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**Abstract**

The Hippo signaling pathway plays an essential role in adult tissue homeostasis and organ size control. In *Drosophila* and vertebrates, it consists of a highly conserved kinase cascade, which involve MST and Lats that negatively regulate the activity of downstream transcription coactivators, YAP and TAZ. Through its interaction with TEADs and other transcription factors, they mediate both proliferative and antiapoptotic gene expression and thus regulate tissue repair and regeneration. Dysregulation or mutation of the Hippo pathway is linked to tumorigenesis and cancer development. Recent studies have uncovered multiple upstream inputs, including cell density, mechanical stress, G-protein-coupled receptor (GPCR) signaling, and nutrients, that modulate Hippo pathway activity. This review focuses on the role of the Hippo pathway as effectors of these biophysical cues and its potential implications in tissue homeostasis and cancer.

## Introduction

The size of each organ is determined by cell number and cell size. This process involves many signaling pathways during development and regeneration controls cell number in tissue and organs. In recent years, the Hippo tumor suppressor pathway is emerging as a key regulator of organ size and tumorigenesis by inhibiting cell proliferation, promoting apoptosis, and limiting stem/progenitor cell expansion (1). This pathway was initially identified through genetic mosaic screens for growth control genes. In *Drosophila*, the core components of the Hippo pathway include a kinase cascade of Ste20-like kinase Hippo (Hpo) with the scaffolding protein Salvador (Sav) and NDR family kinase Warts (Wts) with its regulatory protein Mob as Tumor Suppressor (Mats) (2-8). Hpo forms a complex with Sav to phosphorylate and activate Wts, which then interacts with Mats (Mob as (9-11). Wts directly phosphorylates the transcriptional co-activator Yki (Yorkie), promoting its interaction with 14-3-3 leading to YAP cytoplasmic retention (12-16). Inactivation of the hippo pathway reduces its downstream kinase mediated YAP phosphorylation. The upphosphorylated YAP translocates to the nucleus where it binds with the TEAD/TEF family transcription factor Sd (Scalloped) to activate transcription of target genes, promoting cell survival and proliferation (17, 18). Then the pathway and its cellular functions, including cell survival, proliferation and organ size control is evolutionally conserved in mammals (13, 19). Core components of the mammalian Hippo pathway include a kinase cascade of mammalian STE20-like protein kinase1/2 (MST1/2) and the large tumour suppressor1/2 (Lats1/2). Mst1/2 in complex with its regulatory protein Sav1 phosphorylates and activates Lats1/2 kinases, which also form a complex with its regulatory protein Mob1. The Yes-associated protein (YAP) is a transcription co-activator and an important downstream effector of the Hippo pathway. YAP was first identified as a non-receptor tyrosine kinase YES1 binding

partner (20). The physiological importance of YAP/TAZ was uncovered after the identification of *Drosophila* Yki as a key effector of the Hippo pathway (12). In a detailed study of Hippo kinase cascade, the Hippo pathway kinase Lats1/2 inhibit YAP by direct phosphorylation on five consensus HXRXXS motifs (13, 19, 21-23). Phosphorylation of S127 in YAP results in cytoplasmic sequestration via 14-3-3 binding and therefore inactivation of YAP. Thus YAP is degraded by the proteasome in a ubiquitin-dependent manner following phosphorylation of Ser 397. Transcriptional co-activator with PDZ-binding motif (TAZ, also called WWTR1), a paralog of YAP paralog in mammals, was initially identified as a 14-3-3 binding protein in a phosphorylation dependent manner (24). TAZ contains four consensus Lats1/2 target motifs and is also regulated by Lats1/2 in a similar fashion (23, 25). Conversely, unphosphorylated YAP localizes in the nucleus and acts mainly through the TEAD family transcription factors to stimulate expression of genes that promote proliferation and inhibits apoptosis (26, 27). Besides TEADs, YAP/TAZ can also interact with several different transcription factors including Smad, Runx1/2, p73, ErbB4, Pax3, and T-box transcription factor 5 (TBX5) to mediate transcription and diverse array of cellular functions (28).

In recent years, beyond the main components of the Hippo pathway defined above, many other additional regulators have been discovered to regulate the Hippo pathway. Accumulating evidence suggests that the core Hippo kinase cascade and YAP/TAZ incorporate various upstream responses, enabling dynamic regulation of tissue homeostasis and cancer (29). In this review we will focus on the expanding roles of YAP/TAZ as mediators of responses to biophysical cues, especially mechanical stress, GPCR signaling and nutrient signaling (Figure 1).

### **Regulation of Hippo-YAP pathway by extracellular mechanical cues**

Growth and development is the net result of various harmonized events of cells to adjust to physical restraints and extracellular mechanical signals. For instance, the cell density mediated cell-cell contact cause growth inhibitory signaling pathway which in large part is mediated by the Hippo pathway (19, 30, 31). Abundant cell-cell contact activate Lats and inactivate YAP that is critically important for contact inhibition. The regulation of the TEAD mediates YAP dependent transcription in response to contact inhibition is also essential for embryo development (32). In addition, the apical-basal cell polarity protein, adherens junctions and tight junctions provide the intrinsic cues to regulate Lats1/2 and restrict YAP activity (33). Interestingly, it was found that YAP /TAZ activity and subcellular localization are regulated by extracellular matrix (ECM) stiffness. When cells are cultured on stiff ECM, YAP/TAZ predominantly localizes to nuclei and promotes YAP /TAZ transcriptional activity. However, when cells are cultured on soft ECM, cells are round and adhesion with ECM is limited. Likewise, YAP/TAZ activity and subcellular localization are depending on the adhesive area. Furthermore, YAP/TAZ activity are modulated by cell stretching, spreading and cell size through changes in cytoskeleton (34, 35). (34, 36). More importantly, activation of YAP/TAZ by rigidity of the extracellular matrix greatly improves differentiation of human pluripotent stem cells into motor neurons (37).

Morphological manipulation and stress fiber quantity changes in response to physical forces inhibit the Hippo pathway and promoting nuclear YAP localization in a way similar to matrix stiffness (38). Also, induction of F-actin polymerization by loss of capping proteins, Cpa and Cpb, or overexpressing an activated actin nucleation factor Diaphanous, leads to cell proliferation and overgrowth in imaginal discs. Studies on *Drosophila* have demonstrated that changing F-actin levels correlates with activation of Yki and causes overgrowth (39). In contrast, reduction of actin-capping protein or inhibition of Capulet, which all induce abnormal F-actin-polymerization, sustains Hippo pathway activity, thereby inducing

expression of Yki target genes near the apical surface in drosophila (40). The outcome of F-actin in regulation of YAP is also likely evolutionarily conserved in mammals as deletion of destrin gene, an actin depolymerizing factor, enhances aberrant actin cytoskeleton and leads to epithelial hyperproliferation (41). This was further established by the observation that CapZ or Cofilin restrict YAP nuclear localization and YAP transcriptional activity (35). The structure of actin cytoskeleton is responsible for the transduction of mechanical stress in cells. The Rho GTPases, which have great effects on actin cytoskeleton organization, is a crucial regulator of YAP/TAZ activity. For example, Disruption of F-actin or inhibition of Rho by specific inhibitors considerably reduces YAP nuclear translocation and activity (36, 38, 42). The molecular mechanism of YAP/TAZ regulation by actin cytoskeleton and mechanical stress has not yet been fully understood. Previous studies ignore MST1/2 and Lats1/2 in the regulation of YAP/TAZ nuclear translocation and transcriptional activation because knockdown of Lats1/2 is not enough to recover YAP/TAZ activity by ECM stiffness (36). However, under detached condition, the Lats1/2 lead to YAP inhibition in a cytoskeleton-dependent manner (42). Similar to that observed in cell detachment, mechanical strain lead to Lats1/2 inhibition to activate YAP in a JNK-dependent manner (43). Accordingly, it is possible that both Lats1/2-dependent and -independent mechanisms are included in the YAP/TAZ regulation by mechanical stress. Recent findings have implicated that YAP/TAZ play a role in breast cancer development in response to mechanical stress. For instance, many cancers such as breast cancer have elevated extracellular stiffness accompanied by an changed ECM composition compared with normal mammary tissue. Remarkably, it was elucidated that YAP is activated in cancer-associated fibroblasts (CAFs), and its function is required for matrix stiffing (44). Higher extracellular stiffness effects on YAP activity and hence contributes to tumor microenvironment. It was proposed that YAP conditioned the tumor microenvironment by modulating matrix stiffing and production of YAP/TAZ target genes,

such as AREG, CYR61 and CTGF to promote tumorigenesis. TAZ is shown to be upregulated in high-grade and metastatic breast tumors (45). In addition, TAZ confers cancer stem cell traits to breast cancer cells, and cancer stem cells expressing high levels of TAZ are observed in high-grade tumors (46). The YAP/TAZ activity and the extracellular matrix provides a positive feedback mechanism in which cancer cells promote matrix stiffening that further activates YAP /TAZ as transcriptional co-activators. Recent studies also show that disturbed flow activate YAP/ TAZ target gene expression through the modulation of Rho-GTPase activities, demonstrating significant role of YAP/TAZ in mediating mechanical cues and vascular homeostasis (47-49).

Overall, Many studies have suggested that actin Rho-GTPases as a sensor to connect mechanical cues to YAP/TAZ activity. However, the involvement of the Hippo pathway kinase MST1/2 and Lats1/2 are not completely understood. Future studies are required to define the mechanotransducers as YAP/TAZ effector as well as the role of the core Hippo kinase cascade in regulation of YAP/TAZ by mechanical cues.

### **Regulation of Hippo-YAP pathway by cell-surface receptors and soluble molecules**

Under normal physiological conditions, hormones or chemical messengers that stimulate cell growth and proliferation. Such molecules are released from the cell sending the signal, cross over the gap between cells by diffusion, and interact with specific receptors in another cell, triggering a response in that cell by activating intracellular signaling which lead to physiological changes inside the cell. Physiologic changes that occur from soluble molecules is tightly regulate cell growth, proliferation and differentiation. It has been hypothesized that extracellular environment, such as hormones might regulate tissue growth and homeostasis through cell surface receptors and Hippo pathway components. An important discovery came with the demonstration that diffusive lipid molecules, such as



lysophosphatidic acid (LPA) and sphingosine-1-phosphate (S1P), could trigger intracellular signaling cascade and activate YAP/TAZ through their cognate G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) (50, 51). Additional study confirmed that both LPA1 and LPA3 are involved in LPA-induced YAP/TAZ activation, which is likely to be related to long-term cell migration and PP1A is required for the LPA-YAP effects in epithelial ovarian cancer cells (52). Consistent with the roles of LPA and S1P in regulating YAP/TAZ, thrombin, the ligand of protease-activated receptors (PARs), stimulated YAP/TAZ activities by inducing its dephosphorylation and target genes expression (53). GPCRs recognize numerous extracellular signals and transduce them to heterotrimeric G proteins, which further transduce these signals intracellular to appropriate downstream effectors and thereby play a main role in various signaling pathways (54). Mechanistically, LPA, S1P and thrombin counteract  $G_{\alpha_{12/13}}$ - and  $G_{\alpha_{q/11}}$ -coupled GPCRs to activate Rho-GTPases. Activation of Rho-GTPase serve as key mediators in the activation of YAP/TAZ from upstream GPCRs. YAP/TAZ activity could be either activated or inhibited depending on the G protein coupled to the GPCRs. Activation of  $G_{\alpha_s}$ -coupled GPCRs by epinephrine and glucagon increases Lats1/2 kinase activities and inactivates YAP/TAZ in a manner dependent on protein kinase A (PKA) (55). Hence, depending on the kind of G proteins, GPCRs can differentially regulate Lats1/2 to stimulate or suppress YAP activity. Other studies further demonstrate that the core Hippo kinase cascade and YAP/TAZ activity is regulated by GPCRs in response to various hormonal cues. For instance, GPR68, a proton-sensing GPCR, is activated in response to decrease in extracellular pH and required for the pH-dependent regulation of the proliferation and apoptosis. Under decrease in extracellular pH, GPR68 lead to increase in the proliferation and decrease in apoptosis of cells with abundant proton sensing GPCR expression. In addition, it was found that YAP (is potent downstream effector of) functions as a downstream effector of GPR68 through  $G_{\alpha_{12/13}}$  and Rho GTPase (56, 57). Besides YAP is required for the pH-

dependent regulation of the differentiation of Mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs) into cancer-associated fibroblasts CAFs. Furthermore, stimulation of G-protein coupled estrogen receptor (GPER) by estrogen activate YAP/TAZ and regulate the expression of numerous gene, including well characterized its target genes via the  $G\alpha_{q/11}$ , PLC $\beta$ /PKC, and Rho/Rock signaling pathways. It was proposed that TAZ was required for breast cancer cell proliferation, migration, and tumor growth. As expected, TAZ expression positively correlated with GPER expression in Human invasive ductal carcinoma (IDC) specimens, indicating a potential role of YAP/TAZ activation by estrogen in breast cancer (58). TxA<sub>2</sub> exerts its biological activity through its cognate Thromboxane A<sub>2</sub> receptor (TP) receptor that couples with  $G\alpha_{q/11}$ ,  $G\alpha_{12/13}$  and other trimeric G proteins to regulate downstream effectors. The TP has been implicated to promote cell migration and proliferation of vascular smooth muscle cells (VSMCs). Treatment of the cells with Thromboxane A<sub>2</sub>, TP activation promotes DNA synthesis and induces VSMC proliferation and migration in a manner dependent on YAP/TAZ (59). Thromboxane A<sub>2</sub> signaling increases YAP/TAZ activity in VSMCs and other cell types via  $G\alpha_{12/13}$ , providing YAP/TAZ as potential therapeutic targets for VSMC-mediated vascular disease. This study shows for the first time that AngII binding to the Angiotensin II type 1 receptor (AT1R) is capable to inhibit Hippo pathway and to activate YAP (60). As GPCR's coupling to the G protein subclass  $G\alpha_{q/11}$ , in general, are able to activate YAP, we therefore expected the same influence of the AT1R, which is mainly coupling to  $G\alpha_{q/11}$ . Stimulation of the AT1R with AngII showed a decreased Lats1/2 activation, which was accompanied by a decreased phosphorylation of its target YAP in HEK293T cells. Despite the initial observation of AngII as a stimulant of YAP dephosphorylation and nuclear localization, Hippo pathway are not activated by stimulation with AngII in podocytes, which show a deactivated pathway. However, the actin cytoskeleton disruption with Latrunculin B reactivate Lats1/2 kinase activity, resulting in an increased

cytoplasmic YAP localization accompanied by a strong induction of apoptosis. Angiotensin II receptor serves as an upstream regulator of the Hippo pathway. The control of Lats1/2 activation and subsequent YAP localization is important for podocyte homeostasis and survival.

In addition to GPCRs, a number of other morphogenic factors elicits diverse receptors mediated signaling pathways to control development and tissue homeostasis. The cytokine receptor leukaemia inhibitory factor receptor (LIFR) activate the Hippo kinase cascade(61). PI3K-PDK1 pathway disrupt the core Hippo complex in response to EGF, leading to inactivation of Lats1/2 and activation of YAP (62). Furthermore, YAP/TAZ are critical mediator of the canonical Wnt/ $\beta$ -catenin and noncanonical alternative Wnt signaling. Two independent groups revealed that Wnt ligands could activate YAP/TAZ through their corresponding GPCRs, Frizzled (FZD) receptors, although distinct signaling mechanisms are utilized. (63-69). In the present studies, TGF $\beta$  and bone morphogenetic protein (BMP) sustain YAP/TAZ activity. Interaction between TAZ and TGF $\beta$ -regulated SMAD2 and SMAD3 govern their nuclear localization and target genes expression. YAP can also involve with SMAD1 and synergize for transcriptional activation of BMP signaling (70-72).

GPCRs are the superfamily of the cell surface receptors mediating the actions of hundreds of extracellular molecules that have a pivotal role in many physiological functions and in multiple diseases, including the development of cancer and cancer metastasis (54). Elevated expression of GPCRs or activating mutation of G $\alpha$  leads to aberrant YAP activation and have been found in several types of cancers (58, 73-75). The regulation of YAP/TAZ by GPCRs implies that the Hippo pathway not only is modulated by a large number of extracellular signals and cell surface receptors but also contributes to a wide range of physiological regulation and may be functioned the key mediators of GPCR agonists or antagonists for disease progression.

### Regulation of Hippo-YAP pathway by nutrient signaling

Nutrients and energy metabolism such as glucose, amino acids and fatty acids are building block of the cells that promotes cell growth. Glucose is a abundant fuel and the most wildy used as an energy source in living organism. Therefore, it is anticipated that nutrient signals can modulate YAP and TAZ activities. As expected, deprivation of glucose, AMPK directly phosphorylates S793 of AMOLT1 and increases AMOTL1 protein levels, resulting in YAP inhibition in a Lats1/2 dependent manner (76). Furthermore, energy stress-activated AMPK directly phosphorylates YAP at multiple sites and this phosphorylation interferes with the interaction between YAP and TEAD, thus contributing to its inactivation and inhibition of TEAD-mediated transcription (77, 78). LKB/STK11 is a known tumor suppressor and a major upstream regulaot of AMPK. LKB1 repress YAP activity via either the core Hippo kinase cascade dependent or independent pathway (79, 80). On the other hand, loss of LKB1 and AMPK contribute to Yki activation and accelerated proliferacion in the drosophila (81). LKB1-mediated inhibition of Yki activity is mediated by AMPK and independent of the Hpo/Wts kinase cascade suggesting a potential energy-dependent pathway controlling proliferation in the central brain(CB) and ventral nerve cord development neural systems(VNC).

Additionally, The Hippo pathway also response to nutrients other than glucose. YAP/TAZ potentiate mTORC activity by increasing expression of the high affinity L-type amino acid transporter (LAT1), which is a heterodimer of SLC7A5 and SLC3A2. YAP/TAZ and TEAD directly induce transcription of LSC7A5, which rescues SLC3A2 protein expression by dimer formation, to increase LAT1 expression and amino acid uptake (82, 83). In parallel, mTOR also is master regulator of cellular growth and survival and stimulates cellular metabolic processes such as protein synthesis. mTORC signaling pathway is reported

to drive YAP activation and its target genes expression in perivascular epithelioid cell tumors and glioblastomas (84-86). Both output of TOR are required for wing cells to divide and gain mass under Yki-Sd control in *drosophila* (87). Of note previous evidence indicated that YAP, a main target of inhibition by the Hippo pathway, can activate AKT through miR-20 mediated inhibition of PTEN (88). These data, combined with a recent study, indicated that mTORC2 can regulate AKT activity both directly and indirectly through the inhibition of the Hippo pathway and the activation of YAP (85). In addition, AKT and MST1 was previously shown to mutually inhibit each other (89, 90). Thus mTOR2 and Hippo pathway can engage in crosstalk at multiple levels. Of note, mTORC2 was also shown to activate SGK1 and PRKCA/PKC $\alpha$  (91-93). Besides lower the cellular cholesterol levels, inhibition of mevalonate pathway inhibits YAP/TAZ nuclear localization and transcriptional response, possibly due to inhibition of the Rho GTPases, which require complex network by which cytoskeleton impinges on YAP/TAZ activation (94). In addition, other nutrient have been shown to be important in regulation of the Hippo pathway. For instance, the salt-induced kinases have been implicated in nutrient sensing that promote Yki target gene expression and tissue overgrowth through phosphorylation of Sav at Ser413 (95).

The most recognized functional output of YAP and TAZ is to promote cell survival and proliferation by cellular nutrient status. Therefore, given the central role of Hippo signaling pathway in nutrient sensing, understanding how nutrients contribute to cancer development remains an area of intense investigation.

## Conclusions

Extensive research within last decades has been identified more components and other signaling pathways linked with the Hippo pathway and YAP/TAZ regulation, since many core Hippo pathway components have been discovered in *drosophila* and mammals. In recent

years, the Hippo pathway is influentially and intensely regulated by a wide array of extracellular biophysical cues, including mechanical cues, cell surface receptors and nutrient signaling from neighboring cells and the extracellular matrix. The core Hippo kinase cascade integrates multiple upstream inputs to control YAP/TAZ activity, allowing vigorous regulation of cellular process such as proliferation, differentiation and apoptosis in intricate physiological contexts and in cancer.

However, it is important to realize that the gaps still remains in the understanding of the key molecular mechanisms in extracellular biophysical cues. For example, it is unclear whether Lats1/2 kinase be involved in YAP/TAZ regulation by actin cytoskeleton under mechanical cues. Current evidence showed that Lats1/2 kinase activity is important for GPCR mediated YAP/TAZ regulation while Mst1/2 are not required for YAP/TAZ regulation by both mechanical cues and GPCR signaling. This suggests that the possibility of other mechanisms or other unknown molecules being involved in the process in response to physiological environment. Furthermore, the detailed mechanism by which the actin cytoskeleton transmits upstream cues to modulate Lats1/2 kinase activity is yet to be uncovered. The possibly existing Lats1/2-independent mechanism of YAP/TAZ regulation by actin cytoskeleton is yet to be uncovered. It is also interesting to define how YAP/TAZ may function to converge on these mechanical and hormonal cues respond to the environment in an appropriate manner. For example, both mechanical cues and cell surface receptors, especially GPCRs signaling input into regulation of Rho GTPase activity and thus affects YAP/TAZ activity.

Taken together, the YAP/TAZ are unquestionably important mediators of extracellular biophysical cues in regulation of organ size control, regeneration and tumorigenesis thus it would be legitimate attractive potential targets for therapeutic target for cancer therapy

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**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest



**FIGURE LEGENDS****Figure 1. Regulation of the Hippo-YAP pathway by extracellular biophysical cues.**

Mechanical stress inhibits Lats 1/2 kinase activity via Rho GTPase and actin cytoskeleton. GPCR signaling can either activate or inhibit YAP/TAZ activity through the coupled G $\alpha$  protein. Cellular junction and cell polarity modulate the Hippo pathway. Nutrient signaling modulates the core Hippo kinase and YAP activity through AMPK. YAP/TAZ activity involved in amino acid induced mTORC1 activation.

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