



Identification of candidate genes and pathways in dexmedetomidine-induced neuroprotection in rats using RNA sequencing and bioinformatics analysis

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Background: Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a major cause of disability worldwide, without definitive and effective intervention. Dexmedetomidine (DEX) has a neuroprotective effect against TBI; however, the detailed mechanism underlying this effect remains unclear.

Methods: Ten male Sprague Dawley rats were used to establish a TBI model. The rats were randomly divided into two groups: the TBI group (TBI, control group) and the DEX treatment group (DEX). The next day, the neurological function of the rats were evaluated by the modified neurological severity score (mNSS). Then, the rats were sacrificed, and RNA sequencing was performed to identify differentially expressed messenger RNAs (mRNAs) and microRNAs (miRNAs) in brain tissue samples. Additionally, we performed a bioinformatics analysis to explore the candidate genes and pathways that might play important roles in DEX-induced neuroprotection. The most significantly differentially expressed miRNAs and possible hub genes were validated by quantitative reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (qRT-PCR) using more samples.

Results: In the DEX group, 517 mRNAs (352 up-regulated and 165 down-regulated) and 35 miRNAs (18 up-regulated and 17 down-regulated) were differentially expressed compared to the TBI group. Gene Ontology analysis revealed the up-regulated mRNAs to be significantly enriched in microtubule-based movement or processes, microtubule and tubulin binding. Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes analysis showed that these up-regulated mRNAs were significantly enriched in the B-cell receptor signaling pathway as well as the cell cycle pathway. Also, *Lyn* and *Cdk1* were found to be associated with the B-cell receptor signaling and cell cycle pathways, respectively. Furthermore, the down-regulated miRNAs were significantly enriched in cellular components, although no significant Gene Ontology terms or KEGG pathways were found for the down-regulated mRNAs or up-regulated miRNAs.

Conclusions: Differentially expressed mRNAs and miRNAs were identified after the administration of DEX in a TBI rat model. The B-cell receptor signaling pathway and the cell cycle pathway might be involved in the neuroprotective effect of DEX against TBI, *Lyn* and *Cdk1* might be hub genes.

Keywords: Traumatic brain injury (TBI); dexmedetomidine (DEX); RNA sequencing; bioinformatics analysis

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Introduction

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a leading cause of disability globally. It is reported that approximately 10 million people suffer TBI annually, which places a significant heavy load on public health (1,2). TBI negatively impacts individuals' life quality and brings a heavy family and societal burden (3). Because of the immediate and delayed effects of injury, the pathology of TBI is not merely complex, but is heterogeneous (4). The neuropathology of TBI comprises primary and secondary injury. The primary injury results from traumatic insult and the direct effects of mechanical forces (5). The secondary injury is caused by the cascade of molecular events and cytopathic reactions triggered by the primary injury, including brain edema, hypoxic-ischemic injury, metabolic disturbance, vascular injury, and inflammation, which aggravate the neuropathology of TBI (5,6). Further insight into the neuropathology of TBI and the mechanism underlying secondary brain injury is crucial to developing novel and definite clinical interventions.

Dexmedetomidine (DEX), a highly selective α -2 adrenergic receptor (α -2AR) agonist, is widely used in clinical anesthesia and the intensive care unit (ICU). It has been confirmed that DEX has a protective effect on multiple organs, such as the nervous system, lungs, heart, kidneys, and liver (7); among them, DEX exerts its earliest and deepest effects on the nervous system. DEX has been demonstrated to protect against cerebral hypoxia-ischemia injury and lipopolysaccharide-induced neuroinflammation (8-10), as well as against hyperoxia-induced toxicity in the brains of neonatal rats (11,12). It has also been shown to improve nervous system function after brain injury (13), to attenuate anesthetic toxicity in developing neurons (14,15), and to reduce the incidence of postoperative delirium and cognitive impairment (16). *In vivo* and *in vitro* studies of TBI models have also revealed that DEX exhibits a neuron-protective effect (17,18). However, the exact molecular mechanisms of the positive and protective characteristics of DEX are not completely understood. In the future, more efforts are needed to validate the exact mechanism through which DEX exerts organ protective effects.

Along with the development of transcriptomic analysis, which is a widely used genomic analysis technique that uses microarrays or RNA sequencing to quantify global RNA expression, molecular diagnosis has been employed to characterize specific pathologic states following TBI (19). However, transcriptomic changes associated with neuroprotective agents have not yet been reported.

A number of studies have used high-throughput tools to explore diagnostic or therapeutic targets for TBI, and some progress has already been made (20,21). Bioinformatics is an emerging discipline that developed following the launch of the Human Genome Project (22); it has since become one of the most fundamental research methods in the life sciences. Bioinformatics analysis enables the mining and analysis of massive data sets, as well as the exploration of key genes and pathways associated with particular diseases. To better understand the exact mechanism of the neuroprotective effect of DEX and to discover new potential therapeutic targets for TBI, we aimed to identify the messenger RNAs (mRNAs) and microRNAs (miRNAs) that are differentially expressed after DEX administration in rat brains by performing RNA sequencing and bioinformatics analysis. We also aimed to determine candidate genes and signaling pathways that might play considerable roles in the neuroprotective effect of DEX against TBI. We present the following article in accordance with the ARRIVE reporting checklist (available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.21037/apm-20-2346>).

Methods

Animals

Healthy male Sprague Dawley rats of 10 ± 2 weeks (weight 300 ± 20 g) were used in our study. The rats were housed in specific-pathogen-free conditions in our laboratory and given free access to food and water. The rats were kept at $22-24$ °C with a 12-hour light/12-hour dark cycle. Animal experiment protocols were approved by the Ethics Review Committee for Laboratory Animals of Kunming Medical University (Approval no. KMMU2020161). Animals were treated in accordance with Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (8th edition, National Academies Press).

TBI model

A rat model of TBI was established using the modified Feeney's weight-drop method (23). The rats were anesthetized with 2% sevoflurane and 3% pentobarbital sodium (30 mg/kg, i.p.). First, in order to expose the skull, a midline incision was made along the central cranial line. Then, a small window (5 mm in diameter) was made at 3 mm to the right of the coronal suture and 3 mm behind the sagittal suture with an orthopedic drill, keeping the dura

intact. Afterward, a 40-g weight was dropped from a height of 25 cm onto the exposed dura, resulting in a 3-mm-deep wound on the brain (24).

Experimental protocols

DEX (Hengrui Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd, Jiangsu, China) was dissolved in normal saline (NS) and administered via intraperitoneal injection. Based on our previous study (25) and according to the manufacturer's recommendations, a DEX dose of 100 µg/kg was finally selected in the present study.

The rats were randomly divided into two groups: the TBI group (n=5), which was administered NS with the same volume as DEX group 1 hour after modeling; and the DEX group (n=5), which was administered DEX intraperitoneally at a dose of 100 µg/kg 1 hour after modeling. After 24 hours, all experimental animals were sacrificed.

Modified neurological severity score (mNSS)

mNSS of the rats was evaluated 24 hours after modeling by who was not aware of the study design. Scoring is based on tail-lifting, walking, sensory, balance beam, loss of reflex, and abnormal movement tests. The maximum score is 18 points, and the score is positively correlated with the degree of injury. All the experimental rats underwent mNSS evaluation, but only three rats from each group were selected for subsequent test.

Total RNA isolation

Total RNA was isolated from the damaged brain issue of each rat using TRIzol reagent (MRCGUER, Co., Inc., Germany) according to the manufacturer's instruction. The purity and integrity of the RNA were assessed using the Nano Photometer spectrophotometer (IMPLEN, CA, USA) and the RNA Nano 6000 Assay Kit of the Bioanalyzer 2100 system (Agilent Technologies, CA, USA). The ration of the samples' absorbance at 260 and 280 nm (A260/A280) >1.8 and an RNA integrity number (RIN) >7.0 were considered to show adequate purity for further analysis.

RNA sequencing

After the extraction of total RNA, the quantification and qualification, library preparation, and subsequent RNA sequencing of samples were performed by Novogene Co.,

Ltd. (Beijing, China). The edge RR package (version 3.18.1) was used to analyze the differentially expressed mRNAs and miRNAs between the TBI group and the DEX group. P values were adjusted using the Benjamini-Hochberg method, and an adjusted P value of 0.05 was set as the threshold for significantly differential expression.

Prediction and selection the target genes of differentially expressed miRNAs

The target genes of differentially expressed miRNAs were computationally predicted with miRWalk 2.0 (<http://zmf.umm.uni-heidelberg.de/apps/zmf/mirwalk2/miRretsys-self.html>) (26) using miRanda and RNAhybrid. Since the main function of miRNA is to inhibit the transcription of mRNA, the predicted target genes were compared with the mRNA sequencing and miRNA sequencing data, and only target genes that were inversely correlated with the differentially expressed miRNAs were selected as target genes.

Gene Ontology (GO) and Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes (KEGG) pathway analysis

The Database for Annotation, Visualization and Integrated Discovery (DAVID; <http://david.ncifcrf.gov>) (27) (version 6.7) was used for GO analysis and KEGG pathway analysis. The significant GO terms and KEGG pathways were defined as those with a corrected P value <0.05 and number of enriched genes ≥1.

Construction of a Protein-Protein Interaction (PPI) network

The Search Tool for the Retrieval of Interacting Genes/Proteins (STRING) version 10.5 (<https://string-db.org/>) (28) was used to construct a PPI network in order to shed light on the functional associations between the transcription products of the differentially expressed genes. Proteins with an interaction score >0.4 were considered to be statistically significant. Genes with a connectivity degree of ≥10 were selected as hub genes. Cytoscape software version 3.7.0 (<http://cytoscape.org>), an open-source bioinformatics software platform (29), was used to visualize molecular interaction networks.

Construction of a miRNA/mRNA integrated network

To further clarify the interactions between miRNAs

Table 1 Primers used for quantitative real-time reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction

Factors	Primers
Cdk1	Forward: TCAAGTGGTAGCCATGAAAAAAA Reverse: ATAACCTGGAATCCTGCATAAGC
Lyn	Forward: ATGGGATGTATTAATCAAAAAGGA Reverse: AAAGTTGAGATTCAGGAACTGGC
GAPDH	Forward: GAGTCAACGGATTGGTCGT Reverse: GACAAGCTTCCCGTTCTCAG
miR-7a-5p	Forward: TGGAAGACTAGTGATTTGTGT
miR-873-5p	Forward: TGATTGTCCAAACGCAATTCT
miR-135a-3p	Forward: TGTAGGGATGGAAGCCATGAAA

and mRNAs, a miRNA/mRNA integrated network was constructed using the differentially expressed miRNAs and the selected target genes. The integrated network was visualized by using Cytoscape soft version 3.7.0 (<http://cytoscape.org>) (29).

Quantitative real-time reverse transcription–polymerase chain reaction (qRT-PCR)

Total RNA was extracted using TRIzol reagent (MRCGUER, Co., Inc., Germany) following the manufacturer's protocol. Reverse transcription was performed using a SureScript™ First-Strand cDNA Synthesis Kit (GeneCopoeia, America). The primers for miR-7a-5p, miR-873-5p, miR-135a-3p, *CDK1*, *Lyn*, and glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) were designed and synthesized by TSINGKE Biological Technology, Ltd. (China). qRT-PCR was performed following the instructions supplied with the PCR kit (GeneCopoeia, America), with GAPDH used as an internal reference. The fold changes were calculated by means of relative quantification ($2^{-\Delta\Delta C_t}$ method). The primers used in our study are presented in *Table 1*.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using GraphPad Prism 8.0 (GraphPad Software, La Jolla, CA, USA). Data are shown as mean \pm standard error of the mean (SEM). Student's *t*-test was used to compare two independent groups. A corrected P value <0.05 was considered to be statistically significant.

Results

DEX administration following TBI exerted a neuroprotective effect in vivo

To confirm the neuroprotective effect of DEX, an *in vivo* rat model of TBI was established (*Figure 1A*). Behavioral changes of the TBI rats were evaluated using the mNSS (n=5 for each group). Our results showed that the mNSS in the DEX group was significantly lower than that in the TBI group (*Figure 1B*) (30); this is similar to the findings of Li *et al.*'s study, in which DEX was associated with increased behavioral function. Subsequently, to further explore the neuroprotective mechanism of DEX, a multi-step protocol was applied to analyze the biological functions and potential roles of these deregulated mRNAs and miRNAs (n=3/5 for each group) (*Figure 1C*).

DEX induced changes in mRNA expression profile in rat brain

To explore the potential biotargets involved in the neuroprotective effect of DEX against TBI, differentially expressed mRNAs were identified in the injured area of the ipsilateral hemisphere cerebral cortex of rats (*Figure 2A*). A total of 517 mRNAs were found to be differentially expressed in the DEX group compared to the TBI group, including 352 that were up-regulated and 165 that were down-regulated (*Tables S1,S2*). A hierarchical heat map was created to show the expression levels of these deregulated mRNAs (*Figure 2B*). We further identified the differentially expressed mRNAs with a fold change >2 ; 125 differentially expressed mRNAs had a fold change >2 (70 up-regulated and 55 down-regulated), and these mRNAs are presented in a volcano plot (*Figure 2C*).

Lyn and Cdk1 may be the potential targets of DEX

To understand the possible functions of these potential biotargets, GO and KEGG pathway enrichment analyses and a PPI network analysis were conducted. GO analysis of the up-regulated mRNAs revealed numerous significantly enriched biological terms (*Figure 2D*), including subcellular components, microtubule-based movement or processes, microtubule motor activity, and microtubule and tubulin binding, as well as cytoskeletal protein binding, which are reportedly associated with the neuronal microenvironment and neuropathological mechanotransduction in TBI (31).

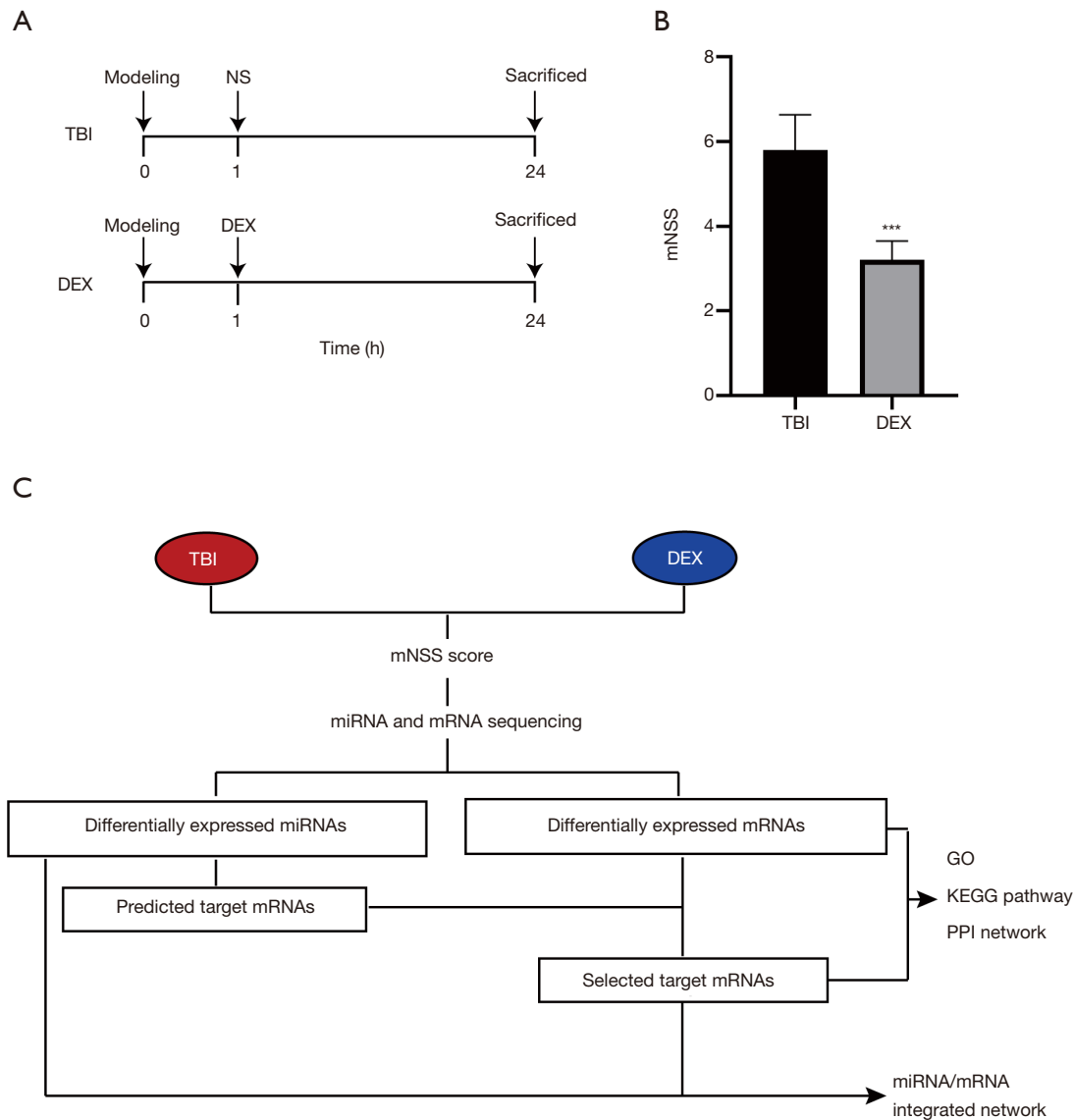


Figure 1 DEX administration after TBI exerts neuroprotective effects *in vivo*. (A) Experimental protocol. (B) DEX administration after TBI was associated with a lower mNSS. (C) Multi-step approach for analysis of the differentially expressed mRNAs and miRNAs. ***P<0.001 *vs.* TBI. N=5 in each group. TBI, traumatic brain injury; DEX, dexmedetomidine; mNSS, modified neurological severity score; GO, Gene Ontology; KEGG, Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes; PPI, protein-protein interaction.

Further, in the KEGG pathway analysis, the cell adhesion molecule, cell cycle, and B-cell receptor signaling pathways were found to be significantly enriched (Figure 2D). However, for the down-regulated mRNAs, no significant GO terms or KEGG pathways were detected. The PPI network analysis of the up-regulated mRNAs revealed 25 hub genes (Figure 2E), including *Lyn* and *Cdk1*, which have been reported as being largely related to the B-cell

receptor signaling and cell cycle pathways, and the *Cdk* family has proved to be a potential target for the treatment of a variety of neurological diseases (32,33).

DEX induced changes in miRNA expression profile in rat brain

The miRNA sequencing revealed 35 differentially expressed

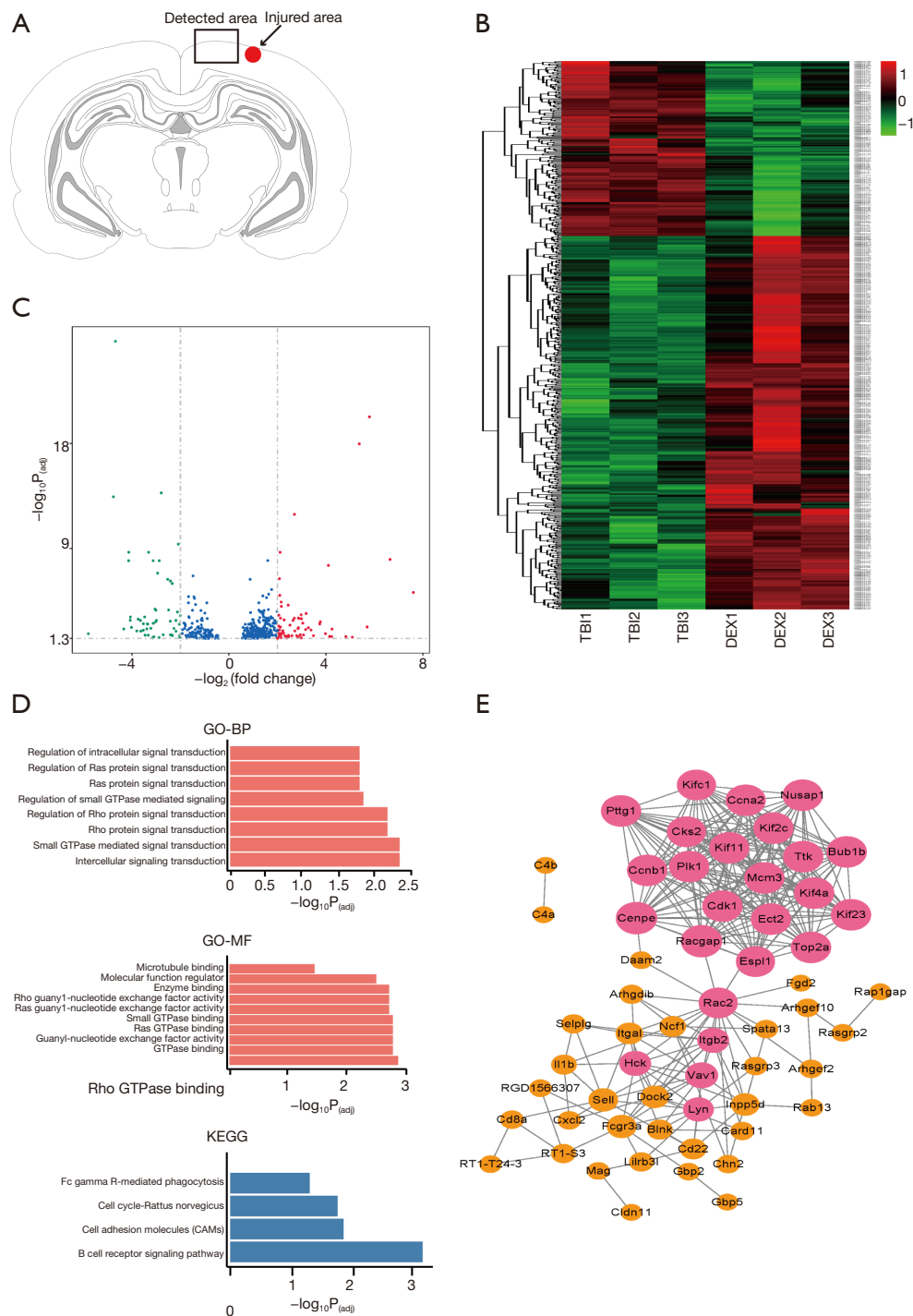


Figure 2 Bioinformatics analysis of the deregulated mRNAs suggested that *Lyn* and *Cdk1* may be potential targets of DEX. (A) Schematic diagram of the sampling site. (B) Heat map of differentially expressed mRNAs after DEX administration (red: up-regulated genes, green: down-regulated genes). (C) Volcano plot of differentially expressed mRNAs with a fold change >2 after DEX administration (red represents up-regulated genes, and green represents down-regulated genes). (D) GO and KEGG pathway analyses of the up-regulated mRNAs. (E) PPI network analysis of the up-regulated mRNAs (orange nodes indicate up-regulation, and pink nodes represent hub genes. The edges represent the relationships between genes). N=3 in each group. DEX, dexmedetomidine; BP, biological process; MF, molecular function; GO, Gene Ontology; KEGG, Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes; PPI, protein-protein interaction.

miRNAs (18 up-regulated and 17 down-regulated) between the TBI group and the DEX group (Tables S3 and S4). These differentially expressed miRNAs are shown in a hierarchical heat map and a volcano plot (Figure 3A and B, respectively). To establish the exact role of these deregulated miRNAs in DEX-induced neuroprotection, bioinformatics analysis methods similar to those used for mRNAs were used. We found GO term with intercellular part was significantly involved in the neuroprotective effect (Figure 3C), which is consistent with the findings of previous studies that confirmed DEX to protect neurons (34), microglial cells (35), and astrocytes (36) in various pathological conditions. However, for the up-regulated miRNAs, no significant GO terms or KEGG pathways were detected. Considering the small number of deregulated miRNAs, further bioinformatics analysis was not performed. More follow-up studies are needed to detect the exact role of miRNAs in the neuroprotective effect of DEX against TBI.

Bioinformatics analysis of the differentially expressed miRNAs and their selected target genes

To further verify the potential effective biotargets of DEX, the predicted target genes of the miRNAs that were differentially expressed between the two groups were explored using the Novomagic, a free online platform for data analysis (<https://magic.novogene.com>). Our preliminary screening found that the 18 up-regulated miRNAs and 17 down-regulated miRNAs had 941 and 1,161 target genes, respectively (Table S5 and S6). Then, considering the fundamental biological functions of miRNAs, only the target genes that were negatively regulated by the differentially expressed miRNAs were selected for further analyses. Finally, 23 and 6 target genes were obtained for the down-regulated and up-regulated miRNAs, respectively (Tables S7 and S8), and were further studied. Analyses of the six target genes of the up-regulated miRNAs failed to obtain any significantly enriched GO terms or KEGG pathways, which may be due to the relatively small number of target genes. Considering the six selected target genes are extremely unlikely to play an essential role in DEX-induced neuroprotection, miRNA/mRNA integrated analysis was not performed.

Analyses of the 23 selected target genes of the down-regulated miRNAs revealed that several GO terms were specifically enriched, including the negative regulation of small GTPase-mediated signal transduction, which has emerged as a central process in the molecular pathogenesis

of glioblastoma (37), and the Golgi apparatus (Figure 3D). However, we failed to obtain an enriched KEGG pathway of significance using the 23 selected genes. No hub genes or mRNAs regulated by several miRNAs were detected by the miRNA/mRNA integrated network analysis. However, the PPI network analysis uncovered multiple significant connections between proteins, which require further study (Figure 3E).

Validation of the results by qRT-PCR

The two hub genes mentioned above, *Lyn* and *Cdk1*, and the top three differentially expressed down-regulated miRNAs were validated by qRT-PCR. Using more experimental animals (n=5 in each group), we confirmed that *Cdk1* was stably up-regulated, while miR-7a-5p and miR-873-5p were firmly down-regulated in validated tests (Figure 4), suggesting that these factors deserve further study. However, the expression patterns of *Lyn* and miR-135a-3p in validated analysis were the opposite to those shown in the results of RNA sequencing.

Discussion

Despite the large number of preclinical and clinical studies that have been performed, intervention strategies for TBI remain a problem, due to the complex, heterogeneous pathological changes of this condition. There is no definitive therapy that has been proven to reduce long-term cognitive impairment, and options for rehabilitation are limited (38,39). Traditionally, DEX has been regarded as a neuroprotective agent against TBI, but the exact mechanism has remained unclear. With the development of basic research, growing and consistent preclinical evidence has identified DEX as an effective sedative agent that is less neurotoxic to the developing brain, which also possesses neuroprotective properties in neonatal and other settings of ongoing acute neurological injury (40), including neurosurgical patients (34), ischemic brain injury (41), and TBI. The emerging genomic “bench-to-bed” technique that advances discoveries of cellular biomarkers and mechanisms from animal or cell models through to clinical application, may provide a useful alternative method for identifying potential targets of DEX. We used transcriptomic and bioinformatics analysis, and identified some potential key genes and pathways that might play important roles in the neuroprotective effect of DEX after TBI.

We identified 517 differentially expressed mRNAs,

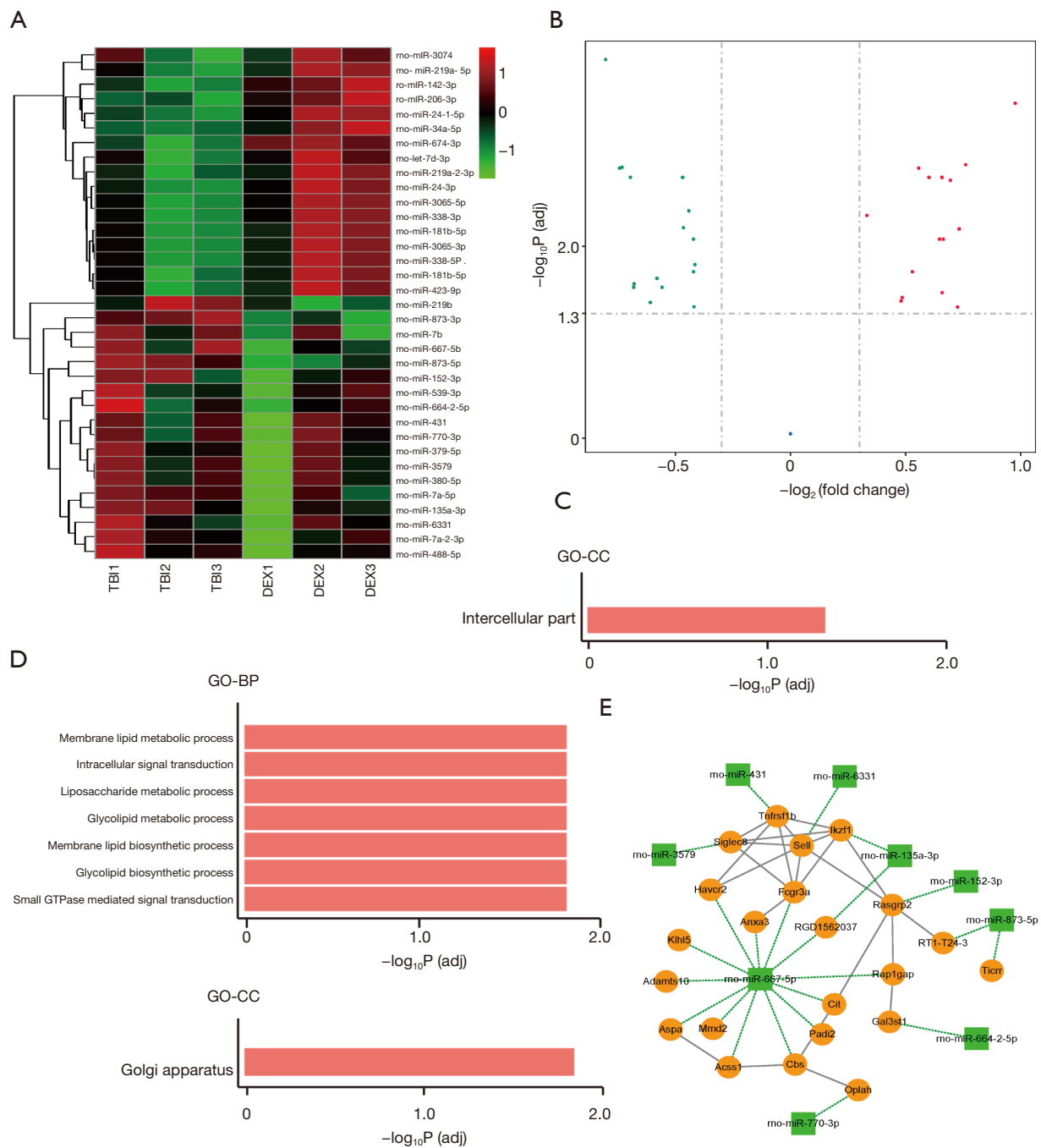


Figure 3 Bioinformatics analysis of the differentially expressed miRNAs and their target genes. (A) Heat map of differentially expressed miRNAs after DEX administration (red represents up-regulated miRNAs, and green represents down-regulated miRNAs); (B) volcano plot of differentially expressed miRNAs after DEX administration (red represents up-regulated miRNAs, and green represents down-regulated miRNAs); (C) GO analysis of the down-regulated miRNAs; (D) GO analysis of the target genes of down-regulated miRNAs; (E) PPI network and miRNA/mRNA integrated network analysis of down-regulated miRNAs and selected target genes. Orange color nodes indicate up-regulation and green color nodes indicate down-regulation. The size of the nodes represents the number of interactions. The solid line represents the interaction between genes and the dotted line represents the interaction between miRNAs and their target genes. DEX, dexmedetomidine; GO, Gene Ontology, BP, biological processes; CC, cellular components; PPI, protein-protein interaction.

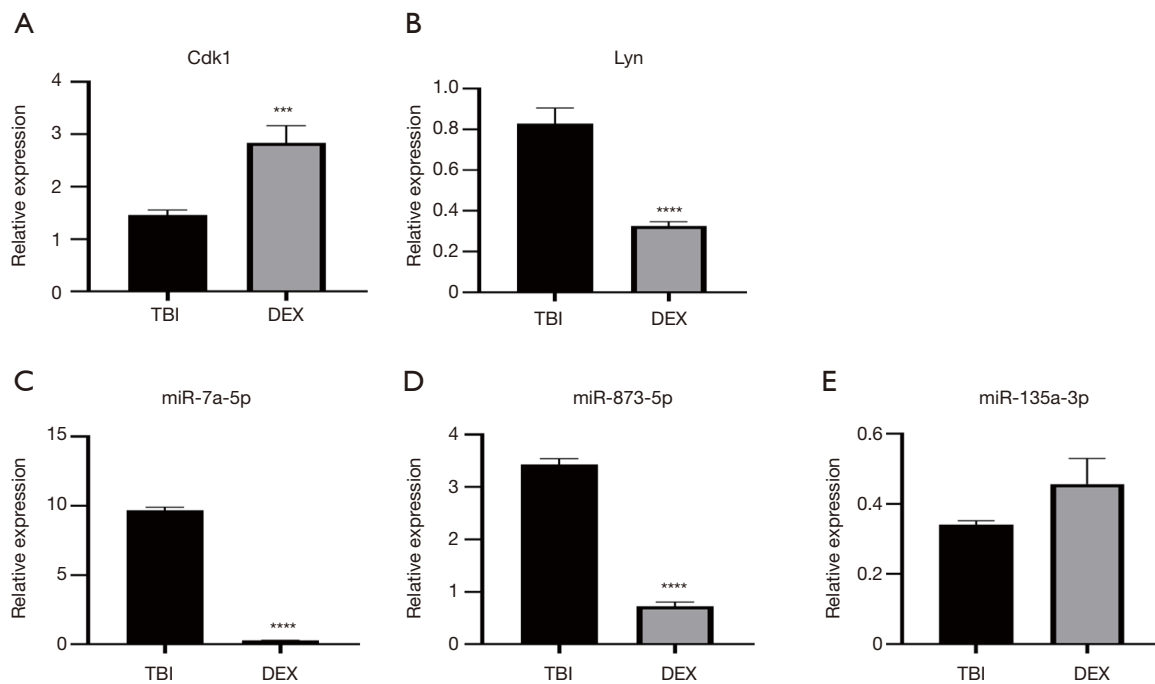


Figure 4 Validation results of qRT-PCR. (A-E) Expression levels of *CDK1*, *Lyn*, miR-7a-5p, miR-873-5p, and miR-135a-3p, respectively, relative to glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH). *** $P < 0.001$ vs. TBI, **** $P < 0.0001$ vs. TBI. $N = 5$ in each group. TBI, traumatic brain injury; DEX, dexmedetomidine.

most of which [352] were up-regulated, and 35 deregulated miRNAs (18 up-regulated and 17 down-regulated). Through bioinformatics analyses with these 352 mRNAs up-regulated after DEX administration, multiple GO terms were discovered to be associated with the neuroprotective effect of DEX, including intercellular signal transduction, microtubule-based movement, and cytoskeletal protein binding. Cell adhesion molecules, which have been reported to play a crucial role in neuroprotection against TBI (31), were also detected in our study. The neural cell adhesion molecule (NCAM), a member of the adhesion molecule superfamily, is considered to be crucial for the development and maintenance of the central nervous system (42), and the results of the present study are consistent with this. Furthermore, in preclinical studies, bioactive peptides of NCAM have been used to successfully treat several neurological disorders, such as TBI, stroke, and Alzheimer's disease (43). However, whether there is an association between NCAM and DEX-induced neuroprotection, currently remains unclear and further research is required. Our results indicate that NCAM may be a potential novel target of DEX's neuroprotective effect against TBI.

In our bioinformatics analysis of up-regulated mRNAs,

25 hub genes were identified, among them, *Lyn* and *Cdk1* were of particular interest. *Lyn*, a tyrosine kinase that belongs to the Src family, is reported to act as a key regulator of the B-cell signaling pathway (32), and might play an important role in DEX-induced neuroprotection. Since it has been reported that *Lyn*-ERK1/2-CREB activation attenuated rat brain ischemic damage via the up-regulation of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) (44), the up-regulation of *Lyn* by DEX in this study might also contribute to the neuroprotective effect. The role of *Lyn* was further validated by qRT-PCR. Additionally, *Cdk1*, a promiscuous serine/threonine kinase that has been shown to phosphorylate a wide range of substrates during mitosis (45,46), might be a crucial gene through which DEX exerts its neuroprotective effect. Indeed, besides their role in cell-cycle control, several cyclin-dependent kinases (*Cdks*) have been reported to regulate ischemic neuronal death (47), and to be involved in neurodegenerative diseases (48). For example, *Cdk5* inhibitor offers protection against neuronal death in Alzheimer's disease (AD) (49). Although Marlier *et al.* reported that inhibition of *Cdk1* using genetic or pharmacological methods can achieve a neuroprotective effect against ischemic neuronal death (50), another

study reached the opposite conclusion, in a lidocaine-induced cytotoxicity model, DEX was found to exert a neuroprotective effect consistent with the up-regulation of *Cdk1* (51). For these two opposite results, we think the possible reasons are: (I) the neuron injury models in the two studies are different, (II) the principal ways that mediate neuronal death in diseases models above remain diverse. In our study, DEX's neuroprotective effect was associated with the up-regulation of *Cdk1*. Furthermore, we verified the up-regulation of *Lyn* and *Cdk1* by qRT-PCR, and found that *Cdk1* was stably up-regulated by DEX, suggesting *Cdk1* may be a potential target of DEX. Due to the complexity and heterogeneity of neuronal death, the same factor may play different roles in different disease models and processes, the exact of *Cdk1* in TBI remains to be further elucidated. Furthermore, in the PPI network analysis, we found that *Racgap1*, a member of GAP family, was the hub gene with the most degrees; however, we failed to find any literature that can prove the relationship between *Racgap1* and neurological disorders, and the biological function of *Racgap1* in neurological diseases needs to be further studied and explored.

We performed functional enrichment analysis and miRNA/mRNA integrated analysis of nine down-regulated miRNAs and their target genes. Although numerous GO terms, including “negative regulation of small GTPase-mediated signal transduction”, “Goli apparatus”, “glycolipid biosynthetic process”, “membrane lipid biosynthetic process” were detected; however, we failed to identify any KEGG pathway of significance. For the up-regulated miRNAs, we finally selected a very small number of target genes, and no significant result was obtained from the bioinformatics analyses. Therefore, we speculated that the up-regulated miRNAs were unlikely to be associated with DEX-induced neuroprotection. We also validated the expression levels of the top three down-regulated miRNAs, and the expression levels of two of them were found to be consistent with the results of RNA sequencing, and this result greatly encouraged us, as these results are expected to provide a good target for our follow-up research.

This study has some limitations and deficiencies. Firstly, only one dose of DEX (100 µg/kg) was administered intraperitoneally in 24 hours. The experimental protocol of this study was determined based on our previous studies, which proved that DEX administration can activate and enhance neuroprotective signaling in a TBI animal model (25). However, diverse, and even conflicting findings, might be acquired if rats are treated with different doses of DEX or

if samples are harvested at different time points. Secondly, although we speculated and initially verified several pivotal genes and signaling pathways that may be associated with the neuroprotective effect of DEX against TBI, we did not confirm the specific mode by which these genes and pathways function, and the intrinsic connections or causal relationships between these genes and pathways remain to be explored. Finally, because of the small number of animals enrolled in this study, further validation by qRT-PCR was needed. It is necessary to conduct more gene expression evaluation studies focusing on the cellular signaling level or using different treatment times.

Based on RNA sequencing and bioinformatics analysis, this study investigated DEX-induced neuroprotection, and revealed deregulated mRNAs and miRNAs after drug administration. We identified and initially verified possible candidate genes and pathways that may be important for DEX's neuroprotective effect. Our study lays a foundation for follow-up studies, helps to clarify the mechanism of DEX, and provides new potential targets for the research and development of neuroprotective agents.

Conclusions

This study identified differentially expressed mRNAs and miRNAs following the administration of DEX in a TBI rat model. Bioinformatics analysis suggested that the B-cell receptor signaling and cell cycle pathways might involve in DEX-induced neuroprotection, *Lyn* and *Cdk1* might be hub genes. Furthermore, qRT-PCR confirmed that the up-regulation of *Cdk1*, as well as the down-regulation of miR-7a-5p and miR-873-5p are associated with DEX's neuroprotective effect.

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Footnote

Reporting Checklist: The authors have completed the ARRIVE reporting checklist. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.21037/apm-20-2346>

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Conflicts of Interest: All authors have completed the ICMJE uniform disclosure form (available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.21037/apm-20-2346>). The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethical Statement: The authors are accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. Animal experiments were approved by Ethics Review Committee for Laboratory Animals of Kunming Medical University (Approval No. KMMU2020161). Animals were treated in accordance with Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (8th edition, National Academies Press).

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Table S1 | Up-regulated mRNAs

Gene ID	D1	D2	D3	T1	T2	T3	DEX	TBI	log2FCChange	pValue	padj
ENSRNOG0000045686	171.9606899	225.3891019	146.831069	1.95867125	4.78795166	3.03048768	1.81426639	3.27942051	5.73042419	6.62E-25	1.48E-21
ENSRNOG0000045696	140.54082	112.84051	175.1870891	8.350041328	3.03047068	149.4388494	3.59072409	3.57290805	1.92729085	2.05E-22	5.38E-18
ENSRNOG0000045698	429.951474	591.328179	121.824688	37.16370862	11.7312812	97.9035759	681.097506	10.4691344	2.74450671	4.38E-18	1.20E-19
ENSRNOG0000045823	14.28184106	14.2644113	12.3614068	37.16377722	54.2788228	36.3340164	152.547946	35.30791203	2.10559801	1.27E-12	1.20E-19
novel.118	527.9280213	127.1727318	36.3727764	2.93792787	1.95310332	0	130.4832786	1.29710073	6.64225669	8.91E-12	8.74E-09
ENSRNOG0000024282	537.764616	468.815587	453.466725	127.078388	127.078388	127.078388	127.078388	117.769832	1.80472968	1.58E-12	1.18E-09
ENSRNOG0000018018	343.9513979	60.9941933	188.73214	6.84651037	9.3751913	18.4844421	197.762438	11.5435426	4.10229299	2.74E-11	2.83E-08
novel.124	517.712866	118.179188	118.179188	32.9486026	30.303428	25.938328	5.9819787	62.5879191	1.81571772	3.81E-07	3.81E-07
ENSRNOG0000030045	300.0000000	300.0000000	300.0000000	140.571469	140.571469	140.571469	140.571469	147.9220184	3.26183318	4.25E-06	4.25E-06
ENSRNOG0000029137	314.459937	120.59737	31.035667	30.3320413	17.054421	202.2071759	82.676964	244.7048771	1.74145665	4.73E-05	5.90E-06
novel.184	311.4098935	36.1829614	37.6744881	0	0	0	0	53.105983	0	0	0
ENSRNOG0000014343	115.139776	103.274567	118.93784	37.5916866	37.5916866	37.5916866	117.499656	377.149406	1.64200091	1.29E-08	1.82E-05
ENSRNOG0000014343	433.077358	119.813963	443.8189191	182.649654	139.765605	133.1320084	631.669436	147.224244	1.70272909	1.70E-08	1.70E-08
ENSRNOG0000014343	368.2314509	455.905187	539.882862	174.071685	157.9890248	169.12876	441.2732037	167.2545703	1.40034826	1.96E-08	1.16E-05
ENSRNOG00000108759	26.2632052	379.404882	382.18186	18.8661825	83.3033888	87.0743937	321.6828398	109.749917	1.55292654	3.07E-08	1.64E-05
ENSRNOG00000108759	74.4506869	135.776209	139.361784	21.2937876	21.1285158	16.426386	26.1188065	36.1188065	1.15563358	7.84E-08	3.86E-05
ENSRNOG0000012355	27.6523276	208.747804	244.881782	11.3737276	101.869052	129.297811	271.107172	115.224163	2.23626626	6.64E-08	5.99E-05
ENSRNOG0000013702	84.9416688	286.449682	115.848026	28.3906901	30.6430002	30.6430002	153.080205	28.0845738	1.6427047	1.16E-07	1.16E-07
ENSRNOG0000013702	89.6616688	286.322213	53.707435	18.749664	67.3334201	106.064579	106.064579	127.373148	2.44576948	7.84E-07	7.84E-07
ENSRNOG0000013717	139.8202524	197.7107147	182.725214	62.3579739	57.1035730	97.898947	162.969922	62.3607169	1.92011641	1.81E-07	1.81E-07
ENSRNOG0000014314	240.143789	312.207181	311.787692	33.876581	31.1789156	101.213789	288.026724	12.0633409	1.23852448	5.13E-07	0.00059417
ENSRNOG0000014314	55.4272162	138.819546	677.201746	294.371846	414.619737	385.871876	100.333495	384.433635	1.54447438	5.78E-07	0.00059507
ENSRNOG0000014314	60.2288206	100.318472	533.091857	301.1075403	371.8894302	283.841568	279.724249	687.6162758	1.34283898	5.00E-07	0.00053361
ENSRNOG00000109658	1727.147689	926.283749	111.282895	532.9732	546.738995	469.713421	125.5723	516.474703	1.52139874	7.51E-07	0.00053361
ENSRNOG00000101529	102.708863	229.802665	61.69068	55.7490516	37.3420295	54.641329	144.749229	41.4663052	1.987114109	7.86E-07	0.00053361
ENSRNOG0000011567	37.1079643	478.647669	484.119101	65.1592725	11.1666158	116.1066158	436.023104	168.38921	1.37214226	4.84E-07	0.00053361
ENSRNOG00000100160	198.3967454	225.266887	75.3006784	23.3623926	78.9007273	85.8076352	133.0846534	314.806651	1.93480651	9.81E-07	0.00053361
ENSRNOG00000100160	68.0516607	167.469594	599.666867	383.848881	305.457659	24.2353884	687.838763	337.682708	0.89463311	1.02E-06	0.00053361
ENSRNOG00000100160	21.5271029	179.126308	201.478407	124.192195	71.812349	82.80313474	248.177025	92.94720072	1.14170862	1.18E-06	0.00054874
ENSRNOG00000100539	86.1302819	93.0418784	123.844552	23.470762	33.073766	33.073766	84.80313801	10.4294324	3.18472626	1.26E-06	0.00054874
novel.127	89.6609627	44.022562	57.8732671	19.619921	27.3474969	25.533474	64.1538883	241.633558	1.00023204	1.84E-06	0.00046951
ENSRNOG00000103184	30.8716827	142.729163	67.931067	57.3191561	57.3191561	57.3191561	43.83402238	2.36710073	1.20871929	1.96E-06	0.00046951
ENSRNOG00000103184	40.5432503	140.230623	100.80047	30.129654	30.129654	22.0174162	106.81403	30.2071382	1.45887583	1.50E-06	0.00046951
ENSRNOG00000103184	128.955242	11.8868408	111.140163	37.1637277	49.810627	49.810627	119.678544	45.2524424	1.45214621	2.29E-06	0.00046951
ENSRNOG0000012051	109.000931	208.827328	141.229105	53.7819743	50.7480475	33.3448105	103.055051	45.9524023	1.73451449	2.79E-06	0.00072252
ENSRNOG0000014837	172.827357	241.90988	254.303389	110.5061784	80.4306788	87.8818768	224.828449	92.9062031	1.12732444	3.40E-06	0.00082558
ENSRNOG0000014837	433.077358	382.883201	827.902757	190.695182	206.737524	128.287453	541.2871105	175.9070053	1.627137103	4.38E-06	0.00088437
ENSRNOG0000014843	14.28184106	208.827328	175.1870891	41.0730622	68.404749	73.2891163	175.5441845	61.2512502	1.51948629	1.96E-06	0.00019308
ENSRNOG00000100160	90.1800007	136.414195	86.6516746	34.3829691	24.2432895	104.420695	301.2827668	1.73654526	3.94E-06	0.00019308	
novel.374	131.648486	150.384604	97.640713	1.95686125	2.7533006	20.0275159	13.2115854	1.96012582	2.88271272	4.00E-06	0.00019308
ENSRNOG00000100449	33.5572055	65.1293186	54.6282307	9.77930824	8.30041328	10.10135789	51.1041918	7.90566282	2.69724264	4.28E-06	0.00049022
ENSRNOG00000100784	28.167184	168.817036	206.288894	65.481027	69.882423	135.38158	139.882028	1.80001924	1.428E-06	0.00049022	
novel.589	57.6174532	66.1293138	11.7613927	14.2542083	16.7176584	16.7176584	79.8627076	93.1073527	1.27674456	4.35E-06	0.00049022
ENSRNOG00000100784	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106
novel.818	197.148061	237.15925	29.1784818	33.3899501	33.3899501	17.2518568	11.1620084	10.2541406	2.84077661	5.02E-06	0.00012159
ENSRNOG0000019400	294.3635508	330.158605	330.158605	157.446688	166.67078	150.510236	312.982462	158.187864	0.98054279	6.05E-06	0.00012159
ENSRNOG00000100784	200.4795952	60.2379176	471.446681	206.34412	112.862192	109.449683	424.684413	142.830808	1.6320297	6.07E-06	0.00012159
ENSRNOG00000100784	179.312338	679.373861	227.548426	110.039805	1269.6587	115.094985	258.059225	1173.73028	1.00004808	1.81E-06	0.00012159
ENSRNOG00000100784	198.326168	127.1527318	65.7088129	40.0468881	41.1729442	116.397736	38.6315274	1.58145836	1.738E-06	0.00012159	
ENSRNOG00000100784	94.37965168	235.700862	70.6935626	22.4924089	25.8527896	34.4461864	133.5278138	127.5628585	1.678281781	6.83E-06	0.00012159
ENSRNOG00000100784	132.1151156	223.200547	157.2916337	17.3889529	54.5700882	107.807837	63.8752894	14.02102117	7.24E-06	0.00012159	
ENSRNOG00000100784	38.84918634	124.050839	45.2095713	11.7351075	9.57510319	8.7048654	11.1436671	2.64501318	1.79E-06	0.00012159	
ENSRNOG00000100784	94.8458184	214.416742	96.4158207	32.608389	34.7863398	44.497474	181.82739	382.15042	1.89147089	1.81E-06	0.00012159
ENSRNOG00000120519	195.0512805	293.684491	238.989729	120.284861	123.848855	76.772072	218.659815	93.1300154	1.22027775	8.29E-06	0.000146053
ENSRNOG00000120519	50.6839946	327.228051	75.5740708	373.299048	171.8890248	70.462043	225.62531	225.62531	3.806E-06	0.000146053	
ENSRNOG00000120519	101.800791	147.7107147	101.800791	101.800791	101.800791	101.800791	101.800791	101.800791	101.800791	101.800791	101.800791
ENSRNOG00000120519	105.825502	118.8868408	111.140163	37.1637277	49.810627	49.810627	119.678544	45.2524424	1.45214621	2.29E-06	0.000146053
ENSRNOG00000100160	109.000931	208.827328	141.229105	53.7819743	50.7480475	33.3448105	103.055051	45.9524023	1.73451449	2.79E-06	0.00012159
ENSRNOG0000014837	172.827357	241.90988	254.303389	110.5061784	80.4306788	87.8818768	224.828449	92.9062031	1.12732444	3.40E-06	0.00082558
ENSRNOG0000014837	433.077358	382.883201	827.902757	190.695182	206.737524	128.287453	541.2871105	175.9070053	1.627137103	4.38E-06	0.00088437
ENSRNOG0000014843	14.28184106	208.827328	175.1870891	41.0730622	68.404749	73.2891163	175.5441845	61.2512502	1.51948629	1.96E-06	0.00019308
ENSRNOG00000100160	90.1800007	136.414195	86.6516746	34.3829691	24.2432895	104.420695	301.2827668	1.73654526	3.94E-06	0.00019308	
novel.374	131.648486	150.384604	97.640713	1.95686125	2.7533006	20.0275159	13.2115854	1.96012582	2.88271272	4.00E-06	0.00019308
ENSRNOG00000100449	33.5572055	65.1293186	54.6282307	9.77930824	8.30041328	10.10135789	51.1041918	7.90566282	2.69724264	4.28E-06	0.00049022
ENSRNOG00000100784	28.167184	168.817036	206.288894	65.481027	69.882423	135.38158	139.882028	1.80001924	1.428E-06	0.00049022	
novel.589	57.6174532	66.1293138	11.7613927	14.2542083	16.7176584	16.7176584	79.8627076	93.1073527	1.27674456	4.35E-06	0.00049022
ENSRNOG00000100784	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106	14.28184106							

Table S2 Down-regulated mRNAs

gene_id	D1	D2	D3	T1	T2	T3	DEX	TBI	log2FoldChange	pvalue	padj
ENSRNOG000000027079	9.437965186	13.43938222	16.01172319	282.6220192	467.265042	249.50354	12.96023253	333.1302004	-4.677626899	1.13E-31	1.88E-27
ENSRNOG000000052600	20.97325597	39.28434804	29.19784818	188.7406564	199.162149	230.31096	29.81848406	206.0712552	-2.788264136	4.30E-18	1.78E-14
ENSRNOG000000055179	1.097325597	9.304187694	5.651196421	102.6827405	134.0514465	225.2602811	5.684236571	153.998156	-4.75708034	1.15E-17	3.82E-14
ENSRNOG000000060956	2.3277501	8.167009198	110.1983302	491.8992238	575.7088982	349.5069832	109.0486411	462.3956987	-2.084561999	1.82E-13	4.30E-10
ENSRNOG000000002117	10.48662798	11.37178496	18.8373214	196.5641033	117.7377008	90.9122105	13.56524478	135.0833651	-3.30872185	1.09E-12	2.12E-09
novel.869	4.194651194	1.033798633	11.30239284	106.822566	96.70854353	87.88181368	5.5102089	98.03953793	-4.126852765	1.28E-12	2.12E-09
ENSRNOG000000031662	147.8614546	80.63629335	215.6873301	2302.042925	846.4391334	723.2572253	15.10816927	1290.58187	-3.12288531	9.61E-12	1.13E-08
ENSRNOG000000046803	19.82459317	11.37178496	10.36052677	104.6386203	86.17592988	112.1250726	13.88563497	100.9798683	-2.868636872	1.02E-11	1.13E-08
ENSRNOG000000059776	17.82272657	13.43938222	17.89545533	409.7530313	196.9836563	196.9836563	136.38736838	288.0623388	-4.13480424	1.03E-11	1.13E-08
ENSRNOG000000015275	52.43313992	73.21675078	53.686366	655.2136778	184.7994941	260.6150337	47.77875223	366.8760685	-2.940216885	1.33E-10	1.30E-07
novel.824	224.4138389	155.0697949	214.745464	639.566784	526.6306826	488.9057221	198.0763599	551.7010629	-1.477548471	2.43E-10	2.23E-07
ENSRNOG000000012307	18.87593037	11.37178496	17.89545533	92.90343193	78.51584722	106.0642579	16.04772356	106.4451235	-2.524868578	5.31E-10	4.99E-07
ENSRNOG000000013828	131.082498	51.68993163	158.2334998	734.4260776	412.6889531	666.686211	113.6687604	604.6008839	-2.409825049	8.16E-10	6.14E-07
ENSRNOG000000036675	31.45988395	23.77736855	56.51196421	217.1006514	206.8222317	142.4291463	37.24973891	188.7840986	-2.3362369	1.41E-09	1.02E-06
ENSRNOG000000059714	1000.42431	841.512087	1080.320382	420.49855	3096.5088414	974.0855931	5083.49474	1831.39644	-1.66240431	2.31E-08	1.32E-05
ENSRNOG000000005167	164.6400594	191.252747	134.686848	554.486799	417.4745047	359.6083411	163.5265515	443.8565482	-1.441643935	2.53E-08	1.39E-05
ENSRNOG000000001360	1051.808787	586.1638247	895.7146327	2365.614756	2586.235407	1811.173471	844.5624148	2254.341211	-1.416449396	3.64E-08	1.88E-05
ENSRNOG000000006549	45.09250033	64.09551523	64.04689277	193.6303107	139.7965085	127.1791947	57.74496944	183.535338	-1.666397983	9.43E-08	4.56E-05
ENSRNOG000000006231	663.8035514	739.1660224	843.9119989	1509.925252	1378.814878	1336.409649	748.9605242	1408.38326	-0.910697227	9.93E-08	4.57E-05
ENSRNOG000000004824	141.5694778	105.4474605	166.7102944	303.1585673	354.2788228	416.1759453	137.9090776	357.871118	-1.374285658	1.42E-07	6.36E-05
ENSRNOG0000000049878	12.58395358	8.270389061	9.418660702	47.91861226	40.91861226	51.51692526	10.09100111	83.25488655	-3.046776958	3.80E-07	0.00015722
novel.276	39.84918634	14.47318086	22.60478568	22.9035058	119.6887915	87.88181368	25.64238499	143.1869703	-2.483366455	4.69E-07	0.00018433
ENSRNOG000000019894	11.53529078	3.101395898	25.43038399	151.5792387	88.09095054	84.85140632	13.35566019	108.1738802	-3.00738795	5.18E-07	0.000194817
ENSRNOG000000013330	346.0587235	158.1711908	275.0248925	744.2053863	615.6791434	845.4836558	259.7516023	735.1227285	-1.500754538	5.41E-07	0.000199141
ENSRNOG0000000013794	337.6694211	259.4834568	421.0141334	839.0646799	705.685114	720.2268179	339.3890038	745.9922044	-1.152720813	5.85E-07	0.000205941
ENSRNOG000000025393	68.1630819	70.29830702	99.83760344	141.799975	492.1603106	402.0340442	454.3314433	342.9140433	-2.119082032	8.69E-07	0.000276828
ENSRNOG0000000060054	176.1753501	155.0697949	183.6638837	329.5627006	324.5960025	368.6995632	171.6363429	340.9527554	-0.989492615	1.16E-06	0.000348074
ENSRNOG000000011141	91.2336347	28.94636172	110.1983302	262.0854171	305.4457959	355.5677979	76.79278513	307.6996883	-2.000665306	2.16E-06	0.000587302
ENSRNOG000000015156	263.2143624	113.7178496	209.0947496	730.5143542	845.4816231	521.2300674	222.3423205	699.0753482	-1.652160392	2.68E-06	0.000707529
novel.701	7.340639589	5.168993163	2.825598211	18.58086639	90.96384153	59.5801158	5.111743654	56.3807265	-3.472980567	2.89E-06	0.000735957
ENSRNOG0000000024882	59.77377951	8.270389061	54.62823207	311.9599451	1059.006427	674.7707074	40.89080021	681.9123599	-4.059242602	2.97E-06	0.000744987
ENSRNOG000000002278	46.14116313	32.04775761	36.73277674	89.96969394	145.5415705	121.6126247	38.30723962	118.9091682	-1.635243101	3.30E-06	0.000816015
ENSRNOG000000011858	225.4625017	182.982358	267.4899639	475.2743991	574.5061992	408.0948589	225.3116079	485.9584857	-1.108272425	4.21E-06	0.000940202
ENSRNOG0000000056550	1316.071812	1047.238015	1336.507954	2685.398148	1986.833939	2201.085885	1233.272594	2291.105991	-0.893448933	4.72E-06	0.001002818
ENSRNOG0000000038598	4.194651194	1.033798633	64.04689277	182.39030351	82.14619244	22.98024797	32.125930211	44.47008084	-3.739881628	5.53E-06	0.00114562
ENSRNOG000000011068	380.6645958	301.8692007	497.3052857	1007.268788	688.4499287	912.1526179	393.2796939	869.2904449	-1.143568338	6.64E-06	0.001398858
ENSRNOG0000000056428	3.145988395	5.168993163	4.709330351	54.76412829	155.1166738	8.08106316	4.341437303	72.65396279	-4.063629618	7.51E-06	0.001413435
novel.242	18.87593037	8.270389061	52.74449993	397.0399301	157.0316944	79.8007237	26.63027312	211.290784	-2.983157054	7.90E-06	0.001453287
ENSRNOG0000000013262	2.097325597	0	6.593062491	43.02895794	31.59784095	36.3648842	2.896796029	36.99722911	-3.643559819	8.03E-06	0.001457054
ENSRNOG00000000000565	24.11924346	8.270389061	36.73277674	117.5317035	107.2411572	90.9122105	23.04083309	105.1683606	-3.7832676	8.38E-06	0.001460513
ENSRNOG0000000045771	2498.963449	1351.174813	2210.559667	4165.007543	4845.00228	3973.874196	2020.232643	4327.961339	-1.099151615	9.06E-06	0.001530492
ENSRNOG0000000013867	305.1608744	216.0639142	208.1524015	705.0881518	704.7276043	389.9124147	243.12573	599.9093903	-1.303760939	1.02E-05	0.001664193
ENSRNOG0000000011750	10.48662798	19.64217402	40.50024102	197.5420342	174.7500482	23.54301434	23.54301434	126.1919098	-2.419594225	1.06E-05	0.001718262
novel.388	11.53529078	23.77736855	10.36052677	266.9751254	55.53559925	47.47638211	15.22439537	123.3290356	-3.020368776	1.23E-05	0.001983138
ENSRNOG0000000014385	40.89784914	26.87876445	72.5236874	155.4910071	120.6463018	32.310196	46.766767	168.8160896	-1.847640599	1.63E-05	0.002043763
ENSRNOG0000000016654	56.62779112	31.01395898	38.61650888	142.7779059	108.1986675	109.0946653	42.08068633	120.0237462	-1.513436228	1.82E-05	0.002604803
ENSRNOG0000000046299	25.16790716	20.67597265	23.54665175	25.42620242	135.0089568	442.4394758	23.13017719	200.9582117	-3.118729209	1.87E-05	0.002621684
ENSRNOG0000000047943	6.291976791	1.033798633	6.593062491	13.69103207	40.83068788	66.68696211	4.639612638	53.59695402	-3.524188785	2.02E-05	0.00278403
ENSRNOG0000000001926	3.145988395	9.304187694	11.30239284	42.05102708	179.054321	81.78290603	7.915232977	81.78290603	-3.363611836	2.09E-05	0.002863735
ENSRNOG0000000008439	13.63261638	4.135194531	6.593062491	182.8730713	27.76779963	36.3648842	8.120291134	82.3352531	-3.345187593	2.29E-05	0.003025375
novel.150	34.60587235	23.77736855	73.46555347	272.8427106	155.1166738	115.155448	43.94959813	181.0382881	-2.03849914	2.42E-05	0.00311255
ENSRNOG00000000011184	59.77377951	99.24466874	155.4079016	237.6371996	576.4212198	284.8582926	104.8087833	366.3055707	-1.803755848	2.42E-05	0.00311255
ENSRNOG0000000004089	199.2459317	163.340184	287.2691514	552.5309372	471.0950383	403.04418	216.6184224	475.5567335	-1.133273051	2.84E-05	0.003597184
ENSRNOG0000000021234	189.8079665	153.0021976	237.3502497	1163.737726	292.9981616	551.5341411	193.3868046	669.423343	-1.791011647	3.37E-05	0.0041042
ENSRNOG00000000012216	653.3169234	349.4239378	856.1562578	1408.220442	1665.110467	1355.602229	619.632373	1476.311046	-1.25214734	4.38E-05	0.005001934
ENSRNOG0000000007332	203.4405829	74.43350155	235.4665175	550.5750755	542.9083582	407.0847232	171.113534	500.1893985	-1.546759853	5.25E-05	0.005804027
novel.1045	2.097325597	0	6.593062491	101.7048097	20.10771697	21.21825158	2.896796029	47.67512608	-4.017960059	5.33E-05	0.005844214
ENSRNOG0000000010475	829.4922736	499.3247396	975.7732487	2673.662978	1346.259527	1647.531473	768.196754	1889.151326	-1.297986799	5.37E-05	0.00584497
ENSRNOG00000000024923	4584.753755	4867.123963	4740.776642	15688.94483	11853.0204	864.7171679	5619.884787	12061.22563	-1.101720647	6.11E-05	0.006243855
ENSRNOG0000000023803	187.7106409	115.7854469	120.558857	250.3503008	319.8084509	360.6184768	141.3516483	310.2590762	-1.135096111	6.80E-05	0.006281683
ENSRNOG0000000050181	18.87593037	4.135194531	13.18612498	107.5723949	14.36265498	215.1589232	12.06574996	112.3646577	-3.218708657	6.90E-05	0.006879119
novel.870	49.28715153	18.60837539	74.40741954	40.9758268	175.2243907	129.2973811	47.43431549	168.3325329	-1.824185138	7.09E-05	0.006991409
ENSRNOG0000000004697	3180.594268	1625.131451	3282.403255	893.078488	485						

Table S3 Up-regulated miRNAs

sRNA	DEX_readcount	TBI_readcount	log2FoldChange	pval	padj
rno-miR-3065-5p	3560.24711	1680.894791	0.97695	2.25E-06	0.00032186
rno-miR-338-3p	3560.627362	1680.894791	0.97716	2.23E-06	0.00032186
rno-miR-142-3p	281.0159749	159.351363	0.76147	1.31E-05	0.0014096
rno-miR-24-1-5p	573.2919838	384.8106147	0.55729	2.50E-05	0.0015301
rno-miR-219a-2-3p	36739.70448	22631.77568	0.65805	5.78E-05	0.0019065
rno-miR-219b	36687.40718	22580.41356	0.65918	5.63E-05	0.0019065
rno-miR-3074	428.5940572	277.2571469	0.6022	4.72E-05	0.0019065
rno-miR-34a-5p	1312.059849	783.7047226	0.69515	6.68E-05	0.0020463
rno-miR-24-3p	23119.69043	18297.57326	0.33195	0.00017732	0.0047545
rno-miR-3065-3p	4751.197976	2709.367188	0.73452	0.00029166	0.0065855
rno-miR-338-5p	4850.017585	2770.515281	0.73279	0.00028839	0.0065855
rno-miR-181a-5p	58233.87567	35823.07747	0.6481	0.00042658	0.0084069
rno-miR-181b-5p	17260.45083	10464.51886	0.66439	0.00042964	0.0084069
rno-miR-674-3p	3006.784495	2036.145624	0.52976	0.0010606	0.018383
rno-miR-206-3p	253.078875	152.2944791	0.65913	0.0021246	0.030382
rno-let-7d-3p	1459.045047	1020.833663	0.48547	0.002469	0.034168
rno-miR-423-3p	902.7767867	634.0164783	0.4811	0.0027664	0.037088
rno-miR-219a-5p	178.1591974	98.51790567	0.72656	0.0035005	0.042906

Table S4 Down-regulated miRNAs

sRNA	DEX_readcount	TBI_readcount	log2FoldChange	pval	padj
rno-miR-7a-5p	435097.3693	783697.9923	-0.80392	2.63E-07	0.00011269
rno-miR-873-5p	941.1774494	1618.701615	-0.73274	1.75E-05	0.0015006
rno-miR-135a-3p	217.3176405	378.9180432	-0.74337	2.14E-05	0.0015301
rno-miR-3579	2004.125885	2799.341916	-0.46856	4.09E-05	0.0019065
rno-miR-380-5p	2004.651077	2802.510805	-0.46986	3.72E-05	0.0019065
rno-miR-7a-2-3p	304.5941613	511.4763462	-0.69608	5.38E-05	0.0019065
rno-miR-6331	885.9687917	1214.636031	-0.44204	0.00014881	0.0042559
rno-miR-539-3p	834.6599286	1166.582415	-0.46587	0.0002534	0.0063947
rno-miR-379-5p	51224.19295	69256.1727	-0.42184	0.00043112	0.0084069
rno-miR-431	840.9467138	1134.098679	-0.41573	0.00083049	0.01549
rno-miR-770-3p	1232.999289	1670.748784	-0.42183	0.0010713	0.018383
rno-miR-7b	42416.92922	65476.64811	-0.58089	0.001309	0.021599
rno-miR-152-3p	2306.436134	3910.824602	-0.6804	0.001544	0.024533
rno-miR-488-5p	44.05245606	75.19996613	-0.68234	0.0018047	0.026698
rno-miR-667-5p	132.3334002	200.2719997	-0.55831	0.0017463	0.026698
rno-miR-873-3p	284.8529718	454.0614683	-0.60966	0.002957	0.038442
rno-miR-664-2-5p	213.6551185	288.7347305	-0.41984	0.0033801	0.042649

Table S7 Selected target genes of the up-regulated miRNAs

sRNA_id	mRNA_id	mRNA_name
rno-miR-142-3p	ENSRNOG00000005108	Wfs1
rno-miR-34a-5p	ENSRNOG00000056558	Gabra3
rno-miR-24-3p	ENSRNOG00000011858	Unc5d
rno-miR-3065-3p	ENSRNOG00000010516	Plau
rno-miR-3065-3p	ENSRNOG00000018384	Adam12
rno-miR-674-3p	ENSRNOG00000010841	Col8a2

Table S8 Selected target genes of the down-regulated miRNAs

sRNA_id	mRNA_id	mRNAname
rno-miR-873-5p	ENSRNOG00000015520	Ticrr
rno-miR-873-5p	ENSRNOG00000045924	RT1-T24-3
rno-miR-135a-3p	ENSRNOG00000004444	Ikzf1
rno-miR-135a-3p	ENSRNOG00000027938	RGD1562037
rno-miR-3579	ENSRNOG00000022640	Siglec8
rno-miR-6331	ENSRNOG00000002776	Sell
rno-miR-431	ENSRNOG00000016575	Tnfrsf1b
rno-miR-770-3p	ENSRNOG00000011781	Oplah
rno-miR-152-3p	ENSRNOG00000021098	Rasgrp2
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000001113	Mmd2
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000001143	Cit
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000002045	Anxa3
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000007102	Acss1
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000007574	Padi2
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000008421	Klh5
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000008857	Adamts10
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000013825	Rap1gap
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000019659	Aspa
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000024382	Fcgr3a
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000027938	RGD1562037
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000029528	Cbs
rno-miR-667-5p	ENSRNOG00000031443	Havcr2
rno-miR-664-2-5p	ENSRNOG00000042041	Gal3st1