

MicroRNA-132 promotes neurons cell apoptosis and activates Tau phosphorylation by targeting GTDC-1 in Alzheimer's disease

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Abstract. – OBJECTIVE: Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a neurodegenerative disorder with limited success in the prognosis of patients worldwide. The microRNA (miRNA) technology shows an encouraging trend in the therapeutics of AD. The study aimed to investigate the role of miR-132 and its underlying mechanism involving neuronal apoptosis and Tau phosphorylation in the pathophysiology of AD.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: Frozen postmortem brain samples and neuronal cells were used as the specimens. The expression of miR-132 was assessed in AD and mild-cognitive (MCI) group by quantitative Real Time-PCR. Reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (qRT-PCR) when, miR-132 mimic, ASO-miR-132, and corresponding controls were transfected into necrotic cells. Flow cytometry was used to detect cell apoptosis in necrotic cells. qRT-PCR, Western blot, and immunoprecipitation were used to quantify and identify apoptosis-related proteins (Bax and Bcl-2), Tau phosphorylation, CDK-5, and GTDC-1 levels in necrotic cells. Furthermore, Dual-Luciferase reporter assay was used to predict a direct target of miR-132.

RESULTS: The expression of miR-132 was significantly higher in patients with MCI and AD compared to the normal group. Overexpression of miR-132 induced neuronal apoptosis by increasing Bax and decreasing Bcl-2 and also regulated phosphorylation of Tau, Rb, Histone H1, and p53 expressions. Besides, GTDC-1 was identified as a direct target gene of miR-132. However, GTDC-1 markedly reversed the effect of miR-132 on cell apoptosis and Tau phosphorylation.

CONCLUSIONS: MiR-132 plays an important role in the pathogenesis of AD via regulation of cell apoptosis and GTDC-1/CDK-5/Tau phosphorylation signaling mechanism. It may be a potential therapeutic target in patients with AD.

Key Words:

Alzheimer's disease, miR-132, Apoptosis, Tau phosphorylation, GTDC-1.

Introduction

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a common neurodegenerative disease in the elderly people. It is characterized by neuropathological hallmarks that include amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles, neuropil threads, and dystrophic neurites¹. The abnormally hyperphosphorylated Tau protein gets aggregated into bundles of filaments and is seen as intraneuronal neurofibrillary tangles of paired helical filaments (PHF)². Neurofibrillary degeneration of abnormally hyperphosphorylated Tau proteins is a significant component of AD pathogenesis³. Tau proteins are not limited only to AD, which is also considered as a vital component of various other neurodegenerative diseases, such as progressive supranuclear palsy (PSP), corticobasal degeneration (CBD), Pick's disease (PiD), and argyrophilic grain disease⁴.

Normally, the function of microtubule-associated protein (MAP) is to stabilize the microtubules for promoting neurite growth^{5,6}. Tau isoforms with three (3R) or four (4R) microtubule binding repeats arise from exclusion or inclusion of exon 10 of the human MAPT gene on chromosome 17. The 3R Tau isoforms predominate in the developing brain contrary to those in the adult brain where both 3R and 4R Tau are expressed in equal amounts⁷. Any mutation in the MAPT gene causes frontotemporal dementia with parkinsonism and is characterized by intraneuronal aggregates of hyperphosphorylated Tau⁸⁻¹⁰. Fur-

thermore, Tau kinases and phosphatases could cause Tau dysfunction and contribute to neurodegenerative disease pathophysiology¹¹.

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are a class of small non-coding transcripts, which have been reported to regulate different biological processes in several neurodegenerative diseases¹². Recent studies^{13,14} have shown that the levels of some specific miRNAs such as miR-34a, miR-125b, and miR-146a were elevated during the disease progression. The up-regulation of these different miRNAs could lead to cell cycle entry (CCE) in cultured post-mitotic neurons. Absalon et al¹⁵ revealed that the up-regulation of miR-26b in AD could activate CCE, Tau phosphorylation, and apoptosis in post-mitotic neurons. CCE suggests neuronal cell cycle regulatory failure leading to cell death is a significant component in AD pathogenesis¹⁶. Furthermore, miRNA profiling and qRT-PCR analysis have directly proven the correlation between miRNA and AD¹⁷.

MiR-132 is located on chromosome 17 in human, which has been reported to exert anti-inflammatory and memory-promoting functions in the nervous system¹⁸. Wong et al¹⁹ suggested that miR-132 could control neuronal survival and directly modulate PTEN/AKT/FOXO3 signaling axis in AD neurodegeneration. Additionally, miR-132 has been found consistently down-regulated in AD, and the levels correlated with the severity of Tau pathology. Spillantini et al²⁰ showed *in vitro* that miR-132 could regulate Tau alternative splicing by targeting poly(ADP-ribose) polymerase binding protein 2 (PTBP2). Smith et al²¹ found *in vivo* that miR-132 was directly up-regulated by endogenous Tau, and its expression, phosphorylation, and aggregation. However, the effects of miR-132 on the pathophysiology and mechanism of AD remain not fully investigated.

In the present study, we aimed to explore the role of miR-132 as a potential biomarker in AD and understand the possible underlying mechanisms involved in miR-132 and Tau phosphorylation mediated neuronal apoptosis. The findings provided new ideas and strategies for clinical treatment of AD.

Materials and Methods

Sample Collection and Preparation

Frozen human *postmortem* brain specimens were collected from the Harvard Brain Tissue Resource Center. These specimens were divid-

ed into two patient groups of 10 mild cognitive impairment (MCI), 10 AD patients, and normal controls. The samples collection was performed in accordance with the policies of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, and approved by the institutional review board.

Human Cortical Neuron Culture

The human fatal cortical tissues of postnatal age of 16 weeks were provided by Advanced Bioscience Resources. The tissues were washed with PBS, cut into small pieces, and digested with Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's Medium (DMEM; Gibco, Grand Island, NY, USA), cleaned (meninges were removed) and cut into 3 mm³ sizes using forceps. The tissues were pre-digested in 0.25% trypsin (Gibco, Grand Island, NY, USA) and was incubated for 20 min at 37°C with occasional swirling. Trypsin was washed off from the tissues. Furthermore, 1 ml of PR medium was used to wash the tissue twice (DMEM with 10% fetal bovine serum, 2 mM L-glutamine, 1 mM sodium pyruvate, and antibiotics). The tissue dissociations were performed using 5 × with a 10 mL plastic disposable pipette. The cell suspension was filtered using a 70 µm followed by a 40 µm cell strainer. The cells were centrifuged at 300 rpm for 5 min, the supernatant was removed, and the pellet was re-suspended in 1 ml of PR medium. The cells were plated in PR medium and the medium was replaced the next day with a fresh PR medium and with a neurobasal medium on day 5.

Quantitative Real Time-Polymerase Chain Reaction (qRT-PCR)

The total RNA was extracted from frozen biopsy samples using TRIzol (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Equal portions of the white and grey matter were dissected from temporal lobe and homogenized. TaqMan microRNA Reverse transcription reagents and universal PCR master mix with microRNA Real Time-Polymerase Chain Reaction primers (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA) were used for miRNA analysis using qRT-PCR. The mRNA expression analysis was performed using 1 µg of Reverse-Transcribed total RNA with TaqMan Reverse Transcription Reagents (Applied Biosystems N808-0234, Foster City, CA, USA) and gene expression was quantified using SYBR green (Applied Biosystems SYBR Green PCR master mix, Foster City, CA, USA).

3'UTR Luciferase Reporter Assay

3'UTR Luciferase reporter plasmids and miR-132 mimic and its controls were co-transfected in the cells. The cells were harvested at 48 h after transfection and the Luciferase activity was determined with Dual-Luciferase reporter assay system on a luminometer (Berthold, LB 9507, Bad Wildbad, Germany) following the manufacturer's information. The experiments were performed in triplicates. The relative ratio of Renilla Luciferase activity to Firefly Luciferase activity was calculated for each well.

Western Blot

Briefly, the cells were lysed in radioimmunoprecipitation assay (RIPA; Beyotime, Shanghai, China) buffer (50 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.0, 150 mM NaCl, 1% NP-40, 0.5% sodium deoxycholate, 0.1% SDS) and protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche, Basel, Switzerland) for 30 min on ice and were cleared by centrifugation. The lysates (20 μ g) were boiled (at 100°C) for 5 min in 4X SDS loading buffer. The samples were separated by sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) and were transferred to a polyvinylidene difluoride (PVDF) membrane. The membranes were treated with 5% non-fat milk blocking buffer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA) then incubated with primary antibody overnight at 4°C. Immunoblotting analysis was used to detect the indicated antibodies using Immobilon Western chemiluminescent HRP substrate (ECL, Millipore, Billerica, MA, USA). The band intensities were quantified by densitometric analysis using NIH Image J (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA, USA). All the experiments were performed in triplicates to represent the results.

Immunoprecipitation Assay

The cells were harvested at day 7 after transfection in RIPA lysis buffer (50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 150 mM NaCl, 1 mM EDTA, 0.1% NP-40) and protease inhibitors. The cell lysates were prepared as described above. Furthermore, the cell lysates (200 μ g) were incubated with 1 μ g of immunoprecipitating antibody for 1 h at 4°C and then incubated overnight at 4°C with 20 μ l of anti-rabbit-IgG beads (eBioscience, San Diego, CA, USA). The immunoprecipitated complexes were washed (4 \times) with lysis buffer (centrifugation at 1000 g at 4°C for 5 min), recovered in 40 μ l 2 \times

Laemmle buffer with 50 mM fresh dithiothreitol and boiled for 5 min. The samples were loaded onto SDS-PAGE gels and analyzed by immunoblotting.

Apoptosis Assay

Identification and quantification of apoptotic cells were performed by flow cytometry analysis using Annexin V-fluorescein isothiocyanate/Propidium Iodide (FITC/PI) apoptosis detection kit (Biosea Biotechnology, Beijing, China). The cells (100,000 cells/well) were seeded in a 6 well-plate. The treated cells were washed twice and re-suspended with cold PBS buffer. The adherent and floating cells were collected and treated according to the manufacturer's instruction and measured with flow cytometer (Beckman Coulter, Fullerton, CA, USA) to differentiate apoptotic cells (Annexin V positive and PI-negative) from necrotic cells (Annexin V and PI-positive).

Statistical Analysis

In this study, the statistical analysis of the data is performed using SPSS 16.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). All the data are expressed as mean \pm standard deviation (SD). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)/ Student's t-test followed by Duncan's multiple-range test were used to assess the statistically significant differences. A p -value of < 0.05 was considered to be significant.

Results

MiR-132 Was Highly Expressed in AD

The human postmortem brain specimens were divided into three groups of normal, mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and AD, respectively. The expression of miR-132 was assessed using qRT-PCR. As shown in Figure 1, the expression of miR-132 was significantly higher in patients with MCI ($p < 0.05$) and AD ($p < 0.05$) compared to the normal group. Moreover, the expression of miR-132 was markedly higher in patients with AD than those with MCI ($p < 0.001$). These data indicated that high expression of miR-132 existed in AD brain.

MiR-132 Promoted Primary Neuronal Cell Apoptosis

The influence of miR-132 on cell apoptosis was analyzed and the results were shown in Figure 2A-2B. Cell apoptosis was significant-

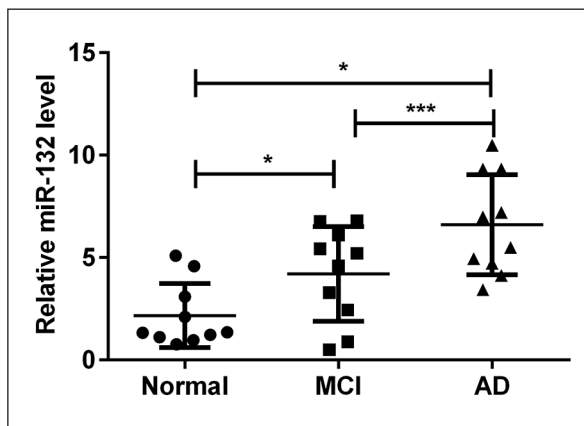


Figure 1. MiR-132 was highly expressed in AD. Thirty human postmortem brain specimens were divided into three groups of normal, MCI and AD, respectively. Then, the relative expression of miR-132 in these three groups was analyzed by qRT-PCR. MiR: microRNA; AD: Alzheimer's disease; MCI: mild cognitive impairment; qRT-PCR: quantitative Real Time-Polymerase Chain Reaction. * $p < 0.05$ and *** $p < 0.001$.

ly increased by the overexpression of miR-132 compared to the control groups ($p < 0.01$). Arbitrarily, the suppression of miR-132 remarkably decreased cell apoptosis ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, apoptosis-related factors (Bax and Bcl-2) were detected by qRT-PCR and Western blot, respectively. The results showed that the overexpression of miR-132 markedly promoted the expression of Bax ($p < 0.05$) and inhibited the expression of Bcl-2 ($p < 0.05$). The expression of miR-132 showed the opposite effects on the two factors expressions (Figure 2D). These data revealed that miR-132 may promote primary neuron apoptosis by affecting the expression of apoptosis-related factors expressions.

MiR-132 Activated Tau Phosphorylation in Primary Neurons

The effect of miR-132 on phosphorylation sites were explored by Western blot. The results showed that there were 3 increasing phosphorylation sites by the overexpression of miR-132 (Figure 3A). Cyclic-dependent kinase-5 (CDK-5) is an important kinase that is involved in phosphorylation of Tau protein. Therefore, the expression of CDK5 was measured by Immunoprecipitation (anti-p35/25) and Western blot. The results showed that the overexpression of miR-132 promoted the expression of CDK5 and the accumulation of p35/p25 (Figure 3B). Immunoprecipitation studies also showed that miR-132

precipitation studies also showed that miR-132 promoted the expression of CDK5 and phosphorylation sites (Figure 3C). These results revealed that miR-132 could activate Tau phosphorylation in primary neurons.

Glycosyl Transferase Like Domain Containing -1 (GTDC-1) Was a Direct Target of MiR-132

The HEK-293 cells were used as a model to investigate the target gene of miR-132. The relationship between 3'UTR miR-132 and GTDC-1 was correlated using Luciferase reporter assay. The results showed that fluorescence intensity of GTDC-1 increased by overexpression of miR-132 but increased by suppression of miR-132 ($p < 0.01$; Figure 4A). However, no significant differences were found in GTDC-1 mut. In addition, qRT-PCR and Western blot analysis showed that expression of GTDC-1 was down-regulated by miR-132 overexpression, but up-regulated by miR-132 suppression ($p < 0.01$; Figure 4D and 4E). These data confirmed that GTDC-1 was a direct target of miR-132 and was negatively regulated by miR-132.

GTDC-1 Inhibited Neuronal Cell Apoptosis and Tau Phosphorylation

To further explore the effect of GTDC-1 on cell apoptosis and Tau phosphorylation, flow cytometry and Western blot assays were performed. The results showed that GTDC-1 markedly inhibited neuronal cells apoptosis compared to the control group ($p < 0.01$; Figure 5A). Additionally, GTDC-1 decreased the expression of Bax and increased the expression of Bcl-2 (Figure 5B). Furthermore, as shown in Figure 5C, GTDC-1 remarkably inhibited phosphorylation of Tau, Rb, and Histone H1 levels. These results indicated that GTDC-1 could inhibit neuronal cell apoptosis and Tau phosphorylation.

Discussion

AD is a neurodegenerative disease caused by various factors and there is still no effective treatment option for the management of AD²²⁻²³. The mechanisms involved in the pathogenesis of AD, especially those which lead to neuronal degeneration and neuronal loss, are incomplete and speculative. Therefore, further investigation of

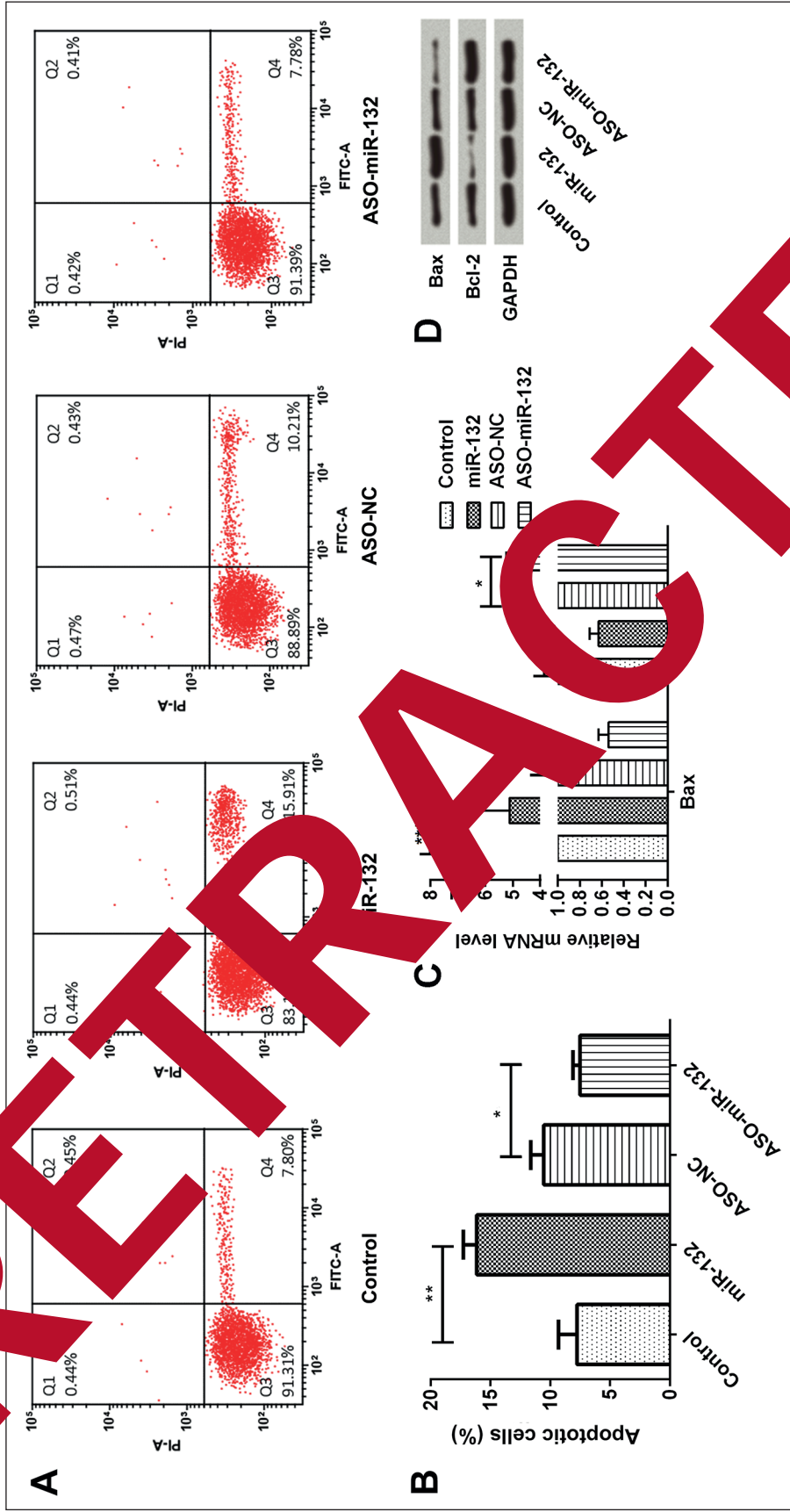


Figure 2. MiR-132 promoted primary neuronal cell apoptosis. Primary neuronal cells were transfected with miR-132 mimics or miR-132 inhibitor ASO-miR-132 to overexpress or suppress miR-132 expression. **A, B,** The percentages of apoptotic neurons in each group of transfected with different miR-132 vectors were determined by flow cytometry. **C, D,** Relative mRNA and protein expressions of apoptosis-associated factors were examined by qRT-PCR and Western blot. MiR: miR-132; ASO: antisense oligonucleotides; qRT-PCR: quantitative Real Time-Polymerase Chain Reaction. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ and *** $p < 0.001$.

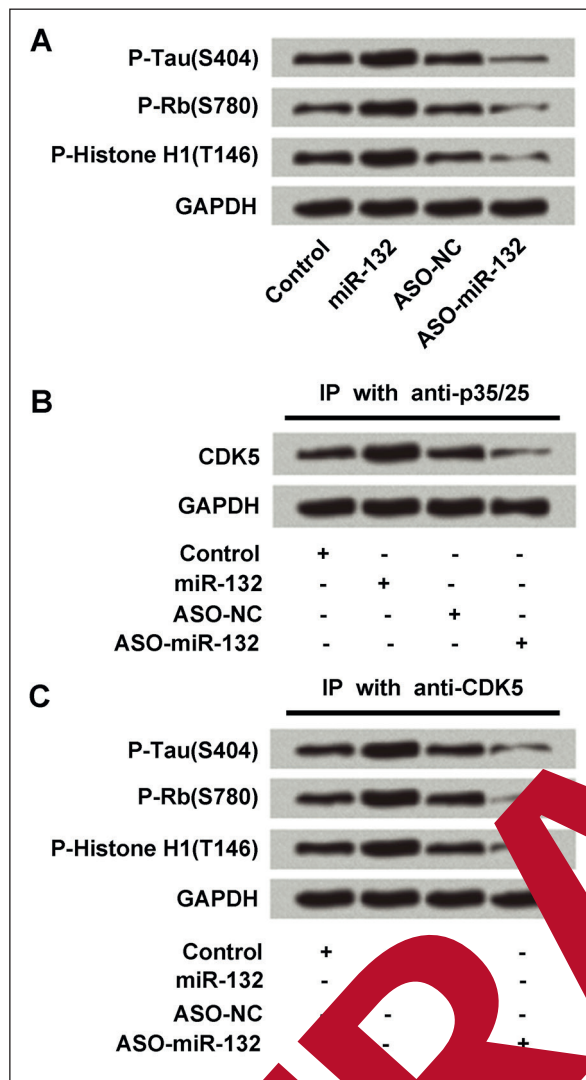


Figure 3. MiR-132 promoted Tau phosphorylation in primary neurons. Primary neuronal cells were transfected with miR-132 mimic or ASO-miR-132. **A**, Protein levels of phosphorylation of Tau, Rb and Histone H1 were tested by Western blot after immunoprecipitation with anti-p35/25 and anti-CDK5, protein levels of CDK-5 and **C**, phosphorylation of Tau, Rb and Histone H1 were measured by Western blot again. MiR: microRNA; ASO: antisense oligonucleotide; CDK5: cyclic-dependent kinase-5.

pathogenesis of AD and search for the specific and sensitive biomarkers will be helpful for the early diagnosis of the disease²⁴. In this study, we explored the functions of miR-132 in AD. Highly expressed miR-132 was observed in patients with MCI and AD. Moreover, miR-132 overexpression induced neuronal apoptosis and also increased phosphorylation of Tau, Rb, Histone H1 and CDK-5 expressions. Besides, whether GTDC-1 was a direct target gene of miR-132 has been clar-

ified. The promoting effect of miR-132 on cell apoptosis and Tau phosphorylation was reversed by GTDC-1.

The role of miRNAs in the pathogenesis of neurodegenerative disorders is still in the preliminary stages and offers many opportunities for further understanding the mechanism of neuronal death²⁵. Recently, altered expressions of miRNAs have been implicated in several neurodegenerative disorders²². The prominent effects of miRNAs on various cellular events such as cellular proliferation, apoptosis, DNA repair and gene expression at the post-transcriptional level in a variety of signaling pathways is worth mentioning in this context²⁶. MiR-132 was identified as a specific miRNA which was downregulated in AD patients. It is well known that miR-132 could regulate some target genes (GTDC-1 and Tau hyperphosphorylation) thereby causing programmed cell death signaling networks¹⁷. Therefore, the present work aims to understand the role of miR-132 in the pathophysiology of AD and extrapolate its function significance in early diagnosis and treatment of the disease. Our study first detected the expression level of miR-132 in the patients with MCI and AD. The results revealed that miR-132 was highly expressed in patients with MCI and AD. Similar with Xie et al²⁶, we demonstrated that the levels of miR-206 and miR-132 in MCI patients' serum were markedly increased compared to normal controls. These data indicated that miR-132 might be involved in regulation of the pathophysiology of AD.

The previous work has established the neuro-modulatory function of miR-132 in neurodegenerative cell model²⁷. A large number of neuronal losses are observed during AD mainly due to apoptosis that is induced by the expression of apoptosis-related genes²⁸. Therefore, the level of neuronal apoptosis might reflect the situation of AD to some extent. Wong et al¹⁹ has shown that the downregulation of miR-132 could induce expression of pro-apoptotic proteins (Bima activated caspase-3 signaling) leading to neuronal apoptosis at both basal and stress conditions. Transient activation of apoptotic pathways results in conditions such as local synapse elimination and dendritic pruning without leading to cell death²⁹. Low levels of miR-132 in neuronal cells are likely to be associated with dendritic decay and neuronal cell death in the AD patients and lead to both synaptic and neuronal loss with the progression of the disease³⁰. In the present work, we observed that miR-132 could promote

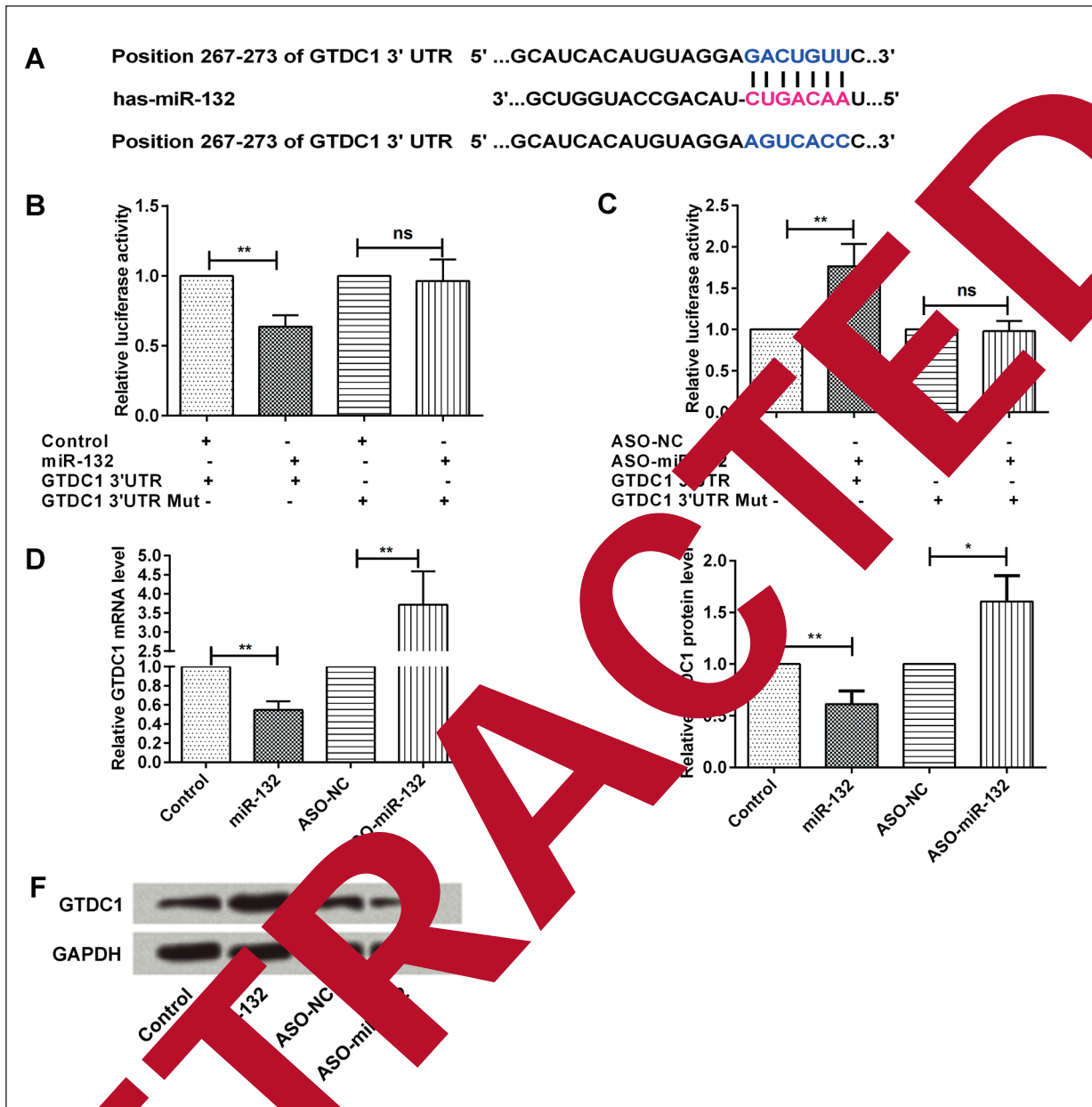


Figure 4 GTDC-1 was a direct target of miR-132. Primary neuronal cells were transfected with miR-132 mimic and ASO-miR-132. **A**, The predicted GTDC-1 binding site on miR-132 was analyzed by TargetScan and microRNA database. **B**, **C**, GTDC-1 was predicted as a target of miR-132 using Luciferase reporter assay. **D**, **E**, **F**, Relative mRNA and protein levels of GTDC-1 were assessed by qRT-PCR and Western blot. GTDC-1: glycosyl transferase like domain containing-1; miR: microRNA; ASO: antisense oligonucleotides; qRT-PCR: quantitative Real Time-Polymerase Chain Reaction. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ represent significant difference.

the neuronal cells apoptosis by the up-regulation of Bax and down-regulation of Bcl-2, suggesting a promoting effect of miR-132 on neuronal cell apoptosis. Currently, it is generally accepted that changes in the regulation of Tau expression and metabolism are involved in the development of AD and Tau protein seems to be a predict-

ed target for miR-132³¹. Hyperphosphorylation of Tau proteins has been targeted in the past to improve the abilities of memory and learning³². Therefore, the therapeutic target of miR-132, which modulates Tau phosphorylation, plays an essential role in AD treatment. Truncation of Tau protein makes it a favorable target for hy-

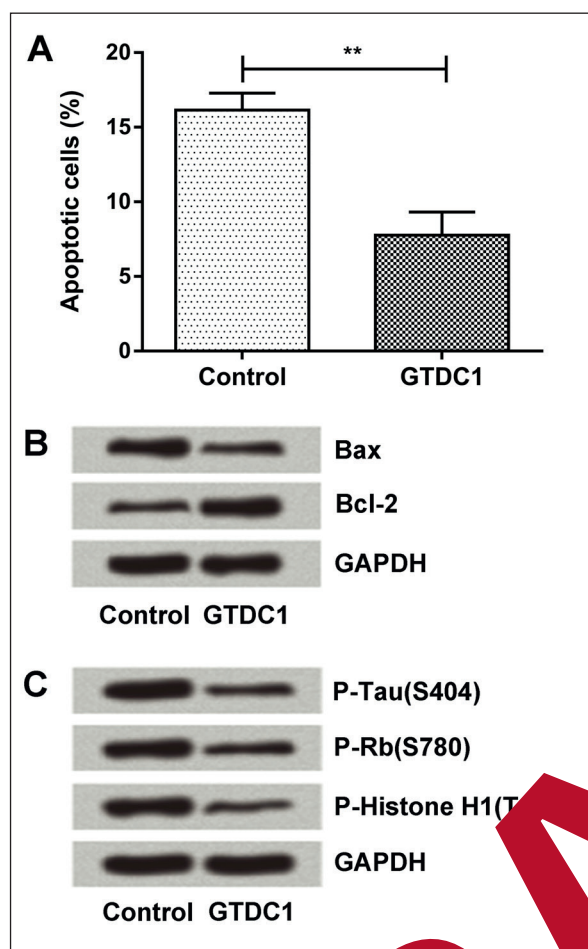


Figure 5. GTDC-1 inhibited neuronal cell apoptosis and Tau phosphorylation. **A**, Neuronal cell apoptosis was detected by flow cytometry. Protein levels of **B**, apoptosis-related factors and **C** phosphorylation of Tau, Rb and Histone H1 were determined by Western blot. GTDC-1: glycosyl transferase domain containing -1. $**p < 0.01$.

perphosphorylation. Experiments in transgenic rats expressing human Tau (containing full Tau 151-391) show neurofibrillary degeneration in the cells, implicating the significance of Tau hyperphosphorylation in a progressive AD disease model. Based on these previous studies, we found that miR-132 could activate Tau phosphorylation in primary neurons. Through these findings, it might be suggested that miR-132 functions as a modulator of Tau protein expression and Tau mediated neuronal functions in an AD condition. A number of previous studies have identified P300 as the target gene of miR-132 to extrapolate its function in an indication^{19,34}. Some genes such as p250GAP³⁵, methyl-CpG binding protein 2 (MeCP2)³⁶, PTBP2³⁷ and P300³⁸ were reported to be directly interacting with the miRNAs. In neuronal apathies, PTBP-2 and P300 have been established to be directly interacted with the infamous Tau proteins, which form the significant core³⁹. MiR-132 mediated dysregulation of PTBP-2 expression is known to

contribute in the abnormal splicing of Tau protein during progressive supranuclear palsy in patients³⁸. Moreover, P300 is also an established target for miR-132, which is involved in miR-132 mediated neuronal death and Tau acetylations in various taupathies³⁹. However, whether GTDC-1 also participated in miR-132 regulated neuronal apoptosis and Tau phosphorylation has not been explored. In the present work, we provided evidence that GTDC-1 was a direct target of miR-132 and it was negatively regulated by miR-132. GTDC-1 has shown to inhibit neuronal apoptosis and Tau phosphorylation, indicating that miR-132 is an ideal biomarker in therapeutic interventional studies for AD.

Conclusions

These results demonstrate that miR-132 could induce neurons cell apoptosis and activate Tau phosphorylation by targeting GTDC-1, indicating

the promoting effect of miR-132 on the development of AD. The current study further suggests that miR-132 is an essential molecule contributing in the maintenance of normal neuronal cell physiology and miR-132 may be an important candidate for therapeutic intervention of AD.

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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