

## REVIEW ARTICLE

**Molecular markers of Chloroquine resistance in India and Southeast Asia**Rakshita Maskeri<sup>1</sup>, Animesh Jain<sup>2</sup>, Sheetal Dinkar Ullal<sup>3</sup>

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**Abstract**

Malaria is a major global public health problem mainly in the tropics and subtropics. Malaria control and elimination strategies mainly rely on efficacious antimalarial drugs. At present the major hurdle faced by malaria control programs is the drug resistance to antimalarials. Molecular surveillance using genetic markers associated with resistance provides a valuable tool for detecting and tracking resistance as well as providing an in-depth understanding of the development and spread of resistance. Despite numerous published literatures there are limited review articles on molecular markers of drug resistance. Hence a review was planned. An exhaustive literature search was performed on PUBMED using “malaria”, “resistance”, “molecular”, “antimalarial”, “Chloroquine”, “Pfcr”, “Pfm”, “Pvcrt”, “Pvm” as key words. Data pertaining to India and Southeast Asia were included. This review showed the widespread presence of molecular markers of drug resistance in Plasmodium falciparum and development of resistance in Plasmodium vivax over the years in Southeast Asia and India. This can have implications on malaria elimination and treatment guidelines in this region.

**Keywords**

Malaria; Antimalarials; Drug Resistance; Genes; Plasmodium falciparum; Plasmodium vivax; India; Southeast Asia

**Introduction**

Malaria remains a major threat to most of the countries across the globe. In 2019, an estimated 229 million cases of malaria occurred worldwide, and deaths were 4,09,000. In India and Southeast Asian region, malaria is caused by two most common species Plasmodium vivax and Plasmodium falciparum. P. falciparum is considered to be more severe as there is a higher probability of developing complications and fatality.(1)

Chloroquine is the first-line treatment for P. vivax infections in most countries the world over. Artemisinin combination therapy (ACT) is indicated for treatment of all cases of uncomplicated P. falciparum.(2)

Individual drug response might vary, and this is associated with polymorphisms in gene encoding for drug metabolizing enzymes and transporters.(3) Drug pressure and gene mutations are a few factors that contribute to

the development of drug resistance. Due to mutations in its enzymes and proteins P. vivax and P. falciparum are developing resistance to drugs. These mutations are used as molecular markers to detect drug resistant parasites.(4)

**Aims & Objectives**

1. To gather data available on molecular markers of chloroquine resistance.
2. To determine the extent of development of chloroquine resistance in P. falciparum and P. vivax over the years in Southeast Asia and India.

**Material & Methods**

An exhaustive literature search was performed on PUBMED using “malaria”, “resistance”, “molecular”, “antimalarial”, “Pfcr”, “Pfm”, “Pvcrt”, “Pvm”, “Chloroquine” as key words. Articles published on Indian and Southeast Asian data in the English language were included. Selection criteria were: (a) articles published

between 2012 and 2019 representing data of samples collected after 2010 (b) studies comprising analysis of one or more molecular marker(s) of drug resistant malaria, (c) original articles but no review articles.

## Results

**Chloroquine resistance (CQR):** Chloroquine previously was the most widely used antimalarial in India. (5) Substantial use in the last few decades due to its safety, effectiveness and low cost gradually led to development of resistance in *P. falciparum*.

### Molecular markers for chloroquine resistance in *Plasmodium falciparum*:

**Plasmodium falciparum chloroquine resistance transporter (pfcr) K76T mutations:** The K76T mutation is the primary determinant of chloroquine resistance and susceptibility. K76T mutation is in the first transmembrane domain of pfcr protein, where the positively charged lysine residue is replaced by neutrally charged threonine residue at 76th position. This leads to efflux of chloroquine by active transport out of digestive vacuole.

**Pfmdr1 N86Y mutations:** The *Plasmodium falciparum* multidrug resistance gene 1 (Pfmdr1) is located on chromosome 5 and has one exon. It encodes for P-glycoprotein homolog 1 protein. Polymorphism in the pfmdr gene is known to be involved in resistance to antimalarials. Results obtained from pfmdr1 Single Nucleotide Polymorphisms (SNPs) studies indicate a significant role for the N86Y mutation in contributing to resistance to chloroquine. Among the various genetic polymorphisms, point mutations in pfmdr1 gene at codon 86 (from asparagine to tyrosine, N86Y) has been extensively studied worldwide. (6,7)

Of the total 16 studies included in this review for pfcr and pfmdr genotypes of drug resistance, 10 studies were carried out in India and 6 were from Southeast Asia. (Table 1) summarizes molecular markers of drug resistance in *P. falciparum*

Shrivastava SK et al conducted a study in malaria endemic states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India. (8) A total of 115 blood samples were included out of which 100 (86.95%) showed presence of both drug resistant K76T mutation in pfcr gene and N86Y mutations in pfmdr gene. These results suggested that pfcr K76T and pfmdr N86Y can be used as potentially useful markers of the assessment of in vitro chloroquine resistance in the Northeast India.

The study conducted by Antony HA et al analyzed 60 samples, 30 samples from Puducherry and 30 from Odisha in India. (9) Of the 60 samples, 34 samples had pfcr K76T resistant genes. Chloroquine resistant parasites were higher in Odisha (73.33%) whereas 40% of Puducherry samples had resistant genes. Pfmdr1 N86Y was found only in 6/60 (10%) samples. This mutation resulting in resistant gene was higher in Puducherry samples

(13.33%) compared to that in samples from Odisha (6.67%). This study showed a strong association of chloroquine resistance with pfcr T76 but not with pfmdr1 Y86 mutation. The study also found a new pfcr haplotype 'CVIKT' associated with chloroquine resistance which was found to be present in Indian strains of *P. falciparum*.

Chatterjee Met al conducted a study in Kolkata, West Bengal that included 89 samples in which pfcr K76T mutations were present in all samples. (10) In this study Y184F mutation in the gene pfmdr1 was detected in all the samples but no mutations were detected at codon 86. The role of mutant Y184F in chloroquine resistance is debatable. The results of this study showed that there is no sign of regaining chloroquine sensitivity among the prevailing parasite population of the study area even after five years of its withdrawal as evidenced by 100% prevalence of mutant K76T in pfcr gene.

Ramani S et al conducted a study of 26 cases of *P. falciparum* malaria in Puducherry in which pfcr K76T mutations and pfmdr N86Y mutations were not detected. (11) As the sample size was small it was not able to detect any other known or unknown polymorphisms.

Sharma J et al conducted a study among 54 *P. falciparum* isolates in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh which found pfcr K76T mutations in 77.78% of cases. (12) Other mutations like M74I (61.11%), N75E (61.11%) and C72S (16.67%) were also found. Triple mutant allele M74I+N75E+K76T was found in 61.11% *P. falciparum* field isolates. Double mutant allele C72S+K76T was seen among 16.67% samples. This suggests high prevalence of chloroquine resistance in Northeast region of India.

A study conducted by Singh G et al in 22 *P. falciparum* samples in Mumbai found both pfcr K76T and pfmdr N86Y mutations in 15 samples (68.18%). (13)

Kar NP et al conducted a study in *P. falciparum* malaria cases in endemic Odisha state in India. (14) Total of 229 cases of *P. falciparum* were included in the study. Pfcr K76T mutation was found in 51 out of 64 cases analyzed. Pfmdr N86Y mutation was found in 55 out of 73 cases analyzed. Results of this study found the presence of *P. falciparum* isolates resistant to chloroquine.

Kumar D et al conducted a study from July 2014 to June 2016 among 25 cases of *P. falciparum* not responding to chloroquine therapy. (15) Pfmdr N86Y mutation was found in 16 samples. This study suggested strong association between pfmdr1 N86Y mutations and in vivo chloroquine resistance.

Patel P et al conducted a study in 180 samples of *P. falciparum* in Chhattisgarh. (16) A total of 143 samples were successfully analyzed for the pfcr gene covering codons 44–177. Out of these, 78% of the samples were mutant genotypes, while only 22% were wild type. In addition, codon K76T was found as a mutant position in all the mutant genotypes. Fifty-three percent of isolates were found to be a double mutant at positions C72S and K76T followed by 24% triple mutants at codons M74I,

N75E, K76T, and a single point mutation at K76T was observed in only 1% of samples. The *pfmdr1* gene was amplified and analyzed from 162 samples, and 59% were found mutant at N86Y. Only 18% of samples were found to be wild-type, and the majority (82%) were mutant genotypes for either *pfcr* to *pfmdr1* mutations. Additionally, 27% of the samples harbored a double mutant (SVMNT) *pfcr* genotype with mutant *pfmdr1*, and 7% had a triple mutant (CVIET) genotype with mutant *pfmdr1*. This study showed a high level of chloroquine resistance genotypes.

Wedam J et al conducted a study on *P. falciparum* in Mangalore, South India.(17) Out of 276 patients with *P. falciparum* malaria 138 cases were randomly selected of which 112 were amplified to check for *pfmdr1* mutations. *Pfmdr1* mutations N86Y, Y184F, D1246Y were analyzed. Wild type was not found. The prevalence of 86N-184F-1246Y mutation was 1.8% (2/112) and 86N-184F-1246D was 98.2% (110/112).

Huang F et al conducted a study on *P. falciparum* along the China Myanmar border.(18) A total of 65 patients were included, of which 63 samples were amplified and mutations found in *pfcr* codon 76 in all the isolates (100%). No mutations of *pfmdr1* (codons 86 or 1246) were found. Although China has not used chloroquine to treat *P. falciparum* for over 30 years, the stable and high prevalence of K76T mutation may be caused by the continued use of chloroquine as a first-line drug for *P. vivax* over several decades.

Saleh et al conducted a study on *P. falciparum* isolates in South Sumatera, Indonesia.(19) Since 2001 in Indonesia artemisinin combination therapy (ACT) has been used as the first line treatment of malaria. But in the study area chloroquine was still used for treatment of *P. falciparum*. This study was conducted from August to December 2012. A total of 25 samples were collected in which *pfcr*K76T mutations was found in all the samples. *Pfmdr* N86Y mutation was detected in 20 samples and 5 samples did not give interpretable results. The results of this study strengthen the previous literature, which stated that resistance to chloroquine has spread to all malaria endemic areas in Indonesia, including South Sumatera.

Study conducted by Tan LL et al found *pfcr* K76T in 70.9% of samples.(20) It showed that chloroquine resistance was still prevalent in Sabah, Malaysia despite discontinuation of chloroquine as first line treatment for *P. falciparum* since 1979.

Feng Ju et al conducted a study along China Myanmar border in 26 *P. falciparum* samples.(21) Sequencing of the *pfcr* gene was successful in 9 isolates (34.6%, 9/26) that covered codons 74, 75, and 76. Of all three mutated codons, K76T was the most prevalent (23.1%, 6/26). The *Pfmdr1* gene was sequenced in 3 isolates of all *P. falciparum* samples (11.5%, 3/26) that covered codon 86 and 184. Mutations at codon N86Y (11.5%, 3/26) were common. Even though China has not used chloroquine to

treat *P. falciparum* infections for more than three decades, the stable and high prevalence of *pfcr* K76T mutation may be a result of the continued use of chloroquine as a first-line drug for *P. vivax* infection over several decades. Chloroquine is also a first-line drug for *P. vivax* infection in Myanmar, especially in the Myanmar-Thailand border area, where a high prevalence of *pfcr*K76T was found. This suggests the natural selection against chloroquine pressure has led to the maintenance of the *pfcr* mutation in *P. falciparum* in this region.

A study was conducted by Norahmad NA et al among 29 cases of *P. falciparum* in Sabah, Malaysia.(22) Mutations for *pfcr*K76T and *pfmdr1* N86Y were found in only 2 cases (2/29 6.9%). This study demonstrated low prevalence of chloroquine resistance in Sabah area, in contrast to results obtained in previous study.

Retenget al conducted a study in 45 cases of *P. falciparum* isolates in North Sulawesi, Indonesia.(23) Among 45 cases, *pfcr* K76T and *pfmdr* N86Y mutations were found in all the samples. The results of this study suggest that the prevalence of the mutated genotypes remained dominant even 6 years after the withdrawal of chloroquine from this region.

#### **Molecular markers for chloroquine resistance in *Plasmodium vivax*:**

Potential molecular markers include mutations in the multidrug resistance 1 (*mdr1*) and *P. vivax* chloroquine resistance transporter (*pvcr*) genes, orthologous to *pfmdr1* and *pfcr* in *P. falciparum*, respectively. K10 insertion ('AAG' insert) in first exon at tenth position of *pvcr*-O is a known chloroquine resistance marker. Y976F and F1076L, which are non-synonymous amino acid mutations of the *pvmdr-1*, have been reported to correlate with chloroquine resistance.(24, 25)

According to (Table 2), four studies were included; of these three studies were from India and one was from Southeast Asia. Joy S et al conducted a study in Southwestern coastal region of India.(26) They collected 140 blood samples out of which sequencing was carried out for 54 (38.5%) and 85 (60.7%) isolates for *pvcr* and *pvmdr1* genes. Out of 54 samples, 3 samples showed K-10 insertion. Out of 85 isolates 84 *P. vivax* isolates had *pvmdr* mutant alleles. Seven non-synonymous mutations (I946V, T958M, Y976F, F979S, M980V, Y1028C and F1076L) were observed. Among these, I946V and Y1028C mutations were observed for the first time from this region. Prevalence of the Y976F mutation was found to be 7.1% while F1076L mutation was 54.5%. The most prevalent and dominant (90.6%, n = 77) mutation was T958M. This was the first study from India reporting K10 insertion in *pvcr*-o. This study indicates a trend towards parasites acquiring chloroquine resistance in endemic Mangalore city, South India.

Anantabotla MV et al conducted a study in 240 *P. vivax* samples from four different regions of India namely, Puducherry (PDY), Mangalore (MAQ), Cuttack (CTC) and

Jodhpur (JDH) respectively.(27)Sixty samples were collected from each region. Eighteen samples from each study site making a total of 72 samples were randomly selected for pvcrt and pvmdr sequence analysis. Out of 18 samples, 16 samples from each site were successfully sequenced. Only six isolates (6/64, 9.4%) had K10 insertion. The prevalence of K10 insertion in pvcrt-o gene was detected for 18.8% in PDY, 12.5% in MAQ and 6.3% in CTC P. vivax isolates, whereas no change in nucleotide was identified in P. vivax isolates collected from JDH region. This is the second report to detect CQ resistance in Indian P. vivax isolates and is the first study to report K10insertion in P. vivax isolates from PDY and CTC region. The sequence analysis shows that the CQ resistance in P. vivax isolates, based on K10 insertion in pvcrt-o gene, was observed more in Southern region of India as compared to North India. The pvmdr-1 gene product of 604 bp, targeting the Y976F and F1076L mutation, was sequenced successfully in 60 isolates. Out of 60 isolates sequenced for pvmdr-1 (15 from each site), most of the isolates showed drug resistant mutations for chloroquine with 91.6% having the F1076L mutation in the pvmdr-1 gene. All the P. vivax isolates sequenced from CTC and JDH showed drug resistant mutations for chloroquine based on the pvmdr-1 molecular marker, and the prevalence of resistance in MAQ isolates fall almost close to CTC and JDH. The prevalence of chloroquine resistance among the PDY isolates were 73.3%. The T958M non-synonymous mutation, resulting due to the nucleotide change at the position 2873 from C to G, was present in all the P. vivax isolates collected from four different regions of India with 100% frequency. The results suggest that P. vivax isolates from four different study regions of India are susceptible to chloroquine; however, the low prevalence rate of both K10 insertion in pvcrt-o and Y976F mutation in pvmdr-1 gene in P. vivax field isolates indicates that CQ resistance in the studied geographical regions might a rise in the near future.

Tacoli C et al conducted a study on P.vivax samples in Mangaluru, South India.(28)Total of 116 patients were included for molecular analysis. Pvmdr1 sequencing was successful for 108 isolates (108/116, 93.1%). Four synonymous (T529T, A970A, S1358S, and R1422R) and eight non-synonymous (S513R, T958M, Y976F, F1076L, Y1028C, L1393N, L1425R, and T1269S) point mutations were identified. Ten pvmdr1 haplotypes were observed with mutations T958M and F1076L occurring in all isolates, whereas the candidate chloroquine resistance marker Y976F was present in one isolate only. The candidate marker Y976F occurred only once (0.9%) in the present study, the figure was almost 8-fold higher in a previous report (Joy et al. 2018). The abundance of pvmdr1 F1076L in isolates from Mangaluru has been considered as an indication of emerging chloroquine resistance.

Noisang C et al conducted a study in 157 P.vivax isolates in Southern Thailand.(29)Two point-mutations at codons 976 and 1076 in the pvmdr1 gene were identified in 125 isolates from four provinces in Southern Thailand. The occurrence of double mutations (Y976F and F1076L) in pvmdr1 was observed in nine Chumphon isolates, seven Ranong isolates, and one Surat thani isolate. A single mutation at codon 976 (Y976F) was detected in only one Chumphon isolate, while another single mutation at codon 1076 (F1076L) was discovered in 81 Yala isolates, four Chumphon isolates, three Surat thani isolates, and two Ranong isolates. Wildtype alleles were observed in 11 Chumphon isolates, four Ranong isolates, and two Surat thani isolates. The K10 insertion (addition of AAG) in pvcrt-o genes occurred in three of three Ranong isolates only. Results of this study calls for urgent drug resistance surveillance of P.vivax and P.falciparum in Southern Thailand.

### Conclusion

Most studies showed the presence of K76T pfcrt and N86Y pfmdr mutations which are strongly associated with chloroquine resistance in P. falciparum. In India pfcrt and pfmdr mutations are still present after years of ACT implementation for the treatment of P.falciparum. We also found the presence of mutations in pvcrt-o and pvmdr genes, which indicates that P.vivax may acquire chloroquine resistance in future. To conclude we found that various studies across India and Southeast suggest the widespread resistance to chloroquine among P. falciparum and the emerging development to chloroquine resistance in P.vivax. This can have implications on malaria elimination and treatment guidelines in this region.

### Recommendation

Malaria and the growing role of drug resistance as a major impediment to its control are global issues. The identification and interpretation of molecular markers of antimalarial drug resistance are critical steps toward understanding and eventually controlling resistance. This review elucidates chloroquine resistance and recommends development of appropriate treatment guidelines based on the resistance pattern observed. Treatment protocols may be reviewed and further studies may be recommended for identification of resistance and mutation from time to time.

### Limitation of the study

This study focuses exclusively on chloroquine resistance. It makes no mention of other important antimalarials.

### Relevance of the study

There are only a few systematic reviews available on molecular markers of drug resistance. This study explains how drug resistance evolves over time.

## Authors Contribution

The study's concept and design were developed in collaboration with RM, AJ & SU. Additionally, they defined intellectual content. They were tasked with conducting a literature search. Furthermore, they analysed the data. Besides this, they assisted in the preparation, editing, and review of manuscripts. RM assisted in the data collection process. AJ is the study's Guarantor. RM wrote the first draft. All authors participated in reviewing the draft, revising and finalizing it.

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## Tables

TABLE 1 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS OF STUDIES THAT ANALYSED THE PFCRTK76T AND PFMDR1 N86Y MUTATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH CHLOROQUINE RESISTANCE

Sl no	Authors	Year of Publishing	Halpotypes Found	<i>Pfcr</i> t K76T mutations	<i>Pfmdr</i> 1 N86Y mutations
1	Shrivastava SK <i>et al</i> <sup>8</sup>	2014	_____	100/115 (86.95%)	100/115
2	Antony HA <i>et al</i> <sup>9</sup>	2016	CVMNK, SVMNT, CVIET and CVIKT	34/60 (56.6%)	6/60 (10%)
3	Chatterjee M <i>et al</i> <sup>10</sup>	2016	SVMNT	89/89 (100%)	0/89
4	Ramani Seta <sup>11</sup>	2016	_____	0/26	0/26
5	Sharma J <i>et al</i> <sup>12</sup>	2016	CVMNK, SVMNT and CVIET	77.78%	Not done for <i>pfmdr</i> genes
6	Singh G <i>et al</i> <sup>13</sup>	2016	_____	15/22 (68.18%)	15/22 (68.18%)
7	Kar NP <i>et al</i> <sup>14</sup>	2016	CVIET, CVMNK, SVMNT	51/64 (84%)	55/73 (75.4%)
8	Kumar Det <i>al</i> <sup>15</sup>	2016	_____	Not checked for <i>pfcr</i> t mutations	9 (34.6%)
9	Patel P <i>et al</i> <sup>16</sup>	2017	_____	143(78%)	96 /162 (59.26%)
10	Wedam J <i>et al</i> <sup>17</sup>	2018	_____	Not checked for <i>pfcr</i> t mutations	86N-184F- 1246Y - 1.8%(2/112) 86N-184F- 1246D – 98.2% (110/112)
11	Huang F <i>et al</i> <sup>18</sup>	2012	_____	63/63 (100%)	0
12	Saleh I <i>et al</i> <sup>19</sup>	2014	_____	25/25 (100%)	20/25
13	Tan LL <i>et al</i> <sup>20</sup>	2014	CVIET and SVMNT	22/ 31 (70.96%)	Not done for <i>pfmdr</i> gene
14	Feng Jet <i>al</i> <sup>21</sup>	2015	_____	6/26 (23.1%)	3/26 (11.5%)
15	Norahmad NA <i>et al</i> <sup>22</sup>	2016	K76T	2/29 (6.9%)	2/29 (6.9%)
16	Reteng P <i>et al</i> <sup>23</sup>	2017	_____	45/45 (100%)	51/59 (88.2%)

TABLE 2 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS OF STUDIES THAT ANALYSED THE PVCRT-O AND PVMDR-1 GENES ASSOCIATED WITH CHLOROQUINE RESISTANCE IN P.VIVAX

Sl. No	Authors	Year of publishing	<i>pvm</i> dr			<i>pvcrt-o</i> K10 insertion
			Mutant Y976F	Mutant F1076L	Mutant T958M	
1	JoyS <i>et al</i> <sup>26</sup>	2018	6/85 (7.1%)	65/85 (76.5%)	77/85 (90.6%)	3/54 (5.5%)
2	Anantabotla VM <i>et al</i> <sup>27</sup>	2019	_____	55/60(91.6%)	60/60(100%)	6/72(8.3%)
3	Tacoli C <i>et al</i> <sup>28</sup>	2019	1/108(0.9%)	94/108 -87.00%	_____	_____
4	Noisang C <i>et al</i> <sup>29</sup>	2019	1/125 (0.8%)	90/125 (7.2%)	_____	3/125 (2.4%)