Overburdened Ferroptotic Stress Impairs Tooth Morphogenesis

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Abstract

Regulated cell death (RCD) has been reported to play a critical role in organ development. Despite apoptosis, the best known and most studied RCD in organogenesis, whether newly identified non-apoptotic cell death participates in the physiological process like development is barely understood. As a metabolic-related cell death pathway, ferroptosis, characterized by iron-dependent and lethal lipid peroxidation, was firstly described in 2012 and is now being wildly explored for its pathological function. Main factors of ferroptosis, lipid metabolism, ROS biology, and iron regulation, are also critically involved in developmental progress but hard to manipulate and investigate effectively *in vivo* through a high throughput way. Here in our study, an *ex vivo* culture model of tooth germ is applied to investigate the possible role of ferroptosis in organogenesis, since both RCD and risk factors of ferroptosis (lipid metabolism, ROS biology, and iron regulation) participate in tooth morphogenesis and the well-established *ex vivo* culture model enables effective manipulation of ferroptosis. To investigate whether ferroptotic stress exists and may influence tooth germ development, we detect the spatiotemporal expression of Gpx4, a core anti-lipid peroxidation enzyme in ferroptosis, in mouse development first molar and incisor. Morphological changes in each group with/without activation of ferroptosis are identified by gross anatomy, sequential HE staining, and related 3D reconstruction. Ferroptosis-related genes, lipid peroxidation, the morphology of mitochondria, and iron accumulation are detected to confirm the activation of ferroptosis. Inhibition of ferroptosis by DFO, Fer-1, and Lip-1, could partly rescue organogenesis of erastin-impaired tooth morphogenesis. Moreover, apoptosis is not significantly activated in erastin-impaired tooth germ indicated by cleavage of Caspase-3 and TUNEL staining. These results demonstrate that ferroptotic stress exists in tooth organogenesis but is well controlled by following upregulation of Gpx4; Overburdened ferroptotic stress cause by erastin significantly suppress tooth morphogenesis.

Key Words: ferroptosis, tooth development, organ culture, cell death, non-apoptotic

cell death

Introduction

A delicate balance between cell division and regulated cell death (RCD) is crucial for

the development of tissues and organs [1]. In organs such as the nervous, immune,

and reproductive systems, cells are initially produced in excess and are subsequently

removed by RCD. During organ development, structures with transient functions are

also eliminated by RCD when they are no longer necessary [2]. The best-known

example of this is the formation of digits in higher vertebrates, where the interdigital

webs are eliminated primarily through the apoptotic machinery [3]. RCD plays a vital

role in animal development and adult life by eliminating abnormal and potentially

harmful cells [4]. Apoptosis, the most extensively studied form of RCD, shrinks the

nucleus and buds the plasma membrane (without rupturing it), making it essential in

achieving cell number regulation, tissue remodeling, and sculpting structures, driving

morphogenesis during organ development [5].

However, several new types of cell death, including pyroptosis, necroptosis, and

ferroptosis, have been discovered [6]. Unlike apoptosis, these newly discovered RCDs

are characterized by pore formation and/or rupture of the plasma membrane, thus

termed as regulated necrotic cell death (RNCD) [7]. While apoptosis benefits organ

morphogenesis in certain circumstances, whether RNCD and its regulatory

mechanisms are biologically required in organ development remains poorly

understood. Pyroptosis and necroptosis are mainly activated by external pathogens or

damage-associated molecular patterns [8], whereas ferroptosis is a distinct form of

iron-dependent, lipid peroxidation-driven programmed cell death [9]. Ferroptosis is a

particular type of cell death that links lipid metabolism, ROS (reactive oxygen species)

biology, iron regulation, and disease [10]. Despite the pathological role of ferroptosis

and/or ferroptotic stress in multiple diseases [11,12], recent studies have identified the

occurrence of ferroptosis in embryonal erythropoiesis and aging [13] and aged

skeletal muscle [14] , indicating its unrecognized role in physiological processes.

Unlike autonomous activation of apoptosis during organ development, the broken

balance between ferroptotic stress and its suppressing mechanisms is now considered

the main reason for ferroptosis. Recent studies demonstrated that MYSM1 deficiency

causes human hematopoietic stem cell loss by ferroptosis, highlighting the broader

developmental and regenerative role of ferroptosis [15]. The investigation into the

potential involvement of ferroptosis and/or ferroptotic stress, other than rest forms of

non-apoptotic cell death like pyroptosis and necroptosis, in organ morphogenesis is an

area of great interest. However, conducting high-throughput analysis through *in vivo*

studies presents challenges as it relies heavily on generating specific transgenic mice,

since eastin, the classic small molecule used to induce ferroptosis is feasible *in vivo*

[16]. Thus, there's a crucial need for a more adequate model to explore the

ferroptosis/ferroptotic stress involved in development

The process of tooth development, which contains cell number regulation

(proliferation, differentiation, and extinction of ameloblast), tissue remodeling

(elimination of transient structure called enamel knot), and sculpting structures (cusp

formation) [17,18], is an ideal model for the investigation of RCD in organ

development. Moreover, *ex vivo* culture of tooth germ is a well-established study

system allows for the controlled manipulation of environmental, genetic and

pharmacological factors (like erastin), which can influence developmental events of

tooth [19], providing compelling evidence for its usefulness as an efficient research

model in studying ferroptosis/ferroptotic stress within developmental process [20].

In the present study, erastin was used in an *ex vivo* culture model of tooth germ to

investigate the possible role of ferroptosis during tooth morphogenesis. To definitively

identify ferroptosis, multiple markers are needed, including lipid peroxidation, iron

accumulation, mitochondria injury, and the expression of ferroptosis-related genes [9].

According to our results, Gpx4 (glutathione peroxidase 4, a peroxidase to counter the

oxidation of lipids in membranes) [21] is upregulated according to odontogenesis and

amelogenesis together with obvious accumulation of iron. Erastin significantly

suppressed the morphogenesis of cultured tooth germ and showed a dose-dependent

manner. And meanwhile, erastin-treated tooth germ has elevated lipid peroxidation

indicated by expression of 4-HNE (4-hydroxy-2-nonenal, end-product of lipid

peroxidation), enhanced iron accumulation, shrunken mitochondria, and alternated

expression of ferroptosis related genes. However, all these phenomena could be partially rescued by Fer-1, a classical inhibitor of ferroptosis.

In summary, our results suggest that erastin induces morphologic defects of tooth germ is conducted by the activation of ferroptosis. Ferroptotic stress and its regulatory mechanism participate in tooth morphogenesis, which borders our understanding of the physiological function of non-apoptotic regulated cell death in organ development.

Results

Spatiotemporal characterization of Gpx4 expression and iron accumulation in tooth morphogenesis

In the different developmental stages of the mouse first submandibular molar, the expression of Gpx4 was detected by IHC (Fig 1A). These data revealed gradually upregulated expression of Gpx4 in tooth germ from E13.5 to E17.5 (Fig 1A-a to 1A-c), but started to decrease from P1 to P3 (Fig 1A-d to 1A-e). An enlarged view of each group indicated a different expression level of Gpx4 between dental epithelia and mesenchyme (Fig 1A-a' to 1A-e'). After calculating the IOD (Integrated optical density) of Gpx4 in epithelia, mesenchyme, and total area of tooth germ respectively, we found that Gpx4 in dental epithelia is higher than that in mesenchyme although they both increased from E13.5 to E17.5, which could be observed in Fig 1A-a' to 1A-d'. Negative controls are listed in Fig S1A.

To better illustrate sequential changes of iron accumulation, another risk factor for ferroptosis, we detected iron concentration and the expression of Gpx4 within mouse submandibular incisor by IF (Fig 1B and 1C). The results showed accumulation of iron is upregulated during the differentiation of odontoblast and ameloblast. In contrast, odontoblast gained a much stronger positive fluoresces signal reflecting a high concentration of Fe^{3+} than that in ameloblast, which is contrary to the expression pattern of Gpx4 observed in developing molar (Fig 1B-a to 1B-d). Then, we found similar but not identical expression pattern of Gpx4 in the incisor when compared to that in a developmental molar; namely, Gpx4 is still positively related to differentiation and maturation of both odontoblast and ameloblast but did not undergo

reduction at the late stage within incisor (Fig 1C-a to 1C-c).

Collectively, our results demonstrated that tooth development was accompanied by

enhancing risk factors of ferroptosis (iron accumulation) and strengthening anti-

ferroptosis mechanism (upregulation of Gpx4), ferroptotic stress might be higher in

odontogenesis than in amelogenesis since it underwent higher iron accumulation but

less upregulated expression of Gpx4.

Erastin impairs tooth morphogenesis especially within dental mesenchyme

To investigate the possible function of ferroptosis in tooth development, an *ex vivo*

culture model of the molar germ was established as described before [22], with or

without treatment of erastin. Successful *ex vivo* culturing of tooth germ from D0 to

D7 is presented in Fig S1B. All the molar germs were dissected from E15.5 mousses'

mandibles and cultured in medium with or without erastin (10μM) for 1, 3, and 5 days

(Fig 2A). Comparing Fig 2A-d and 2A-h, gross anatomy showed apparent tiny tooth

germ in the erastin treated group than that of CTRL (Control group) in D5 (Day 5).

Histological analysis of D5 was performed in Fig 2B; treatment of erastin (10μM)

elevated the number of necrotic-like cells (NLCs), especially in dental mesenchyme

(Fig 2B-b' and -d'). We also found a dose-dependent manner of erastin in suppressing

tooth morphogenesis (Fig 2C). In D5 incubation of different concentrations (1.5, 5, 10,

and 20μM) of erastin, tooth germ deteriorated morphologically (decreasing size, Fig

2C-a to -e) and histologically (elevating number of NLCs within dental mesenchyme,

Fig 2C-f' to -j') according to the increasing concentration of erastin of erastin

treatment. Relative development suppression of tooth germs was then calculated by

height, width, and coronal area compared to the CTRL (Fig 2D); The radar graph

showed significant dose-dependent impairment of erastin to tooth germ, the original

bar graphs are listed in Fig S2.

Ferroptosis is activated in erastin-treated molar germ

Accurate identification of ferroptosis should be determined by series markers,

including iron concentration, lipid peroxidation, mitochondria dysmorphia, and

overexpression of ferroptotic genes. We estimated the activation of ferroptosis in

tooth germ. Indicated by TPE-o-Py (*ortho*-substituted pyridinyl-functionalized

tetraphenylethylene) [23] detection in Era-10μM of D5 (Fig 3A-a to 3A-b''), more

iron is accumulated than that in CTRL and the region of high concentration mainly

located in dental mesenchyme (red, Fig 3A-a and 3A-b). Lipid peroxidation was

indicated by the expression of 4-HNE; the distribution pattern of 4-HNE was similar

to iron accumulation which suggested the activation of iron-dependent lipid

peroxidation occurred within Era-10μM of D5 (Fig 3A-c to 3A-d''). Results of D1

and D3 showed similar patterns in the accumulation of iron and the expression of 4-

HNE (Fig S3), also a dose-dependent manner in D5 (Fig S4). Morphological changes

of mitochondria revealed severe shrinkage of mitochondria in dental mesenchyme of

Era-10μM (Fig 3B). The size of mitochondria in each group is calculated in Fig 3C;

results clearly showed the main size distribution of Era-10μM is significantly

decreased. Then, the expression of *Gpx4*, *Slc7a11,* and *Ptgs2* in each tooth germ was

modulated by q-PCR. Fig 3D showed *Ptgs2*, a gene representing the peroxidation

level, dramatically increased in tooth germ after erastin treatment, while *Gpx4* and

Slc7a11, anti-ferroptosis related genes, underwent upregulated but much more

moderate expression. All these results contributed to the confirmation of the activated

ferroptosis occurred in erastin-treated molar germ, and demonstrated that no lethal

concentration of erastin could lead to tooth morphogenesis partly through activation

of ferroptosis in dental mesenchyme.

Ferroptotic inhibitors partly rescue erastin-impaired tooth organogenesis

To further prove the function of ferroptosis in the suppression of tooth germ

morphogenesis, a rescue assay was applied by using Fer-1 (classical inhibitor of

ferroptosis), Lip-1 (inhibitor of lipid peroxidation), and DFO (iron chelator) to co-

incubated tooth germ with erastin.

As results shown in Fig 4A, although all these three molecules show rescuing

efficiency, Fer-1 holds the highest efficiency in recovering the organogenesis of molar

germ in gross anatomy (Fig 4A-c) and reducing the number of NLCs at the

histological level (Fig 4A-h and 4A-h'). Calculating the height, width, area of tooth

germ (Fig 4B, original bar graphs are listed in Fig S5), and the number of NLCs (Fig

4C) showed inhibitors could partly rescue impairment by erastin, while Fer-1 rescued

most.

To avoid bias caused by sectioning, sequential HE slides of CTRL and Era-1.5μM

were applied for 3D reconstruction as previously described [24]. In Fig 5D-a to 5D-j,

tooth germ in CTRL showed well-developed morphology in the 3D models. However,

cusp formation in Era-1.5μM (Fig 4D-e to 4D-h) underwent significant suppression

comparing to CTRL in different directions of view; original sequential slides are listed

in Fig S6 to CTRL and Fig S7 to Era-1.5μM. 3D reconstruction was also performed in

Era-1.5μM+Fer-1 (Fig 4D-i to 4D-l). Compared to Era-1.5μM (Fig 4D-e to 4D-h),

Fer-1 reversed abnormal features dramatically in tooth morphology and cusp

formation. Source sequential sections are listed in Fig S8.

Ferroptosis is the dominant cell death type contributes to erastin-impaired tooth

morphogenesis

We further estimated key characteristics of ferroptosis to further assess whether Fer-1

rescued erastin-impaired tooth germ through inhibiting ferroptosis. Comparing to

CTRL group after 5 days *ex vivo* culture (Fig 5A-a and 5A-d), iron accumulation and

lipid peroxidation (indicated by 4-HNE) in Era-1.5μM is much higher (Fig 5A-b and

5A-e). Fer-1 treatment vanished iron accumulation and lipid peroxidation caused by

erastin (Fig 5A-c and 5A-f). Results of TEM clearly showed decreased mitochondria

shrinkage in Era-1.5μM+Fer-1 than that of Era-1.5μM (Fig 5B and 5C). All these data

convinced that Fer-1 rescued erastin-impaired tooth morphogenesis through inhibiting

ferroptosis.

Apoptosis is the main innate cell death type in physiological process. To exclude

possible over activation of apoptosis induced by erastin treatment, we detected CL-

CASP3 by IF staining, main executor protein of apoptosis, in each group. In Fig 5D,

CL-CASP3 is weakly expressed in CTRL group since the activation of apoptosis is

physiologically required in tooth development (Fig 5D). The expression of CL-

CASP3 slightly increased in both Era-1.5μM and Era-1.5μM+Fer-1, but showed no

statistical differences comparing to CTRL group (Fig S9A). TUNEL assay is also

performed to identify apoptotic cells by detecting DNA damage, results further

convinced that apoptosis is not significantly activated in erastin treated tooth germ

(Fig S9B). Taken together, ferroptosis is the dominant cell death led by erastin

treatment in impaired tooth germ.

Discussion

In the last several decades, the beneficial role of apoptosis in regulating organ

development and tissue regeneration has been identified [25]. Apoptosis in tooth

development had been characterized by the activation of Caspase 3 and DNA damage,

which revealed a spatiotemporal apoptotic cell death pattern due to different stage of

tooth morphogenesis [26]. This raises the question of whether other newly determined

non-apoptotic cell death pathways also participate in the physiological processes like

development, maintaining homeostasis, ageing, etc. Except for NETosis, a neutrophil

extracellular trap-related cell death, the possible function and mechanism of the rest

non-apoptotic cell death including, pyroptosis, necroptosis, and ferroptosis, are still

barely investigated. Characterized by its close relationship with the metabolism of

lipid, iron, and ROS [27,28], risk factors inducing ferroptotic stress and/or activating

ferroptosis also critically involved in development and ageing, which made

ferroptosis and its regulatory mechanism, other than apoptosis, pyroptosis, and

necroptosis, a promising undiscovered type of cell death during tooth development.

To explore the potential involvement of ferroptosis in organogenesis, we have

developed an *ex vivo* culture model of tooth germ morphogenesis. This system allows

for the application of erastin to induce significant activation of ferroptosis throughout

the developmental process, offers a valuable opportunity to investigate the specific

mechanisms underlying the role of ferroptosis in organ development. Our study

detected the expression of Gpx4 and the accumulation of iron both in mouse

submandibular incisor and developing first molar. Although Gpx4 expressed

ubiquitously in both tooth germ and incisor of mouse, its abundance differs in

different cell types. Results revealed an increasing iron accumulation both in

odontoblast and ameloblast according to the developmental process. The

spatiotemporal expression of Gpx4 is also positively linked to odontogenesis and

amelogenesis. This phenomenon indicated growing ferroptotic stress (accumulating

iron) and strengthening anti-ferroptosis mechanism (increasing expression of Gpx4)

physiologically coexisted and may maintain a critical balance along with the

differentiation and maturation of odontoblast and ameloblast. However, the discovery

of changes in iron and lipid metabolism during tooth morphogenesis is not novel. In

the 1930s, pioneer scientists in dental biology had already identified the presence of

iron in the tooth of different animals [29-31], then found some defects of enamel in

mouse is related to abnormal iron metabolism [32]. Lipid metabolism and lipid

peroxidation, the other core risk factors of ferroptosis, were also described in the early

stage of dental biology research [20,33,34]. All these factors had been found

respectively but were considered relevant until the discovery of ferroptosis and the

established conception of ferroptotic stress. Our results provided a new perspective to

reconsider the underlying function of all these ancient studies in a comprehensive

manner. They illustrated the importance of the Gpx4-dependent anti-ferroptosis

pathway in managing all these already existing ferroptotic stress during tooth

morphogenesis.

To further investigate the meaning of this precarious balance between ferroptotic

stress and expression of Gpx4, we use erastin to inhibit the internalization of GSH,

which is the critical substrate for Gpx4 to protect cells from lipid peroxidation.

Although Gpx4 (-/-) mice die embryonically in utero by midgestation (E7.5) and are

associated with a lack of normal structural compartmentalization [35], specific

deletion of Gpx4 in neutrophil [36] and chondrocyte [37] both lead to ferroptosis-

induced organ dysregulation and degeneration. Thus, it is essential to assess the

biological function Gpx4-dependent ferroptotic suppressing system. In our study,

erastin significantly impaired tooth morphogenesis in a dose-dependent manner

within the *ex vivo* tooth germ culture model. The *ex vivo* organ culture of tooth germ

is a well-established classical model for the study of tooth morphogenesis. Compared

to *in vivo* study, the *ex vivo* culture of tooth germ is convenient for manipulating

culture conditions and investigate factors affecting tooth germ in a high throughput

way [38]. Although lacking of circulation and immune system, the *ex vivo* culture of

the tooth germ, other than the traditional 2D culture of dental cells *in vitro*, can retain

most properties of tooth development, like interactions among oral epithelia,

mesenchyme, and stromal cells. We successfully established this model and the tooth

germs from D0 to D7 are well developed (Fig S1B). To induce ferroptosis, erastin is

the most used agent inhibiting GSH transport but is not stable *in vivo,* which makes *ex*

vivo organ culture of tooth germ the ideal way to study the possible function of

ferroptosis/ferroptotic stress in tooth morphogenesis. Moreover, according to our

results, erastin treatment will not induce overactivation of apoptosis in tooth germ

(Fig 5D).

The histologic analysis by HE staining showed an increased number of NLCs

located in dental mesenchyme of erastin-treated tooth germ. 3D reconstruction of all

the slides convinced that necrotic mainly occurred in the region of the odontoblast

layer. Unlike CL-CASP3 to apoptosis, membrane localization of GSDM family

proteins and MLKL to pyroptosis and necroptosis respectively, ferroptosis is a special

type of cell death which have unique inducer but no special proteins reflecting its

activation. Thus, ferroptosis in erastin-treated tooth germ is determined by the

accumulation of iron, upregulation of 4-HNE, shrunken and condensed mitochondria,

dramatically upregulated expression of *Psg2* (risk marker to ferroptosis), and mildly

increased expression of *Gpx4, Slc7a11* (protective factor to ferroptosis). These results

indicated that erastin could lead to abnormal tooth morphology via activating

ferroptosis. Moreover, characterized by more apparent NLCs, stronger iron and 4-

HNE fluorescence signal, and severer mitochondria degeneration, dental mesenchyme

cell/odontoblast seems more sensitive to erastin-induced ferroptosis than that of dental

epithelium cell/ameloblast. This difference in ferroptotic sensitivity could be

explained by the results in Fig 1, which showed that more iron accumulation and less

Gpx4 expression is in odontoblast compared to similar regions of ameloblast both

within the incisor and the developing molar. This phenomenon is interesting and

worthy of further investigation.

According to our results, ferroptotic stress is physiologically increased during tooth

development. Thus, rather than "initially activate ferroptosis" in tooth morphogenesis,

erastin, a system x_c^- inhibitor, inhibits GSH production, and induced ferroptosis in

tooth germ is more likely lead by "overburdened ferroptotic stress". As a multi-step process of cell death, the different inhibitor has the different target to suppress ferroptosis. Here in our study, regular ferroptosis inhibitors were applied in the rescue assay of impaired tooth morphogenesis. Tooth germ was treated by Fer-1, Lip-1 (radical trapping agents which inhibit the propagation of lipid peroxidation), and DFO (an iron chelator). Surprisingly, although all these inhibitors could reverse erastin-induced impairment of tooth morphogenesis, Fer-1 reduced the number of NLCs much more efficiently than lip-1 and DFO. Different from lip-1 or DFO, which only targets lipid peroxidation or labile iron accumulation, Fer-1 could both inhibit lipid peroxidation and reduce the labile iron pool in cells, notably is not consumed while inhibiting iron-dependent lipid peroxidation [39]. Sustaining double effects of Fer-1 in inhibiting ferroptosis possibly enables it effectively rescue the impairment of tooth germ than other agents.

In conclusion, by using *ex vivo* culture model of tooth germ, we identified continuing accumulation of ferroptotic stress in both odontogenesis and amelogenesis during tooth development. Activation of ferroptosis impaired tooth morphogenesis, especially within dental mesenchyme, and could be partly rescued by ferroptotic inhibitor. This study provides a promising model to effectively investigate the developmental role of ferroptosis and will broaden our knowledge about possible involvement of non-apoptotic RCD during organogenesis.

Materials and methods

Animals and organ culture

ICR mice were purchased from Chengdu Dossy Experimental Animals Co., Ltd (Sichuan, China). All animal work was done according to the National Institutes of Health guidebook and approved by the Committee on the Ethics of Animal Experiments of Sichuan University (WCHSIRB-D-2021-12544). The presence of a vaginal plug was used as an indication of embryonic day 0 (E0). The first mandibular molar tooth germs of E15.5 were dissected under stereomicroscope (Carl Zeiss,

Germany). All the dissection steps were performed on ice. The dissected tooth germs

were placed in the upper chamber of the Trans-well (3450, Corning, USA) and four

tooth germs were placed on one dish. The culture medium and drugs were mixed and

placed in the lower chamber. Tooth germs were cultured in DMEM/F12 supplemented

with 10% fetal bovine serum, 50 U/ml penicillin/streptomycin, and 100 μg/ml

ascorbic acid and incubated at 37°C and 5% CO_2. Medium was changed every other

day. Tooth germs were cultured for 5 days in the presence of different concentration

of Erastin (0μM, 1.5μM, 5μM, 10μM, 20μM). Culture medium added with Fer-

1(Ferrostatin-1 1μM), Lip-1(Liproxstatin-1, 200nM), DFO (Deferasirox, 100μM)

were used to pretreat molar germ for 4 hours. All these small molecules were

purchased from Selleck. After 5 days of cultivation, the tooth germs were fixed in 4%

PFA, embedded in paraffin. Tooth germs were photographed at 0-day, 1 day, 3 day, 5

day and each tooth size (width, height and area) were measured (n=9 for each group)

by using the modified method reported in the literature previously. Each experiment

was repeated 3 times [40].

Immunohistochemistry

Sections were dewaxed and rehydrated before antigen repair, and then cooled to room

temperature. Sections were incubated overnight at 4°C with Gpx4（1:200, Invitrogen,

PA5-102521）in 2% bovine serum albumin (BSA)/phosphate buffered saline (PBS),

pH 7.4. Negative control sections were incubated with 2% BSA/PBS. After washed,

sections were then incubated with SignalStain® Boost IHC Detection Reagent (8114S,

Cell Signal Technology, USA) and then washed and incubated with diaminobenzidine

(DAB) to detect any reactions and were examined by light microscopy after

counterstaining with hematoxylin.

Immunofluorescence and iron probe staining

Tissue sections were treated with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) with 0.5% Triton

X-100 for permeabilization. After washing and blocking, sections were incubated with

4-HNE (1:200, Abcam, ab48506), cleaved Caspase 3 (1:200, Cell Signaling

Technology, 9664) in blocking buffer (PBS and 2% bovine serum albumin) overnight

at 4□. After washed, second antibody Alexa Fluor® 488 (1:200, Abcam, ab150077), Alexa Fluor® 594 (1:200, Abcam, ab150116) mixed with 4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI) was applied. Incubate at room temperature for one to two hours and then wash and seal the slices.

To accurately detect the changes of iron accumulation within differently cultured tooth germs, we use an aggregation-induced emission featured iron (III) probe from ortho-substituted pyridinyl-functionalized tetraphenylethylene (TPE-o-Py) [23], which is kindly gifted by Prof. Youhong Tang. This probe displays high sensitivity and selectivity toward iron (III) detection. The recognition arises from the position isomer of ortho-substitution, and the fact that TPE-o-Py has a low acid dissociation constant (pKa) that is close to that of hydrolyzed Fe^{3+}. The iron probe staining was performed as described. Briefly, TPE-o-Py was dissolved in THF (Tetrahydrofuran) before being added to PBS and diluted to working concentration of 20μM. The working solution was then placed on sections, and incubated at room temperature for half an hour and then aspirated and sealed, then a laser confocal microscope (Olympus FV3000, Japan) was used to detect the fluorescence signal. Since the TPE-o-Py probe pronounced red-shift in fluorescence emission which is positively related to the concentration of iron, low concentration of Fe^{3+} was detected under fluorescence channel of Alexa Fluor 405 (Excitation wave length: 402nm, Emission wave length: 421nm), while Alexa Fluor 594 (Excitation wave length: 590nm, Emission wave length: 617nm) for high concentration.

Tissue preparation for transmission electron microscope

Prefixed with a 3% glutaraldehyde, then the tissue was postfixed in 1% osmium tetroxide, dehydrated in series acetone, infiltrated in Epox 812 for a longer, and embedded. The semithin sections were stained with methylene blue and Ultrathin sections were cut with diamond knife, stained with uranyl acetate and lead citrate. Sections were examined with JEM-1400-FLASH Transmission Electron Microscope.

RNA extraction and qPCR

Total RNA of tooth germs (E15.5 cultured for 5 days) were extracted by using TRIzol™ Reagent (Invitrogen, USA) according to instruction of manufacturer. The

amount and the integrity of RNA were assessed by measurement of absorbance at 260

and 280 nm. First-strand cDNA synthesis was performed with a HiScript III Q RT

SuperMix for qPCR (Vazyme, China). The levels of *Gpx4, Ptgs2, Slc7a11* were

measured by quantitive real-time PCR (Bio-Rad, USA) with ChamQ Universal SYBR

qPCR Master Mix (Vazyme, China) and normalized to the level ofβ-Actin mRNA.

These experiments were performed in triplicate. Primer sequences used in qPCR are

listed below.

Gene	Sequence
Gpx4	F: CCTCCCCAGTACTGCAACAG
	R: GGCTGAGAATTCGTGCATGG
Ptgs2	F: CTGCGCCTTTTCAAGGATGG
	R: GGGGATACACCTCTCCACCA
Slc7a11	F: GATGGTCCTAAATAGCACGAGTG
	R: GGGCAACCCCATTAGACTTGT
β-Actin	F: AGATGTGGATCAGCAAGCAG
	R: GCGCAAGTTAGGTTTTGTCA

3D reconstruction of tooth germ sections

421   Sequential section and subsequent HE staining of each tooth germ were performed as

422   described before. Digital pathological system (Olympus vs200) was used to scan all

423   the stained sections and reconstructed by following previously described protocol [24].

TUNEL assay

425   We used a One Step TUNEL Apoptosis Assay Kit (Beyotime, C1090) to detect the

426   possible DNA damage in apoptotic cell of tooth germs. The TUNEL assay was

427   performed following instructions.

Statistical analysis

Analysis of Gpx4 relative expression levels were carried out by Image-pro plus7.0

(Media Cybernetics, USA). Statistical analyses were carried out using the GraphPad

Prism version 8.00 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA, USA). All statics were

shown as the arithmetic mean $\pm$ the standard error of the mean. The significance of

differences between groups was tested by using the one-sample t-test. Differences

were considered significant when *p<0.05*.

Acknowledgment

This study was funded by grants from National Natural Science Foundation of China U21A20368 (L. Y.), 82101000 (H. W.), and 82201045 (F. Y.). The iron probe, TPE-*o*-Py, is kindly gifted by Prof. Youhong Tang (Flinders University, Australia) and Prof. Benzhong Tang (The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, China); Author contributions: Haisheng Wang: Contributed to conception and design, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation, drafted manuscript; Xiaofeng Wang: Contributed to conception and design, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation, drafted manuscript; Chenglin Wang: Contributed to conception and design critically revised manuscript; Fanyuan Yu: Contributed to conception and design, critically revised manuscript; Ling Ye: Contributed to conception and design, critically revised manuscript. All authors gave their final approval and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work. The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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 Figure Legends

Figure 1 Spatiotemporal characterization of Gpx4 expression and iron accumulation

in tooth morphogenesis. **(A)** (i~v) HE staining for tooth germ in E13.5 to P3, scar

bars=200μm; (a~e) Gpx4 expression detected by IHC, scar bars=200μm; (a'~e')

Enlarged view of each Gpx4 staining, scar bars=50μm; epithelia versus mesenchyme

****P<0.001* **(B)** (a) Iron probe staining in incisor, scar bars=200μm; (b~d) Enlarged

view of selected region, scar bars=50μm, bright (gray) and high concentration of iron

(red) are present; **(C)** IF staining for Gpx4 (red) and nucleus (blue) in selected region

of incisor, scar bars=50μm. Epi=Epithelia, Mes=Mesenchyme; White dotted line

outlines odontoblasts; Yellow dotted line outlines ameloblasts.

Figure 2 Erastin impairs tooth morphogenesis especially within dental mesenchyme.

(A) Gross anatomy of tooth germ cultured *ex vivo* for five days, scar bars=500μm; **(B)**

(a, c) HE staining for tooth germ in D5, scar bars=100μm; (b, d) High resolution of

epi-mes junction papilla, scar bars=50μm; Black stars pointe out NLCs; (b', d') NLCs

indicated by black stars. **(C)** (a~e) Gross anatomy of tooth germs in different

concentrations of erastin in D5, scar bars=500μm; (f~j) HE staining of different

concentration treated tooth germ in D5; (f'~j') High-resolution view of epi-mes

junction region of each tooth germ, scar bars=50μm; **(D)** Rada graph for calculation

of height, width, and area in each tooth germ. Black dotted line outlines ameloblasts,

AM=ameloblast, DP=dental papilla.

Figure 3 Ferroptosis is activated in erastin-treated molar germ. **(A)** (a, b) High

density of Fe^{3+} (red) in CTRL and Era-10μM of D5, white star pointed out strong

fluoresce signal of Fe^{3+}, scar bars=50μm; (a', b') Low density of Fe^{3+} (grey) and (a'',

b'') merged view of iron probe staining; (c, d) Merged view of IF straining of 4-HNE

(Magenta) and DAPI (blue), white star pointed out strong fluoresce signal of 4-HNE,

scar bars=5050μm; (c', d') for DAPI and (c'', d'') for 4-HNE; AM=ameloblast,

DP=dental papilla, HD=high density, LD=low density; **(B)** TEM **s**canning for CTRL

and Era-10μM in D5; (a, d) Epi-Mes junction area of CTRL and Era-10μM in D5 are

detected, scar bars=5μm; (b, c) representative view of cells in epithelia and

mesenchyme for CTRL, scar bars=2μm; Black arrow pointed out typical

mitochondria in each region (b') for epithelia and (c') of mesenchyme, outlined by

white dotted line; (e, f) representative view of cells in epithelia and mesenchyme for

Era-10μM, scar bars=2μm; Black arrow pointed out typical mitochondria in each

region (e') for epithelia and (f') of mesenchyme, outlined by white dotted line; **(C)**

Relative frequency of the mitochondrial size in both groups; (D) Fold changes of gene

expression in CTRL and Era-10μM in D5, versus CTRL *$***P<0.001$*.

Figure 4 Ferroptotic inhibitors partly rescue erastin-impaired tooth organogenesis. **(A)**

(a~e) Gross anatomy of tooth germs in differently treated group, scar bars=500μm;

(f~j) HE staining of differently treated tooth germ, scar bars=100μm; (f'~j') High

resolution view of epi-mes junction region of each tooth germ; Black dotted line

outlines ameloblasts, black star pointed out NLCs, AM=ameloblast, DP=dental

papilla, scar bars=50μm; **(B)** Rada graph for calculation of height, width, and area in

each tooth germ; **(C)** Average number of NLCs in each group, versus Era-1.5μM

$***P<0.001$, versus Era-1.5μM+Lip-1 *$##P<0.01$*; **(D)** 3D reconstructed view of tooth

germ in D5. (a~d) CTRL from the front view, coronal plane, sagittal plane, and 45°

side view; (e~h) to Era-1.5μM and (i~l) to Era-1.5μM+Fer-1 were viewed by the same

way. Scar bars=100μm.

Figure 5 Ferroptosis is the dominant cell death type contributes to erastin-impaired

tooth morphogenesis. **(A)** (a~c) High density of Fe^{3+} (red) in CTRL, Era-1.5μM and

Era-1.5μM+Fer-1 of D5, white star pointed out strong fluoresce signal of Fe^{3+}, scar

bars=50μm; (a'~c') Low density of Fe^{3+} (grey) and (a''~c'') merged view of iron

probe staining; (d~f) Merged view of IF straining of 4-HNE (Magenta) and DAPI

(blue), white star pointed out strong fluoresce signal of 4-HNE, scar bars=50μm; (d'~

f') for DAPI and (d''~ f'') for 4-HNE; AM=ameloblast, DP=dental papilla, HD=high

density, LD=low density; **(B)** TEM **s**canning for Era-1.5μM and Era-1.5μM+Fer-1 in

D5; (a, d) Epi-Mes junction area of Era-1.5μM and Era-1.5μM+Fer-1 in D5 are

detected, scar bars=5μm; (b, c) representative view of cells in epithelia and

mesenchyme for Era-1.5μM, scar bars=2μm; Black arrow pointed out typical

mitochondria in each region (b') for epithelia and (c') of mesenchyme, outlined by

white dotted line; (e, f) representative view of cells in epithelia and mesenchyme for

Era-1.5μM+Fer-1, scar bars=2μm; Black arrow pointed out typical mitochondria in

each region (e') for epithelia and (f') of mesenchyme, outlined by white dotted line;

(C) Relative frequency of the mitochondrial size in both groups. **(D)** (a~c) Expression

of CL-CASP3 (green) in CTRL, Era-1.5μM and Era-1.5μM+Fer-1 in D5, scar

bars=200μm; (a'~c') Enlarged view of CL-CASP3 in each group, scar bars=50μm. **(E)**

Schematic model illustrates the overburdened ferroptotic stress impaired tooth

morphogenesis in *ex vivo* organ culture model.

Figure 1. Spatiotemporal characterization of Gpx4 expression and iron accumulation in tooth morphogenesis

Figure 2. Erastin impairs tooth morphogenesis especially within dental mesenchyme

Figure 3. Ferroptosis is activated in erastin-treated molar germ

Figure 4. Ferroptotic inhibitors partly rescue erastin-impaired tooth organogenesis

Figure 5. Ferroptosis is the dominant cell death type contributes to erastin-impaired tooth morphogenesis