Deletion of FNDC5/Irisin modifies murine osteocyte function in a sex-specific manner

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Abstract

Irisin, released from exercised muscle, has been shown to have beneficial effects on numerous tissues but its effects on bone are unclear. We found significant sex and genotype differences in bone from wildtype (WT) mice compared to mice lacking *Fndc5* (KO), with and without calcium deficiency. Despite their bone being indistinguishable from WT females, KO female mice were partially protected from osteocytic osteolysis and osteoclastic bone resorption when allowed to lactate or when placed on a low-calcium diet. Male KO mice have more but weaker bone compared to WT males, and when challenged with a low-calcium diet lost more bone than WT males. To begin to understand responsible molecular mechanisms, osteocyte transcriptomics was performed. Osteocytes from WT females had greater expression of genes associated with osteocytic osteolysis and osteoclastic bone resorption compared to WT males which had greater expression of genes associated with steroid and fatty acid metabolism. Few differences were observed between female KO and WT osteocytes, but with a low calcium diet, the KO females had lower expression of genes responsible for osteocytic osteolysis and osteoclastic resorption than the WT females. Male KO osteocytes had lower expression of genes associated with steroid and fatty acid metabolism, but higher expression of genes associated with bone resorption compared to male WT. In conclusion, irisin plays a critical role in the development of the male but not the female skeleton and protects male but not female bone from calcium deficiency. We propose irisin ensures the survival of offspring by targeting the osteocyte to provide calcium in lactating females, a novel function for this myokine.

In-text word count (Introduction, Results, and Discussion): 12270

Number of data elements: 1 table, 8 figures.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that bone and muscle interact mechanically as movement of the skeleton by muscle is essential for life. Less well-known but becoming more generally accepted is that muscle and bone can communicate through secreted factors ***Brotto and Bonewald*** (***2015***); ***Bonewald*** (***2019***). Muscle produces factors such as *β*-aminoisobutyric Acid (BAIBA) and irisin with exercise, that have positive effects on bone, adipose tissue, brain, and other organs, whereas sedentary muscle produces factors such as myostatin that has negative effects on both bone and muscle ***Brotto and Bonewald*** (***2015***); ***Karsenty and Mera*** (***2018***); ***Kitase et al.*** (***2018***); ***Bostrom et al.*** (***2012***); ***Hamrick et al.*** (***2006***).

Many of the factors secreted by bone are produced by osteocytes, the most abundant and the longest-living bone cell ***Bonewald*** (***2011***); ***Dallas et al.*** (***2013***). These cells are derived from terminally differentiated osteoblasts that become surrounded by the newly mineralizing bone matrix ***Dallas et al.*** (***2013***). Osteocytes are multifunctional and appear to be the major mechanosensory cell in bone ***Bonewald*** (***2011***); ***Temiyasathit and Jacobs*** (***2010***); ***Uda et al.*** (***2017***). Under unloaded conditions, these cells produce sclerostin, a negative regulator of bone formation and Receptor Activator of Nuclear factor Kappa β ligand (RANKL), the major factor that recruits and activates osteoclasts to resorb bone ***Nakashima et al.*** (***2011***); ***Xiong and O'Brien*** (***2012***); ***Xiong et al.*** (***2015***); ***Ono et al.*** (***2020***). In contrast, with anabolic mechanical loading, these cells produce factors such as prostaglandin E2 (PGE_2) that have positive effects on myogenesis and muscle function ***Mo et al.*** (***2015***). Osteocytes play a major role in mineral metabolism, through regulation of both calcium and phosphate homeostasis. Osteocytes secrete Fibroblast Growth Factor 23 to target the kidney to regulate phosphate excretion. Both Parathyroid Hormone (PTH) and Parathyroid related peptide (PTHrP) regulate calcium homeostasis via the PTH type 1 receptor on osteocytes ***Feng et al.*** (***2009***); ***Teti and Zallone*** (***2009***). Under the physiological calcium-demanding condition of lactation, osteocytes respond to PTHrP by removing their surrounding perilacunar matrix to provide calcium for offspring, and upon weaning this perilacunar matrix is rapidly replaced, a process referred to as perilacunar remodeling ***Qing and Bonewald*** (***2009***); ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***); ***Wysolmerski*** (***2013***). However, under pathological conditions such as ovariectomy, hyperparathyroidism, hypophosphatemic rickets, and cancer, excessive removal of their perilacunar matrix occurs through osteocytic osteolysis ***Tsourdi et al.*** (***2018***); ***Jähn-Rickert and Zimmermann*** (***2021***); ***Pin et al.*** (***2021***); ***Shimonty et al.*** (***2023***).

Bone is the largest calcium reservoir in the body and human mothers can lose an average of 250 mg/day of calcium in milk, emphasizing the need for a calcium-replete diet to prevent bone loss ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***); ***Wysolmerski*** (***2002***); ***Kalkwarf*** (***2004***). During lactation, PTHrP targets the

osteocyte to elevate genes coding for factors necessary for the removal of their calcium-ladened perilacunar matrix and to increase RANKL as an activator of osteoclasts ***Kovacs*** (***2001***). During lactation, RANKL targets osteoclasts, thereby driving osteoclastic bone resorption. Osteocytic osteolysis is accomplished through the expression of 'osteoclast-specific' genes such as cathepsin K (*Ctsk*), tartrate-resistant acid phosphatase (TRAP, gene *Acp5*), and carbonic anhydrase 1 (*Car 1*) ***Qing and Bonewald*** (***2009***); ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***). In addition, there is an increase in genes coding for the proton pumps, ATPase H^+ Transporting V1 Subunit G1 (*Atp6v1g1*) and ATPase H^+ Trans- porting V0 Subunit D2 (*Atp6v0d2*) necessary to dissolve and remove calcium from bone collagen ***Jahn*** (***2017***).

Systemic calcium deficiency such as a decrease in dietary calcium triggers an increase in PTH, acting to mobilize calcium from bones to maintain normal homeostatic circulating calcium ***Goltzman*** (***2008***). Worldwide, over 3.5 billion people suffer from dietary calcium deficiency, and women are at a higher risk of this condition ***Kumssa et al.*** (***2015***); ***Body et al.*** (***2016***). Aging often results in hypocalcemia and bone loss due to low vitamin D, hypoparathyroidism, genetic abnormalities, medications decreasing dietary calcium absorption, and menopause in women. Calcium deficiency can lead to osteopenia, osteoporosis, and increased fracture risk, primarily due to secondary hyperparathyroidism ***Kumssa et al.*** (***2015***); ***Body et al.*** (***2016***).

Irisin is a recently discovered myokine generated in response to exercise when Fibronectin type III Domain Containing protein 5 (FNDC5) is proteolytically cleaved by a yet undetermined protease ***Bostrom et al.*** (***2012***). FNDC5 is expressed in the heart, kidney, testes, brain, and other tissues; however, skeletal muscle appears to be the primary producer ***Erickson*** (***2013***); ***Maak et al.*** (***2021***); ***Tsourdi et al.*** (***2022***). Cleaved irisin circulates to distant organs, such as adipose tissue where irisin increases a thermogenic gene program, including the expression of uncoupling protein 1 (UCP1) in a process referred to as browning. This is associated with increased energy expenditure and improvement in glucose tolerance, both of which are important for the prevention of Type 2 diabetes and the reduction of complications from obesity ***Perakakis et al.*** (***2017***); ***Korta et al.*** (***2019***). Irisin can also regulate glucose uptake in skeletal muscle ***Lee et al.*** (***2015***), and increases myogenesis and oxidative metabolism, responsible for increasing skeletal muscle mass ***Colaianni and Grano*** (***2015***). Irisin also plays an important positive role in cognitive functions with exercise, aging, and degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease (AD) and Parkinson's disease (PD) ***Islam et al.*** (***2021***). Using the tail-vein injection method to deliver exogenous irisin, it was shown that irisin can cross the blood-brain barrier ***Islam et al.*** (***2021***).

Results from studies regarding the effects of irisin on the skeleton are complex and somewhat contradictory. Colaianni et al have shown that recombinant irisin exerts a beneficial effect on cortical bone in young male mice by reducing the secretion of osteoblast inhibitors and increasing the activity

100 of osteogenic cells ***Colaianni et al.*** (***2015***). However, another study has shown that recombinant irisin
101 treatment of MLO-Y4 osteocyte-like cells induces gene and protein level expression of *Sost*/sclerostin,
102 a negative regulator of bone formation while maintaining cell viability under oxidative stress ***Kim et al.***
103 (***2018***). Rosen et al. have shown using female FNDC5 overexpressing female mice that irisin acts
104 directly acts on osteoclast progenitors to increase differentiation and promote bone resorption
105 ***Estell et al.*** (***2020***). Kim et al. have shown that 9-month-old ovariectomized FNDC5 global KO mice
106 are protected against ovariectomy-induced trabecular bone loss through the inactivation of
107 osteocytic osteolysis and osteoclastic bone resorption ***Kim et al.*** (***2018***). The majority of these
108 studies used only male or female mice, suggesting a sex-dependent response may be responsible
109 for these seemingly opposing findings ***Estell et al.*** (***2020***); ***Colaianni et al.*** (***2017***); ***Kawao et al.*** (***2018***);
110 ***Ma et al.*** (***2018***); ***Colucci et al.*** (***2019***); ***Posa et al.*** (***2021***).

111 As shown previously, FNDC5 deletion has a protective effect against ovariectomy- induced
112 bone loss via a reduction of osteocytic osteolysis and osteoclastic resorption ***Kim et al.*** (***2018***). We,
113 therefore, hypothesized that FNDC5 deletion would also be protective against bone loss due to
114 calcium deficiency that occurs with lactation and a calcium-deficient diet. Our data show that the
115 female skeleton in FNDC5 null female mice was resistant to bone loss due to both lactation and
116 low calcium. However, for FNDC5 null males, deletion not only failed to protect but exacerbated
117 bone loss in response to low calcium. We propose that male and female osteocytes respond to
118 irisin differently under calcium-demanding conditions based on the divergence of the male and
119 female osteocyte transcriptome with sexual maturity when the female osteocyte must serve a
120 critical role in reproduction and lactation.

121

Results

With lactation, FNDC5 global KO mice lose less bone and are mechanically stronger compared to WT

No significant differences were observed in either bone composition or morphometry between 4-5-month-old virgin WT and FNDC5 global KO female mice (Fig 1A, 1B, 1C, sup table 1), showing that the absence of FNDC5/irisin does not affect female bone development. It has been previously shown that during lactation, maternal bones release calcium to supplement milk, especially in response to the large calcium demand induced by large litter size or a calcium- deficient diet ***Wysolmerski*** (***2002***); ***Ardeshirpour et al.*** (***2015***). Similar to previous studies, 2 weeks of lactation resulted in bone loss in both WT and KO mice, with a significant reduction in cortical bone area (Ct. B.Ar), cortical bone area fraction percentage (Ct.B.Ar/T.Ar%), and cortical thickness (Ct. Th) (Fig 1A, 1B) as well as bone mineral density, BMD (Fig 1C). However, the KO mice lost less bone compared to the WT mice, as evidenced by the significantly higher bone area fraction percent, cortical thickness, and BMD (Fig. 1A, 1B, 1C) as well as the lower percentage of bone loss (Sup Table 1). These data suggest that the FNDC5 KO mice are more resistant to the effects of calcium demand. Analysis of trabecular bone parameters including trabecular bone volume fraction (BV/TV), trabecular thickness (Tb. Th), trabecular spacing (Tb. Sp), and trabecular number (Tb. N) showed no significant difference in bone loss between lactating WT and lactating KO mice (Sup table 1). There was no significant difference in the pup numbers between WT and KO females (Sup fig 1A).

Bone loss can have significant effects on bone mechanical properties including bone strength, stiffness, and fragility. To determine mechanical properties, 3-point bending tests were performed on mice femurs. There was no significant difference between virgin WT and KO mice in terms of ultimate force and stiffness (Fig. 1D). However, femurs from the lactating KO mice were stronger than lactating WT, as evidenced by the higher stiffness and significantly higher ultimate force needed to break the bone (Fig 1D, Sup Table 1, Table 2). This data indicates that lactating KO female bone retains greater resistance to fracture than lactating WT mice by less lactation-induced bone loss.

With lactation, FNDC5 global KO mice have fewer TRAP-positive osteo- clasts and osteocytes as well as smaller osteocyte lacunar area compared to WT mice

Previously it was shown that lactation-induced bone loss occurs via not only osteoclastic bone resorption but also osteocytic osteolysis ***Qing et al*** (***2012***). To determine the relative contribution of each means of resorption, tibial longitudinal sections were stained for tartrate-resistant acid phosphatase TRAP-positive multinucleated osteoclasts as well as TRAP-positive osteocytes.

Virgin FNDC5 KO female mice had fewer TRAP-positive osteocytes compared to virgin WT

156 mice (Fig. 1E, 1G). This is the first and only difference we have observed between WT and KO female
157 mice and suggests that the osteocytes in the female KO mice are less 'primed' to initiate osteocytic
158 osteolysis. With lactation, TRAP-positive osteocytes significantly increased in both WT and KO mice (Fig
159 1G, Sup Table 2). Virgin KO mice started with a lower number of TRAP- positive osteocytes compared to
160 virgin WT, and with lactation, their number of TRAP-positive osteocytes was still significantly lower
161 compared to lactating WT (Fig. 1G).

162 During lactation, in response to calcium demand, osteocytes can remove their perilacunar
163 matrix. This process is similar but not identical to osteoclastic bone resorption ***Tsourdi et al.*** (***2018***);
164 ***Bélanger*** (***1969***); ***Wysolmerski*** (***2012***) as osteoclasts generate resorption pits, whereas osteocytes
165 increase their lacunar size ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***); ***Wysolmerski*** (***2013***). We measured the osteocyte
166 lacunar area and found no significant difference between virgin WT and KO female mice (Fig. 1F, 1H)
167 even though the KO females have fewer TRAP-positive osteocytes (Fig. 1G). With lactation, the lacunar
168 area increased in both groups; however, KO mice had significantly smaller average lacunar area
169 compared to WT (Fig. 1H). We did not observe any difference in the osteocyte density among any of
170 the groups (WT= 258.2±51.46, WT L= 274.6±57.37, KO= 254.8±47.66, and KO L= 273.4±59.75). These
171 data show that female lactating FNDC5 KO mice undergo less osteocytic osteolysis compared to WT
172 females under the calcium-demanding condition of lactation.

173 In virgin mice, there were no significant differences in osteoclast number per bone perimeter
174 (Oc/B.Pm) between WT and KO female mice (Fig 1I). With lactation, osteoclast number increased in
175 both groups, however, KO mice had significantly fewer osteoclasts (Fig 1I) and a significantly lower
176 percentage increase in the number of osteoclasts compared to WT (Sup Table 1). This suggests that
177 with lactation, fewer osteoclasts are activated in the KO as compared to the WT mice.

178 RANKL, another major factor in bone resorption ***Xiong and O'Brien*** (***2012***), is also increased
179 during lactation to induce osteoclastic bone resorption ***Ardeshirpour et al.*** (***2015***) by osteocytes, the
180 major source of RANKL ***Nakashima et al.*** (***2011***); ***Xiong and O'Brien*** (***2012***); ***Ono et al.*** (***2020***). Virgin
181 WT and KO mice had comparable serum RANKL levels (Fig. 1J). With lactation, the increase in serum
182 RANKL was significant in the WT mice, but not in the KO mice (Fig. 1I, Sup Table 1).
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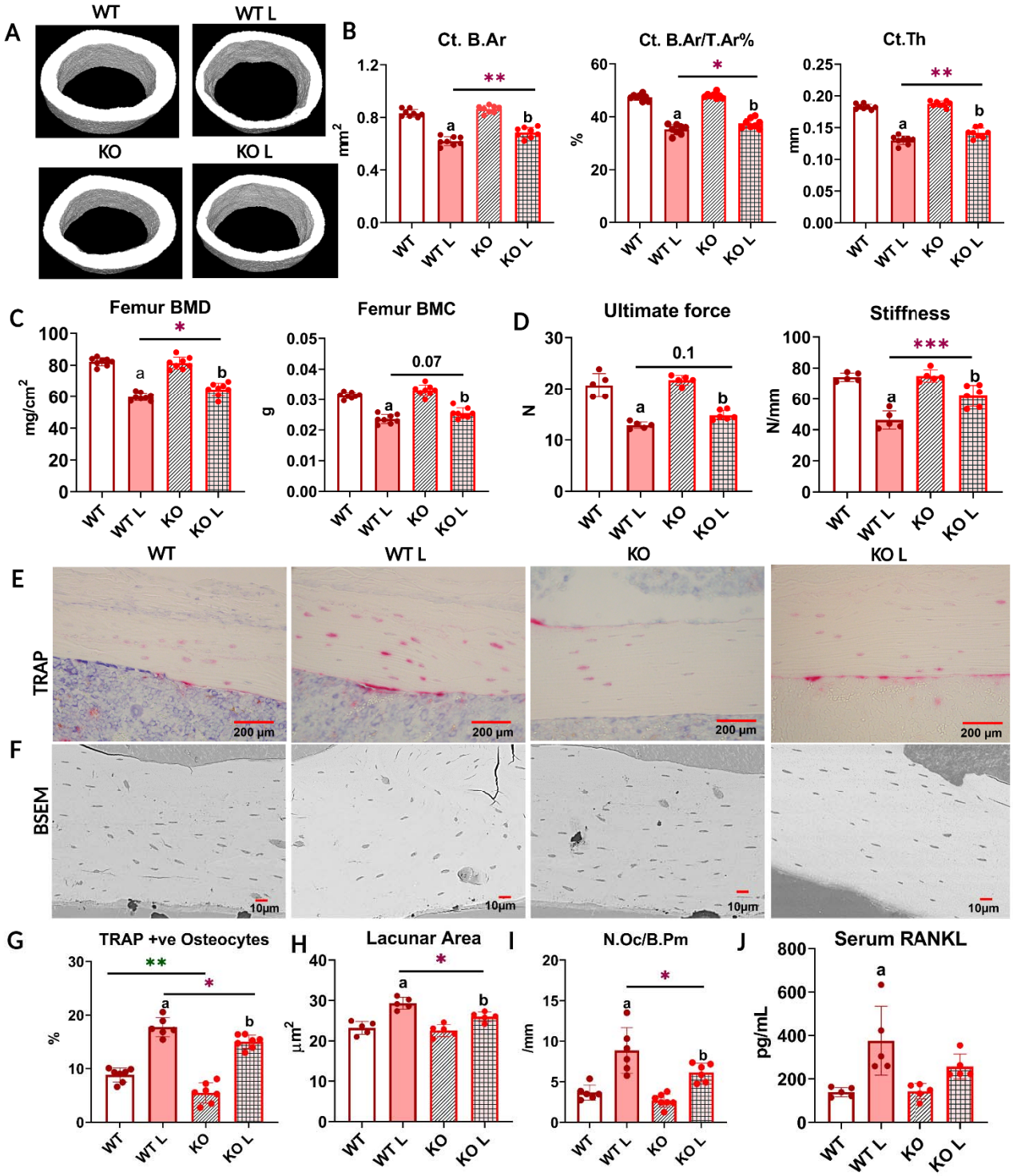


Fig 1: With lactation, FNDC5 global KO mice lose less bone and are mechanically stronger compared to WT

A: Respective μCT images of femoral midshafts from WT virgin (WT), KO virgin (KO), WT lactation (WT L), and KO lactation (KO L) mice.

B: μCT analysis of femoral cortical bone parameters of virgin and lactating WT and KO female mice reported as cortical bone area (Ct. B.Ar), cortical bone area fraction (Ct. B.Ar/ T.Ar %), and

190 cortical thickness (Ct. Th).

191 **C:** Ex vivo DXA analysis for BMD and BMC of femurs from virgin and lactating WT and KO female
192 mice.

193 **D:** 3-point bending analysis of WT and KO virgin and lactating mice reported as ultimate force
194 and stiffness.

195 **E:** Representative TRAP-stained images of cortical bone from WT virgin (WT), WT lactation (WT L),
196 KO virgin (KO), and KO lactation (KO L) mice.

197 **F:** Representative backscatter scanning electron microscope (BSEM) images of WT virgin (WT), KO
198 virgin (KO), WT lactation (WT L), and KO lactation (KO L) mice femur at 400X magnification.

199 **G:** Percent TRAP-positive osteocytes (TRAP +ve) in tibia from virgin and lactating WT and KO mice.

200 **H:** Osteocyte lacunar area in femurs from virgin and lactating WT and mice.

201 **I:** Osteoclast number per bone perimeter in tibia from virgin and lactating WT and KO mice.

202 **J:** Serum RANKL levels in virgin and lactating WT and KO mice.

203 4-5-month-old WT and KO virgin and lactating mice, n= 5-8/group. a= Significantly different from
204 WT, b= Significantly different from KO, *= $p< 0.05$, **= $p< 0.01$, ***= $p< 0.001$. 2-way ANOVA was
205 performed for statistical analysis. The interaction was not significant.

206 **FNDC5 KO female and male bone have opposite responses to a low- calcium diet**

207 After observing that bones are partially protected against lactation-induced bone loss in
208 FNDC5/irisin KO female mice, we sought to determine if FNDC5/irisin null (KO) male bone is protected
209 from calcium deficiency. Therefore, both female and male mice were placed on a calcium-deficient
210 diet for 2 weeks to induce bone loss. We do not see any significant difference in body weight in any
211 of the groups (Sup fig 1B, C), or in food intake (Per day average food intake was 3.9±0.9g for WT
212 females on a normal diet, 3.74±1.01g for KO females on a normal diet, 3.66±1.1g for WT females on
213 a low-calcium-diet, 3.8±0.7g for KO females on a low-calcium-diet, 4.2±1.3g for WT males on a
214 normal diet, 4.3±1.5g for KO males on a normal diet, 3.94±1.8g for WT males on a low-calcium-diet,
215 and 4.4±1.2g for KO males on a low-calcium-diet).

216 With regards to the female mice, similar results were observed with the low calcium diet as was
217 observed with lactation. At baseline, WT and KO female mice showed no significant differences in their
218 BMD and BMC (Sup Table 2), as well as no differences in either cortical (Fig 2B) or trabecular bone
219 parameters (Sup Table 3). After 2 weeks of a low calcium diet, both WT and KO female mice lost
220 bone as can be evidenced by decreased BMD (Sup Table 2) and bone area fraction (Fig 2B).
221 However, similar to the lactation experiment, the KO female mice were partially resistant to bone loss
222 compared to the female WT mice given a low calcium diet (Fig 2A, B). Interestingly a higher marrow
223 cavity area was observed in the WT compared to the KO, unlike the lactation experiment (Sup Table 2).

224 Mechanical testing showed that bone from female KO mice required a significantly higher force to
225 break, and thus were stronger com- pared to WT females given a low calcium diet (Fig 2C).
226 Therefore, similar to the calcium-demanding conditions of lactation, on a low calcium diet, the female
227 KO bone is more resistant to bone loss than WT.

228 Unlike female bone, significant differences were observed between WT and KO male bone
229 at baseline. KO male mice on a normal diet had a significantly higher BMD, BMC (Sup Table 2), and
230 bone area fraction compared to WT males of the same age (Fig 2E). However, femurs from KO mice
231 had significantly lower stiffness than WT (Fig 2F), indicating a difference in the material properties of
232 the bone. Therefore, the KO males have larger, denser, but weaker bones compared to WT males. To
233 determine the effect of calcium deficiency on male mice, KO and WT mice were subjected to a low-
234 calcium diet for 2 weeks. Unlike the female KO mice which were protected from the effects of a low
235 calcium diet, the KO male mice had an opposite response. The male KO mice had greater bone loss
236 compared to the WT male mice (Fig 2D, E, Table 2), the trabecular bone loss followed the same
237 trends but was not statistically significant (Sup Table 2), and the femurs from the KO male mice were
238 significantly less stiff and therefore weaker compared to the WT males on a low calcium diet (Fig 2F).
239 These data confirm a sex-specific response to a low-calcium diet.

240 To ensure that the effects observed in the KO mice were due to circulating irisin, and not
241 FNDC5 deletion, we injected AAV8- irisin in KO male mice, with AAV8-GFP as the control, and placed
242 them on the same low Ca diet. We chose male mice due to the highly significant effect on bone mass
243 and strength we saw in the KO males compared to WT males on a low-calcium diet. The irisin injection
244 rescued the skeletal phenotype in KO male mice, shown by the higher cortical bone area fraction
245 and the lower endosteal perimeter (Fig 2G). There was a tendency for higher ultimate force and
246 stiffness in the KO males that received the AAV8-irisin injection, however, this did not reach
247 statistical significance (Fig 2H). These data show that the observed effects in the FNDC5 null animals
248 are due to an absence of irisin.

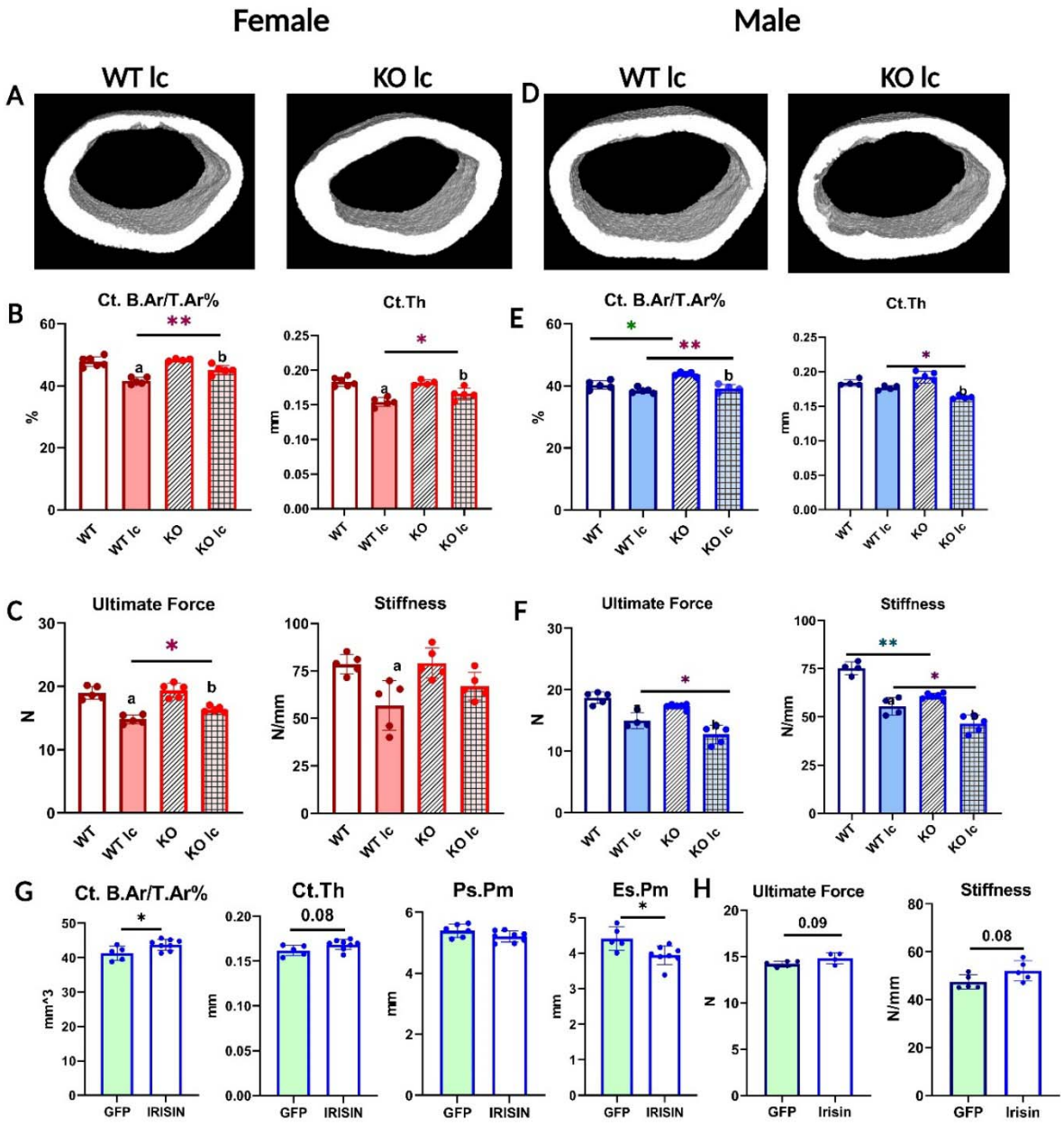


Fig 2: FNDC5 KO female and male mice have opposite responses to a low- calcium diet with regard to bone composition, structure, and mechanics, and irisin injection rescues FNDC5 KO male mice phenotype under a low-calcium diet

A: Representative µCT images of femoral midshaft cortical bones from WT low- calcium diet female mouse (WT lc) and KO low-calcium diet female mouse (KO lc).

B: Female femoral midshaft cortical bone parameters of WT control (WT), WT low-calcium diet (WT lc), KO control (KO), and KO low-calcium diet (KO lc) mice reported as cortical bone area fraction (Ct. B.Ar/T.Ar%) and cortical thickness (Ct.Th).

C: Mechanical properties of femurs from female WT and KO control and low- calcium diet reported as

259 ultimate force and stiffness.

260 **D:** Representative µCT images of femoral midshaft cortical bones from WT low-calcium diet male mice (WT
261 lc) and KO low-calcium diet male mice (KO lc).

262 **E:** Male femoral midshaft cortical bone parameters of WT control (WT), WT low-calcium diet (WT lc), KO
263 control (KO), and KO low-calcium diet (KO lc) mice reported as cortical bone area fraction (Ct. B.Ar/T.Ar%) and
264 cortical thickness (Ct. Th).

265 **F:** Mechanical properties of femurs from male WT and KO control and low- calcium diet reported as
266 ultimate force and stiffness.

267 n= 4-5/group. a= Significantly different from WT, b= Significantly different from KO, *= $p< 0.05$, **= $p<$
268 0.01. 2-way ANOVA was performed. As depicted here, red is female, and blue is male.

269 **G:** µCT measurement of femoral cortical bone of AAV8-GFP or AAV8-irisin injected male KO mice after a 2-
270 week low calcium diet, reported as cortical bone area fraction (Ct. B.Ar/T.Ar%), cortical thickness (Ct. Th),
271 periosteal parameter (Ps.Pm), and endosteal parameter (Es.Pm).

272 **H.** Mechanical properties of femurs from male KO low-calcium diet mice injected with AAV8-GFP or AAV8-
273 irisin reported as ultimate force and stiffness.

274 n= 5-7/group, *= $p< 0.05$. Student's t-test was performed for statistical analysis between male KO GFP vs
275 irisin-injected mice. As depicted here, green shaded bars represent GFP-injected mice.

276 **Osteocytes from female and male KO mice respond differently to a low- calcium diet**

277 To investigate if the bone loss was due to osteoclast or osteocyte activation, tibiae from all
278 the groups were TRAP-stained. Under a normal control diet, the tibia from both KO female and male (Fig.
279 3A) mice had fewer TRAP-positive osteocytes compared to their WT counterparts. This indicates that
280 their osteocytes were less 'primed' or 'activated' for resorption.

281 Under a low calcium diet, the number of TRAP-positive osteocytes increased in both WT and KO
282 female mice, similar to lactation (Fig 3A, Table 1); however, the total number was still significantly lower
283 in the KO females than the WT females. The low calcium diet increased TRAP-positive osteocytes in both
284 WT and KO male mice. The KO male mice had a significantly higher level of increase (Fig 3A, Table 1), and
285 had significantly higher TRAP-positive osteocytes compared to WT. This indicates an increased activation
286 of osteocytes in the KO males and suggests higher osteocytic bone resorption.

287 There was no significant difference between WT and KO mice in osteoclast numbers per bone
288 perimeter for both females and males (Fig. 3B). Both WT and KO females had an increase in their
289 multinucleated TRAP-positive osteoclast number with a low-calcium diet, however, KO females had a
290 significantly lower number of osteoclasts compared to WT females on a low-calcium-diet (Fig 3B).
291 Similarly, under a normal diet, there was no difference in the number of osteo- clasts between male WT
292 and KO. Under a low-calcium diet, osteoclast numbers increased in both groups, however, there was no

293 significant difference between WT and KO male mice (Fig. 3B). We also measured osteoblast numbers per
294 bone perimeter. There was no difference in osteoblast numbers in either female or male normal or low-
295 calcium diet mice groups (data not shown).

296 Under normal control diet conditions, female WT mice had significantly higher osteocyte
297 lacunar area compared to WT males (Fig 3C, 3D). There was no significant difference between
298 FNDC5 KO female and male mice with regards to osteocyte lacunar area. This indicates that under
299 control conditions, female osteocytes have more resorptive activity. On a low calcium diet, all the
300 groups have increased osteocyte lacunar area, indicating an increased level of osteocytic osteolysis
301 (Fig 3E). However, in female KO mice, the average lacunar area is significantly less than in WT female
302 mice, similar to what was observed with the lactation response. The male KO mice, on the other
303 hand, have significantly larger lacunar areas compared to WT males on a low calcium diet, suggesting
304 in- creased osteocytic osteolysis. Together these data show that bones from female KO mice are
305 more resistant to calcium-demanding conditions, but the deletion of FNDC5/irisin from males makes
306 them more susceptible to bone loss under calcium-demanding conditions. This also shows that male
307 and female KO mice respond completely differently to the challenge of calcium deficiency.

308 Serum RANKL levels increased in all the low calcium diet groups compared to control diet
309 groups (Fig 3F). There was no significant difference between WT and KO female mice and between
310 WT and KO male mice. Serum PTH was measured because decreases in serum calcium stimulate the
311 parathyroid gland to release PTH to remove calcium from bone to maintain normal calcium levels ***Jahn***
312 ***et al*** (***2017***); ***Matikainen et al*** (***2021***). PTH levels significantly increased in WT females and WT and KO
313 males when subjected to a low calcium diet compared to the control diet (Fig 3G), however, the KO
314 female group did not have a statistically significant increase in PTH levels. There was no significant
315 difference in serum calcium levels in any of the groups (8-10 mg/dL range for all groups), which
316 indicates that the elevated PTH is maintaining normal circulating calcium levels in these mice (Fig 3H).

317 Since FNDC5/irisin is robustly produced in skeletal muscle, we wanted to determine if the
318 deletion of FNDC5/irisin affects muscle function, under either a normal or a low calcium diet. *In vivo*
319 and *ex vivo* muscle contractility functions were performed in these mice. No difference was found
320 between WT and KO mice on either a normal or a low calcium diet (Sup Fig 2). This indicates deletion
321 of FNDC5 is not affecting muscle function and that bone resorption is releasing sufficient calcium
322 into the circulation to maintain calcium homeostasis and supplying sufficient calcium for skeletal
323 muscle function.

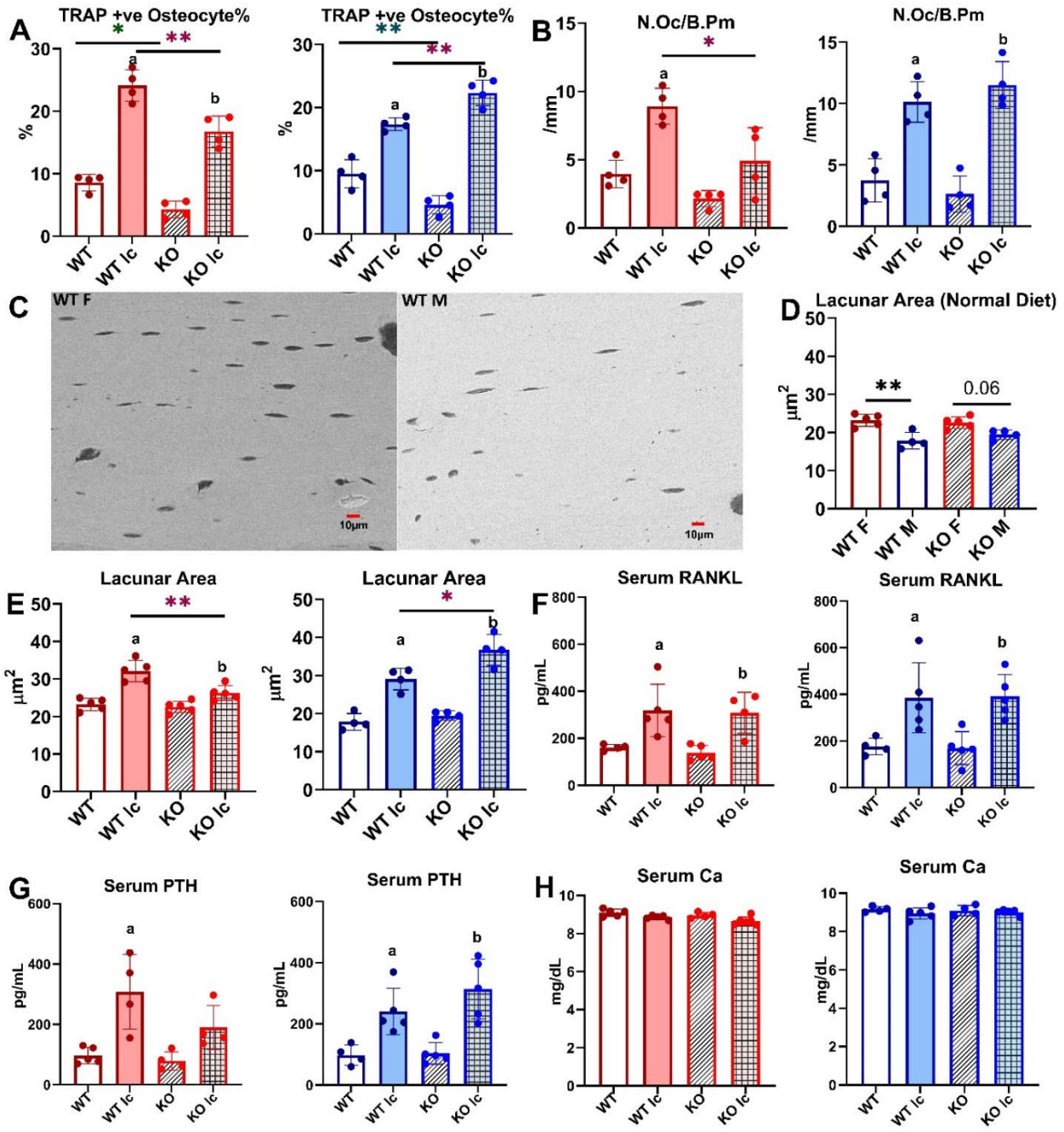


Fig 3: Osteocytes from female and male KO mice respond differently to a low-calcium diet

A: Percentage of TRAP-positive (+-ve) osteocytes in female and male WT and KO mice given a normal or a low-calcium diet.

B. Osteoclast number (N.Oc/B.Pm) in WT and KO female and male mice given a normal or a low-calcium diet.

C: Representative BSEM images depicting osteocyte lacunar area in femurs from WT female (WT F) and WT male (WT M) given a normal diet at 450X magnification.

D. Osteocyte lacunar area in WT and KO female and male mice given a normal diet.

333 **E**: Lacunar area in female and male WT and KO mice given a normal or a low- calcium diet.

334 **F:** Serum RANKL levels in female and male WT and KO mice given either a normal diet or a low-
335 calcium diet.

336 **G:** Serum PTH levels in female and male WT and KO mice given either a normal diet or a low-
337 calcium diet.

338 **H:** Serum calcium levels in female and male WT and KO mice given either a normal diet or a low-
339 calcium diet.

340 n= 4-5/group. a= Significantly different from WT, b= Significantly different from KO, *= p< 0.05,
341 **= p< 0.01. 2-way ANOVA was performed. As depicted here, red is female, and blue is male.

342

Table 1: Bone Parameters and Serum Markers		% Change in female		% Change in male	
	Change	WT	KO	WT	KO
Bone Area	Decrease	13%	7% *	2%	13% *
Bone Area Fraction	Decrease	17%	11% *	7%	23% *
Cortical Thickness	Decrease	19%	13% *	4%	15% *
Osteoclast Number/Bone Perimeter	Increase	125%	127%	170%	336% *
TRAP-positive Osteocytes	Increase	180%	290% *	85%	388% *
Osteocyte Lacunar Area	Increase	38%	16% *	60%	89% *
Serum PTH	Increase	150%	75% *	70%	164% *
Serum RANKL	Increase	100%	118%	119%	130%

343

344 **Table 1: FNDC5 KO female and male mice have opposite responses to a low-calcium diet compared to**
345 **WT female and male mice where female KO mice are protected but male KO mice have greater bone loss than**
346 **WT.**

347 Percentage changes in different bone and serum parameters of WT and KO female and male mice with a
348 2-week low-calcium diet. *= $p<0.05$ compared to WT.

349 **Female and male osteocyte transcriptomes are distinctly different**

350 Total RNA sequencing of osteocyte-enriched bone chips from female and male WT mice revealed
351 significant sex-dependent differences in the osteocyte transcriptome under normal conditions (Fig. 4A, C,
352 F). The major differentially expressed genes were involved in the steroid, fatty acid, cholesterol, lipid
353 transport, and metabolic processes. Compared to male WT mice, female WT mice had an approximately
354 2-3-fold higher expression of very low-density lipoprotein receptor (*Vldlr*), voltage-dependent calcium
355 channel T type alpha 1H subunit (*Cacna1h*), aldehyde dehydrogenase (*Aldh1l2*), and a 2-3-fold lower
356 expression of apolipoproteins *Apoa1*, *Apoa2*, *Apoa4*, *Apoc3* and others involved in steroid and fatty acid
357 metabolic process. There was also a 2-3-fold lower expression of several lipid and solute carrier genes
358 and apolipoprotein genes in female WT compared to male WT. This suggests that male osteocytes may
359 be greater regulators and utilizers of these sources of energy than female osteocytes.

360 Differences were also observed in genes involved in extracellular matrix organization
361 pathways, bone development, ossification, bone remodeling, and re- sorption pathways. Female WT
362 osteocytes have higher expression of genes shown to be highly expressed in osteocytes during
363 lactation compared to male WT osteocytes. These include *Tnfsf11* (RANKL, 2.7-fold), *Ctsk* (2.5-fold),
364 *Acp5* (TRAP, 2.2- fold), *Mmp13* (2.7-fold), osteoclast associated receptor (*Oscar*, 4.6-fold), macrophage
365 stimulating 1 receptor (*Mst1r*, 3-fold), as well as several collagen genes and bone formation and
366 mineralization genes including alkaline phosphatase (*Alpl*, 2.4-fold), periostin (*Postn*, 2.6-fold), and
367 *Dmp1* (2.2-fold). *TGFβ3* was expressed higher in the WT females compared to WT males, but no
368 significant difference was found in either *TGFβ1* or *TGFβ2* expression levels between WT females
369 and males. This suggests that the higher expression of bone formation genes may be to
370 accommodate the rapid replacement of the perilacunar matrix with weaning. The upregulated and
371 downregulated pathways in WT females compared to WT males are depicted in Fig. 4.

372 **Female and male KO osteocyte transcriptomes have fewer differences compared to WT female and**
373 **male transcriptomes**

374 KO female and KO male osteocyte transcriptomes significantly differed in pathways
375 facilitating ossification and bone mineralization, and extracellular structure and matrix organization
376 (Fig. 4B, F). In KO females, several collagen genes such as *Col2a1*, *Col5a2*, *Col8a2*, and *Col11a1* were 2-
377 4-fold greater compared to KO males. Bone formation genes including *Alpl* (2.5-fold), osteocalcin

(*Bglap*, 2.7-fold), *Postn* (2.9-fold), and *Wnt4* (2.4-fold) were also more highly expressed in KO females compared to KO males, however, the resorption genes including *Acp5* and *Ctsk* were not significantly different between KO female and KO male osteocytes. *TGFβ3* was expressed higher in the KO females compared to KO males, similar to the WTs.

The transcriptomes of WT and KO male osteocytes differed significantly, with much lower expression of genes in pathways involving steroid, fatty acid, lipid, and cholesterol transport and metabolic processes in the KO males compared to WT males (Fig. 4C, F). A 2-4-fold downregulation of genes coding for solute carriers, aldehyde oxidase, and fatty acid binding proteins was observed in KO males, while *Oscar* and *Mst1r* are 2-3-fold higher in KO males compared to WT males. In contrast, a relatively small number of genes, 40, were differentially expressed between WT female and KO female osteocytes which reflects the lack of differences in bone morphology and bone mechanical properties (Fig. 4D, F).

393 **Fig 4: Female and male wildtype osteocyte transcriptomes are distinctly different; however, female**
394 **and male KO osteocyte transcriptomes have fewer differences compared to WT female and male**
395 **transcriptomes.**
396 **A**: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between WT female control (WT F) and
397 WT male control (WT M) osteocyte transcriptome.
398 **B**: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between KO female control (KO F)
399 and KO male control (KO M) osteocyte transcriptome.
400 **C**: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between WT male control (WT M) and
401 KO male control (KO M) osteocyte transcriptome.
402 **D**: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between WT female control (WT F) and
403 KO female control (KO F) osteocyte transcriptome.
404 **E**: Heat map showing the differentially expressed genes among WT female control (WT F), WT
405 male control (WT M), KO female control (KO F), and KO male control (KO M) osteocyte transcriptome.
406 **F**: Gene set enrichment analysis of Gene Ontology (GO) analysis of the significantly regulated
407 genes between WT female control (WT F) and WT male control (WT M) osteocyte transcriptome,
408 between KO female control (KO F) and KO male control (KO M) osteocyte transcriptome, WT male
409 control (WT M) and KO male control (KO M) osteocyte transcriptome, and WT female control (WT F)
410 and KO female control (KO F) osteocyte transcriptome. The figure shows the union of the top 10 GO
411 terms of each analysis. If a term in the union, besides the top 10, is also significant (adjusted p-value
412 less than 0.05 was used for GO analysis) in an analysis, it is also included in the figure.
413 The latter group in the figure's title is the reference group. n=3/group. For DEG analys
414 unadjusted p-value <0.01 was used.
415 **With calcium deficiency, genes responsible for osteocytic osteolysis are lower in the female KO**
416 **compared to the female WT osteocyte transcriptome**
417 Calcium deficiency in WT female mice induced higher expression of osteoclast and resorption
418 genes compared to WT females on a normal diet (Fig. 5A, E). *Acp5*, *Ctsk*, *Pth1r*, and *Mst1r* were elevated
419 2-4-fold in the calcium-deficient WT females. Real-time PCR analysis of osteocytes also showed an
420 increase in *Tnsfs11*, *Acp5*, and *Ctsk gene* expression levels in the calcium-deficient WT females compared
421 to WT females on a normal diet. There was no difference in *Sost* expression (Sup Fig 2D). Additionally,
422 five different Mmps (*Mmp13*, *Mmp15*, *Mmp2*, *Mmp16*, and *Mmp14*) were upregulated 2-3.5-fold in the
423 WT calcium-deficient females. These are genes thought to play a role in osteocytic osteolysis. Bone
424 formation and remodeling genes including *Bglap*, *Bglap2*, *Alpl*, *Wnt 5a*, and *Wnt 2b* were upregulated 2-
425 5-fold in the WT low calcium diet group compared to WT female normal diet group as well. These genes
426 may be increased to provide quick bone formation upon return to normal calcium demand.

427 Calcium deficiency in KO female mice also induced increased expression of a number of
428 osteoclast and resorption genes including *Ctsk* (2.8-fold), *Mmp13* (3- fold), and *Oscar* (2.6-fold) in
429 comparison to KO female osteocytes on a normal diet (Fig. 5B, E). However, unlike the WT osteocytes,
430 expression levels of *Acp5* and *Pth1r* were not different in osteocytes from KO female mice on a
431 normal diet or a low calcium diet. Real-time PCR analysis also showed an increase in *Ctsk* gene
432 expression level in the calcium-deficient KO females compared to KO females on a normal diet, with no
433 significant difference in the expression levels of *Tnfsf11*, *Acp5*, and *Sost* genes (Sup fig 2D).

434 Next, we compared KO female mice on a low-calcium diet to WT female mice on a low-calcium
435 diet (Fig. 5C, E). Several bone resorption genes were lower by 2-fold in KO females, including *Tnsfs11 and*
436 *Mmp15*. Real-time PCR analysis also showed a significantly lower expression of the *Tnsfs11* gene in the
437 calcium- deficient KO females compared to calcium-deficient WT females (Sup Fig 2D). Additionally,
438 bone formation genes including *Alpl*, *Bglap*, *Wnt2b*, *Col1a1*, *Col1a2*, and *Postn* were also
439 approximately 2-fold lower in the KO low calcium females compared to WT low calcium females. This
440 suggests that female KO osteocytes are less responsive to calcium deficiency than female WT
441 osteocytes.

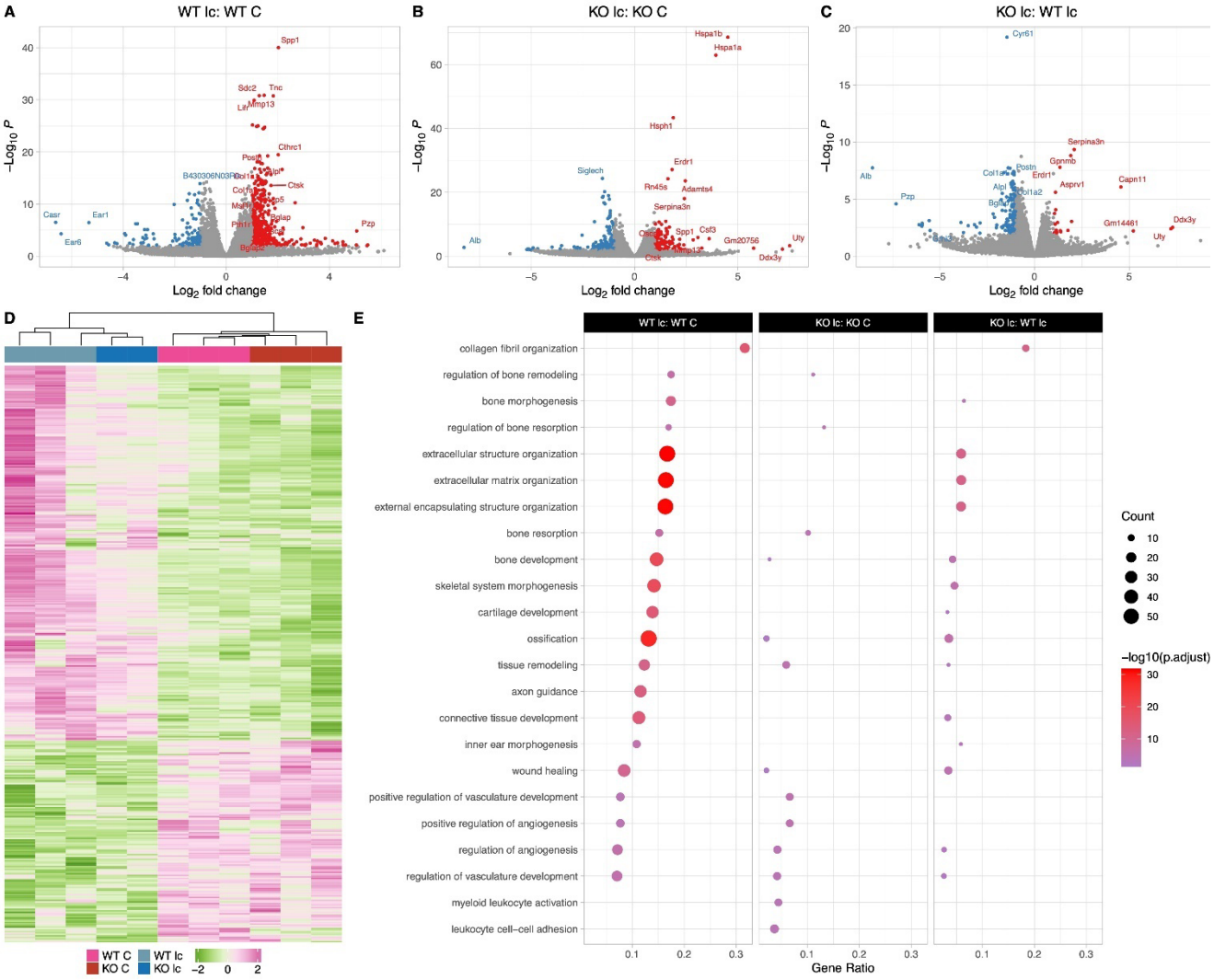


Fig 5: The Osteocyte transcriptomes from female WT and KO mice are distinct when challenged with a low-calcium diet

A: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between WT female control (WT C) and WT female low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT lc) osteocyte transcriptome.

B: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between KO female control (KO C) and KO female low-calcium diet-fed mice (KO lc) osteocyte transcriptome.

C: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between WT female low-calcium diet-fe mice (WT lc) and KO female low-calcium diet-fed mice (KO lc) osteocyte transcriptome.

D: Heat map showing the differentially expressed genes among WT female control (WT C), WT female low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT lc), KO female control (KO C), and KO female low-calcium diet-fed mice (KO lc) osteocyte transcriptome.

E: Gene set enrichment analysis of Gene Ontology (GO) analysis of the significantly regulated genes between WT female control (WT C) and WT female low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT lc) osteocyte transcriptome, between KO female control (KO C) and KO female low-calcium diet-fed

457 mice (KO lc) osteocyte transcriptome, and WT female low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT lc) and KO
458 female low- calcium diet-fed mice (KO lc) osteocyte transcriptome. The figure shows the union of
459 the top 10 GO terms of each analysis. If a term in the union, besides the top 10, is also significant
460 (adjusted p-value less than 0.05 was used for GO analysis) in an analysis, it is also included in the figure.

461 The latter group in the figure's title is the reference group. n=2-3/group. For DEG analys
462 unadjusted p-value <0.01 was used.

463 **With calcium deficiency, genes responsible for bone resorption, bone formation, and lipid metabolism**
464 **are differentially regulated in the osteocyte transcriptome in male KO mice compared to male WT mice**

465 Calcium deficiency in WT male mice caused a 2-7-fold increased expression of *Tnsfs11*, *Acp5*,
466 *Ctsk*, *Oscar*, and *Mst1r* in their osteocyte transcriptome compared to WT males on a normal diet (Fig.
467 6A, E). Real-time PCR validation also showed a similar increase in *Tnsfs11*, *Acp5*, and *Ctsk* gene
468 expression levels in the calcium- deficient WT males compared to WT males on a normal diet (Sup Fig
469 2E). Bone formation and remodeling genes including *Postn*, *Col1a1*, *Col1a2*, *Bglap*, and *Wnt4* were also
470 elevated 2-4-fold in the WT male low calcium diet compared to the WT normal diet control group.

471 Multiple genes involved in the steroid and fatty acid metabolic process pathways as well as
472 lipid catabolic processes were downregulated 2-7-fold in the calcium-deficient WT males compared
473 to WT males on a normal diet. These genes include several solute carrier family protein genes
474 *Slc27a2* and *Slc27a5*, several apolipoprotein genes including *Apoa1*, *ApoB*, and *Apoc1*, several cyp
475 genes including *Cyp2e1* and *Cyp7a1*, and *Plin1*.

476 Similarly, osteocytes from KO males on a low calcium diet had a 2-4-fold higher expression of
477 osteoclast genes such as *Tnsfs11*, *Oscar*, and *Car3* and a 2-5-fold upregulation of bone formation genes
478 such as *Col1a1*, *Col1a2*, *Alpl*, *Bglap*, and *Postn* compared to osteocytes from KO males on a normal
479 diet (Fig. 6B, E). Therefore, genes responsible for bone resorption and bone formation were increased
480 in both WT and KO with calcium deficiency. Real-time PCR data showed an increase in *Tnsfs11*, Acp*5*,
481 and *Ctsk* gene expression levels in the calcium-deficient KO males compared to KO males on a normal
482 diet, validating the RNA sequencing data (Sup Fig 2E).

483 When KO males were compared to WT males on a low calcium diet (Fig. 6C, E), there was a 2-3-
484 fold higher expression of bone resorption genes including *Oscar* and *Mst1r* in the KO low calcium diet
485 males compared to WTs. Several collagen formation genes and ossification genes including *Col3a1*,
486 *Col8a2*, *Tnn*, *Aspn*, and *Igfbp6* were also significantly downregulated in the KO males on a low-calcium
487 diet compared to WTs on a low-calcium diet. It is not clear whether these also play a role in the increased
488 bone resorption observed with calcium deficiency in KO males. Real-time PCR analysis showed no
489 significant difference in expression levels of *Tnsfs11*, *Acp5*, *Sost*, and *Ctsk* genes between calcium-
490 deficient KO males and calcium-deficient WT males, reflecting the RNA sequencing data (Sup Fig 2E). No
491 significant difference was observed in expression levels of genes involved in the lipid catabolic process

pathway or fatty acid metabolism pathways.

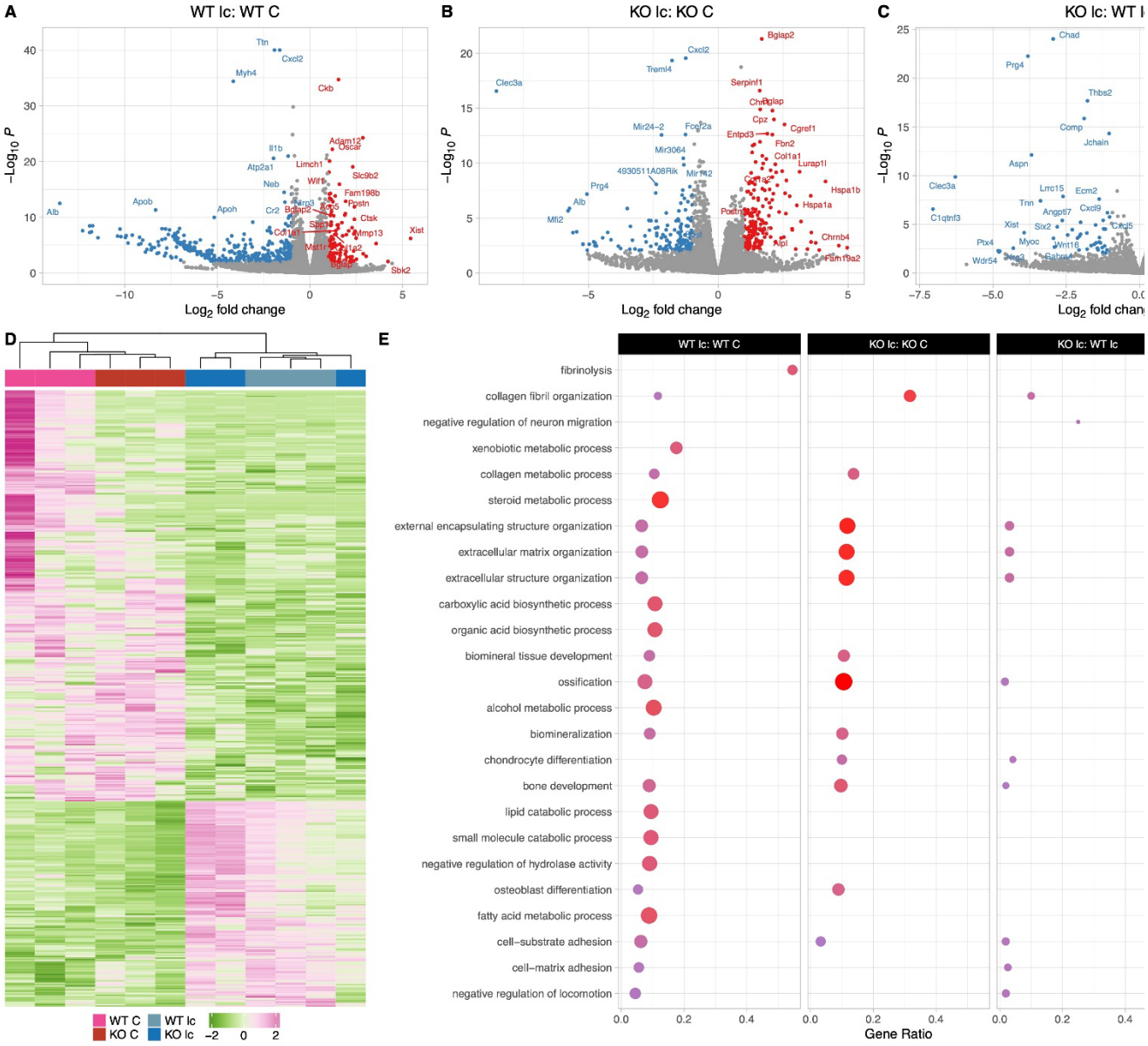


Fig 6: The Osteocyte transcriptomes from male WT and KO mice are dis- tinct when challenged with a low-calcium diet

A: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between WT male control (WT C) and WT male low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT lc) osteocyte transcriptome.

B: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between KO male control (KO C) and KO male low-calcium diet-fed mice (KO lc) osteocyte transcriptome.

C: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between WT male low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT lc) and KO male low-calcium diet-fed mice (KO lc) osteocyte transcriptome.

D: Heat map showing the differentially expressed genes among WT male control (WT C), WT male

504 low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT lc), KO female control (KO C), and KO male low-calcium diet-fed mice (KO
505 lc) osteocyte transcriptome.

506 **E:** Gene set enrichment analysis of Gene Ontology (GO) analysis of the significantly regulated
507 genes between WT male control (WT C) and WT male low- calcium diet-fed mice (WT lc) osteocyte
508 transcriptome, between KO male control (KO C) and KO male low-calcium diet-fed mice (KO lc)
509 osteocyte transcriptome, and WT male low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT lc) and KO male low-calcium
510 diet-fed mice (KO lc) osteocyte transcriptome. The figure shows the union of the top 10 GO terms of
511 each analysis. If a term in the union, besides the top 10, is also significant (adjusted p-value less than
512 0.05 was used for GO analysis) in an analysis, it is also included in the figure.

513 The latter group in the figure's title is the reference group. n=3/group. For DEG analys
514 unadjusted p-value <0.01 was used.

515 **Male and female osteocytes respond differently to calcium deficiency in a genotype-specific manner**

516 In response to 2 weeks of calcium deficiency, WT female mice had higher expression of genes
517 involved in extracellular matrix and structure organization as well as ossification compared to WT
518 male mice with calcium deficiency. Calcium deficiency in WT female mice caused significantly
519 increased expression of bone formation genes compared to WT males including several collagen
520 genes such as *Col2a1*, *Col6a3*, *Col4a2*, as well as *Postn*, and *Bglap2*. This was accompanied by an
521 increased expression of bone resorbing genes in WT females including several *Car* genes, *Mmp13*,
522 *Mmp16*, *Tnsfs11*, and *Mst1r* in their osteocyte transcriptome compared to WT males on a low-calcium
523 diet (Fig. 7A, C, D). This suggests that both bone formation and bone resorption are upregulated in
524 WT females compared to WT males in response to calcium deficiency, and WT females undergo
525 higher bone remodeling compared to WT males.

526 On the other hand, in response to calcium deficiency, KO female and male mice have less
527 significantly differently expressed genes compared to WT females and males (Fig &B, C, D). The
528 major upregulated bone formation genes in KO females compared to KO males include several
529 collagen genes such as *Col2a1* and *Col8a2*. The major bone resorption gene that were upregulated
530 in KO females compared to KO males were *Mmp13* and *Dcstamp*.

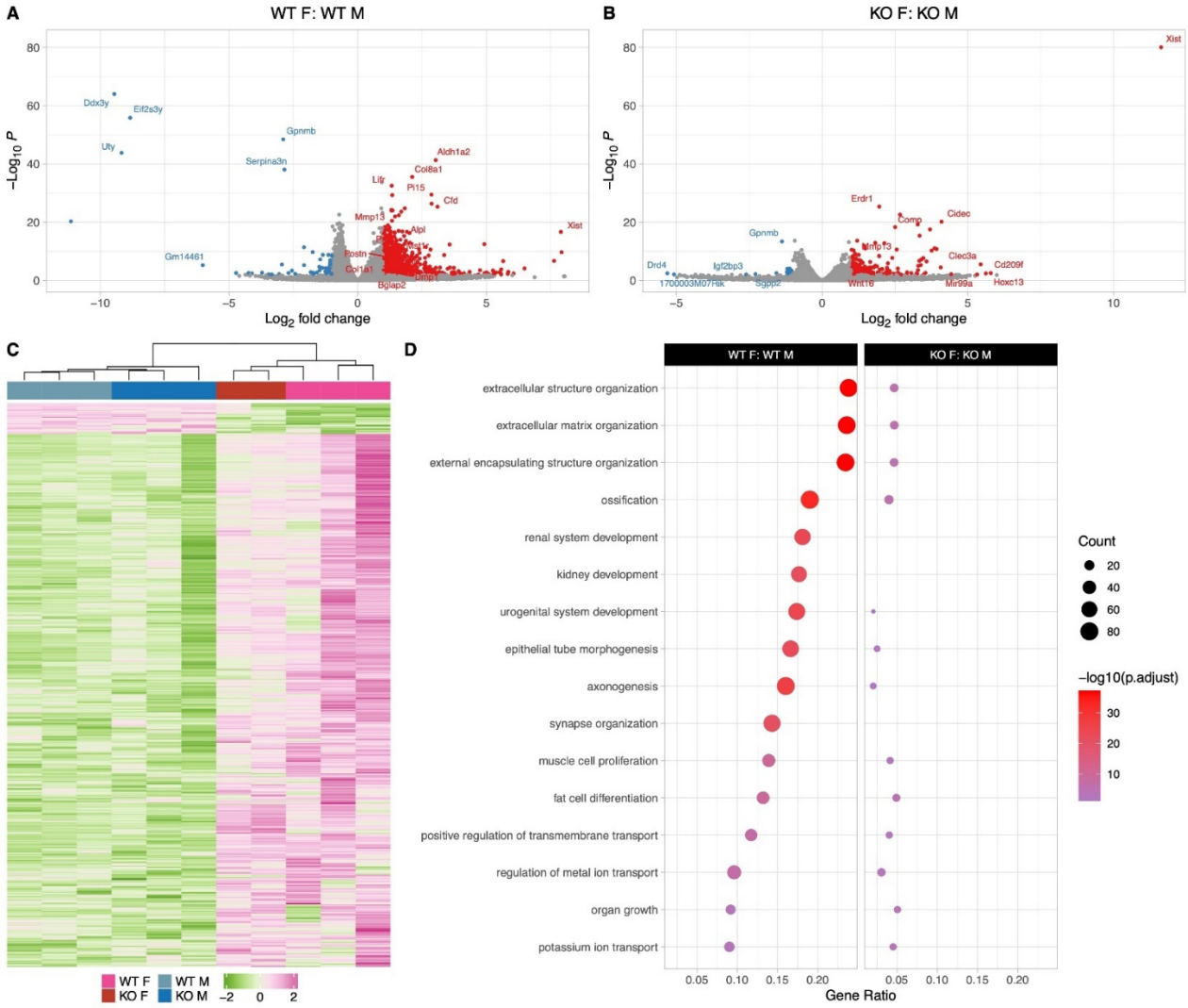


Fig 7: The Osteocyte transcriptomes from male and female mice are distinct when challenged with a low calcium diet

A: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between WT female low-calcium diet-fed (WT F) and WT male low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT M) osteocyte transcriptome.

B: Volcano plot showing the significantly regulated genes between KO female low-calcium diet-fed (KO F) and KO male low-calcium diet-fed mice (KO M) osteocyte transcriptome.

C: Heat map showing the differentially expressed genes among WT male low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT M), KO male low-calcium diet-fed mice (KO M), WT female low-calcium diet-fed (WT F), and KO female low-calcium diet-fed (KO F) osteocyte transcriptome.

D: Gene set enrichment analysis of Gene Ontology (GO) analysis of the significantly regulated genes between WT female low-calcium diet-fed (WT F) and WT male low-calcium diet-fed mice (WT M) osteocyte transcriptome, and between KO female low-calcium diet-fed (KO F) and KO male low-calcium diet-fed mice (KO M) osteocyte transcriptome. The figure shows the union of the top 10 GO terms of each analysis. If a term in the union, besides the top 10, is also significant (adjusted p-value less than

546 0.05 was used for GO analysis) in an analysis, it is also included in the figure.

547 The latter group in the figure's title is the reference group. n=2-3/group. For DEG analys

548 unadjusted p-value <0.01 was used.

549 ## Discussion

550 Irisin has been shown to be increased in the blood of humans and mice with exercise. Irisin,
551 working mainly through its receptor $\alpha V\beta 5$ integrin, has been shown to have powerful effects on fat,
552 bone, and brain tissues ***Bostrom et al.*** (***2012***); ***Tsourdi et al.*** (***2022***); ***Korta et al.*** (***2019***); ***Islam et***
553 ***al.*** (***2021***); ***Kim et al.*** (***2018***); ***Colaianni et al.*** (***2017***); ***Wrann et al.*** (***2013***); ***Xin et al*** (***2016***); ***Wang***
554 ***et al.*** (***2017***); ***Bao et al.*** (***2022***); ***Zhang et al.*** (***2022***). With regard to bone, studies have generated
555 complex and even contradictory results ***Erickson*** (***2013***); ***Maak et al.*** (***2021***); ***Colaianni and Grano***
556 (***2015***); ***Kim et al.*** (***2018***); ***Estell et al.*** (***2020***); ***Colaianni et al.*** (***2014***); ***Zhang et al.*** (***2018***). Of note,
557 the majority of bone studies have been performed either exclusively on males, or females, but few
558 on both. Most studies have used recombinant irisin treatment whereas we have focused on the
559 effects of deleting irisin. Other studies have mainly examined the effects on osteoblasts and
560 osteoclasts, whereas our studies have focused on osteocytes ***Kim et al.*** (***2018***).

561 Global deletion of FNDC5 on a normal diet had essentially no effect on bone in females,
562 but in contrast, the null male mice have significantly more bone compared to wildtype males, but
563 this bone has impaired mechanical properties. This suggests that the lack of FNDC5 is having no
564 effect on the development or growth of the female skeleton, but does affect the male skeleton,
565 increasing the size yet impairing matrix properties responsible for strength. Examination of their
566 osteocytes showed that both female and male null mice have significantly fewer TRAP-positive
567 osteocytes compared to their sex-matched wildtype controls suggesting that their osteocytes
568 are more quiescent or less primed for bone resorption.

569 Challenging the null animals with calcium deficiency revealed dramatic differences in
570 osteocytic osteolysis and osteoclast activation, two major functions of osteocytes. Deletion of
571 FNDC5 in females is partially protective against calcium deficiency, but deletion in males
572 accelerates both of these osteocyte functions resulting in greater bone loss compared to
573 controls. We have shown previously that under calcium-demanding conditions such as
574 lactation, osteocytes express genes previously thought only to be specific for osteoclasts
575 including cathepsin K, TRAP, carbonic anhydrase, the proton pump V-ATPase, and others ***Qing et***
576 ***al.*** (***2012***) and shown that osteocytes are the major source of RANKL ***Nakashima et al.*** (***2011***);
577 ***Xiong and O'Brien*** (***2012***); ***Xiong et al.*** (***2015***). In this study, lactating females lacking FNDC5
578 were partially resistant to bone loss, similar to ovariectomized females as previously published
579 ***Kim et al.*** (***2018***). To determine the effects of calcium deficiency on males, mice were given a
580 low-calcium diet for 2 weeks. Unlike the protective effects of FNDC5/irisin deletion in females,
581 bone loss was exacerbated in null males compared to controls on a low calcium diet.

582 With two weeks of lactation and litter size comparable to wildtype controls, the null

583 female mice had less circulating RANKL, fewer TRAP-positive osteoclasts, fewer TRAP-positive
584 osteocytes, and smaller lacunar size. Our observation that the deletion of FNDC5/ irisin makes
585 lactating mice partially resistant to bone loss has an important implication with regard to the
586 purpose of lactation. Lactation is a critical period for pups as they obtain essential nutrients,
587 especially calcium, from the mother's milk for their proper growth. Calcium lost by the
588 mother's bone during lactation is rapidly replaced upon weaning with complete recovery of bone
589 mass within a week ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***); ***Wysolmerski*** (***2002***); ***Kalkwarf*** (***2004***); ***Kovacs*** (***2001***);
590 ***Wysolmerski*** (***2012***). Our data suggest that FNDC5/irisin acts as a regulator of calcium release from
591 maternal bones to fulfill the offspring demands during lactation. Therefore, irisin appears to play a
592 beneficial role in ensuring offspring survival and consequently, successful reproduction.

593 To determine if low calcium would have a similar effect on male FNDC5 null bone, both
594 males and females were subjected to a low-calcium diet for 2 weeks. The effects of a low-calcium
595 diet on female osteocytes and bone loss were essentially identical to the effects of lactation, with
596 two exceptions. First, serum RANKL levels were not significantly different between virgin and
597 lactating null females, while they were between null females on a normal compared to a calcium
598 diet suggesting that RANKL plays less of a role in lactation compared to calcium deficiency.
599 Secondly, the medullary cavity and endosteal bone in the low-calcium females were completely
600 protected in the FNDC5 null females but were not in the lactating FNDC5 null mice. Bone loss due to
601 lactation or due to dietary calcium deficiency may target different bone sites. Our unpublished
602 observations suggest that endosteal bone is removed faster than periosteal bone with lactation, but
603 this remains to be carefully validated. This difference may also be due to elevated PTHrP during
604 lactation ***Kovacs*** (***2001***), whereas hypocalcemia increases circulating PTH levels ***Goltzman*** (***2008***),
605 and it is not clear if hormones target distinct bone sites. Similar to the lactating FNDC5 null mice,
606 the null females placed on the low calcium diet had fewer TRAP-positive osteoclasts, fewer TRAP-
607 positive osteocytes, and smaller lacunar size. Serum RANKL levels increased in both wildtype and
608 null mice with dietary calcium deficiency, therefore, serum RANKL alone is not enough to explain
609 the partial protective effect of FNDC5 deletion against bone loss. In summary, female null mice
610 are not only resistant to bone loss due to estrogen deficiency as we showed previously ***Kim***
611 (***2018***) but are also resistant to calcium deficiency either due to an increase in PTHrP as with
612 lactation, or an increase in PTH as with a low calcium diet.

613 Osteoporosis manifests earlier in females due to menopause, but males also develop
614 osteoporosis but at an older age ***Johannesdottir et al.*** (***2013***); ***Johnston and Dagar*** (***2020***), and
615 the elderly are known to suffer from calcium deficiency which accelerates bone loss ***Kumssa et***
616 ***al.*** (***2015***); ***Body et al.*** (***2016***). Dietary calcium deficiency has been shown previously to affect
617 female and male bone differently where female rat bones are more sensitive to a low calcium diet

618 compared to males ***Geng and Wright*** (***2001***). Similarly, in our study, we saw that wildtype
619 females were more affected by calcium deficiency and lost more bone compared to wildtype
620 male mice. However, the opposite was observed for the FNDC5/irisin null mice, where female
621 null mice were partially resistant, and male null mice were more susceptible to bone loss with
622 calcium deficiency compared to their wildtype counterparts. Despite starting with more bone
623 volume compared to wildtype, the FNDC5 null males had increased osteocyte lacunar area and
624 lost more bone with dietary calcium deficiency compared to wild-type males. This greater bone
625 loss can be explained through the dramatic increase of TRAP-positive osteocytes and TRAP-
626 positive osteoclasts, but not by a significantly greater increase in circulating RANKL. This sex
627 difference indicates that FNDC5/irisin may be involved in the regulation of calcium release from
628 bone via osteocytes in a sex-dependent manner.

629 Lacunar area is an indicator of osteocyte regulation of their lacunar microenvironment.
630 Here we report that osteocyte lacunar size is significantly larger in virgin wildtype female mice
631 compared to same-age wildtype males. This difference in lacunar area indicates a distinction
632 between female and male osteocyte function. The mammalian skeleton is a sexually dimorphic
633 organ ***Sharma*** (***2023***), and female and male bones respond differently to circulating factors,
634 hormones, and myokines as well as other challenges ***Kurapaty and Hsu*** (***2022***); ***Lu et al.*** (***2022***);
635 ***Osipov et al.*** (***2022***). As osteocytes are regulators of bone formation and resorption ***Bonewald***
636 (***2011***); ***Dallas et al.*** (***2013***); ***Robling and Bonewald*** (***2020***), this sex difference may be due to
637 differences in male and female osteocytes. A recent study by Youlten and colleagues has
638 shown that male and female osteocyte transcriptomes are distinctly different ***Youlten et al.***
639 (***2021***). At 4 weeks of age, the female osteocyte transcriptome diverges from the male osteocyte
640 transcriptome and these differences continue with age. A cluster of genes more highly
641 expressed in female osteocytes compared to male osteocytes are those involved in bone
642 resorption, the same ones elevated in osteocytes in response to lactation. These transcripts
643 include genes necessary for osteocytic perilacunar remodeling and reduction in pH, which are
644 essential for calcium removal ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***). This suggests that the larger lacunar area in
645 female osteocytes compared to male osteocytes may be due to the higher expression of bone
646 resorption genes.

647 The magnitude of the effect size due to FNDC5 deficiency appears modest with regards
648 to the quantitative cortical bone parameters. However, if one examines the changes in
649 osteocyte lacunar size and the mechanical properties of these bones, the differences are
650 greater. As shown in Figure 3 E, the lacunar area of the wildtype females on a low calcium diet
651 increases by over 30% and the FNDC5-null by less than 20%, while in the males it is
652 approximately 38% in wildtype compared to 46% in null. According to Sims and Buenzli ***Buenzli***

653 ***and Sims*** (***2015***), a potential total loss of ~16,000 mm^3 (16 mL) of bone occurs through lactation
654 in the human skeleton. This was based on our measurements in lactation-induced murine
655 osteocytic osteolysis ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***). They used our 2D section of tibiae from lactating mice
656 showing an increase in lacunar size from 38 to 46 μm^2. In that paper we also showed that
657 canalicular width is increased with lactation. Therefore, this suggests dramatically lower
658 intracortical porosity due to the osteocyte lacunocanalicular system in female null mice
659 compared to female wild-type mice either with lactation or a low calcium diet and a dramatic
660 increase in intracortical porosity in null males compared to wild-type males on a low calcium
661 diet. Based on these data, using the FNDC5 null animals, we would speculate that the product
662 of FNDC5, irisin, is having a significant effect on the ultrastructure of bone in both males and
663 females challenged with a low calcium diet.

664 To begin to understand the molecular mechanisms responsible for the sex and genotype
665 differences, we compared the osteocyte transcriptomes of 5-month-old female and male, wildtype
666 and null mice. Our results show that the osteocyte transcriptomes of female and male wildtype
667 mice are significantly different under normal conditions. A surprising difference we observed
668 but not described in the Youlten paper ***Youlten et al.*** (***2021***) was that compared to wildtype
669 female osteocytes, wildtype male osteocytes have much higher expression of genes involved in
670 steroid, lipid, and cholesterol metabolism and transport pathways, lipid and solute carrier
671 genes, and apolipoprotein genes. This suggests that osteocyte metabolism and bioenergetics
672 are distinctly different between wildtype females and wildtype males. We hypothesize that the
673 differentially expressed genes in these bioenergetic and metabolic pathways modulate bone
674 mass and formation and may shed light on the sexual dimorphism of bones. As these
675 differentially regulated pathways were not previously reported by Youlten and colleagues
676 ***Youlten et al.*** (***2021***), this may be due to differences in strain, housing, diet, or microbiome.
677 Another explanation is the greater osteocyte purity in our study as we used a series of collagenase
678 digestions and EDTA chelation to remove any surface cells which was not performed in the
679 Youlten paper ***Youlten et al.*** (***2021***).

680 A second major difference between female and male wildtype osteocytes was the higher
681 expression of genes involved in collagen matrix formation, bone mineralization, remodeling,
682 resorption, and osteocytic osteolysis pathways in females compared to males. Many of the highly
683 expressed bone resorption genes in wildtype female osteocytes have been shown to be
684 elevated during lactation ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***) including *Acp5*, *Ctsk*, and *Mmp13*, all involved in
685 osteocytic osteolysis. This further supports our hypothesis that wildtype female osteocytes are
686 more primed for resorption compared to wildtype males, presumably to meet the increased
687 calcium demand during lactation, and correlates with the observed larger lacunae compared to

688 males.

689 TGFβ is another potential player in osteocyte perilacunar/canalicular remodeling.
690 Alliston and colleagues generated transgenic mice with reduced expression of the TGFβ Type II
691 receptor in mice expressing Dmp1-Cre ***Dole et al.*** (***2020***) (PMID: 32282961) and found a
692 significant difference in bone parameters and markers of osteocyte perilacunar remodeling
693 between the sexes. The females were subjected to lactation and the transgenics were found to
694 be resistant to osteocytic osteolysis compared to controls. However, these investigators did not
695 investigate the lacunar remodeling process in males as compared to females as was performed
696 in the present study using a low calcium diet. Their study does suggest that TGFβ is involved in
697 the osteocytic osteolysis that occurs with lactation, however, even though the transgenic males
698 showed a disrupted lacunocanlicular network compared to wildtype males, this does not
699 necessarily indicate a defect in perilacunar remodeling. It is more likely that the defect
700 occurred during bone formation when osteoblasts were differentiating into osteocytes. In our
701 study, we observed a higher expression of *TGFβ3* in wildtype female mice compared to
702 wildtype male mice, with no significant differences in *TGFβ1* or *TGFβ2* expression. This
703 suggests that *TGFβ3* may play a role in generating the larger lacunar area in wildtype females
704 compared to wildtype males through increased matrix related signaling.

705 Few differences were observed between wildtype female and null female osteocyte
706 transcriptomes as would be expected for bone morphometry and the only difference observed
707 was the number of TRAP-positive osteocytes. In contrast, osteocytes from wildtype males and
708 null males are significantly different with regards to fatty acid and lipid metabolism pathways
709 whereas null male mice have lower expression of these genes compared to wildtype males.
710 This suggests a role for irisin in lipid metabolism and bioenergetics in male osteocytes. Lower
711 expression in the null male mice may be responsible for the higher bone mass and inferior
712 biomechanical properties compared to wildtype males suggesting these pathways mediate the
713 effects of FNDC5/irisin on male bone.

714 Osteocytes from null females have higher expression of genes and pathways involved in
715 collagen matrix organization, ossification, and mineralization compared to null males. Unlike
716 wildtype males and females, there was no difference in expression of lipid, cholesterol, and fatty
717 acid metabolism genes in null males compared to null females. Again, this indicates that
718 FNDC5/irisin regulates male bone through these lipid-related pathways.

719 Lactation and calcium deficiency induce the same changes in females. Similar to that
720 reported previously for lactation ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***), osteocytes from wildtype female mice on a low
721 calcium diet exhibited an increase of several osteo- clast/resorption/lactation genes including *Acp5*,

722 *Ctsk*, *Oscar*, *Mst1r*, and *Pth1r* compared to wildtype females on a normal diet. Surprisingly, we also
723 observed an increase in bone formation genes including *Col1a1*, *Alpl*, and *Bglap*. As osteocytic
724 osteolysis is rapidly reversed within a week of weaning, the osteocyte may be preparing to rapidly
725 reverse bone loss. We propose that once calcium is replenished, shutting off the proton pump will
726 rapidly reverse the pH within the osteocyte lacunae, allowing bone-forming proteins such as
727 alkaline phosphatase to become active to rapidly replace the osteocyte perilacunar matrix ***Jahn et***
728 ***al.*** (***2017***); ***Andersson et al.*** (***2003***); ***Silver et al.*** (***1988***); ***Kaplan*** (***1972***); ***Farley and Baylink*** (***1986***).

729 The main molecular mechanism responsible for the resistance of null female mice to
730 calcium deficiency compared to wildtype female mice is lower expression of genes such as
731 *Tnfsf11*, responsible for osteoclastic resorption. A correspondingly lower expression of bone
732 formation genes including *Col1a1*, *Alpl*, and *Bglap* compared to wildtype females on a low-
733 calcium diet was observed. The lower expression of both formation and resorption genes
734 suggests a coupling of resorption with formation. Irisin appears to regulate calcium release in
735 the female skeleton.

736 Osteocytes from wildtype male mice on a low calcium diet expressed higher levels of
737 bone resorption genes including *Tnsfs11*, *Acp5*, *Ctsk*, *Oscar*, and *Mst1r* compared to wildtype
738 male mice on a normal diet as expected. Like the females, there is a coupling with bone formation
739 genes as there is also an increase in *Bglap* and *Col1a1*, suggesting the potential for osteocytes to
740 rapidly replace their perilacunar matrix with calcium repletion. Similarly, the male null mice with
741 calcium deficiency showed an increase in bone resorption genes including *Tnsfs11*, *Oscar*, and
742 *Car3*, as well as an increase in bone formation genes such as *Alpl* and *Bglap* compared to null
743 mice on a normal diet. The major differences between wildtype male mice with calcium
744 deficiency and FNDC5-null male mice with calcium deficiency were the lower expression of
745 genes involved in the extracellular matrix organization, ossification, and bone development
746 pathways in the null male mice compared to wildtype males. This suggests a mechanism for how
747 null male mice lose more bone with calcium deficiency compared to wildtype males.

748 Irisin could be having direct or indirect effects on osteocytes. Irisin can modulate adipose
749 tissue ***Bostrom et al.*** (***2012***); ***Zhang et al.*** (***2014***); ***Celi and Brown*** (***2017***); ***Luo et al.*** (***2022***), can
750 potentially modulate osteogenic differentiation of bone marrow mesenchymal stem cells through
751 $\alpha V\beta 5$ ***Zhu et al.*** (***2023***) and bone marrow adipose tissue can modulate bone properties ***Yeung et***
752 ***al.*** (***2005***); ***Rosen and Bouxsein*** (***2006***); ***Muruganandan and Sinal*** (***2014***); ***Styner et al.*** (***2015***);
753 ***Schwartz et al.*** (***2015***); ***During*** (***2020***) as well as osteocyte number and activity ***Saedi A et al.***
754 (***2019***, 2020). Irisin can modulate brain activity and signaling ***Islam et al.*** (***2021***); ***Wrann et al.***
755 (***2013***); ***Young et al.*** (***2019***); ***Jo and Song*** (***2021***); ***Qi et al.*** (***2022***) through BDNF ***Wrann et al.*** (***2013***) and
756 BDNF promotes osteogenesis in human bone mesenchymal stem cells ***Liu et al.*** (***2018***). Our data

757 do not show significant expression of *Fndc5* in osteocytes. Studies from our group have found no
758 expression of *Fndc5* in primary osteoblasts and primary osteocytes (transcriptome analysis with a
759 raw count of 8-12), however both skeletal muscle (gastrocnemius) and C2C12 myotubes have high
760 expression of *Fndc5* (transcriptome raw count of 512-1000, unpublished). As such, we postulate
761 that the effect of irisin on osteocytes is not an autocrine effect, but rather due to irisin production
762 by skeletal muscle.

763 Irisin must bind to *α*V*β*5 integrins to function. Osteocytes express high levels of this receptor
764 which was first discovered using the female MLO-Y4 osteocyte-like cell line ***Kim et al.*** (***2018***).
765 Integrins are usually stable in the cell membrane with a half-life of 12-24 hours ***Moreno-Layseca et***
766 ***al.*** (***2019***). In our RNA sequencing data, we observed a stable expression of both *ITGAV* and *ITGB5*,
767 encoding integrins *α*V and *β*5 respectively, with no differences between either wildtype or null,
768 male or female, calcium replete or calcium deficient mice. Recently it has been published that
769 Hsp90*α* is necessary to facilitate irisin-*α*Vβ5 binding ***Mu et al.*** (***2023***). *Hsp90a,* the gene encoding
770 this heat shock protein, is very highly expressed in both wildtype and null male and female mice,
771 with no significant regulation by diet. The high expression of Hsp90*α* in osteocytes may explain their
772 significant and rapid responses to irisin ***Kim et al*** (***2018***).

773 In summary, during normal development and on a regular diet, FNDC5/irisin deletion has
774 few if any effects on the female skeleton but a significant effect on the male skeleton resulting
775 in more but weaker bone. However, with challenges, such as calcium deficiency, dramatic
776 differences were observed. Our data suggest that irisin activates the osteocyte in females to
777 initiate the removal of their perilacunar matrix and for bone resorption through osteoclast
778 activation, presumably to provide calcium for reproduction purposes. In contrast, in males, irisin
779 protects against osteocytic osteolysis and osteoclastic bone resorption under calcium-
780 demanding conditions. This sex-specific effect may be due to the sexual dimorphism of the
781 osteocyte transcriptome. We have discovered a new novel function of irisin to ensure the
782 survival of offspring and that irisin is essential for male but not female skeletal development.
783 These findings could have implications for understanding sex-dependent differences in bone
784 diseases, such as osteoporosis, and lead to the development of sex- targeted therapies.

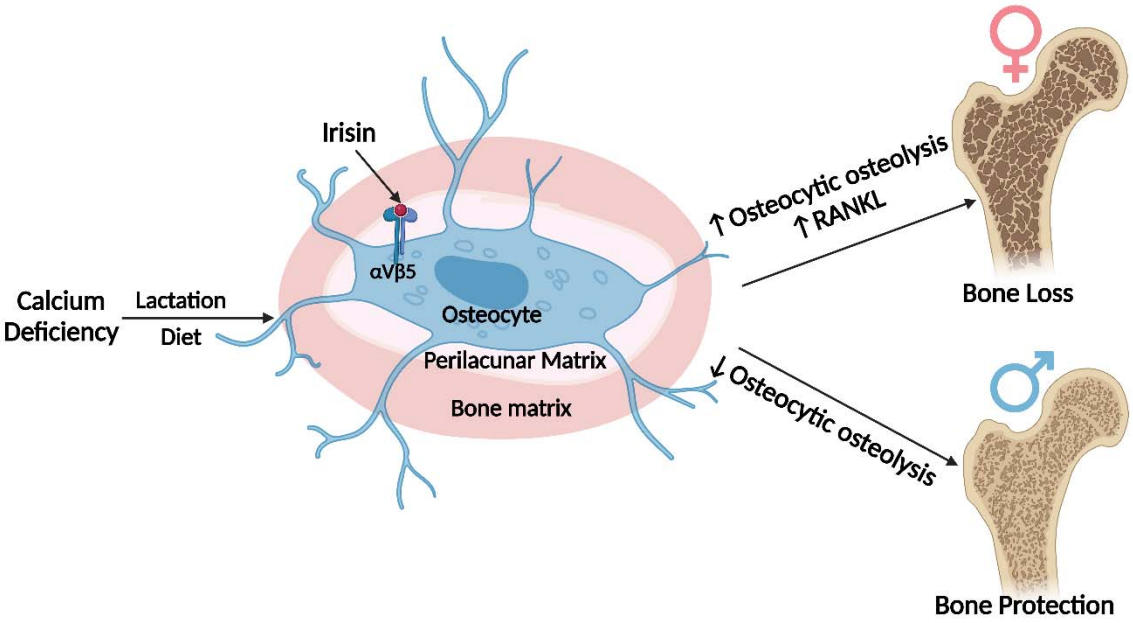


Fig 8: Graphical abstract (image was created using BioRender.com)

- No differences are observed in bone from Fndc5 /irisin null female, whereas null male skeletons are larger but weaker compared to wildtype controls.
- With calcium deficiency, lactating female null mice are protected from bone loss due to osteocytic osteolysis, whereas male null mice on a low calcium diet lose greater amounts of bone compared to their wildtype controls.
- The osteocyte transcriptomes show wildtype males have higher expression of the steroid, lipid and fatty acid pathways which are lower in the null males, whereas the wildtype females have higher expression of genes regulating osteocytic osteolysis than null females.
- With calcium deficiency, female null osteocytes have lower while male null osteocytes have higher expression of osteocytic osteolysis genes compared to wildtype controls.

797 ## Methods

798 **Animal Experiments**

799 All animal experiments were performed per procedures approved by the Institutional Animal
800 Care and Use Committee (IACUC) of the Indiana University School of Medicine. Heterozygous C57Bl/6J
801 FNDC5 Knockout (KO) mice were provided by Dr. Bruce Spiegelman at Harvard University and bred in
802 our facility to obtain homozygous global FNDC5 KO and wildtype (WT) control mice. Genotype was
803 determined using a PCR reaction with primers targeting portions of exon 3 absent in KO (WT Forward:
804 GCG GCT CGA GAG ATG AAG AA, WT Reverse: CAG CCC ACA ACA AGA AGT GC, KO Forward: GGA CTT
805 CAA GTC CAA GGT CA, KO Reverse: CCT AAG CCC ACC CAA ATT AC). Mice were housed in a temperature-
806 controlled (20–22°C) room on a 12-hour light/dark cycle with ad libitum food and water. Qualified
807 veterinary staff and/or animal care technicians performed regular health check inspections.

808 For the lactation experiments, 4-month-old WT and FNDC5 global KO female mice were bred,
809 delivered pups, and lactated for 2 weeks before sacrifice. Virgin WT and KO mice were used as
810 controls. All animals were 4-5 months old at the time of sacrifice and analysis. For all lactating mice,
811 the litter size ranged from 8-11 pups ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***).

812 For the low calcium diet experiments, 4-5-month-old male and female WT and FNDC5 global KO
813 mice were fed either a control diet (0.6% calcium, Teklad, TD.97191) or a low calcium (Ca) diet (0.01%
814 calcium, 0.4% phosphorus, Teklad TD.95027) for 2 weeks. Food was replaced every two days. Distilled
815 water was used in place of tap water to control calcium intake. On the day of sacrifice, blood was
816 collected under anesthesia, and mice were euthanized for sample collection, processing, and analysis
817 ***Qing*** (***2012***); ***Jahn et al.*** (***2017***).

818 **AAV8 injection**

819 AAV8-irisin and AAV8–GFP constructs were obtained from Dr. Bruce Spiegelman at Harvard
820 University. AAV8 Mouse ORF 1-140 (containing the N-terminal signal peptide and irisin) plus a five-
821 amino-acid linker plus a C-terminal flag tag was cloned into the pENN.AAV.CB7.CI.pm20d1flag.WPRE.rBG
822 vector (Addgene plasmid no. 132682). AAV8-GFP (pENN.AAV.CB7.CI.eGFP.WPRE.rBG), used as control,
823 was obtained from Addgene (105542), and packaged at the UPenn Vector Core to a titer of 2.10 × 1013
824 GC per ml39. FNDC5 KO male mice were placed under anesthesia and injected into the tail vein with
825 either AAV8-irisin or AAV8-GFP control (1 X 10^{10} GC per mouse) in 100 μL in PBS ***Islam et al.*** (***2021***).
826 One week after injection with either the control virus containing GFP or the virus coding for
827 circulating irisin, the mice were placed on a low-calcium diet for two weeks before sacrifice.

828 ***In vivo* and *ex vivo* muscle contractility and electrophysiology measurement**

829 *In vivo* plantarflexion torque was assessed one day before sacrifice (Scientific Inc, Canada) as
830 described in ***Pin et al.*** (***2022***). Briefly, the mouse was placed under anesthesia and the left hind foot was

831 affixed to the force transducer aligned with the tibia at 90°. The tibial nerve was stimulated using
832 monopolar electrodes (Natus Neurology, Middleton, WI). Maximum twitch torque was established by
833 using a 0.2 ms square wave pulse. Peak plantarflexion torque was measured by using a stimulation of
834 0.2 ms delivered at 100Hz stimulation frequency.

835 *In vivo* electrophysiological functions were assessed one day before sacrifice with the Sierra
836 Summit 3–12 Channel EMG (Cadwell Laboratories Incorporated, Kennewick, WA, USA) as described
837 in ***Huot et al.*** (***2022***). Briefly, peak-to-peak and baseline-to-peak compound muscle action potentials
838 (CMAP) were measured using supramaximal stimulations of <10 mA continuous current for 0.1 ms
839 duration, and peak-to-peak single motor unit (SMUP) potentials were measured using an
840 incremental stimulation technique. Motor unit number estimation (MUNE) was measured using the
841 equation: MUNE = CMAP amplitude/average SMUP.

842 *Ex vivo* muscle contractility was measured in the extensor digitorum longus (EDL) muscle as
843 described in ***Huot et al.*** (***2021***). EDL was collected from the mouse and mounted between a force
844 transducer, and then submerged in a stimulation bath. The muscles were forced to contract, and
845 data were collected using Dynamic Muscle Control/Data Acquisition (DMC) and Dynamic Muscle
846 Control Data Analysis (DMA) programs (Aurora Scientific). The EDLs were weighed for normalization
847 purposes.

848 **Body composition assessment by dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry (DXA)**

849 The right femurs from mice were dissected and cleaned of soft tissue, fixed in 4%
850 paraformaldehyde (PFA) for 48 hours, and then transferred to 70% ethanol. Ex vivo DXA
851 measurements were obtained using a faxitron (Faxitron X-ray Corp, Wheeling, IL) to measure bone
852 mineral density (BMD) and bone mineral content (BMC) ***Essex et al.*** (***2022***).

853 **Bone morphometry analysis by micro-computed tomography (μCT)**

854 Right femurs were analyzed using a Skyscan 1176 μCT as described previously ***Pin et al.***
855 (***2022***). Briefly, specimens were scanned at 55 kV, 145 μA, high resolution, 10.5 mm voxel, and 200 ms
856 integration time. For cortical parameters, three- dimensional images from a 1mm region of interest
857 (ROI) of the mid-diaphysis were used to calculate total cortical bone area fraction (Ct. B. Ar/T. Ar%),
858 cortical bone thickness (Ct. Th), marrow cavity area, periosteal perimeter (Ps. Pm), and endosteal
859 perimeter (Es. Pm) according to ASBMR guidelines ***Bouxsein et al.*** (***2010***). For trabecular
860 parameters, three-dimensional images reconstructed within the range of 0.5 mm from the most
861 proximal metaphysis of tibiae were analyzed. Trabecular morphometry was performed by excluding
862 the cortical bone from the endocortical borders using hand-drawn contours followed by thresholding
863 and characterized by bone volume fraction (BV/TV), trabecular number (Tb. N), trabecular thickness
864 (Tb. Th), trabecular spacing (Tb. Sp), and connectivity density (Conn.D) ***Kitase et al.*** (***2018***).

865 **Tartrate-resistant acid phosphatase (TRAP) staining**

866 Tibiae were stripped of soft tissue, fixed in 4% PFA for 48 hours, decalcified in 10% EDTA for
867 3-4 weeks, and processed into paraffin as described previously followed by sectioning (5 μm) and
868 staining for TRAP activity using the standard naphthol AS-BI phosphate post coupling method and
869 counterstained with toluidine blue ***Pin et al.*** (***2021***). Briefly, after equilibration in 0.2 M sodium acetate,
870 50 mM sodium tartrate, pH 5.0, for 20 min at RT, sections were incubated at 37°C in the same buffer
871 containing 0.5 mg/ml naphthol AS-MX phosphate (Sigma Chem. Co., St. Louis, MO) and 1.1 mg/ml Fast
872 Red Violet LB salt (Sigma) and counter- stained in toluidine blue. Images were taken at 5X and 40X using
873 an Olympus BX51 fluorescent microscope and Olympus cellSense Entry 1.2(Build 7533) imaging
874 software. TRAP-positive osteocytes and osteoclasts 1.5 mm distal from the growth plate were quantified
875 using Osteomeasure software (OsteoMetrics.Inc) in a blind fashion. Toluidine blue-stained osteoblasts
876 from the same sections were quantified 1.5 mm distal from the growth plate using the same software.

877 **Osteocyte lacunar area measurement by Backscatter Scanning Electron Microscopy (BSEM)**

878 Femurs were stripped of soft tissue and fixed in 4% PFA for 48 hours before proceeding to
879 dehydration and embedding steps as previously described ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***). Briefly, femurs were
880 dehydrated in graded ethanol and placed into acetone. Subsequently, the femurs were immersed in
881 infiltration solution made of 85% destabilized methyl methacrylate (MMA, Sigma), 15% dibutyl
882 phthalate (Sigma), 1% PEG400 (Sigma), and 0.7% benzoyl peroxide (Polysciences, Inc., Warrington,
883 PA)/acetone until infiltration was complete. The femurs were then placed on pre-polymerized base
884 layers, covered with freshly catalyzed MMA embedding solution (for 100 mL, 85mL MMA, 14mL
885 dibutyl phthalate, 1mL PEG400, 0.33uL DMT, and 0.8g BPO), and incubated under vacuum until the
886 MMA was polymerized. The polymerized blocks were trimmed, sequentially polished to a completely
887 smooth surface, and coated with gold using a sputter coater (Desk V, Denton Vacuum, NJ, USA). Then
888 BSEM (JEOL: JSM-7800F) was performed to image the osteocyte lacunae on the sectioned bone surface
889 at 450X magnification starting 2 mm distal from the growth plate. Six fields from the endosteal and
890 periosteal sides of the cortical bone were taken as described previously ***Qing and Bonewald*** (***2009***).
891 Using ImageJ (NIH), the images were thresholded for background removal, binarized, and the lacunar
892 area from each sample quantitated.

893 **Mechanical testing using 3-point bending**

894 Mechanical testing was performed essentially as described in ***Melville et al.*** (***2015***). Briefly,
895 the left femurs were stripped of soft tissue, wrapped in PBS- soaked gauze, and stored at -20°C until
896 use. Frozen femurs were brought to room temperature and mounted across the lower supports (8
897 mm span) of a 3- point bending platen on a TestResources R100 small force testing machine. The
898 samples were tested in monotonic bending to failure using a crosshead speed of 0.05 mm/s.

899 Parameters related to whole bone strength were measured from force/displacement curves.

900 **Serum RANKL analysis**

901 The levels of RANKL were measured in mouse centrifuged serum by using an ELISA kit (Bio-
902 Techne Corporation, Minneapolis, MN), according to the manufacturer's protocol.

903 **Serum parathyroid hormone (PTH) analysis**

904 Serum was obtained from terminal cardiac puncture and serum PTH levels were determined
905 using the MicroVue Bone Mouse PTH 1-84 ELISA assay (Quidel Corp., San Diego, CA) according to the
906 manufacturer's protocol.

907 **Calcium measurement**

908 Plasma calcium levels were determined using the Pointe Scientific calcium Reagent kit
909 (Manufacturer and city). Briefly, diluted serum (1:4 in dH2O) was incubated with a working calcium
910 color reagent for 1 min and the absorbance read at 575 nm using a spectrophotometer (BioTek
911 Synergy HTX).

912 **Sample collection and processing for RNA sequencing**

913 Bulk RNA sequencing was performed on osteocytes from the control and low calcium diet,
914 male and female, WT and KO mice. Osteocyte RNA was extracted from tibia and femur diaphyses
915 after sequential digestion to remove surface cells including osteoclasts, osteoblasts, and lining cells as
916 previously described ***Qing et al.*** (***2012***); ***Pin et al.*** (***2022***). Briefly, soft tissue was removed from the
917 bones, the epiphyses were cut off and bone marrow was removed by flushing with PBS. The remaining
918 midshafts were incubated at 37°C with 0.2% type 1 collagenase (Sigma) for 30 minutes, followed by
919 chelation/ digestion in 0.53 mM EDTA/ 0.05% trypsin (Cellgro, Mediatech, Inc, Manassas, VA) at 37°C
920 for 30 min followed by a second collagenase digestion. After each step, the bone chips were rinsed
921 with PBS and after the final step, flash-frozen in liquid nitrogen, and pulverized in liquid nitrogen,
922 with Trizol reagent (Qiagen, Carlsbad, CA) added to the resulting bone powder. Total RNA was
923 isolated with an RNA purification kit (Qiagen miRNeasy mini kit) and DNase treatment to remove
924 DNA contamination.

925 **Library preparation and RNA sequencing**

926 Total RNA samples were first evaluated for their quantity and quality using Agilent TapeStation.
927 All the samples used for the sequencing had a RIN of at least 5. 100 nanograms of total RNA were used
928 for library preparation with the KAPA total RNA Hyperprep Kit (KK8581) (Roche). Each resulting
929 uniquely dual-indexed library was quantified and quality accessed by Qubit and Agilent TapeStation.
930 Multiple libraries were pooled in equal molarity. The pooled libraries were sequenced on an Illumina
931 NovaSeq 6000 sequencer with the v1.5 reagent kit. 100 bp paired-end reads were generated.

932 **RNA-seq data analysis**

933 The sequencing reads were first quality-checked using FastQC (v0.11.5, Babraham Bioinformatics,
934 Cambridge, UK) for quality control. The sequence data were then mapped to the mouse reference
935 genome mm10 using the RNA-seq aligner STAR (v2.7.10a) ***Dobin et al.*** (***2013***) with the following
936 parameter: "--outSAMmapqUnique60". To evaluate the quality of the RNA-seq data, the number of
937 reads that fell into different annotated regions (exonic, intronic, splicing junction, intergenic,
938 promoter, UTR, etc.) of the reference genome was assessed using bamutils ***Breese and Liu*** (***2013***).
939 Uniquely mapped reads were used to quantify the gene level ex- pression employing featureCounts
940 (subread v2.0.3) ***Liao et al.*** (***2014***) with the following parameters: "-s 2 -Q 10".

941 **Quality control of samples**

942 During data quality control, one of the KO female control samples (sample 23) was found to
943 have a similar proportion of reads on chromosome Y as in male mice and a very low expression of
944 the gene Xist, typically highly expressed in females (Supplementary Figure 3A, 3B), therefore this
945 sample was excluded from the analysis.

946 The WT female low-calcium diet samples (samples 16, 17, and 18) had low mapping
947 percentages of 37%, 32%, and 61%, respectively. This may be due to bacterial contamination. The
948 two possible methods to process these data are to filter all the possible contaminated reads before
949 alignment or align the reads without filtering. However, filtering the possible contaminated reads
950 before alignment may result in removing some reads from the mouse genome which is similar to the
951 bacterial genome (causing lower gene expression). In contrast, using data without filtering may
952 result in some genes having higher expression levels due to reads from the bacterial genome which
953 are aligned to mice genes. We decided to perform a principal component analysis (PCA) using data
954 without filtering and found that the samples clearly clustered into four groups: control male mice,
955 control female mice, low-calcium diet male mice, and low-calcium diet female mice (Supplementary
956 Figure 3C). Within each group, the separation of WT and KO mice is also clear. Due to contamination,
957 samples 16 and 18 were slightly far apart from the others. However, contamination should not have
958 a large global influence on the data as samples 16, 17, and 18 are close to the non-contaminated
959 samples 5 and 6, also in the low-calcium diet female group. Additionally, we validated the data using
960 qPCR with selected genes.

961 **Differentially expressed gene analysis**

962 The read counts matrix was imported to R ***Team*** (***2022***) and analyzed with DEseq2 ***Love et al.***
963 (***2014***). Within DESeq2, read counts data were normalized with median of ratios, and differentially
964 expressed genes (DEGs) were detected after independent filtering. In DEG analysis, we first detected
965 DEGs between different groups. Significant genes were defined as genes with an unadjusted p-value less

966 than 0.01 and absolute log2 fold change larger than 1. Gene set enrichment analysis was applied on
967 gene sets from ***Gene ontology resource: enriching a GOld mine*** (***2021***) using R package
968 clusterProfiler ***Wu*** (***2021***). p value of less than 0.05 was considered as significant for the gene
969 ontology analysis. Several RNA sequencing and pathway figures were prepared with R packages
970 ggplot2 ***Wickham*** (***2016***) and ComplexHeatmap ***Gu*** (***2022***). The data was deposited in NCBI GEO
971 database (accession number GSE242445).

972 **Real-time quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR)**

973 Total RNA was reverse transcribed to cDNA using the Verso cDNA Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific).
974 Transcript levels were measured by real-time PCR (Light Cycler 96; Roche), taking advantage of the
975 TaqMan and SYBR Gene Expression Assay System (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Expression levels for
976 RANKL (*Tnfsf11*, Forward primer: CCG AGC TGG TGA AGA AAT TAG, Reverse: CCC AAA GTA CGT CGC
977 ATC

978 TTG), Cathepsin K (*Ctsk*, Primer Bank ID: Mm.PT.58.9655974, IDT), TRAP (*Acp5*,
979 Mm.PT.58.5755766, IDT), and sclerostin (*Sost*, Mm00470479_m1, Applied Biosystems) were quantitated.
980 Gene expression was normalized to β-2-microglobulin (*B2m*, Forward: ACA GTT CCA CCC GCC TCA CAT T,
981 Reverse: TAG AAA GAC C A G TCC TTG CTG AAG) levels using the standard 2−ΔΔCt method.

982 **Statistical Analysis**

983 Data are expressed as individual data points. The statistical analysis was done by Prism 8.2
984 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA, USA) and R 4.3.0. When comparing three or more groups with
985 two variables, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used. To compare between two groups,
986 the unpaired, two-tailed Student's t-test was used. Differences were considered significant at * $p <$
987 0.05, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$.

988 ## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

989 We would like to thank the Center for Medical Genomics, the Small Animal Phenotypic Core, and
990 the Histology and Histomorphometry Core at the Indiana Center for Musculoskeletal Health for help
991 and advice with histological sample preparation. We would like to thank Dr. Yukiko Kitase, Dr. Eijiro
992 Sakamoto, and Carrie Zhao for their help and advice with the experiments. This work was supported
993 by NIH awards P01 AG039355 (to L.F.B).

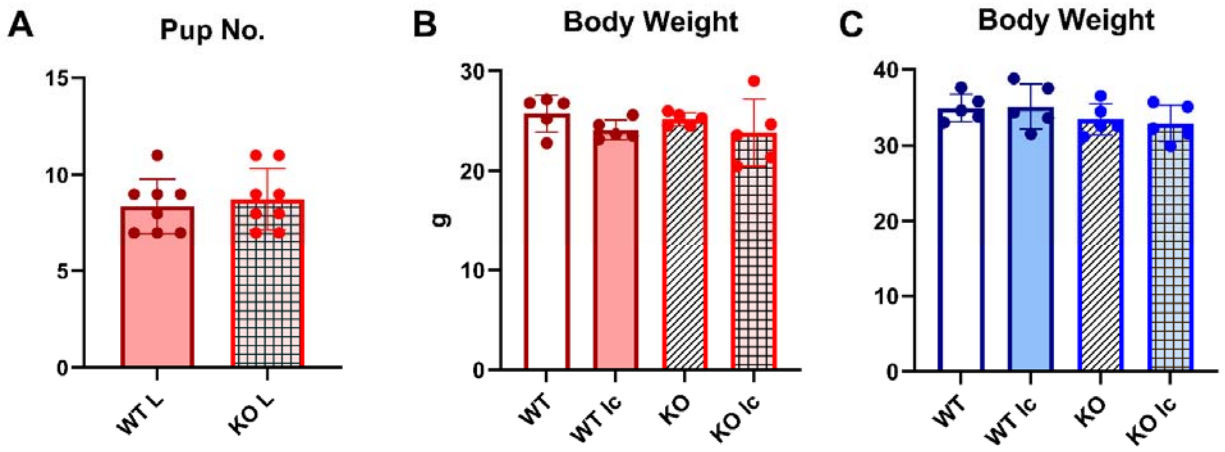
994 **Disclosures**

995 The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

996 **Data Availability Statement**

997 All data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author
998 upon reasonable request.

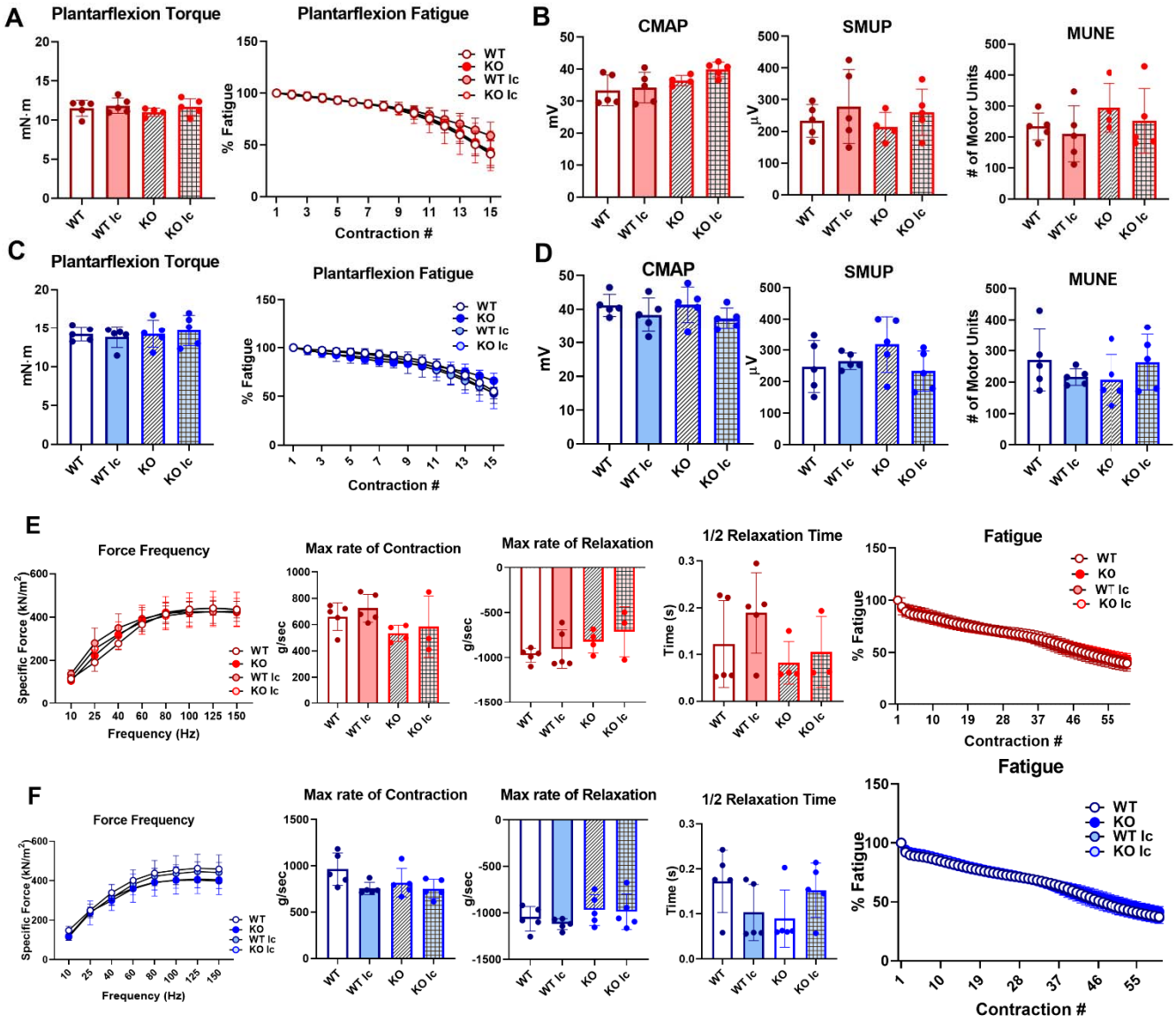
999 The osteocyte transcriptome data has been deposited into the NCBI GEO database. The
1000 accession number for the data is GSE242445.
1001



Supplementary Figure 1: Pup numbers for the lactation experiment, and body weight measurements for the low calcium-diet experiment

Panel **A** shows total pup numbers in WT and KO female mice that underwent pregnancy and 2 weeks of lactation. There are no significant differences in the pup numbers between genotypes. Students t-test was performed for statistical analysis. n= 8/group.

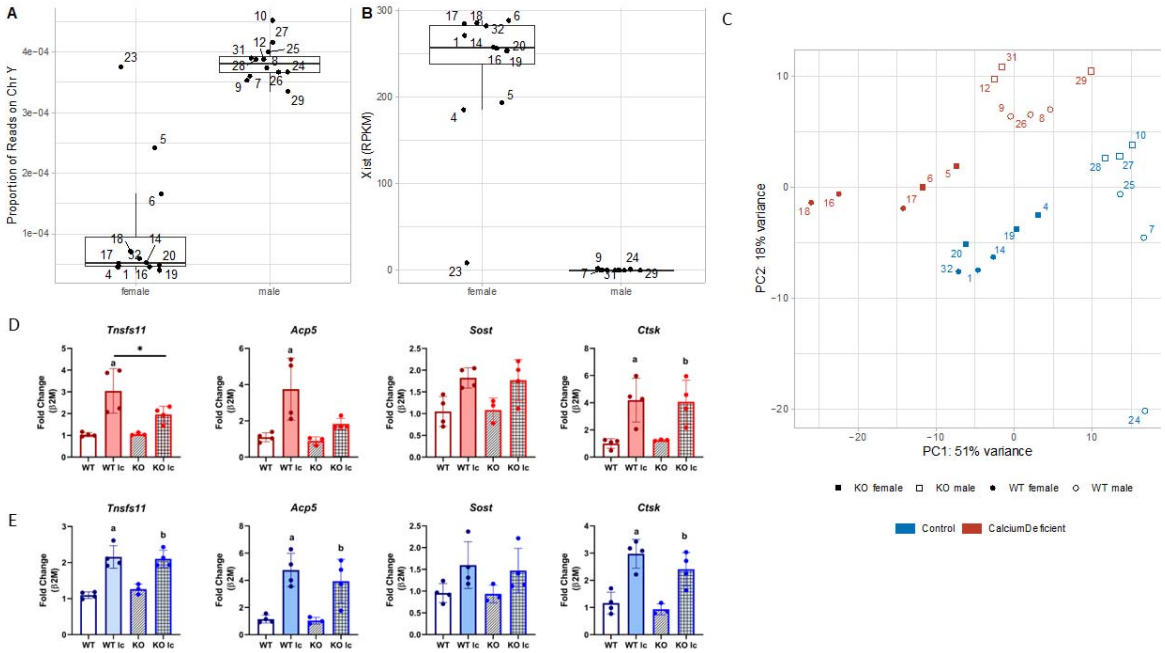
panels **B** and **C** show total body weight of WT and KO female (B) and male (C) mice. No statistically significant difference was found among the groups, regardless of genotype or diet. 2-way ANOVA with Tukey's post hoc test was done. n= 4-5/group. As depicted here, red is female, and blue is male.



Supplementary Figure 2: Neither genotype nor dietary calcium alters muscle functions *in vivo* or *ex vivo*

Panels **A** and **C** show *in vivo* muscle plantarflexion force (reported as plantarflexion torque and plantarflexion fatigue) in WT and KO female (**A**) and male (**C**) mice on a control or a low calcium diet, panels **B** and **D** show muscle electrophysiology parameters of CMAP, SMUP, and MUNE in WT and KO female (**B**) and male (**D**) mice, and panels **E** and **F** show *ex vivo* EDL functional measurement (reported as specific force frequency, maximum rate of contraction, maximum rate of relaxation, half-relaxation time, and % fatigue) in WT and KO female (**E**) and male (**F**) mice.

2-way ANOVA was performed. n= 4-5/group. As depicted here, red is female, and blue is male.



Supplementary Figure 3: Quality control and validation of RNA sequencing

Sanity check of data on the sample's sex. **A**: Boxplot of proportional of reads on chromosome Y. Male should have a higher value than female. **B**: Boxplot of RPKM of *Xist*. Males should have very low expression of *Xist*.

C: Scatter plot of PC1 and PC2 from Principal Component Analysis (PCA) of gene expression data.

D: qPCR analysis of *Tnsfs11*, *Acp5*, *Sost*, and *Ctsk* genes from osteocyte-enriched bone chips from female samples. n= 3-4/sample. Two-way ANOVA was performed for statistical analysis. Gene fold-change was normalized using β-2-microglobulin as the housekeeping gene. a= Significantly different from WT, b= Significantly different from KO, *= $p < 0.05$.

E: qPCR analysis of *Tnsfs11*, *Acp5*, *Sost*, and *Ctsk* genes from osteocyte-enriched bone chips from male samples. n= 3-4/sample. Two-way ANOVA was performed for statistical analysis. Gene fold-change was normalized using β-2-microglobulin as the housekeeping gene. a= Significantly different from WT, b= Significantly different from KO, *= $p < 0.05$.

Bone Parameters	Virgin		Lactation	
	WT	KO	WT	KO
Femoral cortical bone parameters				
Ct. B. Ar/T. Ar (%)	47.4 ± 1.2	48 ± 1	35.2 ± 1.8[a]	37.5 ± 1.8[b, c]
Ct. Th (mm)	0.18 ± 0.004	0.19 ± 0.005	0.13 ± 0.004[a]	0.14 ± 0.01[b, c]
Ps. Pm (mm)	5.16 ± 0.2	5.2 ± 0.06	5.18 ± 0.16	5.2 ± 0.14
Es. Pm (mm)	3.95 ± 0.1	4 ± 0.13	4.4 ± 0.11[a]	4.3 ± 0.09[b]
Marrow cavity area (mm^2)	0.93 ± 0.1	0.93 ± 0.04	1.16 ± 0.05[a]	1.13 ± 0.05[b]
Femoral trabecular bone parameters				
BV/TV (%)	3.7 ± 1	4.5 ± 0.8	3.1 ± 0.7	4 ± 1.1
Tb. Th (mm)	0.043 ± 0.002	0.044 ± 0.001	0.039 ± 0.002[a]	0.039 ± 0.001[b]
Tb. Sp (mm)	0.37 ± 0.05	0.36 ± 0.03	0.57 ± 0.15[a]	0.44 ± 0.09
Tb. N (1/mm)	0.85 ± 0.2	1.06 ± 0.2	0.8 ±0.2	1.04 ± 0.25

Bone parameters	Change	% Change	
		WT	KO
Cortical Bone Area Fraction	Decrease	26%	22% *
Cortical Thickness	Decrease	29%	24% *
Ultimate Force	Decrease	38%	31% *
Osteoclast Number/ bone parameter	Increase	141%	129%
TRAP-positive osteocytes	Increase	101%	175% *
Lacunar Area	Increase	26%	15% *
Serum RANKL	Increase	170%	80% *

1034 **Supplementary Table 1: FNDC5 KO mice femurs are partially resistant to lactation-induced bone loss.**

1035 Femoral cortical and trabecular bone parameters of WT and FNDC5 KO female virgin and lactation mice. n
1036 = 5-8/group. Data presented as mean ± standard deviation. a= significant compared to WT control, b= significant
1037 compared to KO control, c= significant compared to WT low Ca diet, 2-way ANOVA, significance <0.05, n= 8/group.

1038 Percentage change in different bone and serum parameters in WT and FNDC5 KO female mice with
1039 lactation. *= p<0.05 compared to WT.
1040

Bone Parameters	Female Normal Diet		Female Low Ca Diet		Male Normal Diet		Male Low Ca Diet	
	WT	KO	WT	KO	WT	KO	WT	KO
***Ex vivo* femur DXA**								
BMD (mg/cm^2)	75.4± 2.4	6.6± 1.5	65.4± 4.3[a]	71.4± 3.4 [c]	74.6± 1.5	78.3± 3[a]	68.2± 3	68.1± 2[b]
BMC (g)	0.03± 0.002	0.03± 0.001	0.024± 0.002[a]	0.027± 0.002 [b,c]	0.029± 0.002	0.032± 0.004	0.026± 0.002	0.025± 0.003[b]
Femoral cortical bone parameters								
Ct. B.Ar/T.Ar%	47.8± 1.6	48.4± 0.4	41.6± 1.1[a]	45.2± 1.4[b, c]	40.1± 1.4	43.6± 0.6[a]	38.3± 0.9	39.1± 1.2[b]
Ct. Th (mm)	0.2± 0.01	0.2± 0.01	0.15± 0.01[a]	0.17± 0.01[b, c]	0.15± 0.01	0.2± 0.01[a]	0.14± 0.01	0.14± 0.01[b]
Marrow Cavity Area	0.92 ± 0.04	0.86± 0.02	1.02 ± 0.06[a]	0.9 ± 0.02[c]	1.1 ± 0.04	1.03 ± 0.06[a]	1.2 ± 0.03	1.08 ± 0.03[c]
Femoral trabecular bone parameters								
BV/TV (%)	3.6 ± 1.2	4.3 ± 1	3.2 ± 1	3.9 ± 1	6.1 ± 1.1	8.7 ± 1.9	5.3 ± 1.2	6.4 ±0.6
Tb. Th (mm)	0.059± 0.002	0.059± 0.004	0.056± 0.002	0.055± 0.001	0.036 ± 0.001	0.035 ± 0.001	0.035±0. 001	0.035 ± 0.002
Tb. Sp (mm)	0.38 ± 0.03	0.35 ± 0.02	0.51 ± 0.12[a]	0.48 ± 0.08[b]	0.274 ± 0.025	0.235 ± 0.021	0.278 ± 0.027	0.265 ± 0.01
Tb. N (1/mm)	0.81 ± 0.2	0.95 ± 0.14	0.7 ± 0.02	0.91 ±0.13	1.7 ± 0.34	2.5[a] ± 0.5	1.5 ± 0.3	1.8 ± 0.1
Femoral mechanical properties								
Ultimate Force (N)	19± 1	19.4± 1.15	14.8± 0.7[a]	16.4± 0.5[b]	18.3± 1	17.6± 0.9	15± 1.3[a]	12.7± 1.5[b, c]
Stiffness (N/mm)	78.6± 3.2	79.1± 4.9	56.8± 5[a]	67± 4.3	76.7± 5.6	56.4± 4.75[a]	56± 10.2[a]	48.5± 4.9[b, c]
Energy to Failure (N)	2.9± 0.3	3.1± 0.6	1.8± 0.5[a]	2± 0.3[b]	3.6± 0.9	3.01± 0.6	2.5± 0.3[a]	2.35± 0.14

1041 **Supplementary Table 2: WT and FNDC5 KO female and male mice bone responds differently**
1042 **to a low-calcium diet**

1043 Femoral BMD, BMC, cortical and trabecular bone parameters, and mechanical properties of
1044 4-5-month-old WT and KO female and male mice under a normal diet or a 2-week low calcium diet.
1045 n = 5/group. Data presented as mean ± standard deviation.
1046 a= significant compared to WT control, b= significant compared to KO control, c= significant
1047 compared to WT low Ca diet, 2-way ANOVA, significance <0.05, n= 4-5/group.
048

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