

ILLUSTRATED REVIEW

Fishing for answers to hemostatic and thrombotic disease: Genome editing in zebrafish

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the teleost vertebrate *Danio rerio* (zebrafish) has emerged as a model for hemostasis and thrombosis. At genomic and functional levels, there is a high degree of conservation of the hemostatic system with that of mammals. Numerous features of the fish model offer unique advantages for investigating hemostasis and thrombosis. These include high fecundity, rapid and external development, optical transparency, and extensive functional homology with mammalian hemostasis and thrombosis. Zebrafish are particularly suited to genome-wide mutagenesis experiments for the study of modifier genes. They are also amenable to whole-organism small-molecule screens, a feature that is exceptionally relevant to hemostasis and thrombosis. Zebrafish coagulation factor knockouts that are in utero or neonatal lethal in mammals survive into adulthood before succumbing to hemorrhage or thrombosis, enabling studies not possible in mammals. In this illustrated review, we outline how zebrafish have been employed for the study of hemostasis and thrombosis using modern genome editing techniques, coagulation assays in larvae, and in vivo evaluation of patient-specific variants to infer causality and demonstrate pathogenicity. Zebrafish hemostasis and thrombosis models will continue to serve as a clinically directed basic research tool and powerful alternative to mammals for the development of new diagnostic markers and novel therapeutics for coagulation disorders through high-throughput genetic and small-molecule studies.

KEYWORDS

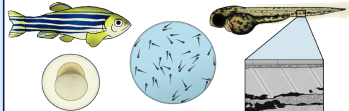
coagulation, genetics, genome editing, hemostasis, thrombosis, zebrafish

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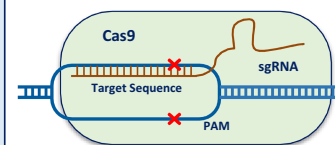
Fishing for answers to hemostatic and thrombotic disease: genome editing in zebrafish

Introduction to zebrafish



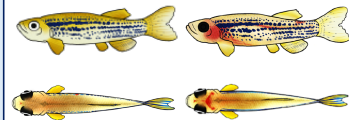
The zebrafish (*Danio rerio*), has numerous features that make it amenable to the study of hemostasis and thrombosis, including high fecundity, rapid and external development, optical transparency, and extensive functional and genomic homology with mammals.

Technologies for genetic studies in zebrafish



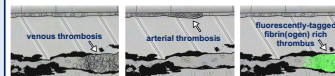
Zebrafish are suited to the application of modern powerful techniques for both targeted (eg, genome editing) and genome-wide genetic manipulation.

Zebrafish models of coagulation disorders



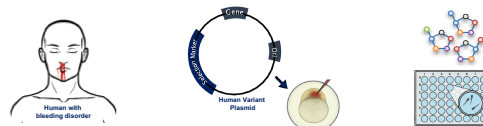
Unlike many mammalian counterparts that exhibit in utero or neonatal lethality, zebrafish coagulation factor mutants survive into early adulthood before succumbing to coagulopathy, enabling unique types of investigation.

Hemostasis/thrombosis in zebrafish



Coagulation in zebrafish shares many features with mammals. Hemostasis can be analyzed in zebrafish using an array of techniques, including vascular injury and labeling of coagulation factors and cells with fluorescent proteins.

Evaluation of patient coagulation factor mutations



Variants of uncertain significance can be studied rapidly in vivo using zebrafish models of coagulation disorders to demonstrate pathogenicity. The zebrafish is also an ideal model for the development of new diagnostic markers and novel therapeutics for coagulation disorders. Zebrafish hemostasis and thrombosis models will continue to serve as a clinically directed basic research model and powerful alternative to mammals.

Graphical Abstract

This graphical abstract outlines our review of the use of zebrafish to study disorders of hemostasis and thrombosis. We initially introduce the zebrafish and its associated technologies. This is followed by a review of the models of hemostatic and thrombotic disease that have been produced using genome editing. Finally, we review application of zebrafish to studies of patient coagulation factor variation.

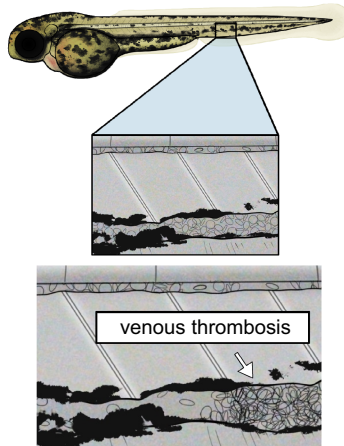
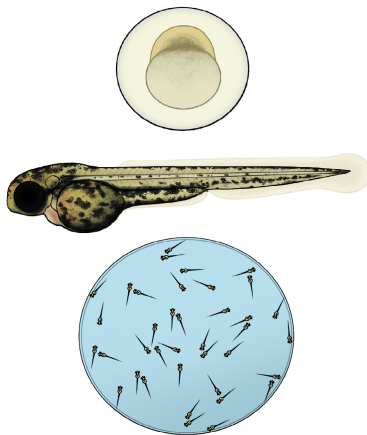
Essentials

- The zebrafish hemostatic system is highly conserved with mammals genomically and functionally.
- Hemostatic disease models produced using genome editing show conservation with human disorders.
- Zebrafish coagulation factor mutants that are early lethal in mammals survive into adulthood.
- Potential disease-causing variants can be rapidly assessed in vivo using zebrafish knockouts.

Unique and relevant features of zebrafish for the study of hemostasis and thrombosis

- ❑ Development is external, rapid, and transparent.¹
- ❑ The first week of life is sustained through yolk-based nutrition.
- ❑ Hundreds of larvae can be maintained in petri dishes at low cost.²

Embryos and Larvae

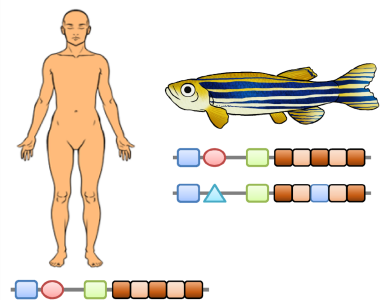


Development

- ❑ Circulation and hemostasis develop by 2 days of life.^{3,4}
- ❑ Hemostasis and thrombosis can be easily visualized under low power microscopy.⁵

- ❑ ~30% of the zebrafish genome is duplicated, including some coagulation factors.^{6,7}
- ❑ Duplications can reveal subfunctionalized roles not identified in mammals.⁸

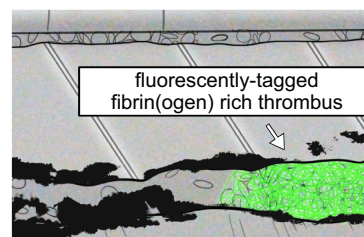
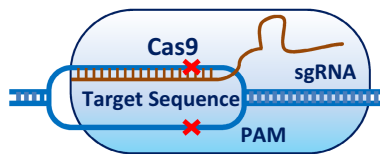
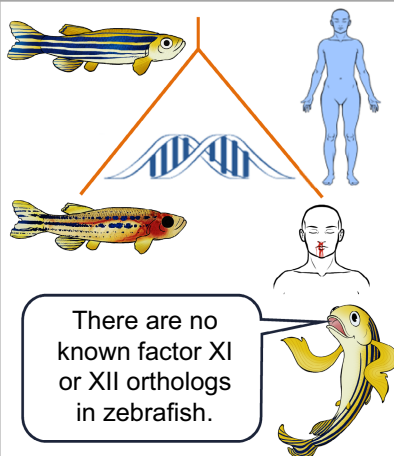
Gene Duplication



Teleost whole genome duplication after divergence from mammals

- ❑ Virtually all known coagulation factors have been identified in the sequenced genome.⁷
- ❑ Hemostasis and thrombosis have been shown to be functionally conserved.^{4,9}

Conservation

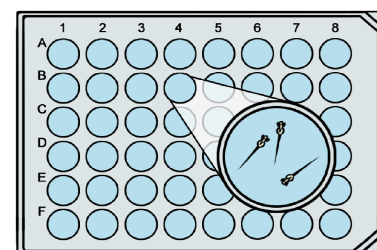
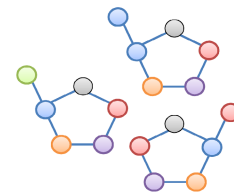


Genome Engineering

- ❑ Transgenic and genome edited models are easy and cheap to produce.¹⁰
- ❑ Fluorescently tagged proteins and structures (eg fibrin(ogen) and blood cells) enable visual assessment of disease states.^{11,12}

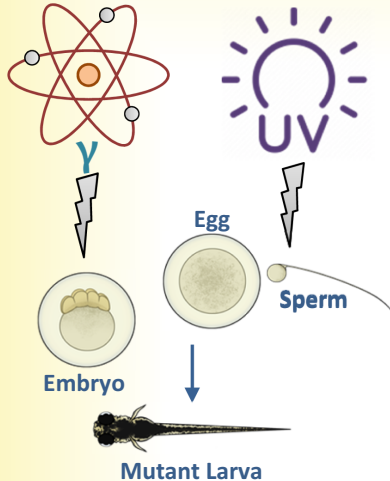
- ❑ Larvae with engineered coagulation disorders can be arrayed into multiwell plates and assayed with small molecule libraries or used for large scale mutagenesis studies.¹³⁻¹⁵

Drug Development



Evolution of technology for the generation of zebrafish disease models

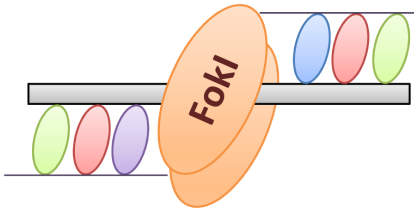
Germline recessive lethal and specific locus mutations are induced by exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light or gamma rays.¹⁶⁻¹⁸



1983
1st zebrafish mutants



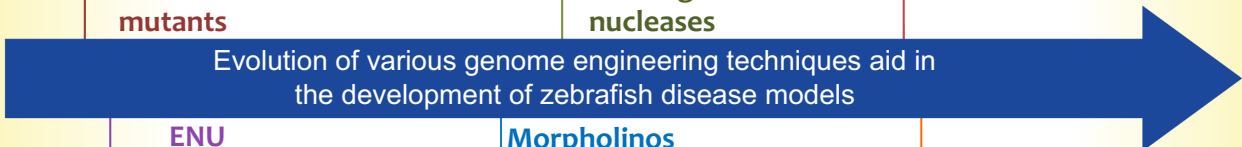
Zinc-finger nucleases (ZFNs) are the first successful application of genome editing to generate zebrafish disease models, but are limited in targeting, difficult to produce, and have a high failure rate.^{22,23}



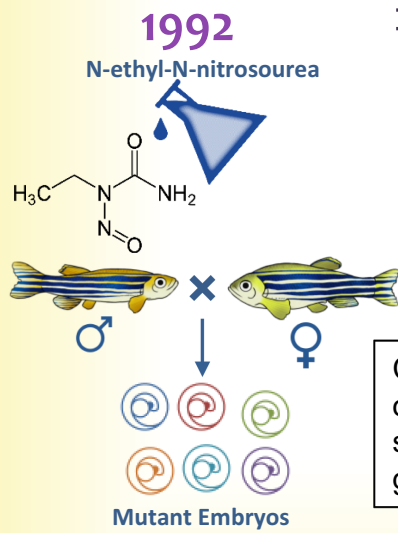
2008
Zinc-finger nucleases

2011
TALENs

TALEN genome editing nucleases (transcription activator-like effector) are much more efficient than ZFNs with broad targeting abilities.^{24,25}

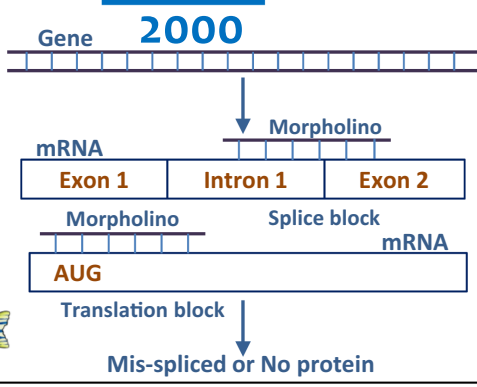


ENU mutagenesis



N-ethyl-N-nitrosourea (ENU), an alkylating agent, is used for the random generation of point mutations in phenotype-driven recessive screens.¹⁹

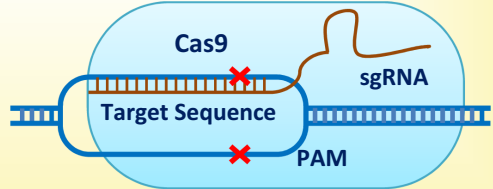
Morpholinos



Chemically modified antisense oligonucleotides (morpholinos) block splicing and translation to produce gene specific knockdowns.^{20,21}

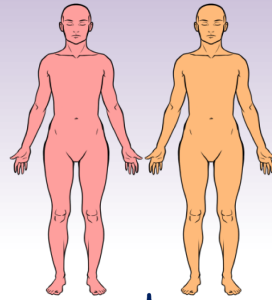
CRISPR/Cas9 utilizes custom single guide RNAs (sgRNAs) that recruit a nuclease for specific targeting. These provide the efficiency and broad targeting of TALENs, but dramatically increase the ease of application.^{26,27}

CRISPR/Cas9
2013



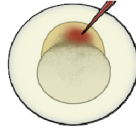
Modeling disorders of hemostasis and thrombotic disease in zebrafish

Genome editing is used to develop models for known disorders of coagulation.²⁸

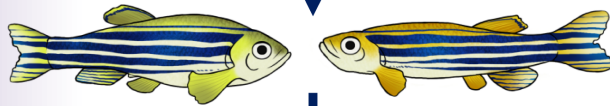
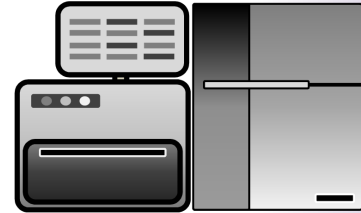


Patient specific variants identified in sequencing or association studies are modeled to determine pathogenicity in vivo.²⁹

Zinc finger nucleases, TALENs, and CRISPR/Cas9 are injected into single cell embryos to target known coagulation factors.^{30,31}



Sanger and next generation sequencing identifies variants in patients.^{32,33}



Deletion



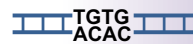
Insertion



Substitution

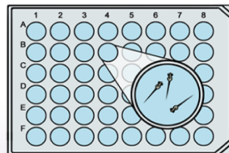
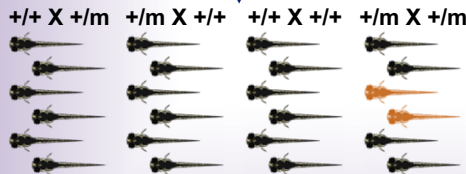
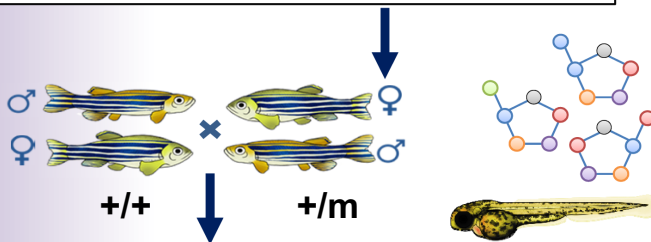


Inversion

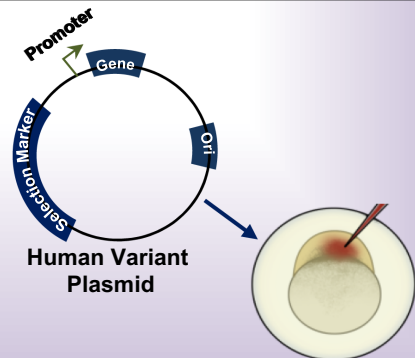


Zebrafish develop from a single cell to a free swimming larva in 3 days, at which point nearly every organ system has developed, including flowing blood and an intact coagulation system.^{3,5}

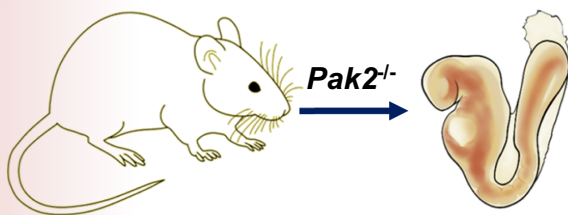
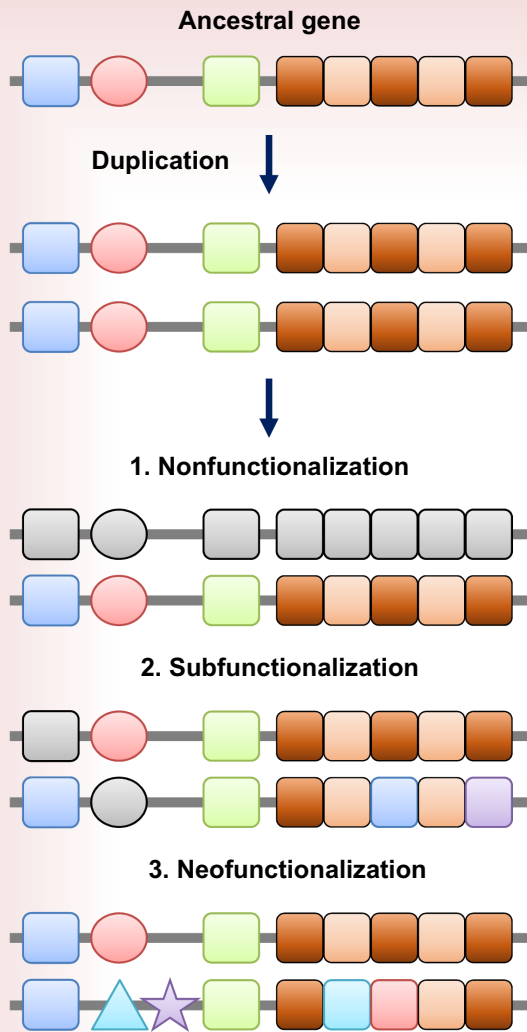
Coagulation disorder models are used to evaluate variants of uncertain significance. Variants are engineered into expression vectors, which are then injected into single cell embryos, and tested for the ability to rescue at the larval stage.^{31,34,35}



Disease models can be used to find modifier genes through unbiased genome-wide chemical mutagenesis^{15,19} (left) or novel therapeutics using small molecule libraries (right).¹³



Zebrafish gene duplication



Loss of p21-activated kinase 2 (*Pak2*^{-/-}) in mice results in embryonic lethality secondary to developmental defects.⁴⁰ Examination of *pak2* duplication (*pak2a* and *b*) in zebrafish enabled dissection of Pak2 functions, and discovery of a role for Pak2a in vascular integrity.³⁹

Teleost fish underwent a whole genome duplication ~400 million years ago.³⁶ Acquired mutations in duplicate genes can result in inactivation (nonfunctionalization), partition of multifunctional genes (subfunctionalization) or acquisition of new function (neofunctionalization).³⁷ Gray boxes indicate loss of domain function.

Tissue Factor

- *tfa*
- *tfb*

Factor IX

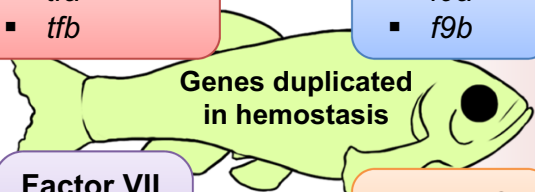
- *f9a*
- *f9b*

Factor VII

- *f7a*
- *f7i*
- *f7l*

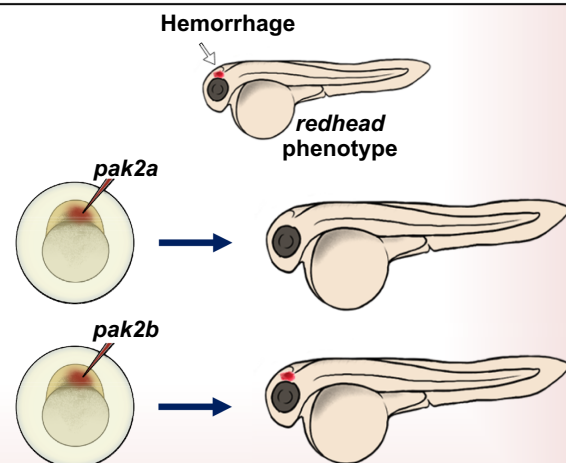
Protein C

- *proca*
- *procb*




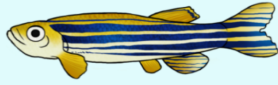
Whole genome duplication in zebrafish has resulted in the duplication of the *tf*, *f9*, *f7*, and *proc* genes.^{7,38}

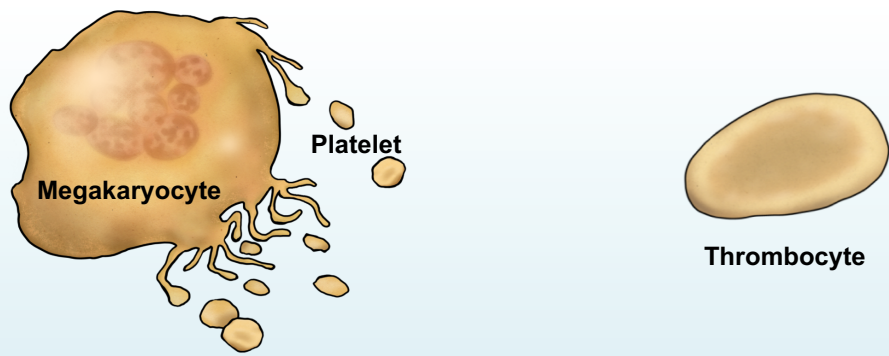
In zebrafish, a hypomorphic *pak2a* mutation causes the redhead (*rh**d*) phenotype (intracranial hemorrhage). Only injection of *pak2a* mRNA rescues the *rh**d* phenotype.³⁹



The teleost-specific genome duplication with the presence of duplicated paralogs gives a unique opportunity to identify previously undiscovered gene functions.³⁶

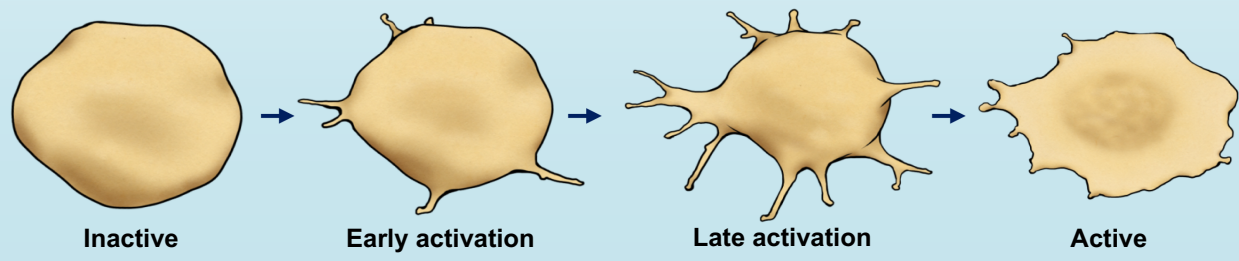
Comparison of platelets and thrombocytes

 <p>Platelets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Anucleate with granular cytoplasm⁴¹ ✦ Produced in large numbers vastly out of proportion to nucleated blood cells ✦ Plasma membrane invades the platelet interior to make a surface-connected canalicular system⁴² ✦ Receptors mediate hemostasis and other functions⁴³ ✦ Unique to mammals <p>Platelets</p>	 <p>Thrombocytes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Nucleated with dense chromatin, cytoplasmic projections⁴⁴ ✦ Relative numbers similar to white cells⁴⁵ ✦ Function similar to platelets in adherence and aggregation⁴⁶ ✦ Stimulated by multiple platelet agonists: eg, ADP, arachidonic acid, collagen⁴⁷ ✦ Receptors for adhesion and aggregation are conserved⁴⁸ ✦ Present in fish, birds, reptiles, and amphibians <p>Thrombocytes</p>
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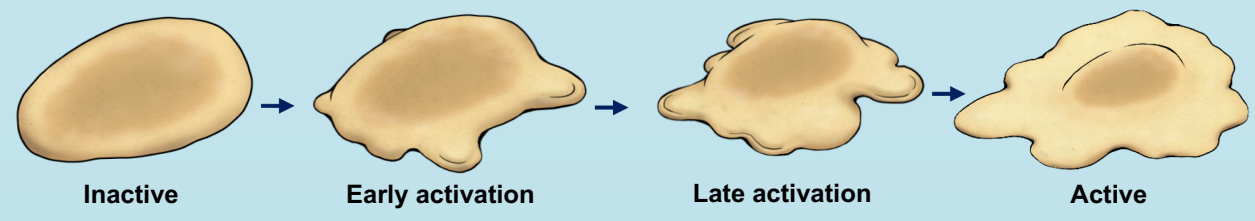


Zebrafish thrombocyte spreading on fibrinogen is similar to human platelets.⁴⁹ During activation, human platelets form filopodia and lamellipodia extensions,⁵⁰ zebrafish thrombocytes also develop pseudopod-like protrusions after activation.

Platelet Spreading in Humans



Thrombocyte Spreading in Zebrafish

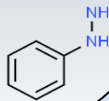


Thrombosis assays in zebrafish



Ferric chloride

- FeCl₃ is layered over larvae immobilized in agarose⁵¹
- FeCl₃ produces free radicals causing endothelial injury and vessel occlusion
- Time to occlusion (TTO) measured in caudal vessels



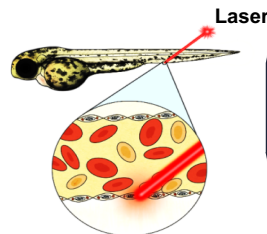
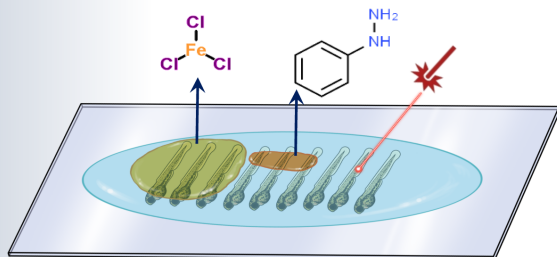
Phenylhydrazine

- Phenylhydrazine is layered over caudal vessels of immobilized larvae^{51,52}
- Thought to activate flippase and externalize phosphatidylserine in erythrocytes and thrombocytes, resulting in vessel occlusion

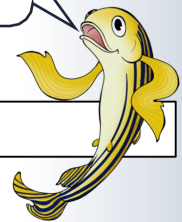


Laser injury

- Endothelium injured in agarose immobilized larvae using a pulsed nitrogen laser, resulting in specific venous or arterial vessel occlusion⁵³



Unlike mammals, erythrocytes and thrombocytes are nucleated.



Outcomes of laser-mediated endothelial injury in various transgenic lines

Normal circulation

Venous injury

Arterial injury

venous thrombosis

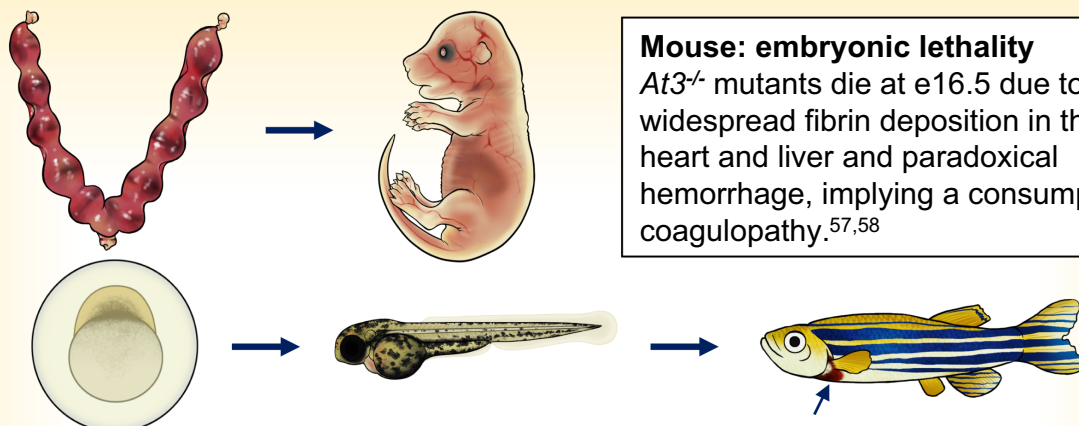
arterial thrombosis

Occlusive thrombi at the site of laser-mediated endothelial injury.⁵³

Occlusive thrombi in a *cd41-eGFP* transgenic¹² (green thrombocytes) shows arterial thrombi to be thrombocyte-rich, analogous to human pathology.⁵ Thrombocytes appear at 48 hours post fertilization (hpf).^{12,54}

Occlusive thrombi from double *cd41-eGFP* and *gata1-DsRed* transgenics⁵⁵ (latter labels erythrocytes red). These are fibrin-rich akin to human venous thrombosis (see fibrinogen illustration below).^{51,55} After circulation initiates at 24 hpf, primitive erythrocytes enter the vasculature.⁵⁶

Zebrafish *at3* deficiency demonstrates overlapping and distinct phenotypes with mammals

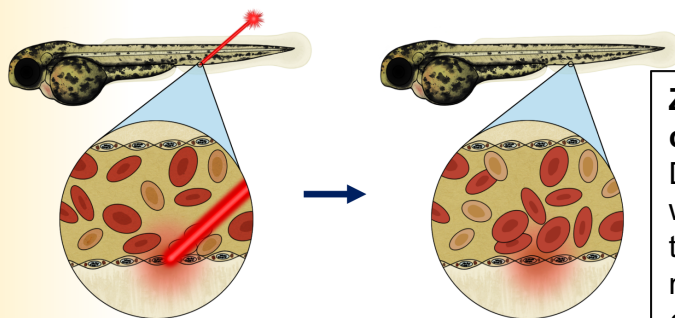


Mouse: embryonic lethality

At3^{-/-} mutants die at e16.5 due to widespread fibrin deposition in the heart and liver and paradoxical hemorrhage, implying a consumptive coagulopathy.^{57,58}

Zebrafish: lethality in adulthood

Genome editing with zinc finger nucleases was used to produce *at3* null mutants. *at3*^{-/-} juveniles tolerate spontaneous thrombosis and uncontrolled disseminated intravascular coagulopathy early in development, but adults succumb to intracardiac thrombosis. Some adults exhibit visible hemorrhage (arrow).⁵⁹

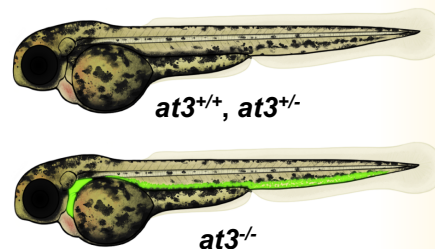


Zebrafish: consumptive coagulopathy

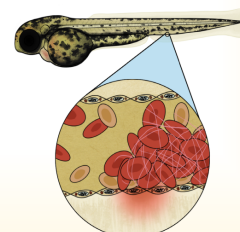
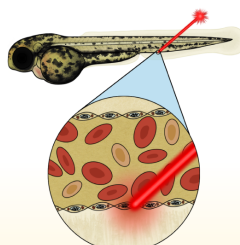
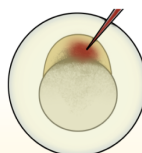
Disseminated intravascular coagulation with consumption of fibrinogen results in the absence of occlusion following laser-mediated venous endothelial injury in *at3*^{-/-} larvae at 3 dpf.⁵⁹

Zebrafish: spontaneous thrombosis

at3^{-/-} mutant zebrafish larvae labeled with fluorescently-tagged fibrinogen reveal fibrin deposition consistent with thrombosis secondary to disseminated intravascular coagulation.⁵⁹



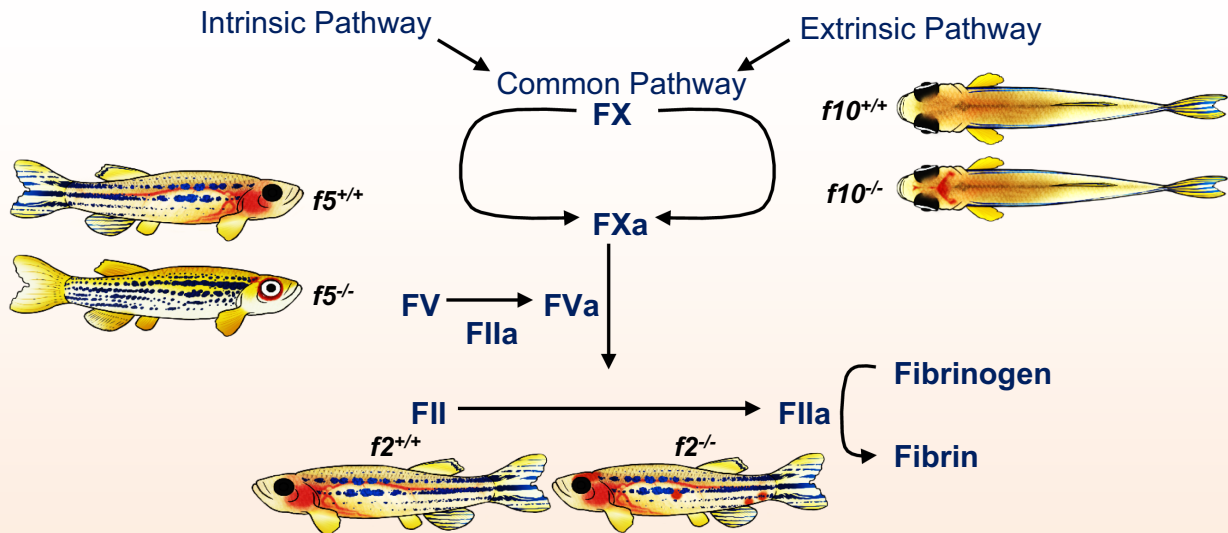
Human and zebrafish *at3* cDNA transgene



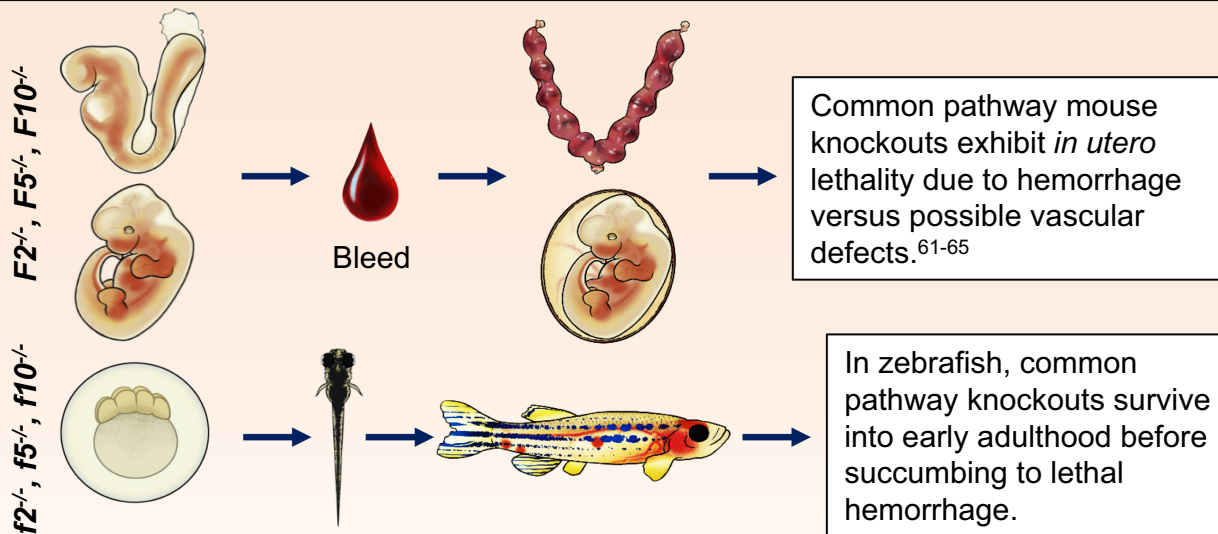
cDNA rescue: Both human and zebrafish *at3* cDNA injected into *at3*^{-/-} single-cell embryos rescue the delayed occlusion after laser-mediated venous endothelial injury.⁵⁹

Common pathway gene knockout in zebrafish results in unexpected survival

Loss of *f2*, *f5*, and *f10* in fish are compatible with development to adulthood



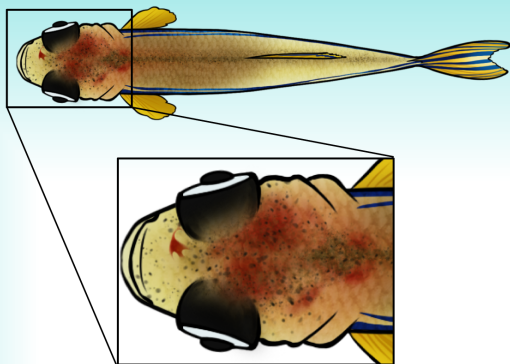
Genome editing with TALENs and CRISPR/Cas9 was used to produce *f2*, *f5*, and *f10* mutant embryos/larvae, which show no overt hemorrhage. They develop normally into the mid-juvenile stage but exhibit spontaneous hemorrhage beginning around 2 months of age, with complete lethality by 4 months.^{31,34,60}



Based on analysis of the zebrafish common pathway mutants, angiogenesis and vasculogenesis appear to be normal. These data suggest that thrombin generation does not play a role in these processes, and in utero death in mammals is likely due to hemorrhage.

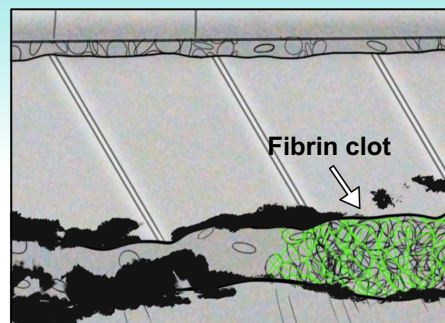


The role of fibrinogen in zebrafish hemostasis



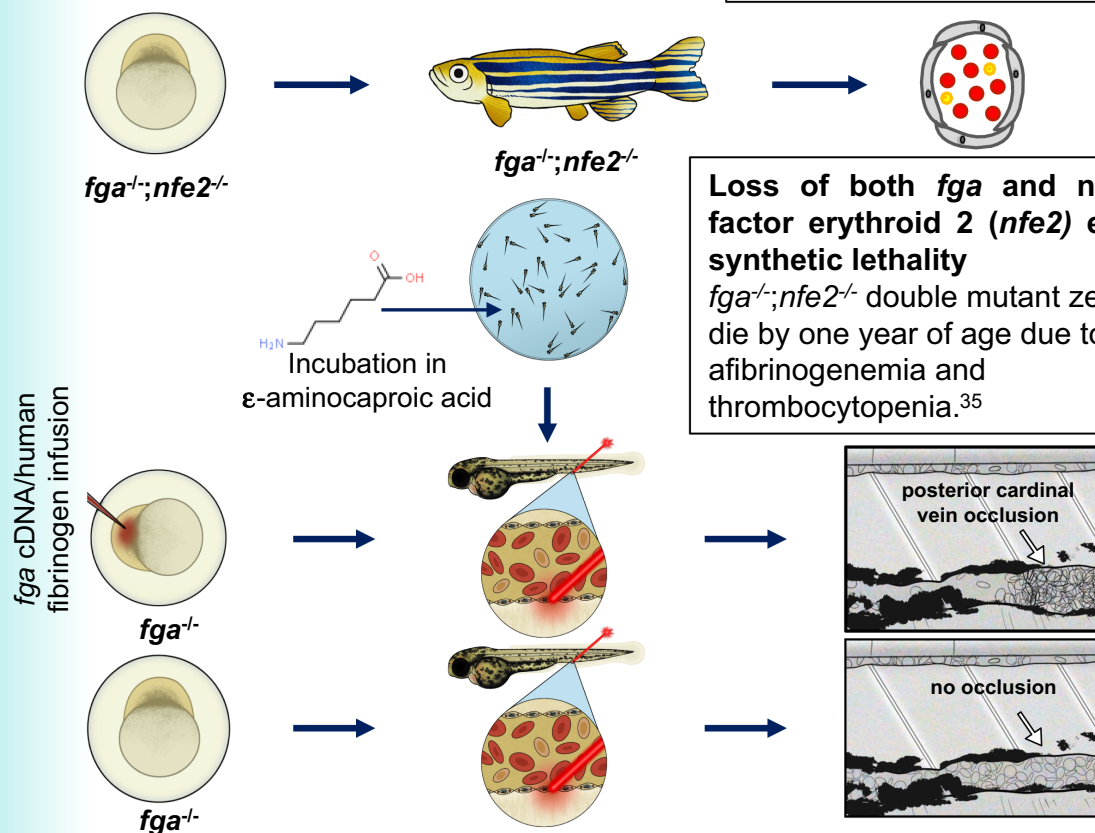
Loss of fibrinogen results in hemorrhage in multiple tissues

fga mutants exhibit spontaneous hemorrhage in the jaw, abdomen, muscle, and fin, as well as the forebrain, midbrain, and hindbrain (inset).^{35,66} Hemorrhage occurs later than common pathway mutations, with partial lethality by one year of age.



Fibrin(ogen) incorporates into a developing clot in zebrafish larvae

Fluorescently tagged fibrinogen demonstrates that fibrin is the primary component of thrombi produced through endothelial injury in the venous circulation.¹¹



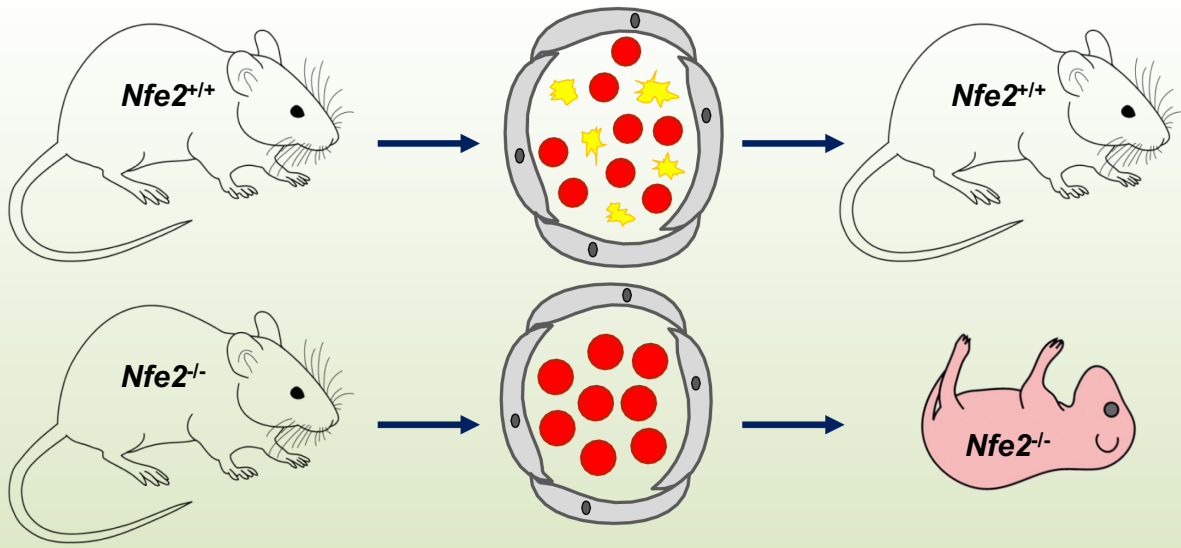
Loss of both *fga* and nuclear factor erythroid 2 (*nfe2*) exhibit synthetic lethality

fga^{-/-}; *nfe2*^{-/-} double mutant zebrafish die by one year of age due to afibrinogenemia and thrombocytopenia.³⁵

fga mutant larval fish exhibit a hemostatic defect

As in mammals, targeted mutation of *fga* results in loss of fibrinogen, and absence of thrombus formation following endothelial injury.^{35,67} This can be rescued by the expression of zebrafish *fga* cDNA or human fibrinogen infusion. Surprisingly, incubation with ϵ -aminocaproic acid also partially reverses this hemostatic defect.³⁵

Loss of nuclear factor erythroid 2 (Nfe2) results in defective adult but normal embryonic/larval thrombopoiesis in zebrafish

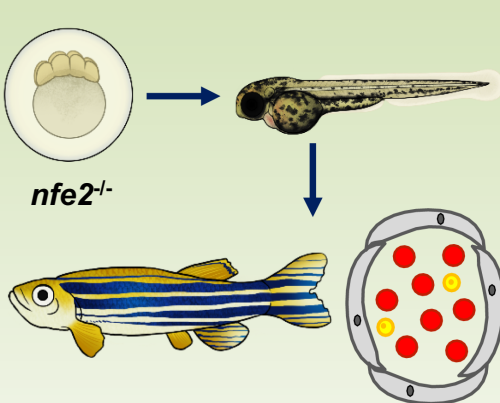
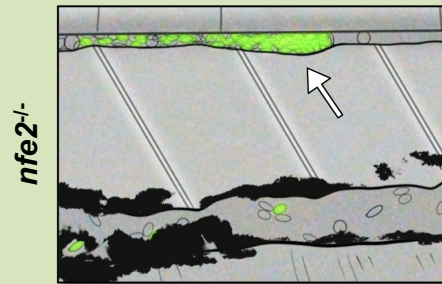


Mouse: thrombocytopenia and neonatal hemorrhage

Nfe2^{-/-} mutants develop normally except for severe, nearly absolute thrombocytopenia. Most homozygous mutants die in the neonatal period secondary to hemorrhage.⁶⁸

Zebrafish: *nfe2^{-/-}* larvae exhibit normal thrombocyte function

TALENs were used to engineer a null mutation in *nfe2*.⁴⁹ Homozygous mutants display normal thrombocyte-rich clots (arrow, right) in the arterial circulation following laser-mediated endothelial injury of the dorsal aorta at 6 dpf.

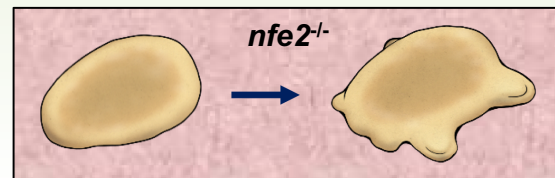
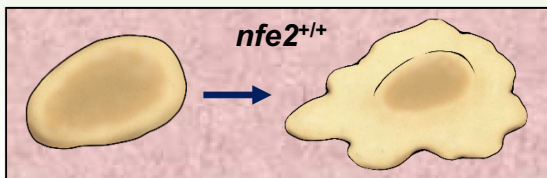


Zebrafish: larval thrombopoiesis

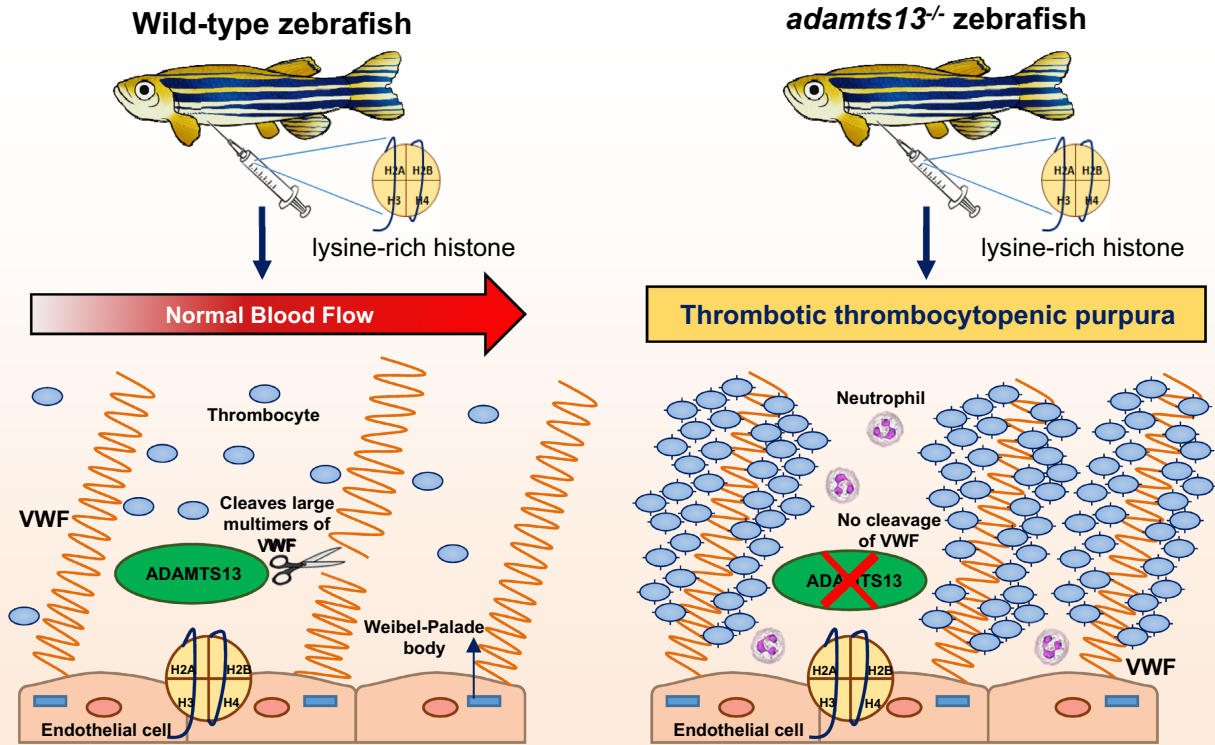
nfe2^{-/-} mutant larva are indistinguishable from wild type siblings. They have normal numbers of thrombocytes and aggregate in response to laser-mediated arterial endothelial injury.⁴⁹

Zebrafish: adult thrombopoiesis

nfe2^{-/-} adults display severe thrombocytopenia, but no apparent hemorrhage and normal long-term survival. Mutant thrombocytes have demonstrably decreased spreading on fibrinogen.⁴⁹

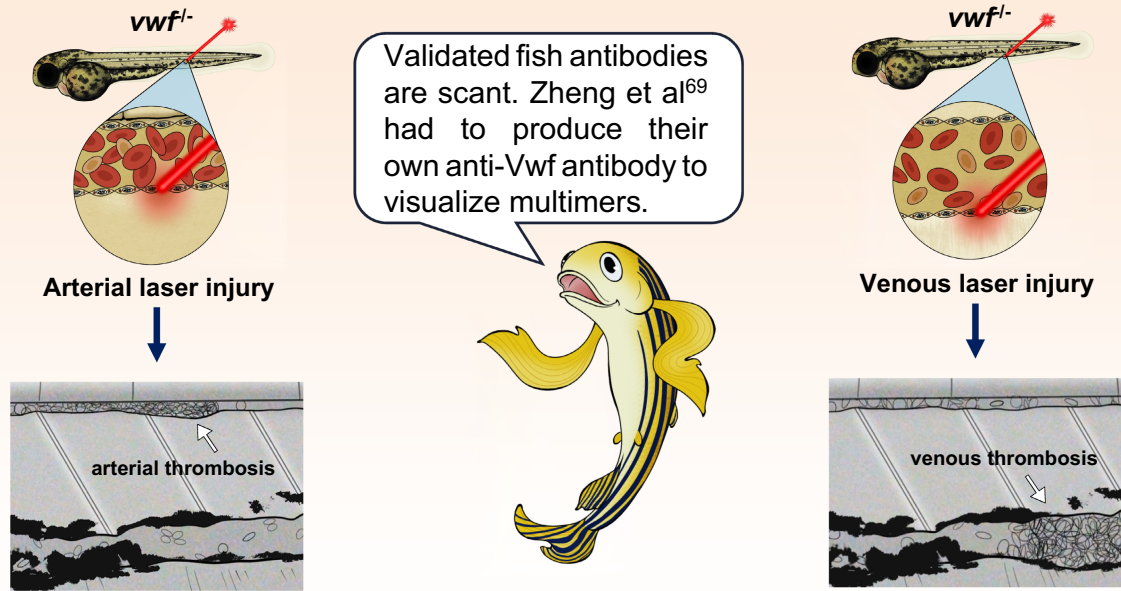


adamts13 and vwf in zebrafish



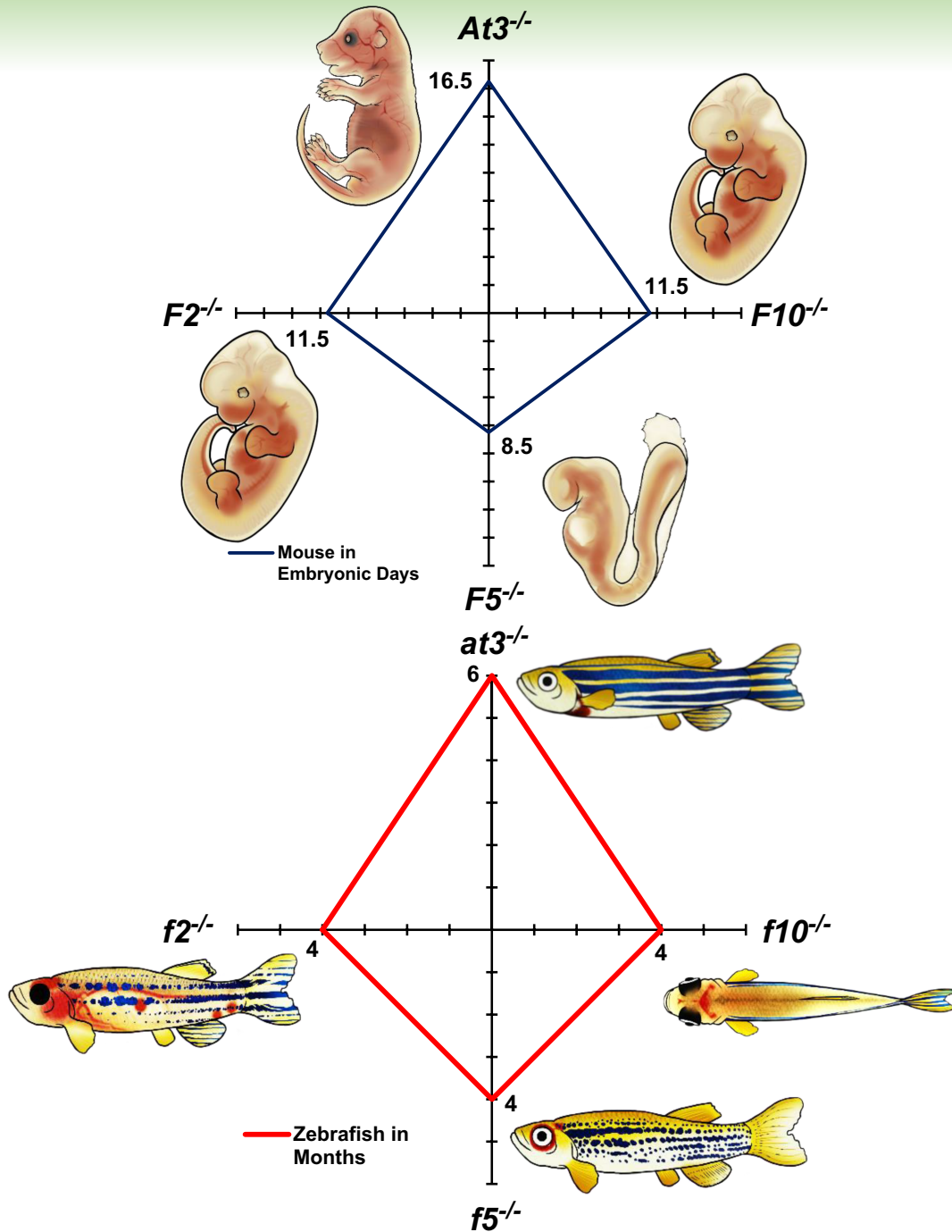
Adamts13 deficiency alone does not cause acute thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura

In *adamts13^{-/-}* zebrafish mutants, intraperitoneal injection of lysine-rich histone triggers severe thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura (TTP) and causes death.⁶⁹ This is mediated through Vwf, as *adamts13^{-/-};vwf^{-/-}* zebrafish mutants do not develop TTP.



Vwf in zebrafish: zebrafish Vwf forms high molecular multimers and is packaged into Weibel-Palade bodies.⁷⁰ Loss of Vwf results in a higher time to occlusion in *vwf^{-/-}* mutant fish than the wild type larvae in both the arterial and venous circulation.⁷¹

Extended survival of fish common pathway mutants relative to mammals



Complete loss of common pathway factors is embryonic lethal in mouse models and presumed lethal in humans.^{31,34,60} Hypotheses for the differences between mammals and zebrafish include:

- absence of birth trauma
- differential hemostatic challenges in an aquatic environment
- lower blood pressures in zebrafish
- species-specific genetic differences resulting in a differential baseline hemostatic balance^{60,72}

(black and red lines indicate average age of death for each mutant line)

Evaluation of human genetic variants in zebrafish hemostasis and thrombosis knockout models

AT3 thrombosis variants	Affected domain(s)	Ability to rescue <i>at3</i> mutant DIC phenotype ⁵⁹
Leu99Phe ^{73,74}	heparin binding domain	complete
Lys114Glu ^{75,76}	heparin binding domain	complete
Arg393His ^{77,78}	reactive center loop (RCL) : P1 Arg mutation	none
Ala404Asp ⁷⁹	pleiotropic effect on RCL and heparin binding domain	partial

F5 deficiency variants	Affected domain(s)	Ability to rescue <i>f5</i> mutant phenotype ³¹
Ser83Arg	A1	complete
Gly97Asp	A1	none
Tyr1702Cys ⁸⁰	A3	none
Arg2074Cys ⁸¹	C2	complete
Arg2187Cys	C2	complete

F10 deficiency variants	Affected domain(s)	Ability to rescue <i>f10</i> mutant phenotype ³⁴
Arg68Cys	EGF1	none
Gly173Tyr	activation peptide	none
Δ T176_Q186 deletion	activation peptide	none
Gly262Asp	protease	none
Ile323Met	protease	partial
Cys390Phe	protease	none
Gln416Leu	protease	partial

FGA variants	Affected domain(s)	Ability to rescue <i>fga</i> mutant phenotype ³⁵
Met1Val ⁸²	pre-peptide	none
Cys55Gly ⁸³	N-terminus	complete
Cys64Tyr ⁸⁴	N-terminus	complete
Tyr809Cys ⁸⁵	α_E C domain	none



Since hemostasis must occur within a closed circulatory system, consisting of flowing blood, proteins, cells, and endothelium, the zebrafish is superior to cell culture systems for assessing variants.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AR and JS developed the concepts and wrote the manuscript. AR and AF produced the illustrations. AR, AF, and JS approved the final content.

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RELATIONSHIP DISCLOSURE

JAS has been a consultant for Sanofi, Takeda, CSL Behring, HEMA Biologics, and Bayer. AR and ACF report no conflicts of interest.

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