

# Recurrent Loss of STING Signaling in Melanoma Correlates with Susceptibility to Viral Oncolysis

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## Abstract

The innate immunoregulator STING stimulates cytokine production in response to the presence of cytosolic DNA, which can arise following DNA damage. Extrinsic STING signaling is also needed for antigen-presenting cells to stimulate antitumor T-cell immunity. Here, we show that STING signaling is recurrently suppressed in melanoma cells, where this event may enable immune escape after DNA damage. Mechanistically, STING signaling was suppressed most frequently by epigenetic silencing of either STING or the cyclic GMP-AMP synthase, which generates STING-activating cyclic

dinucleotides after binding cytosolic DNA species. Loss of STING function rendered melanoma cells unable to produce type I IFN and other immune cytokines after exposure to cytosolic DNA species. Consequently, such cells were highly susceptible to infection with DNA viruses including HSV1, a variant of which is being developed presently as a therapeutic oncolytic virus [talimogene laherparepvec (T-VEC)]. Our findings provide insight into the basis for susceptibility to viral oncolysis by agents such as HSV1. *Cancer Res*; 76(22); 6747–59. ©2016 AACR.

## Introduction

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States, and melanoma, affecting about 1.2 million people in the United States, accounts for the vast majority of skin cancer-related deaths. Indeed, the health and economic burden of melanoma is substantial and is projected to increase through 2030 without new interventions (1, 2). Although basal cell and squamous cell skin cancer responds well to treatment, especially if the cancer is detected and cared for early, cutaneous melanomas are usually difficult to treat especially when diagnosed in advanced stages. Melanoma cells commonly exhibit genomic instability and are frequently resistant to conventional chemotherapy and targeted chemo- and immunotherapies (3, 4).

Oncolytic virotherapy is a novel anticancer treatment that generally uses genetically engineered viruses to infect and lyse cancer tissue. Recently, a large variety of RNA- and DNA-based oncolytic viruses (OV) have been tested preclinically and clinically for their ability to exert an oncolytic effect. In many cases, OVs have also been genetically modified to incorporate immunostimulatory modules to enhance systemic antitumor immunity. For example, Amgen talimogene laherparepvec (T-VEC) is a herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1)-based OV that has been engineered to express granulocyte-macrophage colony-stimulating factor (GM-CSF), which may facilitate tumor clearance. It has

been recently reported that T-VEC exhibits significant improvement over GM-CSF alone as evaluated in a phase III trials for the treatment of melanoma. However, the overall response rate was noted to remain limited (~26%; refs. 5, 6). Although OVs have shown potential in cancer treatment including melanoma, these therapeutic strategies are still challenged with safety and effectiveness considerations. Little information is available regarding whether an oncolytic therapy, such as based on HSV1, will exert efficacy in a patient, as the molecular mechanisms explaining viral oncolysis remain to be clarified.

However, considerable information relating to our understanding of antiviral innate immune signaling pathways now exists. For example, stimulator of IFN genes (STING) is an essential molecule that controls the production of host defense proteins, including type I IFNs and proinflammatory cytokine, following the recognition of aberrant DNA species in the cytosol of the cell (7–9). STING is a sensor for cyclic dinucleotides [CDN; cGAMP (c[ $2',5'$ ]pA(3',5')p)] produced by a cellular nucleotidyltransferase referred to as cGAS (cyclic GMP-AMP synthase, Mab-21 domain-containing protein or C6orf150) following its association with nucleic acid species such as viral DNA (10). CDNs such as cyclic di-AMP (c-di-AMP) directly generated by intracellular bacteria are also potent activators of STING-dependent cytokine production (11). Cytosolic DNA species can constitute the genome of invading DNA microbes or even self-DNA leaked from the nucleus or possibly mitochondria (12). Recent studies have shown that STING-dependent cytosolic DNA sensing within phagocytes is essential for the recognition of tumor cells and type I IFN-dependent antitumor immunity (13). It has been observed that loss of STING renders mice susceptible to AOM/DSS-induced colorectal cancer (14). Additional studies have indicated that STING signaling is frequently impaired in human colon cancer cells, an event that might enable such cells to escape immunosurveillance and eradication by phagocytes (15). These data collectively suggest that the STING pathway may have an important function in eliminating transformed cells and for facilitating adaptive anti-tumor immunity.

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**Note:** Supplementary data for this article are available at Cancer Research Online (<http://cancerres.aacrjournals.org/>).

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Given these findings, we have extended our studies into evaluating STING function in melanoma, in part, because such cancers appear to be susceptible to viral oncolytic treatment, which suggests defects in innate immune pathways. Here, we report that STING-mediated innate immune signaling is largely impaired both in human melanoma-derived cells and in primary patient melanoma-derived tissues. We recurrently found loss of STING and/or cGAS expression in melanoma, predominantly through epigenetic hypermethylation silencing. Our findings suggest that suppression of STING signaling may be an important part of tumor development. Moreover, loss of STING function rendered melanoma cells more susceptible to HSV1 and vaccinia virus-mediated oncolysis. Therefore, the development of a prognostic assay that enables the measurement of STING or cGAS expression may lead to a better indication of the efficacy of viral oncolytic treatment.

## Materials and Methods

### Materials

All reagents were from ThermoFisher Scientific or Sigma unless specified.

### Cell culture

Normal human melanocytes (HEMa) and human melanoma cell lines were purchased from and authenticated by ThermoFisher Scientific and ATCC, respectively, in August 2014. hTERT-BJ1 telomerase fibroblasts (hTERT) were purchased from and authenticated by Clontech in 2010.

### Immunoblot analysis

Whole-cell lysate was resolved on SDS-PAGE and transferred to polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) membranes. After blocking with 5% blocking reagent, membranes were incubated with primary antibodies followed by appropriate secondary antibodies. The image was resolved using an enhanced chemiluminescence system and detected by autoradiography. Antibodies used were: rabbit polyclonal STING antibody (Ishikawa and Barber; ref. 8),  $\beta$ -actin (Sigma Aldrich), p-IRF3 (Cell Signaling), IRF3 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology), p-p65 (Cell Signaling), p65 (Cell Signaling), p-TBK1 (Cell Signaling), TBK1 (Abcam), and cGAS (Cell Signaling).

### IFN $\beta$ ELISA analysis

IFN $\beta$  ELISA was performed using the Human IFN $\beta$  ELISA Kit (PBL InterferonSource) following the manufacturer's protocol.

### Immunofluorescence microscopy

Cells were cultured and treated with glass coverslips. Cells were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde for 15 minutes at 37°C and permeabilized with 0.05% Triton X-100 for 5 minutes at room temperature. Immunostaining was performed with rabbit-anti-STING polyclonal, rabbit-anti-IRF3 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology), or rabbit-anti-p65 (Cell Signaling) followed by fluorescence-conjugated secondary antibodies (FITC goat-anti-rabbit). Images were taken with Leica LSM confocal microscope at the Image Core Facility, University of Miami (Miami, FL).

### Quantitative real-time PCR

Total RNA was reverse-transcribed using QuantiTect Reverse Transcription Kit (Qiagen). Real-time PCR was performed with the TaqMan gene Expression Assay (Applied Biosystems).

### Immunohistochemistry and histologic analysis

Tissue microarray was purchased from Pantomics. Immunohistochemical (IHC) staining was performed with rabbit-anti-cGAS antibody or rabbit-anti-STING antibody following standard protocol.

### Virus amplification, purification, titration, and infection

HSV-1  $\gamma$ 34.5 was kindly provided by Bernard Roizman. Vaccinia virus ( $\nu$ TF7-3) was kindly provided by John Rose. Virus was amplified in Vero cells and purified by sucrose gradient ultracentrifugation following standard protocol. Plaque assay using serial diluted virus was performed in Vero cells following standard protocol. Cells were infected with virus at specific multiplicity of infection (MOI) for 1 hour, washed, and then incubated for designated period for specific assay examination.

### RNA *in situ* hybridization

STING and cGAS RNA probed was custom-designed by ACD and RNA *in situ* hybridization (RNAish) was performed using RNAscope Multiplex Fluorescent Reagent Kit for cultured cells and 2-plex RNAscope Reagent Kit for formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded (FFPE) cells and tissue following the manufacturer's instruction.

### Mouse treatment

Balb/C *nu/nu* mice were purchased from Charles River and maintained in the institutional Division of Veterinary Resources. All experiments were performed with Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) approval and in compliance with IACUC guidelines. Tumor cells were introduced in the flanks of Balb/c nude mice by subcutaneous injection of  $2 \times 10^6$  of the appropriate tumor cells and tumors allowed to develop to an average diameter of approximately 0.5 cm. HSV1 $\gamma$ 34.5 was then injected into the tumors every other day for a total of 3 times at  $1 \times 10^7$  PFU. PBS was used as vehicle control. Effects on tumor growth were monitored. Mice were euthanized when tumor diameter exceeds 10 mm.

### gDNA sequencing

gDNA was extracted from melanoma cells as well as normal cells using Qiagen DNeasy Kit, and specific locus was sequenced by Polymorphic DNA Technologies.

### Statistical analysis

All statistical analysis was performed by the Student *t* test unless specified. The data were considered to be significantly different when  $P < 0.05$ .

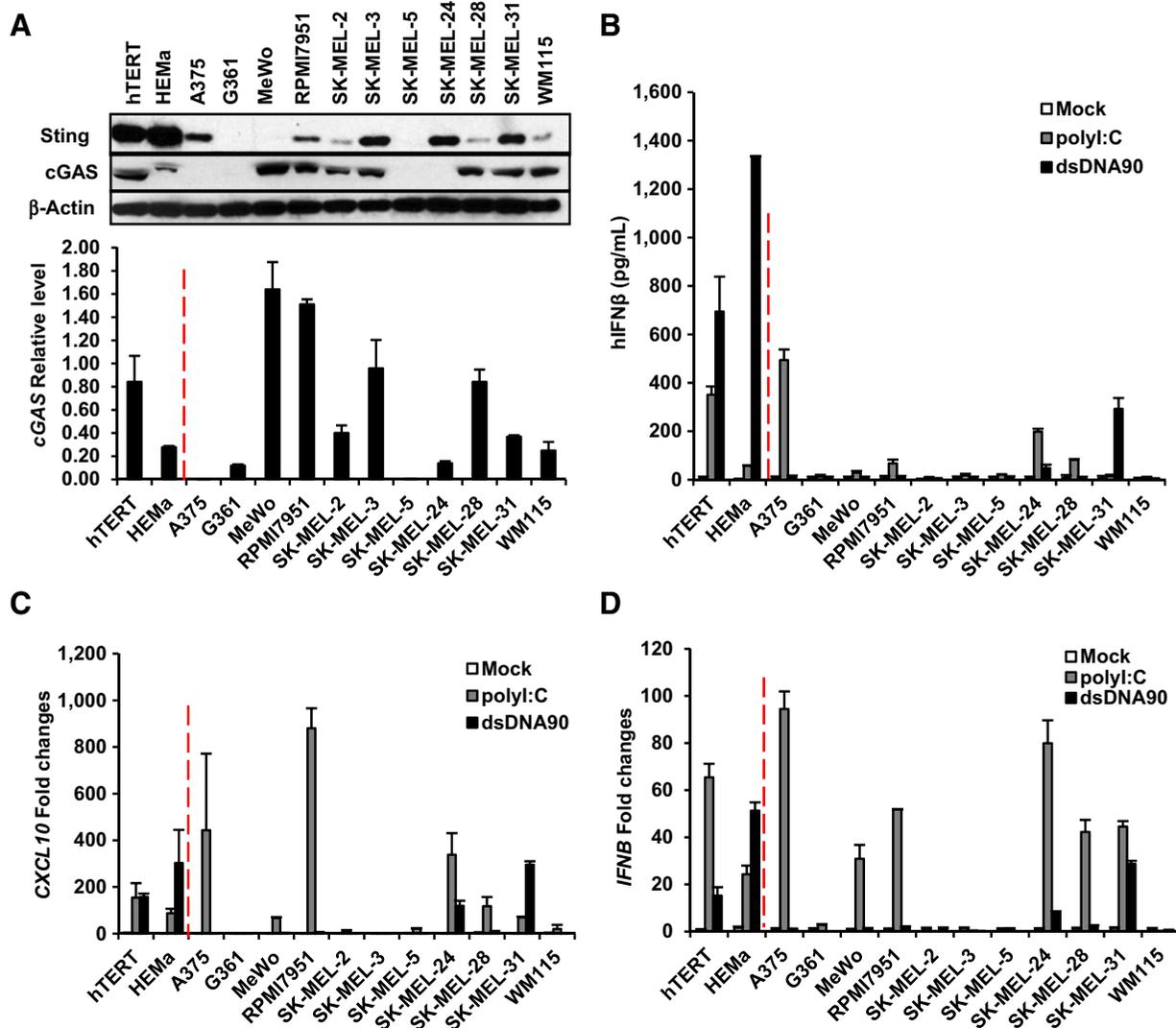
## Results

### Recurrent loss of STING signaling in human melanoma-derived cell lines

The STING-controlled innate immune pathway has been reported to be largely impaired in human colon cancers, an event that may facilitate tumorigenesis (15). To evaluate whether this key pathway is similarly defective in other types of cancer, we further examined STING expression by immunoblot in a panel of human malignant melanomas. These results showed that STING expression was not detectable in 3 of 11 cell lines examined (G361, MeWo, and SK-MEL-5), and STING expression level was dramatically suppressed in a further 3 cell lines (SK-MEL-

2, SK-MEL-28, and WM115; Fig. 1A). The synthase cGAS resides upstream of STING and generates CDN's capable of triggering STING function. We therefore complemented this study by similarly examining the expression of cGAS by immunoblot and found that this synthase was absent in 4 of 11 cell lines examined (A375, G361, SK-MEL-5, and SK-MEL-24; Fig. 1A). Real-time PCR analysis using cGAS probe confirmed that cGAS was not detectable in A375 and SK-MEL-5, but low level of cGAS was detected in G361 and SK-MEL-24 (Fig. 1A). Immunoblot analysis using higher amount of whole-cell lysate further confirmed cGAS expression in G361 cells albeit at low level (Supplementary Fig. S3C). To correlate STING/cGAS expression analysis with functional STING signaling, we next transfected cells with dsDNA to activate STING-dependent cytokine pro-

duction or with dsRNA (polyI:C) to activate the STING-independent RIG-I like signaling pathway and measured type I IFN expression by ELISA (7). This study indicated that all 11 melanoma cells responded poorly to STING-dependent, dsDNA-triggered type I IFN production. Using fluorescent microscopy analysis, we confirmed that all cells were indeed transfected with fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC)-labeled dsDNA activator (Supplementary Fig. S1). However, control hTERT cells and normal HEMa were able to express high levels of IFN $\beta$  when transfected with dsDNA, suggesting the STING-mediated type I IFN responses were suppressed specifically in the melanoma cells (Fig. 1B). This finding was further supported by real-time PCR analysis, in which dsDNA stimulated *IFNB* and *CXCL10* induction was suppressed in majority of the



**Figure 1.**

STING expression is suppressed and dsDNA-induced innate immune activation is impaired in majority of human melanoma cell lines. **A**, hTERT fibroblasts, normal HEMa, and a series of human melanoma cell lines were analyzed for STING and cGAS expression by immunoblot at 20  $\mu$ g whole-cell lysate input (top).  $\beta$ -Actin was analyzed as loading control. cGAS expression was also analyzed by qPCR (bottom). **B**, ELISA analysis of human IFN $\beta$  production in the media of cells (same as **A**) transfected with 3  $\mu$ g/mL polyI:C or dsDNA90- or mock-transfected for 16 hours. qPCR analysis of human *CXCL10* (**C**) and *IFNB* (**D**) induction in cells (same as **A**) transfected with 3  $\mu$ g/mL dsDNA90- or mock-transfected for 3 hours.

melanoma cells examined, although weak activity was detected in SK-MEL-24 and SK-MEL-31 cells (Fig. 1C and D). In contrast, 6 of the 11 melanoma cells were able to produce type I IFN and CXCL10, albeit at various levels, in response to dsRNA, indicating that the RIG-I-like RNA signal pathway were mostly intact in majority of melanoma cells examined (Fig. 1B–D). Using siRNA treatment to knockdown STING expression in normal cells and 2 melanomas cell lines (SK-MEL-24, SK-MEL31) that appeared to retain partial STING activity, we confirmed that the upregulation of these dsDNA-induced cytokines was STING-dependent (Supplementary Fig. S2). Taken together, our data indicate that STING-dependent signaling is largely impaired in a majority of melanoma cells with only SK-MEL-24 and SK-MEL-31 exhibiting weak STING activity. Furthermore, the chemotherapy drug cisplatin triggered *IFNB* and *CXCL10* induction in normal hTERT and melanoma SK-MEL-31 cells with functional STING signal, but not in melanoma cells lacking STING activity (A375, G361, MeWo, and SK-MEL-5), suggesting that STING signal is required for cytokine production in cancer cells following DNA damage, an event that may alert immune system for and facilitate antitumor responses (Supplementary Fig. S3A and S3B).

#### Loss of STING-dependent TBK1-IRF3 activation in melanoma cells

To examine the extent of STING signaling defect in melanoma cells, we evaluated IRF3 and NF- $\kappa$ B activation by immunofluorescent microscopy and immunoblot analysis. When stimulated with dsDNA, STING rapidly undergoes translocation from the endoplasmic reticulum (ER), along with TBK1, to perinuclear-associated endosomal regions, containing NF- $\kappa$ B and IRF3, in a procedure similar to autophagy (7, 16). This incident accompanies STING phosphorylation and degradation, almost certainly to avoid prolonged STING-induced cytokine production, which is now known to provoke chronic inflammation (17). Our results confirmed that, following dsDNA treatment in normal hTERT cells, STING translocated to perinuclear region and underwent phosphorylation and degradation events (Fig. 2A and D, left). During this process, TBK1 was phosphorylated in hTERT cells as well as its cognate target IRF3 and the p65 subunit of NF- $\kappa$ B (Fig. 2D). We also observed IRF3 and p65 translocation into the nucleus, indicating normal activation (Fig. 2B–D). A similar effect was observed in SK-MEL-24 and SK-MEL-31 cells, which exhibited partial dsDNA-dependent cytokine production, confirming that these 2 cell lines retained some STING function (Figs. 2A–D and 1B–D). However, while RPMI7951 and SK-MEL-3 retained STING/*cGAS* expression and displayed similar IRF3 activation upon dsDNA treatment, these cells lacked p65 translocation. This observation would explain why dsDNA failed to trigger type I IFN production, which requires both IRF3 and NF- $\kappa$ B for its transcriptional activation (Figs. 2A–D and 1B–D). In addition, in cells where STING and/or *cGAS* expression were not detected (such as A375, G361, MeWo, and SK-MEL-5), no evidence of TBK1 or IRF3 phosphorylation/translocation was detected in these cells following dsDNA treatment (highlighted by red boxes; Fig. 2B and D). Although phosphorylated p65 was observed, no translocation of this transcription factor into the nucleus was evident in any of the RPMI7951, SK-MEL-3, A375, G361, MeWo, or SK-MEL-5 cells (Fig. 2C and D). These results indicate that dsDNA-induced STING signaling is deregulated at

various points along the pathway in many of the melanoma cell lines examined (Fig. 2 and Supplementary Fig. S4). For example, while STING retained some signaling activity and ability to induce the translocation of IRF3, as in RPMI7951 and SK-MEL-3 cells, NF- $\kappa$ B signaling was observed to be affected. In contrast, STING did not appear to undergo any phosphorylation or translocation in A375, G361, MeWo, or SK-MEL-5 cells, suggesting that STING function is affected upstream of IRF3/NF- $\kappa$ B activation, likely due to loss of STING and/or *cGAS* expression.

#### RNAscope and IHC analysis of STING/*cGAS* expression

Since the STING pathway requires the presence of STING and *cGAS*, and since STING and/or *cGAS* expression was observed to be absent in about 40% melanoma cells examined, being able to measure the presence of STING and *cGAS* could be useful in predicting functional STING signaling in melanoma. Although immunoblot and RT-PCR methodology is effective in examine STING/*cGAS* expression in cultured cell lines, biopsied tissue often contains not only tumor cells but also other cell types including infiltrating immune cells that could retain normal STING/*cGAS* expression (9). Thus, analysis of STING and/or *cGAS* protein or RNA expression within the cancer cell itself is necessary for accurate evaluation into the presence of these products. We previously developed an RNAish assay using RNAscope technology that can efficiently detect *STING/cGAS* mRNA copies within individual cells. By using FITC-labeled STING probe (green) and Cy5-labeled *cGAS* probe (red), we similarly examined melanoma cells using RNA FISH. Results showed that both probes combined within the same assay effectively detected *STING* and *cGAS* mRNA in control HEMA cells. *STING* mRNA (green) was also detected in A375, SK-MEL-24, and SK-MEL-31 cells but not in G361, MeWo, or SK-MEL-5 cells whereas, *cGAS* mRNA (red) was not detected in A375 or SK-MEL-5 cells (Fig. 3A). mRNA copy numbers were quantitated with results being consistent with our previous results obtained using our expression analysis (Figs. 1A and 3A). Thus, RNA FISH analysis can effectively quantitate STING/*cGAS* expression simultaneously in single cells.

We further evaluated mRNA expression by chromogenic *in situ* hybridization (RNA CISH) of paraffin-embedded melanoma cells. This situation may mimic situations where biopsied and paraffin-embedded patient-derived materials are generally used for biomarker analysis. This study indicated that we were able to detect and quantitate both *STING* and *cGAS* mRNA expression in SK-MEL-24 and SK-MEL-31 cells as before. In A375 cells, only *STING* was detected, whereas *cGAS* was absent. *STING* was not detected in G361 or MeWo cells. Both *STING* and *cGAS* were absent in SK-MEL-5 cells (Fig. 3B). Overall RNA CISH analysis generated results similar to RNA FISH evaluation.

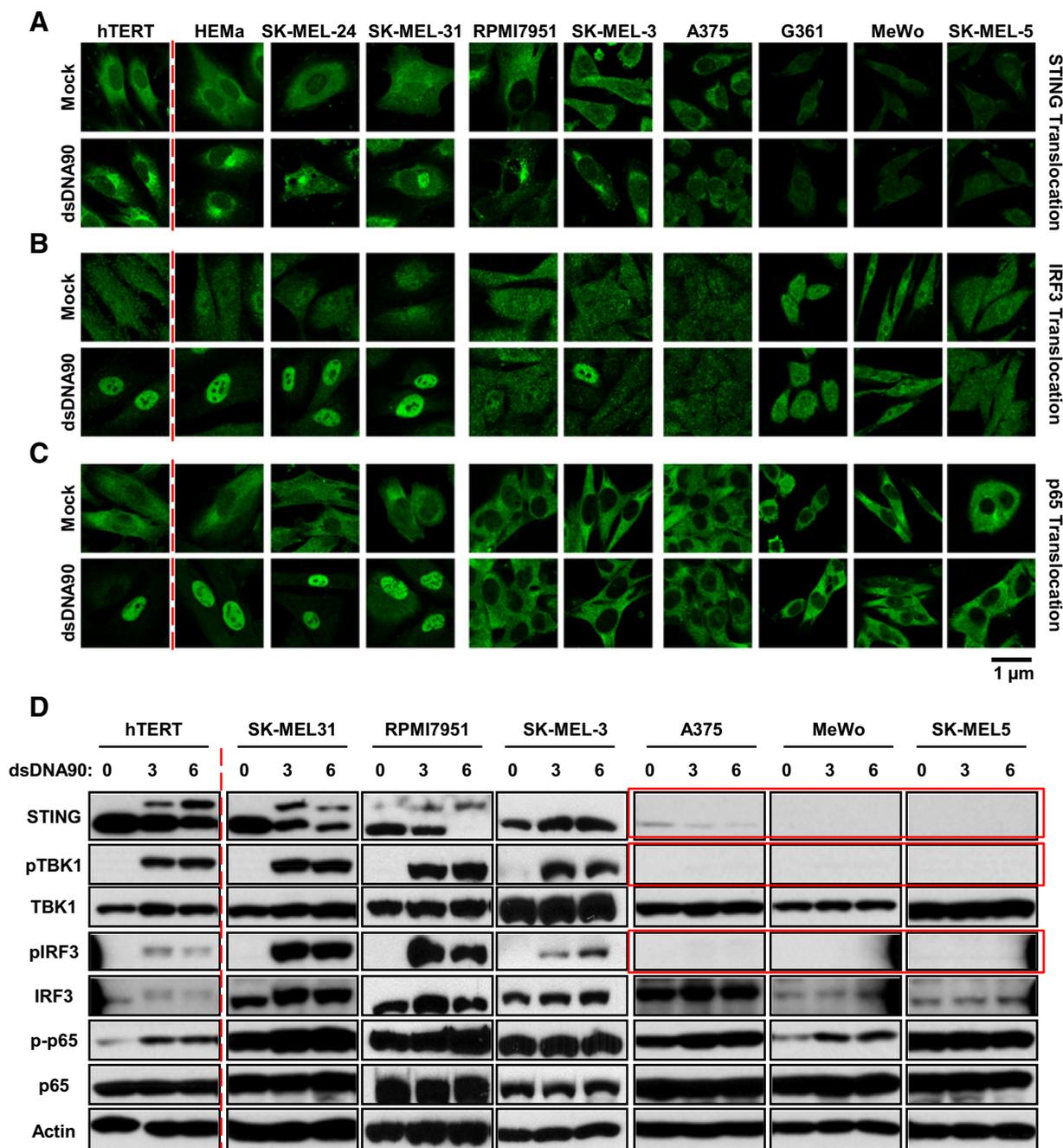
Using antibody to *cGAS* and STING, we also performed IHC analysis on paraffin-embedded cells and confirmed *cGAS* and STING protein expression status in accord with our immunoblot and RNAscope studies (Fig. 3C).

#### IHC analysis of STING/*cGAS* expression in melanoma tissue microarray

To evaluate STING/*cGAS* expression in patient-derived melanoma samples, we subsequently examined by IHC analysis a paraffin-embedded melanoma tissue microarray (TMA; MEL961, Pantomics) that contains 8 normal skin tissues, 8 benign nevus tissues, 56 malignant melanoma tissues, and 24 metastatic

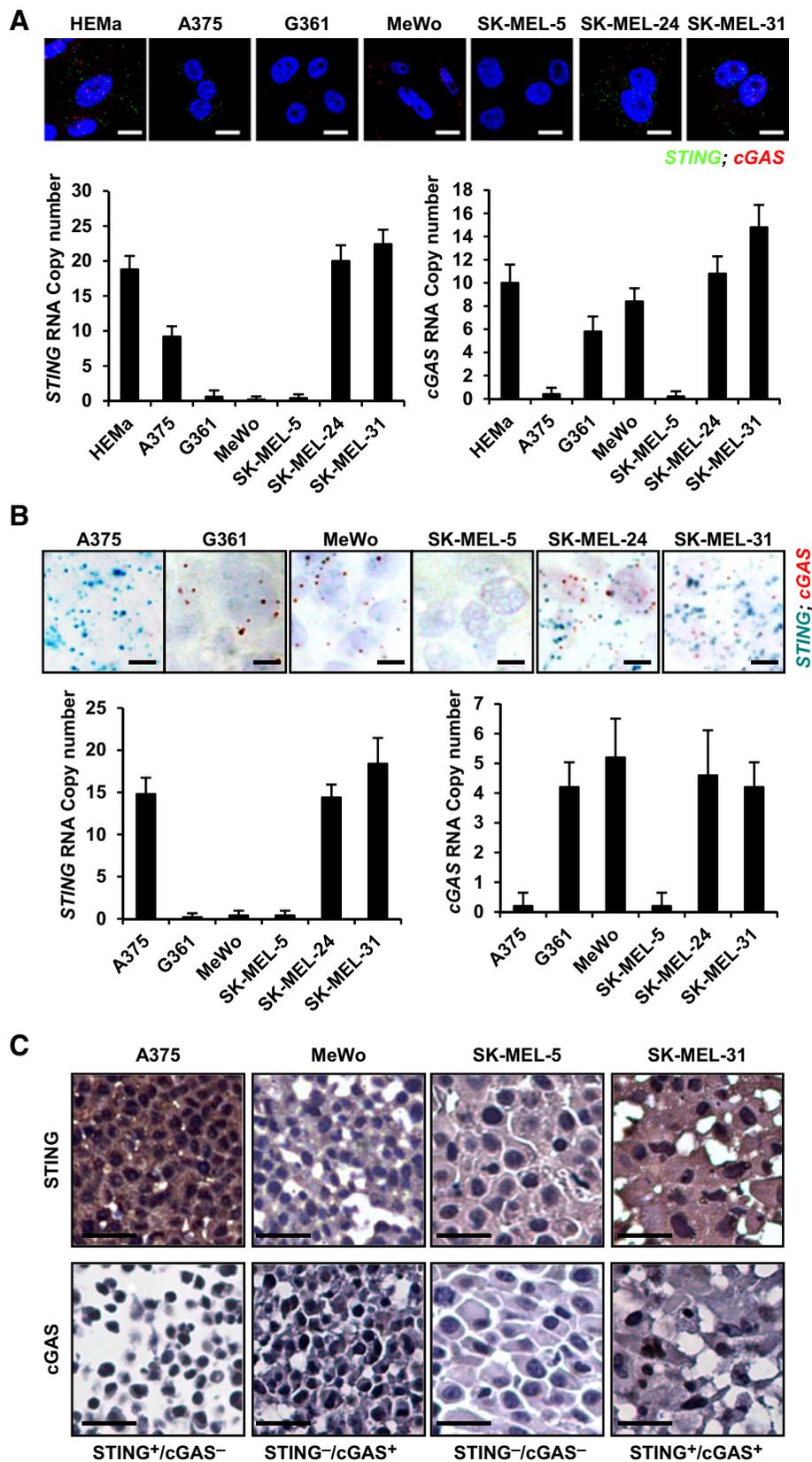
melanoma tissues. We observed that all normal tissues expressed both STING and cGAS. cGAS was not detected in 2 benign nevus tissues, whereas STING was noted to be present in all 8 nevi. In malignant melanoma tissues, 23.2% of melanoma samples lost STING expression, whereas 16.1% of melanoma samples did not express cGAS, and both STING and cGAS were absent in 14.3% of melanoma tissues. In more advanced metastatic melanoma tis-

sue, loss of both STING and cGAS was more profound (41.7%; Fig. 4 and Supplementary Table S1). Given these data, suppression of STING or cGAS expression may commonly occur in human melanoma and plausibly other human cancers (15). In summary, our IHC procedures may be useful for the analysis of cGAS and STING expression in FFPE preserved clinical tumor samples.

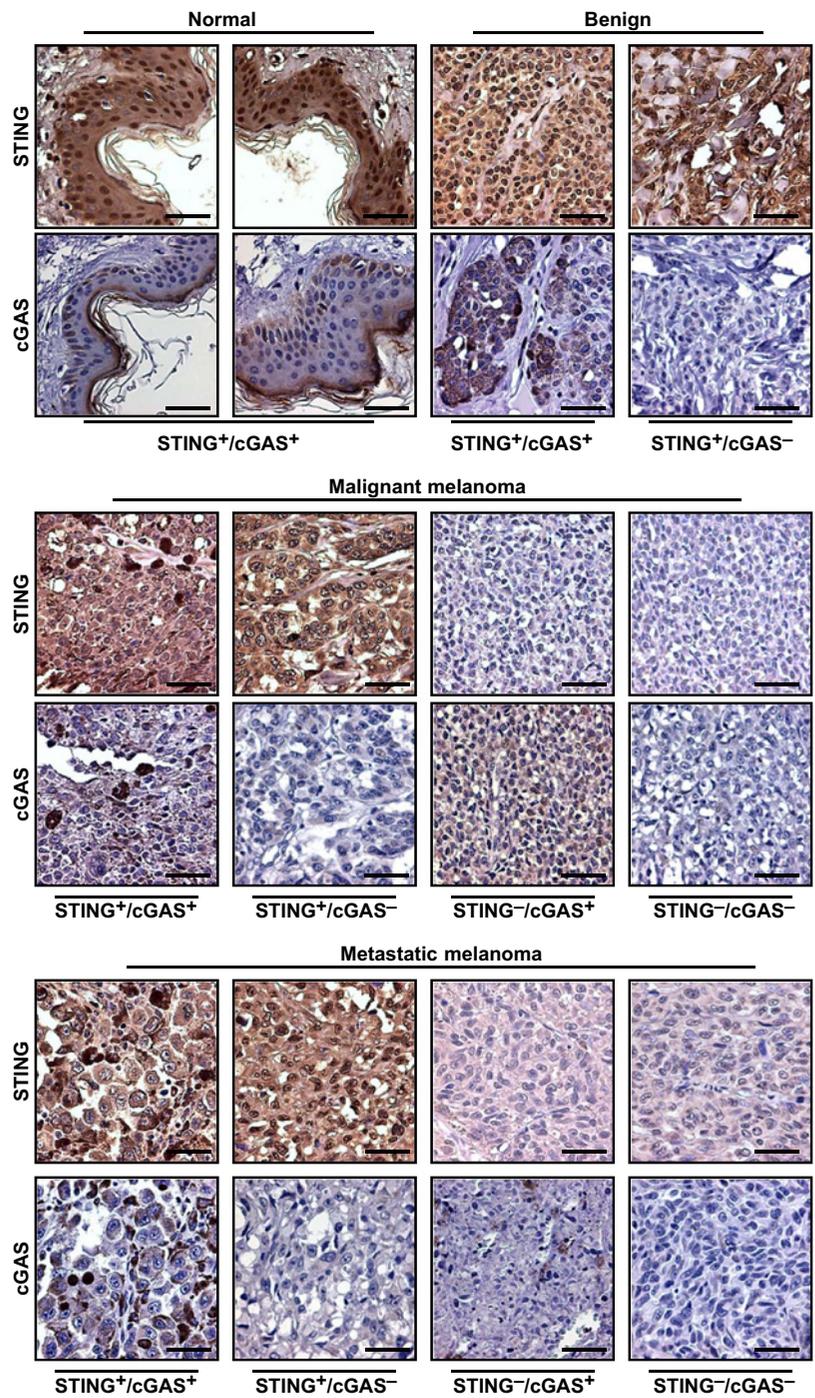


**Figure 2.** dsDNA-induced STING signaling pathway is defective in majority of human melanoma cell lines. Immunofluorescent microscopy analysis of STING translocation (A), IRF3 translocation (B), and p65 translocation (C) in normal and human melanoma cell lines transfected with 3  $\mu$ g/mL dsDNA90- or mock-transfected for 3 hours. Original magnification,  $\times$ 1,260; bar size, 1  $\mu$ m. D, immunoblot analysis of STING signal activation in cells (same as above) transfected with 3  $\mu$ g/mL dsDNA90 for indicated time periods.

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**Figure 3.** RNAish and IHC analysis of STING and cGAS in human melanoma cell lines. **A**, RNA FISH analysis of STING and cGAS expression in normal and human melanoma cell lines. Representative images are shown at  $\times 1,260$ . Bar size, 500 nm. Quantitation of *STING* and *cGAS* RNA copy numbers are shown in bar graph. **B**, RNA CISH analysis of STING and cGAS expression in FFPE normal and human melanoma cell lines. Representative images are shown at  $\times 600$ . Bar size, 1  $\mu$ m. Quantitation of *STING* and *cGAS* RNA copy numbers are shown in bar graph. **C**, IHC analysis of STING and cGAS expression in melanoma cells. Images were shown at  $\times 400$ . Bar size, 20  $\mu$ m.



**Figure 4.** STING and cGAS expression were suppressed in high percentage of human melanomas. IHC analysis of STING and cGAS in human melanoma TMA containing normal human epidermal and human melanoma tissues. Representative images of normal human epidermal and human melanoma tissues stained for STING and cGAS. Images are shown at  $\times 400$ . Bar size, 50  $\mu\text{m}$ . STING and cGAS expression status is summarized and shown in the bottom.

	Normal	Benign	Malignant	Metastatic
STING <sup>+</sup> /cGAS <sup>+</sup>	100% (8/8)	75% (6/8)	46.4% (26/56)	37.5% (9/24)
STING <sup>-</sup> /cGAS <sup>+</sup>			23.2% (13/56)	8.3% (2/24)
STING <sup>+</sup> /cGAS <sup>-</sup>		25% (2/8)	16.1% (9/56)	12.5% (3/24)
STING <sup>-</sup> /cGAS <sup>-</sup>			14.3% (8/56)	41.7% (10/24)

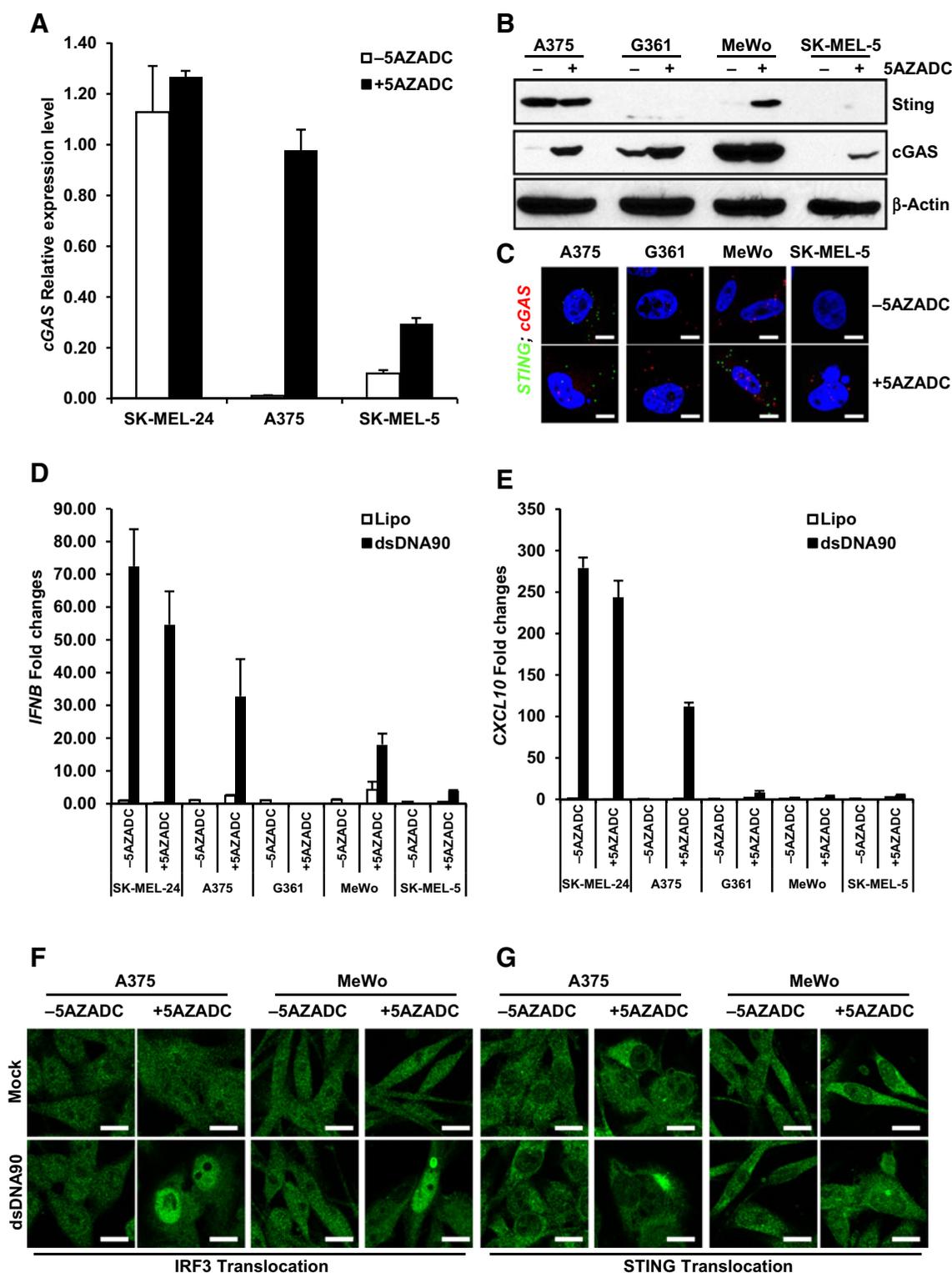
### STING/cGAS expression may be suppressed through DNA hypermethylation in melanoma cells

Loss of STING/cGAS expression could occur through either genetic alteration or mutation. To evaluate the gene status of *STING* and *cGAS* in melanoma cells, we sequenced the *STING* and *cGAS* gene within all 11 melanoma cells. Sequence analysis of the entire *STING* gene (introns and exons comprise approximately 7.2 kb on chromosome 5q31.2) indicated that 7 of the 11 melanoma cells exhibited HAQ *STING* variant (18, 19), which was previously reported to occur in approximately 20% of the population (Supplementary Table S2). *STING* gene in all melanoma cells as well as normal HEMA cell contains the R272 polymorphism, which was reported to represent approximately 85% of the population but does not exert any defects in *STING* function (Supplementary Table S2). Collectively, sequence analysis did not reveal any major genetic defect in the *STING* gene within the melanoma cells. Similar sequence analysis was also carried out on *cGAS* exons. However, no major mutations or deletions were noted (Supplementary Table S3). Taken together, genetic mutations or deletions do not seem to be involved in *STING*/cGAS defective expression in melanoma cells. In view of this, we examined whether *STING* or *cGAS* expression was suppressed by epigenetic processes, such as by hypermethylation of the promoter regions (20, 21). Indeed, databank analysis indicated the presence of considerable CpG islands within the *STING* and *cGAS* promoter region (Supplementary Fig. S5). We thus treated melanoma cells lacking either *STING* or *cGAS* expression with the demethylating agent 5-aza-2'-deoxycytidine (5AZADC) for 5 days and evaluated recapitulation of *STING* or *cGAS* expression. Real-time PCR analysis showed that *cGAS* expression was recovered in A375 cells as well as SK-MEL-5 cells, although at a lower extent. Although SK-MEL-24 exhibited low *cGAS* expression by RT-PCR, 5AZADC treatment did not seem to affect *cGAS* expression level of SK-MEL-24 cells significantly (Fig. 5A). This result was again confirmed by both immunoblot and RNA FISH analysis, in which *cGAS* expression was apparently recapitulated in A375 and SK-MEL-5 cells following 5AZADC demethylation (Fig. 5B and C). In MeWo cells, *STING* expression was restored by 5AZADC treatment as shown by both immunoblot and RNA FISH analysis. However, *STING* remained absent in similarly treated G361 cells as well as in SK-MEL-5 cells, although *cGAS* expression was partially restored in the same treated SK-MEL-5 cells (Fig. 5A–C). Therefore, DNA hypermethylation is involved in silencing *STING* or *cGAS* expression in some melanoma cells (A375 and MeWo). However, it is not yet clear why expression levels of *STING* are muted in the remainder melanoma cells (G361, SK-MEL-5). Other epigenetic modifications such as histone modifications or other transcription regulator factors such as miRNA could be involved in suppressing *STING* and/or *cGAS* expression (22, 23). To determine whether reconstitution of *STING*/cGAS expression rescued *STING*-dependent dsDNA signaling, we examined *IFNB* and *CXCL10* induction in 5AZADC-treated melanoma cells following dsDNA stimulation. We observed induction of both *IFNB* and *CXCL10* production in *cGAS* rescued A375 cells, as well as modest expression of *IFNB* in *STING* rescued MeWo cells, concomitant with IRF3 and *STING* translocation (Fig. 5D–G). Whereas no *STING* function was observed in G361 or SK-MEL-5 cells following 5AZADC treatment, we confirmed that both *STING* and *cGAS* are necessary for dsDNA-stimulated cytokine production (Fig.

5D and E). Thus, demethylating agents may be able to partially rescue *STING*-dependent innate immune gene induction in select melanoma cells.

### Defect in *STING* signal renders melanoma cells susceptible to DNA virus infection

*STING* innate immune signaling plays a critical role in host defense responses to DNA viruses. For example, mice lacking *STING* are extremely sensitive to HSV infection (7, 9). A strain of HSV1 lacking the  $\gamma$ 34.5 gene, referred to as talimogene laherparepvec (OncoVex, T-VEC), is presently being evaluated in clinical trials as a therapeutic agent for the treatment of cancer including melanoma (5, 6, 24). However, the mechanisms of oncolysis remain to be fully determined and there is no evaluation, presently, for determining the likely efficacy of HSV-based antitumor treatment. We have previously shown that *STING* activity is defective in numerous colon cancer cells, which renders cells sensitive to DNA virus infection including HSV1. We postulated that lack of *STING* function in melanoma cells may correlate with an increased susceptibility to DNA virus infection and replication. Plausibly, the ability of *STING* to effectively signal may affect outcome to HSV-based oncoviral therapy. To start addressing this, we infected the melanoma cells or control hTERT and HEMA with HSV1 lacking the  $\gamma$ 34.5 gene similar to the strain presently being investigated as an oncolytic agent against human melanoma. The  $\gamma$ 34.5 viral protein has been proposed to suppress host defense responses, although the mechanisms need to be fully clarified. Thus, without the robust repression of the host innate immune signaling, HSV1 $\gamma$ 34.5 is able to potently trigger *STING*-dependent innate immune activation, including type I IFN production (9). Similar to dsDNA treatment, HSV1 $\gamma$ 34.5 induced robust production of *IFNB* and *CXCL10* mRNAs in control hTERT and HEMA cells, as well as in SK-MEL-24 and SK-MEL-31 cells that retained partial *STING* signaling (Fig. 6A and B). However, little type I IFN production was observed in the remainder of the melanoma cells. Loss of the ability to induce type I IFN correlated with increased HSV1 $\gamma$ 34.5 replication, likely due to the impaired antiviral effects, especially in melanoma cells lacking *STING*/cGAS expression (A375, G361, MeWo, and SK-MEL-5; Fig. 6C). Furthermore, cells with defective *STING* signal underwent rapid cell death, likely due to robust viral replication, whereas control cells and cells with partial *STING* function (SK-MEL-24 and SK-MEL-31) were significantly more resistant (Fig. 6D). These data confirmed that melanoma cells exhibiting defective *STING*-signaling enabled more HSV1 replication and lysis. We further examined the ability of vaccinia virus to activate host innate immune signaling in the absence of *STING* function in melanoma cells. Vaccinia virus, a dsDNA virus with 190-kb genome that replicates in the cytoplasm of infected cells, is another candidate DNA virus that is currently under evaluation as an oncolytic therapeutic agent to treat cancer (25). Similar to our observations using HSV1 $\gamma$ 34.5, vaccinia virus triggered *IFNB* and *CXCL10* production only in the control cells and melanoma cells with partial *STING* function but not in cells with loss of *STING*/cGAS expression (A375, G361, MeWo, and SK-MEL-5; Supplementary Fig. S6). Our results indicate that melanoma cells with defective *STING* signaling are highly susceptible to HSV1 and vaccinia virus infection. Thus, it is plausible that melanoma lacking *STING*/cGAS expression is more sensitive to DNA virus oncolytic activity and being able to measure *STING*/cGAS expression in melanoma tissue may help predict the response of patients to selected viral oncolytic therapy.

**Figure 5.**

DNA demethylation partially recapitulated STING and cGAS expression in human melanoma cell lines. **A**, qPCR analysis of cGAS expression in indicated human melanoma cells mock-treated or treated with 1  $\mu\text{mol/L}$  5AZADC for 5 days. **B**, immunoblot analysis of STING and cGAS in indicated human melanoma cells treated same as above. Fifty micrograms of whole-cell lysate was used and  $\beta$ -actin was analyzed as loading control. **C**, RNA FISH analysis of STING and cGAS in cells (same as above) treated with 5AZADC same as above. Representative images are shown at  $\times 1,260$ . Bar size, 400 nm. qPCR analysis of *IFNB* (**D**) and *CXCL10* (**E**) in cells (same as above) treated with 5AZADC followed by dsDNA transfection at 3  $\mu\text{g/mL}$  dsDNA90 for 3 hours. Immunofluorescent microscopy analysis of IRF3 translocation (**F**) and STING translocation (**G**) in indicated cells treated same as in **D**. Representative images are shown at  $\times 1,260$ . Bar size, 500 nm.

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### ***In vivo* analysis of melanoma cells response to HSV1 $\gamma$ 34.5 therapy**

Our *in vitro* analysis indicated that loss of STING signaling may affect the outcome of select oncoviral therapy (Fig. 6A–D). To further evaluate this possibility *in vivo*, we generated melanoma xenografts by subcutaneously inoculating nude mice with melanoma cells harboring partial (RPMI7951 and SK-MEL-3) or defective (A375, MeWo, and SK-MEL-5) STING signaling. HSV1 $\gamma$ 34.5 was then administered intratumorally and tumor growth monitored (Fig. 7 and Supplementary Fig. S7). Results showed that tumors derived from melanoma cells with defective STING signaling were extremely susceptible to HSV1 $\gamma$ 34.5 treatment (Fig. 7A and B Supplementary Fig. S7). Tumor size decreased rapidly after HSV1 $\gamma$ 34.5 treatment. Four of 6 A375 tumors and 3 of 5 SK-MEL-5 tumors diminished 2 to 3 weeks after treatment (Fig. 7A and B). In contrast, tumors derived from melanoma cells exhibiting partial STING signaling (RPMI7951 and SK-MEL-3) were refractory to viral oncolytic treatment (Fig. 7C and D). While these tumors are slow growing *in vivo*, majority of mice did not respond to HSV1 $\gamma$ 34.5 therapy at all and the animals were sacrificed after the tumor burden became significant. Therefore, our findings complement our previous studies and indicate that the ability to measure STING function in melanoma may predict the outcome of DNA virus-related oncolytic therapy against human melanoma and perhaps other type of cancers.

### **Discussion**

STING controls a key innate immune pathway triggered by the presence of cytosolic dsDNA species (7). STING signaling can be triggered by CDNs produced by intracellular bacteria such as *Listeria monocytogenes* (11) or by more recently discovered cGAMP produced by cGAS following association with cytosolic dsDNA species (11, 26). Cytosolic dsDNA can comprise the genome of DNA microbes including DNA viruses such as HSV1 or bacteria such as mycobacterium tuberculosis, as well as self DNA leaked from the nucleus of DNA damaged cells. We have recently demonstrated that STING-deficient mice are susceptible to carcinogen-aggravated CAC (14). DNA damage can trigger STING function intrinsically within the damaged cell, an event that activates production of cytokines that can presumably attract immune cells to the defective cells for phagocytosis before the former can undergo malignant transformation (27–32). Therefore, STING activation may be required to suppress tumorigenesis.

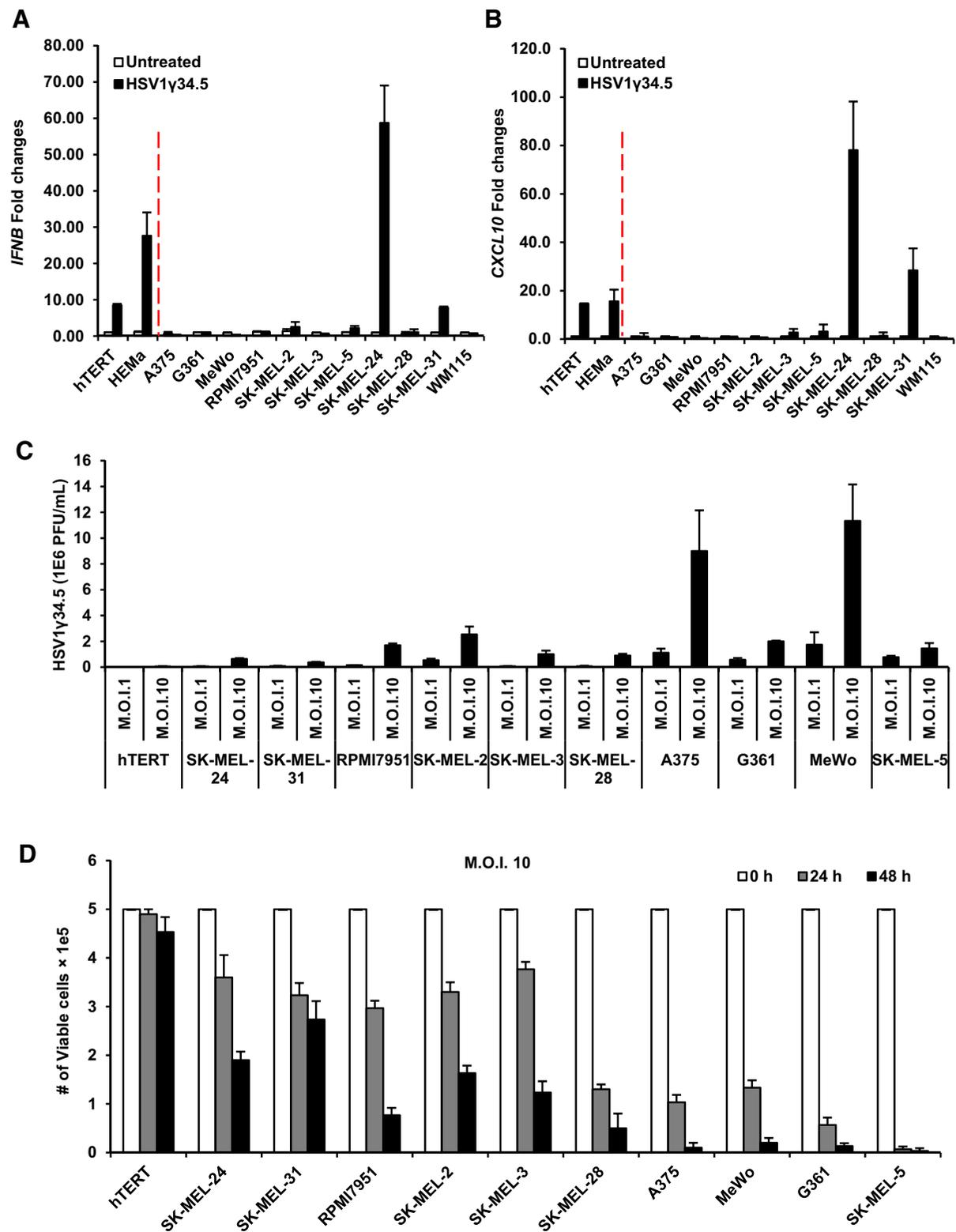
In addition, STING has been reported to be essential for IFN $\beta$ -dependent antitumor T-cell responses (33). Data suggest that STING in professional antigen-presenting cells (CD8<sup>+</sup> dendritic cells) is activated by the DNA from engulfed dying tumor cells, which results in the production of cytokines, including type I IFN, facilitating cross-presentation and cytotoxic T lymphocyte (CTL) priming (13). Correspondingly, the therapeutic intratumoral administration of CDNs has been shown to repress tumor growth, presumably through activation of STING-facilitated dendritic cell (DC)-dependent CTL production (13, 34). Therefore, both intrinsically and extrinsically activated STING-dependent cytokine production have important roles in suppressing cancer development.

Previously, we have reported that STING signaling is frequently suppressed in human colon cancer. As mentioned, loss of intrinsic STING signal may play a key role in preventing cancer develop-

ment through inability to respond to DNA damage and alert the immunosurveillance machinery (28, 35). To extend these studies, we analyzed the expression and regulation of STING signaling in melanoma and similarly found that STING-dependent cytokine production was frequently suppressed in human melanoma. Although no significant mutation or deletion events involving the STING or cGAS genes were observed, the inhibition of STING signaling was found to mainly occur through epigenetic suppression of STING and/or cGAS expression. Cytosolic DNA-mediated STING signaling was partially rescued by demethylating agent (5AZADC) treatment in some STING-defective melanoma cells, suggesting that DNA hypermethylation is one of the mechanisms for STING/cGAS suppression. However, in other STING-defective melanoma cells, demethylation was not effective in being able to restore STING expression. STING and/or cGAS may selectively become targets for suppression at various stages of cancer development, the suppression of either being sufficient to impede STING function. We have also noticed in some melanoma cells that although both STING/cGAS were expressed, the ability of STING to effectively activate the transcription factors NF- $\kappa$ B or IRF3 was impaired by molecular mechanisms that remain to be determined. Thus, STING function can be impaired at different steps along the signaling pathway, although epigenetic suppression of either STING/cGAS expression seems to be common. Collectively, we observed that STING-dependent signaling was defective in numerous melanomas, which indicated that inhibiting STING function may be a key obligation for the development of melanoma, plausibly enabling such cells to evade the immune system.

Loss of STING may be common in tumors and may even predict outcomes to anticancer therapy. Accordingly, we have developed assays to evaluate the expression levels of both STING and cGAS, loss of either of which will affect STING function. We validated these assays in melanoma and showed that both RNAish-based and IHC-based assays were able to measure STING and cGAS mRNA or protein expression in melanoma cells accurately and sensitively. Using IHC, we screened a melanoma TMA that showed loss of either STING or cGAS in more than 50% malignant and more than 60% metastatic melanomas. Loss of STING function may not be a key tumor onset factor. However, STING does appear to be important in the generation of cytokines in response to DNA damage (14, 15, 30). Loss of STING function is almost certainly important in later stages of cancer development to escape immunosurveillance and host antitumor immunity, especially beneficial in tumor metastasis. Our assays may be useful in predicting the effective response rates of cancers to select therapeutic interventions. Furthermore, recapitulating STING signal in tumors, via novel antitumor gene therapy approaches, may reactivate host antitumor immunity against escaped tumor cells.

Accordingly, we noticed that loss of STING function in melanoma cells rendered cells highly sensitive to DNA virus-mediated oncolytic effect (such as HSV1). Oncolytic HSV1 is one viral therapeutic agent in clinical application. For example, Amgen's talimogene laherparepvec (T-VEC) is an HSV-1-based OV that has been engineered to express GM-CSF to increase immunorecognition. Although T-VEC has shown improved effect over traditional immune therapies for advanced melanoma, the overall response rate is still limited. This phenomenon could be potentially due to diverse STING/cGAS expression status among melanoma cases. OVs may directly destroy the

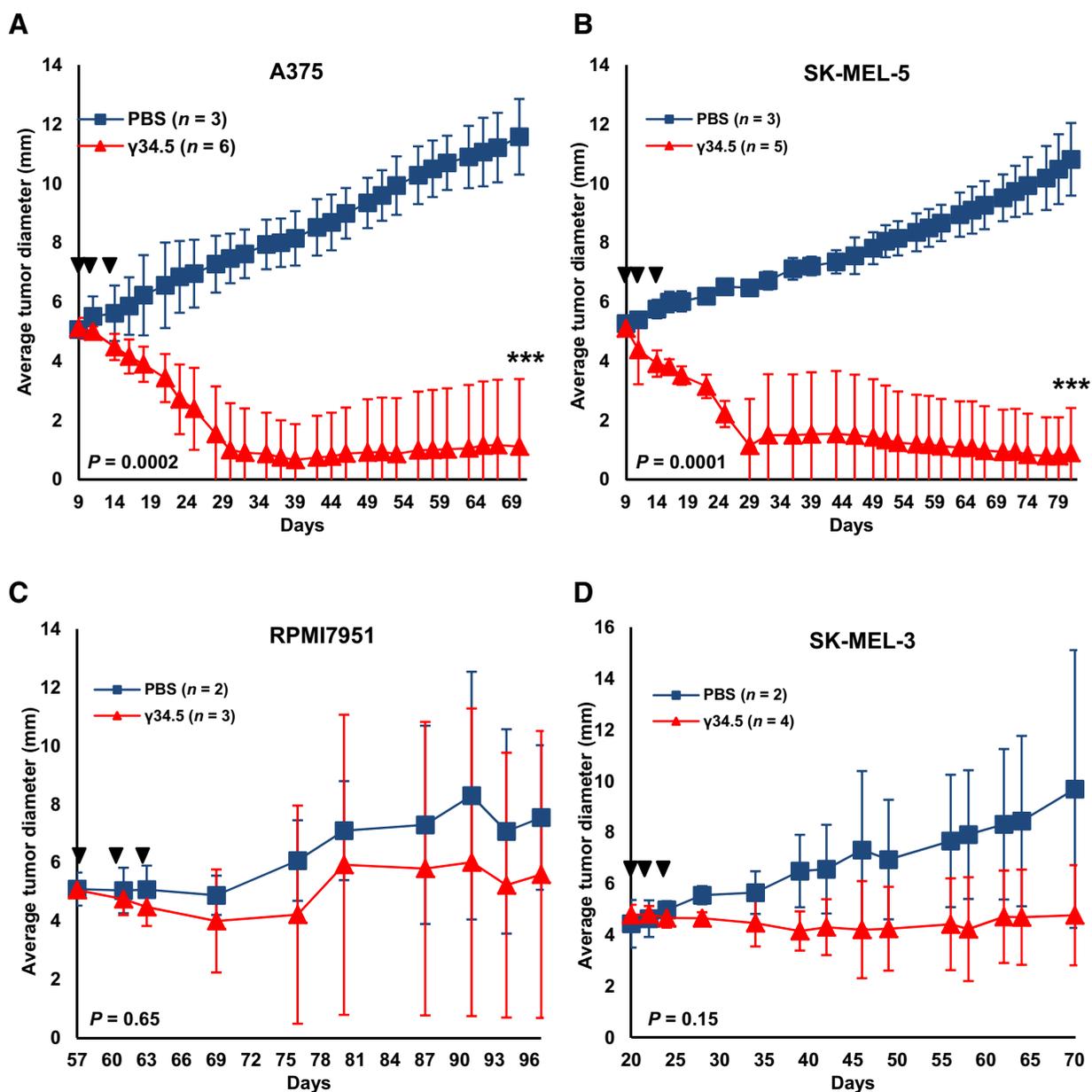
**Figure 6.**

STING signal defect leads melanoma cells more susceptible to HSV1 infection. Cells (same as in Fig. 1) were infected with HSV1y34.5 at MOI 5 for 1 hour, and human *IFN $\beta$*  (A) and *CXCL10* (B) induction was analyzed by qPCR 3 hours postinfection. C, normal hTERT cells and selected human melanoma cell lines were infected with HSV1y34.5 at MOI 1 or MOI 10 for 1 hour, and titration of HSV1y34.5 was analyzed by standard plaque assay in vera cells 24 hours later. D, cells (same as in C) were infected with HSV1y34.5 at MOI 10 for 1 hour, and cell viability was analyzed by trypan blue staining 24 and 48 hours later.

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tumor cell by lysis as well as create a tumor antigen source for activation of antitumor immune response (33). STING may play key roles in both of these processes. Therefore, utilization of STING/cGAS as molecular biomarker may enable a more predictive response to the use of microbes for the treatment of cancer. Such assays may also shed insight into the efficacy of other STING-dependent antitumor therapies based on CDNs or even DNA adduct-based chemotherapeutic regimens (36). Furthermore, gene therapies involving modification of the STING/cGAS status may provide advantages of utilizing host innate and

adaptive defense mechanism to facilitate antitumor effects in combination with traditional antitumor therapies. We have noticed that even in the presence of both STING and cGAS, the innate immune signal remains impaired in some melanoma cells, suggesting that other defects in the STING signaling pathway are likely, the causes of which require further elucidation. Thus, further studies on STING signal in cancer development may provide insight into the molecular mechanisms of human carcinogenesis as well as provide novel antitumor therapeutic approaches.



**Figure 7.**

Increased HSV1γ34.5 oncolytic effect was observed in melanoma xenografts with impaired STING signal *in vivo*. A375 (A), SK-MEL-5 (B), RPMI7951 (C), and SK-MEL-3 (D) melanoma xenografts were generated in the right flank of nude Balb/c mice. When tumors had reached approximately 0.5 cm in diameter, tumors were injected every other day a total of three times (arrows) with 1E7 PFU HSV1γ34.5 in 50 μL PBS or 50 μL PBS only and tumor growth measured every other day. Statistical analysis was carried out comparing the two treatment groups at the last time point using the unpaired Student *t* test. *P* values are as indicated.

**Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest**

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

**Authors' Contributions**

Conception and design: T. Xia, G.N. Barber

Development of methodology: T. Xia

Acquisition of data (provided animals, acquired and managed patients, provided facilities, etc.): T. Xia, H. Konno

Analysis and interpretation of data (e.g., statistical analysis, biostatistics, computational analysis): T. Xia

Writing, review, and/or revision of the manuscript: T. Xia, G.N. Barber  
Study supervision: G.N. Barber

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## Recurrent Loss of STING Signaling in Melanoma Correlates with Susceptibility to Viral Oncolysis

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