Dual Role of Cell-Cell Adhesion In Tumor Suppression and Proliferation

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ABSTRACT

It is known that mechanical interactions couple a cell to its neighbors, enabling a feedback loop to regulate tissue growth. However, the interplay between cell-cell adhesion strength, local cell density and force fluctuations in regulating cell proliferation is poorly understood. Here, we show that local spatial patterns of cell growth within tissue spheroids are strongly influenced by cell-cell adhesion. As the strength of the cell-cell adhesion increases, intercellular pressure initially decreases, enabling dormant cells to more readily enter into a proliferative state. We identify an optimal cell-cell adhesion regime where pressure on a cell is a minimum, allowing for maximum proliferation. We use a theoretical model to validate this novel feedback mechanism coupling adhesion strength, local stress fluctuations and proliferation. Our results, predicting the existence of a non-monotonic proliferation behavior as a function of adhesion strength, are consistent with experimental results. Several experimental implications of the proposed role of cell-cell adhesion in proliferation are quantified, making our model predictions amenable to further experimental scrutiny. We show that the mechanism of contact inhibition of proliferation, based on a pressure-adhesion feedback loop, serves as a unifying mechanism to understand the role of cell-cell adhesion in proliferation.

Adhesive forces between cells, mediated by cadherins, play a critical role in morphogenesis, tissue healing, and tumor growth (1, 2). In these processes, the collective cell properties are influenced by how cells adhere to one another, enabling cells to communicate through mechanical forces (3, 4). Amongst the family of cadherins, E-cadherin is the most abundant, found in most metazoan cohesive tissues (5). E-cadherin transmembrane proteins facilitate intercellular bonds through the interaction of extracellular domains on neighboring cells. The function of cadherins was originally appreciated through their role in cell aggregation during morphogenesis (6, 7). Mechanical coupling between the cortical cytoskeleton and cell membrane is understood to involve the cadherin cytoplasmic domain (8). Forces exerted across cell-cell contacts is transduced between cadherin extracellular domain and the cellular cytoskeletal machinery through the cadherin/catenin complex (9). Therefore, to understand how mechanical forces control the spatial organization of cells within tissues and impact proliferation, the role of adhesion strength at cell-cell contacts need to be elucidated.

Together with cell-cell adhesion, cell proliferation control is of fundamental importance in animal and plant development, regeneration, and cancer progression (10, 11). Spatial constraints due to cell packing or crowding are known to affect proliferation and cell packing (12–17). The spatiotemporal arrangement of cells in response to local stress field fluctuations, arising from intercellular interactions, and how it feeds back onto cell proliferation remains unclear. Indeed, evidence so far based on experimental and theoretical studies on the mechanism underlying the cross-talk between the strength of cell-cell adhesion and proliferation, invasion and drug resistance is not well understood (15, 18–21).

We briefly discuss two seemingly paradoxical roles of E-cadherin in proliferation. E-cadherin depletion lead cells to adopt a mesenchymal morphology characterized by enhanced cell migration and invasion (22, 23). Also, increased expression of E-cadherin in cell lines with minimal expression reverses highly proliferative and invasive phenotypes (24, 25). Besides being a proliferation suppressor there is also evidence that cadherin expression can inhibit cell growth rate (26, 27). We detail the dual role that E-cadherin plays below.

E-cadherin downregulation and tumor progression through the EMT mechanism: Loss of E-cadherin expression is related to the epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition (EMT), observed during embryogenesis (6, 28), tumor progression and metastasis (29, 30). EMT results in the transformation of epithelial cells into a mesenchymal phenotype, where adhesive strength between the cells is significantly decreased, and drives tumor invasiveness and cell migration in epithelial tumors. In this 'canonical' picture, down regulation of cell-cell adhesion contributes to cancer progression (31).

E-cadherin upregulation may promote tumor progression: In contrast to the reports cited above, others argue that EMT may not be required for cancer metastasis (32–34). In fact, E-cadherin may facilitate collective cell migration that potentiates invasion and metastasis (35, 36). Increased E-cadherin expression is deemed necessary for the progression of aggressive tumors such as inflammatory breast cancer (IBC) (37) and a glioblastoma multiforme (GBM) subtype (38, 39). In multiple GBM cell lines, increased E-cadherin expression positively correlated with tumor growth and invasiveness (38). In normal rat kidney-52E (NRK-52E) and non-tumorigenic human mammary epithelial cells (MCF-10A), E-cadherin engagement stimulated a peak in proliferation capacity through Rac1 activation (40). By culturing cells in micro-fabricated wells to control for cell spreading on 2D substrates, VE-cadherin mediated contact with neighboring cells showed enhanced proliferation (41). The dual role of cell-cell adhesion, suppressing proliferation in some cases and promoting it in other instances, therefore warrants further investigation.

The contrasting scenario raise unanswered questions that are amenable to analyses using relatively simple models of tumor growth: (1) How does the magnitude of forces exerted by cells on one another influence their overall growth and proliferation? (2) Can a minimal physical model capture the role of cell-cell adhesion in suppressing and enhancing tumor growth? Here we use simulations and theoretical arguments to establish a non-monotonic dependence between cell-cell adhesion strength (f^{ad}; depth of attractive interaction between cells) and proliferation capacity. While the parameter f^{ad} is a proxy for cell-cell adhesion strength representing

E-cadherin expression, we note that adhesion strength may also increase due to cadherin clustering (42), increasing time of contact between cells (42), or through "mechanical polarization", where cells reorganize their adhesive and cytoskeletal machinery to suppress actin density along cell-cell contact interfaces (43, 44). We show that cell proliferation increases as f^{ad} increases, and reaches a maximum at a critical value, f_c^{ad}. In other words, increasing cell-cell adhesion from low levels causes the tumor proliferative capacity to increase. We identify an intermediate level of cell-cell adhesion where invasiveness and proliferation are maximized. As f^{ad} is increased beyond f_c^{ad}, proliferation capacity is suppressed. The non-monotonic dependence of proliferation on f^{ad} qualitatively explains the dual role of cell-cell adhesion, as we explain below. By building on the integral feedback mechanism coupling cell dormancy and local pressure (15), we suggest a physical pressure based formalism for the effect of cell-cell adhesion on cell proliferation. In particular, we elucidate the role of cell-cell contact, nearest neighbor packing and the onset of force dependent cell growth inhibition in influencing cell proliferation.

RESULTS

Cell-Cell Adhesion Strength and Feedback On Cell Proliferation: Cell dynamics within proliferating tissues is a complex process, where the following contributions at the minimum are coupled: (i) cell-cell repulsive and adhesive forces, (ii) cell dynamics due to growth, and (iii) cell division and apoptosis. Stochastic cell growth leads to dynamic variations in the cell-cell forces while cell division and apoptosis induce temporal rearrangements in the cell positions and packing. Cell-cell adhesion strength, dictated by f^{ad} (see SI Eq.S2), leads to experimentally measurable effects on the spatial arrangement of cells (see Fig. 1a), quantified by the angle, β, and the length of contact, l_c between the cells. The angle, β, should decrease as a function of f^{ad} while l_c should increase (44) (see SI Figs. S1a and S1b for further details).

Dynamics of cell-cell contact leads to spatiotemporal fluctuations in the local forces experienced by a cell (and vice versa), through which we implement a mechanical feedback on growth and proliferation. Depending on the local forces, a cell can either be in the dormant (D) or

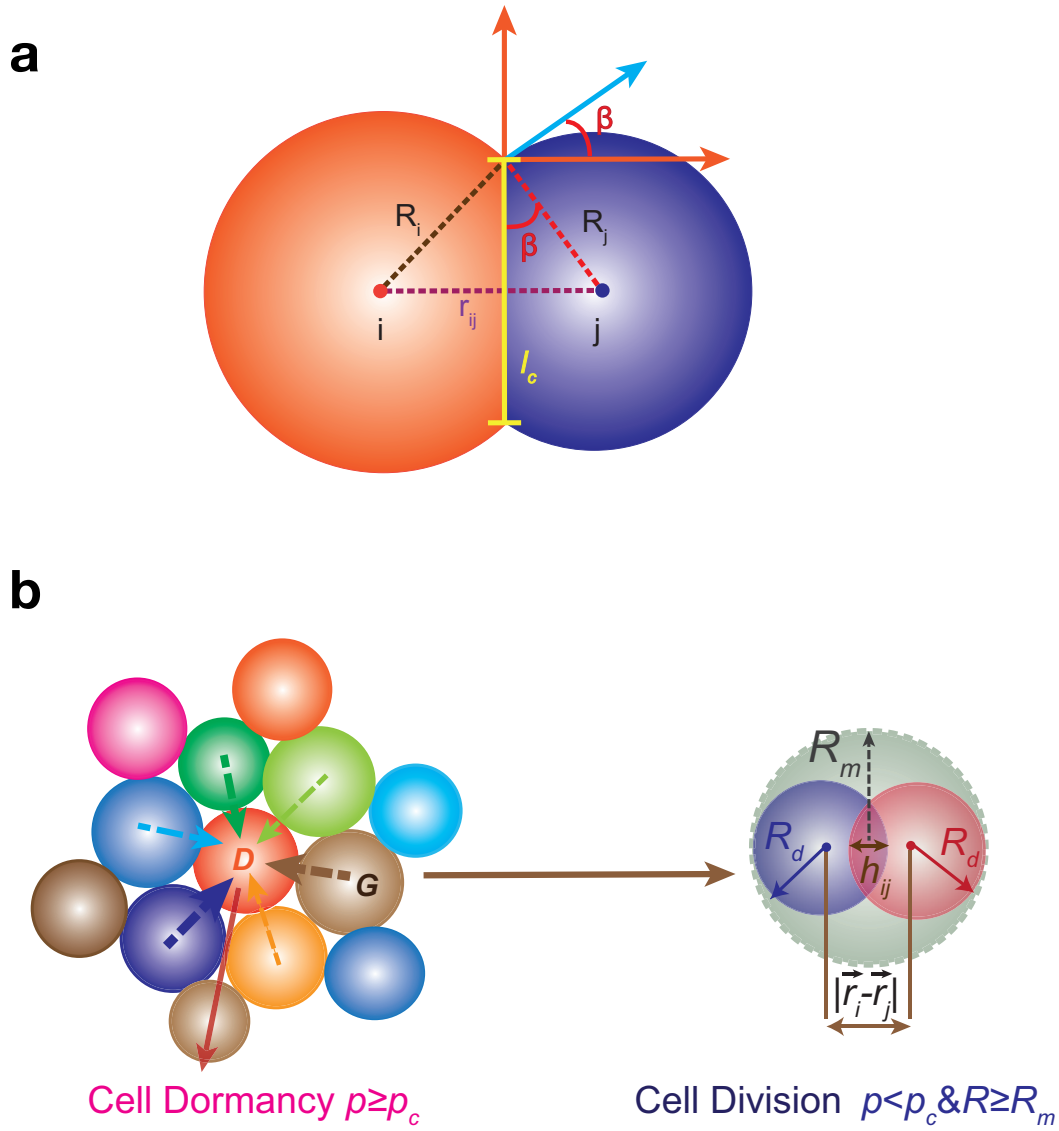

FIG. 1: **a)** Cell-cell adhesion dictates the angle of contact between cells, β, and the length of contact, l_c. **b)** Cell dormancy (left) and cell division (right). If the local pressure p_i that the ith cell experiences (due to contacts with the neighboring cells) exceeds a specified critical pressure p_c, it enters the dormant state (D). Otherwise, the cells undergo growth (G) until they reach the mitotic radius, R_m. At that stage, the mother cell divides into two identical daughter cells with the same radius R_d in such a manner that the total volume upon cell division is conserved. A cell that is dormant at a given time can transit from that state at subsequent times. Cell center to center distance, $r_{ij} = |\vec{r}_i - \vec{r}_j|$, and cell overlap, h_{ij}, are illustrated.

in the growth (G) phase (see Fig 1b). The effect of the local forces on proliferation is taken into account through the pressure experienced by the cell (p_i; see Methods). If p_i exceeds p_c (a pre-assigned value of the critical pressure), the cell enters dormancy (D), and can no longer grow or divide. However, if $p_i < p_c$, the cell can continue to grow in size until it reaches the mitotic radius R_m, the size at which cell division occurs.

Proliferation Depends Non-monotonically on f^{ad}: Our major finding is summarized in Fig. 2, which shows that tumor proliferation and a measure of invasiveness ($\Delta r(t = 7.5$ days)), exhibit a non-monotonic dependence on f^{ad}. Both quantities increase from small values as f^{ad} increases, attain a maximum at $f^{ad} = f_c^{ad}$, and decrease as f^{ad} exceeds f_c^{ad}. In the simulations, we began with 100 cells at $t = 0$, and let the cells evolve as determined by the equations of motion, and the rules governing birth and apoptosis (see Methods and SI Section I for details). We performed simulations at different values of f^{ad} until ~ 7.5 days ($= 12\tau_{min}$, where τ_{min} is the average cell division time), sufficient to account for multiple cell division cycles. The total number of cells (N) as a function of f^{ad} at various times in the range of $1\tau_{min}$ to $12\tau_{min}$ are shown in Fig. 2a.

On increasing f^{ad} from 0 (no E-cadherin expression) to $1.75 \times 10^{-4} \mu\text{N}/\mu\text{m}^2$ (intermediate E-cadherin expression), the total number of cells, N, at $t = 12\tau_{min}$($\sim$7.5 days; dark red in Fig. 2a) increases substantially. When f^{ad} exceeds $f_c^{ad} = 1.75 \times 10^{-4}$, the proliferation capacity (PrC) is down-regulated (Fig. 2a). While $N = 12,000$ cells on day 7.5 at $f^{ad} = 1.75 \times 10^{-4} \mu\text{N}/\mu\text{m}^2$, for higher values ($3 \times 10^{-4} \mu\text{N}/\mu\text{m}^2$), the tumor consists of only $4,000$ at the same t. The surprising non-monotonic dependence of cell numbers, N, on f^{ad}, is qualitatively consistent with some recent experiments (38, 45), as we discuss below. The non-monotonic proliferation behavior becomes pronounced beginning at $t = 5\tau_{min}$ (see Fig. 2a). The fractional change in the number of cells between f_c^{ad} and another value of f^{ad}, $\Delta N(f^{ad}, t)/N = [N(f_c^{ad} = 1.75 \times 10^{-4} \mu N/\mu m^2, t) - N(f^{ad}, t)]/N(f_c^{ad} = 1.75 \times 10^{-4} \mu N/\mu m^2, t)$ as a function of time, quantifies the asymmetry in the proliferation capacity due to adhesion strength. As shown in Fig. 2b, the parameter $\Delta N(t)/N$, exhibits non-linear behavior. From fits of N, as a function of time, the

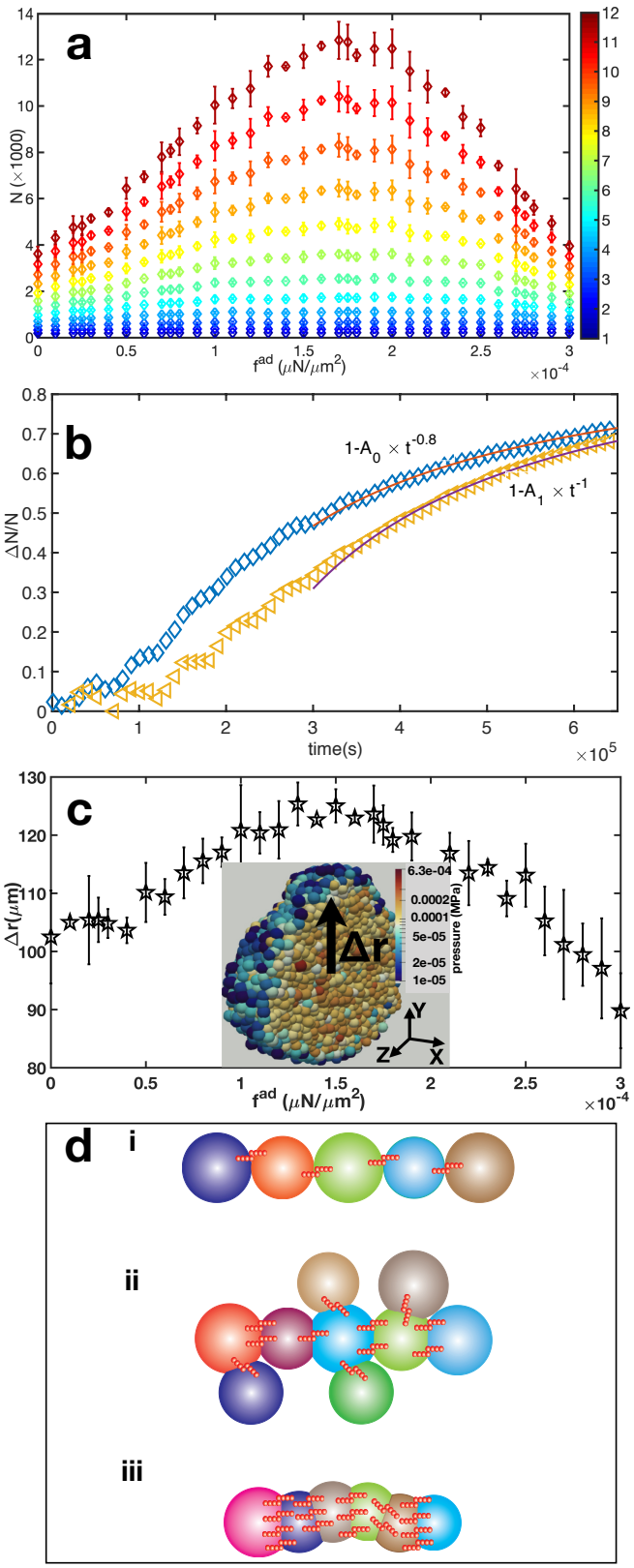

FIG. 2: (Caption next page.)

FIG. 2: **a)** Proliferation capacity (PrC) measured as the total number of cells (N in units of 1000), at $t = \tau_{min}$ to $12\tau_{min}$, at intervals of $\tau_{min}(= 54,000$ sec), as a function of cell-cell adhesion strength (f^{ad}) using $p_c = 10^{-4}$MPa. Error bars here, and henceforth, are calculated from the standard deviation. The scale on the right gives t in units of τ_{min}. **b)** Fractional change in N (defined in the text) between $f^{ad} = 1.75 \times 10^{-4}\mu\text{N}/\mu\text{m}^2$ and $f^{ad} = 0$ (diamonds), between $f^{ad} = 1.75 \times 10^{-4}$ and $f^{ad} = 3 \times 10^{-4}$ (left triangles), as a function of time. Predicted power law behavior of $\Delta N(t)/N$ are plotted as lines. **c)** The dependence of the invasion distance (Δr), at 7.5 days ($= 12\tau_{min}$), on f^{ad}. Inset shows a cross section through a tumor spheroid and the distance Δr from tumor center to periphery at $t \sim 12\tau_{min}$ for $f^{ad} = 1.5 \times 10^{-4}$. Color indicates the pressure experienced by cells. **d)** Schematic for the three different regimes of cell-cell adhesion exhibiting differing PrCs. E-cadherin molecules are represented as short red bonds. These regimes in the simulations correspond to (i) $f^{ad} \leq 0.5 \times 10^{-4}$ characterized by low cell-cell adhesion and low PrC. (ii) $1 \times 10^{-4} \leq f^{ad} \leq 2 \times 10^{-4}$ characterized by intermediate cell-cell adhesion and high PrC, and (iii) $f^{ad} \geq 2.5 \times 10^{-4}$ with high cell-cell adhesion and low PrC.

proliferation asymmetry parameter is expected to evolve in time as $1 - A_0 \times t^{-0.8}$ for $f^{ad} = 0$ and $1 - A_1 \times t^{-1}$ for $f^{ad} = 3 \times 10^{-4}\mu N/\mu m^2$, where A_0 and A_1 are constants (see SI Fig. S2a for the power law fits).

Invasion Distance Mirrors Tumor Proliferation Behavior: The invasion or spreading distance, $\Delta r(t)$ (shown in Fig. 2c), measurable experimentally using imaging methods (46), is the average distance between center of mass of the tumor spheroid and the cells at tumor periphery, $\Delta r(t) = \frac{1}{N_b}\sum_i^{N_b} |\vec{r}_i - \vec{R}_{CM}|$. Here, the summation is over N_b, the number of cells at the tumor periphery at positions $\vec{r}_i$ and $\vec{R}_{CM}$ is the tumor center of mass ($(1/N)\Sigma_j \vec{r}_j$). In accord with increased proliferation shown in Fig. 2a, $\Delta r(t = 12\tau_{min})$ is also enhanced at intermediate values of f^{ad} (Fig. 2c). The uptick in invasiveness from low to intermediate values of f^{ad} is fundamentally different from what is expected in the canonical picture, where increasing cell-cell adhesion, suppresses invasiveness and metastatic dissemination of cancer cells (31, 47). In contrast, tumor invasiveness as a function of increasing adhesion or stickiness between cells (as

tracked by $\Delta r(t = 12\tau_{min})$) initially increases and reaches a maximum, followed by a crossover to a regime of decreasing invasiveness at higher adhesion strengths. We note that the decreased invasive behavior at $f^{ad} > f_c^{ad}$ is in agreement with the canonical picture, where enhanced E-cadherin expression results in tumor suppression. Schematic summary of the results is presented in Fig. 2d.

The inset in Fig. 2c shows the highly heterogenous spatial distribution of intercellular pressure (snapshot at $t = 12\tau_{min}$), marked by elevated pressure at the core and decreasing as one approaches the tissue periphery. As cell rearrangement and birth-death events give rise to local cell density fluctuations, the cell pressure is a highly dynamic quantity, see videos (Supplementary Movies 1-3; SI Figs. S3a-c) for illustration of pressure dynamics during the growth of the cell collective. Spatial distribution of pressure is important to understanding the non-monotonic proliferation behavior, as we discuss in more detail below.

Fraction of Dormant Cells Determine Non-monotonic Proliferation: To understand the physical factors underlying the non-monotonic proliferation behavior shown in Fig. 2a, we searched for the growth control mechanism. We found that the pressure experienced by a cell as a function of cell packing in the 3D spheroid (SI Fig. S2b) plays an essential role in the observed results. For $f^{ad} > 0$, a minimum in pressure is observed at non-zero cell-cell overlap distance, h_{ij} (SI Fig. S2b). For instance, at $f^{ad} = 1.5 \times 10^{-4} \mu\text{N}/\mu\text{m}^2$ and $3 \times 10^{-4} \mu\text{N}/\mu\text{m}^2$, the pressure ($p_i$) experienced by cells is zero at $h_{ij} \sim 0.4\mu$m and 1.3 μm respectively. At this minimum pressure, $p_i \to 0$, the proliferation capacity (PrC) of the cells is maximized because cells are readily outside the dormant regime, $p_i/p_c < 1$. Due to the relationship between cell-cell overlap (h_{ij}) and center-to-center distance ($|\mathbf{r}_i - \mathbf{r}_j| = R_i + R_j - h_{ij}$), our conclusions regarding h_{ij} can equivalently be discussed in terms of the cell-cell contact length (l_c), the angle β (see Fig. 1) and cell-cell internuclear distance, $|r_i - r_j|$.

Fig. 3a shows the probability distribution of pressure at $t = 7.5$ days at three representative values of f^{ad}, corresponding to low, intermediate and high adhesion strengths. The crucial feature that gives rise to the non-monotonic proliferation and invasion (Figs. 2a -2c) is the

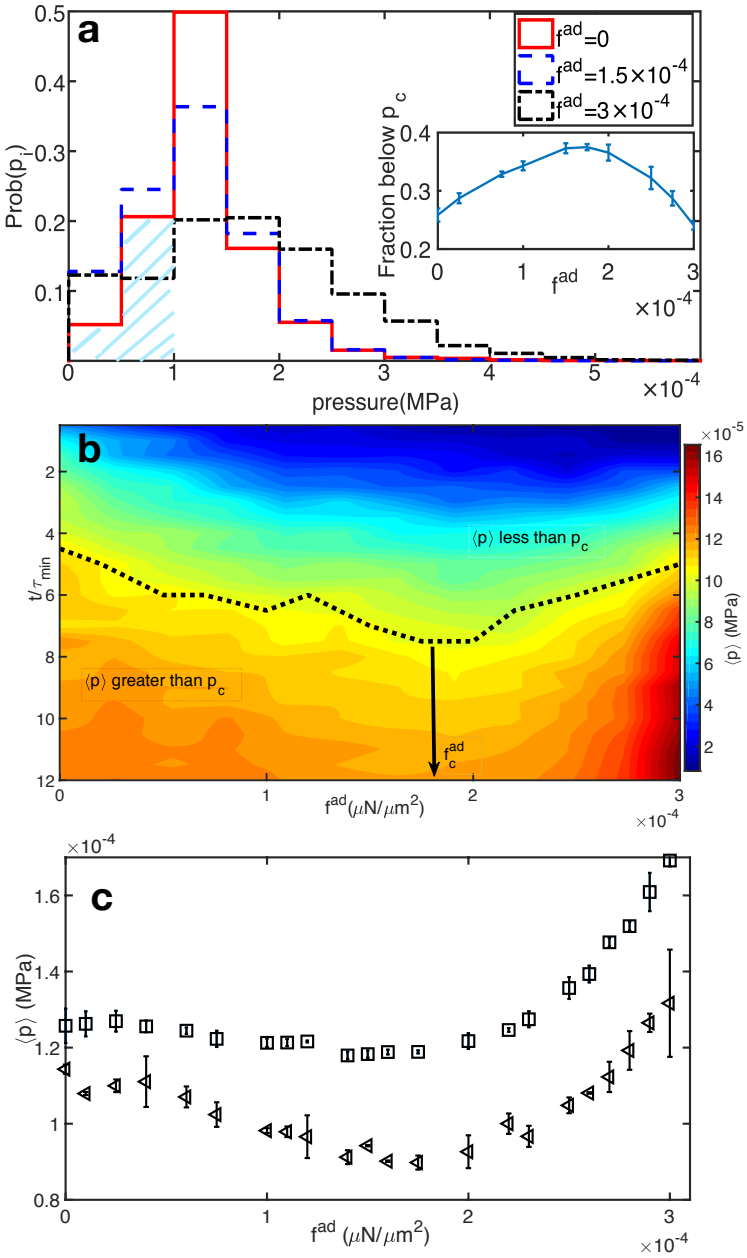

FIG. 3: **a)** The probability distribution of pressure experienced by cells within a 3D tissue spheroid on day 7.5 for three different values of f^{ad}. The shaded region represent pressure experienced by cells below $p_c = 1 \times 10^{-4}$MPa, at $f^{ad} = 0$. Fraction of cells (F_C) with $p < p_c$ is shown in the Inset. **b)** Phase plot of average pressure experienced by cells as a function of time and f^{ad}. The scale for pressure is on the right. **c)** The average pressure $\langle p \rangle$ experienced by cells at $t = 6\tau_{min}$ (left triangles; $\sim$ day 3.75 of growth) and $t = 12\tau_{min}$ (squares; $\sim$ day 7.5 of growth) for different values of f^{ad}.

nonlinear behavior of the pressure distribution below $p_c = 1 \times 10^{-4}$MPa (see shaded portion in Fig. 3a, quantified in the Inset) as f^{ad} is changed. In the inset of Fig. 3a, the fraction of cells in the proliferating regime shows a biphasic behavior with a peak at $f_c^{ad} \sim 1.75 \times 10^{-4} \mu N/\mu m^2$. The fraction of cells in the growth phase ($p_i < p_c$) peaks at $\approx$ 38%, between 1×10^{-4} μN/μm$^2 <$ f^{ad} $<$ 2×10^{-4} μN/μm^2, . For both lower and higher cell-cell adhesion strengths, the fraction of cells in the growth phase is at or below 25% on day 7.5 of tissue growth. We present the phase diagram of the average pressure ($\langle p \rangle = \frac{\Sigma_i p_i}{N}$, color map) on cells as a function of f^{ad} and time (in units of τ_{min}) in Fig. 3b. The dotted line marks the boundary $\langle p \rangle = p_c$, between the regimes where cells on average grow and divide ($p_i < p_c$), and the opposite limit where they are dormant. At a fixed value of t, the regime between $1 \times 10^{-4} \leq f^{ad} \leq 2 \times 10^{-4}$ shows a marked dip in the average pressure experienced by cells. The low pressure regime, $\langle p \rangle < p_c$, is particularly pronounced between $2\tau_{min} \leq t \leq 7\tau_{min}$. In Fig. 3c, the average pressure at $t = 6\tau_{min}$ and $12\tau_{min}$, as a function of f^{ad}, is shown for illustration purposes. Minimum in $\langle p \rangle$ between $f^{ad} \approx 1.5 - 2 \times 10^{-4}$ μN/μm^2 is seen. In our pressure dependent model of contact inhibition, there is a close relationship between proliferation capacity (PrC) and the local pressure on a cell. As the number of cells experiencing pressure below critical pressure increases, the PrC of the tissue is enhanced. It is less obvious why the average cell pressure acquires a minimum value at $f^{ad} = f_c^{ad}$ (Fig. 3b-c). We provide a plausible theoretical explanation below.

Pressure Gradient Drives Biphasic Proliferation Behavior: The finding in Fig. 2a could be understood using the following physical picture. PrC is determined by the number of cells with pressures less than p_c, the critical value. If the pressure on a cell exceeds p_c, it becomes dormant, thus losing the ability to divide and grow. The average pressure that a cell experiences depends on the magnitude of the net adhesive force. At low values of f^{ad} (incrementing from $f^{ad} = 0$) the cell pressure decreases as the cells overlap with each other because they are deformable ($|r_i - r_j| < R_i + R_j$). This is similar to the pressure in real gases (Van der Waals picture) in which the inter-particle attraction leads to a decrease in the

average pressure. As a result, in a certain range of f^{ad}, we expect the number of cells capable of dividing should increase, causing enhanced proliferation. At very high values of f^{ad}, however, the attraction becomes so strong that the number of nearest neighbors of a given cell increases (SI Figs. S4a-b). This leads to an overall increase in pressure (jamming effect), resulting in a decrease in the number of cells that can proliferate. From these arguments it follows that $N(t)$ should increase (decrease) at low (high) f^{ad} values with a maximum at an intermediate f^{ad}. The physical picture given above can be used to construct an approximate theory for the finding that cell proliferation reaches a maximum at $f^{ad} = f_c^{ad}$ (Fig. 2a). The total average pressure (p_t) that a cell experiences is given by $p_t \sim \bar{n}_{NN}\langle p_1\rangle$ where $\bar{n}_{NN}$ is the mean number of nearest neighbors, and $\langle p_1\rangle$ is the average pressure a single neighboring cell exerts on a given cell. We appeal to simulations to estimate the dependence of $\bar{n}_{NN}$ on f^{ad} (see SI Fig. S4). For any cell i, the nearest neighbors are defined as those cells with non-zero overlap (i.e. $h_{ij} > 0$). To obtain $\langle p_1\rangle$, we expand around h_0, the cell-cell overlap value where both the attractive and repulsive interaction terms are equal ($h_{ij}|_{F_{ij}^{el}=F_{ij}^{ad}}$), corresponding to the overlap distance at which $p = 0$ (SI Fig. S2b). Thus, by Taylor expansion to first order, $\langle p_1\rangle$ can be written as $\langle p_1\rangle \approx \frac{\partial p_1}{\partial h}(h-h_0)$. Here, $h = \bar{h}_{ij}$, is the mean cell-cell overlap, which depends on f^{ad} (see SI Fig. S5). We note that the variation in h_0 with respect to R_i and R_j, as well as other cell-cell interaction parameters is small compared to cell size. Estimating the dependence of $h - h_0$ on adhesion strength (see SI Fig. S6), an approximate linear trend is observed. At higher adhesion strengths, cells find it increasingly difficult to rearrange themselves and pack in such a way that intercellular distances are optimal for proliferation.

In order to calculate the pressure gradient with respect to cell-cell overlap, $\frac{\partial p_1}{\partial h}$, we use

$$p_1 = \frac{|F|}{A} \simeq \frac{Jh^{\frac{3}{2}} - Bf^{ad}h}{Ch}, \tag{1}$$

$$\frac{\partial p_1}{\partial h} \simeq \frac{J}{2Ch^{\frac{1}{2}}}|_{h=h_0} = \frac{J}{2Ch_0^{\frac{1}{2}}}, \tag{2}$$

to separate the dependence on cell-cell overlap and adhesion strength. In Eqs. 1 and 2 J, B and C are independent of both h and f^{ad} and can be obtained from SI Eqs. (S1) and (S2), and

the definition of A_{ij}. The resulting expressions are: $J = 1/[\frac{3}{4}(\frac{1-\nu_i^2}{E_i} + \frac{1-\nu_j^2}{E_j})\sqrt{\frac{1}{R_i(t)} + \frac{1}{R_j(t)}}]$, $B = [\pi R_i R_j/(R_i + R_j)] \times \frac{1}{2}(c_i^{rec} c_j^{lig} + c_j^{rec} c_i^{lig})$, and $C = \pi R_i R_j/(R_i + R_j)$. On equating the repulsive and attractive interaction terms, we obtain $h_0 \approx K(f^{ad})^2$, implying $\frac{\partial p_1}{\partial h} = \frac{J}{2C}\frac{1}{\sqrt{K} f^{ad}}$, where, $K = (B/J)^2$. Thus, the total pressure (p_t) experienced by a cell is $p_t \sim \bar{n}_{NN}\langle p_1 \rangle = \bar{n}_{NN}(h - h_0)\frac{\partial p_1}{\partial h}$,

$$p_t = (G + \beta f^{ad})(E + \alpha f^{ad})(\frac{J}{2C}\frac{1}{\sqrt{K} f^{ad}}). \tag{3}$$

The mean number of near-neighbors $\bar{n}_{NN}$ increases with f^{ad} and to a first approximation can be written as $G + \beta f^{ad}$ (see SI Fig. S4a-b; G, β are constants obtained from fitting simulation data). Similarly, the deviation of the cell-cell overlap from h_0 is approximately $E + \alpha f^{ad}$ (see SI Fig. S6; E, α are constants). Notice that Eq. 3 can be written as, $\Omega p_t = (G\alpha + \beta E) + \beta\alpha f^{ad} + \frac{GE}{f^{ad}}$, where $\Omega = (\frac{J}{2C\sqrt{K}})^{-1}$. In this form, the second term depends linearly on f^{ad} and the third is inversely proportional to f^{ad}. As described in the physical arguments, enhancement in proliferation is maximized if p_t is as small as possible. The minimum in the total pressure experienced is given by the solution to $\frac{\partial p_t}{\partial f^{ad}} = 0$. Therefore, the predicted optimal cell-cell adhesion strength is $f^{ad}_{opt} = (\frac{GE}{\alpha\beta})^{\frac{1}{2}} = 1.77 \times 10^{-4} \mu\text{N}/\mu\text{m}^2$. This is in excellent agreement with the simulation results ($f^{ad}_c \approx 1.75 \times 10^{-4} \mu N/\mu m^2$) for the peak in the proliferation behavior ($N(t = 7.5$ days) in Fig. 2a). More importantly, the arguments leading to Eq. 3 show that the variations in the average pressure as a function of f^{ad} drives proliferation.

Cell Packing and Spatial Proliferation Patterns Are Dictated by Cell-Cell Adhesion: A thermodynamic equation of state for active matter, such as the relation between pressure and density of an ideal gas, is as of yet an unresolved question (48–50). We calculate the average pressure, $\langle p \rangle$, experienced by cells as a function of the number of cells at varying f^{ad} (see Fig 4a). N_c, defined as the number of cells at which $\langle p \rangle = p_c$, exhibits a biphasic behavior, supporting the maximum number of cells at an intermediate f^{ad}. This provides further evidence that in a growing collection of cells, at intermediate f^{ad}, cells rearrange and pack effectively in such a manner that the average pressure is minimized. For all three adhesion strengths considered, an initial regime where pressure rises rapidly is followed by a more gradual increase in

pressure, coinciding with the exponential to power law growth in the number of cells (see SI Fig.S2). $\langle p \rangle$ as a function of N are well fit by double exponential functions. We propose that the intercellular pressure in 3D cell collectives should exhibit a double exponential dependence on N. However, the precise nature of the intercellular pressure depends on the details of the interaction between cells.

With recent advances in experimental techniques (51, 52), it is now possible to map spatial variations in intercellular forces within 3D tissues. Hence, we study how the spatial distribution of pressure and proliferation is influenced by cell-cell adhesion strength. We find that the cells at the tumor center experience higher pressures, above the critical pressure p_c (see Fig. 4b), independent of f^{ad}. In contrast, the average pressure experienced by cells close to the tumor periphery is below the critical value p_c. The pressure decreases as a function of distance r from the tumor center, with the lowest average pressure observed at the intermediate value of $f^{ad} = 1.5 \times 10^{-4}$ as one approaches the tumor periphery. We calculate the average pressure dependence on r using,

$$\langle p(r) \rangle = \frac{\Sigma_i p_i \delta[r - (|\vec{R}_{CM} - \vec{r}_i)]}{\Sigma_i \delta[r - (|\vec{R}_{CM} - \vec{r}_i)]}. \tag{4}$$

Due to the high pressure experienced by cells near the tumor center, a low fraction ($F_c < 0.2$) of cells are in growth phase at small $r < 50\mu m$ while the majority of cells can grow at large r (see Fig. 4c). A rapid increase in F_c is observed approaching the tumor periphery for the intermediate value of $f^{ad} = 1.5 \times 10^{-4}$ (see the red triangles in Fig. 4c). To understand the rapid tumor invasion at intermediate value of f^{ad}, we calculated the average cell proliferation rate, $\Gamma(r)$ (see SI Section VII for more details)). We found that the cell proliferation rate is similar for different f^{ad} at small r, while a much higher proliferation rate is observed for the intermediate value of f^{ad} at larger r (see Fig. 4d). This spatial proliferation profile is in agreement with experimental results, where increased mechanical stress is correlated with lack of proliferation within the spheroid core (51).

DISCUSSION

Internal Pressure Provides Feedback In E-cadherin's Role In Tumor Dynamics: We have shown that the growth and invasiveness of the tumor spheroid change non-monotonically with f^{ad}, exhibiting a maximum at an intermediate value of the inter-cell adhesion strength. The mechanism for this unexpected finding is related to a collective effect that alters the pressure on a cell due to its neighbors. Thus, internal pressure may be viewed as providing a feedback mechanism in tumor growth and inhibition. The optimal value of f_c^{ad} at which cell proliferation is a maximum at $t >> \tau_{min}$, is due to p_c, the critical pressure above which a cell enters dormancy. Taken together these results show that the observed non-monotonic behavior is due to an interplay of f^{ad} and pressure, which serves as a feedback in enhancing or suppressing tumor growth. We note that the main conclusion of our model, on the non-monotonic proliferation behavior with a maximum at $f^{ad} \approx f_c^{ad}$, is independent of the exact value of p_c (see SI Fig. S7), as well as alternative definitions of pressure experienced by the cells (see SI Figs. 8-9; see SI Section IV and V for more details).

The growth mechanism leading to non-monotonic proliferation at times exceeding a few cell division cycles is determined by the fraction of cells, F_C, with pressure less than p_c. The growth rate, and hence F_C, depends on both p_c as well as f^{ad}. This picture, arising in our simulations, is very similar to the mechanical feedback as a control mechanism for tissue growth proposed by Shraiman (15, 21). In his formulation, the tissue is densely packed (perhaps confluent) so that cellular rearrangements does not occur readily, and the tissue could be treated as an elastic sheet that resists shear. For this case, Shraiman produced a theory for uniform tissue growth by proposing that mechanical stresses serves as a feedback mechanism. In our case, large scale cell rearrangements are possible as a cell or group of cells could go in and out of dormancy, determined by the $p_i(t)/p_c$. Despite the differences between the two studies, the idea that pressure could serve as a regulatory mechanism of growth, which in our case leads to non-monotonic dependence of proliferation on cell-cell adhesive interaction strength, could be a

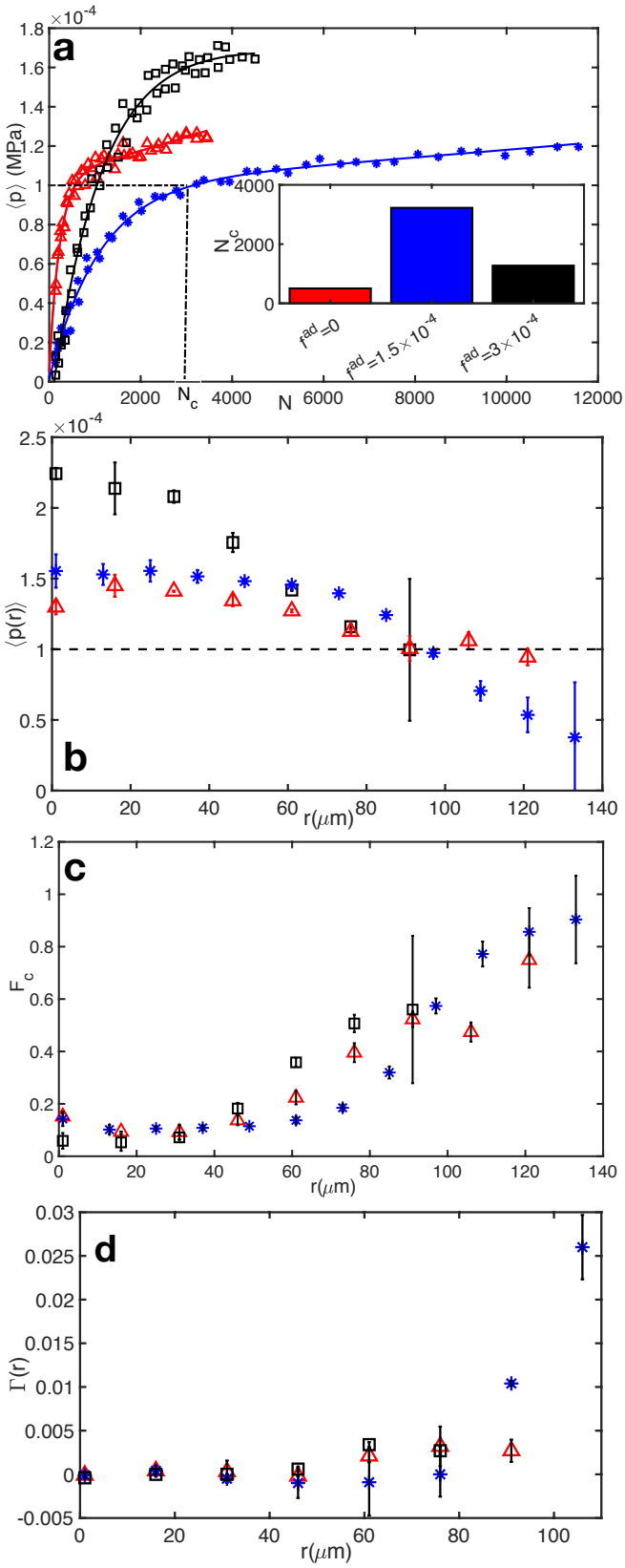

FIG. 4: (Caption next page.)

FIG. 4: **a)** (Figure in previous page) Average pressure experienced by cells, $\langle p \rangle$, as a function of the total number, N, of cells; $\langle p \rangle$ versus N at $f^{ad} = 0$ (red;triangle), $f^{ad} = 1.5 \times 10^{-4}$ (blue;asterisk) and $f^{ad} = 3 \times 10^{-4}$ (black;squares) are shown. The corresponding double exponential fits are, $[1.1 \times 10^{-4} e^{5.8 \times 10^{-5} \times N} - 1 \times 10^{-4} e^{-4.4 \times 10^{-3} \times N}]$ (red line, $f^{ad} = 0$), $[1.0 \times 10^{-4} e^{1.7 \times 10^{-5} \times N} - 9.9 \times 10^{-5} e^{-9.2 \times 10^{-4} \times N}]$ (blue line, $f^{ad} = 1.5 \times 10^{-4}$) and $[1.8 \times 10^{-4} e^{7.6 \times 10^{-6} \times N} - 1.9 \times 10^{-4} e^{-9.1 \times 10^{-4} \times N}]$ (black line, $f^{ad} = 3 \times 10^{-4}$). Inset shows N_c, the number of cells at which $\langle p \rangle = p_c$. **b)** The average pressure experienced by cells at a distance r (μm) from the spheroid center. The dashed line shows the critical pressure $p_c = 10^{-4}$MPa. **c)** The fraction of cells with $p < p_c$ at a distance r. **d)** The average cell proliferation rate at distance r from the center of the spheroid for $f^{ad} = 0$, $f^{ad} = 1.5 \times 10^{-4}$ and $f^{ad} = 3 \times 10^{-4}$. Colors and symbols corresponding to f^{ad} are the same for **a-d**. t is fixed at $650,000 sec (\sim 12\tau_{min})$ for **b-d**.

general feature of mechanical feedback(15).

Cell-matrix Interactions: Biphasic cell migration controlled by adhesion to the extracellular matrix has been previously established. In pioneering studies, Lauffenburger and coworkers (53, 54) showed using theory and experiments that speed of single cell migration is biphasic, achieving an optimal value at an intermediate strength of cell-substratum interactions. Similarly, invasion of melanoma cells into a matrix was also found to be biphasic (55), increasing at small collagen concentrations and reaching a peak at an intermediate value. At much higher values of the collagen concentration, the invasion into the matrix decreases giving rise to the biphasic dependence. A direct link between the survival of genetically induced glioma-bearing mice and the expression level of CD44, which is a cell surface marker, has recently been reported (56). These authors showed that the survival depends in a biphasic manner with increasing CD44 expression. Simulations using the motor clutch model established that the results could be explained in terms of the strength of cell-substrate interactions. In contrast to these studies, our results show that adhesion strength between cells, mediated by E-cadherin expression, gives rise to the observed non-monotonic behavior in the tumor proliferation (Fig. 2a). The mechanism, identified here, is related to the pressure dependent feedback on growth (15) whose effectiveness

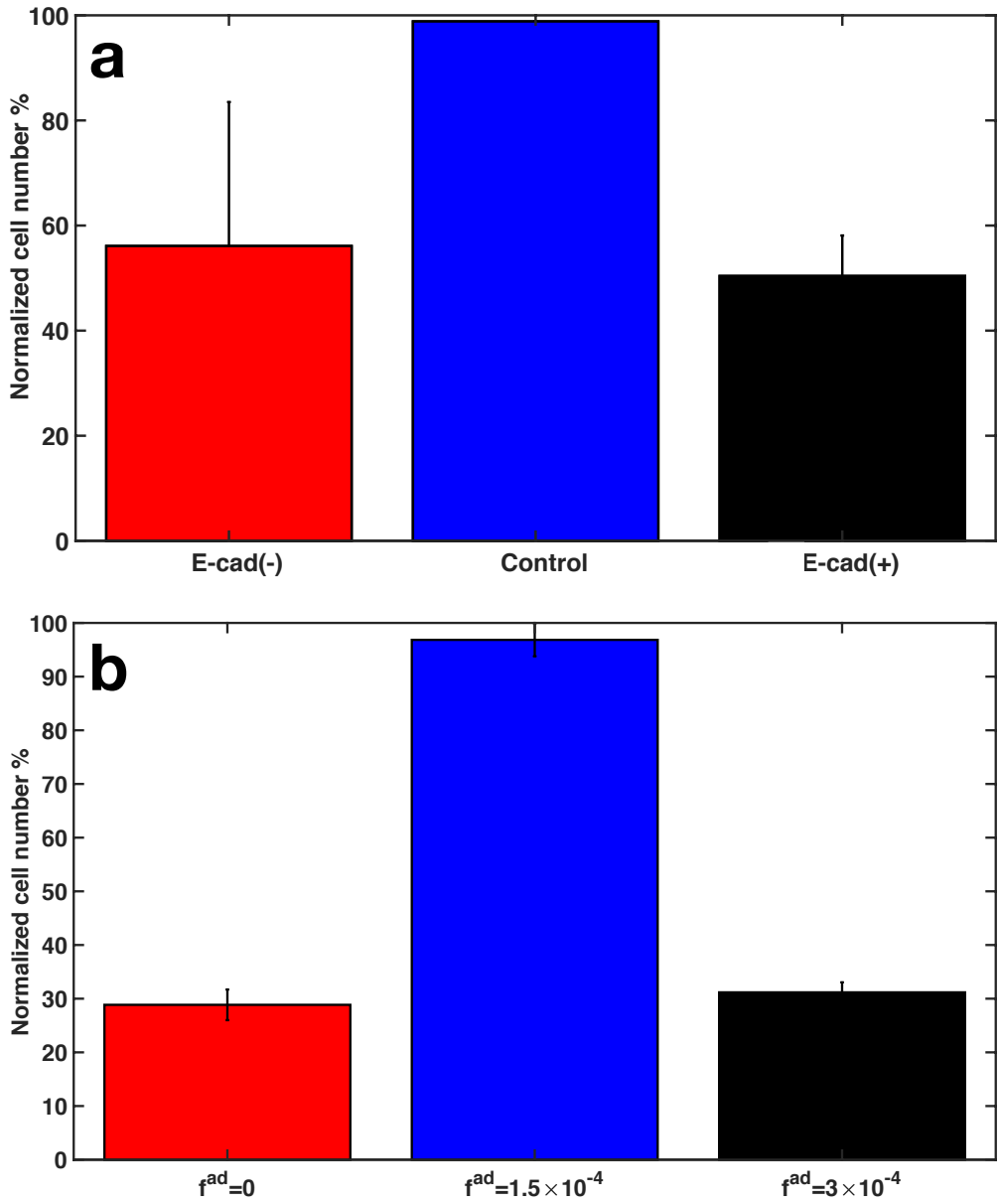

FIG. 5: **a)** Experimental data for the number of cells normalized by maximum number (as %) at three levels of E-cadherin expression for primordial germ cells (PGC) from *Xenopus laevis* ≈1.5 days after ferilization (45). Both overexpression and knockdown of E-cadherin leads to a decrease in PGC cell numbers. Control morpholino oligonucleotides (Contr MO) and uninjected show native E-cadherin expression while E-cad MO (E-cad(-)) and E-cad GFP (E-cad(+)) induces knockdown and overexpression of E-cadherin respectively. **b)** Simulation data for the number of cells normalized by maximum number (as %) at three levels of cell-cell adhesion strength ($t = 650,000 sec (\sim 12\tau_{min})$). Values of f^{ad} (in units of $\mu N/\mu m^2$) are shown in parenthesis, as a proxy for experimental E-cadherin expression levels.

is controlled by cell-cell adhesion strength, f^{ad}.

Plausible Connection To Experiments: We mention two experiments, which provide quantitative support to our conclusion: (1) Maintenance of appropriate E-cadherin expression is required for normal cell development in several species such as Drosophila, zebrafish and mouse (45, 57). In order to make quantitative connections between our findings and experiments, we consider a study on how the proliferation capacity of primordial germ cells (PGCs) depend on cell-cell adhesion. Even though the total number of PGCs in an embryo is only around 10-30 cells, while there are thousands of cells in the simulations, we compare the percentage change in cell numbers that result from modulating E-cadherin expression levels. We make this comparison to propose that perhaps E-cadherin does modulate proliferation through a pressure dependent mechanistic pathway in tissues, as discussed above. The proliferation behavior of PGCs in *Xenopus laevis* with changing E-cadherin expression levels is shown in Fig. 5a. In this experiment, E-cadherin overexpression, achieved by mRNA injection of GFP E-cadherin DELE mRNA (E-cad GFP), leads to $\sim 50\%$ reduction (compared to control) in the number of cells after 1.5 days of post fertilization embryo growth (45). Similar reduction in the number of cells is observed with E-cadherin knockdown using specific morpholino oligonucleotides (E-cad MO) (45). Therefore, an optimal level of cell-cell adhesion exists where proliferation is maximized, in agreement with simulation predictions (Fig. 5b). The section VI in SI provides other examples for the role of E-cadherin in both tumor suppression and proliferation.

(2) The loss of E-cadherin is considered to be a key characteristic in epithelial to mesenchymal transitions, priming the cells to dissociate from the primary tumor and invade surrounding tissues (58). However, in a subset of high grade glioblastoma, patients with tumor cells expressing E-cadherin correlated with worse prognosis compared to patients whose tumor cells that did not express E-cadherin (38). In this tumor type, heightened expression of E-cadherin correlated with increased invasiveness in xenograft models (38). These experimental results, which are consistent with our simulations in promoting proliferation as f^{ad} is changed from $= 0\ \mu\text{N}/\mu\text{m}^2$ to $f^{ad} = 1.75\ \mu\text{N}/\mu\text{m}^2 = f_c^{ad}$ (Fig. 2a), suggest an unexpected role of E-cadherin in promoting

tumor growth and invasion.

Cautionary Remarks: As detailed in the SI, it is difficult to make precise comparisons between the simulations and experiments because the growth of tumors is extremely complicated. For example, other cytoplasmic and nuclear signaling factors may be important in understanding the role of cell-cell adhesion in modulating the proliferative capacity of cells, (39) as multiple signaling pathways are located in direct proximity to the adherens junction complexes (20). Nevertheless, our results suggest that the mechanism of contact inhibition of proliferation, based on critical cellular pressure, could serve as a unifying mechanism in understanding how cell-cell adhesion influences proliferation. The relation between proliferation and cell-cell adhesion has important clinical applications, such as in the development of innovative therapeutic approaches to cancer (59, 60) by targeting E-cadherin expression. Under certain circumstances, inhibiting E-cadherin expression could lead to tumor progression. On the other hand, in cancer cells nominally associated with low or negligible E-Cadherin levels, tumor progression and worsening prognosis could result upon increasing E-Cadherin levels. Therefore, it is likely that tumor stratification based on high, intermediate and low E-cadherin expression maybe useful as a treatment strategy (see SI, Section VI for further discussion). A similar therapeutic strategy was recommended based on *in vivo* experiments validating the biphasic dependence of cell migration on CD44 levels (56). Although a direct connection to specific cancers using our results cannot be made, we provide partial evidence for the counterintuitive experimental finding that enhanced adhesion between cells could promote cell proliferation.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we have established that the modulation of cell-cell adhesion strength contributes to contact inhibition of cell growth and proliferation. Surprisingly, cell proliferation exhibits a non-monotonic behavior as a function of cell adhesion strength, increasing till a critical value, followed by proliferation suppression at higher values of f^{ad}. We have shown that E-cadherin expression and critical pressure based contact inhibition are sufficient to explain the

role of cell-cell adhesion on cell proliferation in the context of both morphogenesis and cancer progression. The observed dual role that E-cadherin plays in tumor growth is related to a feedback mechanism due to changes in pressure as the cell-cell interaction strength is varied, established here on the basis of simulations and a mean field theory.

The pressure feedback on the growth of cells is sufficient to account for cell proliferation in the simulations. For cells, however, it may well be that mechanical forces do not directly translate into proliferative effects. Rather, cell-cell contact (experimentally measurable through the contact length l_c, for example) could biochemically regulate Rac1/RhoA signaling, which in turn controls proliferation, as observed in biphasic proliferation of cell collectives in both two and three dimensions (40, 41).

One implication of our finding is that the mechanical pressure dependent feedback may also play a role in organ size control. As tissue size regulation requires fine tuning of proliferation rate, cell volume, and cell death at the single cell level (61), pressure dependent feedback mediated by cell-cell adhesion could function as an efficient control parameter. In principle, cells in tissues could be characterized by a range of adhesion strengths. Competition between these cell types, mediated by adhesion dependent pressure feedback into growth, could be critical in determining the relative proportion of cells and therefore the organ size.

METHODS

Model: We simulate the collective movement of cells using a minimal model of an evolving tumor embedded in a matrix using an agent-based three dimensional (3D) model (62–64). The cells, which are embedded in a highly viscous material mimicking the extracellular material, are represented as deformable objects. The inter-cell interactions are characterized by direct elastic (repulsive) and adhesive (attractive) forces. The total force on the ith cell is given by,

$$\vec{F_i} = \Sigma_{j\epsilon NN(i)}(F_{ij}^{el} - F_{ij}^{ad})\vec{n}_{ij}, \tag{5}$$

where $\vec{n}_{ij}$ is the unit vector from the center of cell j to cell i. The forces are summed over the nearest neighbors ($NN(i)$) of the ith cell. The form of the elastic force, F_{ij}^{el}, and the inter-cell adhesive force, F_{ij}^{ad}, are taken from

the study of Schaller and Meyer-Hermann (62), and are described in the Supplementary Information (SI). The strength of the adhesive interaction between cells, f^{ad}, is measured in units of $\mu N/\mu m^2$, ($F_{ij}^{ad} \propto f^{ad}$ given by Eq. (S2) in the SI).

Cell-to-cell and cell-to-matrix damping account for the effects of friction due to other cells, and the extracellular matrix (ECM) (for example, collagen matrix), respectively. The model accounts for apoptosis, cell growth and division. Thus, the collective motion of cells is determined by both systematic cell-cell forces and the dynamics due to stochastic cell birth and apoptosis under a free boundary condition (65).

Pressure-dependent Dormancy: A crucial feature in the model is the role played by the local pressure, p_i, experienced by the ith cell relative to a critical pressure, p_c. A given cell, at any time t, can either be in the dormant (D) or in the growth (G) phase depending on the pressure on the cell (see Fig 1b). The total pressure (p_i) on the ith cell,

$$p_i = \sum_{j \in NN(i)} \frac{|F_{ij}|}{A_{ij}}, \tag{6}$$

is the overall sum of all the normal pressures due to the nearest neighbors. If $p_i > p_c$ (a pre-assigned value of the critical pressure), the cell becomes dormant, and can no longer grow or divide. Note that a cell that becomes dormant at time t does not imply that it remains so at all later times because as the cell colony evolves, p_i, a dynamic quantity fluctuates, and hence can become less or greater than p_c (see SI Figs. S3a-c, Supplementary Movies 1-3A).

It has been shown *in vitro* that solid stress, defined as the mechanical stress due to solid and elastic elements of the extracellular matrix, inhibits growth of multicellular tumor spheroids irrespective of the host species, tissue origin or differentiation state (66). This type of growth inhibition is mediated by stress accumulation around the spheroid as a result of the progressive displacement of the surrounding matrix due to the growing clump of cells. In our model, however, the effect of pressure on cell growth is driven by local cell-cell contact as opposed to the global stress exerted by the surrounding matrix. Both *in vivo* and *in vitro*, epithelial cells exhibit contact inhibition of proliferation due to cell-cell interactions (67). The value of the critical pressure used in our work is in the same range as experimentally measured cell-scale stresses (10-200 Pa) (52) and with earlier works using critical cellular compression as the mechanism for contact inhibition (62, 64). We have also verified that the qualitative results are independent of the precise value of p_c, as well as alternative definitions of local pressure (see Sections IV to V in the SI).

Cell Dynamics: Because the Reynolds number for cells in a tissue is small (62, 68), overdamped approximation is appropriate. The equations of motion are given in the SI (see Eq. S4). Besides the cell-cell repulsive and

adhesive forces, another contribution to cell dynamics comes from cell growth, division and apoptosis. Stochastic cell growth leads to dynamic variations in the cell-cell forces. Cell division and apoptosis induce temporal rearrangements in the cell positions and packing. Hence, both the contribution of the systematic forces and cell growth, birth and apoptosis towards cell dynamics are taken into account in the model, for which we described the unusual dynamics previously (65, 69). The parameters used in the simulations are given in the SI (see Table I), also justifying the range of f^{ad} explored in our simulations. In order to explore the plausible dual role of E-cadherin on cell proliferation, we vary f^{ad}, keeping all other parameters constant.

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