Cooperative Effects of RIG-I-like Receptor Signaling and IRF1 on DNA Damage-Induced Cell Death

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Abstract

Properly responding to DNA damage is vital for eukaryotic cells, including the induction of DNA repair, growth arrest and, as a last resort to prevent neoplastic transformation, cell death. Besides being crucial for ensuring homeostasis, the same pathways and mechanisms are at the basis of chemoradiotherapy in cancer treatment, which involves therapeutic induction of DNA damage by chemical or physical (radiological) measures. Apart from typical DNA damage response mediators, the relevance of cell-intrinsic antiviral signaling pathways in response to DNA breaks has recently emerged. Originally known for combatting viruses via expression of antiviral factors including IFNs and establishing of an antiviral state, RIG-I-like receptors (RLRs) were found to be critical for adequate induction of cell death upon the introduction of DNA double-strand breaks. We here show that presence of IRF3 is crucial in this process, most likely through direct activation of pro-apoptotic factors rather than transcriptional induction of canonical downstream components, such as IFNs. Investigating genes reported to be involved in both DNA damage response and antiviral signaling, we demonstrate that IRF1 is an obligatory factor for DNA damage-induced cell death. Interestingly, its regulation does *not* require activation of RLR signaling, but rather sensing of DNA double strand breaks by ATM and ATR. Hence, even though independently regulated, both RLR signaling and IRF1 are essential for proper induction/execution of intrinsic apoptosis. Our results not only support more broadly developing IRF1 as a biomarker predictive for the effectiveness of chemoradiotherapy, but also suggest investigating a combined pharmacological stimulation of RLR and IRF1 signaling as a potential adjuvant regimen in tumor therapy.

Introduction

DNA damage is a ubiquitous and existential threat to organisms. Potential causes comprise ionizing radiation (IR), genotoxic chemicals, but also cell-intrinsic mechanisms. Among various possible DNA alterations, the most drastic and impactful are DNA double-strand breaks (DSBs). Complex mechanisms involving detection by ATM, ATR, and downstream processes including the tumor suppressor p53 and checkpoint inhibition, either lead to sufficient repair of the damage or to induction of programmed cell death [1, 2]. The latter mostly comprises apoptosis, but other forms such as necroptosis and pyroptosis have recently been reported as well. Mutations of the central DSB sensors can cause severe diseases such as ataxia telangiectasia, associated with carcinogenesis and serious immunodeficiency [3-5]. Originally discovered and best-studied in the context of the antiviral innate immune response, IRF1 has been implicated in the DNA damage response and tumor suppressor functions [6-9].

Following the IRF1 example, it became apparent that cell-intrinsic antiviral signaling pathways also substantially contribute to DNA damage-induced cell death. Both STING and RIG-I-like receptor (RLR) pathways detect damage-associated molecular patterns (DAMPs), such as endogenous DNA fragments and nuclear RNA, and can trigger cell death [10, 11]. Previously, RIG-I stimulation has been

shown to induce death of breast cancer cells, putting forward a potential application in tumor therapy [12]. Typically, the RLRs, RIG-I and MDA5, are stimulated by non-self RNA in the event of viral infection. Interaction with their adaptor MAVS leads to activation of the transcription factors IRF3, NF-κB p65/RELA and p50/NFKB1. The resulting expression of ISGs and IFNs of type I/III causes the establishment of an antiviral state and, in most cases, effective containment of the invading pathogen. In addition to apoptosis sensitizing effects of NF-κB and IFNs through expression of pro-apoptotic factors, direct cell death mediating effects have recently been reported for MAVS and IRF3 [13, 14]. Chattopadhyay et al. were first to identify and characterize the RLR-induced IRF3-mediated pathway of apoptosis (RIPA) [15]. Stimulation of RLRs with dsRNA or viral infection induces MAVS-dependent ubiquitination of IRF3 and subsequent activation of pro-apoptotic factors independent of IRF3's transcriptional activity [16]. Furthermore, MAVS was shown to directly interact with procaspase-8, forming so-called MAVS-death-inducing signaling complexes upon viral infection [17]. Here we show that RLR signaling, IRF1, and canonical DNA damage response pathways, comprising ATM/ATR and p53, are essential for efficient induction of apoptosis. We show that these pathways have independent pro-apoptotic capacities, and we present new insights into IRF1's complex cellular functions.

Methods

Cell culture, cell line generation, and stimulation. Cell lines were grown at 37 °C, 95 % humidity, and 5 % CO_2 in Dulbecco's modified eagle medium (DMEM high glucose, Life Technologies, Carlsbad, CA, USA), supplemented with final 10 % (v/v) fetal calf serum (FCS, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA), 1x non-essential amino acids (Thermo Fisher Scientific), and 100 U/ml penicillin and 100 ng/ml streptomycin (LifeTechnologies). For generation of transgene expressing A549 cell lines by lentiviral transduction, lentiviral particles were produced by transfecting HEK 293T cells with plasmids pCMV-dr8.91, pMD2.G, and the respective retroviral vector (pWPI) using calcium phosphate transfection (CalPhos Mammalian Transfection Kit, Takara Bio Europe, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France). After two days the supernatant was harvested, sterile filtered, and used to transduce target cells two times for 24 h. Transduced cells were selected with antibiotics appropriate for the encoded resistance gene (5 µg/ml blasticidin, MP Biomedicals, Santa Ana, CA, USA; 1 µg/ml puromycin, Sigma Aldrich; 1 mg/ml geneticin (G418), Santa Cruz, Dallas, TX, USA). Knockout (KO) cell lines were generated by clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats (CRISPR)/Cas9 technology. DNA oligonucleotides coding for guideRNAs against the respective genes (sequences shown in Supplementary Table S1) were cloned into the expression vector LentiCRISPRv2 (Feng Zhang, Addgene #52961).

Transduced A549 wild-type cells were selected with puromycin, single cell clones were isolated, and KO was validated by immunoblotting and functional tests (Fig. S5). A549 *IFNAR1*$^{-/-}$ *IFNLR1*$^{-/-}$ *IFNGR*$^{-/-}$ (IFNR TKO), *IRF1*$^{-/-}$, *IRF1* OE, *IRF3*$^{-/-}$, IRF3-eGFP H2B-mCherry, *MAVS*$^{-/-}$, *MYD88*$^{-/-}$, *RELA*$^{-/-}$, and

87 *RIG-I*$^{-/-}$ were reported previously [18-22]. A549 *RIG-I* OE cells were generated by stable lentiviral
88 transduction as described previously [19]. Cells transduced with non-targeting gRNA (sequence taken
89 from the GeCKO CRISPR v2 library) were used as controls. PH5CH non-neoplastic hepatocytes and
90 HepG2 cells were kindly provided by Dr. Volker Lohmann (Heidelberg University, Heidelberg,
91 Germany). Huh7.5 cells were generously provided by Dr. Charles Rice (Rockefeller University, New
92 York).
93 Stimulation was performed with doxorubicin (DOX, Hölzel Diagnostika, Cologne, Germany),
94 etoposide (ETO, Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA, USA), or cells were transfected with *in*
95 *vitro* transcribed and chromatographically purified 200 bp 5'ppp-dsRNA [23], poly(C) (Sigma-
96 Aldrich), and poly(I:C) (Sigma-Aldrich) using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA)
97 following the manufacturer's protocol. Cells were γ-irradiated with doses of 0-30 Gy using a
98 Gammacell 40 Exactor (Best Theratronics, Ottawa, Canada).
99 **Real-time imaging of cell death.** A549 cells stably expressing histone H2B mCherry [21] were seeded
100 at density of 2 x 10^3 cells per 96-well. The next day, cells were stimulated with 1-2 µM DOX (10 h),
101 25 µM ETO (10 h), 0.1 ng/ml dsRNA (8 h), or γ-IR. DMSO (Carl Roth, Karlsruhe, Germany), poly(C),
102 and mock irradiation were used as appropriate controls. Post treatment, fresh medium was
103 supplemented with 1:10 000 IncuCyte® Cytotox Green Reagent (Sartorius, Göttingen, Germany) to
104 determine dead cells. Total cell number and dead cells were monitored every 2 h using a 10x
105 magnification in an IncuCyte® S3 Live-Cell Analysis System (Satorius, Göttingen, Germany). For IFN
106 pre-stimulation, 200 IU/ml IFN-β (IFN-β1, Bioferon, Laupheim, Germany) or IFN-γ (R&D Systems,
107 Minneapolis, MN, USA) were added at the time of seeding. For inhibitor administration, 40 µM Z-
108 VAD-FMK (Z-VAD, R&D Systems) and 10 µM Necrostatin-7 (Nec-7, Sigma Aldrich), or 25 µM
109 TPCA-1 (Sigma Aldrich) were added 2 h prior treatment. IncuCyte® Software (2019B Rev2, Satorius,
110 Göttingen, Germany) was used to mask cells in phase contrast images. Calculations were performed
111 applying the following settings: red fluorescence: segmentation top-hat, radius 100 µM, threshold
112 (GCU) 0.4, edge split sensitivity -35, area 60-1000 μm^2, integrated intensity ≥ 60; green fluorescence:
113 segmentation top-hat, radius 100 µM, threshold (GCU) 10, edge split sensitivity -40, area 100-700 μm^2,
114 eccentricity ≤ 0.8, mean intensity 7-1000, integrated intensity ≥ 2500. Percentage of dead cells was
115 calculated relative to total cell count. Data represent the results of at least three biologically independent
116 experiments. For curve charts, results were normalized to the control cell line of each replicate. Bars
117 represent non-normalized means 36 h post treatment.
118 **Immunofluorescence microscopy and determination of cellular IRF3 distribution.** Fluorescence
119 microscopy was performed to visualize phosphorylated histone H2A.X. After 4 h treatment with 2 µM
120 DOX or DMSO, or 1 h post γ-IR with 20 Gy or 0 Gy, cells were permeabilized with -20 °C methanol
121 and fixed with 4 % paraformaldehyde. To block non-specific background, cells were incubated with
122 1 % (w/v) bovine serum albumin (BSA) and 10 % (v/v) FCS for 30 min. Primary antibodies specific
123 for phospho-H2A.X (Cell Signaling Technology, 9718, 1:1000) were applied at 4 °C over-night. Slides

124 were incubated with Alexa Fluor® 488 anti-rabbit (ThermoFisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA,
125 A11008, 1:1000) and DAPI (ThermoFisher Scientific, D1306, 1:5000) for 1 h. For determination of
126 cellular IRF3 distribution, A549 cells stably expressing IRF3-eGFP and histone H2B-mCherry were
127 stimulated either with DOX or poly(I:C) for 12 h. Fluorescence was visualized using a Primovert
128 microscope (Carl Zeiss, Jena, Germany).
129 **Immunoblotting.** Stimulated cells were lysed in Laemmli sample buffer, and digested with Benzonase®
130 Nuclease (Merck Millipore, Burlington, MA, USA). For inhibitor administration, 20 µM KU-55933
131 (Sigma-Aldrich), 25 µM Rabusertib (Hölzel Diagnostika), 25 µM TPCA-1 (Sigma Aldrich), or 10 µM
132 VE-822 (Hölzel Diagnostika) were added 2 h prior treatment. For stimulation with IFNs, 200 IU/ml
133 IFN-α (PBL Assay Science, Piscataway, NJ, USA), IFN-β, or IFN-γ were applied over-night. Lysed
134 samples were further denatured at 95 °C for 5 min and cleared from detritus. Resulting protein extracts
135 were subjected to 10 % (w/v) SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis and transferred to PVDF
136 membranes (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA, USA, 0.2 µm pore size). Upon incubation with 5 % (w/v) BSA
137 for 2 h to block non-specific background, membranes were probed using antibodies specific for β-actin
138 (Sigma-Aldrich, A5441, 1:5000), calnexin (Enzo Biochem, Farmingdale, NY, USA, ADI-SPA-865-F,
139 1:1000), CASP3 (Cell Signaling Technology, 9662S, 1:1000), CASP9 (Cell Signaling Technology,
140 9508, 1:1000), IRF1 (Cell Signaling Technology, 8478S, 1:1000), phospho-IRF3 (pS396,
141 ThermoFisher Scientific, MA5-14947, 1:1000), JAK1 (Cell Signaling Technology, 3332S, 1:1000),
142 MDA5 (Enzo Biochem, ALX-210-935, 1:1000), NFKB1 (p50) (Abcam, Cambridge, UK, ab32360,
143 1:1000), p53 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Dallas, TX, USA, sc-126, 1:1000), or STAT1 (BD
144 Biosciences, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA, 610115, 1:1000) at 4 °C over-night. For detection, anti-rabbit
145 horseradish peroxidase (HRP) (Sigma-Aldrich, A6154-5X1ML, 1:20 000) or anti-mouse HRP (Sigma-
146 Aldrich, A4416-5X1ML, 1:10 000) were applied for 1 h, membranes were covered with Amersham
147 ECL Prime Western Blotting Detection Reagent (ThermoFisher Scientific) for 1 min, and luminescence
148 was detected using a sensitive CCD camera system (ECL ChemoCam Imager 3.2, INTAS Science
149 Imaging Instruments, Göttingen, Germany). Densitometric analysis of the protein bands was performed
150 using ImageJ (1.52e). Data shown represent the results of at least three biologically independent
151 experiments.
152 **Quantitative PCR with reverse transcription (qRT-PCR).** Upon stimulation, cells were lysed and
153 total RNA was isolated with the Monarch RNA isolation kit (New England Biolabs, Ipswich, MA,
154 USA), following the manufacturer's protocol. After extraction, complementary DNA (cDNA) was
155 generated using the High Capacity cDNA Reverse Transcription kit (ThermoFisher Scientific).
156 Determination of messenger RNA (mRNA) expression was performed using iTaq Universal SYBR®
157 Green Supermix (Bio-Rad) on a CFX96 real-time-system (Bio-Rad). Sequences of specific exon-
158 spanning PCR primers are shown in Supplementary Table S2. GAPDH mRNA was used as a
159 housekeeping gene control and relative expression determined by $2^{\Delta Ct}$ (thus, not normalizing to
160 reference condition).

161 **Cell Viability.** A549 cells were seeded at a density of 6 x 10^3 cells per 96-well. Upon treatment with
162 2 µM DOX or DMSO for 24 h, cell viability was determined using the CellTiter-Glo® luminescent cell
163 viability assay (Promega, Madison, WI, USA) following the manufacturer's protocol. Luciferase
164 activity was measured using a Mithras LB 943 multimode reader (Berthold Technologies, Bad Wildbad,
165 Germany).
166 **Caspase activity.** A549 cells were seeded at density of 6 x 10^3 cells per 96-well. 48 h post treatment
167 with 0-2 µM DOX for 10 h, caspase-3/7 activity was determined using the Apo-ONE® homogeneous
168 caspase-3/7 assay (Promega) following the manufacturer's instructions. Resulting fluorescence was
169 measured using the Mithras LB 943 multimode reader (Berthold Technologies).
170 **Statistics**
171 Comparison of datasets was performed using a paired, two-tailed Student's t-test. * indicates $p \leq 0.05$,
172 ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$, **** $p \leq 0.0001$. Error bars represent standard deviation.

173 ## Results

174 **Apoptosis induction via DNA damage response pathway in A549 cells**
175 To investigate the molecular links between DNA damage-induced cell death and innate immune
176 signaling, we used immunocompetent A549 human lung carcinoma cell lines with functional knockouts
177 (KOs) of components of both pathways. Cells were treated with DNA DSB inducers, specifically γ-IR
178 or the topoisomerase II inhibitors doxorubicin (DOX) and etoposide (ETO), and the resulting cell death
179 was monitored on single-cell level by real-time imaging.
180 Treatment of A549 cells with DOX resulted in pronounced cell death (Fig. 1A) and a corresponding
181 reduction of bulk cell viability (Fig. 1B), accompanied by the detection of the DNA damage marker
182 phospho-histone H2A.X by immunofluorescence (Fig. 1C). As in DMSO control conditions no cell
183 death was observed (Fig. 1A), for the clarity of presentation we omitted this control in the following
184 figures (data was acquired in every experiment). In order to characterize the type of cell death
185 predominant upon DOX-induced DNA damage, we first evaluated activation of caspase-3 and -7 being
186 pivotal markers of apoptosis. DOX treatment activated caspase-3 and -7 in a dose-dependent manner
187 (Fig. 1D). Conversely, we treated cells with the pan-caspase inhibitor Z-VAD, or depleted caspase-3 or
188 -9. Both approaches resulted in a significant reduction of cell death upon DOX treatment (Fig. 1E, F,
189 H). These findings confirmed prior reports that cell death driven by DOX is mainly due to apoptosis
190 [24]. Next, we investigated typical components of the DNA damage response upstream of caspase
191 activation. In line with p53's (*TP53*) essential role in inducing apoptosis, depletion of p53 showed a
192 significant reduction of cell death (Fig. 1G, H). Interestingly, *TP53*$^{-/-}$ had the opposite effects at late
193 time points, elevating cell death for time points >54 h (Fig. 1G). Amongst others, p53 induces apoptosis
194 via activation of PUMA and NOXA. Accordingly, we found *PUMA* and *NOXA* transcript levels to be
195 increased in DOX treated cells (Fig. 1I), supporting a canonical DNA damage response through p53 in
196 DOX-treated A549 cells.

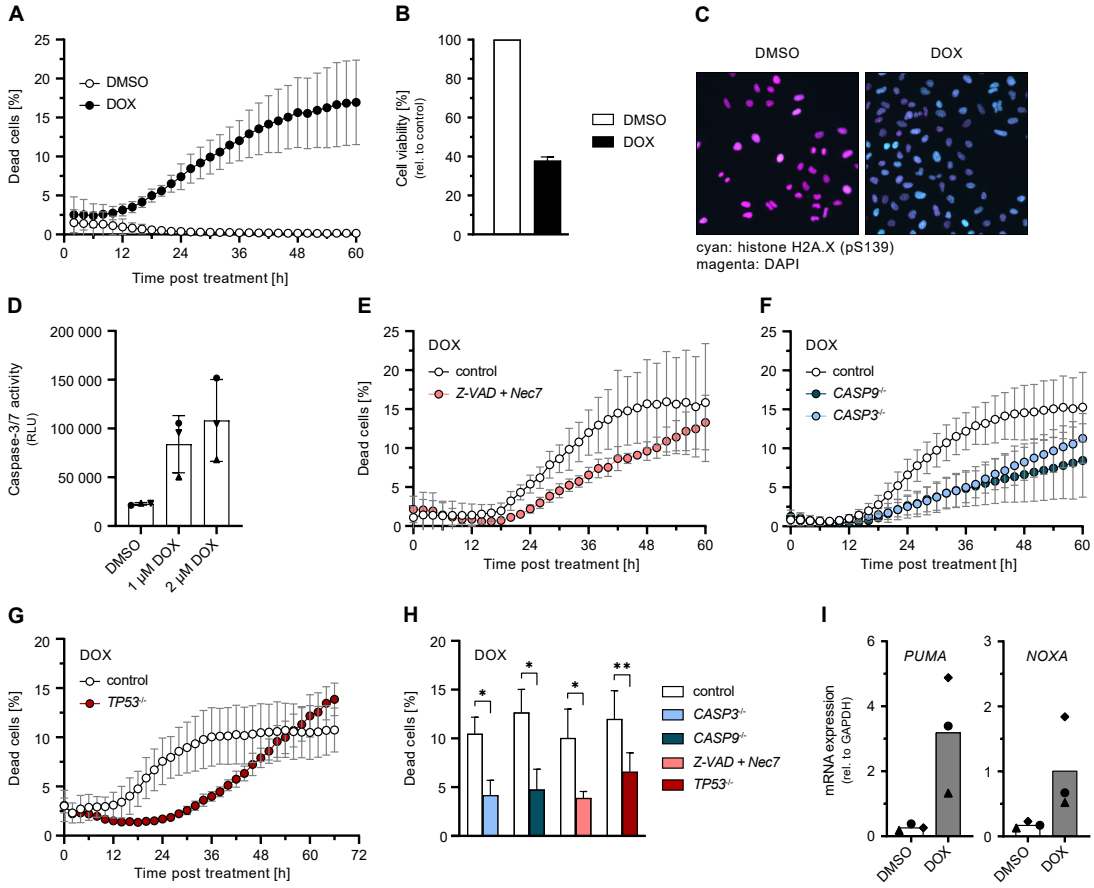


Fig. 1. Induction of apoptosis upon DOX-mediated DNA damage.

(**A**) Percentage of dead A549 cells relative to total cells counted over time post DOX or DMSO treatment. **(B)** Cell viability of A549 cells post DOX treatment for 24 h. **(C)** Immunofluorescence of phosphorylated histone H2A.X (S139) (cyan) and DAPI-stained nuclei (magenta) in A549 cells post DOX treatment for 4 h. **(D)** Caspase-3/7 activity of A549 cells 24 h post DOX treatment for 10 h. **(E-H)** Percentage of dead A549 cells with caspase inhibition or functional KO of the indicated genes relative to total cells counted over time **(E-G)** or 36 h **(H)** post DOX treatment. **(I)** A549 cells were treated with 1 µM DOX or DMSO for 24 h. PUMA and NOXA mRNA transcripts were determined by qRT-PCR. (**A, B, D-I**) Data shown represent the results of at least three biologically independent experiments.

Relevance of innate antiviral immunity pathways in DNA damage induced cell death

In order to investigate the contribution of antiviral signaling cascades to the induction of DSB-induced cell death, we compared the impact of the major antiviral pathways using KOs of their respective signaling adapters. We observed DOX-induced cell death to be significantly reduced only by MAVS depletion (RLR signaling), but not so in the absence of STING (cGAS signaling), TRIF (TLR3 signaling), or MYD88 (general TLR signaling) (Fig. 2A-C). Despite RLR signaling appeared to play a major role, neither canonical IRF3 phosphorylation nor its nuclear translocation could be detected

(Fig. 2D, E). Consistently, there was also no characteristic RLR-mediated induction of ISGs, such as *IFIT1* (Fig. 2F).

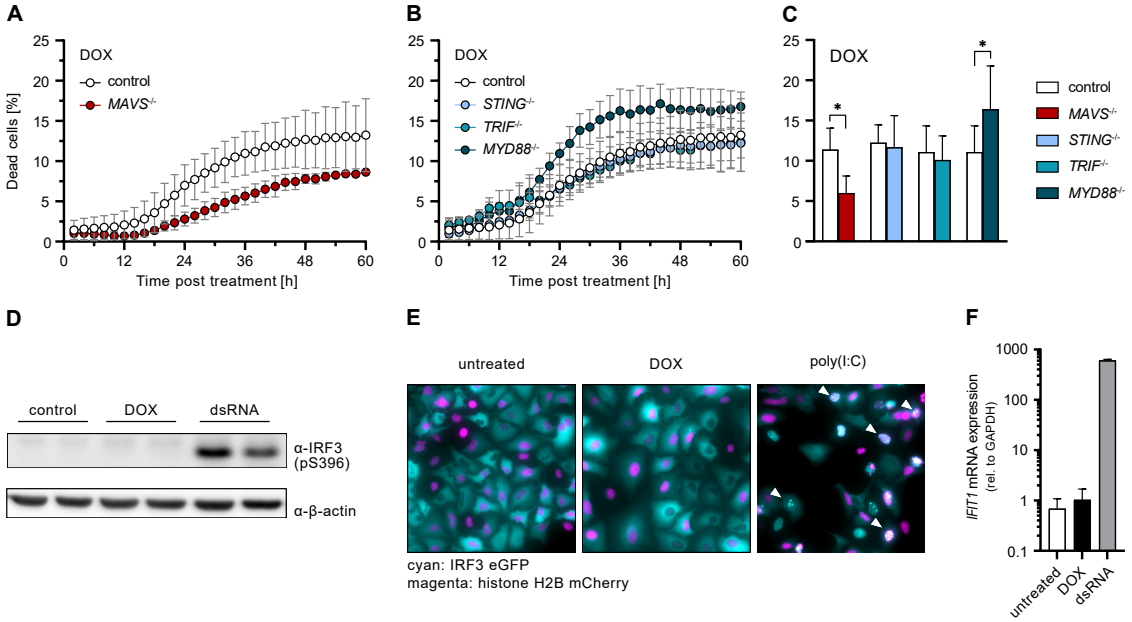
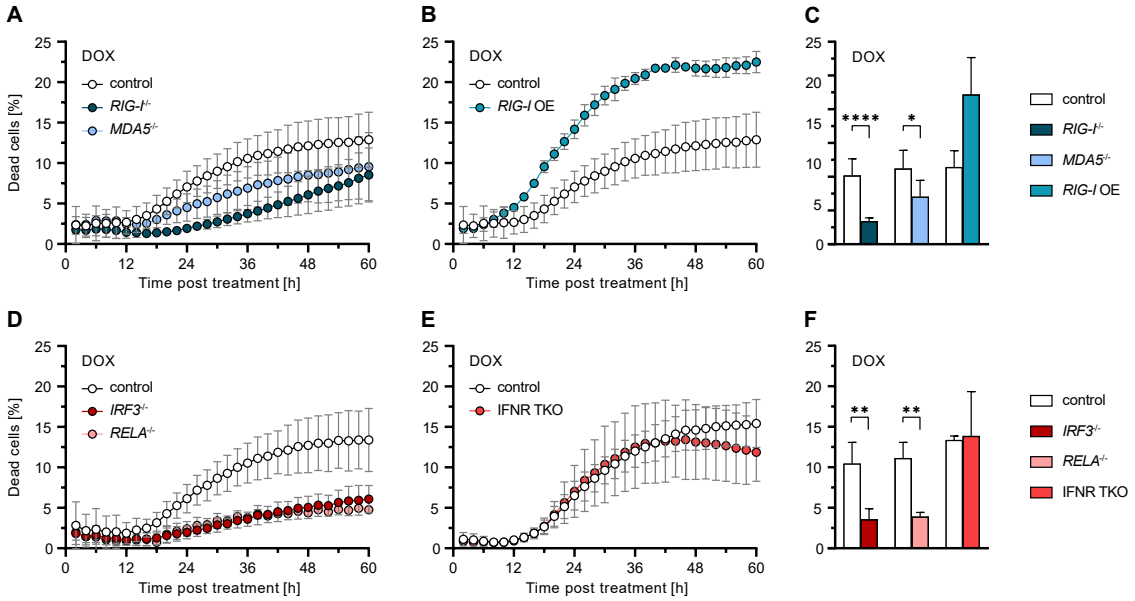


Fig. 2. Relevance of antiviral signaling adapters and ISG response during DOX-induced DNA damage response.

(**A-C**) Percentage of dead A549 cells with functional KO of the indicated genes relative to total cells counted over time **(A, B)** or 36 h **(C)** post DOX treatment. **(D)** A549 cells were stimulated with 1 µM DOX or 1 ng/ml dsRNA for 8 h. Phosphorylated IRF3 (S396) was determined by western blot. **(E)** A549 cells were stimulated with 1 µM DOX or 2 µg/ml poly(I:C) for 12 h. Cellular distribution of IRF3 eGFP (cyan) and histone H2B (magenta) was visualized by immunofluorescence microscopy. **(F)** A549 cells were stimulated with 1 µM DOX or 10 ng/ml dsRNA for 24 h. IFIT1 mRNA transcripts were determined by qRT-PCR. (**A-C, F**) Data shown represent the results of at least three biologically independent experiments.

Given the observed relevance of MAVS in DOX-induced cell death, we further analysed the effect of specific RLR depletion. Both *RIG-I*$^{-/-}$ and *MDA5*$^{-/-}$ reduced cell death upon DOX treatment, however, RIG-I exhibited a considerably stronger effect (Fig. 3A, C). Reciprocally, *RIG-I* overexpression (OE) markedly increased cell death upon DOX treatment (but not in untreated conditions, compare Fig. S1A), underlining the decisive role of RLR signaling in this process (Fig. 3B, C). In order to determine the factors responsible for mediating cell death downstream of MAVS, we further examined the influence of transcription factors IRF3 and NF-κB p65/RELA. We observed that depletion of either factor significantly reduced DOX-induced cell death (Figure 3D, F). Using IFN-"blind" A549 *IFNAR1*$^{-/-}$ *IFNLR1*$^{-/-}$ *IFNGR*$^{-/-}$ (IFNR TKO) cells, we demonstrated that this effect was independent of a response mediated by secreted IFNs (Fig. 3E, F), which was further confirmed using *STAT1*$^{-/-}$ cells (Fig. S1B). This was in accordance with the lack of ISG expression observed previously (Fig. 2F). Thus, IRF3

239 appears to have death sensitizing effects distinct from its classical transcriptional activity in the antiviral
240 program.
241 Taken together, we demonstrated that RLR signaling is required for the induction of cell death after
242 DNA damage and that this function is independent of IFN secretion and the induction of canonical
243 ISGs.



244
245 **Fig. 3. Implications of RLR signaling components and IFN signaling on DOX-induced apoptosis.**
246 **(A-F)** Percentage of dead A549 cells with functional KO or OE of the indicated genes relative to total cells counted
247 over time **(A, B, D, E)** or 36 h **(C, F)** post DOX treatment. Data shown represent the results of at least three
248 biologically independent experiments.
249
250 **Role of IRF1 in DNA damage induced apoptosis**
251 Another transcription factor of the IRF family important for antiviral defenses [6, 18], IRF1, has
252 previously also been implicated with the DNA damage response [25]. We hypothesized that upon
253 genotoxic insult, IRF1 might be a downstream target of the RLR/IRF3 pathway, as reported for virus
254 infection, and thereby link RLR activity to the DNA damage response. Indeed, upon DOX treatment,
255 we observed IRF1 upregulation at the mRNA (Fig. 4A) and protein level (Fig. 4B). Of note, *IRF1*
256 induction occurred independently of the presence of p53 (Fig. 4B). In order to determine the relevance
257 of IRF1 to cell death, we next tested *IRF1*$^{-/-}$ cells in DOX treatment. Strikingly, IRF1 depletion almost
258 completely abolished DOX-induced cell death (Fig. 4E, H). Conversely, increasing IRF1 abundance,
259 either by OE through stable transduction or by pre-stimulation of cells with IFN-β or IFN-γ, markedly
260 increased cell death upon DOX treatment (Fig. 4E, F, H), and the percentage of dead cells correlated
261 with IRF1 levels in western blot (Fig. 4C, D). Notably, neither IFN stimulation alone, nor DOX
262 treatment in IFN-primed but IRF1-depleted cells did induce cell death (Fig. S2A, B). Surprisingly, the
263 same phenotype was observed in *RIG-I*$^{-/-}$ conditions (Fig. S2C), in which IRF1 was present, suggesting

a strict requirement of both RLR signaling and *IRF1* induction for proper triggering and/or execution of apoptosis. Similar observations were also made after ETO treatment (Fig. S2D, E), ruling out DOX-specific effects.

The fundamental importance of IRF1 was additionally demonstrated in response to γ-IR. Although irradiation did induce DNA damage in A549 cells (Fig. S2F), we could neither observe induction of *IRF1* expression nor any cell death upon administration of up to 30 Gy (Fig. 4G-I). Strikingly, induction of cell death upon γ-IR was restored under conditions of elevated IRF1 levels, such as stable OE or IFN-γ pre-stimulation (Fig. 4G, H). In line with this, cells in which γ-IR naturally leads to an upregulation of *IRF1* expression, such as PH5CH cells, did exhibit a dose-dependent induction of cell death (Fig. S2G, H).

Thus, we showed that besides p53 and RLR signaling, IRF1 is essential for proper triggering of cell death upon DNA damage. IFNs, in particular IFN-γ, sensitize cells for DNA damage-induced apoptosis through upregulation of IRF1.

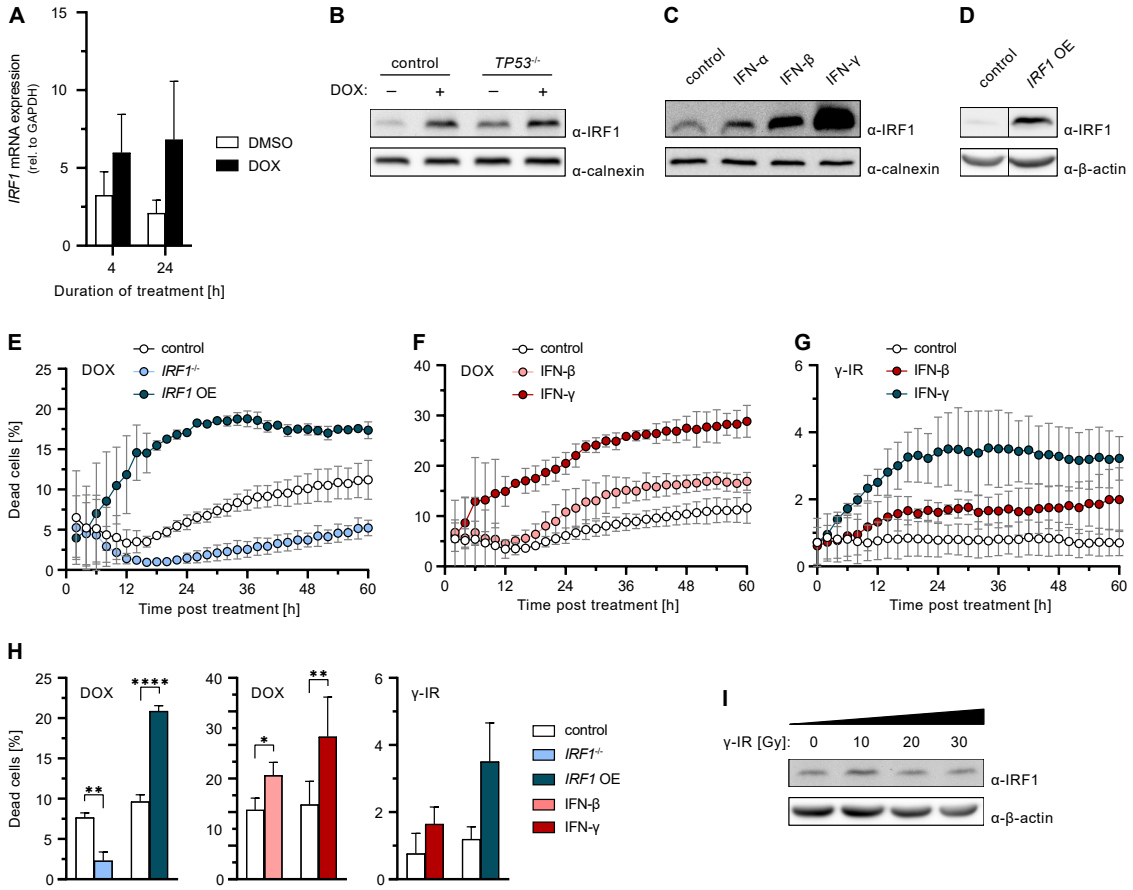


Fig. 4. Relevance of IRF1 on DNA damage-induced cell death.

(A) A549 cells were treated with 1 µM DOX or DMSO for 10 h. IRF1 mRNA transcripts were determined by qRT-PCR. **(B)** A549 cells were treated with 1 µM DOX or DMSO for 10 h. Levels of IRF1 were determined by western blot. **(C)** A549 cells were stimulated with IFN-α, IFN-β, or IFN-γ over-night. Levels of IRF1 were determined by western blot. (**D**) Levels of IRF1 in A549 control and *IRF1* OE cells were determined by western

283 blot. **(E-H)** Percentage of dead A549 cells with functional KO or OE of IRF1, or post IFN pre-stimulation relative
284 to total cells counted over time (**E-G**) or 36 h (**H**) post DOX or γ-IR (20 Gy) treatment. **(I)** A549 cells were γ-
285 irradiated. After 10 h IRF1 protein levels were determined by western blot. (**A, E-H**) Data shown represent the
286 results of at least three biologically independent experiments.
287

288 **Regulation of *IRF1* expression upon DNA damage**

289 Above we have shown that RLR/IRF3 signaling as well as expression of *IRF1* are crucially important
290 for DNA damage-induced cell death. We further found IRF1 to be consistently induced under all tested
291 conditions of DNA damage leading to cell death. We now aimed to confirm whether IRF1 is in fact
292 induced as a downstream target of RLR signaling. We first investigated the induction of *IRF1*
293 expression after RIG-I stimulation using dsRNA as a canonical, highly specific agonist [23]. Indeed,
294 we observed a fully RLR-dependent (RIG-I, MAVS, IRF3) increase of IRF1 levels, with a partial
295 contribution of p65/RELA and IFN signaling (IFNR TKO) (Fig. 5A), in line with a recent report of our
296 lab [18]. dsRNA-stimulation furthermore also led to the induction of cell death, which was fully
297 abolished upon depletion of the RLR signaling components RIG-I, MAVS, or IRF3 (Fig. 5B, D).
298 Depletion of p65/RELA and the IFN receptors (IFNR TKO) had minor pro-survival effects, suggesting
299 a major role for transcription-independent RIPA with a possible but limited role for IFN signaling and
300 ISG induction (Fig. 5C, D). Interestingly and in clear contrast to the situation upon DNA damage,
301 dsRNA-induced cell death was independent of IRF1 (Fig. 5C). Nonetheless, experimentally elevating
302 IRF1 levels markedly increased the percentage of dead cells also in this setting (Fig. S3A, B).
303 These findings confirmed that, despite not being essential for cell death induction, IRF1 is induced
304 downstream of RLR signaling, at least when stimulated by a strong RIG-I specific agonist. We next
305 investigated whether this would be also the case in the context of DNA damage. Unexpectedly, upon
306 treatment of cells with DOX, induction of *IRF1* expression was neither affected by depletion of RLR
307 nor of IFN signaling components, including JAK1 (Fig. 5E, F; Fig. S3C). This suggested *IRF1*
308 expression is induced independently of and coincidentally with antiviral RLR signaling upon DNA
309 damage. We therefore hypothesized sensing of DNA damage might directly induce *IRF1*. To test this,
310 we treated cells with specific inhibitors of the prototypical DSB sensors ATM and ATR, as well as
311 potential downstream pathways. We found *IRF1* induction upon DOX-treatment to be completely
312 blocked by the ATM inhibitor KU-55933 [26] and the ATR inhibitor VE-822 [27], suggesting important
313 roles of these sensors in activation of IRF1 (Fig. 5G; Fig. S3D).
314 As *IRF1* expression has previously been shown to be NF-κB sensitive [28], we employed the common
315 pan-NF-κB and JAK1 inhibitor TPCA-1 [29, 30]. Remarkably, TPCA-1 treatment completely
316 prevented the induction of *IRF1* expression upon DOX treatment, and even strongly diminished basal
317 expression (Fig. 5G, Fig. S3D). This effect could further be confirmed upon RLR-stimulation with
318 dsRNA (Fig. S4A) and even upon IFN-γ treatment, which is a strong and well-studied canonical inducer
319 of *IRF1* (Fig. S4B). We could rule out a cell line (A549) specific effect by testing three other human

cell lines, PH5CH, HeLa and Huh7.5 (Fig. S4C). To our knowledge, this striking effect of TPCA-1 on *IRF1* expression has not been reported before. Again, corroborating IRF1's crucial role in DNA damage-induced apoptosis, supressing *IRF1* induction by TPCA-1 also reduced cell death in DOX-treated A549, PH5CH, HeLa, and Huh7.5 cells (Fig. S4D).

Finally, we aimed to identify which signaling pathway and NF-κB subunit would be responsible for *IRF1* expression upon triggering the DNA damage response. As reported in literature, ATR may signal through CHK1 to activate p50/NFKB1, a potential target of TPCA-1 [31, 32]. We therefore inhibited CHK1 by Rabusertib [33] prior to DOX-treatment. However, our experiments did not reveal any effect of CHK1 inhibition or p50/NFKB1 depletion on IRF1 levels (Fig. 5G; Fig. S3D, E). We hence conclude that a so far elusive pathway downstream of the ATM/ATR system induces *IRF1*.

Taken together, we demonstrated that *IRF1* expression upon DOX-treatment is induced by the DSB sensors ATM/ATR rather than RLR signaling. This induction is independent of CHK1 signaling. Additionally, we identified a previously unappreciated IRF1-depleting effect of the NF-κB inhibitor TPCA-1.

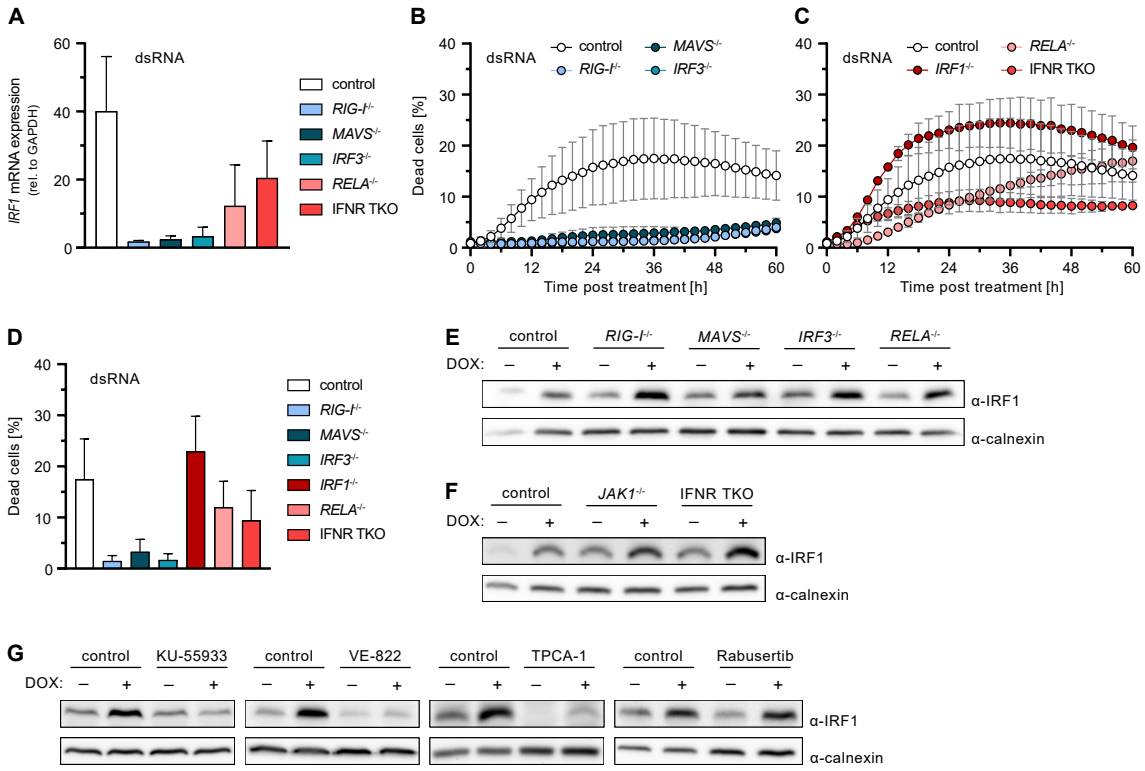


Fig. 5. Effect of cell-intrinsic antiviral signaling components on dsRNA-induced cell death and *IRF1* expression.

(A) A549 cells with functional KO of the indicated genes were stimulated with 2 ng/ml dsRNA for 6 h. IRF1 mRNA transcripts were determined by qRT-PCR. **(B-D)** Percentage of dead A549 cells with functional KO of the indicated genes relative to total cells counted over time **(B, C)** or 36 h **(D)** post dsRNA stimulation. **(E-G)** A549 cells with functional KO of the indicated genes or administration of the indicated inhibitors were treated with

341 2 μM DOX or DMSO for 6 h. Levels of IRF1 were determined by western blot. (**A-D**) Data shown represent the
342 results of at least three biologically independent experiments.

343 **Discussion**

344 Cells, particularly of multicellular organisms, have elaborate systems in place ensuring the integrity of
345 their genome, as DNA damage poses severe risks of accumulating tumorigenic mutations or alterations.
346 In response to excessive DNA damage beyond the potential of being properly repaired, cells trigger the
347 execution of cell death programs, most commonly apoptosis [34]. This is also exploited for common
348 cancer chemoradiotherapies, in which excessive DNA damage is radiologically (e.g., γ-IR) or
349 pharmacologically (e.g., DOX or ETO) introduced, leading to the induction of cell death programs
350 particularly in dividing tissues such as tumors. Elucidating the underlying mechanisms of how DNA
351 damage molecularly leads to cell death is crucial to a better understanding of the circumstances leading
352 to cancer and the pathways relevant for chemoradiotherapy. While classical DNA damage checkpoint
353 control via p53 has been investigated thoroughly [1], much less is known about the relevance and
354 contribution of non-canonical pathways. For example, a ground-breaking study surprisingly found the
355 antiviral type I IFN pathway essential for certain chemotherapies' efficacy [35]. Cytostatic and pro-
356 apoptotic effects of IFNs have long been noticed [36-38]; however, it remained unresolved what
357 triggered the production of IFNs in the studied context in the first place. Recent data also revealed cell-
358 intrinsic triggering of cell death upon activation of antiviral signaling adapters, such as MAVS and
359 STING. Interestingly, this was not only the case for viral infections, but also in response to DNA
360 damage [10, 11, 39].
361 In the present study, we confirm this interrelationship between DNA damage response and antiviral
362 signaling pathways, and we demonstrate an almost complete dependence of DOX- and ETO-triggered
363 cell death on the presence of intact RLR/MAVS signaling. In clear contrast to recently published data,
364 other branches of the cell-intrinsic antiviral defense, such as the TLR or the cGAS/STING system [10,
365 40, 41], did not affect DOX-induced cell death in our experimental setup. Instead, the cytosolic RNA
366 sensors RIG-I and, to a lesser extent, MDA5 were triggered and essential for the induction of cell death.
367 This is in line with a study by Ranoa et al. suggesting small nuclear RNAs U1 and U2 translocate into
368 the cytoplasm in irradiated cells and trigger RIG-I activation [11]. In our experimental system, an intact
369 RIG-I/MDA5-MAVS-IRF3 axis was essential for DNA damage induced cell death; however, we could
370 not observe canonical transcriptional activities of IRF3, such as the induction of IFN genes or ISGs.
371 While the relevance of both IRF3 and p65/RELA suggested the involvement of *IFNB* expression, KO
372 of the receptors for all three types of IFNs (IFNR TKO) did not impact cell death. A plausible
373 mechanism for this IFN-independent triggering of apoptosis is RIPA, involving LUBAC-dependent
374 ubiquitylation of IRF3 and subsequent activation of pro-apoptotic BH3-only proteins [16]. The clear
375 contribution of p65/RELA in our experiments might be through its transcriptional activation of further

376 pro-apoptotic proteins [42]. To our knowledge, cooperative effects between RIPA and NF-κB have not
377 been described before and may be an interesting subject for future investigations.
378 Efficient sensing of nuclear DSBs and triggering an appropriate response is critical for cell survival
379 upon DNA damage, or for initiating cell death and preventing potentially cancerous transformation. As
380 expected, we observed an essential role for p53, highlighting its central function in checkpoint control,
381 coordinating DNA damage repair and triggering apoptosis as a last resort [43]. Interestingly, depletion
382 of p53 reduced the number of apoptotic cells at early time points, but increased cell death at later times.
383 Thus, absence of p53 led to a lack of induction of apoptosis in response to DOX-mediated DSBs at first,
384 but likely massive accumulation of unrepaired DNA damage eventually led to increased, putatively
385 necrotic cell death [44]. As a factor potentially linking the DNA damage response and antiviral
386 signaling, we investigated the role of the multifunctional transcription factor IRF1, as it is known to be
387 involved in both the DNA damage response [8, 25] and IFN signaling [6, 18, 45]. Indeed, we found that
388 *IRF1* was considerably upregulated upon DOX and ETO treatment as well as γ-IR in different cell lines.
389 Interestingly, only in A549 cells, described to be relatively radioresistant as a common characteristic
390 for non-small cellular lung cancers [46], *IRF1* was not appreciably induced upon irradiation. We also
391 observed a reduced histone H2A.X phosphorylation after γ-IR compared to DOX treatment, but
392 potential underlying mechanisms are only partially understood and may comprise several processes [47,
393 48]. Nonetheless, we could further corroborate this clear correlation between *IRF1* induction and
394 triggering/execution of a cell death program on a functional level. Experimentally increasing IRF1
395 levels by stable OE or by pre-treatment of cells with IFN-γ, known as a strong inducer of *IRF1* [45],
396 radioresistance of A549 cells could be overcome. A similar effect has previously been demonstrated in
397 T cells [25]. In our experiments, increased *IRF1* expression also led to a sensitization towards DOX-
398 treatment. *Vice versa, IRF1* KO almost completely rescued cell survival upon DOX-, ETO- and γ-IR-
399 induced DNA damage. These observations clearly establish a fundamentally important role of IRF1 in
400 DNA damage-induced cell death. This is in accordance with literature suggesting IRF1 as a biomarker
401 for radioresistance in tumor cells [49]. For example, extremely radioresistant osteosarcomas were
402 shown to exhibit significantly reduced *IRF1* expression levels [50]. Our data further support
403 establishing IRF1 as a predictive biomarker in chemoradiotherapy in tumor patients.
404 Our finding strongly suggested IRF1 to be the functional link between the DNA damage response and
405 the antiviral system, with RLR signaling (either directly or via the IFN/JAK/STAT cascade) leading to
406 transcriptional activation of IRF1. However, KO experiments clearly refuted this hypothesis. Neither
407 KO of essential factors of the RLR pathway nor of IFN signaling components abolished *IRF1* induction
408 upon DNA damage, suggesting that RLR signaling may activate IRF1 post-translationally. Generally,
409 IRF1 is thought to be only regulated on a transcriptional level [45]. However, one study reports the
410 requirement for "licensing" of IRF1 to become fully active, which required TLR signaling and MYD88
411 [51]. In preliminary experiments, we did not find any evidence for post-translational modifications in
412 our setting, but this may warrant deeper investigations in the future. Alternatively, IRF1 might enhance

413 the transcriptional response of IRF3, as reported before [52]. While we cannot rule out this possibility,
414 the virtually complete inhibition of cell death in *IRF1*$^{-/-}$ despite abundant presence of IRF3 makes this
415 unlikely. In another study, we have also not found any indication of a dampening of IRF3 responses in
416 A549 *IRF1*$^{-/-}$ cells [18]. Notably, despite IRF1 being critically important for cell death induction in our
417 system, *IRF1* (over-)expression alone did not suffice to elicit apoptosis. We therefore suspect RLR
418 signaling and IRF1 activity to cooperate further downstream, putatively via the transcriptional
419 activation of complementary pro-apoptotic factors.
420
421 It is interesting to note that cell death is also elicited upon RLR stimulation by dsRNA (the canonical
422 way to trigger antiviral signaling). Also in this case, *IRF1* is induced, but strictly dependent on RIG-I
423 and to a lesser extent dependent on IFN signaling. Surprisingly, however, depletion of IRF1 did not
424 affect the cell death rate upon dsRNA stimulation, pointing towards transcription-independent
425 mechanisms such as RIPA [15]. Still, KO of NF-κB (*RELA*) or the IFN receptors (IFNR TKO) affect
426 cell death, suggesting some transcriptional regulation, which, however, was independent of IRF1. This
427 may suggest that full-fledged RLR signaling upon dsRNA encounter induces a sufficiently broad
428 transcriptional response, which (in contrast to the situation upon DNA damage) itself is capable of
429 triggering apoptosis. Strikingly, even in dsRNA stimulation, ectopic OE of *IRF1* or pre-treatment of
430 cells with IFN-γ led to a notable increase in the number of dying cells, putatively by the same
431 cooperative pro-apoptotic effects observed in the case of DNA damage. This observation of a general
432 sensitization for cell death by IRF1 is in line with data showing that *IRF1* OE enhances apoptosis in
433 breast or gastric cancer treatment [53-55]. It is further plausible to speculate that reported pro-apoptotic
434 effects of type I IFN [56, 57] would also be mediated by upregulation of *IRF1* through homodimeric
435 STAT1 transcription factor complexes (GAF) inadvertently formed early upon IFNAR engagement
436 [58]. This could mechanistically explain how IFN-α improved chemotherapy response and overall
437 survival in a murine tumor model [35]. Thus, evidence further accumulates suggesting *IRF1*-inducing
438 agents to be more broadly considered as adjuvants in tumor therapy.
439 Two central questions remain: firstly, which pro-apoptotic factors are specifically induced by IRF1
440 upon DNA damage that so potently sensitize cells to committing suicide upon (slight) RLR triggering.
441 To this end, we are currently investigating IRF1-dependent candidate genes induced upon DOX-
442 treatment at a transcriptomic level. Secondly, how is *IRF1* induced upon DNA damage in the first place
443 if not through classical STAT1:STAT1 activity. In our study, we found its transcriptional regulation to
444 be fully independent of RLR signaling and p53 but completely reliant on DNA DSB sensing via ATM
445 and ATR. Still, the downstream pathway leading to *IRF1* expression remains elusive. While p65/RELA
446 or p50/NFKB1 depletion did not affect *IRF1* induction, it was completely abolished by TPCA-1, a
447 commonly known inhibitor of NF-κB. Interestingly, TPCA-1 considerably reduced baseline *IRF1*
448 expression independent of the cell line used, and could even abolish the strong induction upon IFN-γ
449 treatment. Thus, in addition to its inhibitory effects on NF-κB, JAK1, and STAT3 [29, 30, 59], TPCA-

450 1 appears to specifically and very efficiently inhibit the activity of an essential transcription factor for
451 *IRF1*.
452 In conclusion, our study highlights the critical relevance of the antiviral RLR system for the proper and
453 timely induction of cell death upon DNA damage. We provide evidence for independent but cooperative
454 involvement of p53, IRF1 and IRF3 activity upon detection of DNA DSBs by the ATM/ATR
455 machinery. We show that elevating expression levels of *IRF1* lead to the sensitization towards cell death
456 across different genotoxic insults, such as chemotherapeutics, γ-IR or cytosolic dsRNA (i.e. virus
457 infection). These data corroborate a fundamental role for IRF1 and RLR signaling in DNA damage-
458 mediated cell death and suggest future exploration of *IRF1* inducers, such as IFN-γ, together with low-
459 dose RIG-I agonists for their potential as highly efficacious adjuvants in chemoradiotherapy.
460 Additionally, our findings support IRF1 as a biomarker predictive for chemo- and radio-sensitivity of
461 tumors.
462

463 **Literature**

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

This study was conceived and designed by M.B. and D.Z., critical intellectual input was provided by V.G.M., experiments were performed by D.Z. with assistance and contributions by S.W., S.S.B. and M.G.V., data was evaluated by D.Z. and M.B., the manuscript was written by D.Z. and M.B. and edited and approved of by all authors.

Ethics Approval

This research did not involve human or animal material; ethical approval was not required.

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Data Availability

The raw data acquired for this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.