Stage-specific metabolic rewiring coordinates nucleotide supply and demand during spermatogenesis

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ABSTRACT

Male meiotic prophase I features a major transition from leptotene/zygotene (LZ) to pachytene/diplotene (PD) spermatocytes, accompanied by rapid growth and extensive transcriptional remodeling. Using stage-resolved purification of spermatogenic populations integrated with Seahorse respirometry, proteomics/metabolomics, and

stable-isotope tracing, we define metabolic programs across this transition. LZ spermatocytes show little oxidative response to glucose or lactate and instead rely on glutamine and CPT1-dependent fatty-acid β-oxidation to sustain mitochondrial respiration. In contrast, PD spermatocytes increase oxygen consumption upon glucose and lactate addition and suppress fatty-acid oxidation. U-[13C]-glucose tracing reveals preferential diversion of glucose-6-phosphate into the pentose phosphate pathway (PPP) in LZ cells, whereas PD cells lose PPP entry coincident with meiotic sex chromosome inactivation and repression of the X-linked enzyme G6PD. Isotope incorporation into UTP/CTP demonstrates active de novo pyrimidine synthesis in LZ cells via PPP-derived ribose and pyruvate carboxylase/TCA-derived aspartate, while PD cells show minimal labeling. Despite silencing nucleotide biosynthesis, PD cells exhibit elevated nascent RNA synthesis and reduced nucleotide pools, consistent with increased nucleotide demand. Notably, pharmacologic inhibition of ENT1, the only nucleoside transporter expressed in these cells, abolishes in vivo 5-ethynyl uridine uptake in early germ cells yet does not impair meiotic progression. This indicates that germ cells do not depend on external nucleoside sources and that PD-stage transcriptional demands are met primarily by nucleotide pools synthesized earlier. Cross-species transcriptomics (mouse, human, zebrafish, yeast) reveals a conserved shutdown of nucleotide biosynthesis during late prophase I. Together, our results support a developmentally enforced separation between nucleotide production in early prophase and nucleotide utilization in pachytene.

INTRODUCTION

Spermatogenesis and spermiogenesis are sequential developmental processes that culminate in the production of mature spermatozoa. Diploid spermatogonial stem cells (SSCs), located at the periphery of the seminiferous tubules, sustain male reproductive capacity throughout life. Spermatogenesis is a complex, multistage process initiated by retinoic acid, during which spermatogonia undergo successive mitotic divisions and then differentiate into preleptotene primary spermatocytes that enter the premeiotic S phase. The final round of DNA replication occurs in preleptotene cells (*1*), and from this point until completion of meiosis I, primary spermatocytes carry a 4C DNA content. After premeiotic DNA replication, cells enter meiotic prophase I (leptotene, zygotene, pachytene, and diplotene) and maintain a 4C DNA content until the first meiotic division. Although recombination can

involve short tracts of repair-associated DNA synthesis, no additional round of bulk DNA replication occurs.

Importantly, a single spermatocyte progresses sequentially from leptotene to zygotene, then through early, mid, and late pachytene, followed by diplotene and diakinesis, before completing the first meiotic division. Two reductive meiotic divisions ultimately generate haploid round spermatids (RS), which undergo spermiogenesis to become mature sperm (*2*).

This developmental program occurs within seminiferous tubules, where premeiotic cells at the periphery have direct access to nutrients from nearby blood vessels. Upon entry into meiosis at the preleptotene stage, cells traverse the blood–testis barrier via tight junctions between Sertoli cells to reach the adluminal compartment, where differentiation continues and nutrient supply is mediated by Sertoli cells and the seminiferous tubule fluid (*3*).

In mice, spermatogenesis and spermiogenesis together span ~35 days and require substantial metabolic adaptation. The development of methods enabling isolation of cells at discrete stages of spermatogenesis revealed a major transcriptomic switch between the leptotene/zygotene (LZ) and pachytene/diplotene (PD) stages (*4–6*). However, despite extensive transcriptional remodeling during this transition—affecting >10,000 genes (*7*) - it remains unclear how these large-scale changes are translated into functional metabolic programs that can support the dramatic increases in biomass and biosynthetic output. This gap is particularly striking given the rapid increase in cellular biomass across the same interval: cell volume increases ~3.4-fold between LZ and PD in prepubertal mice (*8*) and ~fivefold in adults (*7*), accompanied by a ~fourfold increase in RNA and protein content, implying substantial bioenergetic and biosynthetic remodeling.

Here, we systematically examine the metabolic challenges faced by developing germ cells and identify a metabolic switch between the LZ and PD stages, characterized by coordinated changes in the metabolome, mitochondrial content and activity, and fuel preferences. Using ^13C-glucose tracing, we find that LZ cells channel glucose away from energy production and toward anabolic pathways that support nucleotide synthesis, including the pentose phosphate pathway (PPP). In contrast, PD cells lose PPP activity coincident with transcriptional silencing of glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD), an X-linked enzyme, as a consequence of meiotic sex chromosome inactivation (MSCI) (*9*). In parallel,

we observe downregulation of rate-limiting enzymes involved in de novo purine and pyrimidine synthesis as cells transition from LZ to PD.

Together, these findings support a model in which meiotic metabolism is organized around a developmentally enforced separation between nucleotide production and nucleotide utilization: LZ cells generate nucleotide pools that support subsequent stages, whereas PD cells, despite continued biosynthetic activity, show reduced capacity for de novo nucleotide synthesis. We further test the contribution of extracellular nucleoside uptake using the ENT1 inhibitor NBMPR(*10*) and find that differentiating germ cells rely predominantly on internal nucleotide sources. Finally, comparative analysis across mouse, human, zebrafish, and yeast suggests that repression of nucleotide biosynthesis gene expression during late meiotic prophase I is evolutionarily conserved, spanning vertebrate spermatogenesis and sporulation-associated meiosis in *S. cerevisiae*.

RESULTS

Metabolome profiling of spermatogenic cells reveals a metabolic switch between LZ and PD populations

As described above, a profound shift in gene expression occurs during prophase I of spermatogenesis, particularly between the LZ and PD populations. To examine how these transcriptional changes, shape cellular metabolism, we isolated discrete germ-cell populations spanning spermatogonia to round spermatids using our previously developed flow-cytometry method (Fig. S1A,B) (*7*). Metabolite composition was then assessed by LC–MS.

LC–MS profiling identified 108 metabolites across four to five biological replicates per population. Given the substantial changes in germ cell volume across prophase I (*7*), metabolite abundances were normalized to cell volume to account for stage-dependent differences in cell size and to better approximate relative intracellular metabolite concentrations., 70 metabolites were differentially expressed among all populations (Kruskal–Wallis test, adjusted $p < 0.05$) (**Table S1**). Principal component analysis (PCA) revealed tight clustering of replicates within each cell type, indicating a distinct metabolic

profile for each developmental stage (**Fig. 1A**). Notably, PC1 captured ~44% of total variance and arranged cell populations along their biological developmental order, separating Spg-LZ from PD-RS and revealing a coordinated, stage-aligned metabolic reprogramming during meiosis.

Fluorescence-activated cell sorting can induce sorter-induced cellular stress, characterized by oxidative/redox perturbations, altered energy charge, and broad changes in metabolite abundances (*11*, *12*). In addition, cellular metabolomes are influenced by the composition of the incubation medium (*13–15*). Therefore, we examined the metabolomes of LZ and PD populations under conditions designed to approximate the *in vivo* environment. Sorted cells were incubated for 12 hours in MEM medium(*7*) and then transferred to synthetic seminiferous tubule fluid (sSTF; Table S2; Fig. 1B). The sSTF formulation was based on previously published measurements of seminiferous tubule fluid composition (*16–19*).

This dataset comprised 81 detected metabolites, 76 of which differed significantly between LZ and PD (Kruskal–Wallis test, FDR-adjusted $p < 0.05$; Table S3; Fig. 1C), reaffirming extensive metabolic divergence between these stages. Comparing the two datasets (Tables S1 and S3) revealed that, of the 131 metabolites detected overall, 56 were shared between freshly isolated cells and sSTF-incubated cells ($r = \sim 0.5$, $p < 0.0001$, Pearson correlation, comparing the changes between PD-versus-LZ cells between the two conditions; Fig. 1D). Together, these results demonstrate pronounced metabolic reprogramming as cells progress through meiotic prophase.

To identify the biological pathways driving this metabolic shift, we conducted KEGG-based pathway enrichment analysis of metabolites differentially expressed between LZ and PD incubated in sSTF medium. Most changes mapped to amino-acid metabolism, glycolysis, and pyrimidine metabolism, implicating central-carbon and nucleotide metabolic pathways as key features of the LZ-to-PD transition (**Fig. 1E**).

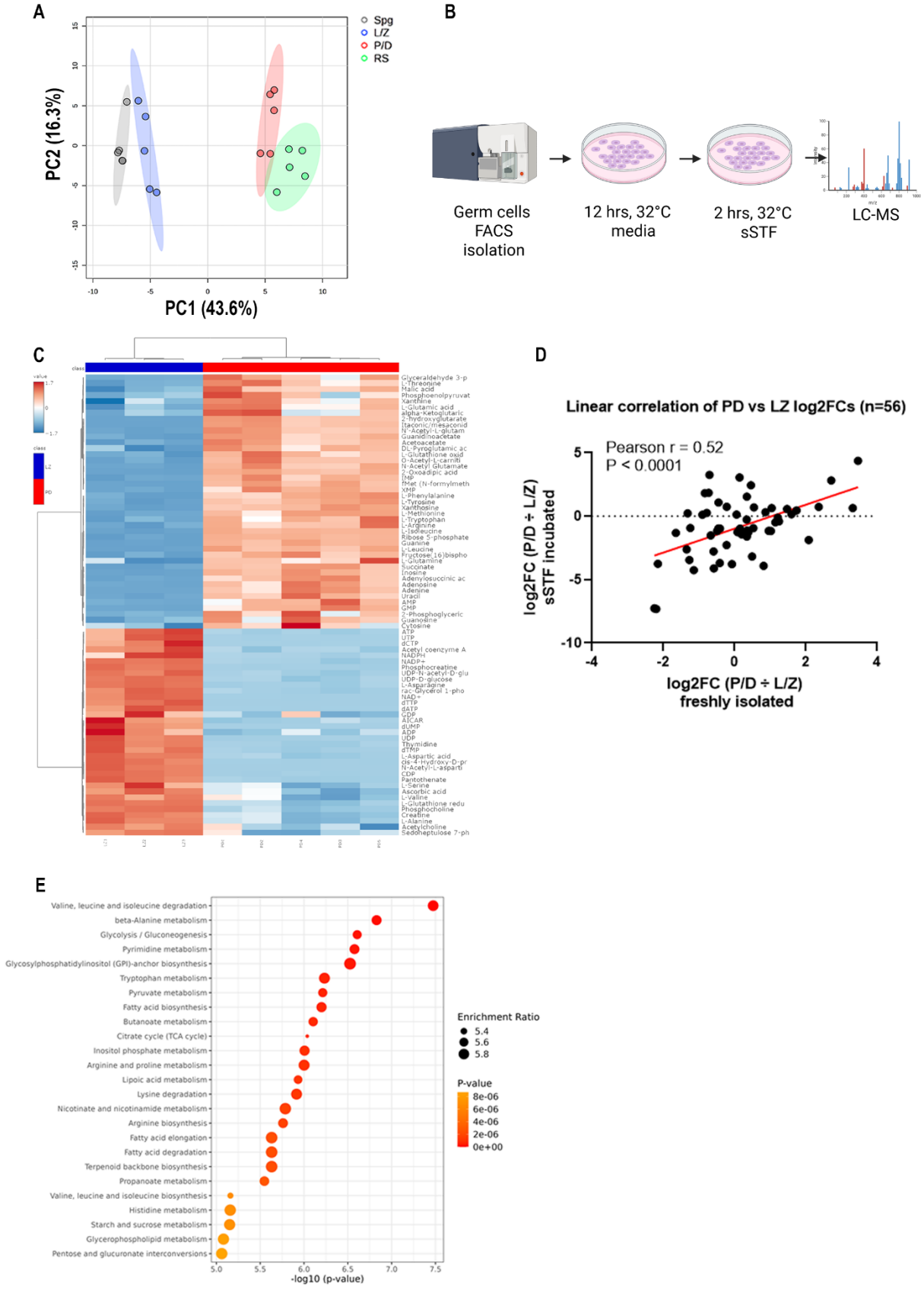
A
Spg
L/Z
P/D
RS
PC2 (16.3%)
PC1 (43.6%)
B
Germ cells
FACS
isolation
12 hrs, 32°C
media
2 hrs, 32°C
sSTF
LC-MS
C
D
Linear correlation of PD vs LZ log2FCs (n=56)
Pearson r = 0.52
P < 0.0001
log2FC (P/D ÷ L/Z)
sSTF incubated
log2FC (P/D ÷ L/Z)
freshly isolated
E
Valine, leucine and isoleucine degradation
beta-Alanine metabolism
Glycolysis / Gluconeogenesis
Pyrimidine metabolism
Glycosylphosphatidylinositol (GPI)-anchor biosynthesis
Tryptophan metabolism
Pyruvate metabolism
Fatty acid biosynthesis
Butanoate metabolism
Citrate cycle (TCA cycle)
Inositol phosphate metabolism
Arginine and proline metabolism
Lipoic acid metabolism
Lysine degradation
Nicotinate and nicotinamide metabolism
Arginine biosynthesis
Fatty acid elongation
Fatty acid degradation
Terpenoid backbone biosynthesis
Propanoate metabolism
Valine, leucine and isoleucine biosynthesis
Histidine metabolism
Starch and sucrose metabolism
Glycerophospholipid metabolism
Pentose and glucuronate interconversions
-log10 (p-value)
Enrichment Ratio
5.4
5.6
5.8
P-value
8e-06
6e-06
4e-06
2e-06
0e+00

Fig. 1. Metabolome profiling of spermatogenic cells reveals a metabolic switch between LZ and PD populations.

(**A**) Principal component analysis (PCA) of LC–MS metabolomics data from freshly isolated germ-cell populations: spermatogonia (Spg), leptotene/zygotene (LZ), pachytene/diplotene (PD), and round spermatids (RS) (n = 4–5 biological replicates per population). (**B**) Workflow for metabolomics of ex vivo–regenerated LZ and PD cells: cells were isolated by FACS, recovered for 12 h at 32°C in MEM medium, followed by 2 hrs incubation in synthetic seminiferous tubule fluid (sSTF) prior to metabolite extraction and LC–MS analysis. (**C**) Heat map showing metabolites with significant differences across groups (Kruskal–Wallis test, FDR-adjusted $p < 0.05$) in overnight-recovered and sSTF-incubated LZ (n = 3) and PD (n = 5) cells. **(D)** Correlation of LZ–PD metabolic fold changes between freshly isolated (Table S1) and ex vivo–incubated (Table S3) spermatogenic cells. Scatter plot shows $\log_2$ fold change (PD vs LZ) for each shared metabolite measured in freshly isolated cells (x-axis) versus sSTF-incubated cells (y-axis). A total of 56 co-detected metabolites were included. Linear regression revealed a moderate positive correlation between datasets (Pearson $r = 0.52$, $P < 0.0001$), indicating partial conservation of the direction and magnitude of metabolic changes between LZ and PD across experimental conditions. (E)KEGG pathway enrichment analysis of metabolites differentially abundant between LZ and PD cells incubated in sSTF (dot size indicates enrichment ratio; color indicates P value).

LZ-to-PD transition is associated with significant mitochondrial reorganization

Because mitochondria are central hubs for energy metabolism and biosynthetic integration, we examined mitochondrial protein composition using our previously generated proteomic dataset to better understand metabolic reprogramming across the LZ-to-PD transition (*7*). Our analysis identified 3,916 proteins, of which 2,229 were significantly differentially expressed (**Fig. 2A**). By intersecting these significantly changing proteins with the MitoCarta 3.0 inventory (*20*), which comprises 1,140 experimentally validated mouse mitochondrial proteins, we identified 569 mitochondrial proteins expressed in LZ and/or PD cells, of which 243 were significantly differentially expressed between LZ and PD spermatocytes (**Fig. 2B**).

Pathway analysis of mitochondrial proteins enriched in LZ cells indicated active amino acid metabolism and fatty acid β-oxidation. In contrast, mitochondrial proteins enriched in PD cells were predominantly associated with the tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle and oxidative phosphorylation (OX-PHOS) (**Fig. 2C**). These data suggest a functional mitochondrial reorganization during the LZ-to-PD transition, characterized by a shift from amino acid and fatty acid catabolism toward enhanced energy production via the TCA cycle and oxidative phosphorylation.

Next, we assessed mitochondrial content across germ-cell populations during spermatogenesis using MitoTracker Green staining. Mitochondrial content decreased progressively from Spg to PreL and LZ stages, followed by a significant elevation in PD cells **(Fig. 2D, Fig S2A**). This trend was corroborated by Seahorse analysis, which revealed a ~3.5-fold decrease in basal oxygen consumption rate (OCR) from Spg to LZ, followed by a ~4 - fold increase from LZ to PD (**Fig. 2E).** Collectively, these results indicate that spermatocytes undergo both quantitative and functional mitochondrial reorganization during the LZ-to-PD transition.

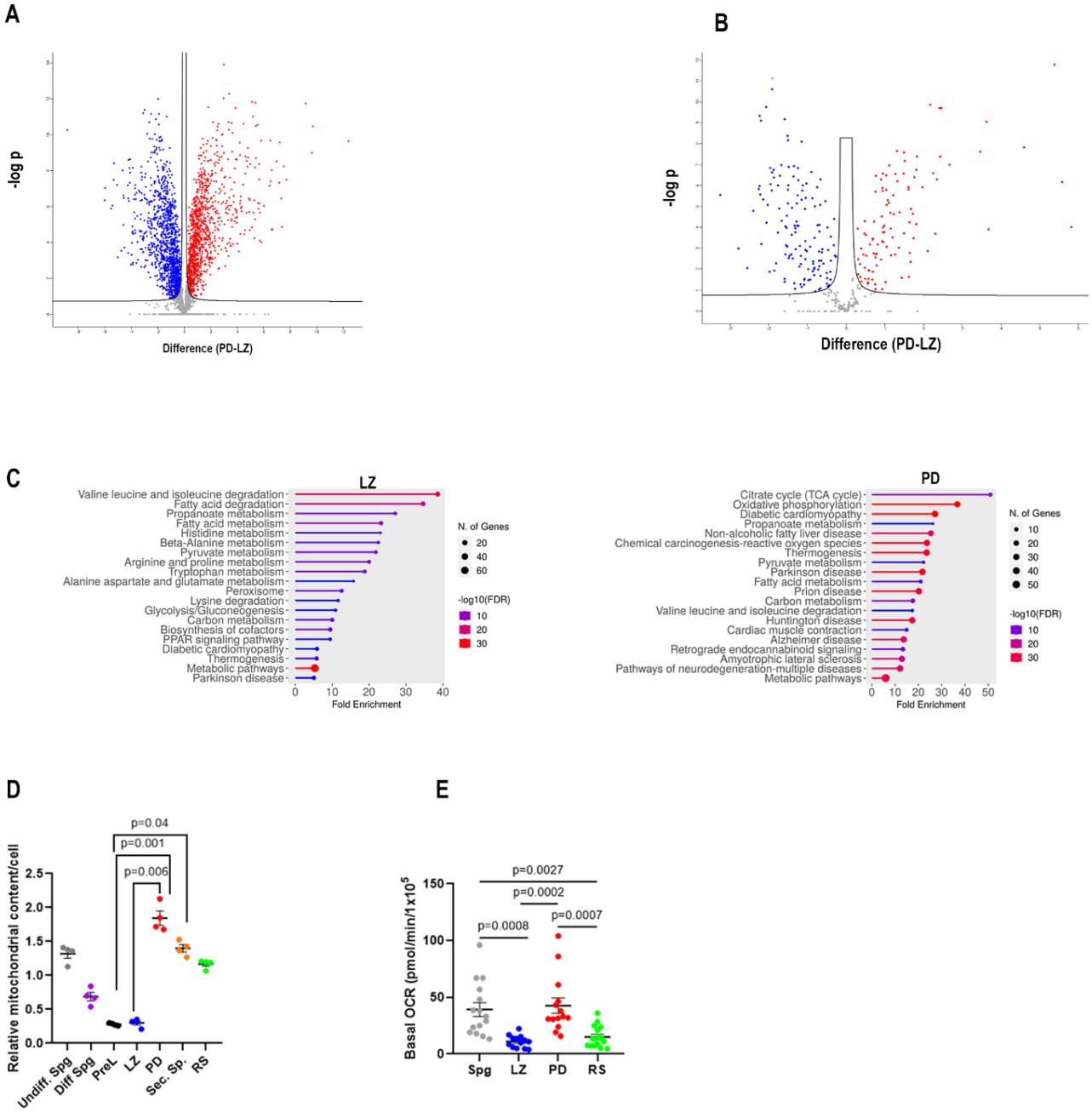

Fig. 2. LZ-to-PD transition is associated with significant mitochondrial reorganization. (**A**) Volcano plot of proteomics data comparing protein abundance between PD and LZ spermatocytes (x-axis: abundance difference, PD–LZ; y-axis: –log P). Proteins significantly increased in PD or LZ are highlighted in red and blue, respectively (t-test, FDR-adjusted $p < 0.05$). (**B**) Volcano plot as in (A), restricted to mitochondria-associated proteins detected in our dataset based on intersection with the MitoCarta 3.0 inventory, highlighting

mitochondrial proteins differentially abundant between LZ and PD. (**C**) KEGG pathway enrichment analysis of mitochondrial proteins enriched in LZ (left) or PD (right). The x-axis indicates fold enrichment; dot size reflects the number of proteins in each pathway; color indicates statistical significance (–log10 FDR). (**D**) Relative mitochondrial content per cell across spermatogenic populations measured by MitoTracker Green staining (undifferentiated spermatogonia, differentiating spermatogonia, preleptotene, LZ, PD, and round spermatids). Points represent experimental replicates (n=4); horizontal bars indicate mean ± SEM; P values are shown (Kruskal–Wallis test). (**E**) Basal oxygen consumption rate (OCR) measured by Seahorse respirometry in the indicated germ-cell populations. Points represent individual samples (n=13-16); horizontal bars indicate mean ± SEM; P values are shown (ANOVA test).

LZ-to-PD transition is associated with a shift in fuel utilization preferences.

Motivated by the observed changes in mitochondrial functional capacity, we investigated substrate preference in LZ and PD spermatocytes using Seahorse respirometry. The addition of 5 mM glucose or lactate to LZ cells incubated in basal buffer lacking carbon sources did not alter OCR. In contrast, PD cells exhibited ~1.7- and ~3.0-fold increases in OCR following addition of 5 mM glucose or lactate, respectively, under the same conditions (**Fig. 3A**; **Fig. S3A**). Of note Spg response to lactate was negligible, similar to LZ and RS response was similar to this of PD (**Fig S3B**).

To identify the energy sources supporting LZ cells given their lack of response to glucose and lactate, we next tested glutamine as a potential substrate. LZ, but not PD, cells showed increased OCR upon glutamine supplementation, with ~1.3- and ~1.6-fold increases following addition of 2 mM or 5 mM glutamine, respectively (**Fig. 3B**).

Strikingly, consistent with the enrichment of mitochondria-localized protein pathways (**Fig. 2C**), fatty acids emerged as a major energy source in LZ cells. Palmitate increased OCR by ~2.3-fold in LZ cells but had little to no effect on basal OCR in PD cells. Moreover, etomoxir - an irreversible inhibitor of carnitine palmitoyltransferase 1 (CPT1) - reduced OCR in LZ cells by ~60%, with no significant change in PD cells. Co-treatment with palmitate and etomoxir recapitulated the effect of etomoxir alone, supporting the specificity of CPT1-dependent fatty acid oxidation in LZ cells **(Fig. 3C**). These findings were further validated by

measuring ^{14}C-CO_2 production from 14C-palmitate, which demonstrated active fatty acid oxidation in LZ cells, but no detectable palmitate utilization via this pathway in PD cells (**Fig. 3D**).

Our proteomic data provide mechanistic insight into these metabolic differences. The inability of LZ cells to utilize lactate is consistent with markedly reduced expression of LDHA and LDHCLDHB was expressed at negligible levels in both cell populations. **(Fig. 3E, F)**. The lack of glutamine utilization by PD cells aligns with reduced expression of glutamine catabolic enzymes, including GLS and GLUD1 (**Fig. 3G**).

Finally, the block in fatty acid oxidation in PD cells is attributable to the absence of ETFDH and markedly reduced levels of ETFA and ETFB, which are required to reoxidize FADH2 and sustain β-oxidation. FADH2 is generated by mitochondrial acyl-CoA dehydrogenases (ACADs), and electrons are transferred via ETF/ETFDH to coenzyme Q in the electron transport chain, regenerating FAD and enabling continued β-oxidation (*21*) (**Fig. 3I**).

Together, these data reveal a metabolic transition during spermatocyte differentiation: LZ cells preferentially rely on fatty acid oxidation and glutamine metabolism, whereas PD and RS cells shift toward glucose and lactate utilization.

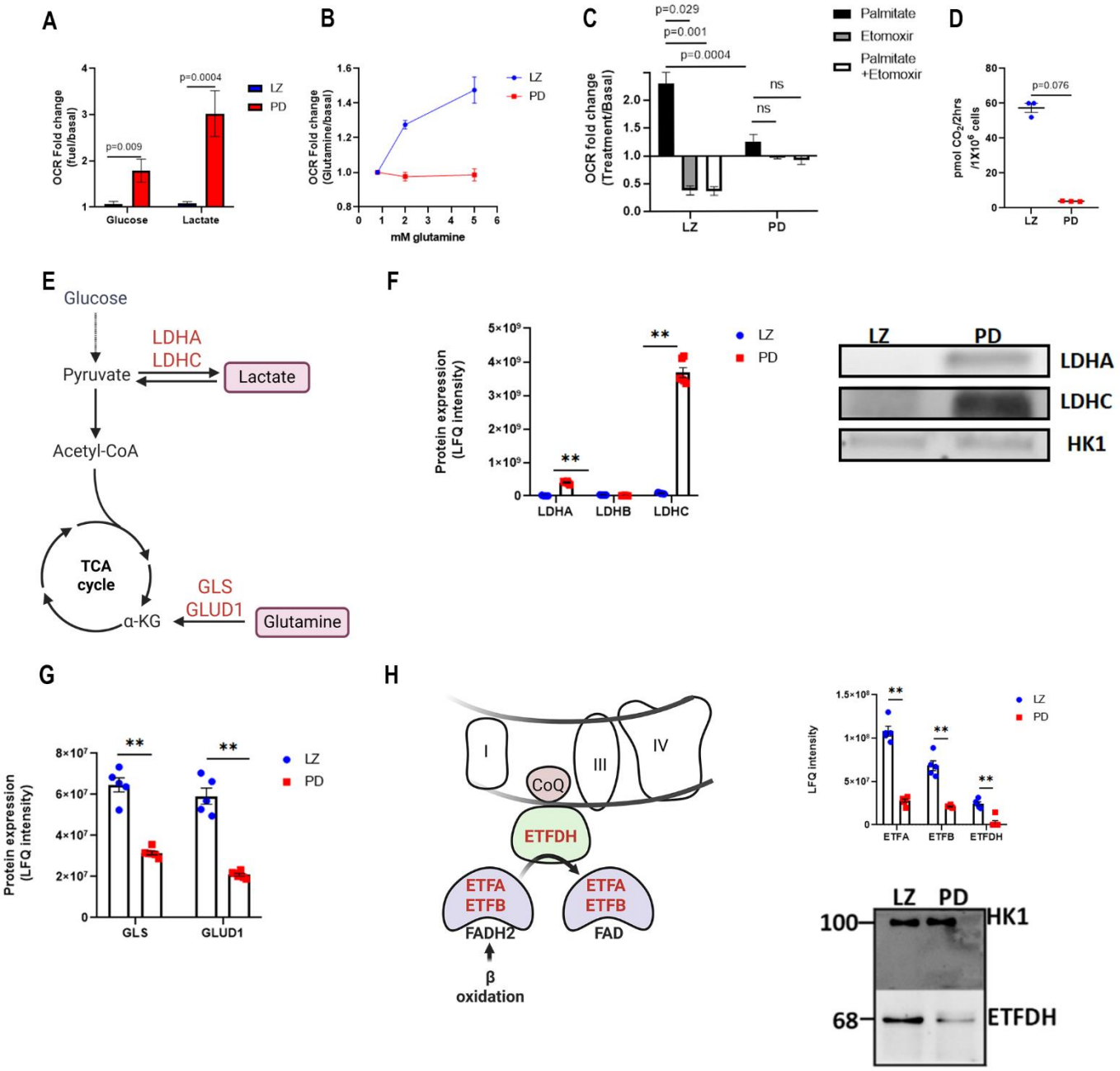

Fig. 3. LZ-to-PD transition is associated with a shift in fuel utilization preferences. (**A**) Seahorse respirometry showing the change in oxygen consumption rate (OCR; fold change relative to basal) in LZ and PD spermatocytes following addition of 5 mM glucose or lactate to cells incubated in carbon-free basal buffer. (**B**) OCR response (fold change relative to basal) of LZ and PD spermatocytes to increasing concentrations of glutamine. (**C**) OCR response (fold change relative to basal) following addition of 0.3 mM palmitate, the CPT1 inhibitor etomoxir 40 μM, or their combination, revealing CPT1-dependent fatty-acid oxidation in LZ but not PD cells.

(**D**) Fatty-acid oxidation measured by $^{14}CO_2$ production from ^{14}C-palmitate in LZ and PD cells, see details in Methods section. (**E**) Schematic summarizing key metabolic entry points examined in this figure, highlighting enzymes implicated in differential utilization of lactate and glutamine. (**F**) Left: proteomics-based quantification (LFQ intensity) of LDHA, LDHB and LDHC in LZ and PD cells. Right: representative immunoblot validating LDHA and LDHC differences (HK1 shown as a control).
(**G**) Proteomics-based quantification (LFQ intensity) of glutamine catabolic enzymes (GLS and GLUD1) in LZ and PD cells. (**H**) Left: schematic of electron transfer from mitochondrial β-oxidation to the respiratory chain via ETFA/ETFB and ETFDH to coenzyme Q (CoQ), enabling FAD regeneration and sustained β-oxidation. Right: proteomics-based quantification (LFQ intensity) of ETFA, ETFB, and ETFDH, with a representative immunoblot for ETFDH (HK1 control). For all plots, points represent biological replicates; bars/lines indicate mean ± SEM; statistical significance is shown on the graphs (ns, not significant).

Differential metabolic fates of glucose in LZ and PD cells

The unexpected absence of an OCR response to glucose addition in LZ cells prompted us to investigate the metabolic fate of glucose in spermatocytes. We subjected both LZ and PD populations to [U]-^{13}C-glucose tracing analysis. Cells were allowed to recover from FACS overnight prior to 2hr tracing in sSTF media. Experimental design, along with schematic representation of glucose tracing into glycolysis and pentose phosphate pathway (PPP) metabolites is depicted in (**Fig 4A**).
This analysis revealed that the levels of glucose 6-phosphate (G6P), both M+6-labeled and total, were only slightly and insignificantly elevated in PD cells compared to LZ cells. In addition, hexokinase (HK1) protein expression - the enzyme responsible for glucose phosphorylation - was comparable between the two populations, suggesting that glucose uptake was not impaired in either cell type (**Fig. 4B**). However, the metabolic fate of G6P in LZ and PD cells was notably different. LZ cells were unable to proceed through the glycolytic pathway, as evidenced by their negligible M+6 tracing in fructose 1,6-bisphosphate (F1,6BP), which was 6-fold lower than that observed in PD cells. This surprising result was explained by the lack of expression of both phosphofructokinase isoforms (PFKM and PFKP) in LZ as compared to PD (**Fig. 4C**). Instead of entering glycolysis, G6P was redirected into the pentose phosphate pathway (PPP). This was

evidenced by the pronounced M+5 tracing of pentose-5 phosphates in LZ cells, which was not observed in PD cells. Furthermore, glucose 6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD), the first enzyme that catalyzes entry into the PPP, was highly expressed at the protein level in LZ but was completely absent in PD cells (**Fig. 4D**). This absence is not unexpected, as G6PD is X-linked, and the transcription of chromosome X is silenced in PD cells due to meiotic sex chromosome inactivation (MSCI) (*9*).
The glucose carbons that bypass the PFK glycolytic step by entering PPP are reintegrated into glycolysis at the three-carbon level. No significant differences were observed in the M+3 tracing of glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate (GA3P) and pyruvate between the two cell populations (**Fig. 4E**).

The next metabolic divergence between LZ and PD cells was identified at the pyruvate dehydrogenase complex (PDC) step, that leads to acetyl-CoA formation. While PD cells proceed with the decarboxylation of glucose-derived pyruvate, LZ cells do not, as evidenced by M+2 tracing of acetyl CoA, which was 5-fold lower in LZ cells than in PD cells. Proteomic analysis revealed that expression of key pyruvate dehydrogenase complex (PDC) components was significantly higher in PD cells compared to LZ cells. Specifically, PDHA2, PDHB, and DLAT showed marked upregulation. (**Fig. 4F**). Notably, PDHA1, the X-linked isoform of the E1α subunit, was absent in PD cells, consistent with MSCI. To compensate, transcription of the autosomal, testis-specific PDHA2 isoform from chromosome 3 is activated, allowing continued PDC function in late prophase 1 cells (*22*). This limited flux of glucose-derived carbons into the TCA cycle in LZ cells may account for their inability to elevate OCR in response to glucose addition.

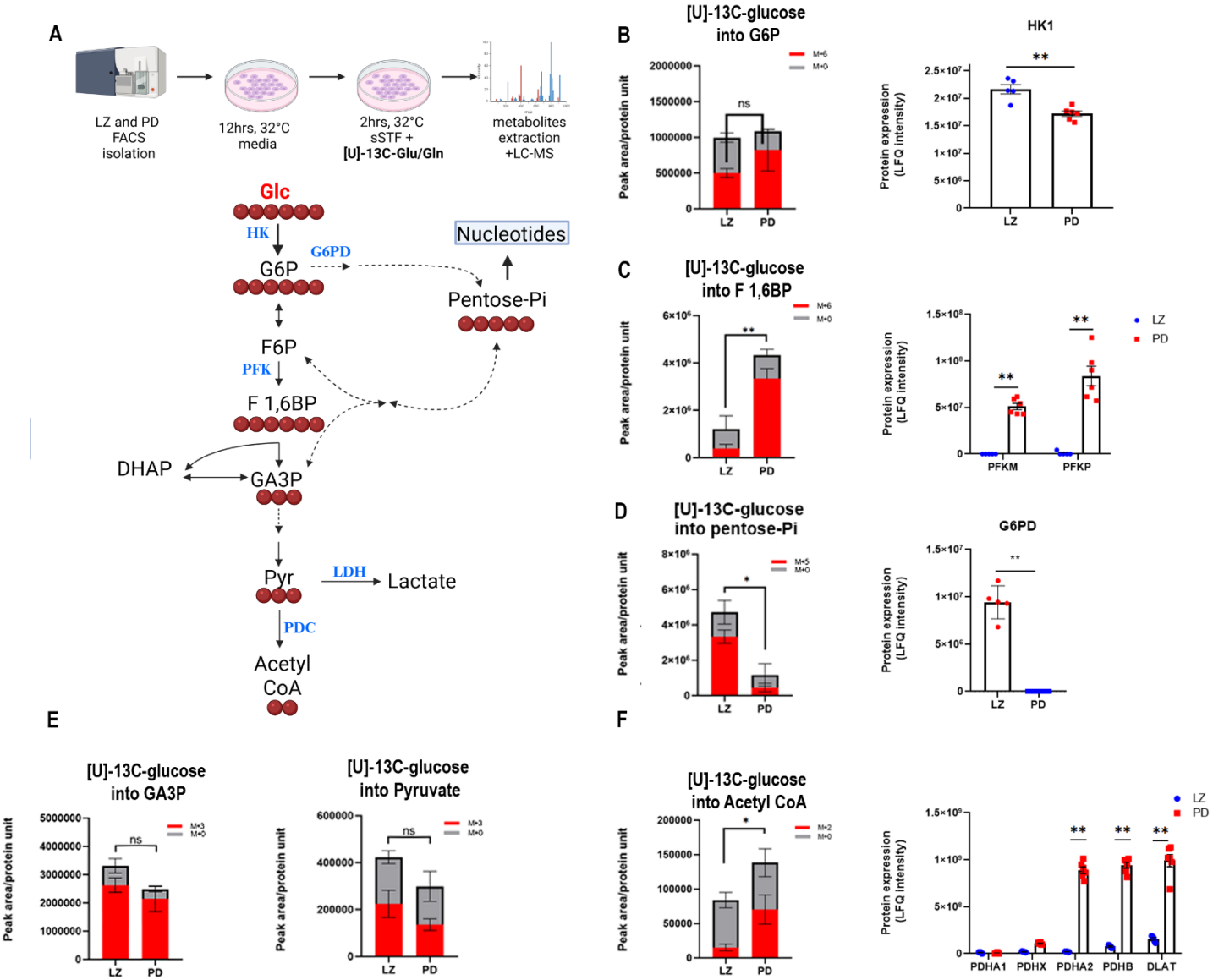

Fig. 4. Differential metabolic fates of glucose in LZ and PD cells.

(**A**) Experimental design for [U-^{13}C]-glucose tracing in FACS-isolated LZ and PD spermatocytes. Cells were recovered overnight after sorting and then incubated for 2 hours in synthetic seminiferous tubule fluid (sSTF) containing [U-^{13}C]-glucose. The schematic depicts labeling of glycolysis and pentose phosphate pathway (PPP) intermediates.

(**B**) Total and M+6–labeled glucose-6-phosphate (G6P) in LZ and PD cells after tracing, together with protein abundance of hexokinase 1 (HK1).

(**C**) Glycolytic entry is impaired in LZ cells: fractional labeling (M+6) and abundance of fructose-1,6-bisphosphate (F1,6BP) in LZ versus PD cells, with proteomic quantification of

phosphofructokinase isoforms (PFKM and PFKP).
(**D**) PPP activity is present in LZ but absent in PD cells. Left: M+5 labeling of pentose-5-phosphate. Note that the LC–MS method does not resolve individual pentose phosphate isomers (e.g., ribose-5-P/ribulose-5-P/xylulose-5-P). Right: proteomic quantification of G6PD, the rate-limiting enzyme for PPP entry.
(**E**) Re-entry of PPP-derived carbon into lower glycolysis: M+3 labeling of glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate (GA3P) and pyruvate in LZ and PD cells.
(**F**) Divergence at the pyruvate dehydrogenase complex (PDC): M+2 labeling of acetyl-CoA from glucose-derived pyruvate is low in LZ compared with PD cells. Proteomic quantification of PDC components shows reduced/absent expression of multiple PDC subunits in LZ, whereas PDC subunits are highly expressed in PD. In PD cells, the X-linked PDHA1 isoform is absent (consistent with meiotic sex chromosome inactivation, MSCI), whereas the autosomal testis-specific PDHA2 isoform is induced. For isotope-tracing panels, values represent isotopologue enrichment and/or metabolite abundance as indicated; bars show mean ± SEM (n =3-4 independent experiments). Proteomic enzyme abundance (mean ± SEM) was calculated from the PXD039015 dataset; points denote 5 biological replicates for LZ and 6 biological replicates for PD. Statistical significance is indicated in the panels.

LZ cells, but not PD cells, are actively engaged in de novo pyrimidine nucleotide synthesis.

Enhanced diversion of glucose into the PPP (**Fig 4D**), suggested that LZ cells engage in nucleotide biosynthesis, while PD cells may not do so. To test this directly, we traced U-^{13}C-glucose and U-^{13}C-glutamine incorporation into pyrimidine nucleotides (**Fig.5A)**.

In LZ cells, U-^{13}C-glucose produced robust M+5 and M+3 labeling in UTP and CTP, whereas PD cells showed little to no labeling (**Fig. 5B**).
The M+5 isotopologues reflect incorporation of glucose-derived carbons into the ribose moiety via the PPP, consistent with pentose phosphate labeling. The M+3 isotopologues are explained by glucose-derived pyruvate entering TCA cycle through pyruvate carboxylase (PC) (which is ~2-fold higher in LZ than PD), generating labeled oxaloacetate and subsequently aspartate. Consistent with this route, aspartate in LZ cells showed prominent

M+3 labeling (and minor M+2), whereas PD cells did not (**Fig. 5C**). Because aspartate contributes three carbons to the pyrimidine ring, this accounts for the M+3 labeling observed in UTP and CTP (**Fig. 5A**).
The minor M+2 aspartate labeling from U-^{13}C-glucose in LZ cells is consistent with partial loss of labeled carbon during TCA-cycle decarboxylation steps after oxaloacetate formation. This interpretation aligns with an active TCA cycle in LZ cells, as indicated by increased oxygen consumption after glutamine addition (**Fig. 3B**). Notably, because pyruvate does not generate acetyl-CoA in LZ cells due to an inactive PDC, acetyl-CoA is likely supplied by alternative fuels such as fatty acids via β-oxidation (**Fig. 3D**).

We also observed that glutamine contributes to pyrimidine-ring carbon in LZ cells but not PD cells. After U-^{13}C-glutamine tracing, LZ cells exhibited M+4 aspartate accompanied by M+3 UTP labeling, consistent with glutamine feeding the TCA cycle to generate labeled aspartate that is then incorporated into pyrimidines.

We functionally corroborated the isotope-tracing results by pharmacologically inhibiting dihydroorotate dehydrogenase (DHODH) using BRQ, a key rate-limiting enzyme in pyrimidine biosynthesis. (**Fig. 5E**) (*23*). Remarkably, BRQ treatment led to a marked accumulation of dihydroorotate (DHO) and depletion of UTP in LZ cells, whereas PD cells showed neither DHO accumulation nor UTP depletion. (**Fig. 5F, G**). Together, the absence of glucose- or glutamine-derived labeling in UTP and CTP in PD cells and the lack of BRQ-induced DHO accumulation strongly support that de novo pyrimidine synthesis is largely confined to the LZ stage (**Fig. 5H**).

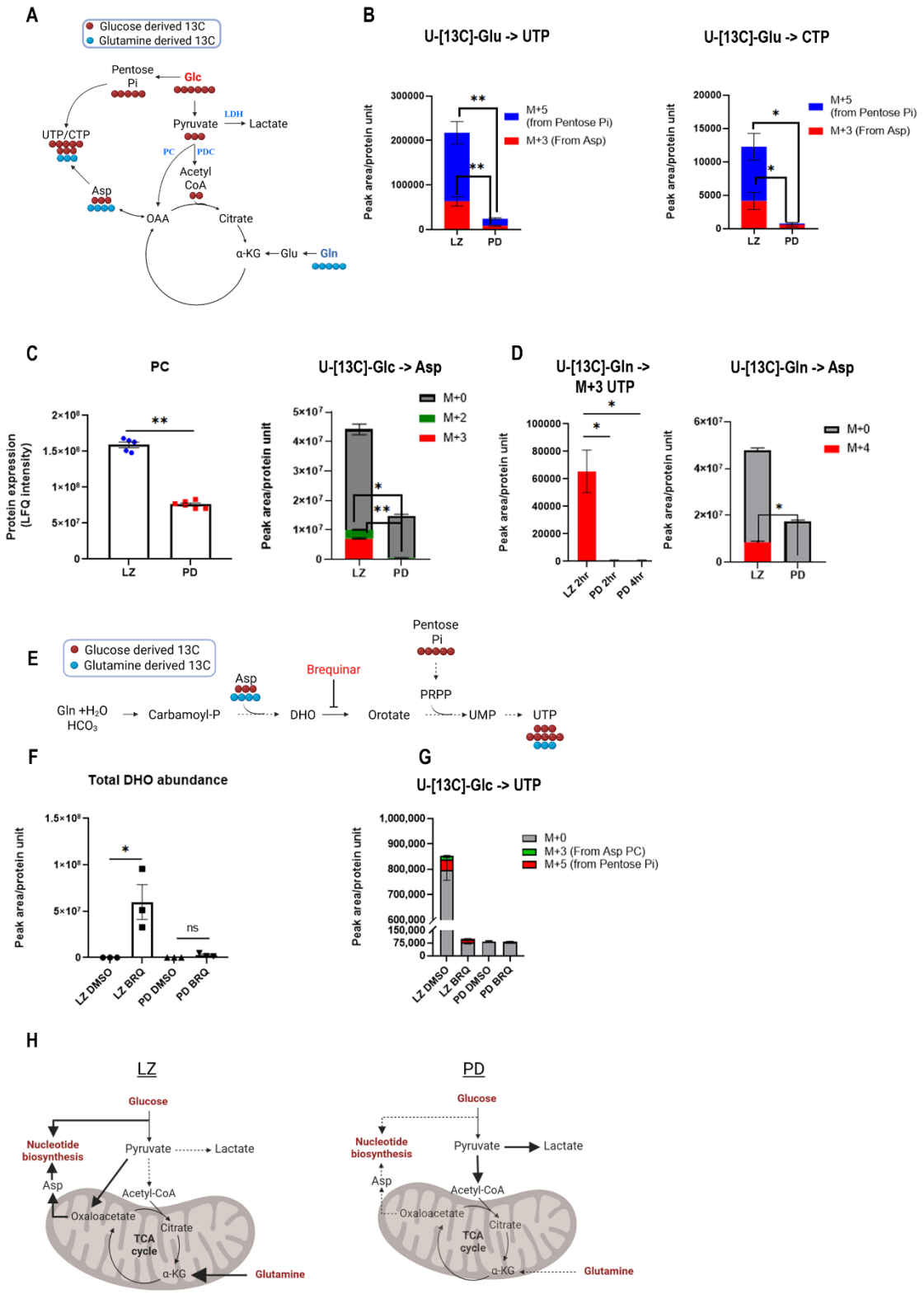
A
Glucose derived 13C
Glutamine derived 13C
Pentose Pi
Glc
Pyruvate
LDH
Lactate
UTP/CTP
PC
PDC
Acetyl CoA
Asp
OAA
Citrate
α-KG
Glu
Gln
B
U-[13C]-Glu -> UTP
U-[13C]-Glu -> CTP
Peak area/protein unit
M+5 (from Pentose Pi)
M+3 (From Asp)
LZ
PD
C
PC
U-[13C]-Glc -> Asp
Protein expression (LFQ intensity)
M+0
M+2
M+3
D
U-[13C]-Gln -> M+3 UTP
U-[13C]-Gln -> Asp
M+4
LZ 2hr
PD 2hr
PD 4hr
E
Pentose Pi
Brequinar
PRPP
Gln +H2O
HCO3
Carbamoyl-P
DHO
Orotate
UMP
UTP
F
Total DHO abundance
ns
LZ DMSO
LZ BRQ
PD DMSO
PD BRQ
G
U-[13C]-Glc -> UTP
M+0
M+3 (From Asp PC)
M+5 (from Pentose Pi)
H
LZ
PD
Glucose
Nucleotide biosynthesis
Pyruvate
Lactate
Asp
Acetyl-CoA
Oxaloacetate
Citrate
TCA cycle
α-KG
Glutamine

Fig. 5. LZ cells, but not PD cells, are actively engaged in de novo pyrimidine nucleotide synthesis.

(A) Schematic of isotope incorporation from U-[^{13}C]-glucose and U-[^{13}C]-glutamine into pyrimidine nucleotides. Glucose-derived carbon contributes to the ribose via the pentose phosphate pathway (PPP; yielding M+5 nucleotides) and to the pyrimidine ring via pyruvate carboxylase (PC)–dependent anaplerosis (pyruvate → oxaloacetate → aspartate; yielding M+3 nucleotides). **(B)** Mass isotopologue labeling of UTP and CTP after U-[^{13}C]-glucose tracing in LZ and PD cells. Stacked bars indicate M+5 (PPP-derived ribose; blue) and M+3 (aspartate-derived ring carbon; red). LZ cells show robust M+5 and M+3 labeling, whereas PD cells show little to no labeling. **(C) Left:** Pyruvate carboxylase (PC) protein abundance in LZ and PD cells. **Right:** Aspartate isotopologues after U-[^{13}C]-glucose tracing (M+0, gray; M+2, green; M+3, red), showing prominent M+3 (and minor M+2) aspartate labeling in LZ cells but not PD cells. **(D)** Contribution of glutamine to pyrimidine-ring synthesis. **Left:** M+3 UTP after U-[^{13}C]-glutamine tracing in LZ cells (2 hours) and PD cells (2 and 4 hours). **Right:** Aspartate isotopologues after U-[^{13}C]-glutamine tracing (M+0, gray; M+4, red), consistent with glutamine entry into the TCA cycle to generate labeled aspartate for incorporation into pyrimidines in LZ cells. **(E)** Pathway schematic highlighting de novo pyrimidine synthesis and inhibition of dihydroorotate dehydrogenase (DHODH) by brequinar (BRQ) at the dihydroorotate (DHO) → orotate step**. (F)** Total DHO abundance following DMSO or BRQ treatment in LZ and PD cells, showing BRQ-dependent DHO accumulation in LZ cells but not PD cells. **(G)** UTP isotopologues after U-[^{13}C]-glucose tracing in DMSO- or BRQ-treated cells, showing reduction of unlabeled **(**M+0) and labeled (M+3 and M+5) UTP in BRQ-treated LZ cells. **(H)** Working model: LZ cells support de novo pyrimidine synthesis through PPP-derived ribose and PC/TCA cycle–supported aspartate production, with glutamine contributing via TCA cycle–derived aspartate; PD cells show limited routing of glucose/glutamine carbon into pyrimidine nucleotides. All tracing experiments were performed as shown in Fig 4A. Bars show mean ± SEM (n =3-4 independent experiments). Statistical significance is indicated in the panels.

LZ-to-PD transition is associated with a surge in transcriptional activity

Nucleotide biosynthesis is a metabolically demanding process that requires substantial cellular resources (*24*)Our observations reveal a striking phenomenon: LZ cells channel central carbon metabolism toward robust de novo nucleotide synthesis, whereas these pathways are largely silenced in PD cells. This shift is particularly notable given the significant ~5 - fold increase in cell volume reported during the LZ-to-PD transition (*7*)and the parallel rise of ~4 - fold in protein content (**Fig 6A**). Such an expansion in cellular biomass requires a substantial increase in translational capacity.

Consistent with this expectation, we observed a ~4.5-fold increase in total RNA content accompanying the LZ-to-PD transition (**Fig 6B**), indicating enhanced ribosome biogenesis. Previous studies similarly reported elevated mRNA synthesis rates in PD cells relative to LZ cells (*25*) (*26*).

To quantify transcriptional activity in our system, we measured the incorporation of 5-ethynyl-uridine (5-EU) into nascent RNA over a 2-hour labeling period across distinct meiotic populations (**Fig 6C**). Using click chemistry to generate fluorescent readouts and microscopic imaging for quantification, we characterized transcription rates throughout prophase I. As zygotene cells transitioned into pachytene, we observed a ~4- fold increase in uridine signal intensity per cell, reflecting a marked rise in RNA synthesis. Although transcription decreased in diplotene cells, the reduction did not reach statistical significance. Cells in diakinesis, anaphase, and telophase of meiosis I exhibited negligible 5-EU incorporation, consistent with transcriptional silencing during these stages (*27*) and therefore served as negative controls relative to leptotene–zygotene and pachytene–diplotene cells.

Taken together, these data indicate that PD cells do not engage in de novo nucleotide synthesis, yet they display markedly increased nucleotide utilization (**Fig. 6D**). Together, these findings support a developmentally enforced sequence in which individual germ cells synthesize nucleotides during the LZ stage and, following differentiation into PD, silence nucleotide biosynthesis and repurpose these pools to meet escalating transcriptional demands.

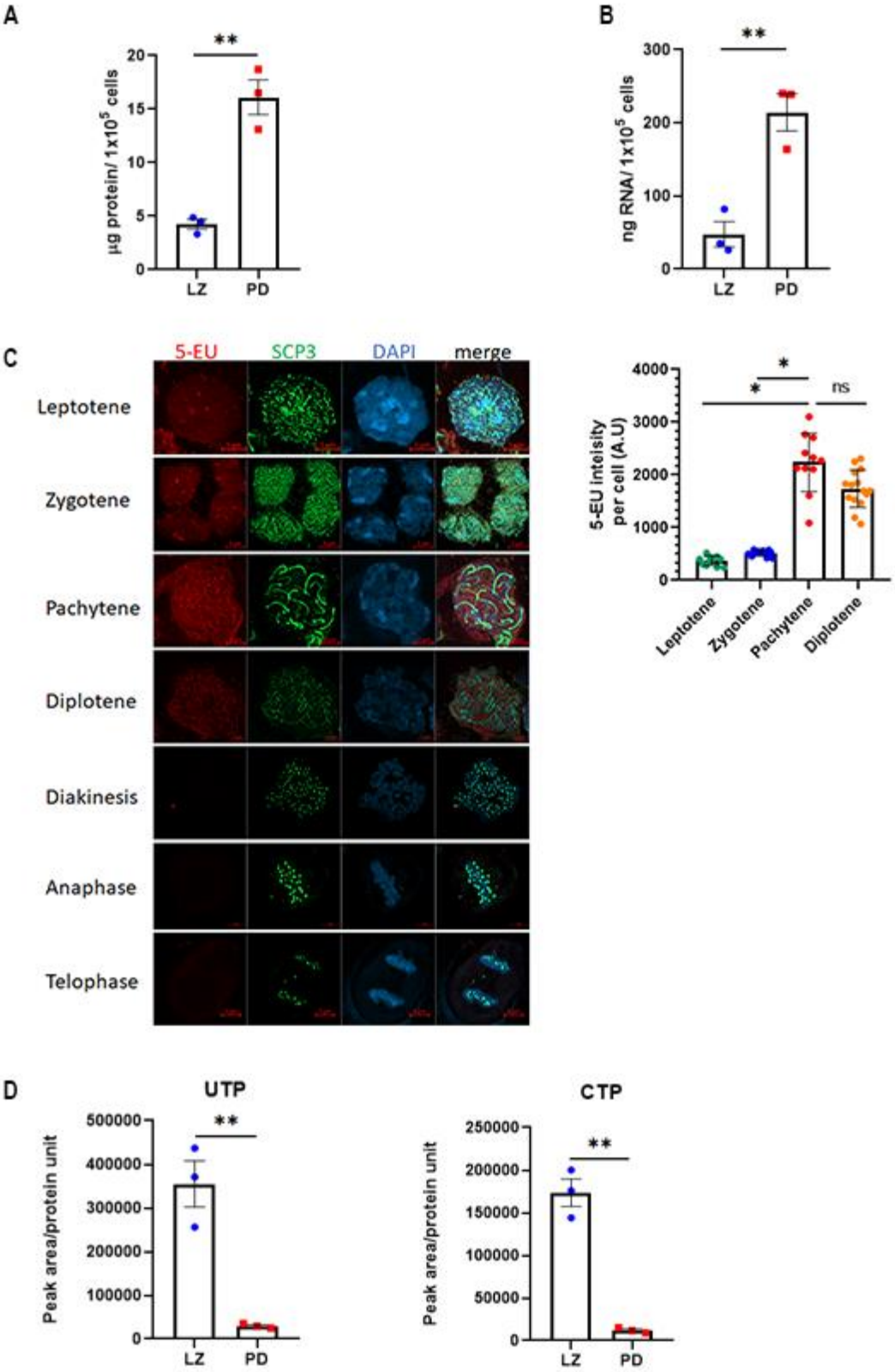
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Fig. 6. LZ-to-PD transition is associated with a surge in transcriptional activity and increased nucleotide utilization.

(A) Total protein content per cell in LZ and PD populations, showing increased protein abundance in PD cells (normalized per 1×10^5 cells), n=3 independent experiments.

(B) Total RNA content per cell in LZ and PD populations, showing increased RNA abundance in PD cells (normalized per 1×10^5 cells), n=3 independent experiments.

(C) Nascent RNA synthesis measured by 5-ethynyl uridine (5-EU) incorporation during a 2-hour pulse. Representative images of meiotic stages (leptotene, zygotene, pachytene, diplotene, diakinesis, anaphase, telophase) showing 5-EU signal (red), SCP3 (green), and DNA (DAPI, blue), with merged channels. Right, quantification of 5-EU fluorescence intensity per cell across prophase I stages, revealing a strong increase in transcriptional output upon entry into pachytene and reduced (not significant) signal in diplotene; late meiotic stages show minimal incorporation consistent with transcriptional silencing. Bars show mean ± SEM (n =12-15 cells) **(D)** Relative abundance of pyrimidine nucleotides UTP and CTP in LZ and PD cells (peak area normalized to protein), showing reduced nucleotide pools in PD cells compared with LZ cells. Bars show mean ± SEM (n =3 independent experiments).

In vivo inhibition of pyrimidine synthesis prevents progression from zygotene to pachytene during first-wave spermatogenesis

We next aimed to examine how inhibiting pyrimidine biosynthesis affects male meiosis in vivo. Because the blood–testis barrier (BTB) restricts access of metabolic inhibitors to meiotic cells, we performed these experiments in prepubertal mice, during the developmental window in which the BTB is not yet established (*28*, *29*). We administered the DHODH inhibitor BRQ from postnatal day 13 to 18, during which leptotene cells differentiate into zygotene and pachytene cells (*8*) **(Fig 7A).**

To address potential drug toxicity, we monitored pup growth and observed a significant reduction in weight gain by day 17 in BRQ-treated mice (**Fig. 7B**). Co-administration of uridine fully rescued this phenotype, indicating that the growth defect reflects nucleotide depletion rather than broader toxic effects. Similarly, the total number of cells isolated from

testes on day 18 was reduced by ~2.8-fold in BRQ-treated mice, an effect completely reversed by uridine supplementation (**Fig. 7C**).

FACS analysis of testes from Stra8-Tomato mice, in which germ cells are fluorescently labeled, revealed that BRQ treatment substantially altered germ cells' composition (**Fig. 7D**). Specifically, BRQ caused a marked reduction in Spg, pre-leptotene PreL, and early leptotene (eL) cells, whereas the LZ population was comparatively less affected. Although nucleotides are synthesized in LZ cells, inhibition of this synthesis results in abnormal pachytene cells.

To further characterize these changes, LZ and PD cells were subjected to nuclear spread analysis and immunostaining for the synaptonemal complex protein SCP3 and γH2AX. Leptotene cells were identified by dispersed γH2AX staining, reflecting physiologic double-strand breaks (DSBs), whereas pachytene cells displayed fully synapsed SCP3-labeled chromosomes and γH2AX restricted to the sex body (**Fig. 7E**).

In BRQ-treated mice, cells within the LZ gate consisted of morphologically normal leptotene and zygotene cells. The PD gate contained abnormal pachytene-like cells with dispersed γH2AX staining, in contrast to vehicle-treated mice, which showed typical pachytene and diplotene cells with γH2AX confined to the sex body. The significant enrichment of zygotene cells in the BRQ-treated group (**Fig. 7F**), together with the appearance of defective pachytene-like cells, indicates that BRQ treatment disrupts meiotic progression during the pachytene stage. Notably, mice treated with BRQ and uridine displayed germ cell distributions and morphologies nearly indistinguishable from vehicle controls (**Fig. 7 D-E**).

Together, these findings demonstrate that inhibition of pyrimidine synthesis not only reduces the pool of replicative cells - including spermatogonia and pre-leptotene - but also blocks meiotic progression beyond the zygotene stage.

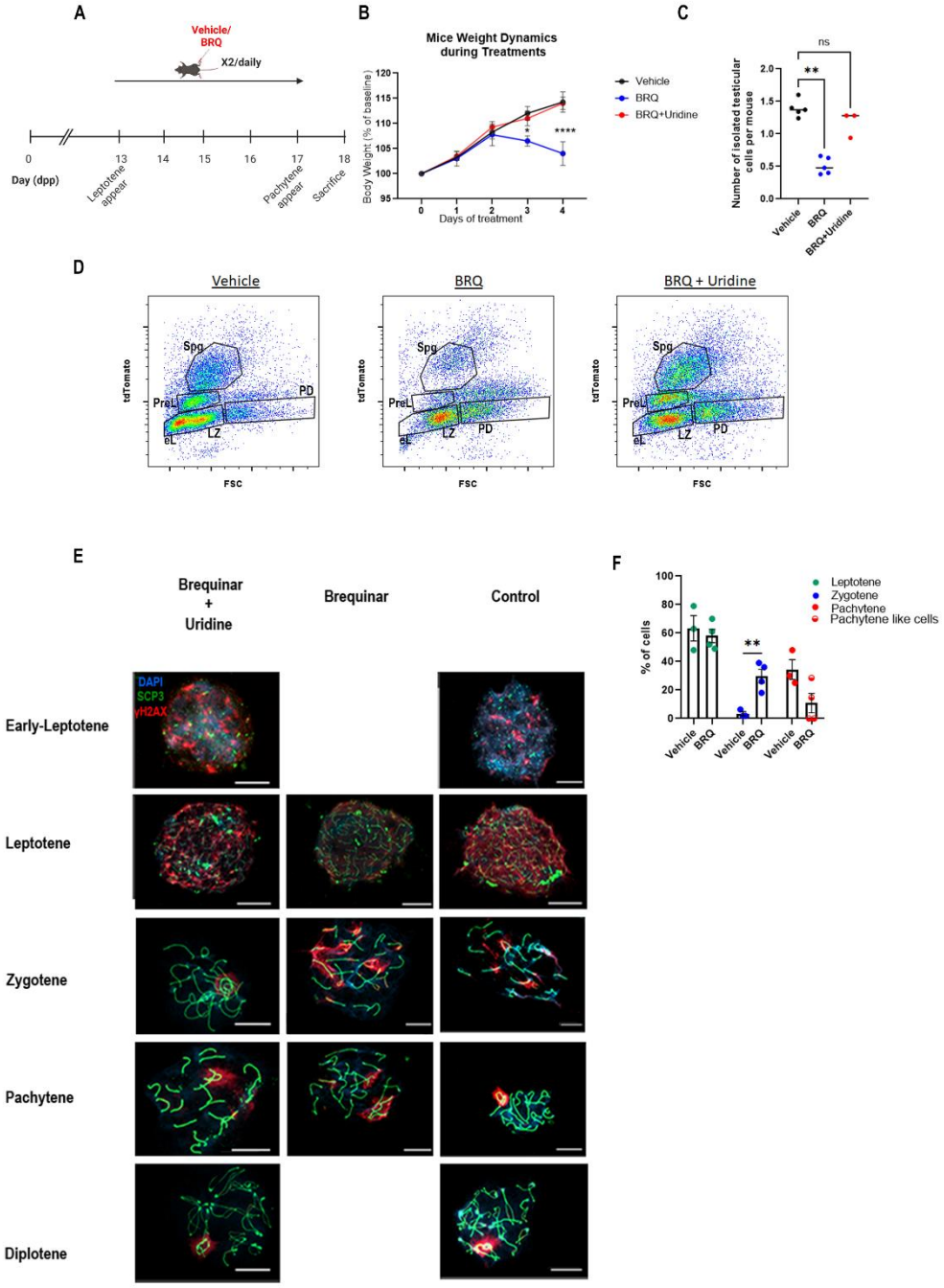


Fig. 7. Inhibition of pyrimidine synthesis in vivo prevents progression from the zygotene to pachytene stage.

(A) Experimental scheme for in vivo inhibition of pyrimidine biosynthesis. Prepubertal mice were treated twice daily with vehicle or brequinar (BRQ) **(**± uridine supplementation) from

postnatal day (P)13–P18, spanning the developmental window in which leptotene cells emerge and progress through zygotene toward pachytene, prior to full establishment of the blood–testis barrier. **(B)** Mouse weight dynamics during treatment (normalized to baseline). BRQ-treated mice show reduced weight gain by day 4 of treatment, which is rescued by co-administration of uridine. **(C)** Total number of cells/mouse isolated from testes at the treatment endpoint (P18). BRQ reduces testis cell yield, and uridine co-treatment restores cell yield toward vehicle levels. **(D)** Representative flow-cytometry profiles of germ cells isolated from Stra8-Tomato testes following vehicle, BRQ, or BRQ+uridine treatment. Gates denote spermatogonia (Spg), pre-leptotene (PreL), early leptotene (eL), and the combined LZ and PD populations. **(E)** Representative nuclear spreads from sorted populations stained for SCP3 (synaptonemal complex; green), γH2AX (DNA damage/sex body; red), and DAPI (DNA; blue) across meiotic stages. In vehicle-treated mice, pachytene nuclei show fully synapsed SCP3 tracks with γH2AX confined to the sex body. In BRQ-treated mice, cells within the PD gate display aberrant pachytene-like morphology with dispersed γH2AX staining, whereas BRQ+uridine resembles vehicle controls, Scale bars=10 microns. **(F)** Quantification of meiotic-stage composition among analyzed spreads, showing enrichment of zygotene cells and reduction of normal pachytene cells following BRQ treatment, consistent with a block in progression from zygotene to pachytene; uridine co-treatment rescues stage distribution (Bars show mean ± SEM (n =3-4 independent experiments).

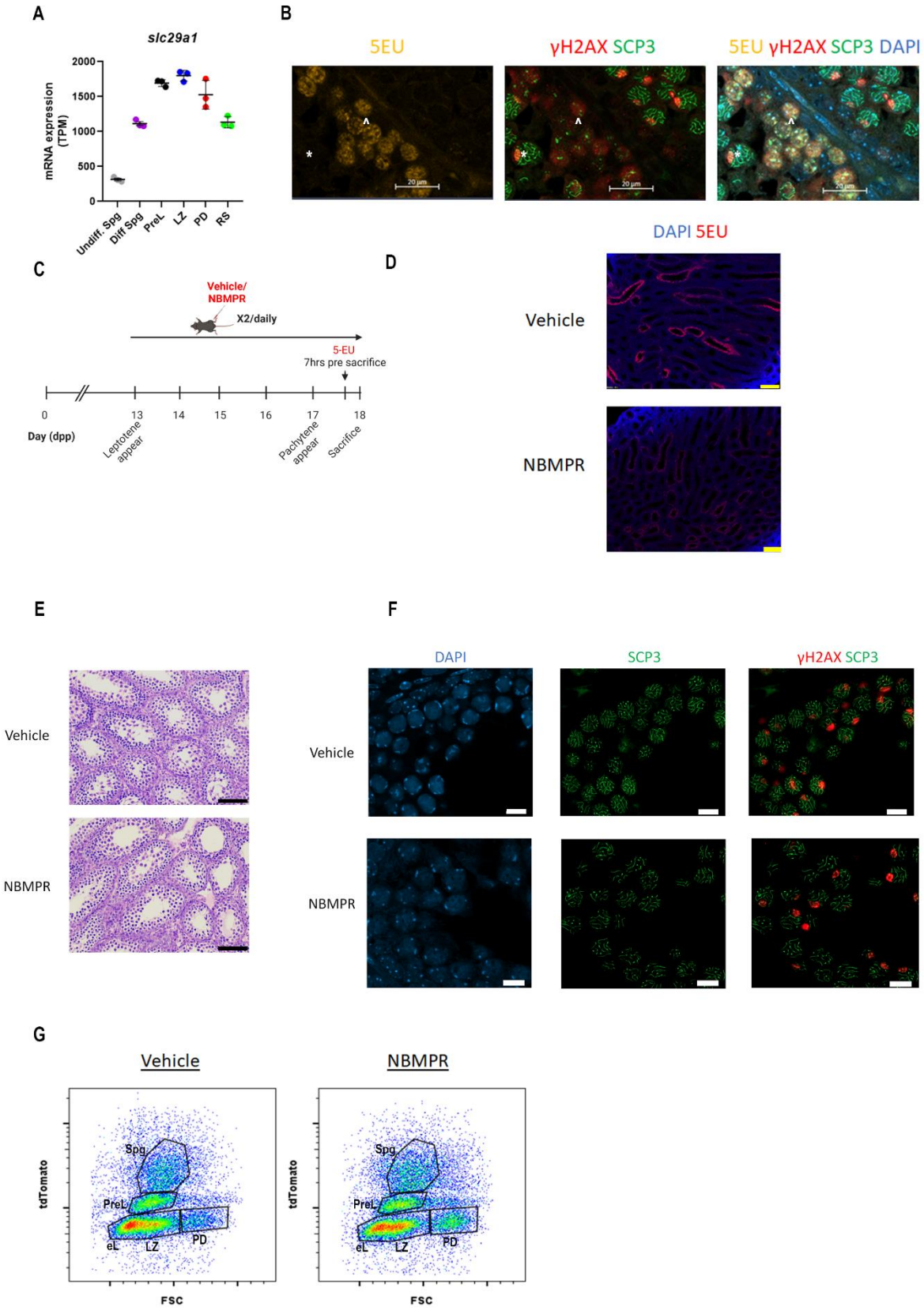
Pachytene cells rely exclusively on nucleotide pools generated during earlier developmental stages rather than on external sources

A key question arising from our findings is whether the pyrimidine (and potentially purine) nucleotides required for proper differentiation of pachytene cells are supplied exclusively by earlier meiotic stages or whether they can also be supplemented from external sources, such as Sertoli cells. Our transcriptomic analysis revealed that among plasma-membrane nucleoside transporters, ENT1 (encoded by SLC29a1) is the only one robustly expressed across germ-cell populations - from differentiating spermatogonia through round spermatids (**Fig.8A**) - suggesting the possibility of nucleoside import from the somatic environment. Of note SLC29a2 that codes for ENT2 was only negligibly expressed.

To determine which germ-cell populations are capable of nucleoside uptake, we injected 18-day-old mice with 5-ethynyl uridine (5EU) and monitored incorporation into RNA using click chemistry. 5EU incorporation was detectable only in germ cells up to the leptotene stage, with no detectable signal in pachytene cells (**Fig.8B**).

We next tested whether nucleoside uptake through ENT1 is required for meiosis. Pups were treated from postnatal day 13 to day 18 with the selective ENT1 inhibitor nitrobenzylthioinosine (NBMPR) (*10*, *30*) (**Fig. 8C**). NBMPR treatment caused a pronounced reduction in 5EU incorporation into germ cells, as observed in paraffin-embedded testis sections (**Fig.8 D**), confirming the efficacy of ENT1 inhibition. Despite completely blocking 5EU uptake, NBMPR treatment did not impair progression through meiosis I. Hematoxylin and eosin staining of testis sections appeared normal **(Fig.8E**), and pachytene cells in both NBMPR- and vehicle-treated mice displayed typical morphology with γH2AX confined to the sex body (**Fig.8F**). Moreover, the FACS profiles of NBMPR-treated and vehicle-treated testes were indistinguishable (**Fig. 8G**).

Together, these findings indicate that nucleotides synthesized de novo during the early stages of meiotic prophase I are sufficient to support normal germ-cell differentiation. External sources of nucleosides - such as Sertoli-cell–derived pools - do not make a significant contribution to sustaining nucleotide levels in pachytene cells.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G
Vehicle
NBMPR
tdTomato
FSC
Spg
PreL
eL
LZ
PD

Fig. 8. Pachytene cells rely on nucleotide pools generated during earlier developmental stages rather than on external nucleoside sources.

(A) Expression of the nucleoside transporter **Ent1 (Slc29a1)** across germ-cell populations. Dot plot shows **Slc29a1** mRNA abundance in LZ and PD cells (RPKM), indicating robust expression of ENT1 among plasma-membrane nucleoside transporters (whereas **Slc29a2/ENT2** is negligible in the dataset).

(B) In vivo 5-ethynyl uridine (5EU) incorporation assay. Representative images of seminiferous tubules from P18 mice after 5EU injection showing 5EU signal (yellow), meiotic markers γH2AX (red) and SCP3 (green), and merged channels including DAPI (blue). 5EU incorporation is detected in leptotene; arrowheads) but is absent from pachytene cells (asterisks). Scale bars=20 micron. **(C)** Treatment scheme for pharmacologic inhibition of nucleoside uptake. Prepubertal mice were treated twice daily with vehicle or the selective ENT1 inhibitor NBMPR from P13–P18; mice received a 5EU pulse prior to sacrifice (timing as indicated) to assess nucleoside uptake in vivo. **(D)** Representative paraffin sections showing 5EU incorporation (red) and DAPI (blue) in testes from vehicle- and NBMPR-treated mice. NBMPR markedly reduces 5EU labeling, confirming effective inhibition of nucleoside uptake. Scale bare=100 micron. **(E)** Hematoxylin and eosin staining of testis sections from vehicle- and NBMPR-treated mice, showing comparable seminiferous tubule organization and no overt disruption of meiotic progression. **(F)** Immunofluorescence analysis of meiotic chromosome spreads/sections stained for SCP3 (green), γH2AX (red), and DAPI (blue) from vehicle- and NBMPR-treated testes. Pachytene cells display normal synapsis and γH2AX confinement to the sex body in both conditions, indicating preserved meiotic progression despite blocked nucleoside uptake. **(G)** Representative flow-cytometry profiles of germ cells from Stra8-Tomato testes following vehicle or NBMPR treatment. Gates denote spermatogonia (Spg), pre-leptotene (PreL), early leptotene (eL), (LZ) and (PD) populations; profiles are indistinguishable between conditions.

Cross-species transcriptomics analysis reveals an evolutionarily conserved shutdown of nucleotide biosynthesis during meiosis

Our results demonstrated that PD cells are unable to synthesize pyrimidine nucleotides in mice. To elucidate the molecular basis underlying this metabolic limitation, we examined the transcriptional profiles of rate-limiting enzymes involved in both purine and pyrimidine nucleotide biosynthesis using our bulk RNA-seq data (GSE162740) from LZ and PD populations **(Fig. 9A-B)**. This analysis revealed a marked and significant reduction in the expression of key enzymes required for purine synthesis, including PPAT**,** GART**,** and MTHFD1, as well as pyrimidine synthesis enzymes CAD**,** DHODH**,** UMPS, and CTPS1, during the transition from LZ to PD.

In addition, the X-linked metabolic enzymes G6PD and PRPS1, which are essential for the generation of 5-phosphoribosyl-1-pyrophosphate (5-PRPP), exhibited pronounced transcriptional silencing at the PD stage. This repression is consistent with MSCI. Collectively, these findings indicate that a coordinated transcriptional shutdown of both purine and pyrimidine biosynthetic pathways underlies the inability of PD cells to autonomously synthesize nucleotides.

Meiosis is widely regarded as a conserved and fundamental feature of eukaryotic sexual reproduction, with core regulatory and cellular processes preserved across evolutionarily distant lineages (*31*, *32*). We therefore sought to determine whether the shutdown of nucleotide biosynthesis observed in PD cells represents a conserved feature of meiosis across species. To address this, we performed a cross-species meta-analysis of three previously published single-cell RNA-seq datasets - one mouse (*33*) **(**GSE148032**)** and two humans (*34*, *35*) **(**GSE112013 and GSE106487**)** - each with clear annotation of prophase I subpopulations.

Consistent with our bulk RNA-seq findings, single-cell analyses of mouse data revealed a downregulation of nucleotide biosynthetic enzymes during the LZ-to-PD transition **(Fig. 9C,** subpopulations markers depicted in **S9A).** Expression of PPAT, GART, and MTHFD1 peaked during the LZ stage and was markedly suppressed upon entry into PD. Similarly, CAD, UMPS, and CTPS1 displayed robust expression in early prophase I followed by pronounced downregulation in pachytene and diplotene cells. Both human studies showed a very similar pattern of changes. The only species-specific behavior could be noted in

DHODH expression. It increased during the LZ-to-PD transition in humans while decreased in mouse. Notably, the X-linked genes G6PD and PRPS1 were consistently silenced following LZ progression in both organisms, reinforcing the conserved impact of sex chromosome regulation on meiotic metabolism.

We also examined the change in the expression of enzymes that we pinpointed as involved in the metabolic switch during LZ to PD transition **(Fig. 9D)**. In contrast to the repression of nucleotide biosynthesis, glycolytic enzymes PFKM**,** PFKP**,** LDHA**,** and LDHC transitioned from low basal expression during LZ to high transcript abundance in PD cells in both mouse and human. Moreover, a conserved isoform switch was observed within the pyruvate dehydrogenase complex, characterized by silencing of the X-linked PDHA1 gene alongside upregulation of the autosomal PDHA2 gene during later stages of prophase I.

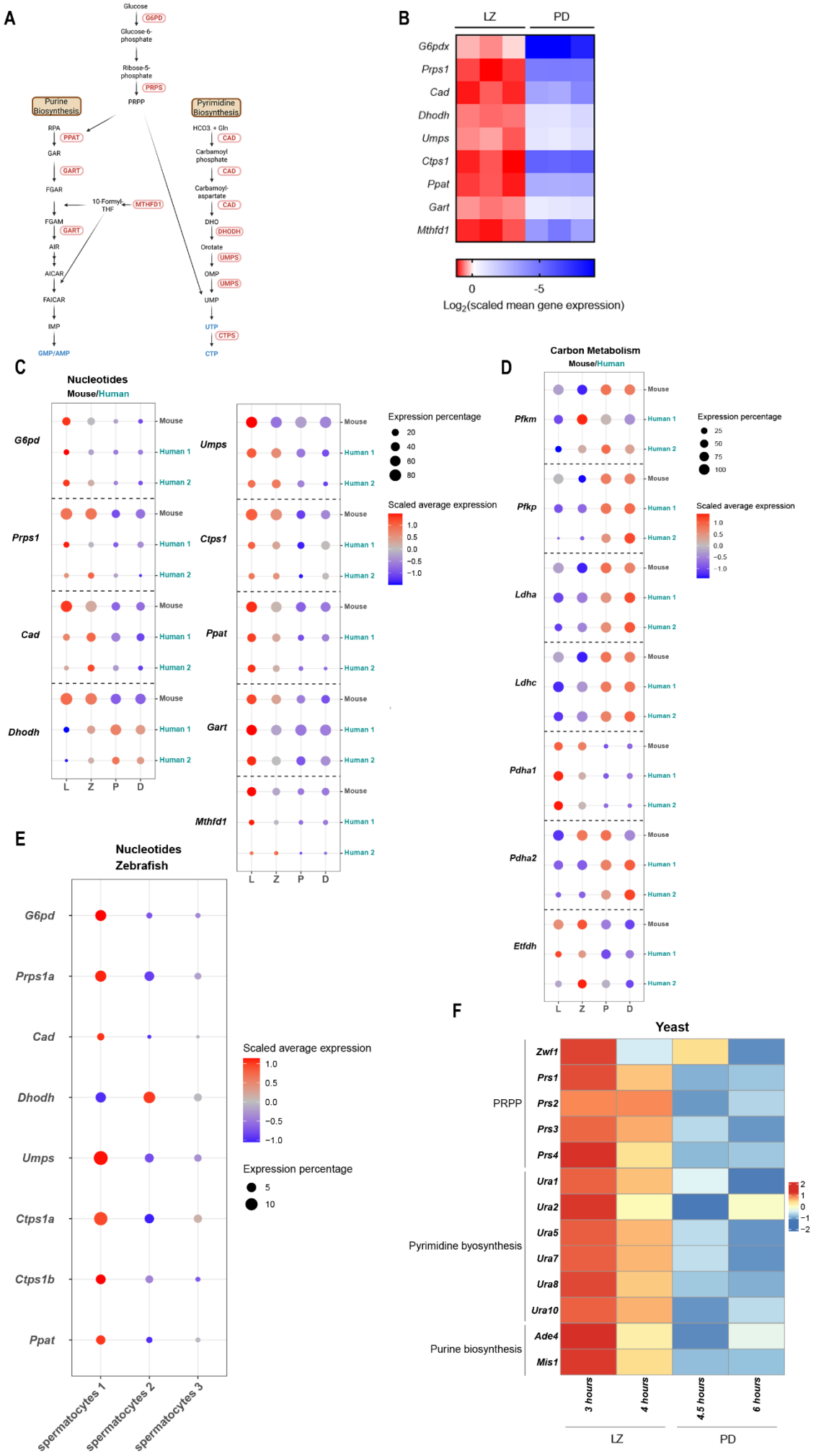
Based on these observations, we hypothesized that metabolic changes between LZ and PD cells may arise from intrinsic constraints imposed on PD cells, particularly the inability to express X-linked metabolic enzymes such as G6PD and PRPS1 due to MSCI, we extended our analysis to zebrafish **(***Danio rerio***)** and yeast (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae)*, eukaryotes that lacks sex chromosomes and does not undergo MSCI.

Analysis of previously published single cell RNAseq data (GSE275361) from zebrafish (*36*) revealed that genes involved in PRPP generation (G6PD, PRPS1A and PRPS1B), pyrimidine (CAD, UMPS, CTPS1A and CTPS1B), purine (PPAT) all underwent significant transcription downregulation upon transiting from early to late prophase 1, **Fig 9E,** (ie. from LZ to PD, based on the relevant markers **S9B).** These results were similar to above mouse and human data. GART, MTHFD1A and MTHFD1B expression was negligible in zebrafish cells.

To test whether repression of nucleotide biosynthesis occurs in a distantly related eukaryotic unicellular organism, we analyzed previously published mRNA-seq bulk data GSE 34082 from *S. cerevisiae* (*37*). In this system synchronous meiosis was induced by incubating cells in SPO medium to induce sporulation. Entry into pachytene stage was accompanied by significant downregulation of genes involved in pyrimidine biosynthesis (URA2, URA5, URA10, URA1, URA7, URA8), purine biosynthesis (MIS1, ADE4), and pentose phosphate generation (PRPS1–4) (**Fig. 9F, see markers in S9C**). The presence of a comparable transcriptional shutdown in zebrafish and yeast, which both lack sex chromosomes and does not undergo MSCI, demonstrates that repression of nucleotide biosynthetic capacity during

late meiotic prophase is evolutionarily conserved and cannot be attributed solely to sex chromosome inactivation.

Together, these results demonstrate that the suppression of nucleotide biosynthesis during late prophase I is an ancient evolutionary conserved feature of meiosis, across diverse eukaryotes, operating independently of sex chromosome presence. While MSCI reinforces this repression in mammals through silencing of X-linked metabolic genes, analogous transcriptional downregulation in zebrafish and yeast indicates that this metabolic transition reflects a fundamental constraint or regulatory principle intrinsic to meiotic progression.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Pfkp
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Ldhc
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Etfdh
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Human 2
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G6pd
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Cad
Dhodh
Umps
Ctps1a
Ctps1b
Ppat
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spermatocytes 2
spermatocytes 3
Scaled average expression
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Prs1
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Prs3
Prs4
Pyrimidine byosynthesis
Ura1
Ura2
Ura5
Ura7
Ura8
Ura10
Purine biosynthesis
Ade4
Mis1
2
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0
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4 hours
4.5 hours
6 hours
LZ
PD

Fig. 9. Cross-species transcriptomics reveals an evolutionarily conserved shutdown of nucleotide biosynthesis during late meiotic prophase I.

(A) Schematic of de novo purine and pyrimidine nucleotide biosynthesis highlighting key rate-limiting enzymes analyzed in this study. **(B)** Heat map of bulk RNA-seq expression (GSE162740) of nucleotide biosynthetic genes in LZ and PD populations, showing coordinated transcriptional repression of enzymes required for purine synthesis (PPAT**,** GART**,** MTHFD1) and pyrimidine synthesis (CAD, DHODH, UMPS, CTPS1) during the LZ-to-PD transition, together with suppression of G6PDH and PRPS1. **(C)** Cross-species single-cell RNA-seq meta-analysis of nucleotide biosynthesis genes in mouse (GSE148032) and human (two data sets: GSE112013 and GSE106487) prophase I subpopulations. Dot plots show scaled average expression (color) and fraction of expressing cells (dot size) across annotated stages (leptotene/zygotene/pachytene/diplotene). Purine pathway genes (Ppat, Gart, Mthfd1) and pyrimidine pathway genes (Cad, Umps, Ctps1) peak in early prophase and are downregulated in pachytene/diplotene, whereas G6pd and Prps1 exhibit strong repression after LZ progression in both species. **(D)** Cross-species expression dynamics of carbon-metabolism genes associated with the LZ-to-PD metabolic switch. Glycolytic genes (Pfkm, Pfkp, Ldha, Ldhc) increase from LZ to PD in mouse and human, and the pyruvate dehydrogenase complex shows a conserved isoform switch characterized by reduced Pdha1 and increased Pdha2 in late prophase I. **(E)** Single-cell RNA-seq analysis of zebrafish (GSE275361) showing downregulation of genes involved in 5-PRPP generation (G6pd, Prps1a, Prps1b), pyrimidine biosynthesis (Cad, Dhodh, Umps, Ctps1a, Ctps1b), and purine biosynthesis (Ppat) upon transition from early to late prophase I (LZ to PD, based on marker-defined populations). **(F)** Bulk mRNA-seq time course of synchronous meiosis in *S. cerevisiae* (GSE34082). Heat map shows repression of genes involved in 5-PRPP generation (Prs1–4), pyrimidine biosynthesis (Ura1/2/5/7/8/10), and purine biosynthesis (Ade4, Mis1) during progression into late meiotic prophase (pachytene).

Color scales indicate normalized/scaled expression as shown in each panel; dot size in single-cell plots reflects the percentage of cells expressing each gene. LZ, leptotene/zygotene; PD, pachytene/diplotene; MSCI, meiotic sex chromosome inactivation.

Discussion

Using our recently published method for isolating spermatogenic cells at defined developmental stages , we were able to characterize metabolic changes across spermatogenesis. Earlier metabolic studies were largely constrained by the cell types that could be isolated with available methodologies. Nevertheless, these works established a key principle: lactate supplied by Sertoli cells serves as an important fuel for pachytene spermatocytes (*38*) and round spermatids (*39*, *40*), as reviewed in Boussouar and Benahmed (*41*). Our findings are consistent with this model, and further show that cells preceding pachytene - specifically the LZ population - are unable to effectively utilize lactate and instead rely on alternative fuels, including glutamine and fatty acids.

Whitmor et. al attempted to overcome stage-availability limitations by profiling ribosome-associated mRNAs during synchronized first-wave spermatogenesis in prepubertal mice, up to the leptotene stage, coupled with network modeling (*42*). That study focused primarily on retinoic acid metabolism, highlighting the value of higher-resolution stage-resolved approaches at early stages of spermatogenesis.

By integrating transcriptomic, proteomic, and metabolomic datasets with ^{13}C-tracing, we identify additional metabolic features that accompany progression through meiosis and revealed major metabolic transitions between the LZ and PD populations. These transitions involve not only shifts in fuel preference but also changes in mitochondrial abundance and composition, consistent with our observed differences in oxygen consumption rate (OCR). In line with this, mitochondrial morphological remodeling during spermatogenesis has been reported previously (reviewed in (*43*). In our study, mitochondrial proteomics supports a functional reorganization that enhances amino acid and fatty-acid metabolism together with increased energy production via the TCA cycle and oxidative phosphorylation during the LZ-to-PD transition.

Analysis of key metabolic enzymes in glycolysis, the pentose phosphate pathway (PPP), and the TCA cycle yielded several notable observations. Genes encoding testis-specific isoforms of glycolytic enzymes (GAPDHs, PGK2, LDHC), as well as the testis-specific PDH subunit PDHA2, are highly expressed at the PD stage. This expression pattern is consistent with increased glycolytic flux, lactate utilization, and efficient channeling of pyruvate into the TCA cycle in PD cells compared to the preceding LZ stage.

The LZ-to-PD metabolic program we describe - specifically, reduced expression of PFK and PDC components in LZ cells and suppression of the PPP in PD cells - may reflect a developmental requirement to downregulate de novo nucleotide synthesis at later stages and instead utilize nucleotides synthesized earlier (**Fig. 10**). Notably, PD cells also exhibit a marked shutdown of fatty-acid β-oxidation, accompanied by reduced abundance of ETFA, ETFB, and ETFDH, which are required for electron transfer and regeneration of FAD. One possible explanation is that limiting β-oxidation supports lipid anabolism at this stage, when cells undergo substantial biomass expansion and membrane synthesis.

Metabolic regulation in PD-stage spermatocytes is further constrained by meiotic sex chromosome inactivation (MSCI), which transcriptionally silences the X chromosome during pachytene. In mouse, the X chromosome encodes 978 protein-coding genes (MGI_EntrezGene.rpt), and 467 carry Gene Ontology Biological Process annotations under "metabolic process" (GO:0008152), creating a potential bottleneck for pathways that depend on X-linked enzymes. Consistent with this idea, our data show that the PPP can be effectively shut down in PD cells coincident with suppression of G6PD at both the transcript and protein levels.

A well-described evolutionary solution to MSCI is retroposition or duplication of X-linked genes to autosomes, generating autosomal paralogs/retrogenes that remain expressed when the X is silent. Several such autosomal copies show testis-specific expression and are abundant at the PD stage (*44–46*). In addition to gene relocation, PD cells likely rely on multiple regulatory layers to match metabolic supply and demand during the LZ-to-PD transition. Large-scale transcriptome remodeling accompanies this transition, with on the order of ~10,000 genes changing significantly in expression (*7*, *47*). Moreover, extensive alternative splicing - a particularly prominent feature of the testis (*48*) - together with mRNA stabilization (*49*) and other post-transcriptional mechanisms (*50*), provide substantial capacity to tune protein output and support metabolic adaptation despite constraints imposed by MSCI.

The evolutionary conservation of nucleotide biosynthesis shutdown during late meiotic prophase, observed in organisms that predate the emergence of sex chromosomes, suggests that this metabolic program did not arise as a consequence of X-chromosome regulation. Rather, meiotic silencing of nucleotide biosynthesis appears to represent an ancient, intrinsic

feature of meiosis, upon which meiotic sex chromosome inactivation was later superimposed in mammals.

Finally, our comparative analysis of nucleotide biosynthesis gene expression across diverse organisms - from yeast to humans - suggests that suppression of these pathways during late stages of prophase I of both male meiosis and yeast sporulation is evolutionarily conserved. An important goal for future work will be to determine how this shutdown is regulated and to clarify its functional role during meiotic progression.

This study combines multi-omics measurements and isotope tracing in purified spermatogenic populations, but several limitations should be considered. First, metabolic states can be perturbed by tissue dissociation, FACS sorting, and short ex vivo incubations; although we minimized these effects and validated key findings across conditions, some metabolite abundances and fluxes may not fully reflect in situ physiology. Second, our stage-resolved analyses compare gate-defined LZ and PD populations, which each encompass cellular heterogeneity and a temporal continuum within prophase I; higher-resolution approaches (e.g., finer sub-staging, time-resolved sampling, or single-cell multi-omics) will be needed to pinpoint when specific metabolic switches occur. Third, our conclusions about nucleotide “storage” are inferred from pathway activity, labeling patterns, and inhibitor experiments; we do not directly define the chemical form, subcellular compartmentalization, or turnover kinetics of the nucleotide pools that support PD transcriptional demands. Fourth, our in vivo pharmacology was performed in prepubertal mice to bypass the fully established blood–testis barrier, and thus may not capture all regulatory constraints present in the adult testis. Finally, the cross-species conservation analysis is based on transcriptomic signatures; functional tests in non-mammalian systems will be required to establish whether repression of

nucleotide biosynthesis is mechanistically conserved and to determine how it is coupled to meiotic progression.

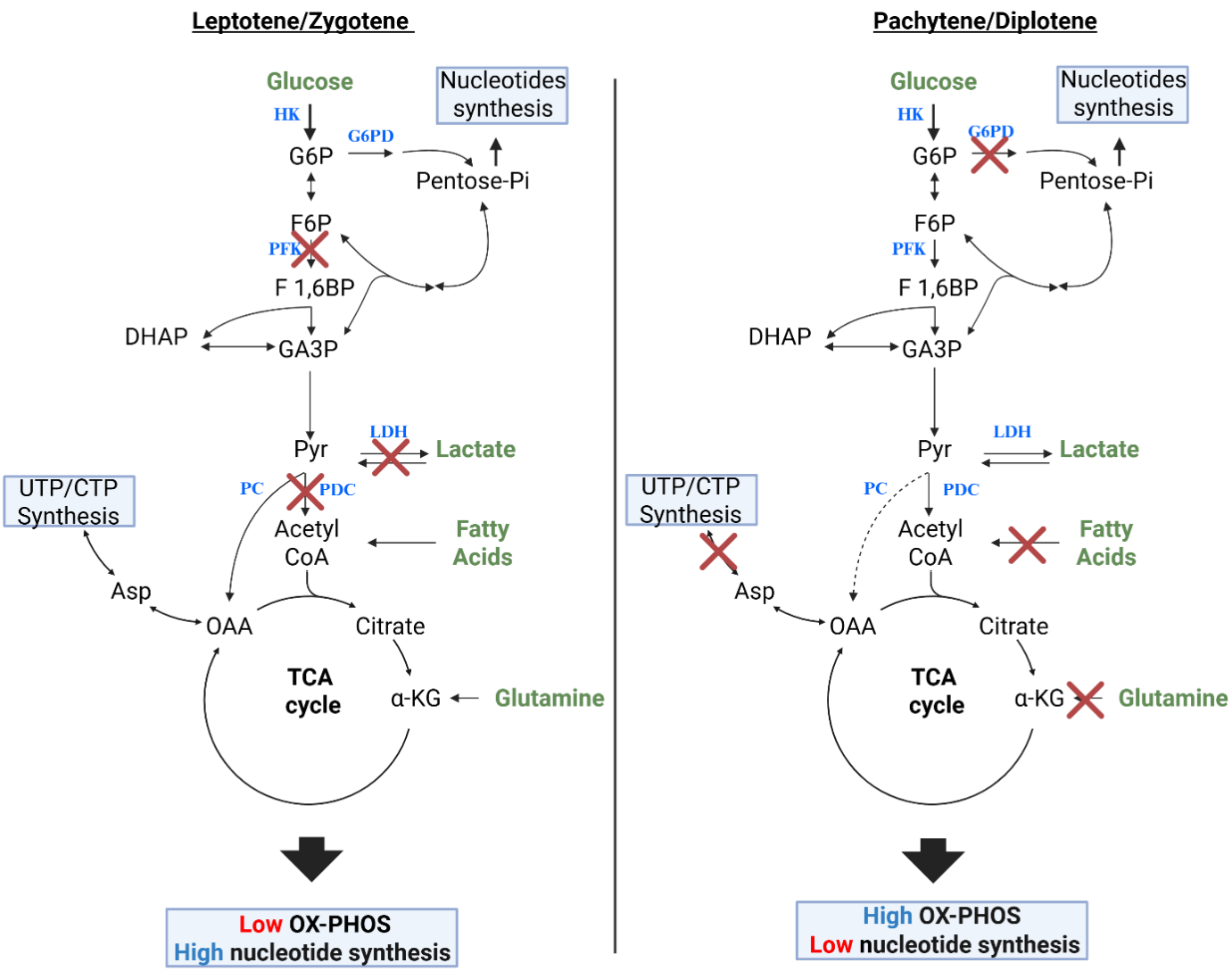

Fig 10. Summary model of the LZ-to-PD metabolic transition during meiotic prophase I.

Schematic integrating multi-omics and isotope-tracing results to depict stage-specific fuel usage and biosynthetic output in LZ (left) versus PD (right) spermatocytes. Red "X" symbols indicate pathways or fuel routes that are reduced or inactive in the indicated stage; arrows indicate predominant carbon flow.

METHODS

Ethics statement

All mice were bred at the Hebrew University- Hadassah Medical School (Jerusalem, Israel), and protocols for their care and use were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of the Hebrew University (approval #MD-22-16877-2).

Mice

Mice were housed under a regular 12-hour/12-hour dark/light cycle with ad libitum access to food and water. Stra-icre (B6.FVB-Tg(Stra8-icre)1Reb/LguJ) male mice (stock 017490) (*51*), tdTomato (B6;129S6-Gt(ROSA)26Sor$^{tm9(CAG\text{-}tdTomato)Hze}$/J females(stock 007905) were purchased from Jackson Laboratories. All mice are on C57Bl background. Hemizygous Stra-icre males were mated with homozygous tdTomato and males which were positive for Stra-icre were used as a source of testis tissue. Genotyping was done by RT PCR according to the suppliers'protocol .

Cells Isolation

Germ cells isolation was performed, as described in our previous study in details(*7*) . In short, adult mice, 12-16 weeks old, or 18 days old pups were euthanized with pental, and cervical dislocation was performed. Testis were removed, put into cold Hanks's solution and seminiferous tubules were released from the tunica albuginea. Tissue digestion was performed in two steps. First, with 4 min incubation with collagenase (C5138 Merck) 1 mg/ml and DNAse (DN-25 Merck) 0.28 mg/ml, followed by 20 min digestion in 33 deg in trypsin-EDTA (D705 Diagnovum) supplemented with 0.93 mg/ml DNAse. The resulting suspension was passed through 40 µm cell strainer, washed in medium and incubated with dead cells removal kit (130-090-101 Miltenyi) for 15 min in room temperature. Live cells were collected according to the manufacturer's instructions and washed in PBS with 5% serum followed by dispersal in sorting buffer. Sorting buffer consisted of PBS with 25 mM HEPES, 5% FBS, 0.05 mg DNAse and 0.75 mM MgCl2.

Flow Cytometry Sorting

After live cell isolation, cells were washed in 2% dialyzed serum in PBS, resuspended in sorting buffer at the density of 10 million cells / 1 ml. During sorting, cells were collected into 5 ml tubes, which were kept overnight in 4°C, inverted with 2ml of different collecting

buffers. Collecting buffer for the immediate extraction of RNA consisted of PBS with 2% albumin. Collecting buffer for the immediate extraction of metabolites and LC-MS analysis consisted of PBS with 5% dialyzed FBS. Collecting buffer for cells cultured for recovery from sorting stress over-night was in culture medium consisting of MEM Eagle supplemented with glutamine 2 mM, lactate 5 mM, pyruvate 5 mM, HEPES 15 mM, dialyzed serum 5% and antibiotic-antimycotic solution (Thermo Scientific, 15240096).

Cells were sorted using a BD FACSAria™ III sorter, as described previously (*7*). Debris exclusion was done based on light scattering. Tomato intensity (yellow-green laser, bandpass582/15) of cells versus forward scatter (FSC) was used to differentiate between the different populations, *(*Fig S1*)*. Doublet's exclusion in each population was performed on the basis of FSC width/area (FWA), followed by side scatter (SSC) width/area (SWA) and tomato width/area (PWA).
Four-way sorting was performed using 100-micron nozzle and threshold was kept in the range of 2500-3000 events/second. PD cells were fragile and sensitive to high pressures that can be developed during sorting; thus, the above conditions were found to be appropriate to keep the PD cells alive.

Metabolomic changes along spermatogenesis

Metabolomic changes along spermatogenesis were studied in two setups: in freshly isolated cells and in cells after over-night recovery in MEM Eagle (Sartorius 01-025) supplemented with 2 mM each glutamine, L-lactate and pyruvate and 5% dialyzed serum. This was followed by two hours incubation in the synthetic seminiferous tubule fluid sSTF (see Table S2). Cells were washed twice in PBS and extracted with acetonitrile/methanol/water (5:3:2) and frozen in -80 deg. LC-MS measurements are described below.

LC-MS

Overnight frozen samples were thawed, vortexed and centrifuged for 20 minutes at 4°C at 20,000Xg. Pellets were used to measure protein content. Extracted metabolites were transferred to new, -80°C precooled, tubes and chromatographically separated on a SeQuant ZIC-pHILIC column (2.1 × 150 mm, 5 µm bead size, Merck Millipore). Flow rate was set to 0.2 mL/min, column compartment was set to 30°C, and autosampler tray was maintained at 4°C. Mobile phase A consisted of 20 mM ammonium carbonate with 0.01% (v/v) ammonium hydroxide. Mobile Phase B was 100% acetonitrile. The mobile phase linear gradient (%B)

was as follows: 0 min 80%, 15 min 20%, 15.1 min 80%, and 23 min 80%. A mobile phase was introduced to Thermo Q-Exactive mass spectrometer with an electrospray ionization source working in polarity switching mode. Metabolites were analyzed using full-scan method in the range 70–1,000 m/z and with a resolution of 70,000. Positions of metabolites in the chromatogram were identified by corresponding pure chemical standards. Data were analyzed using the MAVEN software suite . Relative metabolite levels were quantified from peak area and normalized to total genomic content. Principal component analysis and heatmaps were generated using Metaboanalyst software (*52*, *53*).

Oxygen consumption rate (OCR) assessment

OCR was measured using a Seahorse XFe96 Analyzer system.

Cells were enzymatically isolated as described above and collected into PBS with 5% Fetal bovine serum (not dialyzed). Cells were washed twice in PBS, then adhered to the cell plate covered with Cell-Tak (354240 Corning). Cell-Tak coating of the cell plate was as following: 9µl of Cell-Tak (1.16mg/ml) was introduced into 325 µl of 0.1M sodium bicarbonate, pH was corrected with 4.5 µl NAOH 1N. 10 µl of this solution was put on 96 wells plate and incubated for 20 min in rt, followed by two washes with 200 µl of water and drying.

Cells were seeded in 30µl salt solution consisting of 142 mM NaCl, 5.4 mM KCl, 0.91 mM NaH2PO4, 1.8 mM CaCl2, 0.8 mM MgSO4 and HEPES 5mM, pH 7.35. PD cells are sensitive to Mg concentration. Higher than 0.8 mM Mg can cause high death rate. The amount seeded cells was: Spg 120 000, LZ 200 000, PD 160 000 and RS 180 000 cells/well. Cells were centrifuged twice for 1 min at 200g, acceleration 5, no brake, each time at a different direction, followed by incubation for 30 min in 37°C in incubator without CO2. After the incubation, OCR measurement buffer was added stepwise: 50 µl and 100 µl in order to prevent cells detachment. OCR measurement buffer consisted of 142 mM NaCl, 5.4 mM KCl, 0.91 mM NaH2PO4, 1.8 mM CaCl2, 0.8 mM MgSO4 and HEPES 5mM, 0.4% albumin FA free, 2mM l-carnitine hydrochloride, pH 7.35

After cartridge calibration, basal OCR measurements were performed in three cycles of 30 sec mix, 3 min wait and 3 min measurement. Injection ports were loaded with 20 µl solutions and total volume in each well was 200 µl. The concentration of fuels, uncoupler FCCP (0453 Tocris) and etomoxir (an inhibitor of carnitine acyl transferase 1) (HY-50202 MCE) is indicated in the legends.

Mitochondrial content changes along spermatogenesis

Enzymatically isolated cells after treatment with dead cell removal kit were incubated for 20 min with MitoTracker Green FM (M46750 Thermo Fisher Scientific) in sorting buffer using dilution 1:33333 and analyzed in BD FACS Aria.

Measurement of fatty acids oxidation

LZ and PD cells were sorted and regenerated overnight by incubation in MEM Eagle, as described above in the " Metabolomic changes along spermatogenesis" section. Following these 1.5 million cells were transferred into Eppendorf tubes containing 100 µl sSTF (see Table S2) supplemented with 0.3 % FA-free albumin, 1mM L-carnitine, 0.2 mM palmitate and 0.66 µCi 1-^{14}C-palmitate (NEC075H050UC, Revvity) and incubated for 2 hours in 32 degrees. ^{14}C-CO_2 was trapped on Whatman filter soaked with NaOH as described in (*54*) and measured in beta counter (Beckman).

Stable isotopes tracing

Cells were sorted and recovered over-night in MEM Eagle medium, as described above in the Metabolomic changes along spermatogenesis section. Following these 1 to 1.5 million cells were transferred into Eppendorf tubes containing 200 µl sSTF (see table S1) supplemented with either 5 mM U-^{13}C-glucose (CLM-1396-MPT-PK, Cambridge Isotope Laboratories) or 2 mM U-^{13}C-glutamine (CLM-1822-H-PK, Cambridge Isotope Laboratories) and incubated for 2 hours in 32 degrees.

At the end of the incubation cells were washed twice in PBS, and extracted and analyzed as above in *Metabolomic changes along spermatogenesis* section.

Estimation of the transcriptional activity of germ cells

Freshly isolated testicular cells from adult mice were prepared as described above. Cells were resuspended and allowed to recover for 2 h in Minimum Essential Medium Eagle (MEM Eagle; Sartorius, 01-025) supplemented with 2 mM each of glutamine, L-lactate, and pyruvate, and 5% serum. After recovery, 5-ethynyluridine (5-EU) was added from a 100 mM stock solution in DMSO to a final concentration of 1 mM, and cells were incubated for 2 h at 32°C.

Following 5-EU labeling, cells were washed once with PBS supplemented with 1% serum and cytospun onto glass slides. Cells were fixed for 15 min in 4% paraformaldehyde (PFA), washed once with PBS, and permeabilized for 5 min with 0.5% Triton X-100 in PBS.

Incorporated 5-EU was detected using the Click-iT RNA Imaging Kit (Invitrogen) according to the manufacturer's instructions.

After the Click-iT reaction, slides were washed once with PBS containing 1% BSA and blocked for 1 h in PBS supplemented with 3% BSA, 5% donkey serum, and 0.1% Triton X-100. Mouse anti-SCP3 (Abcam, ab97672; 1:500) was diluted in blocking buffer and applied overnight at 4°C. The next day, slides were washed three times for 5 min each with PBS containing 0.1% Triton X-100 and 0.5% BSA, followed by one wash with PBS containing 1% BSA. Alexa Fluor 488–conjugated anti-mouse secondary antibody (Abcam, ab150117; 1:200) was applied in PBS containing 1% BSA for 2 h at room temperature in the dark. Slides were washed three times for 5 min each with PBS and mounted in mounting medium containing Hoechst (1:250). Stained cells were imaged on a Zeiss LSM 980 confocal microscope using a 40× objective.

Inhibition of pyrimidine synthesis in vivo in prepuberty mice

Prepubertal Stra8-Tomato mice were divided into three groups. The control group received vehicle injections. The brequinar (BRQ) group received BRQ (Cayman, 36183) dissolved in 30% PEG-400 in PBS, administered twice daily at 11 mg/kg. The BRQ+uridine group received BRQ as above plus uridine (Merck, U3003) at 500 mg/kg dissolved in PBS. Injections began on the evening of postnatal day 13 (P13) and continued through P17 (inclusive). Mice were euthanized on P18, and testis cells were isolated and sorted as described above in the "Cell isolation" and "Flow cytometry" sections. Cells from the LZ and PD gates were collected, and nuclear spreads were prepared as described previously (*7*). Spreads were stained with anti-γH2AX (1:1000; Cell Signaling, 20E39718) and anti-SCP3 (1:100; Abcam, ab97672), and imaged on a Zeiss LSM 980 Airyscan confocal microscope using a 63× objective.

Inhibition of nucleosides uptake in vivo in prepuberty mice

Prepubertal Stra8-Tomato mice were divided into two groups. The control group received vehicle injections, and the ENT1-inhibitor group received NBMPR (Merck, N2255) twice daily at 14 mg/kg. NBMPR was first dissolved in DMSO and then diluted into 50% PEG-400. Injections began on the evening of postnatal day 13 (P13) and continued through P17

(inclusive). Mice were euthanized on P18, and testis cells were isolated and sorted for FCS analysis as described above in the “Cell isolation” and “Flow cytometry” sections.

In additional experiments, vehicle treated and NBMPR treated mice were injected on P18 with 5-ethynyl uridine (5-EU; 2 mg per mouse) and euthanized 7 h later. Testes were fixed in 4% formalin and embedded in paraffin. Sections were deparaffinized, subjected to antigen retrieval in citrate buffer, and permeabilized in 0.5% Triton X-100. The Click-iT reaction was performed using the Invitrogen kit (C10330) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Following the Click-iT reaction, sections were immunostained for γH2AX and SCP3 as described in the preceding section. Slides were scanned on an Olympus SLIDEVIEW VS200 to assess 5-EU incorporation and imaged on a Zeiss LSM 980 Airyscan confocal microscope using a 63× objective to identify specific cell populations incorporating 5-EU. Selected testes were also stained with hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) for morphological evaluation.

Bioinformatics-batch and single cells RNAseq

Processed datasets listed as SMARTdb (listed below) were obtained via SMARTdb (*55*), an integrative database for single-cell multi-omics data related to reproduction. These datasets were obtained as h5ad files and converted to Seurat objects using R (v4.4.3) with the package sceasy (v0.0.7).

For single-cell datasets, normalized expression values from the RNA assay, as provided by SMARTdb or by Sposato et al.(*36*) , were used for plotting without additional transformation. In yeast, RPKM values were log-transformed with the addition of a pseudocount of one, and timepoints I-O (3-6 hours) were selected based on stage-specific marker expression.

Dot plots were created with the Seurat package (v5.2.1) DotPlot function, and subsequently replotted with ggplot2 (v3.5.1) for customized presentation.

Heatmaps were visualized using the heatmap function from the ComplexHeatmap (v2.22.0) package.

Datasets used in this study.

Species	Dataset (Condition)	Reference (Year)	Source	Notes
Human	Normal adult testis	Guo et al., *Cell Res* (2018)(*34*)	SMARTdb	—
Human	Adult testis (healthy, obstructive azoospermia)	Wang et al., *Cell Stem Cell* (2018)(*35*)	SMARTdb	L1–L3 reannotated as leptotene (L)
Mouse	Adult testis	Zhao et al., *Nat. Commun.* (2021)(*33*)	SMARTdb	Fine-grained subtype annotation
Zebrafish	Testis developmental atlas (5–22 months)	Sposato et al., *Development* (2024)(*36*)	GitHub: asposato /aging_zebrafish _testis	—
Yeast	Meiotic time course	Brar et al., *Science* (2012)(*37*)	GEO: GSE34082	Time points I–O (3–6 h)

Table footnote:

Processed datasets listed as SMARTdb were obtained directly from the authors upon request, as direct download of processed data objects is not available through the SMARTdb interface. Sposato et al. repository is available at https://github.com/asposato/aging_zebrafish_testis

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