

1 **The Great Deceiver: miR-2392's Hidden Role in Driving SARS-CoV-2 Infection**

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91

92 **Summary (150 words)**

93 MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are small non-coding RNAs involved in post-transcriptional gene
94 regulation that have a major impact on many diseases and provides an exciting avenue towards
95 antiviral therapeutics. From patient transcriptomic data, we have discovered a circulating
96 miRNA, miR-2392, that is directly involved with SARS-CoV-2 machinery during host infection.
97 Specifically, we found that miR-2392 was key in driving downstream suppression of
98 mitochondrial gene expression, increasing inflammation, glycolysis, and hypoxia as well as
99 promoting many symptoms associated with COVID-19 infection. We demonstrate miR-2392 is
100 present in the blood and urine of COVID-19 patients tested, but not detected in COVID-19
101 negative patients. These findings indicate the potential for developing a novel, minimally
102 invasive, COVID-19 detection method. Lastly, using both *in vitro* human and *in vivo* hamster
103 models, we have developed a novel miRNA-based antiviral therapeutic targeting miR-2392 that
104 significantly reduces SARS-CoV-2 viability and may potentially inhibit a COVID-19 disease
105 state in the host.

106

107 **Key words**

108 COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, microRNA, miRNA, Facile Accelerated Specific Therapeutic
109 (FAST), FASTmer, miR-2392, antiviral therapeutic

110

111 **Introduction**

112 In Fall of 2019, the zoonotic spillover event led to the first know human infection with the
113 severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and subsequent human-to-
114 human transmission triggered a pandemic leading to a worldwide health crisis from the resulting
115 disease, referred to as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Huang et al., 2020; Zhu et al.,
116 2020). COVID-19 causes substantial pulmonary disease but can also cause systemic health risks
117 from extrapulmonary manifestations. Its effects entangle the entire body including but not
118 limited to the cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, and hematological systems that may lead to long
119 lasting effects after the virus has left the body, known as PASC (post-acute sequela of COVID-
120 19) (Carfi et al., 2020; Feng et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2020). SARS-CoV-2 is
121 classified as a member of the Coronaviridae family, a group of viruses with a enveloped positive-
122 stranded RNA that has the ability to infect cross-species (V'Kovski et al., 2021). Currently, three
123 novel vaccines have completed efficacy trials and have been approved for emergency use by the
124 Food and Drug Administration (Baden et al., 2021; Polack et al., 2020; Sadoff et al., 2021).
125 While these vaccines represent a favorable milestone, additional data is required to demonstrate
126 the long-term effectiveness against SARS-CoV-2 and protection against new strains. To prevent
127 an endemic, the complete global eradication of COVID-19 will require a wide majority of the
128 world's population to be vaccinated to achieve herd immunity. Unfortunately, there will always
129 be a portion of the population that will not get vaccinated. Therefore, additional strategies for

130 antiviral therapeutic options against COVID-19 are particularly relevant and important to explore
131 in order to treat severe illnesses and overcome this global pandemic. Currently the majority of
132 antivirals are repurposed drugs utilized for other disease and have shown limited clinical
133 efficacy, such as remdesivir (Abdelrahman et al., 2021). This brings a needed urgency to develop
134 antivirals specifically designed against SARS-CoV-2.

135 One potential avenue for an alternative antiviral agent is treatment against specific
136 microRNAs (miRNAs) associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection and subsequent manifestation of
137 COVID-19. MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are non-coding RNAs that are involved with regulation of
138 post-transcriptional gene expression and can impact entire pathways related to viruses and
139 diseases (Jiang et al., 2009; Trobaugh and Klimstra, 2017). Each miRNA can target multiple
140 messenger RNAs (mRNAs) and taken together, miRNAs are predicted to regulate over half of
141 the human transcriptome (Friedman et al., 2009). Recent evidence has shown different diseases,
142 including COVID-19, leads to distinct complements of miRNAs in the blood (Mishra et al.,
143 2020; Nersisyan et al., 2020; Portincasa et al., 2020; Sacar Demirci and Adan, 2020; Sardar et
144 al., 2020; Teodori et al., 2020; Widiasta et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). These circulating
145 miRNAs are highly stable and have the potential to be used for minimally invasive novel
146 detection, potential biomarkers, and therapeutic targets (Tribolet et al., 2020). Research on the
147 interactions between miRNAs and viruses have revealed a multifaceted relationship.
148 Specifically, viruses have been shown to avoid the immune response by leveraging cellular
149 miRNAs to complete their replication cycle (Trobaugh and Klimstra, 2017). The following
150 mechanisms are central to the interaction of viruses and miRNAs: 1) miRNA processing
151 pathways can be blocked or inhibited by viruses interacting with key proteins such as Dicer and
152 associated proteins, 2) viruses can sequester miRNAs resulting in dysregulation of specific target
153 mRNAs, 3) viruses can utilize miRNAs to redirect regulatory pathways of other miRNA targets
154 to provide survival advantages, and 4) viruses can directly encode miRNA precursors that are
155 processed by the canonical miRNA cellular pathway and have well-defined functions to
156 specifically target and regulate the viral replicative cycle (Schult et al., 2018; Trobaugh and
157 Klimstra, 2017).

158 Here, we report on a miRNA, miR-2392, that may directly regulate and drive a COVID-19
159 response. This miRNA was initially predicted from COVID-19 patient data that consisted of
160 multiple miRNAs being suppressed/inhibited (miR-10, miR-10a-5p, miR-1-3p, miR-34a-5, miR-
161 30c-5p, miR-29b-3p, miR-155-5p, and miR-124-3p) and one miRNA being upregulated (miR-
162 2392). With further examination, we discovered miR-2392 to be a key miRNA involved with
163 COVID-19 progression. Specifically, miR-2392 drives downstream suppression of mitochondria
164 activity while increasing inflammation, glycolysis, and hypoxia. MiR-2392 upregulation was
165 concomitant with symptoms associated with COVID-19 infection in the host. We found that
166 miR-2392 was circulating in COVID-19 infected patients and increased as a function of viral
167 load. Our results demonstrate that miR-2392 may be utilized as an effective biomarker of
168 COVID-19. Furthermore, we have developed a miR-2392 inhibitor and provide evidence that its
169 use reduces SARS-COV-2 viability in targeted viral screens with A549 cells and reduces the
170 impact of infection in COVID-19 animal models. With further development this miR-2392
171 inhibitor may represent an effective antiviral therapeutic towards inhibiting the virus and limiting
172 a negative host response from COVID-19.

173

174 **Results**

175

176 *Identification of key miRNAs associated with COVID-19 infection*

177 Currently, the majority of the published literature associated with miRNAs and SARS-CoV-2
178 is based on *in silico* predictions. To identify miRNAs that may be involved in driving COVID-19
179 severity in the host, we first examined publicly available Bronchial Alveolar Lavage Fluid
180 (BALF) RNA-sequencing (RNA-seq) data from 13 individuals. Differential gene expression was
181 assessed using a 1.2-fold change in gene expression for p-values less than 0.01 revealing 42
182 increased genes and 347 decreased genes, compared to controls. Using the upstream regulator
183 analysis from the Ingenuity Pathway Analysis (IPA) knowledge database, the miRNAs from
184 differentially expressed genes (FDR < 0.05) from COVID-19-positive patients were inferred.
185 Eight miRNAs were predicted to drive significant changes in COVID-19 positive patients with
186 the downregulation of seven miRNAs (miR-10, miR-1, miR-34a-5p, miR-30c-5p, miR-29b-3p,
187 miR-124-3p, and miR-155-5p) and upregulation of a single miRNA, miR-2392 (**Fig. 1A**). Using
188 IPA's downstream effects analysis to predict biological processes from the combined
189 suppression of the seven miRNAs and the upregulation of miR-2392 resulted in increased
190 inflammation, immune suppression, and suppression of mitochondrial activity in the BALF
191 dataset (**Fig. 1B and 1C**).

192 In support of these findings, previous studies have shown alterations in specific miRNAs
193 may directly impact viral infections. For example, upregulation of miR-10, miR-124, or miR-1
194 have been shown to have antiviral roles during infection (Hu et al., 2020; Sardar et al., 2020;
195 Yang et al., 2016). Interestingly, upregulation of miR-30 and miR-155 have been shown
196 independently to provide suppression in other types of coronaviruses (Dickey et al., 2016; Ma et
197 al., 2018). The one miRNA predicted to be upregulated in COVID-19 patients from the BALF
198 data was miR-2392. Though limited, the existing literature on miR-2392 demonstrates it is
199 related to mitochondrial suppression and increased glycolysis (Fan et al., 2019) and circulating
200 factors related to negative health risks (Chen et al., 2013; Fan et al., 2019; Hou et al., 2019; Li et
201 al., 2017; Park et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2019).

202 Pathway analysis was performed with targets and pathways for miR-2392 to determine its
203 impact on the host when upregulated. We observed that the upregulation of miR-2392 in the
204 RNA-seq dataset impacted many downstream targets and pathways related to negative health
205 outcomes (**Fig. 1C**). In addition to mitochondrial suppression, we also predicted activation of
206 factors related to reactive oxygen species (ROS). Alternatively, since it is known that miR-2392
207 directly interacts with the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) to inhibit the levels of many of the
208 mtDNA coded oxidative phosphorylation transcripts, this could be a compensatory response to
209 the inhibition of mitochondrial bioenergetics.

210 Glycolytic pathways (**Fig. 1C**) are also upregulated in association with increased miR-2392.
211 MiR-2392 drives both hexokinase 2 (HK2) and pyruvate kinase (PKM) which are both positive
212 regulators of glycolysis. HK2 phosphorylates glucose to produce glucose-6-phosphate and is a
213 primary regulator of glycolysis. HK2 further enhances GDP-glucose biosynthesis. GDP-glucose
214 is a nucleotide sugar which an essential substrate for all glycosylation reactions (i.e.
215 glycosylation of viral spike proteins). Pyruvate kinase is essential for the production of ATP in

216 glycolysis as this enzyme catalyzes the transfer of the phosphate group from
217 phosphoenolpyruvate to ADP to make ATP. The mechanism of how miR-2392 is driving these
218 pathways is not clearly understood, but one possibility could be due to the stabilization of
219 glycolytic transcripts.

220 Overall, the miR-2392 observed upregulation of glycolysis and antiviral effects related to
221 miR-2392 suppression are consistent with the recently documented role of glucose metabolism in
222 the progression of viral infection and poor outcome of COVID-19 (Ardestani and Azizi, 2021). It
223 is also consistent with the reported effects of suppression of glycolysis by inhibitors like the
224 glucose analog, 2-deoxy-D-glucose (2-DG), that was shown to suppress SARS-CoV-2
225 replication in *in vitro* models (Ardestani and Azizi, 2021; Bojkova et al., 2020; Codo et al.,
226 2020). Interestingly, 2-DG is also 2-deoxy-D-mannose and as such can interfere with processes
227 utilizing mannose, a monosaccharide that is *in vivo* produced from glucose. Mannose plays
228 important roles in the glycosylation of specific proteins. Replacement of a mannose molecule by
229 2-DG in the respective SARS-CoV-2 N-glycans or O-glycans might lead to their truncation and
230 subsequently to the suppression of virus infectivity and proliferation. These and miR-2392 data
231 clearly indicate that selective targeting of glucose metabolism might have significant impact on
232 current and future SARS-CoV-2 pandemics.

233 Targets related to the goals of antioxidant N-acetyl cysteine (NAC) therapy are also observed
234 to be upregulated. These include activated endothelial cell increasing their expression of
235 numerous adhesion molecules, including intercellular adhesion molecule 1 (ICAM1), vascular
236 cell adhesion molecule 1 (VCAM1), and E-selectin, which allow attachment of hematopoietic
237 immune and non-immune cells to the endothelial surface, and thus, contribute to inflammation
238 and activation of the coagulation cascade. Powerful antioxidants such as NAC counteract
239 COVID19 infections by potentially suppressing viral replication via improving intracellular thiol
240 redox ratio as a precursor for major thiol antioxidant glutathione (Ho and Douglas, 1992) and
241 inhibiting the NF- κ B pathway (Poppe et al., 2017). Inhibition of the NF- κ B pathway has been
242 shown to reduce inflammatory damage by altering the glutathione and glutathione disulfide ratio
243 (Aykin-Burns et al., 2005; Griffin et al., 2003; Jia et al., 2010). Because NAC can also modulate
244 oxidative burst and reduce cytokine storm without weakening the phagocytizing function of
245 neutrophils (Allegra et al., 2002; Kharazmi et al., 1988; Sadowska et al., 2006), its use in
246 COVID-19 patients as a single agent or in combination with other antioxidants are being
247 conducted in clinical trials (Alamdari et al., 2020). A recent study has shown noteworthy
248 benefits of NAC in patients with severe COVID-19 infection (Ibrahim et al., 2020). Major
249 mechanisms proposed for these favorable patient outcomes were NAC's ability to reduce IL-6
250 induced mitochondrial oxidative stress via Complex I inhibition as well as to prevent increased
251 inflammation due to uncontrolled activation of mTORC1. These results were in line with the role
252 of miR-2392 in reducing the activities of electron transport chain complexes and enhancing
253 glycolysis, which is known to be induced by mTORC1 activation. The same study also
254 speculated that NAC could inhibit SARS-CoV-2 binding to ACE2 by reducing disulfide bonds in
255 its receptor-binding domain. Inflammatory pathways and others that are observed with COVID-
256 19 infection were also seen to be activated downstream of miR-2392.

257

258 *Conservation of miR-2392 between species and its predicted interactions with the SARS-CoV-2*
259 *genome*

260 Viral miRNAs can play a role in interspecies transmission due to the high conservation of
261 miRNAs among species and the ability of viruses to integrate miRNAs into its own genome
262 (Sacar Demirci and Adan, 2020; Schult et al., 2018). In addition, such integration of miRNAs
263 within the virus has been shown to assist viruses to replicate and evade the immune system
264 (Islam and Islam, 2021). To determine if miR-2392 might be capable of driving the observed
265 COVID-19 health risks and symptoms in the host, we analyzed the conservation of human miR-
266 2392 across species and the integration of miR-2392 into the SARS-CoV-2 genome (**Fig. 2**).

267 The UCSC Genome Browser was utilized to determine the conservation of miR-2392 across
268 different species (Kent et al., 2002). The mature 20 base-pair miR-2392 is derived from an 84
269 base-pair region of the 3'-UTR in the long non-coding RNA (lncRNA) gene, maternally
270 expressed 3 (MEG3) and located in an imprinted region DLK1-DIO3 that also contains three
271 clusters for the expression of 51 additional miRNAs (**Fig. 2A and 2B**). A base wise evolutionary
272 conservation comparison demonstrated that miR-2392 is highly conserved among non-human
273 primates. In addition, conservation of miR-2392 is evident in dogs, cats, and ferrets, species
274 known to be infected with SARS-CoV-2 while mice and rats, species not impacted by COVID-
275 19 (Johansen et al., 2020), have poor conservation with miR-2392.

276 To determine the impact of miR-2392 on normal tissues, we studied the impact of miR-
277 2392's host gene, MEG3, on normal tissues utilizing GTEx data (Consortium, 2020). For the
278 majority of healthy tissues, MEG3 was either not detected or being expressed at low levels (**Fig.**
279 **2B**). This can imply that miR-2392 does not seem to significantly affect normal tissues.

280 To explore potential binding sites for miR-2392, we used the miRanda software (Enright et
281 al., 2003) to identify all potential binding sites with respect to the SARS-CoV-2 reference
282 genome (Wuhan-Hu-1; NC045512.2) and representative genomes from lineages of concern. We
283 found that the miR-2392 seeding region is heavily integrated within SARS-CoV-2 and conserved
284 in different viral strains (**Fig. 2C**). The three best hits from the miRanda scores are located in the
285 NSP2, NSP3, and E-genes. Notably, these regions were conserved among 6 variants and lineages
286 of concern each represented by 14 recent genomes from the respective lineage available from the
287 Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID, (Shu and McCauley, 2017)).

288
289 *MiR-2392 targets mitochondrial and inflammatory pathways associated with SARS-CoV-2*

290 To determine in more detail the specific impact of miR-2392 gene targets and pathways in
291 COVID-19 patients, miR-2392 gene targets were retrieved from the miRmap database as
292 predicted by base pairing with its seed-region (Vejnar and Zdobnov, 2012). This list was further
293 refined by overlap found in several other miRNA databases including miRmap (Vejnar and
294 Zdobnov, 2012), miRwalk (Dweep and Gretz, 2015), miRDB (Chen and Wang, 2020), miRnet
295 (Chang et al., 2020b), and ClueGo (Bindea et al., 2009). We also included RNA-seq analysis of
296 39 autopsy tissue samples from the heart, lung, kidney, liver, and lymph node of COVID-19-
297 positive patients with high or low viral loads (Park et al., 2021). The refined list of miR-2392
298 gene targets (consisting of 375 genes) was examined using volcano plots in all samples (**Fig. 3A-**
299 **F**).

300 To better determine the systemic impact on miR-2392 gene targets in COVID-19, we
301 performed pathway analysis from the nasopharyngeal swab samples in living donors with and
302 without COVID-19 using the SARS-CoV-2 viral load as the independent variable (high,
303 medium, low, other virus). The miR-2392 gene targets are differentially expressed (FDR<0.05)
304 in at least one comparison of COVID-19-positive patients or other detected virus and were found
305 to separate into six distinct hierarchical clusters that were identified and annotated utilizing
306 ShinyGO (Ge et al., 2020) to determine the major pathways altered (**Fig. 3G**). The majority of
307 these upregulated miR-2392 targets are involved in immune and inflammatory pathways. The
308 downregulated miR-2392 targets were involved in mitochondrial function, oxidative stress, cell
309 cycle, developmental biology, and ubiquitin binding which are pathways recently associated with
310 the SARS-CoV-2 infection process (Hemmat et al., 2021). This data demonstrates miR-2392
311 may target several gene pathways related to perpetuating SARS-CoV-2 infection. For the
312 majority of the tissues (excluding the lymph nodes), higher viral loads are associated with greater
313 miR-2392 gene targets being regulated. Interestingly, the lymph nodes show an inverse
314 relationship with viral loads compared to other tissues.

315 Because miR-2392 was recently shown to directly target the transcription of mitochondrial
316 DNA genes (Fan et al., 2019), we evaluated the impact on expression of the mitochondrial miR-
317 2392 targets in our datasets. Differentially expressed miR-2392 target mitochondrial genes were
318 identified using the MitoCarta database (Rath et al., 2021) (**Fig. 3H**). This revealed 14 genes
319 harboring miR-2392 seed sequences that were significantly dysregulated in the nasal and heart
320 samples. In nasal samples, SLC25A28, mitoferrin which mediates mitochondrial iron transport,
321 was strongly upregulated along with IBA57, which is involved in iron sulfur assembly. The
322 mitochondrial outer membrane protein import complex subunit TOMM20, cytochrome c oxidase
323 (complex IV) subunit COX6B1, and mitochondrial transcription factor COT-2 (NR2F2) were
324 strongly down regulated. In the heart, the folate enzyme MTHFD2L (methylenetetrahydrofolate
325 dehydrogenase) was up-regulated while all of the other nuclear-coded mitochondrial genes
326 identified were down regulated. Downregulated heart mitochondrial genes included NDUFS5
327 (complex I subunit), COX6B1 and COX10 (complex IV structural and assembly subunits),
328 CKMT1A (mitochondrial creatine kinase), MRPL34 (subunit of the large subunit of the
329 mitochondrial ribosome), COT-2 (NR2F2), AK4 and MSRB3 (adenylate kinase 4 and
330 methionine-R-sulfoxide reductase which mitigate oxidative stress), MRS2 (magnesium
331 transporter) and CLIC4 (chloride channel). The kidney showed mild upregulation of complex I
332 and single methyl group metabolism, but down regulation of complex IV (COX10), regulatory
333 factor (COT-2), and iron sulfur center protein (IBA57). Hence, SARS-CoV-2 seems to
334 downregulate nuclear mitochondrial gene transcription in the more oxidative heart and kidney, as
335 well as in nasal tissues.

336 Since inflammation is a key component of COVID-19 infection, we also overlaid the
337 standard known inflammatory genes determined from Loza et al. (Loza et al., 2007) to the miR-
338 2392 targets (**Fig. 3I**). The analysis reveals that, at the mRNA level, most of the complement
339 pathway genes are upregulated in the tissue samples analyzed. These changes could be
340 compensatory, as proteins encoded by the genes could be downregulated as a function of
341 traditional miRNA effects. The responses reflect the importance of degrees of inflammation for

342 mediation of disease severity in COVID-19 patients and a key modulatory role of miR-2392 in
343 this context.

344 Proteomic and transcriptomic analysis on miR-2392 targets on blood from COVID patients
345 utilizing COVIDome (Sullivan et al., 2021) revealed interesting patterns between RNA and
346 protein levels for miR-2392 targets (**Fig. 3J and 3K**). We utilized the miR-2392 gene targets
347 only determined through miRmap to determine a broader relationship between the proteins and
348 genes. Several miR-2392 targets in the tissue show a significant transcription increase in
349 COVID-19-positive samples with small to no changes on the proteomics level: PLK1, CD38,
350 PYCR1, RNASE1, BIRC5, RRM2, SIGLEC1 (**Fig. 3J**). Interestingly, all these genes were also
351 positively regulated for the majority of tissues when considering only miR-2392 gene targets
352 with miRmap (**Figs. S1 and S2**). In the blood, the miR-2392 targets CXCL10, STAT1, IFIT3,
353 and C1QC were positively regulated at both the protein and gene levels. This upregulation was
354 also observed in all other tissues (**Figs. S1 and S2**). We explored the correlation between RNA
355 expression and protein abundance for miR-2392 targets in COVID-19 positive and negative
356 samples (**Fig. 3K**). Pearson correlation in both sample types is very close, with a slightly
357 stronger value in COVID-19 negative samples (negative samples $\text{cor}=0.2089863$, $\text{p-value}=4\text{e-}10$,
358 positive samples $\text{cor}=0.2053345$, $\text{p-value}=8\text{e-}10$). Further investigation is needed to understand
359 if increased levels of miR-2392 could potentially bind genes' mRNAs at a higher rate and
360 therefore prevent translation to protein or if there are other mechanisms preventing mRNA
361 translation to protein.

362

363 *Overexpression of miR-2392 simulates a phenotype similar to COVID-19 infection*

364 To determine if the upregulation of miR-2392 alone would elicit effects similar to a COVID-
365 19 infection, cells were treated with a miR-2392 mimic. Using RNA-seq data, there were 649
366 genes with a fold-change greater than ± 1.2 and a p-value less than 0.05 (**Fig. 4A**). A number of
367 these differentially expressed genes were predicted targets of miR-2392 (**Fig. 4B**). Of particular
368 interest are differentially expressed genes in this model that are also dysregulated in SARS-CoV-
369 2 infected cells. We analyzed whole cell proteome data from a human-derived cell culture model
370 for a SARS-CoV-2 infection profile (Stukalov et al., 2021), and found 10 proteins that were
371 significantly changed in abundance and were also altered with miR-2392 overexpression: KIF22,
372 FKBP14, RAD51, AFAP1, ZCCHC17, ZWINT, MAGED1, CENPF, TMEM70, and NFKB2
373 (**Fig. 4C**). Viral infection is associated with alterations in protein posttranslational modifications
374 of cellular proteins, including ubiquitination. This phenomenon can occur by viral or host
375 directed modifications. We analyzed the ubiquitinome of the human-derived cell culture model
376 of SARS-CoV-2 infection and observed a number of proteins that were increased or decreased in
377 normalized ubiquitin abundance and were also dysregulated genes by miR-2392 overexpression.
378 Furthermore, we found miR-2392 overexpression impacted genes involved with mitochondria,
379 and inflammation (**Fig. 4D-4F**).

380 To determine if there was a direct correlation between miR-2392 overexpression and SARS-
381 CoV-2 infection, comparisons were made using gene expression fold-change values or overlap in
382 statically significant curated gene sets from canonical pathways determined by our fGSEA
383 analysis. Using previously published data from Blanco-Melo *et al.* (Blanco-Melo et al., 2020),
384 showed there was a statistically significant and positive correlation of the miR-2392 treatment

385 compared to both the A549 and Calu-3 cell culture models infected with SARS-CoV-2 (**Fig. 4G**
386 **and 4H**) as well as in lung biopsies post-mortem from two COVID-19 positive patients (**Fig.**
387 **4H**). Using nasal swab samples, a significant and positive correlation was determined between
388 patients with medium- and low-viral loads compared to non-infected patients (**Fig. 4I and 4J**).
389 Further identification of miR-2392 correlation to SARS-CoV-2 infections was made using RNA-
390 seq from multiple tissues (heart, kidney, liver, lymph node, and lung) obtained during autopsies
391 of COVID-19 patients with high or low viral loads (**Fig. 4I-J**). There was a positive correlation
392 to lung and lymph node tissues with miR-2392 expression. Interestingly, there was a significant
393 and positive correlation to liver tissue when comparing gene fold-change values (**Fig. 4I**) but not
394 fGSEA curated biological genesets (**Fig. 4J**). In contrast, a negative correlation to heart tissue
395 was observed.

396 Statistically significant pathways that were enriched due to miR-2392 treatment were
397 examined using fGSEA (**Fig. 4K-O**). It was observed that the miR-2392 treatment induced
398 pathway response that was significantly related to SARS-CoV-2 pathways. One obvious
399 relationship shows that the Reactome SARS-CoV-2 pathways were significantly activated for the
400 miR-2392 treated cells compared to the controls (**Fig. 4K and 4L**). Significant Hallmark
401 pathways (**Fig. 4N**) show distinct pathways that have been reported to be associated with
402 COVID-19 in patients, such as upregulation of hypoxia (Herrmann et al., 2020), glycolysis
403 (Ardestani and Azizi, 2021), and cell cycle pathways (Su et al., 2020). Interestingly, the KEGG
404 pathway analysis (**Fig. 4M**) indicates the overexpression of miR-2392 treated highly upregulated
405 systemic lupus erythematosus which has been reported to occur in COVID-19 patients and have
406 shown similar pathologies due to the increase of inflammation (Zamani et al., 2021).

407 Lastly, we determined the impact of miR-2392 specific targets being downregulated in the
408 cell lines after miR-2392 overexpression. A regulatory network was built by including the
409 predicted miR-2392 targets in the microRNA Data Integration Portal (MIRDIP) that were also
410 downregulated in the overexpression cell model as well as from the recently described consensus
411 transcriptional regulatory networks in coronavirus infected cells (Ochsner et al., 2020) (**Fig. 4P**).
412 The gene enrichment analysis of these putative miR-2392 targets showed the presence of GO-
413 terms related with the RNA metabolism, transcription, ribosome activity and Golgi complex
414 (**Fig. 4Q**).

415 *Circulating miR-2392 and the suppression of other miRNAs in COVID-19 infected patients*

416 To demonstrate the presence of circulating miR-2392 in COVID-19 infected patients, we
417 quantified the amount of miR-2392 by droplet digital PCR (ddPCR) in the serum, urine and
418 nasopharyngeal swab samples (**Fig. 5**). For the serum there were ten COVID-19 positive
419 intubated patients, ten COVID-19 positive patients (not intubated), and ten negative patients. For
420 the urine samples there were 15 inpatient COVID-19 positive samples, 15 outpatient COVID-19
421 positive samples, 10 inpatient COVID-19 negative samples, and 11 COVID-19 negative healthy
422 donors. Lastly, we quantified nasopharyngeal swab samples from 10 COVID-19 positive patient
423 samples, 6 common cold coronavirus positive patient samples (229E, HKU1, and OC43), and 6
424 Respiratory Illness/Coronavirus NL63 positive patient samples. In addition, we also quantified
425 three other miRNAs which we predicted to be inhibited by COVID-19 infection (**Fig. 1A**) which
426 were: miR-1-3p (**Fig. S3**), miR-155-5p (**Fig. S4**), and miR-124-3p (**Fig. S5**).

428 We observed a statistically significant increase of miR-2392 in COVID-19 positive patients
429 from both the serum and urine samples (**Fig. 5A**). In addition, Receiver Operating Characteristic
430 (ROC) curve analysis revealed that miR-2392 is significantly associated with SARS-CoV-2
431 infection in patients (**Fig. 5B**) in all tissues. Lastly, when dissecting the amounts of miR-2392
432 with specific conditions associated with infection, we observe that more severely affected
433 patients (i.e. intubated patients or patients in ICU), had higher presence of miR-2392 (**Fig. 5C**).
434 Interestingly, low levels miR-2392 appeared in the nasopharyngeal location with no significant
435 differences occurring between seasonal coronavirus samples. Since we hypothesize that miR-
436 2392 is a primary initiator for systemic impact of the infection, this might indicate that miR-2392
437 does not strongly appear until the virus has established its presence in the body.

438 As mentioned above we also measured the quantity of miR-1-3p (**Fig. S3**), miR-155-5p (**Fig.**
439 **S4**), and miR-124-3p (**Fig. S5**) and performed the same analysis. For miR-1-3p we observed
440 significant suppression in the serum while no significant differences in the urine or
441 nasopharyngeal samples (**Fig. S3**). MiR-1-3p is known to be beneficial for cardiovascular
442 functions, with the inhibition of miR-1-3p leading to heart failure and heart disease (Condorelli
443 et al., 2010). Similar response was observed for miR-155-5p with significant suppression in the
444 serum while no significant differences in the urine or nasopharyngeal samples (**Fig. S4**). For
445 miR-124-3p, we observed very low amounts (on average < 2 copies/5 ng RNA), for all
446 conditions, which indicates that miR-124-3p is not circulating for any of the patients for any the
447 conditions observed (**Fig. S5**). MiR-124-3p provides as an ideal miRNA negative control
448 candidate for SARS-COV-2.

449

450 *Inhibiting miR-2392: a novel antiviral COVID-19 therapeutic*

451 The link that we found between miR-2392 and COVID-19 infection prompted us to ask
452 whether we could develop effective antivirals for COVID-19 by inhibiting miR-2392. We used
453 the Facile Accelerated Specific Therapeutic (FAST) platform to develop an effective antisense-
454 based therapeutic against human miR-2392 (Aunins et al., 2020; Eller et al., 2021), termed
455 SBCov207, for the treatment of COVID-19 (**Fig. 6A**). The FAST platform combines the four
456 essential modules of drug development cycle (design, build, test, and learn) to optimize
457 therapeutics against any gene and species of interest in less than a week. The anti-miR-2392
458 FASTmer was evaluated for efficacy and toxicity against a SARS-CoV-2 infection of the human
459 lung cell line A549 (**Fig. 6B-D**). Treatment of uninfected A549 cells showed no cytotoxicity up
460 to 20 μ M. The control nonsense FASTmer (SBCov208) showed no toxicity even up to 40 μ M.
461 Treatment of A549 cells infected with SARS-CoV2 showed drastic improvement in cell viability
462 with an average of 85% viral inhibition at 10 μ M (IC₅₀ of $1.15 \pm 0.33 \mu$ M). In contrast, the
463 control nonsense FASTmer showed significantly lower viral suppression (**Fig. 6E-G**). Human
464 cell line-based infection models reaffirm that the anti-miR-2392 (SBCov207) is effective in
465 inhibiting SARS-CoV2, while not exhibiting toxicity at the concentrations tested.

466 In a separate *in vivo* model, the anti-miR-2392 FASTmer was evaluated in a Syrian hamster
467 infection model (**Fig. 6H-6J**). Initially six hamsters were treated with FASTmers for 72 hours
468 without infection to observe any changes in animal behavior indicating toxicity. There were no
469 observed changes in animal behavior indicating a lack of obvious toxicity. Following this study,
470 30 male hamsters were divided into 5 treatment groups. The infected hamsters were given 10^5

471 plaque forming units (pfu) of WA01/2020 strain of SARS-CoV-2 passaged twice in Vero E6
472 cells from the original isolate obtained from BEI Resources. The anti-miR-2392 FASTmer
473 treatment was given by intraperitoneal (IP) injection or intranasal (IN) instillation 24 hours
474 before viral inoculation or both 24 hours before and 24 hours after viral inoculation. Each
475 FASTmer dose was at a concentration of 10 μ M in a 100 μ L volume (approximately 0.13
476 mg/kg). Half of the hamsters in each group (n = 3) were euthanized and necropsied on day 3 and
477 7 post-infection respectively.

478 Loss of body weight of hamsters over the course of the experiment were <10% in all groups
479 and significantly different for the IN treatment one day before viral inoculation (compared to the
480 control) and while statistical differences between other groups were not present (**Fig. 6H**). Virus
481 titers from oropharyngeal swabs of hamsters receiving IN treatment were significantly lower ($p =$
482 0.018) than those from hamsters receiving FASTmers IP or PBS on day 1 post-challenge, but
483 there were no differences among groups in magnitude of shedding on days 2 and 3 post-
484 challenge (**Fig. 6I**). Although not statistically different than the control treatment, the data
485 indicates a downward trend with FASTmer treatment (**Fig. 6J**). In addition, the total
486 histopathological score for the IN was lower than the controls although not significant.

487

488 *The impact of miR-2392 on diseases, relationship to COVID-19 symptoms, and predicted FDA*
489 *drugs to target miR-2392*

490 To predict whether miR-2392 might have a direct relationship to COVID-19 symptoms in the
491 host, we determined the pathway and disease relevance of miR-2392 using miRnet (Chang et al.,
492 2020b). Among the diseases predicted to be associated with miR-2392 were a surprising number
493 of clinical observations present in individuals with COVID-19 infection (**Fig. 7A**). These include
494 heart or cardiovascular disease and failure, both known to heavily contribute to morbidity and
495 mortality in patients with COVID-19 (Nishiga et al., 2020), hyperesthesia (Krajewski et al.,
496 2021), as well as less common COVID-19 symptoms, such as lymphadenopathy and pharyngitis
497 related to sore throat (Edmonds et al., 2021; Walsh-Messinger et al., 2020), liver dysfunction
498 (Portincasa et al., 2020), splenomegaly (Malik et al., 2020), CNS (Mahajan and Mason, 2021;
499 Rodriguez et al., 2020) and kidney failure (Hultstrom et al., 2021).

500 It is interesting to note that miR-2392 was also predicted to affect diseases that appeared not
501 to be associated with COVID-19 infection, but literature searches reveal these pathologies do
502 occur in some COVID-19 patients. For example, azoospermia, which is linked to male infertility,
503 has been shown to occur in some male patients (Younis et al., 2020). The menstrual cycle in
504 females have been reported to be deregulated for months after COVID-19 infection (Li et al.,
505 2021). Association with dental damage has also been observed in COVID-19 patients (Sirin and
506 Ozcelik, 2021), also deafness or hearing loss (Koumpa et al., 2020). We used the tool Kaplan-
507 Meier Plotter (Nagy et al., 2018) to associate miR-2392 expression with pan-cancer patient
508 survival (**Fig. S7**). We observed that the high expression of miR-2392 is generally related to poor
509 prognosis with the majority of cancer types (p -value < 0.05). If miR-2392 is associated with
510 COVID-19, as we are hypothesizing, and is persistent after the virus clears the host, then the
511 implications for the potential long-term impact on the millions of people infected with COVID-
512 19 could be devastating. Intriguingly, one of the miR-2392 predicted consequences in the

513 immune category is decreased antibody levels in the blood; this might account for the reported
514 loss of the antibodies overtime (Gudbjartsson et al., 2020; Self et al., 2020).

515 Using computational prediction models, we also predicted small molecules, including FDA-
516 approved drugs that could inhibit miR-2392 from two different approaches. The first approach
517 employed a state-of-the-art machine learning method that we recently developed for predicting
518 missing drug targets (Galeano et al., 2021). We applied this algorithm on an association dataset
519 between 213 small molecules and 1,519 miRNAs from the SM2miR database (Liu et al., 2013)
520 (see statistics in **Fig. S8**). Our model also integrated chemical similarity between small
521 molecules and sequence similarity between miRNAs. In ten-fold cross-validation experiments,
522 we achieved an average area under the receiver operating curve of 0.877 when predicting
523 missing small molecule-miRNA associations (**Fig. S9**). A list of the top-20 predicted small
524 molecules for miR-2392 (**Fig. 7B**) includes Dexamethasone, the first drug known to save lives in
525 critically ill COVID-19 patients (Ledford, 2020), and Atorvastatin, that has shown similar
526 protective role in COVID-19 patients (Rossi et al., 2020). The second approach follows ideas
527 first presented in Sirota *et al.* (Sirota et al., 2011) and consists on analyzing the genomic signature
528 of miR-2392 (*i.e.* significant up and down-regulated genes) and predicting small molecules that
529 can reverse it. We screened the genomic signature of miR-2392 against the genomic signature of
530 30,000 small molecules contained in the connectivity map (CMAP) (Lamb et al., 2006). The top-
531 20 small molecules predicted by our approach (Sirota et al., 2011) includes the androgen receptor
532 antagonist Enzalutamide and the insulin sensitizer Pioglitazone (Carboni et al., 2020) both of
533 which are in clinical trials for COVID-19 (**Fig. 7C**; Clinical Trial #NCT04475601 and
534 NCT04604223). We also found literature evidence for the leukotriene inhibitor ubenimex (Asai
535 et al., 2020), and the bacterial DNA inhibitor metronidazole (Gharebaghi et al., 2020).

536

537 **Discussion**

538 While the potential eradication of the novel coronavirus through worldwide vaccination is
539 underway, there remains a major need to develop effective interventional strategies to minimize
540 the damage caused by coronavirus infections. Host-mediated lung inflammation is a driver of
541 mortality in COVID-19 critically ill patients. Thus, it is logical to focus on therapeutics that may
542 have immunomodulating properties or disrupt viral replication. Our research uncovers a novel
543 eight miRNA signature in patients with COVID-19 viral loads compared to those without disease
544 as predicted from RNA-seq data. The expression of seven miRNAs was decreased (miR-10,
545 miR-1, miR-34a-5p, miR-30c-5p, miR-29b-3p, miR-124-3p, and miR-155-5p) while a single
546 miRNA, miR-2392, was significantly increased (**Fig. 1**). This key miRNA signature was
547 involved in major cellular and molecular mechanisms that drives the viral-host response.

548 From previous research, the upregulation of miR-10a-5p, from the miR-10 precursor
549 miRNA, provides antiviral benefits through the suppression of SDC1 that can act as a defense
550 mechanism for Porcine hemagglutinating encephalomyelitis viruses (Hu et al., 2020). The
551 upregulation of miR-124 is shown to inhibit the Japanese encephalitis virus replication (Yang et
552 al., 2016). Notably, the upregulation of mir-30c-5p and miR-155-5p have been independently
553 shown to be involved with antiviral functions through immune and inflammatory pathways with
554 other type of coronaviruses (Dickey et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2018). It was also indicated that
555 inhibition of miR-34a-5p in the host by SARS-CoV-2 suppresses beneficial antiviral pathways

556 that this miRNA regulates. (Bartoszewski et al., 2020; Sacar Demirci and Adan, 2020). miR-1-3p
557 has previously been identified as an antiviral agent for viral related respiratory diseases and the
558 downregulation by SARS-CoV-2 is predicted to follow similar pathways for survival in the host
559 (Sardar et al., 2020). Examination of patients with COVID-19 showed increased levels of miR-
560 2392 circulating blood (**Fig. 5**). Interestingly, we show that for both miR-1-3p and miR-155-5p
561 from serum patient samples were significantly inhibited (**Figs. S3 and S4**), which is in
562 agreement with the current viral literature as discussed above. MiR-124-3p was shown to have
563 no significant changes and barely present for SARS-CoV-2 patients (**Fig. S5**), indicating the
564 responses discussed above is potentially specific for Japanese encephalitis virus.

565 Several studies have measured differential expression of miRNAs in COVID-19 patients and
566 proposed their use as biomarkers or therapeutics. A post-mortem examination from lung biopsies
567 in nine COVID-19 patients compared to controls found miR-26a, miR-29b, and miR-34a were
568 correlated to endothelial dysfunction and inflammatory biomarkers (Centa et al., 2020). In a
569 separate study performing multi-transcriptome sequencing in red blood cell depleted whole
570 blood from moderate or severe COVID-19 patients four additional miRNAs, miR-146a, miR-21,
571 miR-142, and miR-15b, were identified as potential biomarkers as well as contributors to disease
572 pathogenesis (Tang et al., 2020). It has also been suggested to use miRNAs to target the
573 angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) receptor that facilitates endocytosis of viral particles
574 into the cells to limit virus-induced glomerular injury, cell infection, kidney damage (Mishra et
575 al., 2020; Nersisyan et al., 2020; Pontecorvi et al., 2020; Sacar Demirci and Adan, 2020; Sardar
576 et al., 2020; Teodori et al., 2020; Widiasta et al., 2020). While these studies are limited to a
577 specific tissue, our data that correlates miRNA signatures from multiple tissues (**Fig. 3**) suggests
578 miR-2392 is a unique target that is ubiquitously involved in COVID-19 symptoms.

579 In 2010, miR-2392 was found in a small-RNA deep-sequencing of normal and malignant
580 human B-cells where it was altered among hundreds of other microRNAs (Jima et al., 2010).
581 Since then, the majority of publications with miR-2392 are focused on cancer tissues and have
582 found a potential role for miR-2392 in driving cellular invasion and metastasis through an
583 epithelial-mesenchymal transition. In 2013, miR-2392 was one of 6 circulating microRNAs
584 altered in the serum and tissue of patients with cervical squamous cell carcinoma that was used
585 to predict the occurrence of lymph node metastasis with the potential to assist in clinical staging
586 (Chen et al., 2013). Higher levels of miR-2392 in gastric cancer was found to be associated with
587 lower clinical staging and increased patient survival (Li et al., 2017). It was shown that miR-
588 2392 inhibited gastric cell invasion and metastasis by targeting MAML3 and WHSC1 for
589 degradation that subsequently decreased an epithelial-mesenchymal transition through the loss of
590 Snail1, Slug, and Twist1 expression. Similarly, miR-2392 and miR-1587 were found to target the
591 ZEB2 protein, a promoter of the epithelial-mesenchymal transition. A lower expression of these
592 two miRNAs were found in human keloid tissues that resulted in a loss of inhibition of ZEB2
593 and subsequent promotion of cellular proliferation and invasion in keloids (Hou et al., 2019).
594 Inhibition of miR-2392 by the long-non-coding RNA CACNA1G-AS1 was found to promote
595 hepatocellular carcinoma through disrupting the degradation of C1orf61, a tumor activator
596 associated with metastasis and tumor progression (Hu et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2019). Recently,
597 Fan et al. demonstrated a novel role for miR-2392 in the regulation of chemoresistance in tongue
598 squamous cell carcinoma by partial inhibition of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) transcription

599 through direct miRNA-mtDNA base pairing which resulted in reprogramming tumor cell
600 metabolism (Fan et al., 2019). These reports for miR-2392 establish the significant impact this
601 single miRNA may have in on cellular activity. Particularly relevant to this study was the altered
602 expression of miR-2392 found in Hepatitis B viral infections. Its expression was found to be
603 increased by more than 2-fold in extracellular vesicles secreted from human hepatocytes infected
604 with the Hepatitis B virus (Enomoto et al., 2017). While miR-2392 has a reported impact on
605 tumor cell biology, our study expands the valuable therapeutic potential of targeting miR-2392 to
606 subsequently decrease SARS-CoV-2 viral infections (**Fig. 6**). These results warrant further
607 exploration of the mechanistic underpinnings for the role of miR-2392 in driving viral infection.

608 One therapeutic insight deduced from miR-2392 interactions is the importance of the
609 mitochondrial oxidative phosphorylation (OXPHOS) and glycolytic pathways in COVID-19,
610 dramatically highlighted in BALF samples reported in **Fig. 1C**. In a study of tongue squamous
611 cell carcinoma (Fan et al., 2019) it was reported that miR-2392 enters the mitochondrion where it
612 binds to Ago2 and then binds to nucleotides 4379 to 4401 in the mtDNA heavy (H) strand. This
613 binding site is within the MT-TQ (tRNA glutamine) gene, which encompasses nucleotides
614 m.4329-4400. MT-TQ is part of a large polycistronic transcript transcribed from the H-strand
615 promoter. This transcript encompasses 12 of the mtDNA H strand polypeptide genes punctuated
616 by tRNAs. Cleavage of the tRNAs releases the mRNAs. Up-stream of TM-TQ are the 12S and
617 16S rRNAs and the complex I gene MT-ND1 gene. Downstream of MT-TQ is MT-ND2, MT-
618 CO1, MT-CO2, MT-ATP6/8, MT-ND3, MT-ND4L, MT-ND4, MT-ND5, and MT-CYB (Lott et
619 al., 2013; Wallace, 2018). Strikingly, the down-regulated mtDNA genes from the BALFS are the
620 complex IV (cytochrome c oxidase) genes MT-CO1 and MT-CO2, the complex III (the bc₁
621 complex) gene (MT-CYB), and the complex I genes (MT-ND2, MT-ND4, and MT-ND5) (**Fig.**
622 **1C** right side arc). Since the miR-2392 inhibition of mtDNA OXPHOS genes shown for the
623 BALF samples (**Fig. 1C**) is also reflected in the miR-2392 down-regulation of the nuclear DNA
624 coded mitochondrial transcripts of the complex I and IV genes and the iron-sulfur and heme iron
625 complexes in the nasal, heart, and kidney autopsy samples (**Fig. 3D**), mitochondrial inhibition by
626 miR-2392 appears to be the only physiological function that is common across all tissues in
627 infected individuals. This suggests that mitochondrial modulation is a central feature of SARS-
628 CoV-2 pathophysiology.

629 The inhibition of mitochondrial genes by miR-2392 would impair OXPHOS, which would
630 have the most adverse effects on the high mitochondrial energetic tissues (brain, heart, kidney),
631 the tissues central to the most severe COVID-19 cases. Inhibition of mitochondrial OXPHOS
632 genes would increase mitochondrial reactive oxygen species (mROS) production, and induce
633 glycolysis to compensate for the energy deficit (see top of **Fig 1C**). Mitochondrial function is
634 regulated by the Sirtuins (Carrico et al., 2018), mitochondrial decline is associated with
635 senescence, and mROS oxidation of mtDNA is linked to activation of the inflammasome and
636 thus NFκB (West et al., 2015; West and Shadel, 2017; Zhong et al., 2018), all of which are
637 modulated around miR-2392 (**Fig. 1C**). Thus, SARS-CoV-2 induction of miR-2392 (**Fig. 5**) and
638 its associated inhibition of mtDNA and nuclear DNA OXPHOS genes (**Fig. 3** and **S1**) could
639 explain many of the metabolic disturbances of COVID-19. Conversely, antagonism of miR-2392
640 function should ameliorate the inhibition of OXPHOS and may explain the therapeutic benefit of
641 the anti-miR-2392 FASTmers.

642 Using miRNAs from serum as a biomarker was first established in patients for the
643 examination of diffuse large B-cell lymphoma (Lawrie et al., 2008). The use of miRNAs as a
644 diagnostic biomarker has several advantages. Circulating miRNAs are readily obtained through a
645 minimally invasive blood draw and are remarkably resistant to degradation in the plasma and
646 serum (Mitchell et al., 2008). Measuring differentially expressed miRNAs may also provide a
647 means to detect asymptomatic individuals as previously demonstrated in another viral infection
648 (Hou et al., 2017). However, potential confounding diseases that may influence the expression of
649 multiple miRNAs requires the further evaluation of the targets found in this study (**Fig. 5**).

650 Recent advances in RNA chemistry and delivery systems enabled the first miRNA-based
651 agents to enter into clinical trials several years ago (Rupaimoole and Slack, 2017). It was
652 discovered that miR-122 increased the stability and replication of the Hepatitis C virus (HCV)
653 through binding to the 5' end of the non-coding region that prevented degradation by the Xrn1
654 exoribonuclease (Jopling et al., 2005; Thibault et al., 2015). In a phase I clinical trial, a 15-
655 nucleotide phosphorothioate DNA-locked nucleic acid anti-miRNA that is designed to inhibit
656 miR-122 was first used and demonstrated no adverse reactions. In a subsequent phase IIa trial of
657 36 patients, there was a significant dose-dependent decrease in HCV load, one patient reported a
658 grade 3 adverse event (thrombocytopenia), and only a small set of patients experienced viral
659 rebound that may be linked to mutations of the HCV viral RNA (Janssen et al., 2013; Ottosen et
660 al., 2015). A separate clinical trial with a N-acetyl-Dgalactosamine (GalNAc)-conjugated anti-
661 miRNA targeting miR-122 and antiviral agents (ledipasvir and sofosbuvir) was successful in
662 reducing viral loads in all treated patients within 4 weeks of treatment as well as sustained viral
663 response in three patients after 76 weeks of follow-up (van der Ree et al., 2017), however
664 subsequent treatments have been suspended due to two cases of severe jaundice. These clinical
665 trials have demonstrated the promising potential of using anti-miRNAs to significantly reduce
666 viral infection with limited adverse effects and the similarities with miR-2392 with SARS-CoV-2
667 warrant further investigations to push to clinical trials.

668 Presently, there remains no specific treatment option for patients presenting with severe
669 COVID-19 disease. While vaccines provide a promising avenue towards preventing the
670 development of these symptoms as well as curbing the infection rate, there remains an urgency to
671 successfully develop and implement therapeutic agents to reduce severe consequences from
672 infection and subsequent patient mortality. As the testing of antibody-based or drug targeted
673 therapies are currently underway, the added utility of miRNAs represents a novel category of
674 therapeutic agents that have previously shown endogenous activity to alter viral infection.

675
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696

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707

708 **Declaration of Interests**

709 The authors declare no competing interests.

710

711 **Figure Legends**

712

713 **Figure 1. Key miRNA signature as predicted from Bronchial Alveolar Lavage Fluid**
714 **(BALF) RNA-seq data in patients with COVID-19. A)** Predicted upstream regulators
715 determined through Ingenuity Pathway Analysis (IPA) consistent with the transcriptional
716 response from differentially expressed genes (FDR<0.05; outer ring). Eight miRNAs were
717 among the key regulators in response to COVID-19 (inner ring). **B)** Major biological responses
718 resulting from dysregulation of this eight miRNA signature drive immune- and inflammatory-
719 related pathways as well as mitochondrial dysfunction determined through IPA. **C)** Pathway
720 regulation by miR-2392 from BALF RNA-seq data determined through IPA.

721

722 **Figure 2. Cross-species and viral integration of miR-2392. A)** The conservation of miR-2392
723 across species determined by UCSC Genome Browser. The boxes (■) represent aligning and
724 conserved sequence regions. Double horizontal line (=) represents both the genome and query
725 have unalignable sequence between regions of aligned sequence, a double-sided insertion. Single
726 lines (-) indicate gaps that are largely due to a deletion in the genome of the first species or an
727 insertion in the genome of the second species. **B)** The expression of MEG3, the miR-2392 host
728 gene, in different tissues from healthy patients. **C)** Potential binding sites of miR-2392 visualized
729 across 300 windows of 100bp length in SARS-CoV-2 genomes (NC045512.2 reference, and
730 representative genomes for variants and lineages of concern from GISAID). The score in each

731 window is the average of miRanda scores for hits within that 100bp window. Three top hits are
732 shown explicitly at the bottom of the plot.

733

734 **Figure 3. Gene targets of miR-2392 in COVID-19 patients as well as mitochondrial and**
735 **inflammatory genes.** Volcano plots showing the differential gene expression analysis from **A)**
736 nasopharyngeal swab and autopsy COVID-19 patient tissues from the **B)** heart, **C)** kidney, **D)**
737 liver, **E)** lung, and **F)** lymph node from RNA-seq datasets separated by viral load. **G)** Differential
738 gene expression analysis for all miR-2392 gene targets significantly expressed in nasopharyngeal
739 swab and autopsy COVID-19 patient tissues. The heatmaps display the t-score statistics for
740 comparing viral load vs negative patient sample for all samples. Main gene clusters were
741 determined through k-mean clustering. Six main gene clusters were determined and ShinyGO
742 (Ge et al., 2020) was utilized to determine the pathways for each cluster which are displayed on
743 the top panel of the heatmap. miR-2392 gene targets in for **H)** mitochondrial specific genes or **I)**
744 inflammatory genes are displayed. Differentially expressed genes are shown with at least one
745 comparison demonstrating a significant adjusted p-value ($FDR < 0.05$) when comparing COVID-
746 19 patients (high, medium or low viral loads) to non-infected control patients (none). A heatmap
747 for the miR-2392 mitochondrial gene targets from the full list of targets determined only from
748 miRmap is available in **Fig. S1**. A heatmap for the miR-2392 inflammatory gene targets from the
749 full list of targets determined only from miRmap is available in **Fig. S2**. **J)** Scatter plot of \log_2 -
750 transformed Fold Changes in RNAs and proteins for miR-2392 targets. The chart shows a set of
751 genes differentially expressed at the RNA level. Student's t-test, RNA $p\text{-value} \leq 0.05$, no
752 limitation on protein p-value. **K)** Scatter plot of \log_2 transformed medians in RNAs and proteins.
753 The orange color represents COVID-19 positive samples, grey - COVID-19 negative samples.
754 Student's t-test is used in Fold Change calculations. The size and the opacity of the point
755 represent \log_2 -transformed Fold Change at the RNA level. The shape of the point represents
756 Fold Change direction: circle - positive, triangle - negative. Pearson correlation for COVID-19
757 positive samples displayed in orange, for COVID-19 negative samples - in grey.

758

759 **Figure 4. Increased miR-2392 expression *in vitro* mimics a COVID-19 disease phenotype.**
760 **A-F)** Volcano plots for RNA-seq results in cells overexpressing miR-2392. **G-J)** Correlation plot
761 of RNA-seq between miR-2392 overexpression and related SARS-CoV-2 datasets. The circle
762 size is proportional to the correlation coefficient. Statistical significance was determined using a
763 two-tailed Student's t-test * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. **K-O)** Dot plots for statistically
764 significant gene sets determined by fGSEA. NES, nominal enrichment score. **P)** and **Q)**
765 Predicted miR-2392 targets by the MIRDIP algorithm that are downregulated in the
766 overexpression experiments. The putative miR-2392 mRNA targets belonging to the consensus
767 transcriptomic networks observed in SARS-CoV-2, MERS and Influenza infections of different
768 human cells are represented in a Venn diagram in the upper part of the panel **P**.

769

770 **Figure 5. Circulating miR-2392 with COVID-19 patients compared to COVID-19 negative**
771 **patients.** Droplet digital PCR (ddPCR) with specific primer for miR-2392 was performed on
772 serum, urine, and nasopharyngeal swab samples (including other seasonal coronavirus samples)
773 from COVID-19 positive and negative patients. The miRNA concentration is reported as

774 copies/5ng RNA. **A)** The levels of miRNA-2392 in all tissues from patients grouped as SARS-
775 CoV-2 positive (SARS-nCoV-2) or negative (neg). Unadjusted t-tests comparing the SARS-
776 CoV-2 positive to neg for each tissue are provided and also adjusted statistics comparing the
777 groups with a mixed model corrected for age and sex is provided. **B)** Receiver Operating
778 Characteristic (ROC) curve is provided for miR-2392 for each tissue comparing SARS-CoV-2
779 positive to negative patients. **C)** Comparing specific categories within each tissue type between
780 COVID-19 positive and negative patients. N = COVID-19 Negative, P = COVID-19 positive,
781 P_{int} = intubated patients, outp = outpatient, ICU = Intensive care unit/inpatient, Cold =
782 Coronaviruses related to the common cold, NL63 = NL63 coronavirus, and CoV-2 = SARS-
783 CoV-2. For all plots * = p < 0.05, ** = p < 0.01, and *** = p < 0.001. We also quantified three
784 other miRNAs with same patient samples as comparison which were miR-1-3p (**Fig. S3**), miR-
785 155-5p (**Fig. S4**), and miR-124-3p (**Fig. S5**).

786

787 **Figure 6. Anti-miR-2393 therapeutic mitigation of SARS-CoV-2 infection with *in vitro* and**
788 ***in vivo* models.** **A)** Schematic of the design for the miR-2392 inhibitor with the FASTmer
789 platform, the synthesis and formulation of the inhibitor, and the experimental models utilized for
790 testing the inhibitor. **B) – D)** Anti-miR-2392 FASTmer inhibitor applied to A549 human cells
791 infected with SARS-CoV-2 and tested for viral viability and cytotoxicity. Viral viability is
792 inhibited by 100% with near 0% cytotoxicity. **E) – G)** Nonsense FASTmer inhibitor applied to
793 A549 human cells infected with SARS-CoV-2 and tested for viral viability and cytotoxicity.
794 Viral viability is inhibited by 50% with near 0% cytotoxicity. **H) – J)** Toxicity and efficacy of
795 anti-miR-2392 FASTmer inhibitor in an *in vivo* infection hamster model. There were six
796 treatments groups: SBCov207 by IP injection 24 hours prior to viral inoculation (IP Day -1),
797 SBCov207 by IP injection 24 hours prior to viral inoculation and 24 hours post-viral challenge
798 (IP Day -1, +1), SBCov207 by IN injection 24 hours prior viral inoculation (IN Day -1),
799 SBCov207 by IN injection 24 hours prior viral inoculation and 24 hours post-viral challenge (IN
800 Day -1, +1), and 100ul of PBS as a control treatment 24 hours prior and post-viral challenge
801 through IN instillation (PBS IN Day -1, +1). **H)** Weights per day for each of the 5 groups pooled
802 (n = 6 for days 1 – 3 and n = 3 for days 4 -7), and the maximum percent weight loss, observing
803 for the two different endpoints. **I)** SARS-CoV-2 assayed by plaque assay on Vero E6 cells from
804 oropharyngeal swabs collected on days 1, 2 and 3. N=6 for each treatment group. **J)**
805 Histopathological total score for lung tissues at day 3; anti-miR-2392 treatments have lower
806 scores than the PBS control. Intranasal (IN), intraperitoneal (IP).

807

808 **Figure 7. Predicted impact of miR-2392 on human disease and the top-20 drug compounds**
809 **predicted to affect miR-2392 expression through machine learning approach.** **A)** Dot plot of
810 diseases associated with miR-2392, as predicted from miR-2392 gene targets by miRnet. The
811 diseases were manually curated to emphasize specific diseases and tissues. The values are plotted
812 according to p-value, and the size of each dot represents the number of downstream gene targets
813 for miR-2392 associated with each disease prediction. The specific cancer relationship to miR-
814 2392 is highlighted in **Fig. S7**, relating miR-2392 expression with patient survival in a pan-
815 cancer analysis. **B)** Barplot of scores using our matrix completion model to predict small
816 molecules that affect miRNA expression. Higher scores indicate more predicted associations. **C)**

817 Barplot of the normalized connectivity map (CMAP) scores. We used transcripts induced by
818 miR-2392 overrepresented genes to query CMAP. Higher negative scores reflect a greater
819 reversal of the miR-2392 transcriptomic signature. Further details on model statistics and
820 performance are found in **Figs. S8 – S10**.

821

822 **Supplemental Figures and Material**

823

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841

842 **Figure S1. Mitochondrial gene targets of miR-2392 and regulated pathways. Related to**
843 **Figure 3.** Differential gene expression analysis for all miR-2392 mitochondrial gene targets
844 significantly expressed in nasopharyngeal swab and autopsy COVID-19 patient tissues. The
845 heatmaps display the t-score statistics for comparing viral load vs negative patient sample for all
846 samples. Main gene clusters were determined through k-mean clustering. Nine main gene
847 clusters were determined and ShinyGO (Ge et al., 2020) was utilized to determine the pathways
848 for each cluster which are displayed on the top panel of the heatmap. Differentially expressed
849 genes are shown with at least one comparison demonstrating a significant adjusted p-value
850 (FDR<0.05) when comparing COVID-19 patients (high, medium or low viral loads) to non-
851 infected control patients (none). Mir-2392 gene targets only determined from miRmap.

852

853 **Figure S2. Inflammatory gene targets of miR-2392 and regulated pathways. Related to**
854 **Figure 3.** Differential gene expression analysis for all miR-2392 inflammatory gene targets
855 significantly expressed in nasopharyngeal swab and autopsy COVID-19 patient tissues. The
856 heatmaps display the t-score statistics for comparing viral load vs negative patient sample for all
857 samples. Main gene clusters were determined through k-mean clustering. Eight main gene
858 clusters were determined and ShinyGO (Ge et al., 2020) was utilized to determine the pathways
859 for each cluster which are displayed on the top panel of the heatmap. Differentially expressed

860 genes are shown with at least one comparison demonstrating a significant adjusted p-value
861 (FDR<0.05) when comparing COVID-19 patients (high, medium or low viral loads) to non-
862 infected control patients (none). Mir-2392 gene targets only determined from miRmap.

863

864 **Figure S3. Circulating miR-1-3p with COVID-19 patients compared to COVID-19 negative**
865 **patients. Related to Figure 5.** Droplet digital PCR (ddPCR) with specific primer for miR-1-3p
866 was performed on serum, urine, and nasopharyngeal swab samples (including other seasonal
867 coronavirus samples) from COVID-19 positive and negative patients. The miRNA concentration
868 are reported as copies/5ng RNA. **A)** The levels of miRNA-2392 in all tissues from patients
869 grouped as SARS-CoV-2 positive (SARS-nCoV-2) or negative (neg). Unadjusted t-tests
870 comparing the SARS-CoV-2 positive to neg for each tissue are provided and also adjusted
871 statistics comparing the groups with a mixed model corrected for age and sex is provided. **B)**
872 Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve is provided for miR-1-3p for each tissue
873 comparing SARS-CoV-2 positive to negative patients. **C)** Comparing specific categories within
874 each tissue type between COVID-19 positive and negative patients. N = COVID-19 Negative, P
875 = COVID-19 positive, P_{int} = intubated patients, outp = outpatient, ICU = Intensive care
876 unit/inpatient, Cold = Coronaviruses related to the common cold, NL63 = NL63 coronavirus, and
877 CoV-2 = SARS-CoV-2. For all plots * = p < 0.05, ** = p < 0.01, and *** = p < 0.001.

878

879 **Figure S4. Circulating miR-155-5p with COVID-19 patients compared to COVID-19**
880 **negative patients. Related to Figure 5.** Droplet digital PCR (ddPCR) with specific primer for
881 miR-155-5p was performed on serum, urine, and nasopharyngeal swab samples (including other
882 seasonal coronavirus samples) from COVID-19 positive and negative patients. The miRNA
883 concentration are reported as copies/5ng RNA. **A)** The levels of miRNA-2392 in all tissues from
884 patients grouped as SARS-CoV-2 positive (SARS-nCoV-2) or negative (neg). Unadjusted t-tests
885 comparing the SARS-CoV-2 positive to neg for each tissue are provided and also adjusted
886 statistics comparing the groups with a mixed model corrected for age and sex is provided. **B)**
887 Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve is provided for miR-155-5p for each tissue
888 comparing SARS-CoV-2 positive to negative patients. **C)** Comparing specific categories within
889 each tissue type between COVID-19 positive and negative patients. N = COVID-19 Negative, P
890 = COVID-19 positive, P_{int} = intubated patients, outp = outpatient, ICU = Intensive care
891 unit/inpatient, Cold = Coronaviruses related to the common cold, NL63 = NL63 coronavirus, and
892 CoV-2 = SARS-CoV-2. For all plots * = p < 0.05, ** = p < 0.01, and *** = p < 0.001.

893

894 **Figure S5. Circulating miR-124-3p with COVID-19 patients compared to COVID-19**
895 **negative patients. Related to Figure 5.** Droplet digital PCR (ddPCR) with specific primer for
896 miR-124-3p was performed on serum, urine, and nasopharyngeal swab samples (including other
897 seasonal coronavirus samples) from COVID-19 positive and negative patients. The miRNA
898 concentration are reported as copies/5ng RNA. For miR-124-3p, the copies/5ng were either equal
899 to 0 or at extremely low levels close to 0 copies/5ng. To try to determine any statistical
900 differences we categorized the groups as ND = Not Determined which are all 0 values or D =
901 Determined which are values > 0 for both N = negative (open symbols) and P = COVID-19
902 positive patients samples (closed symbols). The number of patients for each column is shown

903 above the points. No significant differences were observed for any of the sample for miR-124-
904 3p.

905

906 **Figure S6. miR-2392 expression pan-cancer survival analysis. Related to Figure 7.** Kaplan
907 Meier patient survival plots for miR-2392 expression in a pan-cancer analysis was determined
908 utilizing The Kaplan Meier plotter (Nagy et al., 2021). The plots were separated with the top row
909 being cancers which patients had significantly poor survival with high expression of miR-2392,
910 the middle row being cancers which patients had poor survival (but not significant) with high
911 expression of miR-2392, and the bottom row being cancers which patients had significantly
912 better survival with high expression of miR-2392.

913

914 **Figure S7. Small molecules-miRNA dataset statistics Related to Figure 7.** (Left) Number of
915 small molecules associated to miRNAs. (Right) Number of miRNAs associated to small
916 molecules.

917

918 **Figure S8. Performance of our method at predicting missing small molecule-miRNA**
919 **interactions. Related to Figure 7.** (Top) The mean value of the Receiver Operating Curve
920 (ROC) is shown for a ten-fold cross-validation experiment (dark blue). 95% confidence interval
921 is also shown (light blue). (Bottom) The mean value of the Precision-Recall Curve (PRC) is
922 shown for a ten-fold cross-validation experiment (dark salmon). 95% confidence interval is also
923 shown (light salmon).

924

925 **Figure S9. Performance of our method at predicting missing small molecule-miRNA**
926 **interactions when controlling for data imbalance. Related to Figure 7.** (Top) Area Under the
927 Receiver Operating Curve (AUROC) was obtained in a ten-fold cross-validation experiment for
928 varying values of the negative to positive label ratio in the test set. (Bottom) Area Under the
929 Precision-Recall Curve (AUROC) was obtained in a ten-fold cross-validation experiment for
930 varying values of the negative to positive label ratio in the test set.

931

932 **Table S1. Annealing temperatures for miRNA primers, related to methods and Figure 5.**
933 Temperatures used for droplet digital PCR to quantify each miRNA target.

934

935 **STAR Methods**

936

937 **RESOURCE AVAILABILITY**

938 **Lead Contact**

939 Further information and requests for resources and reagents should be directed to and will be
940 fulfilled by the Lead Contact, Afshin Beheshti (afshin.beheshti@nasa.gov).

941

942 **Materials Availability**

943 This study did not generate new unique reagents.

944

945 **Data and Code Availability**

946 The published article includes all datasets generated and analyzed during this study.
947 Processed bulk RNA-seq data is available online (<https://covidgenes.weill.cornell.edu/>). RNA-
948 Seq alignment script for BALF samples and SHSY-5Y cells studies are attached. Limma script
949 for SHSY5Y studies is attached.

950

951

952 **EXPERIMENTAL MODEL AND SUBJECT DETAILS**

953

954 ***Human serum and nasopharyngeal swab sample collection for ddPCR***

955 All plasma and nasal swab samples from those with COVID-19 infection, seasonal
956 coronavirus infection, and controls were collected from inpatients at the University of Maryland
957 Medical Center, in Baltimore, USA, between March and May of 2020. Sample collection
958 obtained through informed consent waiver, which was approved by the University of Maryland,
959 Baltimore IRB.

960 For serum samples, N=10 samples from COVID-19 intubated patients, COVID-19
961 outpatients, and COVID-19 negative patients were obtained. An equal distribution of N=5 males
962 and females were used for each group. Also, an equal age distribution of patients from 27 to 85
963 years old was utilized for each group.

964 For the nasopharyngeal samples the following patient samples were obtained: N=10 SARS-
965 CoV-2 positive patients, N=6 common cold coronavirus samples, and N=6 Coronavirus NL63
966 samples. For the common cold coronavirus samples the breakdown was the following for the
967 specific viruses: N=2 Coronavirus 229E, Coronavirus HKU1, and N=2 Coronavirus OC43.

968

969 ***Human nasopharyngeal swab sample collection for RNA-seq analysis***

970 Patient specimens were processed as described in Butler et al., 2020 (Butler et al., 2021).
971 Briefly, nasopharyngeal swabs were collected using the BD Universal Viral Transport Media
972 system (Becton, Dickinson and Company, Franklin Lakes, NJ) from symptomatic patients. Total
973 Nucleic Acid (TNA) was extracted from using automated nucleic acid extraction on the
974 QIA Symphony and the DSP Virus/Pathogen Mini Kit (Qiagen).

975

976 ***Human autopsy tissue collection for RNA-seq analysis***

977 The full methods of the patient sample collection from the autopsy patients are currently
978 available in the Park et al. (Park et al., 2021). All autopsies are performed with consent of next of
979 kin and permission for retention and research use of tissue. Autopsies were performed in a
980 negative pressure room with protective equipment including N-95 masks; brain and bone were
981 not obtained for safety reasons. All fresh tissues were procured prior to fixation and directly into
982 Trizol for downstream RNA extraction. Tissues were collected from lung, liver, lymph nodes,
983 kidney, and the heart as consent permitted. For GeoMx, RNAscope, trichrome and histology
984 tissue sections were fixed in 10% neutral buffered formalin for 48 hours before processing and
985 sectioning. These cases had a post-mortem interval of less than 48 hours. For bulk RNA-seq
986 tissues, post-mortem intervals ranged from less than 24 hours to 72 hours (with 2 exceptions -
987 one at 4 and one at 7 days - but passing RNA quality metrics) with an average of 2.5 days. All
988 deceased patient remains were refrigerated at 4°C prior to autopsy performance.

989

990 ***Human urine sample collection***

991 Urine was collected from patients and volunteers at the University of North Carolina at
992 Chapel Hill. All patients provided informed consent prior to participation in IRB-approved re-
993 search protocols (UNC IRB: 20-0822 [RHS] and 20-0792 [NMB]). Mid-stream urine of outpa-
994 tients and non-critically ill patients was collected by the clean catch method. Urine of intubated
995 critically ill patients was collected from a port on the Foley catheter. Urine was aliquoted into 5
996 ml aliquots and stored at -80°C.

997 Urine aliquots were thawed, and microRNA was extracted from 1 ml per sample using
998 Norgen Urine microRNA Purification Kit (Cat. 29000). Microalbumin and creatinine levels were
999 assessed using Microalbumin 2-1 Combo strips (CLIAwaived Inc, cat# URS-2M).

1000

1001 ***Cell lines used for miR-2392 mimic experiments***

1002 Human SH-SY5Y cells were obtained from the ATCC and grown in Minimum Essential
1003 Medium (Gibco) / 10% FBS (Invitrogen) /1% MEM Non Essential Amino Acids (Gibco) /
1004 1% GlutaMAX -1 (Gibco). Cells were plated in 3.5 cm dishes and incubated with miR-2392 or
1005 control lentivirus particles (MOI 1) for 48h. Cells were harvested and lysed in Trizol reagent and
1006 RNA was extracted following manufacturers protocol (Invitrogen).

1007

1008 ***COVID-19 hamster model***

1009 Male Syrian hamsters 6-8 weeks old were utilized for efficacy studies with anti-miR-2392
1010 FASTmer treatment. Three hamsters were used for each experimental group for a total of 30
1011 hamsters with 10 treatment groups. Hamsters were infected with 10^5 pfu of SARS-CoV-2. There
1012 were 5 major treatment groups (N=6 per group) with two endpoints at day 3 or 7 post-viral
1013 challenge (N=3 per endpoint). Groups 1 and 3 were given the FASTmer treatment by IP injection
1014 while groups 2 and 4 were given by IN instillation under ketamine-xylazine anesthesia. Groups 1
1015 and 2 were given single FASTmer treatment 24 hours before viral challenge. Groups 3 and 4
1016 were given two doses of FASTmers at 24 hours before and 24 hours after viral challenge. The
1017 control group 5 was treated with PBS 24 hours prior to and 24 hours following viral challenge by
1018 IN instillation.

1019 Treatment efficacy was assessed in multiple ways: 1) Change in daily body weight, 2)
1020 oropharyngeal shedding of virus on days 1-3 from all groups post-challenge assayed by plaque
1021 assay on Vero E6 cells (PFU/swab), 3) tissue burden of the virus at necropsy on day 3 from 2
1022 lung tubes and turbinates assayed by plaque assay (PFU/100mg), and 4) histopathologic scoring
1023 on lungs and turbinates from all hamsters; the histopathological score for individual tissues,
1024 inflammation score from the interstitial lung inflammation, and total histopathological
1025 scores/assessment was made.

1026 The dose of anti-miR-2392 that was used was calculated to raise blood levels to 10 μ M if it
1027 were given intravenously. The molecular weight of anti-miR-2392 is 15,804. Assuming that
1028 hamsters weigh 120 grams and have 8% of body weight as blood, blood volume was
1029 approximately 0.01 liters. The dose per hamster was 1.58 mg in a 100 μ l volume from an anti-
1030 miR-2392 solution.

1031

1032 ***In vitro viral screening model***

1033 A549-ACE2 cells, gifted by Dr. Brad Rosenberg (MSSM), were maintained in DMEM
1034 (Quality Biological, Gaithersburg, MD; #112-014-101) + 10% Fetal Bovine Serum (Gibco;
1035 #26140079) + 1% Penicillin-Streptomycin (Gemini Bio; #400-109). The day prior to treatment,
1036 5,000 A549-ACE2 cells were plated per well in 96-well plates. MiR-2932 was diluted in
1037 duplicate in A549-ACE2 media to a starting concentration of 20 μ M (Run 1) or 22 μ M (Runs 2
1038 and 3), and then an 8-point 1:2 dilution series was prepared. Media was removed from cells and
1039 90 μ L of each dilution was transferred to the cells. The plates were incubated for 2 hours at 37°C
1040 before being infected with an M.O.I. of 0.1 SARS-CoV-2 WA-1 (provided by Dr. Natalie
1041 Thornburg at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Parallel plates were also run and
1042 left uninfected to monitor toxicity. Since Runs 2 and 3 were run simultaneously, a single toxicity
1043 plate was run for both. All plates were incubated at 37°C for 72 hours before being analyzed via
1044 Cell Titer Glo (Promega, Madison, WI; #G7573). Cell viability was compared to uninfected,
1045 untreated cells and infected, untreated cells.

1046

1047 **METHOD DETAILS**

1048

1049 ***miRNA extraction for Droplet Digital PCR (ddPCR)***

1050 MiRNA extractions from serum were carried out using the Qiagen miRNeasy serum/plasma
1051 kit (#217184). MiRNA extractions from urine samples were carried out using Norgen urine
1052 microRNA Purification Kit (Cat. 29000, Norgen Bioteck Corp. Thorold, ON, Canada).
1053 Quantitation of miRNA samples was done using a NanoDrop 2000 Spectrophotometer
1054 (ThermoFisher Scientific).

1055

1056 ***cDNA generation and ddPCR***

1057 First, cDNA was synthesized from miRNA samples using the Qiagen miRCURY LNA RT
1058 Kit (Cat. 339340) using a concentration of 5ng/ μ L for the miRNA per sample. Next, samples
1059 were mixed with a 1:20 dilution of the generated cDNA with the BioRad QX200 ddPCR
1060 Evagreen Supermix (Cat. 1864034) and the appropriate miRNA primers from miRCURY LNA
1061 miRNA PCR Assays (Qiagen). BioRad QX200 Automated Droplet Generator (Cat. 1864101)
1062 was used to create emulsion droplets. With the C1000 Touch™ Thermal Cycler with 96-Deep
1063 Well Reaction Module (Bio-Rad) the following PCR reaction was used for all the primers: 1
1064 cycle 95°C for 5 min, 40 cycles of 95°C for 30 sec and 58°C for 1 min (the annealing
1065 temperature can change depending on the primer), 1 cycle of 4°C for 5 min, and 1 cycle of 90°C
1066 for 5 min. Not all miRNA primers sets for ddPCR will have the same annealing temperature, so
1067 optimizing the annealing temperature is required for each primer set. Their respective annealing
1068 temperatures are found in **Table S1**. Finally, the QX200™ Droplet Digital™ PCR System (Bio-
1069 Rad) quantified the amount of miRNA for each primer set per sample. QuantaSoft software (Bio-
1070 Rad) generated the data for each primer set and sample. The same threshold setting was used for
1071 all samples per primer set. The concentration (miRNA copies/ μ L) value generated by QuantaSoft
1072 was converted to miRNA copies/ng of serum. These values were used for all miRNA analysis.
1073 For all analysis the miRNA concentrations were $\log_2(x+1)$ transformed to allow for easy
1074 comparison between miRNAs and samples.

1075

1076 ***Publicly available Bronchial Alveolar Lavage Fluid (BALF) COVID-19 RNA-sequencing data***

1077 Fastq files were downloaded from SRA (NCBI BioProject PRJNA605907 (Shen et al., 2020)
1078 and NCBI BioProject PRJNA390194 (Ren et al., 2018)). Fastq data files were trimmed using
1079 TrimGalore v (0.6.4) with a quality cutoff of 30. Data were then aligned using STAR (v2.7.3)
1080 two pass mode to the Human reference genome (GRCh38 v99 downloaded 04-27-2020).
1081 Unaligned data were written to a fastq file, and then realigned to the GRCh38 reference genome
1082 using Bowtie 2 (v2.3.4.1), and output sam file converted to a bam file using samtools (v1.7). The
1083 resultant Bam files were merged, sorted, and read groups added using picard tools (v2.21.3)
1084 (script in supplemental data).

1085

1086 ***Publicly available RNA-seq data: A549, Calu-3, NHBE, and COVID-19 lung biopsy***

1087 Raw RNA-seq read counts from the publication by Blanco-Melo *et al.* for the A549, Calu-3,
1088 and NHBE cell lines as well as post-mortem lung biopsies from two COVID-19 patients were
1089 downloaded from the Gene Expression Omnibus (series accession GSE147507) (Blanco-Melo et
1090 al., 2020).

1091

1092 ***RNA-seq of Nasopharyngeal Swab COVID-19 patient samples***

1093 RNA isolation and library preparation is fully described in Butler, et al. (Butler et al., 2021).
1094 Briefly, library preparation on the all nasopharyngeal swab samples' total nucleic acid (TNA)
1095 were treated with DNase 1 (Zymo Research, Catalog # E1010). Post-DNase digested samples
1096 were then put into the NEBNext rRNA depletion v2 (Human/Mouse/Rat), Ultra II Directional
1097 RNA (10 μ g), and Unique Dual Index Primer Pairs were used following the vendor protocols
1098 from New England Biolabs. Kits were supplied from a single manufacturer lot. Completed
1099 libraries were quantified by Qubit or equivalent and run on a Bioanalyzer or equivalent for size
1100 determination. Libraries were pooled and sent to the WCM Genomics Core or HudsonAlpha for
1101 final quantification by Qubit fluorometer (ThermoFisher Scientific), TapeStation 2200 (Agilent),
1102 and qRT-PCR using the Kapa Biosystems Illumina library quantification kit.

1103

1104 ***RNA-seq of COVID-19 autopsy tissue samples***

1105 RNA isolation and library preparation is fully described in Park, et al. (Park et al., 2021).
1106 Briefly, autopsy tissues were collected from lung, liver, lymph nodes, kidney, and the heart and
1107 were placed directly into Trizol, homogenized and then snap frozen in liquid nitrogen. At least
1108 after 24 hours these tissue samples were then processed via standard protocols to isolate RNA.
1109 New York Genome Center RNA sequencing libraries were prepared using the KAPA Hyper
1110 Library Preparation Kit + RiboErase, HMR (Roche) in accordance with manufacturer's
1111 recommendations. Briefly, 50-200ng of Total RNA were used for ribosomal depletion and
1112 fragmentation. Depleted RNA underwent first and second strand cDNA synthesis followed by
1113 adenylation, and ligation of unique dual indexed adapters. Libraries were amplified using 12
1114 cycles of PCR and cleaned-up by magnetic bead purification. Final libraries were quantified
1115 using fluorescent-based assays including PicoGreen (Life Technologies) or Qubit Fluorometer
1116 (Invitrogen) and Fragment Analyzer (Advanced Analytics) and sequenced on a NovaSeq 6000
1117 sequencer (v1 chemistry) with 2x150bp targeting 60M reads per sample.

1118

1119 ***miR-2392 mimic experiments in SH-SY5Y cells and RNA-seq***

1120 RNA was dissolved in nuclease free water and concentration determined spectrometrically at
1121 260nm using a Biotek plate reader (Biotek). 500ng RNA was used as input for a whole
1122 transcriptome library preparation (ThermoFisher Total RNA). Libraries were quantified using a
1123 bioanalyzer chip reader (nanoDNA chips: Aglient Technologies) and diluted to 100 pM final
1124 concentration. Barcoded libraries were combined and use to seed a OneTouch bead templating
1125 reaction (OneTouch2). Cloned libraries were enriched and loaded on 540 Ion Torrent chips.
1126 Data were sequenced using the Ion Torrent RNA-seq workflow. Unaligned Bam files were
1127 converted to fastq and aligned to the Grch 38 reference genome using STAR Two pass approach
1128 (Dobin paper) to create gene count tables as described in Overbery et al. (Overbey et al., 2021)
1129 (script in supplementary).

1130

1131 ***Anti-miR-2392 FASTmer inhibitor design and construction***

1132 The FAST (Facile Accelerated Specific Therapeutics) platform was used to design FASTmer
1133 inhibitors, which are composed of a nanobiohyrd molecule based on antisense peptide nucleic
1134 acid (PNA) moiety conjugated to nanoparticle for improved delivery and membrane transport.
1135 The PNA moiety was chosen to be 15 bases long (in order to maximize both solubility and
1136 specificity), which yielded six potential target sequences within the 20-nucleotide mature human
1137 miR-2392. These potential targets were screened using FAST for solubility, self-complementing
1138 sequences, and off-targeting within the human genome (GCF_000001405.26) and SARS-CoV-2
1139 viral genome (NC_045512). The antisense sequence complementing miR-2392 nucleotides 2 to
1140 16 (TCTCACCCCATCCT) was chosen in order to minimize off-targeting while maximizing
1141 coverage of the miR-2392 seed region. The FASTmer was synthesized (with an N-terminal
1142 histidine tag and a 2-(2-(2-aminoethoxy)ethoxy)acetic acid linker) on an Apex 396 peptide
1143 synthesizer (AAPPTec, LLC) with solid-phase Fmoc chemistry. Fmoc-PNA monomers were
1144 obtained from PolyOrg Inc., with A, C, and G monomers protected with Bhoc groups. Following
1145 synthesis, the peptides were conjugated with nanoparticles and purified via size-exclusion
1146 filtration. Conjugation and concentration of the purified solution was monitored through
1147 measurement of absorbance at 260 nm (for detection of PNA) and 400 nm (for quantification of
1148 gold nanoparticles).

1149

1150 **QUANTIFICATION AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

1151

1152 ***Analysis of BALF RNA-seq data***

1153 Bam files were imported into Partek Genome Studio v7.0, and gene expression values
1154 quantified vs the Grch38 reference annotation guide (Ensembl v99). Samples with fewer than 2
1155 million aligned reads were excluded from further analysis. Genes with fewer than 10 reads in
1156 25% of samples were excluded, and differential gene expression determined using ANOVA with
1157 infection status as contrast. Differentially expressed gene files were used in GSEA and IPA to
1158 determine biological significance and pathways being regulated.

1159

1160 ***Analysis of Nasopharyngeal Swab RNA-seq data***

1161 The nasopharyngeal swab samples were analyzed comparing COVID-19 viral infection to
1162 the negative patients and was as previously described in Butler et al. (Butler et al., 2021) and the
1163 DESeq2 (Love et al., 2014) was utilized to generate the differential expression data. Heatmaps
1164 were displayed using pheatmap (Kolde, 2015). Volcano plots were made use R program
1165 EnhancedVolcano (Blighe et al., 2018).

1166

1167 *Analysis of Autopsy RNA-seq data*

1168 The full methods of the analysis from the autopsy patients is currently available in the Park et
1169 al. (Park et al., 2021). Briefly, RNA-seq data was processed through the nf-core/rnaseq pipeline
1170 (Ewels et al., 2020). This workflow involved adapter trimming using Trim Galore!
1171 (<https://github.com/FelixKrueger/TrimGalore>), read alignment with STAR (Dobin et al., 2013),
1172 gene quantification with Salmon (Patro et al., 2017), duplicate read marking with Picard
1173 MarkDuplicates (<https://github.com/broadinstitute/picard>), and transcript quantification with
1174 StringTie (Kovaka et al., 2019). Other quality control measures included RSeQC, Qualimap, and
1175 dupRadar. Alignment was performed using the GRCh38 build native to nf-core and annotation
1176 was performed using Gencode Human Release 33 (GRCH38.p13). FeatureCounts reads were
1177 normalized using variance-stabilizing transform (vst) in DESeq2 package in R for visualization
1178 purposes in log-scale (Love et al., 2014). Differential expression of genes were calculated by
1179 DESeq2. Differential expression comparisons were done as either COVID+ cases versus
1180 COVID- controls for each tissue specifically, correcting for sequencing batches with a covariate
1181 where applicable, or pairwise comparison of viral levels from the lung as determined by
1182 nCounter data. Volcano plots were made use R program EnhancedVolcano (Blighe et al., 2018).

1183

1184 *Analysis Combining Autopsy and Nasopharyngeal Swab RNA-seq data*

1185 To combine the results from the autopsy and nasopharyngeal swab RNA-seq data, we utilized
1186 the t-score values from the DESeq2 analysis. Heatmaps were displayed using pheatmap (Kolde,
1187 2015).

1188

1189 *Gene Set Enrichment Analysis (GSEA)*

1190 For pathway analysis on the miR-2392 targets (**Fig. 3**) we utilized ShinyGO (Ge et al., 2020)
1191 to determine the significantly regulated pathways for each main cluster in the heatmap. The
1192 clustering was determined through k-mean statistics.

1193 For pathway analysis on the miR-2392 mimic RNA-seq data, we utilized fast Gene Set
1194 Enrichment Analysis (fgSEA) (Korotkevich et al., 2021). Pathway analysis was done comparing
1195 miR-2392 mimics to all controls and the ranked list of genes were defined by the t-score
1196 statistics. The statistical significance was determined by 1000 permutations of the genesets
1197 (Subramanian et al., 2005).

1198

1199 *Analysis of proteomic and transcriptomic blood datasets from COVID-19 patients*

1200 For the analysis of the miR-2392 targets in the blood tissue, we downloaded whole blood
1201 transcriptome data and plasma proteome data from The COVIDome Explorer Researcher Portal
1202 (Sullivan et al., 2021). For Transcriptome data we used the following filters: Category "Effect of
1203 COVID-19 status", Platform "Blood", Statistical test "Student's t-test", Adjustment method

1204 "none", Sex "male" and "female", Age Group "All". For Proteome data we used the following
1205 filters: Category "Effect of COVID-19 status", Platform "SOMAscan", Statistical test "Student's
1206 t-test", Adjustment method "none", Sex "male" and "female", Age Group "All". We created the
1207 list of the intersecting genes from both datasets. We analyzed the list using RStudio Desktop
1208 1.3.1093 (RStudio Team (2020). RStudio: Integrated Development Environment for R. RStudio,
1209 PBC, Boston, MA URL <http://www.rstudio.com/>), and visualized data using ggplot2 version
1210 3.3.2 (Wickham, 2016) and ggrepel version 0.8.2 (<https://ggrepel.slowkow.com/>).

1211

1212 ***Analysis of Monocyte RNA-seq data***

1213 The monocyte COVID-19 RNA-Seq data, published under the accession GSE159678
1214 (Rother et al., 2020), was downloaded from SRA and gene expression was quantified using
1215 Salmon's selective alignment approach (Srivastava et al., 2020). The RNA-Seq processing
1216 pipeline was implemented using pyrpipe (Singh et al., 2021) (https://github.com/urmi-21/pyrpipe/tree/master/case_studies/Covid_RNA-Seq). Exploratory data analysis and differential
1217 expression analysis were performed using MetaOmGraph (Singh et al., 2020).

1218

1220 ***Analysis of A549, Calu-3, NHBE, and COVID lung biopsy data***

1221 Each data series was normalized and filtered for low-expressed genes (counts<1). Cell
1222 culture samples treated with SARS-CoV-2 were compared to untreated controls and COVID-19-
1223 positive patient samples were compared to healthy lung biopsies. Differentially expressed genes
1224 were determined from the R-program Limma-Voom (Ritchie et al., 2015) using a linear model
1225 with weighted least squares for each gene and the false discovery rate adjusted p-values were
1226 calculated.

1227

1228 ***Analysis of miR-2392 mimic RNA-seq data***

1229 Differential gene expression was determined using LIMMA-voom (Ritchie et al., 2015).
1230 Data were filtered to ensure data contained at least 5 million aligned reads, and average gene
1231 counts of > 10. Cell treatments we used as contrasts for differentially expressed gene
1232 calculations. These results were then uploaded to GSEA for further analysis. (R script in
1233 supplementary section)

1234

1235 ***Conservation of miR-2392 between species***

1236 To determined conservation of miR-2392 among different species we utilized UCSC
1237 Genome Browser (Kent et al., 2002). Hsa-miR-2392 was entered as an input and a select of
1238 species was used to compare which included common species that are currently used in SARS-
1239 CoV-2 *in vivo* studies (i.e. mice, ferrets, and hamsters). We also chose primates and other
1240 animals to provide a wide spectrum of species to observe conservation of miR-2392. Lastly, the
1241 USCS Genome Browser provides the host gene for miR-2392 (i.e. MEG3) and redirects to GTEx
1242 (Consortium, 2020) to provide a plot of MEG3 levels based on RNA-seq data on normal tissues.

1243

1244 ***Mapping miR-2392 sequence to SARS-CoV-2 sequences***

1245 To explore potential binding sites for miR-2392 we used miRanda software (Enright et al.,
1246 2003) to identify all potential binding sites with respect to the SARS-CoV-2 reference genome

1247 (Wuhan-Hu-1; NC045512.2) and representative genomes from lineages of concern. The lineages
1248 of concern were selected from Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID) with
1249 each lineage being represented by 14 recent genomes.

1250

1251 *In silico predictions of genes from miRNAs*

1252 Through the use of a Cytoscape (Shannon et al., 2003) plug-in called ClueGo/CluePedia
1253 (Bindea et al., 2013), we were able to predict genes targeted by the miRNAs determined. This
1254 involved entering all miRNAs in ClueGo and allowing the software to determine the top 50
1255 genes that were significantly regulated and connected to the miRNAs. The predictions only
1256 reflect the functions that will be regulated by the miRNAs and do not show whether the function
1257 will be activated or inhibited. Lastly, miRNet 2.0 was utilized to predict the diseases and
1258 pathways that are associated with the miRNAs (Chang et al., 2020a). This was plotted as a dot
1259 utilizing the R-program ggplot2 (v3.2.1) (Wickham, 2016).

1260

1261 *ddPCR analysis of miRNA levels in patient samples*

1262 First, we normalized the amount of each miRNA measured per body location (nasal, serum,
1263 and urine) using the general logarithm transformation. We compared miRNA levels in samples
1264 from patients either positive or negative for SARS-nCoV-2 using the student's t-test (unadjusted)
1265 as well as controlling for sex and age using least squares adjustment. Next, we generated receiver
1266 operating characteristic curves from each body location to show the performance of a
1267 classification model (SARS-nCoV-2 positive versus negative) at all classification thresholds
1268 using the absolute, non-transformed levels (miRNA copies per 5 ng RNA). Finally, we
1269 performed a subanalysis on each location to compare the variance of each miRNA in SARS-
1270 nCoV-2 negative patients compared to other patient groups. For serum and nasal samples, 1-way
1271 ANOVA was used to identify variation associated with the patient classification. For urine
1272 samples, 2-way ANOVA was used with location (outpatient versus inpatient) and SARS-nCoV-2
1273 positivity as the main factors. If the ANOVA yielded a $P < 0.05$, Dunnett's post-test was used to
1274 compare subgroup means to the negative patient sample mean.

1275

1276 *Computational drug repositioning model*

1277 Using the SM2miR database (Liu et al., 2013), we assembled an $n \times m$ binary matrix (X)
1278 containing 3,593 associations between small molecules ($n = 213$, rows) and miRNAs ($m =$
1279 $1,519$, columns). Each matrix entry (X_{ij}) was assigned a value of 1 where a small molecule is
1280 known to be associated to miRNA, and was 0 otherwise. The chemical notation as a simplified
1281 molecular input line entry system (SMILES) was obtained for each small molecule from
1282 PubChem. We then calculated the 2D Tanimoto chemical similarity between pairs of small
1283 molecules using the MACCS key binary fingerprints with RDKit (RDKit: Open-source
1284 cheminformatics; <http://www.rdkit.org>). Similarly, for each miRNA, we obtained its sequence
1285 from miRbase (Kozomara et al., 2019) and computed sequence similarity between miRNAs as
1286 the score of their Needleman-Wunsch alignment. We used the binary matrix, together with the
1287 chemical and sequence similarities, as input to our state-of-the-art drug target prediction model
1288 to predict missing associations in X (Galeano et al., 2021). The model parameters where: $p = \frac{1}{2}$,

1289 $\beta_{\text{Chem}} = 1$, and $\alpha_{\text{seq}} = 0$. To assess the prediction performance of the model, we performed ten-
1290 fold cross-validation simulations.

1291

1292 **References**

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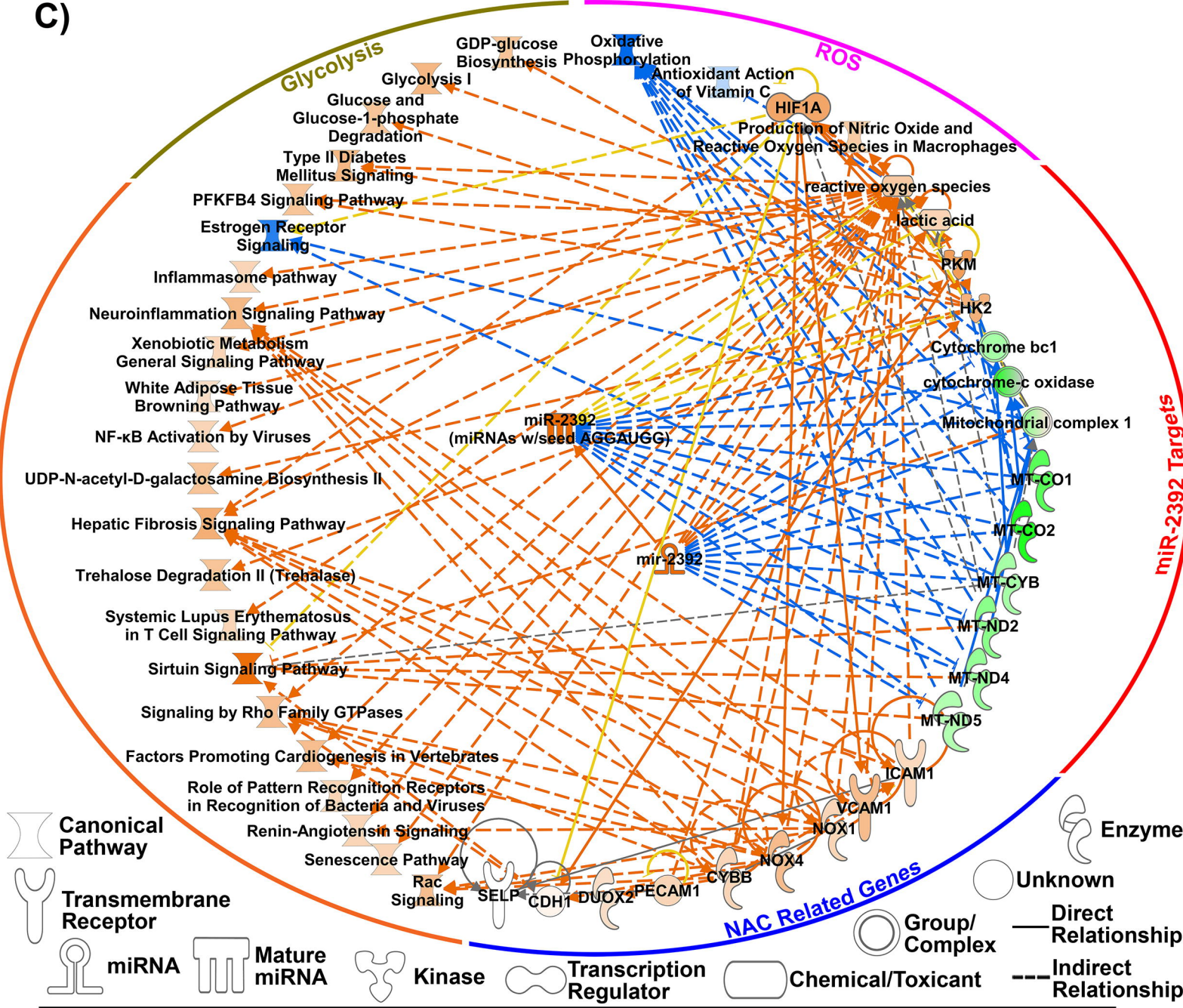
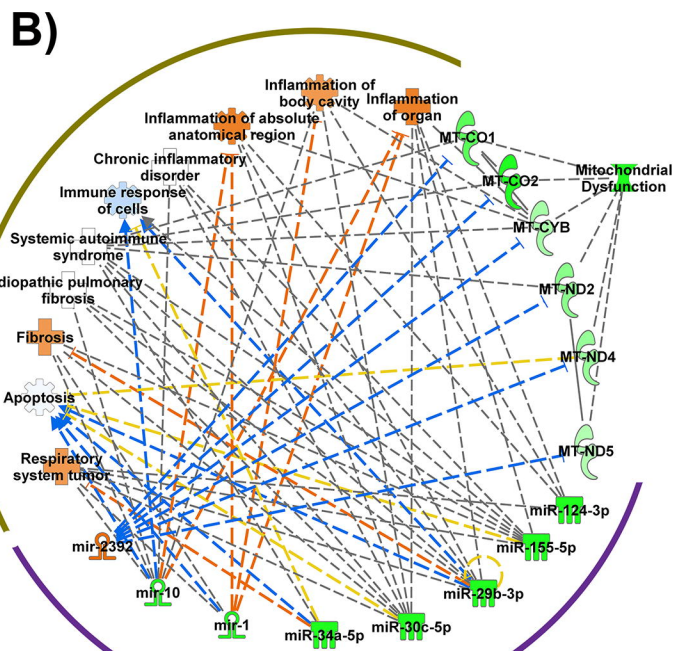
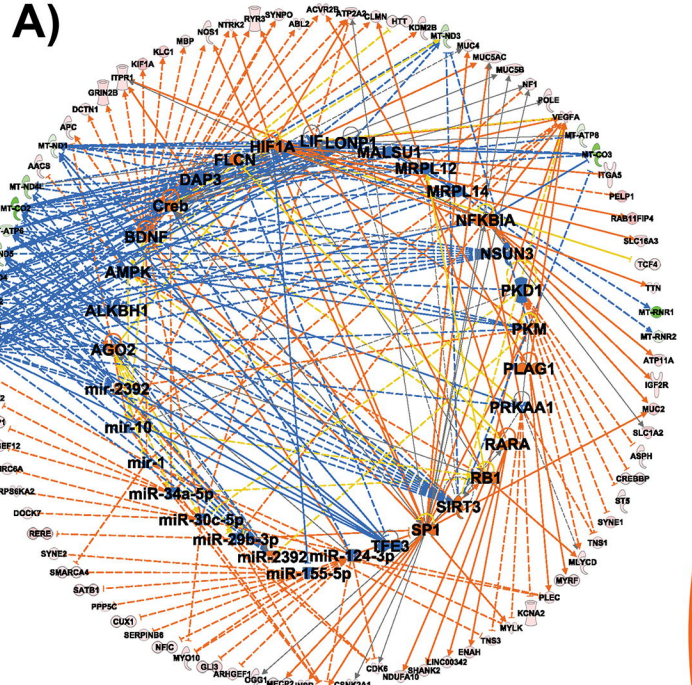
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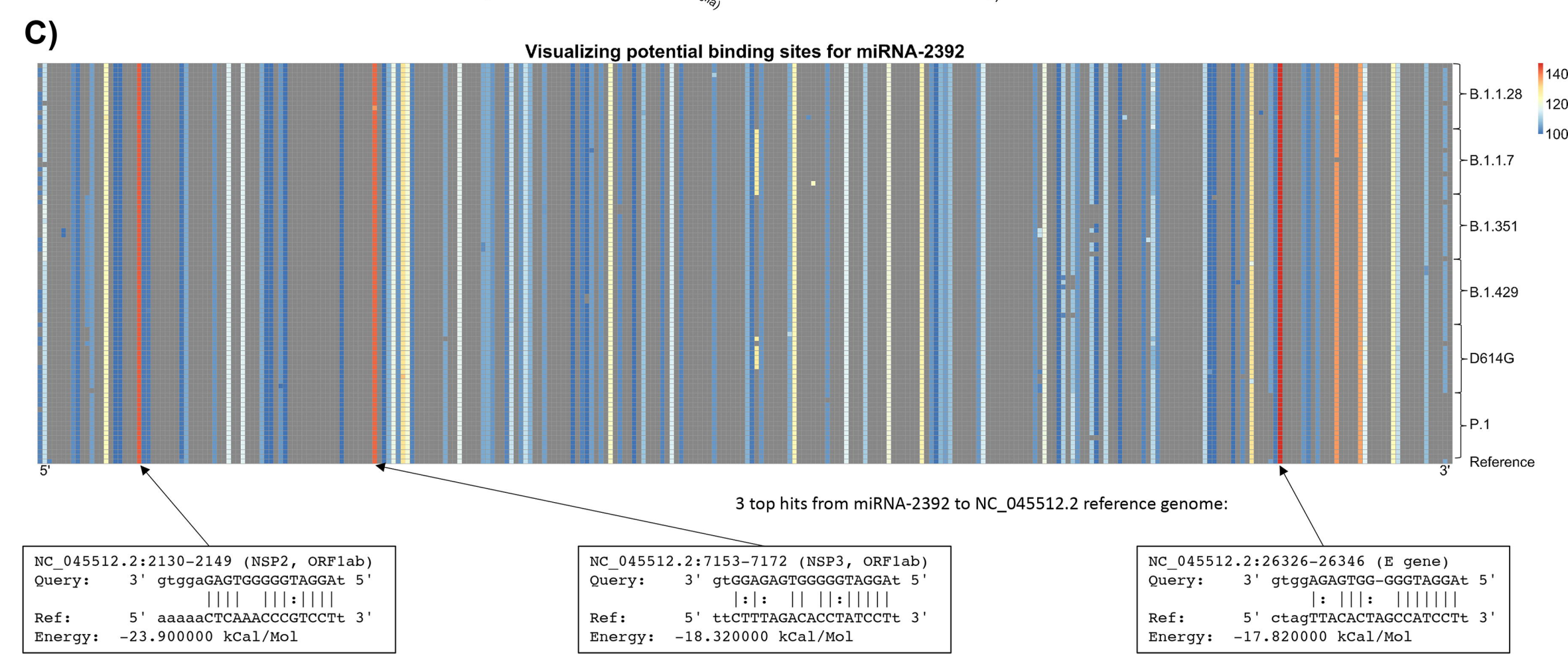
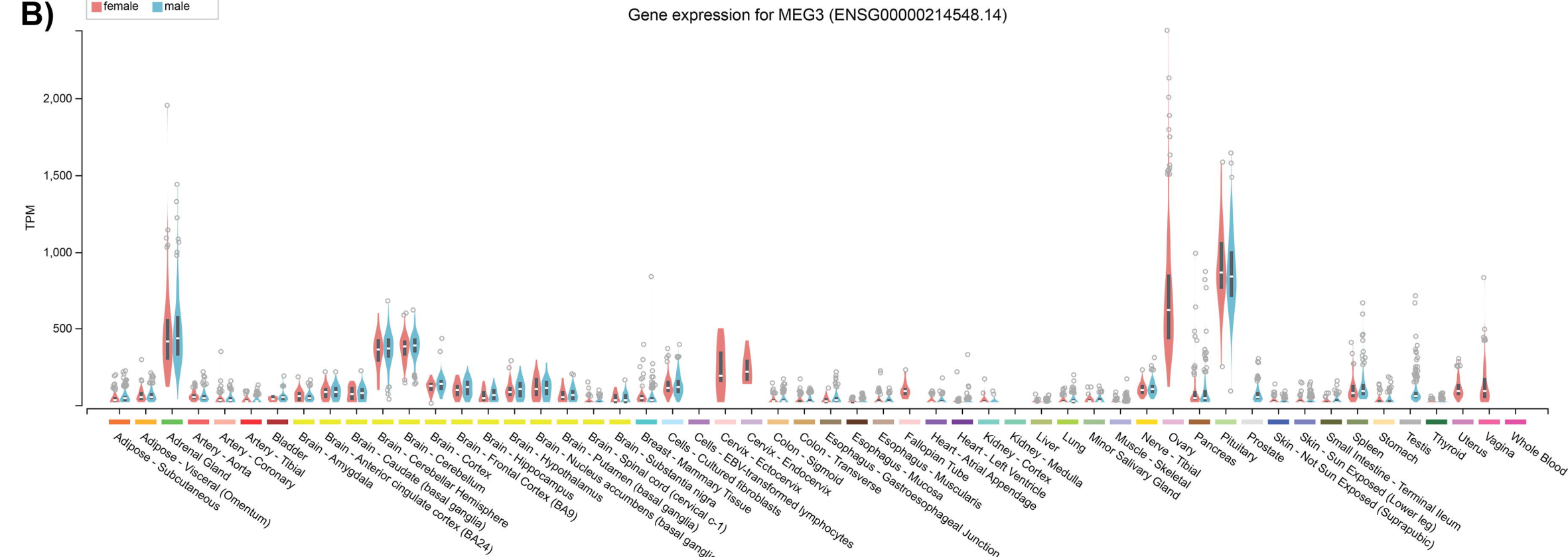
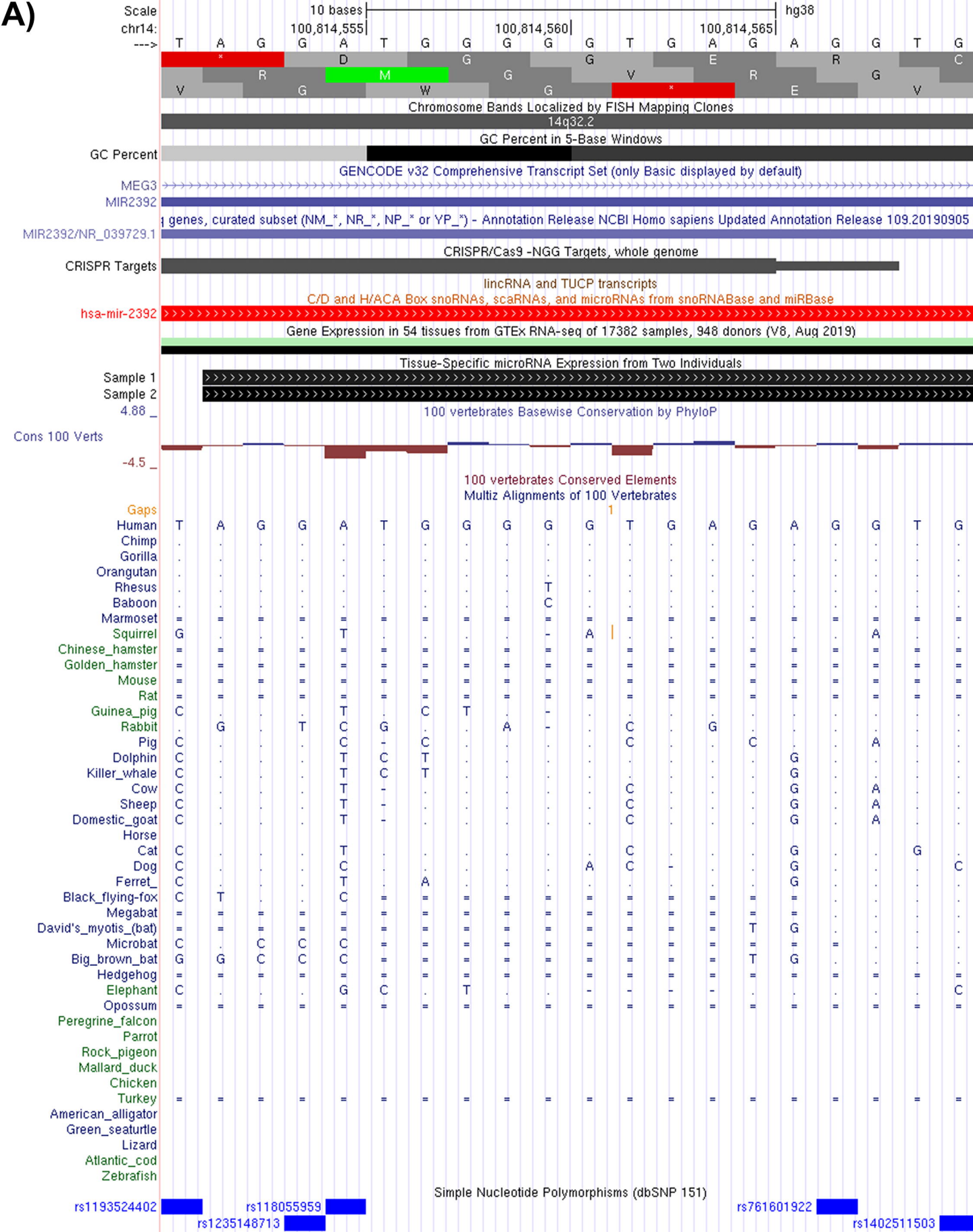
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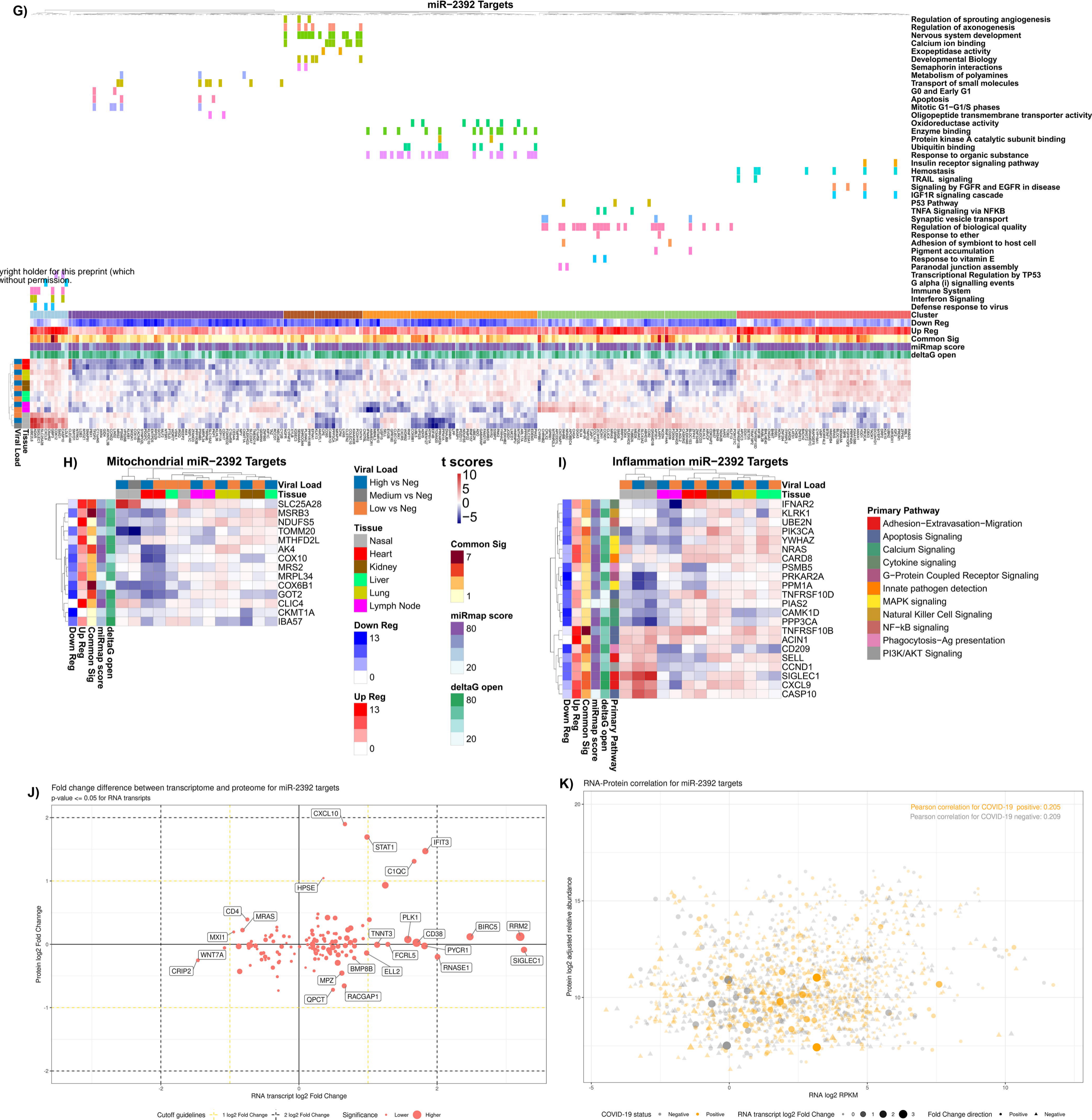
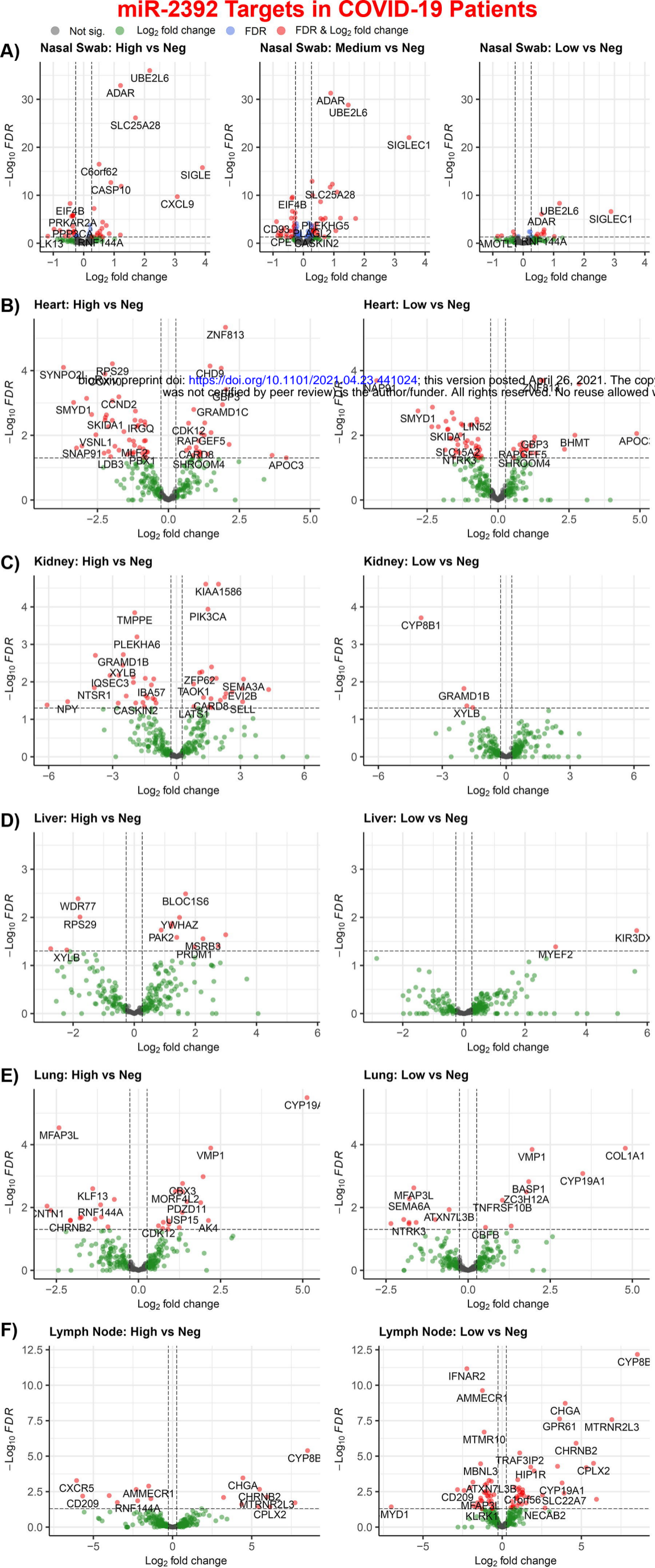
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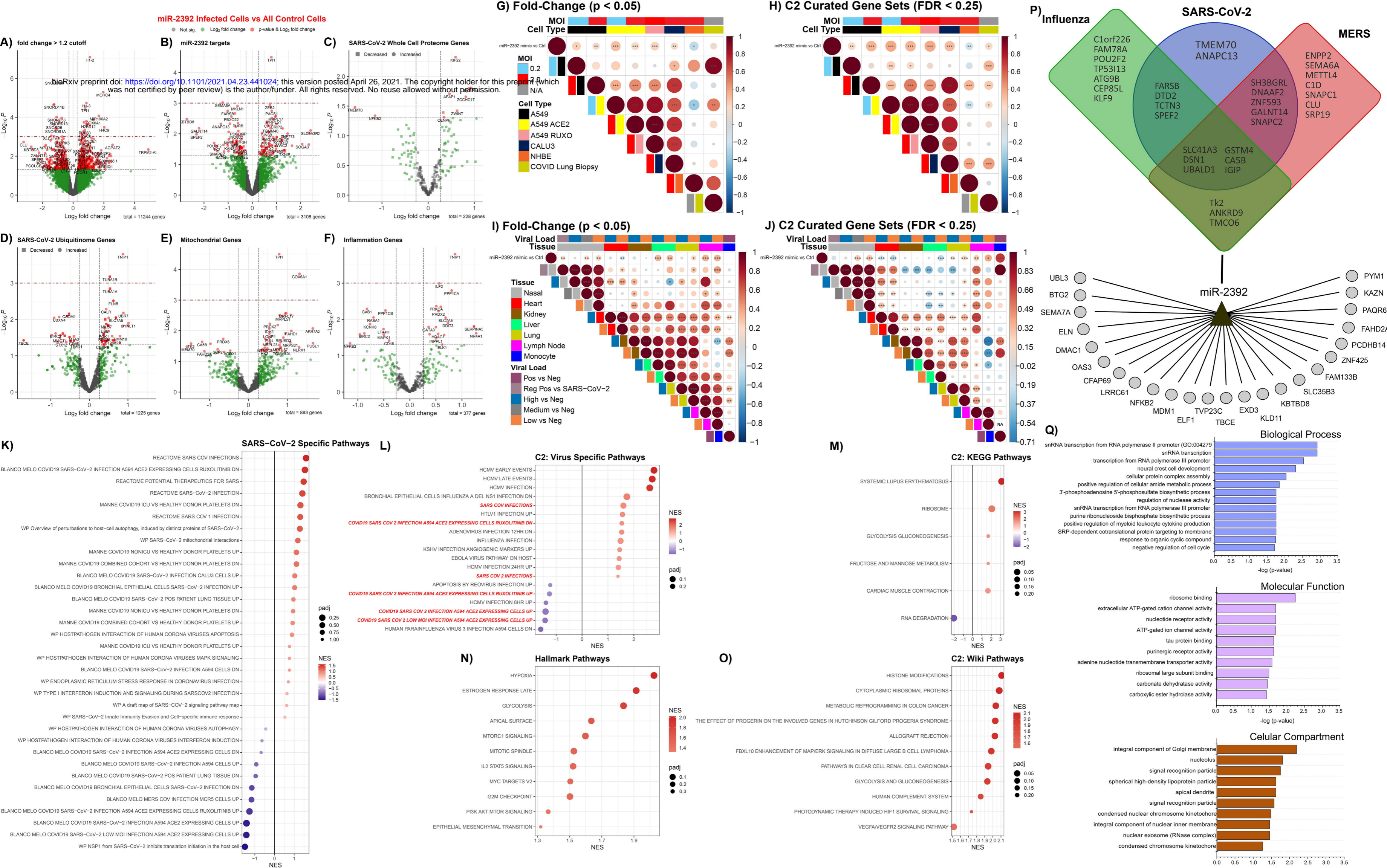
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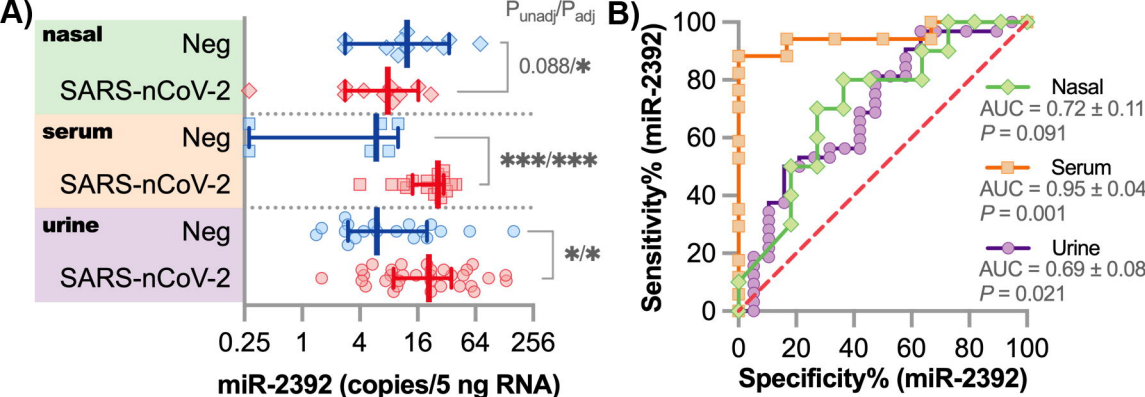
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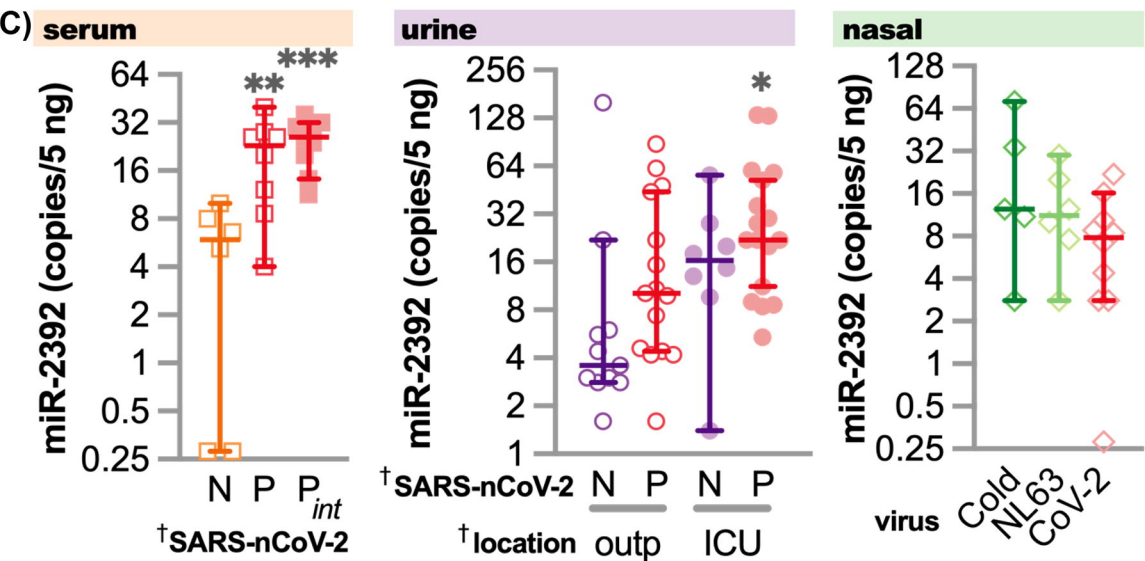








unadjusted = t-test on SARS (on log transformed values)
adjusted = mixed model corrected for age and sex (single terms)
*, **, *** = $p < 0.05, 0.01, 0.001$



nasal and serum = ANOVA on log values

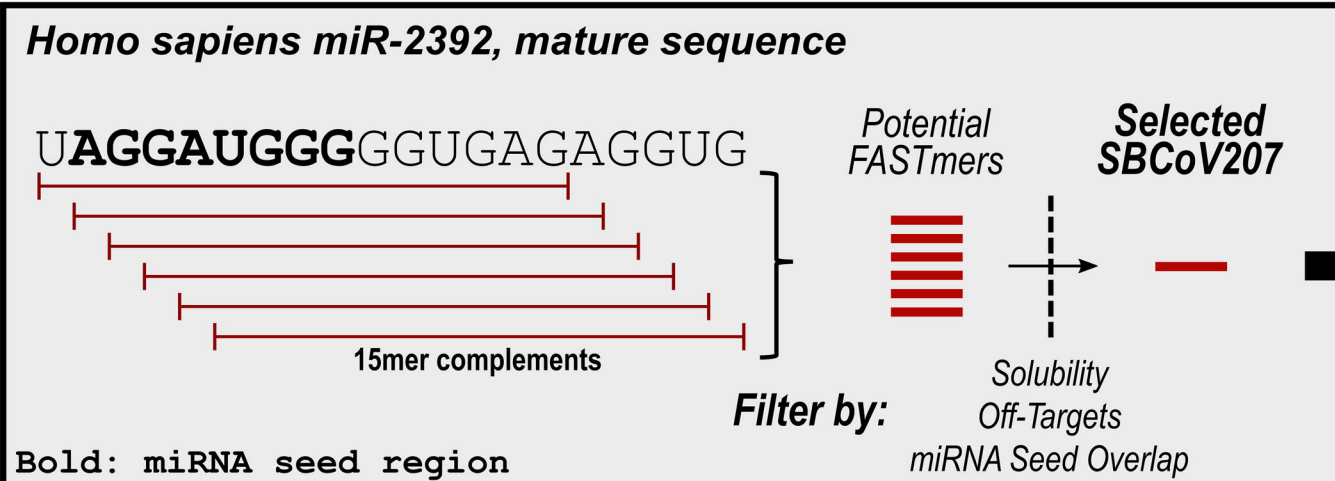
urine = 2-way ANOVA on log values

$\dagger, \ddagger = p < 0.05, 0.01$ from ANOVA

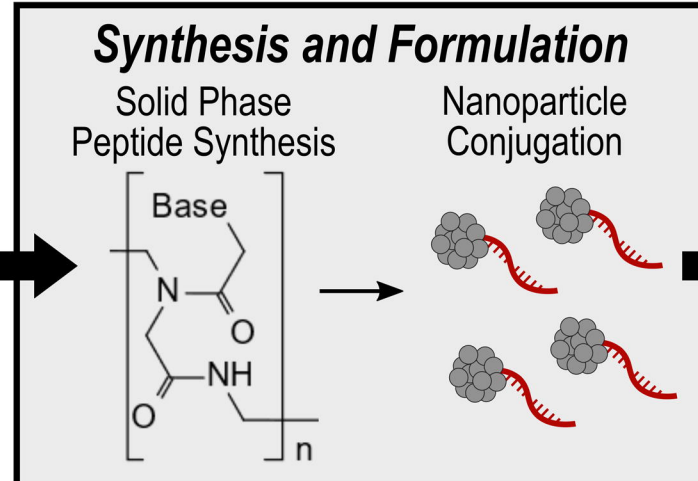
*, **, *** = $p < 0.05, 0.01, 0.001$ from Dunnet's post-test compared to Negative

A)

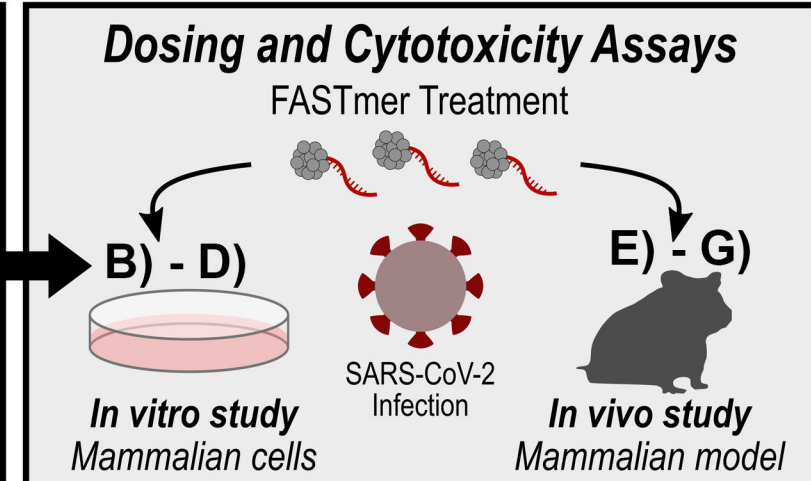
Design



Build

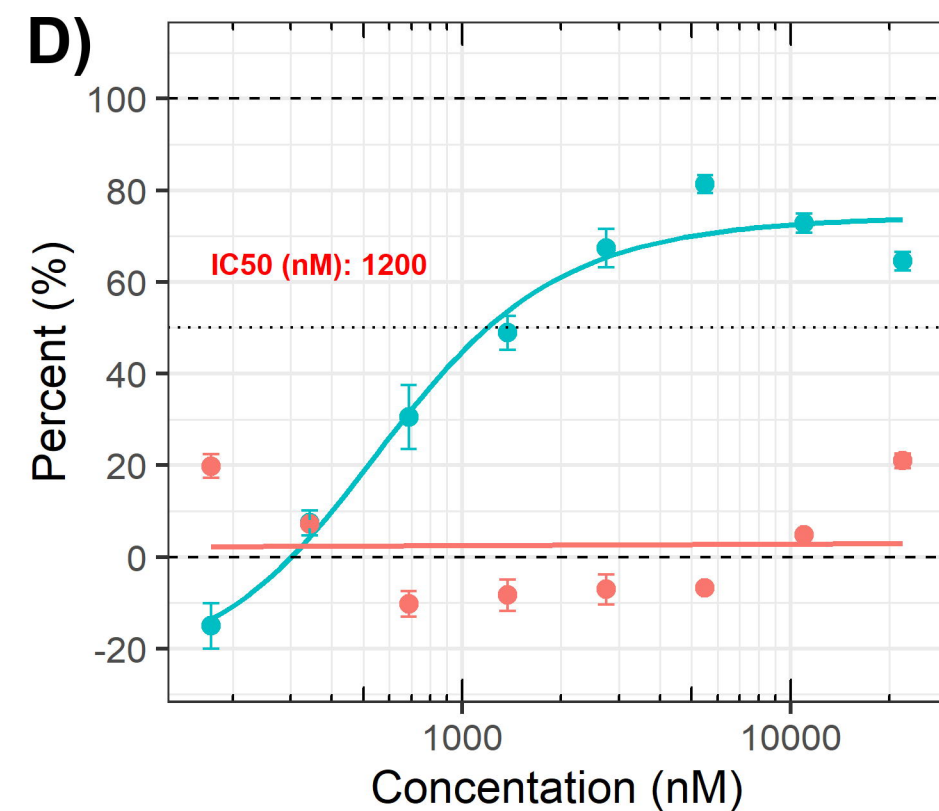
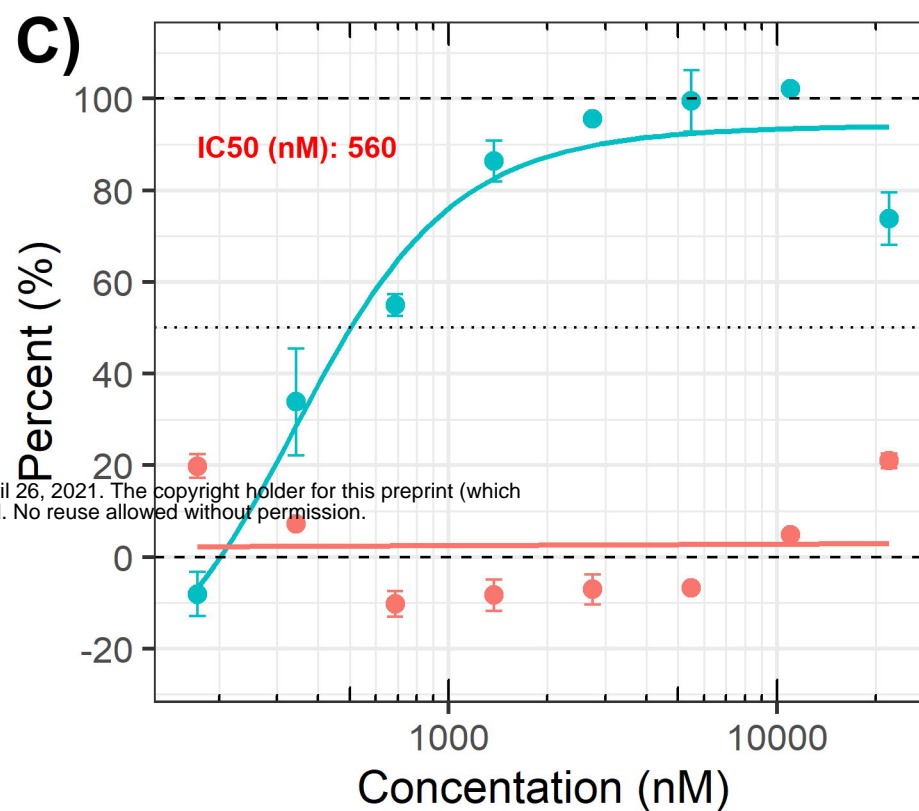
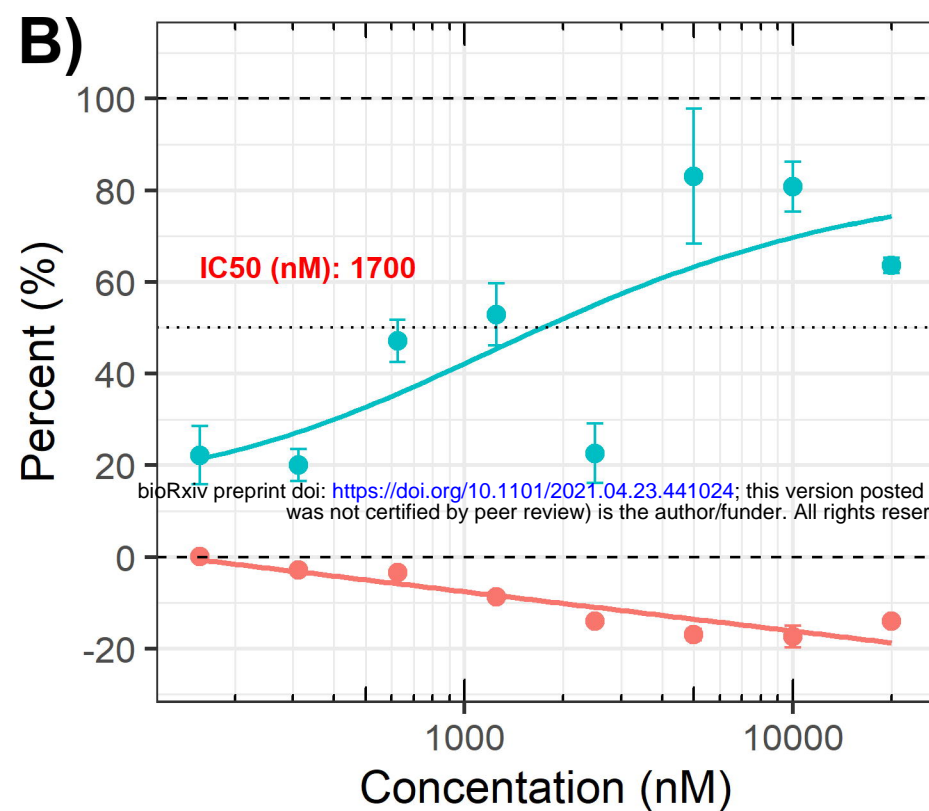


Test



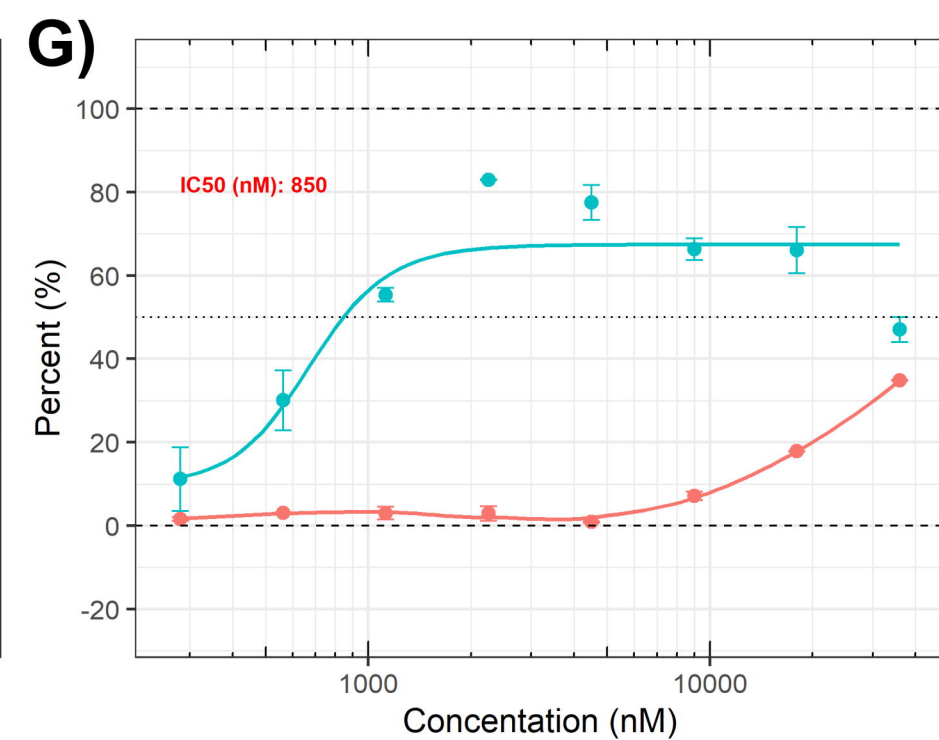
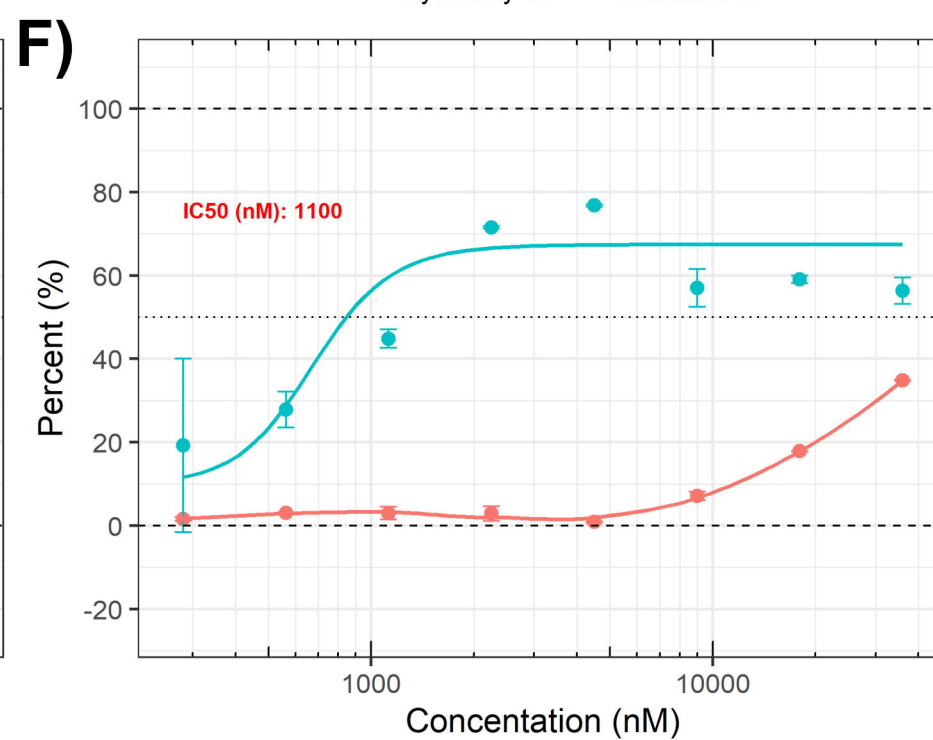
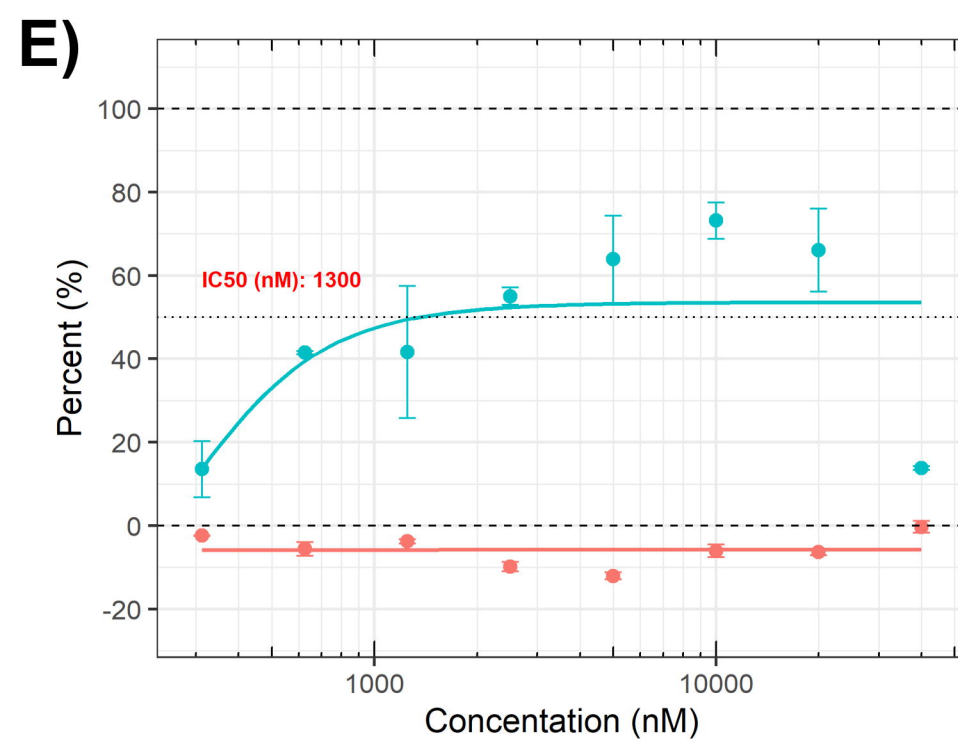
anti-miR-2392 FASTmer Treatment

Cytotoxicity % Inhibition %

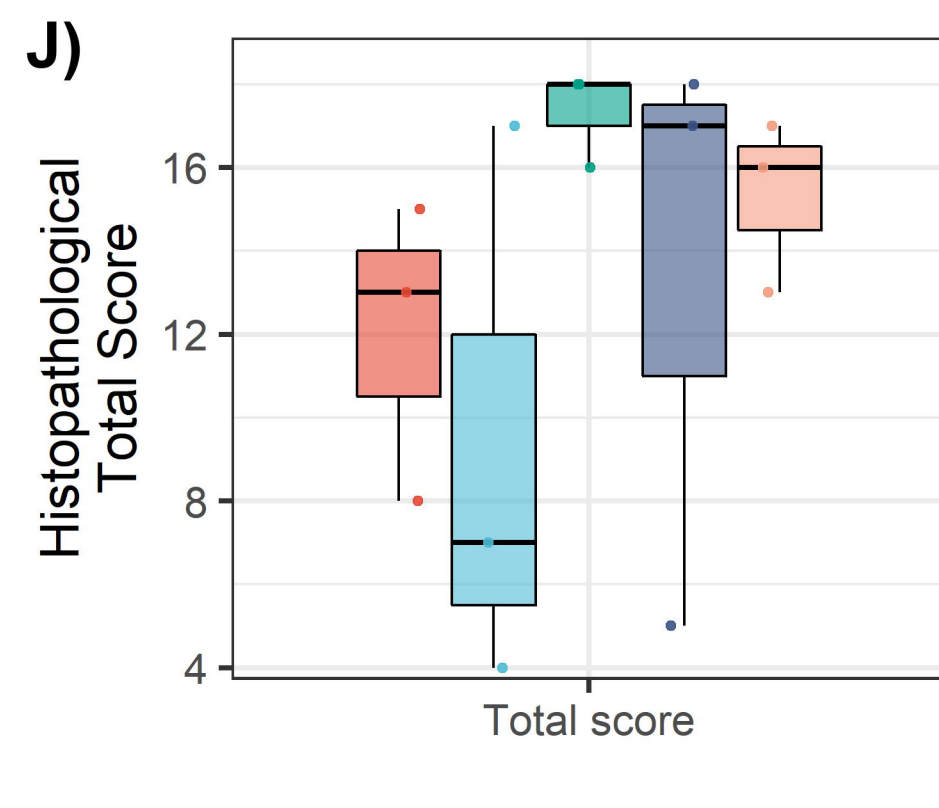
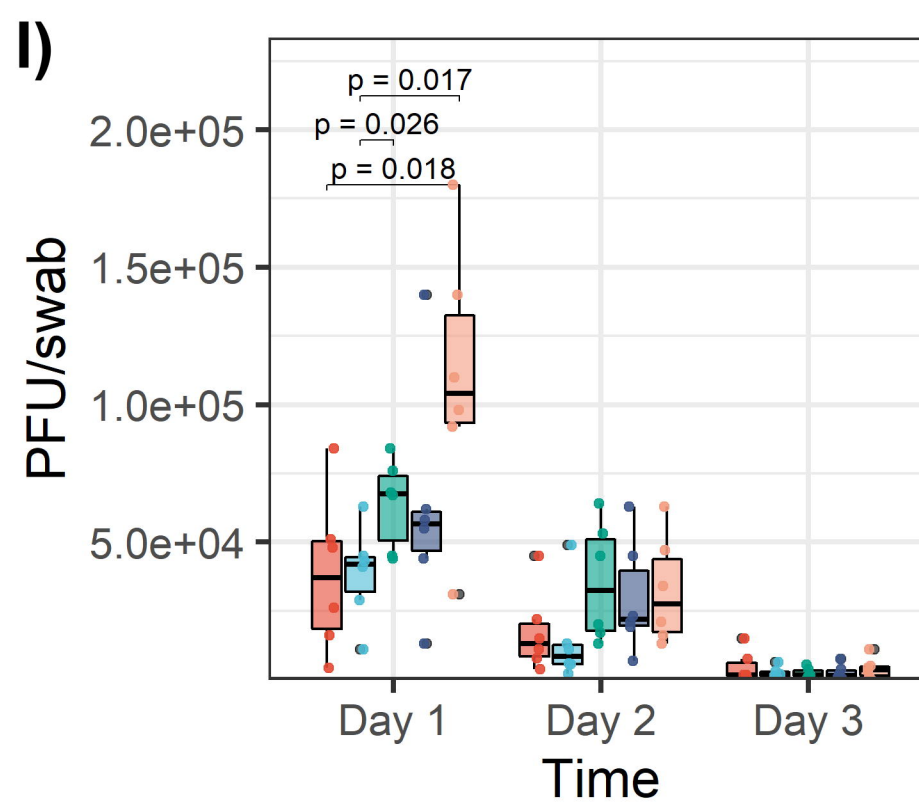
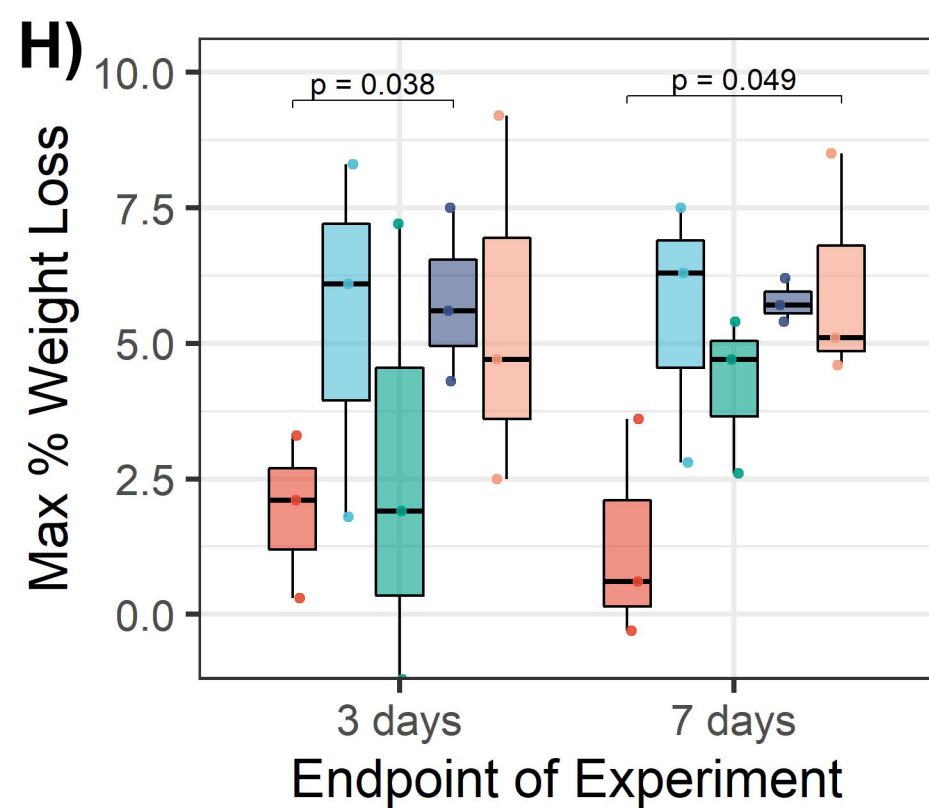


Nonsense FASTmer Treatment in Human (A549) Cells

Cytotoxicity % Inhibition %

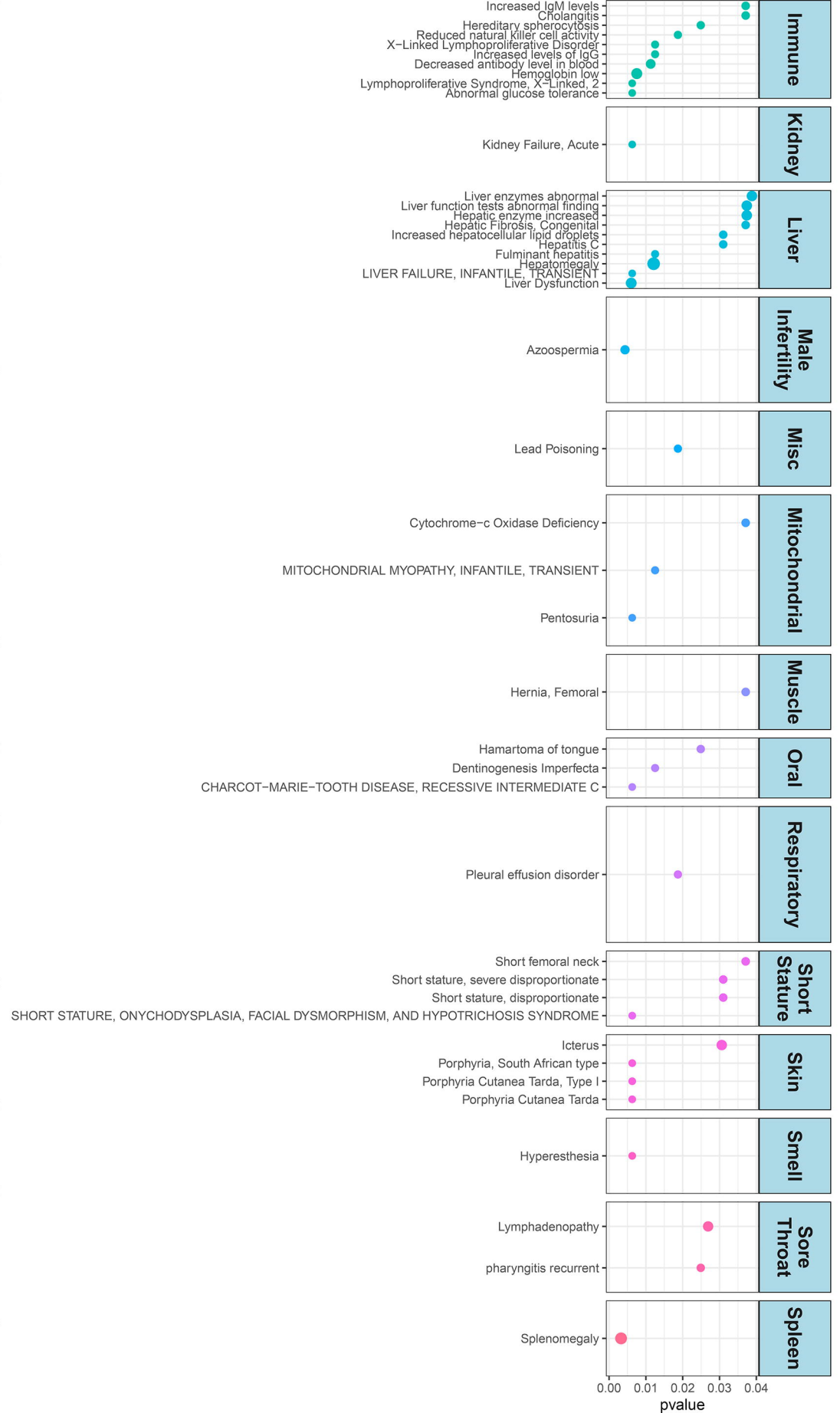
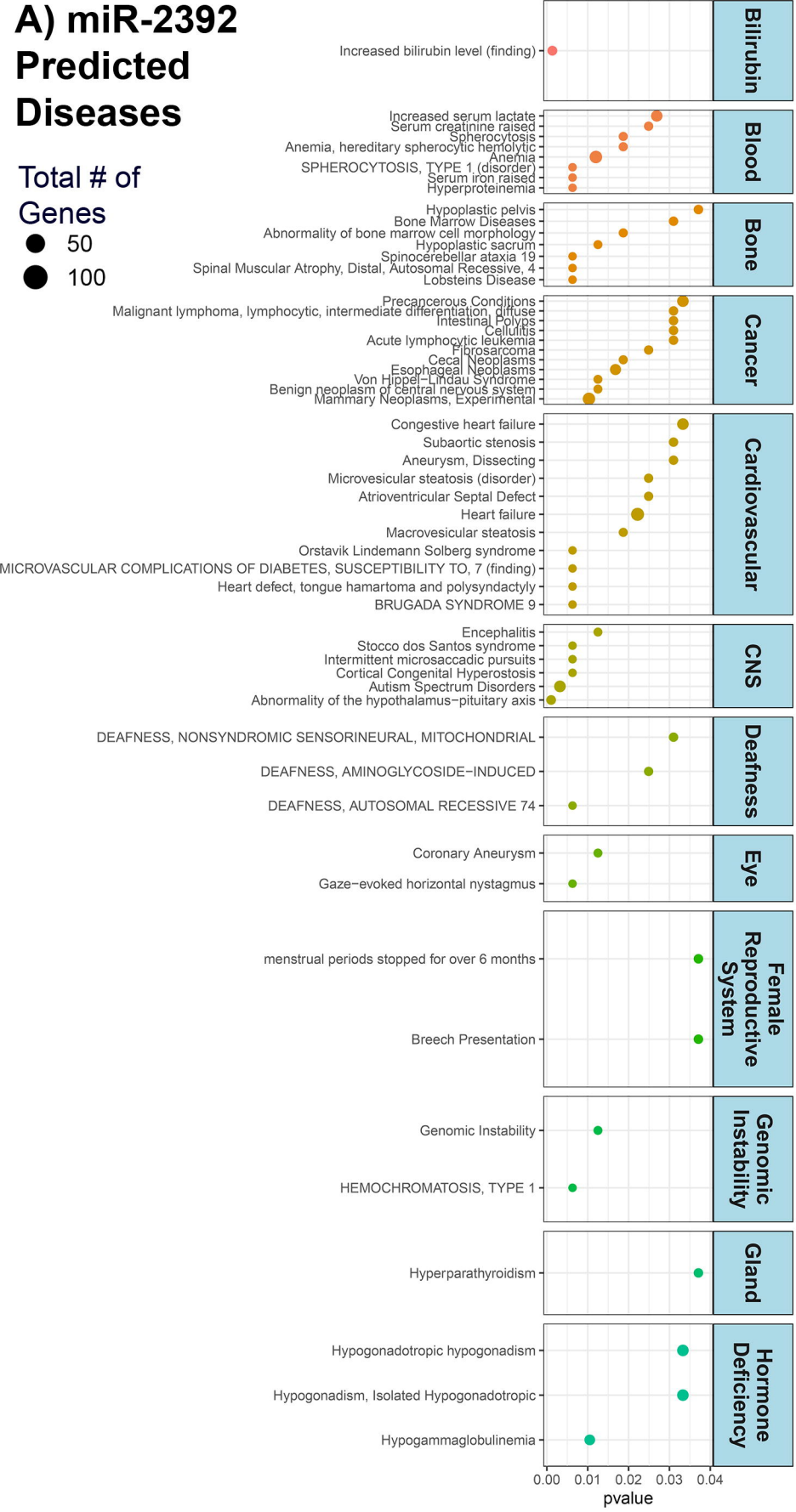


Treatment IN Day -1 IN Days -1, +1 IP Day -1 IP Days -1, +1 PBS IN Days -1, +1

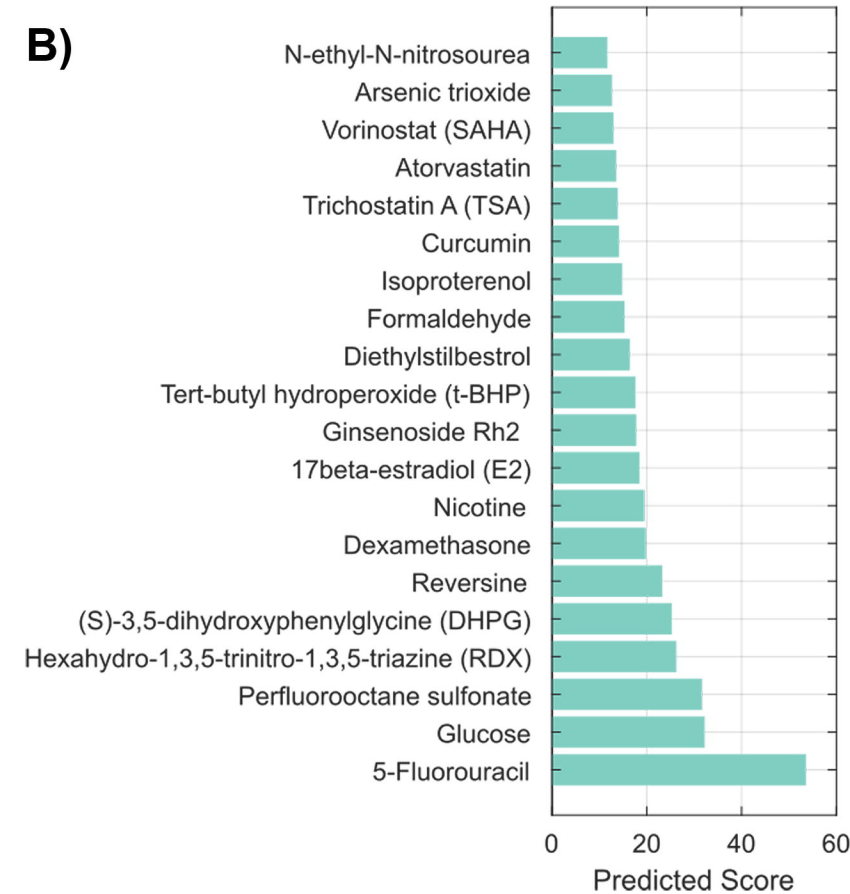


A) miR-2392 Predicted Diseases

Total # of Genes
 ● 50
 ● 100



B)



C)

