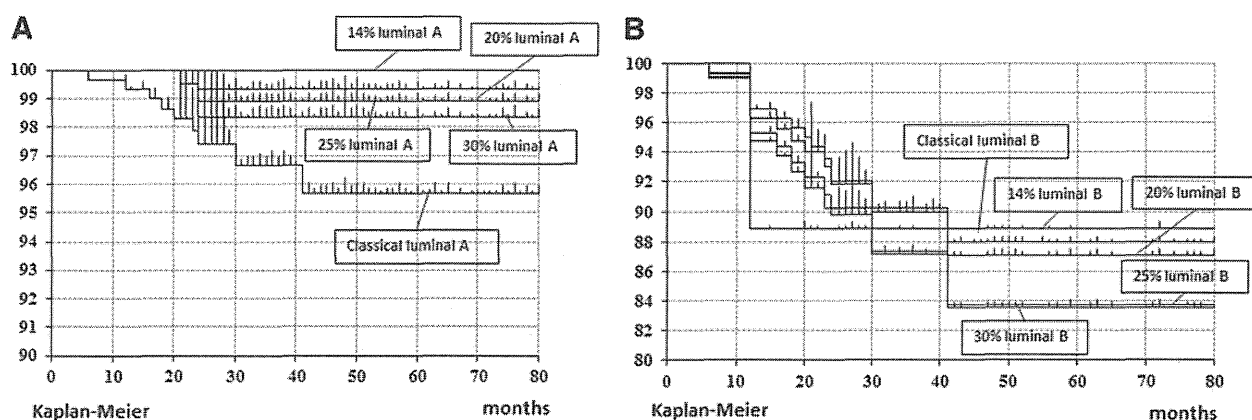
Fig. 4 DFS according to Ki-67 labeling index of the patients. a Luminal A: *classical luminal A* ER positive and HER2 negative; *14 % luminal A* Ki-67 labeling index less than 14 %; *20 % luminal A* Ki-67 labeling index less than 20 %; *25 % luminal A* Ki-67 labeling index less than 25 %; *30 % luminal A* Ki-67 labeling index less than 30 %. b Luminal B: *classical luminal B* ER positive and HER2 positive; *14 % luminal B* Ki-67 labeling index more than 14 %; *20 % luminal B* Ki-67 labeling index more than 20 %; *25 % luminal B* Ki-67 labeling index more than 25 %; *30 % luminal B* Ki-67 labeling index more than 30 %

HER2, and Ki-67, if using appropriately processed surgical pathology specimens and well-controlled immunohisto-chemical procedures, could at least contribute to identifying high-risk Japanese breast cancer patients within the hormone receptor positive subgroup of breast cancers. Nishimura et al. [26] also indicated that ER/PgR, HER2, and Ki-67 are all important biological markers for predicting prognosis and making effective treatment decisions in Japanese breast cancer patients by using only these biomarkers. The combination of these markers has been proposed at least in defining luminal A and B types of breast cancer without necessarily performing gene profiling studies with some exceptions [12, 29]. Luminal B type breast cancer represents a clinically important subgroup generally associated with adverse clinical outcome regardless of systemic adjuvant therapy [19]. It was recently recommended at the St. Gallens consensus meeting that chemotherapy was indicated for the majority of these patient defined as ER positive and with a Ki-67 labeling index of more than 14 % [12]. However, it is also true that the optimal cutoff points of the Ki-67 labeling index in these cases have been reported as 10–25 % [3, 12]. For instance, no pathological responders were reported in the cases with more than 25 % Ki-67 in neoadjuvant chemotherapy of Japanese breast cancer patients [13]. These discrepancies or variations of proposed values of Ki-67 labeling may be all due to differences of methodologies involved in obtaining the Ki-67 labeling index including pre-analytical factors such as fixation of the specimens and/or ethnical or racial backgrounds of the patients and further investigations are required for clarification.

The direct application of a specific cutoff for clinical decision making may be considered unreliable unless analyses are conducted in a highly experienced laboratory with its own reference data [3]. The International Ki-67 in Breast Cancer Working Group demonstrated that no consensus has been reached regarding the ideal cutoff point of the Ki-67 labeling index. The results of our present study demonstrated that there were statistically significant differences of DFS between classical luminal A and luminal with a 14 or 20 % cutoff of Ki-67. In addition, we examined the cutoff values of the Ki-67 labeling index segregated by 5 %. A statistically significant difference was noted between classical luminal A group and "20 % luminal A" in DFS but not between classical luminal A group and "25 % luminal A". Therefore, we propose an optimal cutoff point of the Ki-67 labeling index of between 20 and 25 %. These results were similar to that of a previous study from Japan mentioned above [13]. Therefore, ER positive and HER2 negative Japanese breast cancer patients with a Ki-67 labeling index of 20–25 % are associated with more aggressive biological course than those not and additional chemotherapy may be of further help or benefit to these patients.

It was recently proposed that the prognostic information provided by ER, PgR, HER2, and Ki-67 immunostaining performed in a rigorously controlled fashion was considered at least equivalent to that provided by 21 gene signature analysis and highlights the relevance of these readily available routine histopathological parameters in the clinical management of early ER positive breast cancer [30]. In addition, we demonstrated using multivariate analysis that the Ki-67 labeling index was one of the most important prognostic factors for the ER positive and HER2 negative group in this study. Therefore, it has become important to standardize the type of fixation, time to fixation, appropriate primary antibody, and methods of immunostaining and interpretation, especially in countries like Japan where

the expensive gene signature tests are and will be out of reach for the great majority of breast cancer patients. We also noted the statistically significant correlation between the Ki-67 labeling index and ER/HER2 status and histological grade of individual patients performed in a single institution. It is true that our present study was retrospective, the number of the patients is relatively small, and the patients were all Japanese but the results still provided sufficient evidence to support the value of the Ki-67 labeling index in the clinical management of breast cancer patients. Further investigations employing larger numbers of patients with longer periods of clinical follow-up may be required for determining the most clinically relevant cutoff points of the Ki-67 labeling index in breast cancer patients, especially those in the early stage in order to confer the maximal clinical benefits upon individual breast cancer patients.

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Reproductive factors and breast cancer risk in relation to hormone receptor and menopausal status in Japanese women

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The associations between menstrual and reproductive factors and breast cancer risk in relation to estrogen/progesterone receptor (ER/PgR) status have been unclear in Japanese women. This case-control study evaluated these associations, overall and separately, by menopausal status. A total of 1092 breast cancer cases and 3160 controls were selected from among female patients aged 30 years and over admitted to a single hospital in Miyagi Prefecture between 1997 and 2009. The receptor status distribution among the cases (missing: 8.4%) was 571 ER+/PgR+, 133 ER +/PgR−, 24 ER−/PgR+ and 271 ER−/PgR−. Menstrual and reproductive factors were assessed using a self-administered questionnaire. Polytomous logistic regression and tests for heterogeneity across ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− were conducted. Later age at menarche was significantly associated with a decreased risk of both ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancer among women overall (P_{trend} = 0.0016 for ER+/PgR+; P_{trend} = 0.015 for ER−/PgR−) and among postmenopausal women (P_{trend} = 0.012 for ER+/PgR+; P_{trend} = 0.0056 for ER−/PgR−). Nulliparity was associated with an increased risk of ER+/PgR+, but not ER−/PgR− cancer among women overall ($P_{heterogeneity}$ = 0.019) and among postmenopausal women (odds ratio for ER+/PgR+ = 2.56, 95% confidence interval = 1.61–4.07; $P_{heterogeneity}$ = 0.0095). A longer duration of breastfeeding tended to be associated with a decreased risk in all subtypes among women overall. Later age at menarche has a protective effect against both ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancer. However, parity might impact differently on various subtypes of breast cancer. Further studies are needed to clarify the etiology of the rare ER+/PgR− and ER−/PgR+ cancer subtypes. (*Cancer Sci* 2012; 103: 1861–1870)

O ver the past few decades, numerous epidemiologic studies of breast cancer have been conducted, based mainly on Caucasian populations. These studies show that menstrual and reproductive factors and menopausal status are associated with breast cancer risk.[1,2] In Japan, cohort studies,[3,4] case-control studies[5–7] and a meta-analysis have revealed similar associations.[8]

Breast cancers are known to express the estrogen receptor (ER) or progesterone receptor (PgR). Tumor subtypes defined by these receptors represent biologically different entities.[9] In Western countries, many studies have evaluated breast cancer risk according to hormone receptor status.[10–13] A meta-analysis shows that nulliparity is associated with a higher risk of ER+ tumors, but not ER− tumors.[13] Another meta-analysis suggests that nulliparity is associated with an increased risk of ER+/PgR+ tumors, but not ER−/PgR− tumors. The protective effects of late age at menarche and longer duration of breastfeeding do not differ across ER/PgR status.[12]

Among studies conducted in the Asian region, a large-scale case-control study from China evaluates risk factors defined according to the four types of hormone receptor status and finds an association with parity history similar to that in the abovementioned meta-analysis.[14] Although a few epidemiologic studies focus on the hormone receptor status of breast cancer in Japan,[15–17] their results are inconsistent. One study shows that parity, the number of births and age at menarche have different associations with the risk of breast cancer according to ER and PR status.[15] Another study shows that only age at menarche is differently associated with the risk of breast cancer according to ER status.[16] A third study shows no gradient in the risk associated with reproductive factors,[17] including age at menarche, age at menopause, age at first birth, parity number and duration of breastfeeding. In most of the Japanese studies, however, hormone receptor data are incomplete, and, therefore, the percentage of breast cancer cases for which the hormone receptor status is unknown is relatively large. Consequently, the sample sizes might have been too small to allow comprehensive evaluation of breast cancer risk according to hormone receptor status. The inconsistencies among the results obtained in these Japanese studies are likely attributable to such limitations.

Therefore, we conducted a hospital-based case-control study to precisely evaluate the association between reproductive factors and breast cancer risk according to hormone receptor status. Data were obtained from women aged 30 years and over who were admitted to a single hospital in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan. Analyses were performed based on joint ER and PR status; that is, ER+/PgR+, ER+/PgR−, ER−/PgR+ and ER−/PgR−. In this study, data on hormone receptor status were available for over 90% of the breast cancer cases included.

Methods

Data collection. In January 1997, we began a questionnaire survey in connection with the present study. Information on lifestyle and personal history was collected from all patients at their first admission to the Miyagi Cancer Center Hospital (MCCH) using a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to patients on the day of their reservation for initial admission (i.e. 10–15 days before admission) and collected by nurses on the actual day of admission. The MCCH is located in Natori City, situated in the southern part of Miyagi Prefecture, and functions as a hospital for both

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cancer and benign disease. Details of the questionnaire survey have been described elsewhere.[18–21]

The questionnaire covered demographic characteristics, personal and family histories of cancer and other diseases, including family history of breast cancer in mother or sisters, current height and weight, general lifestyle factors before the development of current symptoms, including cigarette smoking, alcohol drinking, physical activity, occupation, menstrual and reproductive histories, and history of oral contraceptives (OC) and other exogenous female hormone uses. Items related to the referral base were also included. The items related to menstrual and reproductive histories included age at menarche, menopausal status, age at menopause, parity history, parity number, age at first birth, history of breastfeeding, duration of breastfeeding and quantity of milk secretion. A question on the duration of breastfeeding was added after 2000. Between January 1997 and December 2009, the questionnaire was distributed to 23 531 first-admitted patients, of whom 21 056 responded.

Study subjects. Cases and controls were selected from among patients who responded to the above questionnaire survey. To identify incident cases of female breast cancer, a list of the patients was linked with the hospital-based cancer registry files. The registry records all cancer cases confirmed by clinical, cytological and/or histopathological examination at the MCCH. Through linkage to the registry, 21 056 patients were classified into 1812 with a past history of cancer, 6848 male patients with cancer, 1096 female patients with breast cancer, 4171 female patients with other cancers, and 7129 non-cancer patients (3708 male and 3421 female patients). Among the 1096 female patients with breast cancer, 1092 aged 30 years and over were included as the cases for the present study.

Controls were selected from among female non-cancer patients. Patients with benign tumors were classified as non-cancer patients for the present study. Accordingly, 3160 female non-cancer patients aged 30 years and over were identified as controls. The diagnoses among the controls were as follows: benign tumor in 1824 (57.7%), cardiovascular disease in 116 (3.7%), digestive tract disease in 377 (11.9%), respiratory tract disease in 122 (3.9%), urologic-gynecologic disease in 170 (5.4%), other benign disease in 302 (9.5%) and no abnormal findings in 249 patients (7.9%). The sites of benign tumors were the digestive tract in 637 subjects, gynecologic organs in 375, urologic organs in 17, breast in 36, bone or connective tissue in 545 and other sites in 214. The final response rate in the questionnaire survey was 94.1% for the case group and 89.8% for the control group.

This study was approved by the ethical review board of the Miyagi Cancer Center and was conducted in accordance with the principles specified in the Declaration of Helsinki. We considered the return of self-administered questionnaires signed by the subjects to imply their consent to participate in the study.

Hormone receptor status. Information on hormone receptor status (i.e. expression of the ER and PgR in breast cancers) was extracted from medical records. In brief, enzyme immunoassays (EIA) were used in the early period of the study to determine hormone receptor status. After mid-2003, immunohistochemistry (IHC) assays were conducted on tumor tissue samples. The cut-off point for receptor positivity in the EIA was 14 fmol/mg for ER and 13 fmol/mg for PgR. In the IHC assay, a histology score (HSCORE) of ≥ 20 for ER and one of ≥ 6 for PgR were evaluated as positive.[22] The concordance between the two assays was 94.3% for ER and 100% for PgR in the laboratory of the MCCH.[22] Among the total of 1092 cases, data on joint ER/PgR status were available for 1000 (91.6%); 571 cases were ER+/PgR+, 133 were ER+/PgR−, 24 were ER−/PgR+ and 271 were ER−/PgR−.

Statistical analysis. We used multiple polytomous unconditional logistic regression analysis to estimate odds ratios (OR)

and 95% confidence intervals (CI) for hormone receptor-defined breast cancer risk in relation to menstrual and reproductive factors, family history of breast cancer, use of OC, and use of exogenous female hormones other than OC.

The exposure variables analyzed in the present study were menstrual and reproductive factors (age at menarche, menopausal status, age at menopause, parity, parity number, age at first birth, history of breastfeeding, total duration of breastfeeding and quantity of milk secretion), family history of breast cancer in mother or sisters (yes or no), history of OC use (ever or never) and use of exogenous female hormones other than OC (ever or never). For history of breastfeeding (formula only, mixed breastfeeding and formula, or breastfeeding only), use of formula only was recognized as no history of breastfeeding, and used as a reference. Breastfeeding only and mixed breastfeeding and formula were both regarded as a positive history of breastfeeding.

We considered the following variables to be potential confounders: age, referral base (from screening or other), area of residence (southern Miyagi Prefecture or other), year of recruitment, smoking (ever or never), alcohol drinking (ever or never), occupation (housewife or other), body mass index (BMI) and physical activity (more or less than 1 h per week). BMI was calculated as weight divided by squared height (kg/m²). In the analysis, menstrual and reproductive factors and history of breast cancer in mother or sisters were also adjusted for each other. Missing values for confounders were treated as an additional variable category, and were included in the model.

In the analysis, we stratified case subjects according to joint hormone receptor status. Stratification by menopausal status was also performed. Menopause was defined as the cessation of menstrual periods due to natural or other reasons, including surgery. With regard to menopause due to other reasons, we were unable to obtain any information about history of oophorectomy; therefore, case subjects aged 45–57 years and controls aged 43–57 years (defined as the mean age at natural menopause ±2 SD) were regarded as patients with unknown menopausal status. In the analysis stratified by menopausal status, case subjects who had ER+/PgR− or ER−/PgR+ tumors were too few to allow precise estimation of OR in comparison with subjects who had ER+/PgR+ or ER−/PgR− tumors; therefore, we excluded these subjects from the analysis according to menopausal status.

Dose-response relationships were tested by treating each exposure category as a continuous variable. We conducted Wald tests for estimating the heterogeneity of breast cancer risk across ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR−. Values were considered significant if the two-sided P were <0.05. All analyses were performed using SAS version 9.3 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA).

Results

The background characteristics of the study subjects are presented in Table 1. Among the case subjects included in the analysis ($n = 1000$), 416 were premenopausal, 555 were postmenopausal and 29 were undefined. Among the premenopausal subjects, 260 (62.5%) were ER+/PgR+, 44 (10.6%) were ER+/PgR−, 12 (2.9%) were ER−/PgR+ and 100 (24.0%) were ER−/PgR−. Among the postmenopausal subjects, 300 (54.1%) were ER+/PgR+, 87 (15.7%) were ER+/PgR−, 11 (2.0%) were ER−/PgR+ and 157 (28.3%) were ER−/PgR−. Among the control subjects ($n = 3160$), 1081 (34.2%) were premenopausal, 1963 (62.1%) were postmenopausal and 116 (3.7%) were undefined. Cases with ER+/PgR+ tumors tended to be heavier, and were more likely to be referred from screening, to engage in physical activity and to be drinkers. Cases with

Table 1. Background characteristics in cases and controls

	All					Controls
	Cases					
	Hormone receptor status					
	ER+/PgR+	ER+/PgR−	ER−/PgR+	ER−/PgR−	Missing	
Total (*n*)	572	133	24	271	92	3160
Menopausal status (*n*)[a]						
Premenopausal	260	44	12	100	22	1081
Postmenopausal	300	87	11	157	43	1963
Unknown menopausal status	12	2	1	14	27	116
Age group (years old) (%)						
30–39	6.1	3.8	4.2	5.9	10.9	8.4
40–49	25.0	18.8	41.7	23.2	13.0	17.6
50–59	28.5	28.6	20.8	30.6	34.8	22.1
60–69	23.4	28.6	12.5	22.9	20.7	25.3
≥70	17.0	20.3	20.8	17.3	20.7	26.5
Average	57.2	59.2	56.3	57.2	57.7	59.6
SD	12.6	11.7	14.0	12.1	12.9	13.7
BMI (%)						
<18.5	4.9	6.0	—	4.8	9.8	5.8
18.5–25	59.4	62.4	62.5	65.3	60.9	63.4
25–30	27.6	26.3	37.5	24.0	22.8	26.0
≥30	8.0	5.3	—	5.5	3.3	4.2
Missing	—	—	—	0.4	3.3	0.7
Average	24.1	23.6	23.9	23.5	23.0	23.5
SD	3.8	3.6	3.1	3.8	3.6	3.6
Year of recruitment (%)						
1997–2002	24.7	39.8	58.3	45.4	50.0	54.7
2003–2009	75.3	60.2	41.7	54.6	50.0	45.3
Area of residence (%)						
Southern Miyagi Prefecture	82.7	85.0	87.5	83.4	78.3	88.4
Other	17.3	15.0	12.5	16.6	21.7	11.6
Referral base (%)						
From screening	21.2	20.3	16.7	13.3	8.7	18.1
Other	78.8	79.7	83.3	86.7	91.3	81.9
Occupation (%)						
Housewife	20.1	21.8	25.0	20.7	31.5	21.4
Other	68.2	68.4	54.2	66.4	54.3	61.7
Missing	11.7	9.8	20.8	12.9	14.1	16.9
Physical activity (%)						
More than 1 h per week	43.9	43.6	41.7	40.2	41.3	44.9
<1 h per week	50.2	50.4	54.2	51.7	50.0	47.4
Missing	5.9	6.0	4.2	8.1	8.7	7.7
Smoking (%)						
Never	79.9	79.7	66.7	81.5	80.4	80.0
Ever	17.7	17.3	20.8	16.2	17.4	15.6
Missing	2.4	3.0	12.5	2.2	2.2	4.4
Alcohol drinking (%)						
Never	68.4	78.9	70.8	69.7	75.0	71.3
Ever	28.7	20.3	12.5	26.9	19.6	23.3
Missing	3.0	0.8	16.7	3.3	5.4	5.3

[a]Menopause was defined as the cessation of menstrual periods due to natural or other reasons including surgery. BMI, body mass index; ER, estrogen receptor; PgR, progesterone receptor.

ER−/PgR− tumors tended to be lighter, and were less likely to be referred from screening, to engage in physical activity, and to be smokers. Cases with unknown ER/PgR status were less likely to be referred from screening in comparison with the other subtypes.

Table 2 shows the OR and 95% CI for menstrual and reproductive factors, family history of breast cancer, and exogenous female hormone use according to the four hormone receptor subtypes. A later age at menarche is signifi-

cantly associated with a decreased risk of ER+/PgR+ (P_{trend} = 0.0016; OR = 0.61, 95% CI 0.45–0.83 for ≥15 years) and ER−/PgR− (P_{trend} = 0.015; OR = 0.57, 95% CI 0.38–0.86 for ≥15 years) cancer. Natural menopause (OR = 0.64, 95% CI 0.49–0.84) and menopause due to other reasons (OR = 0.53, 95% CI 0.35–0.80) are associated with a lower risk of ER+/PgR+ cancer in comparison with premenopause. Nulliparity is associated with a higher risk of ER+/PgR+ cancer (OR = 1.30, 95% CI 0.96–1.78; P = 0.094), but

Table 2. OR (95% CI) of breast cancer risk by hormone receptor status associated with risk factors

	Control	ER+/PgR+ (n = 572)				ER+/PgR− (n = 133)				ER−/PgR+ (n = 24)				ER−/PgR− (n = 271)				$P_{heterogeneity}$ ER+/PgR+ vs ER−/PgR−
		Case	OR	95% CI	P	Case	OR	95% CI	P	Case	OR	95% CI	P	Case	OR	95% CI	P	
Age at menarche																		
≤ 12	691	187	1.00 (reference)[a]			27	1.00 (reference)[a]			7	1.00 (reference)[a]			81	1.00 (reference)[a]			
13	600	133	0.93	0.71–1.21		25	1.10	0.62–1.95		5	0.95	0.29–3.16		60	0.85	0.59–1.22		
14	574	105	0.83	0.62–1.11		36	1.82	1.05–3.15		4	0.83	0.22–3.13		57	0.89	0.61–1.31		
≥ 15	1021	128	0.61	0.45–0.83		41	1.28	0.71–2.32		7	0.73	0.20–2.74		61	0.57	0.38–0.86		
P for trend					0.0016				0.23				0.62				0.015	0.93
Menopausal status																		
Premenopause	1081	260	1.00 (reference)[b]			44	1.00 (reference)[b]			12	1.00 (reference)[b]			100	1.00 (reference)[b]			
Natural menopause	1424	241	0.64	0.49–0.84		74	1.20	0.72–2.02		11	0.59	0.19–1.89		128	1.22	0.83–1.80		
Menopause due to other reason	539	59	0.53	0.35–0.80		13	0.71	0.32–1.58		0	–	–		29	0.95	0.53–1.69		
Parity																		
Parous	2590	460	1.00 (reference)[c]			112	1.00 (reference)[c]			21	1.00 (reference)[c]			234	1.00 (reference)[c]			
Nulliparous	235	69	1.30	0.96–1.78	0.094	10	0.94	0.47–1.85	0.85	1	0.48	0.06–3.72	0.48	16	0.65	0.38–1.11	0.12	0.019
Age at first birth[i]																		
≤ 24	1242	179	1.00 (reference)[d]			49	1.00 (reference)[d]			2	1.00 (reference)[d]			102	1.00 (reference)[d]			
25–29	1071	213	1.26	1.00–1.59		47	1.09	0.71–1.66		15	9.04	1.92–42.68		99	0.97	0.72–1.32		
≥ 30	211	57	1.57	1.08–2.30		15	1.77	0.91–3.44		3	7.80	1.13–54.07		30	1.31	0.81–2.11		
P for trend					0.0086				0.17				0.009				0.48	0.26
Parity number[i]																		
1	273	58	1.00 (reference)[e]			13	1.00 (reference)[e]			4	1.00 (reference)[e]			36	1.00 (reference)[e]			
2	1243	250	1.03	0.73–1.45		57	1.07	0.55–2.05		13	0.67	0.19–2.30		120	0.77	0.51–1.17		
3	773	115	0.91	0.62–1.35		35	1.22	0.59–2.50		1	0.12	0.01–1.21		64	0.71	0.44–1.15		
4	214	29	1.02	0.60–1.73		4	0.58	0.18–1.90		1	0.43	0.04–4.71		11	0.52	0.25–1.08		
≥ 5	87	8	0.87	0.38–1.99		3	1.23	0.32–4.77		2	2.28	0.29–18.15		3	0.39	0.11–1.36		
P for trend					0.59				0.94				0.64				0.045	0.17
Breastfeeding[i]																		
Formula only	410	89	1.00 (reference)[f]			26	1.00 (reference)[f]			3	1.00 (reference)[f]			41	1.00 (reference)[f]			
Mixed breastfeeding and formula	1268	262	0.99	0.75–1.32		58	0.78	0.48–1.27		13	1.70	0.45–6.44		134	1.10	0.75–1.60		
Breastfeeding only	891	107	0.73	0.53–1.02		28	0.60	0.33–1.08		4	0.72	0.14–3.74		59	0.88	0.57–1.37		
Total month of breastfeeding[i]																		

Table 2 (continued)

	Control	ER+/PgR+ (n = 572)				ER+/PgR− (n = 133)				ER−/PgR+ (n = 24)				ER−/PgR− (n = 271)				$P_{heterogeneity}$ ER+/PgR+ vs ER−/PgR−
		Case	OR	95% CI	P	Case	OR	95% CI	P	Case	OR	95% CI	P	Case	OR	95% CI	P	
0–3	394	143	1.00 (reference)[f]			29	1.00 (reference)[f]			7	1.00 (reference)[f]			56	1.00 (reference)[f]			
3–12	302	74	0.70	0.50–0.97		17	0.79	0.42–1.49		3	0.39	0.08–1.97		37	0.84	0.53–1.32		
12–24	396	89	0.65	0.47–0.89		18	0.61	0.32–1.13		3	0.47	0.11–2.10		31	0.57	0.35–0.93		
>24	478	94	0.68	0.48–0.97		21	0.59	0.30–1.16		1	0.07	0.004–0.99		36	0.61	0.36–1.03		
P for trend					0.013				0.082				0.04				0.023	0.58
Quantity of breast milk secretion[i]																		
Poor or no	761	168	1.00 (reference)[f]			43	1.00 (reference)[f]			11	1.00 (reference)[f]			74	1.00 (reference)[f]			
Fair	876	141	0.82	0.64–1.06		28	0.61	0.37–1.01		6	0.44	0.14–1.37		82	1.08	0.77–1.52		
Good	885	141	0.80	0.62–1.04		38	0.82	0.52–1.31		3	0.30	0.08–1.16		67	0.90	0.63–1.29		
Family history of breast cancer in mother or sisters																		
No	3037	524	1.00 (reference)[g]			116	1.00 (reference)[g]			21	1.00 (reference)[g]			238	1.00 (reference)[g]			
Yes	123	48	2.14	1.49–3.08	<.0001	17	3.52	2.03–6.09	<.0001	3	4.06	1.15–14.31	0.029	33	3.51	2.32–5.31	<.0001	0.044
Oral contraceptives use																		
Never	2604	504	1.00 (reference)[h]			115	1.00 (reference)[h]			22	1.00 (reference)[h]			241	1.00 (reference)[h]			
Ever	158	30	0.90	0.59–1.37	0.62	8	1.22	0.57–2.59	0.61	0	–	–	–	16	1.03	0.60–1.78	0.91	0.68
Use of exogenous female hormones other than oral contraceptives																		
Never	2588	498	1.00 (reference)[h]			112	1.00 (reference)[h]			21	1.00 (reference)[h]			241	1.00 (reference)[h]			
Ever	134	26	0.86	0.55–1.36	0.52	9	1.56	0.76–3.19	0.23	1	0.79	0.10–6.17	0.82	11	0.79	0.42–1.50	0.47	0.82

All models were adjusted by age, BMI (<18.5, 18.5–25, 25–30, ≥30), smoke (never, current or past), alcohol (never, current or past), occupation (housewife, other), physical activity (<1 h per week, more than 1 h per week), year of recruitment (continuous), area (southern Miyagi Prefecture, other) and reference (from screening, other). [a]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer (yes, no), parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [b]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche (≤12, 13, 14, ≥15), parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [c]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche. [d]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, parity number (1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [e]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, age at first birth (≤24, 25–29, ≥30). [f]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, age at first birth, parity number (1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [g]Additionally adjusted by parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [h]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [i]For parous women only. BMI, body mass index; CI, confidence interval; ER, estrogen receptor; OR, odds ratio; PgR, progesterone receptor.

— 169 —

not ER−/PgR− cancer ($P_{\text{heterogeneity}}$ = 0.019). An older age at first birth is significantly associated with an increased risk of ER+/PgR+ cancer (P_{trend} = 0.0086; OR = 1.26, 95% CI 1.00–1.59 for $\geq$25–$\leq$29 years; OR = 1.57, 95% CI 1.08–2.30 for $\geq$30 years) and ER−/PgR+ cancer (P_{trend} = 0.009; OR = 9.04, 95% CI 1.92–42.68 for $\geq$25–$\leq$29 years; OR = 7.80, 95% CI 1.13–54.07 for $\geq$30 years). Multiparity is associated with a decreased risk of ER−/PgR− cancer (P_{trend} = 0.045). Breastfeeding only and a good quantity of breast milk secretion are associated with a decreased risk of cancers for all hormone receptor subtypes, but not statistically significantly. Data on duration of breastfeeding were available for 2222 subjects (52.3%). A longer period of breastfeeding is associated with a lower risk of cancers of all subtypes, although the result for ER+/PgR− is not statistically significant (P_{trend} = 0.013 for ER+/PgR+, P_{trend} = 0.082 for ER+/PgR−, P_{trend} = 0.04 for ER−/PgR+ and P_{trend} = 0.023 for ER−/PgR−). A family history of breast cancer in mother or sisters is significantly associated with an increased risk of all subtypes. The heterogeneity test for a family history of breast cancer reveals a significant difference in risk across ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− tumors ($P_{\text{heterogeneity}}$ =0.044). The use of OC and exogenous female hormones other than OC is not significantly associated with breast cancer risk for any of the subtypes.

Table 3 shows the results according to ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− status among premenopausal women. A later age at menarche is marginally associated with a decreased risk of ER+/PgR+ cancer (P_{trend} = 0.056). An older age at first birth is significantly associated with an increased risk of ER+/PgR+ cancer (P_{trend} = 0.027). However, tests of heterogeneity between the risks of ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancer show non-significance for these factors. A family history of breast cancer is positively associated with the risk of both ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancer.

Table 4 shows the results for postmenopausal women. A later age at menarche is associated with a decreased risk of both ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancer (P_{trend} = 0.012 and 0.0056, respectively). Nulliparity is positively associated with a risk of ER+/PgR+ cancer, but not ER−/PgR− cancer ($P_{\text{heterogeneity}}$ = 0.0095). Among parous women, no dose-response relationship with parity number is observed for either of the receptors. A longer period of breastfeeding is associated with a lower risk of both ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancer; however, this is not statistically significant (P_{trend} = 0.062 and 0.076, respectively). A family history of breast cancer is associated with an increased risk of both ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancer; the magnitude of the risk appears to be greater for ER−/PgR− cancer ($P_{\text{heterogeneity}}$ = 0.052; OR = 3.23, 95% CI 1.86–5.62).

Discussion

This hospital-based case-control study revealed the associations between menstrual and reproductive factors and breast cancer risk in terms of joint hormone receptor status. A few epidemiologic studies conducted in Japan have focused on tumor subtypes.[15–17] However, it has been difficult to determine whether the associations among Japanese women differ from those among Western women. It is known that the proportion of tumor subtypes differs across menopausal status[23] and the breast cancer patients' survival rates are reported to be different according to tumor subtypes.[24] Etiology and biology of subtypes might be different from each other. Therefore, the present study is important for clarifying the impact of menstrual and reproductive factors on breast cancer risk in relation to tumor subtypes and menopausal status among Japanese women.

Regarding menstrual factors, a meta-analysis showed that a late age at menarche is associated with a decreased risk of ER

+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancers.[12] A recent study from China demonstrates a similar association.[14] In the present study, a later age at menarche is associated with a decreased risk of ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancers among both women overall and postmenopausal women. It has been hypothesized that a later age at menarche might result in a shorter proliferation of mammary gland cells, which might be more susceptible to carcinogenesis.[25] This hypothesis might explain the association between a later age at menarche and a lower risk for both ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancer.

Parity, parity number and age at first birth have been recognized as factors affecting breast cancer risk in Japan and other countries.[12,14,15,17] A meta-analysis has shown that nulliparity[13] and a higher age at first birth[12,13] are associated with an increased risk of ER+/PgR+ cancer, indicating that the effects differ between ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− status.[12] In the present study, nulliparity was associated with an increased risk of ER+/PgR+ cancer among both women overall and postmenopausal women, and higher age at first birth was associated with an increased risk of ER+/PgR+ cancer among women overall. A significant association with age at first birth was also observed for ER−/PgR+ cancer. However, as the confidence interval was wide, the result for ER−/PgR+ cancer is questionable. Our overall analysis also showed that multiparity was associated with a decreased risk of ER−/PgR− cancer. Nulliparity showed a decreased risk, but not statistically significant. Although the precise mechanism is unknown, it has been reported that successive multiparity induces a protective effect through sequential differentiation of mammary gland stem cells;[26] such cells are thought to be associated with ER−/PgR− cancer.[27]

A meta-analysis has shown that breastfeeding is associated with a decreased risk of ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancer.[12] A previous study from the Asian region demonstrates an association between a longer duration of breastfeeding and a decreased risk of ER+/PgR+ cancer, but not ER−/PgR− cancer.[14] Meanwhile, studies in Japan have indicated no association between breastfeeding and the risk of either receptor-positive or negative breast cancer.[16,17] Although our data for the risk of ER−/PgR+ cancer were based on a small sample size, our findings suggest that a longer period of breastfeeding might protect against all subtypes of breast cancer, being almost consistent with the findings of the abovementioned meta-analysis.

With regard to the risk associated with a family history of breast cancer, a meta-analysis reveals a positive association between a history of breast cancer in mother or sisters and breast cancer risk among both premenopausal and postmenopausal women.[28] Our previous study conducted in Miyagi prefecture also demonstrates such an association.[3] In the present study, the increased risk posed by a family history of breast cancer is consistently observed for all subtypes. In addition, there is a variation in the magnitude of risk among the subtypes. A higher OR for family history is found for ER−/PgR− cancer ($P_{\text{heterogeneity}}$ = 0.044). The mechanism might include genetic mutation, such as BRCA1,[29] which has been associated with a positive family history of breast cancer, and might confer susceptibility to ER−/PgR− cancer.[30]

The present study had both strengths and limitations. First, we considered comparability between cases and controls. We selected the controls from among patients admitted to the same hospital as the cases. The participation rates were high for both cases and controls. However, the distribution of risk factors for breast cancer among control subjects may have differed from that in the general population. To improve comparability between the cases and controls, statistical analyses were appropriately controlled for background characteristics, such as area of residence and referral patterns. Although persistent bias

Table 3. OR (95% CI) of breast cancer risk by hormone receptor status among premenopausal women

	Control	Premenopausal ER+/PgR+ (n = 260)				ER−/PgR− (n = 100)				$P_{heterogeneity}$
		Case	OR	95% CI	P	Case	OR	95% CI	P	
Age at menarche										
≤12	465	129	1.00 (reference)[a]			49	1.00 (reference)[a]			
13	270	67	0.94	0.66–1.35		22	0.77	0.45–1.32		
14	183	41	0.91	0.60–1.40		13	0.70	0.36–1.36		
≥15	150	21	0.48	0.26–0.87		16	1.08	0.54–2.18		
P for trend					0.056				0.72	0.37
Parity										
Parous	891	215	1.00 (reference)[b]			88	1.00 (reference)[b]			
Nulliparous	144	33	0.82	0.52–1.27	0.37	9	0.58	0.28–1.21	0.15	0.41
Age at first birth[h]										
≤24	401	75	1.00 (reference)[c]			34	1.00 (reference)[c]			
25–29	391	104	1.28	0.90–1.84		41	1.04	0.63–1.72		
≥30	89	34	1.85	1.07–3.19		13	1.57	0.74–3.34		
P for trend					0.027				0.35	0.57
Parity number[h]										
1	135	29	1.00 (reference)[d]			11	1.00 (reference)[d]			
2	445	125	1.38	0.84–2.29		55	1.62	0.79–3.35		
3	250	51	1.28	0.72–2.28		18	0.97	0.41–2.29		
4	47	8	1.32	0.52–3.34		3	0.93	0.23–3.76		
≥5	14	2	0.88	0.17–4.51		1	0.97	0.10–9.39		
P for trend					0.78				0.44	0.4
Breastfeeding[h]										
Formula only	160	42	1.00 (reference)[e]			13	1.00 (reference)[e]			
Mixed breastfeeding and formula	542	136	0.92	0.60–1.41		57	1.28	0.67–2.44		
Breastfeeding only	188	36	0.63	0.36–1.09		18	1.43	0.65–3.13		
Total month of breastfeeding[h]										
0–3	155	77	1.00 (reference)[e]			16	1.00 (reference)[e]			
3–12	120	37	0.63	0.39–1.03		13	1.35	0.59–3.10		
12–24	130	41	0.60	0.37–0.98		12	0.98	0.41–2.36		
>24	108	34	0.70	0.40–1.22		10	1.15	0.44–2.96		
P for trend					0.091				0.88	0.28
Quantity of breast milk secretion[h]										
Poor or no	317	86	1.00 (reference)[e]			26	1.00 (reference)[e]			
Fair	299	62	0.72	0.49–1.07		32	1.38	0.78–2.42		
Good	257	64	0.80	0.54–1.19		26	1.45	0.80–2.64		
Family history of breast cancer in mother or sisters										
No	1046	239	1.00 (reference)[f]			89	1.00 (reference)[f]			
Yes	35	21	2.86	1.56–5.23	0.0007	11	4.34	2.07–9.07	<.0001	0.31
Oral contraceptives use										
Never	942	227	1.00 (reference)[g]			91	1.00 (reference)[g]			
Ever	99	25	1.22	0.74–2.01	0.44	8	0.91	0.42–1.97	0.8	0.5
Use of exgenous female hormones other than oral contraceptives										
Never	943	228	1.00 (reference)[g]			90	1.00 (reference)[g]			
Ever	73	17	0.95	0.53–1.72	0.87	6	1.00	0.41–2.42	0.99	0.93

All models were adjusted by age, BMI (<18.5, 18.5–25, 25–30, ≥30), smoke (never, current or past), alcohol (never, current or past), occupation (housewife, other), physical activity (<1 h per week, more than 1 h per week), year of recruitment (continuous), area (Southern Miyagi Prefecture, other), reference (from screening, other). [a]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer (yes, no), parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [b]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche (≤12, 13, 14, ≥15). [c]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, parity number (1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [d]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, age at first birth (≤24, 25–29, ≥30). [e]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, age at first birth, parity number (1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [f]Additionally adjusted by parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [g]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [h]For parous women only. BMI, body mass index; CI, confidence interval; ER, estrogen receptor; OR, odds ratio; PgR, progesterone receptor.

might exist, it is likely that any problems with comparability have been weakened. Second, the problem of limited statistical power must be considered in the analysis of ER−/PgR+ cancer; the results for this subtype might be inconclusive because of the small number of cases. To confirm the risk for ER−/PgR+ cancer, further studies are needed. Third, we must evaluate the possibility of information bias. Self-reported information on exposure might have been vulnerable to misclassification. However, any such misclassification in reproductive factors would have been non-differential.[31] This bias

Table 4. OR (95% CI) of breast cancer risk by hormone receptor status among postmenopausal women

	Control	Postmenopausal								$P_{heterogeneity}$
		ER+/PgR+ (n = 300)				ER−/PgR− (n = 157)				
		Case	OR	95% CI	P	Case	OR	95% CI	P	
Age at menarche										
≤12	194	54	1.00 (reference)[a]			28	1.00 (reference)[a]			
13	304	64	0.87	0.56–1.35		35	0.79	0.46–1.37		
14	375	61	0.71	0.46–1.10		41	0.80	0.47–1.37		
≥15	855	105	0.61	0.40–0.93		43	0.46	0.26–0.80		
P for trend					0.012				0.0056	0.48
Age at natural menopause										
≤47	259	37	1.00 (reference)[b]			19	1.00 (reference)[b]			
48–50	546	98	1.31	0.85–2.03		42	1.00	0.56–1.79		
51–53	398	62	0.93	0.58–1.50		42	1.23	0.68–2.21		
≥54	167	42	1.64	0.97–2.76		22	1.47	0.75–2.87		
P for trend					0.38				0.17	0.56
Parity										
Parous	1620	238	1.00 (reference)[c]			136	1.00 (reference)[c]			
Nulliparous	85	33	2.56	1.61–4.07	<.0001	6	0.76	0.32–1.81	0.54	0.0095
Age at first birth[i]										
≤24	800	101	1.00 (reference)[d]			64	1.00 (reference)[d]			
25–29	648	107	1.26	0.92–1.74		55	0.90	0.61–1.35		
≥30	117	22	1.16	0.65–2.09		14	1.11	0.56–2.22		
P for trend					0.26				0.96	0.43
Parity number[i]										
1	131	28	1.00 (reference)[e]			21	1.00 (reference)[e]			
2	757	122	0.73	0.44–1.21		62	0.47	0.27–0.84		
3	497	61	0.66	0.38–1.15		43	0.57	0.31–1.06		
4	163	21	0.86	0.43–1.70		8	0.44	0.18–1.09		
≥5	72	6	0.64	0.23–1.78		2	0.30	0.06–1.41		
P for trend					0.51				0.18	0.48
Breastfeeding[i]										
Formula only	234	45	1.00 (reference)[f]			25	1.00 (reference)[f]			
Mixed breastfeeding and formula	683	123	1.06	0.71–1.58		71	1.06	0.64–1.76		
Breastfeeding only	683	69	0.76	0.48–1.20		40	0.92	0.51–1.64		
Total month of breastfeeding[i]										
0–3	226	65	1.00 (reference)[f]			38	1.00 (reference)[f]			
3–12	173	37	0.74	0.46–1.19		19	0.56	0.30–1.04		
12–24	248	48	0.70	0.45–1.09		19	0.54	0.29–1.00		
>24	361	58	0.63	0.38–1.04		26	0.60	0.31–1.17		
P for trend					0.062				0.076	0.73
Quantity of breast milk secretion[i]										
Poor or no	420	79	1.00 (reference)[f]			44	1.00 (reference)[f]			
Fair	550	79	0.93	0.65–1.35		45	0.95	0.60–1.50		
Good	602	73	0.78	0.54–1.13		40	0.82	0.51–1.32		
Family history of breast cancer in mother or sisters										
No	1879	274	1.00 (reference)[g]			138	1.00 (reference)[g]			
Yes	84	26	1.67	1.01–2.76	0.044	19	3.23	1.86–5.62	<.0001	0.052
Oral contraceptives use										
Never	1586	267	1.00 (reference)[h]			139	1.00 (reference)[h]			
Ever	52	5	0.49	0.19–1.30	0.15	7	1.39	0.59–3.28	0.46	0.095
Use of exgenous female hormones other than oral contraceptives										
Never	1571	262	1.00 (reference)[h]			141	1.00 (reference)[h]			
Ever	56	7	0.68	0.29–1.60	0.38	4	0.64	0.22–1.85	0.41	0.93

All models were adjusted by age, BMI (<18.5, 18.5–25, 25–30, ≥30), smoke (never, current or past, missing), alcohol (never, current or past), occupation (housewife, other), physical activity (<1 h per week, more than 1 h per week), menopausal status (natural menopause, menopause due to other reason), age at menopause (≤47, 48–50, 51–53, ≥54), year of recruitment (continuous), area (southern Miyagi Prefecture, other), reference (from screening, other). [a]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer (yes, no), parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [b]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche (≤12, 13, 14, ≥15), parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [c]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche. [d]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, parity number (1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [e]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, age at first birth (≤24, 25–29, ≥30). [f]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, age at first birth, parity number (1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [g]Additionally adjusted by parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [h]Additionally adjusted by family history of breast cancer, age at menarche, parity number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5). [i]For parous women only. BMI, body mass index; CI, confidence interval; ER, estrogen receptor; OR, odds ratio; PgR, progesterone receptor.

is unlikely to have distorted our present results. Fourth, it is possible that the inclusion of patients with benign tumors in the control group influenced the results, because patients with benign tumors of the gynecologic organs or breast might have a background similar to that of patients with breast cancer. Therefore, we performed additional analyses by excluding patients with benign tumors of the gynecologic organs ($n = 375$) or breast ($n = 36$) from the controls. However, the exclusion of these patients had no effect on the OR (data not shown).

One of the strengths of our study was the stability of menopausal status. In any prospective study, some of the premenopausal women in the original cohort may become postmenopausal by the end of follow up.[3,4,15] In contrast, any case-control study like the present one has information on menopausal status at the time of diagnosis. Another strength of our study was the low rate of missing data (8.4%) for hormone receptor status. Although missing cases were less likely to have been referred from screening, the distribution of the hormone receptor statuses in our study was roughly the same as that in a large previous study in Japan.[32] Compared with our present study, the rates of missing data in previous studies, including cohort studies, which ranged from 9% to 61%, were relatively high.[10,11,14,15,17] Cancer incidence in Japanese cohort studies has been evaluated based on population-based cancer registries.[3,33,34] However, data on hormone receptor status in population-based cancer registries are incomplete.[3,33,34] Therefore, hospital-based studies would be more suitable for assessing the risk of breast cancer by hormone receptor status.[18] From this viewpoint, the present study is considered to represent one of the most accurately conducted assessments of breast cancer risk in terms of hormone receptor status.

In conclusion, this hospital-based case-control study has clarified risk factor profiles according to breast cancer subtypes stratified by joint hormone receptor status and menopausal status. A later age at menarche is associated with a decreased risk of both ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− among women overall and postmenopausal women. Nulliparity is associated with an increased risk of ER+/PgR+, but not ER−/PgR−, among postmenopausal women and women overall. A longer duration of breastfeeding is associated with a decreased risk of all subtypes among women overall. These results indicate that a later age at menarche has a protective effect against both ER+/PgR+ and ER−/PgR− cancer, but that parity might impact differently on various subtypes of breast cancer. A longer duration of breastfeeding might protect against breast cancer, irrespective of receptor type. Further studies are needed to clarify the etiology of the rare ER+/PgR− and ER−/PgR+ cancer subtypes among Japanese women.

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Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Oestrogen-induced genes in ductal carcinoma *in situ*: their comparison with invasive ductal carcinoma

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Abstract

It is well known that oestrogens play important roles in both the pathogenesis and development of invasive ductal carcinoma (IDC) of human breast. However, molecular features of oestrogen actions have remained largely unclear in pure ductal carcinoma *in situ* (pDCIS), regarded as a precursor lesion of many IDCs. This is partly due to the fact that gene expression profiles of oestrogen-responsive genes have not been examined in pDCIS. Therefore, we first examined the profiles of oestrogen-induced genes in oestrogen receptor (ER)-positive pDCIS and DCIS (DCIS component (DCIS-c)) and IDC (IDC component (IDC-c)) components of IDC cases (*n*=4 respectively) by microarray analysis. Oestrogen-induced genes identified in this study were tentatively classified into three different groups in the hierarchical clustering analysis, and 33% of the genes were predominantly expressed in pDCIS rather than DCIS-c or IDC-c cases. Among these genes, the status of *MYB* (C-MYB), *RBBP7* (RBAP46) and *BIRC5* (survivin) expressions in carcinoma cells was significantly higher in ER-positive pDCIS (*n*=53) than that in ER-positive DCIS-c (*n*=27) or IDC-c (*n*=27) by subsequent immunohistochemical analysis of the corresponding genes (*P*<0.0001, *P*=0.03 and *P*=0.0003 respectively). In particular, the status of C-MYB immunoreactivity was inversely (*P*=0.006) correlated with Ki67 in the pDCIS cases. These results suggest that expression profiles of oestrogen-induced genes in pDCIS may be different from those in IDC; and C-MYB, RBAP46 and survivin may play important roles particularly among oestrogen-induced genes in ER-positive pDCIS.

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Introduction

Breast cancer is the most common malignant neoplasm in women worldwide. In particular, the incidence of ductal carcinoma *in situ* (DCIS) has been markedly increasing possibly due to advancements in population-based mammographic screening for detection (Li *et al.* 2005), and ~20% of breast carcinoma cases actually present as pure DCIS (pDCIS) without invasive components at the time of diagnosis in many countries (Kepple *et al.* 2006, Tsikitis & Chung 2006). This pDCIS is in general considered as

a precursor lesion of invasive ductal carcinoma (IDC). It has been demonstrated that approximately half of untreated pDCIS progresses to IDC with marked variability in the latency of the progression (Cuzick 2003) and up to 80% of IDC were also reported to contain at least small foci of DCIS component (DCIS-c) distinct from the IDC component (IDC-c) if carefully evaluated (Ellis *et al.* 2003). Therefore, it has become very important to examine the biological features of pDCIS to identify the possible molecular mechanisms related to the acquisition of invasive