

# miR-187 inhibits the growth of cervical cancer cells by targeting FGF9

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**Abstract.** MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are a cluster of short non-coding RNAs playing critical roles in human cancers. miR-187 was recently found to be a novel cancer-related microRNA. However, the expression and function of miR-187 in cervical cancer have not been investigated. In this study, we found that miR-187 level was decreased in cervical cancer tissues and cell lines. Patients with low level of miR-187 had significantly decreased rate of overall survival (OS) and progression-free survival (DFS). miR-187 overexpression inhibited proliferation and promoted apoptosis of cervical cancer cells, whereas miR-187 knockdown promoted proliferation and inhibited apoptosis of cervical cancer cells. Forced expression of miR-187 inhibited the subcutaneous growth of cervical cancer cells in nude mice. Furthermore, FGF9 was found to be the downstream target of miR-187 in cervical cancer cells. Importantly, targeting FGF9 was required for miR-187 exerting its tumor suppressive roles in cervical cancer cells.

## Introduction

Cervical cancer, one of the most common gynecological malignant diseases, ranked fourth in all cancer-related mortalities in women, accounting for ~270,000 deaths in USA (1,2). Remarkable advances in the diagnosis and treatment of cervical cancer have been achieved, the prognosis of cervical cancer patients especially for those in advanced stage remains poor (3,4). Unfortunately, the exact molecular mechanisms underlying the initiation and progression of cervical cancer remain largely unknown. Therefore, investigating the mechanisms for the initiation and progression of cervical cancer will promote the identification of novel biomarkers and treatment targets, which is critical for improving the prognosis of cervical cancer patients.

Previous studies showed that the initiation and progression of cervical cancer is a complex process in which numerous proteins and non-coding RNAs are involved (5,6). MicroRNAs (miRNAs), a group of small non-coding RNAs, have been found to play important roles in human cancers including cervical cancer (7,8). Some miRNAs have been regarded as the biomarkers and therapeutic targets for cervical cancer patients (9). Among numerous cancer-related microRNAs, miR-187 was recently found to be a novel target in human cancers including liver (10), breast (11), ovarian (12), prostate (13), non-small cell lung (14) and colorectal cancer (15,16). It was found to play an oncogenic role in breast (11), ovarian (12) and non-small cell lung cancer (14). On the other hand, miR-187 was also found to play tumor suppressive roles in colorectal cancer (15,16), hepatocellular carcinoma (10) and prostate cancer (13). However, the expression and function of miR-187 in GC remain uninvestigated.

In the present study, we found that miR-187 was significantly decreased in cervical cancer tissues and cell lines. This study also confirmed that decreased expression of miR-187 was associated with poor clinicopathological features and poor survival of cervical cancer patients. miR-187 inhibited the proliferation and increased the apoptosis of cervical cancer cells. Furthermore, we identified that FGF9 was a downstream target of miR-187 in cervical cancers. Inhibiting FGF9 is critical for the functional influence of miR-187 in cervical cancer cells.

## Materials and methods

**Patients and tissue specimens.** The collection of clinical samples were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Renmin Hospital of Wuhan University. All patients enrolled in this study were pathologically confirmed as cervical cancer and were provided with written consent and agreed to donate their tissue samples for research use. These clinical samples were stored in liquid nitrogen before extracting RNAs.

**Cell culture and transfection.** Cervical cancer cell lines including C33A, HeLa, Caski and SiHa were cultured in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM; Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) supplemented with fetal bovine serum (10%, FBS; HyClone Laboratories, Logan, UT, USA) and penicillin/streptomycin (1%; Invitrogen). Human normal cervical epithelial cells (NCEC) were derived from healthy female

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cervical tissue and were cultured in serum-free medium (Invitrogen) along with EGF, bovine pituitary extract and penicillin/streptomycin (1%; Invitrogen). All cells were maintained in cell incubator at 37°C with 5% CO<sub>2</sub>. miR-187 mimic and inhibitor were obtained from Shanghai GenePharma Co., Ltd. (Shanghai, China). FGF9 vector and FGF9 siRNA were from Guangzhou Ruibo Biological Technology, Co., Ltd. (Guangzhou, China). All these vectors were transfected into cervical cancer cells using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen) based on the provided protocols. The transfection efficiency of miR-187 mimic and inhibitor were confirmed by evaluating miR-187 level with qRT-PCR. The transfection efficiency of FGF9 vector and siRNA were confirmed by evaluating FGF9 level with western blot analysis.

**Reverse transcriptase-quantitative PCR (RT-qPCR).** The RNA in cervical cancer tissues and cell lines was isolated with TRIzol reagent (Invitrogen) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Reverse transcription of miRNA and mRNA were performed with miScript II RT kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany) and QuantScript RT kit (Tiangen Biotech, Co., Ltd., Beijing, China), respectively. SYBR-Green PCR kit (Qiagen) was used for RT-PCR quantification. Relative miR-187 level and FGF mRNA level were calculated using 2<sup>-ΔΔCt</sup> method after normalization to U6 and GAPDH, respectively.

**Western blot analysis.** Cellular proteins from cervical cancer cells were extracted with RIPA buffer. Isolated proteins were subjected to electrophoresis on 4-20% SDS-PAGE gels and transferred to PVDF membranes. After blocked with 5% non-fat milk/TBST (Tris-buffered saline Tween-20), the membranes were incubated with the primary antibody including GAPDH (1:2,000; Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA, USA), FGF9 (1:1,000; Santa Cruz Biotechnology) and caspase-3 (1:1,000; Santa Cruz Biotechnology) at 4°C overnight and incubated with HRP-conjugated secondary antibody at room temperature for 2 h. The protein bands were detected and visualized with the ECL reagent (Beyotime Institute of Biotechnology, Haimen, China).

**Cell viability and proliferation assay.** For viability assay, cervical cancer cells transfected with corresponding vectors were seeded in 96-well plates (5x10<sup>3</sup> cells/well). After cell seeding (0, 24, 48 and 72 h) MTT reagent was added to each well and the cells were incubated at 37°C for 4 h. After removing the culture medium, cervical cancer cells were solubilized in 150 μl dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) and subjected to colorimetric analysis (wavelength, 490 nm). For proliferation assay, cervical cancer cells transfected with corresponding vectors were seeded in 6-well plates and maintained in cell incubators for 2 weeks. Two weeks later, the cell colonies were stained with crystal violet solution. The number of cell colonies were counted and compared between groups.

**Apoptosis assays.** To evaluate the apoptosis of cervical cancer cells, the flow cytometry assay was performed to evaluate the percentage of apoptotic cells. In brief, cervical cancer cells were harvested and re-suspended in phosphate-buffered saline

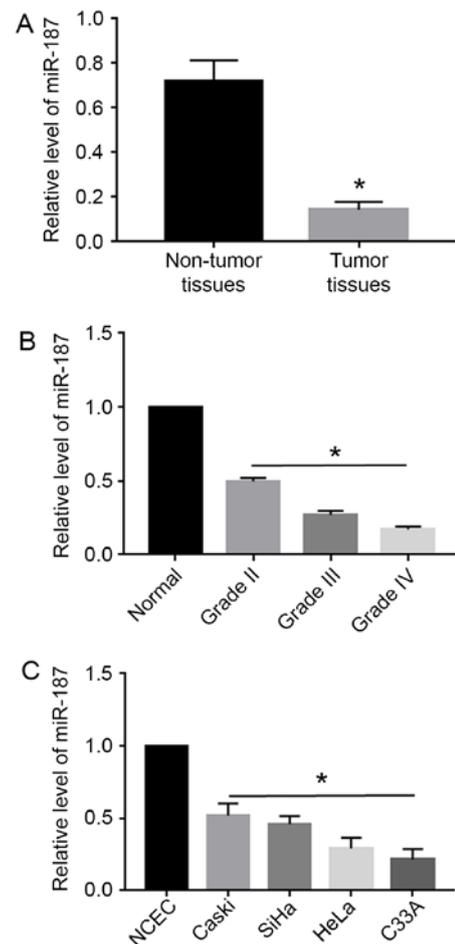


Figure 1. Downregulation of miR-187 in cervical cancer. (A) qRT-PCR was performed to evaluate the level of miR-187 in cervical cancer. The levels of miR-187 in non-tumor tissues were relative to the level of miR-187 in tumor tissue. The expression level of miR-187 was significantly reduced in cervical cancer tissues. (B) The expression level of miR-187 was decreased with the progression of cervical cancer grade. (C) The expression of miR-187 was compared between cervical cancer cell lines and NCEC cells. The expression level of miR-187 was significantly reduced in cervical cancer cell lines. \*P<0.05.

(PBS), and then stained with Annexin V detection kit, and subjected to FACScan analysis. Additionally, cellular level of caspase-3 which is a marker of cell apoptosis was evaluated with western blot analysis.

**Luciferase reporter assay.** Cervical cancer cells seeded in 24-well plates were transfected with 200 ng of miR-187 mimic or inhibitor or the corresponding control vector along with 50 ng of wild-type (WT) or mutant (MT) 3'-UTR of FGF9 mRNA. Forty-eight hours after the transfection, these cells were collected and luciferase activity was detected with a Dual-luciferase reporter assay system following the manufacturer's instructions (Promega, Madison, WI, USA).

**Mouse xenograft model.** To investigate the *in vivo* influence of miR-187 on cervical cancer cells, C33A cells transfected with miR-187 mimic or control vector were subcutaneously inoculated into nude mice. Twenty-eight days after the cell inoculation, the mice were sacrificed and the formed subcutaneous tumors were subjected to Ki-67 staining. Tumor volumes

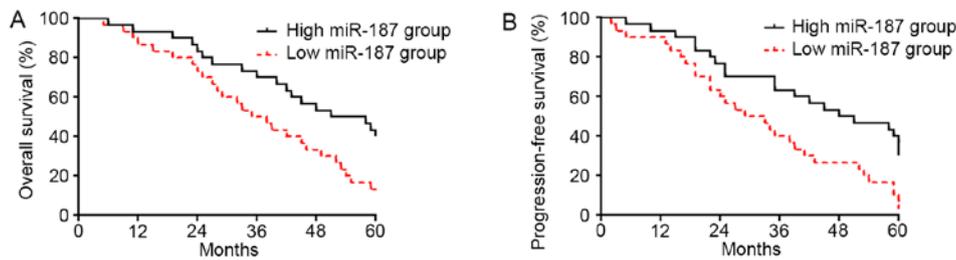


Figure 2. Low expression level of miR-187 is associated with poor prognosis of cervical cancer patients. Patients were divided into miR-187 low level group and high level group. (A) Overall survival rate and (B) disease-free survival rate were compared between the patients of these two groups. Patients with low expression level of miR-187 showed significantly decreased rate of overall survival and disease-free survival.

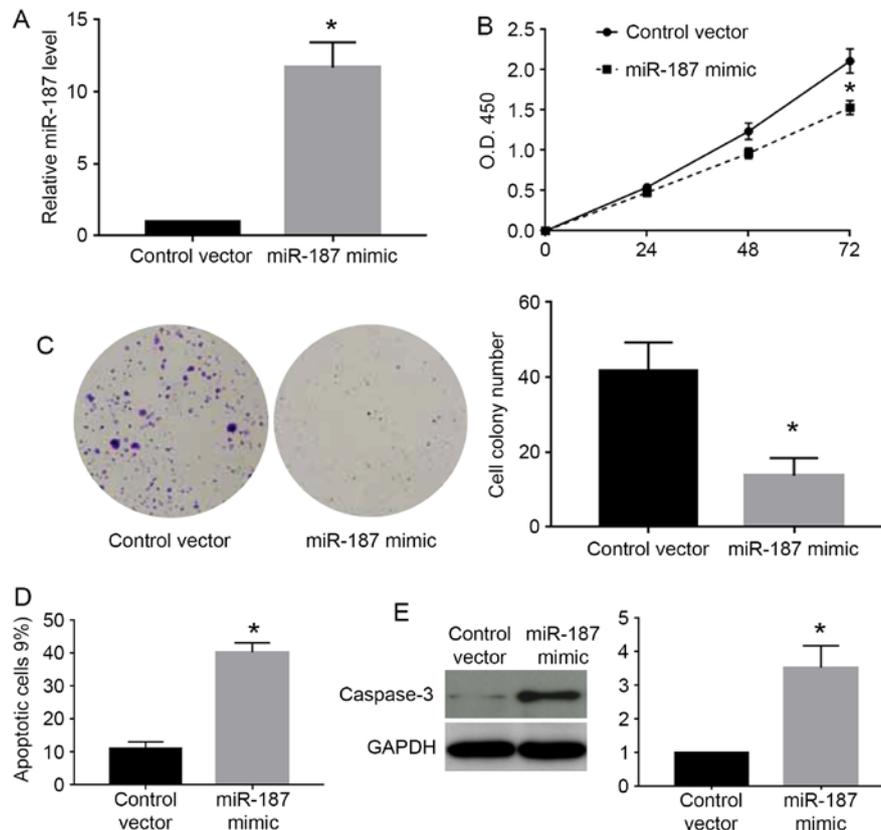


Figure 3. miR-187 overexpression inhibits proliferation and promotes apoptosis of C33A cells. (A) miR-187 mimic was transfected into C33A cells to overexpress miR-187. miR-187 mimic significantly increased the expression level of miR-187 in C33A cells. (B) MTT assay was performed to evaluate the effect of miR-187 on cell viability. miR-187 overexpression significantly reduced the cell viability of C33A cells. (C) Colony formation assay was performed to investigate the effect of miR-187 on cell proliferation. miR-187 overexpression significantly reduced the number of cell colonies formed by C33A cells. (D) Flow cytometry assay was performed to evaluate the effect of miR-187 on cell apoptosis. miR-187 overexpression significantly increased the percentage of apoptotic cells formed by C33A cells. (E) Western blot analysis was performed to evaluate the effect of miR-187 on cellular level of caspase-3. miR-187 overexpression significantly increased cellular level of caspase-3 in C33A cells. \* $P < 0.05$ .

were calculated every 7 days based on the following formula: length  $\times$  width<sup>2</sup>/2. The protocols for *in vivo* experiments were approved by the Animal Research Protection Committee of Renmin Hospital of Wuhan University.

**Statistical analysis.** Statistical analyses were performed using the GraphPad and SPSS 15.0 software. Comparisons between the groups were performed using the t-test and the  $\chi^2$  test. Overall survival and progression-free survival analysis were performed using the Kaplan-Meier method for plotting and the log-rank test for comparison. All differences were regarded as statistically significant at the level of  $P < 0.05$ .

## Results

**miR-187 is downregulated in human cervical cancer.** Using qRT-PCR, miR-187 expression levels were evaluated in 60 pairs of cervical cancer tissues and the corresponding non-tumor tissues, as well as in cervical cancer cell lines. Compared with the non-tumor tissues, cervical cancer tissues showed significantly decreased level of miR-187 ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 1A). Moreover, the level of miR-187 was elevated with the progression of the stage of cervical cancer ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 1B). Additionally, miR-187 level in all cervical cancer cell lines including Caski, SiHa, HeLa and C33A was significantly

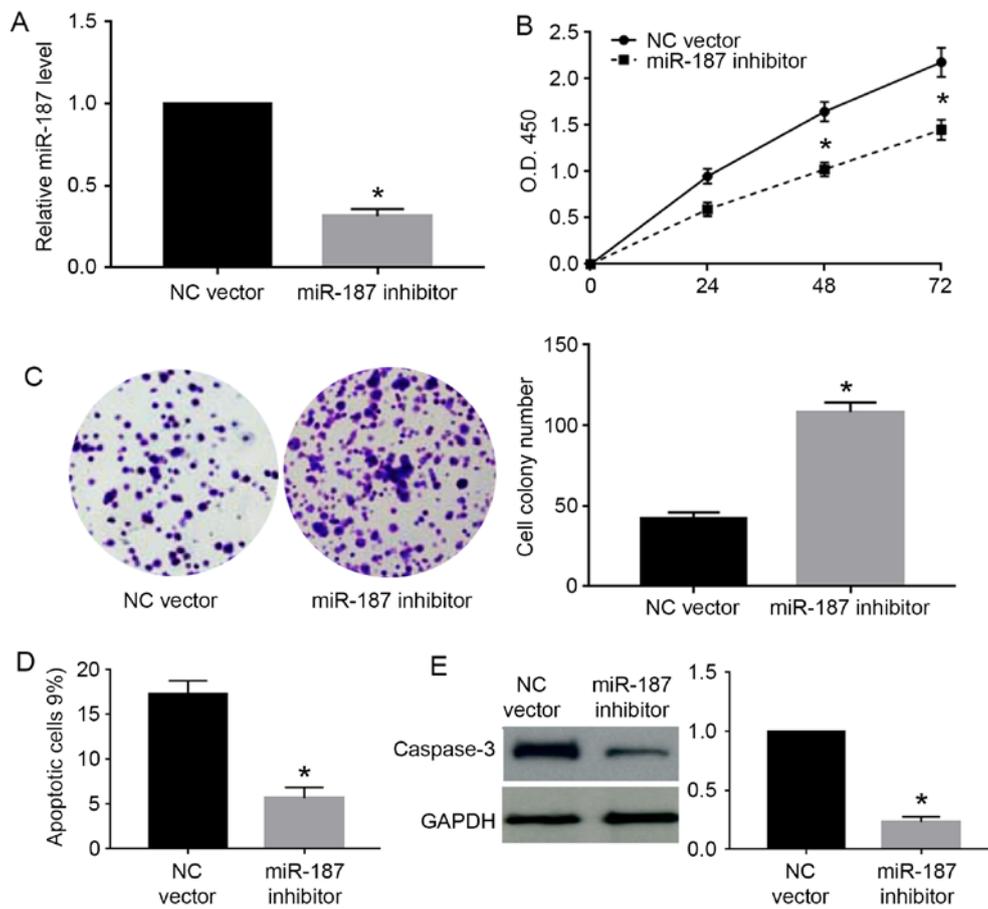


Figure 4. miR-187 inhibition promotes the proliferation and prevents apoptosis of Caski cells. (A) miR-187 inhibitor was transfected into Caski cells to knock down miR-187. miR-187 inhibitor significantly decreased the expression level of miR-187 in Caski cells. (B) MTT assay was performed to evaluate the effect of miR-187 knockdown on cell viability. miR-187 knockdown significantly reduced the cell viability of Caski cells. (C) Colony formation assay was performed to investigate the effect of miR-187 knockdown on cell proliferation. miR-187 knockdown significantly increased the number of cell colonies formed by Caski cells. (D) Flow cytometry assay was performed to evaluate the effect of miR-187 knockdown on cell apoptosis. miR-187 knockdown significantly decreased the percentage of apoptotic cells formed by Caski cells. (E) Western blot analysis was performed to evaluate the effect of miR-187 knockdown on cellular level of caspase-3. miR-187 knockdown significantly decreased cellular level of caspase-3 in Caski cells. \*P<0.05.

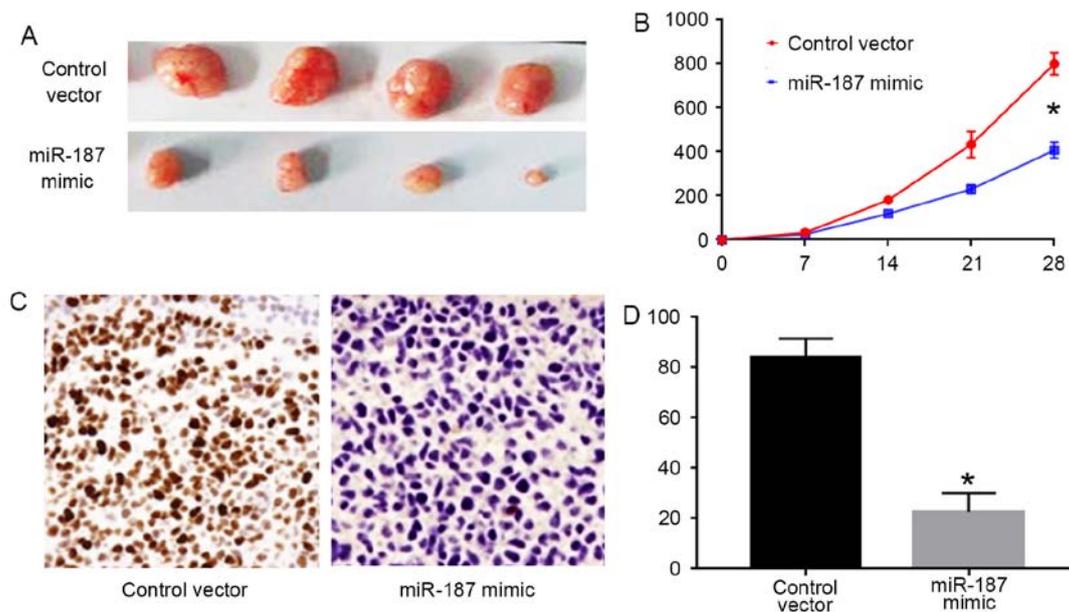


Figure 5. miR-187 overexpression inhibits the *in vivo* growth of C33A cells in nude mice. (A and B) Subcutaneous injection model was performed to evaluate the influence of miR-187 overexpression on *in vivo* growth of C33A cells. miR-187 overexpression significantly decreased the volume of tumors formed by C33A cells. (C and D) Ki-67 staining was performed to evaluate the effect of miR-187 on the *in vivo* proliferation of C33A cells. miR-187 overexpression significantly decreased the number of Ki-67 positive cells. \*P<0.05.

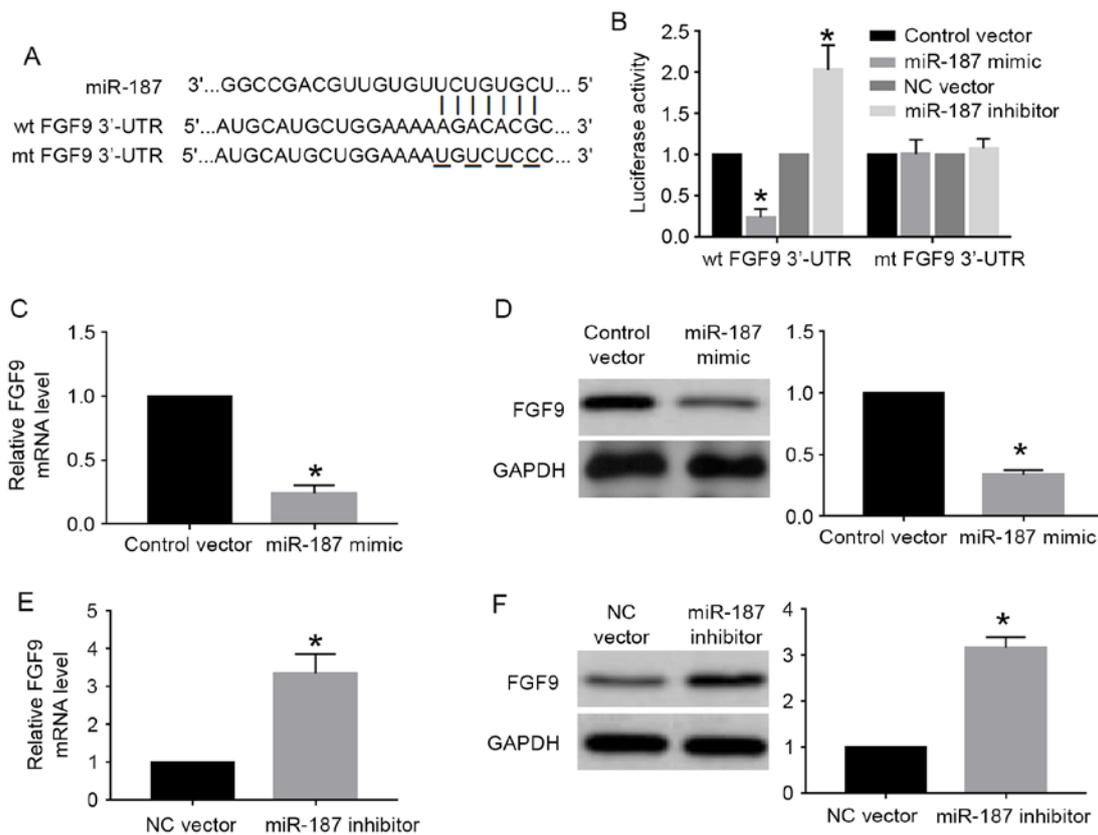


Figure 6. FGF9 is the downstream target of miR-187 in cervical cancer cells. (A) The complementary sequences in the wild-type 3'-UTR of FGF9 interact with miR-187. (B) Luciferase assay was used to investigate whether miR-187 could interact with FGF9 3'-UTR. Overexpression of miR-187 decreased while miR-187 knockdown increased the luciferase activity of wild-type FGF9 3'-UTR. Neither miR-187 overexpression nor knockdown affected the luciferase activity of mutant FGF9 3'-UTR. (C) miR-187 overexpression significantly reduced the mRNA level of FGF9 in C33A cells. (D) miR-187 overexpression significantly reduced the protein level of FGF9 in C33A cells. (E) miR-187 knockdown significantly increased the mRNA level of FGF9 in Caski cells. (F) miR-187 overexpression significantly increased the protein level of FGF9 in Caski cells. \*P<0.05.

decreased compared with that in the normal cervical epithelial cells (NCEC) (P<0.05; Fig. 1C).

*Decreased miR-187 level is associated with poor survival of cervical cancer patients.* To explore the clinical significance of miR-187 level in cervical cancer, we investigated the correlation of miR-187 expression level with the prognosis of cervical cancer patients. As shown in Fig. 2A, patients with low level of miR-187 had significantly decreased rate of overall survival (P<0.05; Fig. 2A). The data of progression-free survival demonstrated that low level of miR-187 was associated with decreased rate of progression-free survival (P<0.05; Fig. 2B), thus indicating that miR-187 could serve as a biomarker for cervical cancer patients.

*miR-187 inhibits the proliferation and promotes apoptosis of cervical cancer cells.* As the miR-187 level was highest in Caski cells and lowest in C33A cells, we chose Caski cells for knockdown experiments and C33A for overexpression experiments. As shown in Fig. 3A, miR-187 mimic significantly increased the expression level of miR-187 in C33A cells (P<0.05). The MTT assay showed that miR-187 overexpression significantly decreased the cell viability of C33A cells (P<0.05; Fig. 3B). Colony formation assay showed that miR-187 overexpression significantly decreased the number of formed cell colonies of C33A cells (P<0.05; Fig. 3C). On

the other hand, flow cytometry assay showed miR-187 overexpression increased the percentage of apoptotic cells (P<0.05; Fig. 3D). The western blot analysis for caspase-3 demonstrated that miR-187 overexpression significantly increased the caspase-3 level in C33A cells (P<0.05; Fig. 3E). Furthermore, we performed miR-187 knockdown in Caski cells. miR-187 inhibitor significantly decreased the level of miR-187 in Caski cells (P<0.05; Fig. 4A). miR-187 knockdown significantly increased the cell viability (P<0.05; Fig. 4B) and cell colony number (P<0.05; Fig. 4C) while decreased the percentage of apoptotic cells (P<0.05; Fig. 4D) and caspase-3 level (P<0.05; Fig. 4E) in Caski cells.

*miR-187 inhibits the in vivo growth of C33A cells.* To confirm the *in vitro* effects of miR-187 on C33A cells, we performed subcutaneous injection experiments for C33A cells. As shown in Fig. 5A and B, forced expression of miR-187 in C33A cells inhibited the tumor growth in nude mice (P<0.05). Furthermore, we performed Ki-67 staining for the formed tumors. The results of Ki-67 staining showed that miR-187 overexpression significantly decreased the number of Ki-67 positive cells in the tumors (P<0.05; Fig. 5C and D).

*FGF9 is the downstream target of miR-187 in cervical cancer cells.* miRNA regulated cell proliferation, apoptosis and other cellular processes by interacting with the 3'-UTR site of

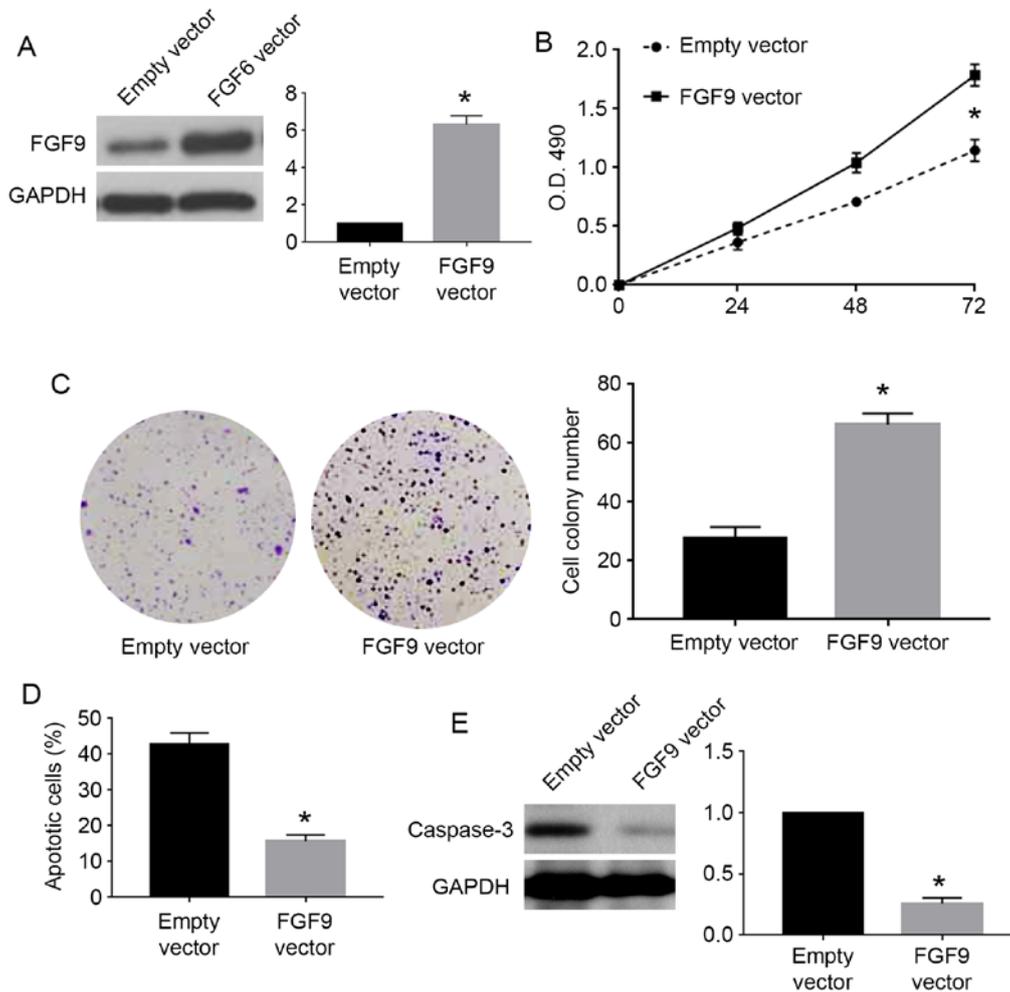


Figure 7. FGF9 overexpression abrogates the functional influence of miR-187 overexpression on cell proliferation and apoptosis. (A) FGF9 overexpressing vectors significantly increased FGF9 level in C33A cells overexpressing miR-187. (B) Overexpression of FGF9 abrogated the inhibitory effect of miR-187 overexpression on the viability of C33A cells. (C) Overexpression of FGF9 abrogated the inhibitory effect of miR-187 overexpression on the colony formation of C33A cells. (D) Overexpression of FGF9 reduced the promoting effect of miR-187 overexpression on apoptosis of C33A cells. (E) Overexpression of FGF9 reduced the promoting effect of miR-187 overexpression on cellular caspase-3 level in C33A cells. \* $P < 0.05$ .

targeted genes. FGF9, which had the complementary sequence for miR-187 binding (Fig. 6A), was one of the predicted genes of miR-187 based on the data of online database. We then performed luciferase assay for wild-type and mutant FGF9 3'-UTR to investigate whether miR-187 could interact with FGF9 3'-UTR. The results of luciferase assay showed that miR-187 overexpression significantly decreased the luciferase activity of wild-type FGF9 3'-UTR while miR-187 knockdown significantly increased that of wild-type FGF9 3'-UTR ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 6B). Altering miR-187 level did not affect the luciferase activity of mutant FGF9 3'-UTR (Fig. 6B). Furthermore, qRT-PCR and western blot analysis showed miR-187 overexpression significantly reduced the mRNA ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 6C) and protein ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 6D) level of FGF9 in C33A cells. miR-187 knockdown significantly increased the mRNA ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 6E) and protein ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 6F) level of FGF9 in Caski cells.

*Inhibiting FGF9 was critical for the biological function of miR-187 in cervical cancer cells.* To confirm whether FGF9 was involved in the biological function of miR-187 in cervical cancer cells, we performed rescue experiments for FGF9 in

cervical cancer cells. For C33A cells overexpressing miR-187, we used FGF9 vector to overexpress FGF9 in these cells. FGF9 vector significantly increased FGF9 expression in C33A cells overexpressing miR-187 ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 7A). FGF9 overexpression reversed the inhibitory effects of miR-187 on cell viability ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 7B) and colony formation ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 7C) while blocked the promoting effects of miR-187 on apoptosis ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 7D) and caspase-3 level ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 7E). For Caski cells with miR-187 knockdown, we used FGF9 siRNA to inhibit FGF9 expression in these cells. FGF9 siRNA significantly reduced the expression of FGF9 in Caski cells with miR-187 knockdown ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 8A). FGF9 knockdown in these cells significantly blocked the promoting effects of miR-187 knockdown on cell viability ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 8B) and colony formation ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 8C) while reversed the inhibitory effects of miR-187 knockdown on apoptosis ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 8D) and caspase-3 level ( $P < 0.05$ ; Fig. 8E).

## Discussion

Many studies have confirmed that miRNAs were critical players in the initiation and progression of human cancers (17-19).

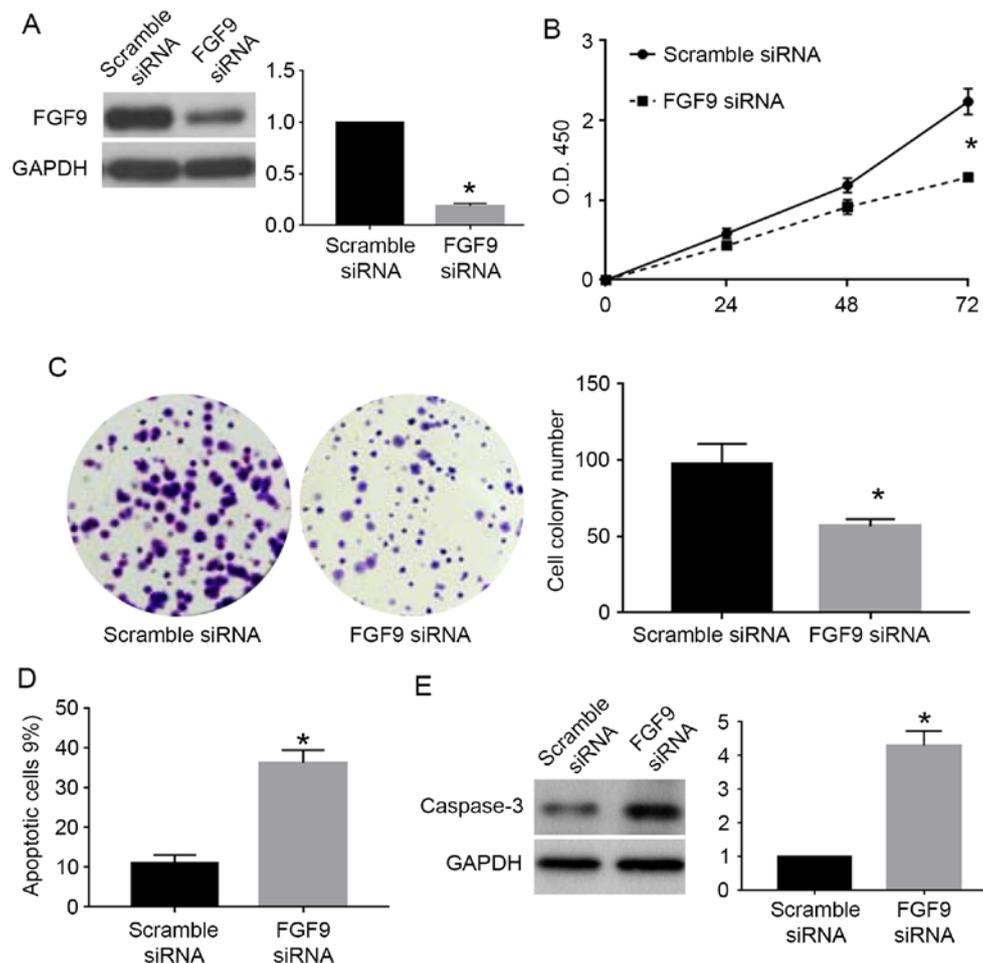


Figure 8. FGF9 knockdown reverses the functional influence of miR-187 knockdown on cell proliferation and apoptosis. (A) FGF9 knockdown decreased FGF9 level in Caski cells with miR-187 knockdown. (B) Knockdown of FGF9 reduced the promoting effect of miR-187 knockdown on the viability of Caski cells. (C) Knockdown of FGF9 abrogated the promoting effect of miR-187 knockdown on the colony formation of Caski cells. (D) Knockdown of FGF9 reversed the inhibitory effect of miR-187 knockdown on apoptosis of Caski cells. (E) Knockdown of FGF9 reduced the inhibitory effect of miR-187 knockdown on cellular caspase-3 level in Caski cells. \* $P < 0.05$ .

Accumulating evidence shows that miRNAs are promising biomarkers and therapeutic targets in cervical cancers (9). miR-187 was recently identified as a novel cancer-related miRNAs. Its expression status has been confirmed in liver (10), breast (11), ovarian (12), prostate (13), non-small cell lung (14) and colorectal cancer (15,16). Study of liver (10), ovarian (12) and colorectal cancer (15,16) suggested that miR-187 acted as a tumor suppressive factor. However, study of breast cancer and non-small cell lung cancer showed that miR-187 played oncogenic roles in these tumors (11,14). In the present study, we demonstrated for the first time that miR-187 expression level was downregulated in cervical cancer tissues and cell lines. Importantly, decreased level of miR-187 in cervical cancer patients was associated with poor prognosis of the patients. These data suggest that miR-187 has a tumor suppressive role in cervical cancer and can serve as a biomarker for cervical cancer patients.

Previous studies regarding miR-187 showed that miR-187 had different roles in different types of human cancers. miR-187 was found to inhibit the metastasis and epithelial-mesenchymal transition of liver cancer cells (10) and colorectal cancers (15,16). A study of colorectal cancer cells showed that

miR-187 could also inhibit the growth of colorectal cancer cells (16). In this study, both overexpression and knockdown methods confirmed that miR-187 exerted its tumor suppressive roles in cervical cancer cells by inhibiting proliferation and prompting apoptosis of cervical cancer cells. *In vivo* experiments proved that miR-187 could inhibit the *in vivo* growth of cervical cancer cells in nude mice.

miRNAs usually have multiple downstream targets in different types of cells. Previously identified downstream targets of miRNAs include S100A4 (10), Dab2 (12), aldehyde dehydrogenase 1A3 (13) and CD276 (16). In this study, we identified that FGF9 was a novel downstream target of miR-187 in cervical cancers based on the data of luciferase assay, qRT-PCR and western blot analysis. FGF9 is well known oncogenic protein in human cancers including colon (20), ovarian (21) and lung cancer (22). Our data demonstrated that inhibiting FGF9 was critical for miR-187 exerting its suppressive effects on the growth of cervical cancer cells.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrated that miR-187 level was decreased in cervical cancer tissues and cell lines. Decreased miR-187 level in cervical cancer patients was associated with poor overall survival and progression-free survival.

miR-187 inhibited the proliferation and promoted apoptosis of cervical cancer cells. *In vivo* experiment confirmed that miR-187 inhibited the growth of cervical cancer cells in nude mice. Furthermore, FGF9 was identified to be the downstream target of miR-187 in cervical cancer cells. Inhibition of FGF9 was required for miR-187 to exert tumor suppressive role in cervical cancer cells.

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