

Malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumors

Pathogenesis • morphology • diagnostic reasoning

Malignant transformation • neural origin • spindle-cell morphology

Dr Abu Suraih Sakhri

MBBS, MD (Pathology)

www.abusuraihsakhri.com

Learning outcomes

- Explain how NF1-associated and sporadic MPNSTs arise.
- Link NF1, CDKN2A/B and PRC2 abnormalities to tumor biology.
- Recognize the key architectural and cytologic features of MPNST.
- Use clinicopathologic context to assess spindle-cell sarcomas.

Where MPNST fits among nerve sheath tumors

Schwannoma

Benign, typically encapsulated; Arises adjacent to a nerve.

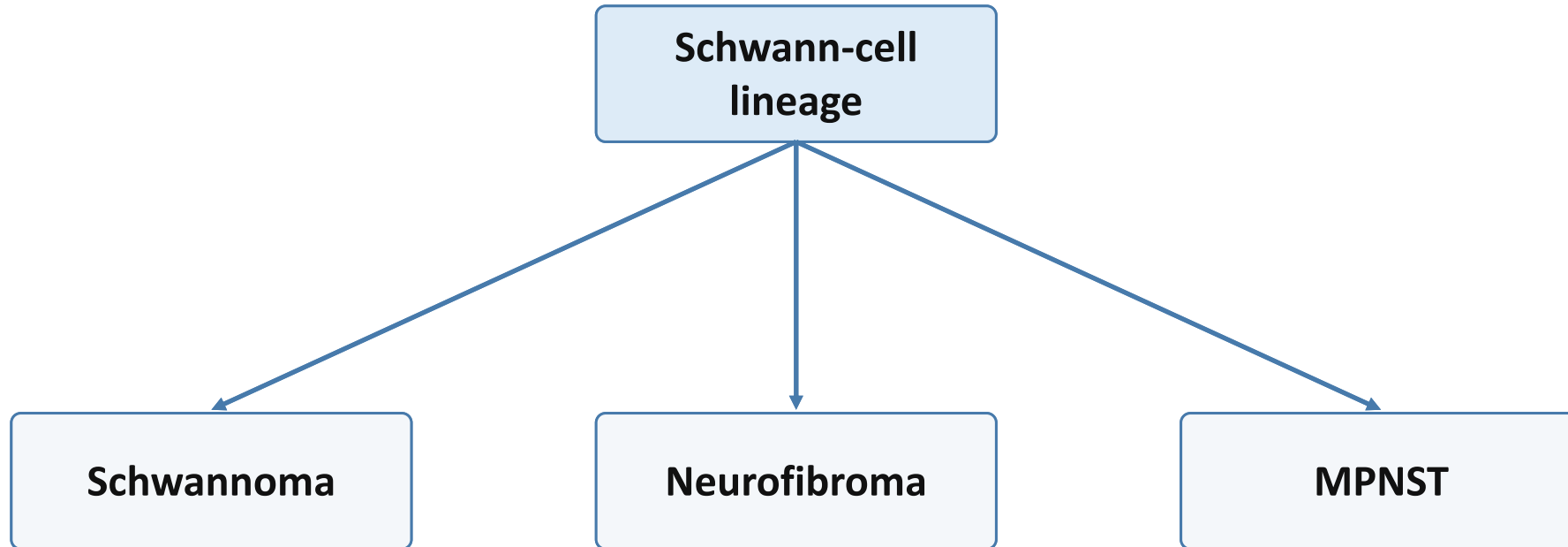
Neurofibroma

Benign, mixed cellular tumor that may expand nerve fascicles.

MPNST

Malignant lesion; Often infiltrates parent nerve and soft tissue.

Common nerve-sheath lineage



Schwannoma, neurofibroma and MPNST show evidence of Schwann-cell differentiation.

MPNST is a malignant soft-tissue tumor

- Most MPNSTs are high grade, but low-grade variants are recognized.
- Its malignant phenotype includes destructive infiltration and, in many cases, marked cytologic atypia.
- Diagnosis requires integration of morphology with neural and clinical context.

Two principal clinical settings

NF1-associated

Approximately half of MPNSTs occur in people with NF1; Many are linked to preexisting plexiform neurofibroma.

Sporadic

MPNST can arise de novo without a known NF1 diagnosis.

NF1 and sporadic occurrence are not equivalent

Among MPNST cases

~half

Are NF1-associated

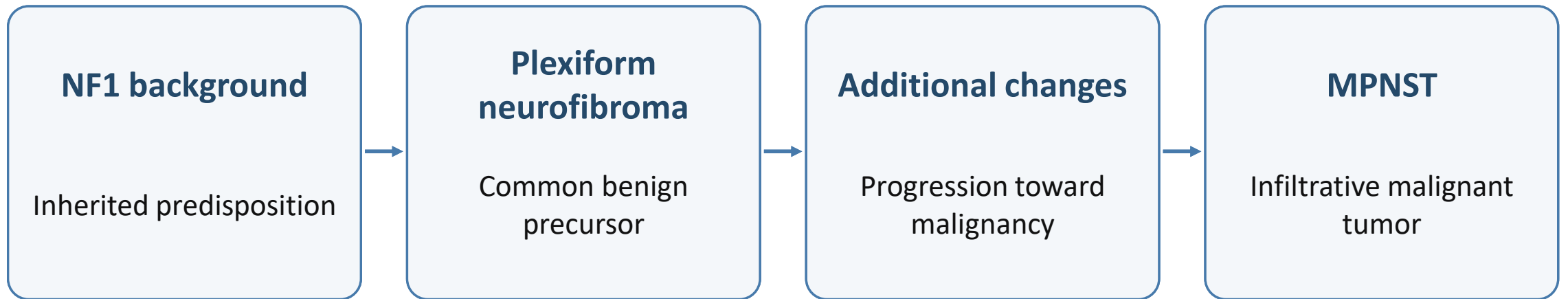
Among people with NF1

~5–10%

Develop MPNST (Robbins)

“About half in NF1” describes the proportion of MPNST cases associated with the syndrome.

NF1-associated malignant transformation



Sporadic MPNST: A distinct presentation

- Some tumors develop de novo rather than through a clinically recognized neurofibroma.
- Absence of a hereditary syndrome does not exclude MPNST.
- Nerve continuity and tumor morphology remain important clues.

Typical anatomic associations

Axial compartments

Chest, abdomen and pelvis.

Neck

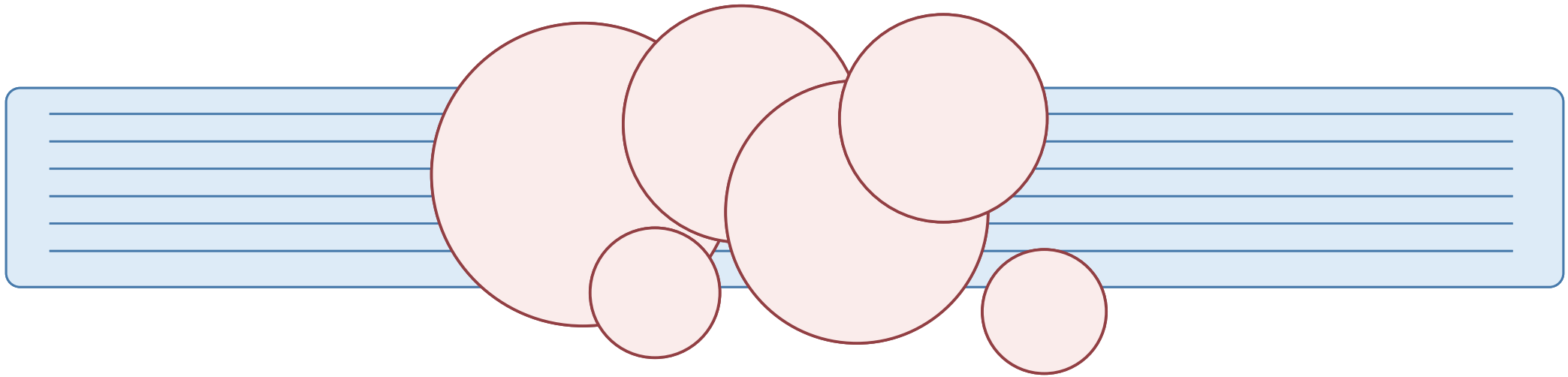
Larger peripheral nerve trajectories.

Limb girdles

Proximal limb-associated nerves.

Why location matters to pathology

Schematic: Tumor permeating nerve axis and adjacent tissue



Pale blue: Longitudinal nerve

Red outline: Infiltrative tumor

MPNSTs are frequently associated with large nerves, so anatomic relationships may be demonstrable.

The clinical question is often a deep mass

- A nerve-associated mass may be benign or malignant; Clinical history alone is not diagnostic.
- NF1 status raises the pretest suspicion of MPNST in a deep soft-tissue lesion.
- Histologic evidence of malignancy and a demonstrable nerve relationship carry substantial weight.

Neurofibromatosis type 1: Relevant context

- NF1 is an autosomal dominant systemic tumor-predisposition disorder.
- Neurofibromas and MPNSTs are recognized neoplastic manifestations.
- Expression is variable, and some patients have markedly severe disease.

Neurofibromin restrains RAS signaling



NF1 acts as a tumor-suppressor gene

- The NF1 gene encodes neurofibromin, a negative regulator of RAS activity.
- Neoplastic Schwann cells in NF1-related neurofibromas have biallelic NF1 defects.
- Loss of the second functional copy is relevant to tumor development.

Mosaicism and variable NF1 expression

- NF1 has high penetrance but variable expressivity.
- Mosaicism can produce disease localized to parts of the body.
- A limited apparent phenotype does not negate an NF1-associated tumor.

Neurofibroma is not a uniform entity

Cutaneous

Superficial, often pedunculated nodules.

Diffuse

Plaque-like infiltrating lesions of skin or soft tissue.

Plexiform

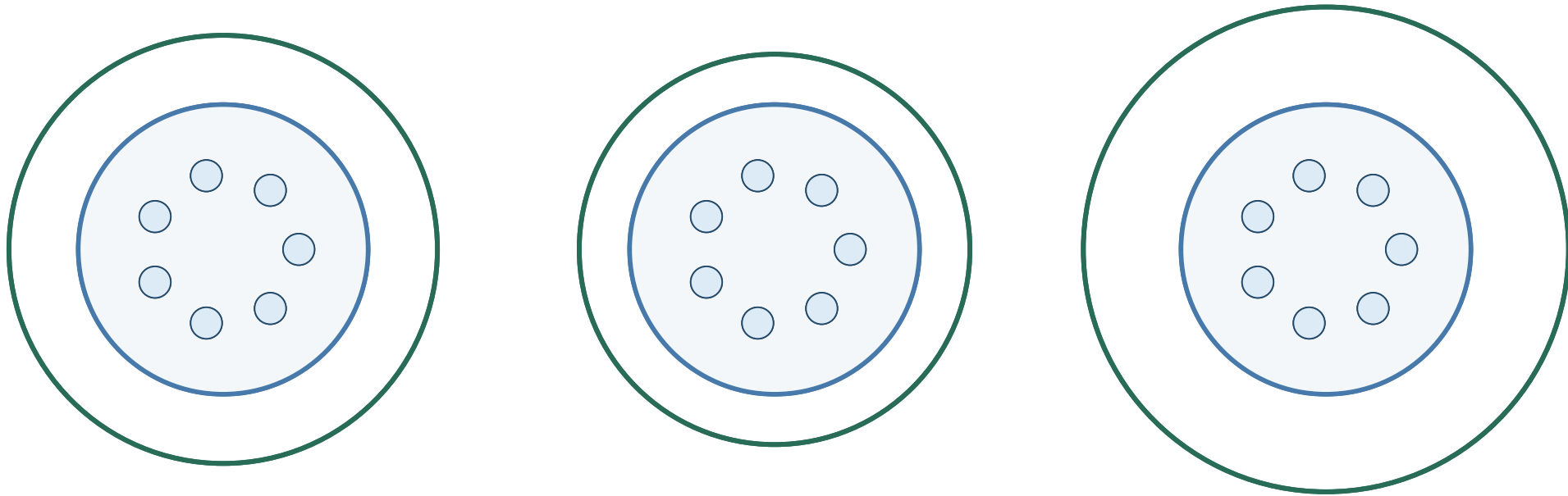
Expansion of multiple nerve fascicles; NF1-associated.

Why the plexiform variant matters

- Plexiform neurofibromas involve nerve roots or larger nerves.
- The growth pattern expands several nerve fascicles rather than forming a single discrete mass.
- This variant as the usual neurofibroma precursor of MPNST.

Normal fascicles versus plexiform expansion

Schematic: Multiple fascicles enlarge while remaining recognizable



Green rings show separate expanded fascicular units

Plexiform neurofibroma expands multiple discrete fascicles.

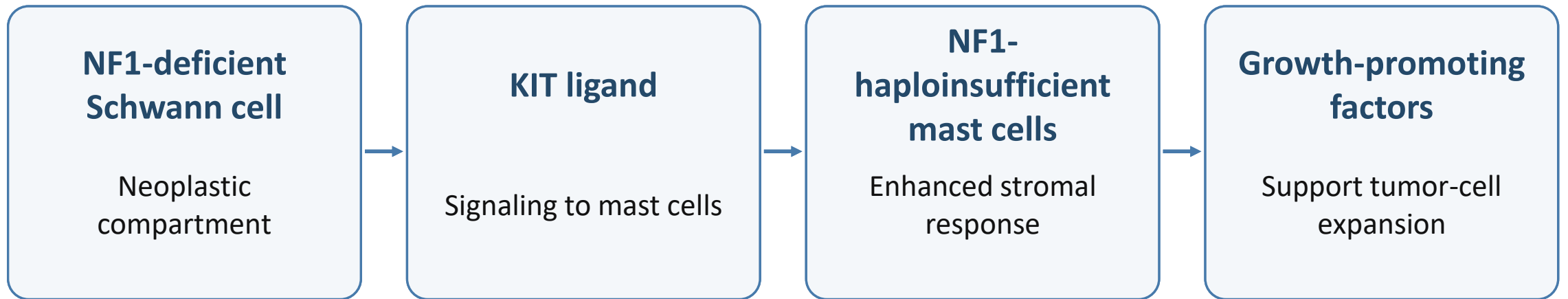
Plexiform neurofibroma: Gross appearance

- Involved nerves become thickened, ropy and multinodular.
- The classic “bag of worms” description reflects multiple expanded fascicles.
- A plexiform pattern is a marker of syndrome association and precursor context, not proof of MPNST.

Plexiform neurofibroma: Microscopic context

- Bland spindle cells are admixed with stromal cell populations.
- The matrix may be loose, myxoid or collagen-rich.
- Collagen bundles may resemble “shredded carrots”; Entrapped axons are characteristic of the architecture.

The neurofibroma microenvironment



Progression risk in NF1

- The Robbins text reports MPNST in approximately 5%–10% of NF1 patients.
- Numerous plexiform neurofibromas and large NF1 deletions are associated with higher risk.
- These are patient-level associations, not histologic diagnostic criteria.

Malignancy is not an inevitable outcome

- Plexiform neurofibroma is a recognized precursor, but malignant transformation affects only a subset of NF1 patients.
- Most benign nerve-sheath tumors do not become MPNST.
- The key question is which lesions show malignant progression.

Schwannoma is a contrasting benign pattern

- Schwannomas generally form encapsulated, circumscribed masses.
- They typically abut rather than infiltrate their parent nerve.
- Antoni A/B areas and Verocay bodies support a schwannoma diagnosis.

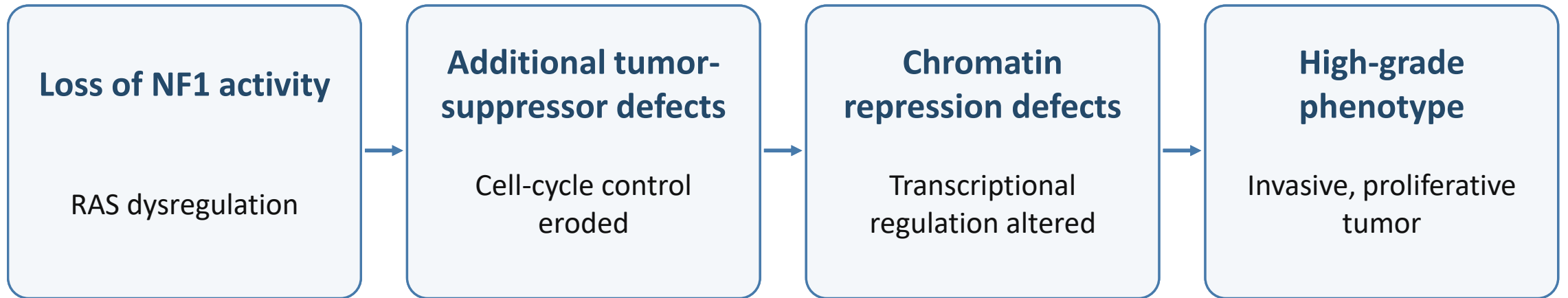
Benign–malignant growth-pattern contrast

Feature	Schwannoma	Plexiform neurofibroma	MPNST
Nerve relation	Abuts nerve	Expands fascicles	Infiltrates nerve axis
Boundary	Encapsulated	Fascicular nodularity	Poorly defined
Cells	Schwann-cell pattern	Mixed bland cells	Often atypical spindled cells
Biologic behavior	Benign	Benign precursor	Malignant

Genetic complexity in MPNST

- MPNSTs show complex chromosomal gains and losses.
- The molecular profile goes beyond simple loss of neurofibromin.
- Additional alterations accompany the development of high-grade disease.

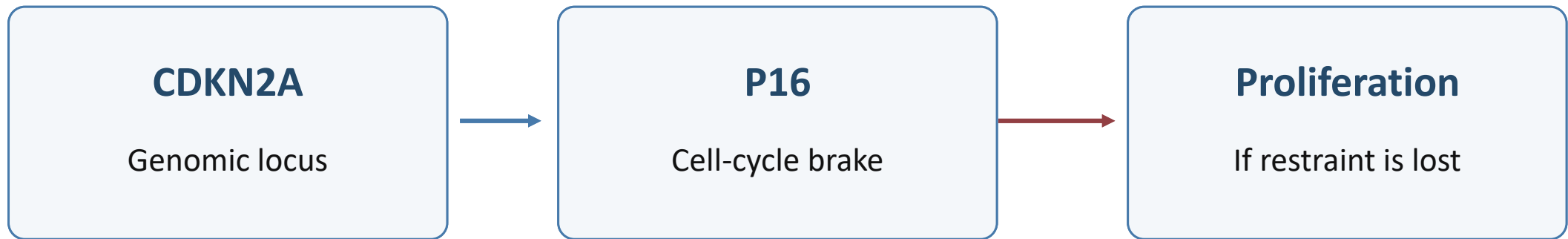
Conceptual sequence of progression



CDKN2A/B: Growth-control locus

- High-grade MPNST can show homozygous loss of CDKN2A/B.
- The region encodes tumor-suppressive functions associated with cell-cycle and p53 regulation.
- Deletion is an ancillary molecular clue in the appropriate setting.

P16 links CDKN2A to cell-cycle control



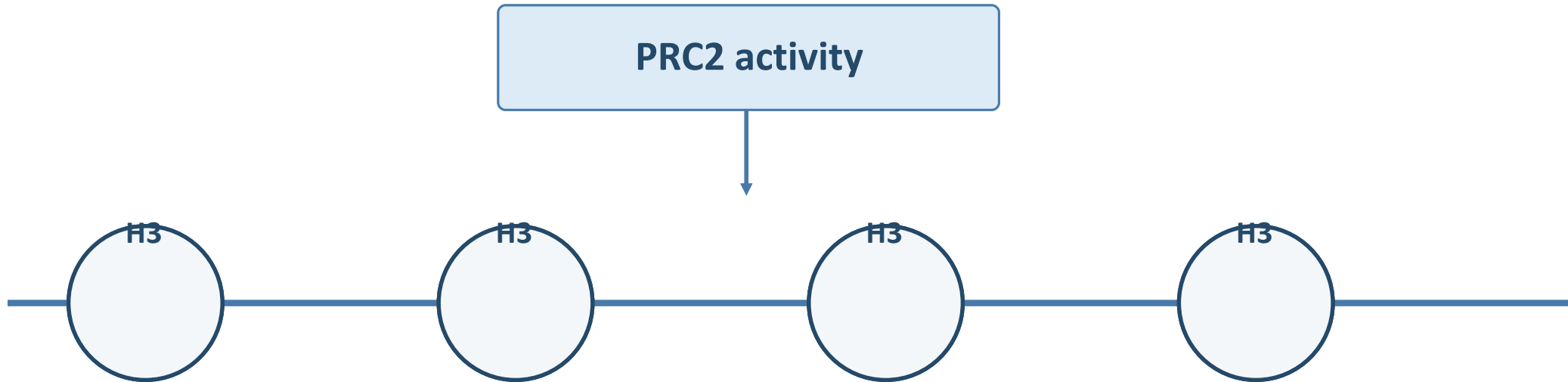
Loss removes restraint

P16 is a cell-cycle regulator encoded by CDKN2A.

P14ARF connects to the p53 network

- CDKN2A also encodes p14ARF, identified by Robbins as a p53 regulator.
- Homozygous deletion may remove more than one tumor-suppressor function.
- The specific pathway lesion must not be inferred from morphology alone.

Polycomb repressive complex 2 (PRC2)



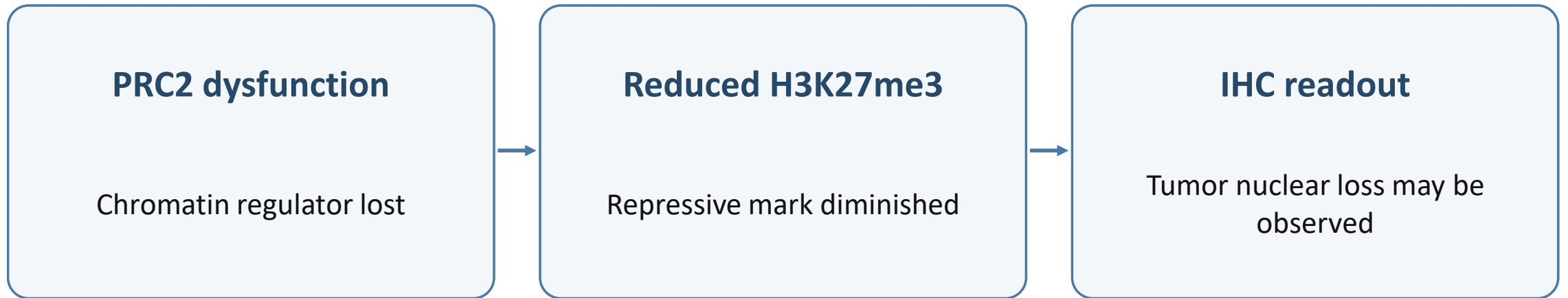
H3K27 methylation → transcriptional repression

PRC2 is a chromatin-modifying repressor complex.

H3K27me3 is a repression-associated mark

- H3K27me3 denotes trimethylation of histone H3 at lysine 27.
- PRC2 contributes to deposition of this mark.
- PRC2 impairment can therefore be reflected by reduced or absent H3K27me3 staining.

PRC2 loss: Molecular event to tissue marker



H3K27me3 loss is not universal

- Published systematic evidence shows complete loss in a subset of high-grade MPNSTs.
- Retained staining cannot by itself exclude MPNST.
- The finding is supportive only within an integrated diagnostic assessment.

H3K27me3 is not stand-alone proof

- The mark can be diminished in other tumors by different mechanisms.
- Patterns of staining and internal controls matter to interpretation.
- A single IHC result does not replace clinicopathologic correlation.

Separate the roles of three molecular clues

Alteration	Biologic role	Diagnostic interpretation
NF1 loss	Growth-signaling restraint lost	Supports syndrome-related pathway
CDKN2A/B loss	Cell-cycle regulator loss	Additional progression-associated change
PRC2 loss	Chromatin repression impaired	Can correlate with H3K27me3 loss

Avoid a one-mutation diagnostic rule

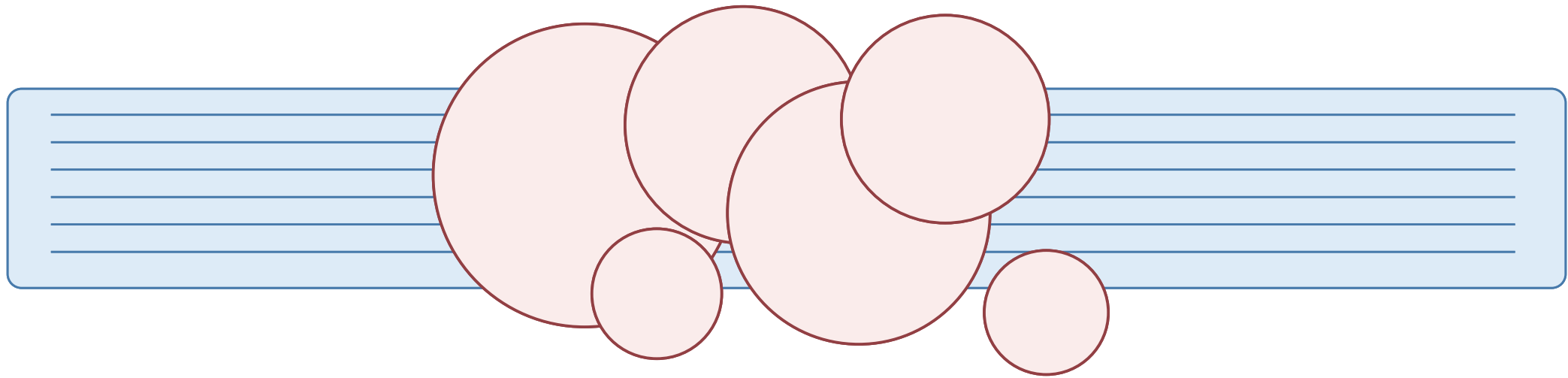
- MPNST commonly accumulates multiple genomic abnormalities.
- Robbins treats molecular findings as clues alongside morphology and clinical evidence.
- Neither NF1 history nor one molecular result is sufficient in isolation.

Gross appearance: Infiltrating mass

- MPNSTs are poorly circumscribed rather than neatly encapsulated.
- Tumor spreads into the surrounding soft tissues.
- The gross boundary may not correspond to an anatomic nerve compartment.

Tumor extension along a nerve

Schematic: Tumor permeating nerve axis and adjacent tissue



Pale blue: Longitudinal nerve

Red outline: Infiltrative tumor

Growth commonly follows the longitudinal axis of the parent nerve.

Invasion versus benign displacement

Displacement

Schwannoma usually remains separate from and adjacent to much of the nerve.

Expansion

Plexiform neurofibroma broadens multiple nerve fascicles.

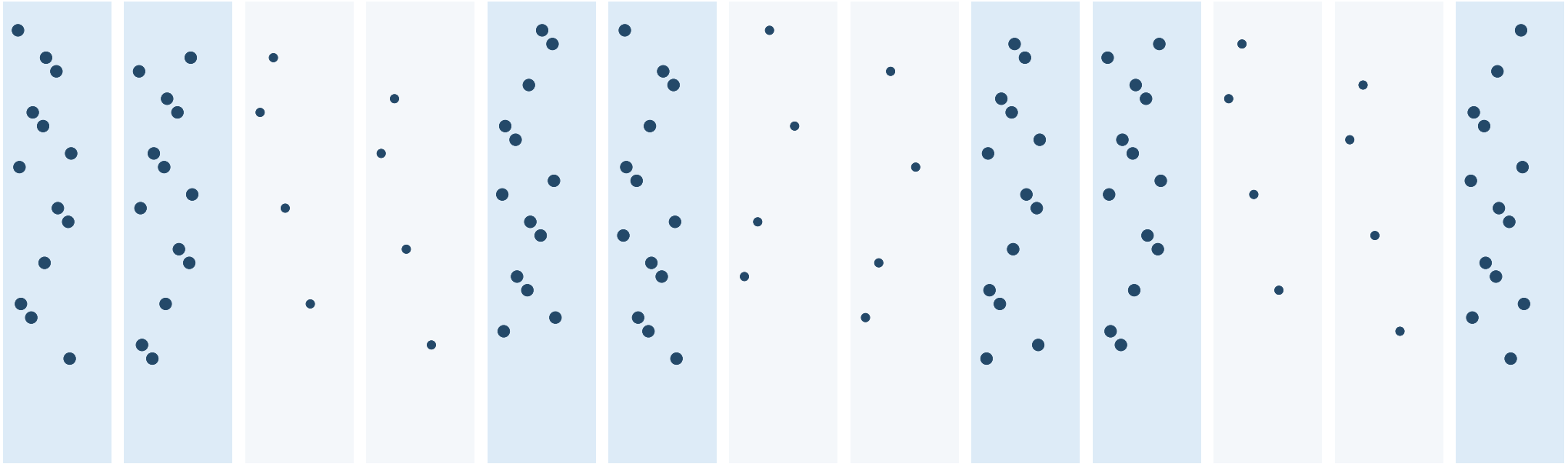
Infiltration

MPNST permeates nerve axis and nearby soft tissue.

Microscopic architecture: Spindle-cell fascicles

- Typical MPNST is composed of elongated spindle cells.
- Cells often aggregate into interlacing or sweeping fascicles.
- Fascicular architecture is suggestive but not specific for MPNST.

Why the tumor can look “marbleized”



Schematic: Alternating higher and lower cellular density

Low-power sections can alternate between relatively cellular and less cellular areas.

The full morphologic spectrum is broad

- Not every MPNST has the same density or arrangement of spindle cells.
- Typical morphology provides a useful entry point; Less differentiated tumors are harder to classify.
- Use the tumor as a whole rather than overcalling a small isolated field.

Nuclear anaplasia is a key malignant feature

- Marked cytologic atypia is often present in high-grade MPNST.
- Anaplasia reflects a departure from the bland spindle-cell appearance of neurofibroma.
- The finding is one part of the malignancy assessment.

Mitoses indicate active proliferation

- Mitotic activity is common in typical high-grade MPNST.
- Mitoses should be interpreted alongside atypia and growth pattern.
- Robbins provides no numerical cutoff in this section; Do not invent one.

Necrosis supports high-grade behavior

- Necrosis is another commonly encountered high-grade feature.
- It is meaningful when coupled with cellular atypia and mitoses.
- Necrosis is not disease-specific and must not be used alone to name MPNST.

A composite high-grade pattern

Architecture

Infiltration, fascicular spindle cells, heterogeneous cellularity.

Cytology

Anaplasia and mitotic activity.

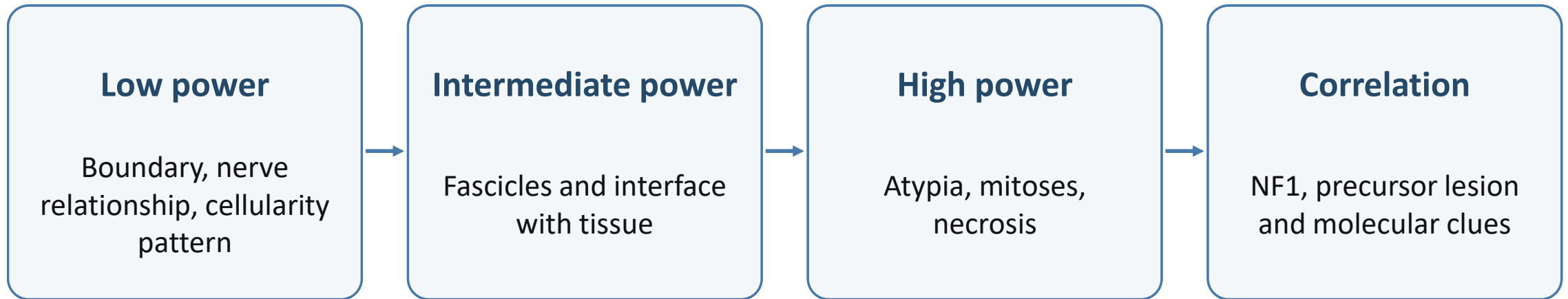
Tissue response

Necrosis and invasion of adjacent soft tissues.

Low-grade MPNST: Necessary qualification

- Although the majority of MPNSTs are high grade, lower-grade variants are recognized.
- The absence of conspicuous necrosis or severe atypia does not settle every diagnostically challenging case.
- No numeric grading algorithm is specified by the supplied Robbins passage.

Reading a spindle-cell section systematically



Divergent differentiation: Definition

- MPNST may contain focal components with another recognizable line of differentiation.
- Robbins terms the phenomenon “divergent differentiation”.
- The additional component exists within an otherwise nerve-sheath malignancy.

Recognized heterologous elements

Glandular

Epithelial-type gland structures.

Cartilaginous

Chondroid elements.

Osseous

Bone-forming elements.

Rhabdomyoblastic

Skeletal-muscle-type differentiation.

Glandular differentiation

- Focal gland-like structures are a described divergent component.
- A glandular focus does not by itself displace the underlying MPNST diagnosis.
- It demands careful exclusion of alternative biphasic tumor types.

Cartilaginous and osseous differentiation

- Cartilage or bone can be represented as heterologous tissue within MPNST.
- These foci demonstrate lineage divergence, not a separate primary skeletal tumor.
- Interpret the differentiated focus in relation to the dominant spindle-cell lesion.

Triton tumor: Rhabdomyoblastic differentiation

- An MPNST containing rhabdomyoblastic differentiation is called a Triton tumor.
- The term is based on the divergent skeletal-muscle phenotype.
- It should not be applied to all pleomorphic or spindle-cell MPNSTs.

Divergent differentiation complicates classification

- Heterologous foci can distract from the underlying nerve-sheath lineage.
- The pathologist must identify the malignant background and its relationship to a nerve.
- A single unusual area cannot substitute for assessment of the overall lesion.

Why MPNST diagnosis can be difficult

- Poorly differentiated MPNST may resemble undifferentiated spindle-cell sarcoma.
- Typical histology is not pathognomonic.
- Robbins explicitly recommends using context, anatomic continuity and molecular evidence.

Four evidence domains support the diagnosis

Clinical

Documented NF1 diagnosis.

Anatomic

Tumor associated with a parent nerve.

Precursor

Transition from or association with neurofibroma.

Molecular

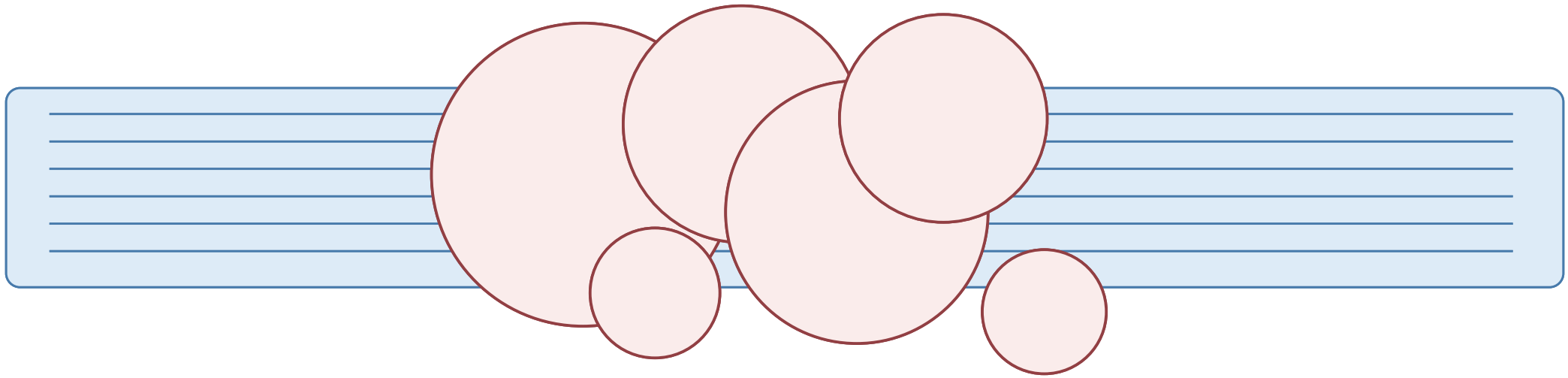
Changes supporting the MPNST pathway.

NF1 history changes interpretation

- A spindle-cell malignancy in a patient with NF1 deserves careful evaluation for MPNST.
- The syndrome is supportive but not definitive evidence.
- An unrelated soft-tissue tumor remains possible in an NF1 patient.

Demonstrating neural continuity

Schematic: Tumor permeating nerve axis and adjacent tissue



Pale blue: Longitudinal nerve

Red outline: Infiltrative tumor

Identify whether a named nerve enters or courses through the lesion.

A preexisting neurofibroma is a second clue

- Many NF1-associated MPNSTs are thought to arise in plexiform neurofibromas.
- Residual neurofibroma can establish the precursor context.
- Absence of visible precursor tissue does not rule out a de novo tumor.

Comparing a neurofibroma with MPNST

Domain	Neurofibroma	MPNST
Tumor cells	Bland; Mixed stromal elements	Often atypical spindle cells
Growth pattern	Fascicular expansion / infiltration by benign cells	Destructive nerve-axis and soft-tissue invasion
Mitoses / necrosis	Not defining findings	Common in high-grade tumors
Association	NF1 especially plexiform type	NF1-related or sporadic

Comparing schwannoma with MPNST

Domain	Schwannoma	MPNST
Tumor boundary	Well circumscribed, encapsulated	Poorly defined
Nerve interaction	Abuts; Typically noninvasive	Infiltrates along nerve
Architecture	Antoni A / Antoni B; Verocay bodies	Fascicular, variably cellular
Biologic behavior	Benign	Predominantly high-grade malignant

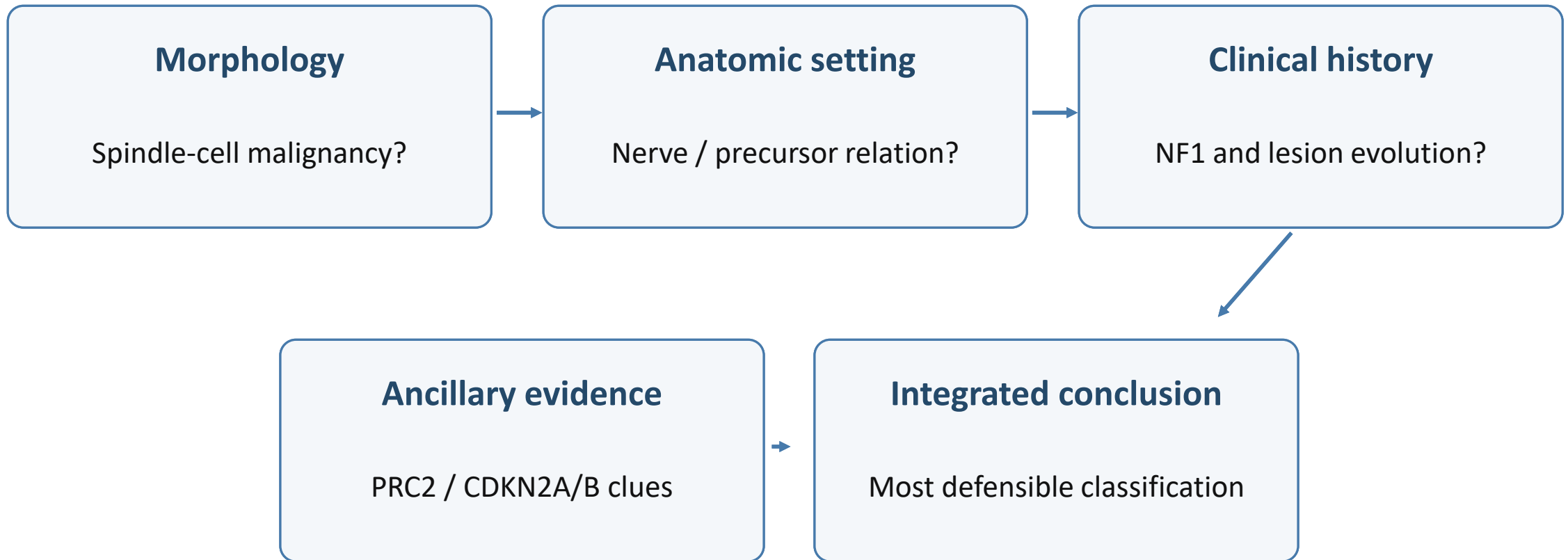
The spindle-cell sarcoma differential

- High-grade spindle-cell morphology overlaps multiple soft-tissue malignancies.
- A compatible fascicular pattern is not by itself a lineage assignment.
- When neural differentiation is uncertain, report and investigate the unresolved differential.

How to interpret ancillary test findings

- Genetic or epigenetic findings may increase confidence in a suspected MPNST.
- H3K27me3 immunostaining is a supplementary tissue-level correlate of PRC2 dysfunction.
- A normal/retained marker result is not an exclusion criterion.

Diagnostic synthesis rather than a checklist



Case 1: NF1 and a deep nerve-associated lesion

A patient with NF1 has a deep mass arising in the region of a large peripheral nerve. Histology shows an infiltrative, mitotically active spindle-cell sarcoma.

Which clinical, anatomic and histologic findings most strongly support MPNST?

Case 1: Integrate the evidence

- NF1 provides a recognized predisposition to MPNST.
- A clearly demonstrated relationship to a large nerve is important.
- Infiltration, spindle-cell fascicles and mitoses support a malignant nerve-sheath lesion.
- Consider whether a plexiform neurofibroma precursor is present.

Case 2: Tumor without known NF1

A patient without documented NF1 has a poorly defined spindle-cell malignancy with no sampled residual neurofibroma. Surgical evaluation suggests origin from a proximal peripheral nerve.

Does the absence of NF1 exclude MPNST? What additional evidence is important?

Case 2: Sporadic origin remains possible

- Sporadic MPNST may arise de novo.
- Demonstrable nerve continuity can provide a decisive contextual clue.
- Assess overall morphology and use appropriate molecular evidence as support.
- Do not infer NF1 solely from the tumor's presence.

Case 3: Focal skeletal-muscle phenotype

A malignant spindle-cell tumor closely related to a peripheral nerve contains a focal rhabdomyoblastic component.

What terminology describes the heterologous component and this MPNST variant?

Case 3: Recognize a Triton tumor

- Rhabdomyoblastic elements represent divergent differentiation.
- MPNST showing this differentiation is designated a Triton tumor.
- The designation depends on the recognizable skeletal-muscle phenotype.

Case 4: An undifferentiated spindle-cell sarcoma

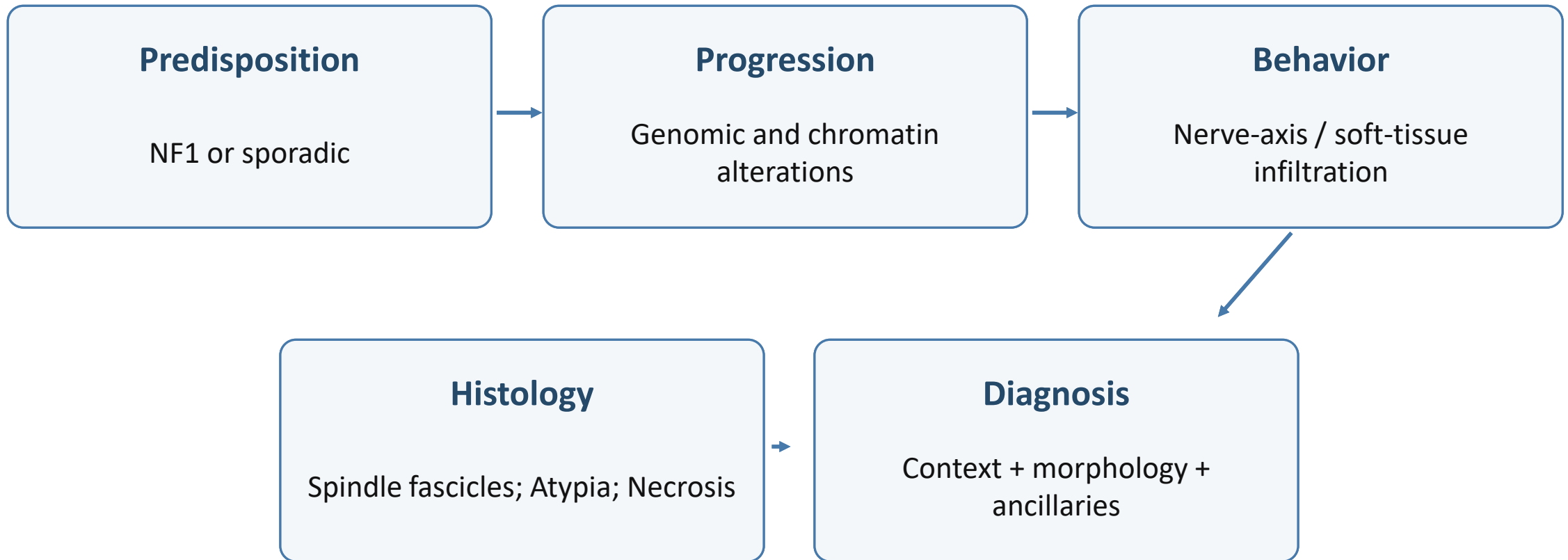
A high-grade spindle-cell lesion is infiltrative but has no demonstrated NF1 association or nerve continuity. Molecular testing is nonspecific.

Why should the diagnosis of MPNST be approached cautiously?

Case 4: Maintain diagnostic discipline

- Poor differentiation can make distinction from undifferentiated sarcoma difficult.
- No single histologic feature makes the diagnosis definitive.
- Seek additional clinical, anatomic and molecular evidence before assigning lineage.

Integrated MPNST concept map



Five diagnostic statements to retain

- MPNST is often high grade and may arise from plexiform neurofibroma in NF1.
- A sporadic de novo MPNST is also possible.
- Tumor infiltration and the nerve relationship are central morphologic/anatomic clues.
- PRC2 and CDKN2A/B alterations reinforce, but do not replace, diagnosis.
- Triton tumor denotes rhabdomyoblastic divergent differentiation.

Sources and image provenance

- Robbins, Cotran & Kumar: Pathologic Basis of Disease, 11th ed. (2026); Chapter 27, pp. 1125–1127.
- Source-derived slides use the MPNST section and adjacent nerve-sheath tumor sections.
- Supplementary H3K27me3 interpretation: 2019 systematic review (PMID 31342317) and mechanistic study (PMID 31175328).
- All diagrams are original editable PowerPoint schematics; no clinical/histologic specimens are simulated.