The C-reactive protein–albumin–lymphocyte (CALLY) index is associated with survival after radical resection of hepatitis B virus-related hepatocellular carcinoma: a propensity score-matched analysis in a Chinese cohort

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Submitted: 23 January 2026; **Accepted:** 15 May 2026
Online publication: 25 July 2026

Arch Med Sci 2026; 22 (5): 2772–2781
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5114/aoms/221897
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Abstract

Introduction: The C-reactive protein–albumin–lymphocyte (CALLY) index has emerged as a promising prognostic tool in various malignancies, yet its role in patients with hepatitis B virus (HBV)-related hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) remains underexplored. This study aimed to evaluate the association between the preoperative CALLY index and survival outcomes following radical resection in Chinese patients with HBV-related HCC.

Material and methods: In this retrospective cohort study, we included 789 Chinese patients with HBV-related HCC who underwent radical resection. Recurrence-free survival (RFS) and overall survival (OS) were assessed using Kaplan–Meier analysis. Multivariable Cox regression and propensity score matching (PSM) were employed to identify independent prognostic factors and address potential confounding.

Results: The CALLY index was identified as an independent prognostic factor for both RFS and OS. Compared with the low-CALLY group, the high-CALLY group demonstrated significantly longer 1-, 3-, and 5-year RFS (96.3%, 65.7%, and 43.8% vs. 95.3%, 57.6%, and 35.0%, respectively; $p = 0.014$) and OS (98.5%, 91.0%, and 66.6% vs. 97.9%, 89.4%, and 56.9%; $p = 0.008$). These differences remained statistically significant following propensity score matching (PSM) adjustment.

Conclusions: A high preoperative CALLY index is associated with improved survival after radical resection in patients with HBV-related HCC, supporting its utility as an easily accessible prognostic biomarker for clinical risk stratification.

Key words: CALLY index, hepatocellular carcinoma, hepatitis B virus, radical resection, prognosis.

Introduction

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) stands as the predominant form of primary liver cancer and represents the third most fatal malignancy globally [1, 2]. Chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection represents one of the primary etiological factors contributing to the development of HCC, particularly in regions such as East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa [3, 4]. In Chi-

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na, more than 80% of HCC cases are attributable to HBV infection [5]. Current clinical management relies heavily on surgical intervention as the primary curative approach for early-stage cases, owing to limited liver donor availability [6, 7]. However, the high recurrence rate, which may reach up to 70% within 5 years after resection of HCC, along with approximately 50% of HCC patients experiencing recurrence within 2 years, significantly compromises the therapeutic outcome [8, 9]. Despite significant advances in therapeutic strategies, including transarterial chemoembolization, programmed death-1/programmed death-ligand 1 inhibitors, and molecular-targeted therapies, the 5-year survival rate for patients with HCC remains unsatisfactory. Therefore, a reliable, convenient, and preoperative prognostic biomarker is urgently needed to improve risk stratification and guide individualized clinical decision-making.

In recent years, the prognostic relevance of systemic inflammation and nutritional status in cancer has gained increasing recognition. Inflammation exerts a significant influence throughout the entire spectrum of tumor progression, from initiation to metastasis, and compromises adaptive immune responses [10, 11]. Concurrently, malignancies impose elevated metabolic demands on the host, while cancer-related anorexia and compromised digestive function exacerbate malnutrition, potentially leading to an unfavorable prognosis [12]. Several biomarkers reflecting inflammatory and nutritional status have been linked to survival in various cancers [13–15]. However, most existing prognostic indices rely on one or two parameters and do not comprehensively integrate inflammation, immune competence, and nutritional condition.

Recently, the C-reactive protein–albumin–lymphocyte (CALLY) index has been proposed as a novel composite biomarker that concurrently reflects inflammatory (CRP), nutritional (albumin), and immune (lymphocyte) status. It has shown promising prognostic value in several malignancies [16, 17], as well as in other diseases such as chronic kidney disease [18]. Nevertheless, data specifically focusing on the prognostic role of the CALLY index in Chinese patients with HBV-related HCC after radical resection remain limited. This study aimed to investigate the association between the preoperative CALLY index and survival outcomes after radical resection in patients with HBV-related HCC.

Material and methods

Study design and patient selection

This retrospective cohort study included consecutive Chinese patients with HBV-related HCC who underwent radical resection between January 2016 and December 2021. This study was approved by the Medical Ethics Committee of Mengchao Hepatobiliary Hospital of Fujian Medical University (No. 2021-035-01). Written informed consent was waived due to the retrospective nature of the study. The inclusion criteria were as follows: 1) histopathologically confirmed HCC with chronic HBV infection; 2) underwent curative (R0) resection; 3) Child-Pugh class A or B liver function; and 4) age between 18 and 70 years. Patients were excluded if they met any of the following criteria: 1) diagnosis of combined hepatocellular-cholangiocarcinoma; 2) history of other malignant tumors; 3) prior receipt of invasive treatments such as transarterial chemoembolization or radiofrequency ablation; 4) presence of multiple intrahepatic metastases, invasion of adjacent organs, or distant metastases; or 5) incomplete clinical data or perioperative mortality.

Data collection and definition

The clinical data were retrospectively collected from medical records, including baseline data ((age, sex, body mass index, type 2 diabetes mellitus, excessive alcohol consumption, HBsAg, HBV DNA, α-fetoprotein (AFP), albumin, total bilirubin, alanine transaminase, prothrombin time, leukocyte, neutrophil, lymphocyte, monocyte, and platelet counts, CRP, cirrhosis, Child-Pugh grade, Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer (BCLC) stage, etc.), antiviral treatment, surgical methods (open or laparoscopic), operation time, and tumor characteristics (diameter, number, differentiation, capsule, microvascular invasion, microsatellite lesions, etc.).

Radical resection, or R0 resection, was defined as complete tumor removal with no microscopic residual tumor at the margins, confirmed by histopathological analysis. HCC recurrence was defined as the presence of new hepatic lesions identified through imaging examinations that fulfilled the diagnostic criteria for HCC. Moreover, the inflammatory-nutritional markers, including CALLY, prognostic nutritional index (PNI), systemic inflammatory response index (SIRI), aggregate systemic inflammation index (AISI), and neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio (NLR), were calculated based on clinical parameters. CALLY = albumin (g/l) × lymphocytes (10^9/l)/(CRP (mg/l) × 10), PNI = albumin (g/l) + 5 × lymphocytes (10^9/l), SIRI = (neutrophils × monocytes)/lymphocytes, AISI = (neutrophils × monocytes × platelets)/lymphocytes, NLR = neutrophils/lymphocytes.

Follow-up

Patients with HBV-related HCC who underwent radical resection received systematic follow-up

evaluations every three months during the first 2 years, every 6 months from years 2 to 5, and annually thereafter. The following examinations were performed in each case: biochemical tests, HBV DNA testing, AFP measurement, and abdominal contrast-enhanced computed tomography or magnetic resonance imaging. The final follow-up was conducted in December 2024. The primary endpoints were recurrence-free survival (RFS), defined as the time from radical resection to radiologically confirmed recurrence, and overall survival (OS), defined as the time from radical resection to death from any cause or the date of the last follow-up.

Statistical analysis

Continuous variables, presented as medians with interquartile ranges (IQR), were compared using the *t*-test or Mann-Whitney *U* test based on the normality of their distributions. Categorical variables, reported as counts (percentages), were analyzed using the χ^2 test or Fisher's exact test according to expected frequencies. The receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve was constructed, and the optimal cutoff value was determined by maximizing the Youden index. The preoperative CALLY index and other inflammation- and nutrition-related biomarkers were stratified into high and low groups according to their respective optimal cutoff values. RFS and OS were estimated using the Kaplan-Meier method, and groups were compared using the log-rank test. Cox proportional hazards regression models identified independent prognostic factors for RFS and OS. Propensity score matching (PSM) using a 1 : 1 nearest-neighbor algorithm with a caliper width of 0.1 standard deviations was performed to reduce baseline imbalances between the high- and low-CALLY groups. Variables significant ($p < 0.05$) in univariate analysis were included in multivariable models, with hazard ratios (HR) and 95% confidence intervals (CI) reported. Statistical analyses were performed using R software (version 4.1.1) and the MatchIt package (version 4.3.0). Statistical significance was defined as a two-tailed $p < 0.05$.

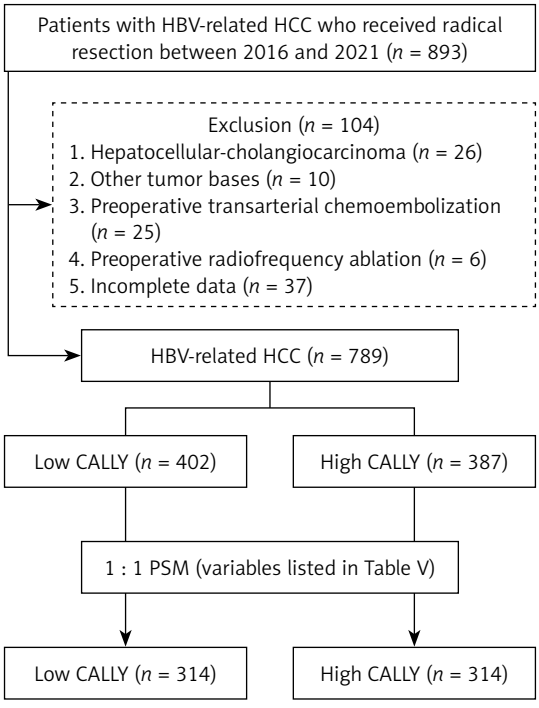

Figure 1. Flow chart for the selection of the study population

Results

Clinicopathological characteristics

The study cohort comprised 789 patients with HBV-related HCC who underwent radical resection (Figure 1). All patients received preoperative nucleoside/nucleotide analog antiviral therapy. As summarized in Table I, the majority of patients were male (81.2%), with a median age of 56.0 years (48.0–62.0) and a median body mass index of 23.0 (21.1–24.9). Most patients had an HBV DNA level ≥ 500 IU/ml (88.8%) and underlying liver cirrhosis (81.1%). Tumor characteristics included a median diameter of 4.0 cm (2.5–6.8), solitary lesions in 87.8% of cases, microvascular invasion in 54.8%, and microsatellite lesions in 22.6%. A complete tumor capsule was observed in only 22.9% of specimens, and 52.5% of tumors were poorly differentiated. According to clinical staging, 89.7% of patients were classified as BCLC stage A and 93.2% as Child–Pugh class A.

RFS and OS after radical resection in patients with HBV-HCC

The median RFS and OS for the cohort were 48.0 months and 66.0 months, respectively. The 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year RFS probabilities were 96.2%, 62.2%, and 39.6%; the corresponding 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year OS probabilities were 98.9%, 91.3%, and 62.4% (Figures 2 A, B).

ROC curve analysis for comparing prognostic performance of indices

We performed ROC curve analysis to compare the prognostic performance of the CALLY index with that of other inflammation- and nutrition-related biomarkers, including the PNI, SIRI, AISI, and NLR, for 5-year OS in patients with HBV-related HCC after radical resection. The results showed that the CALLY index yielded the largest area under the curve (AUC = 0.713), compared with the PNI (AUC = 0.630), SIRI (AUC = 0.624), NLR (AUC = 0.618), and AISI (AUC = 0.592). Furthermore, the

Table I. Clinicopathological characteristics of patients with HBV-related HCC undergoing radical resection

Variables	Total (n = 789)	Variables	Total (n = 789)
Age [years]	56.0 (48.0–62.0)	Complete	181 (22.9%)
Male	641 (81.2%)	Incomplete	494 (62.6%)
Body mass index	23.0 (21.1–24.9)	No tumor capsule	114 (14.4%)
Type 2 diabetes mellitus	101 (12.8%)	Microvascular invasion	360 (45.6%)
Excessive alcohol consumption	71 (9.0%)	Microsatellite lesions	184 (23.3%)
HBV DNA ≥ 500 [IU/ml]	701 (88.8%)	BCLC stage	
Antiviral treatment	789 (100%)	0	8 (1.0%)
Albumin [g/l]	39.0 (36.0–42.0)	A	708 (89.7%)
Total bilirubin [μmol/l]	16.3 (12.0–21.9)	B	73 (9.3%)
Alanine transaminase [IU/l]	33.0 (23.0–49.0)	Surgical method	
Prothrombin time [s]	13.3 (12.7–13.9)	Open	368 (46.6%)
AFP [μg/l]	48.0 (6.3–697.4)	Laparoscopic	421 (53.4%)
Cirrhosis	641 (81.2%)	Operation time [min]	120.0 (90.0–160.0)
Child-Pugh grade		Leukocyte count [× 10^9/l]	5.8 (4.7–7.1)
A	735 (93.2%)	Neutrophil count [× 10^9/l]	3.6 (2.6–4.9)
B	54 (6.8%)	Lymphocyte count [× 10^9/l]	1.5 (1.1–1.9)
Tumor diameter [cm]	4.0 (2.5–6.8)	Monocyte count [× 10^9/l]	0.4 (0.3–0.5)
Number of tumors		Platelet count [× 10^9/l]	163.0 (119.0–213.0)
1	680 (86.2%)	C-reactive protein [mg/l]	2.3 (1.0–7.9)
≥ 2	109 (13.8%)	CALLY	2.7 (0.56–7.0)
Tumor differentiation		PNI	46.6 (42.5–51.1)
Well	12 (1.5%)	SIRI	0.9 (0.6–1.7)
Moderate	363 (46.0%)	AISI	146.5 (81.4–270.6)
Poor	414 (52.5%)	NLR	2.2 (1.6–3.9)
Tumor capsule			

CALLY – C-reactive protein–albumin–lymphocyte index, PNI – prognostic nutritional index, SIRI – systemic inflammatory response index, AISI – aggregate systemic inflammation index, NLR – neutrophil to lymphocyte ratio.

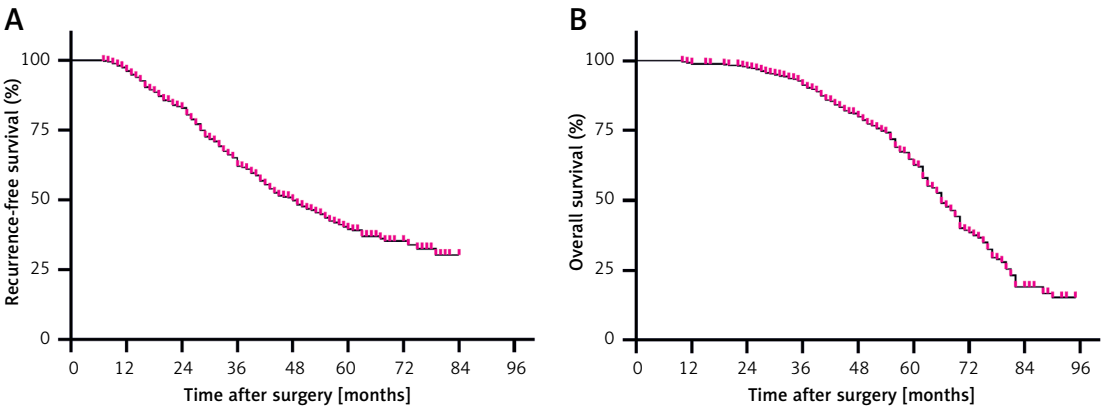

Figure 2. Kaplan-Meier curves for RFS (**A**) and OS (**B**)

Table II. Comparison of prognostic performance of different indices using ROC curve analysis

Indices	AUC	95% CI	Youden index	Cutoff value	Sensitivity	Specificity	P-value
CALLY	0.713	0.675–0.752	0.377	2.5	0.754	0.623	< 0.001
PNI	0.630	0.588–0.672	0.214	46.8	0.546	0.668	< 0.001
SIRI	0.624	0.581–0.666	0.200	0.8	0.672	0.528	< 0.001
AISI	0.592	0.549–0.635	0.154	116.1	0.720	0.435	< 0.001
NLR	0.618	0.576–0.661	0.179	2.4	0.578	0.601	< 0.001

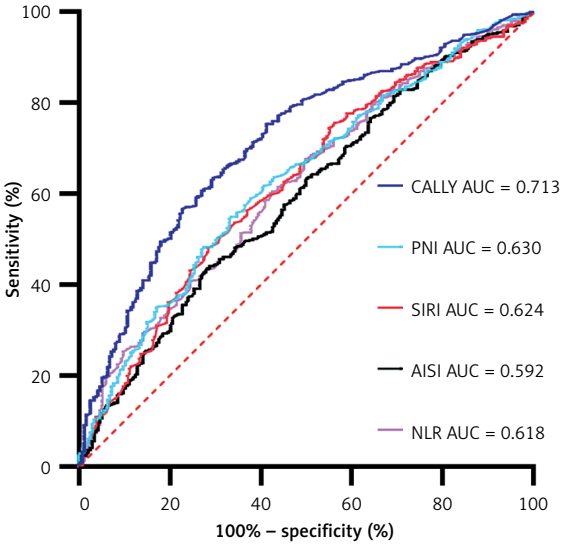

Figure 3. Comparison of prognostic performance of different indices using ROC curve analysis

CALLY index exhibited the highest Youden index (0.377). At an optimal cutoff value of 2.5, the sensitivity and specificity were 75.40% and 62.38%, respectively (Table II and Figure 3).

Prognostic factors for RFS after radical resection in patients with HBV-HCC

Univariate and multivariate Cox regression analyses identified tumor diameter ≥ 5 cm, tumor number ≥ 2, BCLC stage B, and low-CALLY index as independent risk factors for RFS after radical resection in patients with HBV-related HCC (all $p < 0.05$) (Table III).

Prognostic factors for OS after radical resection in patients with HBV-HCC

Univariate and multivariate Cox regression analyses identified tumor diameter ≥ 5 cm, tumor number ≥ 2, poor tumor differentiation, absence of a tumor capsule, and low-CALLY index as independent risk factors for OS after radical resection in patients with HBV-related HCC (all $p < 0.05$) (Table IV).

Comparison of low- and high-CALLY groups

Given the significant association between the CALLY index and survival outcomes in the Cox regression analysis, we conducted a further analysis to assess its prognostic significance for patients with HBV-related HCC following radical resection. The clinicopathological characteristics of

Table III. Cox regression analysis of RFS after radical resection in patients with HBV-HCC

Variables	Univariate		Multivariate	
	HR (95% CI)	*P*-value	HR (95% CI)	*P*-value
Age ≥ 60 years	1.129 (0.925–1.378)	0.234		
Male	1.046 (0.813–1.346)	0.727		
Excessive alcohol consumption	1.129 (0.832–1.531)	0.436		
HBV DNA ≥ 500 [IU/ml]	1.069 (0.779–1.468)	0.678		
AFP ≥ 400 [µg/l]	1.276 (1.043–1.561)	0.018	1.172 (0.949–1.447)	0.140
Cirrhosis	1.177 (0.910–1.524)	0.215		
Tumor diameter (≥ 5 cm)	1.409 (1.157–1.715)	0.001	1.295 (1.054–1.591)	0.014
Tumor number (≥ 2)	1.475 (1.142–1.904)	0.003	1.367 (1.052–1.775)	0.019
Tumor differentiation (poor vs. well/moderate)	1.105 (0.907–1.347)	0.320		
Tumor capsule (no vs. complete/incomplete)	1.129 (0.858–1.486)	0.387		
Microvascular invasion	1.323 (1.084–1.615)	0.006	1.156 (0.936–1.426)	0.178
Microsatellite lesions	1.393 (1.116–1.739)	0.003	1.187 (0.939–1.501)	0.152
BCLC stage B	1.542 (1.162–2.047)	0.003	1.522 (1.144–2.026)	0.004
Child-Pugh grade A	0.867 (0.578–1.301)	0.491		
Open surgery	0.993 (0.816–1.209)	0.947		
High CALLY (≥ 2.5)	0.777 (0.638–0.947)	0.012	0.811 (0.664–0.989)	0.038
High PNI (≥ 46.8)	0.731 (0.601–0.890)	0.002		
High SIRI (≥ 0.8)	1.263 (1.037–1.538)	0.020		
High AISI (≥ 116.1)	1.278 (1.008–1.497)	0.042		
High NLR (≥ 2.4)	1.211 (0.994–1.474)	0.057		

RFS – recurrence-free survival, HR – hazard ratio, CI – confidence interval, other abbreviations as in Table I.

Table IV. Cox regression analysis of OS after radical resection in patients with HBV-HCC

Variables	Univariate		Multivariate	
	HR (95% CI)	*P*-value	HR (95% CI)	*P*-value
Age ≥ 60 (years)	1.131 (0.925–1.382)	0.225		
Male	0.943 (0.735–1.210)	0.645		
Excessive alcohol consumption	1.115 (0.652–2.284)	0.608		
HBV DNA ≥ 500 [IU/ml]	1.166 (0.844–1.611)	0.353		
AFP ≥ 400 [µg/l]	1.180 (1.013–1.810)	0.023	1.093 (0.813–1.741)	0.147
Cirrhosis	1.092 (0.847–1.408)	0.493		
Tumor diameter (≥ 5 cm)	1.294 (1.063–1.575)	0.010	1.350 (1.093–1.668)	0.005
Tumor number (≥ 2)	1.304 (1.130–1.869)	0.047	1.427 (1.074–2.342)	0.015
Tumor differentiation (poor vs. well/ moderate)	1.404 (1.019–1.508)	0.041	1.392 (1.086–1.764)	0.039
Tumor capsule (no vs. complete/incomplete)	1.254 (1.024–1.528)	0.031	1.388 (1.059–2.286)	0.027
Microvascular invasion	1.128 (1.016–2.126)	0.030	1.303 (0.983–1.982)	0.176
Microsatellite lesions	1.194 (1.030–2.299)	0.012	1.482 (0.848–1.814)	0.227
BCLC stage B	1.232 (1.088–2.670)	0.018	1.256 (0.920–2.028)	0.151
Child-Pugh grade B	1.165 (0.807–1.514)	0.128		
Open surgery	0.952 (0.782–1.560)	0.627		
High CALLY (≥ 2.5)	0.774 (0.636–0.942)	0.009	0.779(0.651–0.972)	0.025
High PNI (≥ 46.8)	0.745 (0.612–0.907)	0.003		
High SIRI (≥ 0.8)	1.307 (1.073–1.592)	0.008		
High AISI (≥ 116.1)	1.136 (0.933–1.383)	0.204		
High NLR (≥ 2.4)	1.283 (1.054–1.561)	0.013		

OS – overall survival, HR – hazard ratio, CI – confidence interval; other abbreviations as in Table I.

Table V. Clinicopathological characteristics before and after PSM stratified by CALLY index

Variables	Before PSM			After PSM		
	Low CALLY (*n* = 402)	High CALLY (*n* = 387)	*P*-value	Low CALLY (*n* = 314)	High CALLY (*n* = 314)	*P*-value
Age [years]	56.0 (48.0–62.0)	57.0 (48.0–62.0)	0.544	56.0 (48.0–63.0)	57.0 (49.0–63.0)	0.274
Male	321 (79.9%)	320 (82.7%)	0.308	256 (81.5%)	262 (83.4%)	0.529
Body mass index	22.8 (20.8–24.8)	23.1 (21.3–25.0)	0.222	22.4 (20.8–24.6)	23.2 (21.3–25.0)	0.072
Type 2 diabetes mellitus	51 (12.7%)	50 (12.9%)	0.922	31 (9.9%)	39 (12.4%)	0.310
Excessive alcohol consumption	42 (10.4%)	29 (7.5%)	0.147	30 (9.6%)	23 (7.3%)	0.315
HBV DNA ≥ 500 [IU/ml]	364 (90.5%)	337 (87.1%)	0.122	284 (90.4%)	274 (87.3%)	0.205
Albumin [g/l]	39.0 (36.0–42.0)	39.0 (36.0–43.0)	0.301	39.0 (36.0–42.0)	39.0 (36.0–42.9)	0.542
Total bilirubin [µmol/l]	16.8 (12.0–21.9)	16.1 (11.8–21.7)	0.600	15.7 (11.7–22.2)	16.5 (12.0–21.9)	0.630
Alanine transaminase [IU/l]	33.0 (23.0–49.3)	33.0 (24.0–48.0)	0.645	33.0 (23.0–50.0)	34.0 (24.0–52.0)	0.880
Prothrombin time [s]	13.4 (12.7–13.8)	13.3 (12.7–13.9)	0.450	13.3 (12.6–13.8)	13.3 (12.8–13.9)	0.480
AFP [µg/l]	52.3 (5.9–530.7)	45.5 (7.1–946.1)	0.981	73.1 (7.2–720.0)	53.3 (7.8–1151.0)	0.925
Cirrhosis	331 (82.3%)	310 (80.1%)	0.421	256 (81.5%)	250 (79.6%)	0.545

Table V. Cont.

Variables	Before PSM			After PSM		
	Low CALLY (*n* = 402)	High CALLY (*n* = 387)	*P*-value	Low CALLY (*n* = 314)	High CALLY (*n* = 314)	*P*-value
Child-Pugh grade			0.035			0.247
A	367 (91.3%)	368 (95.1%)		291 (92.7%)	298 (94.9%)	
B	35 (8.7%)	19 (4.9%)		23 (7.3%)	16 (5.1%)	
Tumor diameter [cm]	4.0 (2.5–7.2)	3.9 (2.6–6.5)	0.350	4.3 (2.9–7.5)	4.0 (2.8–6.5)	0.534
Number of tumors			0.182			0.383
1	340 (84.6%)	340 (87.9%)		274 (87.3%)	281 (89.5%)	
≥ 2	62 (15.4%)	47 (12.1%)		49 (14.2%)	38 (11.0%)	
Tumor differentiation			0.716			0.434
Well	5 (1.2%)	7 (1.8%)		5 (1.3%)	6 (1.9%)	
Moderate	182 (45.3%)	181 (46.8%)		136 (43.3%)	149 (47.5%)	
Poor	215 (53.5%)	199 (51.4%)		174 (55.4%)	159 (50.6%)	
Tumor capsule			0.276			0.170
Complete	90 (22.4%)	91 (23.5%)		72 (22.9%)	73 (23.2%)	
Incomplete	246 (61.2%)	248 (64.1%)		183 (58.3%)	199 (63.4%)	
No tumor capsule	66 (16.4%)	48 (12.4%)		59 (18.8%)	42 (13.4%)	
Microvascular invasion	199 (49.6%)	161 (41.8%)	0.028	153 (48.7%)	133 (42.4%)	0.109
Microsatellite lesions	102 (25.4%)	82 (21.2%)	0.165	78 (24.8%)	70 (22.3%)	0.452
BCLC stage			0.493			0.123
0	3 (0.7%)	5 (1.3%)		1 (0.3%)	5 (1.6%)	
A	358 (89.1%)	350 (90.4%)		281 (89.5%)	286 (91.1%)	
B	41 (10.2%)	32 (8.3%)		32 (10.2%)	23 (7.3%)	
Surgical method			0.617			0.173
Open	191 (47.5%)	177 (45.7%)		151 (48.1%)	134 (42.7%)	
Laparoscopic	211 (52.5%)	210 (54.3%)		163 (51.9%)	180 (54.6%)	
Operation time [min]	125.0 (95.0–165.0)	117.0 (85.0–157.0)	0.206	125.0 (95.0–165.0)	119.0 (85.0–155.0)	0.398
Leukocyte count [× 10^9/l]	5.8 (4.6–7.0)	5.7 (4.7–7.2)	0.430	5.8 (4.7–7.0)	5.8 (4.8–7.2)	0.584
Neutrophil count [× 10^9/l]	3.6 (2.7–4.8)	3.5 (2.6–4.9)	0.102	3.5 (2.7–4.8)	3.6 (2.7–5.0)	0.254
Lymphocyte count [× 10^9/l]	1.5 (1.0–1.9)	1.49 (1.1–2.0)	0.014	1.5 (1.1–2.0)	1.43 (1.0–1.9)	0.231
Monocyte count [× 10^9/l]	0.4 (0.3–0.5)	0.4 (0.3–0.5)	0.111	0.4 (0.3–0.5)	0.4 (0.3–0.5)	0.924
Platelet count [× 10^9/l]	163.0 (116–212.3)	162.0 (121.0–214.0)	0.417	169.0 (123.8–214.0)	160.5 (112.0–213.0)	0.701
C-reactive protein [mg/l]	2.4 (1.1–8.8)	2.2 (0.9–6.9)	0.315	2.2 (0.9–6.8)	2.7 (1.0–8.9)	0.623
PNI	46.3 (42.4–50.3)	47.1 (42.5–52.0)	0.039	46.6 (43.0–51.1)	46.4 (41.5–51.2)	0.287
SIRI	0.9 (0.6–1.6)	0.9 (0.5–1.7)	0.015	0.9 (0.5–1.5)	0.9 (0.6–1.9)	0.248
AISI	151.1 (80.8–280.4)	145.4 (82.1–262.0)	0.127	141.9 (78.7–260.1)	157.1 (94.9–270.7)	0.420
NLR	2.3 (1.7–3.8)	2.2 (1.5–4.1)	0.014	2.2 (1.6–3.5)	2.4 (1.6–4.5)	0.200

PSM – propensity score matching; other abbreviations as in Table I.

the low-CALLY group (n = 402) and the high-CALLY group (n = 387) are presented in Table V. Kaplan-Meier survival analyses demonstrated that the high-CALLY group had higher 1-, 3-, and 5-year RFS rates (96.3%, 65.7%, and 43.8%, respectively) than the low-CALLY group (95.3%, 57.6%, and 35.0%; p = 0.014; Figure 4 A). Similarly, the high-CALLY group had higher 1-, 3-, and 5-year OS rates (98.5%, 91.0%, and 66.6%, respectively) than the low-CALLY group (97.9%, 89.4%, and 56.9%; p = 0.008; Figure 4 B).

PSM analyses for CALLY index

To address the observed differences in clinicopathological characteristic between the low- and high-CALLY groups, we applied PSM to reduce the impact of potential confounding by measured variables. Following PSM, 628 patients were successfully matched, with 314 patients in each group. No statistically significant differences were observed in baseline characteristics between the two groups (all p > 0.05; Table V). The 1-, 3-, and 5-year RFS rates in the high-CALLY group were higher than those in the low-CALLY group (97.4%, 67.4%, and 43.0% vs. 95.2%, 59.1%, and 35.7%, respectively; p = 0.013; Figure 4 C). Similarly, the 1-, 3-, and 5-year OS rates in the high-CALLY group were higher than those in the low-CALLY group (98.7%, 91.7%, and 66.3% vs. 98.1%, 89.0%, and 54.2%, respectively; p = 0.003; Figure 4 D).

Discussion

This study represents the first large-scale investigation in Chinese patients with HBV-related HCC to evaluate the association between the preoperative CALLY index and survival outcomes after radical resection. Our results suggest that a high preoperative CALLY index was independently associated with more favorable RFS and OS, and these associations remained statistically significant after PSM adjustment. These findings suggest that the CALLY index, which integrates markers of systemic inflammation, nutritional status, and immune function, may be a convenient and low-cost biomarker for preoperative prognostic risk stratification in HBV-related HCC.

The prognostic value of the CALLY index has been investigated in a variety of solid tumors. Previous studies have reported associations between the CALLY index and prognosis in gastric cancer, colorectal cancer, esophageal cancer, pancreatic cancer, and other digestive system malignancies [19–25]. In these tumors, a higher CALLY index has been associated with lower systemic inflammation, better nutritional reserve, preserved immune function, and more favorable survival. This consistency across cancer types supports further

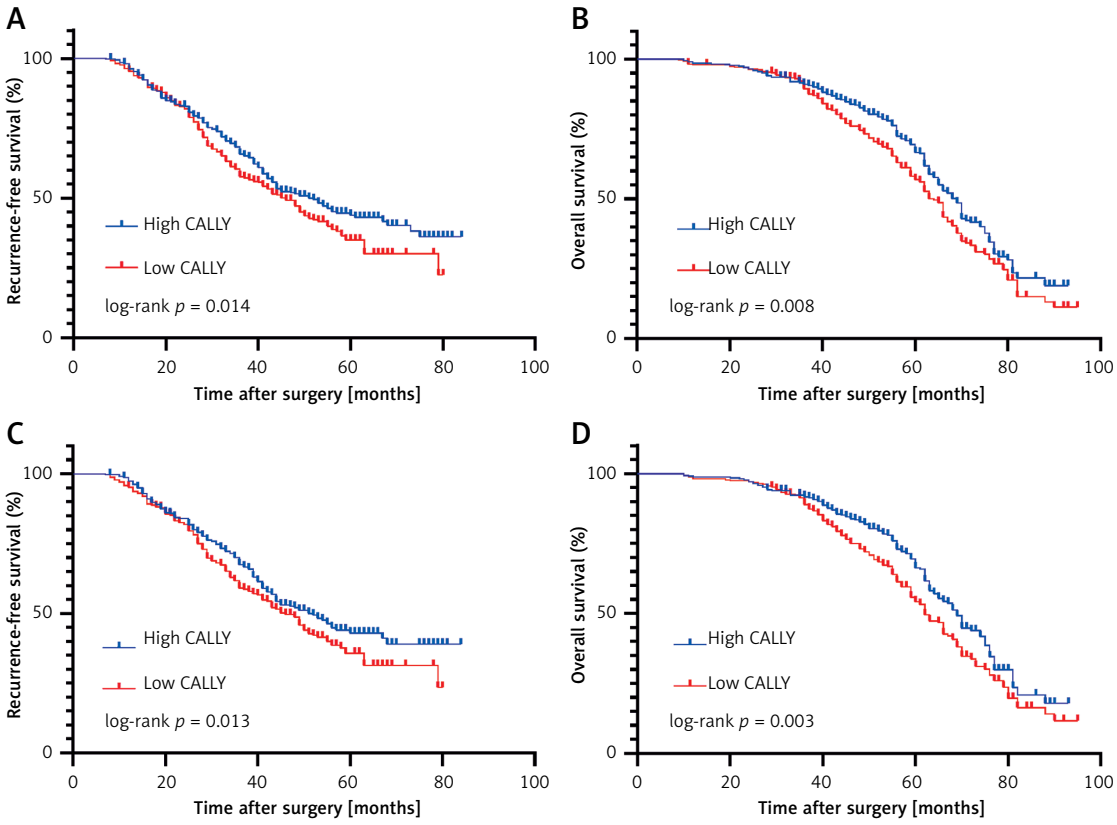

Figure 4. Kaplan-Meier curves for RFS and OS stratified by CALLY index before (**A**, **B**) and after (**C**, **D**) PSM

evaluation of the CALLY index as a universal immunonutritional prognostic biomarker.

In the field of HCC, several studies have explored the prognostic role of the CALLY index. Iida *et al.* first reported that the CALLY index was superior to traditional inflammatory markers such as NLR, PLR, and PNI in predicting prognosis after hepatectomy for HCC [26]. Müller *et al.* reported its prognostic value in patients with unresectable HCC treated with transarterial chemoembolization [27]. More recently, Zhao *et al.* reported that the CALLY index had better prognostic performance than the TNM staging system in patients with liver cancer [28]. These studies support the potential prognostic value of the CALLY index as a prognostic biomarker in HCC. However, most previous studies included HCC patients with heterogeneous etiologies and did not use PSM to address potential baseline confounding. In contrast, our study focused exclusively on Chinese HBV-related HCC, the dominant subtype in China and East Asia, and used 1 : 1 PSM to reduce baseline imbalances. Moreover, all patients in our cohort received nucleoside/nucleotide analog antiviral therapy, reducing variation in antiviral treatment status, although potential confounding by treatment cannot be excluded. These features provide evidence specific to the HBV-related HCC population undergoing resection.

The biological rationale for this association is plausible. The CALLY index integrates three components: CRP (inflammation), albumin (nutrition), and lymphocyte count (immune function). As an acute-phase inflammatory marker, CRP reflects the severity of systemic inflammation and promotes tumor progression and immune suppression [29–31]. Albumin indicates hepatic synthetic function and nutritional status, and hypoalbuminemia is closely associated with postoperative complications and poor survival [32, 33]. Lymphocytes are essential for cellular anti-tumor immunity, and lymphopenia may reflect impaired immune surveillance [34, 35]. By combining these three indicators, the CALLY index integrates information on several aspects of host physiological status that may not be captured by single- or dual-parameter scores. However, the present study does not establish that this combination provides superior biological assessment or explain the observed prognostic association [21, 36].

This study has several limitations. First, its single-center, retrospective design may introduce selection bias, and the large sample size does not eliminate this limitation. Second, the CALLY index was evaluated only at baseline; postoperative dynamic monitoring could reveal additional prognostic insights. Third, our cohort was restricted to patients undergoing radical resection; the index's value in palliative or non-surgical settings remains to be determined. Fourth, as optimal cutoff values for CALLY may vary, external validation in multicenter prospective cohorts is essential before widespread clinical implementation [37, 38]. Finally, due to the inherent limitations of retrospective data, we could not reliably determine whether patients had preoperative acute infections, systemic inflammatory diseases, or exposure to corticosteroids, all of which may independently influence CRP and lymphocyte levels and potentially affect the prognostic assessment of the CALLY index. Thus, further prospective studies are warranted to validate our findings.

In conclusion, the preoperative CALLY index was independently associated with survival outcomes in patients with HBV-related HCC after radical resection. Its combination of inflammatory, nutritional, and immune-related markers may provide useful prognostic information. While promising for risk stratification, its incremental prognostic value and clinical utility require further validation through prospective studies.

Funding

This study was supported by the National Science and Technology Major Project of China (No. 2026ZD0557700).

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Medical Ethics Committee of Mengchao Hepatobiliary Hospital of Fujian Medical University (No. 2021-035-01).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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