1	Schwann cell-specific PTEN and EGFR dysfunctions affect neuromuscular
2	junction development by impaired Agrin signaling and autophagy
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## 19 Abstract

The neuromuscular junction (NMJ) is formed by motor nerve terminals, 20 post-junctional muscle membranes, and terminal Schwann cells (SCs). The formation 21 of NMJ requires complex and dynamic molecular interactions. Nerve- and 22 muscle-derived molecules have been well characterized but the mechanistic 23 involvement of SC in NMJ development remains poorly understood. Schwann 24 cell-specific phosphatase and tensin homolog (Pten) inactivation and epidermal 25 growth factor receptor (EGFR) overexpression (Dhh-Cre; Cnp-EGFR; Pten<sup>flox/flox</sup> or 26 DET) mice were used to study. In this study, NMJ malformation was observed in DET 27 mice. Acetylcholine receptors (AChRs) were distorted and varicose presynaptic nerve 28 terminals appeared in the tibialis anterior (TA) muscle of DET mice. Agrin signaling, 29 30 related to NMJ development, was down-regulated in TA muscle. For mechanism study, both RAS/MEK/ERK and PI3K/AKT/mTOR signaling pathways were activated in 31 the sciatic nerves of DET mice. Besides, autophagy was downregulated in these 32 sciatic nerves. Torin 2, an mTOR inhibitor, rescued these phenotypes. The 33 downregulated-autophagy might result in Agrin signaling abnormity, which induced 34 NMJ malformation. Taken together, our results indicate that SCs-specific Pten and 35 EGFR are critical for NMJ development. 36

37 Key words: Neuromuscular junction; Schwann cells; Pten; EGFR

39	Abbreviations: PNS, peripheral nervous systems; CNS, central nervous systems; SCs,
40	schwann cells; NMJ, neuromuscular junction; AChRs, acetylcholine receptors; PTEN,
41	phosphatase and tensin homolog; EGFR, epidermal growth factor receptor; MPNSTs,
42	malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumors; TA, tibialis anterior; TEM, Transmission
43	electron microscopy; Rps20, ribosomal protein S20; Dmd, dystrophin, muscular
44	dystrophy; Lamb2, laminin, beta 2; Chrna1, cholinergic receptor, nicotinic, alpha
45	polypeptide 1; Dag1, dystroglycan 1; DGC, dystrophin-glycoprotein complex.

47 Introduction

During muscle development and movement in vertebrates, peripheral and central 48 nervous systems (PNS and CNS, respectively) participate in the progress through 49 motor neuron axons [1]. Motor neuron axons stretch out from the spinal cord to the 50 51 muscle fibers. The direction and integrity of these axons depend not only on neuron-derived interactions among axons, but also on the support from axonal 52 Schwann cells (SCs) [2]. Motor axons are long structures that link to specific muscles, 53 with the neuromuscular junction (NMJ) acting as a bridge between the nervous 54 55 system and the muscular system. NMJ is a tripartite synapse, including motor nerve terminals, muscular post-junctional membranes and SCs that cover the entire 56 nerve-muscle junction [3]. Axons release acetylcholine, which can bind to 57 58 acetylcholine receptors (AChRs) located on the muscle fibers. In response to innervation of nerve terminals, these receptors are aggregated on the muscle fibers. 59 The intimate interaction between motoneurons and skeletal muscle fibers induces 60 61 NMJ formation with its abnormal development results in neurological muscular disorders [4]. Complex signal processes of NMJ development are necessary for 62 muscular function. Agrin, a component of extracellular matrix, is required for nerve 63 induction of AChR clustering [5]. Both LRP4-MuSK signaling [6] and Hippo 64 65 pathways [7] are involved in the Agrin-mediated NMJ development.

Recently, SCs has created great attention in NMJ development, but the actual mechanism remains elusive. SCs can sense nerve-released acetylcholine and in turn influence transmitter release [8]. SCs can also regulate synapse elimination during

NMJ formation [9]. After injury, SCs guide the regenerated motor axons to the original site of innervation [10]. Nerve terminal growth and AChR clusters were shown to be reduced after ablation of SCs [11]. In addition, terminal SCs ablation can induce NMJ withdrawal and fragmentation [12]. At the molecular level, NMJ deficits were observed in SCs-specific *Nrg1* and *Erbb2* mutant mice [13].

The phosphatase and tensin homolog (PTEN) tumor suppressor gene, regulates 74 75 cell growth and survival through inhibition of the PI3K/AKT/mTOR pathway. Previous study has found that genetically disrupting PTEN in SCs can markedly delay 76 onset of both developmental myelination and remyelination after injury[14]. In 77 Schwann cells, DLG1 interacts with PTEN to inhibit axonal stimulation of 78 myelination [15]. The epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) is a receptor for 79 members of the epidermal growth factor family of extracellular protein ligands. The 80 81 functional role of EGFR signaling in myelination has been reported by both gain- and loss-of-function approaches [16]. However, the roles of PTEN and EGFR in NMJ 82 development remain to be elucidated. 83

We have previously established a mouse model that generates sporadic malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumors (MPNSTs) by *Pten* inactivation and *EGFR* overexpression in Schwann cells[17]. While investigating MPNSTs in this mouse model, we serendipitously found that the muscle was remarkably weak in postnatal experimental animals. Further analyses of this phenotype revealed the SCs-specific role of *Pten* and *EGFR* in NMJ development.

## 90 Material and methods

## 91 Generation of experimental animals

For Schwann cell-specific Pten ablation, Pten<sup>flox/flox</sup> mice were crossed to desert 92 hedgehog (Dhh)-Cre transgenic mice to obtain Dhh-Cre; Pten<sup>flox/+</sup> mice. Transgenic 93 mice carrying the floxed *Pten* allele have the essential exons 4 and 5 of the *Pten* gene 94 floxed with loxP sequences. For Schwann cell-specific EGFR overexpression, 95 transgenic mice carried the 2',3'-cyclic nucleotide 3' phosphodiesterase (Cnp) gene 96 regulatory element driving human EGFR gene (Cnp-EGFR). Cnp-EGFR mice were 97 crossed with *Pten*<sup>flox/flox</sup> mice to obtain *Cnp-EGFR*; *Pten*<sup>flox/+</sup> mice. Finally, *Dhh*-Cre; 98 Pten<sup>flox/+</sup> mice were crossed with Cnp-EGFR; Pten<sup>flox/+</sup> mice to obtain the Schwann 99 cell-specific *Pten* inactivation and *EGFR* overexpression (*Dhh*-Cre; *Cnp-EGFR*; 100 Pten<sup>flox/flox</sup> or DET) mice. Genotyping was performed as described previously 101 102 (Supplement Fig. 1) [17]. Experimental animals were sacrificed on postnatal days (P) 10, P20 and P30 for analyses. All animal studies were approved by the appropriate 103 ethics committee and performed in accordance with the ethical standards stipulated by 104 105 both The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and The Chinese University of Hong 106 Kong.

# 107 Histological analyses

Tibialis anterior (TA) muscles were collected from experimental mice after euthanization by carbon dioxide. TA muscles were fixed in 10 % formalin, embedded into paraffin and sectioned for further histological analyses. Hematoxylin and eosin staining of mouse TA muscle sections was performed using standard procedures.

112 Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) analyses

113 TEM analysis of TA muscles was performed as described previously [18]. 114 Ultrathin sections were cut and then stained with lead citrate before imaging using a 115 transmission electron microscope (Philips CM100 TEM, Electron microscope unit, 116 The University of Hong Kong).

117 Confocal microscope analyses

TA muscles were freshly dissected from mice and fixed overnight in 4 % PFA, 118 rinsed with PBS before incubated with 0.1M glycine in PBS for one hour at room 119 temperature. After rinsing with 0.5 % Triton X-100 in PBS, muscles fibers were 120 121 incubated in blocking buffer (5% BSA and 1% Triton X-100 in PBS) for one hour. incubated with the following antibodies 122 Tissues were then overnight: anti-neurofilament 200kDA, clone NE14, Alexa Fluor 555 conjugate (1:500, Merck 123 124 Millipore Sigma, Massachusetts, USA), alpha-bungarotoxin, Alexa Fluor 488 conjugate (1:200, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Massachusetts, USA). Images were 125 collected using flurescence microscope (Leica TCS SP8 Multiphoton Microscope, 126 127 University Life Science, The Hong Kong polytechnic University).

128 Qu

# Quantitative PCR (qPCR) analyses

Total RNA was extracted from frozen TA muscles using the RNAeasy Micro kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany) according to the manufacturer's recommendations and qPCR was performed as previously described [19] using the StepOnePlus Real-Time PCR System (Life Technologies, California, USA). Expression data were normalized to *ribosomal protein S20* (*Rps20*) expression. Primers sequences were as follows: *Rps20* forward, 5'-TGCTGAGGAACAAGTCGGTC-3' and *Rps20* reverse,

5'-AGTCCGCACAAACCTTCTCC-3'; dystrophin, muscular dystrophy (Dmd) 135 5'-CTCACTGCCTGTGAAACCCT-3' forward and Dmd 136 reverse, 5'-CAGGCTCAAGAGATCCAAGCA-3'; laminin, beta 2 (Lamb2)forward, 137 5'-ACCCACACGGTCGGGATG-3' and Lamb2 138 reverse, 5'-ACAGCCAGGTACATCCAAGG-3'; Agrn forward, 139 5'-CTAGGGGAATCTCCGGTCCC-3' 140 and Agrn reverse, 5'-CCCATTAAGGCAGGGGTTGT-3'; cholinergic 141 receptor, nicotinic, alpha polypeptide 1 (Chrna1) forward, 5'-TATAACAACGCAGACGGCGA-3' and 142 143 Chrnal forward, 5'-GCTGGTCACTTTCCGGGTTA; dystroglycan 1 (Dag1) forward, 5'-GAGGGACTGGAAGAACCAGC-3' Dagl 144 and reverse, 5'-CCTGCTGCAGACACCTTGAT-3'. 145

146 Western blot analyses

Sciatic nerves were homogenized and lysed with sodium dodecyl sulphate lysis 147 The lysate was fractionated by SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis and buffer. 148 149 then transferred onto polyvinylidene fluoride membranes. Primary antibodies used for immunoblotting were as follows: anti-phosphatidylinositide 3-kinases p85 (PI3K) 150 (1:2000, Cell Signaling Technology, Massachusetts, USA); anti-phospho-PI3K p85 151 (Tyr458) (p-PI3K, 1:2000, Cell Signaling Technology); anti-phospho-AKT (Ser473) 152 (p-AKT, 1:2000, Cell Signaling); anti-AKT (1:2000, Cell Signaling Technology); 153 anti-phospho-ERK 1/2 (Thr202/Tyr204) (p-ERK, 1:2000, Cell Signaling Technology); 154 anti-ERK 1/2 (1:2000, Cell Signaling Technology); anti-p62 (1:2000, Cell Signaling 155 Technology); autophagy marker anti-LC3B (1:1000, Cell Signaling Technology); 156

anti-phospho-mammalian target of rapamycin complex 1 (p-mTOR, Ser2448) (1:1000,

158 Cell Signaling Technology). The membranes were then incubated with secondary
159 antibody (anti-rabbit or anti-mouse). Protein loading was detected by using
160 super-enhanced chemiluminescence reagent (Merck Millipore Sigma).

## 161 Treatment of mice with mTOR inhibitor

Intraperitoneal injections of Torin 2 (MedChemExpress, New Jersey, USA) at 4
 mg/kg/day were performed. DET mice received Torin 2 or only the carrier solution
 as a control from birth up to 3-month. Mortality of mice was recorded.

## 165 **Rotarod performance test**

The experimental procedure was performed as described previously[20]. Briefly, each experimental mouse (P30) was given 3 trials of walking in the rotating roll until they drop down, and the time of latency to fall was recorded. The apparatus used was LE8200 (Panlab, Harvard Apparatus).

### 170 Statistical analysis

The number of animals used for each experiments and analysis used in each panel are stated in the figure legends. All bar graphs represent mean  $\pm$  SEM and all statistical analyses were performed using GraphPad (California, USA) Prism software (v6). The two-tailed Student's t-test was used for group comparisons and were considered statistically significant if P < 0.05.

176 **Results** 

177 Muscular dysplasia in Schwann cell-specific *Pten* inactivation and *EGFR*178 overexpression (DET) mice

179	We first noticed that the DET mice displayed runty phenotype with tremoring,
180	difficulty in movement. In contrast, experimental groups including: wild-type (WT),
181	(2) <i>Dhh</i> -Cre only, (3) <i>Cnp-EGFR</i> only, (4) <i>Dhh</i> -Cre; <i>Pten</i> $f/f$ , (5) <i>Dhh</i> -Cre; <i>Pten</i> $f/f$ ;
182	Cnp-EGFR, all looked normal under the same conditions (data not shown). P10,
183	P20 and P30 mice were used to study the different development stages of the
184	muscular dysplasia. Both the average body weight and height of DET mice were
185	significantly less than that in the other three groups (Dhh-Cre only, Cnp-EGFR only
186	and Dhh-Cre; Pten <sup>f/f</sup> ) at P10, P20 and P30 (Fig. 1A to F). These data indicated that
187	the muscle development of DET mice was delayed from an early postnatal age. TA
188	muscle from P30 DET mice were used for further study and compared with Dhh-Cre
189	mice ( <i>Dhh</i> <sup>Tg/+</sup> ) as control. Histological analyses of TA muscle by HE staining showed
190	altered fiber density or smaller fiber shape in DET mice when compared with control
191	(Fig. 1G). Furthermore, TEM studies of TA muscle from P30 DET mice showed
192	abnormal ultrastructural organization with narrow sarcomeres and partially distorted
193	Z-lines, while TA muscle from the control group was consistently well-organized (Fig
194	1H). Based on these analyses, it could be concluded that muscular dysplasia occurred
195	in DET mice.

# 196 Morphological alterations of NMJ in DET mice

197 Since NMJ acts as a bridge between axons and muscle, it was hypothesized that 198 the muscular dysplasia was caused by NMJ dysfunction in DET mice. TA muscle 199 fibers from P30 DET mice were probed with antibody against neurofilament to label 200 axons and alpha-bungarotoxin to label AChRs. The morphology of post-synaptic AChRs, which indicates the endplate development of NMJ, in DET mice were abnormal, with distorted round shape endplates and perforated endplates, suggesting a delayed endplate maturation phenotype. In contrast, the AChRs in control group looked structurally consistent, with mature branched endplates distributed (**Fig. 2A-D**). Besides, a significant decrease in the mRNA level of *Chrna1* was also evident in DET mice (**Fig. 2E**).

## 207 Impaired Agrin signaling in NMJ development of DET mice

Synaptic basal lamina, a form of extracellular matrix, together with Agrn and 208 209 Lamb2, are essential for NMJ formation and maintenance [21]. Significantly decreased mRNA levels of Agrn and Lamb2 were evident in DET mice when 210 compared with control group (Fig. 3A and B). Agrn triggers myocyte proliferation by 211 212 modulation of dystrophin-glycoprotein complex (DGC) signaling. ECM-DGC interaction through Dag1 promotes myocyte differentiation and maturation. Dag1 213 also serves as a receptor for Agrn [22]. The mRNA level of *Dag1* was significantly 214 215 decreased in DET mice when compared with control group (Fig. 3C). It has been previously shown that mice lacking *Dmd* show muscle weakness at young ages[23]. 216 In our study, the mRNA level of Dmd was also decreased in DET mice when 217 compared with control group (Fig. 3D). These results indicated that the SC-specific 218 219 mutation in DET mice induced NMJ malformation by impairing Agrin signaling.

# 220 SC-specific mTOR-autophagy pathway changed in DET mice

EGFR overexpression can result in upregulation of RAS/MEK/ERK signaling pathway [16]. An increased phosphorylation of MEK and ERK were detected in the

sciatic nerves of DET mice, indicating RAS/MEK/ERK signaling pathway activation 223 (Fig. 4A and B). Both Pten inactivation and EGFR overexpression can activate the 224 225 PI3K/AKT/mTOR signaling pathway [17]. In our study, we found increased phosphorylation of PI3K, AKT, mTOR in the sciatic nerves of DET mice, indicating 226 PI3K/AKT/mTOR signaling pathway activation (Fig. 4C-E). In addition, the 227 activation of ERK can also promote mTOR phosphorylation[24] and play a crucial 228 role in regulating autophagy[25]. Thus, two autophagy markers, P62 and LC3B, 229 were assessed in the sciatic nerves of DET mice by Western blot analyses. Results 230 231 showed that P62 was upregulated and LC3B was downregulated in DET mice, indicating the inhibition of autophagy (Fig. 4F and G). To confirm the key role of 232 mTOR in NMJ development, DET mice were treated with Torin 2, a drug that 233 234 primarily inhibits mTOR signaling. Torin 2 reversed the muscle weakness, shown as increased running time in the rotarod test (Fig. 4H) and extended the lifespan (Fig. 4I) 235 of DET mice. Therefore, upregulation of the mTOR pathway in SCs underlied the 236 237 dysfunction of NMJ development in DET mice.

#### 238 Discussion

Our results revealed that both *PTEN* and *EGFR* are crucial regulators of the mTOR/autophagy signaling pathway in SCs that influence NMJ development. Conditional inactivation of *Pten* with *EGFR* overexpression in SCs induces activation of both RAS/MEK/ERK and PI3K/AKT/mTOR signaling pathways, which resulted in the NMJ malformation at a young postnatal age. The hyperactivation of mTOR can inhibit autophagy, which plays an important role in NMJ development process, since Torin 2 treatment effectively rescues this effect. Mice with either SC-specific *Pten*-deficiency or overexpression of *EGFR* do not display any NMJ phenotype at a young postnatal age. Taken together, these results revealed the importance of *Pten* and *EGFR* in SCs for NMJ formation.

Although synapse formation during the NMJ development has been well studied, 249 the contribution of the glial cells, such as presynaptic SCs, to NMJ development 250 251 remains unclear [26]. Recently, it has been shown that presynaptic SCs contribute to pre- and post-synaptic maturation [27]. Importantly, the molecular pathways in SCs 252 that drive NMJ development are yet to be elucidated. SCs can release synaptogenic 253 254 factors, promote synaptogenesis and regulate motoneurons [28]. Previously, the role of SCs in NMJ development was showed by studying Nrg1 and Erbb2 mutant mice 255 [27]. In our study, inactivation of Pten with EGFR overexpression in SCs induced 256 257 NMJ malformation as shown by the reduction of AChR cluster sizes and the appearance of varicose nerve terminals. Many studies have demonstrated the 258 importance of Agrin signaling in NMJ formation [5,29,30]. Agrin modulates DGC 259 integrity and signaling through Dag1, which induces AChR clustering in cultured 260 muscles and direct NMJ formation [31]. Recent evidence indicates that Yap is 261 required for the formation of NMJ, by tethering to DGC upon activation and Agrin 262 signaling [7]. Since SCs can also release Agrin, this further supports the importance of 263 Agrin signaling in NMJ formation in TA muscles [32]. 264

*PTEN* is a tumor suppressor gene that plays an important role in regulating cellgrowth, survival and migration. In SCs, mammalian DLG1-PTEN interaction

regulates myelin thickness [15], while PTEN loss-of-function hampers myelination 267 [14]. Synaptic remodeling has been shown to be related with myelinating SCs [33] 268 269 and dysmyelinated motoneurons results in NMJ developmental defects [34]. These findings indicate that SCs-specific PTEN mutation might regulate NMJ development. 270 271 Interestingly, we found no abnormality in P30 SC-specific Pten-mutated mice. EGFR is a receptor for members of the EGF family of extracellular protein ligands. 272 Activation of EGFR can promote cell proliferation, migration, adhesion, angiogenesis, 273 and inhibition of apoptosis [35]. EGFR signaling in SCs can mediate myelination and 274 remyelination [16]. We also did not observe muscle weakness in P30 275 EGFR-overexpressing mice. However, when inactivation of Pten and EGFR 276 overexpression were concurrence in SCs, dysregulation of NMJ development 277 278 occurred. The molecular pathways involved the upregulation of both RAS/MAPK/ERK and PI3K/AKT/mTOR signaling pathways, consistent with our 279 previous report [17]. Upregulation of RAS/MAPK/ERK or PI3K/AKT/mTOR 280 signaling pathway alone did not affect NMJ development at a young postnatal age. 281 Since activation of ERK can also promote mTOR phosphorylation [24], it is 282 hypothesized that hyperactivation of mTOR might be the key factor in SCs-mediated 283 NMJ dysfunction since previous study has shown that loss of mTOR function delayed 284 SC myelination[36]. Activation of mTOR signaling results in axonal degeneration 285 [37,38,39] and also plays a crucial role in regulating autophagy. Inhibition of 286 SCs-specific autophagy results in abnormally enlarged abaxonal cytoplasm in 287 myelinating SCs [40]. Torin 2, an mTOR inhibitor, rescued some of the phenotypes of 288

289	DET mice. These data indicate that the inactivation of PTEN with EGFR
290	overexpression in SCs-induced NMJ malformation is largely dependent on
291	mTOR-autophagy signaling.
292	Our study revealed the cooperation of RAS/MAPK/ERK and PI3K/AKT/mTOR
293	signaling pathways in SCs may be an important contributing factor in regulating NMJ
294	development, and closely associated with the mTOR-autophagy signaling pathway.
295	Conflicts of interest
296	None
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427 Figure legends

Figure 1 Muscular dysplasia phenotype in Schwann cell-specific Pten inactivation 428 429 and EGFR overexpressing (DET) mice. Body weights of postnatal day 10 (P10, A), P20 (**B**), P30 (**C**) mice from different genotypes. Body heights of P10 (**D**), P20 (**E**), 430 P30 (F) mice from different genotypes. (G) Representative hematoxylin and eosin 431 (HE) stained images of mouse TA muscle sections from DET mouse compared with 432 Dhh  $^{Tg/+}$  control. Scale bar, 10 µm. (H) Representative transmission electron 433 microscopy analyses showing abnormal ultrastructural organization with narrow 434 435 sarcomeres and partially distorted Z-lines (arrow) in DET TA muscles. Scale bar, 500 nm. Values were expressed as mean  $\pm$  SEM. \*P < 0.05; \*\*P < 0.01, compared with 436 *Dhh* <sup>Tg/+</sup> control group. 437

438 Figure 2 Morphological alterations of NMJ in DET mice. (A) Representative confocal images of TA muscles taken from P30 control and DET mice. TA muscles 439 were stained with antibodies against neurofilament Alexa Fluor 555 conjugate to label 440 441 presynaptic axons (left panels), and alpha-bungarotoxin Alexa Fluor 488 conjugate to 442 label AChR clusters (middle panels). Merged images from both stains shown in the right panels. Scale bar, 10  $\mu$ m. Quantitative analyses of the AChR cluster size (**B**), 443 AChR morphology (C) and NMJ innervation (D). (E) qPCR analysis of Chrnal 444 expression in TA muscles taken from P30 control and DET mice. Values were 445 expressed as mean  $\pm$  SEM. \**P* < 0.05, compared with *Dhh* <sup>Tg/+</sup> group. 446

447 Figure 3 Impaired Agrin signaling in NMJ development of DET mice. RNA was448 isolated from P30 hind limb muscles and analyzed for key genes involved with Agrin

signaling. Expression of (**A**) *Agrn*, (**B**) *Lamb2*, (**C**) *Dag1* and (**D**) *Dmd* were detected by qPCR. Values were expressed as mean  $\pm$  SEM. \**P* < 0.05; \*\**P* < 0.01, compared with *Dhh* <sup>Tg/+</sup> control group.

- 453 Western blot analyses were performed on sciatic nerves isolated from P30 control and
- 454 DET mice to detect protein levels of p-MEK, p-ERK, p-PI3K, p-AKT, p-mTOR, P62
- and LC3B (A-G). DET mice were treated with Torin 2 for 3 months, then assayed on
- 456 the rotarod apparatus (H) and analyzed for its effect on survival (I). Values were
- 457 expressed as mean  $\pm$  SEM. \**P* < 0.05; \*\**P* < 0.01, compared with *Dhh* <sup>Tg/+</sup> control.

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