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Pomegranate by-products in colorectal cancer chemoprevention: effects in Apc-mutated Pirc rats and mechanistic studies in vitro and ex vivo

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6 **Pomegranate by-products in colorectal cancer chemoprevention: effects in *Apc*-mutated Pirc rats and**
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8 **mechanistic studies *in vitro* and *ex vivo***
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32
33
34 **Abbreviations:** CRC, colorectal cancer; MDF, Multiple Depleted Foci; PMD, Pomegranate Mesocarp
35

36 Decoction; u-A, urolithin-A; SB, sodium butyrate; NM, normal mucosa; AD, adenoma
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Abstract

Scope: To investigate the effect of pomegranate mesocarp, a polyphenol-rich by-product of juice production, in colorectal cancer (CRC) chemoprevention.

Methods and Results: A mesocarp decoction (PMD) was administered for 6 weeks in the diet to Pirc rats, mutated in *Apc*, a key-gene in CRC. Multiple Depleted Foci (MDFs), as CRC biomarkers, were reduced in PMD-fed rats compared to Controls (MDF/colon: 34 ± 4 vs 47 ± 3 , $P<0.05$). Apoptosis in MDFs from PMD-treated rats was increased compared to Controls (2.5 ± 0.2 vs 1.6 ± 0.2 , $P<0.01$). To elucidate the involved mechanisms, two colon-relevant metabolites of the polyphenolic and fiber PMD components, urolithin-A (U-A) and sodium butyrate (SB), were tested alone or in combination *in vitro* (HT-29 cells), and *ex vivo* in adenoma (AD) and normal mucosa (NM) from Pirc rats. U-A 25 μM plus SB 2.5 mM (USB) caused a significant reduction in COX-2 expression compared to untreated controls (-74.5%, -76.5%, -69.02% in HT-29, AD, NM). USB also caused a strong increase in C-CASP-3 expression in HT-29 cells (10 times), in AD and NM (+74% and +69%).

Conclusion: These data indicate a chemiopreventive activity of PMD due, at least in part, to pro-apoptotic and anti-inflammatory action of its metabolites, that could be exploited in high-risk patients.

1 Introduction

Considering the significant impact of cancer in terms of human lives and economic cost (US\$ 1.16 trillion in 2010, World Cancer Report 2014, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs297/en/>), there is a continuous interest in searching new mechanisms to be targeted, and in implementing preventive strategies such as chemoprevention, that is “*the use of natural, synthetic or biologic agents, able to delay, reverse or inhibit tumor progression*” [1]. Colorectal cancer (CRC), the second leading cause of cancer death in Europe (IARC, GLOBOCAN 2012 <http://gco.iarc.fr/today/home>), is strongly affected by lifestyle, particularly nutritional habits. CRC develops through a sequential multistep progression of epithelial cells initiated to a cancerous state with defined pre-cancerous intermediaries. Numerous trials document the ability of Non-Steroidal Anti Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) to prevent CRC, but the chronic use of these drugs increases the risk of serious cardiovascular events, so that alternative strategies are needed [2, 3]. In the last thirty years, several studies focused on the effects of polyphenols from various sources (i.e. curcumin, resveratrol, green tea) on colorectal carcinogenesis *in vitro*, *in vivo*, and in some clinical trials, testing their synergistic effects in association with chemotherapeutic treatments or their preventive activity in subjects at high CRC risk [4] (<https://clinicaltrials.gov/>). Among fruits with a high polyphenolic content is pomegranate (*Punica granatum*), endowed with anti-oxidative and anti-inflammatory properties in *in vitro* studies, as well as anticancer activity *in vitro* and *in vivo* [5] [6] [7]. Pomegranate juice is commonly produced from arils or from the whole pressed fruit also containing peel and mesocarp [8]. The predominant phenolic component of pomegranate belongs to the ellagitannin family (ETs), among which punicalagin, showing pronounced anti-proliferative and anti-inflammatory activities in addition to anti-oxidative effects, is peculiar of this fruit [9] [10]. Several studies reported that total phenolic compounds (TPC) and punicalagin are more abundant in pomegranate mesocarp and peel than in arils and seeds, used for industrial juice production [11]. Beside polyphenols, the polysaccharide component, also present in mesocarp, has been suggested to exert anticancer activity [12] [13]. We recently demonstrated that the polysaccharide component of Wonderful pomegranate has prebiotic properties [14], which have in turn been associated with beneficial effects against colon carcinogenesis [15].

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3 Taking into account these studies and the recent encouragement to the implementation of new approaches for
4 *the efficient use of the huge biomass into a spectrum of bio-based products*, a concept named “biorefining”
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7 (*Sustainable development goals 09/2015, UN; Bioenergy task 42, IEA*).

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9 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>, <http://www.ica-bioenergy.task42->

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11 [biorefineries.com/en/ieabiorefinery.htm](http://www.ica-bioenergy.task42-biorefineries.com/en/ieabiorefinery.htm)), the use of fruit (including pomegranate) by-products in cosmetics
12
13 and food industries is rising [16]. On the other hand, there are no data about the use of these by-products in
14
15 medical preparations for therapeutic or preventive purposes.

16
17 The present study has been conceived to investigate the possibility of employing a pomegranate mesocarp
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19 decoction (PMD), characterized in polysaccharide and ellagitannin content, for CRC prevention. After its
20
21 characterization, PMD was tested in a short-term (six weeks) *in vivo* experiment on Pirc male rats. Pirc rats
22
23 are a genetic model of CRC bearing an heterozygote mutation in the *Apc* gene, that predisposes to
24
25 spontaneous development of colon polyps as in Familial Adenomatous Polyposis (FAP) individuals [17].
26
27 Pirc rats also present microscopic pre-neoplastic lesions in the colon, called Multiple Depleted Foci (MDF),
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29 which represent the early step in the development of CRC and can thus be used as tumor biomarkers in
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31 chemoprevention studies [18] [19]. Moreover, to investigate the mechanisms involved in the effects observed
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33 *in vivo* at the level of early carcinogenesis phases, and to assess the capacity of PMD to influence
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35 carcinogenesis at more advanced phases, we studied *in vitro* (HT-29 colon cancer cells) and *ex vivo* (biopsies
36
37 of normal mucosa (NM) and adenoma (AD) from Pirc rats), two main metabolites of PMD: urolithin-A (u-
38
39 A) and sodium butyrate (SB). U-A is the main punicalagin metabolite in the colon [20] [21]; sodium
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41 butyrate (SB), one of the main short chain fatty acid (SCFA) produced by fermentation of the soluble fiber
42
43 component in the colon, has anticancer activity *in vitro* and *in vivo* [22] [23].
44

45 **2 Materials and Methods**

46 Chemical reagents

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48 Gentamicin, Hank’s Balanced Salt Solution (HBSS), DTT, Thiazolyl Blue Tetrazolium Bromide (MTT),
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50 RIPA buffer and protease/phosphatase inhibitors were purchased from Sigma Aldrich (Milan, Italy). α + β
51
52 punicalagins and ellagic acid were purchased from Merck. AIN76 diet components were purchased from
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54

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3 Piccioni (Milan, Italy). NucleoSpin® TriPrep kit for RNA extraction was purchased from Machery-Nagel
4 GmbH & Co. KG (Duren, Germany). DMEM and penicillin-streptomycin solution were purchased from
5 PAN Biotech (Aidenbach, Germany). Fetal Bovine Serum (FBS) was purchased from GIBCO, BRL
6 (Rodano-Milan, Italy). Urolithin-A was purchased from Toronto Research Chemicals (Toronto, Canada).
7 Sodium butyrate was purchased from Merck-Millipore (Vimodrone-Milan, Italy). MTS solution was
8 purchased from Promega (Gessate, Italy). Protein assay was performed using DC Protein Assay kit
9 purchased from Bio-Rad (Segrate-Milan, Italy).

12.1 Pomegranate Mesocarp Decoction preparation and characterization

12 Pomegranate ripe fruits of Wonderful variety cultivated in Puglia, Italy (harvested in 2015), were used to
13 recover the mesocarp. A total amount of 18 kg of fresh fruits were manually treated to separate the mesocarp
14 from the other parts of the fruit. The mesocarp (80% moisture) was then used to prepare a decoction through
15 boiling in water for 1h (extractive ratio 1:40 w dried mesocarp/v). The sample was cooled, filtered and the
16 solution freeze-dried, then ground and used as powder (PMD). The final yield was 75% of dried mesocarp.
17 The total fat content was extracted by Soxhlet, and gravimetrically determined according to ISS protocol
18 (1996/34); the protein content (PC) was evaluated by Kjeldhal method: $PC (g/100g) = N * 6.25$, where N is
19 total nitrogen. Lastly, dietary fiber analysis (both soluble and insoluble) was done according to AOAC
20 method 991.43 (Determination of soluble, insoluble and total dietary fiber in foods and food products, final
21 approval 1991).

22 The HPLC-DAD analysis was carried out using a Sinergi Fusion 150mm×2 mm i.d., 4µm, RP-18, column
23 from Phenomenex (Bologna, Italy), with a flow rate of 0.2 mL/min. The mobile phase was constituted by A,
24 acidified water by HCOOH (0.1% v/v) and B, acetonitrile. The linear multistep solvent gradient started
25 from 95% A and reached 75 % A in 4 min, followed by a 4 min plateau; the next step was 6 min to reach
26 65 % A, and finally 2 min to reach 10 % A and 90% B, with a re-equilibration time of 10 min and a total time
27 of analysis of 26 min. The ellagitannins determination was performed using as external standards $\alpha + \beta$
28 punicalagins (at 380 nm, linearity range between 0.5-8 µg) and ellagic acid (at 370 nm, linearity range of
29 0.031–1.25 µg) obtaining calibration curves with R^2 0.998 and R^2 0.9995 respectively.

2.2 Animals and treatments

Pirc (F344/NTac-Apc^{am1137}) and wild type (*wt*) Fisher F344/NTac rats, originally obtained from Taconic (Taconic Farms, Hudson, NY, USA), were maintained in polyethylene cages and bred in CESAL (University of Florence, Italy) in accordance with the Commission for Animal Experimentation of the Italian Ministry of Health (Authorization number 323/2016-PR). The colony was maintained by mating heterozygote Pirc rats with *wt* rats and pups genotyped at 3 weeks of age [17]. To study the chemopreventive effect of PMD, male Pirc rats, aged 4 weeks, were randomly assigned to two groups: controls (n=10), fed with standard AIN76 diet, and PMD-treated (n=11) fed with the same AIN76 diet supplemented with 10000 ppm of PMD, corresponding, on the basis of the polyphenolic content of PMD, to a dose of 50 mg/kg/die of total polyphenolic compounds. Rats were sacrificed by CO₂ asphyxia after 6 weeks of treatment, in line with the experimental protocol approved by the Commission for Animal Experimentation of the Italian Ministry of Health.

2.3 Processing of colon, sample collection and determination of Multiple Depleted Foci (MDF)

At sacrifice, the entire intestine (from pylorus to anus) was dissected, flushed with cold saline and longitudinally opened. The apparently Normal Mucosa (NM) from the proximal portion of the colon was scraped and stored at - 80°C in RNAlater™ (RNA stabilization Reagent, Qiagen) for RNA and protein analyses. A small sample of NM from the medial portion (about 9 mm²) was collected and fixed in 10% formalin solution to assess proliferative and apoptotic activity. The remaining colon and rectum were processed to determine the presence of MDF (number of MDF/colon) and their multiplicity (number of crypts/MDF) [18]. After the enumeration of MDFs, these were marked with permanent ink, dissected under microscope and then embedded in paraffin in such a way that crypts could be sectioned longitudinally (4 µm thick).

2.4 Cell proliferation and apoptosis in NM and MDF

To assess the proliferative activity in the morphologically normal mucosa (NM), Proliferating Cell Nuclear Antigen (PCNA) immunoreactivity was determined using a mouse monoclonal antibody (PC-10, Santa Cruz, CA, USA) at 1:1000 dilution. Proliferative activity was expressed as labelling index (LI): number of cells

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2
3 positive to PCNA/cells scored x 100, evaluated in at least 15 full longitudinally sectioned crypts of the NM.
4
5 Histological sections of the NM (4 μm thick) were also stained with hematoxylin-eosin to determine the
6
7 number of apoptotic cells in at least 15 full entire longitudinally sectioned crypts, according to previous
8
9 published procedures [24]. Apoptosis was also evaluated in histological sections of MDFs dissected as
10
11 previously described [25].
12

13 **2.5 Semi-quantitative RT-PCR**

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15 Gene expression was evaluated in the NM, taken at the sacrifice as described above. Total RNA extraction,
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17 reverse-transcription of 1 μg of total RNA and subsequent PCRs were performed as previously described
18
19 [26]. For each target gene, the relative amount of mRNA in the samples was calculated as the ratio of each
20
21 gene to β -actin mRNA (primers used are shown in Tab.1).
22

23 **2.6 Western Blotting**

24
25 Protein expression was evaluated in samples from *in vitro*, *in vivo* and *ex vivo* experiments. For HT-29 cells,
26
27 40 μL of RIPA-buffer supplemented with 1% protease inhibitors and 1% phosphatase inhibitors were added
28
29 to each well, and the obtained protein solution was sonicated for 15'' and centrifuged for 1' at 14000 rpm and
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31 4°C. For colon samples, scraped NM in the *in vivo* experiments and *ex vivo* samples of adenoma and normal
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33 mucosa were homogenized in RIPA-buffer in the proportion of 8 $\mu\text{L}/\text{mg}$ tissue for not more than 2',
34
35 sonicated and centrifuged as above. Each supernatant was collected and the protein content was measured.
36
37 For western blotting, 40 μg of protein extracts were used for each experimental point. Electrophoretic
38
39 running, immunostaining, band acquisition and quantification were performed as previously described [27].
40
41 Each measured density was normalized by using the corresponding GAPDH density value.
42
43 The antibodies used were: COX-2 (160126 rabbit, Cayman Chemical), 1:200; PCNA (PC10: sc-56 mouse
44
45 Santa Cruz Biotechnology, INC), 1:1000; C-CASP-3 (Asp175 Rabbit Cell Signaling), 1:1000; NOS2 (N-20
46
47 rabbit Santa Cruz Biotechnology, INC) 1:500; BAK (rabbit Anti-BAK, NT Millipore) 1:500; GAPDH
48
49 (14C10 Rabbit mAb Cell Signaling) 1:3000; anti-rabbit IgG antibody (Cell Signaling), 1:4000 and anti-
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51 mouse IgG (Chemicon, Temecula, CA), 1:5000.
52

53 **2.7 HT-29 cells culture and treatments**

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2
3 HT-29 cells (provided from ATCC) were grown in high glucose Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's Medium
4 supplemented with 10% of fetal bovine serum, Pen-Strep (penicillin 10000 U/mL and streptomycin 10
5 mg/mL), incubated at 37°C in a cell incubator (5% CO₂) and used during the linear phase of growth. For
6 performing experimental treatments, cells were plated in 12-MW (130000 cells/well) and treated starting on
7 the following day with DMEM (control treatment) or: a) urolithin-A (3,8-dihydroxybenzo(c)chromen-6-one,
8 u-A) 0.1, 1, 10, 25, 50 and 100 µM; b) sodium butyrate (SB) 50 µM, 100 µM, 500 µM, 1 mM, 5 mM, 10
9 mM; c) u-A 25 µM plus SB (USB) 500 µM, 1 mM and 5 mM. Treatments lasted 24h or 72h at 37°C in a
10 humidified atmosphere.
11
12

13 **2.8 MTS viability assay on HT-29 cells**

14 Cell proliferation assays were performed in 96-MW (8000 cells/well) after 72h treatments. At the end of this
15 time, media were removed, cell monolayers were washed two times with 1 X PBS, and finally 100 µL/well
16 of DMEM with 5% FBS and 20 µL of ready-to-use MTS solution were added. The measurement of
17 absorbance at 490 nm was performed after 90' incubation at 37°C in 5% CO₂ humidified atmosphere.
18

19 **2.9 *Ex vivo* short-term cultures and treatment**

20 Pirc rats (n=4) at 8-months of age were sacrificed as described above. The colon was rinsed two times with
21 PBS supplemented with Pen-Strep (penicillin 10000 U/mL and streptomycin 10 mg/mL) and gentamycin (10
22 µg/mL), then opened to collect samples of adenoma (AD) and apparently normal mucosa (NM). All samples
23 were transferred in 1.5 mL tubes containing 40 mM DTT in HBSS, rinsed with HBSS supplemented with
24 Pen-Strep and gentamycin 50 µg/mL (HBSS/PSG), and dissected under microscope. ADs and NMs were
25 dissected into approximatively equal parts (weight range: 10-15 mg). Samples were then transferred in 48-
26 MW containing DMEM (control) or DMEM containing u-A 25 µM plus SB 2.5 mM (USB) and maintained
27 for 24 h in cell incubator at 37°C and 5% CO₂. All these procedures were performed within 1 h from
28 sacrifice.
29

30 Cell viability of AD and NM samples was assessed in separate samples performing the MTT test at time zero
31 (T₀) and after 24 h (T₂₄). Briefly, samples dissected under microscope were transferred in 2 mL tubes
32 containing HBSS/PSG. Then, T₀ samples were transferred in 48-MW containing 200 µL of DMEM without
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3 red-phenol supplemented with 1% FBS, Pen-Strep, 50 µg/mL gentamycin and 1 mg/mL of MTT and
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5 incubated for 3 h at 37°C in cell incubator. At the end of the incubation, samples were transferred in 2 mL
6
7 tubes containing acidified isopropanol (isopropanol plus HCl 4 mM and 0.1% Nonidet-P40), weighted, and
8
9 incubated at 37°C with shaking for 3 h to extract MTT. At the end of the extraction, they were centrifuged
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11 for 5' at 4°C and 1000 rpm. The T₂₄ samples after dissection were transferred into 48-MW containing
12
13 DMEM, incubated for 24 h and then subjected to the MTT test as described for the T₀ counterparts. For all
14
15 samples, 200 µL of each supernatant were then transferred in 96-MW for measuring MTT absorbance at 570
16
17 nm in a plate reader spectrophotometer. All measures were performed in duplicate and the absorbance values
18
19 (A) were normalized to the weight of the sample after MTT incubation (A/mg) [28]. Finally, the viability at
20
21 24 h was expressed as % of the corresponding T₀ counterpart.
22

23 **2.10 Statistics**

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25 Differences between PMD group and controls in MDFs, immunological and morphological indexes and RT-
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27 PCR data were analyzed with t-test for unpaired samples. Data from MTS test and western blotting assay *in*
28
29 *vitro* were analyzed by one-way ANOVA followed by Bonferroni's multiple range test, with GraphPad
30
31 Prism 5.0 (GraphPad Software) as appropriate. Western blotting data from the *ex vivo* experiments were
32
33 subjected to two-way ANOVA to take into account the effect of both treatment and tissue type (AD or NM).
34

35 **3 Results**

36 **3.1 Composition of PMD**

37
38 The proximate composition of the dried decoction resulted to be: proteins 1.9%, total sugar 0.4%, dietary
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40 fibers about 11% (soluble 10.9%, insoluble < 1%); fat was absent, as expected. The decoction contained also
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42 ellagitannins (151.47±3.42 mg/g) with a prevalence of $\alpha+\beta$ punicalagines (67.5±1.24 mg/g) and a minor
43
44 content of ellagic acid and derivatives (21.7±0.35 mg/g).
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48 **3.2 Effect of PMD on colon tumorigenesis in Pirc rats**

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50 The mean weight of the rats at the beginning of the treatment (4 weeks of age) was 60 ± 3 g (means ± SE,
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52 n=21). At sacrifice, when the animals were 10 week-old, the mean weight was similar between controls and
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3 PMD group (216 ± 11 g in controls (n= 10) vs 217 ± 6 g in PMD treated (n = 11), means \pm SE), with no
4
5 apparent signs of toxicity of the treatment.

6
7 The determination of pre-neoplastic lesions MDF in the two experimental groups showed that the number
8
9 of MDF was significantly reduced in PMD-treated rats compared to controls (Fig. 1, panel a). Moreover,
10
11 PMD-treated rats showed MDF with a lower multiplicity when compared to those in the control rats (Fig. 1,
12
13 panel b).

14 15 **3.3 Proliferation, apoptosis and inflammation in the colon mucosa of Pirc rats**

16
17 To understand the molecular mechanisms of action underlying the protective effect of PMD, we determined
18
19 the expression of inflammatory proteins, apoptosis and proliferation in the normal mucosa (NM) of both
20
21 groups. Among the inflammatory genes, we measured by RT-PCR the mRNA expression of *S100-A9*, *Il-6*,
22
23 *Il-1 β* , *Nos-2* and *Cox-2* in NM samples. The results showed that none of these genes was influenced by
24
25 PMD administration (data not shown). Protein levels evaluation (western blot) of NOS and COX-2
26
27 confirmed the gene expression data, indicating no difference between control and treated animals (data not
28
29 shown).

30
31 Concerning the impact on proliferation, the labelling index (LI) in sections immunostained with PCNA, as
32
33 well as PCNA immunoblotting in NM samples, showed that proliferative activity was not affected by PMD
34
35 (Fig. 2 panels a and b).

36
37 Apoptosis determined in histological sections of NM based on nuclear morphology was also similar in the
38
39 two groups (AI: 0.15 ± 0.03 and 0.21 ± 0.11 in controls and treated animals, respectively, means \pm SE). In
40
41 agreement with the histological analysis, western blot determination of CASP-3 and BAK proteins showed
42
43 no statistically significant difference between control and treated groups (CASP-3/GAPDH: 8.93 ± 1.9 vs
44
45 10.07 ± 2.02 ; BAK/GAPDH: 0.51 ± 0.21 vs 1.10 ± 0.29 in controls (n=10) and in PMD treated (n=11)
46
47 groups respectively, means \pm SE). Apoptosis level was also determined in sections of dissected MDF. In this
48
49 case, the apoptotic index (AI) resulted to be significantly higher in the MDFs from the PMD group
50
51 compared to those in controls (Fig. 2, panel c).

3.4 Effect of PMD on HT-29 colon cancer cells viability

Based on the protective effects observed *in vivo* on microscopic pre-neoplastic lesions (MDFs), we also evaluated the effects of pomegranate products in more advanced steps of colon carcinogenesis, such as macroscopic adenomas from older Pirc rats and human colon cancer cell lines. For these *in vitro* and *ex vivo* experiments, two main colon-relevant metabolites of the polyphenolic and fiber PMD components, urolithin-A (u-A) and sodium butyrate (SB), were used. First, we investigated the effect of different doses of u-A and SB on the viability of HT-29 cells upon 72 h exposure (Fig. 3, panels a and b). The IC_{50} for u-A resulted to be $43.9 \mu\text{M}$, and that of SB 3 mM. The combination of u-A and SB was also tested (Fig. 3 panel b, dotted line): in the presence of a fixed concentration of u-A ($25 \mu\text{M}$, inducing a 25% reduction in cell viability) the IC_{50} of SB was not statistically different from that of SB alone, indicating the absence of a synergistic effect. However, at SB concentrations lower than IC_{50} , the co-presence of u-A further reduced viability, (Fig. 3 panel b, compare dotted and continue lines), suggesting an additive type interaction between the two metabolites.

3.5 Proliferation, apoptosis and inflammation in HT-29 cells treated with urolithin-A, Sodium Butyrate, or both

The effect of urolithin-A and Sodium Butyrate on markers of proliferation, apoptosis and inflammation was assessed in HT-29 cells by means of western blotting. Cells were treated for 24 or 72 h with u-A $25 \mu\text{M}$ (u-A) corresponding to 25% cell viability reduction as described above, SB 2.5 mM (SB) or with a combination of u-A $25 \mu\text{M}$ and SB 2.5 mM (USB).

Compared to the respective controls, the expression of the proliferation marker PCNA was significantly reduced by SB after 24 h, while u-A and USB reduced it slightly, but not significantly. At 72 h the untreated cells showed a slight reduction in proliferation compared to 24 h, and the USB combination brought about a further significant decrease compared to respective 72 h control (Fig. 3, panel c). As for apoptosis, activated Caspase-3 (C-CASP3) expression was strongly increased by the combination of u-A and SB by 24h; during the following 48h, the levels in treated cells were still higher compared to the respective controls, although the differences were no longer significant (Fig. 3, panel d).

1
2
3 Interestingly, we also observed that in cells treated for 72 h, the expression of the inflammatory markers
4 iNOS and COX-2 was reduced by all the treatments (fig. 3, panels e and f respectively), with the USB
5 treatment being the most effective (-79.7% and -74.5% compared to respective controls for iNOS and COX-
6 2 respectively, $p < 0.01$). Notably, in the untreated 72 h controls, iNOS and COX-2 protein levels were higher
7 compared to 24 h controls; no significant effects of the treatments were observed at 24 h.

12 3.6 Effect of PMD on proliferation, apoptosis and inflammation in biopsies from Pirc adenomas and 13 normal mucosa

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16
17 Colon adenoma (AD) and normal mucosa (NM) samples from Pirc rats were used for short term (24h) *ex*
18 *vivo* experiments, in which the combination of u-A and SB treatment (USB), being the most effective in the
19 *in vitro* experiments, was tested at the same concentration used in HT-29 cells. Viability of the samples,
20 assessed with the MTT method at time 0 (control) and after 24 h of incubation, was 75% and 50% of the
21 corresponding values at 0 time for NM and AD respectively.

22
23
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25
26
27 The effect of USB treatment on proliferation, evaluated by means of PCNA western blot, was slight and non-
28 significant both in AD and in NM samples (Fig. 4, panel a). On the contrary, USB showed a prominent pro-
29 apoptotic effect in AD, as indicated by increased C-CASP-3 and BAK expression (Fig. 4, panels b and c,
30 respectively) compared to untreated controls; a significant increase in these two pro-apoptotic proteins was
31 also observed in the NM. Finally, a marked anti-inflammatory effect on both AD and NM samples treated
32 with USB was observed (Fig. 4, panel d): COX-2 protein expression was decreased of about 77% in AD and
33 69% in NM. Interestingly, the two-way ANOVA analysis on these data showed that, as expected, basal
34 proliferative activity and apoptosis level were higher in the adenoma tissue compared to the normal mucosa.

35 4 Discussion

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The majority of the published studies on the potential beneficial and chemopreventive effects of
pomegranate focused on the juice obtained either from whole fruits or arils [29]. Despite the fact that peel
and mesocarp also contain polyphenols, to which the beneficial effects of pomegranate are ascribed [30],
only few studies investigated the effects of peel [31] and no studies, to our knowledge, focused on
mesocarp. In the present study we evaluated the possibility of employing a decoction obtained from

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3 pomegranate mesocarp (PMD), a juice production by-product, as a source of molecules with
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5 chemopreventive activity in CRC. The decoction we used was characterized by a high content in
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7 ellagitannins (about 15% w/w), and a moderate content in soluble fibers, providing a manageable powder
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9 with low hygroscopicity. Fibers from different vegetables can act as a vehicle for polyphenols in the colon
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11 improving their bioavailability, particularly after the fermentation of the substrate [32]. Accordingly, our
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13 preliminary experiments on the advanced M-Shime® gastroimulator pointed out a beneficial effect of PMD,
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15 mainly in terms of short chain fatty acids (SCFA) production by the human microbiota (manuscript in
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17 preparation), suggesting prebiotic properties associated with low CRC risk [15]. PMD was first tested in a
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19 short-term *in vivo* experiment, at a dose corresponding to a daily intake of 50 mg/kg of polyphenols, on Pirc
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21 male rats. Pirc rat, with a germ line mutation in the *Apc* gene, is a suitable model for CRC chemopreventive
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23 studies [33], as it spontaneously develops colon adenomas and, at young age, microscopic pre-neoplastic
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25 lesions (MDFs) that can be used as an end-point in short-term chemopreventive studies [34]. Our results
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27 clearly show that both the number of MDFs and their size in terms of crypts forming each MDF (multiplicity
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29 index) were significantly reduced by PMD treatment, suggesting that indeed PMD is able to reduce
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31 colorectal tumorigenesis. In the normal mucosa of PMD-treated rats, only slight effects on proliferation,
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33 apoptosis and inflammation were observed compared to controls. On the contrary, in MDFs from the PMD
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35 group, an increase in apoptosis was observed, suggesting that the observed chemopreventive effect may be
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37 due to increased apoptosis in these lesions, leading to elimination of precancerous cells, as also suggested by
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39 the lower multiplicity of MDF in the PMD-group. Increased apoptosis in tumours and preneoplastic lesions
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41 was previously observed in animals treated with compounds showing preventive activity [35].
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43 To elucidate the molecular mechanisms involved in the protective effects observed *in vivo*, and to verify the
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45 efficacy of PMD treatment at more advanced carcinogenesis phases (i.e. in cancer cells and in macroscopic
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47 adenomas), we tested the effect of two colon-relevant metabolites of the polyphenolic and fiber components
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49 of PMD: urolithin-A (u-A) and sodium butyrate (SB) respectively [20] [23]. These were assessed *in vitro* on
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51 HT-29 human carcinoma cell line, bearing an *Apc* gene mutation. U-A and SB alone demonstrated inhibitory
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53 effects on cell viability with an IC_{50} (43.9 μ M and 3 mM respectively) in line with those reported previously
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3 [6] [36]. We also wanted to evaluate the effect of the combination of these two metabolites, and combining
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5 25 μM u-A (corresponding *per se* to a 25% reduction in cell viability) with various concentration of SB, we
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7 found an additive effect on cell viability reduction. We then focused on the combination of u-A and SB
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9 (USB) using 2.5 mM of SB and 25 μM of u-A, concentrations that can actually be reached in the colon [23]
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11 [21]. The effect on HT-29 cells were tested after 24 and 72 h of incubation. Western blotting analyses of
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13 several protein markers involved in proliferative, inflammatory and apoptotic mechanisms showed that USB
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15 treatment was capable of affecting these parameters in a more pronounced manner than single treatments. In
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17 fact, USB treatment brought about the strongest reduction in proliferative activity (PCNA reduction) at 72 h
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19 and the strongest apoptotic induction (C-CASP-3 increase) at 24h. Besides, although u-A and SB alone were
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21 both able to lower iNOS and COX-2 after 72 h treatment, in line with previously reported data [37] [38], the
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23 anti-inflammatory effects of the combination were again more pronounced. The efficacy demonstrated by
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25 USB in this human cancer cell line, encouraged us to verify the efficacy of the combined treatment on
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27 macroscopic lesions of Pirc rats. For this purpose, and to reduce the number of experimental animals, we
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29 performed *ex vivo* experiments, in which small samples of adenomas (ADs) and NMs of eight-month-old
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31 Pirc rats were collected and maintained in culture for 24h with or without USB at the same concentrations
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33 tested in HT-29 cells. In the control samples, the MTT method showed that the tissue was still viable at 24 h.
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35 Furthermore, PCNA expression (proliferative activity) and cleaved CASP-3 and BAK expression
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37 (apoptosis) were significantly higher in AD compared to NM, in agreement with many studies [39] [24]
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39 documenting higher proliferation and apoptosis in AD compared to NM. As a whole, these results indicate
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41 that this *ex-vivo* system is quite reliable. The treatment with USB increased apoptosis, as measured by BAK
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43 and C-CASP-3 protein level, in both AD and NM, compared to untreated controls. A pro-apoptotic effect of
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45 PMD was also observed *in vivo* in MDF from PMD-treated rats, while in the NM *in vivo*, this effect was not
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47 detected. A significant reduction in COX-2 expression was brought about by USB in *ex vivo*-treated AD
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49 and NM samples; regarding the NM, again this result is at variance with the *in vivo* studies were COX-2
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51 expression was not varied. The discrepancies observed between the *in vivo* and the *ex vivo* results for
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53 apoptosis and COX-2 in NM might be due to modifications associated with the incubation in an oxygen-rich
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environment, which might sensitize cells to apoptosis and shift them towards an inflammatory phenotype. Thus, the expression of COX-2 in the NM *ex-vivo* might be higher than in physiological conditions and a reduction by PMD could be more easily observed. Finally, regarding proliferation, a slight effect of USB was observed on AD, while PCNA expression in NM was not affected by USB treatment, in agreement with what observed in the *in vivo* experiments.

Concluding Remarks. In conclusion, these results show that PMD is able to significantly reduce tumorigenesis in a robust model of carcinogenesis *in vivo*, with a mechanism of action that involves an increase in apoptosis in the preneoplastic lesions MDFs. PMD is obtained by a green and simple process, an added value to the use of by-products of juice production. The particular combination of ellagitannins (up to 15%) and the pool of fermentable polysaccharides (about 10%) of PMD may increase the production of bioactive metabolites, such as urolithins and butyrate, in the colon. Indeed, the results of parallel *in vitro* and *ex vivo* experiments clearly indicate that urolithin-A and sodium butyrate, and especially their combination, exert significant anti-inflammatory and pro-apoptotic effects both on human colon cancer cells and on adenomas of Pirr rats. All together, these data suggest that the chemopreventive effect of PMD may be due, at least in part, to the pro-apoptotic and anti-inflammatory effects of its colon metabolites. Finally, this study indicates the potential value of these by-products as a source of bioactive molecules, that could be exploited for CRC prevention in high-risk subjects.

Author's contribution

KT carried out the *in vitro* and *ex vivo* experiments, she also drafted the manuscript together with LG and GC. APF carried out the carcinogenesis experiment and gene expression analysis. AR and IS carried out part of the carcinogenesis experiments and the gene expression and histochemistry experiments. MK prepared the decoction of pomegranate mesocarp and carried out the relative chemical analyses together with NM. LG performed the *in vitro* experiments. GC determined apoptosis and proliferation in immunohistochemistry. GC, LG and NM conceived, designed and supervised the work. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.

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8 pomegranate fruits.
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Table 1: primers used for the amplification of different genes by RT-PCRs

Gene	Forward	Reverse
<i>β-actin</i>	5'-ACCACAGCTGAGAGGGAAAT-3'	5'-AGAGGTCTTTACGGATGTCAAC-3'
<i>IL-6</i>	5'-TCTCTCCGCAAGAGACTTCC-3'	5'-TCTTGGTCCTTAGCCACTCC-3'
<i>IL-1β</i>	5'-TGACCCATGTGAGCTGAAAG-3'	5'-AACTATGTCCCGACCATTGC-3'
<i>S100A9</i>	5'-GCACGAGCTCCTTAGCTTTG-3'	5'-GACTTGGTTGGGCAGATGTT-3'
<i>NOS-2</i>	5'-GCCTAGTCAACTACAAGCCCC-3'	5'-CCTGGGGTTTTCTCCACGTT-3'
<i>COX-2</i>	5'-ACGTGTTGACGTCCAGATCA-3'	5'-GGCCCTGGTGTAGTAGGAGA-3'

Figure Legends

Figure 1. Pre-neoplastic lesions: MDF/colon (panel A) and crypts/MDF (panel B) in Pirc rats fed with AIN76 (CTRL) or AIN76 diet supplemented with 50mg/kg/die of PMD (means \pm SE); controls: n=10, PMD-treated: n= 11. * p<0.05 significantly different from controls (Student *t*-test).

Figure 2. Effects of PMD in the Pirc colon: proliferation activity evaluated as LI in histological sections immunostained with a PCNA-antibody and PCNA protein expression by western blot (panels A and B respectively) in NM of Pirc rats treated with PMD. Panel c: Apoptotic Index in MDFs from controls and PMD group. Bars are means + SE; controls: n=10, PMD-treated: n= 11. ** p < 0.01 significantly different from controls (Student *t*-test).

Figure 3. Effects of PMD on HT-29 cells: panel A: concentration-response curve of u-A (log IC₅₀ = -4.358, R² = 0.8274); panel B: concentration-response curves of SB (log IC₅₀ = -2.511, R² = 0.9224) and SB plus u-A 25 μ M (dotted line, logIC₅₀ = -2.405, R² = 0.9275); incubation time: 72 h. Panels C to F: relative protein expression of PCNA, C-CASP-3, iNOS and COX-2 respectively, after 24 and 72 h treatment with u-A 25 μ M (u-A), SB 2.5 mM (SB) or u-A 25 μ M plus SB 2.5 mM (USB) compared to the respective control. Bars are means + SE; *: p< 0.05, **: p < 0.01, ***: p < 0.001 significantly different from respective controls. §: p < 0.05, §§: p < 0.01 significantly different from 24 h control (one-way ANOVA).

Figure 4. Effects of PMD in Pirc adenomas and NM biopsies *ex vivo*: relative expression of PCNA, C-CASP-3, BAK and COX-2 (panels A, B, C and D, respectively) in control and USB-treated AD and NM samples after 24 h in culture. §, §§, §§§: p<0.05, <0.01, < 0.001, respectively, comparing AD vs NM (two way ANOVA). *, **, ***: p < 0.05, < 0.01, < 0.001, respectively, comparing treated vs untreated samples. (two-way ANOVA). Bars are means + SE.

Figures

Figure 1

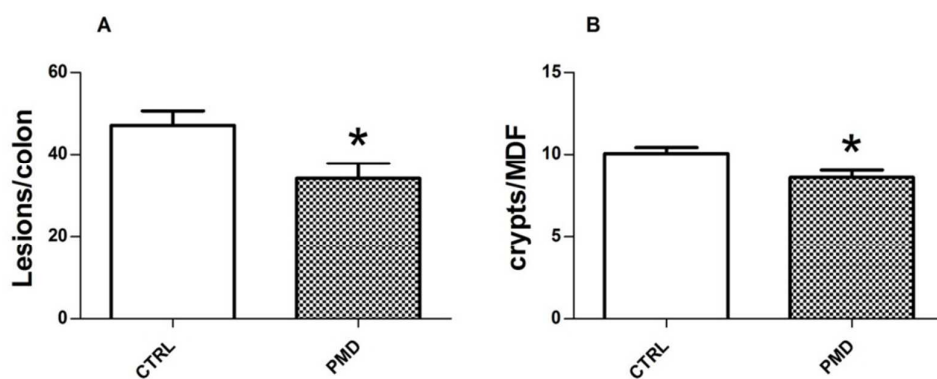
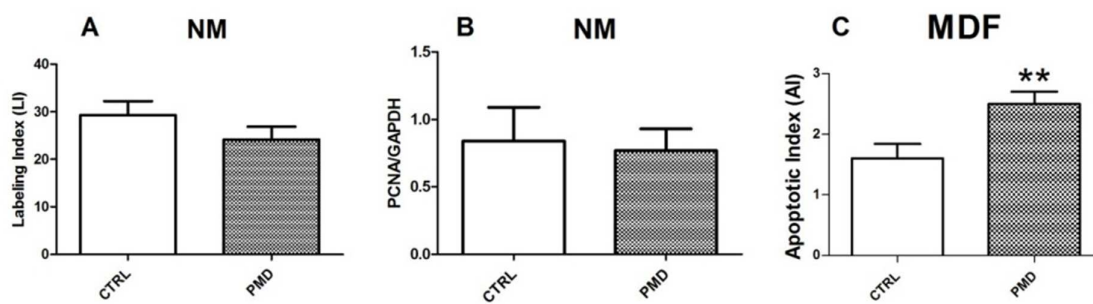


Figure 2



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Figure 3

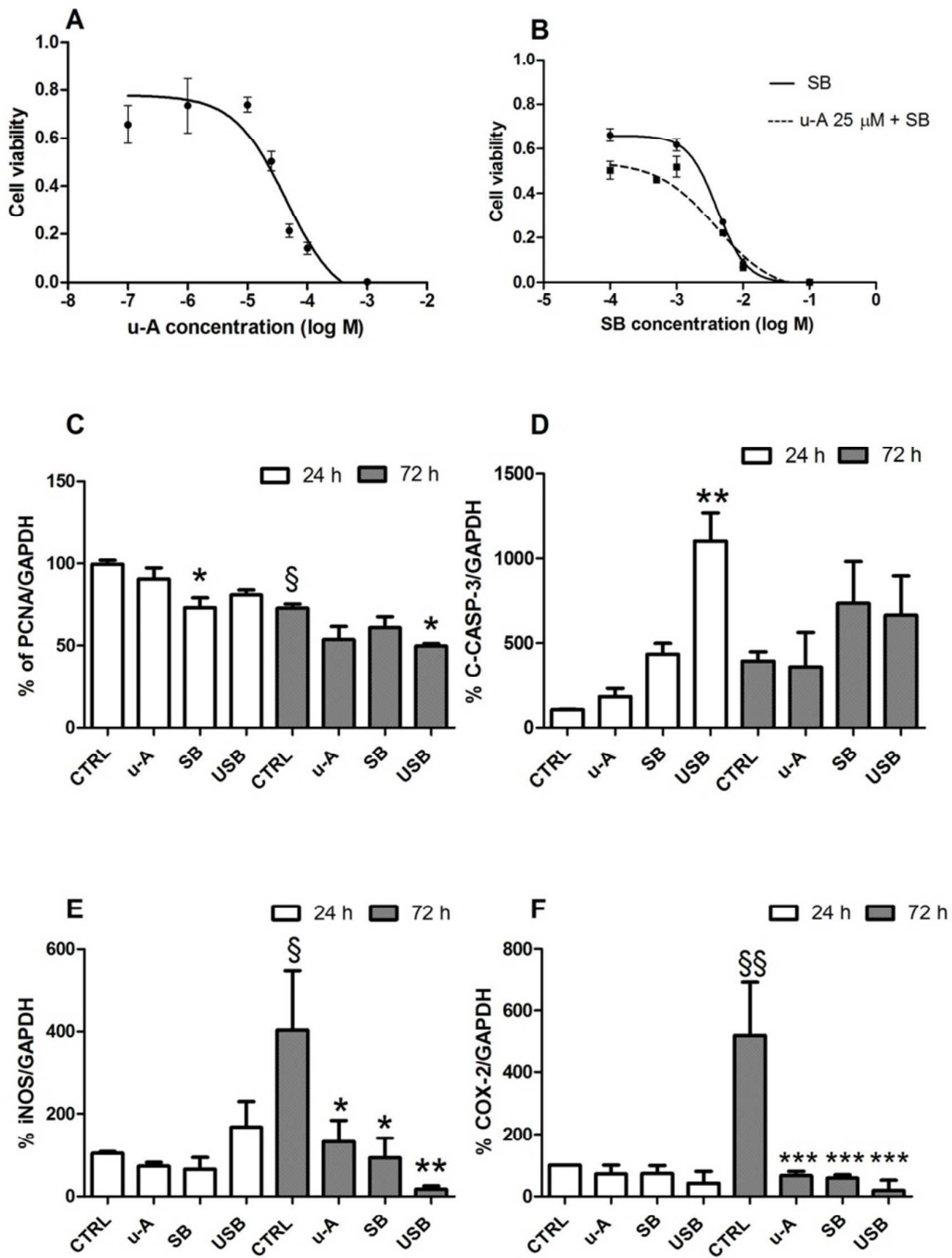
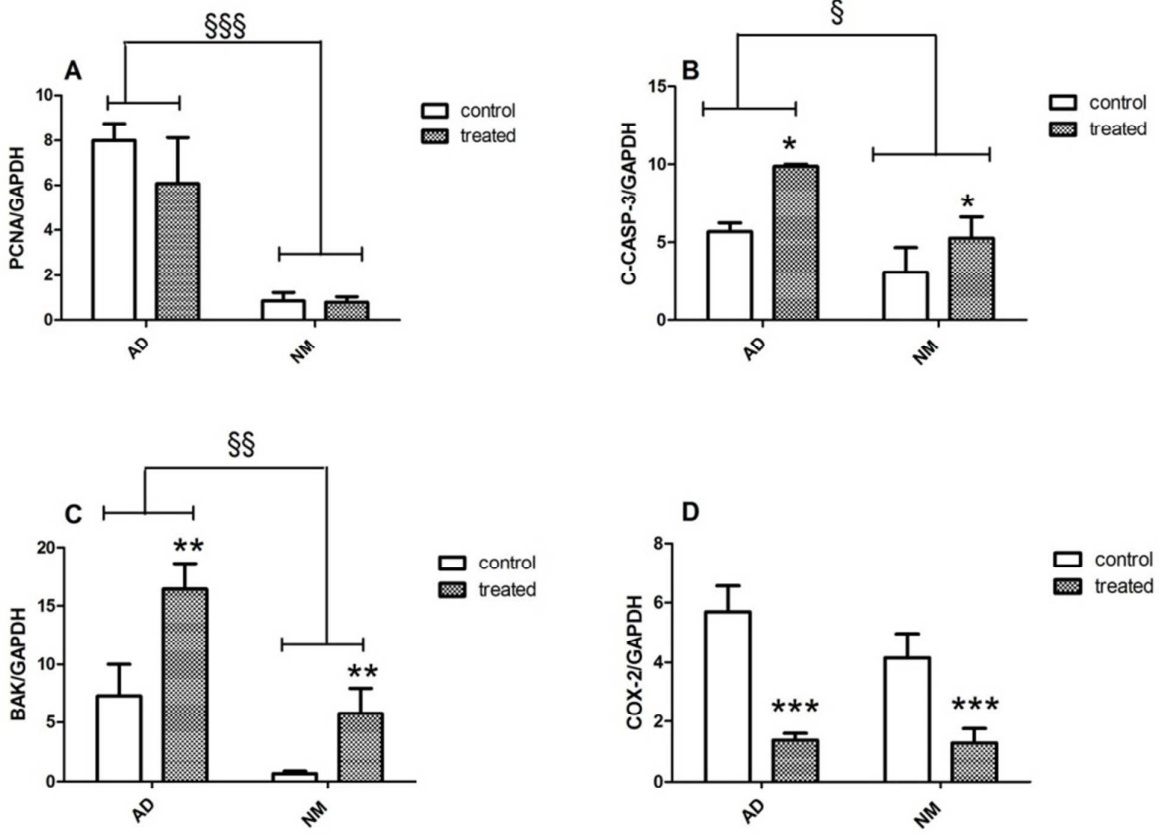


Figure 4



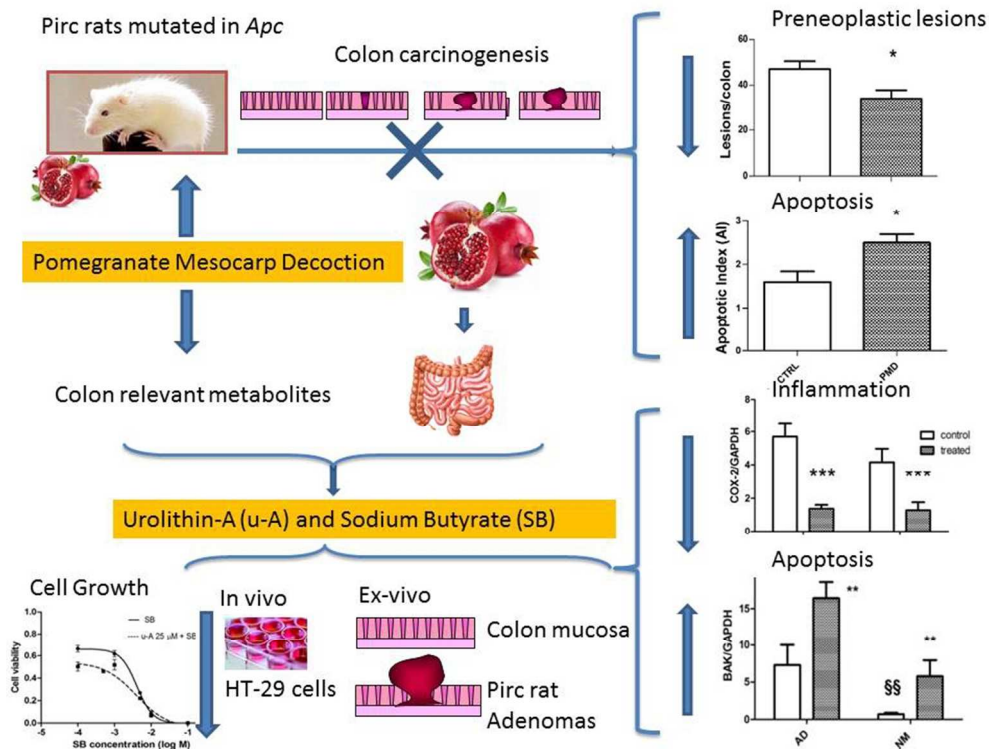
review

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3 **Pomegranate by-products in colorectal cancer chemoprevention: effects in *Apc*-mutated Pirc**
4 **rats and mechanistic studies *in vitro* and *ex vivo***
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7 **Tortora et al.**
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10 Pomegranate mesocarp (PMD), a polyphenol-rich by-product of juice production, reduces colon
11 carcinogenesis in *Apc*-mutated rats and increases apoptosis (cell death) in precancerous lesions.
12 Two main metabolites of PMD: urolithin-A and butyrate, alone or in combination, reduce
13 inflammation and increase apoptosis in a cancer cell line or in adenoma and normal mucosa from
14 rats. The data indicate a preventive activity of PMD that could be exploited in patients at high risk
15 for colon cancer.
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254x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)

Review