

# $\beta$ 2AR-HIF-1 $\alpha$ -CXCL12 signaling of osteoblasts activated by isoproterenol promotes migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells

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## Research article

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# Abstract

**Background** Chronic stress is well known to promote tumor progression, however, the mechanisms that underlie the association of chronic stress with cancer metastasis remain elusive. **Methods** First, the changes in migration and invasion ability of prostate cancer cell lines PC-3 and DU145 were assessed by transwell migration assay. And HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression of osteoblasts and the momentous proteins of epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) of PC-3 and DU145 cells were examined by western blot. Then, an analysis of the main cytokines associated with bone metastasis was performed in osteoblasts by qRT-PCR. Finally, HIF-1 $\alpha$  siRNA and inhibitor YC-1 were used to assess the reverse of isoproterenol (ISO)-induced changes of HIF-1 $\alpha$  in osteoblasts, and  $\beta$ 2-adrenergic receptor ( $\beta$ 2AR) inhibitor ICI118,551 and CXCR4 inhibitor LY2510924 were used to antagonizes migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells induced by osteoblasts triggered by ISO. **Results** In this study, ISO, a non-selective  $\beta$ -adrenergic receptor ( $\beta$ AR) agonist, used as a pharmacological surrogate of sympathetic nerve activation induced by chronic stress, exhibits no direct effect on migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 prostate cancer cells. Whereas, osteoblasts pretreated with ISO promote EMT and migration as well as invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells, which can be inhibited by  $\beta$ 2AR inhibitor. Mechanically, ISO increases the secretion of CXCL12 via the  $\beta$ 2AR-HIF-1 $\alpha$  signaling in osteoblasts. Moreover, inhibiting CXCL12-CXCR4 signaling with LY2510924 blunts the effects of osteoblasts in response to ISO on EMT and migration as well as invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells. **Conclusions** These findings indicate that  $\beta$ 2AR-HIF-1 $\alpha$ -CXCL12 signaling in osteoblasts facilitates migration and invasion as well as EMT of prostate cancer cells, and may play a potential role in affecting bone metastasis of prostate cancer.

## Background

Prostate cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among men and the second leading cause of cancer death in the United States[1]. Emerging studies suggest that chronic psychological stress is a vital factor associated with poor clinical outcomes in cancer patients[2-4]. Meanwhile, b-blocker drugs that block b-adrenergic signaling involved in cancer progression may improve clinical outcomes of cancer patients[5, 6]. Accumulating evidence indicates that persistent secretion of stress-related hormones and neurotransmitters plays pivotal roles in the initiation and promotion of tumors[7]. Isoproterenol (ISO), a non-selective b-adrenergic receptor (bAR) agonist, used as a pharmacological surrogate of sympathetic nerve activation, promotes invasion and metastasis of tumors both *in vitro* and *in vivo*[8-10]. Previous studies demonstrated that central and sympathetic nervous systems activated by chronic stress promoted tumor metastasis through b2-adrenergic receptor (b2AR)[11].

Bone is a favored site for cancer cell metastasis[12]. The organ-specific nature of bone metastasis is now commonly agreed on not only a genetic determinant in tropism and the bone colonization process, but also the “seed and soil” theory to explain tumor cell tropism towards bone[12]. Osteoblasts also play a key role in cancer bone metastasis[12]. In experimental animal models, mice were intracardially injected with bone-tropic prostate cancer cells. The lateral endocardial bone regions preferentially colonized by the prostate cancer cells were associated with a 5-fold higher number of osteoblasts compared to that in the

medial endocortical regions[13]. Chemokine receptor type 4 (CXCR4) and C–X–C motif chemokine 12 (CXCL12) ligand are involved in the migration of various cancer cells[14, 15]. In healthy prostate epithelial cells, CXCR4 is not expressed, on the contrary, its expression level is significantly increased in invasive cancer cells[16]. Importantly, a previous study has shown that the CXCL12 (SDF-1)/CXCR4 signaling axis mediates prostate cancer cells homing to bone, as osteoblasts express the CXCL12 ligand and prostate cancer cells express the CXCR4 receptor[13].

The skeleton is richly vascularized and abundantly innervated with sympathetic nerves[17]. Sympathetic neurons are found in bone marrow, localize within cortical bone and regulate bone metabolism. Neurotransmitters released after sympathetic activation not only inhibit the proliferation of osteoblasts, but also stimulate cytokine secretion of osteoblasts including CXCL12 and RANKL (receptor activator of NF- $\kappa$ B ligand), which plays pivotal roles in stimulating osteoclast formation and hematopoietic cell trafficking[18-20]. However, little is known on whether neurotransmitters released after sympathetic activation regulate the function of osteoblasts to affect migration and invasion of metastatic cancer cells.

Herein, we demonstrated that osteoblasts stimulated by ISO promoted migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells in *in vitro* co-culture. We identified b2AR-HIF-1 $\alpha$ -CXCL12, involved in osteoblasts treated with ISO, as a signaling pathway that facilitated migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells, which could be inhibited by the b2AR-blockers ICI118,551 and CXCR4 inhibitor LY2510924.

## Methods

### Materials

Isoproterenol (ISO) and propranolol (Pro) were purchased from Abcam (Cambridge, MA, USA). ICI118,551, LY2510924 and YC-1 were supplied by MedChem Express (Monmouth Junction, NJ, USA). Antibodies were obtained from the following sources: rabbit polyclonal antibodies specific to E-cadherin and Vimentin from Proteintech Group, Inc. (Wuhan, China); mouse monoclonal antibody to  $\alpha$ -tubulin from Ray Antibody (Beijing, China); rabbit polyclonal antibodies to HIF-1 $\alpha$  from Cell Signaling Technology (Danvers, MA, USA); goat anti-rabbit or anti-mouse IgG-conjugated horseradish peroxidase from CWBiotech (Beijing, China). The siRNAs against mouse HIF-1 $\alpha$ , and control siRNA were provided by Genepharma Co, Ltd. DMEM/F-12, DMEM, 1% penicillin/streptomycin (P/S) and Minimum Essential Medium with Eagle Alpha modification ( $\alpha$ MEM) were purchased from Thermo Fisher Scientific (Waltham, MA, USA). 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS) was obtained from Pan-Serotech (Heilbronn, Germany).

### Cell culture

Human prostate cancer cells PC-3 and DU145, mouse osteoblasts and MC3T3E1 cell lines were obtained from the Cell Bank, Chinese Academy of Sciences (Shanghai, China). PC-3 and DU145 cells were

maintained in DMEM/F-12 and DMEM respectively, which were supplemented with 10% FBS and 1% P/S. Mouse MC3T3E1 cells were maintained in  $\alpha$ MEM supplemented with 10% FBS and 1% P/S. Cells were maintained at 37 °C in a 5% CO<sub>2</sub> atmosphere. To obtain osteoblast-conditioned medium (OBCM), cells were grown to 90% confluence and culture media were changed to  $\alpha$ MEM supplemented with 10% FBS with/without ISO. OBCM was collected two days after the medium change and stored at -80 °C until use.

### **Culture of primary mouse calvarial osteoblasts**

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Southern Medical University following the guidelines for the experimental use of animals. Twelve newborn ICR mice (1 day of age) were purchased from laboratory animal center (Southern Medical University, China), where they were kept in a sterile plastic cage under hygienic conditions. All animals used in this experiment were humanely euthanized by CO<sub>2</sub> asphyxiation before isolating Calvaria. Calvaria were isolated from 2–3-day old newborn mice. Collected bone tissue was digested 5 times using 0.1 mg/mL collagenase I (GIBCO BRL, Grand Island, NY, USA) in  $\alpha$ MEM with 1:40 diluted trypsin (Solarbio, Beijing, China). The cells isolated in the last 3 digestions were combined and cultured in  $\alpha$ MEM containing 10% FBS, 1% P/S.

### **Migration and invasion assays**

Assays were performed using 6.5-mm transwell inserts (24-well, 8  $\mu$ m pore size, Corning, NY, USA) pre-coated with/without 100  $\mu$ L Matrigel basement membrane matrix (BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA, USA) for migration and invasion assays, respectively. Similar procedures were carried out for the migration and invasion assays. Primary osteoblasts or MC3T3E1 osteoblasts were grown to 90% confluence in 24-well tissue culture plates. 24 h before migration, fresh 2.5% FBS DMEM containing 10 mM ISO (Abcam) or PBS was added to the cells. Primary osteoblasts or MC3T3E1 osteoblasts cell lines were pretreated with 50  $\mu$ M ICI118,551 (MedChem Express) for selective blocking b2AR. On the day of assays, PC-3 or DU145 cells were detached with trypsin and resuspended in DMEM supplemented with 10% FBS for 1 h prior to assay. For inhibiting the CXCR4, 50 nM LY2510924 (a CXCR4 inhibitor, MedChem Express) was applied for 30 min prior to assay. 500  $\mu$ L serum-free medium containing approximately  $1 \times 10^5$  cells was placed in the upper chamber. Plates were incubated for 12 h or 24 h at 37 °C in a 5% CO<sub>2</sub> incubator (Thermo Scientific, HERACELL 150i) for migration and invasion respectively. Unmigrated cells were removed with cotton-tipped swabs from the top of the membrane and the filters were washed with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS). Cells were fixed in 3.7% formaldehyde solution for 15 min and stained with 0.05% crystal violet in PBS for 30 min. Cells migrated were examined and counted under a microscope (Nikon ECLIPSE TE2000-U). Quantification of migratory and invasive cells of five distinct images from each replicate per group was performed.

## Western blotting assay

Total protein from the cells was extracted with cold radio immunoprecipitation lysis buffer, protease inhibitor and phosphatase inhibitor cocktail (Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA, USA). The protein samples were separated by 10% SDS-PAGE and transferred onto PVDF membranes (Millipore, Billerica, MA, USA), which was blocked with 5% skim milk prepared in PBS with Tween 20 (PBST). After blocking with 5% non-fat milk for 2 h at room temperature, the membranes were incubated with the following primary antibodies at 4 °C under gentle agitation overnight: E-cadherin (1:2000, 20874-I-AP; Proteintech), Vimentin (1:6000, 10366-I-AP; Proteintech),  $\alpha$ -tubulin (1:6000, RM2007; Ray Antibody), HIF-1a (1:1000, D2U3T; Cell Signaling Technology). Following washes in PBST 3 times, the membranes were incubated with goat anti-rabbit IgG-HRP (1:6000, CW0103; CWBiotech) or goat anti-mouse IgG-HRP (1:6000, CW0102; CWBiotech) for 1 h at room temperature. Protein expression was quantified by densitometric analysis using the ImageJ software (National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA).

## Quantitative real-time PCR (qRT-PCR)

qRT-PCR was performed to determine the mRNA expression of *RANKL*, *CXCL12*, *CXCL16*, *WISP-1*, *Annexin II*, *TGF- $\beta$ 1*. Total RNA from the samples was isolated using RNAiso plus (TaKaRa, Kusatsu, Shiga, Japan), followed by reverse transcription with the HiScript II Q RT SuperMix kit (Vazyme, Nanjing, China). qPCR was conducted using 2 $\times$ T5 Fast qPCR Mix SYBR Green (Tsingke, Beijing, China) and run with the Applied Biosystems 7500 Fast Real-Time PCR System (Applied Biosystems). PCR conditions included an initial denaturation step of 3 min at 95 °C, followed by 40 cycles of PCR consisting of 30 s at 95 °C, 30 s at 60 °C, and 30 s at 72 °C. The PCR data were analyzed by the  $2^{-\Delta\Delta CT}$  method (Livak and Schmittgen, 2001). All mouse primer sequences used are as follows, Mouse *RANKL* (5'- AGCCGAGACTACGGCAAGTA-3' and 5'- AAAGTACAGGAACAGAGCGATG-3');

Mouse *CXCL12* (5'- TGCATCAGTGACGGTAAACCA-3' and 5'- CACAGTTTGGAGTGTTGAGGAT-3');

Mouse *CXCL16* (5'- CCTTGTCTCTTGCGTTCTTCC-3' and 5'- TCCAAAGTACCCTGCGGTATC-3');

Mouse *Annexin II* (5'- ATGTCTACTGTCCACGAAATCCT-3' and 5'- TGACTGACCCGTAGGCACTT-3');

Mouse *TGF- $\beta$ 1* (5'- CTGGCGAGCCTTAGTTTGGAC-3' and 5'- TGACTGACCCGTAGGCACTT-3');

Mouse *WISP-1* (5'- ACTGGGCGTCAGCCTAATC-3' and 5'- CCCCACTGTAATCGCAGTAGAG -3');

Mouse *GAPDH* (5'- AGGTCGGTGTGAACGGATTTG -3' and 5'- GGGGTCGTTGATGGCAACA -3').

## Transient siRNA Silencing

Transient silencing of *HIF- $\alpha$*  was achieved by transfection of siRNA oligos using Lipofectamine 3000 reagent (Invitrogen) following the manufacturer's instructions. Cells were transfected 24 h after seeding, re-transfected on day 4 and processed and analyzed 6 days after the first transfection by the time that cells had reached full confluency. An *HIF- $\alpha$*  siRNA sequence (sense 5'-GUGGUAUUAUUCAGCACGATT-3', antisense 5'-UCGUGCUGAAUAAUACCACTT-3') and negative control siRNA sequence (sense 5'-UUCUUCGAACGUGUCACGUTT-3', antisense 5'-ACGUGACACGUUCGGAGAATT-3') synthesized by Genepharma Co, Ltd. Total protein lysates were prepared 72 h post-transfection.

## ELISA assays

ELISA assays for CXCL12 (Cat. No. RK00168, ABclonal Technology) were performed according to the manufacturer's instructions. In brief, cell culture supernates from MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts were centrifuged at 1000 *g* for 10 min and detected: (a) preparing the standard and reagents; (b) washing plates 4 times; (c) adding 100  $\mu$ L of standards and test samples to each well; (d) adding 100  $\mu$ L Biotin-Conjugate antibody working solution; (e) adding 100  $\mu$ L Streptavidin-HRP working solution; (f) adding 100  $\mu$ L substrate solution; (g) adding 100  $\mu$ L stop solution; (h) adding 100  $\mu$ L stop solution; (i) detecting the optical density within 5 min under 450 nm.

## Statistics

All of the experiments were at least done in triplicates individually, unless otherwise stated. The data are presented as mean  $\pm$  standard error of the mean (SEM). Data were analyzed by comparing the means using one-way ANOVA followed by Dunnett's test or two-way ANOVA followed by Bonferroni's *post hoc* test or a *t*-test. For all analyses,  $P < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

## Results

### Isoproterenol-simulated sympathetic nerve activation presents no direct effect on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells.

A cancer diagnosis in itself identified as a major distress factor causes anxiety and depression[21]. The process of cancer metastasis to bone is multifactorial, and dependent not only upon intrinsic characteristics of cancer cells, but also the cellular and cytokine profiles of the tissue in the tumor microenvironment[10]. As chronic stress has been linked to cancer progression[7-9], whether increasing stress hormone in sympathetic outflow, typically caused by chronic stress, could directly alter migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells is of particular interest. Therefore, we first determined whether 10  $\mu$ M isoproterenol(ISO), a non-selective  $\beta$ AR agonist as a pharmacological surrogate of sympathetic nerve activation[8], increased migration and invasion of human prostate cancer cells, namely PC-3 and DU145. As shown in Figure 1A-B, when PC-3 and DU145 cells were plated in the transwell filter, 10  $\mu$ M ISO

treatment did not increase the number of cells that migrated or invaded through transwell insert , indicating that 10  $\mu$ M ISO has no direct effect on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells.

### **Osteoblasts triggered by ISO promote migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells.**

Prostate cancer is a cancer type that frequently metastasizes to bone and preferentially colonizes to osteoblast-rich area in early stages[12]. Activation of sympathetic nervous system modulated the bone marrow microenvironment, building a receptive niche for metastatic colonization of breast cancer cells[10]. Therefore, we explored whether osteoblasts contributed to the effect of sympathetic activation on prostate cancer metastasis to bone. In co-culture transwell assays, MC3T3E1 osteoblast cell lines obviously increased migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells plated on the transwell filter compared with that in corresponding control groups, while MC3T3E1 pretreated with ISO significantly exacerbated migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells towards to MC3T3E1 cells (Figure 2A and B). PC-3 and DU145 cells prior to the addition of 10  $\mu$ M propranolol (Pro), a non-selective  $\beta$ AR antagonist, for 30 min (in order to block bAR signaling, specifically in cancer cells), did not present the effect on their migration and invasion towards to MC3T3E1 cells in response to ISO (Figure 2A and B). Consistent results were obtained for testing migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells co-culture with primary osteoblasts (Figure 2C and D). These findings suggest that the effects of ISO on migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells are mediated by osteoblasts.

### **Inhibition of b2AR signaling in osteoblasts antagonizes migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells induced by osteoblasts triggered with ISO.**

b2-adrenergic receptor (b2AR) is present, rather than other adrenergic receptors, in primary mouse osteoblasts[20]. ISO binds b2AR of osteoblasts to modulate cell function[22-25]. To investigate whether b2AR signaling is essential for the effects of osteoblasts pretreated with ISO on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells, we treated osteoblasts with ISO combined with/without ICI (ICI118,551, a selective  $\beta$ 2AR antagonist). We found that MC3T3E1 treated with ISO markedly increased the number of migratory and invasive PC-3 and DU145 cells compared with control groups. However, treatment with ICI118,551 blocked the effects of MC3T3E1 induced by ISO on promoting migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells (Figure 3A and B). Consistent results were obtained for testing migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells co-cultured with primary osteoblasts (Figure 3C and D). These findings suggest that  $\beta$ 2AR signaling is a prerequisite for osteoblasts treated with ISO to promote migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells.

### **Conditioned medium (CM) from osteoblasts treated with ISO induces EMT of prostate cancer cells.**

Epithelial–mesenchymal transition (EMT), that is a physiological process during embryonic development, plays crucial roles in regulating the differentiation of multiple tissues and organs. In addition, growing evidence demonstrated that EMT was a phenotypic conversion linked to invasion and metastasis *in vitro* and *in vivo*, respectively[26-30]. Therefore, an analysis of the main EMT bio-markers was performed in PC-3 and DU145 cells. No difference of E-cadherin and Vimentin expression was observed between the control and ISO treated groups (Figure 4A). However, CM from MC3T3E1 in response to ISO significantly downregulated the expression of E-cadherin as well as upregulated the expression of Vimentin in PC-3 and DU145 cells, which was inhibited by selective  $\beta$ 2AR antagonist, ICI118,551 (Figure 4B). PC-3 and DU145 cells treated with CM collected from primary osteoblasts in response to ISO showed consistent results (Figure 4C). These findings indicate that osteoblasts treated with ISO induce the EMT of prostate cancer cells.

### **ISO increases the secretion of CXCL12 via $\beta$ 2AR-HIF-1a in osteoblasts.**

In order to unveil the molecular mechanisms underlying the osteoblast-mediated modulation of cell migration and invasion in response to ISO, an analysis of the main cytokines associated with bone metastasis was performed in MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts. ISO significantly increased *CXCL12* expression in MC3T3E1 (Figure 5A) as well as primary osteoblasts compared with control groups (Figure 5B). Similar results at the CXCL12 protein level examined by ELISA was presented in Figure 5C. HIF-1a-CXCL12 signaling in osteoblast-lineage cells promotes systemic breast cancer growth and metastasis in mice[31]. To test the possibility of that HIF-1a signaling might contribute to the upregulation of CXCL12 expression level in osteoblasts treated with ISO, we analyzed HIF-1a expression in osteoblasts by Western-blotting. ISO significantly increased the expression of HIF-1a in MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts compared with control groups (Figure 5D). However, ICI blunted the effect of ISO on the expression of HIF-1a in MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts (Figure 5E). Furthermore, addition of recombinant YC-1, a HIF-1a antagonist, blocked the effect of ISO on CXCL12 expression in MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts (Figure 5F). Consistently, HIF-1a knockdown significantly reduced CXCL12 expression in MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts treated with ISO (Figure 5G), indicating that HIF-1a is the key cytokine affecting the secretion of CXCL12 in osteoblasts treated with ISO. These findings suggest that  $\beta$ 2AR-HIF-1a signaling mediates the expression of CXCL12 in osteoblasts treated with ISO.

### **LY2510924, an inhibitor of CXCR4, blunts the ISO stimulatory effect of osteoblasts on the EMT and migration as well as invasion of prostate cancer cells.**

CXCL12 is a well-known C-X-C chemokine because of its chemoattractive properties for immature and mature hematopoietic cells and plays an important role in homing of HSCs to the bone marrow[32]. The binding of CXCL12 to CXCR4 can regulate multiple functions of cells. In bone marrow, CXCL12, mainly produced by osteoblasts, binds to CXCR4 and regulates the migration of CD34<sup>+</sup> cells[33]. CXCR4 is

absent in healthy prostate epithelial cells, while its expression level is significantly upregulated in PC-3 and DU145 cells[34-36]. Current evidence, accompanied by the observation that ISO strongly increases the expression of CXCL12 in osteoblasts (Figure 5A-C) encouraged us to further explore whether this cytokine contributes to the effect of osteoblasts treated with ISO on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells. In a transwell co-culture assay, MC3T3E1 dosed with ISO significantly promoted migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells compared with control groups. Addition of recombinant LY2510924, an inhibitor of CXCR4, blocked the effect of MC3T3E1 in response to ISO on migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells (Figure 6A and B). Similar results were obtained by co-culturing PC-3 or DU145 cells with primary osteoblasts, respectively (Figure 6C and D). Moreover, CM from MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts dosed with ISO significantly decreased the expression of E-cadherin and increased the expression of Vimentin in PC-3 and DU145 cells, which was inhibited by LY2510924 (Figure 6E and F). These findings indicate that CXCL12 in osteoblasts is the key cytokine involved in migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells towards osteoblasts treated with ISO.

## Discussion

The tumor metastatic efficiency depends on its genetic and phenotypic make-up as well as the receptive microenvironment for tumor colonization, establishment, and growth in distant sites. In the case of prostate cancer, host-derived factors within the bone microenvironment are essential for the establishment of cancer cells in bone[37]. However, little is known about the conditions and factors that regulate the bone microenvironment to affect cancer-bone metastasis. Sympathetic nerves releasing norepinephrine are present within tumors and their microenvironment, which can regulate gene expression and cellular functions in the tumor microenvironment through various pathways. Aberrant activation of sympathetic nerves promotes the growth, invasion, and metastasis of tumors[7]. Although several studies have highlighted the stimulatory effects of ISO on migration of prostate cancer cells[38, 39], the results of our study showed that ISO, a non-selective  $\beta$ AR agonist, presented no direct effect on migration and invasion of human prostate cancer PC-3 and DU145 cells. A possible explanation for this result could be the time point selected for the analysis (12 h), which was likely later than the time interval for ISO affecting on cell migration in our culture conditions. Additionally, the  $\beta$ 2AR expression level of prostate cancer cells plays a key role in the entire metastatic process, including its effects on the phenotype of the prostate cells and thereby their ability to migrate and invade, and probably also their colonization at the metastatic site[40]. Low expression of  $\beta$ 2AR in prostatic epithelial cells is associated with a mesenchymal-like phenotype[41], indicating that these cells may have the potential to colonize at the metastatic site. To what extent this effect on the metastasis of prostate cancer remains unclear. We are interested in investigating this point in our future study.

Cancer diagnosis induces chronic stress that thereby promotes initiation and progression of cancer in patients[2, 3]. However, in our present study, 10 $\mu$ M ISO, a pharmacological surrogate of chronic stress *in vitro*, shows no direct effect on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells. These suggest that there are some other pathways to mediate chronic stress promoting the metastasis of prostate cancer. In the bone microenvironment, osteoblasts contribute to bone disease and remodeling[42]. Additionally, the

uniform distribution of the osteoblast lineage within the bone may contribute to cancer cell colonization and adhesion during bone metastasis of prostate cancer[13]. Moreover, the bone marrow microenvironment stimulated by activation of sympathetic nerves facilitates cancer cells to disseminate to and colonize in bone [10]. In the present study, we found that osteoblasts treated with ISO promoted migration and invasion of human prostate cancer PC-3 and DU145 cells. On the other hand, we showed that b2AR activation in osteoblasts predominantly accounted for the stimulatory effect of ISO on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells. This was supported by the observation that MC3T3E1 and osteoblasts pretreated with ISO for 24 h could promote migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells. In our experimental setting, although cancer cells were directly subjected to ISO stimulation, PC-3 and DU145 cells were pretreated with propranolol for 30 min, which presented no effects on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells induced by osteoblasts in response to ISO. Therefore, the stimulatory effect of ISO on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells must occur *via* stimulation of the b2AR in osteoblasts, rather than *via* a direct effect on prostate cancer cells. It is reported that cancer cells inoculation in mice pretreated with ISO for 14 days can increase the number of bone lesions and tumors, and stimulation of the b2AR in host stromal cells mediated the stimulatory effect of ISO on breast cancer cell-bone metastasis[10], suggesting that b2AR signaling in osteoblasts is essential for cancer cell metastasis to bone. Importantly, study *in vivo* by selective deletion of the b2AR in osteoblasts is required to further confirm the results in our future work. EMT, which is a biological process and responsible for migration and invasion of cancer cells, promotes tumor metastasis[43, 44]. We hypothesized that osteoblasts treated with ISO contributed to migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells by inducing EMT. In this study, we demonstrated that CM from osteoblasts in response to ISO downregulated the expression of E-cadherin, while upregulated the expression of Vimentin in human prostate cancer PC-3 and DU145 cells. These data support that osteoblasts treated with ISO promote migration and invasion probably *via* inducing EMT in prostate cancer cells.

CXCL12 is a well-known bone marrow-derived C-X-C chemokine and a pre-B cell growth stimulating factor. Previous researches have reported that CXCL12/CXCR4 axis plays a critical role in prostate cancer progression. Over the last few years, it has been well acknowledged that the levels of CXCL12 in human and mouse tissues were higher in the preferable sites of metastasis for prostate cancer cells (*e.g.*, bone, liver, and kidney), compared with that in tissues rarely affected (*e.g.*, lung, tongue, and eye)[45]. Wang and collaborators showed that by disrupting cellular interactions mediated by the CXCR4/CXCL12 axis with the CXCR4 inhibitor AMD3100, the preferential homing pattern of prostate cancer cells to osteoblast-rich bone surfaces was disrupted[13]. In the present study, we found that CXCR4 inhibitor LY2510924 reduced migration and invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells towards osteoblasts in response to ISO, suggesting that this signaling axis is probably employed by metastatic prostate cancer cells as well as their bone metastatic potential induced by sympathetic activation. Regardless of the pathophysiological factor(s) increasing its expression or activity, our findings further reinforce that CXCL12 is one of the most important “soil” factors that facilitates the metastasis of bone by prostate cancer cells. HIF-1a signaling is one of the key pathways to mediate various cancer progression. Devignes *et. al.* reported that selective deletion of the HIF-1a in osteoblast-lineage cells suppressed metastasis to bone[31]. We also found that

HIF-1a mediated the effect of ISO on osteoblasts to enhance the secretion of CXCL12, indicating that HIF-1a signaling of osteoblasts may mediate prostate cancer bone metastasis in response to sympathetic activation.

Despite the limitations of the *in vitro* model employed, our present study reinforces the role of osteoblasts and their secreted bioactive molecules in the bone microenvironment as key modulators of cancer metastasis to bone. Osteoblast-derived CXCL12 in response to ISO promotes migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells. This supports the role of sympathetic signaling in bone metastatic process[10], and the use of b-blockers as possible adjuvant therapy for prostate cancer patients[46, 47]. Whether b2AR signaling of osteoblast promotes the recruitment of circulating metastatic prostate cancer cells into bone remains to be determined. Importantly, it is reported that the beneficial effect of b-blockers on disease-free survival and overall survival in the epidemiological or perioperative setting remains variable, tumour-specific, and of few evidences at present[48]. Although we have identified b2AR-HIF-1a-CXCL12 signaling axis in osteoblasts as a key factor to promote migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells, whether this signaling axis plays the similar role in other tumors is still unclear, which requires further *in vivo* model and clinical studies.

## Conclusions

In summary, these results provide evidence in support of the central role of osteoblasts in regulating bone metastasis of prostate cancer. We demonstrated that osteoblasts treated with ISO, a pharmacological surrogate of sympathetic nerve activated by chronic stress and depression, promoted migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells. We delineated that this effect on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells was mediated *via* b2AR in osteoblasts, rather than through a direct effect on cancer cells. Furthermore, the expression of CXCL12 induced by ISO *via* b2AR-HIF-1a signaling in osteoblasts, regulates this effect *via* CXCR4 in prostate cancer cells (Figure 7). This study contributes to our understanding of the prometastatic role of osteoblasts in patients with prostate cancer in response to chronic stress, and provides a possibility of using b2AR antagonist or CXCR4 inhibitor to treat prostate cancer in clinic.

## Abbreviations

**CXCL12**, chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 12; **CXCL16**, chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 16; **CXCR4**, chemokine (C-X-C motif) receptor type 4; **EMT**, epithelial-mesenchymal transition; **GAPDH**, glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase; **HIF-1a**, hypoxia inducible factor-1 alpha; **SDF-1**, stromal cell-derived factor 1; **RANKL**, receptor activator of NF- $\kappa$ B ligand; **TGF- $\beta$ 1**, transforming growth factor- $\beta$ 1; **WISP-1**, Wnt1-inducible signaling pathway protein 1.

## Declarations

### ***Ethics approval and consent to participate***

Mice were bred and housed in accordance with animal welfare rules in a pathogen-free facility. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Southern Medical University following the guidelines for the experimental use of animals.

### ***Consent for publication***

Not applicable.

### ***Availability of data and materials***

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### ***Competing interests***

The authors declare that they have no competing interests" in this section.

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### ***Author contributions***

ZH designed and conducted the experiments, performed data analysis, and wrote the manuscript. GL, ZZ, RG, WW, XL, WZ and HZ performed experiments and data analysis. ZC wrote the manuscript. FZ, SX and FD designed the study, interpreted the data, wrote the manuscript, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Not applicable.

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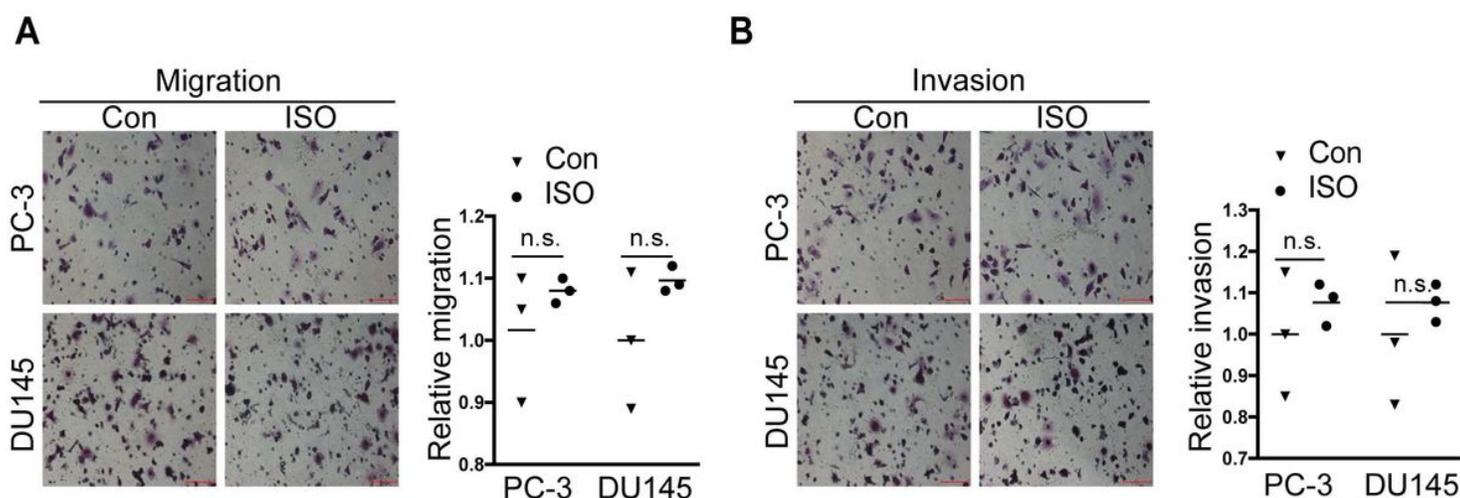
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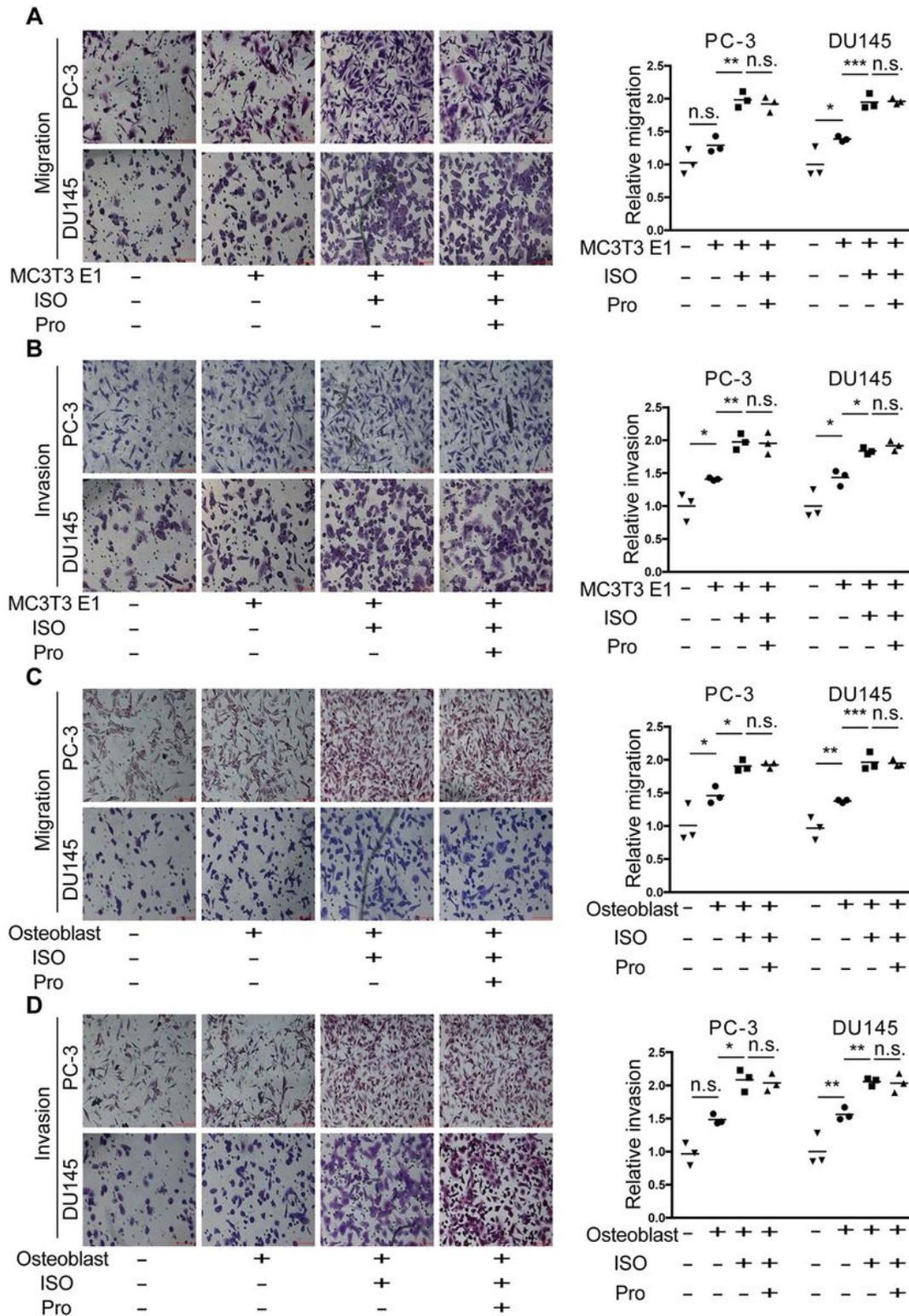
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## Figures



**Figure 1**

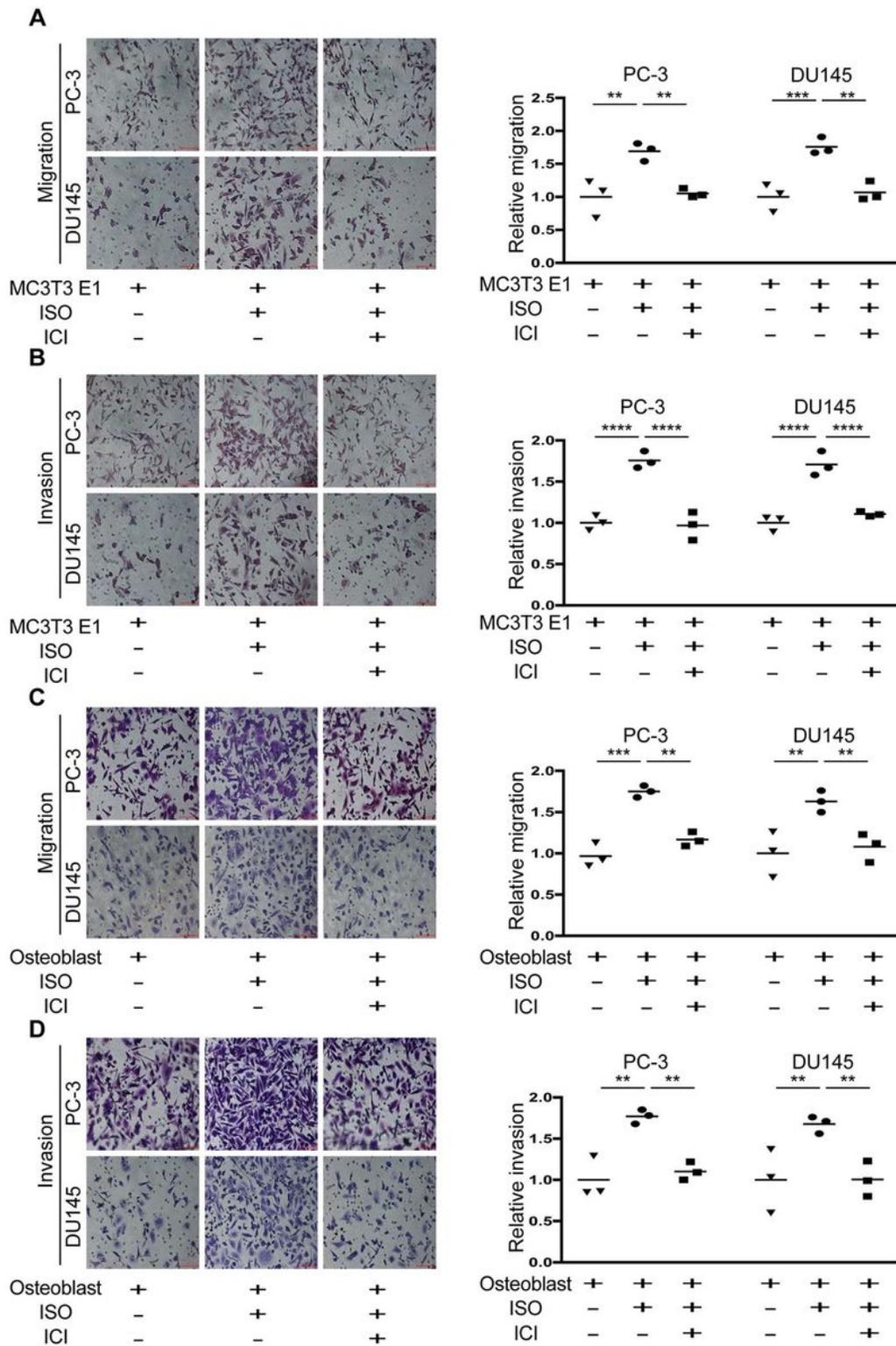
Effect of isoproterenol (ISO) on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells. (A) Migration of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured by Boden chamber transwell over 12 h in the presence or absence of 10  $\mu$ M ISO (left); Quantification of relative migratory cells of five distinct images (right) (n = 3); (B) Invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured by Boden chamber transwell over 24 h in the presence or absence of 10  $\mu$ M ISO (left); Quantification of relative invasion (right) (n = 3). Scales bars, 100  $\mu$ m; Results are shown as mean  $\pm$  SEM; n.s. not significant.



**Figure 2**

Effect of osteoblasts pretreated with ISO on migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells. (A) Migration of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 12 h in the co-culture with MC3T3 E1 osteoblasts with or without 10  $\mu$ M ISO, or PC-3 and DU145 cells were prior to the addition of 10  $\mu$ M propranolol (Pro), a non-selective  $\beta$ AR antagonist, for 30 min in order to block  $\beta$ AR signaling in cancer cells (left). Quantitative analysis of relative cell migration ( $n = 3$ ) (right). (B) Invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells were

measured over 24 h in the co-culture with MC3T3 E1 osteoblasts with or without 10  $\mu$ M ISO, or PC-3 and DU145 cells were prior to the addition of 10  $\mu$ M Pro (left). Quantification of relative invasion (right) (n = 3). (C) Migration of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 12 h in the co-culture with primary osteoblasts and the experimental procedures were similar to (A) (left). Quantification of relative migration (right) (n = 3). (D) Invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 24 h in the co-culture with primary osteoblasts and the experimental procedures were similar to (B) (left). Quantification of relative invasion (right) (n = 3). Scales bars, 100  $\mu$ m; Data represent the mean  $\pm$  SEM. \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001, and n.s. not significant.

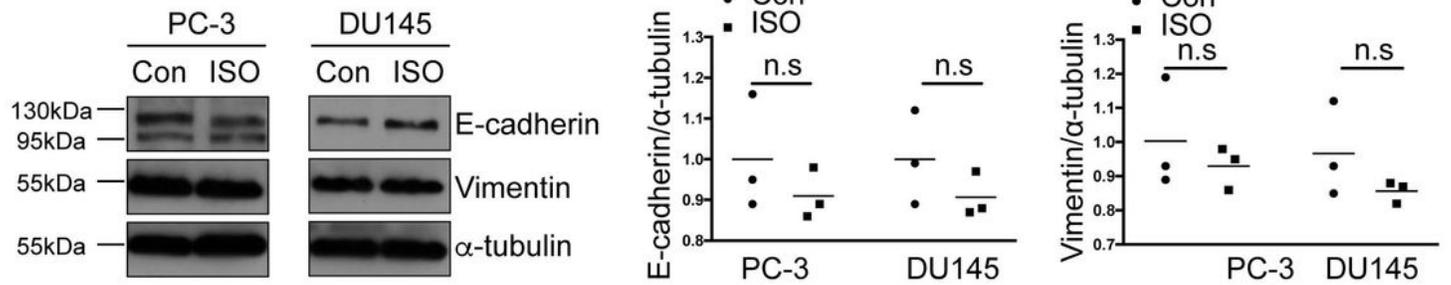


**Figure 3**

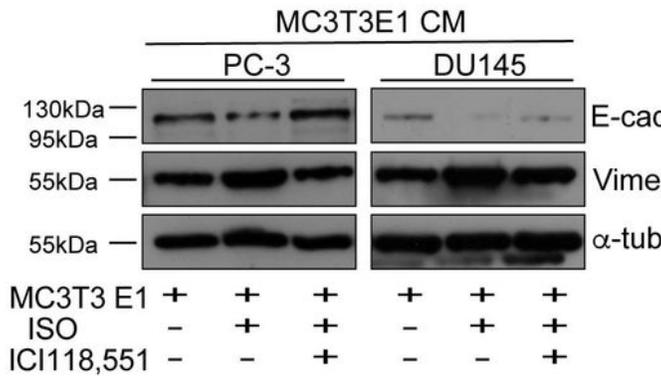
$\beta$ 2AR blockage of osteoblasts triggered by ISO inhibits migration and invasion of prostate cancer cells. (A) Migration of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 12 h in the co-culture with MC3T3E1 osteoblasts with or without 10  $\mu$ M ISO, or with 10  $\mu$ M ISO combined with 50  $\mu$ M ICI (ICI118,551), a  $\beta$ -adrenergic receptor antagonist (left). Quantification of relative migration (right) (n = 3). (B) Invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 24 h in the co-culture with MC3T3E1 osteoblasts with or

without 10  $\mu$ M ISO, or with 10  $\mu$ M ISO combined with 50  $\mu$ M ICI (ICI118,551) (left). Quantification of relative invasion (right) (n = 3). (C) Migration of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 12 h in the co-culture with primary osteoblasts and the experimental procedures were similar to (A) (left). Quantitative analysis of relative cell migration (right) (n = 3). (D) Invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 24 h in the co-culture with primary osteoblasts and the experimental procedures were similar to (B) (left). Quantitative analysis of relative cell invasion (right) (n = 3). Scales bars, 100  $\mu$ m; Data represent the mean  $\pm$  SEM. \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01, and \*\*\*\*p < 0.001.

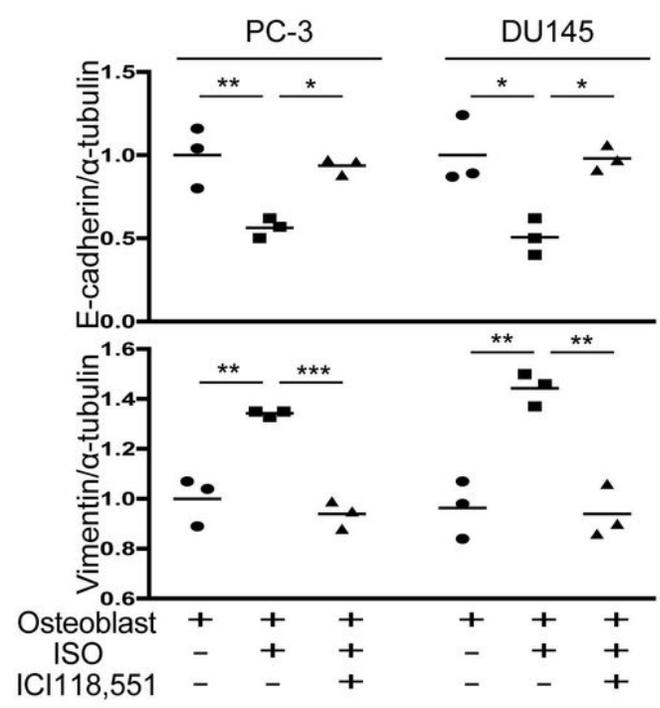
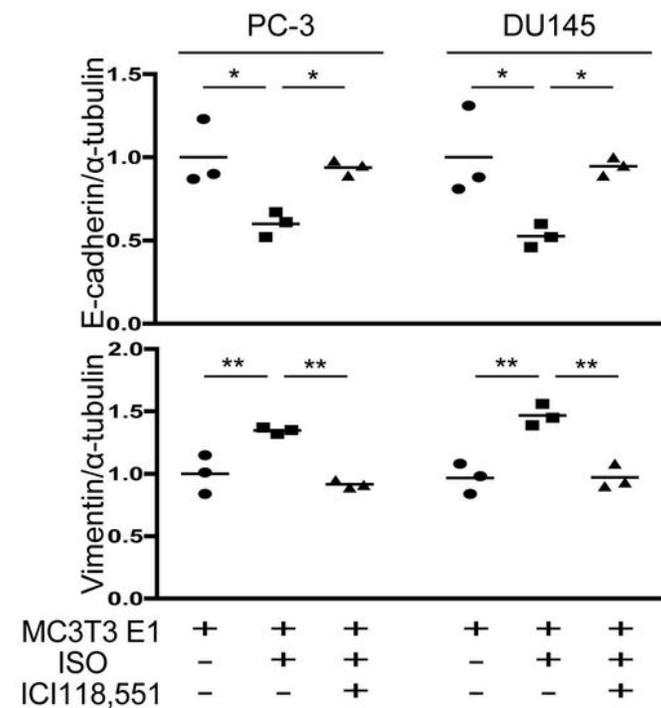
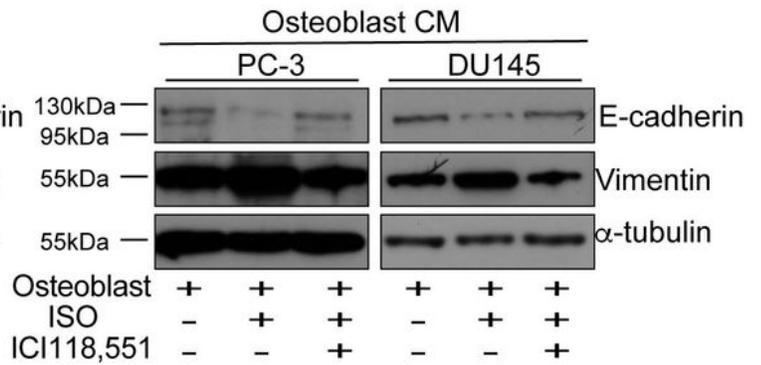
**A**



**B**

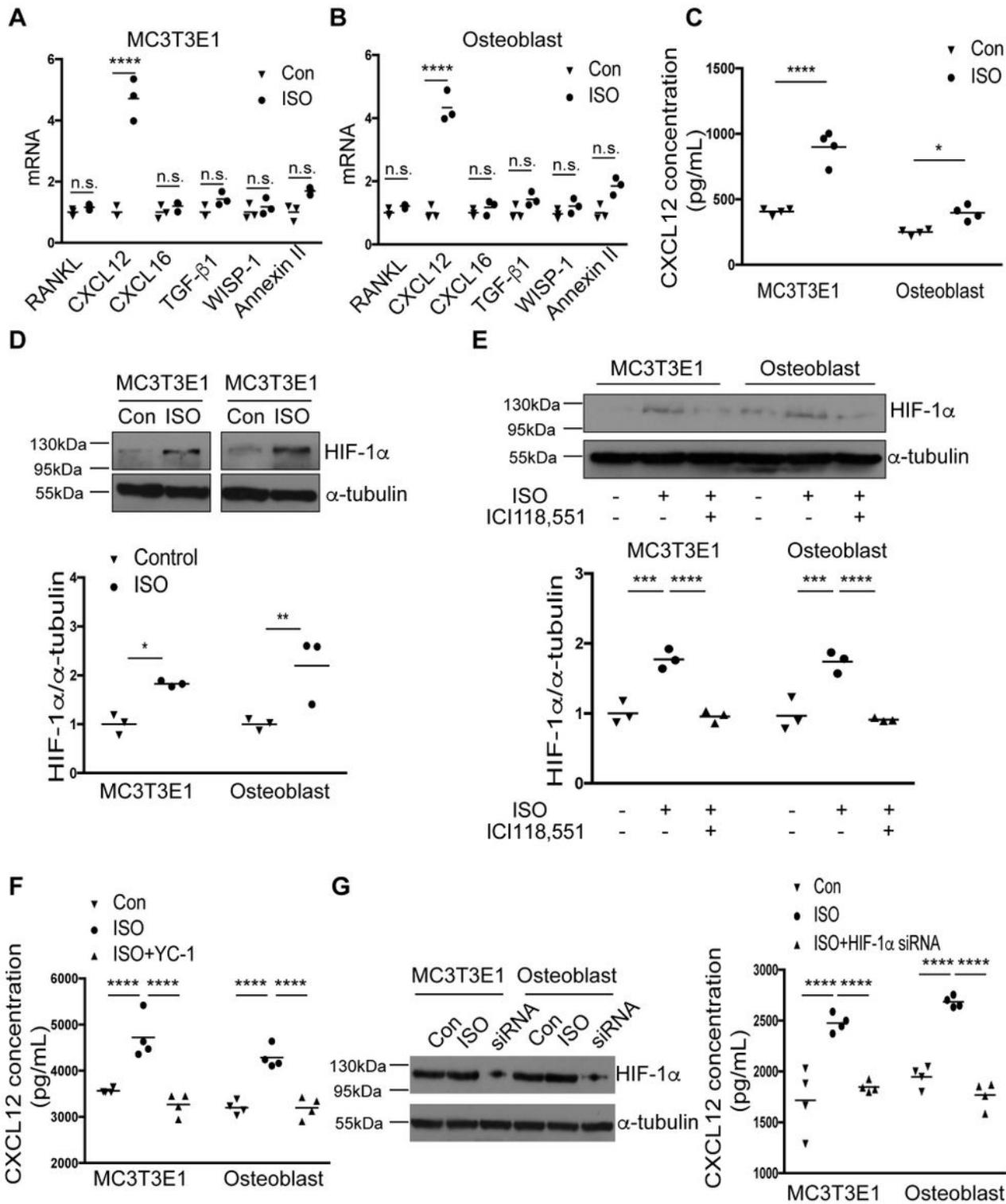


**C**



## Figure 4

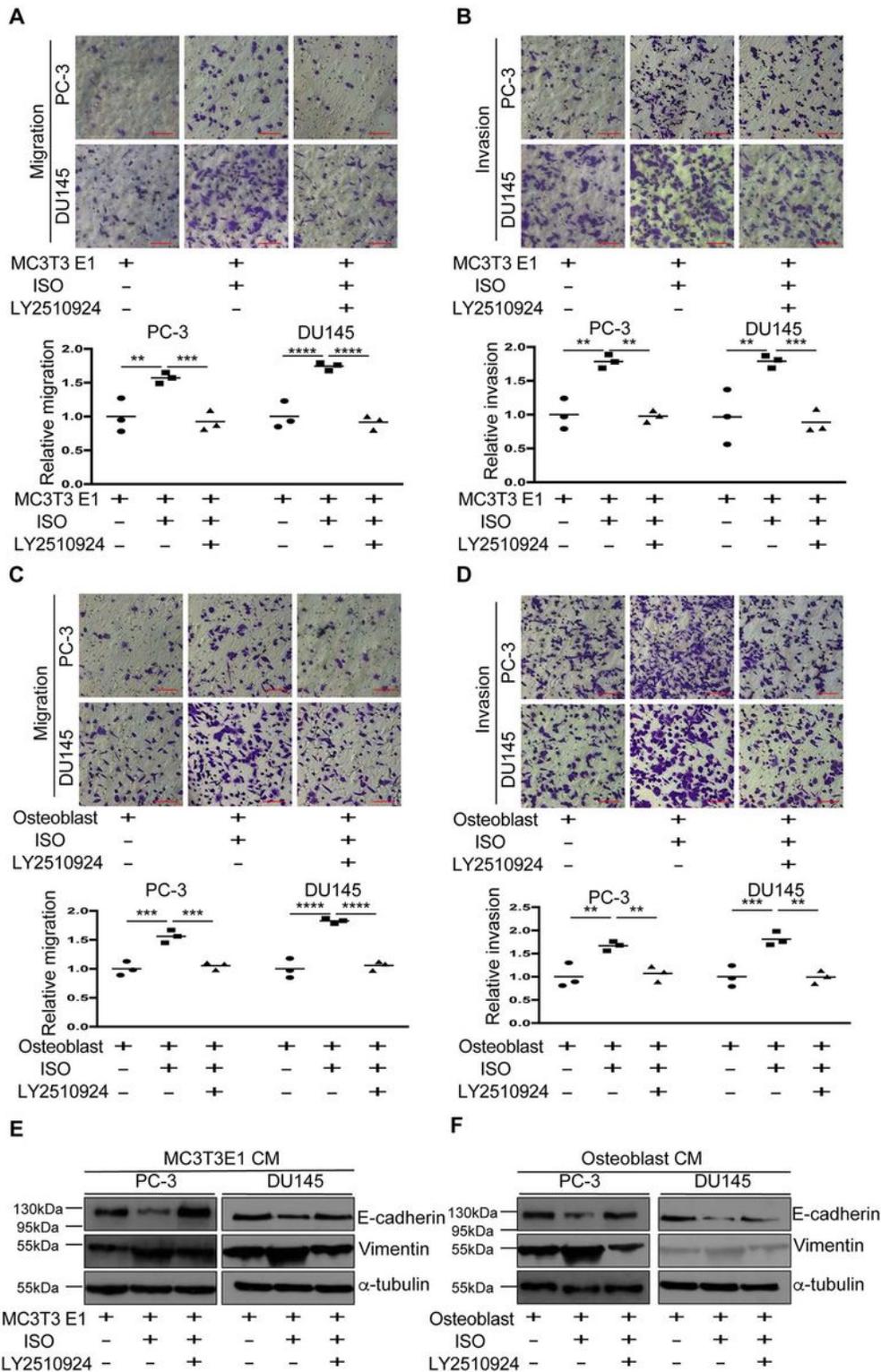
Osteoblasts pretreated with ISO induce EMT of prostate cancer cells. (A) E-cadherin and Vimentin of EMT markers were measured by Western blotting in PC-3 and DU145 cells treated with or without 10 $\mu$ M ISO (left). Quantitative analysis of relative expression (n = 3) (middle and right). (B) E-cadherin and Vimentin were measured by Western blotting in PC-3 and DU145 cells co-cultured with MC3T3E1 cells pretreated with or without 10 $\mu$ M ISO, or 10 $\mu$ M ISO combined with 50 $\mu$ M ICI118,551 (up). Quantitative analysis of relative expression (n = 3) (bottom). (C) E-cadherin and Vimentin were measured by Western blotting in PC-3 and DU145 cells co-cultured with primary osteoblasts pretreated with or without ISO, or 10 $\mu$ M ISO combined with 50 $\mu$ M ICI118,551 (up). Quantitative analysis of relative expression (n = 3) (bottom). Data represent the mean  $\pm$  SEM. \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001, and n.s. not significant.



**Figure 5**

ISO increases the secretion of CXCL12 via  $\alpha$ 2AR-HIF-1 in osteoblasts. qRT-PCR assay for metastasis related genes in MC3T3E1 (A) and primary osteoblasts (B) treated with 10 $\mu$ M ISO for 12 h. The data are shown as fold changes compared to that in the control groups (n = 3). (C) CXCL12 level was detected by ELISA in MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts treated with 10 $\mu$ M ISO for 24 h. (n = 4). (D) HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression and quantification were determined by Western blotting in MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts

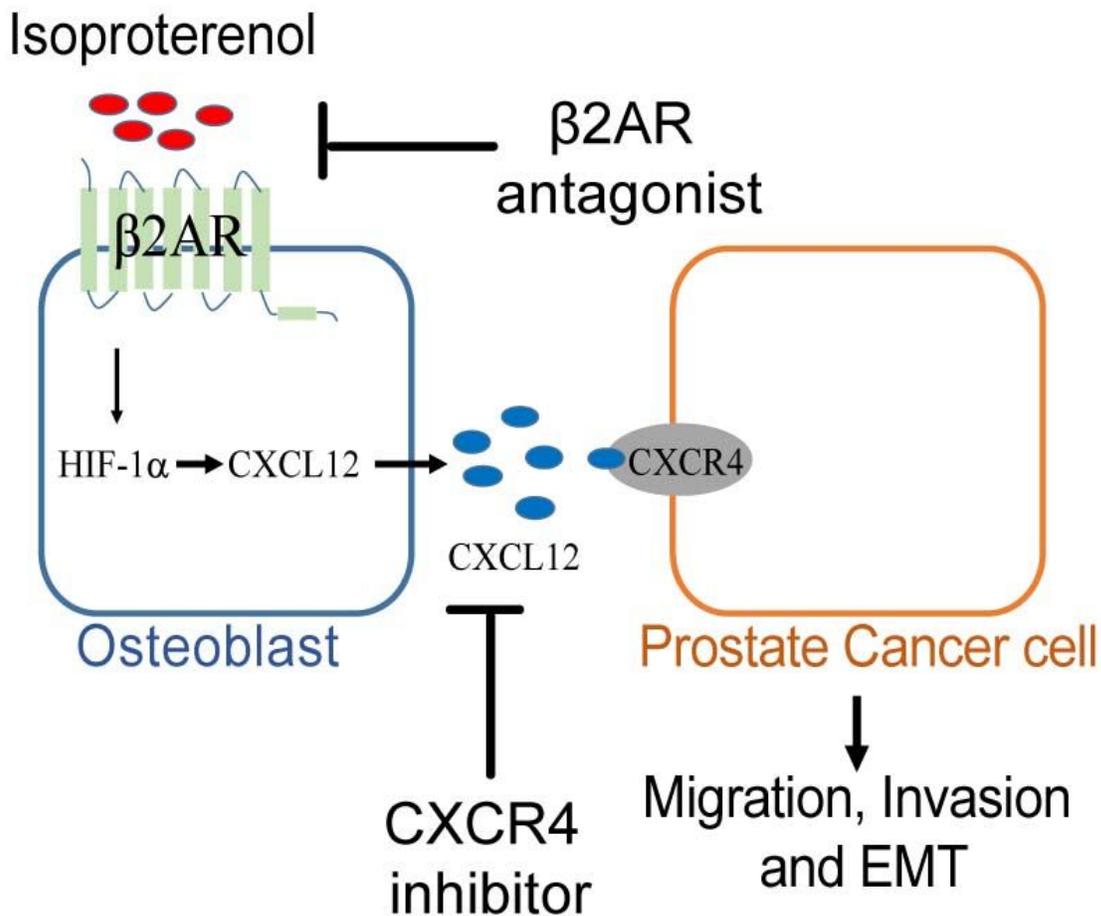
treated with 10 $\mu$ M ISO (n = 3). (E) HIF-1 $\alpha$  expression and quantification were determined by Western blotting in MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts treated with 10  $\mu$ M ISO combined with or without 50  $\mu$ M ICI118,551 for 24 h (n = 3). (F) CXCL12 level was detected by ELISA in MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts treated with ISO combined with or without YC-1, a HIF-1 $\alpha$  antagonist, for 24 h (n = 4). (G) MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts were transfected with siRNAs of HIF-1 $\alpha$  or control siRNAs for 24 h and then stimulated with ISO for 24 h. Expression of HIF-1 $\alpha$  were detected by Western blotting (left) (n = 2), and CXCL12 level was detected by ELISA (right) (n = 4). Data represent the mean  $\pm$  SEM. \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*\*\*p < 0.0001 and n.s. not significant.



**Figure 6**

Effects of LY2510924 on EMT and migration/invasion of prostate cancer cells induced by osteoblasts triggered by ISO. (A) Migration of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 12 h in the co-culture with MC3T3E1 osteoblasts in response to 10  $\mu$ M ISO with or without 10 nM LY2510924, a CXCR4 antagonist (top). Quantification of relative migration (bottom) (n = 3). (B) Invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 24 h in the co-culture with MC3T3E1 osteoblasts in response to 10  $\mu$ M ISO with or without

10 nM LY2510924 (top). Quantification of relative invasion (right) (n = 3). (C) Migration of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 12 h in the co-culture with primary osteoblasts and the experimental procedures were similar to (A) (top). Quantitative analysis of relative cell migration (bottom) (n = 3). (D) Invasion of PC-3 and DU145 cells were measured over 24 h in the co-culture with primary osteoblasts and the experimental procedures were similar to (B) (top). Quantitative analysis of relative cell invasion (bottom) (n = 3). (E and F) PC-3 and DU145 cells were treated with CM from MC3T3E1 and primary osteoblasts in response to ISO with or without LY2510924 for 24 h, and expression of E-cadherin and Vimentin were detected by Western blotting (n = 2). Scales bars, 100  $\mu$ m; Data represent the mean  $\pm$  SEM. \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001, and \*\*\*\*p < 0.0001.



**Figure 7**

Schematic illustration for ISO induced-osteoblasts activation and migration/invasion of prostate cancer cells. Osteoblasts respond to  $\beta$ 2AR signaling activated by ISO to produce CXCL12 through upregulating the expression of HIF-1 $\alpha$ . Osteoblast-driven CXCL12 binds to CXCR4 to promote migration and invasion as well as EMT of prostate cancer cells.  $\beta$ 2AR,  $\beta$ 2 adrenergic receptor; ISO, isoproterenol; CXCL12,

chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 12; CXCR4, chemokine (C-X-C motif) receptor type 4; HIF-1α hypoxia inducible factor-1alpha; EMT, epithelial-mesenchymal transition.

## Supplementary Files

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