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Maternal gut microbiota *Bifidobacterium* promotes placental morphogenesis, nutrient transport and fetal growth in mice

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Abstract

The gut microbiota plays a central role in regulating host metabolism. While substantial progress has been made in discerning how the microbiota influences host functions post birth and beyond, little is known about how key members of the maternal gut microbiota can influence feto-placental growth. Notably, in pregnant women, *Bifidobacterium* represents a key beneficial microbiota genus, with levels observed to increase across pregnancy. Here, using germ-free and specific-pathogen-free mice, we demonstrate that the bacterium *Bifidobacterium breve* UCC2003 modulates maternal body adaptations, placental structure and nutrient transporter capacity, with implications for fetal metabolism and growth. Maternal and placental metabolome were affected by maternal gut microbiota (*i.e.* acetate, formate and carnitine). Histological analysis of the placenta confirmed that *Bifidobacterium* modifies placental structure via changes in *Igf2P0, Dlk1, Mapk1* and *Mapk14* expression. Additionally, *B. breve* UCC2003*,* acting through *Slc2a1* and *Fatp1-4* transporters, was shown to restore fetal glycaemia and fetal growth in association with changes in the fetal hepatic transcriptome. Our work emphasizes the importance of the maternal gut microbiota on feto-placental development and sets a foundation for future research towards the use of probiotics during pregnancy.

Introduction

All nutrients and metabolites required for feto-placental growth are provided by the mother, which in turn is thought to be influenced by the maternal gut microbiota through breakdown of complex dietary components [1]. During gestation, liberated metabolites may be used by the placenta for morphogenesis, and transported across the placenta for use by the fetus for growth and development [2, 3]. This is highly important across gestation, particularly at later stages, when fetal growth is maximal. Notably, there are also alterations in the maternal microbiota throughout pregnancy with levels of the bacterial genus *Bifidobacterium* rising from trimester 1 onwards [4–6]. Failure of the mother to provide nutrients and metabolites to the fetus can result in pregnancy complications including small for gestational age, fetal loss and stillbirth. However, the contribution of the maternal gut microbiota in determining fetal outcomes is largely unexplored. Knowledge in this area would be highly valuable for developing treatments to improve fetal growth, with benefits for population health.

Studies performed with germ free (GF) mice have identified that the microbiota is a key regulator for adequate development, early immune education and metabolism [7–11]. However, little is known about how maternal gut microbiota influences feto-placental growth and placental structure and function. Here, we hypothesized that the maternal gut microbiota, and specific microbiota members, regulate fetal growth by modulating placental development and nutrient supply. We tested this hypothesis by comparing conceptus growth across a range of microbiome complexity; using conventional specific-pathogen-free (SPF) mice as a model for standard microbial colonization, and as a base line to define correct feto-placental growth [11]; GF mice which represent a completely clean and naïve microbiome system; and a mono-colonized maternal GF model – GF mice colonized with *Bifidobacterium breve* UCC2003 (group referred throughout the manuscript as BIF) [12]. *Bifidobacterium*, including *B. breve* UCC2003, is known to beneficially modulate the wider gut microbiota and host responses [13–15]. It is defined as a probiotic "live microorganisms, which when ingested or locally applied in sufficient numbers confer one or more specified demonstrated health benefits for the host" (FAO/WHO; [16]). Therefore, *B. breve* may represent a suitable option for treating pregnancy complications by exerting metabolic effects on maternal physiology and associated feto-placental growth. Indeed, *B. breve* induced changes in placental morphogenesis and the abundance of placental glucose and lipid transporters, which were associated with improvements in growth and metabolism of the fetus.

Materials and Methods

***Bifidobacterium breve* UCC2003/pCheMC**

B. breve UCC2003/pCheMC was generated by introducing the plasmid pCheMC to electrocompetent *B. breve* UCC2003 as described previously to allow antibiotic tagging of *B. breve* for subsequent culture studies [17]. In brief, *B. breve* UCC2003 was grown until mid-log phase, chilled on ice and washed twice with ice cold sucrose citrate buffer (1mM citrate, 0.5M sucrose, pH5.8) and then electroporation of cells was carried out under the following conditions; 25MF, 200Ohms, 2KV. Transformed cells were incubated for 2 hours in Reinforced Clostridial Medium (RCM) at 37°C in a controlled anaerobic chamber then plated [18] on RCM agar plates with selective antibiotics. Colonies were sub-cultured 3 times on RCM agar plates with selective antibiotics. Antibiotics were used at the following final concentrations erythromycin 2µg/mL.

Lyophilised *B breve*

B. breve was grown in De Man, Rogosa and Sharpe agar (MRS) under anaerobic conditions overnight. The bacterial cell pellet was resuspended in 10% milk powder and lyophilised in 200ml quantities. Lyophilised *B. breve* was reconstituted with 500µl PBS. Concentration of *B. breve* was 10^{10}CFU/ml. All batches were tested for contamination upon reconstitution on Luria-Bertani (LB) and Brain-Heart Infusion (BHI) plates under anaerobic and aerobic conditions at 37°C. No contamination of *B. breve* was detected.

Mice

All mouse experiments were performed under the UK Regulation of Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act of 1986. The project license PDADA1B0C under which these studies were carried out was approved by the UK Home Office and the UEA Ethical Review Committee. All mice were housed in the Disease Modelling Unit at the University of East Anglia, UK. Animals were housed in a 12:12 hour light/dark, temperature-controlled room and allowed food and water *ad libitum* (food/water intake was not recorded). Female Germ Free C57BL/6J (GF) and Specific Pathogen Free (SPF) mice aged 6-8 weeks were used for the study. GF mice were bred in germ free isolators (2 females to 1 male) and on gestational day (GD) GD9.5, pregnant mice (confirmed by weight gain) were removed from the GF isolator and transferred to individually ventilated cages. The sterility of these cages was previously tested and found to be suitable for housing GF mice for 1 week. Sterile water was changed every 2 days. We assessed responses at 2 gestational phases – the majority of studies were carried out at GD16.5, whilst the RNASeq studies utilized fetal livers harvested at GD18.5. A total of 6 SPF mice were used for GD16.5 assessments (no SPF mice were studied on GD18.5). For the GF group a total of 5 (GD16.5) and 3 (GD18.5) dams were used. For the BIF mice, a total of 6 (GD16.5) and 4 (GD18.5) dams were used.

***B. breve* colonisation levels**

Mice were given 100µL of reconstituted lyophilised *B. breve* UCC2003 by oral gavage (containing 10^{10} CFU/mL) at GD10, GD12 and GD14 or 100µL vehicle control (PBS, 4 % skimmed milk powder), with this dosing regimen reflecting a more realistic time frame for women who are more likely to take probiotics once their pregnancy is confirmed. At GD16.5 and GD18.5, mice were sacrificed by cervical dislocation and samples collected for molecular and histological analysis. The experimental design can be found in Figure 1A.

Faecal samples were checked for contamination and *B. breve* colonization at GD12 and GD14 and GD16. Briefly, faecal samples from GF and BIF mice were diluted in 500 µL of PBS and agitated for 30 mins at 4˚C on an Eppendorf MixMate 5353 Digital Mixer Plate Shaker. The faecal solution was passed through a 0.45µm syringe filter. Faecal solution was diluted 1 in 100 and 20 µL was added to a De Man, Rogosa and Sharpe agar plate with erythromycin and incubated for 48 hours in an anaerobic chamber at 37˚C. Colony forming units were counted using a click counter. In SPF animals housed in the same animal facility we have previously shown that *Bifidobacterium* represents ~1% of the total gut microbiota [19].

Blood hormones and circulating metabolites

Maternal blood was obtained by cardiac exsanguination immediately after cervical dislocation. Blood

133 was centrifuged and serum collected and stored at -80ºC until further analysis. Blood glucose and
134 serum concentrations of leptin, insulin, triglycerides, cholesterol, and free fatty acids were determined
135 as previously reported [20]. Fetal blood glucose levels were measured with a handheld glucometer
136 (One Touch Ultra; LifeScan) immediately after decapitation of the fetus (fetuses were selected at
137 random).
138
139 **Placental histology**
140 Placentas were cut in half and fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde overnight at 4ºC. Samples were washed 3
141 times with PBS for 15 minutes each and storage in 70% ethanol until embedding in wax. Embedded
142 placentas were cut at 5µm thickness and stained with haematoxylin and eosin for gross morphology.
143 Placental layer volume densities (labyrinth zone, junctional zone and decidua) were calculated using
144 point counting and the Computer Assisted Stereological Toolbox (CAST v2.0) and converted to
145 estimated volumes by multiplying by the weight of the placenta. For analysis of labyrinth components,
146 sections were stained with lectin for identification of fetal endothelial vessels and with cytokeratin for
147 trophoblasts. Further details of the double-labelling immunohistochemistry can be found elsewhere
148 [21]. Structural analysis of the labyrinth was performed as previously described [22–24]. Briefly, fetal
149 capillaries, maternal blood spaces and trophoblast volume densities were calculated with a point
150 counting system in 16 random fields and their densities were then multiplied by the estimated volume
151 of the labyrinth zone to obtain the estimated component volume. To estimate the surface density of
152 the maternal-facing and fetal-facing interhaemal membranes, we recorded the number of intersection
153 points along cycloid arcs in a total 20 random fields of view. Both interhaemal membrane surfaces
154 were converted to absolute surface areas and the total surface area for exchange calculated by
155 averaging the two absolute surface areas. Fetal capillary length densities were obtained using counting
156 frames with two contiguous forbidden lines [24] and then converted to absolute capillary length by
157 multiplying by the volume of labyrinth zone. Feta; capillary diameter was estimated using the equation;
158 $d=2(\text{mean area}/\pi)^{1/2}$. The interhaemal membrane barrier thickness was determined using orthogonal
159 intercepts and measuring the shortest distance between fetal capillaries and the closest maternal
160 blood spaces at random starting locations (at least 99) within the labyrinth zone [24].
161
162 For the analysis of placental glycogen, sections were stained with Periodic acid–Schiff (Sigma-Aldrich)
163 previous incubation with 0.5% periodic acid (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Sections were counterstained
164 with Fast-green (Sigma-Aldrich) and digitalized with the nanozoomer scanner (Hamamatsu). Analysis of
165 placental glycogen accumulation was performed with Image J and conducted blinded to experimental
166 groups. TUNEL staining for placental cell death was performed using the TUNEL Assay Kit - HRP-DAB
167 (Abcam, ab206386) following manufacturer instructions except for the counterstaining which was
168 substituted for Nuclear Fast Red (Vector). Sections were digitalized using a nanozoomer scanner
169 (Hamamatsu) and the amount of apoptosis in the labyrinth zone was calculated in 5 random areas (x20
170 magnification) and analysed by Image J software.
171
172 **Western blotting**
173 Protein extraction was performed with RIPA buffer as described previously [25]. Lysates were
174 separated by SDS-PAGE and incubated with antibodies against p-MAPK (Thr202/Tyr204) (Cell
175 Signalling, 4370; 1/1000), t-MAPK 44/42 (Cell Signalling, 4695; 1/1000), DLK-1 antibody (Abcam,
176 ab21682; 1/1000), p-P38MAPK (Cell Signalling, 4511; 1/1000) and t-P38MAPK (Cell Signalling, 8690;

1/1000). Reactive bands were detected by chemiluminescence (Thermo Scientific, Scientific SuperSignal West Femto) and quantified by Image J software. Proteins were normalized to Ponceau S Staining [26].

RNA extraction and qPCR

Extraction of RNA from micro-dissected placental labyrinth zones was performed with RNeasy Plus Mini Kit (Qiagen) and reverse transcribed using the High Capacity cDNA RT Kit minus RT inhibitor (Applied Biosystems) according to manufacturer's instructions. Samples were analysed using MESA Blue SYBR (Eurogentec) and primers (See Table S1) were synthesized by Sigma-Aldrich. The expression of each gene was normalized to the geometric mean expression of two reference genes *Hprt* and *Ubc*, which remained stably expressed across the groups. Analysis was performed using the 2-ΔΔCt method [27].

Sequence pre-processing, Differential Gene Expression (DGE) analysis and Functional enrichment analysis

Fetal liver RNA on GD18.5 was extracted using the RNeasy Plus Mini Kit (Qiagen). Purified RNA was quantified, and quality controlled using RNA 6000 Nano kit on a 2100 Bioanalyser (Agilent). Only samples with RIN values above 8 were sequenced. RNA sequencing was performed at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute (Hinxton, UK) on paired-end 75 bp inserts on an Illumina HiSeq 2000 platform. Isolated RNA was processed by poly-A selection and/or Ribo-depletion. RNA sequence pre-processing and DGE analysis was performed as previously described with slight modifications [28]. Briefly, FASTQ reads were initially quality-filtered using fastp v0.20.0 with options -q 10 (sequence reads with phred quality <10 were discarded). Subsequently, sequence reads for each sample were merged (merge-paired-reads.sh) and followed by rRNA sequence filtering via SortMeRNA v2.1 based on SILVA rRNA database optimised for SortMeRNA software [29, 30]. Filtered reads were then unmerged (unmerge-paired-reads.sh) and ready for transcript quantification. Transcript mapping and quantification were then performed using Kallisto v0.44.0 [31]. *Mus musculus* (C57BL/6 mouse) cDNA sequences (GRCm38.release-98_k31) retrieved from Ensembl database were indexed with Kallisto utility *index* at default parameter and was used for following transcript mapping and abundance quantification via Kallisto utility *quant* at 100 bootstrap replicates (-b 100) [32].

RNA raw counts were subjected (Kallisto outputs) to DGE analysis, which was performed using R library *Sleuth* (v0.30.0) [33]. Transcripts were then mapped to individual genes using Ensembl BioMart database (GRCm38.p6) with function *sleuth_prep* and option *gene_mode = TRUE*. Genes with an absolute $\log_2$ (fold change) >1.0 and q value <0.05 (p-adjusted value; based on Wald test statistics) were considered to be differentially regulated [34]. DGE statistics were plotted via functions within package *Sleuth*. Finally, functional enrichment analysis was performed using g:Profiler webtool g:GOst based on organism *Mus Musculus* species [35]. Briefly, a list of DGEs (Ensembl IDs) was uploaded to g:GOst, then selected 'GO molecular function', 'GO biological process' and 'Reactome' in the 'data sources'. Significance threshold was set at 0.001 (g:SCS threshold).

Metabolite extraction, Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR) spectroscopy and metabolite quantification

Extraction of metabolites from fetal liver, placenta and maternal caecum contents were performed as previously described as a standard protocol [36]. For caecal samples, frozen materials (stored at -80°C prior to analysis) were weighed ~50mg before the addition of 600µL of faecal water phosphate buffer solution. The faecal water phosphate buffer was prepared as follows: add 0.51g $NaH_2PO_4.H_2O$ and 2.82g K_2HPO_4 to 200 mL D_2O (Deuterium Oxide; Merck). To this, 34.5mg TSP (Trimethylsilyl propanoic acid; used as NMR standard) and 100mg NaN_3 (Merck) were added [37]. Next, the mixture was centrifuged for 10 min at 17,000 x g before transferring the mixture to an NMR tube (Merck) for subsequent NMR analysis.

For liver and placenta samples (stored at -80°C prior to analysis), frozen fresh tissue (~20-45 mg) was placed into a 2ml sterile microcentrifuge tube pre-loaded with ~15-20 glass beads (Merck) while 200µL of ice-cold methanol (Fisher Scientific) and 42.5µL of ultra-pure cold water were added to it and vortexed. Tissue was disrupted via a tissue lyser (Qiagen) for 2 x 2 mins. 100µL of ice-cold chloroform (Merck) was then added and vortexed. 100µL of ice-cold chloroform and 100µL of ultra-pure cold water were added to the mixture, and kept on ice for 15 minutes. Liquid was then transferred into a new sterile microcentrifuge tube and centrifuged for 3 minutes at 17,000 x g. The top aqueous phase was transferred into a new microcentrifuge tube and speed-vacuumed for 30 minutes at 50°C and 30 minutes without heating prior to reconstitution with faecal water phosphate buffer solution at 600 µL. The mixture was then moved to an NMR tube (Merck) for subsequent NMR analysis. Metabolites from culture media Brain Heart Infusion (BHI; Oxoid) and spent media (BHI cultured with *B. breve* UCC2003 for 48 h) were extracted as follows: 400µL of medium was transferred into a sterile microcentrifuge tube with the addition of 200µL faecal phosphate buffer and mixed well. The mixture was then moved to an NMR tube (Merck) for further NMR analysis.

Samples in NMR tubes were subsequently subjected to NMR spectroscopy. The ^{1}H NMR spectra were recorded at 600 MHz on a Bruker AVANCE spectrometer (Bruker BioSpin GmbH, Germany) running Topspin 2.0 software. The metabolites were then quantified using the software Chenomx® NMR Suite 7.0™.

Statistical analysis

All statistical analysis and sample size are shown in each figure/table and in the corresponding figure/table legends. Only samples from viable fetuses were analysed. No statistical analysis was used to pre-determine sample size and samples were assigned code numbers and, were possible, analysis was performed in a blinded fashion. Statistical calculations were performed using the GraphPad Prism software (GraphPad v9, San Diego, CA), SAS/STAT 9.0 (Statistical System Institute Inc. Cary, NC, USA) and RStudio Version 1.4.1106 (RStudio Boston, MA) with R Version 4.0.3 (Vienna, Austria). Data reported as mean±SEM. Morphometric parameters of mother, litter size and western blot data were analysed by one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey post hoc test. Feto-placental weights, placental stereological measurements and placental Lz gene expression levels were analysed with a general linear mixed model, taking into account viable litter size as a covariate and taking each fetus as a repeated measure of the mother. In this statistical analysis, fetuses and placentas per litter are nested within litters[38]. Identification of outliers was performed with ROUT Method. For metabolomics, differences between individual metabolites between the three groups were tested with a Kruskal-Wallis test using the kruskal.test function with correction for multiple comparisons applied using the

264 Benjamini & Hochberg false discovery rate method using the p.adjust function. Pairwise comparisons
265 between the three groups were carried out with a Dunn's test on individual metabolites significantly
266 different after correction for multiple comparisons using the dunnTest function in the FSA package. The
267 level of significance for all statistical tests used in this study was set at $P<0.05$. All figures in the
268 manuscript show individual values (raw data). However, P values and mean±SEM within the graphs
269 analysed by the general linear mixed model were corrected for repeated measures. Graphs containing
270 the individual dots and graphs with corrected mean±SEM were generated with Graphpad and merged
271 with Adobe Illustrator.
272
273 **Results**
274 ***Germ-free mice treated with B. breve have altered body composition and caecum metabolic profile***
275 To assess whether maternal microbiota can influence feto-placental growth, GF mice were treated
276 orally with *B. breve* UCC2003 from day 10 of gestation (treatment on days 10, 12 and 14; i.e. BIF
277 group), and compared to GF and SPF dams (for experimental overview see Figure 1A). Timing and
278 dosing were based on the fact that levels of *Bifidobacterium* rise throughout pregnancy (5)
279 (colonization levels during pregnancy can be found in Figure S1). Previous work has indicated three
280 consecutive doses of *B. breve* UCC2003 facilitates stable gut colonization, with the advantage of also
281 avoiding repeated handling of the mice, which may induce spontaneous abortions [28, 39]. In addition,
282 from a translational point of view, we also wanted to correlate our animal model with potential future
283 supplementation studies in women at the point pregnancy is confirmed.
284
285 Maternal body composition differed between groups with GF and BIF mice showing increased digestive
286 tract weight and lower pancreas mass compared to SPF mice. GF and BIF mice had similar circulating
287 concentrations of glucose and insulin to SPF mice (Table 1). Compared to SPF mice, treatment with *B.*
288 *breve* reduced maternal gonadal fat depot, liver, and spleen weights in BIF mice. No differences were
289 observed in the circulating concentrations of leptin, cholesterol, triglycerides, or free fatty acids in
290 maternal serum (Table 1).
291
292 Metabolomics analysis in maternal caecum samples indicated that the concentration of 13 out of 81
293 metabolites were significantly altered (Table 1 and Table S2). Acetate was influenced by *B. breve* (Table
294 1), with BIF dams having intermediate concentrations compared to SPF and GF mice (the low levels of
295 acetate detectable in GF mice, most likely originated from the diet and/or are host-derived). These
296 findings suggest that acetate producing *B. breve* and the wider gut microbiota may exert selective
297 effects on maternal metabolic (gonadal fat depot and liver) and immune organs (spleen).
298
299 ***Maternal gut microbiota and B. breve regulate fetal growth by controlling fetal glycaemia and***
300 ***hepatic transcriptome***
301 The three experimental groups had similar numbers of viable fetuses per litter, although GF and BIF
302 groups showed a higher variability compared to the SPF group (Figure 1B). Compared to SPF and BIF
303 mice, GF fetuses were growth restricted, hypoglycaemic and had reduced liver weight, but had
304 preserved brain size (Figure 1C-E). As the liver is a key organ for glucose storage and production and
305 fetuses from BIF mice had heavier livers and improved glycaemia, we next determined if there were
306 changes in the fetal hepatic transcriptome (livers were collected from a small cohort of mice on
307 GD18.5, when fetal liver function is particularly active prior to term. Indeed, mouse fetal hepatocytes

are mature from GD18.5, when they present a similar gene expression pattern to those in the postnatal liver [40]). A total of 602 genes were differentially expressed, with 94 significantly up-regulated and 508 down-regulated genes in BIF group, when compared to GF group (Figure 1F-H). Functional enrichment analysis indicated that pathways involved in haemoglobin and oxygen transport-binding were significantly upregulated in the fetal livers of BIF mice (Figure 1I and Table S3). In contrast, many metabolic pathways were downregulated in response to *B. breve* administration, including carboxylic acid and lipid metabolic processes, steroid hydroxylase activity, fatty acid metabolism and response to glucocorticoid (Figure 1H; Table S3). Therefore, maternal *B. breve* appears to exert changes in fetal hepatic function with implications for fetal growth.

Maternal gut microbiota and B. breve control placental morphogenesis

To further understand the links between the maternal gut microbiota and the regulation of fetal growth, we assessed placental structure (performed on GD16.5, when placental growth in mice is maximal [24]). When compared to SPF mice, placentas were lighter in GF and BIF mice (Figure 2A). Placental efficiency, defined as the grams of fetus produced per gram of placenta, was significantly improved in the BIF group compared to GF mice (Figure 2B). Analysis of placental compartments showed that lack of maternal gut microbiota significantly hampered growth of the placental labyrinth transport zone (Lz), without compromising the endocrine junctional zone or decidua volumes (Figure 2C). It also did not affect placental glycogen storage (Figure 2D) or the volume of the trophoblast (Figure E-F). Analysis of maternal blood spaces revealed that GF and BIF groups had reduced spaces compared to SPF mice, while the volume and the length of fetal capillaries were significantly reduced in the GF compared to SPF (Figure 2F-G). Similarly, surface area for exchange of the Lz was significantly decreased in GF compared to SPF mice (Figure 2H). The barrier between maternal and fetal blood was also determined to be thinner in BIF *versus* GF mice (Figure 2I). Lz apoptosis levels were similar between groups (Figure 2J).

To define the molecular mechanisms behind the changes in the Lz, we quantified the expression of select genes in micro-dissected Lz. The angiogenic factor *Vegf* was similarly expressed between groups (Figure 3A). However, the expression of signalling pathways involved in cell proliferation and growth, namely the MAPK pathway, was significantly altered by changes in maternal gut microbiota; *Mapk1* was shown to be increased in both GF and BIF, while *Mapk14* (also known as *p38Mapk*) was revealed to be specifically up-regulated in the Lz of BIF mice. In addition, *Dlk1* and *Igf2P0*, which are key genes implicated in metabolism and Lz formation, were significantly up-regulated in the BIF group compared to GF mice. The expression of *Akt* did not vary with group (Figure 3A). As informed by western blotting, activation of ERK was reduced in the placental Lz of GF compared to SPF mice, and this effect was reversed by BIF (Figure 3B). p38MAPK protein activity was similar between groups. DLK1 protein level was also lower in GF compared to SPF mice. However, BIF increased DLK1 protein levels when compared to both SPF and GF mice (Figure 3B). Overall, these findings suggest that the maternal gut microbiota, and *B. breve*, regulate the development of the mouse placental Lz via modulation of specific cell growth and metabolic genes/pathways.

Maternal gut microbiota and B. breve controls key placental nutrient transporters

To better understand the changes in fetal growth and glycemia between groups, we quantified the expression of selected amino acid, glucose and lipid transporters in the Lz. We found no difference in

352 the expression of system A amino acid transporters (*Slc38a1, Slc38a2, Slc38a4*) between groups (Figure
353 3C). However, the key glucose transporter *Slc2a1* was up-regulated in the Lz of BIF mice compared to
354 GF mice (*Slc2a3* mRNA levels were similar between groups; Figure 3C). Fatty acid transporters were
355 also altered, with increased levels of *Fatp1* in the GF group compared to SPF and BIF, while *Fatp4* was
356 increased in the BIF group compared to the GF (Figure 3D; *Cd36* and *Fatp3,6* expression levels were
357 unaltered). Collectively, these data suggest that maternal gut microbiota, and *B. breve*, could regulate
358 fetal growth by inducing changes in the expression of key nutrient transporters within the placenta.
359
360 ***Differences in placental labyrinth growth are linked to an altered placental metabolome***
361 To gain further mechanistic understanding of the changes observed in the placental Lz and fetal liver,
362 we analysed >80 metabolites at GD16.5 (Figure 4 and Table S2). We found 5 metabolites significantly
363 altered in the placental Lz (Figure 4). 2-Aminoadipate in the Lz was very low in GF/BIF groups as well as
364 in fetal livers (Figure 4A). Treatment with *B. breve* significantly reduced the concentrations of
365 acetylcarnitine and carnitine in Lz tissue compared to SPF placentas, but not in fetal livers (Figure 4B-
366 C). Levels of formate in placental Lz were significantly elevated in both GF and BIF compared to SPF
367 mice (Figure 4D), with a similar trend (although not significant) in fetal liver samples. Acetate was also
368 altered in the Lz (Figure 4E), with concentrations significantly lower in the SPF compared to the GF
369 group, whilst BIF samples showed intermediate levels (although these levels were much lower than
370 observed in the maternal caecum). Similar to formate, concentrations of acetate in fetal liver followed
371 similar directions to the Lz, yet were not statistically different between groups. These data suggest that
372 maternal gut microbiota, and *B. breve*, regulate the fetal and placental growth via modulation of the
373 placental Lz metabolome.
374
375 **Discussion**
376 In this study, we demonstrate that the maternal gut microbiota and the microbiota member *B. breve*
377 regulate feto-placental growth. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first demonstration of a
378 maternal gut bacterium remotely controlling placental structure and nutrient transporters, with
379 important implications for fetal glycaemia and fetal growth. We observed that the effects of
380 *Bifidobacterium* are partially mediated by altered metabolites in maternal caecum and in placental Lz
381 tissue, with alterations in the expression of key genes in the placental Lz and fetal liver.
382
383 *Bifidobacterium* is the dominant microbiota member in vaginally delivered, breast-fed infants, with
384 certain species and strains known to stimulate and aid the maturation of the immune system [41]. *B.*
385 *breve* UCC2003 also regulates responses at the gut barrier, inducing homeostatic epithelial cell
386 programming, and protecting against inflammatory insults [28, 42]. Importantly, pregnancy is
387 accompanied by increasing *Bifidobacterium* abundance in the gut of women and mice [5] and
388 alterations in the abundance of *Bifidobacterium* are linked to the development of serious pregnancy
389 complications like preeclampsia [43]. Recently, it has been demonstrated that the maternal gut
390 microbiota regulate embryonic organ growth by promoting fetal neurodevelopment [44]. Our study
391 shows that maternal gut microbiota induces changes in fetal organogenesis and that *B. breve*
392 supplementation restored fetal glycaemia and liver weight. In this regard, fetal brain weight was
393 unaltered in the three experimental groups, whilst liver mass was drastically reduced only in the GF
394 group. Together, these results suggest that untreated GF fetuses prioritize the growth of the brain at
395 expense of the liver. This fetal strategy, known as the 'brain sparing effect', is a protective mechanism

396 to preserve oxygenation and nutrient delivery to the brain in situations of placental insufficiency [45–
397 48]. Our RNAseq analysis shows an upregulation of genes involved in oxygen transport and
398 haemoglobin binding, and downregulation of metabolic pathways like steroid hydroxylase activity,
399 carboxylic acid binding or fatty acid metabolism in the BIF group. These data therefore suggest that
400 fetal defenses against growth retardation were better in the BIF group compared to the GF group, and
401 that the downregulation of the metabolic pathways could be due to the fact that BIF fetuses already
402 achieved their hepatocyte maturation or their maximum liver growth potential earlier than the GF
403 group. In fact, *B. breve* supplementation restored fetal glycaemia and weight, achieving similar values
404 to that seen for SPF fetuses.
405
406 Previous *in vivo* studies show different strains of *Bifidobacterium* (including *B. breve*) modulate glucose
407 handling [49], with this genus consistently associated with potential protection against human
408 metabolic disorders e.g. type 2 diabetes [50, 51]. Our observations of reduced maternal gonadal fat
409 mass and maternal liver weight in *B. breve*-treated dams compared to SPF dams, suggest that
410 *Bifidobacterium,* or *B. breve* metabolites, could affect responses of key organs in the mother, and
411 subsequently impact fetal resource allocation. *B. breve* UCC2003 appeared to induce changes in the
412 metabolite milieu, including carnitine and acetate in the maternal caecum and/or placenta, which
413 could be determinant for the effects observed on fetal growth. Carnitine is well-known for mediating
414 the transport of fatty acids into mitochondrial matrix for fatty acid β-oxidation and BIF placentas had
415 lower concentrations of acetylcarnitine and carnitine compared to SPF. These results suggest a
416 potential greater reliance on these compounds for energy production, or enhanced transfer of these
417 fatty acids to the fetus [52]. On the other hand, acetate is a major bifidobacterial fermentation by-
418 product, which directly mediates glucose homeostasis through the free fatty acid receptor 2 [53] and
419 epithelial cell responses. Previous work in adult mice suggests that elevation of gut acetate levels due
420 to *Bifidobacterium* treatment plays a key role in regulating glucose handling systemically and reduces
421 visceral fat accumulation [54]. Acetate also exerts systemic metabolic [55, 56] and immunological
422 effects [57]. More generally, microbial-derived short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) modulate multiple host
423 physiological systems and during pregnancy are associated with maternal gestational weight, neonatal
424 length and body weight, and protection against allergic airway disease in the developing fetus [58, 59].
425 Acetate crosses the placenta [59], so in our model, the elevated maternal *B. breve*-derived acetate may
426 exert effects on feto-placental growth in three potential ways. Firstly, higher maternal caecum acetate
427 concentrations in SPF and *B. breve* supplemented dams vs. GF dams could indicate maternal effects,
428 through interactions within the maternal gut mucosa and subsequent impact on maternal organs (liver,
429 adipose and spleen). Secondly, effects on the placenta, through the potential use of acetate for cellular
430 metabolism, growth and function. Finally, effects on fetal metabolism following transport of acetate
431 across the placenta to the fetus. Compared to the maternal caecum, levels of acetate were relatively
432 low in the placental Lz and fetal liver (for all 3 groups). This suggests that *B. breve* (and SPF microbiota-
433 derived acetate) may be used to support anabolic processes *in utero* (hence the very low levels
434 detected). Moreover, the observed modulation of immune-associated pathways in the fetal liver,
435 including those associated with G protein-coupled receptor signalling (e.g. *Dusp9*), also indicates a role
436 for direct acetate-associated responses [60]. Further work is required to fully understand the
437 mechanisms behind the differences observed in maternal organs between the SPF and BIF groups
438 (liver, adipose and spleen) and how these changes impact on materno-fetal resource allocation. Thus,
439 future work should assess the ontogeny of these changes and incorporate an additional pregnant SPF

group treated with *B. breve* to fully understand the chemical, endocrine and metabolic interactions occurring between *B. breve,* maternal organs (gut, liver, adipose and spleen) and fetal metabolism.

Administration of *B. breve* significantly reduced the interhaemal membrane barrier thickness of the placenta (compared to GF group), which may facilitate exchange of nutrients and gases. Previous work has shown that the barrier thickness is regulated by *Igf2P0*, as *Igf2P0*/knockout mice have increased thickness of the exchange barrier and reduced passive permeability of the placentas [61]. In our case, *Igf2P0* was significantly elevated in the BIF group compared to the SPF and GF groups and although *in vivo* functional assays evaluating the passive and active transport of solutes are required to verify the implications of this effect on fetal nutrient allocation (e.g. performing unidirectional maternal–fetal transfer assays using ^{51}Cr-EDTA or glucose and amino acid analogues, ^{3}H-MeG or ^{14}C-MeAIB [23, 61, 62]), this result explains, in part, the improvement in fetal weight observed in the BIF group. Moreover, IGFs have been implicated in the regulation of glucose transporters in a variety of organs by utilizing signalling pathways like PI3K/AKT and MAPK [63], and among the different nutrient transporters evaluated, *Slc2a1* mRNA levels were significantly elevated in the BIF group compared to GF group. The other two transporters that were altered, *Fatp1* and *Fatp4*, changed in opposite directions suggesting that *B. breve* could modulate the expression of these two transporters in different ways depending on the direction and magnitude of fatty acid flux at the placental Lz [64, 65]. The divergent expression of *Fatp1* and *Fatp4* in the BIF compared to GF group may also be linked to intracellular carnitine utilization, as *Fatp1* can interact with carnitine palmitoyltransferase 1 to promote fatty acid transport into mitochondria [66].

Maternal gut microbiota affected placental structure and its vascular bed, which is required for adequate fetal growth [23]. The mechanisms governing these structural changes could be partially mediated by changes in the expression *Igf2P0* and *Dlk1* (two important imprinted genes in placental physiology [67]), and via MAPK upregulation. In addition to the changes above described for barrier thickness, deletion of *Igf2P0* results in feto-placental growth restriction in association with reduced placental surface area for exchange and fetal capillary volume (reviewed by [68]); parameters that were significantly affected in the SPF vs GF groups, and partially restored by *B breve* administration. *Dlk1,* a non-canonical ligand of the Notch signalling pathway localized to the endothelial cells of fetal capillaries in the placental Lz, regulates placental vascularisation and branching morphogenesis [69] and both, IGF2 and DLK1, can mediate cellular actions via the MAPK pathway [70–72]. We observed no differences in the mRNA levels of *Dlk1* between SPF and GF mice. However, at the protein level, DLK1 in the Lz was controlled by the maternal gut microbiota and more specifically by *B. breve*. Similarly, *Mapk1* levels were increased in both GF and BIF groups compared to the SPF, but at the protein level, ERK activity was lower in the GF but not BIF group when compared to the SPF group, suggesting once again that *B. breve* is involved in the regulation of DLK-MAPK signaling. Another important signaling pathway for embryogenesis and placental Lz angiogenesis and vascular remodeling is p38MAPK (encoded by the gene *Mapk14*) [73]. This pathway has been linked to environmental stresses and inflammatory cytokines [74]. However, p38MAPK also regulates many normal cellular processes, including proliferation and cytoskeletal organisation. We observed that exposure to *B. breve* increases the mRNA abundance of *Mapk14* and carnitine, a metabolites that was found to be altered in the Lz of the BIF group compared to the SPF group, can also promote p38MAPK signalling activation in cardiac tissue [75]. Taken together, our findings reveal that (1) maternal gut microbiota promotes fetal and

484 placental growth in mice and (2) *B. breve* UCC2003 treatment may link to the altered
485 metabolites/nutrient milieu in the mother, affecting placental nutrient transporter abundance and
486 placental barrier thickness for exchange, with effects on fetal growth and development (when
487 compared to GF).
488
489 **Limitations of the study**
490 While our study has clear strengths and strong translational implications for pregnancy complication
491 treatments, it has limitations that are important to consider as they impact on the conclusions drawn.
492 First, our study only addresses the effects of *B. breve* UCC2003 in a completely clean and naïve
493 microbiome system (GF model). This is not representative of the human gut environment, and
494 therefore future experiments could include the addition of a SPF group treated with *B. breve* UCC2003
495 and also a similar group treated with another probiotic species (e.g. *Lactobacillus acidophilus*), or a
496 combination of species. This would help to define *Bifidobacterium*-specific effects (driven by key
497 metabolites), including their efficacy, safety and potential use of probiotics during pregnancy.
498 Moreover, it could be argued that the SPF group interferes in the interpretations of the *B. breve*
499 effects. However, there is lack of fundamental knowledge on what is considered "normal or abnormal"
500 in the GF system, as very little research has been done in understanding the role of the maternal gut
501 microbiota on placental development (SPF vs GF). Therefore, the addition of the SPF group is required
502 to define a baseline for adequate feto-placental growth, and it would also be important to understand
503 how reconstitution of GF mice with SPF microbiota also modulates these responses. As previously
504 mentioned, future work should evaluate the response of pregnant SPF mice to *B. breve* UCC2003
505 supplementation (using microbial profiling [e.g. shotgun metagenomics] to follow microbiota changes),
506 as well as the efficiency of *B. breve* UCC2003 using other types of mouse models such as antibiotic-
507 treated mice. These animal models may also reduce issues with the immune naïve physiology of the GF
508 system [8]. Unsurprisingly, we did not see a full 'rescue' of placental phenotype in the monocolonised
509 GF *B. breve* (BIF) group, compared to the complex microbiota found in SPF dams. However, structural
510 and functional adaptations of these placentas exposed to *B. breve* were adequate enough to 'rescue'
511 fetal weight and fetal glycaemia. An array of gut-associated signaling and a diverse metabolite pool are
512 expected to provide more complete placental development. Indeed, other or additional
513 *Bifidobacterium* species and/or strains may be required for placental and fetal development, given
514 strain-specific host physiology responses [42, 76]. Further studies should allow the relative
515 contributions of other microbial- and *Bifidobacterium*-derived factors to be elucidated. Moreover,
516 ideally, future work should analyze fetal and placental growth each day of the supplementation period
517 and use larger cohorts of pregnant mice. It would also be valuable to assess the impact of *B. breve*
518 supplementation from prior to, and/or during the whole pregnancy.
519
520 Exploring three different compartments (i.e. mother, placenta and fetus) with respect to metabolites
521 and elucidating their role is a complex process, and makes interpretations and drawing definitive
522 conclusions difficult. Further studies using e.g. 13^{C} labeled *Bifidobacterium* or specific metabolites for
523 tracking experiments may allow more nuanced interactions to be uncovered in future work.
524 Nonetheless, this study has revealed novel roles for the gut microbiota and specifically *Bifidobacterium*
525 and provides the bases for future therapeutic strategies for treating pregnancy complications. These
526 data suggest an opportunity for *in utero* programming through maternal *Bifidobacterium* and
527 associated metabolites. Overall, although our study was performed in mice and is not representative of

528 a clinical scenario, our study highlights the importance of the maternal gut microbiota during gestation
529 and demonstrates that *B. breve* modulates maternal physiology, placental structure and nutrient
530 transporter capacity with impact on fetal glycaemia and fetal growth (Figure 5). Our findings prompt an
531 in-depth investigation into how additional members of the maternal gut microbiota impact on
532 pregnancy outcomes. These future studies are important for the design of novel therapies to combat
533 fetal growth restriction and other pregnancy complications.
534

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Author Contributions: JL-T, ZS, ANS-P, LJH designed research; JL-T, ZS, RK, GLG conducted research, JL-T, ZS, RK, MJD contributed analytic tools and performed analysis; DvS contributed reagents; JL-T, ZS, ANS-P, LJH wrote the paper with feedback from all the authors.

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Data availability

The fetal liver RNA-Seq raw sequencing data are deposited at the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) under BioProject PRJNA748000. Relevant data are within the manuscript, individual figures and its Supporting Information files. Additionally, data is available from the corresponding authors on reasonable request. Scripts for differential gene expression analysis can be accessed at GitHub, https://github.com/raymondkiu/Maternal-foetal-microbiota-paper/

Figure legends

Figure 1. Effects of maternal gut microbiome and *B. breve* supplementation during pregnancy on fetal viability, growth and hepatic transcriptome. (A) Experimental design. **(B)** Number of viable fetuses per litter (One-way ANOVA with Tukey's multiple comparison). **(C)** Fetal weight. **(D)** Circulating glucose concentrations in fetal blood. **(E)** Fetal organ weights. **(F-G)** RNA-Seq analysis of fetal liver samples obtained at GD18.5. **(F)** PCA plot and **(G)** volcano plots showing up and down-regulated differentially expressed genes (DEGs) in BIF group (compared to GF group). **(H)** Heat map of the 20 most up and down-regulated DEGs (BIF group). **(I-J)** Functional profiling (g:Profiler) on 602 DEGs. Key enriched GO terms and REACTOME pathways are shown in the figure. Fetal data were obtained on GD16.5 from: SPF (49 fetuses/6 dams), GF (33 fetuses/5 dams), BIF (34 fetuses/6 dams). Dots represent raw data for each variable assessed (individual values). However, the statistical analysis and the mean±SEM reported in the graphs were obtained with a general linear mixed model taking into account viable litter size as a covariate and taking each fetus as a repeated measure followed by Tukey multiple comparisons test (further explanations can be found in the Materials and Methods-statistical analysis section). Identification of outliers was performed with ROUT Method. RNA-seq was performed on fetal livers obtained at GD18.5 from a total of 3 GF and 4 BIF pregnant dams/litters. RNA-Seq data analysis is described in the material and methods section. (NS, not significant; *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001).

Figure 2. Effects of maternal gut microbiome and *B. breve* supplementation during pregnancy on placental structure on day 16.5 of gestation. (A) Placenta weight. **(B)** Placental efficiency determined by dividing fetal by placental mass. Scale bar= 1mm. **(C)** Placental regional analysis. **(D)** Representative staining of placental glycogen with PAS and glycogen abundance. Scale bar= 2.5mm and 250µm. **(E)** Representative image of lectin and cytokeratin staining for labyrinth zone structural quantification. Scale bar= 500µm and 50µm. **(F-I)** Stereological parameters determined in placental labyrinth zone. **(J)** Representative image of TUNEL staining for apoptosis quantification in labyrinth zone. Scale bar= 2.5mm and 100µm. All data were analyzed by general linear mixed model, taking into account litter size as a covariate and taking each fetus as a repeated measure followed by Tukey multiple comparisons test. ROUT test was used for identification of outlier values. Dots represent raw data (individual values). However, the statistical analysis and the mean±SEM reported within the graphs were obtained with the general linear mixed model (further explanations can be found in the Materials and Methods statistical analysis section). Placental weight-efficiency was obtained from: SPF (49 fetuses/6 dams), GF (33 fetuses/5 dams), BIF (34 fetuses/6 dams). Laboratorial analysis was performed with: SPF (14-15 placentas from 6 dams), GF (10 placentas from 5 dams) and BIF (9-11 placentas from 6 dams). Only placentas collected on day 16.5 of gestation were analysed. One to three placentas per litter were randomly selected and used for assessment. Placentas were analysed blind to the experimental groups. (NS, not significant; *P<0.05; ***P<0.001). Abbreviations: D (decidua), Jz (junctional zone), Lz (labyrinth zone), TB (trophoblasts), FC (fetal capillaries), MBS (maternal blood spaces).

Figure 3. Effects of maternal gut microbiome and *B. breve* supplementation during pregnancy on placental gene and protein levels on day 16.5 of gestation. (A) Gene expression levels in micro-dissected labyrinth zones. **(B)** Immunoblots and protein quantification by Western blot in micro-dissected labyrinth zones. **(C-E)** Gene expression levels in micro-dissected labyrinth zones for amino-acids, glucose and lipid transporters. Western blot data was analysed by one-way ANOVA. qPCR data were analyzed by general linear mixed model, taking into account litter size as a covariate and taking each fetus as a repeated measure followed by Tukey multiple comparisons test. ROUT test was used for identification of outlier values. Dots represent raw data (individual values). However, the statistical analysis and the mean±SEM reported within the graphs (for qPCR data) were obtained with the general linear mixed model (further explanations can be found in the Materials and Methods statistical analysis section). Gene expression analysis was performed with: SPF (13 placentas from 6 dams), GF (11 placentas from 5 dams) and BIF (14 placentas from 6 dams). Protein quantification was performed with: SPF (4 placentas from 4 dams), GF (5 placentas from 5 dams) and BIF (5 placentas from 5 dams). Only placentas collected on day 16.5 of gestation were analysed. For qPCR, one to three placentas per litter were assessed and selection of the samples was conducted at random. For protein expression analysis, 1 placenta per litter was selected. (NS, not significant; *P<0.05; **P<0.01).

Figure 4. Metabolomic profiling of placental labyrinth zone and fetal liver on day 16.5 of gestation. Data were analysed by Kruskal-Wallis test followed by multiple comparisons using the Benjamini & Hochberg false discovery rate method and Dunn's test. ROUT test was used for identification of outlier values. Different superscripts indicate significant differences between groups (a *versus* b, P<0.05). Data presented as mean±SEM. Number of litters analysed per group: SPF (8 placentas-livers from 4 dams), GF (8-7 placentas-livers from 4-5 dams), BIF (6-7 placentas-livers from 5 dams). Only tissues collected

821 at GD16.5 were analysed. Selection of the samples was conducted at random. (NS, not significant;
822 *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001).

823 **Figure 5. Summary illustration showing the most relevant results on how the maternal gut**
824 **microbiota and *B. breve* affects mother, placenta and fetus during gestation.** The effects of lacking
825 maternal gut microbiota on maternal, placental and fetal phenotype are shown in red circles (SPF vs GF
826 comparisons). Our results suggest that lacking maternal gut microbiota aside from inducing changes in
827 the maternal digestive tract, pancreas and caecum metabolites, has important implications for the
828 correct growth of the fetus and its placenta. The effects of *B. breve* administration compared to the
829 SPF and GF groups are shown in blue and red arrows, respectively. Overall, *B. breve* induces changes in
830 the maternal compartment that affect the structure, metabolome and function of the placenta in
831 association with alterations in fetal metabolism, growth and hepatic transcriptome. Abbreviations: SPF
832 (Specific-Pathogen-Free mouse); GF (Germ-Free mouse); BIF (Germ-Free mouse treated with *B. breve*
833 UCC2003); Lz (labyrinth zone); MBS (maternal blood spaces); FC (fetal capillaries); SA (surface area for
834 exchange); BT (barrier thickness); DEG (differentially expressed genes)

835 **Supplementary Figure 1. Colonization levels of *B. breve* determined in maternal faecal samples on**
836 **gestational day (GD), 12 and 14.** Analysis performed by two-ways ANOVA (****P<0.0001). Data
837 displayed as mean ± SEM. Number of dams for GF and BIF groups are 5 and 6, respectively. Assessment
838 was performed only on dams sacrificed at GD16.5.
839
840 **Table 1. Effects of maternal gut microbiome and *B. breve* administration during pregnancy on**
841 **maternal body composition, circulating metabolites and hormones in maternal serum, and**
842 **metabolites in caecum on day 16.5 of gestation.** Body composition and metabolites/hormones in
843 serum were analyzed by one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey multiple comparisons test. Metabolites in
844 maternal caecum were analysed by Kruskal-Wallis test followed by multiple comparisons using the
845 Benjamini & Hochberg false discovery rate method and Dunn's test. ROUT test was used for
846 identification of outlier values. The level of significance was set at $P<0.05$. NS: not significant. Data
847 presented as mean±SEM. The number of dams used for each group is annotated on the table and only
848 data from dams at day 16.5 of gestation were used.
849
850 **Supplementary Table 1. List of primers used for placental labyrinth zone qPCR.**

851 **Supplementary Table 2. List of metabolites analysed in maternal caecum, placental labyrinth zone**
852 **and fetal liver on day 16.5 of gestation.**
853
854 **Supplementary Table 3. List of differentially expressed genes and pathways detected in the liver**
855 **RNA-Seq on day 18.5 of gestation.**
856
857
858
859
860
861
862

Table 1. Body composition and circulating metabolites-hormones						
	SPF (n=6)	GF (n=5)	BIF (n=6)	SPF vs GF	SPF vs BIF	GF vs BIF
Hysterectomy weight (g)	26.01±0.91	27.87±0.78	27.17±0.80	NS	NS	NS
Digestive Tract (g)	2.76±0.03	6.83±0.32	7.25±0.63	<0.0001	<0.0001	NS
Caecum (g)	0.66±0.03	3.47±0.25	3.96±0.41	<0.0001	<0.0001	NS
Small intestine (g)	1.66±0.03	2.65±0.11	2.59±0.14	<0.0001	<0.0001	NS
Pancreas (mg)	315.40±30.12	183.40±24.74	190.60±38.71	0.041	0.044	NS
Gonadal fat (mg)	433.10±43.20	297.0±37.02	272.0±27.35	NS	0.016	NS
Liver (g)	2.09±0.10	1.79±0.05	1.55±0.08	NS	0.001	NS
Spleen (mg)	117.90±2.80	91.76±10.60	83.03±6.72	NS	0.0127	NS
Glucose (mmol/L)	8.08±0.78	8.38±1.18	8.88±0.74	NS	NS	NS
Insulin (µg/L)	0.12±0.004	0.19±0.05	0.20±0.06	NS	NS	NS
Leptin (pg/mL)	2465±177.1	2739±486	2425±303	NS	NS	NS
Cholesterol (mmol/L)	1.33±0.03	1.56±0.08	1.41±0.09	NS	NS	NS
Triglycerides (mmol/L)	1.54±0.08	1.79±0.14	1.50±0.11	NS	NS	NS
Free Fatty Acids (µmol/L)	890.6±101.3	1440±362	1092±114.5	NS	NS	NS
Maternal caecum metabolites						
	SPF (n=3)	GF (n=4)	BIF (n=5)	SPF vs GF	SPF vs BIF	GF vs BIF
Butyrate (mmol/Kg)	12.47±7.97	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
Citrulline (mmol/Kg)	0.30±0.06	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
Fucose (mmol/Kg)	0.08±0.01	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
Isobutyrate (mmol/Kg)	0.41±0.24	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
Isovalerate (mmol/Kg)	0.09±0.01	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
Malonate (mmol/Kg)	0.09±0.02	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
Methylamine (mmol/Kg)	0.05±0.02	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
Propionate (mmol/Kg)	4.48±1.99	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
Trimethylamine (mmol/Kg)	0.06±0.007	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
Valerate (mmol/Kg)	0.57±0.27	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
2.methylbutyrate (mmol/Kg)	0.05±0.01	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
5.Aminopentanoate (mmol/Kg)	0.33±0.14	0.00±0.00	0.00±0.00	0.006	0.008	NS
Acetate (mmol/Kg)	35.49±20.66	0.55±0.06	3.22±1.39	0.006	0.129	0.094

863
864

Figure 1

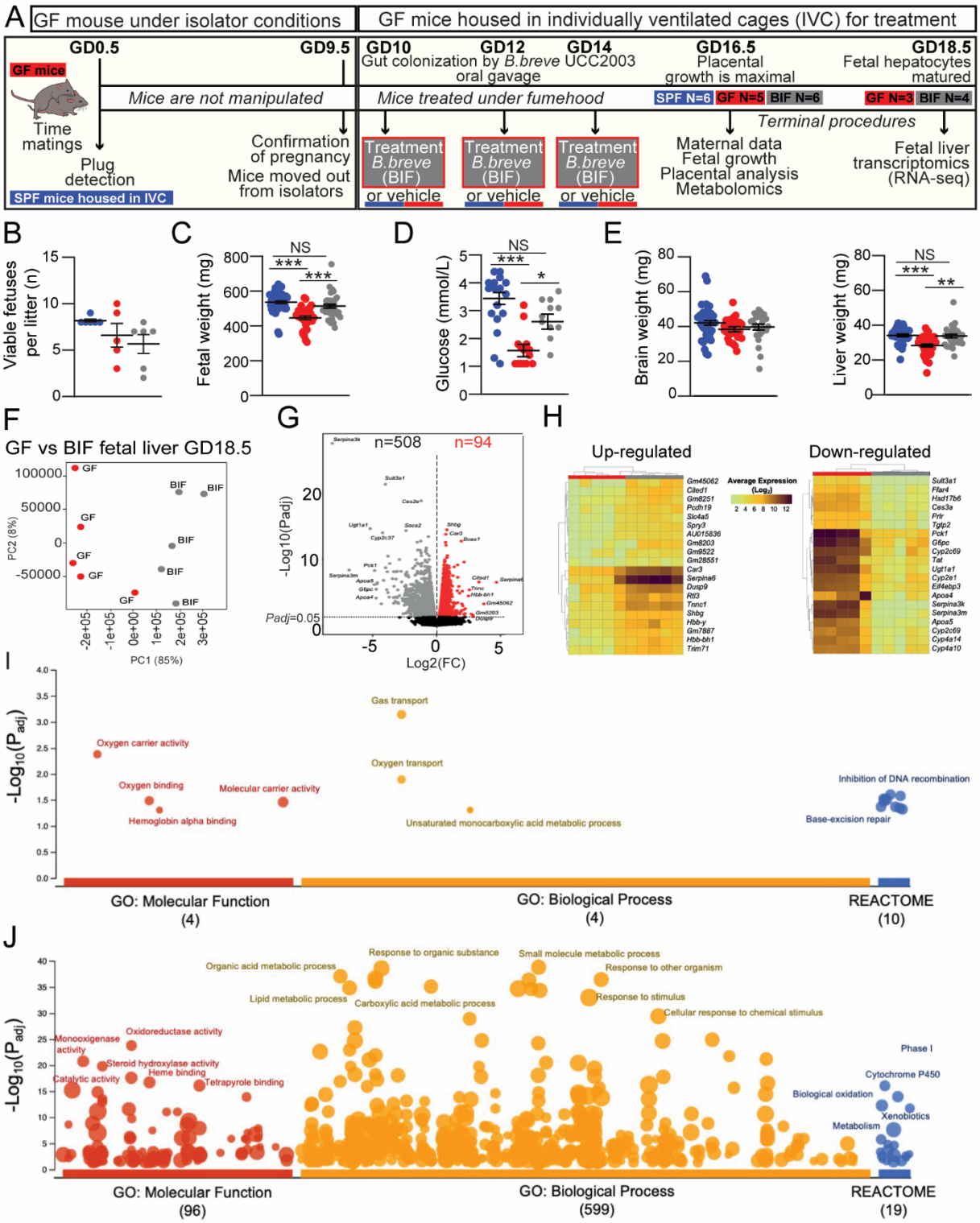

A
GF mouse under isolator conditions
GF mice housed in individually ventilated cages (IVC) for treatment
GD0.5
GD9.5
GD10
GD12
GD14
GD16.5
GD18.5
GF mice
Gut colonization by B.breve UCC2003 oral gavage
Placental growth is maximal
Fetal hepatocytes matured
Mice are not manipulated
Mice treated under fumehood
SPF N=6
GF N=5
BIF N=6
GF N=3
BIF N=4
Terminal procedures
Time matings
Plug detection
SPF mice housed in IVC
Confirmation of pregnancy
Mice moved out from isolators
Treatment B.breve (BIF) or vehicle
Maternal data
Fetal growth
Placental analysis
Metabolomics
Fetal liver transcriptomics (RNA-seq)
B
Viable fetuses per litter (n)
C
Fetal weight (mg)
NS
***
D
Glucose (mmol/L)
*
E
Brain weight (mg)
Liver weight (mg)
**
F
GF vs BIF fetal liver GD18.5
PC2 (8%)
PC1 (85%)
G
n=508
n=94
-Log10(Padj)
Padj=0.05
Log2(FC)
H
Up-regulated
Down-regulated
Average Expression (Log2)
I
-Log10(Padj)
Gas transport
Oxygen carrier activity
Oxygen transport
Oxygen binding
Molecular carrier activity
Hemoglobin alpha binding
Unsaturated monocarboxylic acid metabolic process
Inhibition of DNA recombination
Base-excision repair
GO: Molecular Function (4)
GO: Biological Process (4)
REACTOME (10)
J
-Log10(Padj)
Organic acid metabolic process
Response to organic substance
Small molecule metabolic process
Response to other organism
Lipid metabolic process
Carboxylic acid metabolic process
Response to stimulus
Cellular response to chemical stimulus
Monooxigenase activity
Oxidoreductase activity
Steroid hydroxylase activity
Heme binding
Catalytic activity
Tetrapyrole binding
Phase I
Cytochrome P450
Biological oxidation
Xenobiotics
Metabolism
GO: Molecular Function (96)
GO: Biological Process (599)
REACTOME (19)

Figure 2

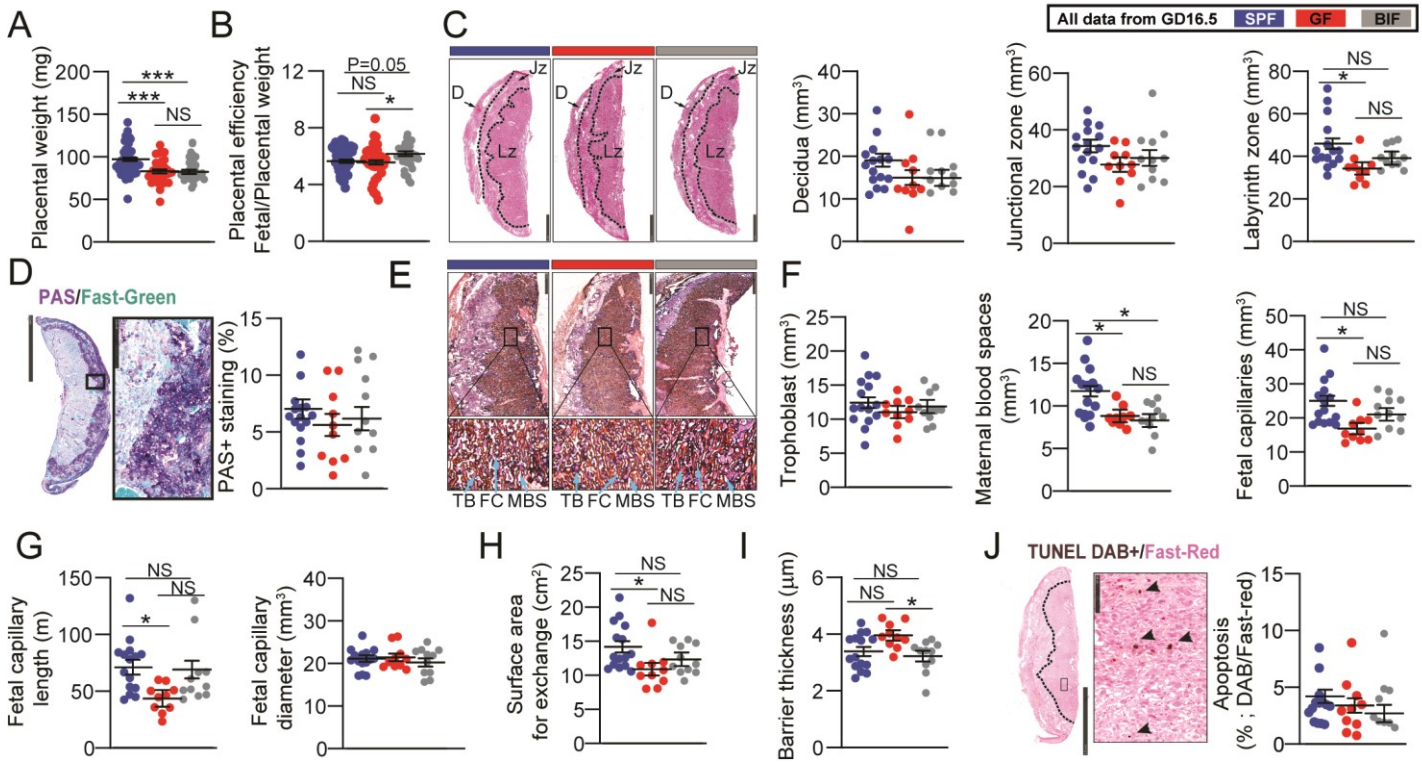

All data from GD16.5
SPF
GF
BIF
A
Placental weight (mg)
B
Placental efficiency Fetal/Placental weight
P=0.05
C
Jz
Lz
D
Decidua (mm³)
Junctional zone (mm³)
Labyrinth zone (mm³)
PAS/Fast-Green
PAS+ staining (%)
E
TB FC MBS
F
Trophoblast (mm³)
Maternal blood spaces (mm³)
Fetal capillaries (mm³)
G
Fetal capillary length (m)
Fetal capillary diameter (mm³)
H
Surface area for exchange (cm²)
I
Barrier thickness (µm)
J
TUNEL DAB+/Fast-Red
Apoptosis (% ; DAB/Fast-red)

Figure 3

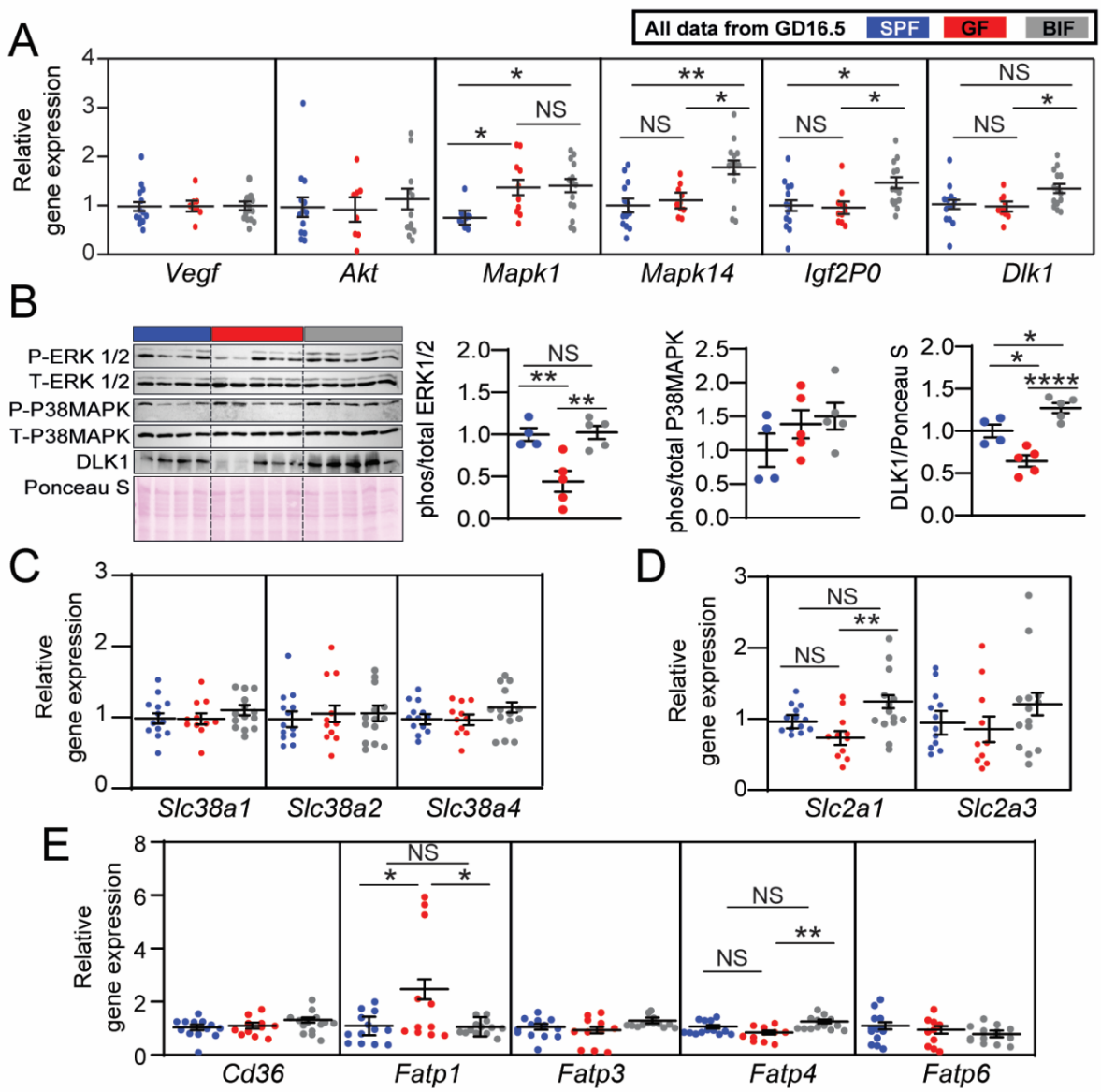

All data from GD16.5
SPF
GF
BIF
A
Relative gene expression
Vegf
Akt
Mapk1
Mapk14
Igf2P0
Dlk1
B
P-ERK 1/2
T-ERK 1/2
P-P38MAPK
T-P38MAPK
DLK1
Ponceau S
phos/total ERK1/2
phos/total P38MAPK
DLK1/Ponceau S
C
Slc38a1
Slc38a2
Slc38a4
D
Slc2a1
Slc2a3
E
Cd36
Fatp1
Fatp3
Fatp4
Fatp6

Figure 4

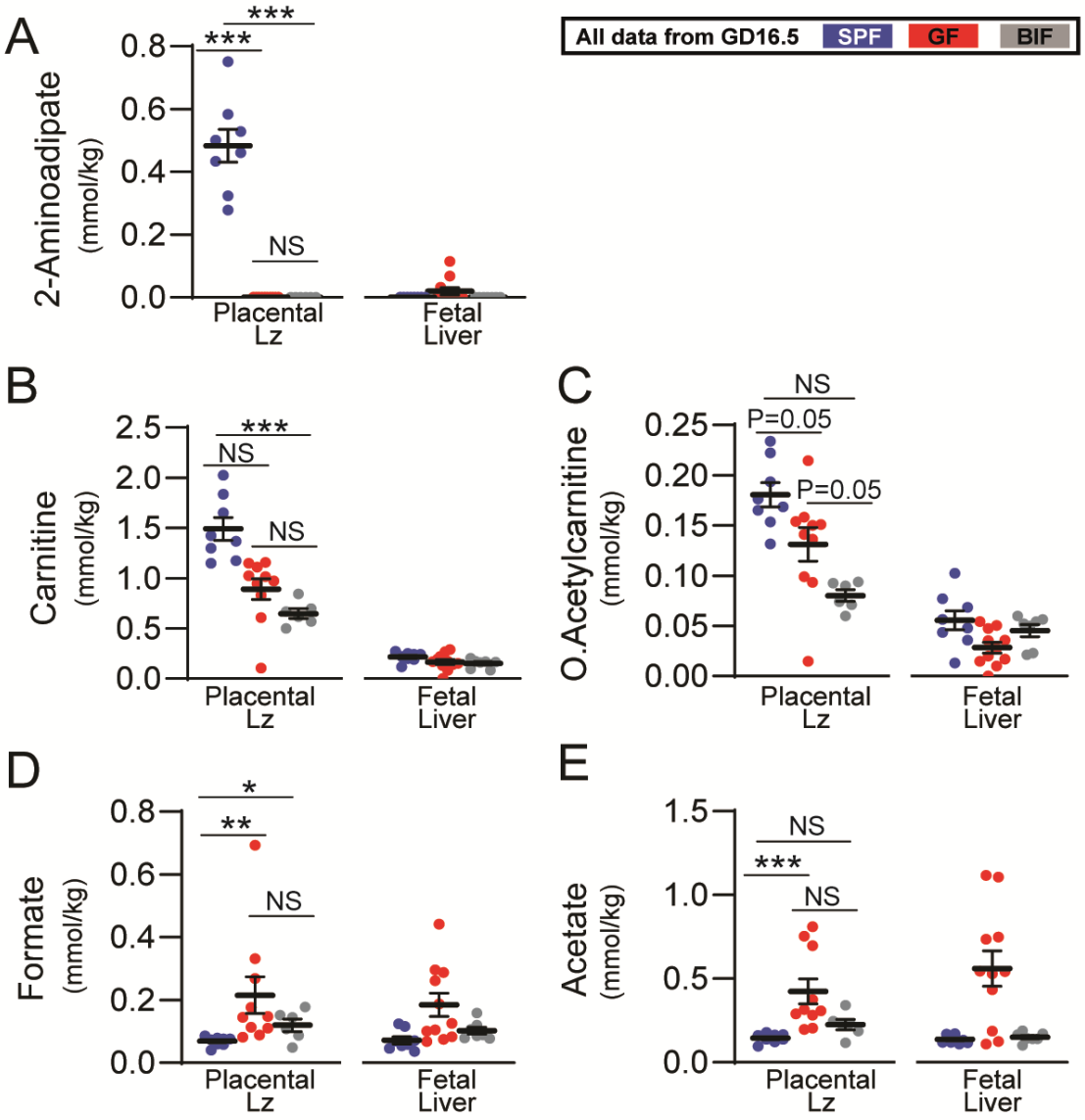
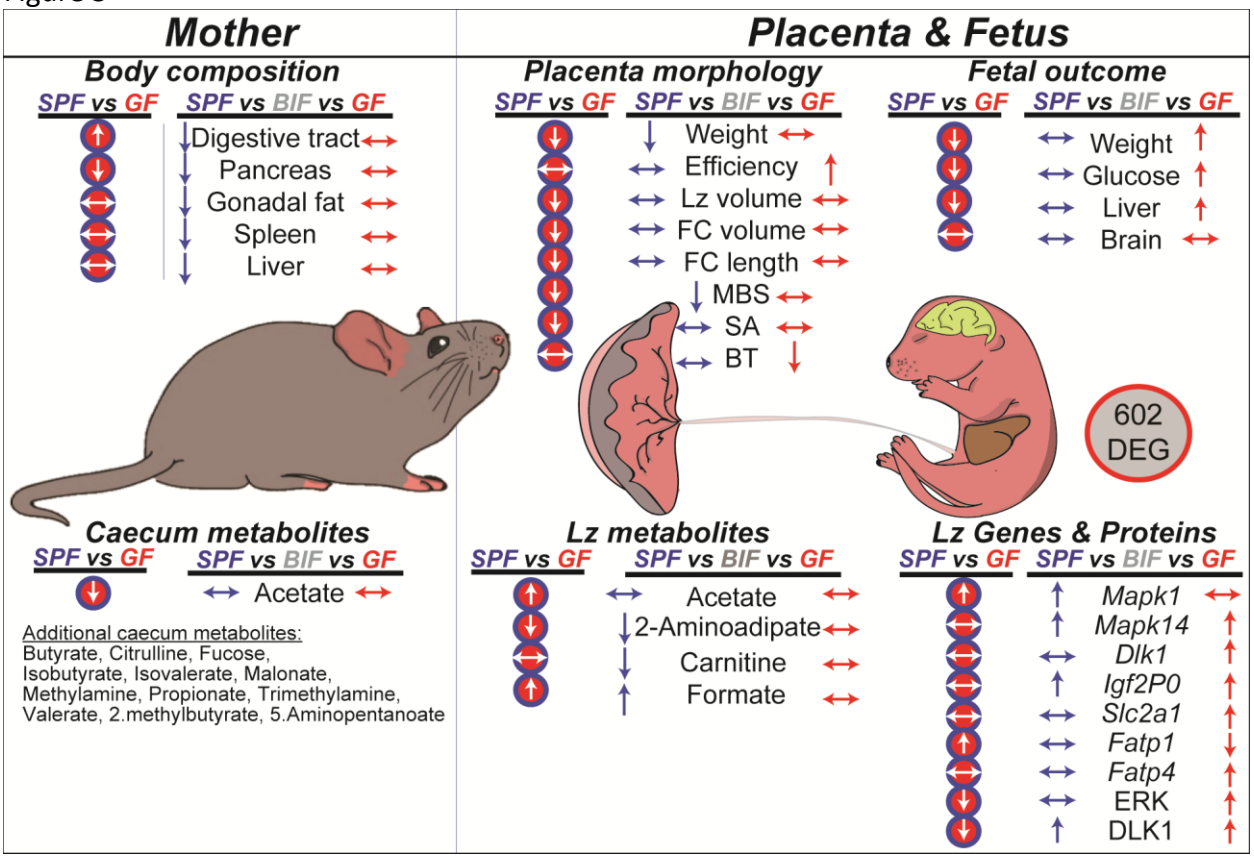
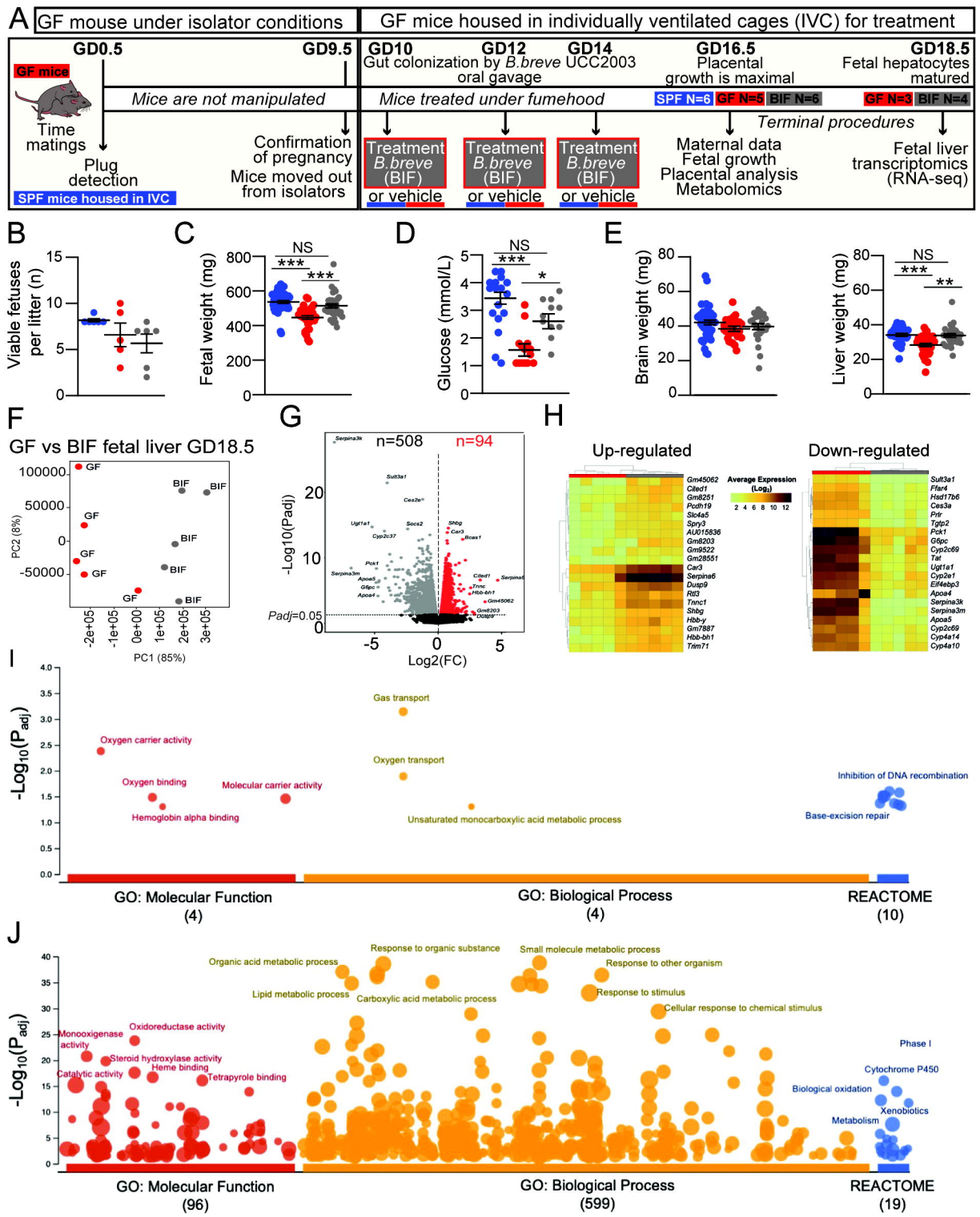

All data from GD16.5
SPF
GF
BIF
A
2-Aminoadipate (mmol/kg)
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0.0
***
***
NS
Placental Lz
Fetal Liver
B
Carnitine (mmol/kg)
2.5
2.0
1.5
1.0
0.5
0.0
***
NS
NS
Placental Lz
Fetal Liver
C
O.Acetylcarnitine (mmol/kg)
0.25
0.20
0.15
0.10
0.05
0.00
NS
P=0.05
P=0.05
Placental Lz
Fetal Liver
D
Formate (mmol/kg)
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0.0
*
**
NS
Placental Lz
Fetal Liver
E
Acetate (mmol/kg)
1.5
1.0
0.5
0.0
NS
***
NS
Placental Lz
Fetal Liver

Figure 5


Mother
Placenta & Fetus
Body composition
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Digestive tract
Pancreas
Gonadal fat
Spleen
Liver
Placenta morphology
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Weight
Efficiency
Lz volume
FC volume
FC length
MBS
SA
BT
Fetal outcome
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Weight
Glucose
Liver
Brain
602 DEG
Caecum metabolites
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Acetate
Additional caecum metabolites:
Butyrate, Citrulline, Fucose,
Isobutyrate, Isovalerate, Malonate,
Methylamine, Propionate, Trimethylamine,
Valerate, 2.methylbutyrate, 5.Aminopentanoate
Lz metabolites
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Acetate
2-Aminoadipate
Carnitine
Formate
Lz Genes & Proteins
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Mapk1
Mapk14
Dlk1
Igf2P0
Slc2a1
Fatp1
Fatp4
ERK
DLK1

Supplementary Table 1	*Forward*	*Reverse*
Hprt	*CAGGCCAGACTTTGTTGGAT*	*TTGCGCTCATCTTAGGCTTT*
Ubc	*GGAGTCGCCCGAGGTCA*	*AAAGATCTGCATCGTCTCTCTCAC*
Vegf	*GAAGCTACTGCCGTCCGATT*	*CTTCATCGTTACAGCAGCC*
Akt	*GCCGCCTGATCAAGTTCTCC*	*TTCAGATGATCCATGCGGGG*
Mapk1	*TGCTTTCTCTCCCGCACAAA*	*GGCCAGAGCCTGTTCAACTT*
Mapk14	*AGCTGTCGAGACCGTTTCAG*	*GATGGGTCACCAGGTACACG*
Dlk1	*GAAAGGACTGCCAGCACAAG*	*CACAGAAGTTGCCTGAGAAGC*
Igf2P0	*GAGGAAGCTCTGCTGTTTGG*	*CAAAGAGATGAGAAGCACCAAC*
Slc38a1	*CGGCGCCTTTCCCTTTATTTC*	*CCGTTAACTCGAGGCCACTT*
Slc38a2	*TTCTGATTGTGGTGATTTGCAAGAA*	*CAGGATGGGCACAGCATACA*
Slc38a4	*AAGGTAGAGGCGGGAAAGGG*	*AGGAACTTCTGACTTTCGGCA*
Slc2a1	*GCTTATGGGCTTCTCCAAACT*	*GGTGACACCTCTCCCACATAC*
Slc2a3	*GA TCGGCTCTTTCCAGTTTG*	*CAA TCA TGCCACCAACAGAG*
Cd36	*ATGGGCTGTGATCGGAACTG*	*GTCTTCCCAATAAGCATGTCTCC*
Fatp1	*GGCTCCTGGAGCAGGAACA*	*ACGGAAGTCCCAGAAACCAA*
Fatp3	*GAGAACTTGCCACCGTATGC*	*GGCCCCTATATCTTGGTCCA*
Fatp4	*GATTCTCCCTGTTGCTCCTGT*	*CCATTGAAGCAAACAGCAGG*
Fatp6	*AACCAAGTGGTGACATCTCTGC*	*TCCATAAAGTAAAGCGGGTCAG*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GF mouse under isolator conditions
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GD16.5
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GD18.5
Fetal hepatocytes matured
Mice treated under fumehood
SPF N=6
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GF N=3
BIF N=4
Terminal procedures
Treatment B.breve (BIF) or vehicle
Maternal data
Fetal growth
Placental analysis
Metabolomics
Fetal liver transcriptomics (RNA-seq)
B
Viable fetuses per litter (n)
C
Fetal weight (mg)
NS
***
D
Glucose (mmol/L)
*
E
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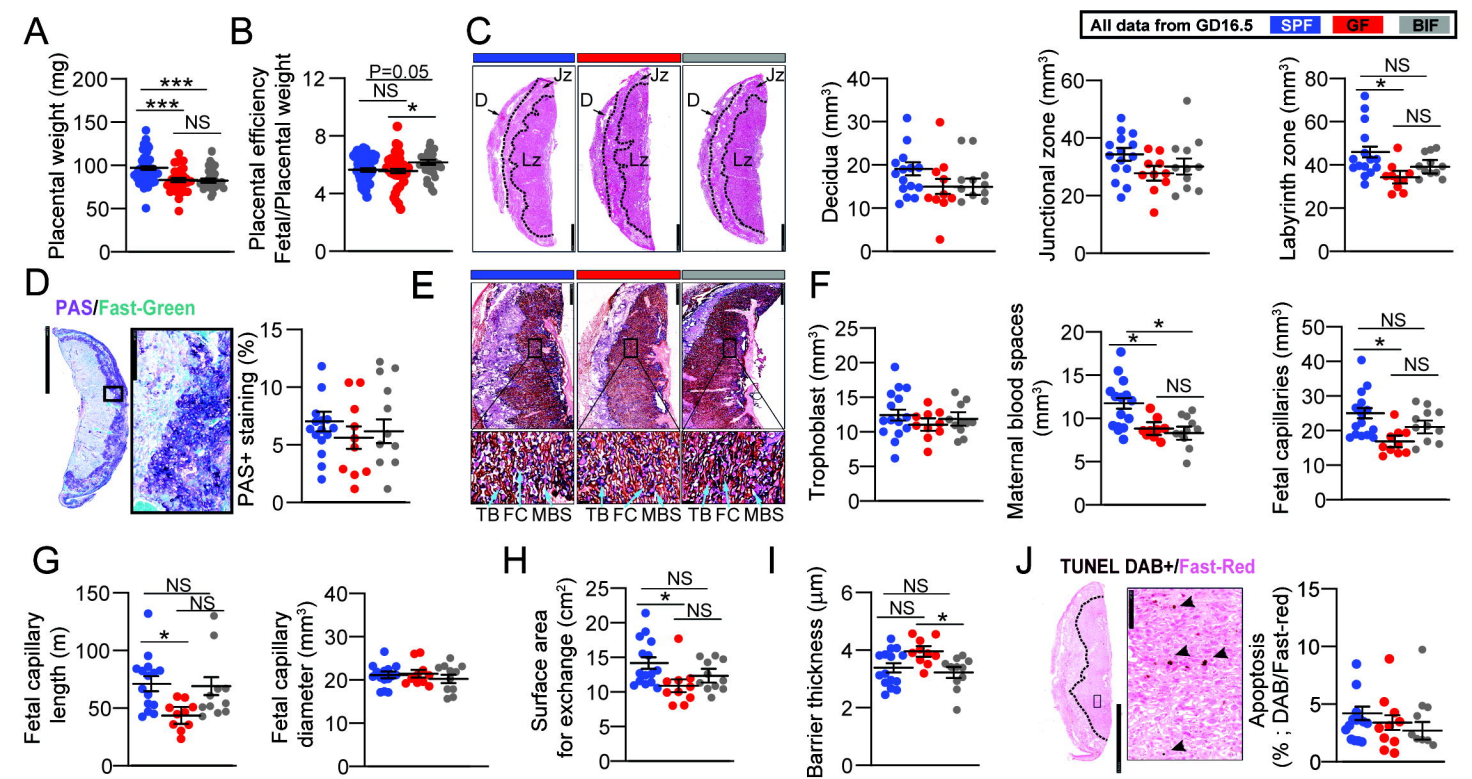
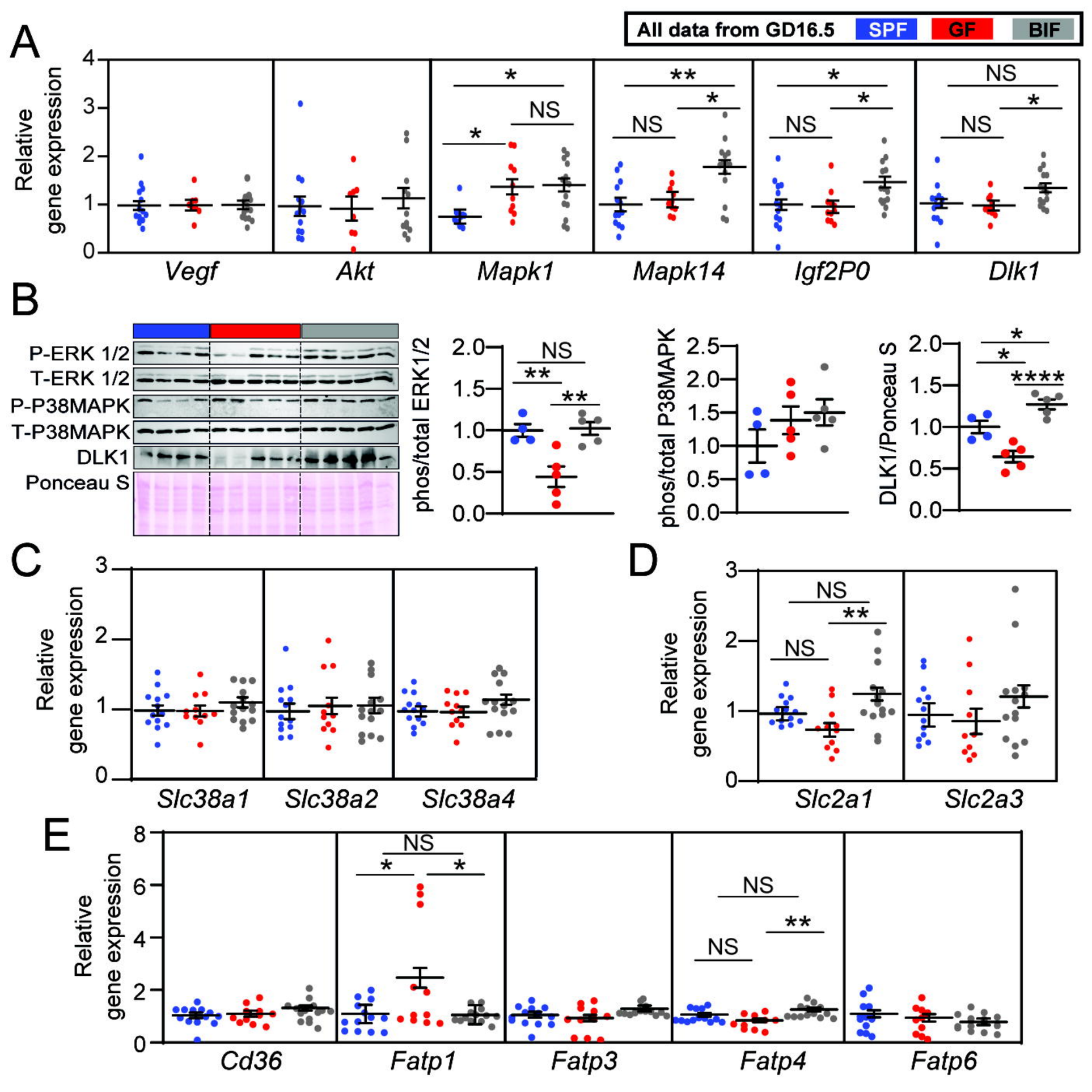
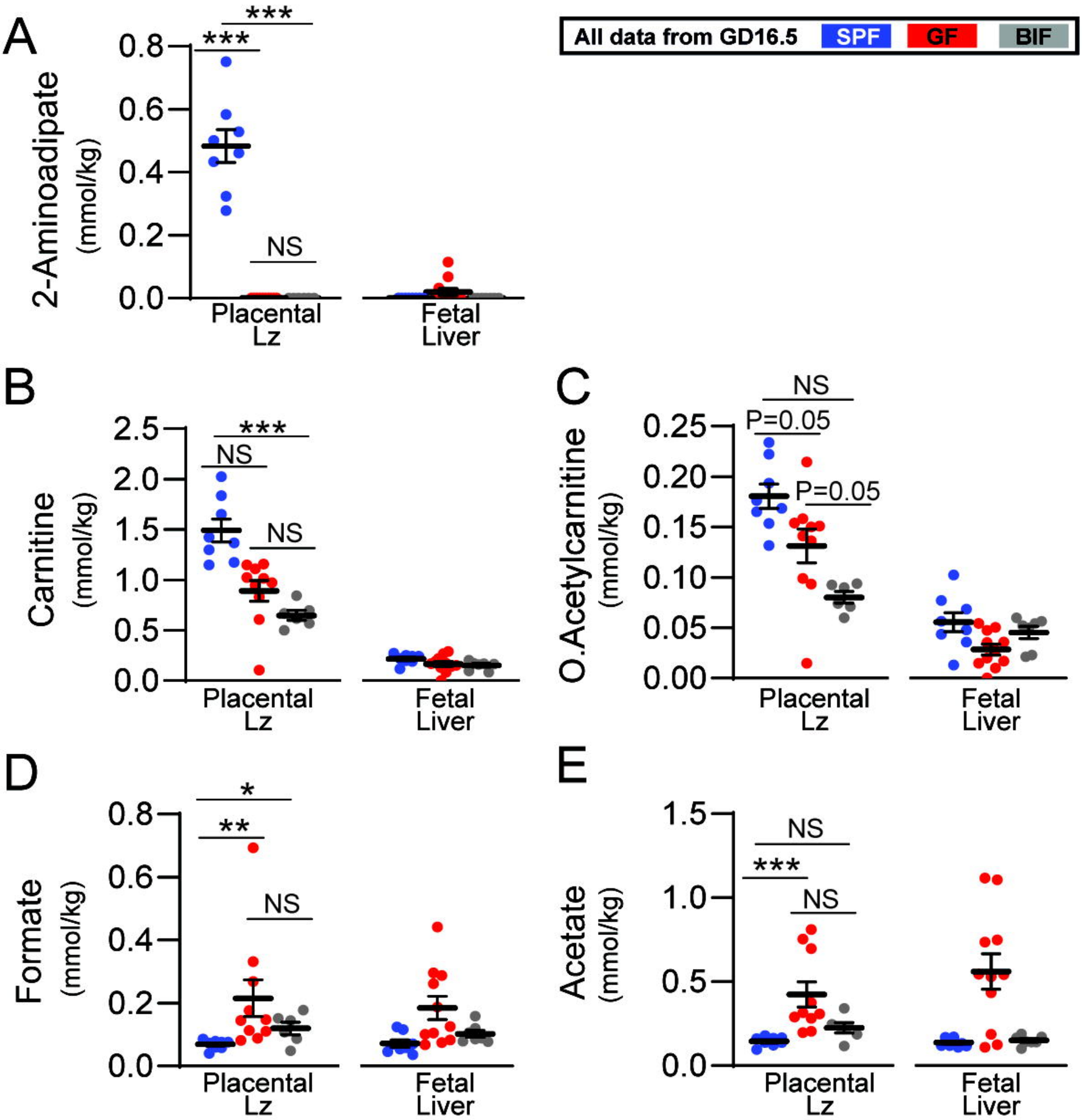
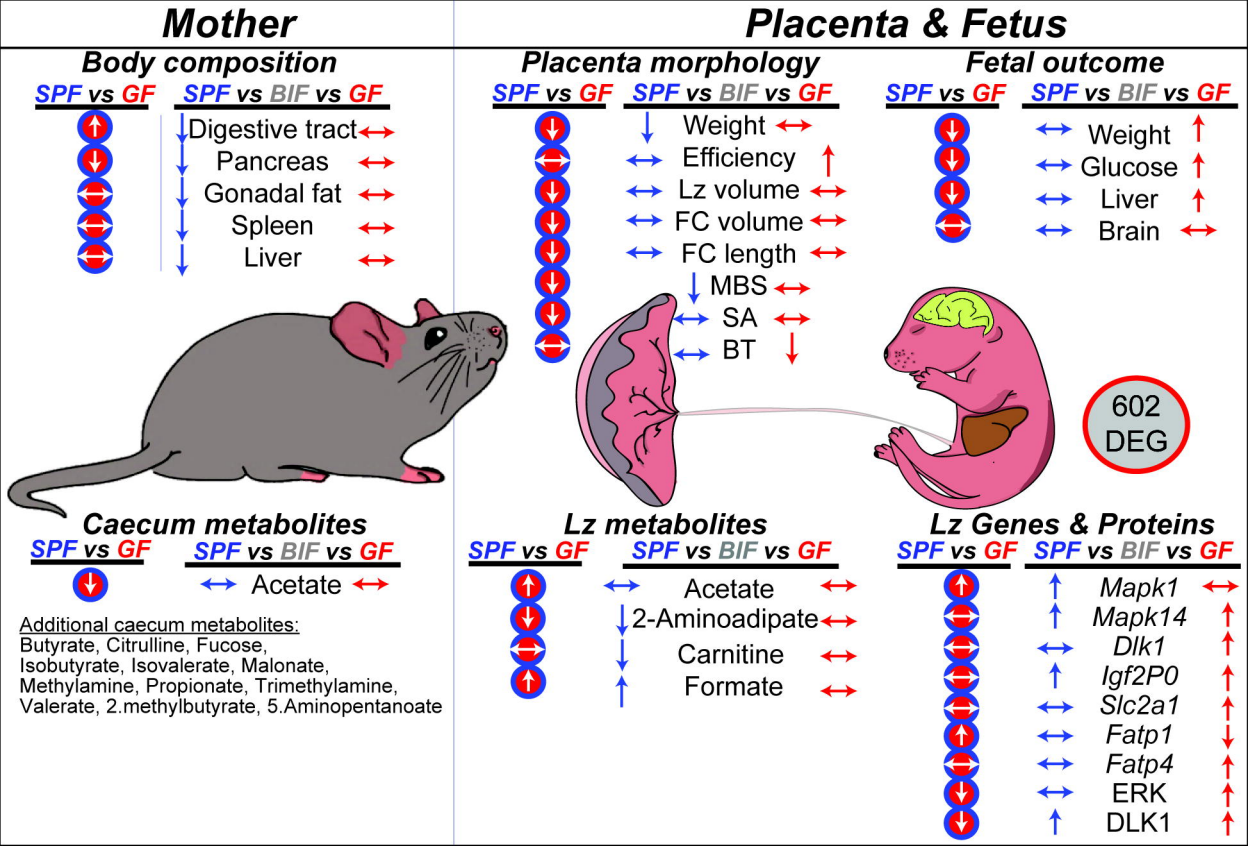
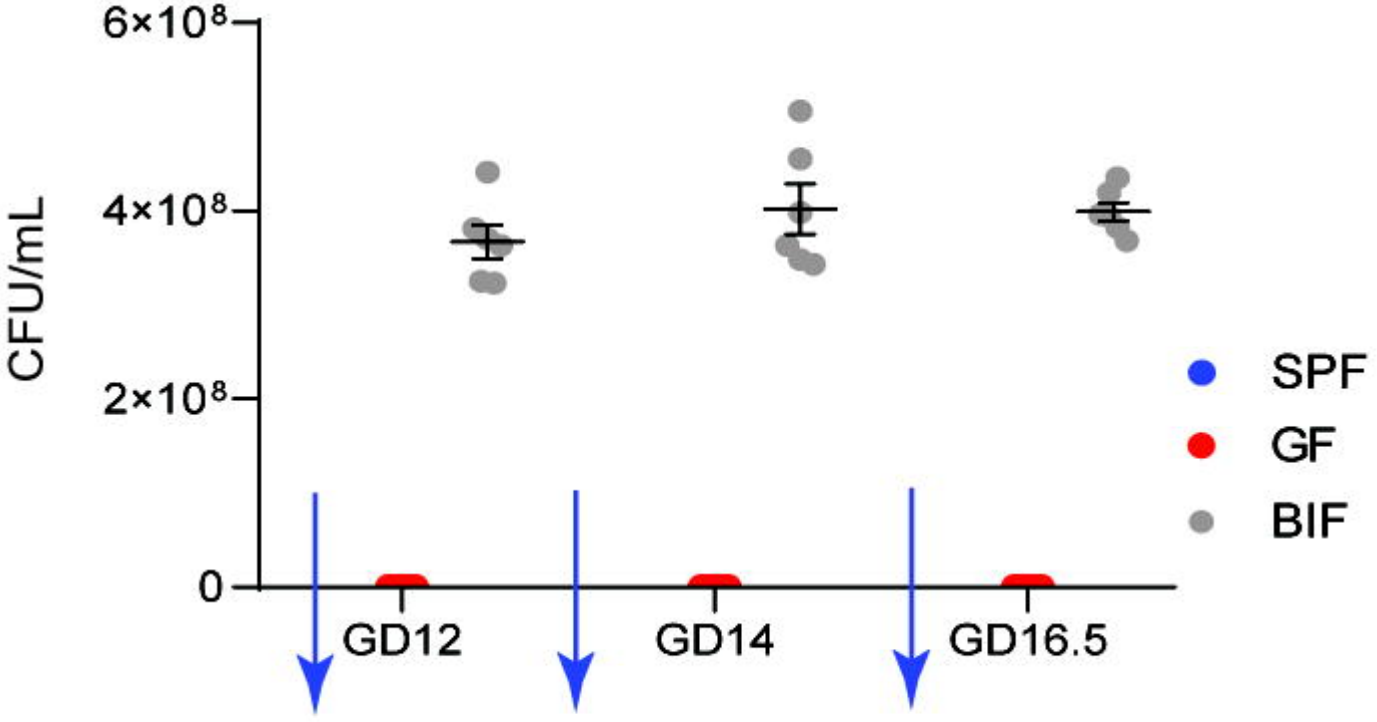
Hemoglobin alpha binding
Molecular carrier activity
Gas transport
Oxygen transport
Unsaturated monocarboxylic acid metabolic process
Inhibition of DNA recombination
Base-excision repair
GO: Molecular Function (4)
GO: Biological Process (4)
REACTOME (10)
J
-Log10(Padj)
Organic acid metabolic process
Lipid metabolic process
Response to organic substance
Carboxylic acid metabolic process
Small molecule metabolic process
Response to other organism
Response to stimulus
Cellular response to chemical stimulus
Monooxigenase activity
Oxidoreductase activity
Steroid hydroxylase activity
Heme binding
Catalytic activity
Tetrapyrole binding
Phase I
Cytochrome P450
Biological oxidation
Xenobiotics
Metabolism
GO: Molecular Function (96)
GO: Biological Process (599)
REACTOME (19)


All data from GD16.5
SPF
GF
BIF
A
Placental weight (mg)
***
***
NS
B
Placental efficiency
Fetal/Placental weight
P=0.05
NS
*
C
Jz
D
Lz
Decidua (mm³)
Junctional zone (mm³)
Labyrinth zone (mm³)
NS
*
NS
D
PAS/Fast-Green
PAS+ staining (%)
E
TB FC MBS
TB FC MBS
TB FC MBS
F
Trophoblast (mm³)
Maternal blood spaces (mm³)
Fetal capillaries (mm³)
G
Fetal capillary length (m)
Fetal capillary diameter (mm³)
H
Surface area for exchange (cm²)
I
Barrier thickness (µm)
J
TUNEL DAB+/Fast-Red
Apoptosis (% ; DAB/Fast-red)


All data from GD16.5
SPF
GF
BIF
A
Relative gene expression
Vegf
Akt
Mapk1
Mapk14
Igf2P0
Dlk1
B
P-ERK 1/2
T-ERK 1/2
P-P38MAPK
T-P38MAPK
DLK1
Ponceau S
phos/total ERK1/2
phos/total P38MAPK
DLK1/Ponceau S
C
Slc38a1
Slc38a2
Slc38a4
D
Slc2a1
Slc2a3
E
Cd36
Fatp1
Fatp3
Fatp4
Fatp6
NS
*
**
****


All data from GD16.5
SPF
GF
BIF
A
2-Aminoadipate (mmol/kg)
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0.0
***
***
NS
Placental Lz
Fetal Liver
B
Carnitine (mmol/kg)
2.5
2.0
1.5
1.0
0.5
0.0
***
NS
NS
Placental Lz
Fetal Liver
C
O.Acetylcarnitine (mmol/kg)
0.25
0.20
0.15
0.10
0.05
0.00
NS
P=0.05
P=0.05
Placental Lz
Fetal Liver
D
Formate (mmol/kg)
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0.0
*
**
NS
Placental Lz
Fetal Liver
E
Acetate (mmol/kg)
1.5
1.0
0.5
0.0
NS
***
NS
Placental Lz
Fetal Liver


Mother
Placenta & Fetus
Body composition
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Digestive tract
Pancreas
Gonadal fat
Spleen
Liver
Placenta morphology
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Weight
Efficiency
Lz volume
FC volume
FC length
MBS
SA
BT
Fetal outcome
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Weight
Glucose
Liver
Brain
602 DEG
Caecum metabolites
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Acetate
Additional caecum metabolites:
Butyrate, Citrulline, Fucose,
Isobutyrate, Isovalerate, Malonate,
Methylamine, Propionate, Trimethylamine,
Valerate, 2.methylbutyrate, 5.Aminopentanoate
Lz metabolites
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Acetate
2-Aminoadipate
Carnitine
Formate
Lz Genes & Proteins
SPF vs GF
SPF vs BIF vs GF
Mapk1
Mapk14
Dlk1
Igf2P0
Slc2a1
Fatp1
Fatp4
ERK
DLK1



Not analysed as cannot detect B.breve in SPF mice due to abundance of other bacteria