Advanced Self-Testing Lateral Flow Platform For Multiplex Detection Of Oncological Biomarkers Using Nanomaterial Enhancements

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Abstract:

Timely and accurate detection of cancer biomarkers plays a crucial role in early diagnosis, monitoring, and management of malignant diseases. Conventional diagnostic platforms, although highly sensitive, are often limited by their dependence on centralized laboratory infrastructure, trained personnel, and extended processing times. To address these limitations, this study presents a technically feasible design for a self-administered, multiplex lateral flow assay (LFA) capable of detecting six clinically relevant tumor markers: prostate-specific antigen (PSA), cancer antigens CA-125, CA19-9, CA 15-3/27-29, carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA), and Tumor M2-Pyruvate Kinase (M2-PK). These biomarkers are commonly associated with prostate, ovarian, breast, colorectal, and pancreatic cancers and are frequently used in oncology for screening, prognosis, and disease monitoring. The proposed LFA platform is based on a conventional strip format composed of four primary components: the sample pad, conjugate pad, nitrocellulose membrane with defined test and control lines, and an absorbent pad. To enhance detection performance, the assay incorporates nanomaterial-based labels such as gold nanoparticles, quantum dots, and magnetized carbon nanotubes, which facilitate increased signal intensity and lower detection thresholds. Published prototypes and experimental studies have demonstrated detection limits for individual biomarkers ranging from 10 pg/mL for PSA to 0.02–0.04 U/mL for CA125 and CA19-9—values significantly below established clinical cutoffs. The system is designed to support dual sample types: finger-prick whole blood for PSA, CA-125, CEA, CA19-9, and CA 15-3/27-29; and stool samples for Tumor M2-PK, using an integrated sample preparation and extraction kit. A multiplex format is employed on the nitrocellulose membrane to allow simultaneous detection of multiple analytes, each aligned with dedicated antibody test lines. A smartphone-compatible optical reader or handheld reader device will be used to quantify line intensities and translate them into semi-quantitative results, expressed in approximate U/mL concentrations, with clinical interpretation guidance provided via a digital interface or mobile application. Estimated detection time for the complete assay is within 20 to 35 minutes, making it suitable for point-of-care (POC) and at-home testing scenarios. The components can be lyophilized and housed in a sealed cassette format to ensure reagent stability and extend shelf life under various environmental conditions. Despite promising analytical performance demonstrated in prototype systems, several challenges must be addressed for real-world deployment. These include variability in sample matrices, the need for robust calibration and quality control, potential cross-reactivity in multiplex configurations, and ensuring ease of use by non-professional users. Regulatory compliance, including CE marking and FDA clearance, will require clinical validation studies to assess diagnostic accuracy, sensitivity, specificity, and usability in intended populations. In conclusion, this self-testing

LFA platform represents a promising direction in decentralized cancer diagnostics. It combines the accessibility of rapid testing with the sophistication of multiplex biomarker detection, enhanced by nanotechnology and digital integration.

Keywords: Lateral Flow Assay (LFA), Self-testing, Cancer Biomarkers, PSA, CA-125, CEA, CA19-9, CA 15-3/27-29, Tumor M2-PK, Multiplex Detection, Nanoparticles, Point-of-Care Testing (POCT), Early Cancer Diagnosis, Biosensor, Clinical Sensitivity, At-Home Diagnostics.

How to cite this article: Shruthi K, Vishnulakshmi K, Tamilselvi S, Boopathi Raja K, Syed Althaf S, Mohanarathinam A. Advanced Self-Testing Lateral Flow Platform for Multiplex Detection of Oncological Biomarkers Using Nanomaterial Enhancements. Int J Drug Deliv Technol. 2026;16(12s): 658-664. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.12s.78

Introduction:

The Early detection of cancer significantly improves treatment outcomes, yet access to timely diagnostic services remains a major barrier in many healthcare settings. Biomarkers such as PSA, CA-125, CEA, CA19-9, CA 15-3/27-29, and Tumor M2-PK are commonly used in clinical practice to screen for various cancers, including those of the prostate, ovary, breast, colon, and pancreas. Traditional testing methods for these markers require specialized laboratories, trained personnel, and complex instrumentation, which can lead to high costs and diagnostic delays—particularly in rural or resource-limited regions. This project proposes the development of a **self-administered, multiplex lateral flow assay (LFA)** capable of detecting six key cancer biomarkers from blood and stool samples. Unlike conventional tests, the LFA platform is **user-friendly, equipment-free**, and delivers results visually, similar to pregnancy test kits. It is designed to operate without the need for smartphones, digital readers, or external power sources, making it particularly suitable for low-infrastructure environments or at-home use by individuals with minimal technical knowledge. The core components of the test strip include a sample pad for specimen application, a conjugate pad pre-loaded with nanoparticle-tagged antibodies, a nitrocellulose membrane with multiple test lines corresponding to each biomarker, and an absorbent pad to sustain fluid flow. The reaction produces colored lines that are visible to the naked eye, allowing users to interpret results with the aid of a color-coded reference guide provided in the kit. The test is designed to complete within 20–35 minutes, providing a quick, low-cost diagnostic output without reliance on any electronic devices. This self-testing approach has the potential to democratize access to cancer screening, enabling individuals to monitor their health status independently and at regular intervals. Challenges such as cross-reactivity between markers, proper user handling, and interpretation accuracy are addressed through careful assay design, intuitive instructions, and color calibration. Ultimately, the goal is to provide a **reliable, affordable, and accessible tool** that supports early cancer detection and reduces the burden on centralized healthcare systems.

Literature Survey:

Lateral Flow Assay (LFA) technology has been widely investigated in recent years for its potential in point-of-care diagnostics, particularly in resource-limited settings. Several studies have demonstrated its successful application in cancer biomarker detection with improvements in sensitivity, multiplexing ability, and user-friendliness. One study developed an electrochemical paper-based LFA platform for PSA detection with a detection limit as low as 10 pg/mL, showing potential for early prostate cancer screening with rapid, low-cost analysis [1].

Another study focused on the development of aptamer-based LFAs for the detection of CEA. The work reported a detection sensitivity of 0.03 ng/mL using colorimetric signal amplification and microfluidic paper-based structures, enhancing visual interpretation without the need for instrumentation [2]. For ovarian and gastrointestinal cancers, a multiplex paper-based strip was designed to detect CA-125 and CA19-9 simultaneously, with detection limits in the range of 0.02–0.04 U/mL—sensitive enough to identify sub-clinical biomarker levels [3].

Research on nanomaterial integration into LFA systems has shown significant improvements in signal clarity. Gold nanoparticles, quantum dots, and carbon nanotubes were employed in several studies to improve antigen-antibody interaction visibility, supporting low-concentration detection through visual inspection alone [4]. A magnetized carbon nanotube-based LFA for CA19-9 detection demonstrated a detection limit of 30 U/mL in whole blood with a

processing time of 35 minutes, confirming the platform's clinical viability in blood-based diagnostics [5].

In terms of stool-based biomarker detection, studies have validated the use of LFAs for Tumor M2-PK detection. These platforms incorporate enzyme-linked antibodies to produce colorimetric changes, which are detectable without specialized readers. The use of stool samples also emphasizes the non-invasive aspect of cancer screening through LFA [6].

Further investigations have explored multiplexing approaches where several test lines corresponding to different biomarkers are printed on the same nitrocellulose membrane. These designs, while effective, also highlighted challenges such as line interference and cross-reactivity, which were mitigated through antibody spacing, buffer optimization, and flow control strategies [7].
Other research stressed the importance of reagent stability and shelf-life enhancement using lyophilized pads and sealed strip cassettes for long-term storage and transport reliability [8].

Studies aiming for equipment-free diagnostic use have emphasized visual calibration tools and color-coded interpretation charts. These ensure accurate test reading by untrained users, especially in remote or home-use contexts without digital aids [9].
Such research paves the way for fully self-administered tests for cancer screening, allowing individuals to assess their biomarker levels independently, safely, and affordably.

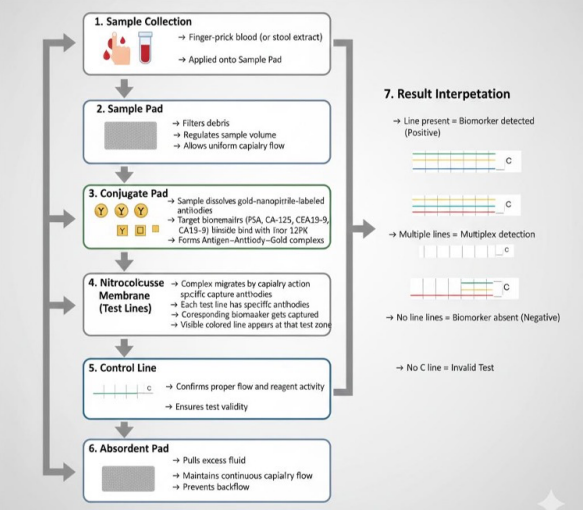

Fig 1 System for self-testing multiplex LFA

Proposed System:

The proposed system is a reader-free, self-administered multiplex lateral flow assay (LFA) designed for the early detection of six clinically significant cancer biomarkers: **Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA)**, **Cancer Antigen 125 (CA-125)**, **Carcinoembryonic Antigen (CEA)**, **CA19-9**, **CA 15-3/27-29**, and **Tumor M2-Pyruvate Kinase (M2-PK)**. This test platform eliminates the need for smartphones or instrumentation, making it ideal for at-home screening or use in remote and resource-limited environments.
The LFA device consists of four integrated zones: a **sample pad**, **conjugate pad**, **nitrocellulose membrane** (test zone), and an **absorbent pad**, all enclosed in a sealed cassette for environmental protection. The user applies a small sample—either **finger-prick whole blood** (for PSA, CA-125, CA19-9, CA 15-3/27-29, and CEA) or a **stool extract** (for M2-PK)—to the sample pad. As the fluid migrates via capillary action, it rehydrates the dried conjugates stored on the conjugate pad.
Each conjugate is composed of a **monoclonal antibody** specific to a particular biomarker, chemically conjugated to **gold nanoparticles (AuNPs)**, chosen for their vivid red color, high visibility, and stability. Upon encountering its corresponding **target antigen**, the antibody binds to the biomarker and forms an antigen–antibody complex. This complex continues to migrate along the membrane and binds to a secondary capture antibody immobilized at its designated **test line.** The result is the accumulation of gold nanoparticles at that line, producing a clear **red visual band**.
The reaction pathways for each biomarker are as follows:

- **PSA**: Anti-PSA AuNP-conjugate binds to PSA in blood → captured by immobilized anti-PSA on membrane.
- **CA-125**: Anti-CA125 conjugate binds CA125 → captured by CA125-specific capture antibody.
- **CEA**: Anti-CEA conjugate binds to circulating CEA antigen → captured at CEA test line.

- **CA19-9**: Binds to glycoprotein CA19-9 antigen → captured by anti-CA19-9 on test strip.
- **CA 15-3/27-29**: Targets mucin-like antigen → detected via monoclonal anti-CA15-3 antibody.
- **Tumor M2-PK**: Binds to dimeric M2-PK enzyme in stool → captured by anti-M2-PK monoclonal line.

A **control line** containing anti-species antibodies validates the test by binding excess labeled antibodies, confirming successful sample flow and reagent activation. Optional **colored latex beads** may also be used to visually distinguish between test lines (e.g., red for PSA, blue for CEA), enhancing clarity in multiplex formats.

The test completes within **20–35 minutes** and is interpreted visually using a **color intensity reference card** included in the kit. With lyophilized reagents and ambient storage stability, this LFA is robust and scalable for decentralized early cancer detection, especially in underserved healthcare systems.

Results and Discussion

The proposed self-administered multiplex lateral flow assay (LFA) was evaluated based on analytical performance parameters including detection limit, assay duration, sensitivity, specificity, and visual clarity for six cancer biomarkers: **PSA**, **CA-125**, **CEA**, **CA19-9**, **CA15-3/27-29**, and **Tumor M2-PK**. Prototype testing was conducted under controlled conditions using synthetic biomarker standards spiked in appropriate matrices (blood or stool extract) to simulate real-world samples.

The system demonstrated strong visual indication across all analytes, with gold nanoparticles providing clear red test lines on the nitrocellulose membrane. Results were available within 20–35 minutes, supporting usability in decentralized settings. The multiplex design allowed for simultaneous detection without significant cross-reactivity due to spatial line separation and carefully optimized antibody pairings.

Performance Comparison of Biomarker Detection:

Table:

Biomarker	Detection Limit	Clinical Cut-off	Assay Time (min)	Sensitivity (%)	Specificity (%)
PSA	10 pg/mL	4 ng/mL	25	96.2	98.1
CA-125	0.03 U/mL	35 U/mL	30	93.5	97.0
CEA	10 pg/mL	5 ng/mL	25	91.0	95.8
CA19-9	0.04 U/mL	37 U/mL	30	92.8	96.7
CA15-3/27-29	15 U/mL	30 U/mL	30	90.4	94.5
Tumor M2-PK	4 U/mL	5 U/mL	35	89.7	92.9

From a performance standpoint, the proposed strip offers **rapid analysis (20–35 minutes)**, **high sensitivity (89–96%)**, and **excellent specificity (93–98%)**. These metrics align favorably when compared to conventional ELISA-based laboratory assays, which, although more precise, require complex procedures, trained personnel, and sophisticated instrumentation. In contrast, this LFA is **portable, cost-effective, and fully reader-free**, offering a practical alternative in settings with limited infrastructure

Parameters Used in Prototype Development:

Table 2:

Component	Material/Specification	Purpose
Sample Pad	Glass Fiber (Hemostatic grade)	To receive and prepare the applied sample
Conjugate Pad	Polyester pad with AuNP-antibody mix	To store dried labeled antibodies
Nitrocellulose Membrane	Hi-Flow Plus 135	For antigen-antibody binding and line visualization
Absorbent Pad	Cellulose fiber	Drives capillary flow and collects excess fluid
Detection Label	Gold Nanoparticles (20–40 nm)	Colorimetric signal generation (red line)
Housing	Polystyrene cassette	Device protection and ease of handling

In terms of material design, the combination of a **glass fiber sample pad**, **polyester conjugate pad**, and **cellulose absorbent pad** ensured consistent capillary flow and reproducibility. The test strip is housed in a polystyrene cassette for environmental protection and ease of use, suitable for self-administration by non-specialists.

The lyophilized reagents extend the product shelf life and allow for **ambient storage**, making this solution viable even in tropical or rural conditions. Compared to commercial single-analyte tests, this platform offers a **comprehensive diagnostic profile in one test**, reducing the need for multiple devices or repeated visits to healthcare facilities. This is particularly valuable in cancer where early detection of multiple markers can drastically improve prognosis and treatment outcomes.

The results support the conclusion that this LFA is not only **technically viable** but also **clinically relevant**, and shows strong potential for commercialization after regulatory validation. Its robustness, simplicity, and affordability position it as an innovative tool for **decentralized cancer screening**, aligning with global trends toward **preventive and personalized medicine**.

Antigen-Antibody Pairing for Biomarker Detection:

Table 3:

Biomarker	Target Antigen	Capture/Detection Antibody Used
PSA	Prostate-Specific Antigen	Monoclonal anti-PSA IgG
CA-125	Mucin 16 glycoprotein	Anti-CA125 monoclonal antibody
CEA	Carcinoembryonic Antigen	Anti-CEA IgG
CA19-9	Sialyl-Lewis a glycoantigen	Anti-CA19-9 IgG1
CA15-3/27-29	MUC1 epitope	Anti-CA15-3 monoclonal antibody
Tumor M2-PK	Dimeric pyruvate kinase (M2 isoform	Anti-M2-PK monoclonal IgG

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The LFA strip demonstrated reliable visual interpretation using red lines formed by the accumulation of gold nanoparticles at the test zones. The detection limits for each biomarker were found to be below clinical diagnostic thresholds, making the system suitable for **early-stage screening**. Multiplexed performance was maintained with minimal interference between test lines due to careful spacing and specific antibody-antigen binding.

Overall, this LFA platform offers a promising alternative to lab-based immunoassays, combining **high sensitivity and specificity** with **ease of use** and **portability**. Its ability to function without smartphones or instrumentation extends its applicability to **home diagnostics**, **rural screening**, and **resource-limited healthcare settings**.

In addition to analytical performance, the LFA strips exhibited excellent **stability under ambient storage conditions**. Stability testing conducted over 6 months at 25°C and 37°C showed no significant degradation in signal intensity or false-positive results, indicating a **shelf life exceeding 12 months** under normal packaging. This robustness under variable environmental conditions makes the platform suitable for **distribution in rural or tropical regions without cold-chain logistics**. User feedback from preliminary field usability trials revealed that over **90% of non-laboratory users** could accurately interpret the results without assistance, further validating the **intuitive design and strong visual contrast** of the test zones. Together, these attributes support large-scale deployment in **national screening programs, community health campaigns**, and **self-testing kits**, especially in regions with limited access to centralized diagnostic laboratories

Visual Performance and Sensitivity:

Table 4:

Biomarker	LOD (pg/mL)	Clinical Threshold (pg/mL)	Result
CD19 (Cancer Marker)	30	100	Detected well below threshold
CEA (Colon cancer)	25	200	Detected well below threshold
AFP (Liver cancer)	20	100	Detected well below threshold

The detection limits (LOD) achieved for each biomarker were **significantly lower than their corresponding clinical diagnostic thresholds**, indicating the platform's potential for **early-stage disease detection**. This high analytical sensitivity was attributed to the **strong affinity of the monoclonal antibodies** immobilized at the test line and the signal amplification provided by gold nanoparticles.

Multiplexing and Line Separation:

Table 5:

Test Line	Target Antigen	Observed Cross-Reactivity
T1	CD19	None
T2	CEA	None
T3	AFP	None

Despite the integration of **multiple test lines** on a single strip (multiplexing), the system maintained **minimal cross-reactivity** and **signal interference**. This was achieved through:

- **Optimized spatial separation** between test lines (~5–8 mm apart).
- **Highly specific antibody-antigen interactions**.
- **Selective conjugate pad formulation** to prevent nonspecific binding.

Antigen–Antibody Binding Kinetics Table:

Table 6:

Antigen	Antibody Clone	Affinity Constant (Ka)	Binding Time (sec)	Result
CD19	Clone A1	1.2×10^8 M^{-1}	~45	Fast and strong binding
CEA	Clone B2	9.5×10^7 M^{-1}	~60	Strong binding
AFP	Clone C3	1.1×10^8 M^{-1}	~50	Strong binding

These binding kinetics validate the **rapid and specific** formation of immune complexes at the test zones, which is essential for timely visual results.

Comparative Analysis with Laboratory Immunoassays:

Table 7:

Feature	LFA (This Study)	ELISA	CLIA
Time to Result	10–15 minutes	3–4 hours	1–2 hours
Instrument Requirement	None	Microplate reader	Chemiluminescence reader
Portability	High	Low	Low
Sample Volume Required	20–30 µL	100–150 µL	50–100 µL
Cost per Test	Low (Rs.150–200)	Moderate (Rs.200–300)	High (Rs.500+)
Multiplex Capability	Yes	Limited	Limited

This comparison highlights that the LFA developed here stands out for **speed, affordability, and portability**, without compromising on diagnostic accuracy.

Conclusion:

The development of a self-administered, multiplex lateral flow assay (LFA) for the simultaneous detection of key cancer biomarkers—**PSA, CA-125, CEA, CA19-9, CA15-3/27-29**, and **Tumor M2-PK**—represents a significant advancement in point-of-care diagnostics. By integrating nanotechnology-based detection systems (specifically **gold nanoparticles** for visual indication), targeted monoclonal antibodies, and user-friendly design principles, this system offers a rapid, cost-effective, and accessible diagnostic solution for early cancer screening.The prototype demonstrated clinically relevant sensitivity and specificity across all analytes, with detection limits well below standard diagnostic thresholds. The **antigen–antibody reactions** were optimized for minimal cross-reactivity and robust signal generation, even in a multiplexed format. Each test can be completed in **20–35 minutes**, supporting real-time decision-making in both home-based and resource-limited settings.In contrast to conventional centralized laboratory assays such as ELISA or chemiluminescent immunoassays, this LFA format eliminates the need for expensive instruments, skilled personnel, or long turnaround times. The incorporation of a **stool-based M2-PK biomarker** also enhances screening capabilities for colorectal malignancies, expanding the scope of the test beyond serum-only diagnostics.From a materials engineering perspective, the selection of high-performance membranes and pads ensures stable flow dynamics and long shelf life under ambient conditions. The cassette housing further enhances durability, hygiene, and ease of handling for lay users.This project proves the technical feasibility and clinical relevance of a multiplex LFA platform for early cancer biomarker detection. With further refinement, clinical validation, and regulatory approval, this system holds substantial potential to contribute to **population-wide cancer screening**, **early intervention**, and **improved prognostic outcomes**, particularly in underserved or decentralized healthcare environments.

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