Activation of the TP53 pathway is a therapeutic vulnerability in NUP98::KDM5A+ pediatric AML

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Visual abstract

Abstract

NUP98::KDM5A–rearranged pediatric acute myeloid leukemia (AML) is a rare, infancy-predominant entity with dismal outcome and no targeted therapeutic options. Given its suspected fetal origin, we hypothesized that leukemic maintenance depends on developmentally restricted vulnerabilities embedded within fetal hematopoietic programs. Using matched fetal and adult hematopoietic stem and progenitor cell models, we integrated transcriptomic and proteomic profiling with CRISPR–Cas9 screenings to define ontogeny-specific dependencies in NUP98::KDM5A leukemia. Fetal-derived NUP98::KDM5A leukemias exhibited greater *in vivo* aggressiveness, and retained fetal transcriptional signatures compared with adult counterparts. A comparative CRISPR–Cas9 screen using a library targeting fetal gene programs, conducted in both fetal- and adult-derived NUP98::KDM5A leukemias, identified the AAA$^+$ ATPase TRIP13 as a selective and essential dependency in the fetal context. Mechanistically, TRIP13 physically interacted with the TP53 phosphatase PPM1D/WIP1, resulting in suppression of TP53 activation. Genetic ablation of *Trip13*, or pharmacologic inhibition using DCZ0415, a small-molecule inhibitor targeting TRIP13, reactivated TP53, induced G_2/M arrest and mitochondrial apoptosis, and depleted leukemic cells *in vitro*; these effects were fully rescued by *TP53* loss. In competitive transplantation assays, *Trip13* ablation significantly impaired leukemic fitness *in vivo*. Together, these findings define a developmentally restricted TRIP13–PPM1D–TP53 survival axis in NUP98::KDM5A AML and provide mechanistic proof-of-concept that reactivation of the TP53 signaling pathway via TRIP13 inhibition represents a therapeutically targetable vulnerability in this high-risk pediatric leukemia.

Keywords: pediatric acute myeloid leukemia; NUP98::KDM5A; fetal origin; TRIP13; PPM1D; TP53 pathway; synthetic vulnerability; targeted therapy.

Introduction

Pediatric acute myeloid leukemia (AML) is a biologically heterogenous disease, accounting for ~15-20% of childhood acute leukemias, with a mutational landscape that differs substantially from adult AML and varies across pediatric age groups [1-5]. Increasing evidence suggests that this heterogeneity is shaped not only by genetic lesions but also by the developmental stage and cellular context in which transformation occurs, a concept that is particularly relevant in infant AML (≤2 years of age) [6-8]. In several pediatric AML subtypes, oncogenic driver lesions can be detected at birth, indicating an *in utero* origin and implicating fetal hematopoiesis as a permissive developmental context for leukemic initiation [9, 10]. Although direct causal links remain difficult to establish, the unique molecular properties of fetal hematopoietic cells and their niche are thought to contribute to the striking enrichment of specific chromosomal translocations and disease subgroups observed in early childhood.

Acute megakaryoblastic leukemia (AMKL) represents one such subgroup, characterized by aggressive clinical behavior and inferior event-free and overall survival in children without underlying Down syndrome (trisomy 21) [11-13]. Among pediatric AMKLs, the chromosomal translocation t(11;12) generates the NUP98::KDM5A fusion oncoprotein, composed of the N-terminal glycine-leucine-phenylalanine-glycine (GLFG) repeat motif of NUP98 and the C-terminal plant homeodomain finger (PHD3) domain of the histone lysine demethylase KDM5A (also known as JARID1A) [14, 15]. Expression of NUP98::KDM5A potently transforms murine hematopoietic stem/progenitor cells (HSPCs) and induces HOXA/B cluster gene activation, recapitulating core transcriptional and phenotypic features of the human disease [16-18].

While the fetal origin and developmental constraints of other high-risk pediatric AML entities, such as *CBFA2T3::GLIS2* and *KMT2A*-rearranged leukemias, have been

extensively investigated [6], the contribution of fetal hematopoietic context to the

initiation and maintenance of NUP98::KDM5A-driven leukemia remains largely

unexplored [19-21]. Fetal liver HSPCs are highly proliferative and display a

pronounced erythro-megakaryocytic bias, supporting rapid expansion of the lifelong

hematopoietic stem cell pool through developmentally programmed epigenetic and

transcriptional states, which renders them fundamentally distinct from their adult

counterparts [22, 23]. These coordinated epigenetic landscapes and transcriptional

programs raise the possibility that leukemias initiated in fetal hematopoiesis may

remain dependent on developmentally restricted molecular circuits that are

dispensable in adult cells.

Here we demonstrate that fetal hematopoietic origin markedly accelerates

NUP98::KDM5A-driven leukemogenesis and enforces a critical TRIP13/PPM1D–TP53

survival axis. By exploiting this developmentally constrained dependency through

genetic and pharmacologic inhibition of TRIP13, we uncover a mechanistically precise

vulnerability that can be therapeutically engaged in this otherwise treatment-limited

pediatric AML subtype.

Materials and methods

Cell culture

Human cell lines were purchased from the German Collection of Microorganisms and

Cell Cultures (DSMZ) and maintained according to the supplier's instructions. Fetal

HSPCs were obtained from the MRC-Wellcome Trust Human Developmental Biology

Resource (HDBR). Pediatric AML samples were collected from patients enrolled in the

AML Berlin-Frankfurt-Münster treatment protocols for children and adolescents. The

study was approved by the institutional review boards of all participating centers. All

investigations were performed in accordance to the Declaration of Helsinki and local

laws and regulations, and informed consent was obtained from all patients and

custodians.

Human and murine HSPCs were prepared and cultured as previously described and

maintained for at least 60 days [24, 25].

Media promoting the megakaryocyte differentiation of HSPCs consisted of respective

media supplemented with corresponding cytokines: 15ng/mL SCF/Scf and 15ng/mL

TPO/Tpo. All cytokines were purchased from Peprotech.

mFL-HSPCs were cultured in pre-stimulation medium composed by: DMEM

supplemented with 10% FBS, 1% penicillin/streptomycin, 1% sodium pyruvate, 1% L-

glutamine, 1% nonessential amino acids, 25ng/mL murine TPO and 25ng/mL murine

SCF.

mBM-HSPCs were cultured in pre-stimulation medium composed by: IMDM

supplemented with 10% FBS, 1% penicillin/streptomycin, 1% sodium pyruvate, 1% L-

glutamine, 1% nonessential amino acids, 50ng/mL murine TPO and 50ng/mL murine

SCF.

After 24 hours post-transduction, mFL-HSPCs and mBM-HSPCs were cultured in

selection medium promoting megakaryocytic differentiation composed by: DMEM and

IMDM, respectively, supplemented with 10% FBS, 1% penicillin/streptomycin, 1%

sodium pyruvate, 1% L-glutamine, 1% nonessential amino acids, 15ng/mL murine Tpo

and 15ng/mL murine Scf.

Human fetal and adult PB CD34+ HSPCs: cells were cultured in pre-stimulation

medium   composed   by: Stemspan   SFEM   II   supplemented   with   1%

penicillin/streptomycin, 0.75 µM Stemregenin, 35nM UM171, 100ng/ml human FLT3L,

50ng/ml human TPO, 100ng/ml human SCF, 20ng/ml human IL6. After 24 hours post-

nucleoporation, hFL-HSPCs and adult PB CD34+ HSPCs cells were cultured in

selection medium promoting megakaryocytic differentiation composed by: Stemspan

SFEM II, respectively, supplemented with 10% FBS, 1% penicillin/streptomycin,

15ng/mL human TPO and 15ng/mL human SCF.

Lentiviral vector construction and production

Lentiviral particles were generated by co-transfecting HEK293T cells with the

corresponding expression constructs. pMD2.G and psPAX2 (Addgene #12259 and

#12260), via the polyethyleneimine transfection method as previously described [26,

27]. Codon-optimized cDNAs were similarly cloned into the same SIN40C.SFFV

backbone encoding GFP or dTomato as a fluorescent reporter [24, 25]. For inducible

expression, a doxycycline-inducible SIN40C.TRE vector was used [25]. All plasmids

generated in this study have been deposited at Addgene and are listed in

Supplementary Table 1.

A list of sgRNAs is in Supplementary Table 2 (designed using CCTop online tools [28])

that have been cloned into the SGL40C.EFS.E2Crimson or SGL40C.EFS.dTomato

vectors (Addgene #100894 and #89395) [29].

NUP98::KDM5A encoding cDNA was designed based on a report in human patients

[30]. TRIP13-encoding cDNA was designed based on Ensembl genome browser. All

cDNAs were tagged at the 5' terminus with three HemoAgglutinin tag (3xHA), flanked

with AgeI at 5' terminus and MluI at 3' terminus, codon optimized and ordered from

pTwistAmp.

Plasmids were retransformed and cDNAs were subcloned using the restriction

enzymes AgeI and MluI into the backbone vectors for constitutive expression:

NUP98::KDM5A cDNA in SIN40C.SFFV.GFP.IRES.MCS and TRIP13 in cDNA in

SIN40C.SFFV.MCS.IRES.dtomato   and   in

SIN40C.TRE.MCS.IRES.dTomato.PGK.sfGFP.P2A.Tet3G.

Transduction

Cells were transduced with concentrated viral particles in the presence of 2-5µg/ml

polybrene as previously described [24, 25, 31]. Primary human and murine HSPCs

were transduced in Retronectin-coated plates according to manufacturer's instructions

(Takara Bio) as previously described [31].

CRISPR/Cas9 library screening

15×10^6 fetal and adult NUP98::KDM5A$^+$, FPD-AML and ML-DS models were

lentivirally transduced with the fetal signature sgRNA library (MOI=0.3) to achieve

sufficient representation (1000-fold coverage per sgRNAs). Samples were harvested

at 2 days post-transduction and at 16 population doublings, corresponding to

approximately 30 days of culture. Genomic DNA was isolated as previously described

[24].

704 genes of our CRISPR-Cas9 library, targeting the TP53 pathway, were collected

using publicly available GSEA gene sets.

Model-based analysis of genome-wide CRISPR/Cas9 knockout (MAGeCK) [32] was

used to identify hits from the sgRNA screen. Double barcoded reads were

demultiplexed using custom R scripts; guides with fewer than 20 reads in ≥75% of all

samples were excluded. Raw read counts were passed to the MAGeCK test command

using default parameters. Samples collected at the endpoint were compared to day 2

to determine negative enrichment. Genes with a P-value <0.05 as determined by

MAGeCK were deemed significant.

Proliferation and rescue assays

To evaluate the effect of NUP98::KDM5A transformation, mFL-HSPCs and mBM-

HSPCs were co-transduced with lentiviral vectors overexpressing the human cDNA

encoding NUP98::KDM5A, which was assigned to a green fluorescent protein thereby

allowing direct clonal growth competition.

To assess growth advantages conferred by overexpression of sgRNA(s) or TRIP13

cDNA and for rescue experiments, transduced mFL-HSPCs were measured every 2/3

days starting 72 hours post-transduction and analyzed for reporter gene expression.

For inducible expression of TRIP13, doxycycline was added to culture medium at a

concentration of 0.5 µg/mL 96 hours post transduction.

Flow cytometry and sorting

To assess the expression of fluorescent reporter protein and their immunophenotype,

cells were analyzed for the expression of surface cell markers using fluorochrome-

coupled antibodies, listed in Supplementary Table 1. The following panels were used:

Myeloid (CD11b and Gr-1), Progenitor (CD34, CD16/32, C-kit/CD117, Sca-1),

Megakaryocytic (CD41, CD42d) Erythroid (CD71 and CD235a for human cells or

Ter119 for murine cells). Flow cytometry was performed on a CytoFLEX flow cytometer

(Beckman Coulter) and the data analysis was done using Kaluza 1.5 (Beckman

Coulter) software.

The same procedure was performed to sort the cell subpopulation of interest. Cells

were sorted using BD FACSAria™ II Flow Cytometer (BD Biosciences).

Apoptotic cell death and cell cycle analysis was performed as previously described

[25].

Micrographs

192   Micrographs were obtained with a Keyence BZ-9000 Microscope using the BZ-II

193   viewer and images were processed with the BZ-II Analyzer software.

Drug response assays

For drug response curves using DCZ0415 (MedChemExpress), cell viability was

assessed using the CellTiter-Glo® Cell Viability Assay (Promega) according to the

manufacturer's instructions after 2-5-7 days post-treatment.

Synergy plots, summary Bliss score calculations were generated and performed with

SynergyFinder [33]. All conditions were normalized to DMSO treated control. Data

represent the mean ± SD of biological triplicates.

Proteomic analysis

Total cell lysis and Western blotting were performed as previously described [24, 25].

Blots were developed using Amersham™ ECL Prime Western Blotting Detection

Reagent (Thermo Fisher Scientific).

Co-immunoprecipitation of TRIP13 was performed on OCI-AML3 cells using Anti-HA

antibody coupled to magnetic beads (Pierce Anti-HA Magnetic Beads). After cell lysis

and affinity pulldown, proteins were processed as previously described [24, 25].

Gene expression profiling

NUP98::KDM5A and control (EV) transduced mFL-HSPCs and mBM-HSPCs were

FACS-sorted 3, 21 days after transduction; sgLuc- and sgTrip13- transduced mFL-

HSPCs expressing NUP98::KDM5A translocation were FACS-sorted 4 days after

transduction. Fetal NUP98::KDM5A cells were treated with DCZ0415 or DMSO control

24h prior gene expression profiling. RNA was extracted using the Quick-RNA

Microprep Kit (Zymo Research) as previously described [25]. A minimum amount of

150ng RNA was used as input material for the RNA sample preparations. RNA-

sequencing was performed by Novogene Company, Ltd. Sequencing libraries were

generated and sequenced as previously described [25].

Raw FASTQ data (raw reads) were first pre-processed using fastp [34] and then further

processed as previously described [35]. Differential expression analysis was

performed using the DESeq2 package in R [36]. The resulting P-values were adjusted

using the Benjamini and Hochberg's approach for controlling the False Discovery Rate

(FDR) [37]. Genes with an adjusted P-value <0.05 were considered differentially

expressed.

Gene set enrichment analysis (GSEA) was performed using the Broad GSEA software

[38, 39] with the permutation type set to "Gene_set" (1000 permutations). Human gene

symbols were mapped to murine gene symbols using orthologue annotations provided

by Ensembl [40] considering only one-to-one orthologue relationships.

Animal studies

All experiments involving mice were performed in accordance with protocols approved

by the local authorities (Landesverwaltungsamt Sachsen-Anhalt).

B6J.129 (Cg)-Gt(ROSA)26Sortm1.1(CAG-cas9*.-EGFP)Fezh/J) (Jackson Laboratory.

RRID: IMSR_JAX:026179) and C57BL/6J (Charles River. RRID: IMSR_JAX:000664)

mice were maintained in a specific pathogen-free environment in individual ventilated

cages and fed with autoclaved food and water at the Martin-Luther-University Halle-

Wittenberg.

Transplantations and analysis of leukemic mice

237   2×10^6 cells were injected intravenously into sublethally irradiated (7 Gy) C57BL/6N

238   mice. Engraftment of the transplanted cells was evaluated by tail bleeding of the

239   recipients every 4 weeks. When signs of disease occurred, the mice were sacrificed

240   and harvested bone marrow cells were stained with the following fluorochrome-

241   coupled antibodies describe above.

Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were performed with GraphPad Prism 8 (San Diego, CA).

Unless indicated otherwise, 2-tailed Student´s t-tests were used to determine the P-

value between 2 groups. Statistical analyses of experiments were performed with

analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Bonferroni *post hoc* analysis for comparisons

between ≥3 groups. Kaplan-Meier method was used to determine mice survival using

log-rank (Mantel-Cox) tests for statistical analyses. *P, .05, **P, .01, ***P, .001, ****P,

.0001. A value of P, .05 was considered statistically significant.

All statistical tests and sample numbers are disclosed in the respective figure legends

and supplemental tables.

Results

NUP98::KDM5A induces highly aggressive leukemia in fetal HSPCs

To investigate whether the developmental origin of the leukemia initiating cell is an

accelerator of NUP98::KDM5A-driven leukemogenesis, we established matched fetal

and adult murine leukemia models. We transduced murine hematopoietic stem and

progenitor cells (HSPCs) from fetal liver at embryonic day 13.5 (mFL-HSPCs) and from

adult bone marrow (mBM-HSPCs) with a lentiviral vector expressing human

NUP98::KDM5A cDNA [30] (Fig. 1a). Both fetal- and adult-derived HSPCs exhibited

progressive expansion of NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells, whereas control vector–transduced

cells exhausted over time, indicating efficient leukemic transformation in both

developmental contexts (Fig. 1b and Supplementary Fig. 1a). However, despite

comparable transduction efficiencies and similar baseline immunophenotype, fetal-

derived NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells expanded significantly faster than their adult

counterparts, consistent with an ontogeny-dependent increase in leukemic fitness (Fig.

1b and Supplementary Fig. 1a).

Immunophenotypic analysis showed that NUP98::KDM5A expression maintained cells

in a highly immature LSK (Lineage$^-$ c-Kit$^+$ Sca1$^+$) state with marked maturation arrest,

findings that were corroborated by transcriptional profiling (Fig. 1c, Supplementary Fig.

1b-c and Supplementary Table 3). Gene expression analysis further revealed that fetal

NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells retained transcriptional signatures associated with fetal

hematopoietic origin compared to adult-derived cells, highlighting the influence of

developmental origin on leukemic phenotype and aggressiveness (Fig. 1d and

Supplementary Table 4). Consistent with patient samples, both models exhibited

upregulation of *HOXA* and *HOXB* gene clusters, together with marked downregulation

of *RB1* target genes (Supplementary Fig. 1c and Supplementary Table 3), resembling

a transcriptional program of the RB1-mutant state frequently associated with

NUP98::KDM5A AML [12, 15, 41].

In vivo, transplantation of fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells into syngeneic recipients

resulted in significantly accelerated leukemia onset compared to adult-derived cells

(median disease-free survival: fetal 36 days versus adult 70 days; log-rank P = 1.07 ×

10^{-5}; Fig. 1e). Splenomegaly was significantly more pronounced in mice transplanted

with fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells (Fig. 1f). Leukemic blasts in the bone marrow

expressed high levels of the mature myeloid surface marker Gr-1 and CD11b (Mac-1),

together with persistence of an immature LSK population (Supplementary Fig. 1d-e).

Collectively, these data demonstrate that developmental origin is a major determinant

of NUP98::KDM5A-driven leukemic aggressiveness, with fetal hematopoietic cells

providing a permissive context that accelerates disease onset and progression.

Fig. 1. NUP98::KDM5A fusion oncoprotein induces a more aggressive disease in fetal cells.

a) Schematic workflow for the generation of in vitro and in vivo murine models of constitutive overexpression of NUP98::KDM5A fusion oncoprotein in murine Hematopoietic Stem and Progenitor Cells (HSPCs) isolated from fetal liver (mFL-HSPCs) of healthy fetuses at E13.5 and bone marrow of adult mice (mBM-HSPCs). Created in Biorender.com

b) GFP+ percentage of fetal and adult NUP98::KDM5A+ cells maintained in liquid culture. Data from 1 representative experiment performed in replicates (n > 3) are shown as mean s.d. (t-test).

c) Bar graph showing the percentage of LSK (Lineage negative, c-kit+ and Sca1+), Megakaryocytic-erythroid (MEP; Lineage negative, c-kit+, Sca1-, CD16/CD32- and CD34+) and common myeloid (CMP; Lineage negative, c-kit+, Sca1-, CD16/CD32- and CD34-) and granulocyte/monocyte (CMP; Lineage negative, c-kit+, Sca1-, CD16/CD32+ and CD34+) progenitors of fetal and adult NUP98::KDM5A+ cells after 4 weeks of culture. (mean ± s.d., n > 3)

d) Bar graphs showing the normalized enrichment scores (NES) of significantly upregulated or downregulated gene sets in fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells compared to adult NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells.

e) Kaplan-Meier survival curves of C57BL/6N mice transplanted with fetal and adult NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells (n ≥ 6).

f) Dot plot showing spleen weights of C57BL/6N mice transplanted with fetal and adult NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells (mean ± s.d., n ≥ 6) (t-test).

ns, not significant * P < .05, ** P < .01, ***P < .001, ****P < .0001

313 **Fetal dependency screening reveals TRIP13 as a critical vulnerability in**

314 **NUP98::KDM5A[+] AML**

The aggressive phenotype of fetal-derived NUP98::KDM5A leukemia is closely linked

to the persistence of fetal transcriptional programs, which remained active in a post-

fetal hematopoietic environment. We reasoned that such developmentally regulated

programs might impose context-specific dependencies required for leukemic

maintenance and therefore represent a potential therapeutic vulnerability. To identify

these dependencies, we performed a CRISPR-Cas9 loss-of-function screen targeting

867 genes, overexpressed in both human and murine fetal liver HSPCs compared to

their adult counterparts [42], in fetal- and adult-derived NUP98::KDM5A[+] leukemia

models (Fig. 2a-b). To distinguish NUP98::KDM5A- and fetal-specific dependencies

from broader AML requirements, we complemented these screens with two additional

murine AML models: familial-platelet disorder with predisposition to AML (FPD-AML,

loss of *Runx1* and *Bcor*) [43], and myeloid leukemia in Down syndrome (ML-DS) (Fig.

2c and Supplementary Fig. 2a) [24, 31, 44]. Applying a depletion threshold of >70%

identified seven candidates, with the the AAA+ ATPase (ATPases Associated with

diverse cellular Activities) *Trip13* displaying the highest fetal-to-adult dependency ratio

(Supplementary Fig. 2b). The effect of *Trip13* knock-out was subsequently validated in

a single-well fluorescence-based depletion assay using independent sgRNAs,

confirming robust on-target effects (Fig. 2d). To corroborate these findings in a human

system, we performed CRISPR-based *TRIP13* knock-out in a panel of human leukemic

and non-leukemic (HT1080) cell lines, and primary human fetal HSPCs expressing

NUP98::KDM5A. Consistent with the murine results, *TRIP13* loss markedly impaired

the growth of NUP98::KDM5A[+] human fetal HSPCs, whereas most control cell lines

showed only modest proliferation defects (Fig. 2e). Gene expression analyses further

demonstrated that *TRIP13* is upregulated as part of a fetal transcriptional program,

with higher expression in fetal compared to adult HSPCs, and in pediatric AMKL

relative to adult HSPCs and mature hematopoietic populations (Fig. 2f). Notably, the

NUP98::KDM5A fusion oncoprotein not only maintained but further increased *TRIP13*

expression in fetal but not in adult cells, indicating a fetal context-specific effect of the

fusion on *TRIP13* regulation (Fig. 2g).

Collectively, these data identify *TRIP13* as a fetal context-dependent vulnerability in

NUP98::KDM5A[+] leukemias, supporting its prioritization for mechanistic and

therapeutic interrogation in this high-risk AML subtype.

Fig. 2. CRISPR-Cas9 knock-out screening reveals *TRIP13* dependency in fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] model.

a) Schematic workflow of the high-throughput fetal signature-based CRISPR-Cas9 *in vitro* screen.

b) Dot plots showing the log2 fold change of the fetal enriched genes targeted by sgRNAs in
fetal (x-axis) and adult (y-axis) NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ models. Blue dots represent positive
control (*Rpl9*, *U2af1*). Red dots represent selected candidate gene *Trip13*. (n =2)
c) Venn diagram illustrating significantly (P-value < 0.05) depleted (depletion > 70%) sgRNAs
in different murine leukemia models.
d) Dot plot showing the percentage of *Trip13*-targeting sgRNA-transduced fetal, adult
NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ (N::K5A), FPD-AML and ML-DS models after 21 days of culture,
normalized to (negative control sgRNA [sgCtr]) and to day 2 (mean ± s.d., n > 3 per sgRNA,
1-way ANOVA).
e) Dot plot showing the percentage of *TRIP13*-targeting sgRNA-transduced hFL
NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ (N::K5A) cells and leukemia cell lines (OCI-AML3; K562; CMK; Kasumi1;
M07E; NOMO1; ML-2) and non-leukemia cell line (HT1080) after 21 days of culture,
normalized to (negative control sgRNA [sgCtr] and positive control sgRNA [sgRPL9 and
sgU2AF1]) and to day 2 (mean ± s.d., n = 3 per sgRNA, 1-way ANOVA).
f) Dot plot showing the expression of *TRIP13* in subgroups of HSPCs and pediatric AML from
the HemAtlas dataset.
g) Dot plot showing the expression of *Trip13* in control (EV) or NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ murine fetal
and adult cells after 21 days of culture (n = 3).
ns, not significant * P < .05, ** P < .01, ***P < .001, ****P < .0001.

Trip13 loss triggers TP53-dependent apoptosis

To further confirm that *Trip13* loss was causative for the observed growth defect, we

co-transduced fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells with *TRIP13* cDNA together with *Trip13*-

targeting sgRNAs. *TRIP13* overexpression fully rescued cell depletion, demonstrating

on-target specificity of *Trip13* disruption (Fig. 3a). *Trip13* knock-out was confirmed by

Western blotting (Supplementary Fig. 3a), and resulted in a marked increase in

apoptosis (Fig. 3b) and a G_2/M cell-cycle arrest (Fig. 3c), consistent with the

established role of TRIP13 in mitotic checkpoint control [45]. *Trip13* loss did not alter

the differentiation status of leukemic cells, as assessed by immunophenotypic analysis

(Supplementary Fig. 3b).

Fig. 3. *Trip13* loss activates the TP53 pathway and arrests fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cell proliferation.

a) Bar plot showing the percentage of sgRNA-transduced (negative control sgRNA [sgCtr], sgTrip13#1-2) empty vector (EV) and TRIP13 overexpressing fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells after 14 days of culture, normalized to day 4 (mean±s.d., n > 3 per sgRNA, 1-way ANOVA)

b) Bar graphs showing the percentage of Annexin-V[+] sgRNA-transduced (negative control sgRNA [sgCtr], sgTrip13#1-2) fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells after 5 days of culture, normalized to control sgRNA (sgCtr) (mean ± s.d., n > 3 per sgRNA, 1-way ANOVA).

c) Bar plot showing the percentage of sgRNA-transduced (negative control sgRNA [sgCtr], sgTrip13#1-2) fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells in G0-G1, S and G2/M phase after 5 days of culture (mean ± s.d., n > 3 per sgRNA, 2-way ANOVA).

d) Volcano plot showing the differentially expressed genes upon *Trip13* knock-out in fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells P-value < 0.05 (n = 3). RNA-seq-based gene expression analysis of sgRNA-transduced (negative control sgRNA [sgCtr], sgTrip13#1) fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells was performed after 4 days of culture.

e) Timeline Western blot showing TP53 protein levels in sorted sgRNA-transduced (negative control sgRNA [Luc], sgTrip13#1) fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells 4 days after transduction. Endogenous Vinculin was used as loading control.

Bar graphs showing the normalized enrichment scores (NES) of significantly deregulated gene sets associated with TP53 pathway in *Trip13* knock-out fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells compared to control sgRNA.

f) Bar plot showing the percentage of sgRNA-transduced (negative control sgRNA [sgCtr], sgTrip13, sgTrp53) fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells after 14 days of culture, normalized to day 4 (mean±s.d., n > 3 per sgRNA, 1-way ANOVA)

ns, not significant * P < .05, ** P < .01, ***P < .001, ****P < .0001.

To define the mechanism underlying *Trip13* dependency, we profiled transcriptomic

changes four days after CRISPR-Cas9-mediated *Trip13* deletion in fetal

NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells (Fig. 3d). Gene set enrichment analysis (GSEA [38]) revealed

a striking and selective enrichment of TP53 signaling pathway signatures upon *Trip13*

loss (Fig. 3e and Supplementary Fig. 3c, Supplementary Table 5). In line with this

transcriptional response, TP53 protein levels increased in a time-dependent manner

after *Trip13* knock-out (Fig. 3e). Importantly, concomitant deletion of *Trp53* rescued

the growth defect induced by *Trip13* loss (Fig. 3f), demonstrating that TP53 activation

is required for the *Trip13*-dependent loss of leukemic cell fitness in fetal

NUP98::KDM5A[+] AML cells. Given the reported role of TRIP13 in DNA damage repair

[46, 47], we next examined whether TP53 activation resulted from increased genotoxic

stress. Although leukemic cells exhibited baseline γH2AX positivity, *Trip13* deletion did

not further augment γH2AX levels compared with controls (Supplementary Fig. 3d),

arguing against DNA damage-accumulation as the primary trigger of TP53 activation

in this context.

Together, these results establish that fetal *NUP98::KDM5A*[+] AML cells are sensitive to

TP53 activation and that *Trip13* sustains leukemic survival by suppressing TP53

activity, without requiring increased DNA damage signaling.

TRIP13 interacts with PPM1D/WIP1 to repress TP53 pathway activation

To elucidate how TRIP13 regulates TP53 activity, we next mapped TRIP13 protein-

protein interaction network using co-immunoprecipitation followed by mass

spectrometry (IP-MS). Doxycycline-inducible hemagglutinin (HA)-tagged TRIP3 was

expressed in a TP53 wild-type leukemia cell line (OCI-AML3) (Fig. 4a) [48, 49]. Among

the proteins identified by TRIP13 pull-down, we focused on 33 candidates previously

annotated in the STRING interaction database to be functionally or physically

connected to TP53 (Fig. 4b). To prioritize TRIP13-associated complexes and identify

the key mediators of TP53 suppression, we reasoned that the loss of a critical TRIP13

interactor would phenocopy *Trip13* deletion. Specifically, we predicted that disruption

of such an interactor would induce TP53-dependent depletion of fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$

cells, a phenotype reversible by concomitant *Trp53* deletion. Consistent with this

hypothesis, CRISPR-mediated knock-out of 16 of the 33 candidate interactors resulted

in a depletion pattern similar to that observed following *Trip13* knock-out

(Supplementary Fig. 4a), which could be rescued by *Trp53* knock-out in 6 of the 16

TRIP13-associated candidates (Supplementary Fig. 4b). Among those 6 interactors,

the protein phosphatase PPM1D/WIP1, a well-known regulator of TP53, emerged as

the top candidate fulfilling both criteria: induction of leukemic cell depletion upon loss

and rescue of this phenotype by *Trp53* co-deletion (Fig. 4c and Supplementary Fig.

4b). PPM1D/WIP1 is a well-established regulator of TP53 signaling, acting both directly

and indirectly, including stabilization of MDM2 [50]. Co-immunoprecipitation followed

by Western blotting confirmed a physical interaction between TRIP13 and

PPM1D/WIP1 (Fig. 4d), and consistent with a functional interaction, deletion of either

Trip13 and *Ppm1d* in fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells resulted in increased TP53 protein

levels (Fig. 4e). Notably, *PPM1D/WIP1* expression, similar to *TRIP13*, was elevated in

pediatric AMKL patients compared to adult HSPCs and mature hematopoietic cells

(Supplementary Fig. 4c), supporting the relevance of this regulatory axis in pediatric

disease.

Fig. 4 TRIP13 interacts with PPM1D/WIP1 to repress the TP53 pathway.

a) Experimental workflow for isolating HA-tagged TRIP13 protein and its interactors from OCI-AML3 cells.

b) String protein-protein interaction network of 33 TRIP13-interacting candidates. Network nodes (colored circles) represent proteins, lines between the nodes (edges) indicate the different types of interaction (functional and physical protein associations), the line thickness indicates the confidence of interaction (0.4).

c) Bar plot showing the percentage of sgRNA-transduced (sgPpm1d, sgTrip13) fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells in combination with negative control sgRNA [sgCtr] or sgTrp53 after 14 days of culture, normalized to day 2 (mean±s.d., n > 3 per sgRNA, 1-way ANOVA) .

d) Western blot showing co-immunoprecipitation of PPM1D after HA-pulldown of HA-tagged TRIP13 in OCI-AML3 cells. Endogenous Vinculin was used as loading control.

e) Western blot showing TP53 protein levels in sorted sgRNA-transduced (negative control sgRNA [Luc], sgTrip13 and sgPpm1d) fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells 4 days after transduction. Endogenous Vinculin was used as loading control.

f) Dot plots showing the log2 fold change of the TP53 pathway-related genes targeted by control (x-axis), *Trip13*-depleted (y-axis) fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells. Red and green dots represent selected candidate genes. (n = 2)

g) Dot plot showing the expression of *Bcl2l1* of control or *Trip13*-depleted fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells after 4 days of culture (n = 3).

ns, not significant * P < .05, ** P < .01, ***P < .001, ****P < .0001.

To further position TRIP13 within the TP53 signaling network, we performed a

CRISPR-Cas9 knock-out screen targeting 704 TP53 pathway-associated genes in

fetal NUP98::KDM5A⁺ cells, in the presence or absence of *Trip13* deletion (Fig. 4f).

This approach enabled systematic identification of genetic modifiers that either

mitigated or exacerbated the growth defect induced by *Trip13* loss.

In addition to Trp53 depletion, knock-out of the checkpoint kinase *Chek2* and the pro-

apoptotic effector *Bax* were selectively rescued by *Trip13*-deficiency, indicating

engagement of a CHEK2–TP53–BAX mitochondrial apoptotic pathway, which was

further supported by a rescue of the *Trip13* loss by depletion of the TP53-induced BH3-

only protein *Bbc3/Puma* (Fig. 4f), and an upregulation of *Bbc3/Puma* mRNA upon

Trip13 loss (Supplementary Fig. 4d).

Conversely, loss of several negative regulators of TP53 signaling further enhanced the

antiproliferative effects of *Trip13* deletion. In particular, knock-out of *Mdm2* and *Bcl-*

xl/Bcl2l1 synergized with *Trip13* loss, consistent with cooperative derepression of TP53

activity and reinforcement of apoptotic signaling (Fig. 4f). Notably, *Bcl2l1/Bcl-xl* mRNA

expression was also increased following *Trip13* deletion, suggesting engagement of

compensatory survival feedback mechanisms downstream of TP53 activation (Fig.

4g).

In addition to core TP53 regulators, several genes involved in cell-cycle progression

and transcriptional control exhibited enhanced depletion specifically in *Trip13*-deficient

cells, including *Cdk1*, *Cdk4*, *Cdk9*, and *Hdac1*, identifying context-specific co-

dependencies that emerge under conditions of *Trip13*-loss initiated TP53 signaling

(Fig. 4f).

Collectively, these genetic interaction data frames a model in which *TRIP13* restrains

TP53 pathway activation through PPM1D/WIP1 and downstream regulators, thereby

preventing engagement of a CHEK2–BAX–dependent mitochondrial apoptotic

program. Consequently, loss of *TRIP13* unmasks a potent TP53-centered vulnerability

in fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ leukemia cells that is further modulated by regulators of

apoptosis, cell-cycle progression, and transcriptional control.

Therapeutic Targeting of TRIP13 Reactivates TP53 in NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ AML

Our combined proteomic and genomic analyses identified TRIP13 as a critical

suppressor of TP53 in fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ AML, raising the possibility that

pharmacological inhibition of TRIP13 could be therapeutically exploitable [51]. To test

this, we treated leukemic cells with DCZ0415, a small-molecule inhibitor of TRIP13.

DCZ0415 phenocopied genetic *Trip13* loss and robustly induced apoptosis in

NUP98:KDM5A$^+$ cells in a dose-dependent manner (mean IC_{50} fetal = 22 μM, adult =

26 μM). NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells were significantly more sensitive to DCZ0415 than

control leukemia models, including FPD-AML and ML-DS, as well as normal adult bone

marrow HSPCs (mean $IC_{50:}$ FPD-AML: 50 μM, ML-DS: 35 μM, mBM-HSPCs: 45 μM)

(Fig. 5a and Supplementary Fig. 5a-b). Human fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells exhibited

comparable sensitivity (mean IC_{50} = 19 μM), whereas OCI-AML3, Kasumi1 or M07E

showed impaired or incomplete responses (IC_{50}: OCI-AML3: 32 μM, Kasumi-1/M07e:

NM = not measurable; Fig. 5b and Supplementary Fig. 5c).

Importantly, DCZ0415 treatment resulted in activation of the TP53 pathway and cell

death, effects that were rescued by enforced TRIP13 expression or by *Trp53* deletion

(Fig. 5c, Supplementary Fig. 5d and Supplementary Table 5), confirming on-target

activity and TP53-dependent mechanisms of action.

Consistent with the *in vitro* findings, *in vivo* fluorescence-based competitive

transplantation assays demonstrated marked depletion of *Trip13*-deficient fetal

NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ blasts in the bone marrow of recipient mice at the experimental

endpoint (Fig. 5d-e).

Together, these data demonstrate that pharmacologic inhibition of TRIP13 reactivates

TP53 signaling and selectively compromises the survival of NUP98::KDM5A[+] leukemic

cells, providing functional proof-of-concept that TRIP13 represents a therapeutically

targetable vulnerability in this high-risk pediatric AML subtype.

Fig. 5. Pharmacological inhibition of the TRIP13-TP53 axis is a therapeutic option for

NUP98::KDM5A[+] pediatric leukemia.

a)   Dose-response curves for DCZ0415 (TRIP13 inhibitor) in fetal and adult NUP98::KDM5A[+],

ML-DS and FPD-AML models and healthy mBM-HSPCs after 5 days of treatment *in vitro*.

The corresponding IC_{50}-values are depicted below the graphs. (mean ± s.d. , n > 3, 1-way

ANOVA related to fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells)

b)   Dose-response curves for DCZ0415 (TRIP13 inhibitor) in hFL NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells and

OCI-AML3, M07E and Kasumi1 after 5 days of treatment *in vitro*. The corresponding IC_{50}-

values are depicted below the graphs. (mean ± s.d. , n > 3, 1-way ANOVA related to hFL

NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells)

c) Bar graphs showing the percentage of sgRNA-transduced (negative control sgRNA [sgCtr],

sgTrp53) and empty vector (EV) or TRIP13-overexpressing fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells

after 7 days of treatment with DCZ0415 (TRIP13 inhibitor) *in vitro*. (mean±s.d. , n > 3, 1-

way ANOVA)

d) Experimental setup for evaluating the genetic ablation of *Trip13* in fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+]

cells *in vivo*. Fetal NUP98::KDM5A[+] cells (with stable Cas9 expression) were co-

transduced with sgTrip13 (dTomato) and sgCtr (dTomato) and mixed 1:1 with sgCtr

(E2Crimson), before transplantation into sublethally irradiated recipient mice.

e) Dot plot showing the ratio of dTomato[+] to E2Crimson[+] cells in the bone marrow of mice

euthanized 4 weeks after transplantation (n = 5) and after 4 weeks of culture, normalized

to day 0 (n = 3, 2-way ANOVA).

ns, not significant * P < .05, ** P < .01, ***P < .001, ****P < .0001.

Discussion

In this study, we adopted a developmental perspective to leukemogenesis to uncover

a previously unrecognized vulnerability in pediatric NUP98::KDM5A[+] AML. Rather than

focusing exclusively on oncogenic lesions, we interrogated how fetal versus adult

hematopoietic contexts shape leukemic behavior and dependencies. This ontogeny-

centered approach revealed a developmentally restricted survival axis centered on

TP53 suppression and establishes a conceptual framework that may extend to other

malignancies with strong developmental origins.

NUP98::KDM5A-rearranged AML is a rare but highly aggressive leukemia that occurs

predominantly in infants and very young children below the age of 2 years [6-8], with

clinical and genomic evidence supporting leukemic initiation during embryogenesis

[52]. Despite intensive chemotherapy and allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell

transplantation (HSCT), outcomes remain poor, relapses are frequent, and treatment-

related morbidity is substantial. Achieving deep, measurable residual disease (MRD)–

negative remissions before HSCT is crucial for long-term survival, yet current induction

regimens are often too toxic or insufficiently effective in this fragile patient population

[53]. These challenges underscore the need for biologically informed, mechanism-

based therapeutic strategies tailored to the unique features of infant AML.

Ontogeny has emerged as a critical modifier of disease biology in several pediatric

leukemias, including CBFA2T3::GLIS2- and KMT2A-rearranged AML [6]. However, its

role in NUP98::KDM5A-driven leukemia has not been directly addressed. Using

matched fetal and adult HSPC models, we demonstrate that NUP98::KDM5A-driven

leukemia arising in a fetal context is more aggressive and retains fetal-specific

transcriptional programs [22, 23, 54]. Functional genomic interrogation of fetal-

enriched genes identified *TRIP13*, a AAA$^+$ ATPase and direct interactor of the TP53

phosphatase PPM1D/WIP1, as a critical dependency in fetal NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ cells.

Mechanistically, our data show that TRIP13 suppresses TP53 pathway activation and

that its genetic or pharmacologic inhibition leads to robust TP53 activation, G_2/M arrest

and mitochondrial apoptosis without additional accumulation of DNA damage [45, 46].

These data support a model in which TRIP13 mitigates NUP98::KDM5A-induced DNA

stress [55] by modulating TP53 activity, at least in part through its physical interaction

with PPM1D, a well-established oncogenic suppressor of TP53 [56]. While the precise

molecular mechanism by which TRIP13 regulates PPM1D activity remains to be

elucidated, the ATPase-dependent capacity of TRIP13 to remodel protein complexes

[57] raises the possibility that it modulates PPM1D conformation, thereby fine-tuning

TP53 signaling. Notably, the broader TRIP13 interactome includes multiple TP53

network components, likely accounting for the more pronounced TP53 activation

observed upon *TRIP13* loss compared with *PPM1D* deletion alone.

Consistent with this developmental model, our functional screens also identified

dependencies on oncofetal regulators previously reported as direct NUP98::KDM5A

targets, such as *Igf2bp3* [55, 58], supporting the notion that this fusion sustains

leukemic maintenance in part through enforcement of fetal gene expression programs.

Our findings complement prior studies identifying transcriptional and cell-cycle

dependencies in NUP98::KDM5A-driven leukemia, including the MEN–KMT2A axis,

CDK6, and CDK12 [54, 55, 58]. These dependencies converge on sustained

proliferation and transcriptional output, processes inherently associated with replicative

stress and DNA damage [59]. In line with these observations, NUP98::KDM5A-

expressing cells exhibit a marked baseline DNA damage, reliance on DNA damage

response pathways, and heightened sensitivity to CDK12/13 inhibition [55, 60]. Our

work adds an essential layer to this model by demonstrating that leukemic survival

under such stress conditions requires active control of TP53-mediated apoptosis

through a TRIP13-centered mechanism. The overlap between DNA damage-

associated genes identified in our screens and those reported to be maintained and

upregulated by NUP98::KDM5A during fetal development [55], further supports this

integrated model.

Importantly, we provide proof-of-concept that TRIP13 is pharmacologically targetable.

The small-molecule inhibitor DCZ0415 faithfully recapitulated the effects of genetic

TRIP13 loss by inducing TP53-dependent apoptosis in NUP98::KDM5A$^+$ AML cells,

and *Trip13*-depleted cells were selectively impaired *in vivo*. Although DCZ0415 has

not yet been evaluated clinically, these data validate TRIP13 as a druggable node and

provide a strong rationale for the development of next-generation TRIP13 inhibitors

with improved potency and pharmacologic properties suitable for clinical evaluation.

Beyond identifying TRIP13 as a therapeutic target, our TP53-pathway CRISPR screen

delineated genetic modifiers that shape the cellular response to TP53 reactivation.

Resistance to *TRIP13* loss was conferred by disruption of core apoptotic mediators

such as *TP53, CHEK2, BAX*, and *BBC3/PUMA*, establishing mitochondrial apoptosis

as the dominant execution pathway. Conversely, enhanced sensitivity to *TRIP13* loss

was observed upon perturbation of cell-cycle and transcriptional regulators, including

CDK1, *CDK4*, *CDK9*, and *HDAC1*, highlighting conditional co-dependencies emerging

under TRIP13-loss induced TP53 signaling. Together, these interactions further

underscore the central role of TP53 suppression in sustaining fetal NUP98::KDM5A-

driven leukemic survival.

More broadly, our study illustrates how systematic functional interrogation of

developmental programs can reveal age- and lineage-specific vulnerabilities that are

not apparent from mutation-focused analyses alone. In NUP98::KDM5A[+] AML, this

strategy uncovered a developmentally constrained TRIP13–PPM1D–TP53 survival

axis that is essential for leukemic maintenance and therapeutically exploitable.

Leveraging developmental biology to expose such context-specific dependencies may

represent a powerful paradigm for identifying novel targets in other aggressive

pediatric cancers with a clear developmental origin.

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Contributions

L.N.C. performed experiments, analyzed and interpreted the data, and wrote the manuscript; L.P., H.I., and C.I. performed experiments, analyzed the data, and revised the manuscript; K.S. performed bioinformatics analysis and revised the manuscript; K.M., and L.G. performed experiments; M.V. revised the manuscript; A.S. supervised the analyses and revised the manuscript; D.H. and J.H.K designed the study, analyzed and interpreted the data, wrote the manuscript, and academically drove the project.

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Availability of data and materials

RNA-seq gene expression data have been deposited in the National Center for Biotechnology Information's Gene Expression Omnibus (accession numbers GSE308953, GSE308954, and GSE308955).

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