



Short Communication

NAT10 primes a post-transcriptional repertoire essential for the maintenance of spermatogonial homeostasis

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 August 2024

Received in revised form 24 October 2024

Accepted 24 December 2024

Available online 15 January 2025

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Male fertility is built on the proper proliferation and differentiation of germline cells within the seminiferous epithelium in the testis, which continuously produces millions of sperm per day in mammals [1]. RNA modifications are emerging as crucial epitranscriptomic regulators, with diverse roles in a wide range of biological processes [2,3]. N4-acetylcytidine (ac⁴C) is highly conserved across prokaryotes and eukaryotes, and is catalyzed by the solely known enzyme “writer,” N-acetyltransferase 10 (NAT10) [4,5]. NAT10 is closely involved in meiotic progression in both male spermatocytes and female oocytes in mice [6,7]. However, the functional importance and the molecular mechanisms by which NAT10-mediated ac⁴C modification coordinates the complex, pre-meiotic process remain poorly understood.

To investigate the role of Nat10 in spermatogonia, we examined testicular 10× single-cell mRNA datasets (E-MTAB-6946) alongside our immunofluorescence staining and western blotting results. The analyses revealed that NAT10 is a nucleolar protein predominantly expressed in spermatogonia in both mouse and human testes (Figs. S1 and S2 online). To further explore NAT10's function in spermatogonial development, we employed two germline-

specific *Nat10* knockout mouse models: the *Nat10*-ScKO model, created by crossing *Stra8*-Cre mice with *Nat10*^{lox/lox} mice (Fig. S3 online), and the *Nat10*-DcKO model, a *Ddx4*-promoter-driven, tamoxifen-inducible *Nat10* knockout model generated by intercrossing our in-house customized *Ddx4*-CreERT2 mice (*C57BL/6J**Ddx4*^{tm1(5×HA-P2A-EGFP-T2A-CreERT2)Bao}) with *Nat10*^{lox/lox} mice (mouse experiments were approved by the Ethics Committee of University of Science and Technology of China (USTC) (ethical approval No. USTCACUC25120124040)) (Fig. S5a and b online). *Nat10* knockout in both mouse models resulted in infertility with significantly reduced testicular sizes (Figs. S4a, b and S5c, d online). Histological analysis revealed a prominent loss of germ cells upon *Nat10* KO (Figs. S4c, d and S5e online). Immunofluorescence staining and western blotting revealed comparable numbers of PLZF-positive spermatogonia in postnatal day 7 (P7) testes; however, by P12, most germ cells were depleted in *Nat10*-ScKO testes, (Fig. S4e–j online). In comparison, the numbers for both undifferentiated and differentiated spermatogonia were significantly reduced in *Nat10*-DcKO testes at P7 (Fig. S5f–n online). These findings suggest that NAT10 is essential for spermatogonial proliferation and differentiation.

Then we injected *Nat10*^{lox/lox}; *Ddx4*^{GFP-CreERT2} mice between P8–P10 to delete the *Nat10* gene in pre-leptotene spermatocytes (Fig. S6a–c online). The testes from WT and *Nat10*-DcKO mice appeared morphologically similar, with seemingly normal meiotic

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DSB repair, although some zygotene spermatocytes were dysregulated in *Nat10*-DcKO mice (Figs. S6d, e and S7a–h online). In adult mice, by 32 d post-tamoxifen (dpt), *Nat10*-DcKO testes exhibited a “Sertoli cell only” phenotype, which was not observed before 18 dpt (Figs. S6f–h and S7i, j online). These data indicate that NAT10 is essential for maintaining steady-state homeostasis of spermatogonia in adult testes.

We next explored the transcriptomic changes in *Nat10*-null spermatogonia. Spermatogonial cells were purified via fluorescence-activated cell sorting (FACS) using EGFP reporter in Ddx4-CreERT2 model [7,8]. The results revealed similar numbers of up- and down-regulated genes, with Gene Ontology (GO) analysis indicating that down-regulated genes were primarily associated with the cell cycle and cell division (Fig. S8a–d online). Additionally, key genes involved in spermatogonial proliferation and differentiation, including *Ccna2*, *Ccnb2*, *Sox3*, *Dmrt1*, *Stra8*, and *lin28a*, were significantly downregulated (Fig. S8e–g online). We further verified these findings by measuring mRNA levels of cell-cycle regulators in tamoxifen-inducible *Nat10* knockout mouse embryonic fibroblast (MEF) cell lines [7], demonstrating significant downregulation of cell-cycle genes such as *Ccnb2*, *Ccna2*, *Ccne1*, *Ccnd1*, *Cdc20*, and *Cdca3* (Fig. S8h online). Strikingly, attempts to produce a *Nat10* homozygous knockout cell line in F9, a testicular teratoma-derived cell line, failed, suggesting that *Nat10*-null mutation causes cell lethality (Fig. S9 online). Collectively, these data suggest that NAT10 regulates a common set of cell-cycle genes crucial for cell viability.

Since NAT10 is the only known “writer” of the ac⁴C, we further carried out liquid chromatography/mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) analysis to analyze the RNA modifications. Our findings revealed that ac⁴C levels were significantly lower in *Nat10*-depleted testes (Fig. S10a–d online). NAT10 requires a cofactor for ac⁴C deposition in 18S rRNAs and tRNAs in mammalian cells [5,9], but global snoRNA (SNORD13) knockout models have shown that NAT10/SNORD13-mediated ac⁴C modification of rRNA does not affect cell survival or proliferation [10], suggesting ac⁴C mark on rRNA is dispensable for cellular development. We next assessed whether NAT10/THUMP1-deposited ac⁴C modification in tRNAs functions in mammalian cells. We generated two stable *Thumpd1* knockout F9 cell lines (Fig. S11 online). Only ac⁴C levels in tRNAs were significantly lower in *Thumpd1*-null F9 cells (Fig. S10e–g online), supporting the previous notion that NAT10 partners with THUMP1 to deposit ac⁴C in tRNAs [5]. Notably, however, the protein translation, cell proliferation or apoptosis was indistinguishable between *Thumpd1*-null and WT F9 cells (Fig. S10h–j online). These data rule out the possibility that NAT10/THUMP1-deposited ac⁴C in tRNAs is responsible for cell lethality in both germline and somatic cells.

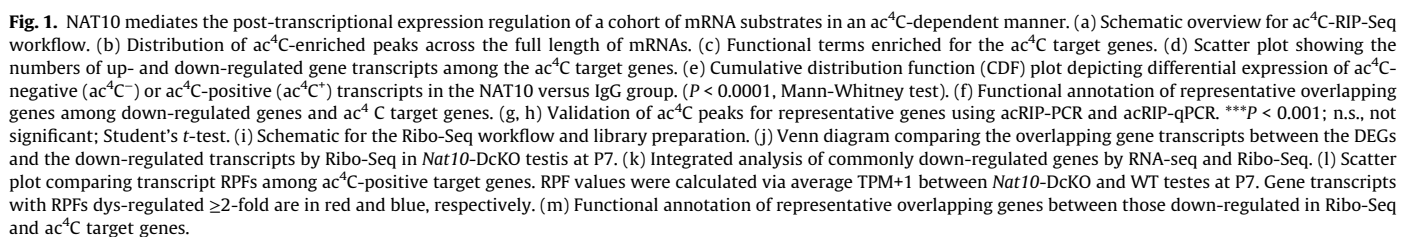
Given these findings, we next reasoned that NAT10-deposited ac⁴C in mRNAs might account for the deleterious effects. To this end, we deciphered the ac⁴C-modified mRNA landscape using an in-house optimized ac⁴C-RIP-seq protocol in pubertal mouse testes (Fig. 1a). Consistent with prior studies [4], most ac⁴C-enriched peaks were located across the 5'UTR and coding sequence region (CDS) of mRNA transcripts (Fig. 1b and Fig. S12a–d online). GO enrichment analysis suggested that ac⁴C-modified mRNAs were primarily associated with cell cycles and cell differentiation (Fig. 1c), while transcripts without ac⁴C showed no significant difference between up- and down-regulated mRNAs (Fig. 1d, e and Fig. S12e, f online). These data suggest that NAT10 stabilizes mRNA transcripts by depositing the ac⁴C mark. The ac⁴C-positive mRNAs that were only down-regulated upon *Nat10* loss comprised a cohort of representative genes in relation to cell proliferation/differentiation and the cell cycle (Fig. 1f and Fig. S12g, h online). Both visual inspection and ac⁴C-RIP-PCR/qPCR assays confirmed that *Dmrt1*, *Six5*, *Sox3*, and *Ccna2* are ac⁴C-modified by NAT10 (Fig. 1g–h). An *in vitro* mRNA decay assay revealed that the *Dmrt1*

and *Sox3* mRNA stability was significantly reduced in *Nat10*-deficient testes (Fig. S12i online). Together, this evidence suggests that mRNA ac⁴C modification accounts for spermatogonial defects upon *Nat10* KO.

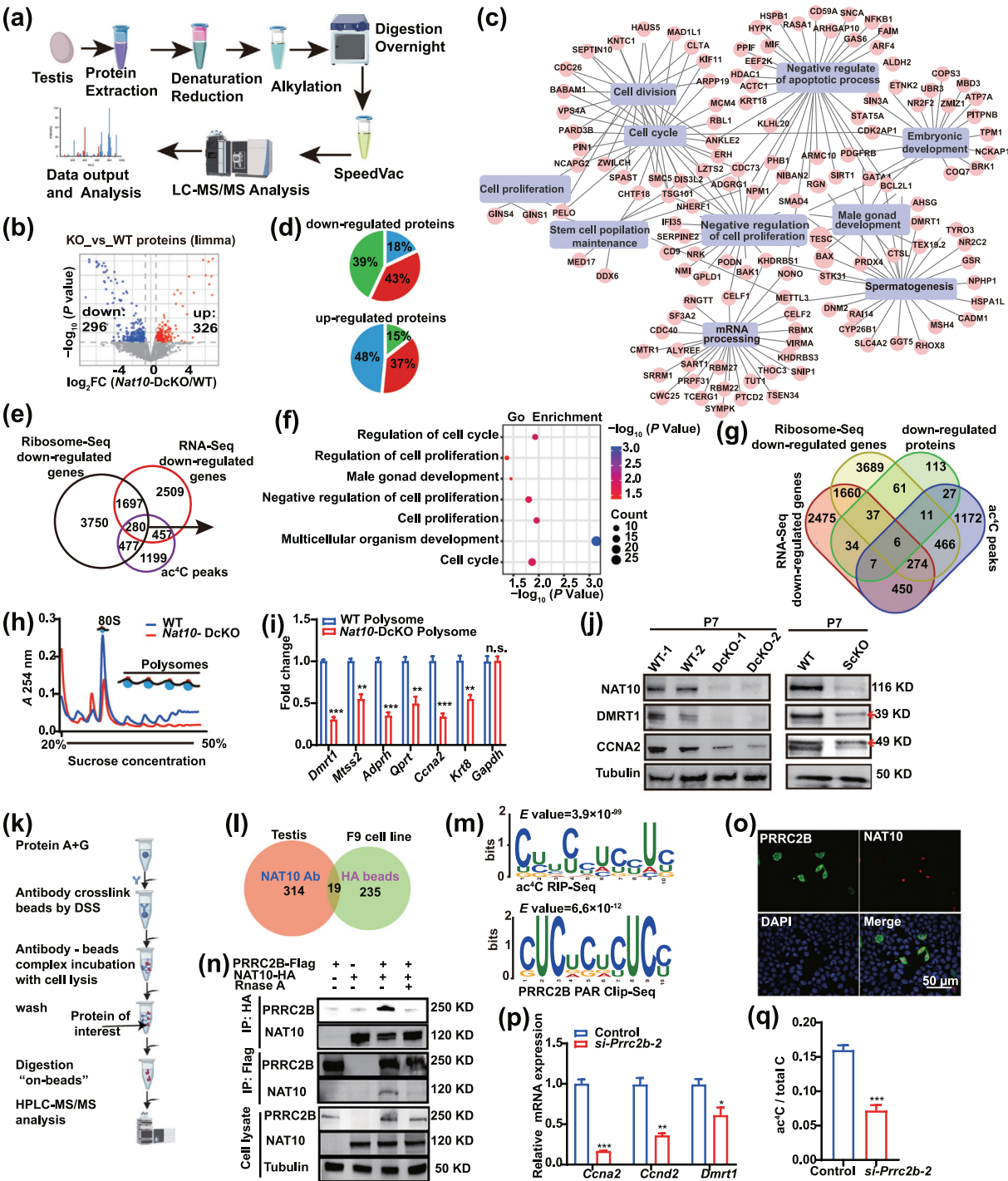
Prior studies imply that ac⁴C modification is associated with enhanced mRNA translation [4,7], we employed an in-house optimized Ribo-seq assay [7,11] (Fig. 1i), which demonstrated high quality and reproducibility. However, following *Nat10* deletion, the majority of RPF transcripts were downregulated (Fig. S13a–f online), suggesting global translational repression upon *Nat10* loss. Combined with RNA-seq data, the downregulated genes exhibited declined RPF occupancy and were primarily enriched in pathways related to the cell cycle and germline development (Fig. 1j, k). Notably, the number of genes exhibiting up- or down-regulation at the mRNA levels was similar for transcripts with elevated RPFs. Further analysis revealed that more of the downregulated genes also showed decreased translation levels (Fig. S13g, h online). Moreover, we observed a greater number of ac⁴C-positive mRNAs with decreased RPF intensity in *Nat10*-deficient testes compared with WT testes (423 vs. 262) (Fig. 1l). These mRNAs were involved in cell cycle, multicellular organism development, and cell differentiation (Fig. 1m). We also validated the expression of representative downregulated genes from Ribo-seq and mRNA-seq (Fig. S13i–m online). These findings underscore the critical role of NAT10 in enhancing the translation of ac⁴C-modified mRNA substrates, particularly those involved in cell cycle and germline development.

To further explore these changes at proteome level, we conducted label-free quantitative MS (Fig. 2a), which identified dysregulated proteins in *Nat10*-deficient testes (up: down, 326:296) (Fig. 2b). GO enrichment analysis revealed that these proteins were closely associated with cell cycle, cell division, proliferation, and germline development (Fig. 2c). We overlapped the dysregulated proteins with the gene transcripts detected by Ribo-seq and found 43% of the downregulated proteins exhibited reduced RPF occupancy (Fig. 2d). Furthermore, among the genes with downregulated RPFs, mRNA transcripts, and ac⁴C-positive transcripts, a total of 280 transcripts were commonly enriched in cell cycle and multicellular development (Fig. 2e, f). We intersected the downregulated proteins with the shared 280 transcripts and identified six ac⁴C-modified genes, including *Dmrt1* and *Ccna2*, that are subject to attenuated gene expression regulation (Fig. 2g and Fig. S14a online). These results were further validated by qPCR and immunoblotting (Fig. 2h–j). Collectively, these integrative analyses unambiguously showed that, at least in part, both DMRT1 and CCNA2 are *bona fide* substrates for NAT10-catalyzed ac⁴C modification *in vivo*, responsible for defective spermatogonial homeostasis.

To interrogate which cofactors interplay with NAT10 to deposit ac⁴C modification, we optimized an in-house, sensitive “on-beads” protein digestion protocol designed for immunoprecipitation mass spectrometry (IP-MS) using testicular spermatogonia and F9 cells. We introduced a Flag-SBP-HA(FSH) tag in-frame at the N-terminus of the NAT10 protein, and confirmed its expression (Fig. 2k and Fig. S15 online). After normalization, we identified 254 and 333 unique NAT10-interacting proteins in F9 cells and P7 testes, respectively (Fig. 2l). GO enrichment classified these proteins as primarily related to cell cycle, mRNA processing, and translation (Fig. S14b online). Of interest, motif conservation analysis and functional screening established PRRC2B as the principal NAT10-interacting protein by recognizing the conserved motif “CuuCcUCCU” (Fig. 2m and Table S3 online) [12,13]. PRRC2B associates with NAT10 in an RNA-dependent manner, which was corroborated through co-immunoprecipitation, as well as by the colocalization of the two proteins in the nuclei via immunofluorescence staining (Fig. 2n, o). Further, the knockdown assay using two siRNAs against *Prirc2b* confirmed that PRRC2B is critical for the expression of genes targeted by NAT10-mediated ac⁴C deposition,



In this study, we exploited our highly efficient, tamoxifen-inducible *Nat10* KO mouse models, and revealed a prominent role of NAT10 in priming a coordinated post-transcriptional repertoire in testicular spermatogonia during both first-wave spermatogene-



sis and adult steady-state spermatogenesis. Through integrative analysis of RNA-seq, ac⁴C-RIP-seq, Ribo-seq, and proteomic data, we identified DMRT1 and CCNA2 as downstream ac⁴C-modified substrates of NAT10. Remarkably, knockout mouse models for either *Dmrt1* or *Ccna2* phenocopied the spermatogonial defects observed in *Nat10* knockout mice [14,15]. Additionally, we identified PRRC2B as a key partner that assists NAT10 *in vivo*. These findings not only enhance our understanding of the mechanisms underlying spermatogonial development at the epitranscriptomic level, but also provide valuable insights for future functional studies on NAT10 substrates and cofactors in other milieus.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the National Key Research and Development Program of China (2019YFA0802600, 2022YFC2702600), Research Funds of Center for Advanced Interdisciplinary Science and Biomedicine of IHM" (QYPY20230032), the National Natural Science Foundation of China (31970793, 32170856 and 32300711), the Anhui Provincial Natural Science Foundation grant (2408085J016), the Reproductive and Genetic Hospital of CITIC-XIANGYA (YNXM-202211), the Hunan Provincial Grant for Innovative Province Construction (2019SK4012) and the Hundred Youth Talents Program of Hunan Province.

Author contributions

JianQiang Bao, XiaoLi Zhu, Shen Zhang, Ge Shan and YunFang Zhang conceived, designed, and supervised the work. JianQiang Bao and XiaoLi Zhu wrote the manuscript. XiaoLi Zhu, Xue Jiang and JiaQi Zou performed mouse crossing, chromosome spreads analysis, immunofluorescent staining. CaoLing Xu and XiaoXiao Gao analyzed the omics data. WenQing Li did plasmids construction. XueMei Xing did HE staining of mouse testis with the help of YuZhang Zhu, Yu Cheng, Muhammad Azhar. Jiao Lei and Fei Meng performed the proteomics analysis. Xin Wang did the experiment on RNA modification detection. Wen-jie Han and Ge Lin modified the manuscript.

Data availability

All the raw data and processed files have been deposited in the Sequence Read Archive (SRA) (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sra>) with the accession numbers: PRJNA1082542 and PRJNA1082548. All MS data were deposited in the ProteomeXchange Consortium (<https://proteomecentral.proteomexchange.org>) via the PRIDE partner repository with the identifier PXD050145.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scib.2025.01.021>.

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