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**Graphical abstract**

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Intestinal Epithelial Glucocorticoid Receptor Promotes Chronic Inflammation-Associated Colorectal Cancer

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.
Abstract

Synthetic immunosuppressive glucocorticoids (GCs) are widely used to control inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). However, the impact of GC signaling on intestinal tumorigenesis remains controversial. Here, we report that intestinal epithelial glucocorticoid receptor (GR), but not whole intestinal tissue GR, promotes chronic intestinal inflammation-associated colorectal cancer in both humans and mice. In colorectal cancer patients, GR is enriched in intestinal epithelial cells and high epithelial GR is associated with poor prognosis. Consistently, intestinal epithelium-specific deletion of GR (GR iKO) in mice increases macrophage infiltration, improves tissue recovery, and enhances anti-tumor response in a chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer model. Consequently, GR iKO mice develop fewer and less advanced tumors than control mice. Furthermore, oral GC administration in the early-phase of tissue injury delays recovery and accelerates the formation of aggressive colorectal cancers. Our study reveals that intestinal epithelial GR signaling represses acute colitis but promotes chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer, and suggests that colorectal epithelial GR could serve as a predictive marker for colorectal cancer risk and prognosis. Our findings further suggest that although synthetic glucocorticoid treatment for IBD should be used with caution, there is a therapeutic window for glucocorticoid therapy during colorectal cancer development in immunocompetent patients.
Introduction

Glucocorticoids (GCs) are stress-induced steroid hormones that regulate diverse metabolic pathways and the immune system. This class of hormones functions by binding glucocorticoid receptor (GR), a ligand-activated transcription factor that regulates a diverse array of genes to maintain cellular homeostasis (1).

GC signaling is an integral part of the signaling network critical for the intestinal stress response and tissue homeostasis (2). Physiological, environmental, and emotional stress induces the release of GCs from the adrenal gland as well as the intestinal epithelium, which are critical in modulation of immune suppression and anti-inflammation of the intestinal mucosa (3, 4). Dysregulation of intestinal stress response disrupts intestinal tissue homeostasis, resulting in development of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), a class of chronic immunopathology of the intestinal mucosa that includes ulcerative colitis and Crohn’s disease (5). Chronic inflammation in the intestine is also a critical component of tumor progression (6, 7), and consistently, IBD patients have been shown to be at significantly increased risk of colorectal cancer (8). The potent anti-inflammatory activities of GCs lead to their wide prescription for the treatment of IBD. However, the exact role of GC signaling in the regulation of intestinal tissue homeostasis, especially colorectal tumorigenesis, remains unclear.

The impact of GC signaling on cancer progression varies upon cancer type and genetic background despite of the prevalent use of synthetic GC in clinical oncology. For instance, synthetic GCs are often used to treat hematologic malignancies due to their ability to inhibit the proinflammatory transcription factor NF-κB, enhance proapoptotic genes, and induce cell cycle arrest (9). In nonhematologic cancers, GCs are commonly
used as supportive care comedication for cancer patients receiving standard therapies
due to their antiemetic, anti-inflammatory, and energy/appetite-stimulating properties (10).
However, the evidence for whether GC signaling promotes or inhibits tumorigenesis in
nonhematologic cancer types is complex (11). Immune suppression by GCs has been
associated with an increased risk of non-Hodgkin lymphomas, skin cancer, bladder
cancer, and prostate cancer (12-16). In colorectal cancer, GR was reported to
promote accurate chromosome segregation during mitosis, making GR a tumor-
suppressor gene (17). It was also recently shown that GR deficiency in intestine leads to
a hypersensitivity to acute colitis-induced colorectal cancer formation (18). Additionally,
GCs have been used as an adjuvant treatment for cell cycle modulation in colorectal
cancer cells (19). On the other hand, GR activation increases cancer stem cell self-
renewal and chemoresistance through YAP signaling (20) and was found to promote the
proliferation of metastatic colorectal cancer cells (21), suggesting an oncogenic role for
GR in colorectal cancer. Therefore, our specific understanding of the role of GR in
intestinal tumorigenesis remains limited.

The wide clinical use of GCs leads to an urgent need to gain a deeper
understanding of GC signaling in intestinal tumorigenesis. However, the association
between GR expression and colorectal cancer progression revealed in several small
human patient cohorts remains inconclusive. For instance, *NR3C1* (GR gene) was
identified as one of putatively crucial components of the adenomatous transformation
process in 17 colorectal adenomas and paired normal mucosa (22). GR expression was
also correlated with colorectal tumor histopathological characteristics and proliferative
capacity, cell cycle-related molecule expression, and patients' survival in 91 colon cancer
patients (19). Yet in another study, an inverse correlation between mRNA levels of GR-α and E-cadherin was observed in colorectal adenocarcinoma (23). Also controversial are the long-term impacts of GC use on the risk of colorectal cancer in humans. On the one hand, a nested population-based cohort study by Ostenfeld et al. found that frequent use of systemic GCs was not associated with an increased overall risk of colorectal cancer in Northern Denmark (24). On the other hand, another population-based cohort study by Lai et al. reported that oral, injected, and/or topical GC use for 1-5 years before diagnosis significantly increased the risk of colorectal cancer in Taiwanese population (25). Because of these discrepancies, understanding the causal relationship between GR signaling and chronic inflammation associated colorectal cancer in vivo will be important for clinic management of IBD and colorectal cancer.

In the present study, we investigated the impact of GC signaling on chronic inflammation associated tumorigenesis in humans and mice. First, using a large size of clinical samples, we observed that compared with paired adjacent normal tissue, intestinal epithelial cells but not total tissue of colorectal cancer samples have high GR levels, and this high epithelial GR level is associated with poor prognosis. We then generated an intestinal epithelium-specific GR-knockout (GR iKO) mouse model and systematically investigated the role of intestinal epithelial GR in chemically induced colitis and chronic inflammation-induced colorectal tumorigenesis. We demonstrate that the immunosuppressive action of intestinal epithelial GR signaling ameliorates IBD but promotes chronic inflammation-induced colorectal cancer through suppressing macrophage-mediated tissue repair and anti-tumor responses. Therefore, our findings have major clinical implications for the use of GCs in the management of IBD and
colorectal cancer. Our study also suggest that colorectal epithelial GR can serve as a predictive marker for colon cancer risk and prognosis
Results

High intestinal epithelial GR expression is associated with poor prognosis in human colorectal cancer patients

To better understand the impact of GC signaling on colorectal cancer development and progression, we analyzed the protein levels of GR in a colorectal cancer tissue microarray from a cohort of colorectal cancer patients in the Fudan University Shanghai Cancer Center by immunohistochemical staining with an anti-GR antibody, and scored the tissues based on the intensity and frequency of staining. The microarray consisted of 431 cancer tissues and 347 adjacent tissues from 214 patients, amounting to 1-3 tumor tissues and 1-2 paired adjacent tissues per patient. GR protein was detected in epithelial cells, immune cells, and stromal cells in cancer and adjacent tissues (Figure 1A). Intriguingly, epithelial GR protein levels but not whole-tissue GR protein levels were significantly increased in cancer tissue compared to adjacent noncancer tissue when scored on a continuous immunohistochemistry H-score scale of 0–300 (26) (Figure 1B). Using the median epithelial GR protein H-score of 230 in the cancer tissue as a cut-off, cancer patients with high epithelial GR expression (n=105, Figure 1C, top images) showed significantly poorer overall survival and disease-free survival than patients with low epithelial GR expression (n=109, Figure 1C, bottom images) (Figure 1D). Moreover, similar to lymph node (LN) metastasis, high epithelial GR expression in colorectal cancer patients was associated with significantly increased hazard ratios for death (Figure 1E) and recurrence (Figure 1F). Together, these results demonstrate that high epithelial GR expression is a biomarker of poor prognosis in colorectal cancer patients.
Intestinal epithelial GR deficiency in mice increases susceptibility to chemically induced inflammation through increased recruitment of macrophages

To further assess the importance of intestinal epithelial GR in the regulation of intestinal tumorigenesis, we generated an intestinal-epithelial specific GR KO (GR iKO) mouse model by crossing GR<sup>flox/flox</sup> mice with Villin-cre mice (as described in Supplementary Methods) (Figure 2A-2C). Under normal feeding conditions, GR iKO mice were phenotypically normal, with normal body weights, normal small intestine and colon lengths (Supplementary Figure 1A-1C), and normal levels of most intestinal cell-type markers in both small intestine and colon (Supplementary Figure 1D-1E). However, microarray analysis performed after elimination of endogenous GCs by adrenalectomy (ADX) indicated that these mice displayed the expected impairment in GC signaling in response to dexamethasone (DEX), a synthetic GC (Figure 2D-2G and Supplementary Table 1).

GR deletion in the intestinal epithelium has recently been shown to increase the susceptibility to dextran sodium sulfate (DSS)-induced colitis (18), a well-established experimental model of IBD. Consistent with this report, when challenged with 2.5% DSS in their drinking water for 7 days, our GR iKO mice experienced more body weight loss, earlier and more severe rectal bleeding, a higher frequency and more severe bloody stool, and more extensive colonic shortening than Flox mice during the treatment (Figure 3A-3E). Accordingly, after the DSS treatment, GR iKO mice had increased colonic tissue damage together with elevated levels of several proinflammatory cytokines/chemokines (Figure 3F-3H). Their small intestines also displayed an increased trend in proinflammatory gene expression (Supplementary Figure 2A-2C).
Flox and GR iKO mice also had distinct transcriptomic profiles in the colon at day 7 (D7) after DSS challenge when analyzed by microarray (Figure 4A-4B, Supplementary Table 2). Gene set enrichment analysis (GSEA) showed that the colon of DSS-treated GR iKO mice had enhanced expression of gene sets involved in innate and adaptive immune networks (Figure 4C). Further immunohistochemical analysis revealed that the colon of GR-deficient mice had a greater accumulation of Emr1(F4/80)$^+$ macrophages (Figure 4D) but not of total CD45$^+$ immune cells nor CD3$^+$ T cells (Supplementary Figure 2D-2E), suggesting that increased recruitment of macrophages may be accountable for the hypersensitivity of GR iKO mice to DSS-induced colitis. In support of this notion, depletion of circulating monocytes/macrophages prior to and during DSS water treatment by liposomes containing clodronate (Figure 4E, F4/80 staining) prevented tissue damage after DSS treatment (Figure 4E and 4F) in both Flox and GR iKO mice. Importantly, Flox and GR iKO mice exhibited comparable degrees of DSS-induced tissue damage after treatment with clodronate-containing liposomes (Figure 4E and 4F, clodronate), indicating that intestinal epithelial GR deficiency-induced hypersensitivity to DSS-induced colitis is primarily mediated by enhanced macrophage recruitment to the colonic epithelium.

GR has been previously reported to inhibit inflammation and immune activation through the repression of NF-κB (27, 28), a master regulator of inflammation whose uncontrolled activation has been implicated in the development of IBD (29). We found that stable knockdown of GR (GR KD) in CT26.WT mouse colon carcinoma cells using shRNAs (Supplementary Figure 3A) significantly enhanced the LPS-mediated induction of several NF-κB target chemokine genes but not the tested cytokine genes (Supplementary Figure 3B and 3C), suggesting that the accumulation of macrophages in
the colon of GR iKO mice after DSS treatment (Figure 4D-4E) may be due to increased chemokines produced by GR-deficient colonic epithelium. Collectively, we successfully generated an intestinal epithelial specific GR deficiency mouse model that is sensitive to chemically induced intestinal inflammation due to enhanced recruitment of macrophages and activation of innate immunity.

**Intestinal epithelial GR deficiency improves recovery after DSS treatment and reduces chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer formation**

Since chronic but not acute intestinal inflammation is associated with tumor progression (6, 7), to evaluate the impact of intestinal epithelial GR in intestinal tumorigenesis in mice, we followed long-term consequences of the DSS treatment in the colon of Flox and GR iKO mice. The expression of several proinflammatory genes and $S100a9$, a prominent regulator of inflammation and myeloid cell differentiation (30, 31), was dramatically increased in the colon of both Flox mice and GR iKO mice after a 7-day treatment of DSS drinking water (D7). Consistent with our observations that GR iKO mice were more sensitive to DSS treatment than control mice (Figure 3 and 4), the induction of these genes was significantly elevated in GR iKO mice compared to that in Flox mice (Figure 5A, D7). After three days of recovery with regular water, reduced levels of $Il1b$, $Tnfa$, $Ccl3$, and $S100a9$ were observed in Flox mice (Figure 5A, D10). However, surprisingly, GR iKO mice showed even greater downregulation of these genes and attenuated induction of $Il6$ and $Cxcl2$ after the 3-day recovery period (Figure 5A, D10), suggesting that immune hyperactivation upon DSS treatment in GR iKO mice is associated with improved recovery after the treatment.
To further assess the unexpected impact of intestinal epithelial GR deficiency on tissue recovery, we directly challenged Flox and GR iKO mice with an AOM/DSS chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer model, in which the mice were first injected with AOM to induce DNA damage and then treated with 3 cycles of alternating DSS-containing water and regular drinking water to induce chronic inflammation and repetitive tissue damage/repair (Figure 5B, top diagram). Although a proportion of GR iKO mice experienced more severe rectal bleeding than Flox mice in the first DSS treatment cycle, a reduced fraction of GR iKO mice relative to Flox mice experienced rectal bleeding during the later DSS cycles (Figure 5B, bottom, and Figure 5C). Histological evaluation of colon tissues dissected after three days of regular water recovery in the first treatment cycle (day 10) further revealed that GR iKO mice exhibited a trend of less severe tissue damage (Figure 5D), diminished tissue macrophage accumulation, and increased epithelial proliferation (Supplementary Figure 4A and 4B) compared to Flox mice. These observations indicate that the hyperactivation of the immune system in the GR-deficient colon upon DSS challenge, though it enhances susceptibility during the acute colitis stage, is associated with improved tissue recovery and healing after the DSS treatment.

Consistent with their improved recovery after the DSS treatment cycles, GR iKO mice developed fewer and smaller colorectal tumors than Flox mice at the end of the chronic AOM/DSS experiment (Figure 5E). Histopathological analyses further revealed that all analyzed Flox mice developed hyperplasia, adenoma, and/or adenocarcinoma, with more than 85% of them bore tumors that were at advanced adenoma or adenocarcinoma stages (Figure 5F and 5G, Flox). In contrast, a significant portion of GR iKO mice did not have any tumors (Figure 5F and 5G, GR iKO). Additional IHC staining
analysis showed that colorectal tumors developed in GR iKO mice had a comparable intensity of Ki67 staining but a trend of increased TUNEL staining compared to those from Flox mice (Supplementary Figure 4C and 4D). These observations indicate that GR iKO mice have a lower risk of developing advanced colorectal cancer than Flox mice.

Intriguingly, at the end of the chronic AOM/DSS experiment, GR iKO mice displayed a lower trend of inflammatory histology in the colon compared to Flox mice (Supplementary Figure 4E), along with significantly lower mRNA levels of most tested proinflammatory genes (Figure 5H). However, the expression of Ifng, which encodes interferon gamma (a key cytokine with multiple antitumor activities that is particularly important in stimulating the tumoricidal activity of macrophages (32)), was significantly increased in the colons of GR iKO mice compared to Flox mice (Figure 5H, Ifng). This observation raises the possibility that the observed reduction in colorectal tumorigenesis in GR iKO mice may be associated with an enhanced macrophage-mediated antitumorigenic response. Indeed, FACS analyses showed that at the endpoint of the AOM/DSS experiment, the GR iKO mice exhibited the significantly increased infiltration of macrophages in the colon compared to Flox mice (Figure 5I and Supplementary Figure 4F). In contrast, the tissue abundance of several other analyzed immune cell types was comparable between Flox and GR iKO mice (Figure 5I and Supplementary Figure 4G). Taken together, our results suggest that intestinal epithelial GR deficiency induces a macrophage-mediated antitumorigenic response, which in turn helps improve tissue repair and recovery after DSS treatment and eventually reduces chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer formation.
Early-phase GC treatment impairs recovery from colitis and promotes chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer

GCs are one of the most clinically prescribed medicines for inflammation inhibition and immunosuppression, including treatment of IBD (5). However, our observations that GR iKO mice suffered more severe acute colitis than Flox mice yet were partially protected from chronic inflammation-induced colon tumorigenesis suggest that early-phase immunosuppression may actually delay recovery from intestinal inflammation/damage and promote chronic inflammation-associated cancer formation. To directly test this possibility, we treated Flox and GR iKO mice subjected to the AOM/DSS procedure with drinking water containing 2.5 µg/ml betamethasone (BMZ), a synthetic GC, from day 3 in the first DSS cycle (D3) to 7 days into the first recovery phase (D14) (Figure 6A, orange bar), and analyzed the impact of this treatment on DSS-induced inflammation and colorectal cancer formation at the end of the AOM/DSS procedure. This BMZ treatment time frame was chosen based on our observation that day 3 to day 7 in the first DSS cycle was the major period of tissue damage in the GR iKO mice (Figure 5C). As shown in Figure 6A, early-phase BMZ treatment reduced rectal bleeding in both Flox and GR iKO mice during the first DSS cycle. However, continued rectal bleeding was observed in a fraction of BMZ-treated mice during the first recovery phase (Figure 6A, BMZ), and histological scores for inflammation and ulceration/erosion on day 10 were increased in BMZ-treated mice compared to vehicle-treated mice (Figure 6B), indicating delayed healing in the BMZ-treated mice during the first recovery phase. Consequently, early-phase BMZ treatment led to increased body weight loss and reduced survival (Figure 6C and Supplementary Figure 5A), and more severe rectal bleeding in the last DSS cycle.
among the surviving mice (Figure 6A). The observed comparable responses of Flox and GR iKO mice to this early-phase GC treatment further indicate that BMZ-mediated intestinal immunosuppression is independent of intestinal-epithelial GR, possibly through inhibition of immune cell activation. In agreement with this idea, BMZ repressed the expression of *Ifng* and *Nos2*, an inducible nitric oxide synthase primarily expressed by immune cells including macrophages (33), in the colon of both Flox and GR iKO mice immediately after the BMZ treatment at D14 (Supplementary Figure 5B).

Consistent with the above observations, early-phase BMZ-treated mice developed more and larger colorectal tumors than vehicle-treated mice (Figure 6D and 6E), and these adenoma or adenocarcinoma tumors were at a more advanced stage (Figure 6F and 6G). The complete reverse of the reduced colorectal tumor progression in GR iKO mice by BMZ is in line with the notion that intestinal epithelial GR deficiency decreases intestinal tumor growth by increasing immune cell activation and function.

To further confirm that early-phase GC treatment could indeed enhance tumor progression at the late stage through immunosuppression, we employed a syngeneic tumor model using CT26.WT mouse colon carcinoma cells that can form tumors in immunocompetent Balb/c mice (34). We pretreated immunocompetent Balb/c mice with either vehicle or 2.5 µg/ml BMZ for 7 days, s.c. allografted CT26.WT cells, then continued the same treatment protocol for an additional 7 days (Figure 7A orange bar, Day -7 to Day 7). Notably, this BMZ treatment increased late-stage CT26.WT tumor volume (Figure 7A, Day 26) and final tumor weight (Figure 7B). To test whether suppression of macrophage infiltration is involved in BMZ-mediated increase of CT26.WT tumor growth, we repeated the BMZ-allograft procedure in NSG mice, one of the most
immunocompromised mouse strains that lacks mature T, B, and natural killer cells due to the *scid* mutation and *Il2rg* knockout (35) but with functional macrophages (36, 37). NSG or *scid* mice have been used to assess macrophage-specific functions in human red blood cell reconstitution, cancer rejection, and obesity (36-39). Intriguingly, the same BMZ treatment scheme also increased late-stage CT26.WT tumor volume (Figure 7C) and weight (Figure 7D) in NSG mice, suggesting that early-phase BMZ treatment enhances tumor growth through suppressing macrophages. Indeed, BMZ reduced the mRNA levels of the mRNA levels of *Adgre1* (*F4/80*) and *Cd68*, two macrophage markers, and several chemokine genes in dissected allografted tumors (Figure 7E).

To further test whether there is a therapeutic window for GC therapy during colon cancer development, we initiated the BMZ treatment at a late stage with visible allografted CT26.WT tumors (D16) in the syngeneic tumor model (Figure 7F and 7G). In contrast to the early-phase BMZ administration, this late-phase BMZ treatment did not significantly promote tumor growth in Balb/c mice (Figure 7F and 7G), indicating that GC treatment will not induce further complications once tumors are established in immunocompetent animals. However, interestingly, the same late-phase BMZ treatment was still able to significantly promote tumor growth in NSG mice (Figure 7H and 7I), suggesting that GC therapy is detrimental for immunocompromised individuals at any stages. In summary, our results demonstrate that early-phase systemic GC treatment, while effective in suppressing acute inflammation, impairs subsequent recovery from acute colitis and thereby promotes chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer progression, at least in part through suppressing macrophages.
**Discussion**

As a class of complex inflammatory disorders affected by various genetic and environmental factors, IBDs lack a specific treatment. Instead, current treatments focus on alleviating inflammation, and GCs serve as a first-line therapy for patients with modest to severe symptoms (5). But the relationship of GR with colorectal cancer in clinic samples is inconclusive. Here, we provide evidence that intestinal epithelial GR signaling reduces intestinal inflammation upon acute chemically induced damage. However, this response delays tissue repair, increasing colorectal cancer formation at a later phase (as depicted in Supplementary Figure 6). Our study therefore indicates that intestinal epithelial GR signaling, activated by endogenous or exogenous GCs, promotes chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer formation.

Emerging evidence indicates that the increase in stress hormones during cancer progression is able to activate GR in cancer cells and promote tumor formation. In breast cancer, this activation increases tumor heterogeneity and metastasis through multiple processes, including the kinase ROR1 (40). Psychological distress and/or cancer-induced negative mood in colorectal cancer and non-small-cell lung carcinoma have also been shown to elevate plasma corticosterone levels and induce Tsc22d3 in dendritic cells, blocking type I interferon responses and dampening therapy-induced anticancer immunosurveillance (41). Our observations in the present study demonstrate that high intestinal epithelial GR expression is associated with poor prognosis in human colorectal cancer patients, and conversely intestinal epithelial-specific GR deficiency promotes tissue repair and reduces the development of advanced colorectal cancer in mice. Our findings further suggest that activation of endogenous GR signaling in colorectal cancer
cells can drive tumor progression through suppression of macrophage recruitment and subsequent tissue healing. Thus, activation of GR signaling by environmental or emotional stress not only directly promotes heterogeneity/metastasis in tumor cells and blocks anticancer activity in immune cells, but also disrupts the communication between epithelial and immune cells, which in turn enhances evasion of damaged cells from immune surveillance and accelerates tumor progression.

Several lines of evidence from the literature support the hypothesis that using GC during the acute inflammatory phase after surgically-induced colon tissue damage is detrimental for injury repair and tissue healing during colorectal cancer development. For instance, in a colorectal cancer cohort evaluated by Ostenfeld et al., frequent use of systemic GCs was not associated with an increased overall risk of colorectal cancer (24), instead preadmission use of oral GCs was associated with increased 30-day mortality (42) and a greater risk of anastomotic leakage (43) after rectal cancer resection. Moreover, preoperative DEX therapy was shown to be associated with an elevated rate of distant recurrence in patients undergoing colectomy for colorectal cancer (44). These reports are consistent with our finding that early-phase oral GC administration delayed recovery after colitis and increased the development of colorectal cancer at a later stage.

Notably, our study is agreement with a recent study by Muzzi et al. that deletion of intestinal epithelial GR in mice aggravates DSS-induced acute colitis (18). However, the study by Muzzi et al. reported that GR iKO mice are hypersensitive to acute colitis-induced colorectal cancer formation in an acute AOM/DSS colorectal cancer model (18), which is in contrast with our observation that GR iKO mice are protected from colorectal cancer formation in a chronic inflammation-associated AOM/DSS colorectal cancer model.
Careful comparison revealed that the GR iKO mouse models used in these two studies are generated differentially. Our GR iKO mouse model is an intestinal epithelium specific constitutive knockout line (driven by Villin-cre), which does not require any additional manipulations prior to experimental procedures. Moreover, we included both males and females in our study. The GR iKO line in the Muzzi et al., in contrast, is a tamoxifen-inducible mouse strain (driven by Villin-cre-ERT). They also only used females for their study. Tamoxifen is a selective modulator of estrogen receptor (45, 46), which is known to interact with GC signaling (47, 48). Moreover, tamoxifen has been shown to repress leukocyte infiltration (49) and increase the risk of large bowel cancer in females (50). Therefore, it is highly likely that the tamoxifen dosing prior to their experimental procedures interfered their experimental outcomes (including reduction of leukocyte infiltration and increase of tumor formation). Another possible contributing factor to this discrepancy may be the different types of inflammation associated colorectal cancer models in the two studies. The AOM/DSS colorectal cancer model employed by Muzzi et al. involved one cycle of 1.2% DSS treatment with AOM injection. As chronic intestinal inflammation is an important risk factor for the development of colorectal cancer, we chose an AOM/DSS colorectal cancer model involving three cycles of 2.5% DSS water. Therefore, it is likely that the single cycle of 1.2% DSS in the Muzzi et al. study did not mimic chronic inflammation in the intestine and that the enhanced colorectal cancer formation in their model reflects the impact of intestinal epithelial GR signaling on acute inflammation. In contrast, treatment with three cycles of 2.5% DSS in regular drinking water, the protocol used in our study, induced chronic inflammation and repetitive tissue damage/repair, which mainly engaged the action of intestinal epithelial GR signaling to
suppress tissue healing. Future studies are needed to validate these possibilities.

Our study has a number of important clinical implications. First, the effect of early-phase GC treatment on colorectal cancer development uncovered in our study has implication in IBD treatment in the clinic, which suggests that GC treatment for IBD should be used with caution. Secondly, our clinic findings in colorectal cancer patients indicate that colorectal epithelial GR, but not total colonic tissue GR, could serve as a predictive marker for colorectal cancer risk and prognosis. Thirdly, our observations that early-phase GC treatment is detrimental for late-phase tumor growth and that late-phase GC treatment did not significantly impact tumor growth in immunocompetent animals suggest that there is a therapeutic window for GC therapy during colorectal cancer development in immunocompetent patients. At the precancer or early inflammation-associated initiation stage, GC treatment would prevent a much-needed immune response that would contain damaged and mutated cells, and therefore is oncogenic. Once tumors are established, GCs may be helpful for managing the side effects of standard cancer therapies without further complications. Finally, the chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer model employed in our study revealed an important role of the immunosuppressive action of GR in promoting colorectal cancer progression. This finding is supported by our clinic observation that high intestinal epithelial GR expression is associated with poor prognosis in human colorectal cancer patients and is also consistent with the report that psychological distress and/or cancer-induced negative mood-associated elevation of plasma corticosterone levels reduces anticancer immunotherapy in colorectal cancer (41). Our chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer model is therefore a clinically relevant colorectal cancer model.
In summary, our study has provided solid evidence that intestinal epithelial GR promotes chronic inflammation-induced colorectal cancer, and an unexpected relationship between early-phase oral GC administration and late-phase colorectal cancer development. Our findings suggest that GC therapy for IBD should be applied with caution and that colonic epithelial GR could serve as a predictive marker for colorectal cancer. Our findings further suggest that identification of an appropriate GC treatment window is needed for future GC usage in IBD and colorectal cancer. Our study therefore has important translational implications for the management of these human diseases.
Methods

Human studies

GR protein levels in a tissue microarray established by the Fudan University Shanghai Cancer Center were analyzed by immunohistochemistry with an anti-GR antibody (cat # 3660, Cell Signaling Technology). This microarray consists of 431 cancer tissues and 347 adjacent tissues from 214 colorectal cancer patients with follow-up data, including 127 males and 87 females, all Asian, with an average age of 57.2±10.9 (mean±SD) (Table 1). The histological staining results were scored on a continuous immunohistochemistry H-score scale of 0–300 by the integration of data relating to the intensity and frequency of staining, and the immunohistochemistry score was calculated with the formula: 1 × (percentage of cells staining weakly [1 +]) + 2 × (percentage of cells staining moderately [2 +]) + 3 × (percentage of cells staining strongly [3 +]) as previously published (26). The cutoff point to define high and low epithelial GR expression in the colorectal cancer tissues was the median IHC score for all the colorectal cancer tissues. Both the log-rank test and Gehan-Breslow-Wilcoxon test were performed to calculate the significance of differences in survival. The Mantel-Haenszel chi-square test was used to calculate the hazard ratios for death and recurrence.

Animal experiments

To test the transcriptional responses of Flox and GR iKO mice to DEX, three-month-old male Flox and GR iKO mice underwent adrenalectomy. After 2 weeks of rest, the mice were injected intraperitoneally with 1 mg/kg body weight DEX in PBS (100 µl), and tissues were harvested after 6 hours.
Acute colitis was induced in mice using 2.5% DSS to the drinking water with two different protocols: (1) treat mice with DSS water for 7 consecutive days; (2) treat mice with DSS water for 7 days, then replace DSS water with regular drinking water to allow recovery for up to another week. The body weights of the experimental mice and rectal bleeding were monitored daily, and stool blood scores were measured at the end of the treatment period. Rectal bleeding severity was scored using a previously described scale (51) (0, none; 1, red; 2, dark red; and 3, gross bleeding) and was graded as none (score 0), mild (score 1), or severe (scores 2 and 3). Histopathological evaluation of colon tissues was described in Supplementary Methods.

To test the importance of macrophages in mediating intestinal epithelial GR deficiency-induced sensitivity to DSS-induced colitis, Flox and GR iKO mice were intraperitoneally (i.p.) injected with control liposomes or liposomes containing clodronate at a dose of 10 mg/kg body weight one day prior to administration of 2.5% DSS in the drinking water and then once daily during DSS treatment to deplete circulating monocytes/macrophages and reduce their infiltration into the intestinal epithelium. The depletion of monocytes/macrophages was monitored in blood at Day 5 after treatment by FACS (not shown).

For the AOM/DSS colorectal cancer model, three- to four-month-old mice were injected with AOM (8 mg/kg body weight). One week later, the mice were fed 2.5% DSS-containing water for 6-7 days, followed by a 14-day recovery period with regular drinking water; this treatment cycle was repeated three times. Rectal bleeding severity was scored and graded as described above for the DSS-induced colitis model. Intestinal and colonic tissue were harvested 10-12 weeks after DSS treatment. For early-phase BMZ treatment
in this model, three- to four-month-old control mice under AOM/DSS treatment were subjected to oral treatment with either vehicle (0.125% ethanol) or 2.5 µg/ml BMZ in 0.125% ethanol in drinking water from day 3 to day 14, and body weight, rectal bleeding severity, and survival were monitored during the entire experimental time frame. Histopathological evaluation of colorectal cancer tissues was described in Supplementary Methods.

Two protocols were used for allograft tumor experiments using mouse colon carcinoma cell line CT26.WT (ATCC, CRL-2638). In the first protocol, two-month-old female Balb/c mice (#000651, The Jackson Laboratory) and female NSG mice (#005557, The Jackson Laboratory) were pretreated with either vehicle (0.125% ethanol) or 2.5 µg/ml BMZ in the drinking water for 7 days, and then 1 x 10^5 CT26.WT cells were injected subcutaneously into each flank. The same treatment then continued for an additional 7 days before switching to regular water. In the second protocol, Balb/c and NSG mice were injected with 1 x 10^5 CT26.WT cells first, the tumor growth was then monitored twice weekly. When tumors became palpable (average tumor size reached 30-40 mm^3 at Day 16), Balb/c and NSG mice were randomly divided into two groups and treated with either vehicle (0.125% ethanol) or 2.5 µg/ml BMZ in the drinking water for the rest of the experiment. The experimental mice in both protocols were monitored twice weekly for tumor growth and overall health. Tumor length and width were measured with caliper, and tumor volume was calculated using the formula V=length*width^2/2. Mice were sacrificed when their total tumor volume reached 2000 mm^3 according to the approved animal protocol.
Histopathologic evaluation of DSS-induced colitis tissue samples

To evaluate the histopathology of Flox and GR iKO mice treated with DSS-containing drinking water, hematoxylin and eosin (H&E)-stained sections of the large intestine (colon) were examined, and nonproliferative lesions were graded and recorded by a professional pathologist based on a previously described 4-point scale (Table 2) (52), and described and recorded based on standard diagnostic criteria (53). Specifically, Inflammation, chronic active accompanied mucosal erosion and was characterized by the intense infiltration of neutrophils with relatively few lymphomononuclear cells. Erosion was defined as significant loss of intestinal glandular epithelial cells (enteroendocrine and surface absorptive cells) and goblet cells, resulting in effacement of the mucosal architecture. Atrophy, glandular (mucosal atrophy) was characterized by the presence of shortened or absent intestinal glands (crypts of Lieberkuhn) in the lamina propria. Fibrosis was characterized by the presence of proliferating fibroblasts with enlarged, oval nuclei with extended cytoplasmic processes within the lamina propria. Edema was characterized by the accumulation of an excessive amount of fluid resulting in expansion of the submucosa.

Evaluation of AOM/DSS colorectal cancer tissue samples

Tumors formed in the colons of AOM/DSS-treated mice were counted. The length and width of each tumor were measured with calipers, and tumor volume was calculated using the formula volume=length*width^2/2. The total tumor volume in each mouse was calculated by adding the volumes of all tumors formed in that mouse.

To evaluate the histopathology of AOM/DSS-treated mouse colons, H&E-stained
Swiss-roll sections of the large intestine (colon) were blindly evaluated by a professional pathologist for the presence of tumors, staging of tumors, and presence of proliferative and nonproliferative lesions (inflammation and ulceration, respectively). The following lesion descriptions, morphologic diagnoses, and severities were used:

**Atypical hyperplasia:** Atypical hyperplasia was characterized by crypts lined by crowded epithelial cells that maintained polarity and some dysplasia. This type of lesion was smaller in size and less proliferative than would be expected for an adenoma or adenocarcinoma.

**Adenoma:** Adenomas were composed of either proliferations of branching tubules in the lamina propria or finger-like projections of lamina propria lined by proliferating epithelium.

**Adenocarcinoma:** Adenocarcinoma was defined as a sessile proliferation of epithelial cells, with invasion into the underlying lamina propria and submucosa.

**Inflammation, acute:** Acute inflammation was characterized as the infiltration predominantly of neutrophils, with fewer lymphocytes, plasma cells, and macrophages, within the lamina propria and submucosa or even extending through the muscularis to the serosa, depending on the severity. Edema could be observed in the submucosa, the degree of which roughly paralleled the inflammation severity. Severity grading was performed subjectively based on the number of inflammatory cells, the extent of the inflammation, and other associated changes, such as edema in the submucosa. With minimal (+1) acute inflammation, there were scattered neutrophils within the lamina propria; mild (+2) inflammation was recorded when there were more neutrophils in the lamina propria and infiltration into the submucosa; submucosal edema was also
sometimes present to a mild degree. Moderate (+3) and marked (+4) inflammation was characterized by progressive increases in the number of inflammatory cells; involvement of the submucosa, muscularis and serosa; associated submucosal edema; and the accumulation of inflammatory cells and cell debris in the lumen of the colon.

**Ulcer:** Ulcers in the large intestine were characterized by a complete loss of the surface epithelium in the tunica mucosa down to the level of the submucosa. Ulcer severity scores were based on the amount of mucosa that was ulcerated, with a minimal (+1) score representing ulceration of approximately 25% or less of the surface epithelium; mild (+2) involving approximately 26-50% of the surface epithelium; moderate (+3) indicating ulceration of approximately 50-75% of the surface epithelium; and marked (+4) ulceration involving greater than 75% of the mucosa in the section evaluated.

**Erosion:** Erosion of the epithelium of the anus was characterized by necrosis of the epithelium that did not extend below the basement membrane of the epithelium; that is, the necrosis did not extend into the lamina propria.

**Isolation of immune cells from the colon**

CD45+ immune cells were isolated from the colon tissues of Flox and GR iKO mice according to a published protocol (54). Surface marker expression was analyzed by flow cytometry on a BD LSRFortessa™ (BD Biosciences) instrument using antibodies from eBioscience specific for the following markers: CD45 (catalog# 48-0451-82), CD3 (catalog # 46-0032-82), CD4 (catalog # 11-0041-82), CD8 (catalog# 11-0081-822), CD11b (catalog# 11-0112-82), CD11c (catalog# 5-0114-82), F4/80 (catalog# 12-4801-82), Ly6C (catalog # 17-5932-82), Ly6G (catalog# 12-9668-82), and MHCII (catalog# 17-
5321-82). The percentages of total monocytes (Ly6C+), macrophages (CD11b+F4/80+), M2 macrophages (CD206+CD16/32-), neutrophils (CD11b+Ly6G+) and dendritic cells in the total CD45+ immune cell population were calculated.

**Data availability**


**Statistical analysis**

Values are expressed as the mean ± standard error of the mean (SEM) from at least three independent experiments or biological replicates, unless otherwise indicated in the figure legend. For data containing two groups, significant differences between means were analyzed by the two-tailed, unpaired, nonparametric Mann-Whitney test or by Student’s t-test for dataset with all sample sizes ≤ 4; differences were considered significant at p<0.05. For data containing more than two groups, significant differences between means were analyzed by two-way ANOVA test with correction for multiple comparisons; differences were considered significant at q<0.05. Statistical analysis of the GR IHC
staining in human colorectal tissues is detailed in the “Human studies” section. Statistical analysis of the microarray datasets is detailed in the “Microarray study and analysis” section in the Supplementary Methods part.

**Study approval**

The Institutional Review Board at the Fudan University Shanghai Cancer Center approved the human study protocol. All subjects provided informed consent.

All animal experiments were conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the NIEHS/NIH Animal Care and Use Committee, with an approved Animal Study Proposal number of 2014-0016 STL 2020.

**Other methods are described in Supplementary Methods.**
Author contributions

S. T. designed the study; performed experiments; analyzed data; designed, guided, and analyzed the clinical study; and wrote the manuscript. Z. Z. designed the study, performed experiments, analyzed data, and wrote the manuscript. R. H. O. provided GR\textit{flox/flox} mice, guided the study, performed experiments, and analyzed data. W. L., M. J., and L. L. performed animal experiments and analyzed data. X. X. and J. L. analyzed the microarray datasets. W. H., Q. L., and Xingxiang Li performed clinical analyses of intestinal GR in colorectal cancer patients. Q. X., L. C., and A. S. W. assisted with animal studies and analyzed gene expression. J. A. C. provided GR\textit{flox/flox} mice and guided and designed the study. X. L. guided, designed, and coordinated the study; analyzed data; and wrote the manuscript. All authors critically reviewed the manuscript.
Acknowledgments

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References


Figure 1. High intestinal epithelial GR expression is associated with poor prognosis in human colorectal cancer patients.

(A) Representative GR protein IHC images of paired colorectal cancer tissue and adjacent tissues. The levels of GR protein in a colorectal cancer tissue microarray from the Fudan University Shanghai Cancer Center were determined by immunohistochemical staining with an anti-GR antibody as described in the Methods. Scale bar, 50 µm or 200 µm. (B) GR is highly expressed in epithelial cells in colorectal cancer tissue compared to adjacent non-cancer tissue. The GR protein staining intensity in epithelial cells was scored in 431 cancer tissues and 347 adjacent tissues as described in the Methods (Data represent mean ± SEM, ****p<0.0001, Mann-Whitney test). (C) Representative images showing high and low epithelial GR staining in the tissue microarray and the survival data of the corresponding patients. The patients included in the microarray were stratified by dichotomizing the GR expression status in cancer tissues on a continuous H-score scale of 0–300 with a cut point of 230 (n = 109 for low expression and 105 for high expression). (D) Colorectal cancer patients with high epithelial GR expression have significantly reduced overall survival and disease-free survival. Kaplan-Meier survival analysis was performed. (E-F) Colorectal cancer patients with high epithelial GR expression (epithelial GR high) have significantly increased hazard ratios for death and recurrence. Colorectal cancer patients without lymph node (LN) metastasis were used as a reference to calculate the hazard ratio of LN metastasis patients for death or recurrence. Colorectal cancer patients with low epithelial GR expression were used as the reference to calculate the hazard ratios for death or recurrence of the patients with high epithelial GR expression.
Figure 2. Generation of intestinal epithelium-specific GR knockout mice (GR iKO).

(A) mRNA levels of full-length GR in different segments of intestine and control liver tissues in Flox and GR iKO mice (n=4 Flox and 3 GR iKO, data represent mean ± SEM, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, Student’s t-test). (B) GR protein is reduced in the colon of GR iKO mice. (C) Deletion of GR in intestinal epithelium. The protein levels of GR were analyzed by immunohistochemical staining. Insets, depletion of GR protein in crypts of GR iKO mice. (D) The numbers of significantly altered gene probes between Flox and GR iKO mice treated with PBS or DEX. ADX Flox and GR iKO mice were treated and the transcriptomes in their colons were analyzed by microarray as described in Methods (n=3 Flox and 4 GR iKO, q<0.05). (E) ADX Flox and GR iKO mice have distinct transcriptional responses to DEX treatment in the colon. The DEX altered common and unique gene probes in from microarray datasets in (D) were represented in a Venn-diagram (Cutoff: |fold-changes| > 2, q-value < 0.05). Brown, upregulated; Blue: downregulated. (F) Volcano plot representation of differentially expressed genes in ADX Flox mice (top panel) and GR iKO mice (bottom panel) from microarray datasets in (D) (Cutoff: |fold-changes| > 2, q-value < 0.05). Brown, upregulated; Blue: downregulated. (G) Deletion of intestinal-epithelial GR reduces the expression of GR target genes yet elevates expression of anti-microbial proteins in the colon upon DEX treatment. ADX Flox and GR iKO were treated as in (D). The expression of indicated genes were analyzed by qPCR and presented by the Box and Whisker plots, where whiskers present the maximum and minimum values (n=4 each genotype, data represent mean ± SEM, *q<0.05, **q<0.01, ***q<0.001, ****q<0.0001, two-way ANOVA test).
Figure 3. Deletion of intestinal epithelial GR increases susceptibility to DSS-induced colitis in mice.

(A-E) Six-month-old Flox and GR iKO mice were treated with 2.5% DSS in the drinking water for 7 days. Their body weight loss (A), the percentage of animals displaying rectal bleeding (B), the percentages of mice by rectal bleeding severity category (C) and bloody stool positivity (D), and the colon lengths (E) were analyzed (n=16 Flox mice and 17 GR iKO mice from two independent experiments). Data in (A) and (E) represent mean ± SEM, *p<0.05, Mann-Whitney test. (F-G) H&E-stained colon sections from DSS-treated Flox and GR iKO mice were examined, and nonproliferative lesions were graded and recorded as described in the Methods. Scale bar in (F), 200 μm. Arrows: inflammation (orange), glandular atrophy and loss (brown), fibrosis (black), submucosal edema (blue), and mucosal erosion (green). Box and Whisker plot in (G), whiskers present the maximum and minimum values (n=10 Flox mice and 8 GR iKO mice, *p<0.05, Mann-Whitney test). (H) GR-deficient mouse colons have increased proinflammatory gene levels after DSS administration (n=4 Flox mice administered regular water, 8 Flox mice treated with DSS, 4 GR iKO mice administered regular water, and 9 GR iKO mice treated with DSS, data represent mean ± SEM, *q<0.05, **q<0.01, two-way ANOVA test).
Figure 4. Intestinal epithelial GR deficiency enhances sensitivity to DSS-induced colitis through activation of intestinal macrophages.

(A-C) GR iKO mice have increased immune system activation and inflammation at the transcriptomic level after DSS treatment. Six-month old Flox and GR iKO mice were treated with regular water or with 2.5% DSS water for 7 days, and their colonic total RNA were analyzed by mouse whole genome microarray (n=3-4). (A) The numbers of significantly altered gene probes between Flox and GR iKO mice treated with or without DSS (n=3-4, q<0.05). (B) Venn-diagram representation of DSS altered common gene probes (9,674) as well as unique gene probes (6,253 unique in Flox mice, and 3,016 unique in GR iKO mice). Red, upregulated; Blue, downregulated. (C) An enrichment network map of enriched GSEA genesets. Red, upregulated genesets; blue, downregulated genesets. (D) DSS-treated GR-deficient mouse colons have increased infiltration of macrophages. Colon sections from DSS-treated Flox and GR iKO mice were stained with an anti-F4/80 antibody and quantified by ImageJ (n=10 Flox mice and 8 GR iKO mice, each data point represents an average of at least three mouse colon sections, including proximal, middle, and distal segments, data represent mean ± SEM, **p<0.01, Mann-Whitney test). (E-F) Flox and GR iKO mice have comparable sensitivities to DSS-induced colitis after monocyte/macrophage depletion. Mice were treated as described in the Methods. Inflammation and the tissue morphology in colon H&E-stained sections were evaluated and scored as described in the Methods (n=8 Flox control, n=7 GR iKO control, n=7 Flox clodronate, and n=8 GR iKO clodronate). Box and Whisker plot in (F), whiskers present the maximum and minimum values, *p< 0.05, **p<0.01, ***p< 0.0001, two-way ANOVA test.
Figure 5. Deletion of intestinal epithelial GR enhances recovery after DSS treatment and suppresses chronic inflammation-associated colorectal cancer formation.

(A) GR iKO mice have reduced expression of inflammatory and immune cell markers at D10. Flox and GR iKO mice were treated with 2.5% DSS for 7 days (light blue area), followed by regular water for 3 days (D0: n=4 Flox and 4 GR iKO; D7: n=10 Flox and 10 GR iKO; D10: n=16 Flox and 15 GR iKO). (B-C) GR iKO mice display increased improvement in rectal bleeding in an AOM/DSS colorectal cancer model. Flox and GR iKO mice were subjected to the procedure of AOM/DSS as described in Methods (n=34 Flox and 32 GR iKO). (D) GR iKO mice show a trend of improved morphologic recovery at D10 in the AOM/DSS model (n=15 Flox and 12 GR iKO). (E) GR iKO mice exhibit reduced tumor formation in the AOM/DSS model (n=16 Flox and 15 GR iKO). Scale bar, 1 cm. (F) Representative images of H&E-stained colon sections from Flox and GR iKO mice in the AOM/DSS model. (G) Tumor stages in Flox and GR iKO mice. The H&E-stained colon sections were evaluated and scored as described in Methods (n=8 Flox and 8 GR iKO). (H) GR iKO mice have reduced expression of proinflammatory markers but enhanced expression of Ifng in the colon at the end stage of the AOM/DSS model (n=11 Flox and 10 GR iKO mice). (I) GR iKO mice have increased infiltration of macrophages in the colon at the end stage of the AOM/DSS model as analyzed by FACS (n=20 Flox and 14 GR iKO mice, each data point represents pooled colon tissues from 2 experimental mice). Data in (A), (E), (H), and (I), represent mean ± SEM, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001, Mann-Whitney test.
Figure 6. Early-phase betamethasone treatment increases AOM/DSS-induced colorectal cancer formation.

(A-C) Eleven-day oral betamethasone (BMZ) treatment during the first DSS treatment/recovery cycle impairs recovery of rectal bleeding of both Flox and GR iKO mice in an AOM/DSS colorectal cancer model. Three- to four-month old Flox and GR iKO mice under the treatment AOM/DSS were subjected to oral treatment of either vehicle (0.125% ethanol) or 2.5 µg/ml BMZ from D3 to D14. (A) The rectal bleeding severity during the entire experimental time frame (initial animal numbers: n=28 Flox vehicle, 27 GR iKO vehicle, 21 Flox BMZ, and 22 GR iKO BMZ). (B) Their histological scores of inflammation (left) and morphology (right) were evaluated by a professional pathologist at 3 days during the first regular water recovery phase (D10) (n=15 Flox vehicle, 12 GR iKO vehicle, 12 Flox BMZ, and 11 GR iKO BMZ). (C) The body weight loss and surviving animals (initial animal numbers: n=28 Flox vehicle, 27 GR iKO vehicle, 21 Flox BMZ, and 22 GR iKO BMZ). (D-E) Oral BMZ treatment during the first DSS treatment/recovery cycle increases colon tumor formation in both Flox and GR iKO mice in an AOM/DSS colorectal cancer model (n=10 Flox vehicle, 8 GR iKO vehicle, 9 Flox BMZ, and 7 GR iKO BMZ, data represent mean ± SEM, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001, two-way ANOVA test). (F-G) Colorectal cancers developed in BMZ treated mice are at more advanced stages compared to vehicle treated mice in an AOM/DSS colorectal cancer model. The tumor histology and stages were evaluated by a professional pathologist as described in Supplementary methods (n=9 Flox BMZ, and n=7 GR iKO BMZ).
Figure 7. Early-phase betamethasone treatment increases the growth of allografted colon carcinoma cells in mice.

(A-B) Early-phase oral BMZ treatment increases the growth of allografted CT26.WT carcinoma cells in Balb/c mice. Two-month-old immunocompetent Balb/c mice were treated and analyzed as described in the Methods. Tumor volume was monitored (A), and a final image of the dissected tumors (middle) and tumor weights (B) are shown (n=8-10, data represent mean ± SEM, *p<0.05, Mann-Whitney test). (C-D) Early-phase oral BMZ treatment increases the growth of allografted CT26.WT colon carcinoma cells in NSG mice (n=8-10, one outlier from each group was removed for tumor weight analysis using interquartile range (IQR) analysis, in which any values outside the 1.5*IQR range were considered outliers, data represent mean ± SEM, *p<0.05, Mann-Whitney test). (E) The expression of macrophage markers, chemokines, and proliferation genes in allografted CT26.WT tumors. The allografted CT26.WT colon tumors in (B) and (D) were analyzed for the expression of the indicated genes by qPCR (n=8-10, data represent mean ± SEM, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001, Mann-Whitney test). (F-I) Late-phase oral BMZ treatment increases the growth of allografted CT26.WT colon carcinoma cells in NSG mice but not Balb/c mice. Two-month-old immunocompetent Balb/c mice and NSG mice were allografted with CT26.WT cells and tumor volume was monitored. When the average tumor size reached 30-40 mm³ (at Day 16), mice in each strain were randomly divided into two groups and treated with vehicle or BMZ for the rest of the experiment (n=8 tumors/group for both Balb/c mice and NSG mice, data represent mean ± SEM, *p<0.05, Mann-Whitney test).
Table 1 Clinical characteristics of 214 patients with colorectal cancer

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Table 2 Description of the four-point scale for histopathologic evaluation of DSS-induced colitis tissue samples

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<td>Within normal limits</td>
<td>Tissue considered to be normal under the conditions of the study and considering the age, sex, and strain of the animal concerned.</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>The amount of change present barely exceeds that considered to be within normal limits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mild (slight)</td>
<td>In general, the lesion is easily identified but of limited severity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>The lesion is prominent, but there is significant potential for increased severity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Marked (severe)</td>
<td>The degree of change is as complete as possible (occupies the majority of the organ).</td>
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