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DOI:

[10.1055/a-2190-2803](https://doi.org/10.1055/a-2190-2803)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for published version (APA):

Schepp, F., Schubert, U., Schmid, J., Lehmann, S., Latunde-Dada, G. O., Kose, T., Steenblock, C., Bornstein, S. R., Linkermann, A., & Ludwig, B. (2023). Mechanistic Insights into Ferroptotic Cell Death in Pancreatic Islets. *Hormone and Metabolic Research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1055/a-2190-2803>

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1 **Mechanistic Insights into Ferroptotic Cell Death in Pancreatic Islets**

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42

43 **Introduction**

44 Ferroptosis was identified as a non-apoptotic cell death mechanism, which causes iron-
45 dependent peroxidation of membrane lipids and subsequent membrane rupture [1,2] As a
46 form of necroptotic cell death, ferroptosis has already been shown to play an important role in
47 the pathogenesis of various diseases [3]. Ferroptosis can be experimentally induced by the
48 glutathione peroxidase-4 (GPX4) inhibitor RSL3. The inhibition of GPX4 causes oxidative
49 stress through the release of free iron molecules and induction of lipid peroxidation, followed
50 by a membrane burst with massive necrotic inflammation [1,4]. The effects of ferroptotic cell
51 death can be attenuated by the treatment with ferrostatin-1 (Fer-1) [5,6], a small lipophilic
52 molecule with various functions. Fer-1 mainly acts as an iron scavenger and prevents lipid
53 peroxidation and subsequent membrane rupture [5]

54 The transplantation of pancreatic islets into the liver represents a therapeutic strategy mainly
55 for patients with type 1 diabetes (T1D) experiencing life-threatening hypoglycemic situations
56 despite optimal diabetes therapy or, in the case of an autologous transplantation setting, to
57 prevent patients undergoing (sub-)total pancreatectomy from iatrogenic diabetes [5,7,8]. The
58 intraportal transplantation of pancreatic islets is less invasive than a complete pancreas
59 transplantation but has comparable effects on the stabilization of glycemic control and
60 diabetes-associated complications [8,9]. However, it is estimated that nearly 70% of the islet
61 graft is lost during the peri- and post-transplant period [10].

62 To further improve the outcome of this therapy, it is of key importance to minimize islet loss
63 and consequently improve islet functional potency and survival. A better understanding of
64 mechanisms mediating islet death during and after the isolation process and targeted
65 prevention are therefore key issues. Bruni *et al.* first described in 2018 that human pancreatic
66 islets are susceptible to pharmaceutically induced ferroptosis. The aim of our study was to
67 gain closer insight into the mechanism of ferroptosis in pancreatic islets on a cellular and
68 functional level and thereby identify potential interventional strategies.

69

70 **Materials and Methods**

71 **Islet isolation**

72 Pancreatic islets were isolated from female Wistar rats according to guidelines established by
73 the University of Dresden Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee. Animals were
74 euthanized with CO₂. Afterwards, the abdomen was opened, and the pancreatic duct was
75 clamped at the papilla. The digestion solution (1 mg/ml collagenase V (Sigma-Aldrich) and
76 100 µg/ml DNase (Roche)) was injected *in situ* into the pancreas via the bile duct. The
77 pancreas was carefully dissected and transferred to digestion solution. The digestion was
78 supported by gentle shaking at 37°C for approximately 12 min. After adding cold washing
79 solution (RPMI 5.5 mM glucose, 10% FBS), the digest was filtered through a cell strainer with
80 a pore size of 600 µm (Sigma-Aldrich) and centrifuged for 1 min (277g, Acc6, Dec6, 4°C). The
81 washing procedure was repeated three times. Pancreatic islets were then separated from
82 exocrine tissue by discontinuous density gradient centrifugation (15 min, 1590g, Acc2, Dec2,
83 4°C) using Ficoll (Sigma-Aldrich) density layers of 1.125 g/cm³, 1.096 g/cm³, 1.08 g/cm³ and
84 1.06 g/cm³. The interfaces containing the purified islets were collected, washed and cultured
85 in 5.5 mM glucose RPMI 1640 (PAA) supplemented with 10% FBS, 20 mM HEPES, 1x
86 penicillin-streptomycin at 37°C in a 5% CO₂ atmosphere prior to further experimentation.

87

88 **Islet yield and purity**

89 Dithizone (DTZ), a zinc chelating agent, is known to selectively stain the islets of Langerhans
90 in the pancreas. While exocrine tissue is not stained, the endocrine part appears red. For
91 determination of the islet yield islet particle number (IP) and islet equivalents (IEQ, islet volume
92 normalized to 150 µm diameter) were determined. To this end, representative triplicate
93 samples were stained with dithizone (2% w/v DTZ in 0.25% v/v DMSO in phosphate-buffered
94 saline (PBS)) and examined using an inverted microscope equipped with a 10x objective and
95 eyepiece micrometer. All islets with a diameter >50 µm were grouped into diameter classes
96 of 50 µm segments (i.e., 50–100, 100–150, 150–200, etc.). Each diameter class was
97 converted into the mean volume of 150-µm diameter islets by a relative conversion factor.
98 This method enables the evaluation of the total IEQ number and total IP number of each
99 preparation. The purity and morphology were described descriptively using light microscopy
100 observation at 100X magnification.

101

102 **Islet viability**

103 Islet viability was assessed by double staining with fluorescein diacetate (FDA) and propidium
104 iodide (PI). FDA is a non-fluorescent molecule, which is hydrolysed to green-fluorescent
105 fluorescein in live cells. Dead cells cannot accumulate or hydrolyse FDA. PI only permeates

106 through the membrane of dead cells resulting in red fluorescence. In detail, islets were washed
107 with PBS and both agents, FDA and PI, were added at a final concentration of 0.5 and 75 μ M,
108 respectively. Samples were incubated in the dark for 5 min and evaluated using an inverted
109 fluorescence microscope (100x magnification). For each sample, 100 islets were individually
110 analyzed by calculating the percentage of non-viable cells (red) and viable cells (green). Islets
111 were grouped into 5 categories (0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100% viability) and islet viability
112 was calculated.

113

114 **Glucose-stimulated insulin secretion**

115 The functional secretory capacity of pancreatic islets was analyzed by glucose-stimulated
116 insulin secretion. Therefore, islets were transferred to Modified Krebs Ringer Buffer (MKRB)
117 and equilibrated at 3.3 mM glucose at 37°C for 30 min. Afterwards, islets were divided into
118 two groups containing fresh MKRB with either 3.3 mM or 16.7 mM glucose and incubated for
119 1 h in a gently shaking water bath at 37°C. For both conditions, five samples containing ten
120 islets each were used. After incubation, islets were collected by gentle centrifugation at 200 g
121 for 1 min. Secreted insulin in the supernatants was measured by ELISA (Mercodia Insulin
122 Elisa Kit). Pellets were resuspended in 200 μ l PBS and analyzed for DNA content determined
123 by DNeasy Kit (Qiagen). Stimulation Index (SI) is calculated as the ratio of secreted insulin in
124 high glucose in comparison to low glucose, both normalized to DNA content ($SI = [\text{Insulin}_{\text{stim}} /$
125 $\text{total DNA}_{\text{stim}}] / [\text{Insulin}_{\text{res}} / \text{total DNA}_{\text{res}}]$).

126

127 **Lipid peroxidation**

128 Lipid peroxidation is the degradation of lipids that occurs as a result of oxidative damage,
129 typically by reactive oxygen species, and is a useful marker for oxidative stress. The
130 peroxidation process leads to the production of malondialdehyde (MDA), which can be
131 measured using the Malondialdehyde Microplate Assay Kit (Cohesion Biosciences). The lipid
132 peroxidation was determined by the reaction of MDA with thiobarbituric acid (TBA) to generate
133 the MDA-TBA adduct. The MDA-TBA adduct was quantified colorimetrically ($\lambda = 532$ nm and
134 600 nm). MDA levels were calculated according to the manufacturer's instruction.

135

136 **Zinc and iron measurement**

137 For the Inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry analysis (ICP-MS), the islets were
138 thawed and centrifuged. The supernatant was discarded, and the pellet resuspended in 200
139 μ l 50 μ M NaOH. For the physical cell lysis, the islets were drawn up six times with a syringe
140 and spread out again. Then 50 μ l of each sample was used for protein quantification. The
141 remaining 150 μ l was placed in a concentrator at 60°C for 4 h. Afterwards, 200 μ l HNO₃ was

142 added to resuspend the cell extract by thorough vortexing. To complete the digestion, the
143 samples were heated for further 4 h at 80°C.

144 After digestion, the samples were cooled to room temperature overnight. 2.6 ml of HPLC water
145 was added to the samples and the iron concentration was analyzed by ICP-MS.

146

147 **Islet treatment with Fer-1 over a period of 7 days**

148 After isolation, all islets were aliquoted equally into two treatment groups: (i) culture media
149 with vehicle (DMSO) as solvent control and (ii) culture media with 10 µM Fer-1 (Ferrostatin-1,
150 Merck Millipore, 341494). Readout assays were performed on days 3, 5, and 7.

151

152 **RSL3 dilution series**

153 After isolation, all islets were aliquoted equally into five groups with increasing concentrations
154 of RSL3 (5 µM, 10 µM, 15 µM, 20 µM, 40 µM; RSL3, type 2 FIN, Selleck Chemicals, S8155)
155 and a solvent control with DMSO. After 24 h FDA/PI assay was performed, and viability was
156 determined.

157

158 **Ferroptosis inhibition**

159 Islets were divided equally into four treatment groups: (i) culture media with vehicle (DMSO)
160 as solvent control, (ii) culture media with a single treatment of 10 µM Fer-1 and day 0, (iii)
161 culture media with a single treatment of 20 µM RSL3 on day 1, (iiii) culture media with a
162 combination of 10 µM Fer-1 on day 0 and 20 µM RSL3 on day 1. The day of isolation was
163 defined as day 0. All readouts were performed on day 2 after isolation.

164

165 **Immunohistochemical analysis**

166 For immunohistochemical analysis, 80-100 islets were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde (PFA)
167 for at least 1 hr, washed with PBS and embedded in tissue-Tek O.C.T. (Sakura Finetek).
168 Embedded islets were sliced by cryosectioning in 6 µM thin sections onto microscope slides.
169 Sections were rehydrated and washed with PBS. Antigen retrieval was performed with PBS
170 with 3% Triton for 15 min. After blocking non-specific antibody binding sites with background
171 sniper (Biocare Medical) for 11 min at room temperature, the sections were incubated at 4°C
172 with primary antibodies (Insulin/Glucagon/Somatostatin/ACSL4/TUNEL) diluted in PBS with
173 0,2%Triton, 2% BSA and 2% goat serum overnight. Sections were washed with PBS in 0.5%
174 Tween. Secondary antibodies together with 4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI) were diluted
175 in PBS with 0,2%Triton,2% BSA, and 2% goat serum. After incubation for 1 h, the sections
176 were finally washed with PBS and 0.5% Tween. Immunofluorescence microscopy was
177 performed using Zeiss Axiovert200M with AxioCamMRc5.

178

179 **Statistical Analysis**

180 Statistical analysis was performed with GraphPad Prism 8. For comparison between groups,
181 ordinary one-way-ANOVA ($p < 0.05$) test with Tukey's multiple comparison was used. Results
182 were shown as mean \pm SEM from N=X independent experiments.

183

184

185 **Results**

186 **RSL3 causes massive islet death in a dose-dependent manner and pretreatment with**
187 **Fer-1 can rescue islet viability and function**

188 We observed that ferroptosis induction with increasing concentrations of RSL3 resulted in a
189 significant reduction in islet viability (Fig. 1 A). At concentrations of 10 μ M RSL3, islet viability
190 was reduced to 40.3% compared to 77.3% in the control group. Induction of ferroptosis with
191 40 μ M RSL3 had a fatal effect on islet viability. In addition, TUNEL-staining was performed to
192 detect apoptotic cell death by labeling fragmented DNA and differentiate between apoptotic
193 and ferroptotic cell death (Fig. 5 A). Treatment with 10 μ M RSL3 and Fer-1 alone and in
194 combination did not cause an increase in TUNEL positive cells compared to the control group.
195 The viability of islets challenged with 20 μ M RSL3 could effectively be preserved by
196 pretreatment with 10 μ M Fer-1 for 24 h (Fig. 1 B). Similar effects were observed regarding
197 islet function (Fig. 2). Pretreatment with Fer-1 increased functional potency compared to RSL3
198 induction alone. Interestingly, single treatment with Fer-1 led to a reduction of islet stimulation
199 Index (7.25 compared to 20.04 in the control group).

200 **Treatment with Fer-1 alone did not impact on islet survival, viability or islet architecture**

201 To determine whether ferroptotic cell death occurs as a common cell death mechanism in
202 cultured rodent islets, the culture time was prolonged to seven days. We observed that
203 treatment with Fer-1 alone over 7 days had no impact on islet viability (Fig. 3). In order to
204 prove whether the sustained islet viability is the result of a positive selection process during
205 islet culture, or whether Fer-1 has a direct effect on the survival of the islets in culture, we
206 examined cell survival over the period of seven days (quantification of IP; Fig. 3). Both groups
207 showed a steady decrease in IP/ml without significant difference.

208 With immunohistochemical analysis we could demonstrate that the prolonged treatment with
209 Fer-1 (Fig. 5 B) did not influence islet architecture.

210

211 **RSL3 and Fer-1 influence the intracellular iron, and zinc concentration of cultured**
212 **rodent islets**

213 In order to elucidate intracellular changes during ferroptosis, the intracellular iron and zinc
214 concentrations were measured. Culturing of the islets with the ferroptosis activator RSL3
215 increased the iron concentration to 0.88 ± 0.17 nmol/mg protein compared to 0.59 ± 0.05
216 nmol/mg protein (Fig. 4 A). Interestingly, pretreatment with the ferroptosis inhibitor Fer-1 could
217 significantly reverse this effect by almost 50% and resulted in an iron concentration of $0.42 \pm$
218 0.03 nmol/mg protein. Furthermore, Fer1 treatment showed a slight reduction of the iron
219 concentration in contrast to control. Several studies also describe ferroptosis induction by zinc,
220 so we decided to measure intracellular zinc concentration in addition to intracellular iron
221 concentration [12,13].

222 Similar to the effect on iron concentrations, a treatment of the islets with RSL3 alone
223 significantly increased the zinc concentration to 2.00 ± 0.30 nmol/mg protein in contrast to
224 control islets with 1.10 ± 0.03 nmol/mg protein. A pretreatment of RSL3 challenged islets with
225 Fer-1 could reduce the zinc concentration of the islets to 1.56 ± 0.05 nmol/mg protein (Fig. 4
226 A).

227

228 **Cell death induction by RSL3 causes an increase in biomarkers of lipid peroxidation in**
229 **ferroptosis**

230 Since there is no specific detection method of ferroptosis, we measured the malondialdehyde
231 (MDA) concentration as a surrogate parameter. MDA occurs as an endproduct of ferroptotic
232 lipid peroxidation (Fig. 4 B). Furthermore, the expression of ACSL4 (Fig.6) was determined as
233 a membrane enzyme that incorporates arachidonate lipid acids into the lipid membrane and
234 extremely sensitive to ferroptotic lipid peroxidation [2,3,14]. RSL3 challenged islets showed
235 an increased MDA concentration to 3.49 ± 0.79 nmol/mg compared to 1.63 ± 0.10 nmol/mg

236 protein in the control group. Pretreatment with Fer-1 (10 μ M) was able to attenuate RSL3
237 induced MDA concentrations to 2.27 ± 0.06 nmol/mg protein.

238 Immunostainings were performed to visualize the expression of ACSL4 in the lipid membrane
239 of the islets (Fig. 6). All imaged islets showing a positive staining for ACSL4, independently of
240 the treatment group. However, 10 μ M RSL3 enhanced ACSL4 protein level as indicated by a
241 strong and pronounced signal compared to control group. Whereas islets treated with 10 μ M
242 Fer-1 alone or Fer-1 and RSL3 in combination led to reduced ACSL4 protein level compared
243 to the control group.

244

245 **Discussion**

246 The aim of the study was to better understand ferroptosis mechanisms in pancreatic islets and
247 thereby identify potential targets for protecting the islets from cell death in the context of
248 transplantation. Minimizing and preventing cell death processes in islet transplantation to
249 improve islet graft function has long been in the focus of islet research. The process of
250 preparation of the pancreas, followed by enzymatic and physical isolation of the islets, leads
251 to cellular stress with increasing radicals.[15,16] These could induce ferroptosis at any stage
252 of preparation and transplantation. We know that apoptotic cell death peaks 5 days after
253 culture and mainly affects beta cells. [17] For ferroptosis, it is still unclear at which stage it
254 occurs, but Desferroxamine (DFO) has been shown to improve islet and graft function.

255 Since ferroptosis requires available cellular iron, we and others have suggested that
256 ferroptosis plays at least some role for the functional limitations of islets after isolation and
257 transplantation. [15]

258 Along this line, Bruni *et al.* first discovered that pancreatic islets were sensitive to RSL3-
259 induced ferroptosis [6].

260 The current study addressed further, the significance of the ferroptosis pathway and the
261 potential of its inhibition on isolated pancreatic islets in a primary cell culture system. We
262 focused on the cellular changes caused by RSL3 and the subsequent induction of ferroptotic

263 cell death as well as the effects of Fer-1 on pancreatic islets. While the literature is replete on
264 the mechanism of action of RSL3 and Fer-1 on ferroptosis for several cell types, that for
265 pancreatic islets is just evolving [5,18]. The current study showed that pharmaceutical
266 induction of cell death by RSL3 causes an increase in typical ferroptosis-associated
267 biomarkers such as iron, MDA and the membrane protein ACSL4. The findings on the features
268 and the mechanism of ferroptosis in pancreatic islets are consistent with the observation in
269 other cell types [1,12,13]. Moreover, we showed that Fer-1 attenuated the toxic consequences
270 of RLS3 and thus protect the islets from ferroptosis. Moreover, TUNEL-staining with RSL3-
271 challenged islets did not show an increase in apoptosis thereby clearly differentiated between
272 apoptosis and ferroptosis cell death processes. Our results allow for better understanding the
273 effects of ferroptosis in islets and to differentiate more precisely between ferroptosis and other
274 cell death mechanisms such as apoptosis. In our *in vitro* setting, islets did not show significant
275 benefit due to the treatment with Fer-1 alone. Neither islet viability nor survival did improve
276 due to the treatment with Fer-1 alone. Hence, islet isolation and culture per se seem not to
277 substantially induce ferroptosis. However, islet function was indeed impaired due to treatment
278 with Fer-1. As Fer-1 accumulates in the membrane of the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) one
279 could speculate that Fer-1 is anchored in the ER membrane and thereby deteriorates islet
280 function [19] Anchoring Fer-1 in the ER membrane may reduce the function of the ER lipid
281 membrane, which causes a reduction of insulin maturation and misfolded proinsulin. This
282 could be one explanation of the reduced insulin stimulation capacity of Fer1 treated islets in
283 contrast to control islets.

284 However, in the setting of intraportal islet transplantation with known drawbacks associated
285 with hypoxic and inflammatory environmental conditions [20], it seems likely, that protective
286 mechanisms of ferroptosis mediated through Fer-1 may have a relevant positive effect.
287 Moreover, hepatocytes are the major iron storage in the human body, and this could further
288 affect the impact of ferroptosis (and its inhibition) on pancreatic islet grafts [21].

289
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