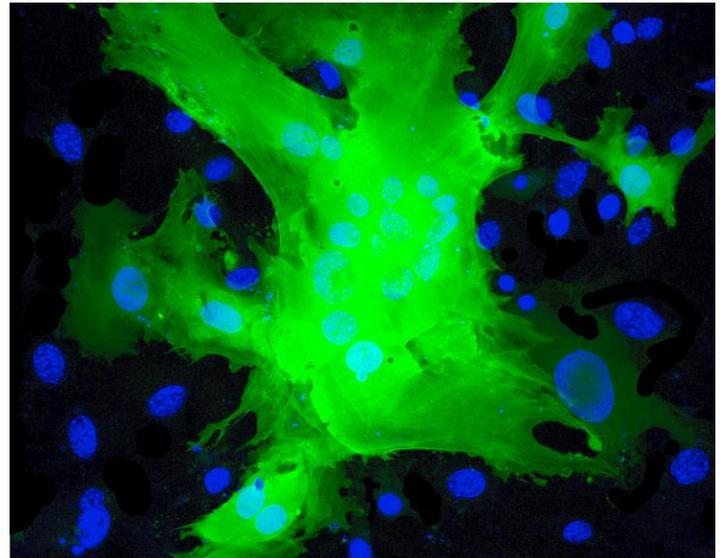
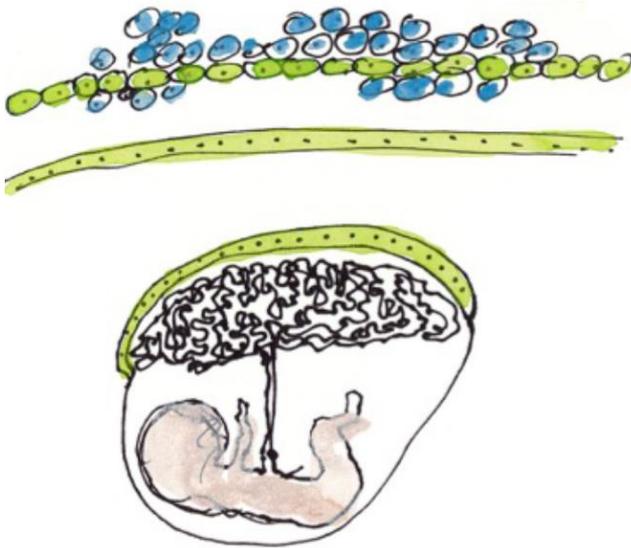


JULY 11, 2019

# press release



## High-risk pregnancy: the interferon effect

Artist's representation of cells and placenta © Fabrice Hyber – Organoïde-Institut Pasteur/Fluorescence microscopy of fused cells (in green) and nucleus (in blue). © Institut Pasteur

**Discovery of a cellular mechanism involved in abnormal placental development during some high-risk pregnancies.**

**High-risk pregnancies occur frequently and may be caused by various factors. It is estimated that 10 to 20% of pregnant women miscarry during their first trimester of pregnancy. Slow fetal growth may also arise as a result of maternal infection with certain microbes, parasites or viruses (such as toxoplasmosis or infection with rubella virus, cytomegalovirus, herpes or Zika) or because of genetic or autoimmune diseases. Teams from the Institut Pasteur, the CNRS, Inserm, Necker-Enfants Malades Hospital (AP-HP) and Université de Paris have identified a new cellular mechanism that alters placental development, potentially causing serious complications during pregnancy. The mechanism is linked with the production of interferon, a molecule produced in response to infection, especially viral infection. The findings are published in *Science* on July 11, 2019.**

The **placenta** is both a surface for exchange and a barrier between mother and fetus – it delivers nutrients needed for fetal growth, produces hormones and protects the fetus from microbes and the maternal immune system. The external layer of the placenta, known as the **syncytiotrophoblast**, is composed of cells which fuse together, forming giant cells that are optimized for the placenta's barrier and exchange functions. Cell fusion is mediated by a protein known as **syncytin**. If the syncytiotrophoblast fails to form correctly, it can cause placental insufficiency and hinder fetal development. An abnormal syncytiotrophoblast can be observed in

conditions such as slow intrauterine growth, the lupus and in women whose fetus has Down syndrome.

**Interferon** is a substance produced by immune cells during infection to combat viruses and other intracellular microbes. High levels of interferon are observed in autoimmune or inflammatory diseases such as lupus, and also in some infections. In this study, the scientists demonstrated that interferon is responsible for placental abnormality and that it acts by preventing syncytiotrophoblast formation. Specifically, interferon induces the production of a family of cellular proteins known as **IFITMs (interferon-induced transmembrane proteins)**, which block the fusion activity of syncytin.

IFITM proteins are beneficial since they prevent viral fusion with cellular membrane, thereby stopping viruses from entering and multiplying within cells. The scientists used experimental models and human cells to demonstrate that this beneficial effect can nevertheless be harmful if IFITM proteins are produced in an important level in the placenta.

*"Identifying the role of IFITMs gives us a better understanding of the mechanisms involved in placental development and how it may be disrupted during infections and other diseases,"* comments Olivier Schwartz, Head of the Virus and Immunity Unit at the Institut Pasteur and joint last author of the paper. The scientists want to investigate whether placental pathologies of unknown etiology, such as some early spontaneous abortions and occurrences of preeclampsia, also involve IFITM proteins. In the longer term, blocking the effects of IFITMs could represent a new therapeutic strategy to prevent interferon-related placental abnormality.

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## source

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### **IFITM proteins inhibit placental syncytiotrophoblast formation and promote fetal demise, *Science*, July 11, 2019**

Julian Buchrieser<sup>1,2†</sup>, Séverine A. Degrelle<sup>3,4,5†</sup>, Thérèse Couderc<sup>6,7†</sup>, Quentin Nevers<sup>1,2†</sup>, Olivier Disson<sup>6,7</sup>, Caroline Manet<sup>8,9</sup>, Daniel A. Donahue<sup>1,2</sup>, Françoise Porrot<sup>1,2</sup>, Kenzo-Hugo Hillion<sup>10</sup>, Emeline Perthame<sup>10</sup>, Marlene V. Arroyo<sup>1,2,11</sup>, Sylvie Souquere<sup>12</sup>, Katinka Ruigrok<sup>2,13</sup>, Anne Dupressoir<sup>14,15</sup>, Thierry Heidmann<sup>14,15</sup>, Xavier Montagutelli<sup>8</sup>, Thierry Fournier<sup>3,4††</sup>, Marc Lecuit<sup>6,7,16††</sup>, Olivier Schwartz<sup>1,2,17††</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Virus and Immunity Unit, Institut Pasteur, Paris, France.

<sup>2</sup> CNRS-UMR3569, Paris, France.

<sup>3</sup> INSERM, UMR-S1139, Faculté de Pharmacie de Paris, Paris, France

<sup>4</sup> Université Paris Descartes, Sorbonne Paris Cité, Paris, France

<sup>5</sup> Inovarion, Paris, France

<sup>6</sup> Biology of Infection Unit, Institut Pasteur, Paris, France

<sup>7</sup> Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale U1117, Paris, France

<sup>8</sup> Mouse Genetics Laboratory, Institut Pasteur, Paris, France

<sup>9</sup> AgroParisTech, Paris, France

<sup>10</sup> Bioinformatics and Biostatistics Hub – C3BI, Institut Pasteur, USR 3756 IP CNRS – Paris, France

<sup>11</sup> Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics and Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Columbia University, New York, NY 10032, USA

<sup>12</sup> Plateforme de Microscopie Electronique Cellulaire, UMS AMMICA, Gustave Roussy, Villejuif, France

<sup>13</sup> Structural Virology Unit, Institut Pasteur, Paris, France

<sup>14</sup> Unité Physiologie et Pathologie Moléculaires des Rétrovirus Endogènes et Infectieux, Hôpital Gustave Roussy, Villejuif, France

<sup>15</sup> UMR 9196, Université Paris-Sud, Orsay, France

<sup>16</sup> Université de Paris, Department of Infectious Diseases and Tropical Medicine, Necker-Enfants Malades University Hospital, APHP, Institut Imagine, Paris, France

<sup>17</sup> Vaccine Research Institute, Créteil, France.

# contact ---

Institut Pasteur Press Office

**MYRIAM REBEYROTTE +33 (0)1 45 68 81 01**

**AURELIE PERTHUISON +33 (0)1 45 68 89 28**

[presse@pasteur.fr](mailto:presse@pasteur.fr)