

1 **Identification of *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastoma subgroups points**  
2 **towards molecular signatures for precision prognosis and therapy**  
3 **stratification**

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25 **Running title: Molecular subtypes in *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas**

26 **Abstract**

27 **Background**

28 Despite the extensive study of *MYCN*-amplified neuroblastomas, there is a significant unmet  
29 clinical need in *MYCN* non-amplified cases. In particular, the extent of heterogeneity within  
30 the *MYCN* non-amplified population is unknown.

31

32 **Methods**

33 A total of 1,566 samples from 16 datasets were identified in Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO)  
34 and ArrayExpress. Characterisation of the subtypes was analysed by ConsensusClusterPlus.  
35 Independent predictors for subgrouping were constructed from the single sample predictor  
36 based on the multiclassPairs package. Findings were verified using immunohistochemistry and  
37 CIBERSORTx analysis.

38

39 **Results**

40 We demonstrate that *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas are heterogeneous and can be  
41 classified into 3 subgroups based on their transcriptional signatures. Within these groups,  
42 subgroup\_2 has the worst prognosis and this group shows a "*MYCN*" signature that is  
43 potentially induced by the overexpression of Aurora Kinase A (AURKA); whilst subgroup\_3  
44 is characterised by an "inflamed" gene signature. The clinical implications of this subtype  
45 classification are significant, as each subtype demonstrates a unique prognosis and  
46 vulnerability to investigational therapies. A total of 420 genes were identified as independent  
47 subgroup predictors with average balanced accuracy of 0.93 and 0.84 for train and test datasets,  
48 respectively.

49

50 **Conclusion**

51 We propose that transcriptional subtyping may enhance precision prognosis and therapy  
52 stratification for patients with *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas.

## 53 **Introduction**

54 Neuroblastoma is the most common extra-cranial solid tumour in children, representing 6-10%  
55 of all childhood cancers<sup>1</sup>. It is an embryonic tumour arising from precursor cells in the  
56 sympathetic nervous system and adrenal medulla<sup>2</sup>, with a median age of diagnosis of 18 months  
57 <sup>3</sup>. It can also be present in the neck, chest, abdomen, or pelvis<sup>4</sup>. Neuroblastoma is a highly  
58 heterogeneous disease, with clinical behaviour ranging from spontaneous regression to drug  
59 resistance and metastasis ultimately resulting in death<sup>5</sup>. The prognosis of the disease is poor  
60 with a 5-year overall survival of approximately 20%, despite more aggressive therapies<sup>6</sup>. As a  
61 result, risk stratification and personalised treatment approaches in neuroblastomas are urgently  
62 needed.

63 The International Neuroblastoma Risk Group Staging System (INRGSS) defines the high-risk  
64 group to include patients with *MYCN*-amplified tumours and patients > 18 months old with  
65 metastatic tumours<sup>7</sup>. N-MYC is a key regulator of transcription, which activates genes that  
66 affect cancer development. It is widely involved in various pathological processes of  
67 neuroblastoma including cell growth<sup>8</sup>, apoptosis<sup>9</sup>, differentiation<sup>10</sup>, angiogenesis<sup>11</sup>, tumour  
68 invasion, and metastasis<sup>12</sup>.

69 *MYCN* amplification was identified as the first independent prognostic factor indicating  
70 adverse clinical outcomes in neuroblastomas<sup>13,14</sup>, which is observed in approximately 20% of  
71 cases<sup>15</sup> and accounts for about 40% of high-risk neuroblastomas<sup>16</sup>. Despite the extensive study  
72 of *MYCN*-amplified neuroblastomas, there is a significant unmet clinical need in *MYCN* non-  
73 amplified cases. In particular, the extent of heterogeneity within the *MYCN* non-amplified  
74 population is unknown.

75 Here, we investigated whether transcriptional subtyping of *MYCN* non-amplified  
76 neuroblastomas can identify molecular subtypes with discrete prognosis and therapeutic  
77 vulnerabilities. Our analysis suggested that *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas were  
78 heterogeneous and could be classified into 3 subgroups based on their transcriptional profiling.  
79 Within them, subgroup 2 had the worst prognosis and this group had a "*MYCN*" signature that  
80 was potentially induced by the overexpression of Aurora Kinase A (AURKA); whilst subgroup  
81 3 was accompanied by an "inflamed" gene signature. We propose that transcriptional subtyping  
82 may enhance precision prognosis and therapy stratification for patients with *MYCN* non-  
83 amplified neuroblastomas.

## 84 **Results**

### 85 **Characterisation of molecular subtypes in *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas.**

86 Following quality control and eliminating duplicates (Supplementary Figs. 1 and 2; details  
87 provided in the Supplementary Methods), a total of 1,566 samples from 16 datasets were  
88 identified in GEO (Gene Expression Omnibus) and ArrayExpress, in which 313 cases are with  
89 *MYCN* gene amplification (*MYCN*-AMP) and 1,253 cases *MYCN* non-amplified (*MYCN*-  
90 normal) (Fig. 1a; Supplementary Table 1). Following the removal of batch effects  
91 (Supplementary Fig. 3a), 2 clear clusters corresponding to *MYCN*-AMP and *MYCN*-normal  
92 neuroblastomas, respectively, were visualised using principal component analysis (PCA)  
93 (Supplementary Fig. 3b). Samples in the *MYCN*-normal group (n = 1,253) were further  
94 randomly divided into a train and a test group with a 7:3 ratio, containing 878 and 375 cases,  
95 respectively (Fig. 1a).

96 In an unbiased attempt to identify subtypes within *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas, we  
97 applied consensus clustering to both train and test groups based on 5,792 variable genes (top  
98 50% median absolute deviation; Supplementary Table 2). As determined by the relative area  
99 under the cumulative distribution function and cluster-consensus scores, the optimal number  
100 of distinct clusters was 3 (Fig. 1b; Supplementary Fig. 3c). In total, within the *MYCN* non-  
101 amplified group, subgroup 1 (blue), 2 (green) and 3 (purple) accounts for 46%, 30%, and 24%,  
102 respectively (Fig. 1c). Cross-cohort analysis using an unsupervised method SubMap<sup>17</sup>  
103 (<https://www.genepattern.org/modules>) confirmed the robustness of this classification  
104 (Supplementary Fig. 4a; false discovery rate, FDR < 0.05).

105 Further clinical characterisation of these subtypes identified key distinguishing features.  
106 Patients within subgroup 2 were frequently observed in the advanced neuroblastomas  
107 according to the International Neuroblastoma Staging System (INSS) and in those defined as  
108 "high risk"<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 2a and b; Supplementary Fig. 4b). We then analysed their overall survival  
109 together with *MYCN*-AMP cases. Patients with *MYCN* amplification had the worst prognosis  
110 (Fig. 2c and d; Supplementary Fig. 4c). Importantly, there was a high degree of variability for  
111 overall survival among *MYCN* non-amplified cases, in which subgroup 2 was associated with  
112 a poor prognosis, followed by subgroup 3; while patients within subgroup 1 had the most  
113 favourable outcomes. These observations were consistent in both train and test cohorts. In  
114 addition, the molecular subtype classification was a strong independent predictor of mortality  
115 including in multivariate analysis with the risk classification that uses commonly measured  
116 clinical variables to predict mortality in neuroblastomas<sup>7</sup>. Using subgroup 1 as a reference, the

117 hazard ratio (HR) and 95% confidence interval (CI) for subgroups 2 and 3 were 20.2 (4.8 ~ 85)  
118 and 9.2 (2.1 ~ 40), respectively (Fig. 2e). Similar results were obtained using univariate or  
119 multivariate cox regression analysis with age and INSS stages in *MYCN* non-amplified  
120 neuroblastomas (Supplementary Table 3). A comprehensive multivariate analysis also revealed  
121 our subgroups to be independent of genomic features such as 1p, 11q, and 17q (Supplementary  
122 Fig. 4d-f)). Impressively, the molecular subtype classification alone outperformed INSS stages  
123 (Fig. 2f) and shows a comparable prediction accuracy as the risk classification (Supplementary  
124 Fig. 4g).

125 Overall, subgroup 2 and subgroup 3 (to a lesser extent) were associated with poor survival  
126 in *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas, suggesting fundamentally different mechanisms  
127 leading to an advanced disease.

128

### 129 **Defining molecular features of the 3 subtypes in *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas.**

130 Using the same 5,792 variable genes described above (Supplementary Table 2), we observed  
131 clear distinctions among these 3 subtypes in *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas (Fig. 3a;  
132 Supplementary Table 4). Intriguingly, subgroup 2 showed a similar signature to *MYCN*-AMP  
133 cases (Fig. 3a). This was consistent with the Gene Set Enrichment Analysis (GSEA), showing  
134 HALLMARK\_MYC\_TARGETS\_V1 and V2 significantly enriched in subgroup 2 (Fig. 3b;  
135 Supplementary Table 5; FDR = 0.0021 and 0.0017, respectively). In contrast, subgroup 3  
136 exhibited an "inflamed" phenotype, with high expression of genes related to  
137 IL6\_JAK\_STAT3\_SIGNALING, INFLAMMATORY\_RESPONSE,  
138 INTERFERON\_ALPHA\_RESPONSE and INTERFERON\_GAMMA\_RESPONSE (Fig. 3b;  
139 Supplementary Table 5; all FDR values less than 0.05). None of these pathways were enriched  
140 in subgroup 1 (Fig. 3b).

141 The above analysis was extended using weighted gene co-expression network analysis  
142 (WGCNA)<sup>18</sup>. Three molecular modules were identified (Supplementary Fig. 5; Supplementary  
143 Table 6) and were further used to construct a protein-protein network consisting of 1,393 genes  
144 and 4,490 edges (Fig. 3c; confidence score > 0.9). Molecular module MEturquoise, which was  
145 significantly correlated with subgroup 2 (Fig. 3d), was enriched for "Mitotic cell cycle process",  
146 "HALLMARK G2M CHECKPOINT", and "DNA repair". In subgroup 3, there were 2  
147 molecular modules, MEblue and MEbrown highly involved (Fig. 3d; Supplementary Table 6).  
148 Molecular module MEblue was enriched for pathways, including "HALLMARK  
149 EPITHELIAL MESENCHYMAL TRANSITION", "TGF-beta receptor signaling pathway",  
150 "PI3K-Akt signaling pathway" and "MAPK signaling pathway" whereas "Cytokine-cytokine

151 receptor interaction", "T cell activation", "B cell-mediated immunity", "Adaptive immune  
152 response" and "Innate immune response" were significantly enriched in molecular module  
153 MEbrown.

154

155 **Subgroup 2 shows a "MYCN" signature, potentially induced by Aurora Kinase A**  
156 **(AURKA) overexpression.**

157 Our above analysis suggested that mechanisms other than gene amplification induce N-MYC  
158 activity in subgroup 2. Indeed, the mRNA level of *MYCN* in subgroup 2 was significantly lower  
159 than cases within the *MYCN*-AMP group (Fig. 4a; Supplementary Table 4;  $P < 0.0001$ ). To  
160 evaluate N-MYC activity in neuroblastoma samples, a total of 87 genes upregulated by N-  
161 MYC were selected to classify its activity<sup>19</sup>. The *MYCN* score for each sample was calculated  
162 using single-sample gene set enrichment analysis (ssGSEA) based on this 87-gene expression  
163 signature. *MYCN* scores in subgroup 2 were significantly higher than those in subgroups 1 and  
164 3, and were comparable to those in the *MYCN*-AMP group, although slightly lower (Fig. 4b).  
165 Moreover, the *MYCN* score was an independent predictor of mortality including in multivariate  
166 analysis with the risk classification (Fig. 4c; HR: 3.3;  $P < 0.001$ ).

167 To investigate the potential mechanism that leads to higher *MYCN* scores in subgroup 2,  
168 correlation analysis coupled with protein-protein interactions (PPI) network construction was  
169 performed (Fig. 4d; Supplementary Table 7). Among the candidate genes, *AURKA* (Aurora  
170 kinase A) was identified to interact with *MYCN*. *AURKA*, a serine/threonine kinase regulating  
171 the process of mitosis<sup>20</sup>, was previously demonstrated to regulate N-MYC protein stability<sup>21</sup>.  
172 *AURKA* was expressed at significantly higher levels in subgroup 2 when compared to the other  
173 2 subgroups and its levels were even slightly higher than those in the *MYCN*-AMP group (Fig.  
174 4e). Classifying *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas into high and low groups, we  
175 demonstrated that the *AURKA* mRNA levels alone could predict the overall survival (Fig. 4f;  
176 HR 4.8;  $P < 0.0001$ ). In addition, the high level of *AURKA* was an independent predictor (HR  
177 3,  $P < 0.001$ ) of mortality including in multivariate analysis with the risk classification  
178 (Supplementary Fig. 6).

179 These findings were further investigated by immunohistochemistry (IHC) staining of N-  
180 MYC or *AURKA* in a custom neuroblastoma tissue microarray, which contains 94 *MYCN* non-  
181 amplified neuroblastomas. Within them, 22 samples were positive for N-MYC (Fig. 5a), and  
182 they had worse survival compared to those with N-MYC negative staining ( $n = 72$ ) (Fig. 5b;  $P$   
183 = 0.03; Supplementary Table 8). In parallel, patients with higher levels of *AURKA* had  
184 unfavourable survival outcomes (Fig. 5c and d;  $P = 0.00014$ ). Moreover, a higher percentage

185 of patients with high AURKA staining was observed in the N-MYC-positive group compared  
186 to the N-MYC-negative group (Fig. 5e; 64% vs. 39%;  $P = 0.041$ ).

187 Taken together, these results suggested that a "MYCN" signature in subgroup 2 is potentially  
188 induced by AURKA overexpression in MYCN non-amplified neuroblastomas.

189

### 190 **Subgroup 3 is accompanied by an "inflamed" gene signature.**

191 Considering immune-related pathways were enriched in subgroup 3, the activity of immune  
192 cells and pathways were further systematically explored. ssGSEA was performed to calculate  
193 enrichment scores of 46 immune gene sets summarised from two previous studies<sup>22,23</sup>, and  
194 subgroup 3 showed significantly higher activity of immune cells and pathways compared to  
195 the other 2 subtypes as well as MYCN-AMP group (Fig. 6a; Supplementary Table 9).  
196 Consistently, cytolytic activity (CYT) or MHC-1 (major histocompatibility complex-1) scores  
197 were highest in subgroup 3 (Fig. 6b and c). This was also true when using the ESTIMATE  
198 algorithm to evaluate the immune scores, stromal scores, and tumour purity scores in  
199 neuroblastomas<sup>24</sup>, showing the highest immune and stromal scores, and lowest tumour purity  
200 scores in subgroup 3 (Fig. 6d; Supplementary Fig. 7a and b).

201 For a comprehensive assessment of immune cell infiltration, we used CIBERSORTx  
202 deconvolution<sup>25</sup> to quantify various immune populations based on a single cell RNA  
203 sequencing (scRNA-seq) dataset in MYCN non-amplified neuroblastoma<sup>26</sup> (Supplementary Fig.  
204 7c). While similar immune cell types were present in each subtype, the absolute number of  
205 several immune cell populations were markedly increased in subgroup 3, including B cells,  
206 myeloid cells, T cells and pDC (plasmacytoid dendritic cells) (Fig. 6e). Finally, to investigate  
207 whether subgroup 3 would benefit more from immunotherapy than the other subgroups, we  
208 compared the expression matrix of 3 subgroups with published melanoma datasets including  
209 response information after treating with immunotherapies<sup>27,28</sup>. The SubMap analysis  
210 highlighted that patients within subgroup 3 are predicted to respond to anti-PD1  
211 immunotherapy (Fig. 6f; Supplementary Fig. 7d). In addition, Su *et al.* observed that anlotinib  
212 treatment in neuroblastoma mice reprogrammed the immunosuppressive tumour  
213 microenvironment (TME) into an immune-stimulatory TME, leading to an extension in the  
214 duration of vascular normalization, and dynamic changes in the expression levels of PD-1 and  
215 PD-L1. In addition, it is noteworthy that the combination of anlotinib with PD-1 checkpoint  
216 inhibitors counteracted the immune suppression induced by PD-L1 upregulation after  
217 monotherapy, ultimately inducing the regression of neuroblastoma<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, we reanalysed

218 the RNA-seq data of neuroblastoma syngeneic mouse models treated with vehicle/anlotinib for  
219 9 days. Then, we compared the molecular features of each condition to our subgroups.  
220 Interestingly, SubMap analysis revealed that subgroup 3 exhibited a significant similarity in  
221 expression profile to mouse models after anlotinib treatment (Fig. 6g;  $P = 0.032$ ).

222 Taken together, these results demonstrated that subgroup 3 is accompanied by an "inflamed"  
223 gene signature, and is more likely to benefit from anti-PD1 therapies.

224

### 225 **Identification of independent predictors to subgroup patients within *MYCN* non-** 226 **amplified neuroblastomas**

227 To identify independent predictors for subgrouping, we applied a multi-cohort analysis pipeline  
228 via multiclassPairs<sup>30</sup> (see [Supplementary Methods](#)). In total, a random forest model, trained  
229 using 928 rules derived from a set of 432 genes ([Supplementary Table 10](#)) displayed the ability  
230 to predict different subgroups accurately in both training and test sets with an F1 score  $> 0.74$   
231 ([Supplementary Table 11](#)). The prediction model and example files can be downloaded from  
232 <https://zenodo.org/records/10258748>.

233 Furthermore, the random forest model successfully stratified patients with *MYCN* non-  
234 amplified neuroblastoma into distinct subgroups 1, 2, and 3 with significant differences in  
235 survival across five independent validation sets (GSE49711<sup>31</sup>, TARGET Microarray<sup>32</sup>,  
236 TARGET RNA-seq, Westermann ALK cohort<sup>33</sup> and Stefan Hüttelmaier cohort<sup>34</sup> respectively)  
237 (Fig. 7a and b; [Supplementary Table 11](#)). These independent predictors worked consistently  
238 between microarray and RNA-seq within GSE47792 (Fig. 7c).

239

### 240 **Evaluation of different patient stratification strategies**

241 Finally, we evaluated our subgrouping method (named Hu\_Subgroups) together with other  
242 reports. van Groningen and colleagues reported that neuroblastoma is composed of 2 super-  
243 enhancer-associated differentiation states: an 'ADRN' subgroup showing up-regulated genes  
244 involved in adrenergic differentiation and an 'MES' subgroup with higher expressions of  
245 mesenchymal markers<sup>35</sup>. To quantify these characteristics, we calculated the "ADRN" or  
246 "MES" scores of our subgroups based on a 369-gene "ADRN" signature or a 485-gene MES  
247 signature, respectively. We observed that subgroup 3 showed the highest "MES" scores and  
248 the lowest "ADRN" scores, consistent with our above findings; while subgroups 1 and 2 had  
249 the highest "ADRN" scores with the lowest "MES" scores in subgroup 2 ([Supplementary Fig.](#)  
250 [8a and b](#)).



251 We also compared Hu\_Subgroups with the Valentijn classification<sup>19</sup>. All subgroup 1  
252 samples (n = 33) and two-thirds of subgroup 3 (n = 8) belonged to Valentijn's NEG group,  
253 while 13 out of 23 subgroup 2 samples were part of Valentijn's POS group (Fig. 8a;  
254 [Supplementary Table 12](#)). In addition, the multivariate analysis indicated that our subgroup 3  
255 could be an independent variable after being adjusted by Valentijn's classifier (Fig. 8b).

256 Since 2006, Oberthuer and colleagues have been dedicated to constructing a molecular  
257 classification system capable of accurately categorizing patients into favourable and  
258 unfavourable groups, continually iterating over the following decade<sup>36-39</sup>. The most recent  
259 molecular predictors NB-th24 and NB-th44 were introduced in 2017<sup>40</sup>. A comparative analysis  
260 between our model and their two models reveals a strong consistency in the favourable and  
261 unfavourable outcomes of the respective groupings (Fig. 8c). Specifically, 218 out of 230  
262 subgroup 1 samples and 77 out of 124 subgroup 3 samples were labelled as the favourable  
263 group based on SVM\_th24. Conversely, more than half of the subgroup 2 samples were  
264 categorized as unfavourable ([Supplementary Table 12](#)). Similar results were identified in the  
265 SVM\_th44 comparison ([Supplementary Fig. 8c](#)). Additionally, multivariate analysis to  
266 determine subgroup 2 could serve as an independent variable after adjusting for Oberthuer's  
267 classifier (Fig. 8d; [Supplementary Fig. 8d](#)).

268 Recently, Westermann and colleagues reported 4 subgroups in neuroblastoma, including  
269 *MYCN*-amplified (*MYCN*), *MYCN* non-amplified high-risk (MNA-HR), *MYCN* non-amplified  
270 low-risk (MNA-LR) and mesenchymal (MES)<sup>41</sup>. With our method, patients within  
271 Westermann\_MNA-HR can be further classified into 3 subtypes (Fig. 8e), showing different  
272 prognosis (Fig. 8f). This was also true for Westermann\_MNA-LR (Fig. 8g). A majority of  
273 cases in Westermann\_MES or *MYCN* belonged to subgroup 3 and 2, respectively (Fig. 8e).

274 George and colleagues classified 498 neuroblastoma samples into 4 distinct clusters based  
275 on RNA-seq profiles<sup>42</sup>. These clusters include the George\_Hi-*MYCN* cluster, characterized by  
276 *MYCN* target genes; the George\_neuronal cluster, predominantly composed of *MYCN* non-  
277 amplified tumours; the George\_immunogenic cluster, enrichment of immune genes; and the  
278 George\_metabolic cluster, encompassing the remaining samples. A substantial portion of the  
279 George\_neuronal cluster and the George\_immunogenic cluster fall into subgroups 1 and 3,  
280 respectively. Specifically, 13 out of 14 samples from the George\_Hi-*MYCN* cluster are  
281 categorized to subgroup 2 (Fig. 8h). Notably, subgroups within the George\_immunogenic  
282 cluster and George\_neuronal cluster also demonstrate distinct survival outcomes (Fig. 8i and  
283 j).

284 Califano and colleagues classified high-risk neuroblastomas into 3 main subgroups  
285 (MYCN<sup>Amp</sup>, MYCNA), 11q-LOH (loss of heterozygosity), and mesenchymal (MES)<sup>43</sup>. In  
286 comparison, in the GSE85047 microarray, all cases of Califano\_ MYCNA were classified in  
287 subgroup 2. Most cases in Califano\_ MES or Stage1 belonged to subgroups 3 and 1  
288 respectively (Fig. 8k). Interestingly, most cases in Califano\_11q-LOH were classified in  
289 subgroup 2 (Fig. 8k), and subgroups within Califano\_11q-LOH and MYCNA exhibit different  
290 survival results (Fig. 8l).

291 Together with other reports, our findings emphasised the extent of inner heterogeneity within  
292 the *MYCN* non-amplified population and the importance of patient stratification.

## 293 **Discussion**

294 Neuroblastoma remains a challenge in the era of personalised therapy, largely due to inter- and  
295 intra-tumoral heterogeneity. Gene amplification in *MYCN* is the first genetic marker that  
296 indicates a highly invasive, advanced neuroblastoma, which has been observed in about 20%  
297 of primary and about 40% of high-risk neuroblastoma cases<sup>44</sup>. Despite the extensive study of  
298 *MYCN*-amplified neuroblastomas, there is a significant unmet clinical need in *MYCN* non-  
299 amplified neuroblastomas.

300 In this study, using tumour expression data and ConsensusClusterPlus, we demonstrate that  
301 *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas are heterogeneous and can be further classified into 3  
302 subgroups based on their transcriptional profiling. Within them, subgroup 2 has the worst  
303 prognosis and this group exhibits a "*MYCN*" signature that is potentially induced by the  
304 overexpression of *AURKA*. *AURKA* interacts with both N-MYC and SCF (Fbxw7) ubiquitin  
305 ligase, which ubiquitinates N-MYC for degradation. Consequently, overexpression of *AURKA*  
306 counteracts the degradation of N-MYC, leading to the growth of neuroblastoma cells<sup>21,45</sup>.

307 Subgroup 3 is accompanied by EMT and an "inflamed" phenotype, with high expression of  
308 genes related to IL2\_STAT5 signaling, IL6 JAK STAT3 signaling, interferon- $\alpha$  activation,  
309 interferon- $\gamma$  activation, and inflammatory response, consistent with the association between  
310 EMT and immune-related gene expression<sup>46,47</sup>. The findings were further confirmed by using  
311 CIBERSORTx deconvolution<sup>25</sup> to quantify various immune populations based upon a *MYCN*  
312 non-amplified neuroblastoma scRNA-seq data<sup>26</sup>, showing increased percentages of fibroblasts,  
313 B cells, myeloid cells, T cells, and pDC (plasmacytoid dendritic cells).

314 The clinical implications of this subtype classification are significant, as each subtype  
315 demonstrates a unique prognosis and vulnerability to investigational therapies. For example,  
316 patients in subgroup 1 show the most favourable prognosis with a long-term survival rate above  
317 85%, despite some of them being clinically classified as INSS stage IV or high risk. It might  
318 suggest that we should take a more careful and precise evaluation of some patients in reality  
319 after the consideration of all clinical information such as age, stage, risk status, or our  
320 stratification rather than making a decision based on a single parameter. With regard to therapy  
321 stratification, evidence showing significantly high MHC-I and CYT scores in subgroup 3  
322 suggests that patients within this group may benefit from immunotherapy. Our analysis  
323 suggests that subgroup 3 is predicted to respond to anti-PD1 immunotherapy. The application  
324 of immunotherapy in neuroblastoma has started with treatments such as GD2 monoclonal  
325 antibody (dinutuximab) and Chimeric antigen receptor T cells (CAR-T) therapy<sup>48,49</sup>. Further

326 studies, including in *vitro*, *in vivo*, and clinical validations, are required to investigate if patients  
327 within subgroup 3 can benefit from immunotherapy.

328 In addition, our study suggests that patients within subgroup 2 may benefit from AURKA  
329 inhibitors that can disrupt the interaction between AURKA and N-MYC. Indeed, AURKA  
330 inhibitors, MLN8054 and MLN8237 (Alisertib), are able to disrupt this interaction, leading to  
331 N-MYC degradation and subsequently cell death and differentiation in neuroblastoma cells<sup>45,50</sup>.  
332 MLN8237 (Alisertib) is currently under phase 2 clinical evaluation in neuroblastoma  
333 (NCT01154816).

334 With the establishment of independent predictors, *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas  
335 were easily classified into one of the 3 subtypes, permitting a realistic scenario in which  
336 prospective subtyping is performed in a cohort, wherein patients are assigned to different  
337 therapeutics (*e.g.*, subgroup 3 to immunotherapy, subgroup 2 to AURKA inhibitors) based on  
338 their subtype. If any one of these predictions demonstrated significant benefit, it would  
339 represent the first standard-of-care molecular biomarker selection for *MYCN* non-amplified  
340 neuroblastomas and a foundational step toward personalised therapy for this devastating  
341 disease.

## 342 **Methods**

### 343 **Subtype identification**

344 The study design is provided in [Fig. 1a](#) with a summary of datasets in the [Supplementary Table](#)  
345 [S1](#). A detailed description of the approach and further characterisation of the subtypes by  
346 principal component analysis (PCA), ConsensusClusterPlus, single-sample Gene Set  
347 Enrichment Analysis (ssGSEA), weighted gene co-expression network analysis (WGCNA),  
348 and CIBERSORTx analysis is provided in the [Supplementary Methods](#).

349

### 350 **Analysis of hazard ratio and overall survival**

351 The univariate and multivariate Cox proportional hazards model assessed the hazard ratio of  
352 each parameter through the survminer (v0.4.9). We performed a log-rank test to compare  
353 Kaplan-Meier survival curves between each subgroup by survival (v3.2-10). Prediction error  
354 curves of each prognostic model were generated from pec (v2019.11.03)<sup>51</sup>.

355

### 356 **Analysis of clinically actionable genes and drug response**

357 To investigate subgroup-specific druggable targets, we performed an integrative analysis to  
358 assess the associations between molecular features and the response to anticancer drugs in  
359 *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas. A detailed description of the approach is provided in  
360 [Supplementary Methods](#).

361

### 362 **Identification of independent predictors**

363 To identify independent predictors for subgrouping, we applied a multi-cohort analysis pipeline  
364 via MetaIntegrator<sup>30</sup> and validated with the machine learning classifier, support vector machine  
365 (SVM) (see details in [Supplementary Methods](#)).

366

### 367 **Tissue microarray (TMA) preparation and immunohistochemistry (IHC)**

368 Separate a small part of the tissue specimen and shape it in a customized mold for chip  
369 production and fix it overnight in 4% paraformaldehyde (PFA). Tissue blocks were embedded  
370 in paraffin in a prepared array. Then the sample was sliced (5  $\mu$ m) and adhered to a poly-L-  
371 lysine coated glass slide for immunohistochemical staining, which was performed as  
372 previously described<sup>52,53</sup>, using specific antibody against N-MYC (1:600 dilutions; Cell  
373 Signaling Technology 51705) and Aurora kinase A (1:200 dilutions; Abcam ab52973). Blindly,  
374 with no knowledge of the clinicopathological characteristics of the tumour, the

375 immunoreactivity in tissue sections was observed under three microscopes at random and then  
376 evaluated by 3 pathologists. Differences in scoring were discussed until a consensus was  
377 reached. The tissue sections were then scored under an optical microscope according to the  
378 degree of staining (0 ~ 3 points were negative staining, light yellow, light brown, dark brown)  
379 and the positive range (1 ~ 4 points were 0 ~ 25%, 26 ~ 50%, 51 ~ 75%, 76 ~ 100%). Finally,  
380 samples were divided into a high-expression group and a low-expression group based on the  
381 median of the final staining score. All procedures adhered to the ethical standards set by the  
382 Clinical Committee of Xinhua Hospital, Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine  
383 (Approval No: [XHEC-D-2016-037](#)).

384

#### 385 **Code availability**

386 Codes were implemented in R and have been deposited in GitHub:  
387 <https://github.com/yz3n18/neuroblastoma>.

388

#### 389 **Data availability**

390 All data supporting the findings of the current study are listed in Supplementary Materials.

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393 For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a CC-BY public copyright license to  
394 any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

395

396 **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

397 YWang, ZW, XH, YZ conceived the research and designed the study. XH, YZ performed  
398 experiments and bioinformatics analysis. XH, YZ, YWang, ZW, CH, RME drafted the initial  
399 manuscript and performed the review and revision of the paper. XH, KC, CC, XL, PD, YG,  
400 YWu, ZL, ZW provided technical support, recruited the patients and collected clinical data.  
401 YWang, ZW supervised the study. All authors contributed to the interpretation of the results  
402 and approved the final version of the manuscript.

403

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412

413 **COMPETING INTERESTS**

414 The authors declare that they have no relevant conflict of interest.

415

416 **ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

417 Sample collection for this study has been reviewed and approved by the Clinical Committee of  
418 Xinhua Hospital, Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine (Approval No: [XHEC-](#)  
419 [D-2016-037](#)). Written informed consent was obtained from all patients.

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614 **Figure Legends**

615 **Figure 1. Characterisation of molecular subtypes in the MYCN non-amplified**  
616 **neuroblastomas.** (a) Workflow showing the study design (details provided in the  
617 Supplementary Methods). (b) Consensus clustering of top 50% variable genes of train cohort.  
618 (c) Principal component analysis (PCA) showing neuroblastoma patients with subgroup  
619 annotations.

620

621 **Figure 2. Clinical characterisation of subtypes within MYCN non-amplified**  
622 **neuroblastomas identifies key distinguishing features.** Graphs showing the frequency (%)  
623 of each molecular subtype in different International Neuroblastoma Staging System (INSS)  
624 stages or risk status in either train (a) or test (b) cohort. *P* values are indicated. Kaplan-Meier  
625 plots showing the overall survival in each molecular subtype or MYCN-amplification (MYCN-  
626 AMP) in either train (c) or test (d) cohort. The numbers below are n (%). *P* values are indicated.  
627 (e) Multivariate analysis of subgroup classification with risk status in MYCN non-amplified  
628 neuroblastomas. HR (hazard ratio), 95% CI (confidence interval), patient number (n), and *P*  
629 values are shown. (f) Prediction error curves (indicating a mean squared error in predicting  
630 survival status) are calculated for the subgroup (red) and INSS stage (green).

631

632 **Figure 3. Defining molecular features of 3 subtypes in MYCN non-amplified**  
633 **neuroblastomas.** (a) Heatmap showing differential expression of selected genes. Red indicates  
634 up-regulation and blue for down-regulation. Colour bars show subgroup information. (b) Gene  
635 set enrichment analysis (GSEA) in 3 subtypes. \*FDR (false discovery rate) < 0.25; \*\*FDR <  
636 0.05; \*\*\*FDR < 0.01. (c) Weighted gene co-expression network analysis (WGCNA) showing  
637 3 molecular modules. Nodes are colour-coded according to the WGCNA modules.  
638 Representative enriched pathway terms are indicated. (d) Overlay of the median-centered log<sub>2</sub>  
639 fold change values per subgroup on the network.

640

641 **Figure 4. Subgroup 2 shows a "MYCN" signature, potentially induced by Aurora Kinase**  
642 **A overexpression.** Violin plots showing MYCN mRNA levels (a) or MYCN scores (b) in  
643 neuroblastomas. *P* values are indicated. (c) Multivariate analysis of MYCN score and risk status  
644 in MYCN non-amplified neuroblastomas. HR (hazard ratio), 95% CI (confidence interval),  
645 patient number (n), and *P* values are shown. (d) Protein-protein interaction (PPI) network  
646 showing an interaction between AURKA and MYCN. (e) Violin plot showing AURKA mRNA

647 levels in neuroblastomas. *P* values are indicated. (f) Kaplan-Meier plot showing the overall  
648 survival in samples with low vs. high *AURKA* expression. The numbers below are n (%). HR  
649 (hazard ratio), 95% CI (confidence interval), patient number (n), and *P* values are shown.

650

651 **Figure 5. N-MYC expression correlates with Aurora kinase A status in *MYCN* non-**  
652 **amplified neuroblastomas and is indicative of patient survival.** (a) Representative N-MYC  
653 staining pattern (negative or positive N-MYC) in *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastoma tissue  
654 microarray cores. Scale bar: 1mm (the left column) and 50µm (the right column). (b) Kaplan-  
655 Meier plot showing the overall survival in samples with negative vs. positive N-MYC  
656 expression. The numbers below are n (%). HR (hazard ratio), 95% CI (confidence interval),  
657 patient number (n), and *P* values are shown. (c) Adjacent tumour sections from representative  
658 cases showing N-MYC and Aurora Kinase A expression in *MYCN* non-amplified  
659 neuroblastoma. Scale bars: 50µm. (d) Kaplan-Meier plot showing the overall survival in  
660 samples with low vs. high Aurora kinase A expression. The numbers below are n (%). HR  
661 (hazard ratio), 95% CI (confidence interval), patient number (n), and *P* values are shown. (e)  
662 Graph showing percentage (%) and numbers of samples with low or high Aurora kinase A in  
663 the negative or positive N-MYC group. *P* = 0.041.

664

665 **Figure 6. Subgroup 3 is accompanied by an "inflamed" gene signature.** (a) Heatmap  
666 showing neuroblastoma-associated immune pathways and immune cell signatures in subgroups  
667 and *MYCN*-AMP. Graphs showing the cumulative distribution of CYT (b) or MHC-1 (c) scores  
668 in different subgroups and *MYCN*-AMP. (d) Violin plots showing immune scores in different  
669 subgroups and *MYCN*-AMP in train, test, or train plus test cohort. (e) Graph showing cell  
670 compositions of each subgroup using CIBERSORTx analysis. (f) Graph showing differential  
671 putative immunotherapeutic response in different subgroups. Bonferroni adjusted *P* values  
672 indicated. (g) Subclass association (SA) matrix for the comparison between different subgroups  
673 and vehicle/anlotinib treated mouse. Bonferroni adjusted *P* values indicated.

674

675 **Figure 7. Identification and evaluation of independent predictors to subgroup patients**  
676 **within *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas.** (a) Predicted probability of each subgroup in  
677 5 different cohorts. Each dot in the scatter plot corresponds to a sample (x-axis: predicted  
678 probability of subgroup 2, y-axis: predicted probability of subgroup 3). The histogram plot  
679 above the scatter plot displayed the distribution of subgroup 2 probabilities while the plot to  
680 the right of the scatter plot displayed the distribution of subgroup 3 probabilities. (b) Kaplan-

681 Meier plots showing the overall survival in predicted molecular subtype in 5 different cohorts.  
682 The numbers below are n (%). *P* values are indicated. (c) Prediction differences in the  
683 superseries GSE47792 using data from either RNA-seq (GSE49711) or microarray  
684 (GSE49710).

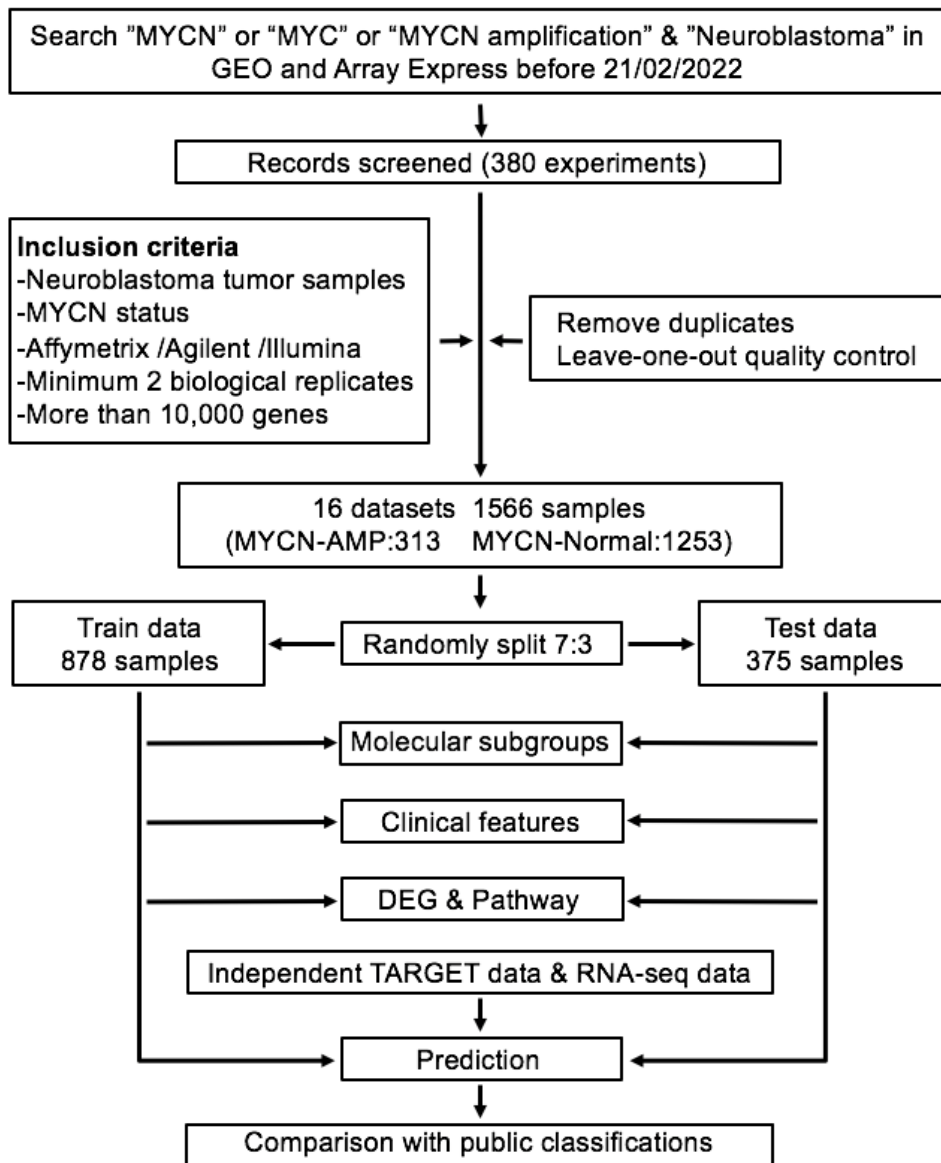
685

686 **Figure 8. A systematic comparison of the subgroup classifier with previously published**  
687 **gene expression classifiers.** (a) Prediction differences in GSE16476 using the subgrouping  
688 method from this report (named Hu) or Valentijn and colleagues (Valentijn). (b) Multivariate  
689 analysis of subgroup classification with Valentijn classification in *MYCN* non-amplified  
690 neuroblastomas. HR (hazard ratio), 95% CI (confidence interval), patient number (n), and *P*  
691 values are shown. (c) Prediction differences in E-MTAB-1781 using the subgrouping method  
692 from this report (named Hu) or Oberthuer and colleagues (Oberthuer's svm\_th24). (d)  
693 Multivariate analysis of subgroup classification with Oberthuer's svm\_th24 classification in  
694 *MYCN* non-amplified neuroblastomas. HR (hazard ratio), 95% CI (confidence interval), patient  
695 number (n), and *P* values are shown. (e) Prediction differences in GSE49711 using the  
696 subgrouping method from this report (named Hu) or Westermann and colleagues  
697 (Westermann). Kaplan-Meier plots showing the overall survival in Westermann\_MNA-HR (f)  
698 or Westermann\_MNA-LR (g) patients using the subgrouping method from this report.  
699 Numbers below are n (%). *P* values are indicated. (h) Prediction differences in GSE49711 using  
700 subgrouping method from this report (named Hu) or George and colleagues (George). Kaplan-  
701 Meier plots showing the overall survival in George\_Immunogenic (i) or George\_Neuronal (j)  
702 patients using the subgrouping method from this report. The numbers below are n (%). *P* values  
703 are indicated. (k) Prediction differences in GSE85047 using the subgrouping method from this  
704 report (named Hu) or Califano and colleagues (Califano). (l) Kaplan-Meier plots showing the  
705 overall survival in Califano\_11q-LOH & MYCNA patients using the subgrouping method  
706 from this report. The numbers below are n (%). *P* values are indicated.

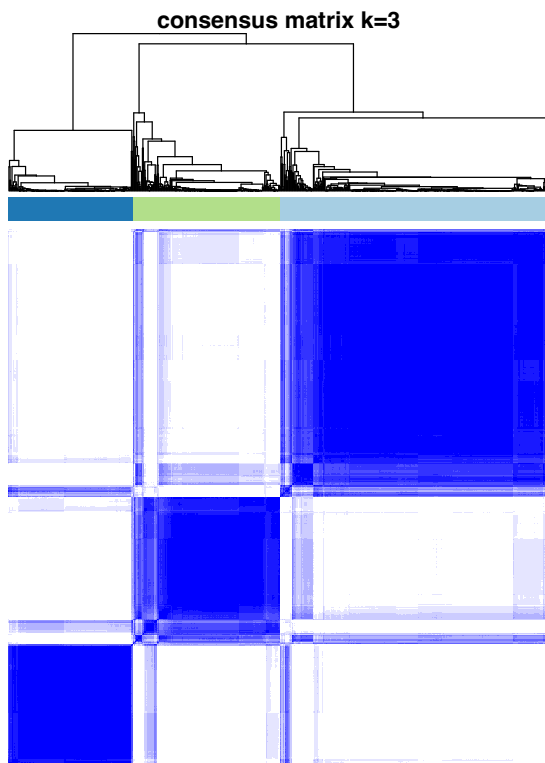


Figure 1

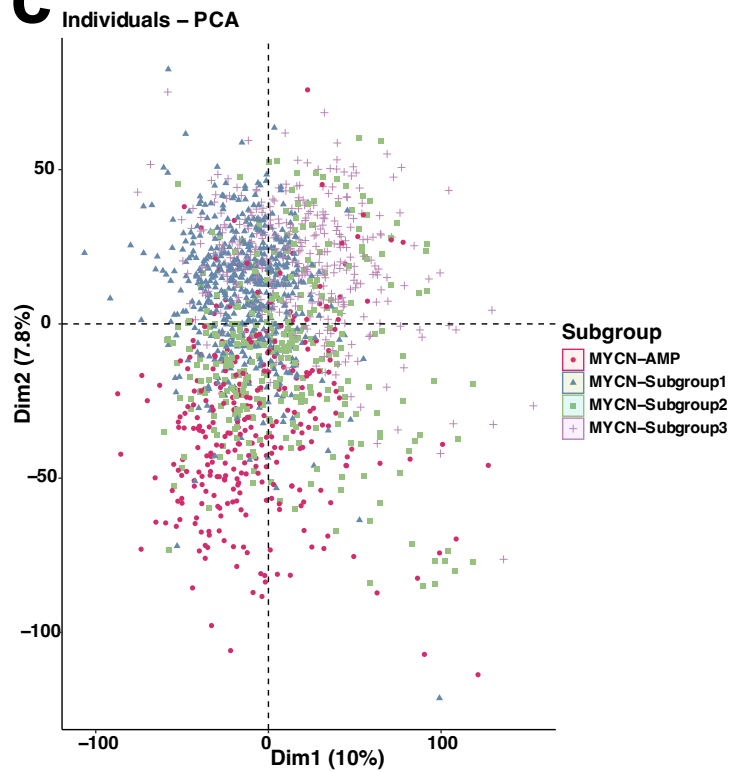
a



b



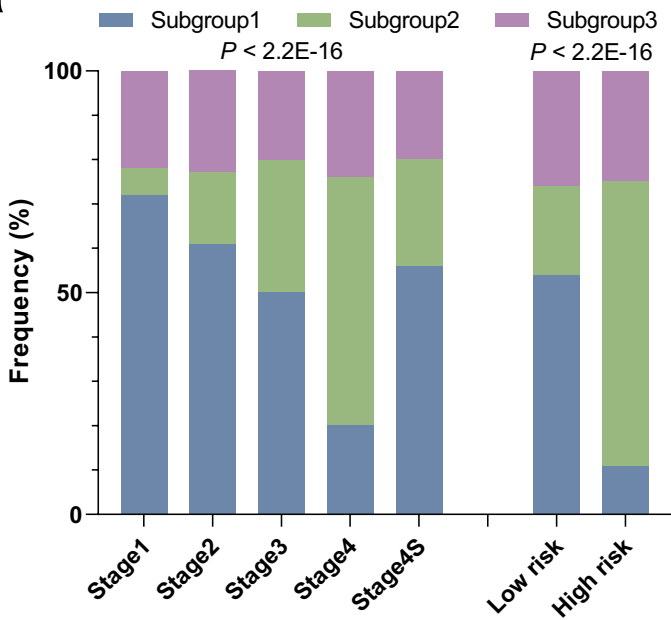
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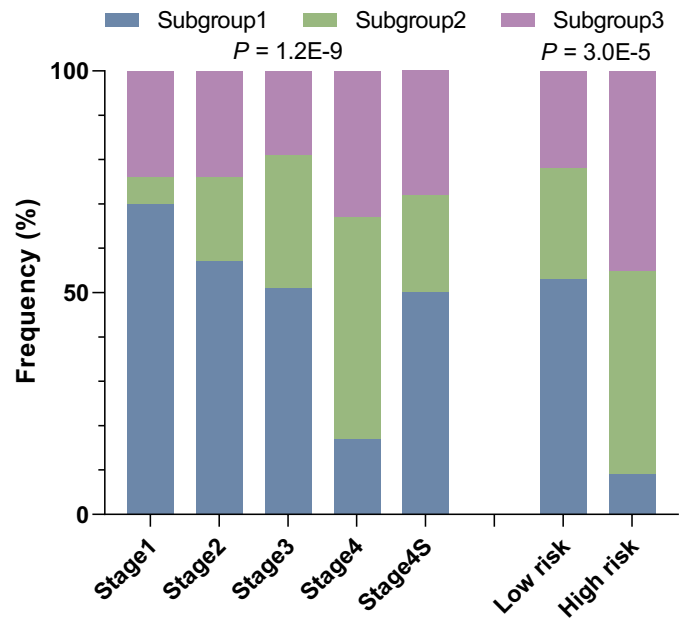


**Figure 2**

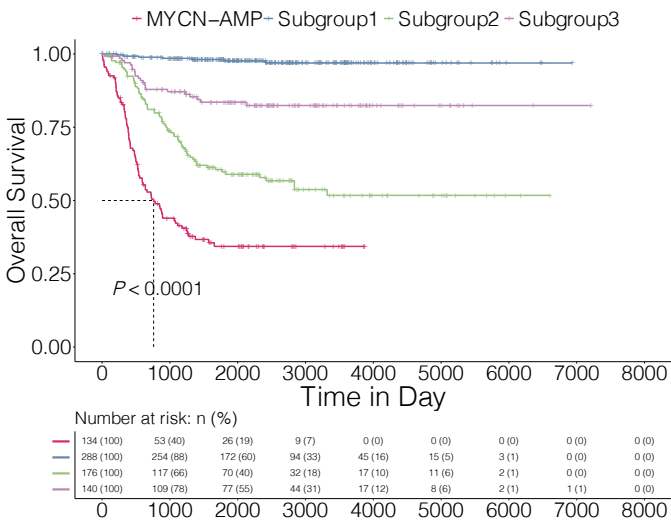
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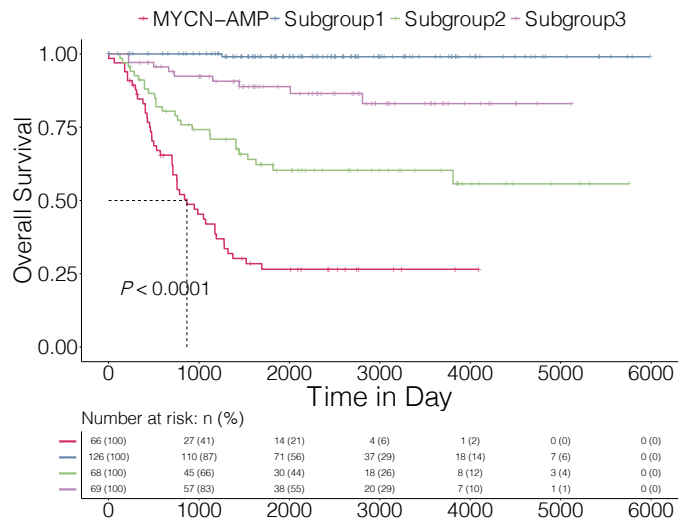
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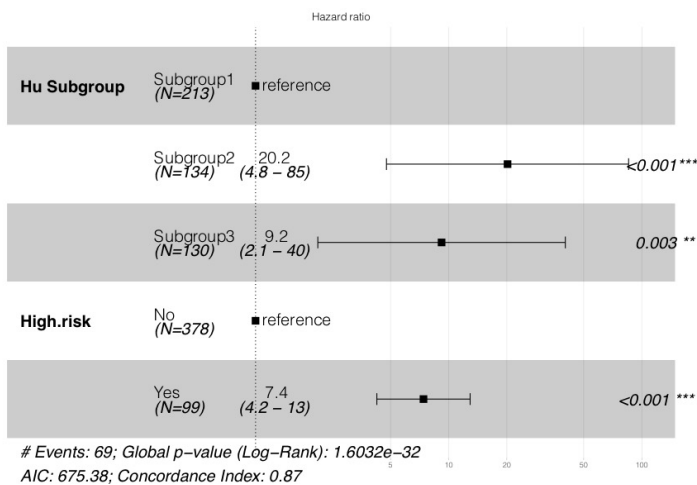
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**d**



**e**



**f**

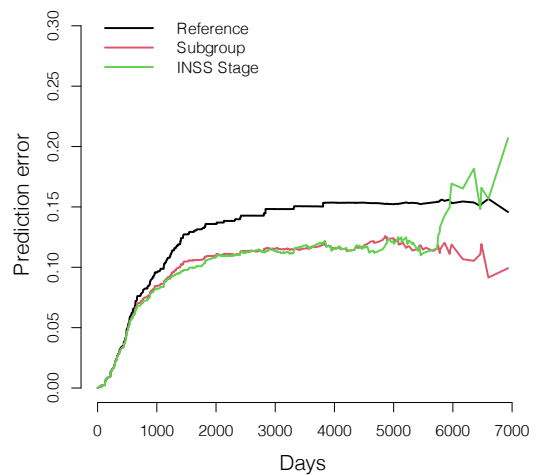
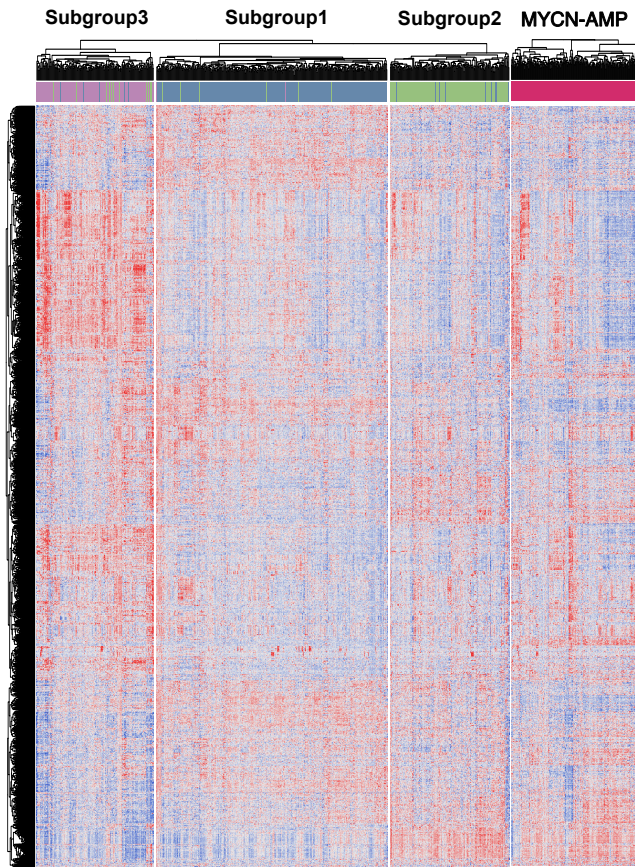
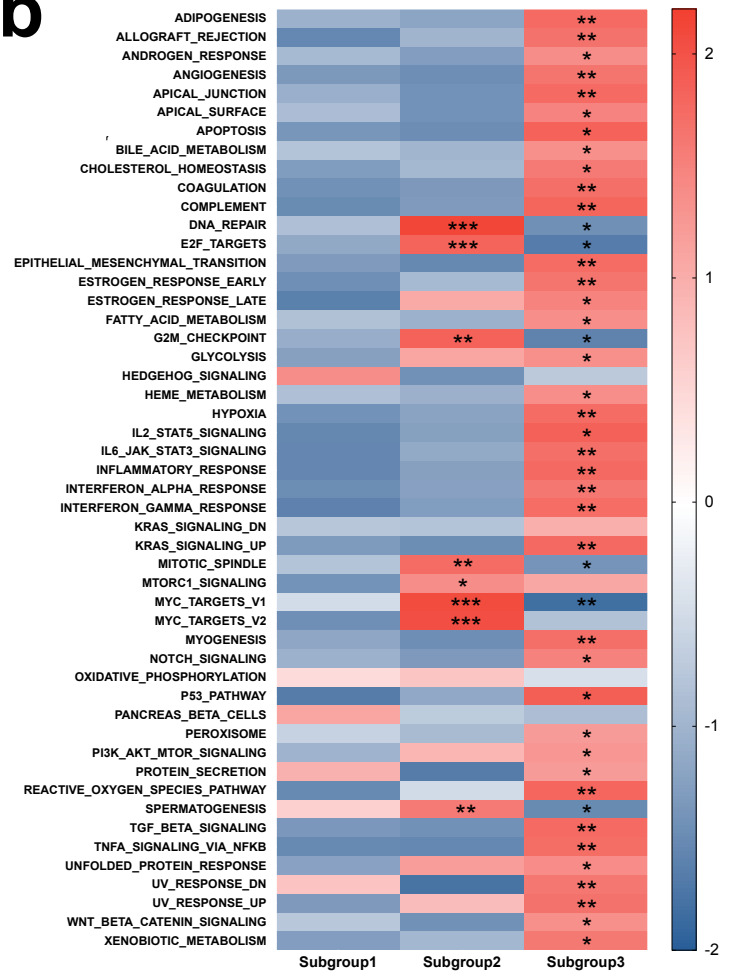


Figure 3

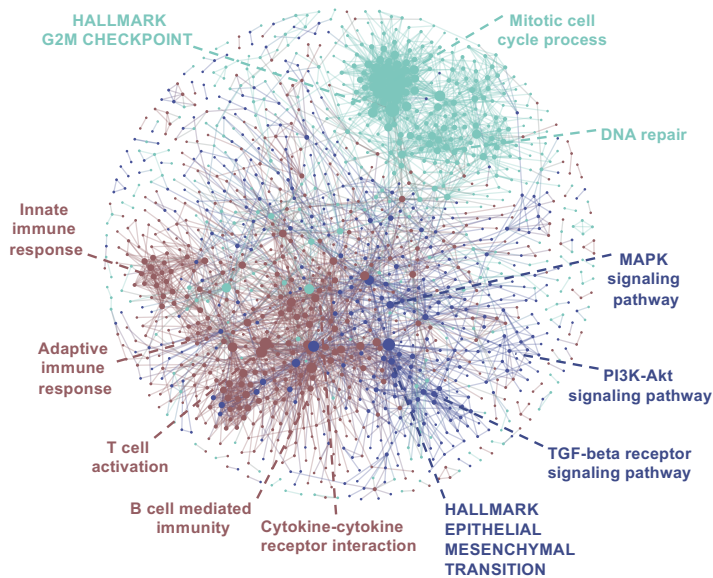
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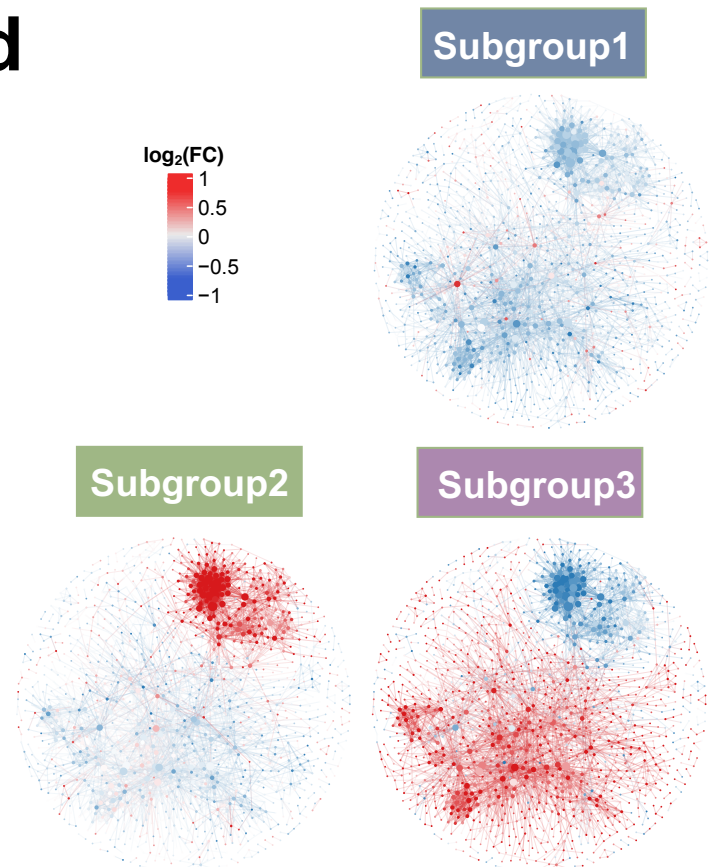
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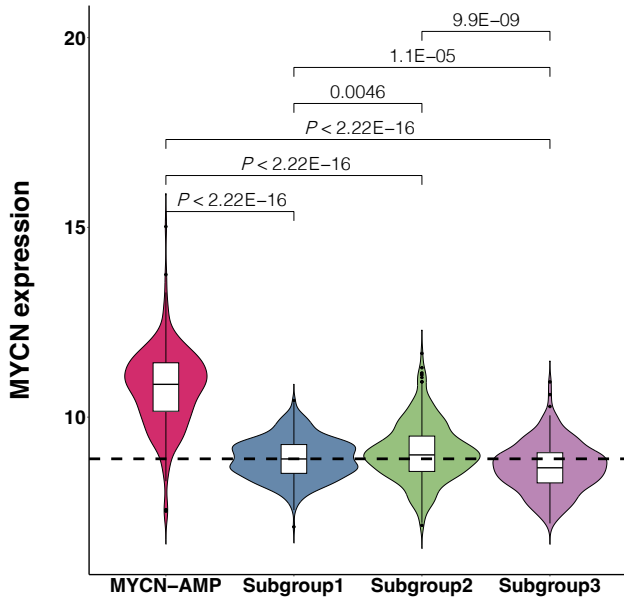


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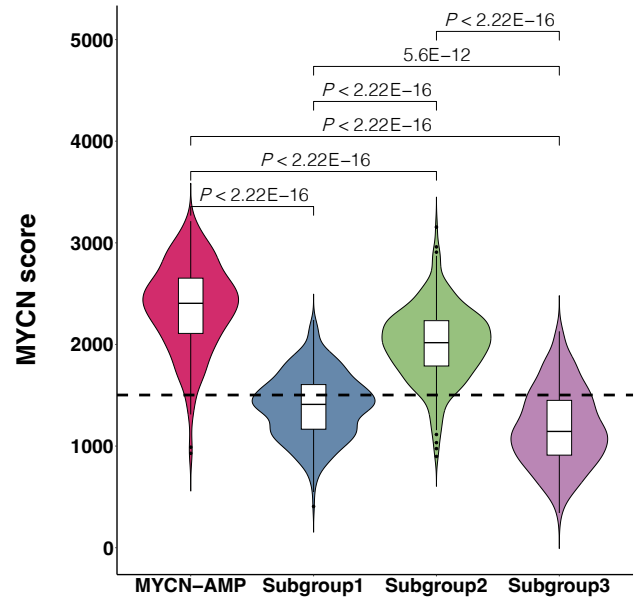


**Figure 4**

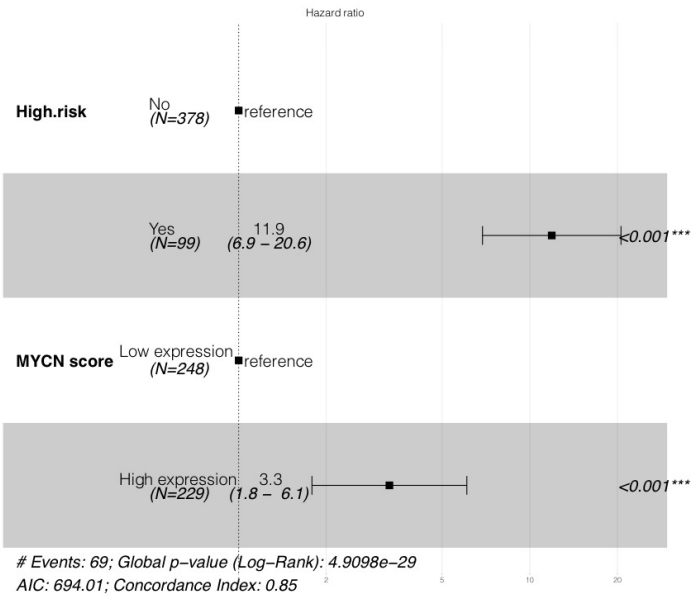
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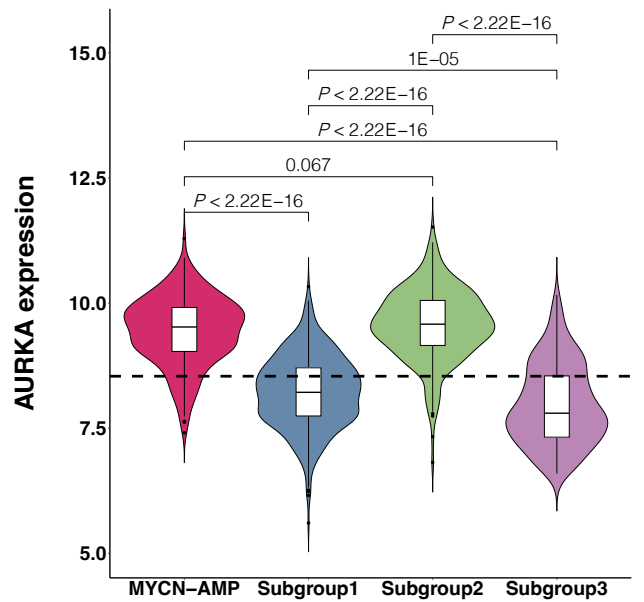
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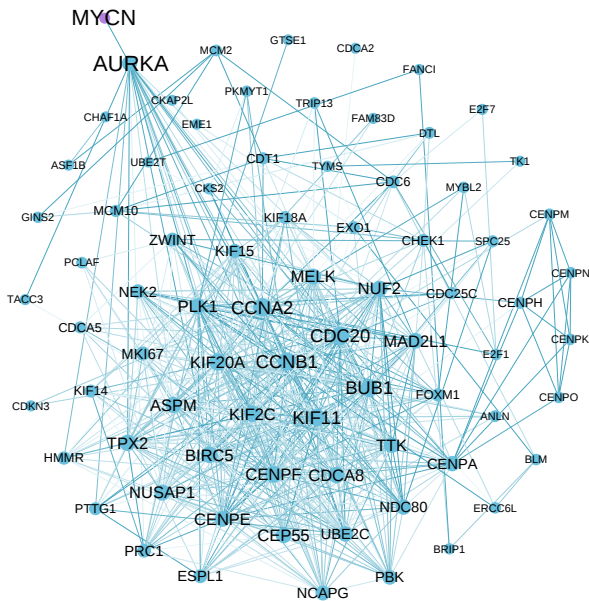
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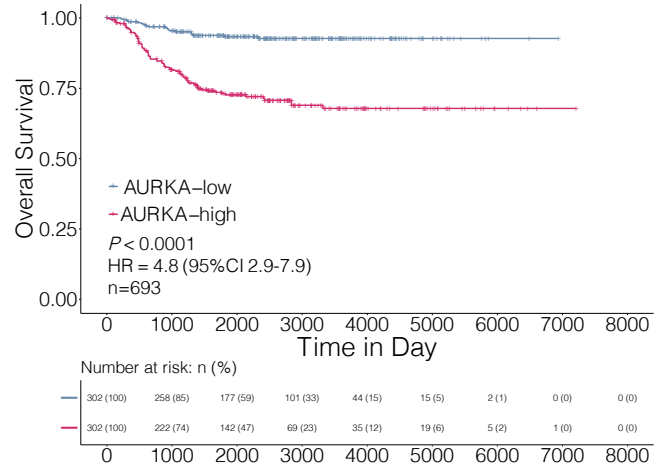
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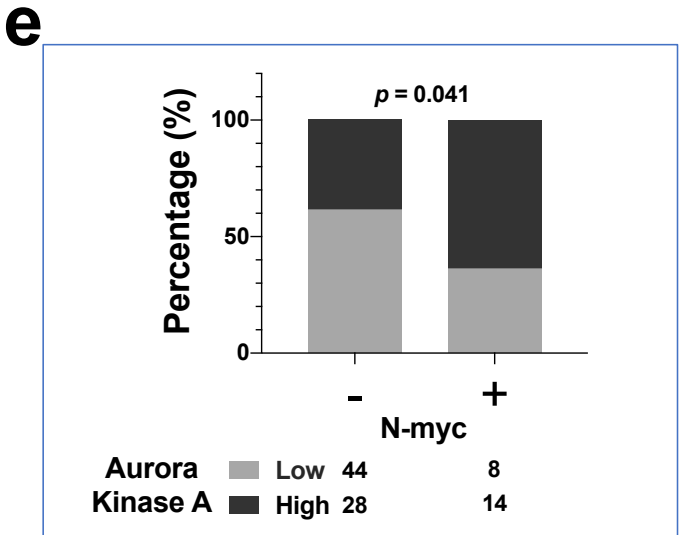
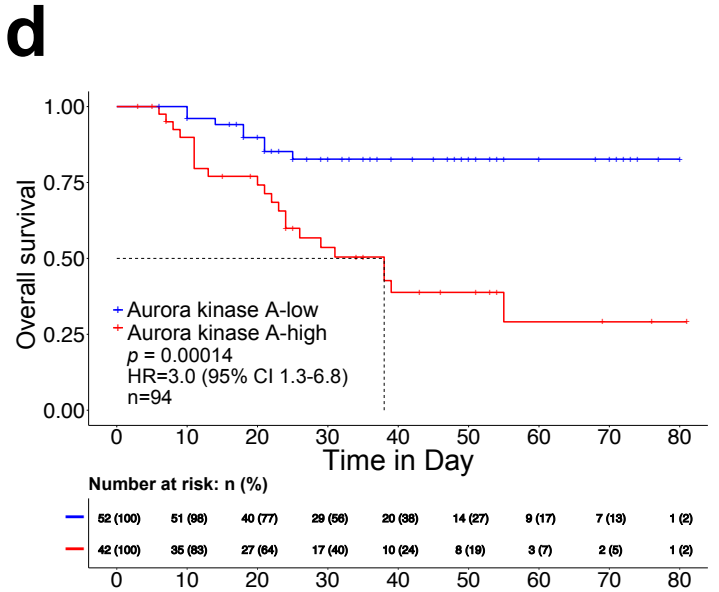
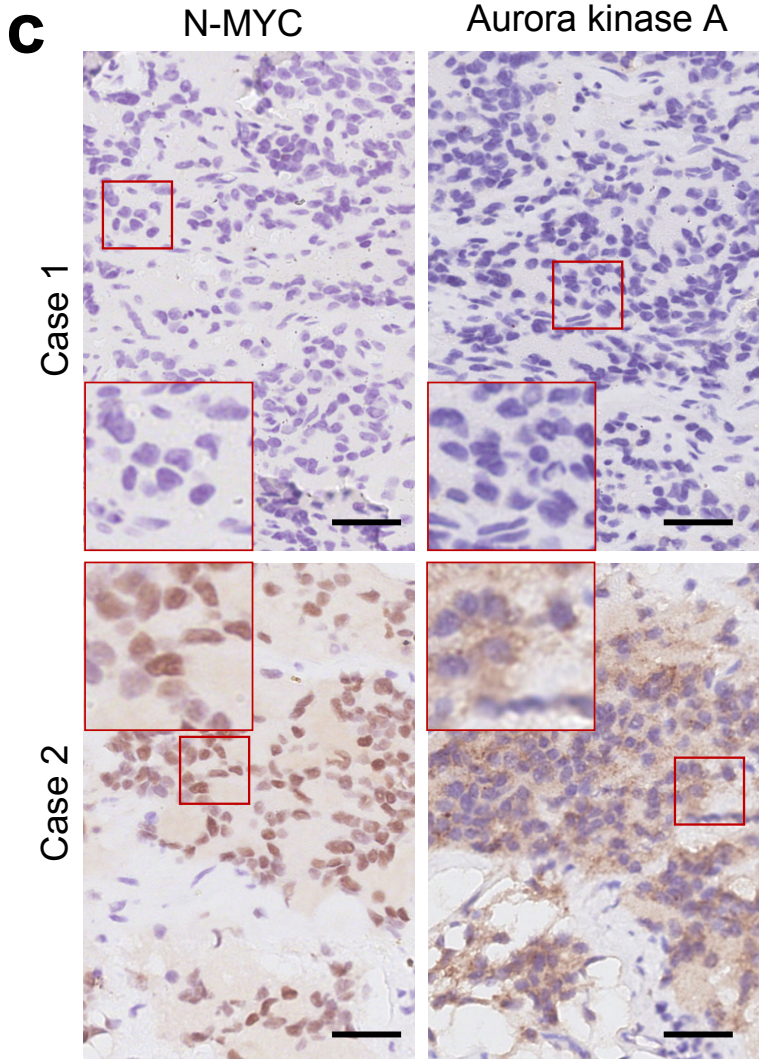
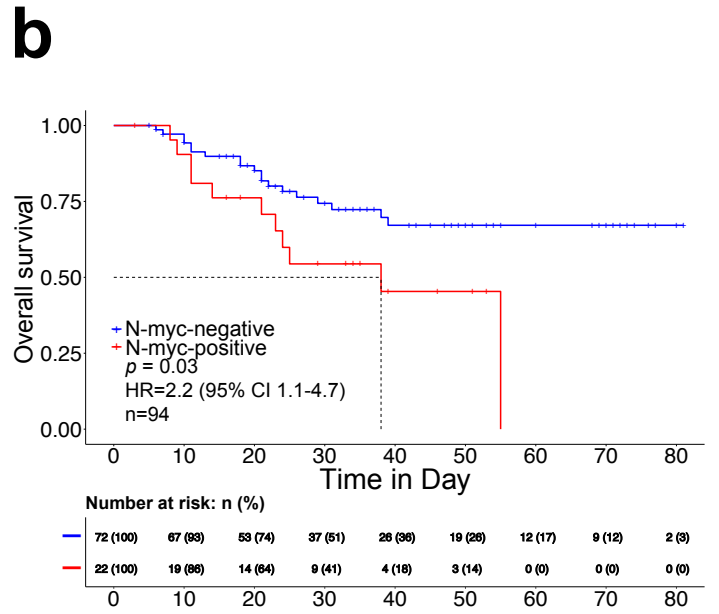
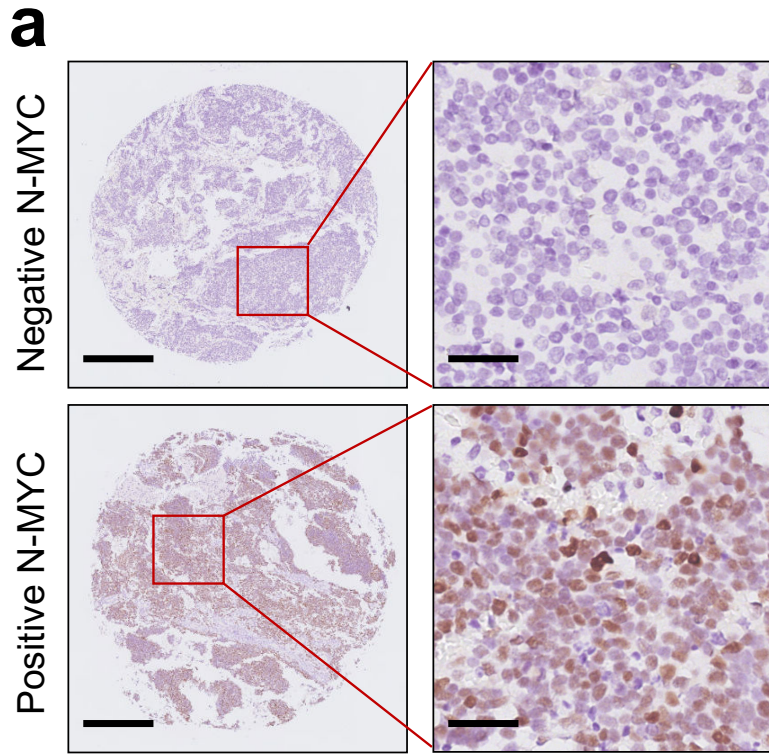
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**f**

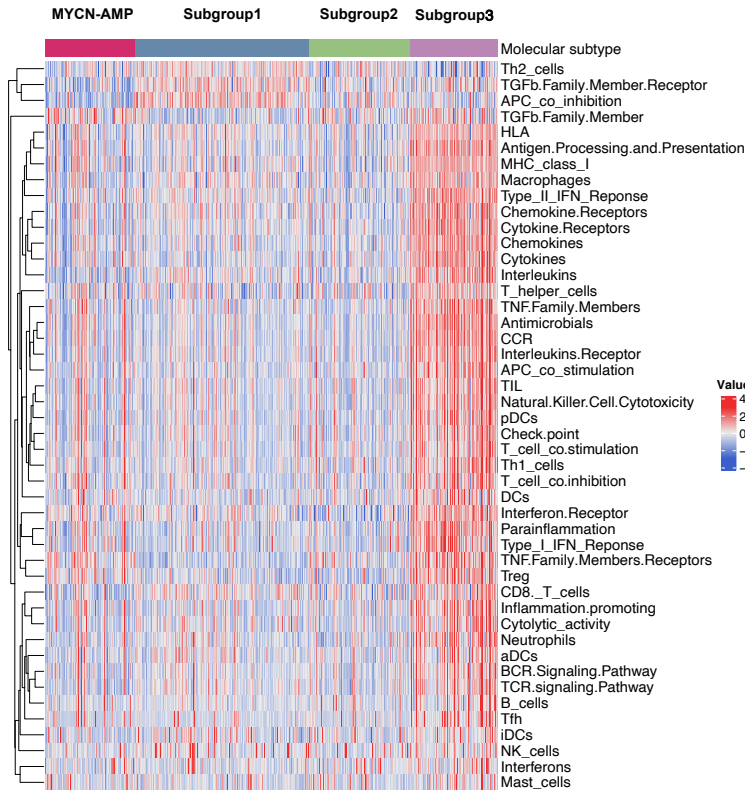


**Figure 5**

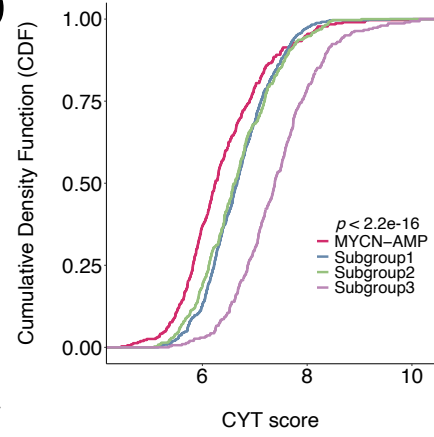


**Figure 6**

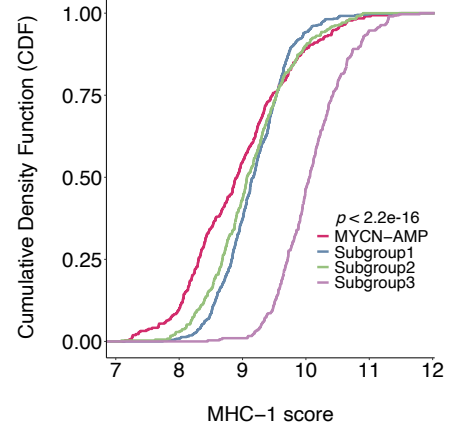
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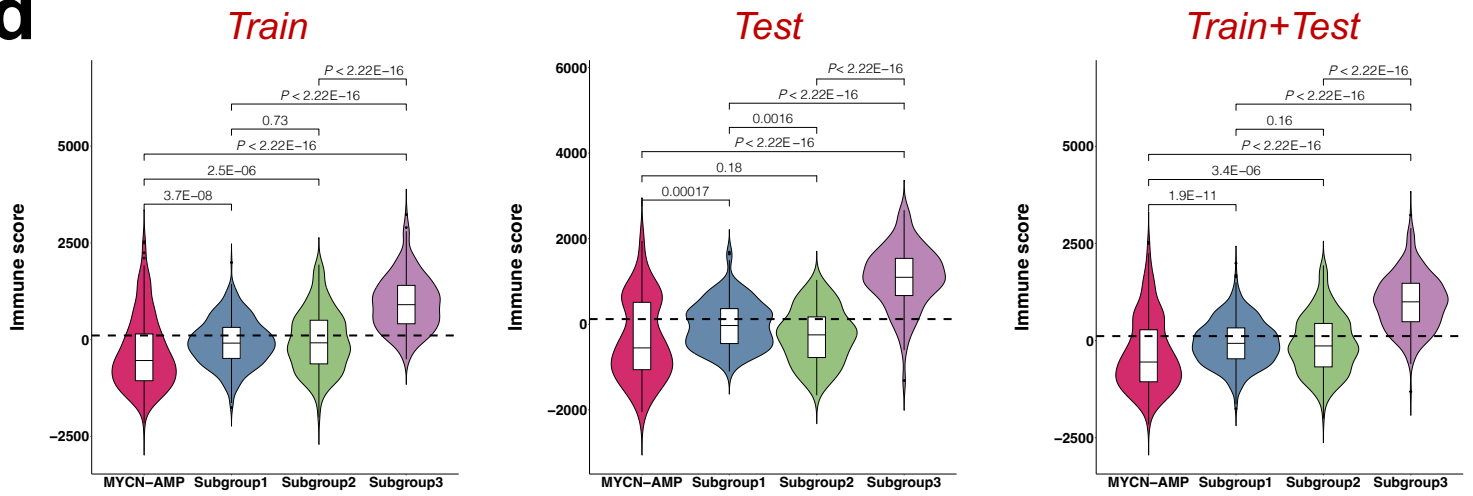
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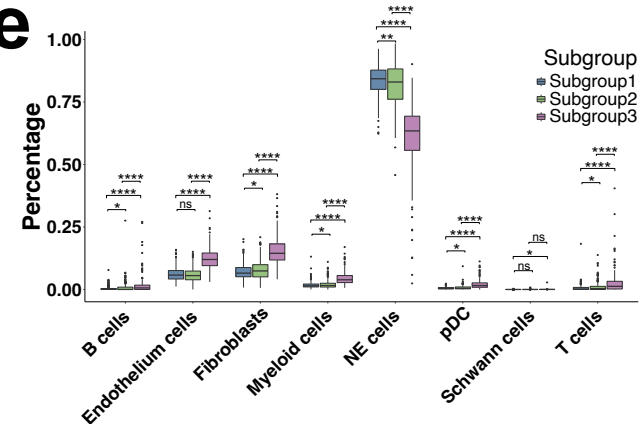
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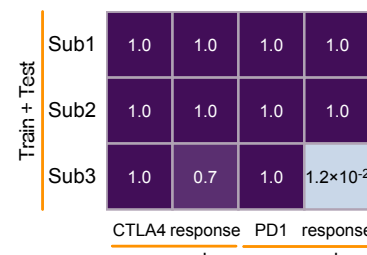
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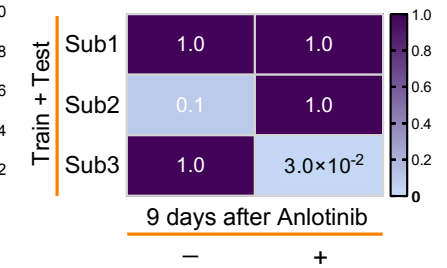
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**f**

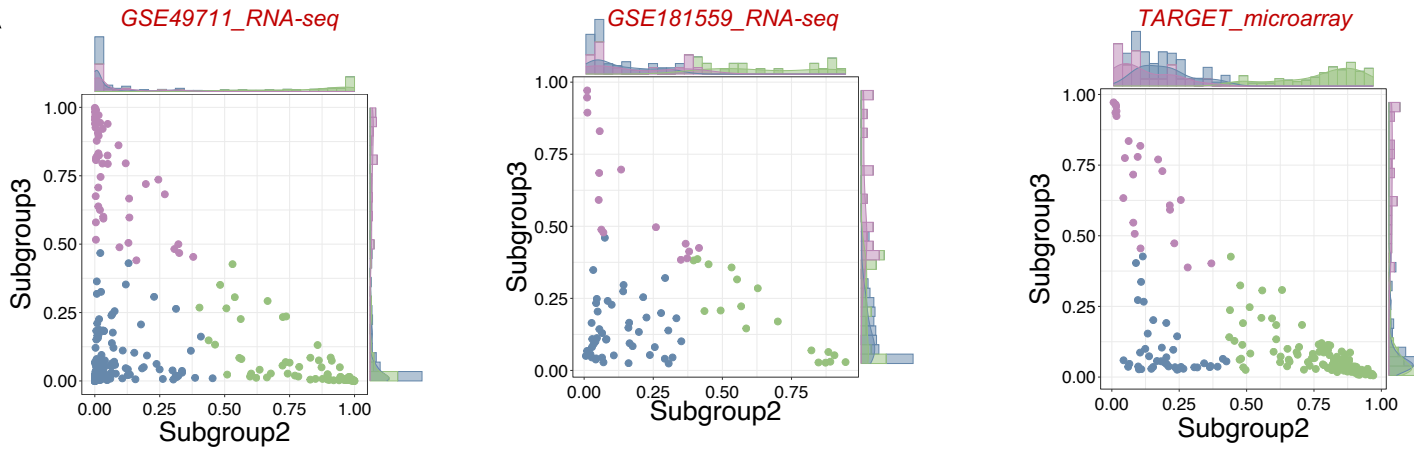


**g**

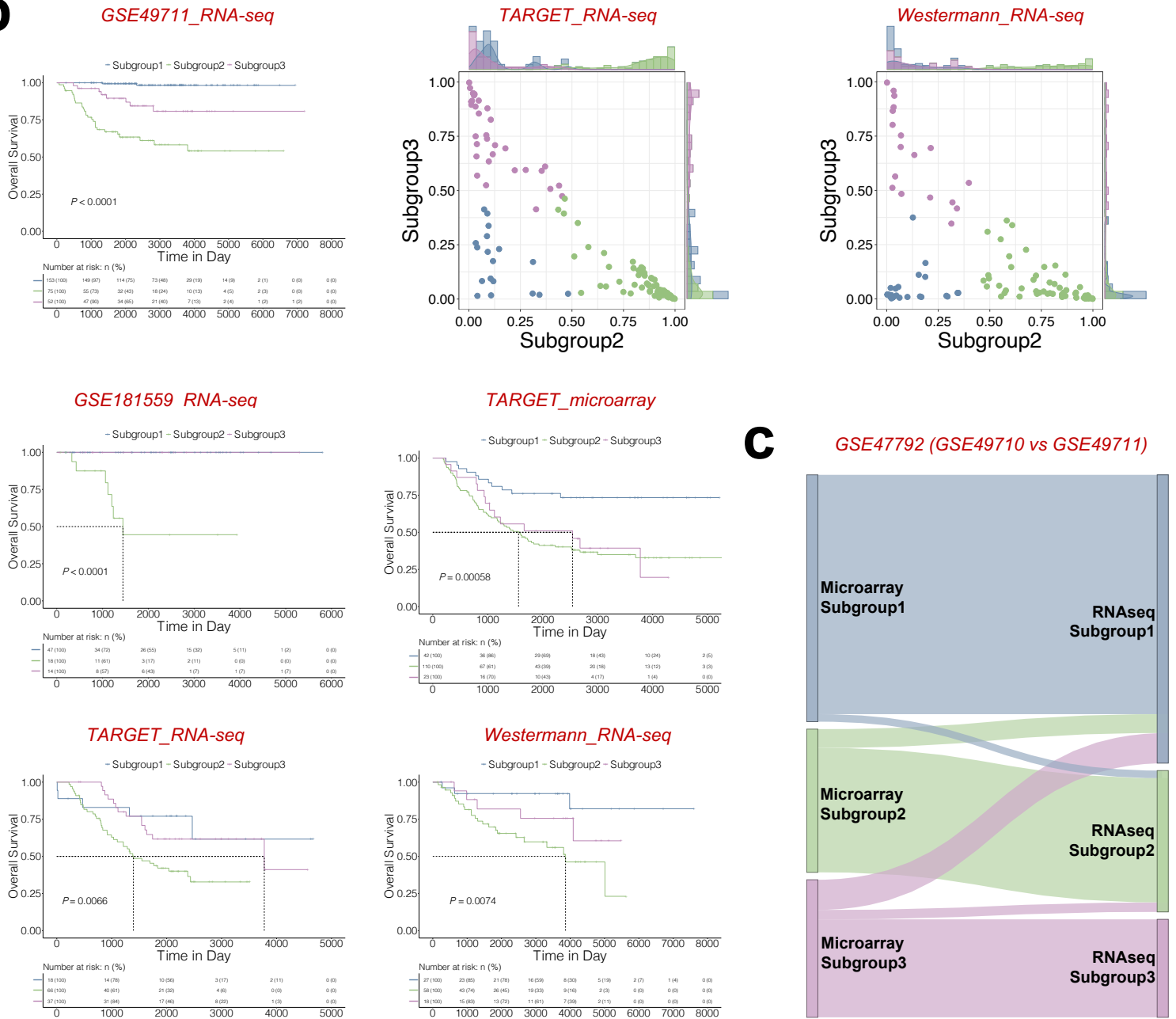


**Figure 7**

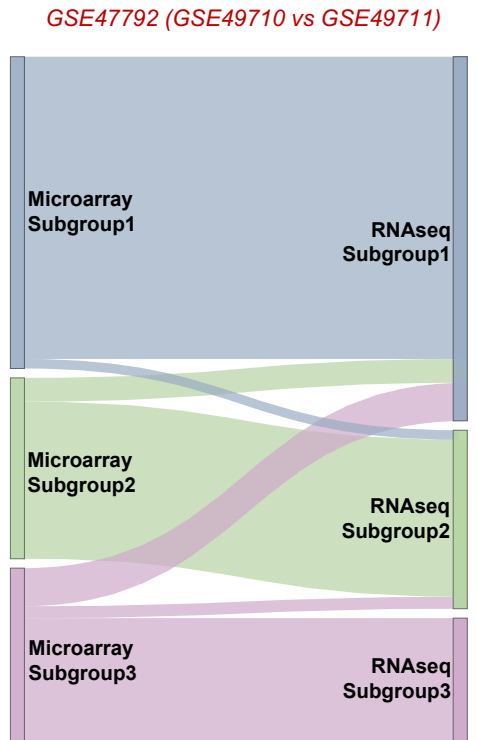
**a**



**b**



**c**



**Figure 8**

