

# Different effects of cortisol on pro-inflammatory gene expressions of LPS-, heat-killed E.coli-, or live E.coli-stimulated bovine endometrial epithelial cells

**Luying Cui**

Yangzhou University

**Yali Wang**

Yangzhou University

**Heng Wang**

Yangzhou University

**Junsheng Dong**

Yangzhou University

**Zixiang Li**

Yangzhou University

**Jun Li**

Yangzhou University

**Chen Qian**

Yangzhou University

**Jianji Li** (✉ [yzjjli@163.com](mailto:yzjjli@163.com))

Yangzhou University <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2691-2468>

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## Research article

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# Abstract

**Background:** Bacterial infections are common in postpartum dairy cows. Cortisol level has been observed to increase in dairy cows during peripartum period, and is associated with the endometrial innate immunity against pathogen like *E.coli* . However, the mechanism underlying how cortisol regulates *E.coli* -induced inflammatory response in bovine endometrial epithelial cells (BEEC) remains elusive.

**Results:** Cortisol decreased the expressions of IL1 $\beta$ , IL6, TNF- $\alpha$ , IL8, and TLR4 mRNA in BEEC treated with LPS or heat-killed *E.coli* , but up-regulated the these gene expressions in BEEC stimulated by live *E.coli* .

**Conclusion:** Cortisol exerted the anti-inflammation action on LPS- or heat-killed *E.coli* -stimulated BEEC, but the pro-inflammation action on live *E.coli* -induced BEEC.

## Background

Endometritis is the inflammation of the endometrium which usually occurs in postpartum dairy cows. There are two main types of bovine endometritis, including clinical endometritis with purulent (> 50% pus) discharge in uterine lumen between 20 and 33 days postpartum or mucopurulent (approximately 50% pus and 50% mucus) discharge after 26 to 33 days postpartum [1, 2], and subclinical (cytological) endometritis, characterized by the abnormal proportion of polymorphonuclear (PMN) cells in endometrial cytology examination [1]. Endometritis causes infertility at the time the uterine infection is present and subfertility even after successful resolution of the disease, resulting in increased culling rate and great economic loss. [2]. The most common cause of uterine infection is the pathogenic microorganisms affecting productivity and fertility of cows. Infection of the endometrium with *Escherichia coli* (*E.coli*) precedes infection by *Trueperella pyogenes* and a range of anaerobic bacteria that include *Fusobacterium*, *Prevotella* and *Bacteriodes* species [3, 4].

Uterine defenses rely initially on classical innate immunity. The bovine endometrial epithelial cells (BEEC) are the first to make contact with potential pathogens that enter the uterus [5]. One of the critical mechanisms recognizing pathogens and their pathogen associated molecular patterns is Toll-like receptors [6]. It is the Toll-like receptor 4 (TLR4) that specifically recognize the lipopolysaccharide (LPS), a structural component of the outer membrane of *E.coli* [7, 8]. The activation of TLR4 causes the recruitment of the signaling adaptor MyD88, resulting in the activation of the downstream NF- $\kappa$ B signaling pathways. These signaling cascades stimulate the expressions of pro-inflammatory mRNA transcripts in the endometrium, including the cytokines interleukin1 $\beta$  (IL1 $\beta$ ), IL6, tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  (TNF- $\alpha$ ) and the chemokine IL8 [9, 10].

As a kind of glucocorticoids, cortisol is widely considered as anti-inflammation steroid hormones [11–13], which regulates all aspects of immune function and inflammation [14]. The effect of glucocorticoids is described as inhibiting nuclear translocation and the function of several pro-inflammatory transcription factors, then suppressing synthesis of inflammatory mediators [15]. Increased level of endogenous cortisol level was observed during parturition [16]. Previous study indicated that cortisol inhibited the

inflammatory response in LPS- induced BEEC [17]. However, the relationship between cortisol and the endometritis caused by *E.coli* have not yet been clarified. The effect of cortisol on *E.coli*-stimulated BEEC is worthy of being investigated.

Here we reported the different effects of cortisol on the gene expressions of pro-inflammatory cytokines induced by *E.coli* or LPS. Quantitative PCR method was used to detect the expressions of IL1 $\beta$ , IL6, TNF- $\alpha$ , IL8, and TLR4 mRNA of BEEC co-treated with cortisol and LPS, heat-killed *E.coli* or live *E.coli*.

## Results

### Cell viability

Cell Counting Kit-8 (CCK-8) and trypan blue assay were used to evaluate the viability of BEEC after heat-killed or live *E.coli* challenge. As shown in Fig.1A, no difference was observed in cell viability in BEEC treated with heat-killed *E.coli* ( $1 \times 10^8$  CFU/mL) from 0 to 60 h. Compared to the control group, the cell viability was not influence by live *E.coli* ( $1 \times 10^6$  CFU/mL) at 6 h (Fig.1B).

### Pro-inflammatory genes and TLR4 mRNA expressions of BEEC co-treated with LPS and cortisol

The effect of cortisol on the pro-inflammatory and TLR4 mRNA expressions of BEEC stimulated with LPS were shown in Fig.2. Higher ( $p < 0.01$ ) levels of LPS-induced IL1 $\beta$ , IL6, TNF- $\alpha$ , and IL8 mRNA expressions were observed as compared with control group at all time points, whereas the TLR4 mRNA increased ( $p < 0.01$ ) only at 6 h after challenge. Compared with *E.coli* treated group, cortisol (5, 15, or 30 ng/mL) decreased ( $p < 0.01$ ) the mRNA expressions of TLR4 at 6 h, and the IL1 $\beta$ , IL6, TNF- $\alpha$ , and IL8 at most observed time points.

### Pro-inflammatory genes and TLR4 mRNA expressions of BEEC co-treated with heat-killed E.coli and cortisol

The results of IL1 $\beta$ , IL6, TNF- $\alpha$ , IL8, and TLR4 mRNA expressions of BEEC co-treated with heat-killed *E.coli* and cortisol were shown in Fig.3. Exposure of cells to heat-killed *E.coli* upregulated ( $p < 0.01$ ) the mRNA expressions of IL1 $\beta$ , IL6, IL8, and TLR4 at all indicated time points, and TNF- $\alpha$  at 6 and 18 h. Compared with *E.coli* treated group, cortisol (5, 15, or 30 ng/mL) treatment generally down-regulated ( $p < 0.05$ ) these gene expressions at 6 and 18 h, and the IL1 $\beta$  and TLR4 mRNA at 2 h.

### Pro-inflammatory genes and TLR4 mRNA expressions of BEEC co-treated with live E.coli and cortisol

The results of IL1 $\beta$ , IL6, IL8, TNF- $\alpha$ , and TLR4 mRNA expressions were shown in Fig.4. The mRNA expressions of IL1 $\beta$ , IL6, IL8 and TNF- $\alpha$  increased ( $p < 0.01$ ) by live *E.coli* challenge at all time points. The TLR4 mRNA in *E.coli* group decreased ( $p < 0.01$ ) at 4 and 6 h, and unchanged at 2 h. Compared with *E.coli* treated group, co-treatment of cortisol and *E.coli* generally increased the mRNA expressions of IL1 $\beta$ , IL6, IL8, and TNF- $\alpha$ , which was most pronounced ( $p < 0.05$ ) at 4 h by 5, 15 and 30 ng/mL cortisol, at 2 h by 15 ng/mL cortisol, and at 6 h by 30 ng/mL cortisol. The mRNA levels of TLR4 in the co-treatment group were higher ( $p < 0.05$ ) than the *E.coli* group at 2 and 4 h.

## Discussion

In this study, we demonstrated that cortisol inhibited the LPS- and heat-killed *E.coli*-induced expressions of pro-inflammatory genes (IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, IL-8, TNF- $\alpha$ , and TLR4) in BEEC. However, in cells challenged by live *E.coli*, we detected the reduced TLR4 mRNA expression and increased mRNA levels of IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, IL-8, and TNF- $\alpha$ . Co-treatment of cortisol and live *E.coli* further up-regulated the expressions of these pro-inflammatory genes.

Increased mRNA expressions of TLR4 have been reported in LPS-stimulated BEEC by Shen *et al.* [18], Herath *et al.* [9] and Dong *et al.* [17], and in heat-killed *E.coli*-stimulated BEEC by Chapwanya *et al.* [19]. Similarly, Yang *et al.* showed that heat-killed *E.coli* activated TLR4 receptor in HEK293 cells. [20]. This concurs with our study, that LPS and heat-killed *E.coli* could up-regulate TLR4 mRNA. Binding of LPS to TLR4 increases the secretion of inflammatory cytokines [21, 22]. IL1 $\beta$  and IL6 are classical pro-inflammatory cytokines. The activities of IL1 $\beta$  and IL6 are similar to TNF- $\alpha$ , including the induction of pyrexia and the production of acute phase proteins [23]. IL8 is a chemokine that recruits immune cells such as neutrophils and lymphocytes, and stimulates the release of neutrophil granules [24]. Brauner *et al.* demonstrated that heat-killed *E.coli* induced the protein production of IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, IL-8, and TNF- $\alpha$  [25]. Similarly in our result, the gene expressions of IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, IL-8, and TNF- $\alpha$  increased following the stimulation with LPS or heat-killed *E.coli*.

In contrast with increased TLR4 mRNA expression induced by LPS or heat-killed *E.coli*, the live *E.coli* down-regulated TLR4 expression. However, the levels of IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, IL-8, and TNF- $\alpha$  mRNA increased after the live *E.coli* stimulation. Previous study indicated that the pathogenic mechanism of *E.coli* is complex. Some pathotypes of *E.coli* have a large repertoire of effectors that are translocated into host cells by the type III secretion system (T3SS) and affect host cell activities [26, 27]. T3SS can induce an early pro-inflammatory response through the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B [28], resulting in the increased expression of pro-inflammatory genes. Another possibility was that several pathogenic Gram-negative bacteria have a modified lipid A, which is a part of LPS and enables the bacteria to evade TLR4-mediated immune surveillance [29]. This possibility was less likely because of the increased TLR4 expression in heat-killed *E.coli* group. Therefore, we speculated that the underlying mechanism of the increased expressions of inflammatory genes was not mediated by TLR4. We were unable to explain why the TLR4 gene expression decreased after the stimulation of live *E.coli*, which may require further investment on TLR4 at posttranscriptional level and on the interaction between TLR4 and live *E.coli*.

It has been accepted that glucocorticoids induce anti-inflammatory effects by inhibiting the expressions of many pro-inflammatory genes [30] and the signal transduction of pattern recognition receptors [31]. According to the previous studies by our lab, cortisol inhibited the LPS-induced mRNA expressions of TLR4, IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, IL-8, and TNF- $\alpha$  in BEEC [17]. In agreement with these reports, we found that cortisol exerted the classical anti-inflammatory effects on BEEC induced with LPS or heat-killed *E.coli*. However, cortisol increased the levels of IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, IL-8, TNF- $\alpha$ , and TLR4 mRNA in BEEC treated with live *E.coli*, exacerbated the pro-inflammatory effect. It has been reported that glucocorticoids have not only universally anti-inflammatory actions, but also pro-inflammatory effects in acute stress situations [32, 33]. The pro-inflammatory effects including increased expressions of chemokines, complement proteins, and cytokines [33], and induction of the secretion and activation of TLR signaling pathway [31, 32]. We supposed that the live *E.coli* stimulation may cause acute stress of cells, resulting in the pro-inflammatory effect of cortisol. There is a substantial space for further research to determine the condition and underlying mechanism of how the pro-inflammatory effect occur.

## Conclusion

The present study demonstrated a two-side effect of cortisol in BEEC stimulated with LPS, heat-killed *E.coli* or live *E.coli*. Cortisol inhibited the LPS- or heat-killed *E.coli*-induced inflammatory response, but up-regulated the live *E.coli*-induced inflammatory response.

## Methods

### Endometrial epithelium cell culture

The cells were isolated as described from Dong *et al.*[17]. Cattle with hoof disease or mastitis from experimental farm of Yangzhou University were sent to the local abattoir and were culled. Bovine uteri from postpubertal nonpregnant cattle with no evidence of genital disease or microbial infection were collected and kept on ice until further processing in the laboratory [10]. After cutting the uterine horn into 3 ~ 4 cm long pieces, the tissue was digested with 0.1% protease from *Streptomyces griseus* (P5147, Sigma, USA) diluted in DMEM/F-12 (D8900, Sigma, USA). Following 18 h incubation at 4°C, the uterine horn was removed from the digestive solution and incised longitudinally under aseptic conditions. The endometrium was scraped using a sterile surgical blade and ophthalmic forceps, and the scraped materials were washed in PBS (pH values from 7.2 to 7.4). The cell suspension was collected and centrifuged at 1000  $\times g$  for 5 min and followed twice further washes with PBS. Then, cells were resuspended in DMEM/F-12 containing 15% fetal bovine serum (FBS, Gibco, USA) and 50 U/mL of penicillin /streptomycin, and seeded into a 25 cm<sup>2</sup> flasks for culture at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere containing 5% CO<sub>2</sub> and 95% sterile air. The purification of BEEC was confirmed to be above 99% by detection of CK-18 using immunohistochemistry. The medium was changed every 1 to 2 days until the cells reached approximately 90% confluence.

# Bacteria

*E.coli* O55 was obtained and isolated from a cow with endometritis (purulent uterine discharge) at experimental farm of Yangzhou University. The strain was routinely cultured overnight (37 °C, 120 rpm) in nutrient LB broth (L3022, Sigma, USA), and the bacterial fluid was pipetted into sterile LB for incubating (37 °C, 120 rpm) until to an optical density (OD 600 nm) of 0.6 to have a final density to  $4 \times 10^8 \pm 1 \times 10^8$  CFU/mL. Both active and heat-inactive *E.coli* were used in this study. For live *E.coli*, the bacterial suspension was centrifuged at  $4000 \times g$  for 10 min and followed twice further washes with PBS, then resuspended in DMEM/F-12 to a dose of  $1 \times 10^6$  CFU/mL. To inactive bacteria, the bacterial suspension was heat killed for 60 min at 70 °C after washed with PBS as described. Then it was centrifuged at  $4000 \times g$  for 10 min and resuspended in DMEM/F-12 to have a final inoculum corresponding to  $1 \times 10^8$  CFU/mL. The doses of active and heat-inactive *E.coli* were selected based on a preliminary study and on studies of Korzekwa *et al.* [34] and Brauner *et al.* [25], respectively.

## Experiment design and treatments

To evaluate the impact of cortisol on the inflammatory response of BEEC induced by *E.coli* or LPS, the cells plated on 6-well plates at a density of  $1 \times 10^6$  cells per well were challenged with  $1 \times 10^6$  CFU/mL live *E.coli*,  $1 \times 10^8$  CFU/mL heat-killed *E.coli*, or 1 µg/mL LPS in the control medium or the medium containing cortisol (H0888, Sigma, USA). The concentrations of cortisol from 5 ~ 30 ng/mL were within the physiological levels in cows. The selection of 5, 15, and 30 ng/mL cortisol was based on previous report of our lab [17]. For detection of the gene expressions of the cytokines, the cells were collected at 2, 4, and 6 h after live *E.coli* challenge or 2, 6, and 18 h after heat-killed *E.coli* or LPS stimulation.

## Cell viability assay

The previous study in our lab demonstrated that 5, 15, and 30 ng/mL cortisol had no effect on BEEC viability [17]. To determine the the effect of heat-killed *E.coli* on cell viability, the Cell Counting Kit-8 (CCK-8) obtained from Dojindo Molecular Technologies, Inc. (Kumamoto, Japan) was used. The cells were plated on 96-well plates at a density of  $1 \times 10^3$  cells per well and grown to 80% confluence in a 37°C, 5% CO<sub>2</sub> incubator. Then the cells were treated with  $1 \times 10^8$  CFU/mL heat-killed *E.coli* for 0, 2, 6, 9, 12, 16, 18, 24, 48, and 60 h, followed by the addition of CCK-8 to each well. After incubation for 2 h at 37°C, the optical density (OD 450 nm) was detected with a microplate reader (Tecan, Austria).

Because the presence of live bacteria will interfere with the CCK-8 result, the influence of live *E.coli* on cell viability was detected using the trypan blue assay (C0011, Beyotime, China). The cells were plated on the 6-well plates at a density of  $1 \times 10^6$  cells per well and grown to 80% confluence in a 37°C, 5% CO<sub>2</sub> incubator. After being treated with  $1 \times 10^6$  CFU/mL *E.coli* for 6 h, the cells were detached with 300 µl trypsin-EDTA solution. The mixture of detached cells was centrifugated at  $1000 \times g$  for 5 min. Then, the

residue was combined with 500 µl trypan blue solution and dispersed. After 5 min staining, cells were counted using an automated cell counter (TC10, Bio-Rad).

## RNA extraction and quantitative PCR

After treatment, cells were washed with 1 mL of PBS. The RNA was subsequently extracted using the TRIzol reagent (15596018, Thermo, USA) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The extracted RNA was quantified using a Nanodrop 2000 spectrophotometer (Thermo, USA). For cDNA synthesis, 1 µg of total RNA was added to a genomic DNA elimination reaction, followed by conversion to cDNA using a reverse transcriptase synthesis kit (DRR047A, TaKaRa, Japan). QPCR was performed using a CFX 96 Real-Time PCR Detection System (BIO-RAD, USA). Amplification mixtures contained 10 µL of SYBR Green PCR mix, 1 µL of each primer, and 2 µL of cDNA template in a final volume of 20 µL per reaction (RR820A, TaKaRa, Japan). Then the following cycling conditions were performed: 95°C for 30 s, 40 cycles of 95°C for 5 s, 60°C for 30 s. The sequences of the primers were presented in Table 1. A single product was amplified by each primer pair. All the PCR products were purified and sequenced (TsingKe Biotech, Beijing, China) and the sequence results were analyzed using BLAST and compared to GenBank database (<http://blast.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/blast.cgi>). The  $2^{-\Delta\Delta C_t}$  method was used to calculate the relative gene expression that normalised against the housekeeping gene  $\beta$ -actin, which was invariant across treatment groups. The PCR analyses were performed in triplicate.

## Statistical analysis

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21.0 (IBM, NY, USA). All data were expressed as the means  $\pm$  standard error (SEM). The significance of differences between groups was evaluated by one-way ANOVA, followed by Dunnett's test. Significance was attributed when a two-sided  $p$ -value less than 0.05. Each experiment was repeated three times.

## List Of Abbreviations

BEEC: Bovine endometrial epithelial cells; CCK-8: Cell Counting Kit-8; cDNA: Complementary DNA; DMEM/F-12: Dulbeccos's Modified Eagle Media/Nutrient Mixture F-12; *E.coli*: *Escherichia coli*; FBS: Fetal bovine serum; LB: Luria-Bertani; LPS: Lipopolysaccharide; qPCR: Quantitative polymerase chain reaction; T3SS: Type III secretion system

## Declarations

## Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

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## Availability of data and materials

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

## Authors' contributions

LC drafted the manuscript, performed qPCR. YW participated in cell culture and performed qPCR. HW participated in data collection and analysis. ZL and JD participated sample collection and cell culture. JL participated in bacteria culture. CQ participated in the data collection and analysis. JJL (Jianji Li) designed the present study. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.

## Ethics approval

This study was conducted according to the guidelines of College of Veterinary Medicine, Yangzhou University. This study was approved by Yangzhou University.

## Consent for publication

Not applicable

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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## Tables

### Table 1

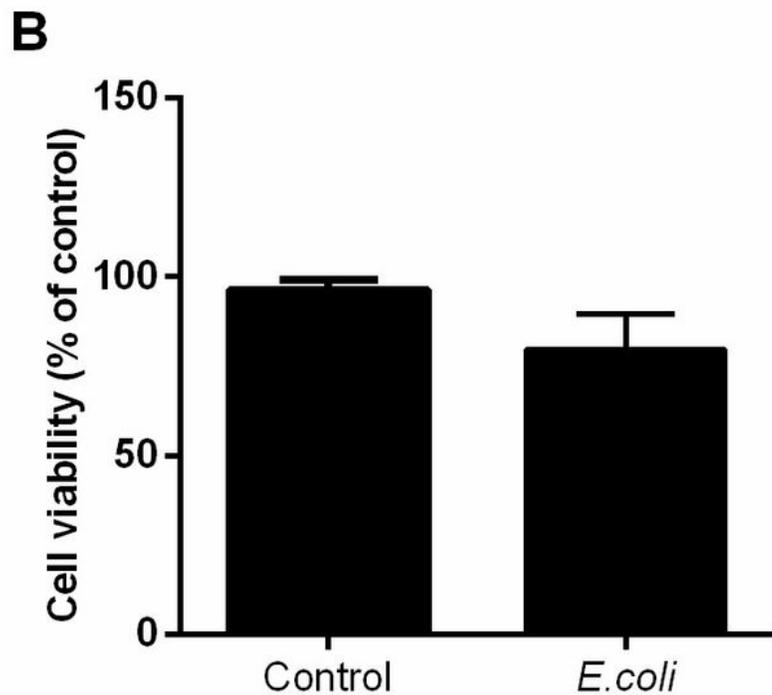
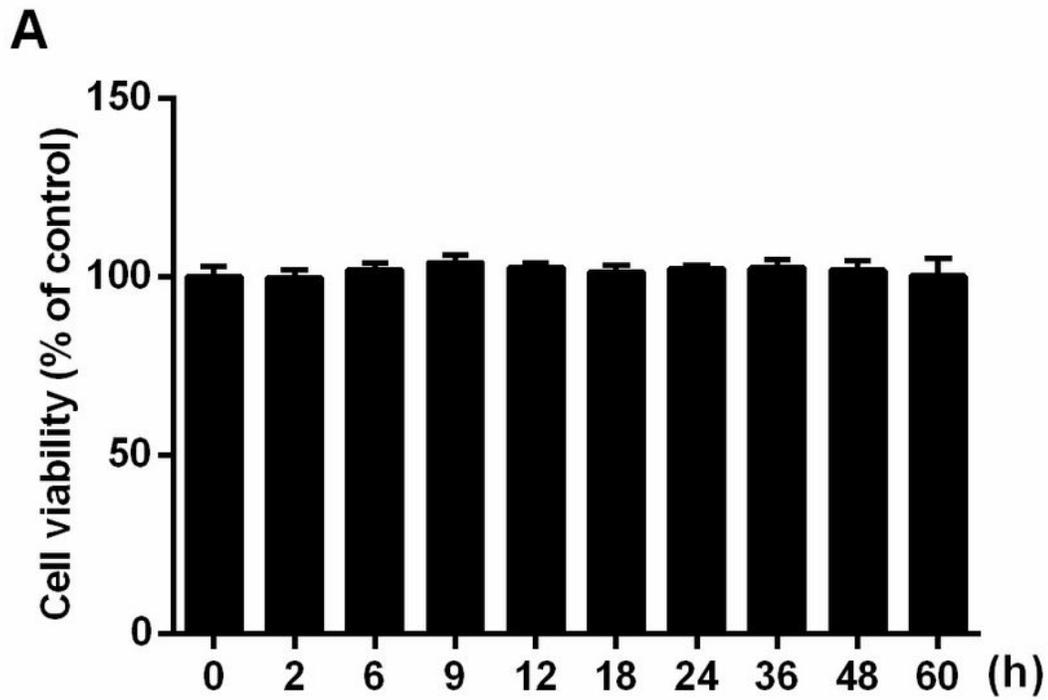
The list of primer sequences used for amplification of qPCR.

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Gene	Primer sequence (5'→3')	Accession number
$\beta$ -Actin	F: CATCACCATCGGCAATGAGC R: AGCACCGTGTTGGCGTAGAG	NM_173979.3
ILR4	F: GCTCTGCCTTCACTACAGGGACT R: CTGGGACACCACGACAATAACC	NM_174198.6
IL1 $\beta$	F: TGATGACCCTAAACAGATGAAGAGC R: CCACGATGACCGACACCACCT	NM_174093.1
IL6	F: TGAAAGCAGCAAGGAGACT R: TGATTGAACCCAGATTGGAAGC	NM_173923.2
TNF- $\alpha$	F: CCCTTGTTCTCACCAC R: CTCGGCATAGTCCAGGTAG	NM_173966.2
IL8	F: TTCCTCAGTAAAGATGCCAATG R: TGACAACCCTACACCAGACCCA	NM_173925.2

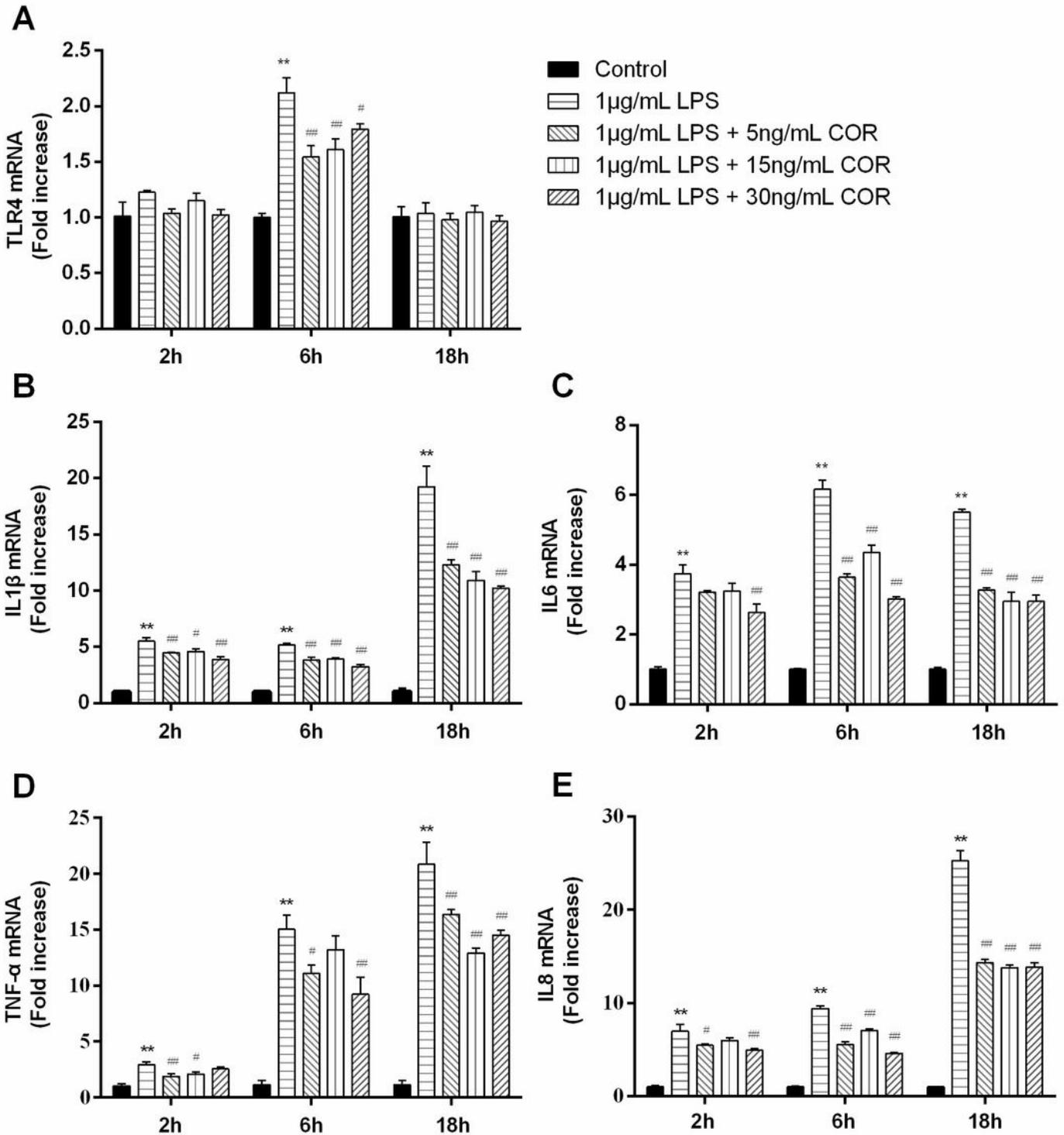
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## Figures



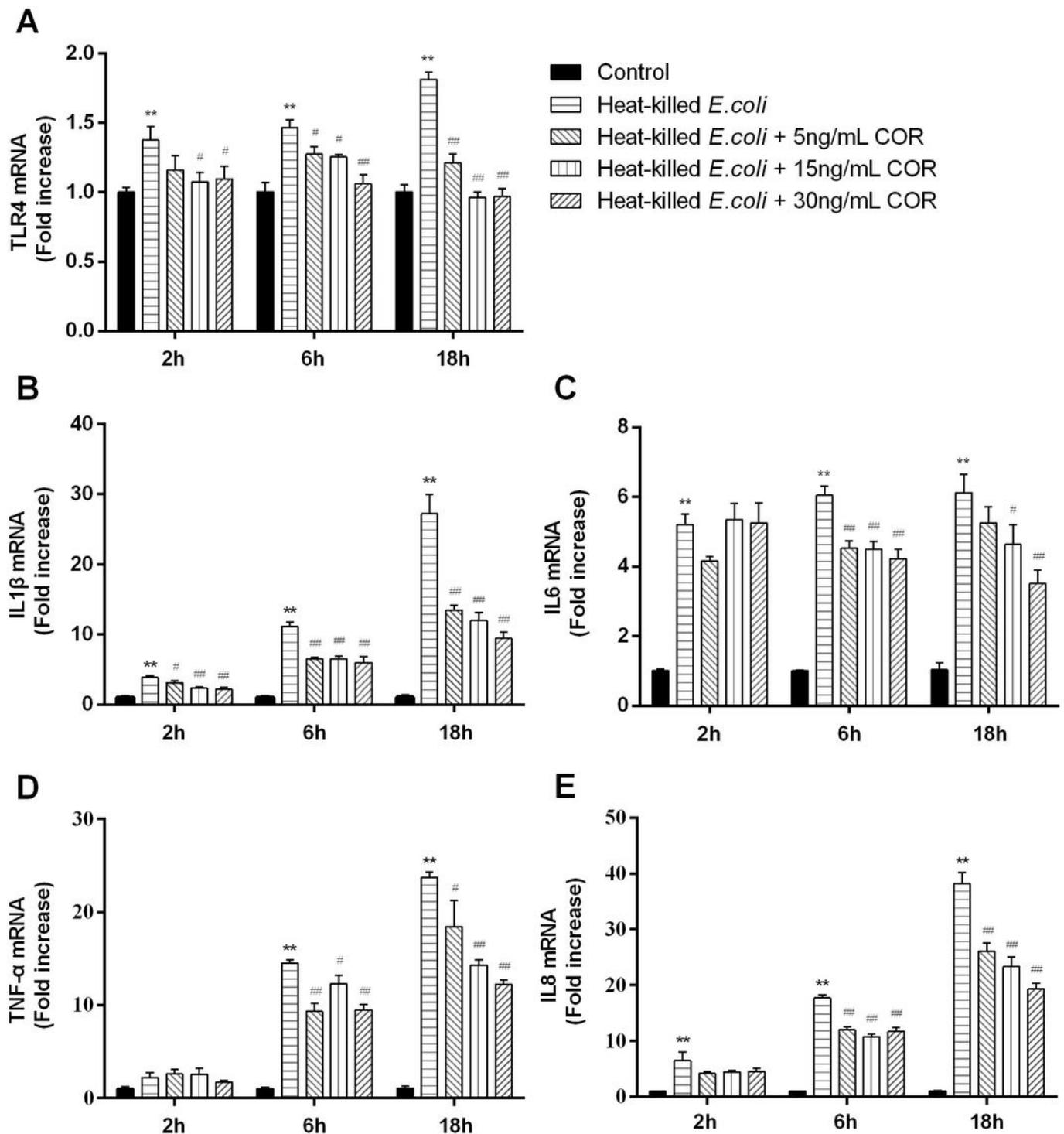
**Figure 1**

The effect of heat-killed and live *E. coli* on bovine endometrial epithelium cell viability. (A) The cell viabilities of BEEC challenged by  $1 \times 10^8$  CFU/mL heat-killed *E. coli* from 0 to 60 h using CCK-8 assay. The data were presented as means  $\pm$  SEM (n = 6). (B) The cell viabilities of BEEC challenged by  $1 \times 10^6$  CFU/mL live *E. coli* at 6 h using trypan blue assay. The data were presented as means  $\pm$  SEM (n = 3).



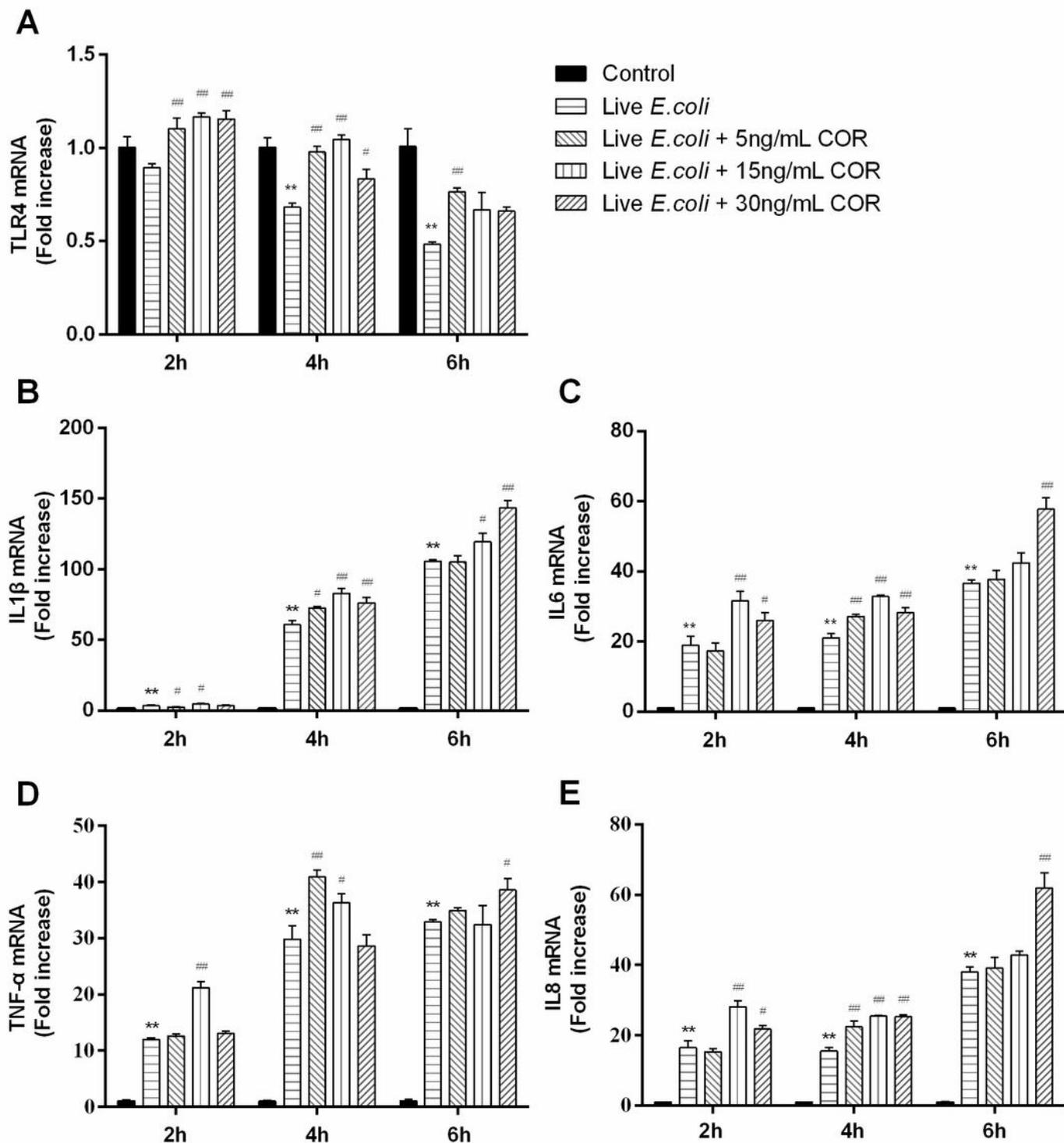
**Figure 2**

Effects of cortisol on the mRNA expressions of TLR4 (A), IL1 $\beta$  (B), IL6 (C), TNF- $\alpha$  (D) and IL8 (E) in LPS-stimulated bovine endometrial epithelial cells. Cells were co-treated with cortisol (5, 15, or 30  $\text{ng}/\text{mL}$ ) and LPS (1  $\mu\text{g}/\text{mL}$ ) for 2, 6, or 18 h. RNA was isolated and analysed by qPCR. The data were present as means  $\pm$  SEM (n = 3). COR, cortisol. \*\* p < 0.01 vs the control group; # p < 0.05, ## p < 0.01 vs the LPS group.



**Figure 3**

Effects of cortisol on the mRNA expressions of TLR4 (A), IL1β (B), IL6 (C), TNF-α (D) and IL8 (E) in heat-killed *E. coli*-stimulated bovine endometrial epithelial cells. Cells were co-treated with cortisol (5, 15, or 30 ng/mL) and heat-killed *E. coli* ( $1 \times 10^8$  CFU/mL) for 2, 6, or 18 h. RNA was isolated and analysed by qPCR. The data were present as means  $\pm$  SEM ( $n = 3$ ). COR, cortisol. \*\*  $p < 0.01$  vs the control group; #  $p < 0.05$ , ##  $p < 0.01$  vs the heat-killed *E. coli* group.



**Figure 4**

Effects of cortisol on the mRNA expressions of TLR4 (A), IL1β (B), IL6 (C), TNF-α (D) and IL8 (E) in live *E. coli*-stimulated bovine endometrial epithelial cells. Cells were co-treated with cortisol (5, 15, or 30 ng/mL) and live *E. coli* ( $1 \times 10^6$  CFU/mL) for 2, 4, or 6 h. RNA was isolated and analysed by qPCR. The data were present as means  $\pm$  SEM ( $n = 3$ ). COR, cortisol. \*\*  $p < 0.01$  vs the control group; #  $p < 0.05$ , ##  $p < 0.01$  vs the live *E. coli* group.