

1 **Adrenal Abcg1 controls cholesterol flux and steroidogenesis**

2 Jani Liiimatta^{1,2,3,*}, Evelyn Curschellas^{4,*}, Emre Murat Altinkilic^{1,2}, Rawda Naamneh Elzenaty², Philipp
3 Augsburg², Therina du Toit^{1,2,5}, Clarissa D. Voegel^{2,5}, David T. Breault^{6,7}, Christa E. Flück^{1,2,#}, Emanuele
4 Pignatti^{1,2,#}.

5 * Authors contributed equally

6 # Authors contributed equally

7 1. Division of Pediatric Endocrinology, Diabetology and Metabolism, Department of Pediatrics,
8 Inselspital, Bern University Hospital, Switzerland.

9 2. Department for BioMedical Research, University Hospital Inselspital, University of Bern, Switzerland.

10 3. Kuopio Pediatric Research Unit (KuPRU), University of Eastern Finland and Kuopio University Hospital,
11 Kuopio, Finland.

12 4. Department of Chemistry, Biochemistry and Pharmacy, Medical Faculty, University of Bern,
13 Switzerland.

14 5. Department of Nephrology and Hypertension, Inselspital, Bern University Hospital, University of Bern,
15 Switzerland.

16 6. Department of Pediatrics, Harvard Medical School, Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts,
17 USA.

18 7. Harvard Stem Cell Institute, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

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20 Short title: 'Abcg1 controls steroidogenesis'

21 Keywords: Abcg1, cholesterol, glucocorticoids, steroids, adrenal cortex.

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1 Corresponding Author: Emanuele Pignatti, Ph.D., Pädiatrische Endokrinologie/Diabetologie/Metabolik,
2 Medizinische Universitätskinderklinik Bern, Freiburgstrasse 15 / C843, 3010 Bern, Switzerland. ORCID:
3 0000-0002-5372-5692.

4
5 Name and E-mail address for reprint requests: Emanuele Pignatti, emanuele.pignatti@unibe.ch.

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7 Disclosure Statement: The authors have nothing to disclose

8 **Abstract**

9
10 Cholesterol is the precursor of all steroids, but how cholesterol flux is controlled in steroidogenic tissues
11 is poorly understood. The cholesterol exporter ABCG1 is an essential component of the reverse
12 cholesterol pathway and its global inactivation results in neutral lipid redistribution to tissue
13 macrophages. The function of ABCG1 in steroidogenic tissues, however, has not been explored. To model
14 this, we inactivated *Abcg1* in the mouse adrenal cortex, which led to an adrenal-specific increase in
15 transcripts involved in cholesterol uptake and *de novo* synthesis. *Abcg1* inactivation did not affect
16 adrenal cholesterol content, zonation, or serum lipid profile. Instead, we observed a moderate increase
17 in corticosterone production that was not recapitulated by the inactivation of the functionally similar
18 cholesterol exporter *Abca1*. Altogether, our data imply that *Abcg1* controls cholesterol uptake and
19 biosynthesis and regulates glucocorticoid production in the adrenal cortex, introducing the possibility
20 that *ABCG1* variants may account for physiological or subclinical variation in stress response.

21

22

1 Introduction

2

3 Steroid hormones mediate a myriad of physiological responses, from the control of blood
4 pressure (mineralocorticoids) and sexual maturation (sex hormones) to the regulation of glucose
5 homeostasis and stress response (glucocorticoids) (1). The extensive impact of steroid hormones on
6 human physiology demands a fine regulation of steroid production. Alterations of this fine balance may
7 result in pathological phenotypes, including adrenocortical insufficiency or steroid hypersecretion, for
8 which many monogenic or polygenic determinants still need to be identified (2,3).

9 As the obligatory precursor of all steroids, cholesterol is a key modulator of steroidogenesis,
10 both in a quantitative and qualitative fashion. Disruption of cholesterol homeostasis results in adrenal
11 insufficiency (e.g., in Smith-Lemli-Opitz disease) (4), while the dysregulated accumulation of cholesterol
12 leads to increased cholesterol storage and physical and biochemical cellular distress (e.g., in lipid
13 congenital adrenal hyperplasia) (5–7). Besides, fine tuning of cholesterol homeostasis is critical for
14 regulation of steroidogenesis within a physiological range. For instance, interfering with cholesterol
15 content in plasma membranes directly impacts the synthesis of pregnenolone, which is a common
16 precursor to all steroids (8). In addition, the master transcriptional activator of steroidogenesis,
17 Steroidogenic Factor 1 (SF1; NR5A1), not only induces the expression of critical steroidogenic enzymes,
18 but also triggers the expression of cholesterologenic genes to provide more substrate for steroidogenesis
19 (9). Furthermore, our group previously showed that intracellular cholesterol deprivation reroutes
20 steroidogenesis to a more androgenic profile, implicating cholesterol in the prioritization of
21 steroidogenic pathways (10).

22 Levels of intracellular cholesterol are therefore finely balanced between cholesterol acquisition,
23 (contributed by uptake from the circulation, *de novo* biosynthesis, and hydrolysis of cholesteryl esters),
24 and disposal (mediated by excretion of cholesterol to the circulation, cholesterol esterification for long-

1 term storage, and cholesterol deployment for biosynthesis of downstream products) (11). Intracellular
2 cholesterol homeostasis in adrenocortical cells is thought to rely on the sterol regulatory element-
3 binding factor 2 (SREBF2), which acts as a master transcriptional activator of the cholesterol biosynthetic
4 pathway and the cholesterol import machinery upon conditions of sterol depletion (7,11–13). However,
5 the molecular programs that control cholesterol availability in steroidogenic cells are not fully
6 characterized.

7 Abcg1 is an ATP-dependent transporter involved in the maintenance of tissue and cellular
8 cholesterol homeostasis. In mice and humans, it is expressed in a variety of cell types including
9 adrenocortical cells (14–22). Its subcellular localization is still a matter of debate: Abcg1 has been found
10 in both endosomes and in the plasma membrane, and in association with actin filaments (23–27). It is
11 thought to mobilize cholesterol from the endoplasmic reticulum and to redistribute it to the plasma
12 membrane, favoring cholesterol efflux to a variety of extracellular acceptors (15,28–30). The role of
13 Abcg1 in steroidogenic tissues, however, is unknown.

14 Here, we study the adrenal cortex to determine the role of Abcg1 in a steroidogenic tissue.
15 Abcg1 inactivation in mouse adrenals results in increased transcripts for cholesterol biosynthesis and
16 uptake, leading to increased corticosterone production. Our data suggest that Abcg1 is a key regulator of
17 cholesterol flux and glucocorticoid production.

18

19 **Methods**

20

21 *Experimental animals*

22

23 All animal procedures were approved by the Veterinary Office of the Canton Bern in Switzerland.

24 Generation of the aldosterone synthase (AS)-Cre strain (Cyp11b2^{tm1.1(cre)Br/t}), and the compound

1 conditional *Abcg1* and *Abca1* strain (B6.Cg-*Abca1*^{tm1Jp} *Abcg1*^{tm1Toil/J}), was previously described (31,32). To
2 generate the bigenic mice carrying one Cre allele and two conditional alleles either within the *Abca1* or
3 the *Abcg1* locus (referred to as '*Abca1 cKO*' and '*Abcg1 cKO*', respectively), males of the Cre-bearing
4 strain were crossed with compound heterozygous females for the conditional *Abca1* and *Abcg1* alleles.
5 Pups expressing the Cre recombinase and either the *Abca1*^{tm1Jp} or the *Abcg1*^{tm1Toil/J} allele were selected
6 and crossed with isogenic littermates. Littermates carrying the Cre allele alone, or one of the two
7 conditional alleles, were used as controls. All mice were kept on a mixed sv129-C57BL/6 genetic
8 background, with free access to chow and water, under a 12-hour light/12-hour dark cycle. Unless
9 otherwise specified, all mice used for this work were 2-month-old females. Adrenal weight was
10 measured on an analytical balance on freshly dissected adrenal glands following clearance of the
11 surrounding fat tissue.

13 *Gene Expression Analysis*

14 RNA was isolated from whole adrenals cleaned of the adherent fat or from livers and homogenized in TRI
15 Reagent (Sigma) using the Direct-zol miniprep RNA kit (Zymo Research), following the manufacturer's
16 protocol. RNA was reverse transcribed using the High-Capacity cDNA Reverse Transcription Kit (Thermo
17 Fisher Scientific). Gene expression analysis was performed by Real Time quantitative PCR (RTqPCR) using
18 the PowerUp SYBR Master Mix and the QuantStudio 1 thermocycler (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Technical
19 duplicates were used to minimize variability. For mouse studies, the following primers were used: *Abcg1*,
20 Fw: ACATCGAATTCAAGGACCTT, Rv: CCCAGAGATCCCTTCAAAA; *Abca1*, Fw: AACTTTCAAGATGCTGACTG,
21 Rv: AAAGAACTCCACATGCTCTC; *Ldlr*, Fw: GTTGCAGCAGAAGACTCAT, Rv: CACCCACTTGCTAGCGAT; *Scarb1*,
22 Fw: CAGGTGCTCAAGAATGTCC, Rv: TAGAAAGGGACGGGATC; *Hmgcr*, Fw: AATGCCTTGTGATTGGAGTT, Rv:
23 CCGGGAAGAATGTCATGAA; *Sqle*, Fw: AAAGAAAGAACAGCTGGAGT, Rv: TAGCTGCTCCTGTTAATGTC; *Insig1*,

1 Fw: ATAGCCACCATCTTCTCCTC, Rv: TCTCTCTTGAACCTGTGTGG; *Gck*, Fw: TGTAAGGCACGAAGACATAG, Rv:
2 GTTGTTCCCTTCTGCTCC; *Pck1*, Fw: GTGGAAGGTCGAATGTGTG, Rv: TTGATAGCCCTTAAGTTGCC; *G6pc*, Fw:
3 GTTCAACCTCGTCTTCAAGT Rv: CTGTTGCTGTAGTAGTCGG; *Nr3c1*, Fw: CTATGAACTTCGCAGGCC Rv:
4 GAGAACTCACATCTGGTCTC; *Gapdh*, Fw: ATCAACGACCCCTTCATTG, Rv: TTGATGACAAGCTTCCCATT; *Actb*,
5 Fw: GACCTGACAGACTACCTCAT, Rv: CTCGAAGTCTAGAGCAACAT. Transcripts encoding GAPDH or Actin
6 beta were used as internal control and data were expressed using the 2^{-ddCt} method.

7

8 *Transcriptome Profiling*

9 Preparation of whole-adrenal RNA isolates was conducted as indicated in the Gene Expression Analysis
10 section. RNA samples were quantified using the RiboGreen assay (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Sample
11 quality was analyzed on a Fragment Analyzer 5200 (Agilent) using the Fragment Analyzer HS RNA
12 kit(15NT) (Agilent, DNF-472-1000). Illumina Stranded mRNA Prep Preparation including polyA
13 enrichment was used according to manufacturer's recommendations to construct libraries from total
14 RNA. Subsequently, the Illumina NovaSeq and NextSeq platforms with a NovaSeq 200cy Kit (v1.5) and a
15 NextSeq 300cy Kit (v2), respectively, were used to sequence the libraries. The produced paired-end reads
16 which passed Illumina's chastity filter were demultiplexed using Illumina's bcl2fastq software version
17 2.20.0.422 (no further refinement or selection). Illumina adapter residuals were trimmed using cutadapt
18 (v4.0 with Python 3.9.16). Quality of the reads in fastq format was checked with the software FastQC
19 (version 0.11.9). Raw reads shorter than 10 bp, having average Q-values below 24 or incorporating
20 uncalled 'N' bases were filtered out using the BBTools software suite (version 38.86). The splice-aware
21 RNA mapping software STAR (version 2.7.10a) was used to map the remaining reads to the mm10
22 reference genome provided by IGenomes (archive-2015-07-17-14-33-26). To count the uniquely mapped
23 reads to annotated genes, the software htseq-count (HTSeq version 0.13.5) was used. Normalization of

1 the raw counts and differential gene expression analysis was carried out with the R software package
2 DESeq2 (version 1.38.3). Combined evidence from previous works suggest that only about 50-60% of
3 cells contributing to whole-adrenal transcriptome profiling efforts are recombined steroidogenic cells of
4 interest (31,33). Therefore, we expected differentially expressed genes to be less abundant in our whole-
5 adrenal extracts with respect to more enriched cell populations (e.g., sorted cortical cells) and used a
6 relaxed fold change threshold (1.2) to capture these genes. Library construction, sequencing and data
7 analysis described in this section were performed by Microsynth AG (Balgach, Switzerland). Profiling
8 results are stored within the Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) repository under the accession number
9 GSE242081.

10

11 *Histology, immunofluorescence, and microscopy*

12 Adrenals were dissected, cleared of the fat tissue, and fixed overnight in 4% paraformaldehyde (PFA). 4-
13 µm paraffin sections were processed for protein immunodetection as previously described (10). Briefly,
14 antigen retrieval was performed in 10mM Sodium Citrate pH 6, and incubation was conducted overnight
15 using a mouse monoclonal anti-Disabled-2/p96 (Dab2; BD Transduction Laboratories, cat no. 610464;
16 RRID: [AB_397837](#)) and a rabbit polyclonal anti-Akr1b7 (kindly provided by Dr Pierre Val and Dr Antoine
17 Martinez; RRID: [AB_3075891](#) (34)). Indirect staining was performed using the goat anti-rabbit IgG (H+L)
18 highly cross-adsorbed secondary antibody conjugated with Alexa Fluor™ 488 (from Thermo Fisher
19 Scientific, cat. No. A11008; RRID: [AB_143165](#)), and a goat anti-mouse IgG (H+L) cross-adsorbed
20 secondary antibody conjugated with Alexa Fluor™ 647 (from Thermo Fisher Scientific, cat. No. A21235;
21 RRID: [AB_2535804](#)). 4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI) was used for counterstaining. Images were
22 captured with a Nikon Eclipse Ti-E microscope. Hematoxylin and eosin staining was carried out on
23 neighboring sections compared to the immunofluorescence experiment. For Oil red O staining, mouse

1 adrenals were snap frozen and 5- μ m sections were processed in a mixed solution of Oil red O and
2 dextrin, followed by nuclear counterstaining with Mayer's hemalum (all products from Merck).

3

4 *Steroid profiling and blood tests*

5 Mouse serum was obtained using cardiac puncture of mice euthanized by intraperitoneal injection of
6 pentobarbital. This terminal procedure was chosen because it allowed to collect paired blood and
7 adrenal tissue samples while causing a significantly lower stress response in mice compared to other
8 euthanasia methods (35). 25 μ l of serum were used for further liquid chromatography and mass
9 spectrometry (LC-MS) analysis using an established in house LC-MS method (36). Briefly, samples were
10 collected and stored at -20° C. Following thawing, 38 μ l of internal standard was added to 25 μ l of
11 sample and extracted with ZnSO₄ and methanol. After centrifugation, the organic phase was purified
12 using a solid-phase extraction on an OasisPrime HLB 96-well plate using a positive pressure 96-well
13 processor (both Waters, UK). For LC-MS analysis, a Vanquish UHPLC (equipped with an ACQUITY UPLC
14 HSS T3 Column, 100Å, 1.8 μ m, 1 mm X 100 mm column; Waters, Switzerland) was coupled to a Q
15 Exactive Plus Orbitrap (both Thermo Fisher Scientific, Reinach, Switzerland). Separation was achieved
16 using gradient elution over 17 minutes using water and methanol both supplemented with 0.1 % formic
17 acid (all Sigma-Aldrich, Buchs, Switzerland) as mobile phases. Data analysis was performed using
18 TraceFinder 4.1 (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Reinach, Switzerland). The method was validated according to
19 international standards. Steroid hormone concentrations were calculated in nmol/L. Values detected
20 below the lower limit of accurate quantification were not used for statistics. Adrenocorticotropin
21 hormone (ACTH) in serum was measured using an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay kit (Abcam, cat.
22 no. ab263880; RRID: [AB_2910221](https://scicrd.org/entry/AB_2910221)), following the manufacturer's protocol. While ACTH is routinely
23 assayed in plasma, we preferred quantification in serum as suggested by the kit based on the

1 equivalence of serum and plasma for ACTH measurement in humans (37). Total cholesterol, high-density
2 lipoproteins (HDL), and low-density lipoproteins (LDL)/very-low density lipoproteins (VLDL) particles
3 were measured using a cholesterol assay kit (Abcam, cat. no. ab65390), while triglycerides were assayed
4 with a triglyceride assay kit (Abcam, cat. no. ab65336), following the manufacturer's instructions.

6 *In situ hybridization*

7 For double enzymatic in situ hybridization, mice adrenal glands were fixed in 4% PFA at 4°C for 24h and
8 5- μ m-thick sections from Formalin-Fixed Paraffin-Embedded (FFPE) blocks were cut. In situ hybridization
9 (ISH) was performed following the manufacturer's recommendation of the BaseScope Duplex Reagent
10 Kit Intro Pack-Mm (Cat. No. 323871, Advanced Cell Diagnostics). Standard conditions were used: 15 min
11 incubation for the Antigen retrieval step and 30 min for Protease III treatment. ISH staining was
12 performed manually with the following combinations of RNAscope® probes (all from Bio-Techne). BA-
13 Mm-Abca1-3ZZ-st-C2 probe, recognizing Abca1, (Cat No. 1218611-C2) detected with the Fast Red signal;
14 BA-Mm-Abcg-E3-1ZZ-st-C1 probe, recognizing Abcg1, (Cat No. 1218601-C1) detected with the green
15 signal. Basescope Duplex Positive Control Probe-Mouse(Mm)-C1-Ppib-1ZZ/C2-Polr2a-3ZZ and Basescope
16 Duplex Negative Control Probe-C1-DapB-3ZZ/C2-DapB-3ZZ (Cat No. 322982) were used respectively as
17 positive and negative controls. Nuclei were visualized using hematoxylin and slides were mounted with
18 Vectamount mounting medium (Cat# H5000, Vector Labs). Images were acquired on a NanoZoomer S60
19 digital slide scanner at 40X (Hamamatsu).

1 *Cholesterol quantification*

2 Adrenal glands were dissected, clear of the surrounding fat pad, and homogenized in
3 radioimmunoprecipitation assay (RIPA) buffer (Pierce, cat. no. 89900) supplemented with a protease and
4 phosphatase inhibitor by Thermo Scientific (cat. no. A32961) at 4°C, using lysing matrix tubes (MP
5 Biomedicals, cat no. 6913100) and a Bead Mill Homogenizer by Omni International. Tissue lysates were
6 incubated for 1h in ice and spun down on a bench centrifuge for 20 min at 4°C to get rid of unprocessed
7 debris. Quantification of cholesterol was carried out using a Cholesterol/Cholesterol Ester-Glo™ Assay by
8 Promega (cat. no. J3190) following the manufacturer's instructions, with the exception that adrenal
9 lysates were diluted from 1:10 to 1:40 in the lysis buffer provided by the kit to fit the calibration curve.
10 The assay was performed either with or without cholesterol esterase, to allow for quantification of both
11 total and free cholesterol, respectively. Values for esterified cholesterol were obtained by subtraction of
12 free from total cholesterol. All cholesterol values were normalized by protein concentration assayed
13 using a DC protein assay (Bio-Rad, cat. no. 5000112).

15 *Statistical analysis*

16 Two-tailed Student's t-test was used for comparisons between any two groups. For every comparison,
17 the F-test was used to assess inequality of variances. In case of inequality of variances, the Welch
18 correction was adopted. One-Way ANOVA and Dunnett multiple comparison test were used for
19 comparisons between groups of three or more, unless otherwise specified. Prism 10 software
20 (GraphPad) was used for statistical analysis. All data were included, no exclusion method was applied.
21 Data are presented as Mean ± Standard Error of the Mean (SEM).

1 Results

2 *Loss of adrenocortical Abcg1 increases transcripts involved in cholesterol metabolism.*

3 To investigate the role of *Abcg1* in the adrenal cortex, we generated a mouse model where both *Abcg1*
4 alleles were conditionally inactivated using an aldosterone synthase (AS; *Cyp11b2*)-specific Cre
5 recombinase (Fig. 1A). The efficiency and extent of recombination were determined by quantifying
6 *Abcg1* transcripts within control and conditional knock-out adrenals (henceforth referred to as '*Abcg1*
7 *cKO*'), and by *in situ* visualization of *Abcg1* mRNAs. Specifically, *Abcg1* transcripts were reduced by about
8 40% in recombined whole adrenals (Fig. 1B), and recombination occurred throughout the entire cortex
9 (Fig. 1C). Importantly, transcripts encoding *Abca1*, a functionally similar ATP-dependent cholesterol
10 exporter (11), were not affected by *Abcg1* knock-out (Fig. 1B).

11 To assess the impact of *Abcg1* on adrenal physiology, we profiled the transcriptome of *Abcg1* cKO
12 adrenals and compared it with the transcriptome of control and *Abca1* cKO counterparts, which were
13 also used as controls (Fig. 2A and B). Using a cutoff of 1.2 for fold change and 0.01 for adjusted p value,
14 we found 19 upregulated and 12 downregulated genes specifically in *Abcg1* knock-out adrenal glands
15 (Fig. 2C). Gene set enrichment analysis (GSEA) revealed that cholesterol metabolism was the most
16 affected pathway, with 34 genes contributing to the cholesterol set enrichment
17 (HALLMARK_CHOLESTEROL_HOMEOSTASIS dataset) (Fig. 2D). Using quantitative PCR, we validated 3 of
18 these upregulated genes, either implicated in cholesterol uptake (*Ldlr*) or biosynthesis (*Hmgcr*, *Sqle*) (Fig.
19 2E). The gene encoding the HDL receptor (*Scarb1*), which is the main route for cholesterol delivery to
20 steroidogenic pathways (38), resulted upregulated using quantitative PCR (Fig. 2E), despite not
21 contributing to the enrichment of the GSEA dataset (Fig. 2C and D). To determine the adrenal perception
22 of cholesterol load, we also quantified *Insig1*, which is normally reduced upon accumulation of sterols

1 (39,40). Surprisingly, we found that *Insig1* was upregulated in *Abcg1* cKO adrenals (Fig. 2F), suggesting
2 that cholesterol metabolism in *Abcg1*-deficient glands is dysregulated.

3 Altogether, our data indicate that *Abcg1* deficiency in the adrenal cortex disrupts intracellular cholesterol
4 homeostasis by driving the expression of transcripts that normally promote increased cholesterol
5 production and uptake.

6

7 *Loss of Abcg1 results in increased corticosterone.*

8 To determine whether increased cholesterol-related transcripts driven by *Abcg1* inactivation results in
9 increased cholesterol storage, we performed an Oil Red O staining of adrenal sections and observed no
10 difference between *Abcg1* cKO and control tissues (Fig. 3A). Direct quantification of total, free, and
11 esterified cholesterol in the adrenals confirmed that cellular cholesterol compartments are not impacted
12 by inactivation of *Abcg1* (Fig. 3B).

13 We then investigated whether the increase in cholesterol-related transcripts might lead to an increase of
14 steroid biosynthesis. The adrenal steroid output (i.e., the sum of pregnenolone, progesterone, 11-
15 deoxycorticosterone, corticosterone, and aldosterone) showed a 74% increase in *Abcg1* cKO mice
16 compared to control animals. Instead, *Abca1* cKO mice did not display any change in adrenal steroid
17 metabolites (Fig. 3C). Most of the variation in *Abcg1* cKO steroid profile was explained by increased
18 corticosterone, the main glucocorticoid in mice, whereas the other steroids were not affected (Fig. 3D).

19 The increase in corticosterone, although significant, was not sufficient to suppress the level of its main
20 secretagogue, adrenocorticotropin hormone (ACTH) (Fig. 3E). While these results are based on female
21 mice, male counterparts displayed a comparable increase in corticosterone, but at an older age (avg. 18
22 weeks for males, compared with 12 weeks for females) (Fig. 3D and F).

1 We then evaluated whether the increase in corticosterone was associated with increased adrenal size or
2 altered zonation. First, we assessed adrenal weight, which revealed *Abcg1 cKO* adrenals mice were
3 unchanged, compared to controls, with a paradoxical trend towards a decrease in adrenal weight (Fig.
4 4A). Next, we stained for the zone-specific markers Dab2 (identifying the zona Glomerulosa – zG-) and
5 *Akr1b7* (identifying the zona Fasciculata -zF-), which showed no difference between control and *Abcg1*
6 *cKO* mice in the zF-to-zG area ratio (Fig. 4B and C). These results indicate that neither increased adrenal
7 mass nor expansion of the zF explains the increased corticosterone production in *Abcg1 cKO* mice.
8 Furthermore, to exclude that corticosterone production was influenced by a change in systemic lipid
9 metabolism in *Abcg1 cKO* mice, we performed serum lipid profiling, which revealed no differences in
10 HDL, LDL, total cholesterol, or triglycerides between *Abcg1 cKO* and control mice (Fig. 4D).
11 Finally, the systemic response to increased glucocorticoid was estimated in *Abcg1 cKO* mice by
12 quantifying three glucocorticoid target genes in the liver, i.e., *Gck*, *Pck1*, and *G6pc* (41–44), which
13 showed a non-significant trend of increase compared to control and *Abca1 cKO* animals (Fig. 4E). Instead,
14 no such trend was observed for *Nr3c1*, whose expression levels are not sensitive to circulating
15 glucocorticoids (Fig. 4E) (44). In addition, *Abcg1 cKO* mice displayed a mild increase in body weight
16 compared to control animals (Fig. 4F), compatible with a moderate but prolonged exposure to increased
17 corticosterone (45).
18 Altogether, our data suggest that loss of *Abcg1* results in increased intracellular cholesterol uptake and
19 biosynthesis, leading to higher glucocorticoid production.

20

1 Discussion

2 We show that inactivation of *Abcg1* in the adrenal cortex leads to increased expression of genes that
3 promote cholesterol availability (from uptake and biosynthesis), as well as an increase in glucocorticoid
4 production. The increase in glucocorticoid production was observed in both female and male mice, albeit
5 at an older age in male mice, possibly due to a slower rate of recombination and/or tissue turnover in
6 these mice (46,47).

7 Although our work does not provide an integrated analysis of 24h urine corticosterone metabolites, the
8 absence of ACTH suppression and the analysis of corticosterone-responsive liver genes suggest that
9 *Abcg1 cKO* mice show only a mild increase of daily corticosterone output, most likely within physiological
10 range. Consistent with this conclusion, we expect only a minor (if any) impact on glucose metabolism,
11 which was not directly investigated in this work. The increase in body weight in *Abcg1 cKO* mice is
12 compatible with a protracted exposure to moderately increased corticosterone levels (45). In addition,
13 the ACTH values averaging 200 pg/ml throughout all our animal groups possibly reflect a mild stress
14 stimulation, compatible with reported values in rats upon pentobarbital-mediated terminal anesthesia
15 (48).

16 Surprisingly, our data are in contrast with the mild glucocorticoid insufficiency and decreased cortical
17 cholesteryl esters found by Hoekstra and colleagues in mice following global deletion of *Abcg1* (20). This
18 discrepancy could be explained by a possible decrease in corticotropin releasing hormone (CRH) and/or
19 ACTH in mice with global *Abcg1* deletion, which were not assayed in the study. Alternatively, global loss
20 of *Abcg1* could lead to functional impairment or dysgenesis of the adrenal cortex, underlying a not-yet-
21 described role of *Abcg1* during intrauterine development. This latter hypothesis is less plausible, though,
22 because of the low level of *ABCG1* expression reported in human fetal tissues (21). In our work, we use a
23 conditional mouse model that leads to inactivation of *Abcg1* specifically in the steroidogenic cells of the

1 adrenal cortex during the first weeks of postnatal development (31), which allows us to rule out prenatal
2 or systemic effects of *Abcg1* deletion on the phenotype. However, an accurate quantification of the
3 extent of recombination in *Abcg1* cKO adrenals is technically challenging. Therefore, we cannot exclude
4 the possibility that the differences between Hoekstra and colleagues' work (20) and ours are due to a
5 different degree of *Abcg1* recombination in adrenocortical cells.

6 Our finding that adrenal *Abcg1* inactivation results in upregulation of transcripts important for
7 cholesterol biosynthesis and uptake is in line with the increases seen in *Hmgcr*, Farnesyl pyrophosphate
8 (*Fpp*), and *Ldlr* in the liver from global *Abcg1* KO mice (15). This similarity suggests that the genetic
9 network regulated by *Abcg1* is conserved among different tissues.

10 *Abcg1* inactivation, however, did not affect transcripts encoding genes directly implicated in
11 steroidogenic conversions, raising the hypothesis that increased adrenal steroidogenesis might be due to
12 excess cholesterol in *Abcg1* cKO mice flowing directly into the steroidogenic machinery and fueling the
13 production of the end-product corticosterone. This hypothesis implies that the amounts of cholesterol
14 entering the steroidogenic pathway are loosely controlled, and exposure to functional cholesterol
15 sources (e.g., lipoproteins) may directly trigger increased steroidogenesis. While, to our knowledge, this
16 has not been formally tested *in vivo*, steroidogenesis is directly stimulated by exposure to lipoproteins in
17 primary adrenal cells and in the established NCI-H295R adrenal cell line (49) (and our data, not shown).

18 It is interesting to note that aldosterone, despite being an adrenal functional end-product, is not affected
19 by *Abcg1* inactivation. This is surprising in consideration of the fact that exposure to cholesterol results in
20 increased aldosterone production *in vitro* (49,50). We suspect this difference is because aldosterone
21 synthase (*Cyp11b2*) expression, unlike the expression of 11-beta-hydroxylase (*Cyp11b1* – the last step in
22 corticosterone biosynthesis -) is finely tuned in mice by a range of physiological stimuli. In fact, the
23 expression of (*Cyp11b2*) in mice and rats, unlike in cells, is regulated in such a way that only a subset of

1 zG cells express the enzyme at a given time (51). Excess sodium can suppress Cyp11b2 expression almost
2 completely, while poor dietary sodium intake produces a marked increase in Cyp11b2 (52). Instead,
3 Cyp11b1 is constitutively expressed in zF cells and converts any available substrate into corticosterone
4 (52), including any excess cholesterol that can be present in *Abcg1 cKO* adrenals. Therefore, we expect
5 that the local concentration of cholesterol and steroid precursors may not affect aldosterone production.
6 Finally, although the extent to which our findings in mice are relevant to human pathophysiology
7 remains to be explored, our data introduce the possibility that *Abcg1* variants may account for
8 physiological or subclinical variation in stress response among healthy subjects. The Human Gene
9 Mutation Database (HGMD) lists 25 different mutations or polymorphisms that have been described in
10 *ABCG1* having a possible or probable pathological outcome (53–60). The individuals carrying these
11 variants present with a series of phenotypes or risk associations predominantly linked to cardiovascular
12 disorders, including impaired HDL homeostasis and increased risk for coronary heart disease. However,
13 steroidogenic capacity in these individuals has not been assessed. Given the association between higher
14 serum cortisol concentrations and cardiovascular risk profile (61), it would be of interest to assess basal
15 and stimulated glucocorticoid levels in individuals carrying these alleles, which might explain
16 interindividual variability in basal cortisol or physiological cortisol responses, and excess cortisol levels in
17 individuals carrying risk alleles.

19 **Funding**

20 This work was funded by the Novartis Foundation for Medical-Biological Research (E.P., 22B088), the
21 NCCR RNA&Disease Translational Fellowship Grant (E.P.), the International Fund Congenital Adrenal
22 Hyperplasia – IFCAH – (E.P.), the University of Bern via the Initiator grant (E.P.), the Uniscientia

1 Foundation Zürich/Vaduz (C.E.F.), and the research fellowship grants from the Sigrid Jusélius Foundation
2 and the Foundation for Pediatric Research (both from Helsinki, Finland) (J.L.).

3

4 **Author contributions**

5 J.L., E.C., M.A., R.N.E., and P.A. assisted with the experiments. T.d.T and C.V. performed the LC-MS
6 analysis. D.T.B. contributed the *Cyp11b2*^{tm1.1(cre)Br/t} mouse model and edited the manuscript. C.E.F.
7 supervised the project and contributed the laboratory infrastructure. E.P., designed and supervised the
8 project, carried out the experiments, and wrote the manuscript.

9

10 **Acknowledgments**

11 We thank Dr Pierre Val and Dr Antoine Martinez for sharing the antibodies used for
12 immunofluorescence, and Dr Idoia Martinez de Lapiscina for valuable discussion. We also thank the
13 Translational Research Unit (TRU) Platform at the University of Bern for supporting the histological
14 procedures. BioRender.com was used to generate schematics.

15

16 **Data Availability**

17 Some or all datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly
18 available but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

19

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4

5 Figure Legends

6 **Figure 1. Effective gene recombination in *Abcg1* cKO mice.** **A.** Schematic representation of the mouse
7 model used to inactivate *Abcg1* in adrenocortical cells using Cre-mediated recombination of *Abcg1*'s
8 third exon (ex3). **B.** Quantitation of transcripts encoding *Abcg1* and *Abca1* in control and *Abcg1* cKO
9 adrenal glands. **C.** *In situ* depiction of *Abcg1* (blue dots) and *Abca1* (red dots) transcripts in control (left)
10 and *Abcg1* cKO adrenal sections (right), including insets' virtual magnifications on each side. All mice
11 used for this figure were 2-month-old females. Scale bar = 25µm. c, capsule; zG, zona Glomerulosa; zF,
12 zona Fasciculata; med, medulla; AS, Aldosterone Synthase. ns, not significant; *, $P \leq 0.05$.

13 **Figure 2. Inactivation of adrenocortical *Abcg1* results in increased transcripts for cholesterol uptake**
14 **and synthesis.** **A.** Schematic representation of the mouse model used to inactivate *Abca1* in
15 adrenocortical cells using Cre-mediated recombination of exons 46 and 47 (ex46, ex47). **B.** Quantification
16 of *Abca1* transcripts in control and *Abca1* cKO adrenal glands. **C.** Volcano plot depicting 12
17 downregulated and 19 upregulated genes (red or beige dots) in *Abcg1* cKO adrenals compared to the
18 combined (summed) datasets of controls and *Abca1* cKO counterparts, using cutoffs of 1.2 for fold
19 change and 0.01 for adjusted p value. Each beige dot is associated with a gene name as indicated in the
20 plot. **D.** Heat map depicting color-coded expression levels of 34 transcripts responsible for the
21 enrichment of the HALLMARK_CHOLESTEROL_HOMEOSTASIS dataset in Gene Set Enrichment Analysis
22 (GSEA). **E and F.** Quantitation of transcripts involved in cholesterol regulation, uptake, and *de novo*
23 synthesis in control and *Abcg1* cKO adrenal glands. All mice used for this figure were 2-month-old
24 females. AS, Aldosterone Synthase. *, $P \leq 0.05$; **, $P \leq 0.01$; ***, $P \leq 0.001$.

1 **Figure 3. Inactivation of adrenocortical *Abcg1* results in increased corticosterone synthesis. A.** Oil Red
2 O staining (red) of control and *Abcg1 cKO* adrenocortical sections. Mayer's hemalum was used to
3 counterstain nuclei (blue). Images are representative of 4 animals per genotype. Scale bar = 25 μ m. **B.**
4 Free, esterified, and total cholesterol in whole adrenal glands from control and *Abcg1 cKO* animals. **C.**
5 Aggregated quantification of adrenal steroids detected in mouse sera using LC/MS; i.e., pregnenolone,
6 progesterone (Prog), 11-deoxycorticosterone (11-DC), corticosterone (Cort), and aldosterone (Aldo). **D.**
7 Steroid concentrations in sera of control and *Abcg1 cKO* mice. Most pregnenolone values were below the
8 threshold of accurate quantification, likely because of intense processivity into downstream products,
9 and are not reported in this graph. **E.** Adrenocorticotropin hormone (ACTH) levels in sera from control
10 and *Abcg1 cKO* mice. **F.** Levels of corticosterone in male control and *Abcg1 cKO* mice at different ages.
11 Except for panel F, all mice used for this figure were 2-month-old females. avg., average; *, $P \leq 0.05$; ***,
12 $P \leq 0.001$; ****, $P \leq 0.0001$.

13
14 **Figure 4. *Abcg1 cKO* mice display increased body weight, but unaltered adrenal mass, zonation, and**
15 **serum lipid profile. A.** Adrenal weight measured on freshly dissected whole adrenals in control and
16 *Abcg1 cKO* mice. **B.** Representative depiction of immunofluorescence assay on adrenocortical sections
17 from control and *Abcg1 cKO* mice. Images are representative of 4 animals per genotype. Scale bar =
18 50 μ m. **C.** Ratio of the zona Fasciculata (zF) area – measured as the area stained by Akr1b7 – and the zona
19 Glomerulosa (zG) area – measured as the area stained by Dab2 –. **D.** Lipid profile in control and *Abcg1*
20 *cKO* mouse sera. **E.** Quantification of glucocorticoid-sensitive (i.e., *Gck*, *Pck1*, *G6pc*) and insensitive
21 (*Nr3c1*) genes in livers from control, *Abcg1 cKO*, and *Abca1 cKO* animals. **F.** Quantification of live animal
22 weight. All mice used for this figure were 2-month-old females. GC, Glucocorticoids. **, $P \leq 0.01$.

23

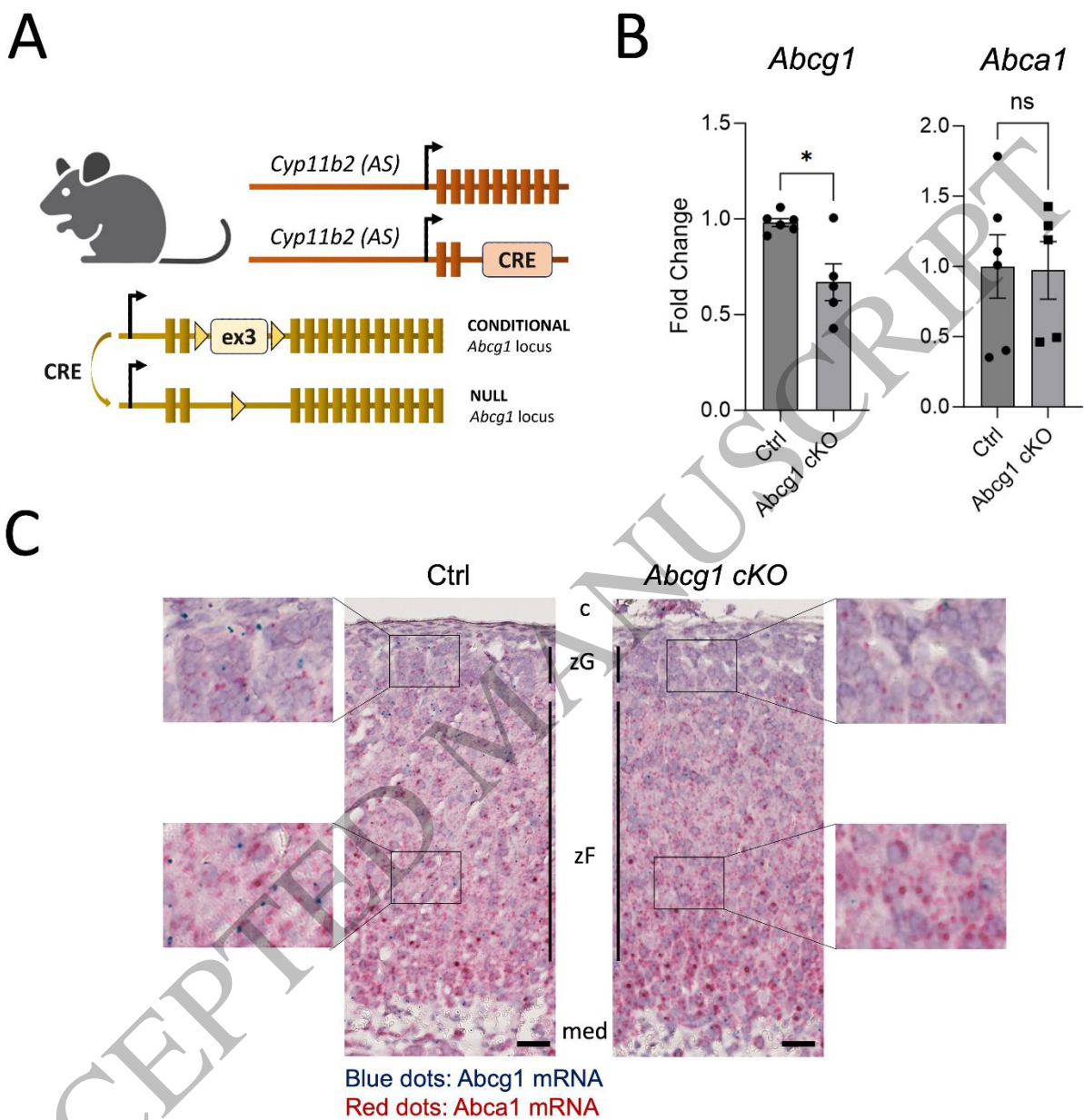


Figure 1
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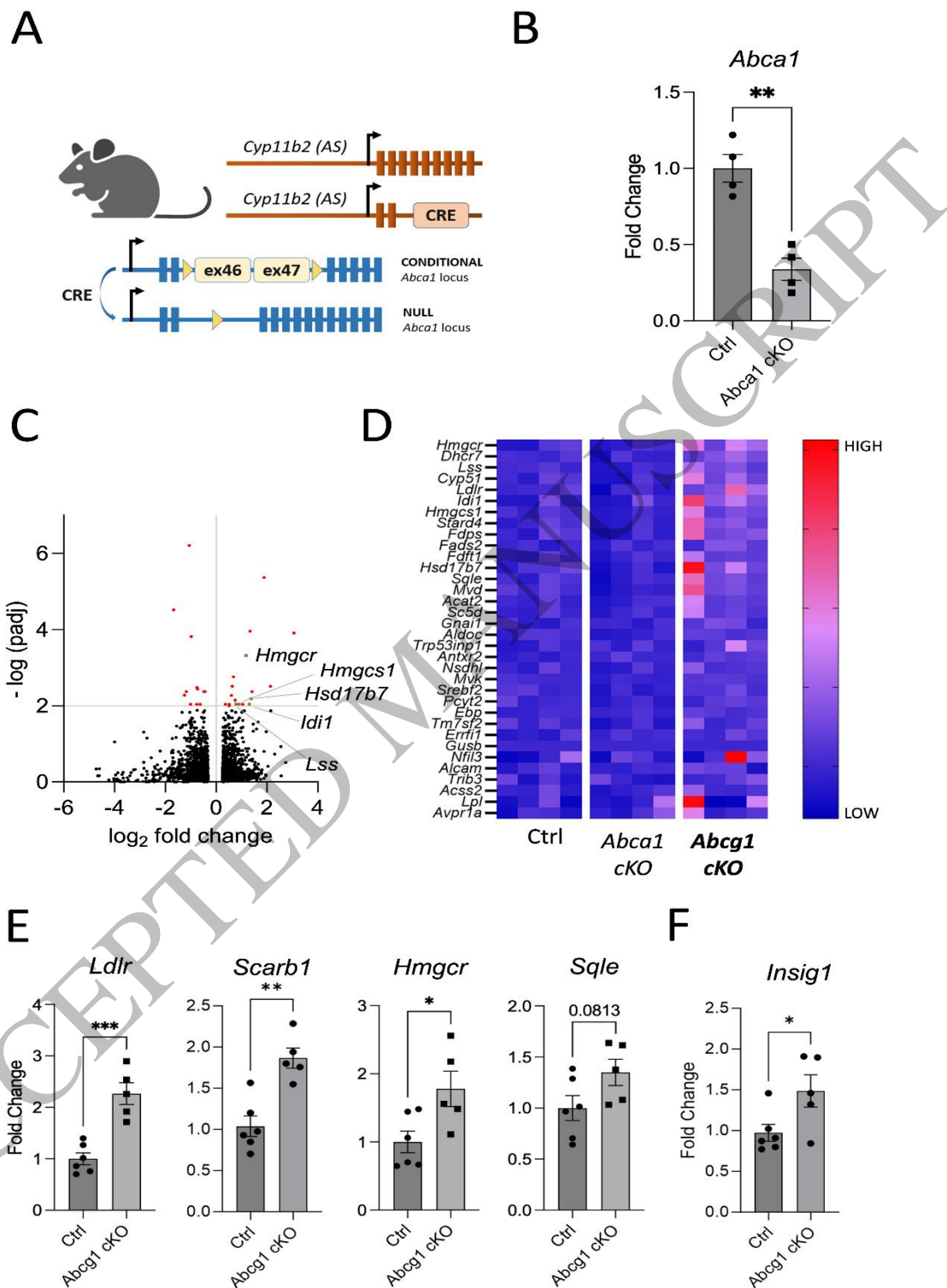


Figure 2
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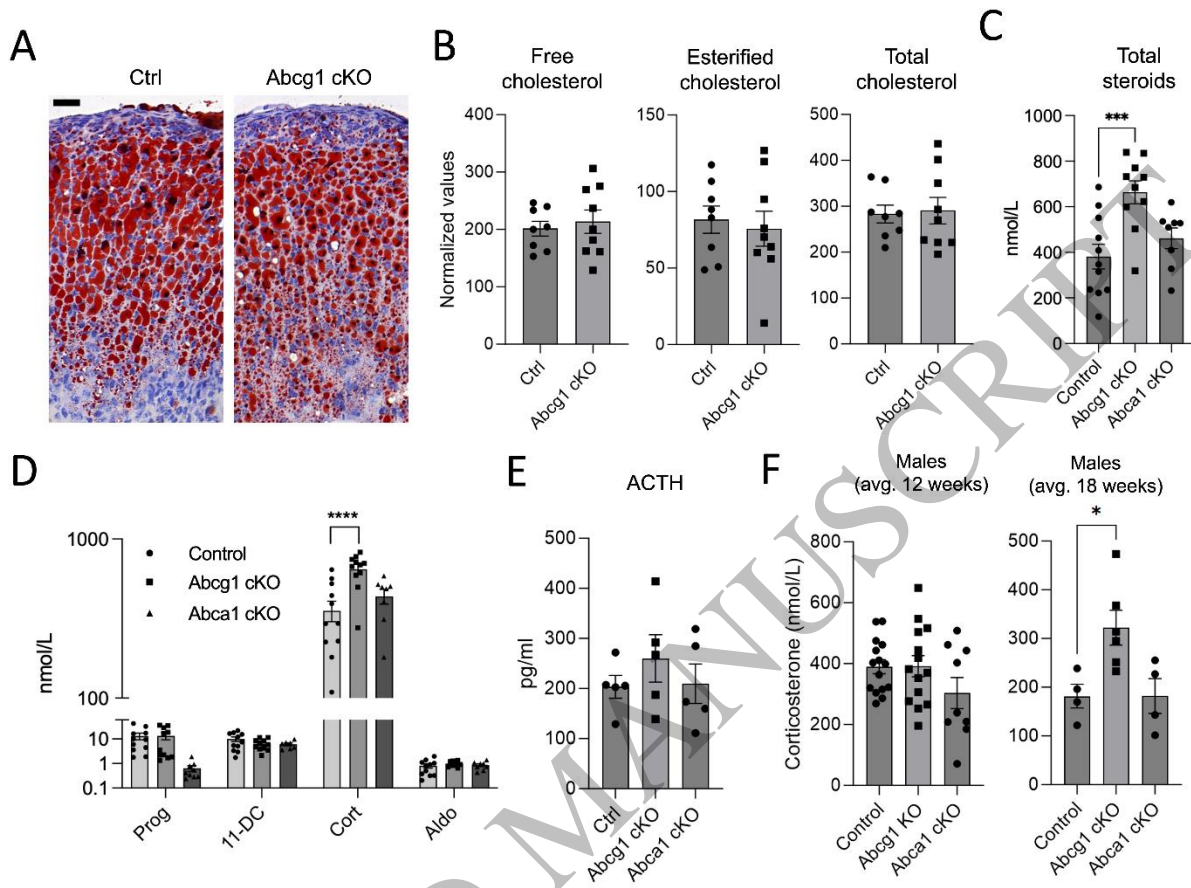


Figure 3
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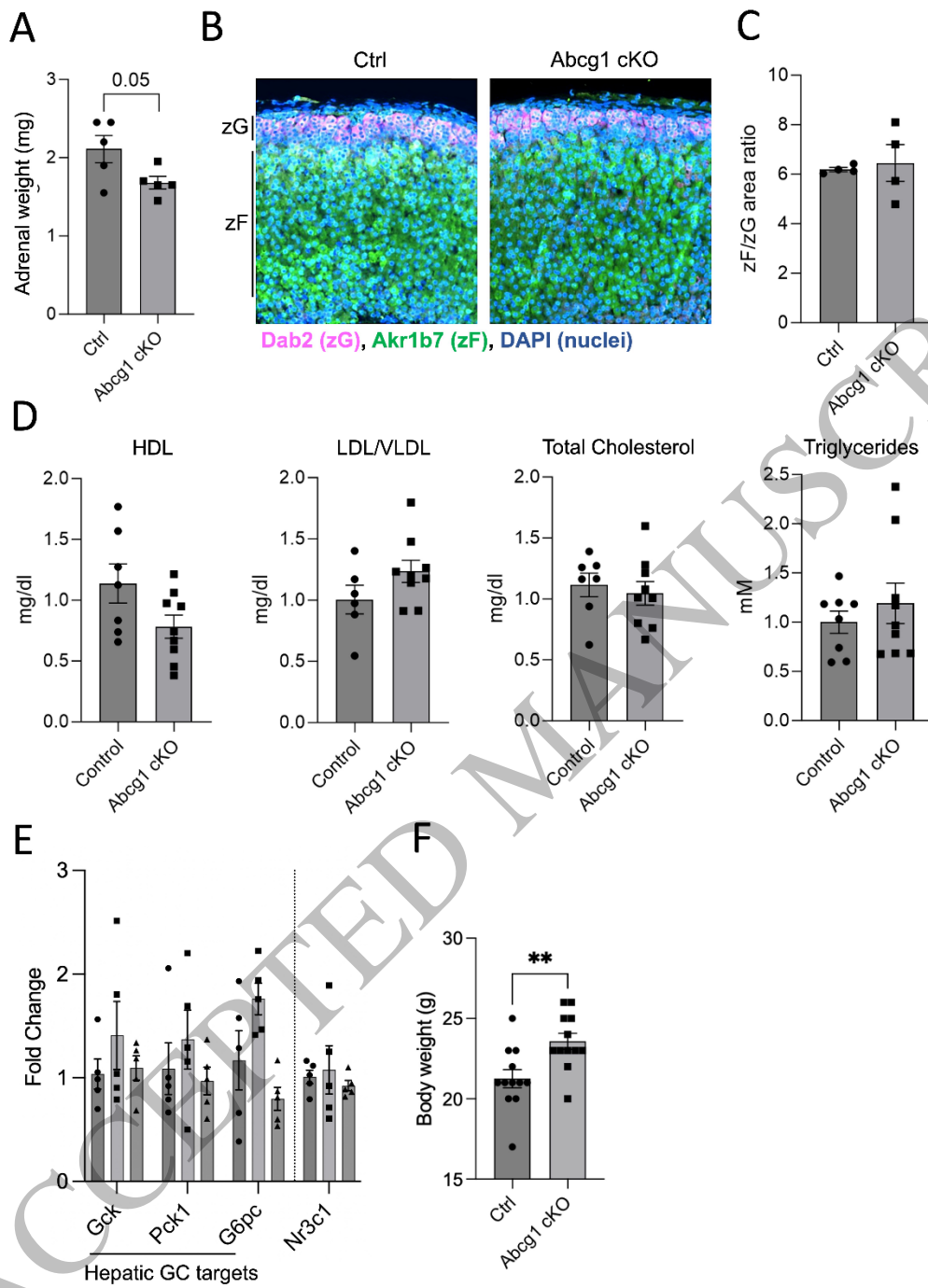


Figure 4
s442x515 mm (x DPI)

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