

Giant Cell Tumor of Bone

Pathogenesis • Morphology • Clinicopathologic reasoning

Bone neoplasm with locally destructive behavior

Dr Abu Suraih Sakhri

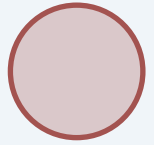
MBBS, MD (Pathology)

www.abusuraihsakhri.com

Learning objectives

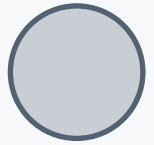
- Identify the neoplastic population within this giant cell–rich lesion.
- Explain the RANKL-dependent recruitment of osteoclasts and resulting bone loss.
- Connect epiphyseal location, gross and microscopic findings with symptoms.
- Interpret recurrence, lung involvement, and the role of RANKL inhibition.

Three cellular populations define the tumor



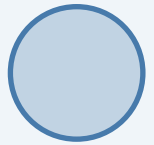
Stromal tumor cells

Mononuclear neoplastic population



Macrophages

Additional mononuclear cells



Osteoclast-type giant cells

Abundant recruited nonneoplastic cells

Benign classification versus destructive behavior

Biologic designation

- The tumor is described as benign.
- Stromal cells comprise its neoplastic component.
- Typical tumor cells are comparatively uniform.

Clinically consequential behavior

- Osteoclast-mediated resorption can be extensive.
- The cortex may be destroyed by expansion.
- Local recurrence and pathologic fracture are important.

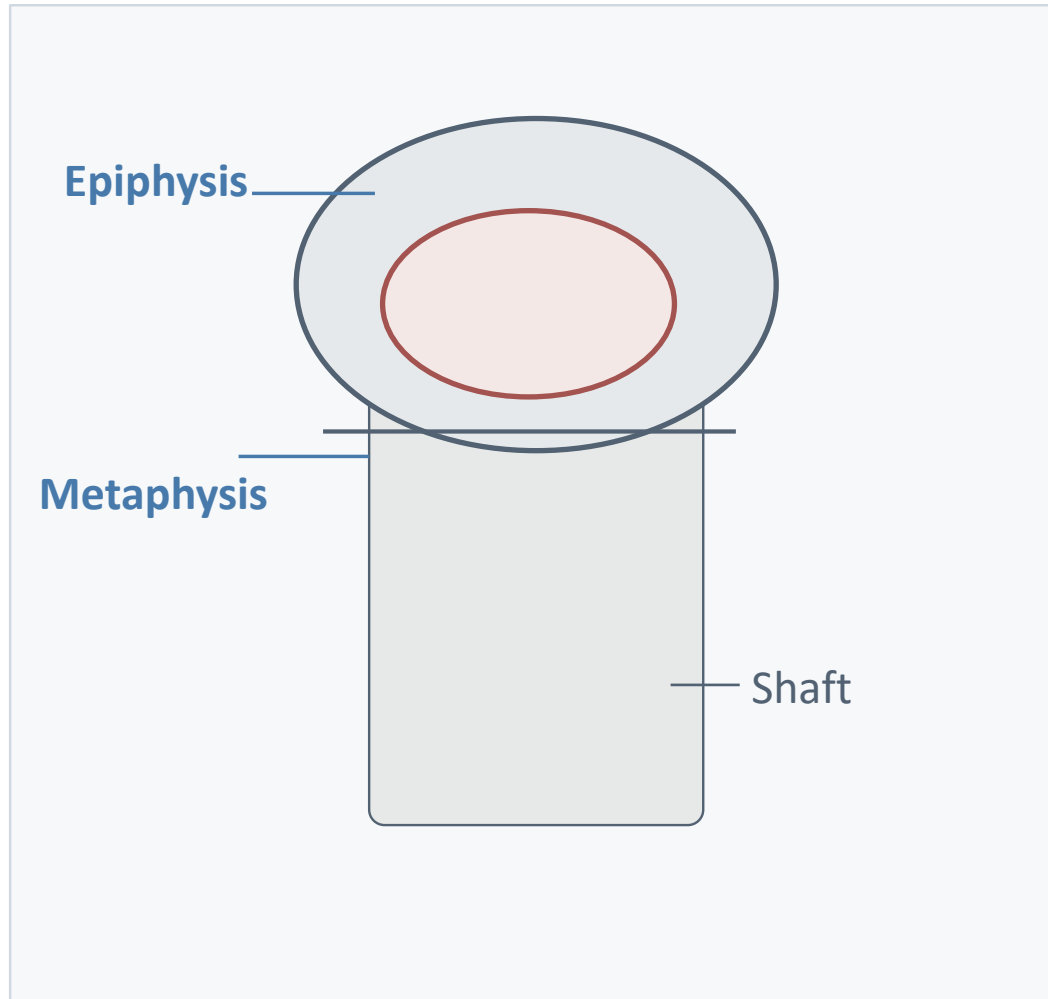
Typical patient population

- The tumor is uncommon in the overall bone-tumor spectrum.
- Presentation mainly in the third to fifth decades.
- The bone-tumor summary table lists a characteristic range of 20–40 years.
- Age supports the diagnostic context; It does not independently establish the diagnosis.

Epiphyseal origin is a core anatomic clue

- Primary origin is typically within the epiphysis of a long bone.
- Tumor growth may extend from the epiphysis into the metaphysis.
- The close relation to a joint helps explain arthritis-like complaints.
- The anatomic pattern should be integrated with morphology.

Epiphysis, metaphysis, and the expanding tumor



Origin

Typically epiphyseal

Extension

May reach the metaphysis

Pattern

Often near an articular surface

Periarticular predilection: Near the knee

- The distal femur and proximal tibia are the most frequent sites.
- These positions place the lesion close to the knee joint.
- The tumor does not have to originate from synovium to produce joint-like symptoms.
- Almost any skeletal bone may nonetheless be affected.

Neoplastic cells versus recruited cells

Primitive osteoblast-precursor stroma

- Represents the neoplastic population.
- Contains acquired H3-3A mutations.
- Expresses increased RANKL.

Osteoclast lineage

- Comprises nonneoplastic cells and precursors.
- Responds to stromal RANKL signals.
- Produces the bone-resorbing phenotype.

The giant cells are not the transformed population

- Most cells in the lesion are nonneoplastic osteoclasts or their precursors.
- The tumor is driven by a smaller neoplastic stromal compartment.
- Giant-cell abundance reflects cellular recruitment and differentiation.
- The most visually conspicuous cell may not be the initiating neoplastic cell.

Normal bone remodeling uses RANK–RANKL signaling



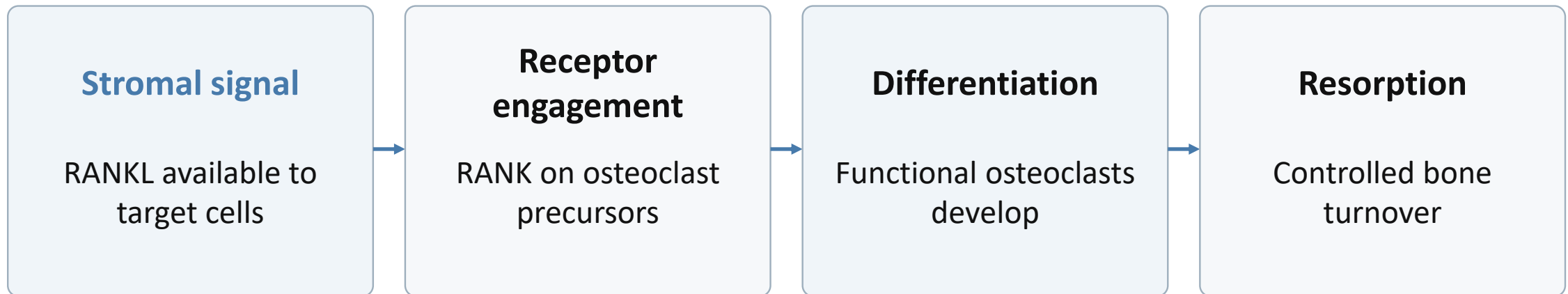
Normal remodeling: Signaling remains under feedback control.

RANKL connects osteoblast lineage to osteoclasts

- RANK is expressed by osteoclast precursor cells.
- RANKL is normally expressed by osteoblasts and marrow stromal cells.
- RANKL-induced RANK signaling activates NF- κ B.
- This signaling is necessary for osteoclast generation and survival.

Normal physiology provides the mechanism exploited by the neoplasm.

A normal cellular sequence produces osteoclasts



In normal bone, formation and resorption are locally coupled.

Osteoprotegerin restrains RANKL signaling

- OPG is a soluble decoy receptor made by osteoblasts and other cells.
- OPG binds RANKL and prevents its binding to RANK.
- It consequently limits differentiation of osteoclasts.
- The RANKL–OPG balance participates in physiologic skeletal remodeling.

OPG is a regulator in normal remodeling; Robbins does not specify an OPG mutation in GCT.

Normal feedback compared with giant cell tumor

Remodeling under normal control

- Resorption is linked to new bone formation.
- Osteoblast–osteoclast signaling is regulated.
- RANKL is opposed by decoy-receptor activity.

Giant cell tumor microenvironment

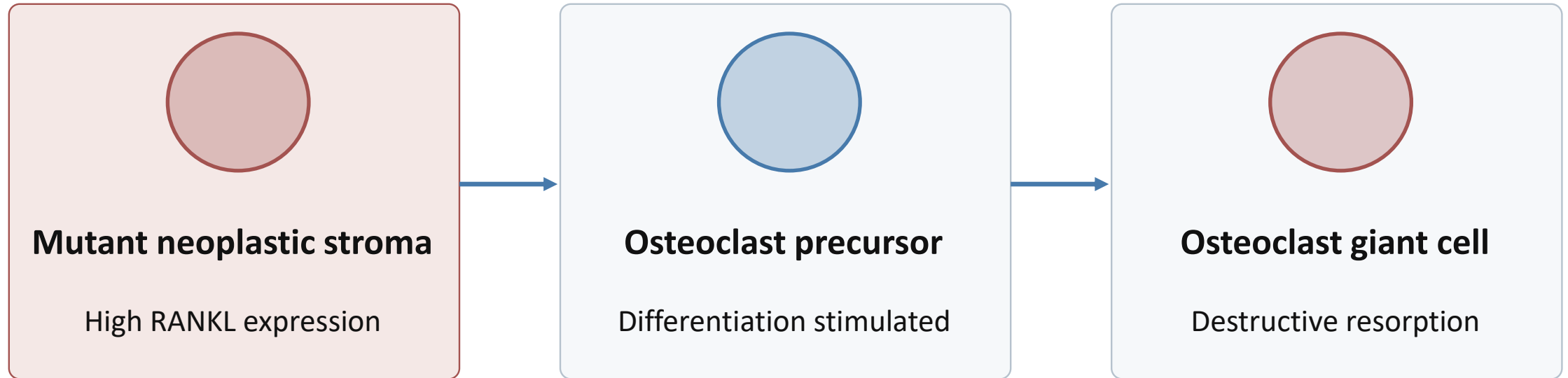
- Neoplastic stroma expresses high RANKL.
- Osteoclast lineage is strongly recruited.
- Localized resorption becomes destructive.

M-CSF is part of the normal osteoclast program

- Macrophage colony-stimulating factor is produced by osteoblasts.
- M-CSF is crucial for osteoclast generation in normal remodeling.
- RANKL and M-CSF therefore act within a broader differentiation network.
- For GCT specifically, increased tumor-derived RANKL.

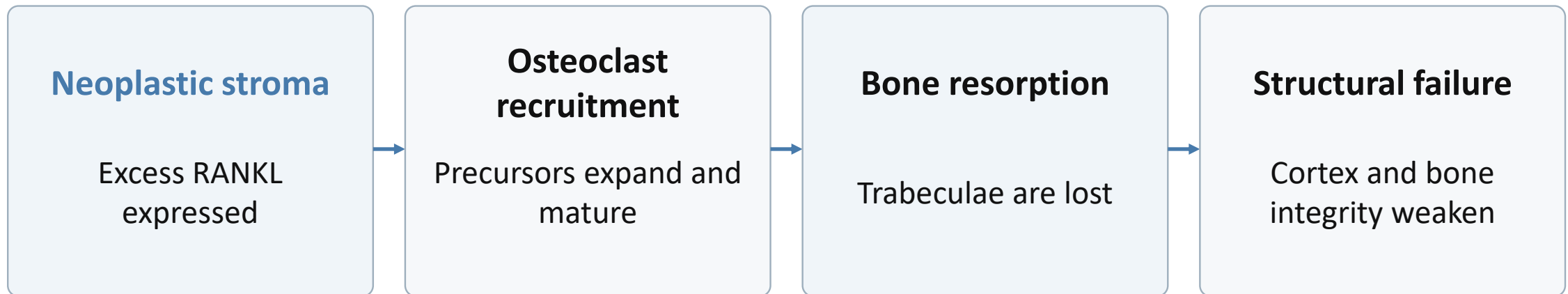
Additional remodeling pathway shown as parent context—not a claim of GCT-specific mutation.

High tumor-derived RANKL creates a destructive circuit



Tumor-associated signaling: Increased osteoclast formation drives osteolysis.

Osteolysis follows a tumor–host cell interaction



The tissue damage results substantially from recruited, nonneoplastic cells.

H3-3A mutation identifies a genetic driver

- The neoplastic stromal cells harbor acquired H3-3A mutations.
- H3-3A encodes histone H3.3, a chromatin packaging protein.
- The mutation supports a neoplastic rather than purely reactive origin.
- Robbins does not specify how this mutation initiates tumor development.

Established molecular facts versus unknown mechanism

Established in the source

- H3-3A is mutated in the tumor cells.
- Histone H3.3 participates in chromatin packaging.
- Neoplastic stromal cells express high RANKL.

Not resolved

- The precise route from the mutation to tumor formation.
- A single fully mapped downstream oncogenic cascade.
- A stated H3-3A alteration in all giant cells.

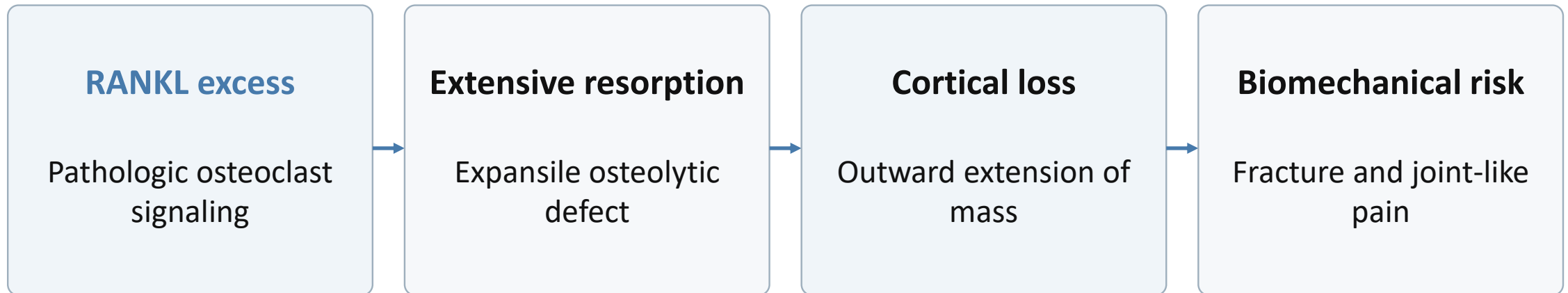
Cellular and molecular attribution

Population	Neoplastic?	Main teaching implication
Stromal osteoblast precursors	Yes	H3-3A mutations; High RANKL
Osteoclast precursors	No	Recruited and differentiate
Osteoclast-type giant cells	No	Resorption and conspicuous morphology
Macrophages	Not identified as tumor cells	Component of mixed cell population

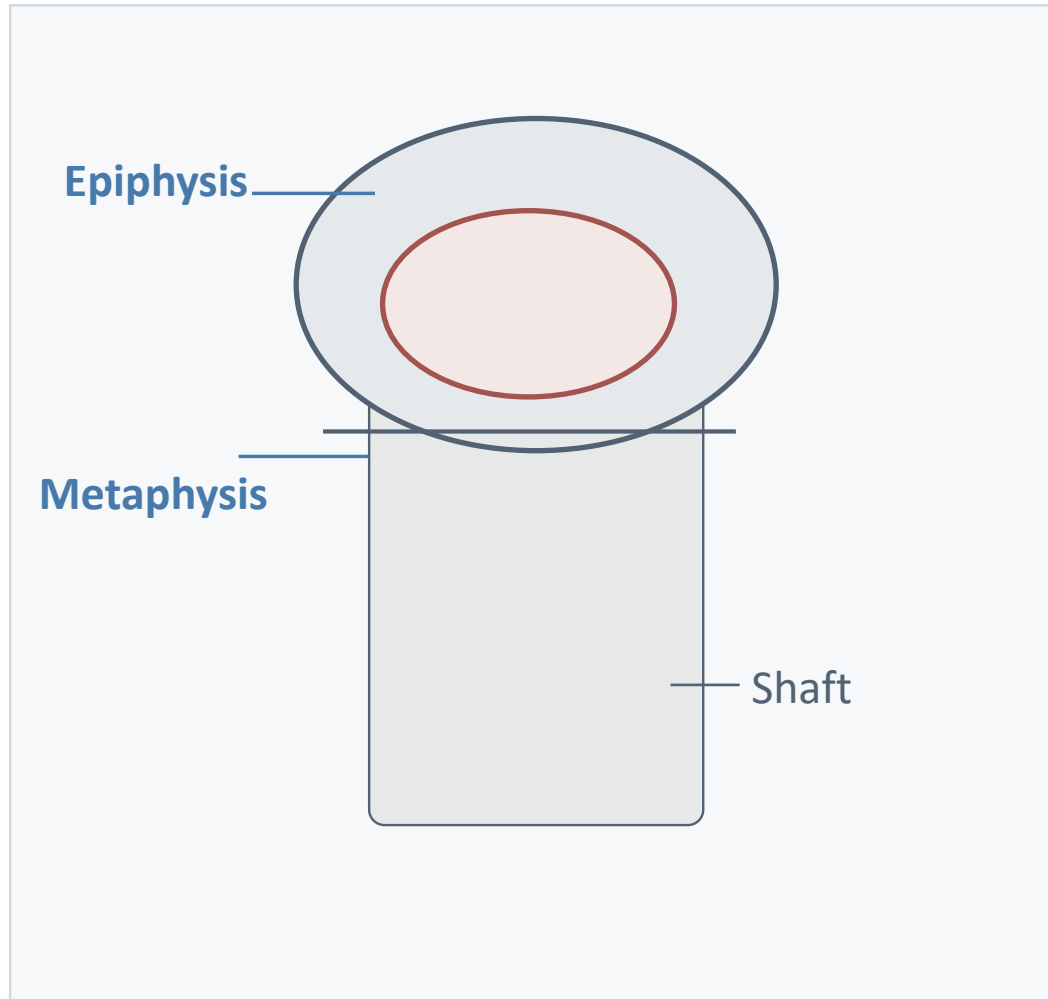
Why bone is resorbed rather than replaced

- Excess RANKL stimulates formation and persistence of osteoclasts.
- The recruited giant-cell lineage is capable of destroying mineralized bone.
- The normal coupling of resorption and formation is disrupted.
- The resulting defect can expand despite benign tumor classification.

One biological mechanism explains multiple findings



Anatomic spread from epiphysis toward metaphysis



Early response

Localized bone resorption

Progression

Thinning or cortical destruction

Late consequence

Fracture or soft-tissue bulge

Most cases involve the distal femur or proximal tibia

- The tumor commonly develops on either side of the knee.
- The epiphyseal origin is more discriminating than the bone name alone.
- Extension into the metaphysis does not negate epiphyseal origin.
- The presentation is compatible with a primarily osseous lesion.

Anatomic distribution is characteristic, not exclusive

- Virtually any bone can be involved.
- An atypical location should prompt more careful clinicopathologic correlation.
- Location is a pattern-recognition clue, not a substitute for tissue diagnosis.
- Local destructive behavior remains relevant outside the knee.

Local symptoms emerge from lesion location

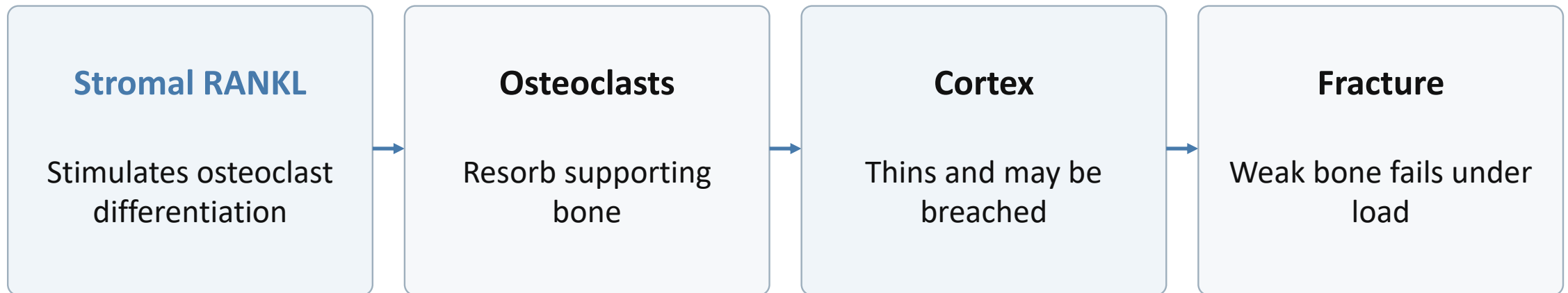
Near a joint

- Periarticular lesion may mimic arthritis.
- Pain and functional limitation may dominate.
- A bone lesion should remain in the differential.

Through weight-bearing bone

- Resorption reduces skeletal strength.
- Tumor may destroy supporting cortex.
- Pathologic fracture may be the presenting complication.

From microscopic signaling to pathologic fracture



Imaging pattern: Lytic and expansile lesion

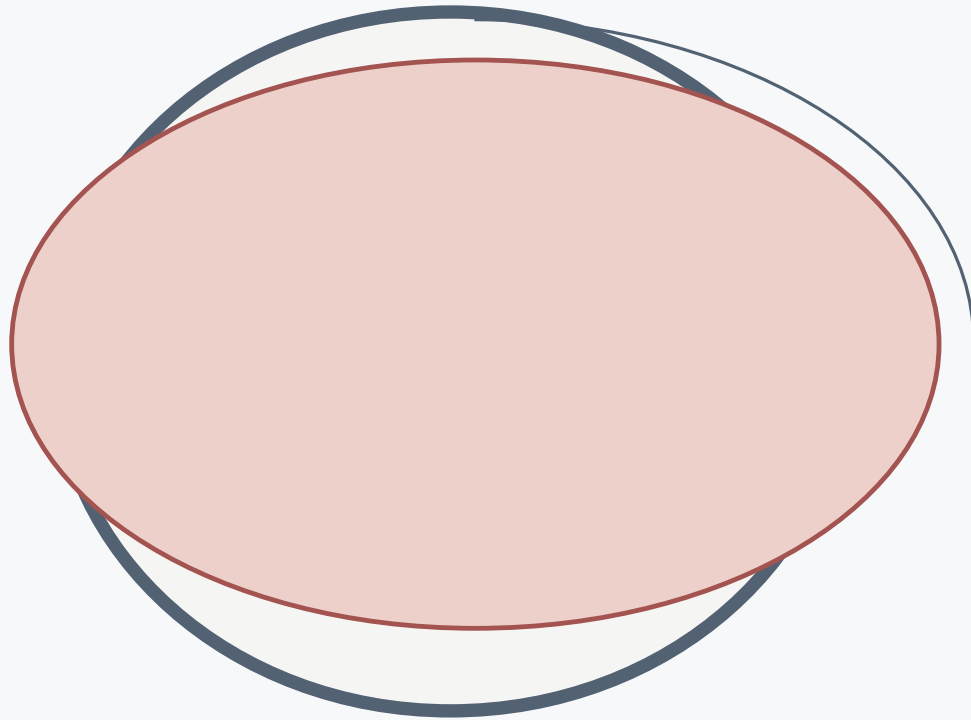
- Robbins Fig. 26.25 describes a predominantly lytic, expansile bone tumor.
- Cortical destruction was evident in the illustrated proximal fibular lesion.
- The same example included a pathologic fracture.
- The radiologic pattern coheres with vigorous osteoclast-mediated bone resorption.

Source figure described; Textbook image not reproduced.

Correlating radiologic and gross observations

Observation	Pathologic explanation
Predominantly lytic defect	Destruction of mineralized bone by osteoclasts
Expansile contour	Growth enlarges the intraosseous lesion
Cortical interruption	Overlying cortex is destroyed
Reactive thin shell	Bone reaction may delineate the mass
Associated fracture	Mechanical integrity is diminished

From cortical destruction to a reactive bone shell



Schematic cross-section

Bone resorption

Tumor expands in cancellous bone

Cortical injury

Overlying cortex can be destroyed

Reactive shell

Thin bone may outline soft-tissue bulge

Destruction can produce an extraosseous bulge

- The overlying cortex may be eroded or fully destroyed.
- A bulky lesion may protrude toward adjacent soft tissue.
- Thin reactive bone can delineate the tumor margin.
- A reactive shell does not imply that the underlying lesion is biologically harmless.

Pathologic fracture is a direct structural complication

- Osteolysis removes normal load-bearing architecture.
- Cortical damage reduces resistance to mechanical stress.
- Fracture may occur through the weakened tumor-bearing bone.
- In this setting, fracture signifies impaired mechanical integrity rather than necessarily malignant transformation.

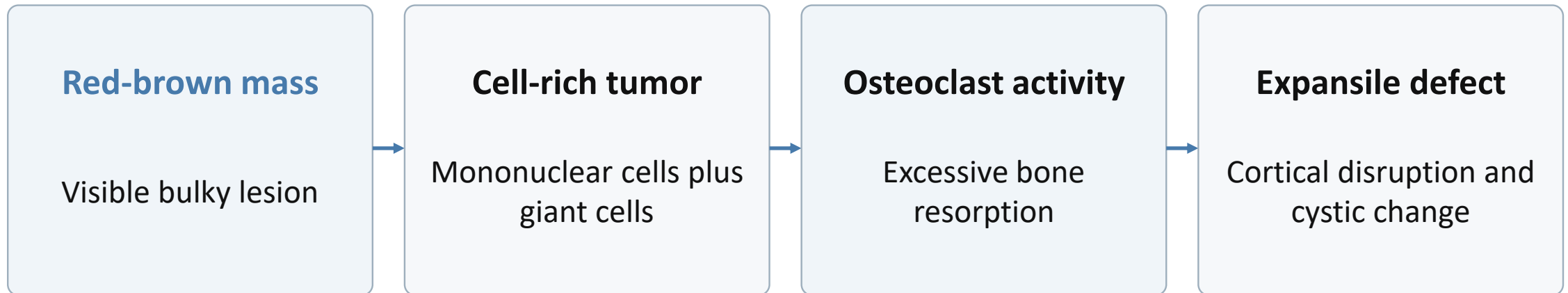
Gross morphology: Red-brown expansile mass

- The lesion can form a large, red-brown tissue mass.
- Bone destruction may permit visible bulging beyond the native contour.
- Gross coloration and expansion must be interpreted with microscopy.
- The appearance is consistent with a vascular and osteoclast-rich lesion, but color is not diagnostic.

Cystic degeneration modifies the gross pattern

- Giant cell tumors frequently show cystic degenerative changes.
- Gross heterogeneity therefore does not exclude this diagnosis.
- Correlation with the cellular tumor regions is needed.
- Distinguish degenerative cyst formation from a separately defined aneurysmal bone cyst.

Gross and microscopic findings are concordant



Core histologic pattern: Uniform stroma and giant cells

- The mononuclear stromal tumor cells are relatively uniform and oval.
- Numerous osteoclast-type giant cells are interspersed.
- Macrophages contribute to the mixed cellular population.
- The key is to recognize which component is neoplastic.

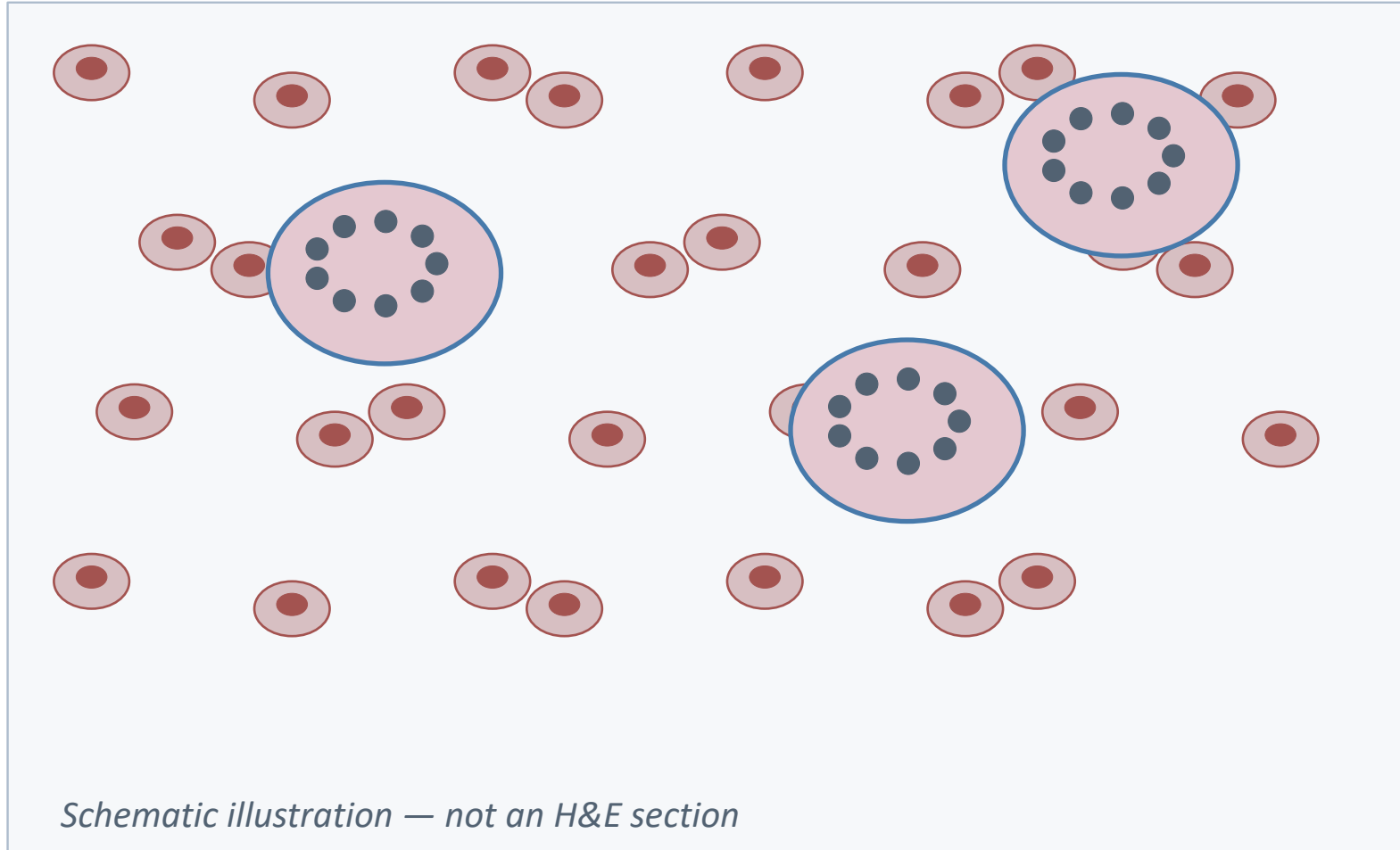
Mononuclear cells: The neoplastic compartment

- The stromal cells have primitive osteoblast-precursor identity.
- They are described as uniform and oval in textbook sections.
- Their chromatin-associated mutation is H3-3A.
- The stromal compartment drives recruitment of osteoclast-lineage cells.

Giant cells can contain exceptionally many nuclei

- The giant cells are of osteoclast type, not malignant epithelial syncytia.
- Giant cells containing 100 or more nuclei.
- The multinucleated cells form a conspicuous component of the lesion.
- The large number of nuclei is not itself a criterion of malignancy.

Schematic microscopic architecture of giant cell tumor



Small oval cells

Neoplastic stroma

Large giant cells

Osteoclast type

Mitoses and necrosis require contextual interpretation

- Mitotic activity may be prominent in giant cell tumor.
- Areas of necrosis may also be encountered.
- Neither finding negates the overall diagnosis when the other classic features align.
- The lesion can remain locally aggressive despite its usual benign classification.

Bland cellular appearance is compatible with aggression

Cytology

- Mononuclear population is described as uniform.
- Multinucleated giant cells may be numerous.
- Mitoses and necrosis can be present.

Behavior

- RANKL-mediated osteolysis is highly destructive.
- Local recurrence is common after curettage.
- Rare pulmonary metastasis is reported.

Correct cellular attribution prevents a conceptual error

- The giant-cell-rich field does not mean giant cells are tumor initiators.
- The stromal cells are the genetically altered population.
- Giant-cell recruitment arises from tumor–host paracrine signaling.
- Clinical consequences can exceed the apparent cytologic atypia.

A pattern-based clinicopathologic approach

Domain	Feature favoring giant cell tumor
Patient context	Most often third–fifth decades
Anatomic setting	Epiphyseal long-bone lesion, often around knee
Radiology / gross	Expansile osteolysis and cortical destruction
Microscopy	Uniform oval stroma plus osteoclast giant cells
Pathogenesis	H3-3A-mutant stroma expressing high RANKL

Location patterns help narrow bone-tumor diagnosis

Entity	Typical skeletal location	Usual age table
Giant cell tumor	Epiphysis of long bones	20–40 years
Nonossifying fibroma	Eccentric metaphysis around knee	Children / adolescents
Ewing sarcoma	Diaphysis of long bones	10–20 years
Chondroblastoma	Epiphysis of long bones	10–20 years

Distinguish aneurysmal bone cyst from giant cell tumor

Characteristic	Giant cell tumor	Aneurysmal bone cyst
Defining pattern	Mononuclear stroma and giant cells	Multiple blood-filled spaces
Typical age	Third–fifth decades	Frequently adolescents
Molecular basis	H3-3A mutation in stromal cells	USP6 rearrangement in neoplastic cells
Growth	Epiphyseal osteolysis	Expansile lytic lesion; Cystic architecture

Distinguish nonossifying fibroma from giant cell tumor

Characteristic	Giant cell tumor	Nonossifying fibroma
Predilection	Epiphysis of long bone	Eccentric metaphysis
Typical population	Adults	Children / adolescents
Biology	H3-3A; High RANKL	RAS-pathway mutations described
Presentation	Pain / fracture possible	Often incidental, asymptomatic

Giant cell tumor contrasted with osteosarcoma

Characteristic	Giant cell tumor	Osteosarcoma
Classification	Benign, locally aggressive	Malignant osteoid-forming tumor
Common location	Epiphysis	Metaphysis around knee
Microscopic focus	Stroma with osteoclast giant cells	Malignant cells producing osteoid
Main mechanism	Tumor-induced bone resorption	Neoplastic bone/osteoid production

Giant cell tumor contrasted with Ewing sarcoma

Characteristic	Giant cell tumor	Ewing sarcoma
Typical age	Third–fifth decades	Usually younger than 20 years
Typical region	Epiphysis	Diaphysis of long bones
Cytology	Mononuclear cells and giant cells	Primitive small round cells
Molecular context	H3-3A-mutant stroma	EWSR1 family gene fusions

Giant cell-rich histology needs context

Misleading shortcut	More reliable evaluation
“Giant cells = giant cell tumor”	Giant cells occur in other bone lesions
“No atypia = no clinical risk”	Examine extent of osteolysis and fracture
“Epiphyseal = single possible entity”	Age and distinct stromal morphology matter
“Recurrence = sarcoma”	Local recurrence occurs in benign aggressive GCT

Curettage addresses the local tumor burden

- Curettage as a treatment approach.
- Curettage is a local surgical technique rather than systemic therapy.
- However, recurrent tumor after local intervention is common.
- The operative decision must account for local structural damage and morbidity.

Local recurrence is a major outcome

- Local recurrence in approximately 40%–60% of cases following curettage.
- This textbook figure is historical/source-specific; No treatment modification is stated.
- Recurrence reflects the recognized locally aggressive natural history.
- Long-term clinical monitoring is important in the lecture's risk framework.

Local recurrence and malignancy are different concepts

Local recurrence

- Tumor reappears at the original skeletal site.
- Can follow curettage.
- Reported frequently in the Robbins account.

Malignancy

- Requires separate diagnostic reasoning.
- Cannot be inferred from recurrence alone.
- Benign GCT may nonetheless behave aggressively.

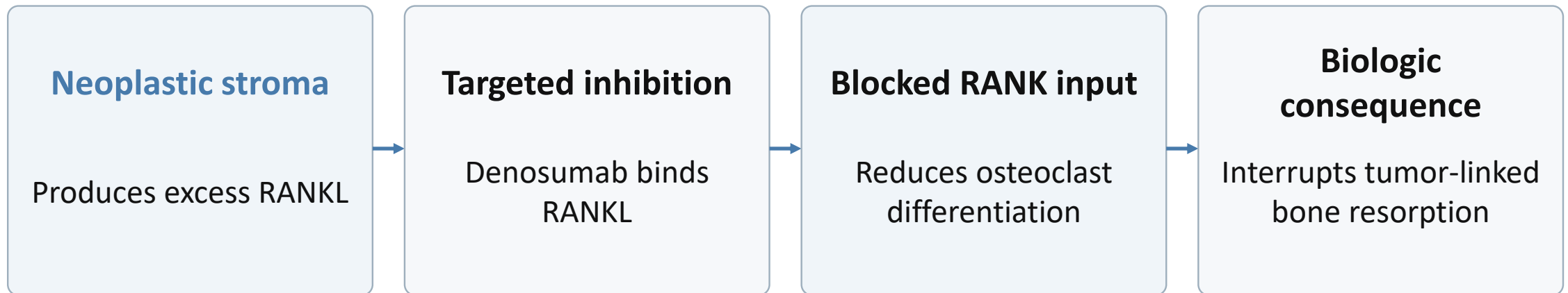
Pulmonary metastases are uncommon but possible

- Lung metastasis in up to 4% of giant cell tumors.
- This is an exception to the lesion's usual benign designation.
- The text describes a generally favorable course for these pulmonary lesions.
- The percentage refers to the textbook account, not a risk estimate for an individual patient.

Pulmonary deposits may have an unusually favorable course

- Some lung metastases may regress spontaneously.
- Other metastatic pulmonary nodules may be cured by excision.
- This course differs from the expected behavior of many high-grade sarcomas.
- Clinical behavior should not be inferred from the word “metastasis” alone.

Denosumab interrupts the osteoclastogenic circuit



This is the mechanism-based rationale.

Therapeutic rationale follows the RANKL mechanism

- Denosumab is an inhibitor of RANKL signaling.
- It targets the pathway mediating osteoclast recruitment and activity.
- It as an alternative when resection could carry major morbidity.
- The textbook excerpt does not supply a dosing schedule or contemporary treatment algorithm.

Treatment choice depends on local clinical context

Local intervention

- Curettage is an established treatment approach.
- Local recurrence is an important limitation.
- Anatomic consequences of bone removal matter.

RANKL pathway intervention

- Denosumab has a mechanism-based rationale.
- Potentially relevant when surgery is morbid.
- Not a substitute for individual multidisciplinary planning.

Build the clinical diagnosis from concordant domains

- Site and age identify a characteristic bone-tumor scenario.
- Imaging and gross findings disclose the destructive pattern.
- The mixed mononuclear and giant-cell populations provide histologic context.
- Tumor-derived RANKL and H3-3A connect cellular biology with the phenotype.

Case 1 — periarticular pain in an adult

Teaching vignette (hypothetical)

- A 34-year-old has progressive pain near the knee.
- Imaging demonstrates an expansile, predominantly lytic epiphyseal lesion.
- Tissue shows uniform oval stromal cells and osteoclast-type giant cells.

Which cellular population is neoplastic, and what explains the osteolysis?

Case 1 — mechanism-based interpretation

- The mononuclear stromal population is neoplastic.
- High RANKL expression promotes osteoclast precursor differentiation.
- The large osteoclast-type giant cells are recruited, nonneoplastic cells.
- The same process links histology to destructive imaging and pain.

Case 2 — fracture through a bone tumor

Teaching vignette (hypothetical)

- A long-bone lesion expands from the epiphysis toward the metaphysis.
- The cortex is thinned and partially destroyed.
- A fracture occurs through the involved segment.

Explain the fracture without assuming the lesion is a high-grade sarcoma.

Case 2 — structural rather than cytologic explanation

- The RANKL–osteoclast axis removes the bone needed for load bearing.
- Expansion and cortical destruction reduce structural integrity.
- Pathologic fracture is therefore biologically plausible for benign GCT.
- Local aggressiveness and malignant classification are not synonyms.

Case 3 — a giant-cell-rich biopsy

Teaching vignette (hypothetical)

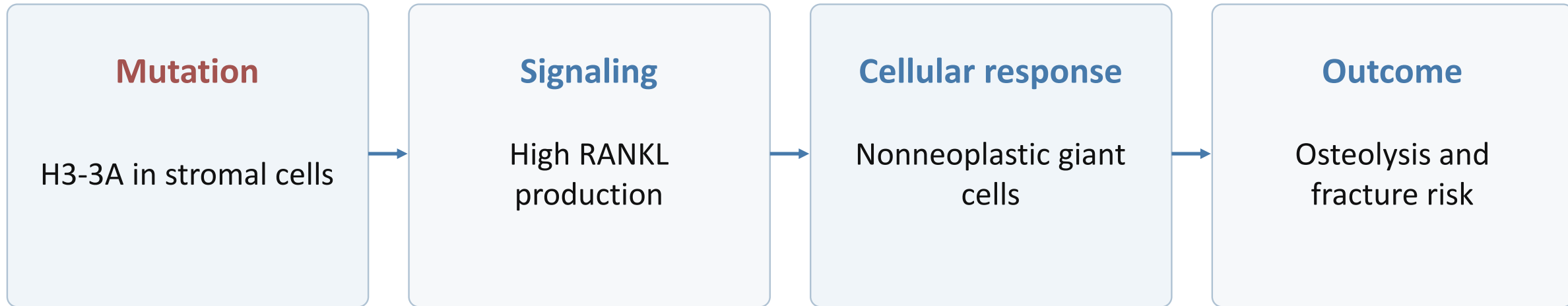
- A bone-biopsy section contains many multinucleated osteoclast-type cells.
- A less conspicuous population of mononuclear stromal cells surrounds them.
- The clinical impression is of an epiphyseal bone tumor.

What is the most important pitfall when interpreting the biopsy?

Case 3 — avoid a giant-cell counting diagnosis

- Many giant cells do not by themselves define the lesion.
- Assess the mononuclear population and the skeletal location.
- Other giant-cell-containing lesions occur in the neighboring differential.
- A correct explanation identifies the cell responsible for tumor biology.

Integrated disease model: Four linked domains



Mutation-to-tumor initiation remains mechanistically incompletely defined.

Five anchor findings to retain

Finding	Interpretive value
Epiphyseal lesion near knee	Characteristic clinical topography
Uniform stromal cells	Neoplastic cell population
Many osteoclast-like giant cells	Recruited cellular effectors
High RANKL; H3-3A mutation	Mechanistic and genetic context
Recurrence; Rare lung spread	Benign designation does not erase clinical risk

Final clinicopathologic synthesis

- Giant cell tumor of bone is a stromal neoplasm with abundant reactive osteoclasts.
- H3-3A-mutant, RANKL-expressing cells drive local osteoclast-mediated destruction.
- The typical lesion is an epiphyseal, expansile osteolytic bone tumor.
- Major clinical issues are fracture, local recurrence, and rare lung involvement.

Primary reference and source boundaries

Primary textbook

Robbins, Cotran & Kumar: Pathologic Basis of Disease. 11th ed. 2026.

Giant Cell Tumor section: bone neoplasms.

Context used selectively:

Bone remodeling; bone-tumor comparison table; adjacent aneurysmal bone cyst and nonossifying fibroma sections.