Original Article

Gestational vitamin D supplementation leads to reduced perinatal *RXRA* DNA methylation: results from the MAVIDOS trial[†]

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Abstract

We have previously demonstrated inverse associations between maternal 25(OH)-vitamin D status and perinatal DNA methylation at the retinoid-X-receptor-alpha *(RXRA)* locus and between *RXRA* methylation and offspring bone mass. We therefore used an existing randomised trial to test the hypothesis that maternal gestational vitamin D supplementation would lead to reduced perinatal *RXRA* locus DNA methylation. The Maternal Vitamin D Osteoporosis Study (MAVIDOS) was a multicentre, double-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled trial of 1000IU/day cholecalciferol or matched placebo from 14 weeks' gestation until delivery. Umbilical cord (fetal) tissue was collected at birth and frozen at -80°C (n=453). Pyrosequencing was used to undertake DNA methylation analysis at 10 CpG sites within the *RXRA* locus (identified previously). T-tests were used to assess differences between treatment groups in methylation at the three most representative CpG sites. Overall, methylation levels were significantly lower in the umbilical cord from offspring of cholecalciferol-supplemented mothers, reaching statistical significance at four CpG sites, represented by CpG5: mean difference in % methylation between the supplemented and placebo groups was -1.98% (95%CI: -3.65 to -0.32, p=0.02). ENCODE evidence supports functionality of this locus with strong DNase hypersensitivity and enhancer chromatin within biologically relevant cell types including osteoblasts. Enrichment of the enhancer-related H3K4me1 histone mark is also seen in this region, as are binding sites for a range of transcription factors with roles in cell proliferation, response to stress and growth factors. Our findings are consistent with previous observational results and provide new evidence that maternal gestational supplementation with cholecalciferol leads to altered perinatal epigenetic marking, informing mechanistic understanding of early life mechanisms related to maternal vitamin D status, epigenetic marks and bone development. This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved

Keywords: Epigenetic; methylation; RXRA; vitamin D; osteoporosis; epidemiology

3

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly well recognised that environmental factors acting through epigenetic mechanisms induce persistent changes in gene expression, leading to differences in phenotype.[1, 2] Various examples of such epigenetic mechanisms have come from the natural world, and also from experimental animal studies. For example, altered pregnancy diet in rats has been shown to lead to modification of DNA methylation, gene expression, and phenotype in the offspring.[1-4] Evidence for the relevance of such mechanisms in human disease is increasing, and we have recently documented associations between perinatal DNA methylation at particular loci and bone phenotype in the offspring.[5, 6] Thus we have previously demonstrated that methylation at the cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 2A (*CDKN2A*)[6] and retinoid-X-receptor-alpha (*RXRA*)[5] loci in umbilical cord DNA was associated with offspring bone mass in childhood in the Southampton Women's Survey (SWS) mother-offspring cohort. RXRA is an essential part of vitamin D signalling, forming a heterodimer with the vitamin D receptor (VDR) in the nuclear action of $1,25(OH)_2$-vitamin D. We thus reasoned that this latter observation might be of key relevance to our demonstrations of associations between maternal 25(OH)-vitamin D status in pregnancy and offspring bone mass[7-9] together with our finding of a positive effect of maternal vitamin D supplementation during pregnancy on neonatal bone mass for winter births (when background 25(OH)-vitamin D concentrations are lowest).[10] In the SWS, methylation at one CpG site upstream of the *RXRA* promoter was associated with a marker of maternal pregnancy 25(OH)-vitamin D status, with greater 25(OH)-vitamin D status associated with lower *RXRA* promoter methylation.[5] Clearly, causation cannot be concluded from an observational study, and therefore we hypothesized, in the setting of the Maternal Vitamin D Osteoporosis Study (MAVIDOS) randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial of vitamin D supplementation in pregnancy,[10] that this intervention would lead to reduced *RXRA* DNA methylation in umbilical cord tissue at birth compared with placebo.

Participants and Methods

Participants: The Maternal Vitamin D Osteoporosis Study (MAVIDOS)

We analysed *RXRA* DNA methylation data from the MAVIDOS study, a multicentre, double-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled trial of vitamin D supplementation in pregnancy, in which the primary outcome was neonatal bone mass. A detailed description of the study methods and primary findings have been published previously.[10, 11] The study was approved by the Southampton and South West Hampshire Research Ethics Committee. MAVIDOS was registered prospectively (ISRCTN:82927713; EUDRACT:2007-001716-23) with full approval from the UK MHRA. Written, informed consent was obtained from all participants.

4

To briefly summarise the trial protocol:[10, 11] women attending one of three United Kingdom (UK) hospitals [University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust, Southampton, UK; Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Oxford, UK; Sheffield Hospitals NHS Trust (University of Sheffield), Sheffield, UK] for early pregnancy ultrasound screening (11-14 weeks' gestation) between 6th October 2008 and 11th February 2014 were invited to participate in the study. Inclusion criteria were: age over 18 years, singleton pregnancy, and gestation less than 17 weeks based on last menstrual period and ultrasound measurements. Exclusion criteria included: women with known metabolic bone disease, renal stones, hyperparathyroidism or hypercalciuria, those taking medication known to interfere with fetal growth, fetal anomalies on ultrasonography and women already using >400IU/day vitamin D supplementation. A screening blood sample was obtained and analysed on the local NHS platform [all three laboratories (Southampton, Oxford and Sheffield) participate in DEQAS vitamin D quality assurance system (http://www.deqas.org/)]; women with 25(OH)D between 25 and 100nmol/l and serum calcium <2.75mmol/l were eligible to enrol fully in the study.

Participants were randomised to receive either cholecalciferol 1000IU/day or matched placebo [Merck KGaA, (Darmstadt, Germany)/ Sharp Clinical Services (Crickhowell, UK; previously DHP-Bilcare)], from before 17 weeks' gestation until delivery. Packs of study treatment were randomly assigned in a 1:1 ratio by Sharp Clinical Services using a computer-generated sequence in randomly permuted blocks of ten, starting randomly midway through the block, and sequentially numbered, before delivery to the study sites, and then dispensed in order by each study pharmacist. The study medication was provided in a blister pack in a single box containing all medication for the whole pregnancy. The participants, those providing antenatal and intrapartum care, and all field researchers involved in data collection and sample analysis were blinded to the intervention. All participants received standard antenatal care, and could continue self-administration of dietary supplements containing up to 400IU/day vitamin D.

Maternal assessments during pregnancy

The participants attended the research centre for a detailed assessment of diet (including supplement use), lifestyle (smoking, physical activity participation, employment) and health (past medical history, current medication use) using interviewer-led questionnaires both prior to commencing the study medication, and again at 34 weeks' gestation. Ethnicity was reported by the participant and categorized as 'white' or 'non-white'.

Assessment of 25(OH)D status

A non-fasted venous blood sample was obtained on the day that the study medication was dispensed and also at 34 weeks' gestation; serum was stored at -80°C. 25(OH)D was assessed by chemiluminescent assay (Liaison automated platform, Diasorin, Minnesota, USA). All samples were analysed in a single batch at the end of the study at MRC Human Nutrition Research, Cambridge, UK. Details of assay performance and quality control through participation in the Vitamin D External

5

Quality Assessment Scheme (DEQAS), National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and the United Kingdom National External Quality Assessment Service (NEQAS) are given elsewhere.[12, 13]

Neonatal DXA

All neonates underwent DXA assessment at whole body minus head and lumbar spine sites (Hologic Discovery, Hologic Inc, Bedford, MA, USA, or GE-Lunar iDXA, GE-Lunar, Madison, WI, USA, with neonatal software) within two weeks of birth. The current analysis uses the whole body minus head measures. The infant was undressed, clothed in a standard towel, fed and pacified before the assessment. Each instrument underwent daily quality control, with cross-calibration between sites. The total radiation dose was estimated to be 0·04 mSv, equivalent to about 7 days' exposure to background radiation in the UK. All DXA images were reviewed for movement artefacts and quality by two operators (NCH and RJM), who were blinded to treatment allocation.

Umbilical Cord DNA extraction

Immediately following delivery, a 5-10 cm segment was cut from the mid portion of each cord, flushed with saline to remove fetal blood, flash-frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at −80°C until required for DNA isolation. Genomic DNA was isolated from frozen archived umbilical cord tissue by classical proteinase K digestion and phenol:chloroform extraction.

Quantitative DNA methylation analysis and pyrosequencing

The region of interest is in close proximity of the *RXRA* gene locus, 2,252 base pairs upstream from the transcriptional start site. It contains 12 CpG dinucleotides (chr9: 137215735- 137216064, Human genome hg19/GRCh37 build) (Online Supplementary Figure 1). We used sodium bisulfite targeted pyrosequencing (Pyromark MD, Qiagen; https://www.qiagen.com/fi/resources/technologies/pyrosequencing-resource-center/technology-overview/)[14] to carry out in-depth analysis of the methylation status of 10 out of 12 CpGs within the previously identified differentially methylated region of *RXRA* in umbilical cords. Pyrosequencing was not performed on CpGs 6 and 7 (at genomic coordinates (hg19) chr9 137215867 and 137215956 respectively) for sample conservation purposes due to their distance from other CpGs (therefore requiring separate amplicons), as shown in Online Supplementary Figure 1. Inter- and intra-plate controls were added to each plate as a control for inter- and intra-plate variability, and 0% and 100% methylation controls were run to ensure that the full range of methylation could be detected. The genomic coordinates for the *RXRA* CpG sites are shown in Online Supplementary Table 1.

Statistical Analysis

Women and babies who had umbilical cord *RXRA* pyrosequencing analysis and had delivered a liveborn infant, were included in the analysis. All outcomes were assessed for normality using visual inspection of histograms. Percentage DNA methylation at all *RXRA* CpGs analysed was normally distributed,

6

except at CpGs 1 and 3. Characteristics of the women in the two treatment arms were compared using t-tests, Mann-Whitney U and χ^2 tests for normally distributed, non-normally distributed and categorical variables, respectively. Characteristics of the MAVIDOS babies (boys versus girls) for whom neonatal DXA and *RXRA* methylation data were available were also compared. Neonatal DXA indices were whole-body minus head bone area (BA), bone mineral content (BMC) and areal bone mineral density (BMD), ~~%BMC and size-corrected bone mineral content [scBMC=BMC adjusted for BA, height and weight (to minimise the effect of body size)]~~. Continuous child characteristics were summarised using mean (SD) or median (interquartile range [IQR]). Categorical variables were summarised using percentages. Differences in continuous variables between boys and girls were tested using t-tests or Mann-Whitney U-tests where appropriate. All participants were analysed by the group to which they were originally randomised. Differences in *RXRA* DNA methylation between the two treatment groups were compared using t-tests or Mann-Whitney U tests for normally distributed and non-normally distributed variables respectively. *RXRA* methylation was Fisher-Yates transformed to standard deviations. Separate linear regression analyses were carried out to analyse the difference in methylation between the treatment groups. We analysed the interaction between treatment group, *RXRA* methylation and season of birth due to previously described seasonal variations in 25(OH)D concentrations reported in many previous studies. To ensure adequate sample sizes, we defined season of birth as a binary variable using the UK Meteorological Office classification, combining winter (December to February) with spring (March to May), to give an overall "winter" variable (December-May), and summer (June to August), with autumn (September to November), to give an overall "summer" variable (June-November). To explore associations between *RXRA* methylation and bone outcomes, linear regression analyses were carried out, adjusted for treatment group and sex where appropriate.

Based on previous findings, we recognised that there was likely to be co-linearity between the individual exposures and outcomes,[5, 6] so we undertook a data reduction approach by investigating clustering of the CpG methylation.[6] Our approach is appropriate given the relatively small number of tests in our analysis, compared with larger scale genome-wide associations studies, for which methods such as Bonferroni or the Benjamini-Hochberg/ False Discovery Rate corrections for multiple testing would be appropriate.[15] Previous studies have shown that where clusters of differential CpGs can be identified, they are more likely to be of functional relevance than are individual CpG changes.[16] By investigating the correlation between methylation at each of the individual CpG sites (Online Supplementary Table 2) and calculating the median absolute deviation (MAD) from the median for each site (Online Supplementary Table 3), we grouped the CpG sites into 3 clusters (CpGs1-5, 8-11, 12), with each cluster represented by the site with the highest MAD score (i.e. the site with the greatest variability within the cluster), that is, CpG sites 5, 11, and 12 respectively. For completeness, we also used the Simes modification of the Bonferroni method to undertake a p-value correction on the analyses, using the Stata

7

"qqvalue" command, which is similar to the "p.adjust" command in R. These are presented as q-values in the relevant results tables.

Further biological support for this clustering was provided by exploration of the ENCODE data[17], demonstrating distinct DNase I hypersensitivity sites at either end of the differentially methylated region, and discrete grouping of transcription factor binding. All analyses were performed in Stata v14 (Statacorp, College Station, Texas, USA). A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Characteristics of participants

965 women (85%) remained in the study until delivery (Figure 1).[10] There were 486 live births in the control group and 479 in the cholecalciferol group, of which 228 and 225 umbilical cords respectively underwent pyrosequencing of the *RXRA* region of interest. 78 babies for whom pyrosequencing results were available did not have a useable DXA scan (43 randomised to placebo, 35 to cholecalciferol), leaving a remaining 375 babies with *RXRA* methylation analysis, DXA outcomes and the relevant maternal information. Of the 453 women included in the initial analysis, the mean (SD) age at delivery was 30.9 (5.2) years in the placebo group and 30.7 (5.1) years in the cholecalciferol supplemented group. Baseline characteristics of women in the placebo and cholecalciferol groups at randomisation were similar (Table 1a). Neonatal DXA whole body minus head bone ~~and body composition~~ measurements were available for 201 boys (91 born to mothers randomised to placebo, 110 to cholecalciferol) and 174 girls (94 born to mothers randomised to placebo, 80 to cholecalciferol), (Table 1b). A Chi-Squared test demonstrated no difference in the sex distribution of the treatment groups. There was no difference in gestational age between the boys and girls. As would be expected, boys had a greater average whole body minus head bone mineral content (BMC, g) and bone area (BA, cm^2) than girls. In this subset of the MAVIDOS trial population, no differences in gestational age or whole body minus head DXA outcomes were observed in the babies by maternal randomisation group to placebo or 1000 IU cholecalciferol (Table 1c).

Cholecalciferol supplementation and perinatal RXRA methylation

Percentage methylation at the *RXRA* Differentially Methylated Region (DMR) varied greatly across the ten CpG sites measured, for example ranging from 29.0% to 81.4% at CpG 5 (mean 47.7%, SD 9.0%) (Online Supplementary Table 1). However, percentage methylation tended to be lower in the cholecalciferol supplemented group than in the placebo group (Figure 2). At CpG 5 (representing CpGs1-5), mean (SD) percentage methylation was 46.7 (8.2) % in the cholecalciferol group and 48.7 (9.7) % in the placebo group, mean difference -1.98 percentage points, p=0.02. Whilst percentage methylation at both CpGs 11 (representing CpGs 8-11) and 12 was lower in cholecalciferol than placebo

8

group births, these differences were not statistically significant (Table 2 and Online Supplementary Table 4). We observed no consistent associations between maternal 25(OH)D status at 34 weeks, or change in 25(OH)D from early to late pregnancy, and RXRA methylation in umbilical cord tissue across the cohort. However, there was evidence of an interaction between change in 25(OH)D between 14 and 34 weeks gestation 25(OH)D and treatment allocation to cholecalciferol or placebo on RXRA methylation at CpG 11 (p=0.022).

Interactions between season of birth, treatment group and percentage DNA methylation at RXRA

Greater increases in maternal 25(OH)D status were seen in summer (June-November) than winter (December-May) births, with the increase in 25(OH)D during pregnancy being more than double in the women giving birth in summer. In summer births, mean (SD) change in 25(OH)D between 14 and 34 weeks gestation was 8.1 (16.0) nmol/l in the placebo group (n=124), and 28.0 (19.8) nmol/l in the vitamin D supplemented group (n=127). In winter births, mean (SD) change in 25(OH)D between 14 and 34 weeks gestation was -15.0 (17.6) nmol/l in the placebo group (n=103), and 13.6 (22.6) nmol/l in the vitamin D supplemented group (n=95).

There was evidence of statistically significant interactions for the outcome of *RXRA* methylation between treatment allocation (cholecalciferol vs placebo) and season of birth (at all three representative CpGs: CpG 5, p=0.02; CpG 11, p=0.009; and CpG 12 p=0.01). The effect of treatment group on *RXRA* methylation appeared greater in summer than winter births (Table 3). In summer births there was a difference in percentage methylation at *RXRA* CpG 5, 11 and 12 between treatment groups ranging from -3.69% at CpG 5 (p=0.001), -2.38% at CpG 11 (p=0.02), and -2.13% at CpG 12 (p=0.005), but the differences between groups were non-significant for winter births. This interaction persisted after adjustment for potential differences in maternal characteristics between the season groups (maternal BMI and skinfold thickness), and for other factors known to influence methylation (offspring sex and maternal smoking).

RXRA methylation and offspring bone indices measured by DXA

In the population as a whole, there were modest positive associations between *RXRA* methylation at CpG 5 and offspring whole body minus head BA, BMC and aBMD (Table 4). However, on stratification according to treatment allocation, associations were noted in the placebo but not the cholecalciferol supplemented groups, as documented in Figure 3. In the placebo group (red bars in Figure 3), *RXRA* methylation at CpG 11 was positively associated with BA (β=6.96 cm^2 per 10% increase in methylation, p=0.05). There was also a tendency towards positive associations between methylation and BA at CpG 5 and CpG 12. Furthermore, again in the placebo group, methylation at CpGs 5 and 11 was positively associated with offspring BMC (at CpG 5, β=1.75g per 10% increase in methylation, p=0.03; at CpG 11, β=2.34g per 10% increase in methylation, p=0.02). Conversely, in the cholecalciferol supplemented

9

group (blue bars in Figure 3), no statistically significant associations were found between methylation at CpGs 5, 11 and 12 and offspring neonatal DXA bone outcomes (Online Supplementary Table 5).

ENCODE Functional Analysis

The DMR itself resides within the upstream CpG island shore region (within 2kb) of the *RXRA* 5'CpG Island. Encyclopedia of DNA elements (ENCODE) consortium data were interrogated for functional evidence within this location.[17] This investigation revealed that the region of interest within the *RXRA* locus contains a cluster of DNase I hypersensitive sites (DHS, a general regulatory marker, often found within regulatory elements such as promoters and enhancers[18]), identified in 84 cell lines out of 125 (See Online Supplementary Figure 2, with examples from the chorion and osteoblast cell lines highlighted). Furthermore, significant enrichment of the enhancer-related H3K4me1 histone mark across a range of tissue types was found both across and within 250bp of the DMR (Online Supplementary Figure 2). Enhancer loci may show dynamic DNA methylation indicative of transcription factor interaction within these functional regions.[19] Consistent with this, genome segmentations from ENCODE (displaying chromatin state segmentations from six cell lines) predict weak enhancer activity or an open chromatin *cis* regulatory element at the *RXRA* DMR (yellow region in Online Supplementary Figure 2) at the *RXRA* DMR. Finally, ENCODE transcription factor (TF) binding data demonstrate significant binding within the *RXRA* DMR. The numbers of transcription factor binding sites found at the *RXRA* DMR in the ENCODE database vary between cell types, for example in the cell line, MCF-7, highly responsive to estrogen and TSH[20], three transcription factors bind with high affinity at the *RXRA* DMR (MYC, CTCF and POL2RA). In summary, these findings suggest the *RXRA* DMR as a region of significant functional activity across a range of cell types, with evidence of strong DNAse I hypersensitivity sites, weak enhancer or cis regulatory element activity, and transcription factor binding.

RXRA methylation and gene expression in vitamin D-treated placental villous fragments

In order to experimentally investigate the influence of vitamin D on *RXRA* methylation in perinatal tissue (placenta), we collected 6 placentas from healthy term pregnancies, outside the MAVIDOS trial (with full ethics approval, REC 11/sc/0323), within 30 minutes of delivery. Placental villous fragments were cultured in buffered solution with or without 20 µM 25-hydroxyvitamin D [25(OH)D] (for detailed methods, see Online Supplementary Material). The placental samples were snap frozen and stored at -80°C. DNA was extracted, and DNA methylation was measured using the Illumina EPIC 850k array. CpGs in which DNA methylation was altered were identified using a Wilcoxon signed-rank test. RNA was also extracted, and stranded RNA sequencing was performed; differentially expressed genes following 25(OH)D treatment were identified. In human placental villous fragments, 25(OH)D treatment altered DNA methylation at 6 CpG sites in the *RXRA* gene (decreased at four CpG sites (-0.80% to -2.67%, p=0.04 and 0.02, respectively) increased in two (1.10% to 1.41%, p=0.04 and 0.01,

10

respectively), as shown in Online Supplementary Table 6. Through RNA sequencing, RXRA gene expression was shown to increase following 25(OH)D treatment (log fold change 0.50, p=0.04).

Discussion

In this study we have demonstrated, to our knowledge for the first time in a randomised controlled trial setting, that supplementation with cholecalciferol in pregnancy is associated with reduced methylation at specific regions near to the *RXRA* promoter in fetal DNA derived from the umbilical cord of the offspring. Percentage methylation levels measured by pyrosequencing were lower in the cholecalciferol supplemented group than the placebo group (statistically significantly at the cluster of CpG sites represented by CpG 5), raising the possibility of site-specificity for a molecular interaction between 25(OH)D in pregnancy and DNA methylation.[21]

These results are consistent with our previous observational findings in the Southampton Women's Survey, in which a negative association was found between an estimate of maternal free 25(OH)-vitamin D and *RXRA* methylation at CpG 4/5,[5] measured using the Sequenom MassARRAY EPITYPER. Additionally, the associations between *RXRA* methylation and neonatal bone indices in the placebo group replicated those observed previously in the SWS; conversely, in the present study, the direction of the association appeared to be reversed (albeit not reaching statistical significance) in the group whose mothers were supplemented with cholecalciferol. It is interesting that the methylation difference between treatment and placebo groups in the present study was greater in summer than winter births. The increase in 25(OH)D from baseline to 34 weeks was markedly greater for summer than winter deliveries, although the absolute difference between groups at 34 weeks was marginally less in summer than winter, suggesting that greater increases in 25(OH)D across pregnancy might facilitate methylation differences consequent to vitamin D supplementation. However, given that RXRA interacts with several different nuclear hormone receptors, such as thyroid hormone receptor and PPAR-gamma, activation of either of which tends to have detrimental effects on bone, it is possible that we are seeing the net result of a complex series of inter-relationships at this molecular level, with exogenous vitamin D perhaps modifying the balance in RXRA interaction between receptor types, resulting in heterogeneous associations between *RXRA* methylation and bone indices. Such considerations may be relevant both to the skeletal and to the seasonal differences we observed, although ultimately these questions must remain the focus of future research. Interestingly, we observed no consistent associations between maternal 25(OH)D in late pregnancy and *RXRA* methylation, but these measures were in different tissues, 6 weeks apart, and we were able to directly test whether treatment of perinatal tissue (placenta) with vitamin D would alter *RXRA* methylation. Thus, consistent with the findings from the MAVIDOS trial, in a small study of human placental villous fragments *RXRA* methylation appeared

11

to be lowered at several CpG sites by the addition of 25(OH)D, and indeed *RXRA* expression upregulated overall, suggesting a specific role the vitamin D-*RXRA* interaction.

Although the exact nature of the mechanistic underpinnings of our findings remains to be elucidated, there are several routes by which maternal 25(OH)D status might influence perinatal *RXRA* methylation. As previously stated, RXRA forms a heterodimer with several nuclear hormones known to influence bone metabolism, including 1,25(OH)$_2$-vitamin D, perhaps implying that maternal 25(OH)D status plays a permissive role in the transcriptional regulation of the *RXRA* gene. Studies have shown that vitamin D may interact with the epigenome on multiple levels,[17, 22-25] and our evaluation of public data from ENCODE suggest that methylation at the studied CpG sites is likely to have functional relevance, with evidence for DNase I hypersensitive regions, enhancer activity and transcription factor binding. Furthermore, this suggested function within the DMR, which itself resides within the shore region of the 5' CpG island. This location has been associated with influence on gene expression.[26] Epigenome-wide association studies (EWAS) have also provided some insight into the actions of vitamin D on DNA methylation. A small EWAS of DNA methylation in severely vitamin D deficient African-American adolescents demonstrated associations between vitamin D status and methylation in several genes, including genes involved in vitamin D metabolism such as the 24 and 25-hydroxylase genes. In the context of low serum vitamin D levels, the promoter of *CYP2R1* may become methylated, and this is reversible on exposure to vitamin D.[27] Other studies have assessed the DNA methylation in CYP enzymes which are part of the vitamin D metabolism pathway, and found a relationship between methylation of the genes *CYP2R1* (25-hydroxylase) and *CYP24A1* (24-hydroxylase) and variations in circulating 25(OH)D levels.[28] However, a study using the ALSPAC cohort and the Norwegian Mother and Child Cohort (MoBa) in which maternal 25(OH)D was measured in mid-pregnancy, demonstrated no convincing associations between maternal 25(OH)D status and DNA methylation in the umbilical cord blood (as opposed to umbilical cord tissue in our study) of 1,416 newborn babies using Illumina 450k DNA methylation array analysis, thereby covering 473,731 CpG DNA methylation sites.[29] The authors suggested that to further identify associations, larger consortium studies, expanded genomic coverage, and investigation of alternative cell types or 25(OH)D status at different gestational time points might be needed.

The data presented are from a placebo-controlled, double-blind, randomised trial, using the gold standards of pyrosequencing to determine CpG site-specific DNA methylation and DXA to assess bone mass. However, the limitations of our study must be considered. Firstly, we have analysed methylation in cells from whole umbilical cord; therefore it is possible that the differential methylation we observed arose from different component cells in individual samples (e.g. fibroblasts and epithelial cells). The difference in DNA methylation between treatment and control groups may thus partly reflect different proportions of cells and their cell-specific DNA methylation. However, any unaccounted cell-heterogeneity may represent proportional differences that are related to the observed phenotypic

12

outcomes,[30, 31] and so potentially on the causal pathway. Secondly, owing to stipulations made during the ethics approval process, participants with baseline 25(OH)D concentrations less than 25nmol/L or greater than 100nmol/l could not be included. In addition, the study population did not include many women who were of non-white ethnicity, which again would affect the generalisability of our findings to a multi-ethnic populations. Third, DXA assessment in neonates presents some difficulties, both due to the low absolute BMC of newborn babies and their tendency to move. However, the validity of DXA in small animals, of comparable size to neonates, has been documented [32] and appropriate DXA software was used. Fourth, some participants were taking vitamin D supplements in addition to the study drug, though supplement use was recorded at interview and did not differ between the treatment groups. Fifth, though we have previously excluded the presence of any SNPs at the CpG sites of interest at the *RXRA* locus by sequencing, we did not have information permitting exclusion of a genetic *cis* or *trans*-effect of local or distant SNPs, respectively. These could influence either associations between vitamin D supplementation and *RXRA* methylation, or influence both *RXRA* methylation and the child's bone phenotype. Sixth, we did not have measurements of 25(OH)D in umbilical cord blood and thus were not able to directly assess a potential mediating role for 25(OH)D for *RXRA* methylation in the same organ at the same time. Finally, it should be noted that the analysis is *post hoc* and that methylation outcomes were not pre-specified in the original analysis plan, and so will require replication in further intervention studies.

In conclusion, we have shown in a randomised controlled trial that maternal supplementation with cholecalciferol from 14 weeks gestation to delivery leads to lower levels of DNA methylation at the *RXRA* promoter in umbilical cord. This informs our understanding of early life mechanisms underpinning maternal vitamin D status, epigenetic change and bone development, and may suggest a novel biomarker for a child's future bone health.

13

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16

Figure legends

Figure 1: MAVIDOS Trial Consort Diagram

Figure 2: Difference in *RXRA* DNA methylation at each CpG site between Cholecalciferol 1000 IU/day supplemented group and placebo group (expressed as Standard Deviations). Each bar is the outcome of a separate linear regression (mean difference and 95%CI).

Figure 3: Associations between *RXRA* methylation at CpG 5, CpG 11 and CpG 12 and whole body minus head bone area (cm^2), bone mineral content (g), bone mineral density (g/cm^2), ~~percentage bone mineral content (%), and size-corrected bone mineral content (g)~~, adjusted for sex, by treatment group (placebo [red bars] or 1000 IU cholecalciferol daily [blue bars]). Outcomes expressed per 10% increase in methylation.

17

Table 1a: Baseline characteristics of the randomly assigned pregnant women included in the analysis. Values are n (%), mean (SD) or median (IQR).

(P-difference 25(OH)D at 34 weeks, cholecalciferol supplemented vs. placebo group, p <0.001)

	n	Placebo (N=228)	Cholecalciferol 1000 IU/day (N=225)
mean (SD) or median (IQR)			
Age (years)	427	30.9 (5.2)	30.7 (5.1)
Height (cm)	423	166.4 (6.3)	165.3 (6.1)
Weight (kg)	427	73.6 (13.1)	71.6 (14.1)
Pregnancy weight gain (kg)	415	9.4 (3.6)	9.7 (3.5)
BMI, (kg/m^2) †	423	25.7 (23.0,29.7)	24.9 (22.4,28.8)
Sum of skinfold thickness (mm)	360	81.9 (27.0)	78.3 (29.1)
25(OH)D at 14 weeks, (nmol/l)	445	45.1 (16.2)	44.4 (15.2)
25(OH)D at 34 weeks, (nmol/l)	432	42.8 (20.0)	66.3 (19.8)
n(%)			
Nulliparous	427	99 (46.3)	91 (42.7)
Educational qualification>A level	423	156 (74.3)	163 (76.5)
Current smoker	426	16 (7.5)	12 (5.7)
Strenuous exercise ≥ once a week	390	22 (11.3)	32 (16.4)

18

Table 1b: Whole body minus head DXA characteristics of the MAVIDOS babies by sex for whom DXA and *RXRA* methylation data are available. p-values < 0.05 are in bold.

	Boys (n=201)	Girls (n= 174)	p difference between boys and girls
Gestational age (weeks)	40.3 (1.2)	40.1 (1.4)	0.080
BA (cm^2)	306.5 (34.9)	295.8 (33.8)	**0.003**
BMC (g)	63.1 (10.8)	59.9 (10.5)	**0.004**
aBMD (g/cm^2)	0.205 (0.018)	0.202 (0.020)	0.100

BA: bone area; BMC: bone mineral content; aBMD: areal bone mineral density.

19

Table 1c: Whole body minus head DXA characteristics of the MAVIDOS babies by maternal randomisation group for whom DXA and *RXRA* methylation data are available. p-values < 0.05 are in bold.

	Placebo (N=185)	Cholecalciferol 1000 IU/day (N=190)	p difference between maternal randomisation group
Gestational age (weeks)	40.1 (1.4)	40.2 (1.3)	0.46
BA (cm^2)	299.4 (36.7)	303.6 (32.6)	0.24
BMC (g)	61.2 (10.9)	62.0 (10.6)	0.46
aBMD (g/cm^2)	0.204 (0.019)	0.203 (0.019)	0.93

BA: bone area; BMC: bone mineral content; aBMD: areal bone mineral density.

20

Table 2: *RXRA* DNA methylation in cholecalciferol 1000 IU/day supplemented[a] and placebo[b] groups. p-values < 0.05 are in bold. q-values were obtained using the Simes method.

CpG	n	% methylation Cholecalciferol 1000 IU/day[a]	% methylation Placebo[b]	Mean difference % methylation [(a-b)]	95%CI	p difference	q difference
RXRA **CpG 5**	447	46.7 (8.2)	48.7 (9.7)	**-1.98**	**-3.65, -0.32**	**0.02**	**0.06**
RXRA **CpG 11**	446	58.3 (7.5)	58.9 (8.1)	-0.67	-2.12, 0.78	0.36	0.36
RXRA **CpG 12**	446	66.1 (5.8)	66.9 (6.6)	-0.84	-1.99, 0.31	0.15	0.225

CpG 5 represents CpGs 1-5; CpG 11 represents CpGs 8-11.

Table 3: *RXRA* DNA methylation in cholecalciferol 1000 IU/day supplemented and placebo groups, stratified by season: winter births (December-May) and summer births (June-November).

CpG	Winter births (Dec-May)				Summer births (June-Nov)			
	Mean diff. % methylation	95%CI	p	q	Mean diff. % methylation	95% CI	p	q
RXRA CpG 5	0.27	(-2.27,2.82)	0.83	0.83	**-3.69**	**(-5.92,-1.45)**	**0.001**	**0.003**
RXRA CpG 11	1.51	(-0.73,3.76)	0.19	0.57	**-2.38**	**(-4.29,-0.47)**	**0.02**	**0.02**
RXRA CpG 12	0.79	(-1.00,2.58)	0.38	0.57	**-2.13**	**(-3.60,-0.65)**	**0.005**	**0.0075**

Difference in methylation = mean(cholecalciferol 1000IU/day) - mean(placebo). To assess differences in % methylation between two groups, t-test used (variables normally distributed). p-values < 0.05 are in bold. q-values were obtained using the Simes method.

22

Table 4: Relationships between perinatal methylation in umbilical cord at CpG sites within the *RXRA* region of interest and bone indices at birth (measured by DXA, whole body minus head). BA: bone area; BMC: bone mineral content; aBMD: areal bone mineral density.

Associations are adjusted for sex and treatment group. β coefficients and 95% CIs have been multiplied by 10 and therefore represent the change associated with a 10% increase in methylation. p-values < 0.05 are in bold.

RXRA CpG	BA, (cm^2)		BMC, (g)		aBMD, (g/cm^2)	
	β (95% CI)	p	β (95% CI)	p	β (95% CI)	p
CpG 5	**4.16 (0.14, 8.18)**	**0.043**	**1.50 (0.26, 2.73)**	**0.018**	**0.002 (0.000, 0.004)**	**0.047**
CpG 11	2.72 (-1.98, 7.42)	0.256	0.83 (-0.63, 2.28)	0.265	0.001 (-0.002, 0.004)	0.478
CpG 12	2.75 (-3.27,8.78)	0.37	0.59 (-1.28, 2.45)	0.535	0.000 (-0.003, 0.003)	0.925

23

```
                    ┌──────────────┐
                    │  SCREENED    │
                    │  N=1449      │
                    └──────┬───────┘
                           │                 25(OH)D>100nmol/l    59
                           ├────────────────▶ 25(OH)D<25nmol/l    89
                           │                 Withdrawn           167
                    ┌──────┴───────┐
                    │ RANDOMISED   │
                    │  N=1134      │
                    └──────┬───────┘
              ┌────────────┴────────────┐
      ┌───────┴────────┐       ┌────────┴────────┐
      │ RANDOMISED TO  │       │ RANDOMISED TO   │
      │ CONTROL        │       │ INTERVENTION    │
      │ GROUP          │       │ GROUP           │
      │ N = 569        │       │ N = 565         │
      └───────┬────────┘       └────────┬────────┘
```

Withdrawn 62
Miscarriage/clinical complication 15
Vit D supplementation >400 iu/day 6

Withdrawn 72
Miscarriage/clinical complication 4
Vit D supplementation >400 iu/day 10

```
      ┌───────┴────────┐       ┌────────┴────────┐
      │ BIRTHS         │       │ BIRTHS          │
      │ N = 486        │       │ N = 479         │
      └───────┬────────┘       └────────┬────────┘
```

Missing 25(OH)D at 14 or 34 weeks 64
Missing epigenetic analysis
or covariate information 194

Missing 25(OH)D at 14 or 34 weeks 72
Missing epigenetic analysis
or covariate information 182

```
      ┌───────┴────────┐       ┌────────┴────────┐
      │   N=228        │       │   N=225         │
      └───────┬────────┘       └────────┬────────┘
              └────────────┬────────────┘
                    ┌──────┴───────────┐
                    │ RXRA methylation │
                    │ ANALYSIS         │
                    │ N=453            │
                    └──────┬───────────┘
```

Babies did not have
Useable DXA 78

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                    ┌──────┴───────────┐
                    │ RXRA methylation │
                    │ BONE OUTCOMES    │
                    │ ANALYSIS         │
                    │ N=375            │
                    └──────────────────┘
```

Figure 1

1000 IU/d vs. Placebo

Cpg unadjusted

Figure 2

Figure 3