Reversal of Diabetes in NOD Mice by Clinical-Grade Proinsulin and IL-10-Secreting Lactococcus lactis in Combination With Low-Dose Anti-CD3 Depends on the Induction of Foxp3-Positive T Cells

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03 May 2024

Original Article

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Running title: Tregs sustain disease reversal by *L. lactis* therapy

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Introduction of beta cell auto-antigens via the gut through *Lactococcus lactis (L. lactis)* has been demonstrated to be a promising approach for diabetes reversal in NOD mice. Here we show that a combination of low-dose anti-CD3 with a clinical-grade self-containing *L. lactis* appropriate for human application secreting human pro-insulin and IL10 cured 66% of new-onset diabetic mice, comparable to plasmid-driven *L. lactis*. Initial blood glucose concentrations (<350 mg/dl) and insulin autoantibody positivity were predictors of stable reversal of hyperglycemia and decline in IAA positivity was an immune biomarker of therapeutic outcome. Assessment of the immune changes induced by the *L. lactis*-based therapy revealed elevated frequencies of CD4$^+$Foxp3$^+$ T cells in the pancreatic draining lymph nodes, pancreas, and peripheral blood of all treated mice, independent of metabolic outcome. Neutralization of CTLA4 and TGF-β partially abrogated the suppressive function of therapy-induced Tregs. Ablation or functional impairment of Foxp3$^+$ Tregs *in vivo* at start or stop of therapy impaired immune tolerance, highlighting the dependence of the therapy-induced tolerance in new-onset diabetic mice on the presence and functionality of CD4$^+$Foxp3$^+$ T cells. Biomarkers identified in this study can potentially be used in the future to tailor the *L. lactis*-based combination therapy for individual patients.

Clinical translation of antigen-based therapies has been disappointing so far, and specifically in autoimmune type 1 diabetes (T1D) the administration of oral insulin or glutamic acid decarboxylase (GAD) has not been efficacious in preventing or halting the disease in high-risk individuals or in new-onset patients to date (1-3). Issues like route and timing of vaccination, dosing strategy, but also reliability of delivery of full protein or peptide due to gastric digestion may lie at the basis of these failures (4). The introduction of a delivery vehicle like the gram-positive food-grade lactic acid bacterium *Lactococcus lactis* (*L. lactis*), able to deliver intact antigen and immunomodulating cytokines directly into the gut, in proximity to the gut-associated lymphoid tissue, is an appealing tool (5; 6). Another reason why antigen-based therapies did not succeed in stopping ongoing autoimmune processes may be that by the time the disease manifests the strong pathogenic immune reactions overpower the regulatory mechanisms induced by the therapy. In light of this consideration, we and others advocate that combinations of robust antigen-based interventions and systemic immune modulators may ultimately be needed to successfully reinstate long-term tolerance in ongoing autoimmunity without compromising immune function (7; 8). Previously, we reported that a combination therapy consisting of a 5-day course of anti-CD3 antibodies at disease onset along with a 6-week oral administration of live genetically modified *L. lactis* producing human pro-insulin (PINS) and IL10 safely restored durable normoglycemia in approximately 60% of non-obese diabetic (NOD) mice and elicited forkhead box p3 (Foxp3)-positive T cells with a regulatory phenotype (9). The route to bring this successful antigen-based therapy to new-onset T1D patients will depend both on the generation of a clinical-grade self-containing *L. lactis* strain (10) but also on a profound understanding of the processes underlying this disease-modifying approach and consequently on the implementation of certified biomarkers of both immune and therapeutic success.

Here, we demonstrated similar therapeutic efficacy in autoimmune diabetes remission using a clinical-grade self-containing *L. lactis* vaccine compared with the plasmid-driven *L. lactis* strain reported previously (9). In addition, we identified both functional beta cell reserve (initial blood

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glucose concentrations <350 mg/dl) and pre-therapy insulin autoantibody (IAA) positivity as predictors of therapeutic efficacy and proved that Foxp3$^+$ T cells are prerequisite for the induction and maintenance of active tolerance induced by the *L. lactis*-based therapy.

Research Design and Methods

Mice.

NOD mice, originally obtained from Dr. Wu (Department of Endocrinology, Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Beijing, China), were housed and inbred in the animal facility of KU LEUVEN since 1989. NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice and NOD.Foxp3.hCD2 mice were bred from stocks kindly provided by Dr. Benoist (Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA) and Dr. Hori (RIKEN Research Center for Allergy and Immunology, Yokohama, Japan) respectively. Housing of all mice occurred under semi-barrier conditions, and animals were fed sterile food and water ad libitum. Mice were screened for the onset of diabetes by evaluating glucose levels in urine (Diastix® Reagent strips, Bayer, Leverkusen, Germany) and venous blood (AccuCheck®, Roche Diagnostics, Vilvoorde, Belgium). Mice were diagnosed as diabetic when having glucosuria and two consecutive blood glucose measurements exceeding 200 mg/dl. NOD-scid and NOD-scid γc -/- mice were bred from stocks purchased from the Jackson Laboratory (Bar Harbor, ME). Animals were maintained in accordance with the National Institutes of Health Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals, and all experimental procedures were approved and performed in accordance with the Ethics Committees of the KU Leuven (Leuven, Belgium) under project number 185-2009.

Bacteria and media.

Details on the construction, culture and *in vitro* quantification of the lactococcal vectors used in the present study are available in the Supplemental Research Design and Methods (9). For intragastric

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inoculations, stock suspensions were diluted 1000-fold in growth media and incubated for 16 hours at 30°C, reaching a saturation density of 2×10^9 cfu/ml. Bacteria were harvested by centrifugation and concentrated 10-fold in BM9 medium. Treatment doses consisted of 100 µl of this bacterial suspension.

New-onset diabetes intervention.

Upon diabetes determination, NOD or NOD transgenic mice were treated for 5 consecutive days intravenously (i.v.) (day 0-4; 2.5 µg/mouse) with hamster anti-mouse CD3 antibodies (clone 145-2C11, BioXCell, West Lebanon, NH). This therapy was given in combination with oral administration of either plasmid-driven or clinical-grade *L. lactis* strains (2×10^9 cfu) 5 times per week during 6 weeks. Control mice were left untreated. Individual blood glucose concentrations at the start of treatment were recorded. Mice were tested 3 times weekly for their weight and blood glucose status. Remission was defined as the absence of glucosuria and a return to normal blood glucose concentrations. Experimental animals were sacrificed immediately or long after stopping therapy (6 or 14 weeks after treatment initiation). Peripheral blood, lymph organs and pancreas were harvested, and single cells were assessed for phenotyping as described in the Supplemental Research Design and Methods. Detailed methodology and references on *in vitro* suppression assays are described in the Supplemental Research Design and Methods. Mice were removed from the study prior to the 14-week endpoint when blood glucose concentrations exceeded 600 mg/dl in two consecutive measurements.

Glucose tolerance test.

One or two weeks prior to sacrifice intraperitoneal glucose tolerance tests (IPGTT) were performed. Mice were fasted for 16 hours, injected intraperitoneally (i.p.) with glucose (2 g/kg) and blood

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glucose concentrations were measured at 0, 15, 30, 60, 90 and 120 minutes.

IAA measurement.

Heparinized plasma was collected from new-onset diabetic NOD mice before treatment randomization and at therapy discontinuation, and IAAs were analyzed at the UF Department of Pathology, Immunology and Laboratory Medicine, College of Medicine, Gainesville, Florida, as described (11).

In vivo blocking of CTLA4 and TGF-β.

Mice tolerized by *L. lactis*-based therapy were injected intraperitoneally (i.p.) after therapy withdrawal with blocking antibodies against CTLA4 (clone UC10-4F10, Bioceros) and TGF-β (clone 1D11.16.8, BioXCell) in the following dose regimen: 250 μg at day 1 and 3 and then 100 μg at day 6, 8, 10, 13 and 18 for CTLA4; 200 μg 3 times per week during 3 weeks for TGF-β. Blood glucose concentrations were measured daily up to 25 days after first injection.

Adoptive transfer of diabetes.

To assess the diabetogenic potential of Teff cells, total T cells from spleen (1×10^7 cells) of new-onset diabetic controls, responders and non-responders of *L. lactis*-based therapy were transferred i.v. into the tail veins of 6- to 8-week-old immune-deficient NOD-scid mice. Recipient mice were monitored twice weekly for the development of diabetes up to 100 days post-cell transfer.

DT-mediated depletion of Foxp3$^+$ T cells in NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice.

NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice (expressing the human diphtheria toxin receptor (DTR) under the control of Foxp3 transcriptional control elements) allow for the depletion of Foxp3$^+$ T cells upon DT

administration (12). For Treg depletion, NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice (unmanipulated or tolerized after stopping the *L. lactis-based therapy*) were injected i.p. with 40 µg/kg bodyweight of DT (Sigma) on days 1, 2, 4, and 7 and examined on day 8. Following DT injections, weight, urine and blood glucose status of mice were monitored. Foxp3[+] T cells were monitored in peripheral blood and pancreas by flow cytometry and histology respectively as described (13).

FOXP3-inhibitory peptide P60 in combination with L. lactis-based therapy

P60 (a 15-mer synthetic peptide that can bind to and block FOXP3, i.p. 50 µg/dose daily, up to 14 doses) was given at start of the *L. lactis*-based therapy, as previously described (14).

Histology of pancreas and insulitis grading.

Six-µm sections from formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded pancreas tissues were cut and collected 100-µm apart, then stained with hematoxylin eosin. Islets were observed under light microscopy at 20× or 40×, enumerated and graded by an independent investigator in blinded fashion. At least 25 islets per pancreatic sample were scored for islet infiltration as follows: 0, no infiltration; 1, peri-insulitis; 2, islets with lymphocyte infiltration in less than 50% of the area, 3, islets with lymphocyte infiltration in more than 50% of the area or completely destroyed.

Islet-resident Foxp3[+] T cell detection.

Pancreas tissues were snap-frozen in 2-methyl-butane 99% (ACROS Organics, Geel, Belgium), and cut into 12-µm tissue sections. Foxp3[+] T cell detection was performed as described (9).

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Statistics.

All data were analyzed using GraphPad Prism 6 (Graphpad Prism, La Jolla, CA). Survival curves were computed with Kaplan-Meier test and compared with log-rank test. Groups were analyzed by ANOVA (non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test) with Dunn's multiple comparison or with Mann-Whitney U test, as appropriate. Error bars represent SEM. Unless otherwise indicated, differences are not significant (ns). * P <0.05, ** P <0.01, *** P <0.001, **** P < 0.0001.

Results

A clinical-grade self-containing L. lactis vaccine combined with low-dose anti-CD3 stably reverts new-onset diabetes, preserves residual beta cell function and halts insulitis progression in NOD mice.

Using a clinical-grade self-containing *L. lactis* strain secreting human PINS along with IL10 in combination with sub-therapeutic doses of anti-CD3 antibodies, 66% (23 out of 35) of mice reverted to normoglycemia for at least 14 weeks after disease onset, which was significantly superior to 43% of mice treated by anti-CD3 alone (**Fig. 1A**). This therapeutic efficacy obtained with the clinical-grade *L. lactis* strain was comparable to the combination therapy with plasmid-driven *L. lactis* strain (72%, 18 out of 25 mice, ns). As expected, animals left untreated (n=20) or treated with the empty vector bacterial strain *L. lactis*-pT1NX (n=9) remained hyperglycemic and were sacrificed when 20% of their starting body weight was lost. Monotherapy with either the clinical-grade or plasmid-driven *L. lactis* strain secreting PINS and IL10 was significantly less effective than the combination with anti-CD3 (0% (n=8) and 17% (n=8) respectively)(**Fig. 1A**).

During follow up, new-onset diabetic controls and mice protected or not by *L. lactis*-based therapy were subjected to IPGTT and sacrificed 6 weeks after treatment initiation at which time their pancreas tissues were assessed by histology. Only in the successfully treated animals, residual beta

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cell function (i.e. assessed as area under glucose tolerance curve (AUCglucose)) was preserved and smaller proportions of islets had severe insulitis (**Fig. 1B**). Of interest, at the end of the combination therapy no difference in the severity of insulitis was observed between responders and non-responders (**Fig. 1C**).

Starting glycemia and IAA positivity predict therapeutic success of L. lactis-based therapy.

No influence of age or gender of mice was observed on therapeutic success of the *L. lactis*-based therapy (data not shown). However, as shown previously (9), glycemic concentrations at the beginning of therapy predicted success, with 82% of mice starting with a glycemia below 350 mg/dl cured (n=22), in comparison to 38% of mice with a starting glycemia above 350 mg/dl (n=13) (**Fig. 2A**). In addition, positivity for IAAs at entry seemed to correlate with therapeutic success (**Fig. 2B**). Interestingly, mice with blood glucose concentrations <350 mg/dl and IAA positivity at therapy start had a clearly superior diabetes remission rate (89%, n = 8) than mice with blood glucose levels >350 mg/dl and being IAA negative (33%; n = 5; P=0.07)(**Fig. 2C**). Moreover, the *L. lactis*-based therapy significantly decreased IAA levels, particularly in mice responsive to the therapy (**Fig. 2D**).

L. lactis-based therapy induces higher levels of Foxp3$^+$ T cells with regulatory capacity but no changes in Teff cells.

The mechanisms underlying disease remission induced by the *L. lactis*-based treatment were investigated by dissociating between the therapeutic immune effects in mice responsive or not to the intervention. We found that the percentages of CD4$^+$Foxp3$^+$ (both CD25$^+$ and CD25$^-$) T cells observed in the peripheral blood (**Fig. 3A**), the pancreatic draining lymph nodes (**Fig. 3B**), and the pancreas (**Fig. 3C**) were significantly higher in mice treated with the *L. lactis*-based therapy in comparison to untreated controls. Interestingly, in the pancreatic draining lymph nodes and pancreas,

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but not in peripheral blood, the increased frequency of CD4$^+$Foxp3$^+$ T cells was less pronounced in responders than non-responders. Using multicolor flow cytometry, we identified that most CD4$^+$Foxp3$^+$ Tregs were positive for CTLA4 and that the expression of this inhibitory marker was significantly higher in pancreatic draining lymph nodes (for both responders and non-responders) and pancreas (only for responders) of treated mice compared to untreated controls (**Supplemental Fig. S1B** and **1C**). Of interest, no differences in the percentages of CD4$^+$Foxp3$^+$CTLA4$^+$ T cells were observed in the peripheral blood of treated mice compared to untreated controls (**Fig. 3D**).

The percentages of naïve (CD44$^-$CD62L$^+$CCR7$^+$), effector memory (CD44$^+$CD62L$^-$CCR7$^-$) and central memory (CD44$^+$CD62L$^+$CCR7$^+$) CD4$^+$ T cells were not altered in any recipient group with respect to therapeutic success or failure (data not shown). Transfer of splenocytes from responders and non-responders of *L. lactis*-based treatment caused diabetes in NOD-scid recipients with similar disease kinetics as transfer of splenocytes isolated from untreated new-onset diabetic controls, suggesting that circulating diabetogenic cells were not depleted from treated mice (**Supplemental Fig. S2**).

Diabetes reversal induced by L. lactis-based therapy is accompanied by and depends on the generation of functional Foxp3$^+$ Tregs.

Using NOD.Foxp3.hCD2 mice treated by *L. lactis*-based therapy, we could isolate CD4$^+$CD25$^+$Foxp3$^+$ T cells for functional *in vitro* studies, in which they suppressed proliferation, CD69 activation and IFN-γ production of pathogenic CD4$^+$CD25$^-$ Teff cells. These Tregs produced IL10 (and TGF-β) when they were co-cultured and stimulated with anti-CD3 antibody in the presence of splenic antigen-presenting cells (APCs) isolated from NOD-scid γc -/- mice (**Fig. 4** and data not shown). No difference in regulatory capacity of CD4$^+$CD25$^-$Foxp3$^+$ T cells was seen between therapy responders and non-responders.

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Addition of anti-CTLA4 Ig (clone UC10-4F10) or a TGF-β neutralizing antibody (clone 1D11.16.8) significantly reduced the suppression by the $CD4^+CD25^+Foxp3^+$ T cells (**Fig. 5A**), suggesting that $CD4^+CD25^+Foxp3^+$ Tregs of cured mice inhibit Teff proliferation via a CTLA4- and TGF-β-dependent fashion *in vitro*. Adding anti-IL10 (clone JES5-2A5) did not alter the direct suppressive effect of the Tregs. On the other hand, these regulatory mechanisms were not demonstrated with the $CD4^+CD25^-Foxp3^+$ T cell fraction from therapy responders and non-responders (**Fig. 5B**). Treating stably cured mice *in vivo* with a combination of anti-CTLA4 Ig (clone UC10-4F10) and anti-TGF-β (clone 1D11.16.8) led to diabetes recurrence in 2 out of 5 mice (**Fig. 5C**).

Finally, we investigated whether the therapeutic success of *L. lactis*-based therapy was depended on the presence and functionality of $Foxp3^+$ T cells. For this, new-onset diabetic NOD mice were simultaneously treated with the *L. lactis*-based therapy and the FOXP3-inhibitory peptide P60 for a period of 14 days (**Fig. 6A**). Interestingly, none of the mice (n=6) developed normoglycemia, while mice treated with the *L. lactis*-based therapy and vehicle (n=11) had already a 60% diabetes remission rate, indicating that Tregs are crucial for induction of therapy-induced tolerance (**Fig. 6B**).

Next, new-onset (spontaneously) diabetic NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice were treated with the *L. lactis*-based therapy and after stable diabetes reversal was observed, $Foxp3^+$ T cells were eliminated using DT as described in the scheme depicted in **Fig. 7A**. First, we established in unmanipulated NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice that the selected DT regimen eliminated over 90% of $CD4^+Foxp3^+$ T cells, with the remaining Tregs expressing low or no CD25, in the peripheral blood within 3 days after first DT injection (**Supplemental Fig. S3A-C**). A progressive repopulation of these cells started from day 5 after first DT injection as has been reported for several Foxp3.DTR strains (15-17). This DT regimen also dramatically decreased the amount of $Foxp3^+$ T cells residing in the pancreas, consequently leading to the development of autoimmune diabetes (**Supplemental Fig. S3B and S2D**). Next, comparable to wild-type NOD mice, the *L. lactis*-based treatment induced autoimmune diabetes remission in 57% of NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice (4 out of 7 mice)(**Fig. 7B**). Transient $Foxp3^+$ T

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cell depletion resulted in a complete reversal to the diabetic state in all mice (n=4) that were initially cured by the therapy, as evidenced by the reappearance of glucosuria along with severe hyperglycemia starting from day 2 after first DT injection (**Fig. 7B**). This breach of immune tolerance to insulin-producing beta cells was also accompanied by the induction of severe insulitis (**Fig. 7C**) and the ablation of the islet-resident Foxp3[+] Treg pool (**Fig. 7D**). Collectively, these data demonstrated that the therapeutic effect from the *L. lactis*-based intervention depended on the presence and functionality of Foxp3[+] Tregs.

Discussion

Oral tolerance as a means of intervention to arrest disease has been extensively explored in various animal models of autoimmune disease including T1D (18). We previously described reversal of new-onset autoimmune diabetes in mice by the oral administration of plasmid-driven *L. lactis* strains secreting diabetes-relevant antigens (i.e. whole PINS or GAD65 peptide) and IL10 in combination with systemic low-dose anti-CD3 (9; 11). In both antigen-based therapies, induction of CD4[+]CD25[+]Foxp3[+] T cells accompanied the therapeutic success.

In the current study, we designed an oral clinical-grade self-containing *L. lactis* strain secreting chromosomal-integrated human PINS and IL10. When combined with a short course of sub-therapeutic doses of anti-CD3, the intervention was safe and highly effective in inducing long-term normoglycemia in new-onset diabetic mice. Initial blood glucose concentrations (<350 mg/dl) in addition to IAA positivity at disease onset were predictors of therapeutic outcome, while preservation of residual beta cell function and decline in IAA positivity were markers of therapeutic success. It is encouraging that studies with anti-CD3 monotherapy in new-onset T1D patients already revealed that subjects enrolled within 6 weeks of diagnosis and with higher levels of C-peptide at

entry responded better to therapy (19-21). These observations suggest that some degree of residual

beta cell mass will be necessary for therapeutic success when intervening at the moment of diabetes

diagnosis, namely when dysglycemia is present. Likewise, a post-hoc analysis of new-onset T1D

participants of the otelixizumab trial found a good correlation between pre-existing IAA levels and

clinical outcome (22). IAA positivity at study entry was also found to distinguish responders from

non-responders among recipients of oral insulin (1).

Our previous studies suggested that the mechanism of *L. lactis*-based therapy involved the induction

of CD4$^+$CD25$^+$Foxp3$^+$ T cells (9). By dissociating between the immune effects of the *L. lactis*-based

intervention in mice responsive or not to the therapy, we were able to further characterize the nature

and role of the immune processes accompanying the treatment. The *L. lactis*-based therapy induced

suppressive IL10-secreting CD4$^+$Foxp3$^+$ (both CD25$^+$ and CD25$^-$) T cells in the pancreatic draining

lymph nodes and pancreas of responders and even more so of non-responders, suggesting enhanced

recruitment of Tregs to the inflamed target tissues. In the periphery, the frequency of CD4$^+$Foxp3$^+$ T

cells was also increased in treated mice compared to untreated controls, pointing towards possible

value for this cell population as immune marker. Interestingly, the frequency of CTLA4$^+$ T cells

among various Treg subsets was significantly higher in the pancreas of combination therapy-treated

responder mice compared to new-onset diabetic mice and in contrast to combination therapy-treated

non-responder mice. CTLA4 by Tregs has a non-redundant role to limit lymphopenia-induced

uncontrolled proliferation of autoreactive Teff cells *in vivo* (23). Alternatively, CTLA4 by Tregs may

prolong the contact time between Tregs and dendritic cells via LFA1 activation (24), increasing the

efficiency of Treg suppression in a (transient) lymphopenic environment as the one induced by low-

dose anti-CD3. As various immune or tissue-specific mediators are important for Treg suppressive

function at these inflammatory sites, more in-depth studies looking at expression of chemokines,

adhesion molecules and extracellular matrix components of site-specific effector Tregs can provide

more insights in follow-up studies. Of note, no difference was seen in the degree of insulitis between

responder and non-responder mice, suggesting also alterations in other lymphocyte subsets besides Tregs.

It is still not fully understood how Tregs control immune effector responses in autoimmune diseases and inflammation. Several studies demonstrated that peripheral Tregs can use different regulatory mechanisms according to their environmental milieu and stimulatory conditions (25). In our case, CTLA4 and TGF-β were important for the regulatory activity of therapy-expanded CD4[+]CD25[+]Foxp3[+] T cells *in vitro* and partially *in vivo*, while IL10 was not. There is no consensus on the role of CTLA4 for Treg function and several effects have been reported; induction of cell-intrinsic negative signals to activated Teff cells, modulation of APCs' development and stable function of Foxp3[+] Tregs (26; 27). With regard to the involvement of TGF-β in therapy-mediated suppression, this cytokine can regulate several immunological processes, such as inflammation, lineage commitment, antibody generation as well as tolerance induction (28). Moreover, it can preserve Foxp3 expression and support the differentiation of other T cells into Treg-like cells (29). In fact, TGF-β can promote the development of IL10-secreting Tregs, as treatment of mice with anti-TGF-β prevented the conversion of CD4[+]Foxp3[-] cells into CD4[+]Foxp3[+]IL10[+] cells in intestine-associated lymphoid tissues (30). Although IL10 seemed to be a good marker for the identification of our *L. lactis*-based therapy-induced Tregs, the role of IL10 in their regulator function remains controversial. Others also demonstrated that anti-IL10 antibodies did not abrogate established tolerance *in vivo* (31). Here, it has been discussed whether IL10 modulated the APCs' maturation phenotype inducing anergy in both antigen-specific CD4[+] and CD8[+] T cells and preferentially converting truly naïve CD4[+] T cells into suppressor cells expressing Foxp3, rather than through direct activity on T cells (32). Based on our observations, it is intriguing to speculate that Treg production of IL10 is a major mechanism by which Tregs regulate inflammation at environmental interfaces, whereas TGF-β and CTLA4-dependent regulation of APCs' function may be a regulatory

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mechanism that predominates in secondary lymphoid tissues where it controls the initial activation and expansion of naïve autoreactive T-cells.

As in mice, human Tregs are defined by having a suppressive phenotype endowed by high and sustained expression of the transcription factor Foxp3 (33) and loss of function/mutation in the Foxp3 gene leads to severe fatal autoimmune disorders (15; 34). In the current study, we discovered that the specific inhibition of Treg functionality by the P60 peptide (14) at the start of *L. lactis*-based therapy completely impaired the induction of therapy-induced tolerance. Moreover, transient depletion of Foxp3$^+$ Tregs from therapy-tolerized NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice was sufficient to induce complete disease relapse in all animals, demonstrating that the presence of Foxp3$^+$ T cells was crucial to maintain therapeutic tolerance and control pathogenic Teff cells which were still present in mice responsive to *L. lactis*-based therapy. A recent study suggested that antigen-specific Foxp3$^+$ Tregs can also mediate tolerance both by diminishing recruitment of antigen-carrying inflammatory APCs to lymph nodes and by impairing their function (35).

In conclusion, our data demonstrated that combining a clinical-grade self-containing *L. lactis* secreting human PINS and IL10 with low-dose anti-CD3 increased the frequency of diabetes reversal compared to anti-CD3 mono-therapy. Both therapy responders and non-responders had increased frequencies of CD4$^+$Foxp3$^+$ T cells, suggesting that immune effects induced by the *L. lactis*-based therapy occurred in each individual recipient, but that therapeutic success (defined as return to stable normoglycemia) depended on other parameters, such as functional beta cell mass still present at disease onset. This idea was further strengthened by the observation that therapeutic success was correlated with starting glycemia. Next to initial blood glucose concentrations at entry, also IAA levels predicted outcome of this *L. lactis*-based therapy using PINS as antigen. Finally, we showed that Foxp3$^+$ Tregs were essential to induce and maintain active tolerance and control diabetogenic immune responses in tolerized mice. These findings provide all the ingredients for testing this intervention in humans: a clinical-grade self-containing *L. lactis* secreting islet antigen(s),

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biomarkers for predicting therapeutic success, and the demonstration that the induction of Foxp3[+] T cells is the basis of the *L. lactis*-based therapy-induced cure.

Authors' contributions

T.T: design, experiments, interpretation of data, drafting of the manuscript; D.P.C: design, experiments, interpretation of data, critical revision of article; H.K: critical revision of article; G.S: experiments; F.M.: experiments; J.P.M.C.M.C: experiments; L.S: critical revision of article; P.R: critical revision of article; C.W: experiments, critical revision of article; N.C: critical revision of article; J.J.L: critical revision of article; F.D: critical revision of article, interpretation of data; C.G: idea, design, interpretation of data, drafting of the manuscript; C.M: idea, design, interpretation of data, drafting of the manuscript. C.M and C.G stand as guarantors for the study.

Acknowledgements

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Disclosure

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Figure legends

Figure 1 – A clinical-grade self-containing *L. lactis* vaccine combined with low-dose anti-CD3 stably reverts new-onset diabetes, preserves residual beta cell function and halts insulitis progression in NOD mice. New-onset diabetic NOD mice were treated as indicated and blood glucose concentrations were followed up for 14 weeks post-treatment initiation (**A**) Shown is the percentage of mice that remained diabetic after treatment. †, dead or moribund mice. In all Kaplan-Meier survival curves, statistical significance between groups was determined by Mantel-Cox log-rank test; * P < 0.05, ****, P < 0.0001. (**B**) IPGTTs were performed on new-onset diabetic NOD mice in addition to *L. lactis*-based combination therapy (CT)-treated mice (both responders and non-responders) 1 to 2 weeks prior to treatment termination. Corresponding area under the glucose tolerance curve (AUCglucose; mg/dl × 120 minutes) over 2 hours is shown. (**C**) Insulitis scoring was performed in a blinded manner on paraffin-embedded pancreatic sections of new-onset diabetic and *L. lactis*-based combination therapy (CT)-treated mice (both responders and non-responders), as indicated, at the end of treatment. Statistical significance between groups was calculated using Mann-Whitney t-test; ** P < 0.01.

Figure 2 – Starting glycemia and IAA positivity at study entry predict therapeutic success of *L. lactis*-based combination therapy. (**A**) New-onset diabetic NOD mice were stratified based on starting blood glucose concentrations (b.g.) under or above 350 mg/dl at study entry. Shown is the percentage of mice that remained diabetic after combination treatment (CT) with the clinical-grade *L. lactis* strain. In the Kaplan-Meier survival curve, statistical significance between groups was determined by Mantel-Cox log-rank test; ** P < 0.01. (**B**) Before treatment randomization, the serum of each individual NOD mouse was collected to measure IAA levels in a blinded fashion. Percentage of mice responsive or not to *L. lactis*-based combination therapy for IAA positivity. (**C**) New-onset diabetic NOD mice were stratified based on starting blood glucose concentrations (b.g.) under or

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above 350 mg/dl and IAA status (positive or negative) at study entry. Shown is the percentage of mice that were tolerized after therapy. (**D**) IAA levels at diabetes diagnosis and after *L. lactis*-based combination treatment follow-up in therapy responders (upper panel) and non-responders (lower panel). Statistical significance between groups was calculated using Mann-Whitney t-test; ** P < 0.01. Starting glycemia and positivity for IAAs at entry correlated with therapeutic success. Change in IAA positivity between pre- and post-therapy was significantly different in therapy responders.

Figure 3 – *L. lactis*-based combination therapy induces higher levels of Foxp3$^+$ T cells in responders than in non-responders. The percentages of CD25$^+$Foxp3$^+$ cells (left panel), CD25$^-$Foxp3$^+$ cells (middle panel), and total Foxp3$^+$ cells (right panel) within the CD4$^+$ T cell population in peripheral blood (**A**), pancreatic draining lymph nodes (**B**) and pancreas (**C**) of new-onset diabetic and *L. lactis*-based combination therapy (CT)-treated mice (both responders and non-responders). The percentages of CD25$^+$Foxp3$^+$CTLA4$^+$ cells (left panel), CD25$^-$Foxp3+CTLA4$^+$ cells (middle panel), and Foxp3$^+$CTLA4$^+$ cells (right panel) within the CD4$^+$ T cell population in peripheral blood (**D**), pancreatic draining lymph nodes (**E**) and pancreas (**F**) of new-onset diabetic and *L. lactis*-based combination therapy (CT)-treated mice (both responders and non-responders). Each symbol represents one mouse, and horizontal bars indicate the median value. Statistical significance was calculated using Mann-Whitney t-test; * P < 0.05, ** P < 0.01, ***, P < 0.001; ****, P < 0.0001.

Figure 4 – *L. lactis*-based combination therapy induces suppressive IL10-secreting Foxp3$^+$ T cells in responders and non-responders. *In vitro* polyclonal suppressor assay. CD4$^+$CD25$^-$ effector T cells (Teff) were isolated from normoglycemic NOD mice, dye-labeled, and stimulated for 72 hours using soluble anti-CD3 in the presence of accessory cells and increasing ratios of CD4$^+$CD25$^+$Foxp3$^+$ or CD4$^+$CD25$^-$Foxp3$^+$ T cells (Treg), isolated from *L. lactis*-based combination

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therapy (CT)-treated NOD.Foxp3.hCD2 mice (both responders and non-responders) at the end of the indicated 6-week treatment. Proliferation of Teff cells was measured by flow cytometric analysis of dye dilution and shown as the percentage of Teff cells undergone 2 or more divisions, normalized to effector only culture. Activation of Teff cells was measured by flow cytometric analysis of CD69 and shown as the MFI, normalized to effector only culture. MSD high-sensitivity multiplex assay of IFN-γ and IL10 concentrations in the Treg:Teff cultures. Statistical significance between groups was calculated using Kruskal-Wallis test followed by Dunnett´s multiple testing; * P < 0.05, ** P < 0.01, ***, P < 0.001; * P < 0.05, ** P < 0.01.

Figure 5 – *L. lactis*-based combination therapy-induced Tregs depend on CTLA4 and TGF-β to control T effector cell responses. T effector (Teff) proliferation – shown as the percentage of Teff cells that had undergone 2 or more divisions, normalized to proliferation by effector only culture. Dye-labeled CD4$^+$CD25$^-$ T cells (Teff) were stimulated with anti-CD3 (0.5 µg/ml) in the presence of accessory cells and (**A**) CD4$^+$CD25$^+$Foxp3$^+$ or (**B**) CD4$^+$CD25$^-$Foxp3$^+$ cells (Treg), isolated from *L. lactis*-based combination therapy (CT)-treated NOD.Foxp3.hCD2 mice (both responders and non-responders), and indicated neutralizing antibodies (10 µg/ml). Statistical significance between groups was calculated using Kruskal-Wallis test followed by Dunnett´s multiple testing; * P < 0.05, ** P < 0.01, *** P < 0.001. (**C**) *L. lactis*-based combination therapy-cured mice were injected with anti-CTLA4 and anti-TGF-β antibodies (n=5) and followed up for diabetes recurrence (mice with glucosuria and blood glucose measurements >200 mg/dl are represented by the dark circles).

Figure 6 – Specific inhibition of Treg function impairs therapy-induced tolerance. (**A**) Treatment scheme for the simultaneous administration of *L. lactis*-based combination therapy (CT) and the specific FOXP3 inhibitor P60 (i.p. 50 µg/daily) in new-onset diabetic NOD mice. (**B**) Shown

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is the percentage of mice that remained diabetic after treatment. In the Kaplan-Meier survival curve,

statistical significance between groups was determined by Mantel-Cox log-rank test; * P < 0.05.

Figure 7 – Foxp3$^+$ T cell depletion breaches *L. lactis*-based combination therapy-induced

tolerance in NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice. (**A**) Treatment scheme for Foxp3$^+$ T cell depletion by DT in *L.*

lactis-based combination therapy (CT)-cured NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice. (**B**) Blood glucose

measurements in new-onset diabetic NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice during *L. lactis*-based combination

therapy (n=7) and after DT treatment (n=4). Mice were considered cured (white symbols) when

random blood glucose concentrations recovered to beneath 200 mg/dl or non-cured (black symbols)

when mice sustained blood glucose concentrations above 200 mg/dl. (**C**) Insulitis scoring and (**D**)

quantification of islet-resident Foxp3$^+$ T cells in the pancreas of therapy-cured NOD.Foxp3.DTR

mice before and after DT treatement. Staining of representative pancreas section from a combination

therapy-tolerized mice for CD4 (red) and Foxp3 (green) in which the white arrow heads indicate the

presence of Foxp3$^+$ T cells within an islet of Langerhans. Statistical significance was calculated

using Mann-Whitney t-test; ****, P < 0.0001.

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Supplemental figure legends

Supplemental Figure S1 – *L. lactis*-**based combination therapy induces higher percentage of CTLA4[+] Tregs in the pancreas of responder mice.** The percentages of CTLA4[+] cells within the CD4[+]CD25[+]Foxp3[+] (left), CD4[+]CD25[-]Foxp3[+] (middle), and CD4[+]Foxp3[+] (right) T cell population in peripheral blood (**A**), pancreatic draining lymph nodes (**B**) and pancreas (**C**) of new-onset diabetic and *L. lactis*-based combination therapy (CT)-treated mice (both responders and non-responders). Each symbol represents one mouse, and horizontal bars indicate the median value. Statistical significance was calculated using Mann-Whitney t-test; * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, ***, $P < 0.001$; ****, $P < 0.0001$.

Supplemental Figure S2 – *L. lactis*-**based combination therapy-tolerized mice are not depleted in pathogenic T effector cells.** Adoptive transfer of total splenocytes (1×10^7) isolated from overtly diabetic (white diamonds), combination therapy (CT) responders (white circles) or non-responders (crossed circles). Statistical calculation was done using Mantel-Cox log-rank test, ns: not significant.

Supplemental Figure S3 – Depletion of Foxp3[+] cells with DT in unmanipulated NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice. After four consecutive i.p. DT injections (on day (d) 1, 2, 5 and 7)(40 μg/kg body weight/d) as indicated in the scheme (**A**), mice (n=6) were killed on day 8, and peripheral blood and pancreas were removed. (**B**) Flow cytometric analysis of peripheral blood demonstrated efficient depletion of Foxp3[+] cells in DT-treated NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice. Foxp3 staining of pancreas sections showed effective depletion of islet-resident Foxp3[+] cells in DT-treated NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice. (**C**) Representative flow cytometric profiles showing the percentage of CD4[+] T cells positive for Foxp3 and the DTR-GFP fusion protein before (d0) and after two

consecutive DT injections (d3 and 5) of NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice (left panel). (**D**) Rapid diabetes

onset upon acute Foxp3$^+$ Treg depletion in NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice.

A

B

C

Diabetes

Figure 2

A

B

C

D

Figure 6

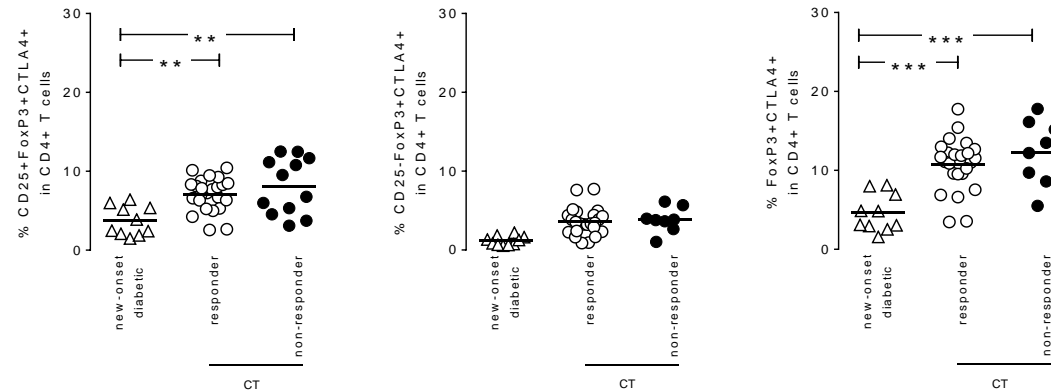**A**

B

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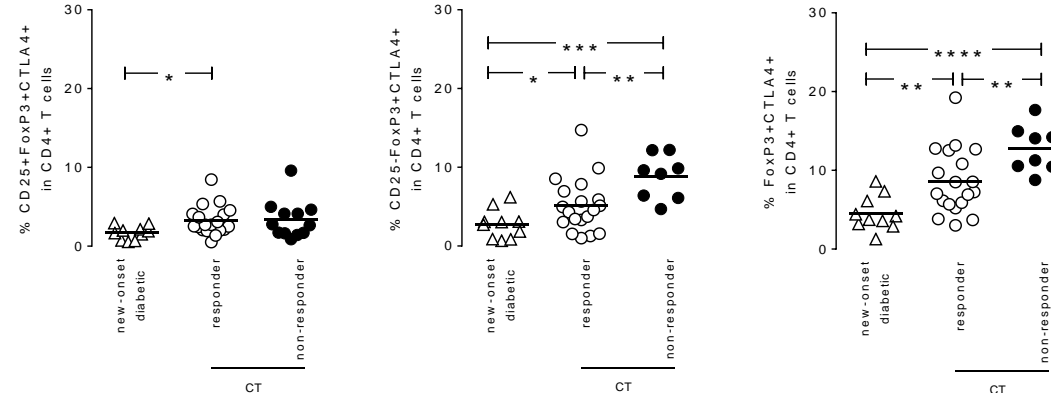

Time after treatment initiation (wks)

C

D
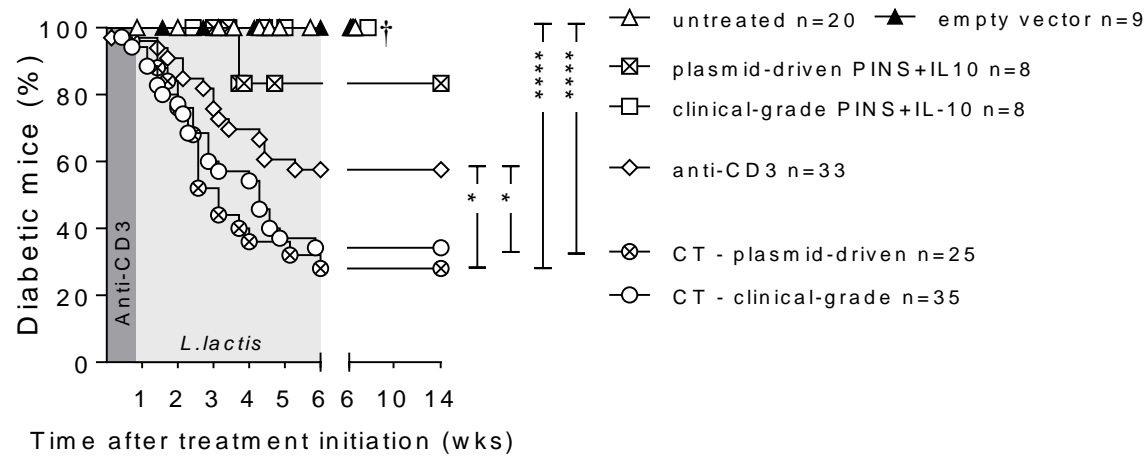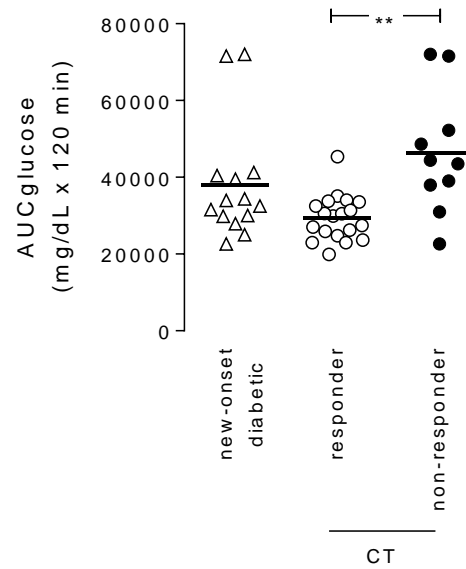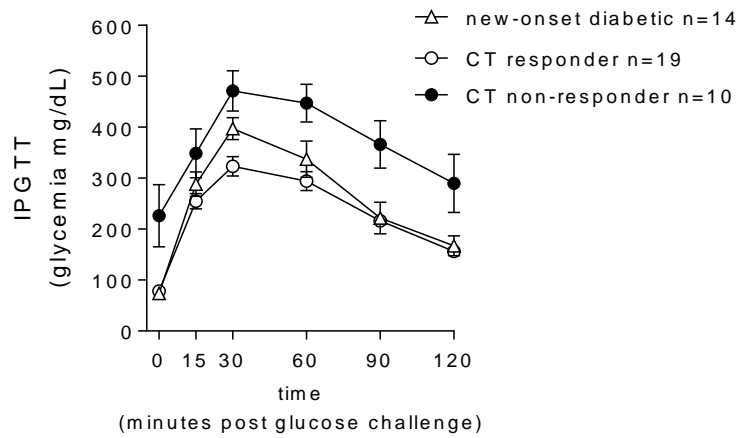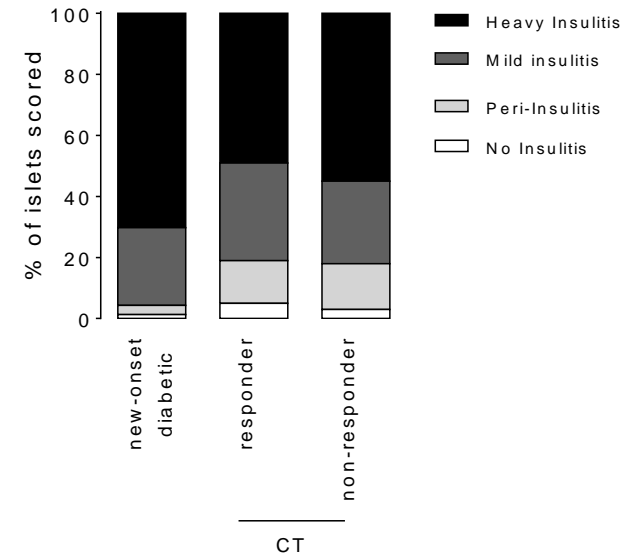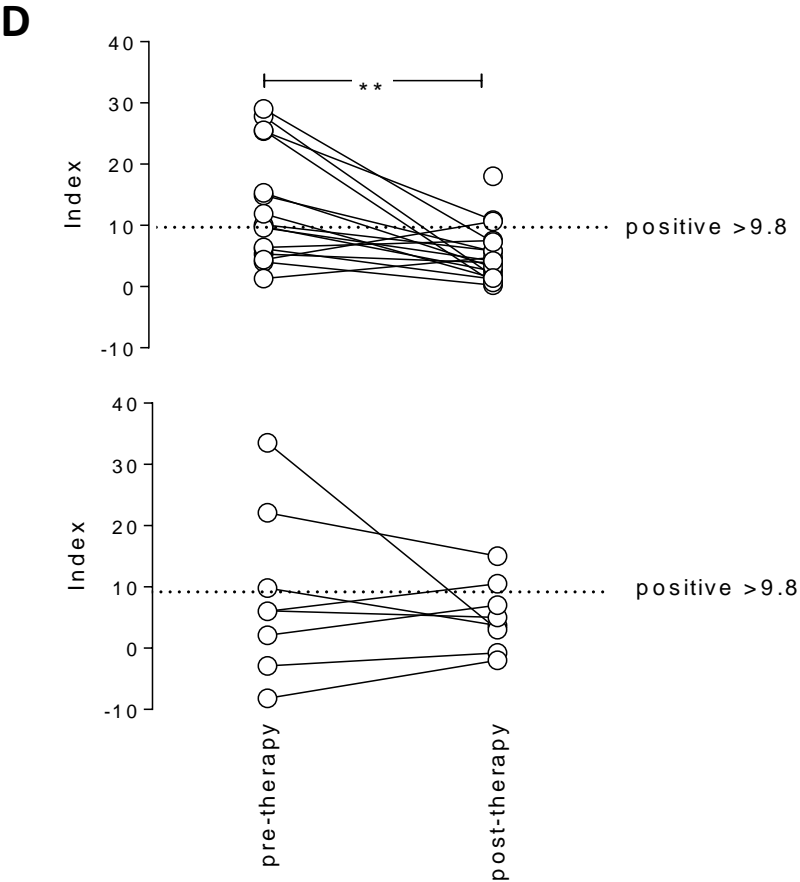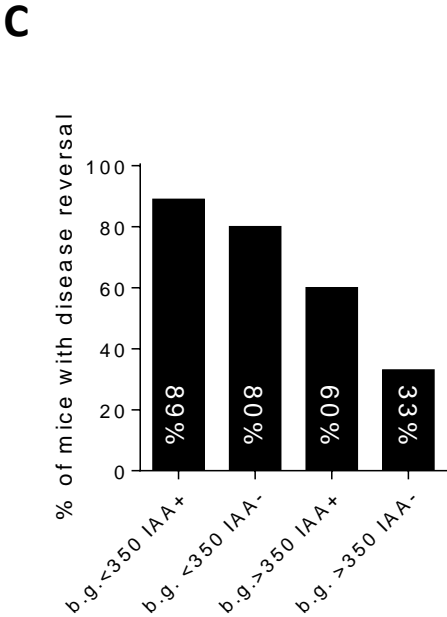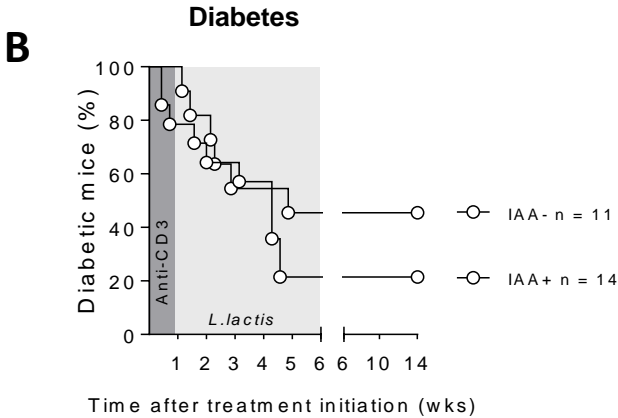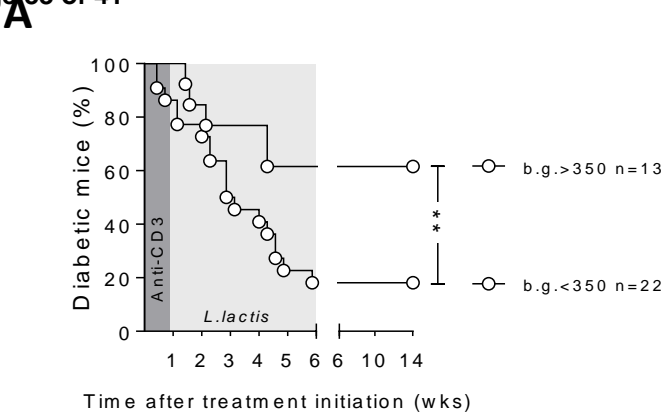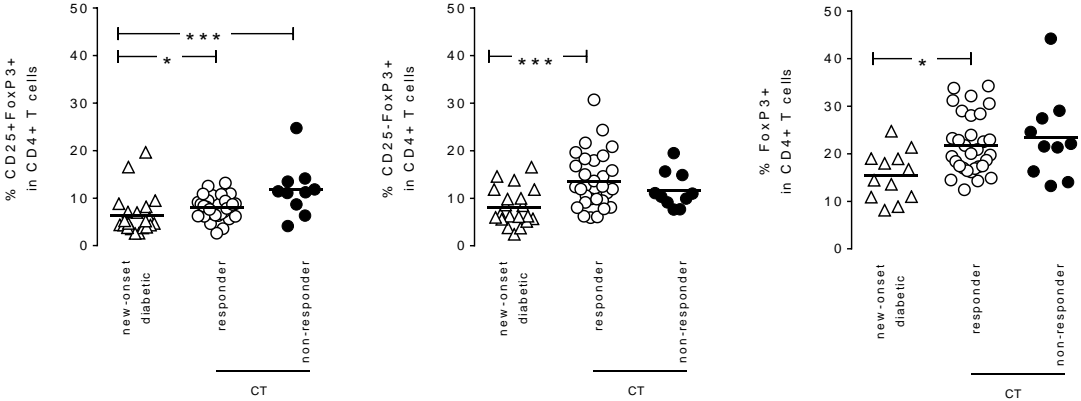
A peripheral blood

B pancreatic lymph nodes

C pancreas

A

NOD.Foxp3.DTR mice

B

C

D