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2 **Hypoxia-induced small extracellular vesicle proteins regulate proinflammatory**  
3 **cytokines and systemic blood pressure in pregnant rats.**

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## 20 ABSTRACT

21

22 Small extracellular vesicles (sEVs) released from the extravillous trophoblast (EVT)  
23 are known to regulate uterine spiral artery remodeling during early pregnancy. The  
24 bioactivity and release of these sEVs differ under differing oxygen tensions and in  
25 aberrant pregnancy conditions. Whether the placental cell-derived sEVs released  
26 from the hypoxic placenta contribute to the pathophysiology of preeclampsia is not  
27 known. We hypothesize that, in response to low oxygen tension, the EVT packages  
28 a specific set of proteins in sEVs and that these released sEVs interact with  
29 endothelial cells to induce inflammation and increase maternal systemic blood  
30 pressure. Using a quantitative MS/MS approach, we identified 507 differentially  
31 abundant proteins within sEVs isolated from HTR-8/SVneo cells (a commonly used  
32 EVT model) cultured at 1% (hypoxia) compared with 8% (normoxia) oxygen. Among  
33 these differentially abundant proteins, 206 were upregulated and 301 were  
34 downregulated ( $p < 0.05$ ), and they were mainly implicated in inflammation-related  
35 pathways. *In vitro* incubation of hypoxic sEVs with endothelial cells, significantly  
36 increased ( $p < 0.05$ ) the release of GM-CSF, IL-6, IL-8, and VEGF, when compared to  
37 control (*i.e.*, cells without sEVs) and normoxic sEVs. *In vivo* injection of hypoxic sEVs  
38 into pregnant rats significantly increased ( $p < 0.05$ ) mean arterial pressure with  
39 increases in systolic and diastolic blood pressures. We propose that oxygen tension  
40 regulates the release and bioactivity of sEVs from EVT and that these sEVs regulate  
41 inflammation and maternal systemic blood pressure. This novel oxygen-responsive,  
42 sEVs signaling pathway, therefore, may contribute to the physiopathology of  
43 preeclampsia.  
44

## 45 List of abbreviations

46 Small extracellular vesicles (sEVs); Sequential Window Acquisition of All Theoretical  
47 Mass Spectra (SWATH); mass spectrometry (MS/MS); Granulocyte-macrophage  
48 colony-stimulating factor (GM-CSF); Interleukin 6 (IL-6); Interleukin 8 (IL-8); Vascular  
49 endothelial growth factor (VEGF); extravillous trophoblast (EVT); Preeclampsia (PE);  
50 small non-coding RNA (miRNAs); antiphospholipid antibody (aPL);  
51 syncytiotrophoblast derived extracellular vesicles (STBEVs); cluster of differentiation  
52 63 (CD63); Tumor susceptibility gene 101 (TSG101); Code of Federal Regulation  
53 (CFR); National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA); A Short Tandem Repeat  
54 (STR); Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA); Phosphate-buffered saline (PBS); size-  
55 exclusion chromatography (SEC); Gene Set Enrichment Analysis (GSEA); Ingenuity  
56 Pathway Analysis (IPA); Information-dependent acquisition (IDA); Placental growth  
57 factor (PIGF); Soluble fms-like tyrosine kinase-1 (sFLT-1); endothelial nitric oxide  
58 synthase (eNOS); nitric oxide (NO); Soluble endoglin (sEng); Glucocorticoids (GC);  
59 Human umbilical vein endothelial cell (HUVECs)  
60

61

## 62 **Clinical Perspectives:**

63

64 • Preeclampsia is a common obstetric complication that results in  
65 significant maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality. The  
66 underlying pathophysiology of preeclampsia is poorly understood.

67

68 • Low oxygen tension (i.e., hypoxia) predominates in preeclamptic  
69 placenta and drives the excessive release of small extracellular  
70 vesicles (sEVs), thought to be exosomes, into the maternal circulation,  
71 causing vascular endothelial cell dysfunction.

72

73 • This study demonstrated that hypoxia modified the content and  
74 bioactivity of sEVs in vitro and in vivo, leading to inflammation and an  
75 increase in systemic blood pressure in pregnant rats, mimicking the  
76 hypertensive changes seen in preeclampsia.

77

78 • Our finding suggests that the extracellular trophoblast derived sEVs  
79 might have a role in the pathophysiology of preeclampsia.

80

## 81 INTRODUCTION

82 Optimal pregnancy outcome is dependent upon successful fertilization, endometrial  
83 implantation, and placentation to support blastocyst development (1). Extravillous  
84 trophoblast plays a significant role in establishing fetomaternal circulation via  
85 remodeling of the uterine spiral arteries and placentation (2). During early  
86 pregnancy (< 10-12 weeks), endovascular extravillous trophoblasts occlude uterine  
87 spiral arteries to maintain a low oxygen environment (~2-3% O<sub>2</sub>), which is essential  
88 for normal embryogenesis and organogenesis (2). Subsequently, extravillous  
89 trophoblast replaces the vascular endothelial and smooth muscle cells to remodel  
90 the uterine spiral arteries with the formation of high capacitance and low resistance  
91 vessels, enabling adequate placental perfusion (3). In addition, extravillous  
92 trophoblast invades the uterine glands and veins and connect all these luminal  
93 structures to form the inter-villous space (4). When extravillous trophoblast invasion  
94 fails to occur or is dysfunctional, uterine spiral arterial remodeling is inadequate, and  
95 placental function is suboptimal, resulting in placental hypoxia and the development  
96 of pregnancy pathologies such as preeclampsia (5).

97  
98 Preeclampsia affects approximately 8% of pregnancies worldwide and is recognized  
99 to cause 60,000 maternal deaths and 500,000 neonatal deaths from preterm delivery  
100 each year (6). This condition is characterized as early-onset (that develops before 34  
101 weeks of gestation), or late-onset (develops at or after 34 weeks of gestation).

102 Early-onset preeclampsia is associated with impaired spiral artery remodeling and  
103 placental ischemia and excessive release of bioactive molecules implicated in the  
104 development of maternal vascular dysfunction (7, 8).

105

106 Cell-to-cell communication between the placental and maternal tissues is essential  
107 for the establishment of normal pregnancy. In recent years, the role of extracellular  
108 vesicles (EVs) and, in particular, small EVs called exosomes in cell-to-cell  
109 communication has been recognized (9). Exosomes are nanometer-sized lipid-  
110 bilayer extracellular vesicles that contain bioactive molecules, including proteins,  
111 lipids, and small non-coding RNAs (e.g., miRNAs). They are released from a wide  
112 range of cells (including placental cells) and are taken up by target cells to modify  
113 their functions. Exosomes have been identified as important mediators in feto-  
114 maternal communication (10, 11)

115  
116 The concentrations of circulating exosomes in plasma are higher in pregnant  
117 compared with non-pregnant women (12). Exosomes are released from placental  
118 cells (e.g., syncytiotrophoblasts) into the maternal systemic circulation as early as 6  
119 weeks of gestation (13), and their concentration increases through gestation (12).  
120 Interestingly, higher concentrations of placental exosomes in maternal circulation are  
121 associated with complications of pregnancies, such as preeclampsia (14),  
122 gestational diabetes mellitus (15), intrauterine growth restriction (16), preterm birth  
123 (17) and maternal obesity (18) compared with the concentrations observed during  
124 normal pregnancy.

125  
126 The potential role of exosomes in the development of preeclampsia has been  
127 investigated by determining the effects of placenta-derived exosomes on various  
128 target cells. Hypoxia increases the release of exosomes from placental cells and  
129 exosomes isolated from cells incubated under low oxygen tension induce the release  
130 of pro-inflammatory cytokines and decrease cell migration in their target cells (19,

131 20). Interestingly, the miRNA content of exosomes isolated from HTR-8/SVneo cells  
132 (commonly used EVT model) changes in response to low oxygen tensions and  
133 regulate endothelial and vascular smooth muscle cell migration (21). These data  
134 support a role for exosomes from EVT in the remodeling of uterine spiral arteries  
135 under both normal and pathological pregnancies (5, 21, 22).

136

137 The capacity of exosomes to induce changes in the target cells is mediated by the  
138 specific delivery of bioactive molecules, such as proteins and miRNAs (23, 24).

139 Recently, using a longitudinal study design, we reported that the miRNA content  
140 within exosomes changes in preeclamptic compared to normotensive pregnancies  
141 (14). In addition, oxygen tension regulates the miRNA profile of EVT-derived  
142 exosomes (21). The biological effects of oxygen tension on the protein profile of  
143 EVT-derived exosomes, however, have yet to be described. Sammar *et al.*  
144 investigated the level of expression of placental protein 13 in syncytiotrophoblast-  
145 derived extracellular vesicles (STBEVs) isolated from preeclamptic and normal  
146 pregnancy placental perfusate and reported low expression in preeclamptic  
147 placentae (25). Tong *et al.* described a novel mechanism by which placental  
148 extracellular vesicles can attenuate the pathogenesis of preeclampsia in the  
149 presence of antiphospholipid antibody (aPL) that can induce the synthesis of toll-like  
150 receptors on placental extracellular vesicles to increase the level of expression of  
151 mitochondrial DNA in these vesicles (26). Thus, these data suggest that placenta-  
152 derived EVs are involved in gene regulation, placental homeostasis, and cellular  
153 function that overall reflect the placental-maternal crosstalk.

154

155 Poor placentation associated with a failed invasion of the EVT is a feature of  
156 preeclampsia and is associated with hypoxia and oxidative stress. We hypothesize  
157 that, in response to low oxygen tension, the EVT packages a specific set of proteins  
158 in sEVs and that these released sEVs interact with endothelial cells to induce  
159 inflammation and increase maternal systemic blood pressure. To test this  
160 hypothesis, small EVs were isolated from a transformed extravillous trophoblast cell  
161 line (HTR8/SVneo, commonly used as EVT model) cultured under different oxygen  
162 tensions to mimic normal and pathological conditions. sEVs were isolated from  
163 HTR8/SVneo cell-conditioned media and the protein profile was identified using  
164 quantitative mass spectrometry. The effect of sEVs on the secretion of GM-CSF, IL-  
165 6, IL-8, and VEGF from endothelial cells was evaluated. Finally, sEVs were injected  
166 in pregnant rats and the systemic blood pressure was monitored. The results  
167 obtained in this study are consistent with the hypothesis that oxygen tension  
168 regulates the release and bioactivity of sEVs from HTR8/SVneo cells and that these  
169 sEVs regulate maternal systemic blood pressure. Extracellular vesicles are a  
170 heterogenic population of vesicles, and there is considerable debate about the  
171 definition and nomenclature of the different populations of extracellular vesicles. In  
172 this study, the term small extracellular vesicles (sEVs) refers to extracellular vesicles  
173 with a median diameter of ~ 100 nm, which are CD63 and TSG101 positive and of  
174 cup-shape morphology.

## 175 METHODS

### 176 Cell culture

177 All experimental procedures were conducted within an ISO17025 accredited  
178 National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA, Australia) research facility. All  
179 data were recorded within a 21 Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) part 11 compliant  
180 electronic laboratory notebook (Lab Archives, Carlsbad, CA 92008, USA). The  
181 project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committees of the University  
182 of Queensland and Royal Brisbane and Women Hospital (HREC/11/QRBW/342).  
183 The HTR-8/SVneo cell line was kindly provided by Dr. Charles H. Graham (Queen's  
184 University, Ontario, Canada). The HTR-8/SVneo cell line was established by the  
185 transfection of the first-trimester trophoblasts with the Simian virus 40 large T antigen  
186 (27). HTR-8/SVneo cells are commonly used as a model for extravillous trophoblast  
187 function. Authentication of HTR-8/SVneo cells was performed with authentication by  
188 STR DNA Profiling Analysis. HTR-8/SVneo cells were maintained in phenol red-free  
189 RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% heat-inactivated fetal bovine serum  
190 (FBS), 1% non-essential amino acids, 1 mM sodium pyruvate, 100 U/mL penicillin,  
191 and 100 mg/mL streptomycin. Cultures were maintained at 37 °C and humidified  
192 under an atmosphere of 5% CO<sub>2</sub>-balanced N<sub>2</sub> and either an 8% or 1% oxygen in an  
193 automated PROOX 110-scaled hypoxia chamber (BioSpherics™, Lacona, NY,  
194 USA). Cells were cultured in RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% FBS-  
195 exosomes depleted for 48h before exosome isolation. Cells were sub-cultured with  
196 dissociation media, TrypLE™ Express (Life Technologies, USA), and cellular viability  
197 was determined using the Trypan Blue exclusion solution and Countess® Automated  
198 cell counter (Life Technologies, USA).

199

## 200 Isolation and characterization of small extracellular vesicles

201 Small extracellular vesicles (sEVs) were isolated from cell-conditioned media, as  
202 previously described with slight modification (21). In brief, cell-conditioned media  
203 was centrifuged at 2,000 x g for 10 min at 4°C (Sorvall®, high-speed  
204 microcentrifuge, 90<sup>0</sup> fixed rotor angle, Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., Asheville, NC,  
205 USA,). The 2,000 x g supernatant fluid was then centrifuged at 12,000 x g for 15 min  
206 at 4°C (Sorvall, high-speed microcentrifuge, 90° fixed rotor angle). The resultant  
207 supernatant fluid was filtered through a 0.22 µm filter (Steritop™, Millipore, Billerica,  
208 MA, USA) and then subjected to size-exclusion chromatography (SEC). Briefly,  
209 Pierce™ Disposable Columns, 10 mL (Thermo Scientific), were packed with 10 ml of  
210 Sepharose® CL-2B (Sigma) and sorted overnight at 4°C. The packed bed was  
211 equilibrated with ice-cold PBS and topped with a column filter. The 500 µl of the  
212 concentrated sample was overlaid on top of the filter and followed by elution with  
213 PBS. Five-hundred-microliter of 12 fractions were collected, and particle  
214 concentration determined using nanoparticle tracking analysis (NAT, NanoSight).  
215 High particle fractions were pooled and stored at -80°C until sEVs analysis. sEVs  
216 were characterized by size distribution, the abundance of proteins associated with  
217 sEVs (i.e., CD63, sc15363 [1:1000] and TSG101, EPR7130 [1:1000]) and  
218 morphology using Nanoparticle Tracking Analysis (NTA), Western blot analysis and  
219 electron microscopy, respectively as previously described (16). sEVs were quantified  
220 using an electrochemical exosome detection method, as we previously described  
221 (28). Samples were suspended in PBS and divided into several aliquots after the  
222 isolation and stored immediately at -80°C. To thaw the sEVs, samples were taken  
223 out from -80°C and maintained at 4°C in ice until completion of the thawing process.  
224 The protein concentration and the number of vesicles were quantified immediately

225 after the isolation and also after thawing at 4°C to evaluate the stability and yield of  
226 the vesicles under the storage conditions. No differences were observed in the  
227 protein concentration and yield (i.e., vesicles/protein) after the thawing process. This  
228 data is consistent with our previously published studies in which no significant  
229 differences were observed using fresh or frozen plasma in exosome quantification,  
230 exosomal marker expression, microRNA expression and protein content(13). All  
231 samples were stored and thawing with the same procedure, discarding that the  
232 differences observed at the endpoint experiments are due differences to stored and  
233 thawing protocols.

#### 234 **Quantitative Mass spectrometry analysis of exosomes**

235 ***In-gel Digestion.*** A local ion library was generated to use in the Sequential Window  
236 Acquisition of All Theoretical mass spectra (SWATH) mass spectra analysis using  
237 an in-gel digestion method. Briefly, two protein pools were prepared from exosomes  
238 obtained from 8% and 1% oxygen. The samples were mixed with Bolt™ LDS  
239 sample buffer (ThermoFisher), sonicated for 5 min and heated at 95°C for 5 min.  
240 Samples were resolved on a Bolt™ Bis-Tris Plus polyacrylamide gel  
241 (ThermoFisher) at 160 V until full separation. The gel was stained with  
242 SimplyBlue™ SafeStain (ThermoFisher Scientific), and a total of 12 gel fractions  
243 were excised for each pooled sample. The fractions were washed firstly with 50 mM  
244 of ammonium bicarbonate/acetonitrile (ABC/ACN) followed by ACN. 50 µl of 100  
245 mM DTT was added to each sample and incubated at 56°C for 30 min. DTT was  
246 removed, and 70 µl of iodoacetamide (IAA) was added and incubated at room  
247 temperature (RT) for 20 min. The samples were washed with 300 µl ACN and  
248 incubated with 50 mM ABC/ACN for 30 min at room temperature. Then, 300 µl of  
249 ACN was added and left for 2 min. ACN was removed and air-dried for 5 min. 50 µl

250 of 13 ng/μl of trypsin (Promega, Australia) in ABC was added to the alkylated gels  
251 and stored on ice for 30 min. Then, 20 μl of 50 mM ABC/H<sub>2</sub>O (v/v) was added and  
252 incubated overnight at 37°C. Following overnight incubation, the supernatant  
253 containing peptides was reserved. A mix of 100 μl of extraction buffer (0.25 ml 5%  
254 (v/v) formic acid, 0.25 ml water and 0.5 ml ACN) was added to the gel pieces and  
255 sonicated for 10 min. The resulting supernatant fluid was collected and combined  
256 with the reserved supernatant fluid. The combined supernatant fluid was dried in a  
257 vacuum centrifuge. The dried samples were resuspended in 200 μl 0.1% TFA.

258 **Filter Aided Sample Preparation:** For SWATH analysis, individual exosome  
259 samples were processed using the Filter Aided Sample Preparation (FASP) method  
260 (29). A total of 15 μg of exosome protein from each sample was reduced with an  
261 equal volume of lysis buffer containing 8% SDS, 100 mM Tris, pH 7.6, and 0.2 M  
262 DTT followed sonication and heating of samples at 95°C, each. Samples were  
263 allowed to cool down completely before adding 8 M urea in 100 mM Tris, pH 8.5.  
264 Samples were transferred into a Nanosep® filter unit with a 30K molecular weight  
265 cut off and centrifuged for 10,000 g for 15 min. Then, filter units were washed with  
266 400 μl of urea buffer and centrifuged for 10,000 g for 15 min. Samples were  
267 alkylated by the addition of 100 μl of 50mM IAA in 8M urea buffer and incubated in  
268 the dark for 20 min. The filter units were washed with 8 M urea buffer followed by  
269 ABC. Proteins were digested using 0.3 μg of trypsin and incubated overnight at  
270 37°C.

271 **Desalting:** The solubilized peptides from pooled and individual samples were  
272 desalted using SOLAμ HRP SPE 96 well plate (Thermo Fisher Scientific) according  
273 to the manufacturer's instruction. **Analysis of peptides:** Tryptic digest was loaded  
274 onto a reversed-phase trap column (CHROMXP C18CL 5μm, 10 x 0.3mm;

275 Eksigent, Redwood City) and on-column wash was performed for 15 min (3 ul/min)  
276 followed by peptide separation on reversed-phase CHROMXP C18CL 3 um, 120  
277 A<sup>0</sup>, 150 x 0.075mm; (Eksigent, Redwood City) analytical column. The LC gradient  
278 started with 95% mobile phase A (H<sub>2</sub>O/ 0.1% FA), 5% B (ACN/ 0.1% FA) at 0 min  
279 and increase to 10% B over for 2 min and then a 58-min linear gradient to 40% B  
280 followed by 50% B for 5 min. Mobile phase B was then increased from 50% to 95 %  
281 over 10 min, followed by a column wash at 95% B for 15 min and re-equilibrated  
282 with 5% Buffer B for 6 min. The flow rate was kept at 250 nl/min during the entire  
283 LC run. The resulting peptide samples were processed in IDA on an AB Sciex 5600  
284 TripleTOF mass spectrometer with the top 18 precursor ions automatically selected  
285 for fragmentation. The data obtained were combined to establish a peptide ion  
286 database. For SWATH acquisition, the TripleTOF® 5600 System was configured as  
287 described by Gillet at al. (30). Using an isolation width of 26 Da (25 Da of optimal  
288 ion transmission efficiency and 1 Da for the window overlap), a set of 32  
289 overlapping windows was constructed covering the mass range 400 to 1200 m/z.

290 **Data Processing:** To generate a local ion library, a protein database search was  
291 conducted using the ProteinPilot version 4.5b Software (AB SCIEX) and the  
292 Paragon™ Algorithm. The search was performed against the SwissProt Homo  
293 sapiens database with a global false discovery rate (FDR) of 1% was used as the  
294 threshold for the number of proteins for import. The SWATH Acquisition Microapp  
295 2.0 in PeakView 2.2 (SCIEX) was used to create a spectral library file. This local  
296 library was extended using the R package SwathXtend (version 2.3) (31) with a  
297 published SWATH dataset of healthy human plasma (32). The extended library was  
298 used for all subsequent SWATH analysis. Processing settings for the SWATH  
299 Microapp: 2 peptides per protein, 3 transitions per peptide, peptide confidence

300 threshold corresponding to 1% global FDR and FDR threshold of 1% was used.  
301 The retention time was then manually realigned with a minimum of 5 peptides with  
302 high signal intensities and distributed along the time axis. The resulting peak area  
303 for each protein after SWATH processing was exported to MarkerView 1.3.1  
304 (SCIEX) for statistical analysis. The resulting data were normalized using the Total  
305 Area Sums (TAS) approach. The coefficient of variation in the abundance of  
306 peptides across the samples was established by comparing SWATH peptide ion  
307 against the IDA library. For independent samples, *t*-tests were used to compare  
308 protein expression between exosomes from cells cultured to 8% and 1% oxygen.  
309 The proteins with  $p < 0.05$  were considered as statistically significant.

310

### 311 [Ingenuity Pathway Analysis \(IPA\) and Gene set enrichment analysis \(GSEA\).](#)

312 IPA (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany) was performed to identify canonical pathways,  
313 diseases and functions, and protein networks. Significantly enriched pathways for  
314 the proteins and pathways were identified with the criterion  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ . To  
315 determine the genes associated with changes in the protein in sEVs in response to  
316 oxygen tensions, GSEA (version 3.0) was performed. Normalized SWATH results  
317 from cells and exosomes were used in the GSEA. The protein expression data  
318 were processed using the hallmark gene sets within the MSigDB database v6.2  
319 with permutations set at 1000 and Signal2Noise metric for ranking genes. Default  
320 values were chosen for all other parameters.

321

### 322 [Effect of sEVs on cytokines release from endothelial cells](#)

323 To determine the effect of exosomes on cytokine release from target cells,  
324 exosomes were isolated from extravillous trophoblast cell-condition media and

325 incubated with cells under either 8% or 1% O<sub>2</sub>. sEVs (20, 40, 80 and 100 µg  
326 protein/ml equivalent to 1 to 10 x 10<sup>8</sup> vesicles per ml) were then incubated with  
327 endothelial cells (HMEC-1, from Lonza) in medium containing 5 mM d-glucose under  
328 an atmosphere of 8% O<sub>2</sub> to mimic the physiological conditions for 24 h. Cytokine  
329 release, defined as the accumulation of immunoreactive cytokine in cell-conditioned  
330 medium, was quantified using a protein solution array assay, as previously described  
331 (20).

332

### 333 **In vivo experiments**

334 All experimental procedures were in accordance with National Institutes of Health  
335 guidelines (NIH Publication No. 85–23, revised 1996) with approval by the Animal  
336 Care and Use Committee at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. All the animal  
337 experiments were performed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (USA). Timed  
338 pregnant Sprague-Dawley rats (day 4 of gestation; copulation plug on day 1; Charles  
339 River, Wilmington, MA) were used in the experiment. On the gestational day (GD) 6  
340 (after two days of acclimatization), dams were anesthetized with 2.5% isoflurane,  
341 and a flexible catheter attached to a radio transmitter (TA11PA-C10, Data Sciences,  
342 and Minneapolis, MN) was inserted into the left femoral artery. After surgery, rats  
343 were given housed in individual cages and allowed to recover for a week. On GD 16,  
344 dams were randomly divided into 2 groups. Dams in the treatment group were  
345 injected intravenously through the tail vein once daily with sEVs from 1% hypoxic  
346 group (exosome protein amount-10 µg/day) for 4 days from GD 16–19. The other  
347 group received sEVs form 8% normoxic group. A subset of control animals was  
348 treated with saline. Blood pressures were recorded continuously from GD 14 until  
349 GD 21. Blood pressure measurements obtained with a 10-s sampling period were

350 averaged and recorded every 10 minutes, 24 hours a day using the software  
351 (Dataquest 4.0) provided by the manufacturer. All acquired blood pressure, and  
352 heart rate data were averaged into 12-hour blocks paralleling the light-dark cycle.

353

### 354 **Statistical analysis**

355 All data are presented as mean  $\pm$  SEM and calculated using Graph Pad Prism (La  
356 Jolla, CA). Repeated measures ANOVA (treatment and time as factors) with a  
357 Bonferroni post hoc were used for comparisons of blood pressures between the  
358 hypoxic (1% oxygen) and control (8% oxygen) groups. Statistical significance was  
359 defined as  $p < 0.05$ .

## 360 RESULTS

### 361 Isolation of sEVs from extravillous trophoblasts

362 sEVs were isolated from HTR-8/SVneo cell-conditioned media and enriched using  
363 differential centrifugation and SEC (Figure 1A). The NTA analysis identified vesicles  
364 with a diameter between 50 to 150 nm, with enrichment of vesicles of around 100 nm  
365 (Figure 1B and C), consistent with sEVs. Vesicles were positive for proteins known to  
366 enriched in sEVs, *i.e.*, CD63 and TSG101 (Figure 1D). There were no differences in  
367 exosome size distribution and abundance of sEVs-associated protein markers  
368 between sEVs isolated from EVT cultured under normoxic and hypoxic conditions,  
369 indicating that hypoxia does not impact upon the size distribution of sEVs. The  
370 morphology and size of the sEVs were confirmed by electron microscopy (Figure  
371 1E). Interestingly, the levels of EVT-derived sEVs from cells cultured under hypoxic  
372 conditions were around 3-fold higher ( $p < 0.05$ ) compared with the values observed in  
373 normoxic conditions (Figure 2A).

374

### 375 Proteomic contents of extravillous trophoblast sEVs

376 Information-dependent acquisition (IDA) and SWATH profile were generated from  
377 sEVs from HTR-8/SVneo cells cultured at 1% (hypoxic) or 8% (normoxic) oxygen  
378 concentrations. The IDA library was used to identify peptide ions that were present in  
379 SWATH ion profiles. Proteins were identified and quantified by comparing SWATH-  
380 generated peptide ion profiles for each sample against the IDA library (PeakView).  
381 IDA of mass spectra from sEVs samples was initially performed and identified 727  
382 total proteins (Table S1) and analyzed using IDA and SWATH. To evaluate whether  
383 hypoxia changes the protein profile within sEVs from HTR-8/SVneo cells, we

384 analyzed data using an unsupervised principal component analysis (PCA) with  
385 Qlucore Omics Explorer. With the first three PCA components explaining >90% of  
386 the total variance, the generated PCA plot revealed that the sEVs from hypoxic and  
387 normoxic groups had distinct protein contents (Figure 2B). The variation in the  
388 relative abundance of exosomal proteins between sEVs from hypoxic and normoxic  
389 cell lines was established by comparison with the SWATH profile against the IDA  
390 library and presented as a volcano plot (Figure 2C). A total of 507 statistically  
391 significant proteins (206 up- and 301 down-regulated) were differentially expressed.  
392 Among all the proteins, alpha-2 macroglobulin, alpha-fetoprotein, apolipoproteins A1  
393 and E, chaperonin, gelsolin, heat shock proteins (Hsp90, Hsp70, Hsp60, and  
394 Hsp10), inter alpha trypsin inhibitor, gamma-glutamyl transferase, lactotransferrin,  
395 serpin, thrombospondin, tubulin, vitrin, vitronectin, annexin family of proteins,  
396 fibronectin, histone, haptoglobin, syndecan-1, galectin 3 binding protein,  
397 glyceraldehyde 3 phosphate dehydrogenase, and alpha 2 HS glycoprotein were  
398 identified that are likely to be associated with preeclampsia pathogenesis.

399  
400 To investigate the potential functions of the differentially expressed proteins,  
401 pathway analysis of the exosomal proteomic profile was performed. The top  
402 canonical pathways identified by IPA are presented in the Figure 3A; with the most  
403 significant difference in the sEVs protein profiles between these groups were  
404 associated with Eukaryotic Initiation Factor 2 (EIF2; a signaling pathway that  
405 activates vascular endothelial growth factor, VEGF signaling, and with glucocorticoid  
406 receptor signaling pathway). Interestingly, the majority of the pathways were  
407 associated with inflammation, and the top 25 canonical pathways with the common  
408 genes (network/overlap) are presented in Figure 3B. Many of the differentially

409 expressed genes are present in multiple pathways related to inflammation. Finally,  
410 GSEA of the total protein profile revealed several gene sets that were significantly  
411 enriched in sEVs derived from hypoxic compared with normoxic cells. This is  
412 illustrated by the normalized enrichment score. There was an enrichment of proteins  
413 involved in MYC targets, hypoxia, and epithelial to mesenchymal transition  
414 suggesting that these biological processes might be regulated by the hypoxic sEVs  
415 (Figure 3C).

416

#### 417 **Effect of HTR-8/SVneo cells-derived sEVs on cytokines releases from** 418 **endothelial cells**

419 The effect of hypoxic and normoxic sEVs on the release of IL-6, IL-8, VEGF, and  
420 GM-CSF from endothelial cells is presented in Figure 4. sEVs derived from hypoxic  
421 EVT dose-dependently increased ( $p < 0.05$ ) the release of all cytokines from  
422 endothelial cells when compared to controls (without sEVs) or sEVs from cells  
423 cultured at 8% oxygen (normoxic control).

424

#### 425 **Effect of EVT-derived exosome in systemic blood pressure in pregnant rats.**

426 The mean litter size and maternal weights were similar between hypoxic (1%  
427 oxygen) and control (8% oxygen) groups. Fetal weights (8% O<sub>2</sub>:  $2.59 \pm 0.06$  g; 1%  
428 O<sub>2</sub>:  $2.47 \pm 0.05$  g), placental weights on GD 21 (1%:  $0.48 \pm 0.09$  g; 8%:  $0.50 \pm 0.05$  g)  
429 were comparable between the two groups. Rats are nocturnal animals, and  
430 continuous monitoring of blood pressure by telemetry revealed a characteristic  
431 circadian pattern with higher arterial pressure and heart rate values during the dark  
432 cycle (active phase) compared to the light cycle. In animals injected with normoxic  
433 sEVs, MAP progressively decreased from GD 16 and reached a nadir on GD21,

434 which was comparable to the MAP in the saline-injected group. Pregnant rats  
435 injected with hypoxic sEVs had significantly higher MAP starting from GD18 to GD21  
436 compared to the respective time point in the control group (Figure 5A; n=6 rats in  
437 each group;  $P < 0.05$ ). The changes in MAP correlated with a significant increase in  
438 systolic blood pressures in the hypoxic compared to the control group (Figure 5B; n=  
439 6 rats in each group). The diastolic blood pressure increased only in the later part of  
440 gestation (i.e., GD 20-21) in the hypoxic compared to the control group (Figure 5C;  
441 n=6 rats in each group). No differences in heart rate were observed between the  
442 hypoxic and control groups (Figure 6; n=6 rats in each group).

## 443 DISCUSSION

444 The data obtained in this study are consistent with the hypothesis that the protein  
445 content of EVT sEVs is programmed by low oxygen tension to be pro-inflammatory  
446 (i.e., increasing the release of the IL-6, IL-8, VEGF and CS-GMS from target cells)  
447 and to promote hypertension.

448 The bioinformatic analysis revealed that in normoxic (8% oxygen) conditions, the  
449 proteins in EVT sEVs are associated with EIF2 signaling that activates the VEGF  
450 signaling pathway. VEGF is a protein mediator that is synthesized and secreted by  
451 placental macrophages. VEGF binds as a ligand with the soluble fms-like tyrosine  
452 kinase (sFLT-1) receptor (also described as VEGF receptor 1) expressed on the  
453 surface of vascular endothelial and smooth muscle cells (33). It also binds with the  
454 kinase insert domain (KDR) receptor (also described as VEGF receptor 2), which is  
455 expressed only on the surface of vascular endothelial cells (33). Activation of these  
456 pathways assists in increasing endothelial cell permeability, migration, proliferation,  
457 and survival, ultimately leading to proper angiogenesis of the fetoplacental vascular  
458 tree and contributing to adequate trophoblast development and placental perfusion

459 (34). VEGF also mediates vasodilatation and increases vessel permeability via the  
460 release of nitric oxide from the uterine arterial endothelial cells in pregnancy (35). In  
461 preeclampsia, however, maladaptation occurs due to the altered concentrations of  
462 VEGF and PlGF, augmented placental secretion of sFLT-1 and soluble endoglin  
463 (sEng), polymorphism in the endothelial nitric oxide gene and reduced  
464 bioavailability of nitric oxide secondary to oxidative stress (36). The consequences  
465 are inappropriate angiogenesis, endothelial dysfunction and vasoconstriction leading  
466 to inadequate placental perfusion to the fetus and maternal hypertension.

467

468 A recent study reported that the gene regulating sFLT-1 receptor (that binds with  
469 VEGF) is polymorphic and that some variants increase susceptibility to preeclampsia  
470 (37). Virtanen *et al.*, found that the concentrations of angiogenic proteins (VEGF and  
471 PlGF) in serum collected from women during the third trimester of uncomplicated  
472 pregnancies are increased and that they stimulate angiogenesis. These angiogenic  
473 factors were found to be decreased in preeclamptic serum, and they also inhibited  
474 tubule formation (38). The findings of our study are consistent with previous data  
475 suggesting that VEGF signaling and placental vasculogenesis are regulated by  
476 hypoxia (39).

477

478 A hypoxic environment (1% oxygen tension for culture) also promotes the packaging  
479 of EVT sEVs with proteins involved in glucocorticoid receptor signaling.

480 Glucocorticoids (GC) are steroid hormones that are secreted predominantly from the  
481 adrenal gland. These hormones exert diverse effects on vascular function and have  
482 an anti-angiogenic effect (40). Ozmen *et al.* studied the effects of GC on human  
483 umbilical vein endothelial cells (HUVEC), where they observed increased expression

484 of VEGF and VEGFR1 proteins and decreased expression of VEGFR2 protein when  
485 HUVECs were treated with GCs (40). Recently, we have reported that the differential  
486 expression of exosomal miRNAs in maternal plasma in term and preterm birth are  
487 associated with GC receptor signaling (41).

488 The concentration of maternal cortisol increases with gestation and is significantly  
489 correlated with blood pressure rise during pregnancy (42). The GC receptor gene is  
490 located on chromosome 5q and encodes a nuclear transcription factor that mediates  
491 GC receptor signaling Polymorphism in the (GC) receptor is associated with the  
492 development of hypertension (43). Interestingly, genetic variants of stratin, a protein  
493 that interacts with the steroid (GC) receptors, is associated with salt-sensitive blood  
494 pressure regulation in mice (44). Moreover, the peripheral blood-derived mixed  
495 population of exosomal microRNAs can regulate systolic blood pressure in older  
496 individuals (45). Placental trophoblast derived exosomal micro RNAs are associated  
497 with maternal-fetal immune interaction and the physiologic consequences of  
498 placental-maternal communication in a murine model (46). Another study observed  
499 that human umbilical cord mesenchymal stem cell-derived sEVs improves the  
500 placental tissue morphology in the pregnant rat by inhibiting trophoblast apoptosis  
501 and promoting placental angiogenesis (47). These reports support our hypothesis  
502 that the proteins encapsulated in sEVs isolated from EVT's cultured under hypoxia  
503 can prevent the decrease in blood pressure observed in normal pregnancy  
504 mimicking preeclamptic symptoms in an in-vivo model- pregnant rats. This lack of a  
505 pregnancy-related fall in blood pressure is considered as a cardinal feature of  
506 preeclampsia (48), which is also observed in other rat models of preeclampsia (49,  
507 50). This suggests that the mechanisms controlling blood pressure during pregnancy  
508 are perturbed by proteins encapsulated in sEVs isolated from EVT's cultured under

509 hypoxia. The lack of impact on fetal growth and number in this study suggests that  
510 this could be a mild model of preeclampsia. Further studies should examine if higher  
511 exosomes concentrations in pregnant rats could negatively impact fetal weight  
512 producing a severe form of preeclampsia. The patterns of exosomal protein  
513 expression and VEGF and GRS signaling pathways seen in the hypoxic and control  
514 groups may give some insights into explaining the hypertensive effect of hypoxia  
515 treated EVT sEV proteins.

516 In this study, we used HTR8/SVneo cell line as EVT model, which is frequently used  
517 as a model of physiologically invasive extravillous trophoblast. Previous studies have  
518 demonstrated that HTR8/SVneo express KR7, CG, CGR, and HLG (51) consistent  
519 with proteins identified in primary EVT. We have previously established that EVT-  
520 derived exosomes carry HLA-G (21). However, other studies have reported whether  
521 HTR-8/SVneo cells contain a mix of cell populations that differs compared with  
522 primary EVT. For example, Abou-Kheir *et al.*, showed that the HTR-8/SVneo cells  
523 contained a heterogeneous population of cells including trophoblast and  
524 mesenchymal/stromal cells (52). In comparison to other placental cell lines, the  
525 abundance of epithelial markers such as cytokeratin 7 (KR7) and e-cadherin was  
526 silenced in HTR-8/SVneo cells (52-54) while a higher abundance of vimentin (a  
527 marker of epithelial to mesenchymal transition) was observed (52-55). Likewise,  
528 Takao *et al.*, observed low expression of HLA-G and integrin alpha-V/beta-3 (56),  
529 which are known primary EVT (epithelial) markers (57-59). Furthermore, genome-  
530 wide gene expression profiles showed that the molecular signature of HTR8/SVneo  
531 cells was vastly different from that of primary EVTs (60). Therefore, results obtained  
532 from HTR-8/SVneo cells must be further verified using the appropriate primary EVT  
533 cells.

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Based on the data obtained, we suggest that hypoxia alters the content of EVT sEVs and that these changes contribute to the physiopathology of preeclampsia. The changes in protein and miRNA expression promote an inflammatory environment within uterine spiral arteries and cause hypertension during pregnancy. These changes are likely to occur in pregnancies characterized by compromised placental perfusion and ischemia (expressed as preeclampsia and intrauterine growth restriction) as an adaptive response aiming to improve placentation.

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**Author's contributions:** C.S., S.D. conceived and designed the study. S.K., and C.S. designed the in vivo experiments. S.S., A.L., K.S-R., M.S., Y.Y., and J.M. performed the experiments. S.D. and C.S. wrote the manuscript. C.S., G.R., S.K., and J.H. edited the manuscript. All authors reviewed/edited the manuscript and approved the final version. C.S. is the guarantor of this work and, as such, had full access to all the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

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742 Figures

743

744 **Figure 1. Characterization of sEVs isolated from HTR-8/SVneo cells.** sEVs were  
745 isolated from cell-conditioned media by differential and ultracentrifugation, followed  
746 by size exclusion chromatography. (A) Flow chart for the exosome isolation and  
747 enrichment procedure (B and C) Representative size distribution of sEVs in NTA of  
748 sEVs isolated from cells cultured at 1% oxygen and 8% oxygen, respectively. (D)  
749 Representative Western blot for exosome enriched marker CD63 and TSG101. (E)  
750 Electron micrograph of sEVs-exo. In E, scale = 100nm.

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752 **Figure 2. Comparison of protein enrichment in sEVs from HTR-8/SVneo cells**  
753 **cultured at different oxygen tensions.** (A) Quantification of sEVs particles from  
754 HTR-8/SVneo cells cultured under 1% or 8% oxygen presented as the normalized  
755 number of particles/ $10^6$  cells/48 h using an electrochemical exosome detection  
756 method based on biotinylated anti-CD9 (Abcam) onto the surface of a streptavidin-  
757 coated screen-printed carbon electrode (SPCE-STR). (B) principal component  
758 analysis (PCA) plot of the protein profile within sEVs from extravillous trophoblasts  
759 (exo-EVT) cultured at 1% and 8%. (C) Volcano plot showing differentially expressed  
760 protein in the hypoxic sEVs compared to normoxic sEVs-exo. The horizontal axis  
761 represents the  $\log_2$  of fold change and the vertical axis represents *p-value*. The  
762 horizontal dotted line shows  $p=0.05$ . Each blue dot represents a protein with blue  
763 dots on the right above the dashed line are proteins upregulated while on the left are  
764 downregulated in hypoxic sEVs.

765

766 **Figure 3. Bioinformatic analysis of sEVs.** (A) IPA canonical pathway analysis of  
767 the protein content within sEVs from hypoxic compared with normoxic. (B) The top  
768 25 canonical pathways selected for finding the genes common in more than one  
769 canonical pathway (overlap). (C) sEVs protein signatures were analyzed by GSEA  
770 using the gene sets (GSE) derived from HTR-8/SVneo cells cultured under 8% and  
771 1% oxygen.

772

773

774 **Figure 4. Effect of sEVs on cytokines secretion from endothelial cells.** The  
775 concentration of GM-CSF, IL-6, IL-8, and VEGF were quantified in sEVs and  
776 endothelial cell-conditioned media using an ELISA kit. sEVs were isolated from HTR-  
777 8/SVneo cells cultured at 8% and 1% oxygen and the concentration of IL-6 (A), IL-8  
778 (B), VEGF (C), and GM-CSF (D), were quantified in sEVs. Data represents n=4 well  
779 for each point (6 different experiments in duplicate). Values are mean  $\pm$  SEM.

780

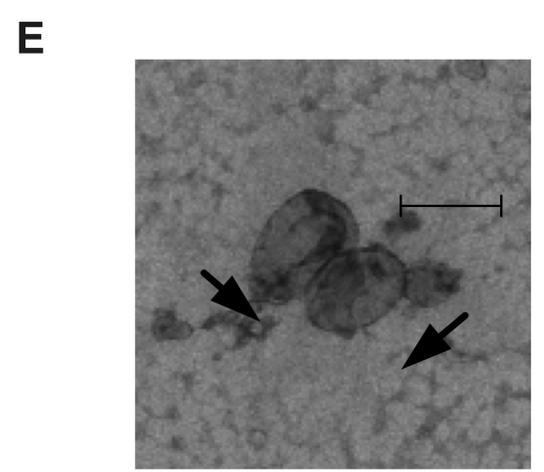
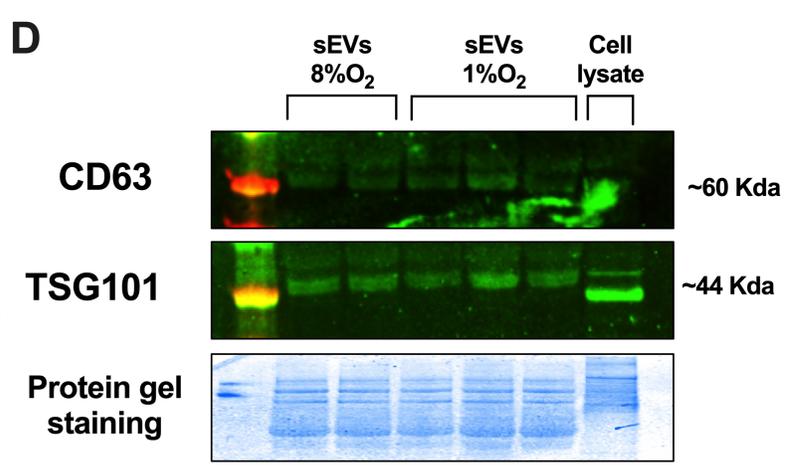
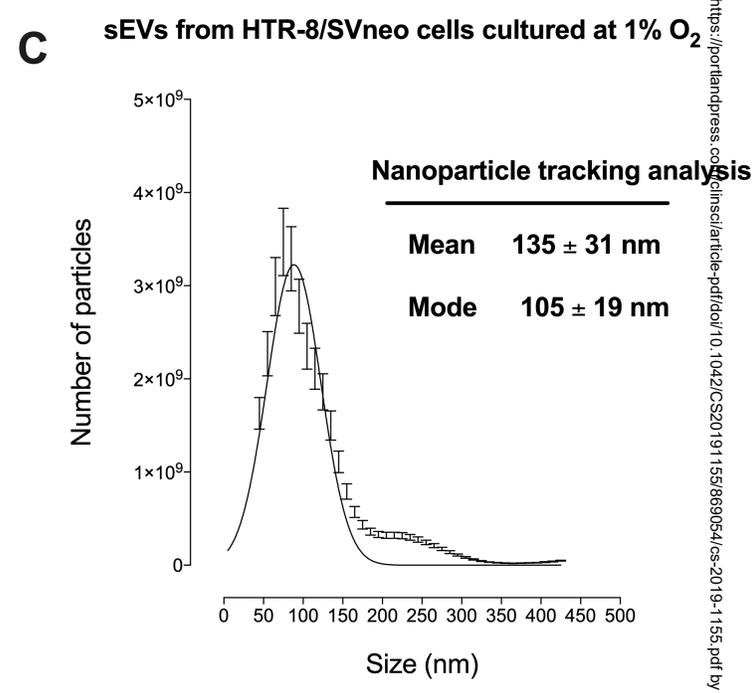
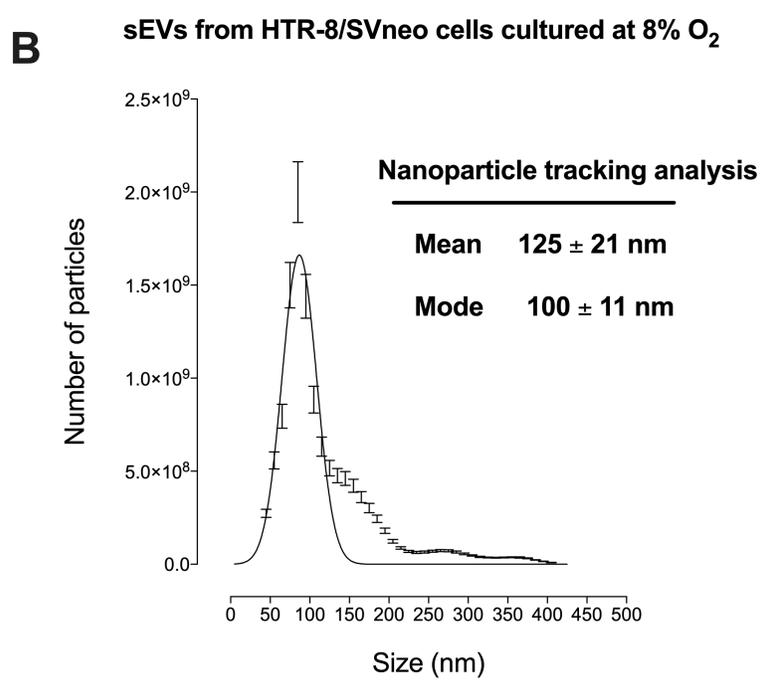
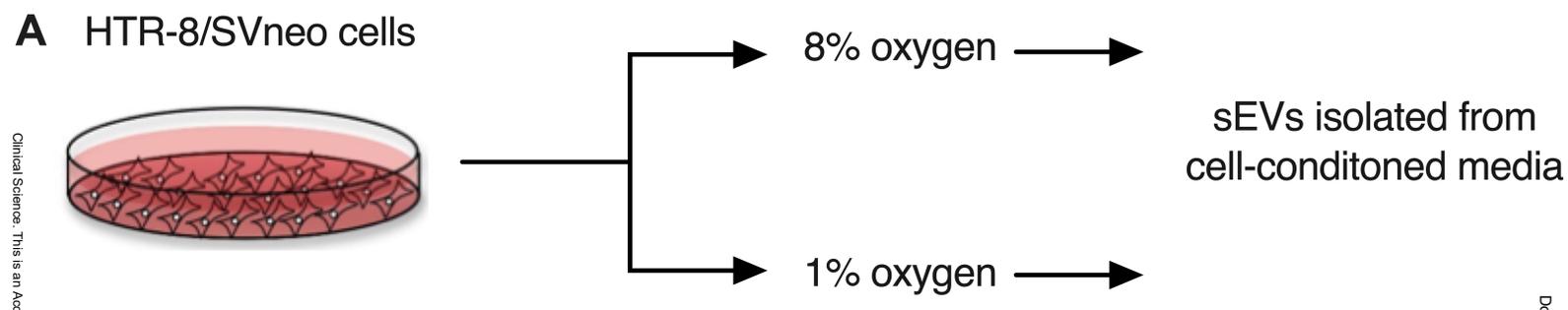
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782 **Figure 5. Mean arterial, systolic, and diastolic pressure in pregnant rats treated**  
783 **with 1% and 8% hypoxic sEVs.** (A) Mean blood pressure was continuously  
784 monitored *via* telemetry catheters in the femoral artery from gestational day (GD) 14  
785 until GD 21. Mean blood pressures are presented in 12-h intervals showing circadian  
786 variation; dark periods are shaded. Data represent the mean  $\pm$  SEM of  
787 measurements in 6 rats in each group. \* $p \leq 0.05$  1% vs 8% hypoxic group. (B and C)  
788 Mean systolic and diastolic pressure were continuously monitored *via* telemetry  
789 catheters in the femoral artery from gestational day (GD) 14 until GD 21. Mean  
790 systolic and diastolic pressures are presented in 12-h intervals showing circadian  
791 variation; nighttime periods are shaded. Data points represent the mean  $\pm$  SEM of  
792 measurements in 6 rats in each group. \* $P \leq 0.05$  vs 8% hypoxic group.

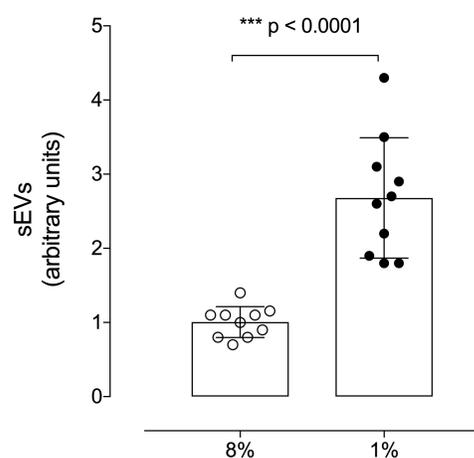
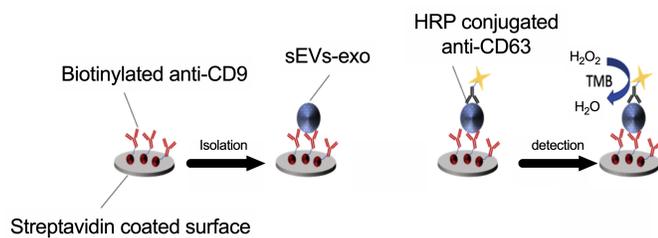
793

794 **Figure 6. Mean heart rate in pregnant rats treated with 1% and 8% hypoxic**  
795 **sEVs.** Mean heart rates were continuously monitored *via* telemetry catheters in the  
796 femoral artery from gestational day (GD) 14 until GD 21. Mean heart rates are  
797 presented in 12-h intervals showing circadian variation; nighttime periods are

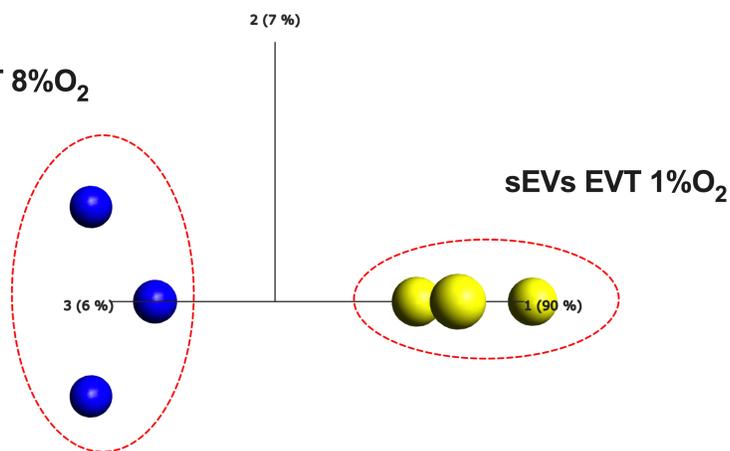
798 shaded. Data points represent the mean  $\pm$  SEM of measurements in 6 rats in each  
799 group.



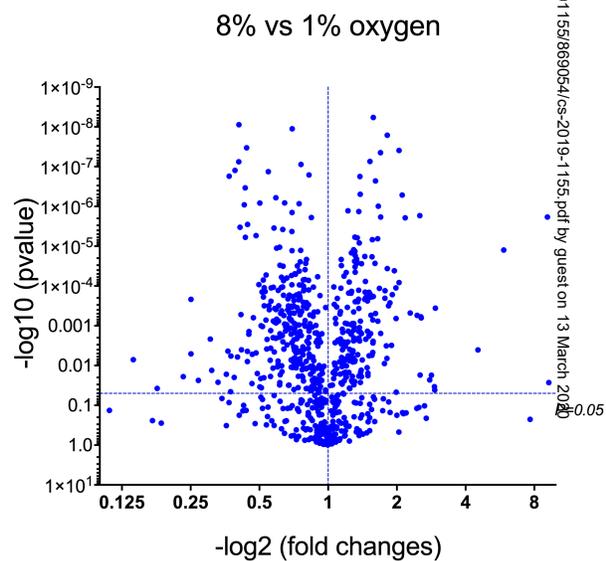
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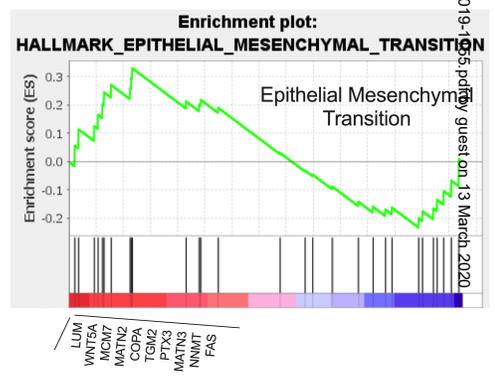
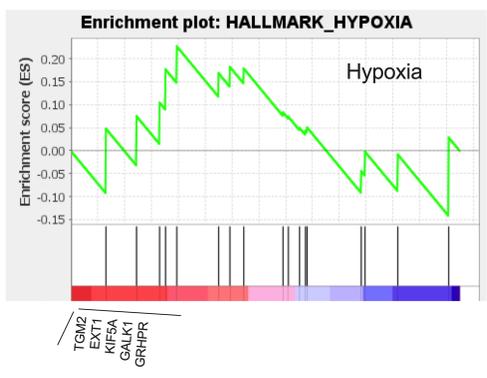
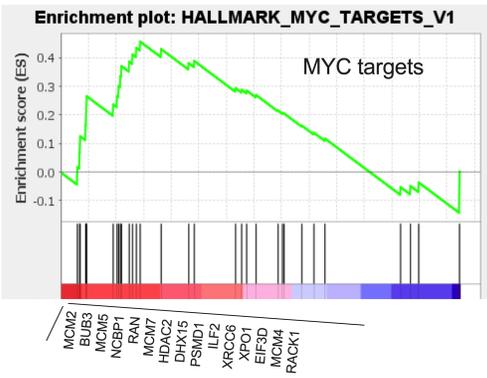
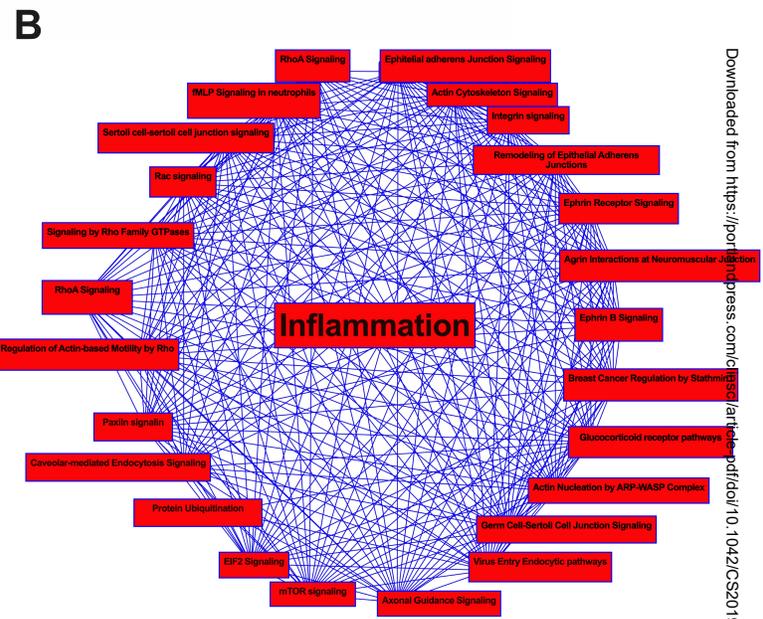
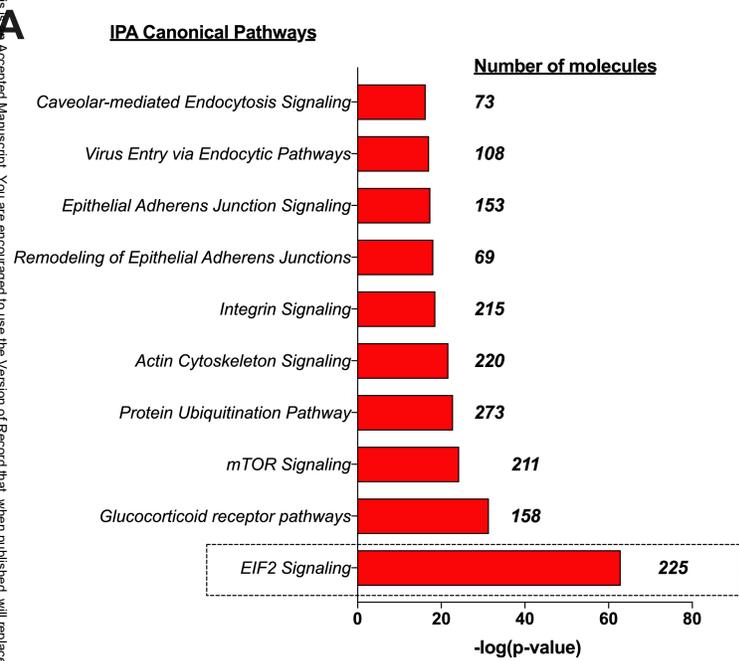


**B**

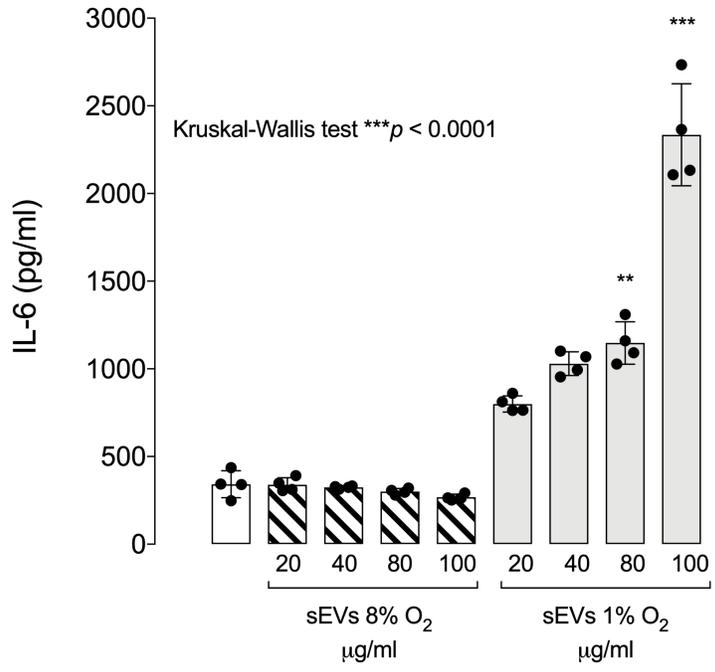


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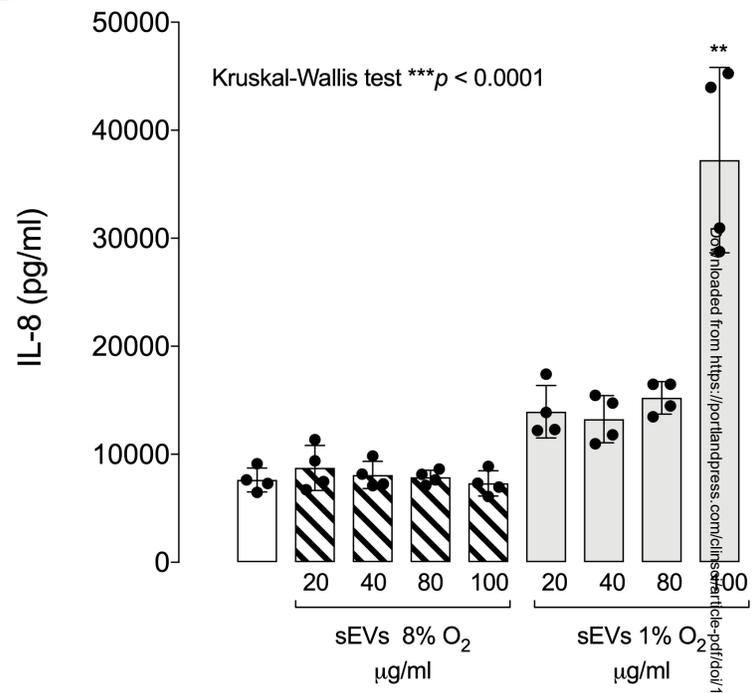




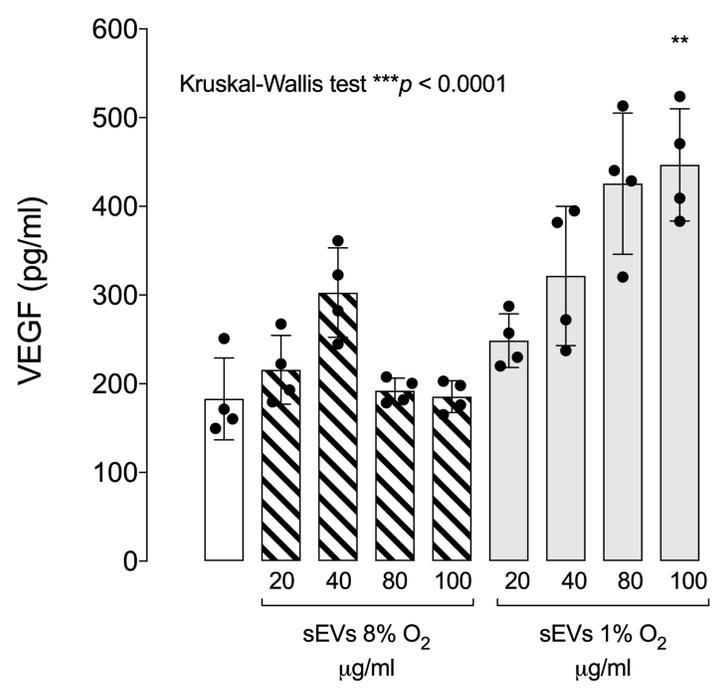
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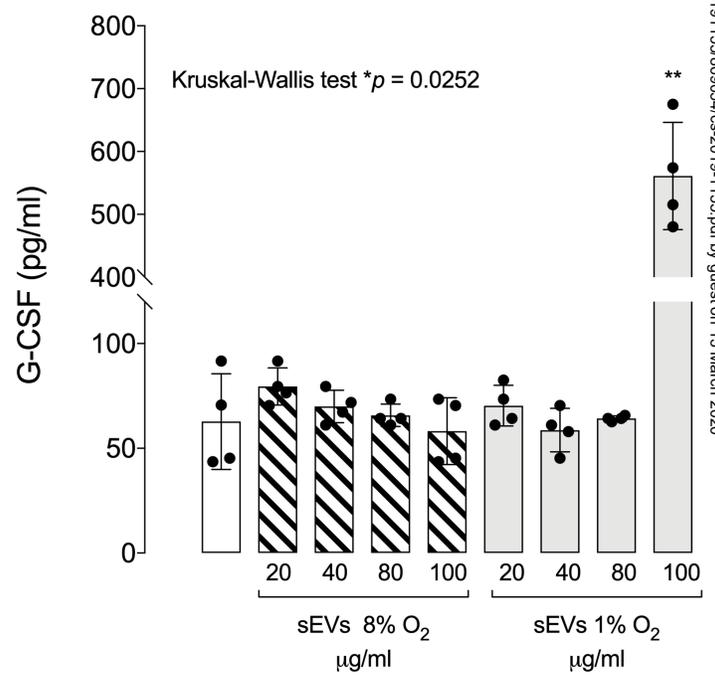
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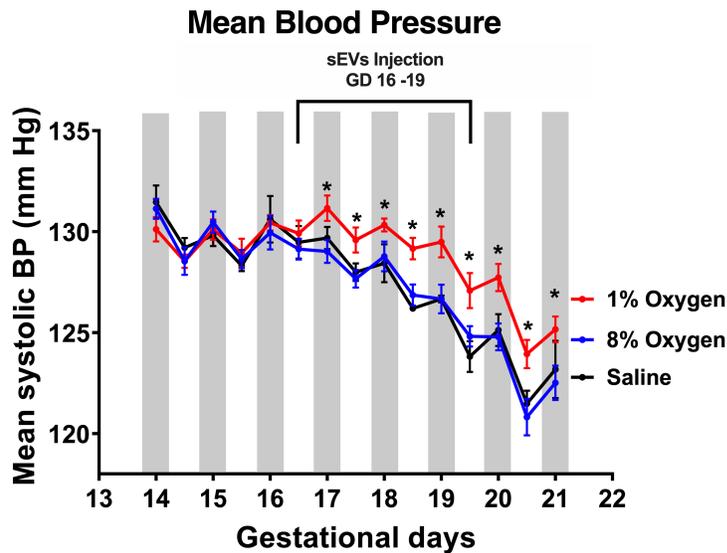
**C**



**D**

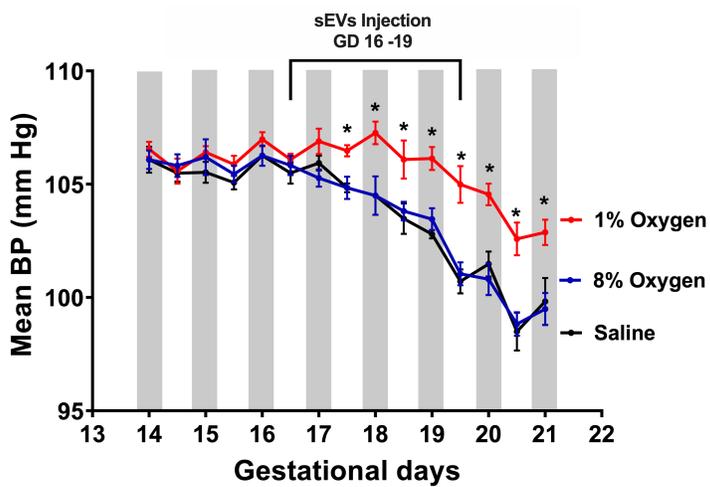


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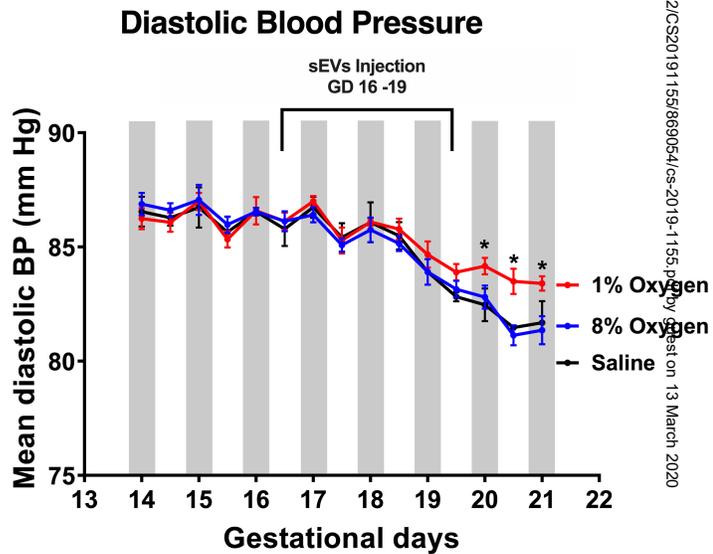


**B**

### Systolic Blood Pressure



**C**



# Mean Heart rate

