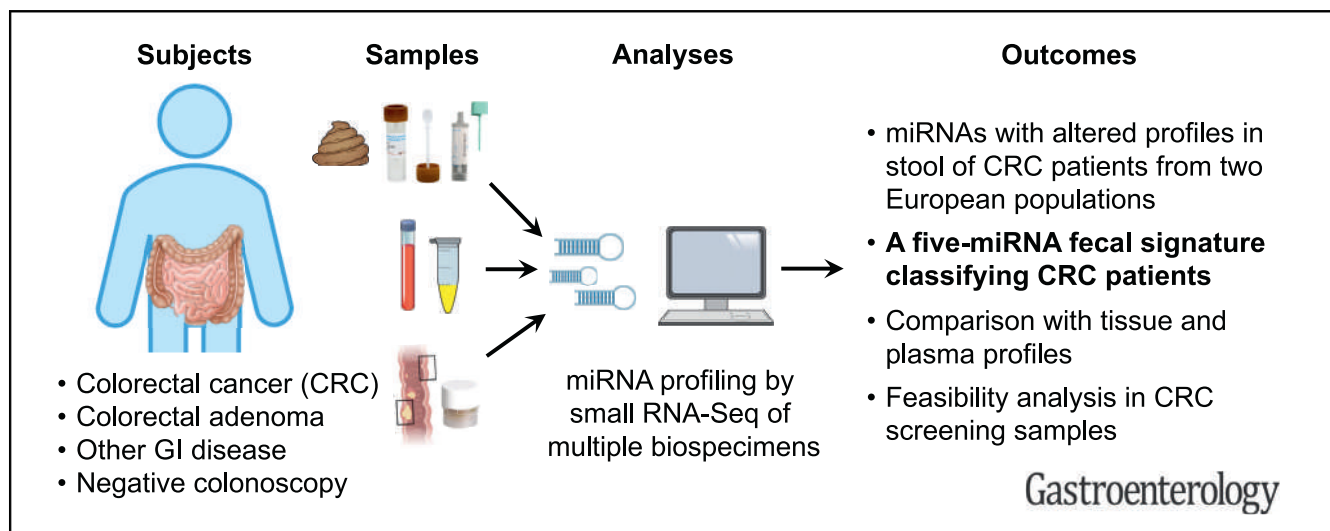


A Fecal MicroRNA Signature by Small RNA Sequencing Accurately Distinguishes Colorectal Cancers: Results From a Multicenter Study

Barbara Pardini,^{1,2,*} Giulio Ferrero,^{3,4,*} Sonia Tarallo,^{1,2,*} Gaetano Gallo,^{5,6} Antonio Francavilla,¹ Nicola Licheri,⁴ Mario Trompetto,⁶ Giuseppe Clerico,⁶ Carlo Senore,⁷ Sergio Peyre,⁸ Veronika Vymetalkova,^{9,10,11} Ludmila Vodickova,^{9,10,11} Vaclav Liska,^{11,12} Ondrej Vycital,^{11,12} Miroslav Levy,¹³ Peter Macinga,¹⁴ Tomas Hucl,¹⁴ Eva Budinska,¹⁵ Pavel Vodicka,^{9,10,11} Francesca Cordero,^{4,§} and Alessio Naccarati^{1,2,§}

¹Italian Institute for Genomic Medicine, Turin, Italy; ²Candiolo Cancer Institute, FPO-IRCCS, Turin, Italy; ³Department of Clinical and Biological Sciences, University of Turin, Turin, Italy; ⁴Department of Computer Science, University of Turin, Turin, Italy; ⁵Department of Surgery, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy; ⁶Department of Colorectal Surgery, Clinica S. Rita, Vercelli, Italy; ⁷Epidemiology and Screening Unit-CPO, University Hospital Città della Salute e della Scienza, Turin, Italy; ⁸LILT (Lega Italiana Lotta contro i Tumori), associazione provinciale di Biella, Biella, Italy; ⁹Department of Molecular Biology of Cancer, Institute of Experimental Medicine of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic; ¹⁰Institute of Biology and Medical Genetics, 1st Medical Faculty, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic; ¹¹Biomedical Center, Faculty of Medicine in Pilsen, Charles University, Pilsen, Czech Republic; ¹²Department of Surgery, University Hospital and Faculty of Medicine in Pilsen, Charles University, Pilsen, Czech Republic; ¹³Department of Surgery, First Faculty of Medicine, Charles University and Thomayer Hospital, Prague, Czech Republic; ¹⁴Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Institute for Clinical and Experimental Medicine, Prague, Czech Republic; and ¹⁵RECETOX, Faculty of Science, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic



BACKGROUND & AIMS: Fecal tests currently used for colorectal cancer (CRC) screening show limited accuracy in detecting early tumors or precancerous lesions. In this respect, we comprehensively evaluated stool microRNA (miRNA) profiles as biomarkers for noninvasive CRC diagnosis. **METHODS:** A total of 1273 small RNA sequencing experiments were performed in multiple biospecimens. In a cross-sectional study, miRNA profiles were investigated in fecal samples from an Italian and a Czech cohort (155 CRCs, 87 adenomas, 96 other intestinal diseases, 141 colonoscopy-negative controls). A predictive miRNA signature for cancer detection was defined by a machine learning strategy and tested in additional fecal samples from 141 CRC patients and 80 healthy volunteers. miRNA

profiles were compared with those of 132 tumors/adenomas paired with adjacent mucosa, 210 plasma extracellular vesicle samples, and 185 fecal immunochemical test leftover samples. **RESULTS:** Twenty-five miRNAs showed altered levels in the stool of CRC patients in both cohorts (adjusted $P < .05$). A 5-miRNA signature, including miR-149-3p, miR-607-5p, miR-1246, miR-4488, and miR-6777-5p, distinguished patients from control individuals (area under the curve [AUC], 0.86; 95% confidence interval [CI], 0.79–0.94) and was validated in an independent cohort (AUC, 0.96; 95% CI, 0.92–1.00). The signature classified control individuals from patients with low-/high-stage tumors and advanced adenomas (AUC, 0.82; 95% CI, 0.71–0.97). Tissue miRNA profiles mirrored those of

stool samples, and fecal profiles of different gastrointestinal diseases highlighted miRNAs specifically dysregulated in CRC. miRNA profiles in fecal immunochemical test leftover samples showed good correlation with those of stool collected in preservative buffer, and their alterations could be detected in adenoma or CRC patients. **CONCLUSIONS:** Our comprehensive fecal miRNome analysis identified a signature accurately discriminating cancer aimed at improving noninvasive diagnosis and screening strategies.

Keywords: Stool MicroRNAs; Noninvasive Diagnosis; Small RNA Sequencing; Colorectal Cancer; Precancerous Lesions; Machine Learning.

In the last 30 years, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in understanding the epidemiology, etiology, molecular biology, and various clinical aspects of colorectal cancer (CRC).¹ However, approximately 1.8 million new cases are annually diagnosed worldwide, posing CRC as the third most common incident cancer. Moreover, although early-stage tumors can be efficiently treated, CRC is still the second-leading cause of cancer-related death, with 900,000 deaths in 2018.^{2,3} Hence, the early detection of preclinical cancers or precursor lesions is a desirable objective, because it may strongly increase the chances for successful treatment and cure.

Most European countries have implemented CRC screening programs based on noninvasive stool tests for detecting fecal occult blood, mainly the fecal immunochemical test (FIT).^{4,5} FIT selects individuals showing a higher prevalence of CRC and advanced benign neoplasia but has limited sensitivity to recognize advanced colorectal adenomas (AAs).⁶ Colonoscopy is also used in an opportunistic screening setting and detects both cancer and premalignant lesions but is bothersome and invasive, as well as costly for the health system.⁷ Despite the fact that FIT-based screening programs are undeniably efficient in detecting premalignant growths and providing an earlier diagnosis, successfully reducing CRC burden, only approximately 5% of individuals who receive a colonoscopy based on FIT results will end up with a significant lesion (CRC or AA). Stool tests show a relatively low specificity, resulting in a high number of false positives and a considerable number of unnecessary colonoscopies.⁸ Complementing traditional screening stool tests with other noninvasively detectable fecal molecular biomarkers could improve the triage of individual for colonoscopy, reducing the costs for the health systems in terms of the number of examinations and decreasing the risks and discomfort for patients.^{9,10}

Identifying reliable biomarkers is not trivial, given the ensemble of hidden interactions between molecules and patient-specific clinical/anamnestic characteristics. However, machine learning (ML) algorithms have been defined to reveal significant features able to accurately discriminate groups of individuals. In particular, explainable ML approaches allow the identification of novel molecular biomarker signatures to improve early CRC diagnosis, as

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Current screening programs for the noninvasive detection of colorectal cancer (CRC) are based on fecal tests with limited accuracy for early malignancies or precancerous lesions. Evaluating microRNA (miRNA) profiles in stool could improve the screening strategy.

NEW FINDINGS

Investigating the whole miRNome in stool and with ad hoc explainable machine learning, we identified in 2 independent cohorts 5 miRNAs that could accurately classify CRC patients from control individuals. The signature was validated in a third cohort and assayed in fecal immunochemical test leftover samples from the screening.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the large number of samples overall collected and sequenced, the disease subtypes investigated were still not exhaustive of the heterogeneity in CRC and adenomas. Although we showed the feasibility of the molecular analysis, the investigation on screening samples still represents a pilot approach.

CLINICAL RESEARCH RELEVANCE

The investigation of the whole miRNome in all of the cohorts led to a comprehensive overview of the fecal miRNA profiles, providing the possibility to accurately single out those signals that may enhance the accuracy of the screening. The identified miRNA signature accurately discriminates different stages of CRC development, and it constitutes a coadjuvant to current screening programs for a noninvasive, accurate diagnosis.

BASIC RESEARCH RELEVANCE

New and previously reported miRNAs altered in CRC are detectable in stool and may highlight a novel role of these molecules released in the gut in physiologic and pathologic conditions.

recently demonstrated for fecal microbial species¹¹ and urinary proteins.¹²

The analysis of small noncoding RNAs in fecal samples has attracted interest with an excellent biological and analytic rationale for its application in large-scale clinical investigations.¹³ Tumor-secreted small noncoding RNAs are directly and continuously released into the intestinal lumen,

* Authors share co-first authorship; § Authors share co-senior authorship.

Abbreviations used in this paper: AA, advanced colorectal adenoma; AUC, area under the curve; BMI, body mass index; CRC, colorectal cancer; CZ, Czech; DEmiRNA, differentially expressed microRNA; EV, extracellular vesicle; FIT, fecal immunochemical test; GI, gastrointestinal; IBD, inflammatory bowel disease; IT, Italian; miRNA, microRNA; ML, machine learning; nAA, nonadvanced adenoma; qPCR, quantitative polymerase chain reaction; RNA-seq, RNA sequencing; RT, reverse transcription.

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and their profiles may be altered in concomitance with the presence of CRC and precancerous lesions. Moreover, small noncoding RNAs, such as microRNAs (miRNAs), are remarkably stable, enabling their accurate detection in stool without the need for special stabilization or logistic requirements.¹⁴ miRNAs are suitable biomarkers in surrogate tissues and biofluids because their levels are altered in specific pathologic states,¹⁵ in the presence of precursor lesions,¹⁶ and in CRC development.^{17–19} In addition, specific fecal miRNA alterations have been associated with the gut microbiome composition²⁰ and proposed as noninvasive CRC biomarkers.²¹

So far, comprehensive miRNA profiling by small RNA sequencing (small RNA-seq) has been mainly performed on tumor tissues or plasma.^{21,22} In contrast, studies on fecal samples investigated few miRNAs in relation to CRC, typically in small cohorts and without taking into account their demographic characteristics.²³ In this respect, studies on the whole fecal miRNome showed that different lifestyles and dietary habits might critically affect specific miRNA levels.^{24,25} In addition, limited evidence is available on stool miRNA profiles in relation to patient clinicopathologic characteristics, such as specific CRC stages, precancerous lesions or other gastrointestinal (GI) diseases, except for the reported pleiotropic dysregulation of miR-21-5p in several diseases.²⁶ Therefore, an miRNA signature for CRC detection derived from a comprehensive fecal miRNome analysis across multiple populations is currently lacking.

This multicenter study aimed to explore, by deep sequencing, the miRNA profiles in stool samples that best characterize CRC patients from control individuals and distinguish colorectal adenomas or other GI diseases. The analyses were performed in different independent cohorts adopting the same protocol for participant recruitment, sample collection, and small RNA-seq experiments/analyses. An integrated explainable ML strategy identified a fecal miRNA signature distinguishing CRC patients from control individuals, and the results were validated in an additional cohort. Finally, altered miRNAs in stool were also investigated in FIT-positive leftover samples collected within a population-based CRC screening program.

Methods

Stool Study Cohorts

Italian cohort. Stool specimens as well as clinical and demographic data were collected from 317 individuals recruited in a hospital-based study in Vercelli, Italy (Table 1). Based on the results of complete colonoscopy examination, participants were classified into (1) 89 sporadic CRC patients, (2) 74 polyp patients (6 hyperplastic polyps, 20 nonadvanced adenomas [nAAs] and 48 AAs; serrated lesions were excluded because there were too few), (3) 49 individuals with a GI disease (6 Crohn's disease, 9 ulcerative colitis, 14 diverticulitis, 7 diverticulosis, 13 hemorrhoidal disease), and (4) 105 colonoscopy-negative control individuals. AAs were defined based on the presence of high-grade dysplasia, villous component, or lesion size of >1 cm as defined by Zarchy and Ershoff.²⁷ Of this cohort, 93 stool samples (from 29 CRC patients, 27 polyps, 13 patients with a GI disease, and 24 colonoscopy-

negative control individuals) have been used and described previously in other studies.^{11,28,29}

Czech cohort. Stool specimens as well as clinical and demographic data were collected from 162 Czech individuals recruited in 2 hospitals in Prague and 1 in Plzen, Czech Republic (Table 1). Based on colonoscopy results, participants were divided in (1) 66 CRC patients, (2) 28 polyp patients (9 hyperplastic polyps, 13 nAAs, 6 AAs; no serrated lesions were collected), (3) 32 patients with other GI diseases (3 Crohn's disease, 11 ulcerative colitis, 17 diverticulosis, 1 unclassified inflammatory bowel disease [IBD]); and (4) 36 colonoscopy-negative individuals.

Validation cohort. Stool specimens from 141 CRC patients recruited in a hospital in Brno, Czech Republic, and 80 stool samples of healthy volunteers contributing to science were included. These participants were previously described in other studies: the CRC population is described by Zwinsova et al³⁰ but here is sequenced for the first time for small RNA-seq; healthy volunteers are a part of the cohorts described and sequenced for small noncoding RNAs by Tarallo et al²⁴ and Francavilla et al.³¹

Fecal immunochemical test cohort. FIT buffer leftover samples from 185 individuals with a positive test result were collected within the CRC screening for the Piedmont Region (Italy). Based on colonoscopy results, participants were classified as control individuals (n = 53), AA (n = 80), nAA (n = 30), or CRC (n = 22). Among them, 57 individuals also provided stool samples before undergoing colonoscopy.

More details on the cohorts included in the study are given in the [Supplementary Materials](#). The local ethics committees of Azienda Ospedaliera SS. Antonio e Biagio e C. Arrigo of Alessandria (Italy, protocol no. Colorectal miRNA CEC2014), AOU Città della salute e della Scienza di Torino (Italy), the Institute of Experimental Medicine of Prague (Czech Republic), Masaryk Memorial Cancer Institute (protocol no. 2018/865/MOU), and Masaryk University of Brno (Czech Republic, protocol no. EKV-2019-044) approved the study. All patients gave written informed consent following the Declaration of Helsinki before participating in the study.

Other Analyzed Biospecimens

For 132 patients having surgery at the Vercelli hospital, primary tissues (102 CRC and 30 adenomas) paired with adjacent colonic mucosa were collected.

Blood samples were collected from 210 out of 317 Italian (IT) cohort participants, stratified into patients with CRC (n = 52), AAs (n = 19), nAAs (n = 15), hyperplastic polyps (n = 6), and other GI diseases (n = 39), and control individuals (n = 79).

Sample Collection

Naturally evacuated fecal samples were obtained from participants previously instructed to self-collect the specimen at home. Samples were collected in nucleic acid collection and transport tubes with RNA stabilizing solution (Norgen Biotek Corp). Stool aliquots (200 μ L) were stored at -80°C until RNA extraction.²⁰ For the validation cohort of CRC patients from Brno, stool samples were collected from untreated patients before the scheduled surgery with DNA-free swabs (Deltalab). Patients performed the collection at home and returned the samples to the hospital, where they were immediately frozen at -80°C until further processing.

Table 1. Study Population Characteristics

Covariate	IT cohort (n = 317)					CZ cohort (n = 162)				
	Controls (n = 105)	Other GI disease (n = 49)	Polyps (n = 74)	CRC (n = 89)	<i>P</i> value	Controls (n = 36)	Other GI disease (n = 32)	Polyps (n = 28)	CRC (n = 66)	<i>P</i> value
Age, y										
Average ± SD	59.6 ± 10.7	56.7 ± 13.6	66.2 ± 9.1	70.6 ± 9.7	7.34E-13	57.8 ± 10.5	58.7 ± 9.4	63.1 ± 8.4	68.0 ± 11.2	8.34E-06
Range	39–84	30–82	42–93	50–88		40–76	41–75	48–82	40–88	
Sex, n										
Male	52	23	41	52	4.83E-01	14	16	14	46	1.74E-02
Female	53	26	33	37		22	16	14	20	
BMI, kg/m ²										
Average	25.3 ± 4.5	25.0 ± 3.4	25.0 ± 3.7	25.8 ± 5.1	9.02E-01	28.2 ± 6.1	28.8 ± 7.0	29.0 ± 3.5	27.1 ± 5.4	1.61E-01
Range	15.4–40.0	19.5–33.7	19.5–36.0	16.0–44.1		21.0–43.9	22.0–60.9	22.6–34.7	16.9–47.6	
Smoking status, n										
Nonsmoker	31	17	18	35	2.16E-01	25	24	13	32	2.53E-02
Ex-smoker	16	6	20	15		3	0	8	12	
Smoker	38	12	22	31		8	8	6	18	
NA	20	14	14	7		0	0	1	4	
Localization, n ^a										
Proximal			19	37				16	16	
Distal			11	20				11	15	
Rectum			18	28				6	34	
NA			32	6				0	1	
Polyp type, n										
Tubular adenoma			18					19		
Tubulovillous adenoma			12					0		
Tubular sessile			5					0		
Hyperplastic polyp			6					9		
NA			31					0		
Adenoma type, n										
AA			48					6		
nAA			20					13		
pT (combined), n										
T1–T2				27					20	
T3–T4				54					43	
Tis				0					1	
NA				7					2	

Table 1. Continued

Covariate	IT cohort (n = 317)					CZ cohort (n = 162)				
	Controls (n = 105)	Other GI disease (n = 49)	Polyps (n = 74)	CRC (n = 89)	<i>P</i> value	Controls (n = 36)	Other GI disease (n = 32)	Polyps (n = 28)	CRC (n = 66)	<i>P</i> value
AJCC staging, n										
I				18					16	
II				24					16	
III				29					15	
IV				5					14	
NA				13					5	
Grade, n										
G1–G2				39					44	
G3				38					18	
NA				12					4	
Metastasis (lymph node or distal), n										
No				49					52	
Yes				31					11	
NA				9					3	
Other GI diseases, n										
Crohn's disease		6					3			
Ulcerative rectocolitis		9					11			
Diverticulosis		7					17			
Diverticulitis		14					0			
Hemorrhoidal disease		13								
NA		0					1			

AJCC, American Joint Committee on Cancer; NA, not available; pT, post-operative tumor size; SD, standard deviation.

^aTotals may be different from the total number of individuals in each category because of the presence of multiple lesions.

For the FIT cohort, leftovers from FIT tubes (~1.2 mL) used for automated tests (OC-sensor, Eiken Chemical Co) for hemoglobin quantification were stored at -80°C until use.

Plasma samples were obtained from 8 mL of blood centrifuged for 10 minutes at 1000 revolutions/minute, and aliquots were stored at -80°C until use. Plasma extracellular vesicles (EVs) were precipitated from 200 μL of plasma using ExoQuick (System Biosciences) according to Sabo et al.³²

Paired tumor/adenoma tissue and adjacent nonmalignant mucosa (at least 20 cm distant) were obtained from CRC and adenoma patients during surgical resection and immediately immersed in RNAlater solution (Ambion). All samples were stored at -80°C until use.

Total RNA Extraction, Small RNA Sequencing Library Preparation, and Quantitative Real-Time Polymerase Chain Reaction

Total RNA from stool and FIT leftover samples was extracted using the Stool Total RNA Purification Kit (Norgen Biotek Corp) as previously described.²⁰ Total RNA from plasma EVs was extracted as described in Sabo et al.³² For tissue samples, total RNA was extracted using QIAzol (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Small RNAs were converted into barcoded complementary DNA libraries for Illumina single-end sequencing (75 cycles on HiSeq4000 or NextSeq500, Illumina Inc) as previously described.²⁴

Candidate miRNA biomarkers were replicated in stool samples using the miRCURY LNA miRNA PCR Assays (Qiagen). Reverse transcription (RT) was performed using the miRCURY LNA RT kit (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer's instructions. All reactions were run on an ABI Prism 7900 Sequence Detection System (Applied Biosystems). Analyses were performed as described by Moisoiu et al.³³ More details are provided in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

Computational and Statistical Analyses

Small RNA-seq analyses were performed as described by Tarallo et al,²⁰ considering a curated miRNA reference based on miRBase v22 and including a characterization of novel miRNAs ([Supplementary Table 1A](#)). Differential expression analyses were performed using DESeq2 v1.22.2.³⁴ Functional enrichment analysis was performed with RBiomirGS v0.2.12,³⁵ considering the validated miRNA-target interactions. A generalized linear model was defined by considering the miRNA levels as the dependent variable and participant age, sex, body mass index (BMI), smoking habit, and cohort as independent variables.

An ML strategy was implemented to identify the optimal fecal miRNA signature to accurately classify CRC patients from control individuals. The ML approach is composed of 3 phases: data preparation, feature selection, and classification. (More details are provided in the [Supplementary Materials](#).) The signature was determined by considering an increasing number of miRNAs prioritized by filter and classifier-embedded methods applied to the training set (70% of the IT/Czech [CZ] cohorts). The optimal set of miRNAs providing the highest area under the curve (AUC) was selected and further tested by 100 stratified 10-fold cross-validations, first on the remaining 30% of the IT/CZ cohorts excluded from the training set and then on the validation cohort. The training and test sets were defined by a stratified selection to maintain the same

proportion of participants characterized by specific covariates (ie, age, sex, cohort, disease status, and tumor staging).

Other statistical tests were performed using the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis (continuous variables) or chi-square (categorical variables) methods. The Benjamini-Hochberg method was used for multiple-testing correction. Results were considered significant at $P < .05$.

Study Design

This study was designed to define and characterize a fecal miRNA signature that accurately distinguishes CRC patients from control individuals ([Figure 1](#)). The applied analysis strategy included the following phases.

Fecal miRNome profiling and biomarker discovery.

- Detection of stool miRNAs with altered levels in CRC: miRNA profiles from small RNA-seq and metadata were used for a differential expression analysis between CRC patients and control individuals of both the IT cohort and CZ cohort, independently. The overlapping differentially expressed miRNAs (DEmiRNAs) from both cohorts were the input of the next step.
- Feature selection and definition of an miRNA predictive signature: An ML strategy identified an miRNA signature composed of the minimal set of DEmiRNAs that better distinguished CRC patients from control individuals by a stratified cross-validation procedure.
- Validation of the miRNA predictive signature. The signature performance was estimated in the validation cohort by a stratified cross-validation procedure.

Fecal differentially expressed microRNA characterization in different sample types and diseases.

- Assessment of DEmiRNA profiles in different biospecimens and clinical situations: DEmiRNA levels were evaluated in (1) tumor/adenoma tissue and adjacent mucosa, (2) plasma EVs of CRC patients and control individual, and (3) fecal samples from patients with a GI disease or precancerous lesions to identify CRC-specific or commonly altered miRNAs. In particular, the miRNA signature from (1) was also tested in the discrimination of patients with precancerous lesions (AA or nAA), alone or in combination with CRC, from control individuals.
- Testing the DEmiRNA levels in samples from a CRC screening program: DEmiRNA profiles were explored in parallel in FIT buffer leftovers and in stool collected in tubes with RNA stabilizing solution. Subsequently, stool DEmiRNA levels were analyzed in the leftover samples of the FIT cohort by stratifying participants based on the colonoscopy results.

A detailed description of the methods is provided in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

Results

Stool MicroRNA Profiles Are Altered in Colorectal Cancer Patients: Evidence From 2 European Populations

In agreement with previous studies,^{20,24,31} an average of 479 (range, 86–1516) miRNAs were detected in each stool

sample by small RNA-seq (further details in the [Supplementary Materials](#) and [Supplementary Table 1B](#) and [C](#)). The age- and sex-adjusted differential expression analysis between CRC patients and control individuals was performed independently on both the IT cohort and CZ cohort identifying, respectively, 250 and 29 DE miRNAs (median expression, >20 reads; adjusted $P < .05$) ([Figure 2A](#) and [Supplementary Table 2A](#)).

Twenty-five stool DE miRNAs were in common between both cohorts ([Figure 2B](#), [Table 2](#), and [Supplementary Table 2A](#)), all with a coherent expression trend (20 up-regulated and 5 down-regulated; $\rho = 0.75$; $P < .001$) ([Figure 2B](#)). The alteration of these fecal miRNA levels in relation to CRC was further supported by a generalized linear model analysis adjusted for cohort, age, sex, BMI, and smoking habits: 22 out of the 25 DE miRNAs remained significantly associated ($P < .05$) ([Supplementary Table 2B](#)). DE miRNA profiles were further explored in relation to CRC patient clinical data ([Figure 2C](#) and [D](#)). The levels of 3 down-regulated miRNAs (miR-607-5p, miR-677-5p, and miR-922-5p) significantly decreased with increasing tumor size ([Figure 2D](#)). miR-922-5p also significantly decreased in patients with advanced disease stages or lymph node invasion ([Figure 2D](#) and [Supplementary Table 2C](#)). Conversely, increasing levels of 19 out of the 20 up-regulated miRNAs in CRC were observed along with tumor size, with miR-1246, miR-1290, miR-148-3p, and miR-194-5p significantly related to this parameter. The levels of 11 CRC-up-regulated miRNAs significantly increased in patients with lymph node invasion. In addition, the levels of 11 miRNAs were significantly higher in samples from patients with rectal compared to colon cancers ([Figure 2D](#)).

Functional analysis of DE miRNA target genes showed their involvement in cancer-related processes, including cell cycle regulation and DNA repair, particularly for up-regulated miRNA targets ([Supplementary Table 2D](#) and [E](#)).

A Fecal MicroRNA Signature Distinguishes Colorectal Cancer Patients From Control Individuals

An explainable ML strategy was implemented to identify the minimal set of miRNAs as a signature for CRC detection ([Supplementary Figure 1](#) and [Supplementary Materials](#)). The pipeline was applied on the 25 DE miRNA profiles and considering 70% of the IT cohort and CZ cohort as the training set ([Supplementary Table 3A](#)). The best miRNA signature distinguishing CRC patients from control individuals included miR-607-5p, miR-6777-5p, miR-4488, miR-149-3p, and miR-1246 (AUC, 0.87 ± 0.01) ([Figure 2E](#)). This set of 5 miRNAs represented the best combination of noncorrelated molecules with the highest discriminative power. Moreover, they showed a good performance in the classification of the 30% of participants excluded from the training set (AUC, 0.81 ± 0.01) ([Figure 2F](#)). The classification improved after the inclusion of sex and age in the model (AUC, 0.86 ± 0.01) ([Table 3](#) and [Supplementary Table 3B](#)). The performance of the signature was again tested in the validation cohort, where it remained

fairly similar, irrespective (AUC, 0.91 ± 0.01) or not (AUC, 0.96 ± 0.01) of age and sex ([Figure 2F](#), [Table 3](#), and [Supplementary Table 3B](#)).

By stratifying patients for CRC stage, the same 5-miRNA signature accurately distinguished patients with stages III–IV CRC (validation cohort: AUC, 0.96 ± 0.01 and 0.94 ± 0.01 , respectively, including or not age and sex), or CRC stages I–II from control individuals (validation cohort: AUC, 0.95 ± 0.01 and 0.87 ± 0.01 , respectively, including or not age and sex) ([Table 3](#) and [Supplementary Table 3B](#)).

The panel of 5 miRNAs of the signature identified by sequencing was tested by RT quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) in RNA isolated from a subset of 96 stool samples equally distributed among IT and CZ cohort participants, with a balanced number of CRC patients and control individuals ([Supplementary Figure 2A](#)). The 5 miRNAs were detected in all samples, also using this second method. The normalized levels from RT-qPCR showed patterns comparable to those provided by sequencing, except for miR-4488 ([Supplementary Figure 2A](#)). In particular, miR-1246 and miR-149-3p levels were significantly increased in patient samples. The same method was used to test the 5 miRNA levels in RNA from 8 FIT leftover samples of participants with a positive FIT result at the CRC screening: all miRNAs were also detected in this biospecimen (data not shown).

For 4 signature miRNAs, a concordant expression pattern was observed between small RNA-seq and RT-qPCR normalized levels, particularly for miR-1246 ($\rho = 0.63$, $P < .001$) and miR-149-3p ($\rho = 0.26$, $P < .05$) ([Supplementary Table 3C](#) and [Supplementary Figure 2B](#)). Only the levels of miR-4488 were characterized by a negative correlation ($\rho = -0.48$, $P < .001$) in CRC patients only.

Stool Differentially Expressed MicroRNA Profiles Mirror Those of Primary Colorectal Cancer and Adenoma Tissues

A paired differential expression analysis was performed between tumor tissues and matched adjacent mucosa collected from 102 CRC patients. Among the 25 stool DE miRNAs, 14 were differentially expressed (adjusted $P < .05$) in this comparison ([Figure 3A](#) and [Supplementary Table 4A](#)), with 7 miRNAs (miR-21-5p, miR-1246, miR-1290, miR-148a-3p, miR-4488, miR-149-3p, miR-12114) up-regulated in tumor tissues coherently with their increase in CRC patient stool. Among them, 3 (miR-1246, miR-4488, miR-149-3p) were included in our miRNA signature. The 5 miRNAs significantly down-regulated in CRC patient stool (miR-607-5p, miR-6777-5p, included in the 5-miRNA signature; miR-6076; miR-922-5p; and miR-9899) were poorly expressed (normalized reads, <20) in both tumor and adjacent tissues ([Supplementary Table 4A](#)).

The differential analysis performed on 30 adenoma tissues matched with adjacent mucosa showed miR-21-5p, miR-1290, miR-148a-3p, and miR-200b-3p as significantly up-regulated in adenoma tissues (adjusted $P < .001$), whereas let-7i-5p and miR-4508 were down-regulated ([Figure 3A](#) and [Supplementary Table 4A](#)).

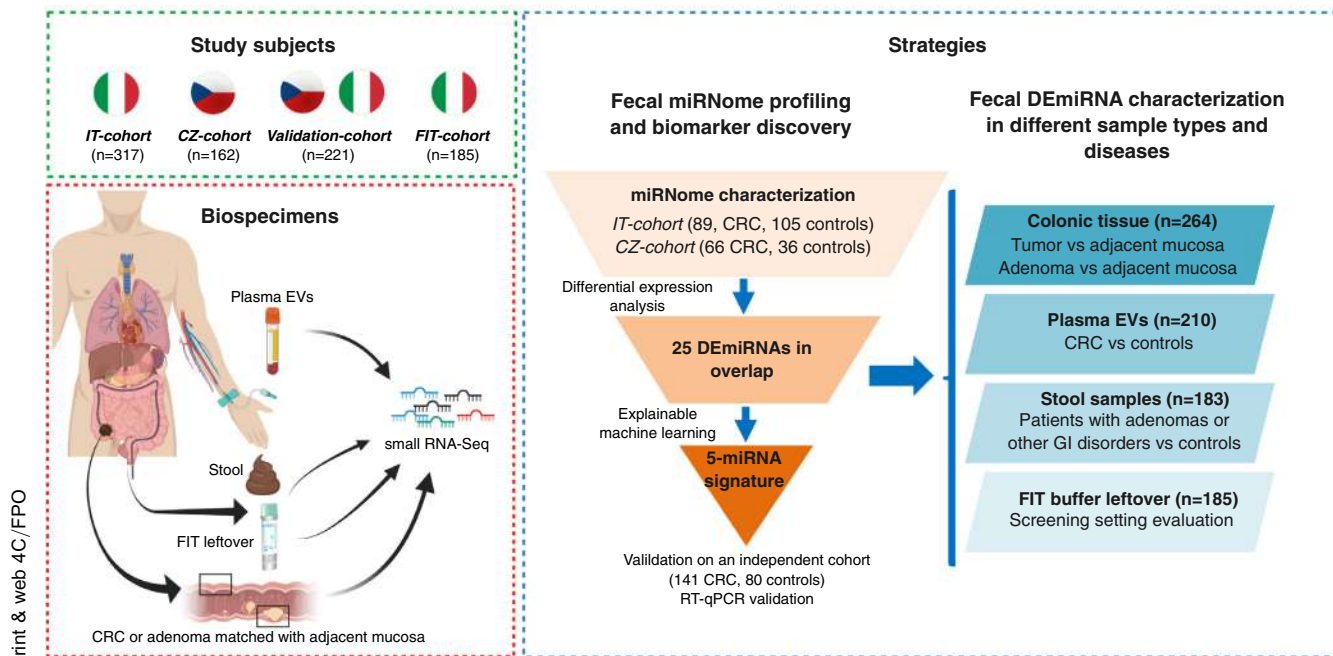


Figure 1. Representation of the study design.

Few MicroRNA Levels Are Dysregulated in Circulating Extracellular Vesicles of Colorectal Cancer Patients

Small RNA-seq was performed on RNA isolated from plasma EVs collected from 210 participants in the IT cohort, detecting an average of 309 (range, 252–1213) miRNAs in these samples (Supplementary Table 4B). Among the 25 DEmiRNAs identified in stool samples of CRC patients, both miR-1246 and miR-4488 emerged as coherently significantly dysregulated in plasma EVs, although the latter was associated with low levels (normalized reads, <20) (Supplementary Table 4B). Another miRNA (miR-150-5p) was differentially expressed between CRC patients and control individuals (Supplementary Table 4B).

A Subset of Stool Differentially Expressed MicroRNAs Is Specifically Dysregulated in Colorectal Cancer Patients but Not in Those With Other GI Diseases

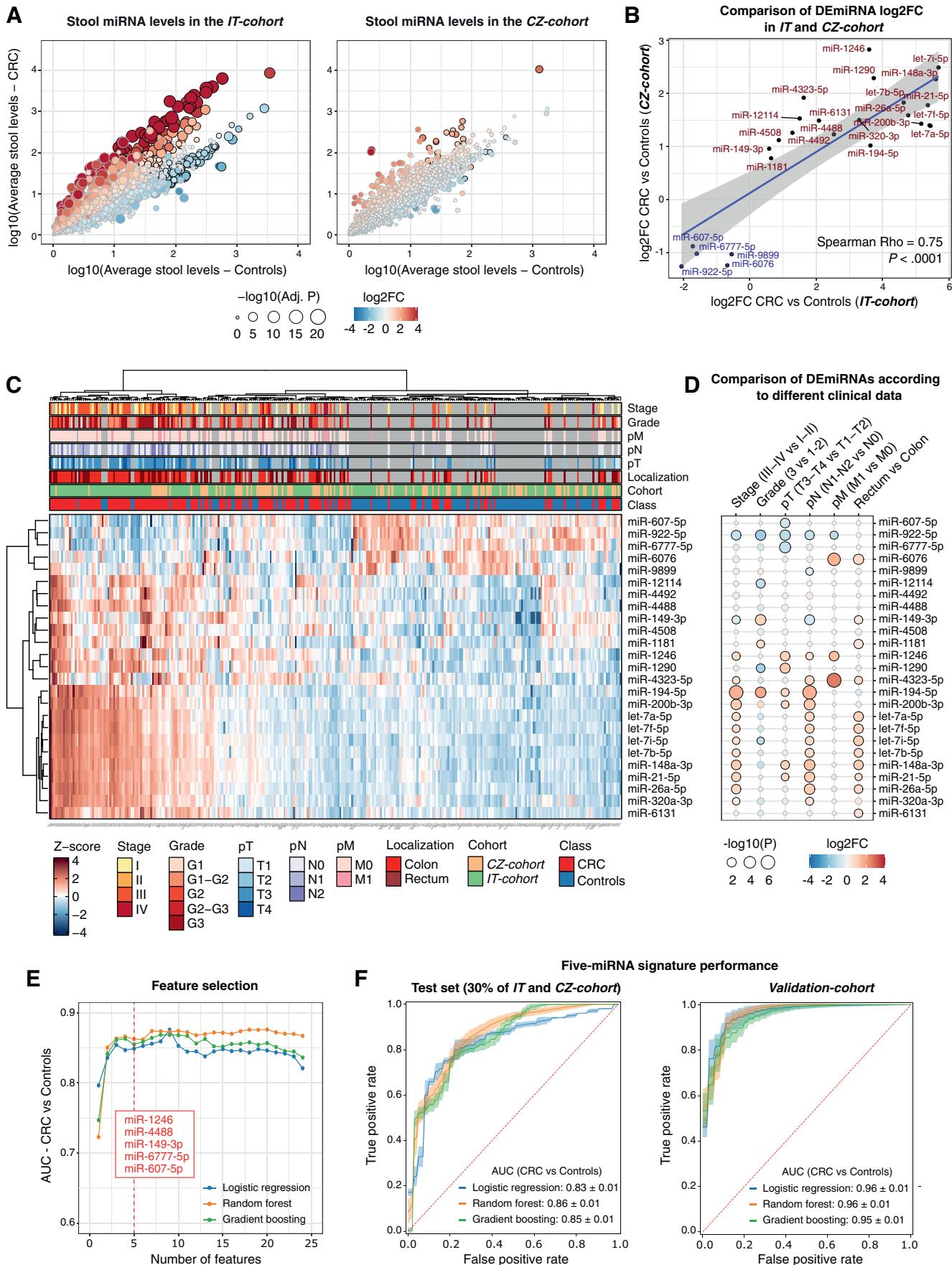
The CRC DEmiRNAs were further compared with those from patients with GI disorders and other precancerous lesions in both the IT and CZ cohorts. The age-, sex-, and cohort-adjusted differential expression analysis between each disease category and control individuals showed that the levels of 21 out of the 25 CRC DEmiRNAs were significantly altered in at least another GI disease (Figure 3B). Notably, in patients with ulcerative colitis, diverticulitis, nAA, or AA, 60% of the CRC DEmiRNAs were also dysregulated (Figure 3B and Supplementary Table 4C). The lowest number of dysregulated miRNAs was observed in patients with Crohn's disease (2 miRNAs) or diverticulosis (5 miRNAs), whereas no DEmiRNAs were found in patients with hyperplastic polyps.

Considering the 5 miRNAs constituting our predictive signature to distinguish CRC patients from control individuals, miR-6777-5p was not differentially expressed (compared to control individuals) in any other GI disease, miR-149-3p was significantly up-regulated only in patients with AA, and miR-607-5p was significantly down-regulated in patients with AA or ulcerative colitis compared to control individuals (Figure 3B and Supplementary Table 4C). Conversely, miR-4488 and miR-1246 stool levels significantly increased in patients with diverticulosis, ulcerative colitis, diverticulitis, or AA, with the latter miRNA also increased in Crohn's disease patients.

The identified signature was also used to classify AA and nAA patients from control individuals. Specifically, the miRNA signature was able to distinguish AA from control participants, both including (AUC, 0.82 ± 0.01) or not (AUC, 0.77 ± 0.02) age and sex in the analysis, as well as nAA (AUC, 0.80 ± 0.03 and 0.77 ± 0.02 , respectively, including or not age and sex). Finally, patients with either CRC or AA were accurately distinguished from control individuals (including or not age and sex: AUC, 0.84 ± 0.01 and 0.81 ± 0.01 , respectively) but not between them (CRC vs AA: AUC, 0.68 ± 0.02) (Table 3 and Supplementary Table 3B).

MicroRNAs Are Detectable in Fecal Immunochemical Test Leftover Samples by Small RNA Sequencing

The sequencing analysis was extended to 185 available leftover samples of the FIT cohort, still detecting an average of 618 miRNAs in each sample (Supplementary Table 1B). All of the 25 stool DEmiRNAs were detected in this type of sample. Considering the threshold adopted by our pipeline (ie, a minimum of 20 reads), 4 (miR-607-5p, miR-1246, let-



7a-3p, miR-922) were detected in all samples, and 18 were detected in more than half (Figure 3C and Supplementary Table 4D). Three miRNAs included in our signature (miR-607-5p, miR-1246, miR-6777-5p) were detected in more than 95% of samples (Figure 3C), whereas miR-149-3p and miR-4488 were detected in 112 (57.4%) and 57 (30.8%) samples, respectively.

Then, miRNA levels in FIT cohort samples were explored by stratifying participants according to the colonoscopy results. Comparing the levels of the 25 stool DEmiRNAs between 46 participants with a negative colonoscopy result (excluding 7 participants with high hemoglobin levels) and 22 patients with CRC, 8 (let-7a-5p, let-7i-5p, miR-148a-3p, let-7b-5p, miR-320a-3p, miR-12114, miR-21-5p, miR-607-5p) were significantly different (adjusted $P < .05$) (Supplementary Table 4E and Figure 3C). Correlating the miRNA levels in FIT leftovers with the hemoglobin levels, only let-7b-5p showed a significant but limited correlation ($\rho = 0.16$, $P < .05$) (Supplementary Table 4F).

Interestingly, miR-1246 and miR-607-5p were characterized, respectively, by increasing and decreasing levels, from colonoscopy-negative participants to CRC patients, as observed in the stool of the 3 case-control cohorts initially investigated for the miRNA signature identification (Figure 3D).

Comparable miRNA expression levels and variability were observed between paired FIT leftover/stool samples from 57 individuals analyzed by small RNA-seq ($\rho = 0.70$, $P < .001$) (Supplementary Table 1B and Supplementary Figure 2C). Considering the levels of 468 miRNAs detected in at least half of FIT leftover samples, 99.6% were coherent with those in stool, with 282 miRNAs significantly correlated (average $\rho = 0.39$, $P < .05$) (Figure 3C, Supplementary Figure 2C, and Supplementary Table 4D). In both sample types, miR-3125-3p, miR-6075-5p, and miR-1246 were characterized by the highest levels, and miR-3125-3p was detected in all samples and associated with the lowest expression variability, in agreement with our previous findings in stool samples of 335 control individuals²⁵ (Supplementary Figure 3A and Supplementary Table 4D). The levels of all 25 stool DEmiRNAs positively correlated between the 2 specimens, with 13 of them reaching statistical significance (including miR-607-5p, miR-1246, miR-149-3p, and miR-4488 from the 5-miRNA

signature; $P < .05$) (Figure 3C and Supplementary Table 4D).

The 5-miRNA signature analyzed in FIT buffer leftovers was finally tested for the classification of patients with CRC from control individuals considering the signature alone or in combination with patient age, sex, and FIT hemoglobin levels. The 5-miRNA signature alone showed comparable classification performance (AUC, 0.85) as using age, sex, and hemoglobin levels (AUC, 0.87), and the combination of both data provided the best classification results (AUC, 0.93) (Supplementary Table 3D).

Discussion

In the present study, to our knowledge, we performed the first large-scale profiling of the stool miRNome by deep sequencing of samples from patients with CRC, colorectal polyps, or other GI diseases and control individuals. Given the pervasive detection across multiple cohorts, we confirmed previous findings about fecal miRNA potential use as noninvasive molecular biomarkers²³ (Supplementary Table 1C and Supplementary Figure 3A). We also reported novel evidence on specific markers across different disease conditions. Notably, a fecal miRNA signature was able to accurately distinguish CRC patients from control individuals: both its ability to distinguish AA and its detection in FIT leftovers support future investigations for a use in CRC screening implementation.

In CRC patients, 25 fecal miRNAs emerged coherently altered in 2 independent cohorts. The profile of these miRNAs in stool reflected their altered expression in tumor tissue or adjacent colonic mucosa. More than half of such DEmiRNAs were already reported as altered in CRC, either in tissue or in various biofluids, including the up-regulated miR-21-5p, miR-148a-3p, miR-149-3p, miR-194-5p, miR-200b-3p, and miR-320a-3p (Supplementary Table 5A).^{23,36} Other miRNAs were associated with a disease for the first time by us; thus, further *in vitro* studies are needed to characterize the functional activity of these molecules and their involvement in CRC. Moreover, 3 DEmiRNAs identified in our study (miR-4323-5p, miR-607-5p, and miR-922-5p) are not currently annotated in the miRbase but were quantified based on the read mapping position within the miRNA hairpin. This is consistent with the need for

Figure 2. (A) Scatterplot reporting the stool miRNA average levels in CRC patients (*y*-axis) or control individuals (*x*-axis) from the IT cohort (*left*) or CZ cohort (*right*). The dot color represents the log₂ fold change (log₂FC) from the differential expression analyses between CRC and healthy individuals, and the size is proportional to the age, sex, and multiple-testing adjusted *P* values. (B) Scatterplot reporting the correlations of log₂FC of the 25 DEmiRNAs from the comparison between CRC and control individuals and in common between the IT cohort (*x*-axis) and the CZ cohort (*y*-axis). The up-regulated and down-regulated miRNAs are reported in red and blue, respectively. (C) Heatmap of stool DEmiRNA levels in CRC and control individuals of both cohorts. For each participant, the CRC stage and grade based on the American Joint Committee on Cancer system, presence of metastasis, lymph node invasion status (pN), tumor size (pT), tumor localization, cohort of origin, and disease status (CRC or control) are reported. (D) DEmiRNA levels comparing CRC patients stratified for clinical data. The dot color represents the log₂FC, and the dot size is proportional to the statistical significance. Black borders represent tests with $P < .05$. (E) Line plot reporting the ability of different combinations of feature selection methods and classifiers to perform the classification of CRC and control individuals. Each dot represents an AUC obtained using a different number of fecal DEmiRNAs in input. (F) Receiver operating characteristic curves obtained for the classification of CRC and control individuals using the identified miRNA signature. Data are reported for the 30% of participants excluded from the training set (*left*) and for the validation cohort (*right*). Adj., adjusted.

Table 2. Expression Levels and Fold Changes of the 25 Stool DE miRNAs in Common Between the IT and CZ Cohorts

ID	miRNA gene ID	Chromosome	Genomic context	Median levels, controls		Median levels, CRC		log ₂ FC		Benjamini-Hochberg adjusted <i>P</i> value ^a	
				IT cohort	CZ cohort	IT cohort	CZ cohort	IT cohort	CZ cohort	IT cohort	CZ cohort
let-7a-5p	MIRLET7A3	chr22	Intergenic	52.18	28.12	717.25	50.53	5.44	1.39	2.51E-24	1.05E-02
let-7b-5p	MIRLET7B	chr22	Intergenic	20.19	12.94	474.50	26.28	4.63	1.83	3.04E-19	6.54E-03
let-7f-5p	MIRLET7F1/MIRLET7F2	chr9/chrX	Intergenic/intron (<i>HUWE1</i>)	54.93	33.83	513.72	38.72	5.41	1.40	2.27E-27	1.05E-02
let-7i-5p	MIRLET7I	chr12	Partial overlap (<i>LINC01465</i>)	16.75	10.68	577.93	27.38	5.68	2.49	1.25E-23	6.54E-04
miR-1181	MIR1181	chr19	Exon (<i>CDC37</i>)	72.46	38.12	83.60	65.61	0.64	0.78	1.12E-02	4.63E-02
miR-12114	MIR12114	chr22	Intron (<i>PPP6R2</i>)	126.48	43.52	266.97	67.67	1.50	1.53	1.06E-07	4.71E-03
miR-1246	MIR1246	chr2	Intron (<i>LINC01117</i>)	909.33	568.34	2970.91	2364.91	3.59	2.83	9.63E-17	3.98E-06
miR-1290	MIR1290	chr1	Intron (<i>ALDH4A1</i>)	46.70	33.77	231.36	82.25	3.73	2.29	1.71E-21	4.13E-04
miR-148a-3p	MIR148A	chr7	Intergenic	19.17	11.56	425.27	25.82	5.60	2.27	4.19E-22	1.92E-03
miR-149-3p	MIR149	chr2	Intron (<i>GPC1</i>)	30.82	16.15	34.55	36.97	0.58	0.96	1.89E-02	3.92E-02
miR-194-5p	MIR194-1 / MIR194-2	chr1 / chr11	Intron (<i>IARS2</i>)/intergenic	69.85	59.45	206.31	68.59	3.63	1.02	3.44E-20	2.38E-02
miR-200b-3p	MIR200B	chr1	Intergenic	22.03	20.39	204.93	23.29	5.16	1.43	2.85E-23	2.01E-02
miR-21-5p	MIR21	chr17	Exon (<i>VMP1</i>)	37.68	42.23	557.19	63.56	5.36	1.78	1.15E-22	1.22E-02
miR-26a-5p	MIR26A1 / MIR26A2	chr3 / chr12	Intron (<i>CTDSPL</i>)/intron (<i>CTDSPL2</i>)	36.78	33.23	425.88	44.01	4.77	1.59	2.85E-23	1.68E-02
miR-320a-3p	MIR320A	chr8	Intergenic	27.26	16.26	271.19	33.93	3.29	1.50	1.01E-15	5.33E-03
miR-4323-5p	MIR4323	chr19	Intron (<i>POU2F2-AS1</i>)	67.11	29.50	73.39	58.96	1.62	1.92	8.88E-07	5.12E-03
miR-4488	MIR4499	chr11	Intergenic	113.12	50.73	342.90	73.67	2.53	1.23	2.94E-19	2.91E-02
miR-4492	MIR4492	chr11	Exon/intron (<i>BCL9L</i>)	25.04	14.50	34.76	22.24	1.28	1.26	1.62E-06	7.47E-03
miR-4508	MIR4508	chr15	Intergenic	94.44	34.09	98.33	86.36	0.87	1.12	3.85E-04	2.56E-02
miR-607-5p	MIR607	chr10	Intergenic	222.53	132.30	51.44	87.13	-1.72	-0.88	2.17E-18	6.54E-03
miR-6076	MIR6076	chr14	Intron (<i>LINC01588</i>)	32.14	23.14	15.10	15.54	-0.68	-1.24	1.05E-02	1.83E-02
miR-6131	MIR6131	chr5	Intergenic	31.05	15.50	103.66	22.39	2.08	1.49	2.19E-12	3.31E-03
miR-6777-5p	MIR6777	chr17	Intron (<i>SREBF1</i>)	235.14	140.02	42.53	80.22	-1.60	-1.02	4.60E-08	1.29E-02
miR-922-5p	MIR922	chr3	Exon (<i>RUBCN</i>)	335.74	206.43	71.51	89.57	-2.06	-1.26	1.99E-11	3.92E-02
miR-9899	MIR9899	chr2	Intron (<i>LYPD6</i>)	71.25	50.86	33.99	26.40	-0.55	-1.03	1.09E-02	4.00E-02

chr, chromosome; ID, identifier; log₂FC, log₂ fold change.^aAge- and sex-adjusted analysis.

Table 3. Performance of the 5-miRNA Predictive Signature in the Different Comparisons

Analysis details ^a		AUC (Mean ± SD)	95% CI	Accuracy	Sensitivity	Specificity	Precision		F1 score	
Comparison	Validation set						Disease	Control	Disease	Control
CRC vs control individuals	IT cohort + CZ cohort ^b	0.86 ± 0.01	0.79–0.94	0.78	0.78	0.78	0.82	0.74	0.80	0.76
CRC vs control individuals	Validation cohort	0.96 ± 0.01	0.92–1.00	0.89	0.90	0.88	0.93	0.83	0.91	0.85
Stage I–II CRC vs control individuals	IT cohort + CZ cohort ^b	0.86 ± 0.01	0.76–0.96	0.81	0.65	0.90	0.79	0.82	0.71	0.86
Stage I–II CRC vs control individuals	Validation cohort	0.95 ± 0.01	0.90–1.00	0.86	0.82	0.91	0.90	0.83	0.86	0.87
Stage III–IV CRC vs control individuals	IT cohort + CZ cohort ^b	0.88 ± 0.01	0.78–0.98	0.83	0.66	0.92	0.82	0.83	0.73	0.88
Stage III–IV CRC vs control individuals	Validation cohort	0.96 ± 0.01	0.91–1.00	0.85	0.75	0.94	0.91	0.82	0.82	0.88
CRC + AA vs control individuals	IT cohort + CZ cohort ^b	0.84 ± 0.01	0.77–0.91	0.77	0.83	0.67	0.81	0.70	0.81	0.69
AA vs control individuals	IT cohort + CZ cohort ^b	0.82 ± 0.01	0.71–0.97	0.79	0.61	0.86	0.62	0.85	0.62	0.85
AA + nAA vs control individuals	IT cohort + CZ cohort ^b	0.77 ± 0.02	0.65–0.89	0.73	0.62	0.81	0.67	0.77	0.64	0.79
nAA vs control individuals	IT cohort + CZ cohort ^b	0.80 ± 0.01	0.63–0.97	0.82	0.13	0.99	0.79	0.82	0.22	0.90
CRC vs AA	IT cohort + CZ cohort ^b	0.68 ± 0.02	0.54–0.82	0.76	0.92	0.25	0.80	0.49	0.85	0.33

^aAnalysis includes age and sex covariates.^bThirty percent of samples were excluded from the training and matched by age, sex, cohort, and CRC stage.

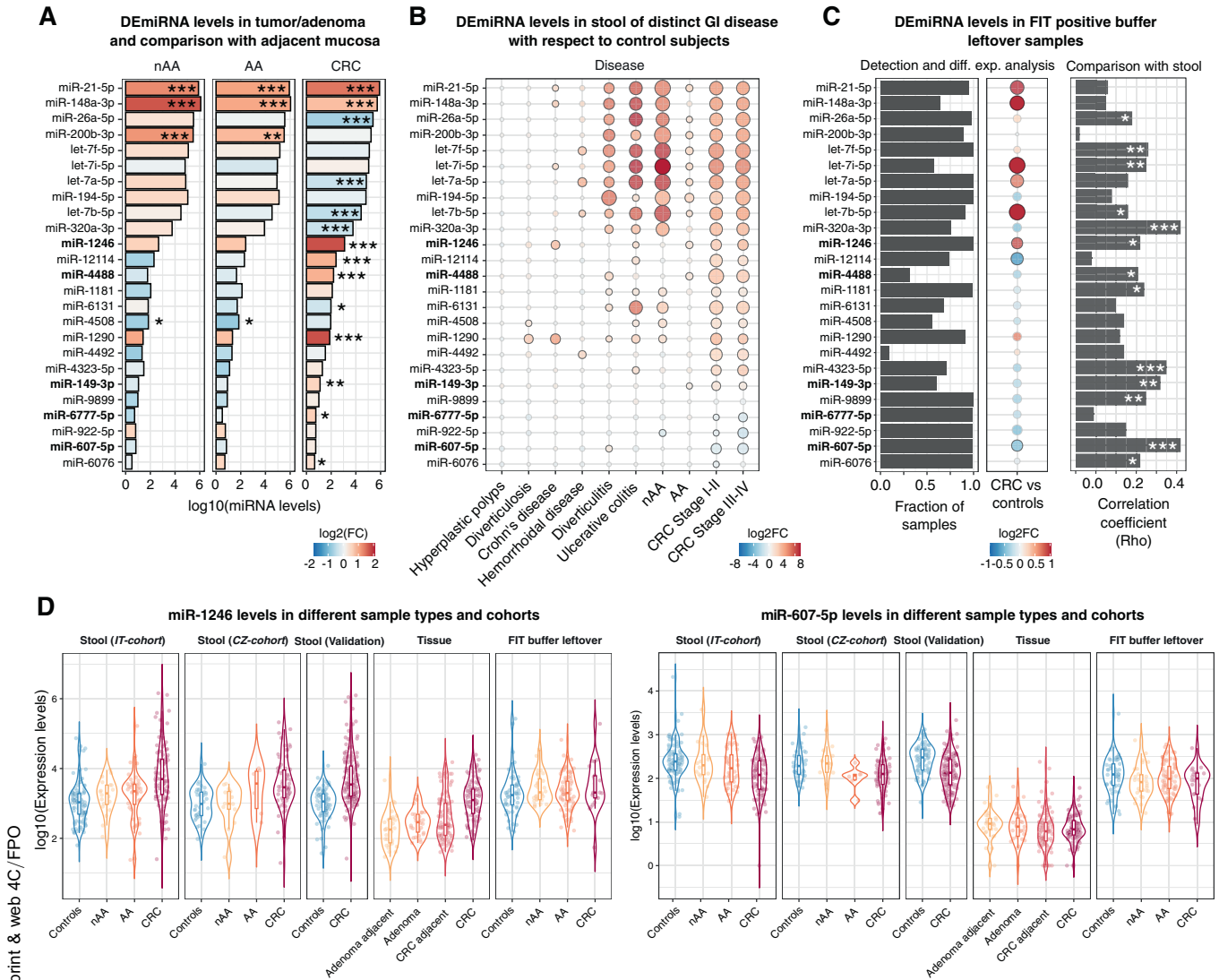


Figure 3. Characterization of the 25 fecal DE miRNAs in different sample types. (A) Bar plot reporting the median levels in tumor, AA, and nAA tissues. The color code represents the log₂ fold change (log₂FC) from the paired differential expression analysis between CRC/adenoma tissues and matched adjacent mucosa. ***Adjusted $P < .001$, **adjusted $P < .01$, *adjusted $P < .05$. (B) Comparison of miRNA levels in the stool of patients with CRC, colorectal adenomas, hyperplastic polyps, or other GI disorders with respect to control individuals. The dot color represents the log₂FC, and the dot size is proportional to the analysis significance. Black borders represent results with an adjusted $P < .05$. (C) DE miRNA analysis in FIT leftover samples from CRC screening. (Left) The fraction of FIT cohort samples in which each miRNA was detected and (center) results of the differential expression analysis between FIT-positive patients with CRC diagnosis based on colonoscopy outcome and those with a negative one. The dot color represents the log₂FC, and the dot size is proportional to the analysis significance. Black borders represent a DESeq2 Benjamini-Hochberg adjusted $P < .05$. (Right) Correlation coefficients between miRNA levels in stool and FIT buffer leftover samples from the same individuals (*** $P < .001$, * $P < .05$). (D) Box plots reporting miR-1246 and miR-607-5p levels in all study cohorts and biospecimens.

continuous refinement of miRBase annotations³⁷ and with evidence of new miRNAs reported by different groups.^{38,39}

Consistent with their overall higher/lower levels in the stool of CRC patients with respect to that of control individuals, the 25 DE miRNA levels also increased/decreased with tumor size and stage. On the other hand, they were characterized by coherent altered levels when patients were stratified by tumor localization (proximal, distal, rectum) (Supplementary Table 4C). This further supports the importance of these miRNAs in relationship with the disease, as confirmed by the overrepresentation of cancer-related

processes involving their validated target genes (Supplementary Table 2D and E).

Based on this initial evidence, we implemented an integrated explainable ML strategy to explore, among the 25 DE miRNAs, the minimal set of stool miRNAs able to accurately discriminate CRC patients from control individuals. Our approach generated a signature composed of 5 miRNAs (namely, miR-1246, miR-607-5p, miR-6777-5p, miR-4488, miR-149-3p) that was clinically validated in an additional independent cohort of cases compared to healthy volunteers and technically validated by another methodology (ie, RT-

qPCR). The accurate discrimination of both participants in early and late cancer stages from control individuals confirmed the robustness of these 5 miRNAs for CRC detection. Although based on a small sample set, the signature could also accurately discriminate participants with AA from control individuals (AUC, 0.86), and in all analyses, high performances were obtained, irrespectively, by adjusting or not for sex and age, 2 relevant risk factors for this cancer.⁴⁰ To the best of our knowledge, this is the first signature based on fecal miRNAs whose efficiency was proven in populations from 2 countries characterized by different lifestyle and dietary habits⁴¹ and CRC incidence.⁴² Notably, such populations also show different trends in early-onset CRC,⁴³ the incidence of which is linked to unhealthy individual habits, such as a sedentary lifestyle.⁴⁴

Similar to the functional analysis of all 25 DEmiRNAs, focused research on the 5-signature miRNA target genes evidenced a prevalence of genes involved in cancer-related processes, including regulation of the cell cycle, programmed cell death, and DNA damage response. Interestingly, functional analysis of predicted target genes of miR-607-5p highlighted terms/processes related to nuclear cell cycle DNA replication and showed *TRIM66*, *HIPK2*, *GRIN2B*, and *WTIP* as the targets with the highest number of miR-607-5p binding sites (Supplementary Table 5B and C).

Among all the miRNAs of the signature, miR-1246 has been previously widely studied in CRC. Altered levels of this miRNA have been found in circulating exosomes in relation to cancer metastasis and prognosis.^{45,46} Exosomal miR-1246 levels were induced by *Fusobacterium nucleatum* in vitro and in vivo CRC models with an increase of tumor cell metastatic potential.⁴⁷ These results align with more recent observations on the relationship between intratumor levels of *F nucleatum* and the aggressiveness of colon and breast cancers.⁴⁸ An intratumor increase in this well-known CRC-related bacteria might induce the release of exosomal miR-1246 in the gut lumen, with the subsequent detection of this miRNA in stool samples. Similar considerations could be drawn from another study investigating a model of enterotoxigenic *Bacteroides fragilis* that induced up-regulation of exosomal miR-1246 in CRC cell lines.⁴⁹ Interestingly, in the same study, this microbial species reduced the exosomal levels of another fecal miRNA included in our signature, miR-149-3p, that was demonstrated to regulate tumor-infiltrating CD4⁺ T-helper type 17 differentiation.⁴⁹

Similar findings were observed when analyzing the fecal miRNome and gut metagenome data from a previous study by our group in which we investigated the miRNA-microbiota relationships in stool samples.²⁰ Specifically, by reanalyzing the data from that study, miR-1246 levels emerged as significantly related to both *F nucleatum* and *B fragilis* abundances, whereas miR-149-3p was inversely related to *B fragilis* abundances (Supplementary Figure 3B). This pervasive relationship between in vitro exosomal miRNA levels and microbial infections suggests that the most informative stool biomarkers for CRC might reflect the dysregulated interactions between colonic tissue and the gut microbiota. Interestingly, in the miRNA-microbiota correlation analysis, 2 down-regulated fecal miRNAs (miR-607-5p and miR-6777-5p), included in the predictive signature

and so far scantily investigated in the literature, were inversely related not only to *F nucleatum* and *B fragilis* abundances but also to *Escherichia coli*, another species related to CRC onset⁵⁰ (Supplementary Figure 3B).

To further explore the stool results, we tested DEmiRNA patterns in tumor and adenoma tissues paired with nonmalignant adjacent mucosa from patients of the IT cohort. Stool generally mirrored the altered miRNA expression levels of these tissues. Only the levels of miR-21-5p and miR-148a-3p increased in both CRC and adenoma compared to matched adjacent mucosa, whereas the other DEmiRNAs (including miR-1246, miR-4488, and miR-149-3p of the signature) showed a CRC-specific dysregulation. miR-607-5p and miR-6777-5p, decreasing in patients' fecal samples, were characterized by low expression levels in both tumor/adenoma and adjacent mucosa, suggesting their deletion or epigenetic silencing. In The Cancer Genome Atlas,⁵¹ both miRNAs are frequently deleted in CRC (Supplementary Table 5D), supporting the down-regulation in stool and tumor tissues observed by us. In agreement with our findings, previous studies have demonstrated that the down-regulation of miRNAs seems to be a premature step in the development of several cancers.^{52,53} Surprisingly, miR-320a, let-7b-5p, and let-7a-3p, more abundant in stool of CRC patients, were more expressed in adjacent mucosa than in tumor tissue. miR-320a has been widely reported as down-regulated in CRC,⁵⁴ whereas its circulating levels increased in relation to gut inflammation in IBD patients,⁵⁵ coherent with our data in stool samples. Interestingly, miR-320a has been described as a key regulator of intestinal barrier formation.⁵⁶ Similarly, the expression of let-7 family members has been observed in the healthy gut epithelium, whereas their genetic depletion induced tumorigenesis in CRC mouse models.⁵⁷ Thus, the analysis of stool miRNAs is relevant to identify not only markers of the tumor small noncoding transcriptome but may also unveil an intestinal response of the stromal component to the presence of a tumor mass.

We also explored the miRNome of plasma EVs from a subset of the study population using the same experimental approach as in stool and tissue samples. However, in this circulating biospecimen, only a few miRNAs showed similar trends as in feces. For instance, among the miRNAs of the signature, miR-1246 and miR-4488 levels significantly increased in plasma EVs of CRC patients compared with control individuals. These results are consistent with previous findings reported by us, supporting stool miRNAs as more sensitive than plasma miRNAs in reflecting intestinal changes driven by a long-term dietary pattern.²⁴ Although more data are needed to compare the stool and plasma EV miRNome, given the reported relationships between miR-1246 levels in EVs and CRC metastasis,⁴⁵ these circulating molecules may be more informative for advanced stages of the disease, which is beyond the scope of our investigation.

In this study, we sought to compare the stool DEmiRNA profiles of CRC patients with those of patients with other bowel inflammatory diseases of different severity confirmed by colonoscopy. Besides different polyp types, we included samples from several GI diseases, like different types of IBDs and diverticulitis. Notably, although the CRC-specific miRNAs were down-regulated, most of the altered miRNAs in common

with adenomas and inflammatory diseases were up-regulated: miR-21-5p was the clearest example, confirming the literature.²⁶ As an exception, miR-607-5p was down-regulated in the stool miRNA profiles of patients with AA and ulcerative colitis. Accordingly, recent studies showed altered miRNA profiles in the fecal samples of patients with inflammation,^{58,59} even in relation to microbiota.⁶⁰ We can therefore conclude that altered stool miRNA profiles reflect either the intestinal response to an inflammatory process or the transcriptional alterations related specifically to CRC development. Importantly, we clearly demonstrated that well-known CRC-related miRNAs, such as miR-21-5p, show dysregulated fecal levels in several disease contexts, suggesting that other miRNAs, such as miR-6777-5p and miR-149-3p, should be investigated to design CRC-specific molecular signatures. This is the first evidence from a large-scale analysis of individuals with different gastrointestinal diseases of stool miRNAs specifically altered in CRC. It also highlights an extensive reflection of the gut inflammation on the fecal miRNA levels.

The fact that specific dysregulated fecal miRNAs could distinguish individuals with CRC or precursor lesions from control individuals and that, at least for cancer, data were confirmed in different cohorts, encouraging their use to complement the existing noninvasive screening tests. In this respect, we also investigated whether miRNAs can be detected in buffer-diluted stool leftovers from FIT tubes used in a context of a population-based screening program, and we found a remarkable similarity between the profiles detected in the stool samples collected in nucleic acid preservative medium tubes from the same participants. Despite data on a larger cohort being needed, this pilot small RNA-seq-based quantification of miRNAs in FIT buffer leftovers is consistent with previous evidence measuring miRNAs in this sample type by RT-qPCR,²² as well as by us. By exploring miRNA profiles within FIT-positive patients, we observed a subset of miRNAs differentially expressed between individuals with a positive or a negative colonoscopy outcome. In addition, miR-1246 and miR-607-5p from the 5-miRNA signature deserve further investigation because they were detected in most of the samples, and their levels respectively increased and decreased progressively, going from individuals with negative colonoscopy results, to those with adenomas of different severity, to CRC patients. Although these data confirm that miRNAs can be widely detected in FIT leftovers, the comparative results between individuals must be carefully considered given the small group size analyzed so far; the lack of samples from FIT-negative individuals; and the fact that we cannot rule out the role of confounding factors, including subclinical diseases in the colonoscopy-negative patients.

Most likely, by including hemoglobin levels evaluated by FIT, the discrimination capability of the present stool miRNA predictive signature would be further improved, as already reported in the past (FIT/FOBT + microbiome,^{11,61} FIT + miRNAs,²¹ and FIT + methylation markers⁶²). The sensitivity and specificity of our 5-miRNA signature suggest that it could show a similar diagnostic performance as the multitarget stool DNA test⁶³ when used as a screening test in average-risk populations. Duran-Sanchon et al²¹ proposed a 2-stool miRNA-based classification signature (namely, miR-27a-3p and miR-

421) combined with hemoglobin levels, age, and sex of FIT-positive individuals. The signature accurately classified CRC (AUC, 0.93) from control individuals but was less efficient when AA patients were included (AUC, 0.70).⁶² Different from us, the researchers initially selected miRNAs based on their differential expression between tumor tissue and adjacent mucosa and included in all models sex and age, 2 important risk factors for CRC. Hereby, we demonstrated the robustness of our signature because its performance remained similar even without the inclusion of age and sex covariates. In addition, despite the study not being designed for identifying stool biomarkers for adenomas, the 5-miRNA signature was able to accurately distinguish AA alone or in combination with CRC (AUC, 0.84), suggesting its use to detect precancer lesions at risk. In our study, miR-27a-3p and miR-421 were detected in tissue samples but not in stool, where only the former miRNA was measurable. In search of reproducible fecal molecular biomarkers for the noninvasive diagnosis of CRC and adenomas,¹¹ a hypothesis-free miRNome-wide approach, such as the small RNA-seq analysis in stool performed in multiple independent populations, overcomes these issues.

The present study has several strengths: (1) the inclusion of independent cohorts from 2 countries with different diet and lifestyle habits as well as CRC rates; (2) the fact that the cohorts were different for CRC clinical characteristics, allowing the identification of accurate biomarkers independent of the disease stage; (3) the adoption of the same protocol for the collection of stool in both training cohorts; (4) the validation of the signature on a cohort with a different stool collection protocol, showing its robustness; (5) the miRNome-wide approach in different biospecimens and different GI disease contexts, which has allowed us to discriminate miRNAs specifically dysregulated in the stool of CRC patients; (6) the implementation of an explainable ML approach able to provide an unbiased method for identifying the minimal set of predictive biomarkers.

However, we are also aware of several limitations. Although there was a similar study design for recruitment, the 2 cohorts were heterogeneous for individual cancer categories. This heterogeneity could be responsible for the observed differences in the median stool miRNA levels and expression differences between the 2 cohorts. Given the difference in the clinical characteristics of CRC patients, the main driver of such a difference may be the higher proportion of low-grade and low-stage tumors in the CZ cohort. However, the fact that the results are reproducible between cohorts further supports the robustness of the signature identified in this study.

Despite the large number of analyzed samples, the variegated spectrum of CRC, adenomas, and other precancerous lesions needs to be more exhaustively represented and deserves further investigation. For example, we did not investigate serrated lesions or deeply explore the alterations in CRC stratified based on molecular or clinical data. In addition, even though the observed DE miRNAs were not reported to be modulated by dietary habits,²⁴ the lack of dietary/lifestyle information of analyzed individuals may represent a limitation of the study. Follow-up studies with additional cohorts representing patients with different ethnicities, dietary patterns, and lifestyle habits are required,

but this is beyond the scope of this study, which, to our knowledge, represents the largest sequencing-based analysis of stool miRNAs so far.

In conclusion, this multicenter and international study based on small RNA-seq allowed us to comprehensively detect in stool several miRNAs differentially expressed in CRC. Furthermore, the implemented ML approach identified a minimal number of miRNAs whose combined profiles showed a good discriminating power for the presence of a tumor or AA, independent of age and sex. This may represent a fecal signature for improving the effectiveness of current noninvasive screening programs, potentially increasing sensitivity and maintaining high specificity, and applicable on a large scale, with a reasonable cost/time required.

In this respect, for FIT implementation, in the near future miRNA profiles will be investigated in additional cohorts, possibly from different countries, increasing the number/types of precancer lesions and also including FIT-negative samples, with the chance to explore the role of diet and lifestyle habits on an adequate scale. Furthermore, the inclusion of FIT-negative samples will allow the possibility to prospectively test miRNA profiles in subsequent rounds of CRC screening, collecting multiple samples per individual. In parallel, the analysis of the microbiome composition of stool/leftover FIT samples will help deepen the research on gut-host crosstalk with small noncoding RNAs. Finally, even if small RNA-seq and RT-qPCR currently represent the most commonly used approaches for miRNA analyses, we must consider that more rapid, practical, but reliable approaches, such as biosensors, may provide an alternative for testing the miRNA signature in a large clinical setting.

Supplementary Material

Note: To access the supplementary material accompanying this article, visit the online version of *Gastroenterology* at www.gastrojournal.org, and at <https://doi.org/10.1053/j.gastro.2023.05.037>.

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Author names in bold designate shared co-first authorship.

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Correspondence

Address correspondence to: Alessio Naccarati, PhD, Italian Institute for Genomic Medicine, c/o IRCCS Candiolo, SP 142, Km 3.95, 10060 Candiolo, Turin, Italy. e-mail: alessio.naccarati@iigm.it; or Barbara Pardini, PhD, Italian Institute for Genomic Medicine, c/o IRCCS Candiolo, SP 142, Km 3.95, 10060 Candiolo, Turin, Italy. e-mail: barbara.pardini@iigm.it.

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CRedit Authorship Contributions

Barbara Pardini, PhD (Data curation: Equal; Formal analysis: Supporting; Funding acquisition: Supporting; Investigation: Lead; Methodology: Lead; Supervision: Lead; Writing – original draft: Lead; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Giulio Ferrero, PhD (Conceptualization: Equal; Data curation: Lead; Formal analysis: Lead; Investigation: Equal; Methodology: Lead; Software: Lead; Supervision: Supporting; Validation: Equal; Visualization: Lead; Writing – original draft: Lead; Writing – review & editing: Lead).

Sonia Tarallo, PhD (Conceptualization: Lead; Data curation: Lead; Formal analysis: Supporting; Investigation: Lead; Methodology: Lead; Validation: Lead; Visualization: Equal; Writing – original draft: Lead; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Gaetano Gallo, MD, PhD (Conceptualization: Supporting; Data curation: Lead; Investigation: Supporting; Resources: Lead; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Antonio Francavilla, PhD (Conceptualization: Supporting; Data curation: Supporting; Investigation: Supporting; Methodology: Equal; Validation: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Nicola Licheri, MSc (Data curation: Equal; Formal analysis: Equal; Resources: Equal; Software: Equal; Writing – review & editing: Supporting).

Mario Trompetto, MD, PhD (Data curation: Equal; Investigation: Supporting; Methodology: Supporting; Visualization: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Giuseppe Clerico, MD, PhD (Data curation: Supporting; Investigation: Supporting; Project administration: Supporting; Visualization: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Carlo Senore, MD, PhD (Conceptualization: Supporting; Data curation: Supporting; Formal analysis: Supporting; Methodology: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Sergio Peyre, MD (Funding acquisition: Lead; Investigation: Supporting; Methodology: Supporting; Project administration: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Supporting).

Veronika Vymetalkova, PhD (Data curation: Equal; Formal analysis: Supporting; Funding acquisition: Supporting; Methodology: Equal; Project administration: Equal; Validation: Equal; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Ludmila Vodickova, PhD (Data curation: Supporting; Formal analysis: Supporting; Funding acquisition: Supporting; Investigation: Supporting; Project administration: Supporting; Validation: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Vaclav Liska, MD, PhD (Data curation: Supporting; Investigation: Supporting; Resources: Equal; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Ondrej Vycital, MD, PhD (Conceptualization: Supporting; Data curation: Supporting; Investigation: Supporting; Project administration: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Miroslav Levy, MD, PhD (Conceptualization: Supporting; Data curation: Supporting; Investigation: Supporting; Project administration: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Peter Macinga, MD, PhD (Conceptualization: Supporting; Data curation: Supporting; Investigation: Supporting; Project administration: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Tomas Hucl, MD, PhD (Conceptualization: Supporting; Data curation: Supporting; Investigation: Supporting; Project administration: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Eva Budinska, PhD (Data curation: Supporting; Investigation: Supporting; Resources: Equal; Validation: Equal; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Pavel Vodicka, MD, PhD (Conceptualization: Supporting; Data curation: Supporting; Formal analysis: Supporting; Funding acquisition: Supporting; Investigation: Supporting; Resources: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Supporting; Writing – review & editing: Equal).

Francesca Cordero, PhD (Conceptualization: Equal; Data curation: Lead; Formal analysis: Lead; Investigation: Equal; Methodology: Equal; Supervision: Supporting; Validation: Supporting; Visualization: Supporting; Writing – original draft: Lead; Writing – review & editing: Lead).

Alessio Naccarati, PhD (Conceptualization: Lead; Data curation: Lead; Formal analysis: Lead; Funding acquisition: Lead; Investigation: Supporting; Methodology: Equal; Project administration: Lead; Resources: Equal; Supervision: Lead; Validation: Equal; Visualization: Lead; Writing – original draft: Lead; Writing – review & editing: Lead).

Conflicts of interest

The authors disclose no conflicts.

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Data Availability

All data relevant to the study are included in the article or in the [Supplementary Material](#). Raw data are available upon request to the corresponding author.