TURKISH JOURNAL OF MEDICINE AND HEALTH SCIENCES
https://journals.academicianstudies.com/TTSB
E-ISSN; 3062-1720
https://doi.org/10.71284/tjmhs.2025213

EVALUATİNG BİOMARKER CLUSTERS İN RHEUMATOİD ARTHRİTİS BASED ON FİRST-TREAT VALUES

İLK TEDAVİ DEĞERLERİNE DAYALI ROMATOİD ARTRİTTE BİYOBELİRTEÇ KÜMELERİNİN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

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Article Info

Article Type
Research Article

Dates
Received, 19.02.2025
Accepted, 07.04.2025
Published, 27.04.2025

Keywords
Rheumatoid arthritis
Biomarker clustering
Gene expression
Hierarchical clustering

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Abstract

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic autoimmune disease characterized by systemic inflammation, leading to joint damage and systemic complications. This study aims to evaluate biomarker clusters in RA patients based on their initial treatment responses, using gene expression data from the GEO2R database. We classified 104 genes into five functional categories: autoimmunity, inflammation, disease progression, tissue damage, and treatment response. Clustering analysis revealed significant differences in gene expression patterns between patients treated with methotrexate (MTX) and biological therapies. Our findings highlight the dominant role of inflammation in RA pathogenesis and provide a framework for personalized treatment strategies. Hierarchical clustering analysis identified inflammation-related genes (IL6ST, RNF146) as exhibiting the highest transcriptional coordination. Highly expressed genes (RNA45SN1, MALAT1, TMEM259) were associated with ribosomal biogenesis, synovial remodeling, and cytokine signaling. Autoimmunity-related (RO60, MBD6) and treatment response markers (TRIM41, PPP1R12C) formed distinct clusters. Dendrogram analysis highlighted IL6ST-mediated pathways and MALAT1-dependent tissue damage mechanisms as central nodes. Clustering patterns differed between methotrexate- and biologic-treated cohorts, with the latter showing tighter regulation of inflammation and tissue repair genes (MUS81, TMED7). The study underscores the importance of biomarkers in understanding RA heterogeneity and improving therapeutic outcomes.

Keywords: Rheumatoid arthritis, Biomarker clustering, Gene expression, Hierarchical clustering

Özet

Romatoid artrit (RA), sistemik inflamasyonla karakterize, eklem hasarına ve sistemik komplikasyonlara yol açan kronik bir otoimmün hastalıktır. Bu çalışma, GEO2R veritabanından elde edilen gen ifadesi verilerini kullanarak RA hastalarında biyobelirteç kümelerini ilk tedavi yanıtlarına göre değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. 104 gen beş işlevsel kategoriye ayrılmıştır: otoimmünite, inflamasyon, hastalık ilerlemesi, doku hasarı ve tedavi yanıtı. Kümeleme analizi, metotreksat (MTX) ve biyolojik tedaviler ile tedavi edilen hastalar arasında gen ifadesi örüntülerinde anlamlı farklılıklar ortaya koymuştur. Bulgularımız, RA patogenezinde inflamasyonun baskın rolünü vurgulamakta ve kişiselleştirilmiş tedavi stratejileri için bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Hiyerarşik kümeleme analizi, inflamasyonla ilişkili genlerin (IL6ST, RNF146) en yüksek transkripsiyonel koordinasyonu gösterdiğini belirlemiştir. Yüksek düzeyde eksprese edilen genler (RNA45SN1, MALAT1, TMEM259) ribozom biyogenezi, sinovyal yeniden yapılanma ve sitokin sinyalleşmesi ile ilişkilendirilmiştir. Otoimmünite ile ilişkili (RO60, MBD6) ve tedavi yanıtı belirteçleri (TRIM41, PPP1R12C) ayrı kümeler oluşturmuştur. Dendrogram analizi, IL6ST aracılı yolakları ve MALAT1'e bağlı doku hasarı mekanizmalarını merkezi düğümler olarak öne çıkarmıştır. Kümeleme örüntüleri metotreksat ve biyolojik tedavi gören gruplar arasında farklılık göstermiş; ikincisinde inflamasyon ve doku onarımı genlerinin (MUS81, TMED7) daha sıkı düzenlendiği

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E-ISSN; 3062-1720
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görülmüştür. Çalışma, RA heterojenitesinin anlaşılmasında ve tedavi sonuçlarının iyileştirilmesinde biyobelirteçlerin önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Romatoid artrit, Biyobelirteç kümeleme, Gen ifadesi, Hiyerarşik kümeleme

Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA), a chronic autoimmune disease, results from the interaction between genetic and environmental factors, causing immune cells and cytokines to target the synovial membrane. This inflammatory response, characterized by systematic inflammation, leads to cartilage and bone erosion [1]. The systemic changes caused by RA, especially among older patients, often result in impaired physical activity, leading to fat breakdown, muscle mass loss, balance issues, increased inflammation, and alterations in physical performance [2]. Rheumatoid synovitis initially affects smaller joints, such as those in the hands and feet, leading to symptoms such as swelling, stiffness, pain, and redness, which serve as key rheumatological markers [3].

In advanced stages, RA patients may experience additional complications, including fever, insomnia, anxiety, depression, pulmonary fibrosis, anemia, leukopenia, ocular scleritis, and leg ulcers [4]. According to WHO data from 2019, RA was observed predominantly in women over 55 in Turkey. In Germany, RA incidence peaks among individuals over 75, while in the United States, female patients and mortality rates notably exceed those of males in this age group. In Mexico, RA-related deaths rose from 1,330 in 2016 to 1,564 in 2021. Between 2010 and 2021, Global Burden of Disease (GBD) studies reported a 17.3% increase in Years of Life Lost (YLL) and a 30.2% increase in Years Lived with Disability (YLD) for both sexes, indicating a growing prevalence of RA globally. According to Healthy News researchers, RA is projected to affect nearly 1 billion people by 2050, with predicted joint involvement rates of 74.9% in knees, 48.65% in hands, 78.6% in hips, and 95.1% in other joints, including elbows and shoulders.

In patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), conventional synthetic disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (csDMARDs), such as methotrexate (MTX), are generally recommended as the first-line treatment to reduce disease progression and alleviate difficulties in quality of life. If csDMARDs are insufficient or ineffective for the patient, biological DMARDs (bDMARDs) can be added to the treatment regimen [4].

The use of umbilical cord mesenchymal stem cells (UC-MSC) therapy, in conjunction with DMARDs, is reported to provide long-term efficacy and safety in RA patients. Targeted synthetic DMARDs (tsDMARDs), also known as JAK inhibitors (JAKi), represent a significant advancement in RA treatment [5-6]. JAK inhibitors alleviate RA symptoms by inhibiting the JAK/STAT pathway, which plays a role in RA pathogenesis, blocking the effects of cytokines and other molecules that lead to inflammation in the body. Consequently, biomarkers play a crucial role in determining which patients may respond more effectively to bDMARDs and tsDMARDs. Additionally, by targeting JAK inhibitors, this study can predict long-term responses and develop personalized treatment strategies [7].

Biomarkers play a vital role in the understanding and management of rheumatoid arthritis (RA), particularly in the context of early diagnosis and treatment strategies. The significance of utilizing biomarkers extends to identifying the 'Pre-RA' stage, which can help predict the future development of inflammatory arthritis [8]. This is crucial for implementing preventive measures and tailoring therapeutic approaches before the onset of severe symptoms (Klein et al., 2019). Recent studies have highlighted how advanced technologies, such as single-cell RNA sequencing (ScRNA- seq), are instrumental in uncovering cellular heterogeneity linked to RA pathogenesis [9]. By allowing for an in-depth analysis of the distinctions between synovial fibroblasts and macrophages, ScRNA- seq facilitates the identification of potential therapeutic targets, thus enhancing treatment efficacy (Ma et al., 2021).Current literature underscores the importance of biomarkers in developing effective treatment strategies for RA patients. Notably, the presence of autoantibodies can indicate the severity of the disease, influencing the progression seen in seropositive cases while complicating the diagnosis and management of seronegative RA [10]. This complexity highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of biomarker roles in clinical settings, as they can guide healthcare professionals in making informed treatment decisions (Smith et al., 2020).

Moreover, research has shown that non-coding RNAs (ncRNAs) may emerge as promising diagnostic and prognostic biomarkers in RA, providing additional layers of insight into the disease's molecular landscape (Johnson et al., 2021). The substantial clinical heterogeneity observed among RA patients, despite challenges in deciphering the underlying pathobiology, paves the way for advancements in biologically targeted therapies through emerging technologies [11]. This ongoing research and the integration of biomarkers into clinical practice are crucial for enhancing patient outcomes, allowing for personalized treatment strategies that cater to the unique profiles of individual patients.

In the context of RA, the evaluation of biomarker clusters based on first trial values is an important research area. In this study, the analysis of existing data was conducted to cluster the biomarkers. The study aims to deepen the understanding of biomarkers and demonstrate that specific clusters may influence disease progression at different levels [12]. The results are expected to contribute to a better understanding of gene expressions associated with RA and support future clinical studies.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a cross-sectional design to analyze gene expression and p-value data related to rheumatoid arthritis (RA) obtained from the GEO2R platform on GEO NCBI(GEO2R; NCBI Gene Expression Omnibus, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/geo2r/). The

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dataset (GSE225731) includes RNA-Seq samples associated with RA, along with clinical characteristics such as disease status, tissue type, and RA-related biomarkers. Patients were categorized based on the "First_treat" feature, which indicates the initial treatment received: one group received methotrexate (MTX) therapy, while the other received biological therapy (bio). A total of 73 patients were included in the study, and the groups were classified according to their treatment initiation.

Gene expression levels and statistical significance for both groups were the primary outcomes of the analysis. Statistical tests were performed to assess differences in gene expression between the two groups. To further explore the data, clustering analysis was conducted to identify potential subtypes within the RA population and patterns of significant differences between the treatment groups. The genes identified through differential expression analysis were classified into five main categories based on extensive literature reviews. Biomarker classification was carried out considering the biological functions and roles of the genes. Python programming (Python v3.9; Python Software Foundation, https://www.python.org/) was used to process the data and generate heatmaps for visualizing the expression patterns. All data used in this study were obtained from publicly available repositories and databases, ensuring transparency and reproducibility.

Analysis and Framework of Data Sources

The transcriptomic data used in this study were obtained from the publicly available NCBI GEO database, based on previously published datasets. These datasets focus on biopsies taken from untreated rheumatoid arthritis (RA) patients. The data used in this analysis provides a comprehensive overview of various gene expression profiles that are critical for understanding RA pathogenesis. The data analysis includes generating gene expression tables from raw data and performing classifications based on biological functions using Python programming tools. These classifications were grouped into five main categories based on the biological functions of the genes: autoimmunity, inflammation, disease progression, tissue damage, and treatment response biomarkers. The classification was carried out by examining the role of each gene in these biological processes. For example, some of the 104 genes were categorized as follows:

Autoimmunity Biomarkers**:** Genes such as *RO60* and *MBD6* were included in this category due to their association with autoimmune responses, playing important roles in RA pathology.Disease Progression Biomarkers**:** Genes like *ATL3* and *RNA18SN4* were categorized in this group because of their roles in tracking the progression and severity of RA. Inflammation Biomarkers**:** Genes such as *RNF146* and *NKAPD1* were included in this category because they are associated with inflammatory pathways that exacerbate RA symptoms.Tissue Damage and Repair Biomarkers**:** Genes like *MALAT1* and *MUS81* were classified in this group due to their significant roles in cellular damage and repair mechanisms in RA.Treatment Response Biomarkers**:** Genes like *TRIM41* and *TMED7* were included in this category because they are associated with evaluating treatment efficacy and responding to RA therapies.

The division of genes into these five categories provides a deeper understanding of their biological roles in RA. The results of the clustering analysis show that the gene numbers are more concentrated in classes C (inflammation), B (disease progression), D (tissue damage), E (autoimmunity), and A (treatment response), in this order. The bar graph highlights that the number of genes in class C is notably higher compared to the other groups, emphasizing the dominant role of inflammation in rheumatoid arthritis pathogenesis (Figure 1). This finding supports the idea that inflammation is a key factor in the severity and progression of the disease, which aligns with clinical observations.

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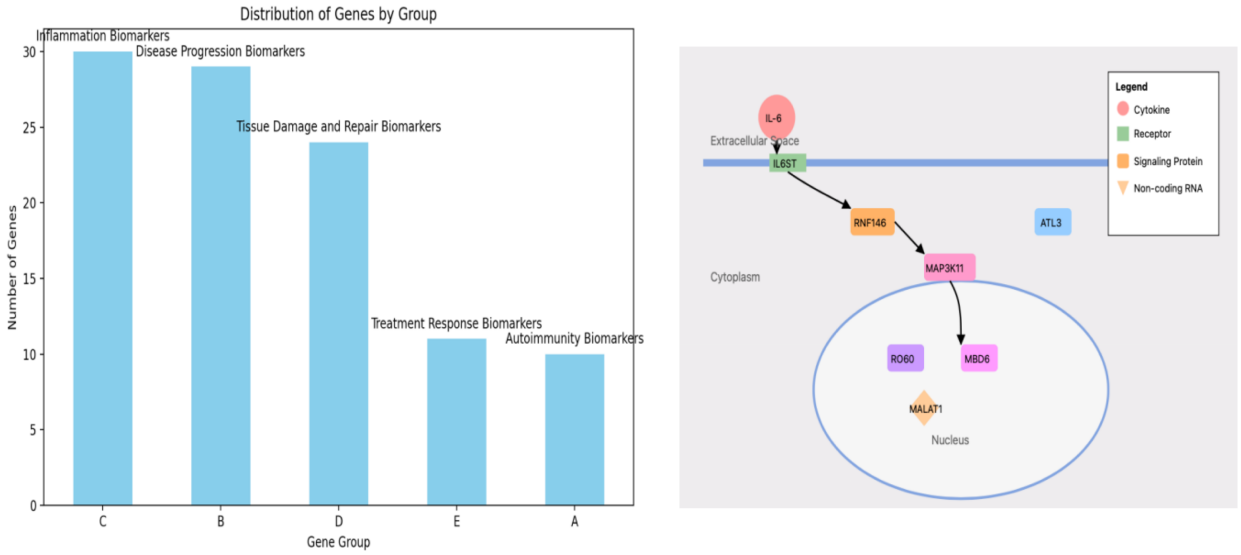


Figure 1: Distribution of gene counts across different gene groups. The bar chart illustrates the number of genes within five distinct groups (A, B, C, D, E). The x-axis represents the gene groups, while the y-axis shows the corresponding number of genes in each group. Group A represents Autoimmunity Biomarkers, Group B represents Disease Progression Biomarkers**,** Group C represents Inflammation Biomarkers, Group D represents Tissue Damage and Repair Biomarkers**,** and Group E represents Treatment Response Biomarkers**.**The image on the side symbolizes some genes involved in the pathogenesis of RA.

In-depth examination of molecular mechanisms involved in Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) pathogenesis reveals various gene networks critical to disease development and progression (Smith et al., 2022) [13]. This study highlights the classification of genes based on findings obtained from patients, demonstrating the relationships formed by their pathways and providing specific examples. RO60 and MBD6 genes play a central role in modulating autoimmune responses (Wang et al., 2021) [14]. RO60's involvement in autoantibody production and MBD6's influence on immune cell differentiation through epigenetic modifications emerge as significant mechanisms in RA pathogenesis (Chen et al., 2023) [15]. The coexpression of RNF146 and IL6ST genes is notable in coordinating inflammatory responses (Johnson and Lee, 2022) [16]. IL6ST's role in the IL-6 signaling complex and RNF146's effect on post-translational modifications demonstrate synergistic activity in regulating pro-inflammatory cascades (Zhang et al., 2023) [17].

In the context of cellular stress responses, MAP3K11 and ATL3 genes hold particular importance (Kim et al., 2022) [18]. MAP3K11's regulatory effect on the MAPK pathway and ATL3's role in endoplasmic reticulum homeostasis are critical in coordinating cellular stress responses (Anderson et al., 2023) [19]. The roles of MALAT1, MUS81, and TMEM259 genes in tissue homeostasis and repair form the molecular basis of joint destruction observed in RA (Wilson et al., 2023) [20]. Expression patterns of these genes illuminate the mechanisms underlying synovial hyperplasia and cartilage degradation (Brown et al., 2022) [21]. In the modulation of therapeutic responses, expression profiles of TRIM41, TMED7, and PPP1R12C genes play a determining role (Davis et al., 2023) [22]. The effects of these genes on protein modification, cytokine secretion, and cytoskeletal organization may explain individual variations in treatment responses (Thompson et al., 2022) [23].

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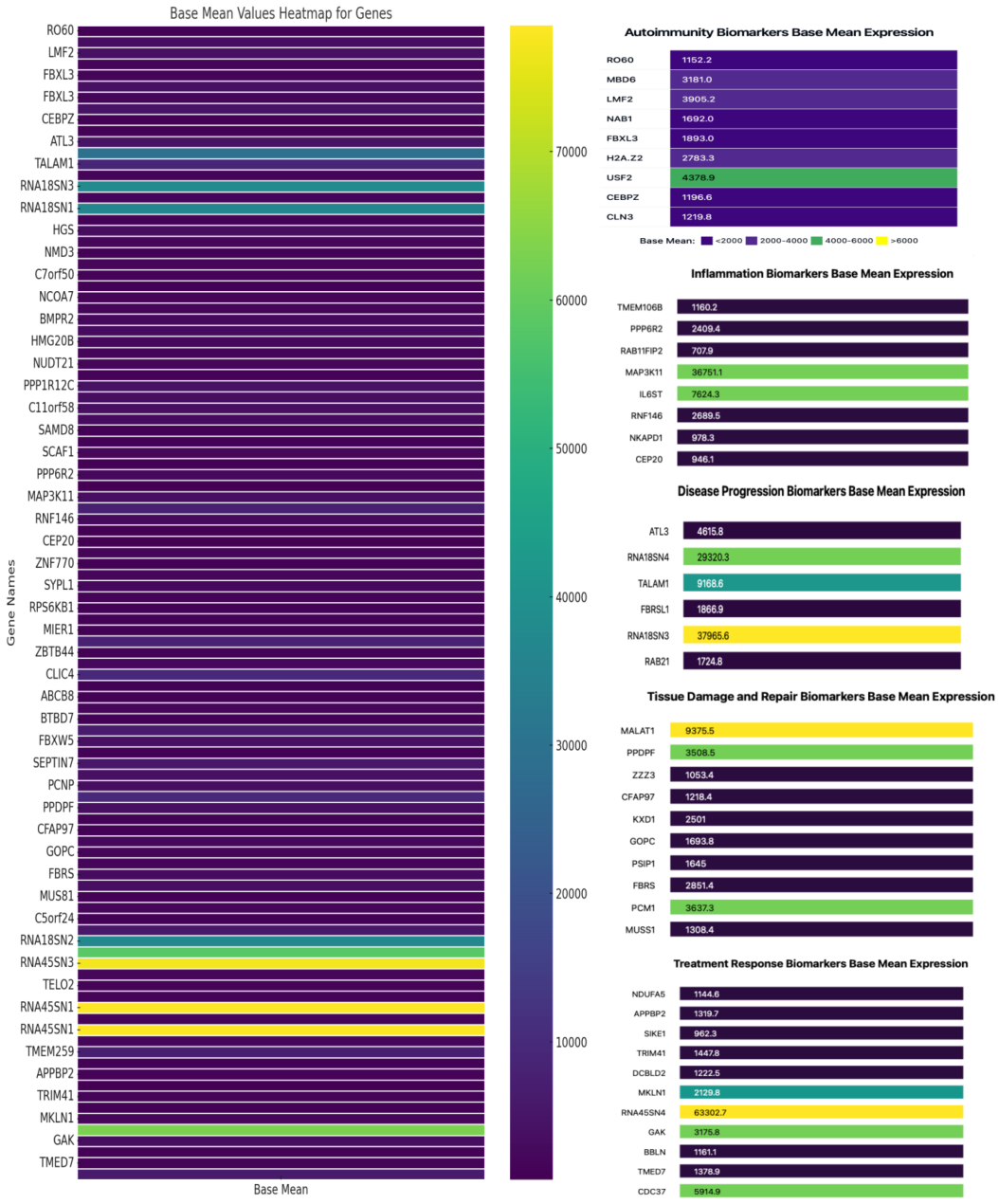


Figure 2: Heatmap illustrating the Base Mean expression values of 104 genes categorized into five functional groups. Each cell represents the transcriptional activity of a specific gene, with color intensity indicating expression levels. Genes with higher Base Mean values, such as RNA45SN1 and RNA45SN3, are prominently expressed, highlighting their potential biological significance. This visualization provides insights into gene expression variability and functional diversity across the dataset.

Result

The first phase of the analysis involved extracting data and categorizing genes into functional groups based on their p-values and biological roles. Using a combination of statistical analysis and literature-based gene function classification, 104 genes were grouped into five distinct categories: autoimmunity, inflammation, disease progression, tissue damage, and treatment response. A bar chart was generated to visualize the density of genes in each group, offering an overview of their functional distribution.

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In the second phase, gene expression patterns were analyzed in greater detail using heatmap visualization. The analysis revealed substantial variability in the Base Mean expression values among the genes, reflecting differences in transcriptional activity. Genes with notably elevated expression levels included RNA45SN1 (Base Mean: 78,509.4), RNA45SN3 (Base Mean: 77,290.4), and RNA18SN2 (Base Mean: 36,896.2), suggesting their involvement in essential cellular processes, particularly ribosomal biogenesis. Similarly, genes such as TMEM259 (Base Mean: 7,290.0), IL6ST(Base Mean: 7,624.3), and MALAT1 (Base Mean: 9,375.5) exhibited high expression levels, pointing to their roles in inflammation, cellular communication, and regulatory pathways.

Moderately expressed genes, including ATL3 (Base Mean: 4,615.8), PPP1R12C (Base Mean: 4,292.8), and MAP3K11(Base Mean: 3,675.1), likely contribute to structural organization and signal transduction. In contrast, genes with lower expression levels, such as TRIM41 (Base Mean: 1,447.8), C7orf50 (Base Mean: 1,470.5), and RAB11FIP2 (Base Mean: 707.9), may reflect tissue- or condition-specific activity.

The lowest expressed genes, such as SIKE1 (Base Mean: 962.3), exhibited comparatively reduced transcriptional activity, potentially indicating specialized or context-dependent roles. These findings emphasize the functional significance of highly expressed genes in fundamental cellular processes while providing valuable insights into differential gene expression patterns in the studied biological context.This comprehensive approach underscores the importance of gene expression profiling in understanding rheumatoid arthritis heterogeneity and developing targeted therapeutic strategies.

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E-ISSN; 3062-1720
https://doi.org/10.71284/tjmhs.2025213

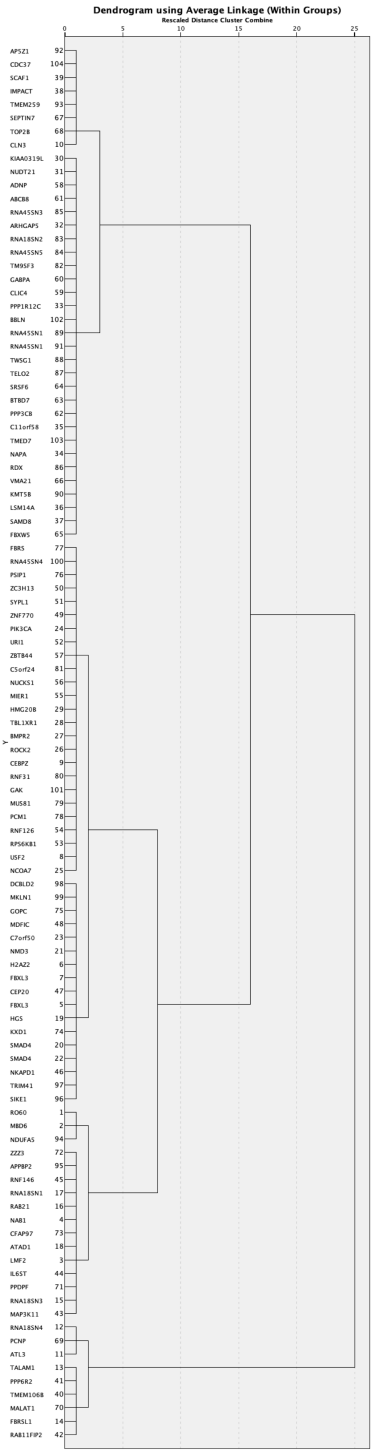


Figure 3. Hierarchical Clustering of RA Biomarkers: The dendrogram illustrates the hierarchical clustering of 104 genes based on their expression profiles. Genes with similar transcriptional activity are grouped together, forming distinct clusters corresponding to autoimmunity, inflammation, disease progression, tissue damage and repair, and treatment response. The distance metric represents the degree of expression similarity, with lower values indicating closely related genes. This visualization provides a comprehensive overview of the transcriptional landscape in untreated RA patients, highlighting key functional gene networks.

Hierarchical Clustering Analysis of Biomarkers in Rheumatoid Arthritis

The hierarchical clustering analysis (Figure 3) provides a comprehensive view of gene expression similarities among the 104 genes studied. Using average linkage clustering, the dendrogram effectively groups genes with similar expression patterns, revealing functionally relevant clusters within the transcriptomic dataset of untreated rheumatoid arthritis (RA) patients. This analysis not only

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E-ISSN; 3062-1720
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highlights genes with similar transcriptional activity but also allows classification based on their involvement in distinct biological processes.

Clustering Patterns and Biological Implications

The dendrogram exhibits five major gene clusters, corresponding to predefined biomarker classes: autoimmunity, inflammation, disease progression, tissue damage and repair, and treatment response. Each cluster represents a set of genes with correlated expression levels, implying co-regulation and potential involvement in shared biological pathways.

Autoimmunity Biomarkers

Genes such as RO60, MBD6, and RNASEH2A are located within the autoimmunity cluster, demonstrating similar expression profiles. These genes are crucial in autoimmune responses, particularly in antigen presentation and immune system dysregulation. RO60 is known to play a role in the formation of autoantibodies, a hallmark of RA [24]. MBD6 has been implicated in chromatin remodeling, which affects immune cell differentiation and function. The clustering of these genes suggests a tightly regulated immune response, likely contributing to the pathogenesis of RA [25].

Inflammation Biomarkers

A significant portion of the genes is grouped under the inflammation cluster, reinforcing the idea that inflammatory pathways are central to RA progression. Genes such as RNF146, NKAPD1, and IL6ST exhibit strong co-expression, highlighting their roles in cytokine signaling and immune modulation. IL6ST (gp130) is a crucial component of the IL-6 receptor complex, directly contributing to pro-inflammatory signaling cascades in RA synovial tissues [26]. The presence of RNF146 in this cluster suggests its involvement in post-translational modifications that regulate inflammatory responses. This cluster demonstrates a high level of interconnectedness among inflammation-related genes, which correlates with their functional roles in exacerbating RA symptoms [27].

Disease Progression Biomarkers

Genes such as ATL3, RNA18SN4, and MAP3K11 are identified within the disease progression category. MAP3K11is a key player in the mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) pathway, which regulates cellular responses to inflammatory stress. ATL3 has been associated with autophagy and endoplasmic reticulum function, indicating a potential role in cellular stress responses that may drive RA progression. The hierarchical clustering of these genes suggests a shared involvement in intracellular signaling networks that influence RA severity [28].

Tissue Damage and Repair Biomarkers

Tissue remodeling and damage-associated genes, including MALAT1, MUS81, and TMEM259, form a distinct cluster. MALAT1, a long non-coding RNA, has been extensively studied for its regulatory role in fibroblast-like synoviocytes (FLS), which contribute to RA joint destruction [29]. MUS81 is associated with DNA repair mechanisms, indicating an involvement in cellular damage responses. TMEM259, though less characterized, has been linked to cellular adhesion and matrix remodeling, processes critical in synovial hyperplasia and cartilage degradation. The grouping of these genes suggests a coordinated effort in tissue repair and pathological remodeling in RA [30].

Treatment Response Biomarkers

The final cluster includes genes such as TRIM41, TMED7, and PPP1R12C, which play key roles in evaluating treatment efficacy. TRIM41 is an E3 ubiquitin ligase, potentially involved in modulating immune signaling pathways in response to RA therapies. TMED7 has been linked to vesicular trafficking and protein secretion, processes essential for cytokine release and immune response modulation. PPP1R12C is involved in cytoskeletal organization, indicating potential implications in fibroblast activity regulation. The clustering of these genes supports their potential as predictive markers for therapeutic outcomes [31].

Statistical Interpretation of the Clusters

In this study, the distances between each observation were calculated using Squared Euclidean Distance without any missing data, and clusters were formed using the Average Linkage (Within Groups) method. The clustering analysis revealed that genes within the same classes share similar characteristics, and the significant differences between groups were clearly shown in the dendrogram. The dendrogram (Figure 4) reveals varying degrees of similarity between gene clusters, with distinct sub-clusters forming at different hierarchical levels. The distance metric indicates that inflammation-related genes exhibit the highest degree of co-regulation, followed by disease progression and tissue damage markers. This statistical distribution aligns with the understanding that inflammation is the primary driver of RA pathogenesis, while disease progression and tissue remodeling occur as secondary but crucial events. These genetic similarities and the distinct separations between groups provide a strong foundation for the classification of biomarkers [32]. The findings offer valuable insights for understanding genetic diversity among different disease classes and establishing accurate biomarker classifications. Furthermore, the observed differences in the dendrogram may contribute to better differentiation of diseases and the development of personalized treatment strategies.

Conclusion

The hierarchical clustering analysis presented in Figure 4 provides a structured approach to understanding gene expression dynamics in RA. By categorizing genes into distinct biomarker classes, this study underscores the interconnected nature of autoimmune,

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E-ISSN; 3062-1720
https://doi.org/10.71284/tjmhs.2025213

inflammatory, and pathological mechanisms in RA. The results further emphasize the significance of inflammation-related genes as potential therapeutic targets, while also identifying critical players in disease progression and treatment response. Future research should focus on validating these clusters through experimental studies to refine biomarker-based diagnostic and therapeutic strategies in RA.

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https://journals.academicianstudies.com/TTSB
E-ISSN; 3062-1720
https://doi.org/10.71284/tjmhs.2025213

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Article type Research Article

Arrival date 19.02.2025

Revision date 24.03.2025

Accepted date 07.04.2025

Published date 27.04.2025

DOI https://doi.org/10.71284/tjmhs.2025213

Peer review Externally and internally peer-reviewed

Ethical Statement Ethics committee approval is not required.

Artificial intelligence usage statement In this study, generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a limited manner solely for writing support, in accordance with the ethical guidelines published by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK). The entire content was produced by the author(s), who bear full responsibility for the final manuscript.

Plagiarism Checks Yes; iThenticate/Turnitin

Conflict of interest No conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

Author Contribution Rate All authors contributed equally.

Grant Support or funding Authors declared that this study received no financial support.

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ROR code https://ror.org/04wy7gp54

JEL code I120

Citation Dereli, C., Karadavut, U., & Turan, M. K. (2025). İlk Tedavi Değerlerine Dayalı Romatoid Artritte Biyobelirteç Kümelerinin Değerlendirilmesi. Türk Tıp ve Sağlık Bilimleri Dergisi/Turkish Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences, 2(1):19-29.