The keratin cortex stabilizes cells at high strains

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Abstract

The eukaryotic cytoskeleton consists of three filament types: actin filaments, microtubules and intermediate filaments (IFs). IF proteins are expressed in a cell-type specific manner, and keratins are found in epithelial cells. In certain cell types, the keratins form a layer close to the membrane which may be referred to as an "IF-cortex". It is hypothesized that this IF-cortex arranges with radial bundles in a "rim-and-spokes" structure in epithelia. Based on this hypothesis, IFs and actin filaments might add

complementary mechanical properties to the cortex. It was previously shown that single IFs in vitro remain undamaged at high strains. We now ask the question of whether this unique force-extension behavior of single IFs is also relevant in the filament network within a cell. Here, we show the influence of equibiaxial strain on wild-type (WT) and keratin-deficient (KO) cells comparing the viscoelastic properties close to the cell membrane using atomic force microscopy, in a spatially resolved manner. We find that cells without keratin exhibit a higher pre-stress than the WT cells. The compressibility modulus is increased at the cell rim, compared to the inside region, due to the geometry of the cell layer. Interestingly, both the pre-stress and the fluidity of the KO cells are altered already at low strains, whereas the WT cells show a response only at large strain. Our results indicate that KO cells compensate for the missing keratin, but are nevertheless very sensitive to external strain, whereas the intricate interplay between the actin and keratin cortices preserves the mechanical state and cell stability.

Introduction

Cells in certain types of tissues permanently experience forces, caused by, for example, fluid flow and active contraction generated by neighboring cells or during peristaltic movement.[1,2] The cell can cope with these forces due to its cytoskeleton,[1] a biopolymer network of three types of filamentous proteins – actin filaments, microtubules and intermediate filaments (IFs)[3] – along with passive cross-linkers and active motor proteins. Interestingly, each type of filament contributes unique mechanic and dynamic properties and together they organize into complex networks providing the cell with distinct mechanical properties and enabling the cell to flexibly adapt to mechanical requirements.[3] Out of the three filament types, actin is considered to be the most relevant for cell mechanics,[4] while microtubules contribute only little.[4,5] The importance of actin for cell mechanics and morphogenesis is reflected in the so-called cortex, a dense, contractile network found just underneath the plasma membrane.[6]

In contrast to actin and tubulin, IF proteins are expressed in a cell-type specific manner,

each providing their own unique properties to the cell.[7] Specifically, epithelial cells express the IF protein keratin.[8] In certain cell types, such as Madin-Darby canine kidney (MDCK) cells,[9] murine trophectoderm cells or murine enterocytes,[10] the IF network forms a "rim" close to the cell membrane, just below the actin cortex and may hence also be referred to as an "IF-cortex". The cortex interconnects the desmosomes in a circumferential network organized in parallel to the plasma membrane and is hypothesized to be part of a rim-and-spokes arrangement.[9] Such a "two-layered" cortex made of mechanically highly distinct filament types could potentially lead to interesting properties of the cell when exposed to high forces. Furthermore, it has been shown that cells exhibit different mechanical properties in different regions of the cell,[11–13] which raises the question of whether the rim-and-spokes arrangement brings additional interesting features to the properties of the cell, depending on the region.

In vitro rheology experiments on networks of actin, microtubules, and IFs show that actin and microtubules rupture at comparatively low forces, while IFs are highly extensible and remain undamaged at high strains.[14–16] This network extensibility found for IFs is also reflected on the single filament level: vimentin IFs can be extended up to at least 4.5-fold their original length[17] and similarly high values were found for keratin, desmin, and neurofilaments.[18–20] Moreover, it has been shown that vimentin IFs stiffen under compression, both in cells and in vitro[21] and it is not unlikely that a similar phenomenon may exist for keratin. These results from studies on IF networks and single filaments reveal two interesting features of this biomaterial: (i) they are more extensible than actin filaments that rupture at low strains; and (ii) they display a distinctly nonlinear stress-strain behavior. At low strains, IFs behave linearly, at strains above 10 to 20 %, they display a plateau regime in which little force is needed to extend the filament further, and at high strains, they stiffen.[17] Thus, the plateau in the stress-strain behavior coincides with a strain-regime where actin is already fluidized[22] and the question arises whether the keratin is able to protect the cell from damage. To answer this question, cells may be strained by mechanical stretching[23] and indeed, such

cell stretchers, where cells are seeded on elastic membranes that are being stretched either uniaxially[24–28] or (equi)biaxially[29–31] have been developed and applied. Alternative methods for stretching of cells exist, such as suspended cell monolayers,[2,32] single cells between two plates[33] or cell "domes".[34] These studies revealed a strain-stiffening of the cells. The actin network reorganizes along the stretching direction[27,28] and fluidizes at high strains,[22,24] while IFs reorganize as well but are much more extensible and stabilize the cell.[26,32]

Despite these insightful studies, which clearly point to an important role of IFs in cell mechanics, it remains unclear, whether and to which extent the unique stress-strain behavior of individual IFs is relevant in the cell. We hypothesize that especially at high strains, the high extensibility and the non-linear stress-strain behavior of IFs influence the viscoelastic properties of the cells. To investigate this hypothesis on MDCK II epithelial cells, we employ an equibiaxial cell-stretcher, compatible with both atomic force microscopy (AFM) and light microscopy. We study the influence of the keratin network on cell mechanics by conducting AFM force spectroscopy on wild-type (WT) and keratin knock-out (KO) cells and we distinguish between the cell edge and interior in a spatially-resolved manner. We find that the pre-stress σ_0 is increased in keratin-deficient cells suggesting a compensation of the missing keratin layer by the actin cortex. Furthermore, the compressibility modulus $\widetilde{K}_A$ is increased at the cell rim compared to the inside region as a consequence of the "brick-like" geometry of the cell layers. Interestingly, both the fluidity value β and the pre-stress σ_0 of the KO cells respond to low strains, whereas for the WT cells they respond only for high strains, pointing at a complex interplay between the actin and the keratin cortices in MDCK cells, which is crucial for cell mechanics. Our findings might suggest that in KO cells actin compensates for the missing keratin network but only the combination of actin and keratin guarantees cell integrity under strain.

Materials and Methods

Cell Stretcher

The home-built stretcher (see Fig. 1a) consists of a motorized internal gear ring (dark gray), controlled by the software "spec" (Certified Scientific Software, Cambridge, MA, USA), to which six arms (light gray) are connected via gears. With each motor movement, the gear ring is turned (large pink arrow) resulting in an outwards movement of the arms (small pink arrows) that hold the PDMS device, thereby stretching the device equibiaxially. To ensure unhindered movement and preventing tearing of the device while the arms are turning, the holes in the device are stabilized by poly(tetrafluoroethylene) (PTFE) sleeves, see SI Appendix, Fig. S2b. During cell culture and in preparation of the stretching experiments, the PDMS device is kept in a pre-stretcher consisting of a PTFE ring with six pins fitting into the PTFE sleeves in the device and a transfer aid. Thus, the membrane within the PDMS device is kept even and all membranes are set to the same fixed strain at the beginning of the experiments. The transfer aid made from stainless steel is situated between the pre-stretcher and the device and provides a seamless transfer from the Petri dish to the stretcher by ensuring a smooth sliding off of the pins of the pre-stretcher onto the arms of the stretcher.

PDMS Devices

We fabricate polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS, Sylgard 184, Dow Chemical, Midland, US) devices with a total diameter of 3.25 cm, see SI Appendix, Fig. S2a. They consist of a membrane with a thickness of 250 μm. The walls have a thickness of 0.5 cm, a width of 3.25 cm and delimit a well of radius 1 cm on the membrane into which the cells are seeded.

To fabricate the walls of the devices, 3 g of PDMS base are mixed with cross-linker at a ratio of 25:1, filled into home-made hexagonal molds made from polylactic acid (PLA, Polymaker, Shanghai, China), cured for 1.5 h at 65°C and removed from the mold. We produce the membranes in two layers. PDMS is mixed with cross-linker at a ratio of 25:1,

spin-coated onto a 4-inch Si-wafer (ramp up to 60 rpm within 10 s, 10 s at 60 rpm) to obtain a thickness of 220 μm and cured for 45 min at 65°C. The membrane is plasma activated at 30 W for 21 s. Dark-red fluorescent microspheres (660/680 nm, 2% solids, FluoSpheres F8807, 200 nm, Invitrogen, Waltham, MA, USA) are diluted in a ratio of 1:200 in isopropanol and spin-coated onto the membrane (ramp up to 60 rpm within 25 s, 25 s at 60 rpm). A second layer of PDMS with a mixing ratio of 25:1 is spin-coated onto the wafer (ramp up to 2460 rpm within, 40 s, 20 s at 2460 rpm) to obtain a thickness of 30 μm.

We place the cured PDMS walls onto the uncured PDMS membrane, cure everything together for 45 min at 65°C and remove the device from the wafer. Holes are punched into the wall using a 4 mm biopsy puncher and the PTFE-sleeves are inserted. The finished PDMS devices are boiled in water for 1 h and stored in sterile water for at least 8h. This step ensures that the PDMS device is sterile for cell culture and that the device is soaked with water to prevent the cell medium from being absorbed by the device.

In preparation for the cell experiments, the pre-stretcher is assembled and added to the PDMS device (SI Appendix, Fig. S2b). The well inside the device is rinsed with PBS, coated with laminin (25 μg/mL, from mouse, Gibco, Life Technologies, Carlsbad, CA, US) for 1h at room temperature and rinsed again with PBS.

Cell Culture

All experiments are performed on Madin-Darby Canine Kidney cells strain II (MDCK II, ECACC 00062107, European Collection of Authenticated Cell Cultures, Salisbury, UK). We stably transfect the cells with a bicistronic vector to allow for coexpression of K8-EGFP and lifeact-mCherry (VectorBuilder, Neu-Isenburg, Germany); this way, we fluorescently tag both the keratin and the actin structures. In the following, we will refer to these cells as wild-type (WT) cells. The keratin 8 knock-out (KO) cells are produced using CRISPR/Cas9n technology. We clone two different gRNAs targeting exon 1 of the canine Krt8 gene into PX462 V2.0 vector (Addgene #62987, Watertown, MA, US; kind gift of Feng Zhang).[35]

The sequences of the gRNAs are gRNA-1: 5'-GGG GCT CAC CTT GTC GAT GAA GG -3' and gRNA-2: 5'- GGG CGG GCA GTG CCT GGG GCT GG -3'. We co-transfect MDCK II cells with both vectors and subject isolated single cell clones to immunofluorescence analysis using anti-keratin 8 (TROMA-1) and anti-desmoplakin (DP-1, Progen, Heidelberg, Germany) antibodies to confirm knock-out (SI Appendix, Fig. S3).

The cells are cultured in Eagle's Minimum Essential Medium, supplemented with Earle's salts and 2 mM GlutaMax (EMEM, Gibco) and 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS, Gibco), and kept at 37°C and 5% $C0_2$. For the WT cells, we add 2 μg/mL Puromycin (Sigma Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA) to the medium. Twice per week, the cells are passaged, and passages 4 to 12 after thawing are used for the experiments.

Two days before the experiments, we seed the cells on the PDMS devices to reach confluence for the experiments. To improve the image quality for fluorescence microscopy, the cell medium is replaced by phenol-free medium (Gibco) containing the same supplements as the regular culturing medium. Additionally, to be able to perform experiments without CO_2 supply, we add 15 mM HEPES to the cell medium.

Cell Fixation, Immunofluorescence Staining and Confocal Imaging

For the imaging of the actin and keratin networks in both cell lines, the cells are seeded in advance on cover slips (diameter of 18 mm, thickness 1.5H, VWR, Radnor, PA, US). When the cells reach confluence, they are washed with PBS and 4% formaldehyde (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, US) is added and incubated for 20 min at room temperature to fix the cells. Afterwards, the cells are permeabilized by washing with 0.1% Triton X solution (Triton X-100, Sigma Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, US diluted with PBS). To stain the actin, phalloidin (Alexa Fluor 647, Invitrogen) is mixed with 0.1% Triton X solution in a ratio of 1 to 40 and added to the cells for 1 h at room temperature. Then, the cells are washed, first with 0.1% Triton X solution, and second with ultrapure water. Finally, the glass slides are mounted on a microscopy slide with mounting medium (ProLong Diamond antifade,

Invitrogen) and stored at 4 °C for at least one day.

The fixed and stained cells are imaged on an inverse confocal microscope (IX83 with a Fluoview FV3000, Olympus, Hamburg, Germany) at 100× magnification (NA 1.45, UP-LanXApo, Olympus) and laser line 640 nm for actin and laser line 488 nm for keratin. Z-stacks are recorded with $\Delta z = 0.41\,\mu$m.

Epi-Fluorescence Imaging

Epi-fluorescence imaging of the fluorescent beads for the characterization of the PDMS stretching devices is performed on a motorized upright fluorescence microscope (BX63, Olympus) at 60× magnification using a water dipping objective (NA 1, LUMPLFLN60XW, Olympus) with an Orca Flash 4.0 camera (Hamamatsu, Tokio, Japan) and a Sola SE II fluorescence lamp (Lumencor, USA) set to 15% power.

We image the fluorescence microspheres using a Cy5 filter set (U-F49006, excitation: ET620/60x, dichroic mirror: T660LPXR, emission: ET700/75m; Olympus) at 50 ms exposure time. At each position, z-stacks are recorded with $\Delta z = 0.54\,\mu$m.

Characterization of the Cell Stretcher and PDMS Device

Characterization of the stretcher and PDMS stretching devices is performed without cells. The devices are filled with water. The device is stretched in motor steps of $\Delta mp = 0.1$ a.u. until rupture.

In the stretcher, the membrane tends to be uneven or tilted due to the way it is manually placed on the stretcher arms (SI Appendix, Fig. S13a). To overcome this problem, we record 3D epi-fluorescence images of the beads and correct the images for the tilt. As the beads are in one layer in the PDMS membrane only and the bead size is smaller than the difference in z between two images, for each lateral position there is only one z-position where the beads are in focus. We compute a spatial Laplacian for every image for a kernel size of 5 pixels to define the sharpness. We normalize the Laplacian along the z-axis with respect to the

maximum absolute value in a pixel-wise manner. Next, we determine which slice in the stack is in focus for a coarse grid of the image. The sum of the normalized, absolute gradient values is computed for each z-slice and grid block. A 2D matrix is then created storing the indices of the z-slice with the highest sum, representing the "best-in-focus" slices at each grid block (SI Appendix, Fig. S13b). Finally, we fit a second order 2D polynomial to the grid and interpolate the original z-stack to the result of this fit to create a tilt-corrected image. We repeat this procedure for every stack at every stretching position in the experiment to generate a time series (SI Appendix, Fig. S13c).

For the calculation of the strain, we manually align the tilt-corrected images at all strains in the center (SI Appendix, Fig. S13d). Using the python implementation "itk-elastix" of the software "Elastix",[36,37] every image in the image series of the beads is registered with respect to its previous image using an affine transformation (SI Appendix, Fig. S13e).

This procedure is repeated for twenty independent experiments. The arithmetic mean and standard deviation of all data sets is calculated and the values for the linear strain in x direction from the averaging for each motor position mp is used to determine the area strain (Eq. 3), since $\varepsilon_x = \varepsilon_y$ applies for equibiaxial strain.

Atomic Force Microscopy

The force spectroscopy measurements are performed on a Nanowizard 4 atomic force microscope (AFM, Bruker Nano GmbH, MA, USA) combined with a manual or motorized inverse fluorescence microscope (IX73 or IX83, Olympus/Evident, Hamburg, Germany). Three different strain positions (0%, 18.4% and 47.8% area strain) are included for the measurements and at each strain approximately the same region within the device is chosen. We use a cantilever with a spherical tip of $2\,\mu$m diameter (CP-PNPL-SiO-A, Nano and More GmbH, Wetzlar, Germany). The maximum force, i.e., the setpoint, is set to $2\,$nN and we use an indentation velocity of $2\,\mu$m/s. Force maps of size $50\,\mu\text{m} \times 50\,\mu\text{m}$ with a pixel size of $2 \times 2\,\mu\text{m}^2$ are recorded. At each strain position, we take four force maps to cover a total area

of $100\,\mu$m $\times$ $100\,\mu$m. The measurements are performed in liquid in a heated environment at 37°C (The Cube, Life Imaging Services, Basel, Switzerland). Phase contrast images are taken at 20× magnification (NA 0.45, LUCPlanFLN, Olympus) with a monochromatic camera (UI-3060CP-M-GL Rev. 2, IDS Imaging Development Systems GmbH, Obersulm) and 50 ms exposure time.

The experiments are terminated either after reaching the highest strain or when the PDMS device breaks.

Cell Shape Analysis

To analyze the area of the cells, cell segmentation is performed on the phase contrast microscopy images using the software "CellPose"[38] and its python implementation (SI Appendix, Fig. S4a, b). We use the model "cyto2"[39] and the default flow threshold of 0.4 for all data sets; here, one data sets corresponds to the data collected from one experiment. 11 data sets are used for the WT cells and 10 for the KO cells. The cell area is determined by summing over the number of pixels per cell and scaling with the pixel size of the images (SI Appendix, Fig. S4c).

For the determination of the eccentricity and orientation of the cells, ellipses are fitted to the outline determined from CellPose using the python function "fitEllipse" in the package "cv2" (SI Appendix, Fig. S4d). The eccentricity of the ellipse is calculated via its semi-major axis a and its semi-minor axis b by

$$e = \sqrt{1 - \frac{b^2}{a^2}}. \tag{1}$$

The orientation is defined as the angle between the semi-major axis a and the x-axis from 0° to 180° as the direction is irrelevant (SI Appendix, Fig. S4e).

AFM Data Analysis

For the analysis of the force spectroscopy measurements, we preprocess the data curves using the python package "nanite"[40] (SI Appendix, Fig. S14). At first, a baseline correction is applied to the raw force curves (SI Appendix, Fig. S14a), correcting its tilt and offset to the x-axis (b). Next, the contact point is estimated using the nanite-function "deviation from baseline" (SI Appendix, Fig. S14c). Finally, the curve is corrected by the tip-sample separation, which separates the distance of the cantilever towards the sample from the deflection of the cantilever in the opposite direction (SI Appendix, Fig. S14d).

The workflow for the analysis is shown schematically in SI Appendix, Fig. S5. We combine the data from the force spectroscopy measurements with the images from light microscopy. The phase contrast images are segmented with CellPose as described before (SI Appendix, Fig. S5a,b). As the phase contrast images have a different pixel size than the AFM images, the resulting cell outlines are interpolated to fit the AFM pixel size (SI Appendix, Fig. S5c). These outlines are then overlaid onto the AFM images where each pixel contains a force spectroscopy curve (SI Appendix, Fig. S5d, e). Each cell is divided into two regions using the outline. The outline traces the outermost pixels that are still part of the cell. The rim is defined as a single pixel-wide line that marks this edge of the cell. The inside region is then identified as the area in the cell center extending three pixels inward from the rim (SI Appendix, Fig. S5f). With this division, we exclude an interim region between the rim and the inside to avoid any unclear classification into either of these regions.

Finally, the curves are rated using the respective method implemented in nanite. We train our own neural network using the respective feature in nanite on force curves that are not included here in the further analysis to fit with our data and results. We exclude every curve with a rating lower than 4.5 to omit out any curves of low quality (SI Appendix, Fig. S5g).

The force curves are averaged per category by aligning all curves on their maximum.

Since the time points of the curves can be different, we interpolate the curves to correct the time axis. Finally, the mean and the standard deviation of the curves are calculated.

The individual curves are fitted with a viscoelastic fit providing the viscoelastic properties prestress of the cortex, apparent compressibility modulus and fluidity. After fitting each curve, we exclude those curves where the viscoelastic fit provides unphysical values and show a failed fitting of the curve. Note that due to the large amount of data included here, statistical tests, such as the Kruskal-Wallis test with a post-hoc Dunn's test, always yield statistical significance, regardless of scientific significance.[41]

Results and Discussion

An equibiaxial cell stretcher to impose area strain on living cells

We design a cell stretcher (Fig. 1a) that pulls on an elastic membrane equibiaxially by turning the six arms (light gray) outwards in an "iris-like" motion (small pink arrows). We first thoroughly characterize the stretcher by adding a layer of fluorescent beads as fiducial markers to the membrane (SI Appendix, Fig. S2a) and by imaging the beads at different motor positions of the stretcher. We analyze the displacement of the beads by registering the images using the software "Elastix"[36,37] and thus obtain the elongation of the membrane ΔL between two motor positions of the stretcher, which we use to calculate the strain in x and y direction as

$$\varepsilon_i = \frac{\Delta L_i}{L_i} \text{ with } i = x, y \tag{2}$$

with the initial length L.

Fig. 1b shows the linear strain ε_i ($i = x, y$) in x- and y-direction against the applied steps of the motor mp ($N = 21$ independent experiments). The solid lines represent the average from all experiments in x (black) and y (pink) direction. The shaded areas present the standard deviations. We find the same linear strain in x and in y direction, confirming

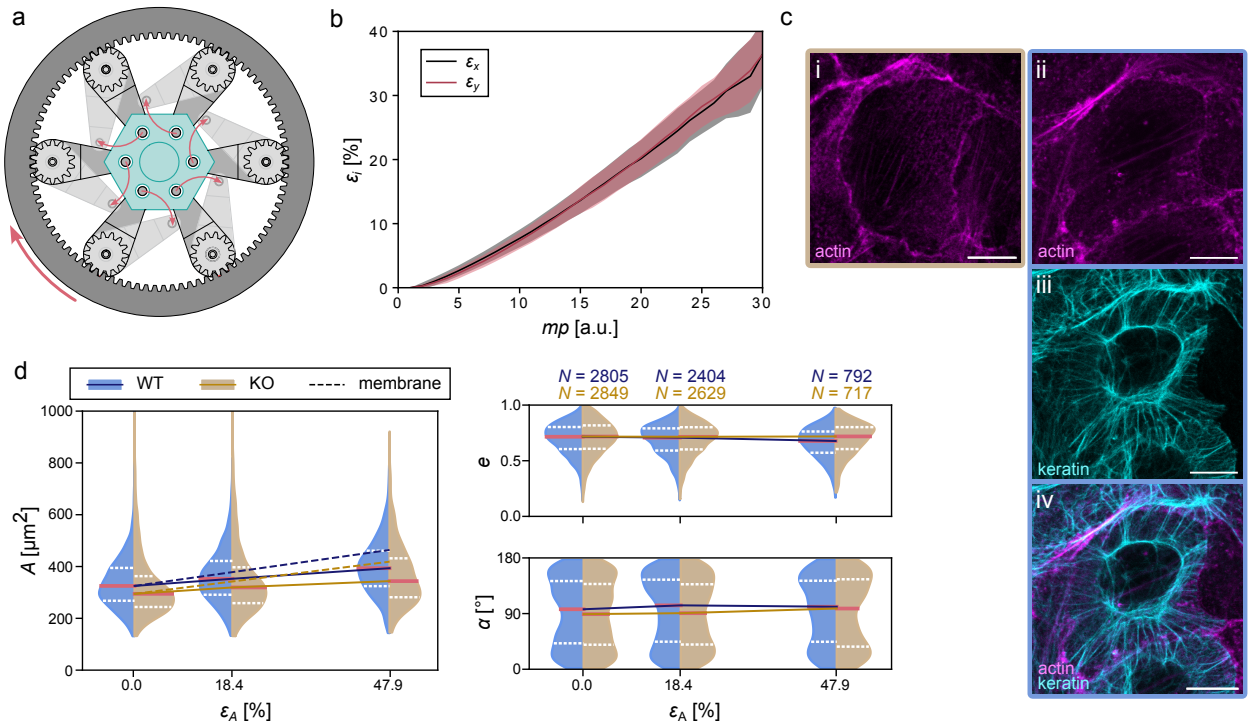

Figure 1: Experimental setup and characterization of the cell stretcher. (a) Schematic of the equibiaxial stretcher. A PDMS device (cyan) is attached to the six arms of the stretcher (light gray). The motor rotates the outer internal gear ring (dark gray, large pink arrow), which then moves the arms outwards (small pink arrows). (b) Averaged linear strain ε_i (x- and y-direction) of the PDMS membrane, calculated from the beads embedded in the membrane, plotted against the motor steps mp; the shaded areas show the standard deviation. (c) Examples of confocal microscopy images of the cell lines used in the study. (i) Fixed, unstrained MDCK II/K8 KO cells with phalloidin-stained actin (magenta), referred to as KO. (ii-iv) Fixed, unstrained MDCK II WT cells transfected with lifeact actin tagged with mCherry (magenta, ii) and keratin 8 tagged with EGFP (cyan, iii), referred to as WT (composite, iv). Scale bars correspond to 10 μm. (d) Area A (left), eccentricity e and orientation α (right) of the WT (blue) and KO (yellow) cells plotted against the area strain ε_A. The violin plots show the distribution of the results for each individual cell with the median (solid pink line) and upper and lower quartiles (dashed white lines). Medians are connected using solid lines. Dashed lines show the theoretically expected area of the cells calculated from the characterization of the membrane. The number of cells N is provided in the figure.

that the stretcher indeed pulls uniformly in both directions. In contrast to uniaxial strain, where the elastic membrane and therefore the cell sample is stretched in one direction and compressed perpendicularly to the stretching direction according to its Poisson's ratio,[42] during equibiaxial stretching the membrane and cells are stretched uniformly in all directions.

A good measure to quantify the degree of stretching is therefore the area strain ε_A. The 2-dimensional area strain can be described as

$$\varepsilon_A = \frac{A_{\text{new}} - A_0}{A_0}$$

and hence

$$\varepsilon_A = \frac{x_{\text{new}} y_{\text{new}} - x_0 y_0}{x_0 y_0}$$

[43] for the area $A = xy$. Substituting x_{new} and y_{new} by $x_0 + \Delta x$ and $y_0 + \Delta y$, respectively, we obtain

$$\varepsilon_A = \frac{(x_0 + \Delta x)(y_0 + \Delta y) - x_0 y_0}{x_0 y_0} = \frac{\Delta x}{x_0} + \frac{\Delta y}{y_0} + \frac{\Delta x}{x_0} \cdot \frac{\Delta y}{y_0}.$$

Using the definition of linear strain (Eq. 2) yields

$$\varepsilon_A = \varepsilon_x + \varepsilon_y + \varepsilon_x \cdot \varepsilon_y.$$

Finally, for equibiaxial strain $\varepsilon_x = \varepsilon_y$, and the area strain can be written as

$$\varepsilon_A = 2\varepsilon_x + \varepsilon_x^2. \tag{3}$$

For our experiments, we use epithelial MDCK II cells which naturally express keratin 8/18 in a rim-and-spokes arrangement.[9] For visualization of the keratin and actin networks, the cells are transfected with keratin 8 tagged with EGFP and lifeact actin tagged with mCherry (Fig. 1c, ii-iv). In the following, we will refer to these cells as wild-type (WT) cells. Additionally, to investigate the influence of the keratin network on the mechanical properties, we use MDCK II K8 knock-out (KO) cells (Fig. 1c, i, SI Appendix Fig. S3). We refer to these cells as KO.

Two days before the experiments, we seed the cells on elastic polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS) membranes and let them grow to a confluent layer. To confirm the stretching

of cells grown on the membranes, we image the cells with phase contrast microscopy at increasing motor positions mp of the stretcher ($N = 10$–11 independent experiments). Each field of view corresponds to $300 \times 300\,\mu\text{m}^2$. The images are segmented using the software "CellPose"[38,39] and the area A of each individual segmented cell is calculated by counting the number of pixels per cell. Additionally, we fit an ellipse to the outline of each segmented cell to calculate their orientation α and eccentricity e (Eq. 1, SI Appendix, Fig. S4d,e). An eccentricity of 0 and 1 represent a circle and a parabola, respectively. Any value between 0 and 1 represents an ellipse.

Fig. 1d shows the results of this analysis for increasing area strains ε_A as violin plots. The WT cells are displayed in blue, the KO cells in yellow. The solid pink lines represent the median of each distribution, the dashed white lines the quartiles. As a guide to the eye, the medians are connected by solid lines in the respective colors. Additionally, we show the theoretically expected value for the area from Eq. 3, considering a perfect and complete transfer of the strain from the membrane to the cells and using the median from each cell line at 0% strain as the starting value.

We find the KO cells to be smaller than the WT cells, as previously also observed for keratin 8 knock-out hepatocytes.[44] Additionally, we observe an increase in cell size with increasing strain for both cell lines. Interestingly, the increase is lower than expected from the applied strain even though the cell layer remains intact and no holes appear in the field-of-view. This deviation from the theoretical area values can have multiple reasons. The elastic membrane is coated with laminin to enhance cell adhesion. This attachment of the cells to the coating and the coating to the membrane can change and be disrupted during stretching leading to a lower strain transmission or an uneven strain distribution.[30,31,45,46] Furthermore, it has been shown that for treatment of the cells with latrunculin, hence weakening the focal adhesions through the inhibition of actin polymerization, the cell strain decreases considerably, proving the relevance of a good adhesion of the cell to the surface.[30] Additionally, the cell body is mechanically inhomogeneous, which can also lead to a reduced strain trans-

mission on the cells.[46] As expected, the orientation and the eccentricity of the cells do not change with increasing strain, see Fig. 1d, right, supporting the notion of equibiaxial strain.

With our cell stretcher, we are able to stretch the elastic membrane up to a linear strain of 38% which translates to an area strain ε_A of 90% (Eq. 3) and is higher than for other equibiaxial cell stretchers.[23,29–31] Here, we stop stretching the elastic membrane at an area strain of 48 % to ensure long-term measurements without risking yielding of the PDMS membrane. Additionally, we choose an intermediate strain approximately halfway between the maximum chosen strain and the relaxed position. Although the applied strain does not fully transfer to the cells, we are still able to stretch the cells equibiaxially to an area increase of up to 23%. In the following, the area strain ε_A refers to the strain applied to the PDMS device.

The cell stretcher is compatible with in situ force spectroscopy

Our stretcher is designed to fit on the stage of an AFM (Nanowizard 4, Bruker Nano GmbH). This setup enables simultaneous inverse light microscopy and AFM measurements (Fig. 2a).

We perform force-mapping, i.e., combined AFM topography imaging with force spectroscopy measurements of the cells on PDMS membranes. Fig. 2b (left) shows a typical topography image of the cell monolayer. The image is post-processed by subtracting a plane to correct for tilt and additionally correcting each scan line individually by a subtracted slope.

At each pixel, we perform a force-spectroscopy measurement and a typical plot of the force F against time t, i.e., approach and retraction, is shown in Fig. 2b (right, black). We indent the sample by lowering the piezo height (Fig. 2b, right, blue) up to a predefined force, the so-called set point. This maximum force is chosen such that the deformation of the cortex is not impaired by the nucleus or substrate. Hence, we ensure not to indent the sample more than 20% of the full sample height.[47] For an average height of 10 μm for MDCK cells, this percentage corresponds to a value of 1-2 μm.[2] In comparison to typical indentation

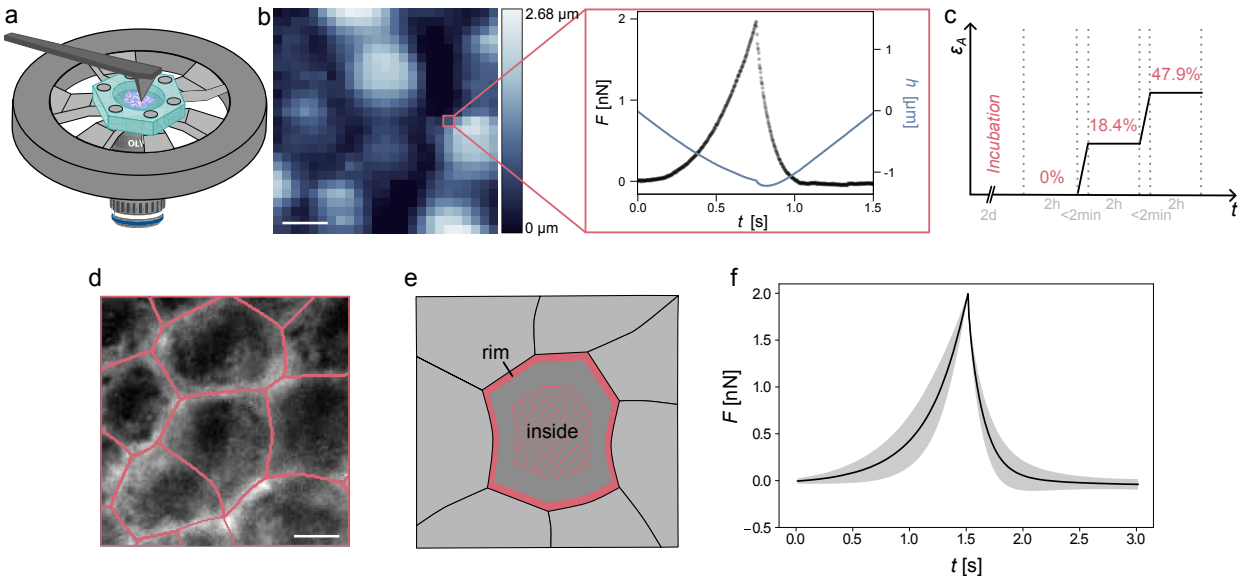

Figure 2: AFM indentation experiments. (a) Schematic of the cell stretcher with the AFM cantilever (dark gray) approaching from above, and the light microscopy objective from below. The cells (purple) are grown on the stretchable PDMS membrane (cyan). (b) (Left) Typical topography image of a cell monolayer showing the sample height differences. Scale bar corresponds to 10 μm. (Right) At each pixel, the cells are indented by changing the piezo height (blue) and a curve of the force F against time t is recorded (black). (c) Sketch of the timeline of a stretching experiment. The cells are seeded two days before the experiment. On the day of the experiment, each strain position is held for two hours, allowing us to image and indent the cells to perform AFM force spectroscopy. Reaching the next strain position takes less than two minutes. (d) Example phase contrast image of the cells with the segmentation (pink). Scale bar corresponds to 10 μm. (e) Schematic of the division of the cell area into two regions: rim (thick pink line) and inside (pink hatched area). In-between both regions, an interim section is excluded from the analysis. (f) Mean force curve (black, N = 736 individual data curves) and the standard deviation (grey shaded area) for the example of the inside region of WT cells at 47.9% area strain.

depths used for investigating the actin cortex,[47] we indent slightly deeper to additionally also measure the keratin cortex and choose a set point of 2 nN. We use a spherical cantilever with 2 μm diameter, which enables us to measure the mechanics of the cortex[47,48] while keeping a high enough resolution for the imaging. Consequently, we choose a pixel size of the size of the cantilever, i.e., $2\times2\,\mu\text{m}^2$.

Fig. 2c describes the timeline for a typical experiment. At each strain position, we take four force maps at adjacent positions with a size of 25 pixels $\times$ 25 pixels each, at a pixel size of $2\times2\,\mu\text{m}^2$, resulting in one large image with a size of $100 \times 100\,\mu\text{m}^2$. With an indentation

velocity v_0 of $2\,\mu$m/s, each indentation measurement at every pixel takes approximately 3 s, summing up to a total time of around 2 h per strain position including any overhead time during change in strains. Increasing the strain takes less than 2 min. In total, a typical experiment takes 6 hours from starting the stretching experiment to finish when reaching the highest strain. Experiments are stopped prematurely, if the PDMS membrane breaks.

In addition to the force mapping, we take phase contrast light microscopy images of the cells at each strain position and segment the cells (Fig. 2d). By combining the AFM images and the light microscopy images, we can use the light microscopy images to segment the cells in the AFM images. To do so, we interpolate on the segmented outlines to fit the AFM pixel size. We overlay the outlines on the AFM image and manually translate it to align the cell outlines with the respective cells on the AFM image. Afterwards, we divide each cell into two regions: "rim" and "inside" (Fig. 2e). From the segmentation, we get the outline of the cells right on the outermost pixels that are still included in that cell. The rim is defined as exactly this one pixel wide line. The inside region includes the cell center, up to three pixels away from the rim. In-between both regions, we exclude an interim area between the two regions to avoid any unclear classifications (SI Appendix, Fig. S5).

Altogether, we compare twelve conditions: two cell lines, two regions (rim and inside) and three strains. Per condition, we collect 700 to 4000 force curves from 10 and 11 independent experiments for KO and WT cells, respectively.

We use the rating function implemented in the software package "nanite"[40] to exclude any failed curves from data acquisition. Additionally, we exclude those curves where the viscoelastic fit provides values that do not make sense from a theoretical point of view, such as values of the fluidity β smaller than 0, or an apparent compressibility modulus or pre-stress multiple orders of magnitudes larger than the expected values, and indicate a failed fitting of the curve. As expected for a complex biological system, we observe cell-to-cell variations as well as a distribution of the data curves even within one cell. All force curves are pre-processed by correcting the baseline and performing a tip-sample correction to separate the

distance of the cantilever moved towards the sample from the deflection of the cantilever in the opposite direction, aligned on the maximum, and averaged. Fig. 2f displays a typical example of the mean force curve of all force curves within one condition (black) together with the standard deviation (shaded area). The force curves and their resulting average of all twelve data categories are shown in SI Appendix, Fig. S6 and S7.

A viscoelastic model to investigate the influence of the keratin cortex on cell mechanics

We compare the mechanical properties of the cell cortex in different regions of the cells. Fig. 3a,b represent schematic side views (not to scale) of cells containing an actin (magenta) and a keratin (cyan) cortex (a) or only an actin cortex (b) and the indentation of the two different regions, i.e., the inside (left) and the rim (right) regions. An example 3D microscopy image of fixed WT cells shows this structure (SI Appendix, Fig. S8). In the inside region, we indent the cortex that is oriented perpendicularly to the indenting direction, forming a thin sheet. In the rim region, the keratin cortex connects to the desmosomes and is oriented in parallel to the indentation direction. As a result, the cantilever effectively indents more keratin and compresses the network in vertical direction. Of note, we manipulate the cells by applying a lateral strain with the cell stretcher (area change ΔA), and then probe the viscoelastic properties of the cells by indenting with the AFM cantilever (area change ΔS).

To quantify the indentation data, we fit the force-time curves obtained from the AFM experiment using the viscoelastic Evans model. The model is explained in detail in Refs.[49,50] for a spherical indenter. This model takes into account the geometrical shape of the sample. For a cell in a monolayer, this shape is approximated as a spherical cap and for a cell curvature that is large compared to the size of the cantilever, the cantilever encounters a close-to-flat surface. Here, we apply this model to the inside region as well as the rim region of the cell, because the diameter of the spherical indenter (2 μm) is small compared to the curvatures on top of the cell layer (see Fig. 3c for a line profile of the height of the cells and

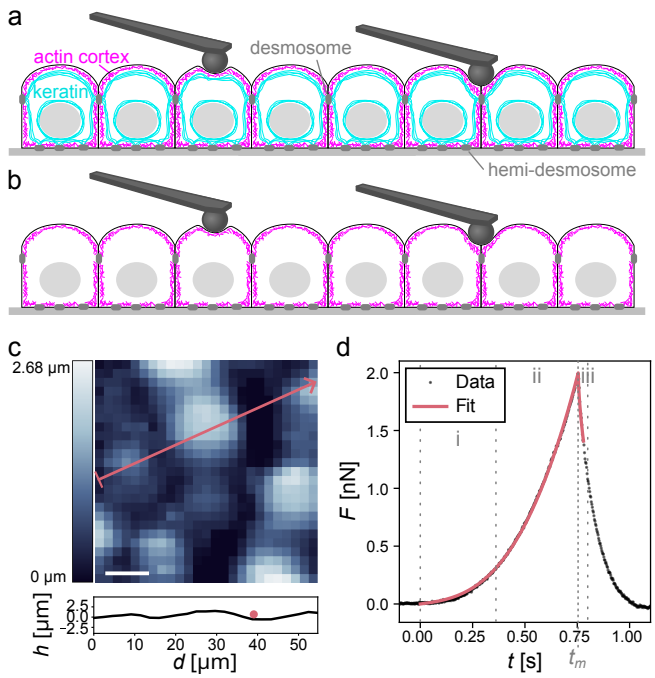

Figure 3: Measuring the viscoelastic properties of an MDCK II cell monolayer. (a) WT, (b) KO cells; schematic side view (not to scale) of the actin cortex (magenta), keratin network (cyan), desmosomes and hemi-desmosomes (dark-gray) and nucleus (gray) in WT cells that are indented with a cantilever (black) over the nucleus (left) and at the cell-cell contacts of two cells ("rim" of the cell) (right). (c) An example line profile (pink line) of the height of the cells is shown together with the spherical indenter of radius 1 μm (pink circle) drawn to scale. Scale bar corresponds to 10 μm. (d) An example plot of the force F against time t (black circles) together with a fit describing a viscoelastic model of the mechanical properties (pink line) and the different regions of the fit: low indentation depth (i), high indentation depth (ii) and relaxation curve (iii). The time of maximum indentation is marked with t_m.

a cantilever (pink closed circle) schematically drawn to scale).

In the Evans model, the sample is defined via a generic shape function $\tilde{g}_{\text{cap}}$ of a deformed sphere as a function of indentation depth. For a spherical indenter with radius R_p on a spherical cap with radius R_1, this function becomes

$$\tilde{g}_{\text{cap}}(R_p, \varphi, \tilde{z}) = \frac{\sin\varphi + \tilde{R}_i \sin\left(\arctan\left(\frac{\tilde{R}_i}{\sqrt{\tilde{R}_p^2 - \tilde{R}_i^2}}\right)\right)}{1 - \tilde{R}_i^2} - \sin\varphi \tag{4}$$

with $\tilde{R}_p = R_p/R_1$ the non-dimensional radius of the probe, $\tilde{R}_i = R_i/R_1$ the non-dimensional contact radius with the indenter and φ the contact angle changing with indentation depth

$\tilde{z} = z/R_1$. A sketch of the geometry can be found in the SI Appendix, Fig. S9.

The cortex is assumed to resist deformations only by the tension σ. σ includes the pre-stress σ_0, which the cortex naturally exhibits due to actomyosin contraction[6,51] and the membrane attached to the cortex,[52,53] and the area compressibility modulus K_A as the response function to area dilation, assuming constant volume:[53,54]

$$\sigma = \sigma_0 + K_A \alpha, \tag{5}$$

with the areal strain of the substrate $\alpha = \frac{S_{\text{new}} - S_0}{S_0}$, where S_0 is the area before indentation and S_{new} is the area after indentation. The viscoelasticity is included through a power law for the compressibility modulus

$$K_A = \widetilde{K}_A \left(\frac{t}{t_0} \right)^{-\beta} \tag{6}$$

where $\widetilde{K}_A$ is the apparent area compressibility modulus.

The force response is then given by applying the elastic-viscoelastic-correspondence principle[24,49,55] as

$$f = 2\pi \tilde{g}_{\text{cap}}(\tilde{z}) R_1 \left(\sigma_0 + \int_0^t \widetilde{K}_A \left(\frac{t-\tau}{t_0} \right)^{-\beta} \frac{\partial \alpha(\tau)}{\partial \tau} \right). \tag{7}$$

The integrals can be approximated through a polynomial ($\alpha(\tilde{z}) = \sum_{n=1}^{m} d_n \tilde{z}^n$) and divided into the force response to indentation, i.e., the approach curve $f_{\text{app}}(t) = f(t \leq t_m)$ until the time of maximum indentation t_m (see Fig. 3d) and upon retraction $f_{\text{ret}}(t) = f(t > t_m)$ starting at the time of maximum indentation t_m. The resulting equations are used to fit the experimental force-time curves in a piece-wise manner (Fig. 3d) to obtain the pre-stress σ_0, the scaling parameter or apparent area compressibility modulus $\widetilde{K}_A$, and the power-law exponent or fluidity β. 30% of the retraction part of the curve are included in the fit.

The pre-stress of the cortex is measured as the immediate response of the cell to the indentation at small times and indentation depths (Fig. 3d, i), while the area compressibility modulus is measured when compressing the cell (Fig. 3d, ii). Finally, the fluidity is mainly

determined through the relaxation part of the force response of the cell (Fig. 3d, iii), although all parameters are not independent of each other (Eqs. 5, 6).[50] The compressibility modulus describes how much pressure is needed to achieve the compression of the cell and is hence a measure for the stiffness of the cell. The fluidity is defined to take values between 0 and 1, with 0 being an elastic solid and 1 being a viscous fluid.

Figs. 4, 5 and 6 show these resulting three parameters at increasing area strains ε_A as violin plots. The WT cells are displayed in blue, the KO cells in yellow. Filled violins represent the results from the inside region, while open violins represent the results for the rim region. The solid pink lines on the violins represent the median of each distribution and the dashed lines the quartiles. As guide to the eye, the medians are connected with solid lines for the inside region and dashed lines for the rim region in the respective colors. The number of force curves is displayed in the respective color at the top of the figure. Further violin plots comparing different pairs of data sets are shown in SI Appendix, Figs. S10-S12, dataset S1.

The actin cortex compensates for the loss of keratin in KO cells

We compare the viscoelastic properties in the different regions of WT and KO cells at increasing strains. We find an increased pre-stress in KO cells, compared to the WT cells, both in the rim (Fig. 4a) and in the inside region (Fig. 4b). This result first seems counter-intuitive as one may expect the pre-stress to decrease when the keratin is removed in the KO cells as there is less material that is deformed when indenting. However, as we use stable KO cells, it is likely that the cells react to the loss of keratin. In fact, it is well possible that the actin cortex in the KO cells compensates for the missing keratin layer by increasing the actomyosin contractility, and as a result the pre-stress increases as well. It was shown before that inhibition of the myosin activity leads to a decrease in cortical tension,[51,56] hence proving a positive correlation between the actomyosin contractility and the cortical tension. Furthermore, a depletion of the crosslinker plectin leads to a reduction of the keratin rim

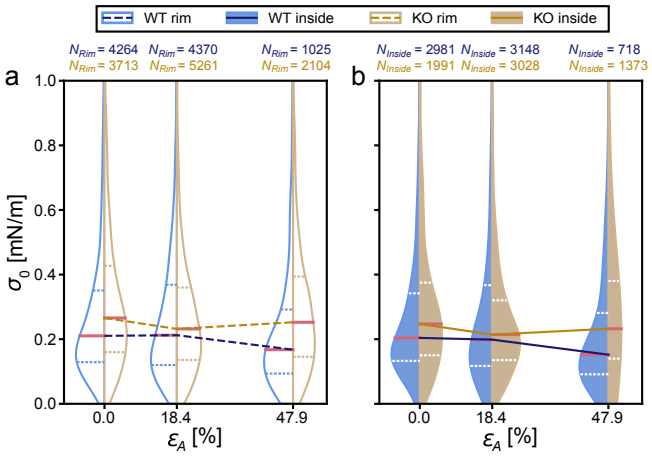

Figure 4: The pre-stress σ_0 of MDCK II cells at different strains ε_A. Data for WT cells are shown in blue, data for KO cells in yellow. Filled violins correspond to the inside-region of the cells, open violins with colored outlines to the rim-region. The lines on the violins represent the median (solid pink line) and the upper and lower quartiles (dashed lines). The medians are connected via lines: dashed lines for the rim-region and solid lines for the inside-region. The number of force curves N is displayed in the figure.

structure and results in an increased actomyosin contractility.[57] With an increased cortex contractility, the overall shape of the cell is also contracted resulting in smaller cells as discussed in Ref.[53] and shown in Fig. 1d, left, supporting this point. Alternatively, but not contradictory, the cells might overcompensate the absence of the keratin with an increased amount of actin in the cortex, hence increasing the cortical tension. An investigation of the cortex thickness in MDCK cysts by epi-fluorescence microscopy remains inconclusive (SI Appendix Text, SI Appendix Fig. S1), presumably due to insufficient resolution.[58]

When comparing the pre-stress for the different strains applied to the cells, we find a decrease of σ_0 from the relaxed state (0 % area strain) to the low strain (18.4 % area strain) for the KO cells, whereas this decrease occurs only for the high strain (47.9 % area strain) in WT cells, hinting at an involvement of the keratin cortex. The resilience of the actin network to the loss of keratin is remarkable, but at the same time, these results strongly indicate that KO cells mechanically compensate for the loss of keratin.

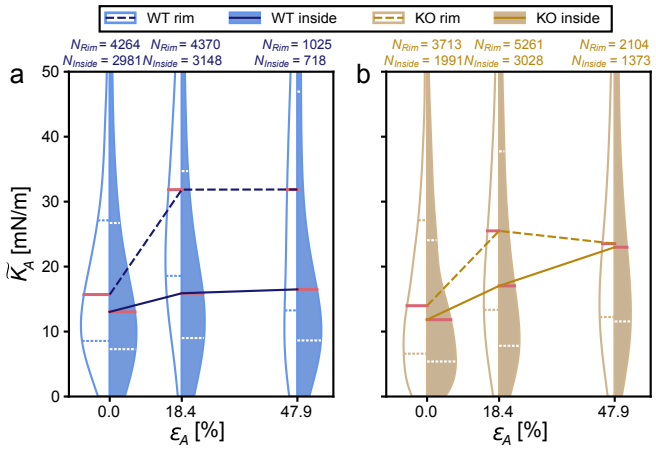

Figure 5: The apparent compressibility modulus $\widetilde{K}_A$ of MDCK II cells at different strains ε_A. Data for WT cells are shown in blue, data for KO cells in yellow. Filled violins correspond to the inside-region of the cells, open violins with colored outlines to the rim-region. The lines on the violins represent the median (solid pink line) and the upper and lower quartiles (dashed lines). The medians a re connected via lines: dashed lines for the rim-region and solid lines for the inside-region. The number of force curves N is displayed in the figure.

The keratin cortex ensures cell integrity at high strains

We find the area compressibility modulus $\widetilde{K}_A$ to be increased in the rim region of both WT and KO cells compared to the inside region in the relaxed state (Fig. 5a, b). In the rim of the cells, more force is needed to compress the cortex as here the cantilever not only deforms the cortical networks that form a thin sheet, perpendicular to the indentation direction, but also compresses the part of the cortex that lays in parallel to the indentation direction, i.e., the adherens belt (Fig. 3a,b right). Hence, there is more effective cortex in the rim region both in the cells with and without keratin increasing the stiffness on the cell-cell contacts. Remarkably, the difference between rim and inside is much more pronounced for the WT cells, which can be attributed to the stiffening of IF under compression as shown for vimentin in vitro and in cells.[21]

In the inside region, the cells are easier to deform, meaning that the cell is softer. This result supports our assumption above of less effective cortex compared to the rim region. Furthermore, the compressibility modulus of the KO cells increases steadily, while in the WT cells the modulus only increases from the relaxed state to the low strain and is preserved

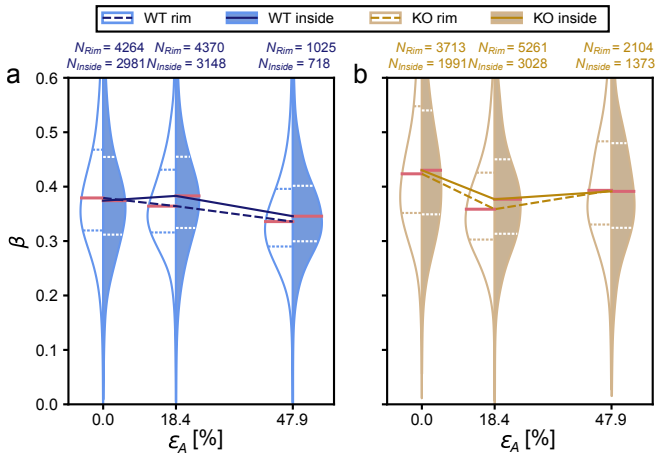

Figure 6: The fluidity β of MDCK II cells at different strains ε_A. Data for WT cells are shown in blue, data for KO cells in yellow. Filled violins correspond to the inside-region of the cells, open violins with colored outlines to the rim-region. The lines on the violins represent the median (solid pink line) and the upper and lower quartiles (dashed lines). The medians are connected via lines: dashed lines for the rim-region and solid lines for the inside-region. The number of force curves N is displayed in the figure.

from the low strain to the high strain (Fig. 5b). Cells stiffen during various processes, such as cell division or movement presumably through an activation of the myosin motors or cross-linking of the networks.[56,59] Both actin filaments and IFs are known to contribute to the stiffening.[59] At low strains, the cell stiffens to stabilize the cell. However, at high strains, the stiffness is preserved likely to keep the cell's ability to deform and adjust to internal and external changes. It is highly remarkable that in the keratin KO cells the actin cortex is able to compensate for the loss of keratin to fulfill the same purpose of stiffening, although the stiffness is decreased in the rim region. However, at high strains, when the actin filaments start to rupture[14] and the actin network fluidizes, the interplay of the keratin network and the actin cortex is necessary to avoid a further stiffening to preserve the functions of the cell.

The interplay of the actin and keratin cortices render the cell adaptive

The fluidity in WT cells changes little for low strain, and decreases at high strain (Fig. 6a) while in KO cells it strongly decreases already at low strain and then remains at a similar

value for the highest strain (Fig. 6b). Thus, the KO cells react already to low strains, whereas in WT cell the interplay between the actin and keratin networks preserve the original fluidity at these low strains, reminiscent of the pre-strains (Fig. 4). For neither cell line, there is a strong difference in fluidity between the regions within the cells. In general, when cells stiffen under strain, i.e., the compressibility modulus increases, the fluidity decreases, as the two values are related (Eq. 6).[49,50] In vitro, actin networks are known to rupture at comparatively low strains,[14] while keratin is much more extensible and resists much higher strains both for single filaments[18] and for networks.[15]

Mechanical integrity, even under external influences is crucial for a cell to maintain its functions. For example, it has been shown that the cell can vary its surface area to keep the fluidity value constant.[24] Additionally, keratin has been revealed to be the main component for mechanical resilience in keratinocytes.[11] An increase in fluidity is often found in cancer cells or during wound healing.[60,61] For the cell, it is important to stay fluid enough to adapt to changes but if the fluidity is too high the cell might lose the ability to keep its shape and functions. The actin cortex is well able to compensate for the loss of keratin and mimic the mechanical behavior of the cell. However, our findings suggest that, also in MDCK cells, the keratin network plays an important role in ensuring cell integrity and preserving the overall mechanical properties of the cell.

Conclusion

We present a cell stretcher to apply high equibiaxial strains to an elastic membrane on which cells are adhered. The stretcher is compatible both with light and atomic force microscopy, enabling us to measure the mechanical properties of the sample while imaging the cells. We investigate two lines of MDCK cells, i.e., with (WT) and without (KO) keratin. We perform force mapping experiments, combining AFM imaging with spatially resolved force spectroscopy and overlay the AFM images with the light microscopy images to divide the

cells into two regions according to the rim-and-spokes hypothesis. This approach enables us to compare the mechanical properties of the two regions. By fitting a dedicated model to the data, we determine the viscoelastic properties of WT and KO cells to investigate the influence of the keratin cortex to cell mechanics. Our results might suggest that in cells without keratin, the actin network compensates for the missing keratin network, leading to an increase in pre-stress compared to the WT cells. We compare a "low" and a "high" area strain. For both the pre-stress and the fluidity we observe that the KO cells display altered mechanical properties already at the low strain, whereas for WT cells, the actin and keratin networks in concerted action are able to maintain the original, i.e., unstrained, values and react only to the high strain. Our results highlight the importance of the keratin network and more specifically the keratin cortex for the integrity of the cell.

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Author contributions

S.K. conceived and supervised the project; R.M. performed and analyzed the experiments; U.R. prepared the fluorescently tagged cell lines and performed the cell culture; N.S. prepared the KO cell line; A.P.-T. provided analysis code; A.V.S. characterized the cell-stretcher; A.J. developed the viscoelastic model; R.M., S.K. and A.J. interpreted the results; R.M. and S.K. wrote a first draft of the manuscript, all authors contributed to writing the manuscript.

Competing interests

There are no conflicts to declare.

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