Adipocyte glucocorticoid receptor deficiency attenuates aging- and HFD-induced obesity, and impairs the feeding-fasting transition

Short title: Adipocyte GR and systemic energy metabolism

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1

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Key words: Glucocorticoids, adipose tissue, energy metabolism, fasting, obesity

Word count: 4672

Number of tables and figures: 8

Non-standard abbreviations

AA: Amino acids; **Abhd5**: Comparative gene identification 58 (**CGI58**); **Acaca**: Acyl-CoA carboxylase; **Actb**: β-Actin; **Adipoq**: Adiponectin; **Adra2**: Alpha-2-adrenergic receptor; **Adrb**: β-Adrenergic receptor; **Angptl4**: Angiopoietin-like 4; **BAT**: Brown adipose tissue; **Cd36**: Platelet glycoprotein 4; **Cebpb**: CCAAT/enhancer binding protein beta; **CT**: Computed tomography; **Dgat2**: Diacylglycerol-acyltransferase-3; **EE**: Energy expenditure; **FA**: Fatty acid; **FAO**: Fatty acid oxidation; **Fabp4**: Fatty acid binding protein 4; **Fasn**: Fatty acid synthase; **Fgf21**: Fibroblast growth factor 21; **Gapdh**: Glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase; **GCs**: Glucocorticoids; **Gnai**: Inhibitory G-protein α-subunit isoforms; **Gnas**: Stimulatory G-protein α -subunit (G_S α); **Gpat1**: Glycerol-3-phosphate acyltransferase 1; **Gpat3**: Glycerol-3-phosphate acyltransferase 1; **GR**: Glucocorticoid receptor; **GTT**: Glucose tolerance test; **HFD**: High fat diet; **HGP**: Hepatic glucose production; **ITT**: Insulin tolerance test; **LC-HRMS**: Liquid chromatography–high resolution mass spectrometry; **Lipe**: Hormone sensitive lipase (**HSL**); **MRI**: Magnetic resonance imaging; **NEFA**: Non-esterified fatty acids; **Pck1**: Phosphoenolpyruvate carboxykinase; **Pgc1a**: Peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma coactivator 1-alpha; **PKA**: Protein kinase A; **Pnpla2**: Adipose triglyceride lipase (**ATGL**); **Ppara**: Peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor alpha; **Pparg**: Peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma; **PTT**: pyruvate tolerance test; **RER**: Respiratory exchange ratio; **Slc27a1:** Fatty acid transport protein 1; **Slc27a4**: Long-chain fatty acid transport protein 4; **SNS**: Sympathetic nervous system; **TG**: Triglycerides; **Ucp1**: Uncoupling protein 1; **WAT**: White adipose tissue; **11β-HSD1**: 11β-Hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase 1

Abstract

Glucocorticoids (GCs) are important regulators of systemic energy metabolism, while aberrant GC action is linked to metabolic dysfunctions. Yet, the extent to which normal and pathophysiologic energy metabolism depend on the glucocorticoid receptor (GR) in adipocytes remains unclear. Here, we demonstrate that adipocyte GR-deficiency in mice significantly impacts systemic metabolism in different energetic states. Plasma metabolomics and biochemical analyses revealed a marked global effect of GR-deficiency on systemic metabolite abundance and thus, substrate partitioning in fed and fasted states. This correlated with a decreased lipolytic capacity of GR-deficient adipocytes under post-absorptive and fasting conditions, resulting from impaired signal transduction from β-adrenergic receptors to adenylate cyclase. Upon prolonged fasting, the impaired lipolytic response resulted in abnormal substrate utilization and lean mass wasting. Conversely, GR-deficiency attenuated aging-/diet-associated obesity, adipocyte hypertrophy and liver steatosis. Systemic glucose tolerance was improved in obese GR-deficient mice, which was associated with increased insulin signaling in muscle and adipose tissue.

We conclude that the GR in adipocytes exerts central, but diverging roles in the regulation of metabolic homeostasis depending on the energetic state: The adipocyte GR is indispensable for the feeding-fasting transition, but also promotes adiposity and associated metabolic disorders in fat-fed and aged mice.

4

Energy homeostasis requires integration of multiple signals between the central nervous system and the periphery to adjust substrate distribution in accordance to metabolic demands. The steroid hormones glucocorticoids (GCs) are important integrators in the body's adaptation to energetic stress by regulating several components of energy homeostasis including glucose and lipid metabolism (1; 2). Consequently, states of chronic GC exposure are associated with metabolic dysfunctions $(1, 2)$. The cellular effects of GCs are mediated in large part through activation of the glucocorticoid receptor (GR). The understanding of how tissue-specific functions of the GC-GR axis contribute to systemic energy metabolism has been substantially extended by mouse models of discrete GR-deficiency in liver and muscle $(1; 3; 4)$.

The most abundant energy reservoir in mammals is white adipose tissue (WAT), which allows non-AT to function normally under conditions of over-nutrition or fasting (5; 6). Thus, an appropriate control in WAT to store and release energy in response to changes in nutrient availability is critical for metabolic homeostasis. GCs were shown to induce lipolysis (7-9), to stimulate lipogenesis in the presence of insulin (10; 11), and to promote lipid storage, uptake, and mobilization (2; 9; 12). An increase of local GC regeneration by the enzyme 11βhydroxysteroid dehydrogenase 1 (11β-HSD1) within WAT suggests a role of the adipocyte GC-GR axis in common obesity (2; 12-16). These lines of evidence are consistent with a central role of GCs in regulating energy metabolism. However, the exact physiological importance of the adipocyte GR for the maintenance of systemic metabolic homeostasis is yet to be determined.

To delineate this undefined role of the GR, we used an adipocyte-specific gene knockout strategy in mice. We demonstrate that adipocyte GR significantly impacts systemic nutrient partitioning in different energetic states. While GR-deficiency disrupts the feeding-fasting transition, it ameliorates obesity and its associated metabolic disorders, thus, exerting opposing roles in the regulation of metabolic homeostasis.

Research design and methods

Animal experiments

Adipocyte-specific GR-deficient mice (Nr3c1^{tm2Gsc}Tg(Adipoq-cre)1Evdr: **GR**^{∆Adip}; C57BL/6 x FVB/N) were generated by crossing *Nr3c1 floxed* (17) with *Adipoq-cre* mice (18). *Adipoqcre* negative littermates served as controls (Nr3c1^{tm2Gs}: **ctrl**). Animals were housed under standardized conditions (12h dark/12h light cycle) and fed a regular diet (Ssniff EF, R/M Kontrolle, Ssniff GmbH, Germany). For high fat diet (HFD) experiments mice received either Ssniff EF acc.D12492 (34.6% crude fat) or Ssniff EF D12450B mod. Animal studies were approved by the Austrian government and the Medical University Vienna (BMWF-66.009/0132-II/3b/2013) and by the regional commission Tuebingen, Germany (TVA1126). Except for HFD and aging-experiments, 8-week-old male mice were used.

Body composition was determined using EchoMRI^{™-100H} (EchoMRI LLC, USA). μ-CT was performed with *in vivo* X-ray microtomograph Skyscan 1176 (RJL Micro+Analytic GmbH, Germany). Fat volume was reconstructed and calculated using NRecon (Version 1.6.9.18) and CTAn (Version 1.14.4.1+).

Glucose and pyruvate tolerance tests (GTT; PTT) were performed in 12-16h-fasted mice; insulin tolerance tests (ITT) were performed on 4h-fasted mice. Glucose (2 g/kg) was administered orally or by intraperitoneal injection (HFD experiments); pyruvate (2 g/kg) and insulin (0.75 U/kg) were given intraperitoneally. Blood glucose levels were determined from tail vein using a glucometer.

Cold tolerance: 4h-fasted mice were housed separately with free access to water at 4°C. Rectal temperature was measured at indicated time points using a BIO-TK9882 thermometer (Biosep, France).

Energy expenditure (EE), locomotor activity, respiratory exchange ratio (RER) and food intake were measured by combined indirect calorimetry over 93.4h (PhenoMaster; TSE Systems, Germany) as described previously (19).

Metabolite and hormone measurements

β-ketones were measured from tail vein blood (Freestyle Precision Xceed, Abbott, USA). Non-esterified fatty acids (NEFA) were determined with the NEFA-HR(2) kit (Wako Chemicals, Germany), glycerol with the Free Glycerol Reagent (Sigma-Aldrich, USA), triglycerides (TG), and cholesterol were measured with a Reflotron Plus analyzer (Roche, Switzerland). Insulin, corticosterone and FGF21 were determined by ELISA (Ultra-Sensitive Mouse Insulin ELISA, Crystal Chem, USA; Corticosterone ELISA, Enzo Life Sciences, USA; Mouse/Rat FGF-21 Quantikine-ELISA, R&D Systems, USA). Liver TG content was determined using a Triglyceride Colorimetric Assay (Cayman Chemical, USA).

Lipolysis Assays

Epididymal WAT was surgically removed and lipolysis was measured as described (20). Stimulations were performed with insulin (30 ng/ml), isoproterenol, forskolin, formoterol or CL-316,243 (all 10 μ M) for 120min. NEFA was determined as described, cAMP content in WAT explants by the cAMP complete ELISA (Enzo Life Sciences). Measurements were normalized to tissue weights.

Histology

Tissues were fixed in 4%-buffered formalin, paraffin-embedded, sectioned and stained with hematoxylin-eosin using standard procedures. Adipocyte sizes were quantified from at least 3-5 different fields/mouse and at least 20-60 cells/field using ImageJ (Rasband, W.S., ImageJ,

U.S. NIH, Bethesda, Maryland http://imagej.nih.gov/ij/1997-2011.). Histological evaluation of livers was performed by a board-certified pathologist (JH).

Molecular analyses

RNA was extracted using commercial kits (Qiagen, Germany; Peqlab, Germany). RNA (1µg) was reverse-transcribed using cDNA synthesis kits (Fermentas, Germany; Applied Biosystems, USA). Quantitative real-time PCR was performed on an Eppendorf Realplex system using the Taq DNA polymerase kit (Eppendorf, Germany) or on a ViiATM7RT-PCR System using the Platinum Sybr Green qPCR Supermix-UDG (Life Technologies; USA). Gene expression was normalized to *Gapdh* or *Actb* mRNA*.* Primer sequences are provided in Supplementary Table 1.

Western blot analyses (40 µg protein) were performed as described (21). Primary antibodies against HSC70 (sc-7298), GR (sc-1004), AKT (sc-8312), G_S α (sc-823), PPAR α (sc-9000; all Santa Cruz Biotechnology, USA), pS473-AKT (#9271), UCP1 (#14670), ATGL (#2439), pSer563-HSL (#4139), pSer660-HSL (#4126), HSL (#4107), pPKA Substrate (RRXS*/T*, #9624; all Cell Signaling, USA) and β-Actin (A1978, Sigma-Aldrich) were used.

Plasma LC-MS metabolomics

Animals were anesthetized with ketamine/xylazin (i.p., 10 mg/kg) or CO_2 inhalation. 500–700 µl blood was drawn via cardiac puncture, filled into lithium-heparin- or EDTA-coated tubes (Greiner Bio-One, Austria) and centrifuged in less than 30 minutes after collection (15 minutes, 7000 rpm, 4°C). Plasma was snap-frozen and stored at -80°C.

Metabolites were analyzed by targeted LC-HRMS metabolomics according to (22) by hydrophilic interaction LC at the HEALTH Institute for Biomedicine and Health Sciences, JOANNEUM RESEARCH (Graz, Austria) as described previously (23): Samples were processed according to (24). Raw data were converted into mzXML by msConvert

(ProteoWizard Toolkit v3.0.5), and metabolites were targeted-searched by the in-house developed tool PeakScout, with a reference list containing accurate mass and retention times in agreement with standards outlined by (25). Pure substances of all analytes, except lipids, were run on the same system to obtain exact reference retention times and fragmentation spectra. The results for 6 samples had to be removed from analysis due to considerable outlier behavior in PCA (two from GR^{∆Adip} HFD-cohort, one from each, fasted control-, fasted $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ -, fed control- and $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ -cohort).

Statistical Analyses

Statistics were performed with GraphPad Prism® or R (26) (v3.2.1, packages *stats*, *missMDA*, nlme) using Tibco[®]Spotfire[®] (v7.0.0). All data except LC-MS metabolomics are presented as mean ± SEM. Two-tailed Student's t-test or Wilcoxon rank-sum test were used for comparing two groups and one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey's, Dunns' or Bonferroni's post-hoc tests for multiple comparison. Tolerance tests and body growth curves were analyzed with repeated-measures two-way ANOVA followed by Bonferroni's post-hoc tests. *P*<0.05 was considered to be statistically significant. Data for EE were analyzed using ANCOVA with body weight and body composition (fat and lean mass) as covariates as previously suggested (27). For LC-MS metabolomics PCA analysis was performed centered and scaled to unit variance (R function *prcomp*). Missing values were imputed by a regularized expectationmaximization (R function *imputePCA* and *estim ncpPCA*). Log₁₀ transformed data was found to be sufficiently normal distributed according to Kolmogorov-Smirnov (86% of all metabolites were normally distributed) and sufficiently homoscedastic according to Levene (84% of all metabolites were homoscedastic). Differences between independent groups were analyzed by ANOVA (R function *aov*) followed by Benjamini-Hochberg (R function *p.adjust*) post-hoc test.

Results

Abnormal plasma metabolome in GR∆Adip mice

Deletion of *Nr3c1* was confirmed by mRNA and protein expression analyses of inguinal WAT (iWAT), epididymal WAT (eWAT), and brown adipose tissue (BAT; Fig. 1A-B). GR^{∆Adip} mice displayed no overt alterations in weights or morphology of eWAT, iWAT and BAT compartments (Supplementary Fig. 1A-B). Accordingly, adipogenic markers (*Cebpb, Pparg, Fabp4*) and adipocyte-specific genes (*Adiponectin, Leptin, Ucp1*) were not differentially expressed among genotypes (Supplementary Tab. 2).

To initially illustrate the basal metabolic signature of GR∆Adip mice, plasma samples of *ad libtum*-fed mice were analyzed by targeted LC-MS metabolomics (Supplementary Tab. 3, PCA results: Supplementary Fig. 2A). 157 metabolites were of suitable quality for multivariate statistical analysis, 20 metabolites only for univariate statistical analysis. 59 metabolites were significantly decreased (p<0.05, ANOVA) and 22 were decreased by trend $(0.05 \le p \le 0.1$, ANOVA) in GR^{\triangle Adip} mice compared to controls. The majority of decreased metabolites were related to FA/lipid metabolism (46; most pronounced in long-chain FA), amino acids metabolism (14; mainly proteogenic and branched-chain AA, which have been implicated as independent risk factors for diabetes (28)), and nucleotide metabolism (10; mainly pyrimidine metabolites; Fig. 1C, Supplementary Tab. 3). This demonstrates a considerable impact of adipocyte GR-deficiency on the plasma metabolome and thus, systemic substrate partitioning, which likely affects whole-body glucose and lipid metabolism in GR^{\triangle Adip} mice (6; 29).

Reduced lipolytic and gluconeogenic capacity in GR∆Adip mice

First, we analyzed glucose homeostasis in GR∆Adip mice. In 4h- and 16h-fasted mice, blood glucose and plasma insulin levels were not significantly altered (Fig. 2A). GTTs revealed no

differences in glucose clearance between the genotypes (Supplementary Fig. 2B). The hypoglycemic response during ITTs was similar in both genotypes (Fig. 2B); whereas blood glucose starting from 30 minutes after insulin administration was lower in $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice. This delay in post-hypoglycemic recovery suggests a reduction in counter-regulatory mechanisms such as hepatic glucose production (HGP). Insulin-induced AKT phosphorylation (Ser473) was greater in GR^{\triangle Adip} livers than in controls (Fig. 2C). This was associated with a lower TG content in GR∆Adip livers (Fig. 2D). Suppression of WAT lipolysis can indirectly reduce HGP by decreasing the influx of glycerol and NEFA (30). In absence and presence of insulin, NEFA release from eWAT explants of 4h-fasted GR^{∆Adip} mice was clearly reduced compared to controls (Fig. 2E). Yet, consistent with a comparable insulin-stimulated AKT phosphorylation in eWAT (Fig. 2C), insulin-mediated suppression of lipolysis was similar between genotypes (49% versus 51%). NEFA release from 16h-fasted GR^{ΔAdip} eWAT explants was also reduced, which was mirrored in decreased plasma NEFA (indicator for WAT lipolysis) and blood β-ketones (indicator for hepatic FA oxidation (FAO)) in 16h-fasted $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice (Fig. 2F). Blood glucose levels of 16h-fasted $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice during PTTs were lower compared to controls (Fig. 2G), reflecting reduced glucose production from the carbon precursor pyruvate. Thus, the lipolytic capacity of $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice is diminished, which correlates with a decrease in glucose production (Supplementary Fig. 2C).

Reduced thermogenesis in GR∆Adip mice

Thermogenesis in BAT requires mobilization of lipid stores, induction of β-oxidation and mitochondrial uncoupling. To evaluate BAT functionality upon adipocyte GR-deficiency, we subjected mice to a brief 4h-fast followed by a 4h exposure to 4°C. Body temperatures of $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ were slightly higher when housed at 23°C (4h-fast; p=0.072), whereas their ability to maintain stable body temperatures at 4°C was mildly reduced (Fig 3A). Despite the impaired cold-adaptation, UCP1 and PPAR α levels were similar in BAT of cold-exposed GR^{\triangle Adip} and

ctrl mice (Fig. 3B). While BAT uses FA stores to fuel thermogenesis, WAT provides energy in form of FA for utilization in BAT. Histology of BAT revealed no differences between genotypes when housed at 23°C (Supplementary Fig. 1B). Yet, upon cold exposure the amount of lipid droplets decreased to a higher extent in GR-deficient BAT (Fig 3C), suggesting that BAT lipolysis is not impaired. In contrast, plasma NEFA and β-ketone concentrations, indicators of WAT lipid mobilization and redistribution, were reduced in coldexposed $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice (Fig. 3D). Considering the requirement of external FA supply for BATmediated temperature maintenance (31), these data suggest that the reduced cold-induced thermogenesis is related to impaired WAT lipolysis and NEFA flux.

Attenuated aging-associated obesity and hepatic steatosis in GR∆Adip mice

Progressing age is linked to abnormalities of carbohydrate and lipid metabolism. Thus, we analyzed whether GR-deficiency would lead to beneficial metabolic effects at older age. Aging-associated weight gain was attenuated in $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice (Fig. 4A) and body fat was reduced compared to controls at 52 weeks of age (Fig. $34B$). Accordingly, $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice had smaller WAT compartments (Fig. 4C), in which adipocyte hypertrophy was less frequently observed (Supplementary Fig. 3A). 4h-fasted $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice displayed lower blood glucose levels and presented an overall reduction of total TG, cholesterol, NEFA and β-ketones in the circulation, whereas corticosterone level were comparable between genotypes (Supplementary Fig. 3B). Weights of $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ livers were reduced (Fig. 4C) and steatosis scores of >5% were found only in control livers (Fig. 4D).

To further characterize the phenotype of aged GR-deficient mice, we determined their metabolic parameters in a PhenoMaster metabolic cage system. GR^{∆Adip} mice had higher RER during light and dark cycles, indicating an overall preference for carbohydrates as metabolic substrate. Locomotor activity, EE, and food intake were not significantly different between genotypes (Fig. 4E, Supplementary Fig. 3C); although GR∆Adip mice consumed a slightly

higher amount of food. There was no significant effect of GR-deficiency on EE after ANCOVA with body weight, lean or fat mass as covariate (data not shown). These data indicate that neither increased physical activity/metabolic rates nor decreased food intake are determinants of reduced adiposity in aged GR∆Adip mice. Although we cannot fully exclude subtle increases in daily EE and/or locomotor activity over several months that might have contributed to reduced fat mass gain during the aging process.

Reduced HFD-induced obesity, improved glucose tolerance and hepatic steatosis in GR∆Adip mice

To investigate whether reduced susceptibility to metabolic dysfunctions also occurs upon dietinduced obesity, mice were subjected to HFD-feeding for 20 weeks. HFD-fed GR∆Adip mice gained significantly less weight than HFD-fed controls, despite similar cumulative food intake (Fig. 5A, Supplementary Fig. 4A). Reduced weight gain manifested early in HFD-fed $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice (Fig.), accompanied by lower levels of several circulating FA species and a trend towards reduced plasma NEFA (Supplementary Tab. 3, Supplementary Fig. 4B). After 2 weeks of HFD-feeding, mRNA expression of several genes critical for FA storage were either significantly reduced or reduced by trend in $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ eWAT compared to controls (Fig. 5B; Acyl-CoA carboxylase (*Acaca*), glycerol-3-phosphate acyltransferase 3 (*Gpat3*), diacylglycerol-acyltransferase-2 (*Dgat2*), phosphoenolpyruvate carboxykinase (*Pck1*) and fatty acid transport protein 1 (*Slc27a1*)). *Acaca* and *Pck1* mRNA levels showed a similar trend in GR-deficient iWAT, while there was no change in expression of fatty acid synthase (*Fasn*) and the FA transporter *Cd36* in both WAT compartment. At termination, HFD-fed $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice displayed lower WAT weights than HFD-fed controls (Supplementary Fig. 4C) and µ-CT analysis confirmed significantly decreased subcutaneous and visceral fat volume of GR∆Adip mice (Fig. 5C). Accordingly, adipocyte hypertrophy in GR∆Adip eWAT and iWAT was reduced (Fig. 5D, Supplementary Fig. 4D). Consistent with the aging cohort, plasma

corticosterone levels were not significantly different between HFD-fed ctrl and GR-deficient mice (Supplementary Fig. 4E).

Next, we asked whether GR-deficiency improves deteriorated glucose metabolism associated with HFD. Blood glucose levels trended to be lower in HFD-fed GR^{∆Adip} mice compared to controls (Fig. 6A), while their fasting plasma insulin levels were significantly lower (Fig. 6B). In agreement, HOMA-IR was decreased in HFD-fed GR^{∆Adip} mice, suggesting improved insulin sensitivity (Fig. 6C). Consistent with the lower HOMA-IR, systemic glucose tolerance of HFD-fed GR^{∆Adip} mice was improved compared to obese controls (Fig. 6D) and insulinstimulated AKT phosphorylation (Ser473) in muscle, eWAT and liver of HFD-fed $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice was increased (Fig. 56E, Supplementary Fig. 4F).

Similar to the aging cohort, adipocyte GR-deficiency attenuated HFD-induced hepatic lipid accumulation and liver weights, which was reflected in lower steatosis scores (Fig. 6F-G). Hepatic mRNA expression of *Fasn* and *Gpat1*, two rate-limiting enzymes of lipogenesis, was reduced in HFD-fed GR∆Adip mice, accompanied by diminished expression of *Pparg* and two fatty acid transporters *Cd36* and *Slc27a4* (Fig. 6H). This suggests that decelerated FA uptake and lipogenesis might contribute to lower steatosis scores in GR-deficient mice.

Thus, adipocyte GR-deficiency reduces obesity, diminishes hepatic steatosis and improves glucose tolerance in HFD-fed mice.

Impaired lipolysis disrupts the feeding-fasting transition in GR∆Adip mice

Having demonstrated that adipocyte GR promotes metabolic dysfunctions in aged and fat-fed mice, we lastly evaluated the requirement of adipocyte GR for energy homeostasis under prolonged fasting conditions. Upon 48h-fasting, total body weight loss was similar among genotypes (Supplementary Fig. 5A). Notably, all mice survived 48h-fasting and did not present symptoms of a hypoglycemic shock (i.e. trembling, seizures or unconsciousness). Body fat mass was ~2-fold higher in fasted $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice compared to controls, while their

lean mass was decreased (Fig. 7A). Accordingly, $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ WAT compartments were enlarged, while their gastrocnemius, heart and liver weights were reduced (Supplementary Fig. 5B). Consistent with their preserved fat mass, GR^{∆Adip} mice presented increased adipocyte sizes, lower plasma NEFA and glycerol concentrations, decreased hepatic TG accumulation and reduced circulating TG levels (Fig. 7B-C; Supplementary Fig. 1B, 5C-D). Blood β-ketones were substantially lower (Fig. 7C), indicating reduced FAO and ketogenesis. Hepatic PPAR α and FGF21 are key mediators of fasted states, and contribute to lipid utilization by increasing FAO in liver (32). Fasting-induced up-regulation of *Ppara* and *Fgf21* mRNA expression was impaired in GR∆Adip livers, accompanied by decreased plasma FGF21 levels (Fig. 7E, Supplementary Fig. 5E). In contrast to shorter fasting periods, 48h-fasting blood glucose was unexpectedly increased in GR∆Adip mice compared to controls (Fig. 7D), suggesting that the observed breakdown of lean mass might provide substrates for glucose production. In support of this assumption, circulating corticosterone, which potently induces protein catabolism and HGP (1), increased to a higher extent in 48h- but not in 16h-fasted GR^{∆Adip} mice (Fig. 7E). Additionally, fasting-induced up-regulation of gluconeogenic genes *Pgc1a* and *Pck1* was similar in livers of both genotypes (Supplementary Fig. 5F). To characterize the fasting metabolome of GR∆Adip mice in more detail, plasma samples were analyzed by targeted LC-MS. From 177 metabolites, 42% were significantly different in 48h-fasted compared to fed GR∆Adip mice (Fig. 7F; Supplementary Tab. 3). Strong increases in AA and related metabolites, several FA species and nucleotides were observed. Conversely, in fasted controls, abundance of most AA and nucleotides was either unchanged or lower than in fed controls. 18% of metabolites were significantly different between 48h-fasted GR^{∆Adip} mice and controls. These included hexose, pentose, nucleotides, and AA all of which, in contrast to the fed state, displayed a greater quantity in $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice (Fig. 1C, 7F, Supplementary Tab. 3).

This reveals that the GR in adipocytes is indispensable for normal substrate mobilization and energy metabolism under prolonged fasting conditions.

Dysregulation of lipolytic signaling in GR∆Adip mice

To determine the molecular underpinning of impaired lipolysis, we compared mRNA and protein expression of lipolytic key factors in eWAT of fed and 48h-fasted mice. HSL (*Lipe*; hormone sensitive lipase) mRNA levels were similar among genotypes, while up-regulation of ATGL (*Pnpla2*; adipose triglyceride lipase) and CGI58 (*Abhd5*; comparative gene identification 58) mRNA expression was significantly reduced in fasted $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ eWAT (Fig. 8A). Protein level of ATGL and its co-activator CGI58 displayed a similar expression pattern in eWAT of fasted mice (Fig. 8B). Fasting-induced lipolysis requires cAMP-mediated activation of protein kinase A (PKA), subsequent phosphorylation of HSL and perilipin thereby, indirectly activating ATGL via release of CGI58 (33). Upon fasting, total PKA substrate phosphorylation including HSL (Ser563/660) and perilipin was substantially decreased in $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ eWAT (Fig. 8B-C). Thus, we analyzed mRNA expression of genes critical for β-adrenergic activation of PKA. Expression of the inhibitory α2-adrenergic receptor (AR) and inhibitory G-protein α -subunit isoforms was similar between genotypes (Supplementary Fig. 6A), whereas up-regulation of β 2-AR (*Adrb2*) was reduced in GR^{\triangle Adip} eWAT under fasting conditions. Conversely, β3-AR (*Adrb3*) mRNA levels were increased (Fig. 8D). Notably, fasting-induced up-regulation of the stimulatory G-protein α -subunit (*Gnas*; $G_S \alpha$), which couples β-ARs to adenylate cyclase-mediated production of intracellular cAMP (34), was significantly diminished in GR-deficient eWAT (Fig. 8D-E). To functionally identify the GR-dependent signaling step in β-adrenergic signal transduction, we applied pharmacologic agonists on eWAT explants from 16h-fasted mice. GR-deficiency reduced cAMP generation upon treatment with isoproterenol (non-selective β-adrenergic agonist), but not in response to forskolin (direct adenylate cyclase agonist; Fig. 8F). NEFA release from

 $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ explants was decreased in response to isoproterenol, CL-316,243 (β3-AR agonist) and formoterol (β2-AR agonist), while forskolin-stimulated lipolysis was similar between both genotypes (Fig. 8G). Similar results were obtained from isoproterenol- or forskolintreated eWAT explants of fed $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice (Supplementary Fig. 6B), albeit the defect in lipolysis was less pronounced than in 16h-fasted mice.

These data demonstrate that the GR is a pivotal permissive factor for β -adrenergic signal transduction to adenylate cyclase and concomitant activation of the lipolytic cascade in WAT.

Discussion

Our study provides the first genetic evidence for the GR in adipocytes as a critical component in normal and pathophysiologic energy metabolism. Initial plasma metabolomics revealed a marked global effect of GR-deficiency on systemic metabolite abundance, including a reduction in various FA species and proteogenic/branched-chain AA (valine, leucine and isoleucine). Albeit steady-state analysis of plasma represents a static net-balance between metabolite production and consumption, the broad changes indicate that systemic fuel partitioning is partly controlled by GR in adipocytes. Along this line, the diminished gluconeogenic capacity of $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice during ITT/PTT may be due to increased hepatic responsiveness to insulin, but could also result from a decrease in substrate availability (6). GC exposure at high concentrations is thought to stimulate lipolysis (1; 2). Our data from eWAT explants of 4h-fasted mice show that the GR is a key factor for lipolysis already in the post-absorptive state. Suppression of WAT lipolysis correlates with hepatic insulin sensitivity and reduced HGP (34; 35), and indirectly counter-regulates gluconeogenesis (6; 30; 36) as WAT-derived substrate fluxes provide glycerol as direct substrate, while NEFA oxidation promotes acetyl-CoA-mediated activation of pyruvate carboxylase (37). Therefore, it is conceivable that reduced lipolysis in GR∆Adip mice contributes in a similar manner to the observed reduction in gluconeogenic capacity.

GC-stimulated lipolysis has been linked to transcriptional up-regulation of ATGL and HSL (7; 9; 38), elevated adenylate cyclase activity (39), intracellular cAMP production and HSL activation (7; 8). Reduced lipolysis in $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice largely resulted from a block in βadrenergic activation of PKA and lipolytic downstream signaling (33). The sympathetic nervous system (SNS) regulates induction of WAT lipolysis and PKA-mediated phosphorylation of HSL serves as surrogate marker for SNS outflow to WAT (40; 41). In fasting states, systemic GR antagonism with RU486 decreased β-adrenergic signaling in WAT through suppression of angiopoietin-like 4 (*Angptl4*) (8). However, *Angptl4* expression was not affected in GR^{∆Adip} eWAT (Supplementary Fig. 6C). GR-deficiency decreased the expression of G_Sα, which mediates SNS-stimulated lipolysis by transducing signals from β-ARs to adenylate cyclase. Notably, adipocyte-specific deficiency in $G_S \alpha$ blocks WAT lipolysis mimicking the phenotype of the $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice (34). In agreement, cAMP generation and NEFA release from GR^{$ΔAdjp$} eWAT explants was reduced in response to β-AR agonists, but could be normalized by direct adenylate cyclase agonism. GCs were shown to positively regulate $G_S \alpha$ expression in rat brain (42), suggesting that a similar regulatory mechanism might exist in adipocytes to trigger β-adrenergic lipolytic responses. Accordingly, dexamethasone treatment increased $G_S \alpha$ levels in eWAT of ctrl mice but not in liver or GN muscle, suggesting that the GC-mediated induction of $G_S\alpha$ occurs in a tissue-selective manner (Supplementary Fig. 6D). However, sequence analysis of the corresponding *Gnas* promoter region (NM_201616.2, NM_001077510.4, NM_001310083.1; -3000bp of TSS) did not reveal the presence of any sequences likely to act as GRE. Notably, the GR positively regulates transcription through several mechanisms, including DNA-independent means by acting as co-factor for lineage-specific transcription factors (43). At this point, however, we cannot predict which molecular mechanism might account for the reduction in *Gnas* expression in GR-deficient WAT and further molecular studies will be necessary to decipher the underlying

causes. Nevertheless, our current data support a model where the GR is required for signal transduction from β2/3-AR to adenylate cyclase and concomitant induction of lipolysis.

In mice and humans, an increase in GC regeneration by the enzyme 11β-HSD1 within WAT compartments suggests a role of the GC-GR axis in common obesity (2; 12-16). Our findings from aged and HFD-fed $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice support that suppressing the adipocyte GC-GR axis restricts obesity and its underlying disease state. We observed no differences in EE and/or food consumption that would explain the attenuated obesity of GR^{∆Adip} mice. Recent studies established an interdependence of lipid mobilization and storage in WAT. Chronic stimulation of lipolysis was shown to coincide with an up-regulation of genes critical for FA storage and induction of *de novo* lipogenesis in WAT (44). Conversely, blocking lipolysis in chow- and/or HFD-fed mice resulted in down-regulation of genes critical for FA storage and in decreased lipogenesis/lipid synthesis in WAT (34; 35). Although not functionally proven by our data, the mild, yet collective reduction in several genes related to FA storage in HFD GR^{∆Adip} WAT suggests that a decrease in lipid synthesis might contribute to the attenuated obesityphenotype. However, further studies are required to determine the exact mechanism(s) underlying the anti-obesity effects of adipocyte GR-deficiency.

Dysfunctional hypertrophic adipocytes are thought to be in part causative for metabolic dysfunctions upon progressive adiposity (5; 45). Improved glucose tolerance and reduced hyperinsulinemia indicates enhanced peripheral responsiveness to insulin in HFD-fed GR^{∆Adip} mice. Indeed, increased insulin-stimulated AKT phosphorylation was not confined to WAT, but also present in muscle and liver of HFD-fed GR∆Adip mice. As NEFA/lipid accumulation can cause deleterious effects on insulin sensitive organs (6), and inhibition of lipolysis improves systemic glucose metabolism (34; 35), the attenuated adiposity and reduced lipolytic capacity are conceivable possibilities for the ameliorated glucose tolerance in GR∆Adip mice. Along this line, adipocyte GR-deficiency attenuated HFD-induced steatosis. HFD-feeding promotes hepatic lipid accumulation partly through up-regulation of genes

involved in FA uptake and lipid synthesis (46-48), several of which were down-regulated in livers of HFD-fed GR∆Adip mice. Accordingly, reduced FA influx and endogenous lipid production likely contribute to the attenuation of steatosis in HFD-fed GR^{∆Adip} mice. Similar to our observations, adipocyte-specific 11β-HSD1 deletion was shown to ameliorate hypercortisolism-induced glucose intolerance and hepatic steatosis (38). Along with the beneficial metabolic state of the aged GR-deficient cohort, these findings indicate that adipocyte GC-GR activity is involved in the development of systemic metabolic dysfunctions. In contrast to HFD-feeding, adipocyte GR-deficiency had adverse consequences when FA became the major energy substrate during prolonged fasting. Fasting induces robust shifts in fuel selection, during which coordinated increases in lipolysis, FA oxidation, and ketogenesis spare glucose and preserve lean mass. Similar to models with impairments in lipolytic enzymes (33; 49-51), GR-deficiency disrupted the transition to lipid-based energy production (i.e. preserved fat, inefficient FA utilization and ketogenesis). The simultaneous impaired upregulation of *Ppara* and *Fgf21* in 48h-fasted GR∆Adip livers is consistent with a proposed necessity of lipolysis for the expression of both genes (51). FGF21 was shown to be required to sustain fasting hypoglycemia by stimulating corticotropin-releasing hormone in hypothalamic neurons and concomitant release of adrenal corticosterone (52). The increased blood glucose levels in 48h-fasted GR∆Adip mice combined with elevated corticosterone indicate a uniquely different fasting response upon complete FGF21-deficiency versus its scarcity due to defective lipolysis. GCs stimulate lipolysis, lean mass catabolism, AA utilization and gluconeogenesis (1; 4; 53). Accordingly, fasting metabolism upon musclespecific GR-deficiency is opposite to GR^{∆Adip} mice in that muscle mass is preserved and WAT depleted (3). Conversely, in fasted GR^{∆Adip} mice, all tissues except WAT respond to GC, visible as increased circulating AA (proteogenic and urea cycle-related), their metabolites (i.e. 2-ketobutyrate, creatine, creatinine, carnitine) and glucose (4; 53). As gluconeogenesis is intimately connected to the TCA cycle by both substrate supply and energy demand (6; 29),

lean mass-derived AA conceivably provided both sources in 48h-fasted GR∆Adip mice. The elevation of purine nucleotide precursor and degradation products (i.e. xanthosine, hypoxanthine, xanthine, urate) additionally suggest that energetic requirements of the disturbed fasting metabolism in GR∆Adip mice results in imbalanced ATP synthesis/degradation rates and thus, a reduction in energy state. Thereby, our results determine adipocyte GR as a critical regulator of energy homeostasis during prolonged fasting.

In conclusion, our results demonstrate that the adipocyte GR controls systemic fuel partitioning and energy metabolism. In prolonged fasting states, GR activity is vital to prevent aberrant fuel selection and lean mass wasting by permitting β-adrenergic stimulation of lipolysis and the switch to lipid-based energy production. Conversely, in models of diet- and aging-induced obesity, GR activity is a determinant of systemic metabolic dysfunctions.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank Ute Burret (Institute for Comparative Molecular Endocrinology, University of Ulm) and Safia Zahma (Institute of Animal Breeding and Genetics, University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna) for excellent technical assistance, and the animal facility staff at the University of Ulm; Medical University Vienna and University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna for their support.

Funding: This work was supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) grant SFB F2807- B20 to RM, grants Priority Program Immunobone 1468 (Tu 220/6-1, 6-2), Collaborative Research Centre 1149 (C02/INST 40/492-1), DFG-ANR (TU 220/13-1) from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), and FP7 BRAINAGE from the European Union Research and Innovation funding program to JPT; and grant FWF P26766 to TS. Part of this work has been carried out with the Competence Center CBmed, funded by the Austrian Federal Government within the COMET K1 Centre Program, Land Steiermark and Land Wien. The

funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Author contributions: KMM and KH performed most experiments, supervised experiments and analyzed/interpreted data. DK, SV, MB and LM provided major technical support. SJ, KF, TDM and MT performed metabolic cage experiments, data analyses and interpretation. NB and CM performed LC-MS metabolomics and data analyses. JH conducted histopathologic liver analyses. All other co-authors gave technical and scientific support. TS, HE, NB and JH assisted in data interpretation and contributed to discussion/experimental design. TS and NB contributed to the writing of the manuscript. KMM, KH, JPT and RM designed and coordinated the study, and wrote the manuscript.

JPT and RM are the guarantors of this work and take full responsibility for the work as a whole, including the study design, access to data, and the decision to submit and publish the manuscript.

Duality of Interest

The authors have no potential conflict of interest to report.

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Figure Legends

Figure 1: Basal metabolic signature in plasma of GR∆Adip mice.

A Relative mRNA expression of *GR* as determined by qRT-PCR in total inguinal white adipose tissue (iWAT), epididymal WAT (eWAT), brown adipose tissue (BAT) of 10-12 week old *ad libitum*-fed ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice. Ct values were normalized to *Actb* (n= 4-7/genotype). **B** Representative Western Blot of GR expression in total iWAT, eWAT, BAT and liver protein extracts of *ad libitum*-fed ctrl and GR∆Adip mice. **C** Volcano plots of relative abundance ratios of metabolites in plasma of *ad libitum*-fed GR∆Adip compared to ctrl mice as detected by LC-MS (n=5-6/genotype). Each arrow represents an individual metabolite within the indicated metabolite classes, while the direction of the arrow indicates, if the metabolite is increased or decreased. Respective p-values are plotted on the y-axis. For all analyses: 8 week-old male mice; standard diet. Data are shown as the mean \pm SEM; $*P$ <0.05; $**P$ <0.01; ****P*<0.001. For all analyses: 8-week-old male mice; standard diet *ad libitum*.

Figure 2: Reduced lipolytic and gluconeogenic capacity in GR∆Adip mice.

A Fasting blood glucose and plasma insulin level at indicated time points. Insulin concentrations were determined by ELISA (n≥6/genotype). **B** Insulin tolerance test. Following a 4h fast, insulin was administered through intraperitoneal injection (0.75 U/kg body weight; n=9/genotype). Blood glucose levels were determined at indicated time points. **C** Representative Western blot analysis and quantification of insulin-stimulated phosphorylation of AKT in liver and eWAT (0.75 U/kg body weight). HSC70 was used as a

loading control. Protein bands were quantified by densitometry and total protein expression was corrected for the respective loading control (n=3/genotype,). **D** Total liver TG content in *ad libitum*-fed mice as determined by a colorimetric assay (n≥6/genotype). **E** NEFA release from eWAT explants of 4h-fasted mice in absence or presence of insulin (30 ng/ml; n \geq 2 mice/genotype/treatment; n=10 explants/genotype). **F** NEFA release from eWAT explants of 16h-fasted mice (n≥2 mice/genotype/treatment; n=10 explants/genotype). Plasma NEFA and blood β-ketone level of 16h-fasted mice. Parameters were determined by colorimetric assays (n≥6/genotype). **G** Pyruvate tolerance test through intraperitoneal injection of pyruvate (2 g/kg body weight) following a 16h fast (n≥7/genotype). Blood glucose levels were determined at indicated time points. For **B** and **G**: results from 2-3 independent experiments. Data are shown as the mean \pm SEM; $*P<0.05$; $*P<0.01$; $**P<0.001$. For all analyses: 8-week-old male mice; standard diet *ad libitum*.

Figure 3: Reduced thermogenesis in GR∆Adip mice.

A Body temperatures of GR∆Adip and ctrl mice upon acute exposure to 4°C for the indicated time (n≥6/genotype). **B** Western blot analysis and quantification of UCP1 and PPARα protein levels in BAT of 4h cold exposed mice. HSC70 was used as a loading control. Protein bands were quantified by densitometry and total protein expression was corrected for the respective loading control (n=4/genotype,). **C** Representative H&E staining of BAT sections from GR∆Adip and ctrl mice after 4h of cold exposure. Scale bar indicates 200 µm. **D** Plasma NEFA, corticosterone and blood β-ketone level of 4h cold exposed mice. NEFA was determined by colorimetric assays and corticosterone was measured by ELISA (n≥6/genotype). Data are shown as the mean \pm SEM; *P<0.05; **P<0.01. UCP1: Uncoupling protein 1; PPAR α : Peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor alpha

Figure 4: Attenuated aging-associated obesity and hepatic steatosis in adipocyte GRdeficient mice.

A Postnatal body weight gain of $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice and ctrl littermates (n=12/genotype; 4 independent litter). **B** Non-invasive monitoring of body compositions of 52-week-old GR^{AAdip} and ctrl mice using EchoMRI. Total body fat and lean mass are depicted in relation to body weight (n=10). **C** Wet weight of eWAT, iWAT and liver in relation to body weight of 52 week-old mice (n≥7/genotype). **D** Representative hematoxylin-eosin stainings of livers and quantification of steatosis scores at 52 weeks of age (n≥7/genotype)**.** Score 1: < 5%, score 2: 5-20%, score $3:$ > 20% and score $4:$ > 50%. Scale bar indicates 200 μ m. **E** Cumulative food intake, daily locomotor activity, energy expenditure and respiratory exchange ratios (RER) of aged mice (n≥6/genotype). For all analyses mice were fed a standard diet *ad libitum*; data are shown as the mean ±SEM; **P*<0.05; ***P*<0.01; ****P*<0.001.

Figure 5: Adipocyte-specific GR*-***deficient mice gain less weight under HFD conditions.**

Mice from each genotype received either a chow or a high fat diet (HFD) starting at week 3-5 after birth. **A** Weight gain of ctrl and GR∆Adip mice littermates over a time period of 16 weeks (n=5-10/genotype). **B** Relative mRNA expression of genes critical for lipid storage in eWAT and iWAT as determined by qRT-PCR of HFD-fed ctrl and GR∆Adip mice. Ct values were normalized to *Actb* (n≥5/genotype). **C** Three-dimensional models of subcutaneous (pink) and visceral (grey) fat in the abdominal region of HFD-fed mice. Quantification of subcutaneous and visceral fat volume after high fat or chow diet of the indicated genotypes (n=5- 10/genotype). **D** Representative hematoxylin-eosin staining of eWAT and quantification of adipocyte cell size from eWAT of ctrl and GR∆Adip mice after HFD (n=5/genotype). Scale bar indicates 25 µm. Data are shown as the mean ±SEM; **P*<0.05; ***P*<0.01; ****P*<0.001. *Fasn*: Fatty acid synthase; *Acaca*: Acyl-CoA carboxylase; *Gpat3*: Glycerol-3-phosphate acyltransferase 3; *Dgat2*: Diglyceride acyltransferase-2; *Pck1*: Phosphoenolpyruvate carboxykinase; *Cd36*: Platelet glycoprotein 4; *Slc27a1*: Fatty acid transport protein 1; *Actb*: β-Actin

Figure 6: Adipocyte-specific GR loss improves glucose tolerance and hepatic steatosis under HFD conditions.

A Blood glucose levels of 12h-fasted ctrl and GR∆Adip mice (n=5-10 mice/genotype). Plasma insulin levels (**B**) and HOMA-IR (**C**) of 12h-fasted ctrl and $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ mice (n=5-10 mice/genotype). Insulin concentrations were determined by ELISA. **D** Glucose tolerance test 18 weeks after chow/HFD. Glucose was administered by intraperitoneal injection (2 g/kg) body weight) following a 16h fast. Blood glucose levels were determined at indicated time points (n=5-10/genotype). **E** Western blot analysis of insulin-stimulated phosphorylation of AKT in muscle (1 U/kg body weight) from ctrl and GR∆Adip mice after chow or HFD. **F** Representative hematoxylin-eosin staining of liver sections from ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice after chow or HFD and histopathological characterization of liver phenotypes from HFD mice (n≥9/genotype)**.** Steatosis score 1: < 5%, score 2: 5-20%, score 3: > 20% and score 4: > 50%. Scale bar indicates 25 µm. **G** Comparison of wet weight of liver after chow and HFD of the indicated genotypes (n=5-10 mice/genotype). **H** Relative mRNA expression of *Fasn, Gpat1*, *Pparg, Cd36* and *Scl27a4* in liver as determined by qRT-PCR of HFD-fed ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice. Ct values were normalized to *Actb* (n=8-10/genotype). For all analyses, ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice received either a chow or a high fat diet (HFD) for 18-20 weeks starting at week 3-5 after birth; data are shown as the mean ±SEM; **P*<0.05; ***P*<0.01; ****P*<0.001. *Fasn*: Fatty acid synthase; *Gpat1*: Glycerol-3-phosphate acyltransferase 1; *Pparg*: peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma; *Cd36*: Platelet glycoprotein 4; *Slc27a4*: Long-chain fatty acid transport protein 4; *Actb*: β-Actin

Figure 7: Impaired lipolysis in white adipose tissue of GR∆Adip mice results in aberrant substrate metabolism and lean mass wasting under prolonged fasting conditions.

A Non-invasive monitoring of body compositions in fed and 48h fasted mice using EchoMRI. Total body fat and lean mass are depicted in relation to body weight (n=6/genotype). **B** Representative hematoxylin-eosin staining of eWAT from 48h-fasted mice. Scale bar indicates 50 µm. **C** Plasma NEFA, glycerol and TG level, liver TG content, blood β-ketone level and blood glucose of fed and 48h-fasted mice. Plasma parameters and liver TG were determined by colorimetric assays (n≥6/genotype). **D** Plasma FGF21 level of *ad libitum* fed and 48h-fasted GR∆Adip and ctrl mice as determined by ELISA **E** Plasma corticosterone level of *ad libitum* fed, 16h- and 48h-fasted GR∆Adip and ctrl mice as determined by ELISA. **F** Volcano plots depicting relative abundance ratios of metabolites as detected by LC-MS metabolomics in plasma of following groups: 48h-fasted compared to fed GR^{∆Adip} mice, 48hfasted compared to fed ctrl mice and 48h-fasted $GR^{\Delta \text{Adip}}$ compared to ctrl mice (n=5-6/genotype). Each arrow represents an individual metabolite within the indicated metabolite classes, while the direction of the arrow indicates, if the metabolite is increased or decreased. Respective p-values are plotted on the y-axis. For **A**, **C, D** and **E**: Data are shown as the mean ±SEM; **P*<0.05; ***P*<0.01; ****P*<0.001. For all analyses: 8-week-old male mice; standard diet.

Figure 8: Adipocyte GR-deficiency impairs the lipolytic response of white adipocytes through impairment of β-adrenergic signal transduction.

A Relative mRNA expression levels of genes with key functions in lipolysis were quantified by qRT-PCR in eWAT under *ad libitum* feeding and 48h-fasting conditions. Ct values were normalized to *Gapdh* (n≥8/genotype). **B** Representative Western blots displaying the activation status and/or total expression levels of lipolytic key proteins eWAT under fed or fasted conditions. HSC70 served as loading control. Quantification of CGI58, ATGL

expression and HSL activation status upon fasting (n=5/genotype). Protein bands were quantified by densitometry; total protein expression was corrected for the respective loading control. **C** Western blot of eWAT from *ad libitum* fed and 48h-fasted mice using an antibody raised against phosphorylated PKA substrates containing a $RRX(S^*/T^*)$ epitope motif. Quantification of PKA activity upon fasting (n=3/genotype). Total phosphorylated PKA substrates were quantified by densitometry and corrected for the respective loading control. **D** Relative mRNA expression levels of in eWAT under *ad libitum* feeding and 48h fasting conditions. Ct values were normalized to *Gapdh* (n≥8/genotype). **E** Representative Western blot of $G_S\alpha$ in eWAT under fed or fasted conditions. HSC70 served as loading control. Quantification of $G_S \alpha$ levels (n=5/genotype). Protein bands were quantified by densitometry; total protein expression was corrected for the respective loading control. **F** cAMP level in eWAT explants of 16h-fasted mice in response to treatment with indicated agonists (10 μ M; n≥2 mice/genotype/treatment; n=10 explants/genotype). **G** NEFA release from eWAT explants of 16h-fasted mice in absence or presence of indicated agonists (10 μ M; n≥2 mice/genotype/treatment; n=10 explants/genotype). Data are shown as the mean ±SEM; **P*<0.05; ***P*<0.01; ****P*<0.001. For all analyses: 8-week-old male mice; standard diet. *Lipe*: Hormone sensitive lipase (HSL); *Pnpla2*: Adipose triglyceride lipase (ATGL); *Abhd5*: Comparative gene identification 58 (CGI58); *Gapdh:* Glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase; PKA: protein kinase A; *Adrb*: β-adrenergic receptor; *Gnas*: stimulatory G protein α -subunit (G_S α). Iso: Isoproterenol; FK: Forskolin; CL: CL-316,243; For: Formoterol.

Figure 1: Basal metabolic signature in plasma of GR^{∆Adip} mice.

A Relative mRNA expression of GR as determined by qRT-PCR in total inguinal white adipose tissue (iWAT), epididymal WAT (eWAT), brown adipose tissue (BAT) of 10-12 week old ad libitum-fed ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice. Ct values were normalized to *Actb* (n= 4-7/genotype). B Representative Western Blot of GR expression in total iWAT, eWAT, BAT and liver protein extracts of ad libitum-fed ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice. C Volcano plots of relative abundance ratios of metabolites in plasma of ad libitum-fed GR^{∆Adip} compared to ctrl mice as detected by LC-MS (n=5-6/genotype). Each arrow represents an individual metabolite within the indicated metabolite classes, while the direction of the arrow indicates, if the metabolite is increased or decreased. Respective p-values are plotted on the y-axis. For all analyses: 8-week-old male mice; standard diet. Data are shown as the mean ±SEM; *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001. For all analyses: 8-week-old male mice; standard diet ad libitum.

Figure 2: Reduced lipolytic and gluconeogenic capacity in GR^{∆Adip} mice. A Fasting blood glucose and plasma insulin level at indicated time points. Insulin concentrations were determined by ELISA (n≥6/genotype). B Insulin tolerance test. Following a 4h fast, insulin was administered through intraperitoneal injection (0.75 U/kg body weight; n=9/genotype). Blood glucose levels were determined at indicated time points. C Representative Western blot analysis and quantification of insulin-stimulated phosphorylation of AKT in liver

and eWAT (0.75 U/kg body weight). HSC70 was used as a loading control. Protein bands were quantified by densitometry and total protein expression was corrected for the respective loading control (n=3/genotype,). D Total liver TG content in ad libitum-fed mice as determined by a colorimetric assay (n≥6/genotype). E

NEFA release from eWAT explants of 4h-fasted mice in absence or presence of insulin (30 ng/ml; n≥2 mice/genotype/treatment; n=10 explants/genotype). F NEFA release from eWAT explants of 16h-fasted mice (n≥2 mice/genotype/treatment; n=10 explants/genotype). Plasma NEFA and blood β-ketone level of 16h-fasted mice. Parameters were determined by colorimetric assays (n≥6/genotype). G Pyruvate tolerance test through intraperitoneal injection of pyruvate (2 g/kg body weight) following a 16h fast (n≥7/genotype). Blood glucose levels were determined at indicated time points. For B and G: results from 2-3 independent experiments. Data are shown as the mean ±SEM; *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001. For all analyses: 8 week-old male mice; standard diet ad libitum.

Fig. 2 207x212mm (300 x 300 DPI) **Page 35 of 68 Diabetes**

A Body temperatures of GR^{∆Adip} and ctrl mice upon acute exposure to 4°C for the indicated time (n≥6/genotype). B Western blot analysis and quantification of UCP1 and PPARα protein levels in BAT of 4h cold exposed mice. HSC70 was used as a loading control. Protein bands were quantified by densitometry and total protein expression was corrected for the respective loading control (n=4/genotype,). C Representative H&E staining of BAT sections from GR^{∆Adip} and ctrl mice after 4h of cold exposure. Scale bar indicates 200 µm. D Plasma NEFA, corticosterone and blood β-ketone level of 4h cold exposed mice. NEFA was determined by colorimetric assays and corticosterone was measured by ELISA (n≥6/genotype). Data are shown as the mean ±SEM; *P<0.05; **P<0.01. UCP1: Uncoupling protein 1; PPARa: Peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor alpha

Fig. 3 151x125mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Figure 4: Attenuated aging-associated obesity and hepatic steatosis in adipocyte GR-deficient mice. $\vdash \tau$ A Postnatal body weight gain of GR^{∆Adip} mice and ctrl littermates (n=12/genotype; 4 independent litter). B Non-invasive monitoring of body compositions of 52-week-old GR^{∆Adip} and ctrl mice using EchoMRI. Total body fat and lean mass are depicted in relation to body weight (n=10). C Wet weight of eWAT, iWAT and liver in relation to body weight of 52-week-old mice (n≥7/genotype). D Representative H&E stainings of livers and quantification of steatosis scores at 52 weeks of age (n≥7/genotype). Score 1: < 5%, score 2: 5- 20%, score 3: $>$ 20% and score 4: $>$ 50%. Scale bar indicates 200 µm. E Cumulative food intake, daily locomotor activity, energy expenditure and respiratory exchange ratios (RER) of aged mice (n≥6/genotype). For all analyses mice were fed a standard diet ad libitum; data are shown as the mean ±SEM; *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001. $\vdash \top$

Figure 5: Adipocyte-specific GR-deficient mice gain less weight under HFD conditions. Mice from each genotype received either a chow or a high fat diet (HFD) starting at week 3-5 after birth. A Weight gain of ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice littermates over a time period of 16 weeks (n=5-10/genotype). B Relative mRNA expression of genes critical for lipid storage in eWAT and iWAT as determined by qRT-PCR of HFD-fed ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice. Ct values were normalized to Actb (n≥5/genotype). C Three-dimensional models of subcutaneous (pink) and visceral (grey) fat in the abdominal region of HFD-fed mice. Quantification of subcutaneous and visceral fat volume after high fat or chow diet of the indicated genotypes (n=5-10/genotype). D Representative hematoxylin-eosin staining of eWAT and quantification of adipocyte cell size from eWAT of ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice after HFD (n=5/genotype). Scale bar indicates 25 µm. Data are shown as the mean ±SEM; *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001. Fasn: Fatty acid synthase; Acaca: Acyl-CoA carboxylase; Gpat3: Glycerol-3-phosphate acyltransferase 3; Dgat2: Diglyceride acyltransferase-2; Pck1: Phosphoenolpyruvate carboxykinase; Cd36: Platelet glycoprotein 4; Slc27a1: Fatty acid transport protein 1; Actb: β-Actin

Figure 6: Adipocyte-specific GR loss improves glucose tolerance and hepatic steatosis under HFD conditions. A Blood glucose levels of 12h-fasted ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice (n=5-10 mice/genotype). Plasma insulin levels (B) and HOMA-IR (C) of 12h-fasted ctrl and GR∆Adip mice (n=5-10 mice/genotype). Insulin concentrations were determined by ELISA. D Glucose tolerance test 18 weeks after chow/HFD. Glucose was administered by intraperitoneal injection (2 g/kg body weight) following a 16h fast. Blood glucose levels were determined at indicated time points (n=5-10/genotype). E Western blot analysis of insulin-stimulated phosphorylation of AKT in muscle (1 U/kg body weight) from ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice after chow or HFD. F Comparison of wet weight of liver after chow and HFD of the indicated genotypes (n=5-10 mice/genotype). G Representative H&E staining of liver sections from ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice after chow or HFD and histopathological characterization of liver phenotypes from HFD mice (n≥9/genotype). Steatosis score 1: < 5%, score 2: 5-20%, score 3: $>$ 20% and score 4: $>$ 50%. Scale bar indicates 25 µm. H Relative mRNA expression of Fasn, Gpat1, Pparg, Cd36 and Scl27a4 in liver as determined by qRT-PCR of HFD-fed ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice. Ct values were normalized to Actb (n=8-10/genotype). For all analyses, ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice

received either a chow or a high fat diet (HFD) for 18-20 weeks starting at week 3-5 after birth; data are shown as the mean ±SEM; *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001. Fasn: Fatty acid synthase; Gpat1: Glycerol-3 phosphate acyltransferase 1; Pparg: peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma; Cd36: Platelet glycoprotein 4; Slc27a4: Long-chain fatty acid transport protein 4; Actb: β-Actin Fig. 6 254x323mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Figure 7: Impaired lipolysis in white adipose tissue of GR^{∆Adip} mice results in aberrant substrate metabolism and lean mass wasting under prolonged fasting conditions. $\vert \tau \vert$ A Non-invasive monitoring of body compositions in 48h fasted mice using EchoMRI. Total body fat and lean mass are depicted in relation to body weight (n=6/genotype). B Representative H&E staining of eWAT from 48h-fasted mice. Scale bar indicates 50 µm. C Plasma NEFA, glycerol and TG level, liver TG content, blood β-ketone level and blood glucose of 48h-fasted mice. Plasma parameters and liver TG were determined by colorimetric assays (n≥6/genotype). D Plasma FGF21 level of ad libitum fed and 48h-fasted GR∆Adip and ctrl mice as determined by ELISA E Plasma corticosterone level of ad libitum fed, 16h- and 48h-fasted GR^{∆Adip} and ctrl mice as determined by ELISA. F Volcano plots depicting relative abundance ratios of metabolites as detected by LC-MS metabolomics in plasma of following groups: 48h-fasted compared to fed GR^{∆Adip} mice, 48h-fasted compared to fed ctrl mice and 48h-fasted GR∆Adip compared to ctrl mice (n=5-6/genotype). Each arrow represents an individual metabolite within the indicated metabolite classes, while the direction of the arrow indicates, if the metabolite is increased or decreased. Respective p-values are plotted on the y-axis. For A,

C, D and E: Data are shown as the mean ±SEM; *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001. For all analyses: 8 week-old male mice; standard diet. \vdash_\top Fig. 7 246x332mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Figure 8: Adipocyte GR-deficiency impairs the lipolytic response of white adipocytes through impairment of β-adrenergic signal transduction.%"A Relative mRNA expression levels of genes with key functions in lipolysis were quantified by qRT-PCR in eWAT under ad libitum feeding and 48h-fasting conditions. Ct values were normalized to Gapdh (n≥8/genotype). B Representative Western blots displaying the activation status and/or total expression levels of lipolytic key proteins in eWAT under fed or fasted conditions. HSC70 served as loading control. Quantification of CGI58, ATGL expression and HSL activation status upon fasting (n=5/genotype). Protein bands were quantified by densitometry; total protein expression was corrected for the respective loading control. C Western blot of eWAT from ad libitum fed and 48h-fasted mice using an antibody raised against phosphorylated PKA substrates containing a RRX(S*/T*) epitope motif. Quantification of PKA activity upon fasting (n=3/genotype). Total phosphorylated PKA substrates were quantified by densitometry and corrected for the respective loading control. D Relative mRNA expression levels of in eWAT under ad libitum feeding and 48h fasting conditions. Ct values were normalized to Gapdh (n≥8/genotype). E Representative Western blot of G_Sa in eWAT under fed or fasted conditions.

HSC70 served as loading control. Quantification of G_sa levels (n=5/genotype). Protein bands were quantified by densitometry; total protein expression was corrected for the respective loading control. F cAMP level in eWAT explants of 16h-fasted mice in response to treatment with indicated agonists (10 µM; n≥2 mice/genotype/treatment; n=10 explants/genotype). G NEFA release from eWAT explants of 16h-fasted mice in absence or presence of indicated agonists (10 μ M; n≥2 mice/genotype/treatment; n=10 explants/genotype). Data are shown as the mean ±SEM; *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001. For all analyses: 8-week-old male mice; standard diet. Lipe: Hormone sensitive lipase (HSL); Pnpla2: Adipose triglyceride lipase (ATGL); Abhd5: Comparative gene identification 58 (CGI58); Gapdh: Glyceraldehyde 3 phosphate dehydrogenase; PKA: protein kinase A; Adrb: β-adrenergic receptor; Gnas: stimulatory G protein α-subunit. Iso: Isoproterenol; FK: Forskolin; CL: CL-316,243; For: Formoterol.

Fig. 8 250x349mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Online Supplemental Materials

Adipocyte glucocorticoid receptor deficiency attenuates aging- and HFD-induced obesity, and impairs the feeding-fasting transition

Kristina M. Mueller, Kerstin Hartmann, Doris Kaltenecker, Sabine Vettorazzi, Mandy Bauer, Lea Mauser, Sabine Amann, Sigrid Jall, Katrin Fischer, Harald Esterbauer, Timo D. Müller, Matthias H. Tschöp, Christoph Magnes, Johannes Haybaeck, Thomas Scherer, Natalie Bordag, Jan P. Tuckermann, Richard Moriggl

Supplementary figures and tables

Supplementary Figure 1: Adipocyte-specific GR deficiency has no impact on adipose tissue size and morphology in 8-week-old mice. A Wet weight of eWAT, iWAT and BAT in relation to body weight (n=4-8/genotype). **B** Representative H&E staining of eWAT, iWAT and BAT from *ad libitum*-fed ctrl and GR∆Adip mice, and quantification of adipocyte cell size of eWAT and iWAT (n=5/genotype). Scale bar indicates 25 µm.

Supplementary Figure 2: Plasma metabolomics and glucose metabolism in 8-week-old GR∆Adip mice. A Scores plot of the principal component analysis (PCA) with 157 metabolites analyzed by LC-MS. Strong group separation was observed between genotypes in the first two components and a weak group separation between fasted and fed state in the third and

fourth component. A tendency for group separation between genotypes under HFD conditions was visible in the first four components. **B** Oral glucose tolerance test. Glucose was administered through oral gavage (2 g/kg body weight) following a 16h fast (n=10/genotype). **C** Correlation between plasma NEFA and mean of plasma glucose increase during pyruvate tolerance tests in 16h-fasted ctrl and GR∆Adip mice.

Supplementary Figure 3: Aging-associated metabolic phenotype 52-week-old GR∆Adip mice. A Representative H&E staining of eWAT and iWAT, and quantification of adipocyte

sizes (n≥5/genotype). Scale bar indicates 100 µm. **B** Plasma TG, cholesterol, NEFA, blood βketone level and plasma corticosterone level. Plasma metabolites were determined by colorimetric assays (n≥8/genotype); corticosterone was determined by ELISA (n≥7/genotype). **C** Patterns of locomotor activity, energy expenditure and respiratory exchange ratios (RER) during light and dark cycles (93.4h; n≥6/genotype). Data are shown as the mean ±SEM. **P*<0.05; ***P*<0.01; ****P*<0.001.

Supplementary Figure 4: Reduced weight gain of HFD-fed GR∆Adip mice is associated with diminished adipocyte hypertrophy and improved insulin signaling. A Measurement of cumulative food intake over a time period of 3 days from ctrl and GR∆Adip mice that either

received a chow or a high fat diet (HFD) (n=5-10/genotype). **B** Plasma NEFA levels of ctrl and GR∆Adip mice after 2 weeks of HFD feeding. Parameters were determined by colorimetric assays (n≥5/genotype). **C** Wet weight of iWAT and eWAT after chow and HFD of the indicated genotypes (n≥5/genotype). **D** Representative H&E staining of iWAT and quantification of adipocyte cell sizes in iWAT from ctrl and GR∆Adip mice after 20 weeks of HFD (n=5/genotype). Scale bar indicates 25 μ m. **E** Plasma corticosterone levels of chow- and HFD-fed mice as determined by ELISA (n≥5/genotype). **F** Western blot analysis of insulinstimulated phosphorylation of AKT in eWAT and liver (1 U/kg body weight) of chow- or HFD-fed ctrl and GR^{\triangle Adip} mice. Data are shown as the mean \pm SEM; **P*<0.05; ***P*<0.01; ****P*<0.001.

Supplementary Figure 5: Adipocyte-specific GR-deficiency reduces fasting-induced lipolysis in white adipose tissues and impairs energy metabolism. A Percent body weight

loss of 48h-fasted GR∆Adip and ctrl mice (n≥8/genotype). **B** Wet weight of eWAT, iWAT, gastrocnemius muscle (GN), heart and liver in relation to body weight (48h-fasted; n≥6/genotype). **C** Quantification of adipocyte cell size of eWAT of 48h-fasted mice (n≥4/genotype). **D** Representative H&E staining of livers of 48h-fasted GR∆Adip and ctrl mice. Scale bar indicates 100 µm. **E** Relative mRNA expression of *Ppara* and *Fgf21* as determined by qRT-PCR in livers of *ad libitum*-fed and 48h-fasted mice. Ct values were normalized to *Gapdh* (n≥5/genotype). **F** Relative mRNA expression of *Pgc1a* and *Pck1* as determined by qRT-PCR in livers of *ad libitum*-fed and 48h-fasted mice. Ct values were normalized to *Gapdh* (n≥5/genotype). Data are shown as the mean \pm SEM; $*P$ <0.05; $**P$ <0.01; $**P$ <0.001. *Ppara*: Peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor alpha; *Fgf21*: Fibroblast growth factor 21; *Pgc1a*: Peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma coactivator 1-alpha; *Pck1*: Phosphoenolpyruvate carboxykinase; *Gapdh:* Glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase.

Suppl.Figure 6

Supplementary Figure 6: Adipocyte-specific GR-deficiency reduces fasting-induced lipolysis in white adipose tissue. A Relative mRNA expression of *Adra2* and *Gnai1-3* as determined by qRT-PCR in eWAT of ad libitum-fed and 48h-fasted mice. Ct values were normalized to *Gapdh* (n≥8/genotype). **B** NEFA release from eWAT explants of *ad libitum*-fed mice in absence or presence of indicated agonists (10 μ M; n \geq 2 mice/genotype/treatment; n=10 explants/genotype). **C** Relative mRNA expression of *Angptl4* as determined by qRT-PCR in eWAT of *ad libitum*-fed and 48h-fasted mice. Ct values were normalized to *Gapdh* (n≥8/genotype). **D** Western blot of $G_S \alpha$ in eWAT, liver and gastrocnemius muscle (GN) of dexamethasone-treated control mice (10 days; 5 mg/kg i.p.). HSC70 served as loading control. Quantification of $G_S \alpha$ levels (n≥3/genotype). Protein bands were quantified by densitometry; total protein expression was corrected for the respective loading control. Data are shown as the mean ±SEM; *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001. *Adra2:* Alpha-2-adrenergic receptor; *Gnai:* Inhibitory G-protein α-subunit isoform; *Angptl4*: Angiopoietin-like 4; *Gapdh:* Glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase; Iso: Isoproterenol; FK: Forskolin.

| Gene symbol | Sequence $(5' - 3')$ |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Cebpb | ATCGACTTCAGCCCCTACCT |
| | TAGTCGTCGGCGAAGAGG |
| Pparg | GAAAGACAACGGACAAATCACC |
| | GGGGGTGATATGTTTGAACTTG |
| Fabp4 | GGATGGAAAGTCGACCACAA |
| | TGGAAGTCACGCCTTTCATA |
| Ucp1 | GACGTCCCCTGCCATTTAC |
| | CGCAGAAAAGAAGCCACAA |
| Adipoq | GGAGAGAAAGGAGATGCAGGT |
| | CTTTCCTGCCAGGGGTTC |
| Leptin | CAGGGAGGAAAATGTGCTGGAG |
| | CCGACTGCGTGTGTGAAATGT |
| Nr3c1 | GGCCGCTCAGTGTTTTCTAA |
| | GCAGAGTTTGGGAGGTGGT |
| Fasn | GCTGCTGTTGGAAGTCAGC |
| | AGTGTTCGTTCCTCGGAGTG |
| <i>Gpat1</i> | GGAAGGTGCTGCTATTCCTG |
| | TGGGATACTGGGGTTGAAAA |

Supplementary Table 1: qRT-PCR primer sequences for specific amplification of cDNA.

Supplementary Table 2: Relative gene expression of adipogenic and adipocyte-specific markers. Relative mRNA expression of *Cebpb*, *Pparg*, *Fabp4*, *Adiponectin*, *Leptin* and *Ucp1* as determined by qRT-PCR in iWAT, eWAT and BAT of ctrl and GR^{∆Adip} mice. Ct values were normalized to Actb (n≥8/genotype). Data are shown as the mean ±SEM. Cebpb: CCAAT/enhancer binding protein beta; Pparg: peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma; Fabp4: fatty acid binding protein 4; Ucp1: uncoupling protein 1; Actb: β-Actin.

Tabsheet: per-sample printed on 3/24/2016 Page 16 of 33

Tabsheet: per-sample printed on 3/24/2016 Page 18 of 33

Tabsheet: per-sample printed on 3/24/2016 Page 20 of 33

Tabsheet: per-sample printed on 3/24/2016 Page 22 of 33

Tabsheet: per-sample printed on 3/24/2016 Page 24 of 33

Tabsheet: per-sample printed on 3/24/2016 Page 26 of 33

Tabsheet: long_sample-metabolite printed on 3/24/2016 Page 28 of 33

Tabsheet: long_sample-metabolite printed on 3/24/2016 Page 29 of 33

Adipocyte glucocorticoid receptor deficiency disrupts the feeding-fasting transition but protects from obesity-induced metabolic disorders

Please find the full version of the table at <Link will be provided after publication acceptance> or <Link will be provided after publication acceptance>.

Page 70 of 68

Tabsheet: long_sample-metabolite printed on 3/24/2016 Page 30 of 33

Tabsheet: Table legend printed on 3/24/2016 Page 32 of 33

