1 **Oxysterols present in Alzheimer's disease brain induce synaptoxicity by activating astrocytes:**
2 **a major role for lipocalin-2**

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Abstract

Background: Among Alzheimer’s disease (AD) brain hallmarks, the presence of reactive astrocytes was demonstrated to correlate with neuronal loss and cognitive deficits. Evidence indeed supports the role of reactive astrocytes as mediators of changes in neurons, including synapses. However, the complexity and the outcomes of astrocyte reactivity are far from being completely elucidated.

Another key role in AD pathogenesis is played by alterations in brain cholesterol metabolism. Oxysterols (cholesterol oxidation products) are crucial for brain cholesterol homeostasis, and we previously demonstrated that changes in the brain levels of various oxysterols correlate with AD progression. Moreover, oxysterols have been shown to contribute to various pathological mechanisms involved in AD pathogenesis.

In order to deepen the role of oxysterols in AD, we investigated whether they could contribute to astrocyte reactivity, and consequently impact on neuronal health.

Methods: Mouse primary astrocyte cultures were used to test the effect of two oxysterol mixtures, that represent the oxysterol composition respectively of mild or severe AD brains, on astrocyte morphology, markers of reactivity, and secretion profile. Co-culture experiments were performed to investigate the impact of oxysterol-treated astrocytes on neurons. Neuronal cultures were exposed to astrocyte conditioned media (ACM) deprived of lipocalin-2 (Lcn2) to investigate the contribution of this mediator to synaptotoxicity.

Results: Results showed that oxysterols induce a clear morphological change in astrocytes, accompanied by the upregulation of some reactive astrocyte markers, including Lcn2. Moreover, ACM analysis revealed a significant increase in the release of Lcn2, cytokines, and chemokines in

response to oxysterols. A significant reduction of postsynaptic density protein 95 (PSD95) and a concurrent increase in cleaved caspase-3 protein levels have been demonstrated in neurons co-cultured with oxysterol-treated astrocytes, pointing out that mediators released by astrocytes have an impact on neurons. Among these mediators, Lcn2 has been demonstrated to play a major role on synapses, affecting neurite morphology and decreasing dendritic spine density.

Conclusions: These data demonstrated that oxysterols present in the AD brain promote astrocyte reactivity, determining the release of several mediators that affect neuronal health and synapses. Lcn2 has been shown to exert a key role in mediating the synaptotoxic effect of oxysterol-treated astrocytes.

Keywords: Oxysterols; Astrocytes; Astrocyte reactivity; Lipocalin-2; Neurons; Synapses; Synaptotoxicity; Alzheimer's disease.

BACKGROUND

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a neurodegenerative disorder, that represents the most common form of dementia and affects millions of people worldwide [1]. The pathogenic hallmarks of AD are extracellular deposits of amyloid-β (Aβ) peptides in the form of senile plaques and intracellular neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) made of hyperphosphorylated tau protein. These lesions are typically accompanied by gliosis, especially surrounding senile plaques [2]. Neuronal death and synapse loss are also observed; in particular, synaptic loss exceeds neuronal loss, meaning that remaining neurons also lose synapses. Synapse loss is indeed the best correlate of cognitive decline [3].

Astrocytes play a crucial role in maintaining brain homeostasis and their reaction to different kind of insults leads to a heterogeneous range of changes, known as "astrocyte reactivity" [4]. An increase in the number of reactive astrocytes is a typical histopathological feature of AD brain, and it correlates with cognitive decline and neuronal loss also in transgenic mouse models [5, 6]. Besides

71 morphological changes and the upregulation of common markers of reactivity (e.g. the glial fibrillary
72 acidic protein, GFAP), reactive astrocytes show significant alterations in gene expression and
73 functions, depending on the specific stimulus [7, 8]. However, the outcome of astrocyte reactivity is
74 still somewhat controversial. Several studies highlighted that reactive astrocytes lose neuroprotective
75 functions, including their ability to promote neurite growth, neuronal survival, and synapse formation
76 [9, 10]. One of the mechanisms through which astrocytes could have an impact on neurons is by the
77 altered release of different kinds of molecules including cytokines, chemokines, growth factors, and
78 neurotransmitters. For instance, an increase in the release of inflammatory mediators by reactive
79 astrocytes has been shown to affect neuronal viability, tau phosphorylation [9, 11], and synaptic
80 function [12, 13]. Another mediator released by reactive astrocytes is lipocalin-2 (Lcn2), a protein
81 identified as a pan-reactive astrocyte marker [8]. Lcn2 is a member of the lipocalin protein family,
82 consisting of more than 20 proteins that transport small hydrophobic molecules (e.g steroids, lipids,
83 and retinoids) and it plays important roles in the immune response, cell migration and proliferation
84 [14]. Increased levels of Lcn2 have been found in the entorhinal cortex and hippocampus of AD brain
85 [15]. Emerging evidence indicates that Lcn2 in the brain is synthethized and secreted as an inducible
86 factor by activated microglia, reactive astrocytes, neurons, and endothelial cells in response to
87 inflammatory stimuli, infections or other insults [16, 17].

88 In addition to amyloid plaques and NFTs, Alois Alzheimer originally described the presence
89 of "adipose inclusions" in the glial cells of AD brains, suggesting a malfunctioning of lipid
90 metabolism [18]. A clear link between AD and lipid metabolism was established later by the
91 identification of the *ε4* allele of apolipoprotein E (ApoE) as a strong genetic risk factor for AD [19].
92 Moreover, in the last few decades, much other evidence supports a role for lipids, in particular
93 cholesterol, in AD pathogenesis [20-22]. As the main lipid component of neuronal and glial
94 membranes, as well as a key constituent of myelin, cholesterol plays an essential role in synapse
95 formation, maintenance, and function [23, 24]. Astrocytes are the main producers of cholesterol in

96 the brain, that is delivered to neurons loaded into ApoE-containing lipoproteins. Brain cholesterol
97 homeostasis is closely controlled by pathways regulating cholesterol biosynthesis, storage, and
98 elimination; in particular, the main process responsible for cholesterol elimination is enzymatic
99 oxidation to oxysterols that are able to cross the blood-brain barrier (BBB). Excess brain cholesterol
100 is essentially oxidized to 24-hydroxycholesterol (24-OHC) by cholesterol 24-hydroxylase
101 (CYP46A1), a member of the cytochrome P450 family mainly expressed by neurons; the additional
102 hydroxyl group enables 24-OHC to flow into the circulation crossing the BBB [25]. Smaller amounts
103 of other enzymatic oxysterols, such as 27-hydroxycholesterol (27-OHC), can be produced in the
104 brain, as well as various oxysterols deriving from cholesterol non-enzymatic oxidation mediated by
105 various compounds (e.g. free radical species, metal cations, and Aβ peptides) [26, 27]. Oxysterols are
106 not only cholesterol metabolites but they also play many regulatory functions, such as modulating
107 cholesterol biosynthesis, inflammatory pathways, and the immune response [28]. We have previously
108 demonstrated a correlation between changes in brain levels of various oxysterols and AD progression.
109 Through analysis of the oxysterol composition in AD and aged-matched control cortex, we observed
110 a significant increase in the levels of various enzymatic (e.g. 27-OHC) and non-enzymatic oxysterols
111 (e.g. 7α-hydroxycholesterol, 7α-OHC; 7β-hydroxycholesterol, 7β-OHC; 7-ketocholesterol, 7-KC;
112 5α,6α-epoxycholesterol, α-EPOX; 5β,6β-epoxycholesterol, β-EPOX). In contrast, 24-OHC levels
113 were markedly decreased compared to control brains, probably due to the decline in CYP46A1
114 expression levels as a result of neuronal loss [27]. The effects of oxysterols are still controversial but
115 growing evidence suggests that some of them (e.g. 27-OHC, 7-KC, 7α- and 7β-OHC) may play a
116 role in AD pathogenesis by inducing oxidative stress, inflammation [29], Aβ formation and
117 accumulation [30, 31], tau hyperphosphorylation [32], synaptic dysfunction [33], and cell death [34,
118 35].

119 At present, data regarding the impact of oxysterols on astrocytes are limited and mostly related
120 to the ability of some of them to affect brain cholesterol synthesis and transport in various astrocytic

121 cell lines [36, 37]. For instance, it has been shown that an increase in systemic levels of 27-OHC can
122 disrupt brain cholesterol homeostasis in rats by reducing cholesterol synthesis and increasing its
123 efflux, but also favouring brain cholesterol accumulation likely due to cell damage; moreover, spatial
124 learning and memory deficits were described as a result [38]. 27-OHC was also observed to induce
125 oxidative stress and to downregulate the antioxidant response in C6 glioma cells, leading to cell
126 toxicity [39]. 24-OHC has been shown to affect redox homeostasis in human glial cells, although its
127 impact may depend on the concentration [40]. Interestingly, the oxysterols 7-KC, 7α-OHC, and 7β-
128 OHC have been shown to inhibit cell growth and decrease viability in several neuronal and glial cell
129 lines; in particular, 7-KC and 7β-OHC exhibited cytotoxic effects also in mixed glial murine primary
130 cultures [35]. High concentrations of 7β-OHC have also been observed to induce toxic effects and
131 morphological changes in an *in vitro* model of reactive astrocytes [41].

132 Since growing data support the involvement of oxysterols in several aspects of AD pathology
133 and given the presence of reactive astrocytes in the disease, we wanted to investigate whether these
134 compounds could impact on astrocyte reactivity, potentially compromising neuronal health. With the
135 aim of mimicking the human AD brain oxysterol composition, we used two oxysterol mixtures, both
136 including the main seven oxysterols previously quantified in cortical AD brain samples and
137 representative of early or late stages of the disease [27], to investigate the effect of oxysterols in
138 mouse cortical astrocytes and neuronal cultures.

139

140 **METHODS**

141 **Composition of oxysterol mixtures**

142 Cell cultures were treated with two oxysterol mixtures, whose compositions represent oxysterol
143 amounts previously quantified in mild (Early AD mixture) or severe (Late AD mixture) AD brain
144 samples [27]. Both oxysterol mixtures consist of the same seven oxysterols but in different

145 proportions. Early AD mixture composition: 24-OHC (52.9%), 27-OHC (3%), 7-KC (9.2%), 7α-
146 OHC (4.5%), 7β-OHC (19.2%), α-EPOX (3%), and β-EPOX (8.2%). Late AD mixture composition:
147 24-OHC (33.4%), 27-OHC (5.8%), 7-KC (12.7%), 7α-OHC (5.4%), 7β-OHC (23.8%), α-EPOX
148 (4.9%), and β-EPOX (14%). Oxysterols were dissolved in absolute ethanol.

149 Oxysterols were provided as described: 24-OHC (5275, Medical Isotopes, Pehlam, NH,
150 USA), 27-OHC (700061P), 7-KC (700015P), 7α-OHC (700034P), 7β-OHC (700035P) (Avanti Polar
151 Lipids, Alabaster, AL, USA), α-EPOX (C4130-000), and β-EPOX (C5030-000) (Steraloids,
152 Newport, RI, USA).

153

154 **Primary cultures and co-cultures**

155 Primary astrocyte cultures were obtained from cerebral cortex of wild type CD1 mice on postnatal
156 day 1-3 as previously described [42]. Briefly, after dissociation of the cortices, cells were re-
157 suspended in growing medium (DMEM high glucose with glutaMAX, sodium pyruvate, 10% fetal
158 bovine serum, 100 U/ml penicillin, 100 µg/ml streptomycin) and seeded into T75 flasks, previously
159 coated with poly-D-lysine (10 µg/ml) for at least 1h at 37°C. Astrocytes were cultured for 7-14 days
160 in a humidified 5% CO_2 incubator at 37°C, shaking them at 200 rpm overnight on days 3 and 7 to
161 remove microglia and oligodendrocytes. The absence of microglial contamination was assessed by
162 immunocytochemistry and Western blotting using antibodies that recognize the ionized calcium
163 binding adaptor molecule 1 (Iba1, microglial marker) (Supplemental Fig. 1). Astrocyte-enriched
164 cultures were then re-plated into 12-wells plates using trypsin and the medium was changed to
165 Neurobasal serum-free medium (supplemented with 2% B-27, 2 mM glutaMAX, 100 U/ml penicillin,
166 100 µg/ml streptomycin) 24h before treatment. Astrocyte cultures were treated with the oxysterol
167 mixtures (Early or Late at different concentrations) up to 24h. Vehicle (ethanol) was added to control
168 astrocytes.

169 Primary neurons were obtained from cerebral cortex of wild type CD1 mouse embryos at
170 embryonic day 15, according to a previously published protocol [43]. Briefly, after dissociation,
171 cortices were washed twice in HBSS (without Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+}) and homogenized in 1ml of Neurobasal
172 serum-free medium (supplemented with 2% B-27, 2 mM glutaMAX, 100 U/ml penicillin, 100 μg/ml
173 streptomycin). The suspension was then filtered using a 40 μm cell strainer, live cells were counted
174 and neurons were plated to a density 5×10^5 viable cells per well of 6-wells plates previously coated
175 with poly-D-lysine (10 μg/ml) for at least 1h at 37°C. After 1h, neuron adhesion was checked and the
176 medium was changed. Cultures were maintained at 37°C with 5% CO_2 in Neurobasal serum-free
177 medium. Neuronal cultures were treated at 13-14 days *in vitro* (DIV). For neurite and spine analysis,
178 neurons were transfected at 5-7 DIV with the plasmid peGFP-N1 (Clontech, Mountain View, CA,
179 USA) using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA) and
180 imaged live 24h after treatment at 14 DIV using an Opera Phenix microscope (Perkin Elmer,
181 Waltham, MA, USA).

182 For co-culture experiments, primary astrocytes were plated into cell-culture inserts (0.4 μm
183 pore membrane, Falcon, Corning, Corning, NY, USA), that allow the passage of small molecules in
184 culture medium. Astrocytes were pre-treated with the Late AD mixture (10 μM) or vehicle (ethanol)
185 for 12h, medium was changed to remove oxysterols, and inserts on which astrocytes were grown were
186 added to neuron cultures for a further 24h.

187

188 **Cytotoxicity assay**

189 Cytotoxicity was assessed by measuring levels of lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) enzyme release into
190 the media using Pierce LDH Cytotoxicity Assay Kit (Fisher Scientific, Thermo Fisher Scientific)
191 according to the manufacturers' instructions. Some cells were lysed with 0.5% Triton X-100 and
192 LDH content in the medium was measured in order to evaluate the maximum LDH amount released
193 from dead cells. LDH release was calculated as a percentage of total LDH released by lysed cells.

194

195 **Gel electrophoresis and Western blotting**

196 After treatments, the cell culture media were collected, cells were washed with PBS and directly lysed
197 with PBS containing sample buffer (NuPAGE LDS Sample Buffer 4X, Invitrogen), reducing agent
198 (NuPAGE Sample Reducing Agent 10X, Invitrogen), protease inhibitor (complete Mini EDTA-Free
199 Protease Inhibitor Cocktail, Roche, Basel, CH) and phosphatase inhibitor (PhosSTOP, Roche)
200 cocktails.

201 Equal amounts of protein samples (20 μg) were boiled, separated by electrophoresis using
202 10% precast gels (NuPAGE 10% Bis-Tris Protein Gels, Invitrogen) and then transferred to
203 nitrocellulose membranes (Amersham Protran, GE Healthcare, Chicago, IL, USA). After blocking
204 with Odyssey Blocking Buffer (LI-COR Biosciences, Lincoln, NE, USA) for 1h at room temperature,
205 membranes were incubated with primary antibodies overnight at 4°C. The following primary
206 antibodies were used: GFAP (Z0334, Dako, Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA, USA),
207 Lipocalin-2/NGAL (AF1857, R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN, USA), SerpinA3N (AF4709, R&D
208 Systems), cleaved caspase-3 (Asp175, 9661, Cell Signaling, Danvers, MA, USA), PSD95 (D74D3,
209 Cell Signaling), Synapsin (6008-30, BioVision, Milpitas, CA, USA), Iba1 (019-19741, Wako
210 Chemicals, Richmond, VA, USA) and β-actin (ab8226, Abcam, Cambridge, UK). After washing to
211 remove unbound antibody with TBS-Tween20 0.05%, the appropriate fluorophore-coupled
212 secondary antibody (1:10000, LI-COR Biosciences) was added for 1h at room temperature.
213 Membranes were washed with TBS-Tween20 0.05% and scanned using an Odyssey infrared imaging
214 system (LI-COR Biosciences). Band intensities were quantified using the Image Studio Software (LI-
215 COR Biosciences) and normalized to the corresponding β-actin bands.

216 Similarly, to detect secreted Lcn2, 250 μl of culture media were concentrated using centrifugal
217 filters (Amicon Ultra, Millipore, Merck, Darmstadt, DE); the protein concentration was calculated

218 using the Bradford Assay (Protein Assay Dye Reagent Concentrate, Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules,
219 CA, USA), and samples were prepared as above to perform Western blotting of cell culture media.

220

221 **Immunocytochemistry**

222 Astrocytes were plated on coverslips (12 or 18 mm diameter, No. 1.5) into 12- or 24-wells plates.
223 After treatment, cells were washed with PBS, fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS for 10 min at
224 room temperature, and then washed again twice with PBS. Cells were permeabilized and blocked
225 (4% goat serum, 0.1% Triton in PBS) for 1h at room temperature before incubating with the anti-
226 GFAP (Z0334, Dako) and/or Iba1 (ab48004, Abcam) primary antibodies (4% goat serum in PBS)
227 overnight at 4°C. The following day, cells were incubated with the appropriate secondary antibody
228 conjugated with fluorescent probes for 1h at room temperature (Alexa Fluor 488 or 594, Invitrogen)
229 and nuclei were stained with Hoescht 33258 (10 µg/ml in PBS, Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA).
230 Cells were imaged using an Eclipse Ti-E inverted Microscope (Nikon, Tokyo, JP) or LSM800
231 confocal microscope (Carl Zeiss, Oberkochen, DE).

232

233 **Cytokine array**

234 Astrocyte culture media was collected and stored at -20°C prior to analysis of cytokine and chemokine
235 content using Mouse Proteome Profiler arrays (Mouse Cytokine Array Panel A, R&D Systems),
236 according to the manufacturers' instructions. Briefly, array membranes were incubated in blocking
237 buffer for 1h at room temperature. Each sample of medium was incubated with the Detection
238 Antibody Cocktail and this mix was then placed onto blocked membranes overnight at 4°C. After
239 washes, membranes were incubated with IRDye 800CW Streptavidin (1:2000, LI-COR Biosciences)
240 for 30 min at room temperature. Membranes were then scanned using an Odyssey infrared imaging
241 system and the spot intensities were quantified using the Image Studio Software (LI-COR

242 Biosciences). Positive and negative control spots included in each membrane allowed quantitative
243 analysis by densitometry and results were expressed as percentage change compared to control
244 cultures.

245

246 **Oxysterol quantification in astrocyte culture medium**

247 Astrocyte culture media (100 µl) was added to a screw-capped vial sealed with a Teflon septum
248 together with D7-7α-hydroxycholesterol (50 ng), D7-7β-hydroxycholesterol (50 ng), D7-7-oxo-
249 cholesterol (50 ng), D6-5α-6α-epoxicholesterol (50 ng), D6-5β-6β-epoxicholesterol, D6-24-
250 hydroxycholesterol (250 ng), D6-27-hydroxycholesterol (50 ng) as internal standards, as well as 50
251 µl of butylated hydroxytoluene (5g/l) and 50 µl of K3-EDTA (10 g/l) to prevent auto-oxidation. Each
252 vial was then flushed with argon for 5 min to remove air. Alkaline hydrolysis, sterol extraction, and
253 gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) analysis were performed as previously described
254 [44].

255

256 **RNA extraction and real-time RT-PCR**

257 Total RNA was extracted using TriFast reagent (Eurogold TriFast, EuroClone, Pero, IT) following
258 the manufacturers' instructions. RNA was dissolved in RNase-free water with RNase inhibitors
259 (SUPERase-In RNase inhibitor, Invitrogen). The amount and purity of the extracted RNA were
260 assessed by using a NanoDrop ND-1000 spectrophotometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific). cDNA was
261 synthesized by reverse transcription of 1 µg of RNA by using a commercial kit and random primers
262 (High-Capacity cDNA Reverse Transcription Kit, Applied Biosystems, Thermo Fisher Scientific)
263 following the manufacturers' instructions.

264 Singleplex real-time RT-PCR was performed on 30 ng of cDNA by using TaqMan Gene
265 Expression Assays for mouse Lcn2 (Mm01324470_m1) and β-actin (Mm02619580_g1), TaqMan

266 Fast Universal PCR Master Mix, and a 7500 Fast Real-Time PCR System (Applied Biosystems). The
267 PCR cycling parameters were set up as previously described [31]. The fractional cycle number (Ct)
268 was determined for each gene considered and results were then normalized to β-actin expression.
269 Relative quantification of target gene expression was achieved with a mathematical method [45].

270

271 **Transient gene knockdown**

272 The transient knockdown of Lcn2 gene was performed by using a Small Interfering RNA (siRNA)
273 (Silencer Select Pre-designed siRNA S69122, Ambion, Thermo Fisher Scientific) following the
274 manufacturers' instructions. A non-targeting siRNA was used as a negative control (Silencer Select
275 Negative Control #2 siRNA, Ambion). Briefly, astrocytes were plated into 12- or 24-wells plates and
276 respectively 50 μl or 100 μl of a mix containing siRNA and transfection agent (Lipofectamine
277 RNAiMAX Reagent, Invitrogen) in a 1:1 ratio was added to each well, in order to reach a final siRNA
278 concentration of 100 nM and 3 μl/ml of transfection agent. After 6h transfection, the medium was
279 changed and astrocytes were treated with the Late AD mixture (10 μM) for 12h. After treatment, cells
280 were washed with PBS and fresh medium was added. Astrocyte conditioned media were then
281 collected after another 24h. Protein and RNA extraction, as well as real-time RT-PCR, were
282 performed as described above. The silencing efficiency, validated by real-time RT-PCR, was
283 approximately 85% (Supplemental Fig. 2).

284

285 **Analysis of neuronal morphology**

286 The neuronal morphology of 14 DIV neurons previously transfected with the plasmid peGFP-N1
287 (Clontech) on 5-7 DIV and treated on 13 DIV was assessed using high resolution digital images of
288 live neurons taken using an Opera-Phenix microscope (Perkin-Elmer). Neurite complexity was
289 analysed using Harmony software: total and maximum neurite length, and number of nodes and

290 extremities were quantified and compared between groups. NeuronStudio software (CNIC, Mount
291 Sinai School of Medicine) was used for dendritic spine analysis. Spine density was defined as number
292 of spines per micrometer of dendrite length. Dendritic spine densities were calculated from 20
293 neurons/condition.

294

295 **Statistical analysis**

296 After performing a Shapiro-Wilk normality test, data were analysed using one-way ANOVA followed
297 by Bonferroni *post hoc* test or Student's t-test (GraphPad Prism 7 Software, Graphpad Software, La
298 Jolla, CA, USA). Results were considered statistically significant when $P<0.05$. Data are represented
299 as means ± standard deviation.

300

301 **RESULTS**

302

303 **Oxysterol mixtures induce a morphological change in astrocytes**

304 Astrocyte reaction to certain stimuli is defined by a wide range of heterogeneous responses, including
305 changes in morphology [7, 46]. To analyse the effect of oxysterols on astrocyte morphology and
306 survival, cells were exposed to increasing concentrations of the Early and Late mixtures (1, 5 or 10
307 μM). Exposure of primary astrocytes to 5 or 10 μM of both oxysterol mixtures for 24h induced a
308 clear change in their morphology with astrocytes adopting a more stellate "brain-like" and reactive
309 appearance rather than the large, flat fibroblast-like morphology typical of unstimulated dissociated
310 astrocytes in culture (Fig. 1B). Importantly, this was not accompanied by cell death since there were
311 no significant increases in the abundance of LDH released into culture medium following treatment
312 when compared to control cultures (Fig. 1A). Time course treatments showed that astrocytes started
313 to display the typical signs of reactivity (increase in the number of GFAP positive processes and

314 stellate appearance) after 12h of exposure to 10 μM of both Early and Late mixtures, with these
315 changes becoming more evident 24h after treatment (Fig. 2).

316

317 **Oxysterol mixtures increase the synthesis of the pan-reactive astrocyte markers Lcn2 and**
318 **SerpinA3N**

319 To validate the induction of astrocytic reactivity by oxysterols, and to confirm that the morphological
320 alteration is accompanied by functional changes, we determined whether treatment with the Early or
321 Late AD mixtures led to an increase in the levels of some pan-reactive astrocyte markers [8].
322 Exposure to both oxysterol mixtures (10 μM) resulted in a marked increase in Lcn2 and serine
323 protease inhibitor A3N (SerpinA3N) protein levels at 12h ($P<0.0001$ and $P<0.001$) and 24h
324 ($P<0.0001$) (Fig. 3), contemporaneous with morphological changes. These molecules are involved in
325 the acute-phase response and were both identified as new reactive astrocyte markers [8, 47]. Total
326 levels of GFAP were only slightly increased ($P<0.05$) or remained unchanged in response to the
327 mixtures (Fig. 3), suggesting that the observed morphological changes are not only dependent on the
328 expression of GFAP.

329

330 **Oxysterol-induced reactivity triggers the release of Lcn2, cytokines, and chemokines by**
331 **astrocytes**

332 Astrocyte reactivity is typically characterized by the release of cytokines, chemokines, and other
333 mediators, that could have several effects on the surrounding cells [48]. Therefore, we investigated
334 whether oxysterol-mediated astrocyte reactivity was accompanied by altered release of mediators into
335 the cell culture medium.

336 Since Lcn2 is secreted by reactive astrocytes [17, 49], we analysed its protein levels in
337 astrocyte conditioned media (ACM) by Western blotting. We saw that the robust increase in

338 intracellular levels of Lcn2 is accompanied by a significant increase in the secretion of Lcn2 after 24h
339 treatment with 10 μM of both Early and Late oxysterol mixtures (P<0.0001) (Fig. 4A).

340 The amounts of 40 cytokines and chemokines in ACM samples were next evaluated using
341 Proteome Profiler antibody arrays. The analysis showed a significant increase in the release of several
342 mediators by astrocytes treated for 24h, especially with the Late AD oxysterol mixture (10 μM). Some
343 of the cytokines found to be increased in the medium of astrocytes treated with this oxysterol mixture
344 were interleukin-1β (IL-1β), soluble intercellular adhesion molecule-1 (sICAM-1) (P<0.001), IL-1α,
345 IL-5, granulocyte colony-stimulating factor (G-CSF), and C-C motif chemokine 12 (CCL12)
346 (P<0.01). In addition, the levels of CCL1, IL-7, IL-10, IL-13, IL-16, IL-17, and C-X-C motif
347 chemokine 9 (CXCL9) were slightly but significantly increased compared to levels in control media
348 (P<0.05) (Fig. 4B, C). In contrast, when astrocytes were exposed to the Early AD oxysterol mixture
349 (10 μM), only sICAM-1 (P<0.01), IL-1α, and IL-1β (P<0.05) were found to be significantly increased
350 relative to levels in control ACM, highlighting a different impact of the two oxysterol mixtures on
351 astrocyte cytokine and chemokine release (Fig. 4C).

352

353 **Oxysterol-stimulated astrocytes compromise neuronal health**

354 It has previously been shown that astrocyte reactivity depends on the specific stimulus and that
355 heterogeneous responses of reactive astrocytes involves different signaling pathways. The
356 consequences of these alterations for astrocytic support of neuronal health requires further
357 investigation [7, 47].

358 To test the effect of oxysterol-stimulated astrocytes on neuronal health, we performed co-
359 culture experiments. GC-MS analysis of oxysterols in ACM showed that, although variable, a
360 substantial proportion (8-54%) of some oxysterols remain in ACM 24h after treatment (Supplemental
361 Fig. 3). Since these oxysterols are known to directly affect neuron viability [31, 33, 50], we co-

cultured neurons with astrocytes that had been pre-treated with oxysterols. As shown in Figure 5A, astrocytes grown on cell culture inserts were pre-treated for 12h with the Late AD oxysterol mixture (10 μM) and then transferred to culture plates containing neurons for a further 24h: this allowed us to investigate the effect of mediators released from stimulated astrocyte on neurons, without transferring oxysterols that remained in ACM. In parallel, neuronal cultures were treated with the Late AD mixture or with ethanol for 24h in the absence of astrocytes, in order to assess the direct effect of the same oxysterol mixture on neurons.

Interestingly, Western blotting analysis showed a significant reduction of postsynaptic density protein 95 (PSD95) levels ($P<0.05$), a scaffold protein important for postsynaptic density structure and function, in neurons cultured with astrocytes that had been previously exposed to oxysterols (Fig. 5B). This reduction was accompanied by a significant increase in the amount of cleaved (active) caspase-3 ($P<0.01$) (Fig. 5B), that was demonstrated to play various non-apoptotic roles in neurons including to affect synaptic functions [51]. A mild but not significant reduction of the pre-synaptic marker synapsin was also observed. Moreover, when neurons were directly treated with oxysterols, PSD95 ($P<0.05$), cleaved caspase-3 ($P<0.01$), and synapsin levels ($P<0.05$) were all significantly altered (Fig. 5B), confirming previous results showing that oxysterols directly compromise neuron health [31, 33]. Importantly, all these results were obtained in the absence of significant neuronal death, as assessed by LDH release (Supplemental Fig. 4). Overall, these data suggest that factors released by astrocytes in response to the oxysterol mixture, whose composition is similar to AD brain oxysterol content, compromise synaptic and neuronal health without causing overt neurotoxicity.

Lcn2 secreted by oxysterol-stimulated astrocytes affects neurite complexity and decreases dendritic spine density

385 Lcn2 has previously been shown to affect synapses, neuronal health and morphology, [17, 52, 53].
386 To investigate whether Lcn2 could play a role in mediating the effect of oxysterol-stimulated
387 astrocytes on neurons, Lcn2 expression was silenced in astrocytes prior to determining the impact of
388 ACM on neuron morphology. To further investigate the effects of ACM on synapses under these
389 conditions, dendritic spine density was also evaluated.

390 For this purpose, astrocytes were transfected for 6h with Lcn2 or scrambled siRNA, and the
391 medium removed prior to treatment with the Late AD mixture (10 μM) for 12h. The medium was
392 removed and fresh medium was added for another 24h, to obtain ACM without oxysterols. Both real-
393 time RT-PCR (Fig. 6A) and Western blotting results (Fig. 6B) confirmed that siRNA-mediated Lcn2
394 gene silencing prevents the increase in Lcn2 expression, synthesis, and release into the medium
395 induced by the Late AD oxysterol mixture, compared to control conditions (scrambled siRNA).
396 Interestingly, oxysterol-induced morphological changes were not prevented by Lcn2 gene silencing,
397 suggesting that the pathway by which oxysterols induce astrocyte alterations is not dependent upon
398 the presence of Lcn2 (Fig. 6C).

399 Next, ACM was added to cultured neurons to determine the impact of secreted Lcn2 on neuron
400 morphology and dendritic spines. Medium from oxysterol-activated astrocytes transfected with the
401 scrambled siRNA compromises neurite complexity, as shown by reduction of total and maximum
402 neurite length, and the number of nodes, automatically identified by Harmony software ($P<0.05$) (Fig.
403 7A). Importantly, the addition of ACM was also found to substantially reduce dendritic spine density
404 ($P<0.001$) (Fig. 7B), further indicating a synaptotoxic effect of proteins secreted by oxysterol-
405 stimulated astrocytes. All of these effects were prevented by silencing Lcn2, confirming a key role of
406 Lcn2 in mediating the impact of oxysterol-stimulated astrocytes on neurite complexity and synaptic
407 health (Fig. 7).

408

409 **DISCUSSION**

410 The pathophysiology of AD is still not fully understood, but evidence supports the involvement of
411 many factors in sporadic AD onset, including inflammation and impaired cholesterol metabolism
412 [54]. Microglia and astrocytes play a role in the neuroinflammation observed in AD and they are
413 found in their activated state in affected brain regions, particularly surrounding amyloid plaques.
414 Astrocyte reactivity is not an exclusive feature of AD brain but the association of reactive astrocytes
415 with amyloid plaques is considered functionally significant. Indeed, post-mortem neuropathological
416 studies have shown that the number of reactive astrocytes increases with disease progression [6, 55],
417 and activated astrocytes and microglia correlate with dementia in AD [5].

418 Astrocyte reactivity leads to a heterogeneous range of phenotypic, transcriptomic, and
419 functional changes, depending on the specific environmental stimulus [7, 8], including those related
420 to ageing and disease [10, 56]. Here, we observed that application of various oxysterols, in the same
421 proportions as those identified in early and late-stage AD brain, distinctly altered astrocyte
422 morphology after 24h treatment. In particular, astrocytes adopted a more stellate appearance with
423 many long and branched processes evident. In support of these data, 7β-OHC has previously been
424 shown to induce morphological changes, characterized by process elongation, in cultured reactive
425 astrocytes [41]. An increase in the number of processes is considered a reliable feature of reactivity,
426 demonstrated in several cell culture models of reactive astrocytes [57, 58].

427 Reactive astrocytes were conventionally identified by GFAP immunoreactivity;
428 however, it is noteworthy that different stimuli can lead to similar degrees of GFAP upregulation
429 while causing substantially different changes in transcriptome profile and cell functions [7].
430 Furthermore, unlike brain astrocytes, most astrocytes in culture are GFAP reactive as a result of the
431 *in vitro* conditions, the absence of their usual environment, and loss of inhibitory influences of
432 neurons [41]. Astrocytes treated with Early or Late AD oxysterol mixtures up to 24h showed a
433 significant but mild increase in GFAP protein levels despite the extensive morphological changes

434 observed. The morphological changes we observed in response to oxysterol mixtures were, however,
435 accompanied by a marked upregulation of Lcn2 and SerpinA3N, both proteins identified as "pan
436 reactive" astrocytes markers [8], as well as by increased release of Lcn2 into culture medium. Lcn2,
437 also known as neutrophil gelatinase-associated lipocalin (NGAL), is an acute phase protein with
438 several roles [14] that is secreted by different kind of cells, including reactive astrocytes [16, 17]. It
439 can act as an autocrine mediator of reactive astrogliosis, since it is able to induce morphological
440 changes in primary astrocytes [57]. In addition, several studies showed that Lcn2 exerts synaptotoxic
441 and neurotoxic effects, affecting neuronal viability, dendritic spine density and morphology, and
442 ultimately cognitive functions [17, 49, 52, 53]. SerpinA3N, also known as alpha1-antichymotrypsin,
443 is a protease inhibitor involved in the acute phase response, that is produced in various tissues
444 including the brain, with reactive and aging astrocytes being the main producers of Lcn2 in the brain
445 [8, 56]. Immunohistochemical analysis of AD brain samples showed that SerpinA3N co-localizes
446 with amyloid plaques, reactive microglia and astrocytes [59]. Moreover, an increase in tau
447 phosphorylation has been observed both in mice overexpressing SerpinA3N and in primary neurons
448 treated with recombinant Lcn2, the latter also showing neurite degeneration and apoptosis [60].

449 It is well known that in many cases astrocyte activation is accompanied by an increase in the
450 release of several soluble factors, including reactive oxygen species and cytokines [11, 48].
451 Interestingly, 7α,25-dihydroxycholesterol has been shown to inhibit the lipopolysaccharide (LPS)-
452 induced release of pro-inflammatory cytokines including IL-17/tumor necrosis factor-α (TNF-α) in
453 cultured human astrocytes [61]. Other oxysterols (e.g. 27-OHC) have been demonstrated to decrease
454 LPS-induced expression of IL-6 and TNF-α mRNA in mouse primary glial cells [62]. However, there
455 are no data on how oxysterols directly affect astrocyte secretion profile. Our cytokine array analysis
456 showed that oxysterol treatment significantly increases the release of a wide range of cytokines and
457 chemokines from primary astrocytes after 24h. Interestingly, this analysis highlighted a differential
458 impact of the two oxysterol mixtures: the majority of the significant increases were observed in ACM

459 from astrocytes treated with the mixture that mimics late AD brain composition. Among the released
460 mediators, inflammatory cytokines (IL-1α, IL-1β, and IL-17), adhesion molecules (sICAM-1),
461 growth factors and chemokines (IL-5, IL-7, IL-16, G-CSF, CCL1, CCL12, and CXCL9),
462 immunoregulatory cytokines (IL-5 and IL-13), and anti-inflammatory cytokines (IL-10) were
463 elevated. In particular, IL-1β and sICAM-1 were the most significantly increased. Astrocytes are both
464 targets and effectors of cytokines and many other mediators that affect not only their immune and
465 inflammatory cell functions but also their synapse-directed and neuronal functions [48]. IL-1β has
466 been previously shown to induce reactive astrogliosis [10], to be released by reactive astrocytes and
467 astrocytes from 5xFAD AD mouse model [63, 64], and to contribute to astrocyte-mediated neuronal
468 death [65]; moreover, its levels are increased in AD brains [27, 66].

469 Using gene ontology classification, proteins involved in extracellular matrix modification and
470 adhesion were identified as the gene class most represented in the transcriptome of reactive astrocytes
471 [8]. ICAM-1 is a transmembrane glycoprotein belonging to the immunoglobulin family of adhesion
472 molecules, expressed not only by endothelial and immune system cells [67] but also by astrocytes
473 [8]. sICAM-1 is released by proteolytic cleavage of the transmembrane protein [64, 68]. Several
474 studies have shown that the addition of sICAM-1 to different *in vitro* models activates pro-
475 inflammatory cascades, including in astrocytes, and inflammatory mediators can in turn favour its
476 release [69, 70]. Furthermore, sICAM-1 levels are increased in AD cerebrospinal fluid and correlate
477 with various AD markers including total tau, phosphorylated tau, and cortical thinning [71, 72]. The
478 data presented here provide the first evidence for a direct impact of oxysterols on astrocyte
479 morphology, markers of reactivity, and secretion profile, and strongly suggest that oxysterol mixtures
480 that mimic oxysterol composition in AD brain induce astrocyte reactivity.

481 The functional implications of astrocyte reactivity are various and very context-dependent.
482 For instance, astrocytes have been shown to mediate Aβ-induced neurotoxicity and tau
483 phosphorylation, as well as to induce a decrease of synaptic markers; interestingly, the release of pro-

484 inflammatory cytokines from astrocytes seems to play a key role in some of these processes [11, 73].
485 To investigate the consequences of oxysterol-mediated astrocytic reactivity on neurons, we exposed
486 neurons to astrocytes that had previously been challenged with oxysterols. Our data indicated that
487 neurons co-cultured with pre-treated astrocytes are characterized by a significant reduction in PSD95
488 protein levels and a clear increase in cleaved caspase-3 protein levels, suggesting that oxysterol-
489 induced reactivity is detrimental for neuronal health. Importantly, similar changes were obtained
490 when neuronal cultures were directly treated with the Late AD mixture in the absence of astrocytes,
491 confirming that oxysterols have a direct and negative effect on neuron health. PSD95 is a scaffold
492 protein abundant in the postsynaptic density (PSD), that anchors N-methyl-D-aspartate receptor
493 (NMDAR) as well as other proteins (e.g potassium channels, cell adhesion molecules) to the PSD. It
494 is also involved in the assembly of specific signaling proteins, that act downstream of NMDAR [74].
495 PSD95 is recognized to play an important role in synaptic plasticity and memory, and in-keeping with
496 this its levels decrease in AD [5]. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have yet assessed the
497 specific actions of oxysterol-treated astrocytes on PSD95 levels, however various mediators released
498 by oxysterol-treated astrocytes have previously been shown to affect synapses, including Lcn2 and
499 IL-1α/β [52, 75, 76]. Indeed, the binding of cytokines and chemokines to their receptors leads to the
500 activation of diverse signaling pathways [77], some of which are involved in PSD95 regulation [78].
501 Concerning oxysterols, it has been demonstrated that 27-OHC reduces dendritic spine density and
502 PSD95 levels in primary mouse hippocampal neurons [33], whereas 24-OHC affects synaptic
503 plasticity via modulation of NMDAR [79]. Since oxysterols are able to directly modulate several
504 pathways involved in PSD95 regulation [50], other oxysterols present into the mixture could be
505 involved in the observed PSD95 reduction, even if their role needs further investigation. Moreover,
506 the ability of oxysterols to alter membrane structure could affect transmembrane protein localization
507 and function, thus modifying the integrity of the PSD structure [80, 81]. The increase in the levels of
508 cleaved caspase-3 fragment further indicates that oxysterol-activated astrocytes are detrimental to
509 neurons. Besides being an effector of apoptosis, caspase-3 was demonstrated to play various non-

510 apoptotic roles in neurons involved in both physiological processes and neurodegenerative diseases
511 [51]. For instance, it is involved in the pathological cleavage of tau protein [82] and its activation
512 correlates with dendritic spine loss and cognitive decline in the absence of neuronal cell death [83].
513 Interestingly, it has previously been shown that increase in neuronal cleaved caspase-3 levels in
514 response to Aβ is exacerbated in the presence of reactive astrocytes, and that increased caspase-3
515 activity is reduced upon pretreatment with an anti-inflammatory molecule *in vitro* [11] and *in vivo*
516 [84]. These and other data highlight that neuronal caspase-3 can be activated by extracellular
517 inflammatory mediators. Caspase-3 can also be activated by oxysterols, mainly those oxidized at C7
518 position but also others [33, 50, 85-87].

519 In AD, synaptic loss is the parameter that best correlates with dementia [88, 89]; therefore,
520 elucidating how synapses are lost is of great importance. This can be examined *in vitro* by monitoring
521 dendritic spine density and/or neurite complexity. The direct effect of oxysterols on synaptic health
522 has been partially investigated as stated above, but we were interested in assessing how oxysterol-
523 activated astrocytes affect synapses. Our results indicate that ACM from oxysterol-activated
524 astrocytes is synaptotoxic, as shown by significant decreases in the number of dendritic spines and
525 reduced complexity of the neurites in primary neurons, as well as by PSD95 reduction as described
526 above. Because Lcn2 is secreted upon oxysterol-induced astrocyte activation and has proven to be
527 neurotoxic [17, 53], we tested whether we could revert the synaptotoxic effect of reactive astrocytes
528 by suppressing Lcn2 expression and therefore reducing its secretion. Our results clearly demonstrate
529 that dendritic spine density and neurites architecture are better preserved when Lcn2 expression is
530 silenced prior to treating astrocytes with oxysterols. These data reveal a major role for Lcn2 in
531 mediating the synaptotoxic effect of oxysterol-treated astrocytes. These findings extend previous
532 studies showing that Lcn2 affects dendritic spine density and morphology [52], as well as contributing
533 to hippocampal damage and cognitive impairment in a mouse model of vascular dementia [49].

534

535 **CONCLUSIONS**

536 Overall, these results describe the complexity of oxysterol effects on astrocytes and neurons. Of
537 interest was our observation that astrocytes respond most strongly to oxysterol mixture representative
538 of late AD brain in comparison to early AD-mimicking mixture. These data add to an emerging
539 consensus that astrocyte responses are differentially altered at specific disease stages in response to
540 various changes in the local environment. Indeed, we demonstrated that oxysterols induce a clear
541 morphological change in astrocytes, that is accompanied by an increase in some reactive astrocyte
542 markers and the release of several mediators. We also demonstrated that oxysterols are detrimental
543 to neuronal health but do not cause overt neurotoxicity. Importantly, we have shown that oxysterol-
544 activated astrocytes induce synaptotoxicity that is mediated by Lcn2. This study thus reveals new
545 aspects of brain oxysterol effects on astrocytes and neurons, confirming their potential ability to
546 contribute to AD pathogenesis, and providing support for further investigations into a potential role
547 for Lcn2 as a novel therapeutic target in AD.

548

549 **ABBREVIATIONS**

550 α-EPOX: 5α,6α-epoxycholesterol; β-EPOX: 5β,6β-epoxycholesterol; 24-OHC: 24-
551 hydroxycholesterol; 27-OHC: 27-hydroxycholesterol; 7-KC: 7-ketocholesterol; 7α-OHC: 7α-
552 hydroxycholesterol; 7β-OHC: 7β-hydroxycholesterol; Aβ: Amyloid-β; ACM: Astrocyte conditioned
553 media; AD: Alzheimer's disease; ApoE: Apolipoprotein E; BBB: Blood-brain barrier; CCL: C-C
554 motif chemokine; CXCL: C-X-C motif chemokine; CYP46A1: Cholesterol 24-hydroxylase; DIV:
555 Days *in vitro*; GC-MS: Gas chromatography-mass spectrometry; G-CSF: Granulocyte colony-
556 stimulating factor; GFAP: Glial fibrillary acidic protein; Iba1: Ionized calcium binding adaptor
557 molecule 1; IL: Interleukin; Lcn2: Lipocalin-2; LDH: Lactate dehydrogenase, LPS:
558 Lipopolysaccharide; NFTs: Neurofibrillary tangles; NGAL: Neutrophil gelatinase-associated
559 lipocalin; NMDAR: N-methyl-D-aspartate receptor; PSD: Postsynaptic density; PSD95: Postsynaptic

560 density protein 95; SerpinA3N: Serine protease inhibitor A3N; sICAM-1: Soluble intercellular
561 adhesion molecule-1; siRNA: Small interfering RNA; TNF-α: Tumor necrosis factor-α.

562

563 **DECLARATIONS**

564 **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

565 All animal procedures were in accordance with the European Communities Council Directive
566 (86/609/EEC and 2010/63/EU), the UK Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, and the Italian
567 Law for Care and Use of Experimental Animals (26/2016), with agreement from both the King's
568 College London (Denmark Hill) Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Board and the Ethical
569 Committee of the University of Turin.

570

571 **Consent for publication**

572 Not applicable

573

574 **Availability of data and materials**

575 All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article [and its
576 supplementary information files].

577

578 **Competing interests**

579 The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

580

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585

586 **Author's contributions**

587 ES, VC and BGPN designed and performed experiments. ES and BGPN analysed samples and
588 performed the statistical analysis. VL and CC performed GC-MS analysis and analysed data. ES and
589 BGPN wrote the manuscript. AB, WN, and GL revised the manuscript. PG, WN, BGPN, and GL
590 obtained the funding. ES, BGPN, GT and SG prepared the figures. All authors read and approved the
591 final manuscript.

592

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595

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823

824 **FIGURE LEGENDS**

825 **Fig. 1 Dose-response experiments to test the effect of the oxysterol mixtures on astrocyte**
826 **viability and morphology.** Primary astrocyte cultures were treated with the Early or Late AD
827 oxysterol mixture (1, 5, or 10 μM), or vehicle (ethanol) for 24h. **(A)** The bar graph shows the lactate
828 dehydrogenase (LDH) release from treated astrocytes. Values are the proportion of LDH released

into medium relative to total LDH in lysed cells normalized to values for control media. Data are expressed as mean ± SD from three different experiments (n=9, one-way ANOVA). **(B)** Astrocyte morphology was examined by immunocytochemistry using a glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) antibody (red) and nuclei were stained with Hoechst 33258 (blue). Representative images from three experiments are shown. Cells were imaged using an LSM800 confocal microscope (Zeiss; 40X objective; scale bar: 100 μm).

Fig. 2 Oxysterol mixtures induce a clear morphological change in astrocytes. Primary astrocytes were treated with 10 μM of the Early or Late AD oxysterol mixture for up to 24h. Astrocyte morphology was examined by immunocytochemistry using a glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) antibody (red) and nuclei were stained with Hoechst 33258 (blue). Representative images from three experiments are shown. Cells were imaged using an Eclipse Ti-E Microscope (Nikon; 20X objective; scale bar: 100 μm).

Fig. 3 Oxysterol mixtures increase the synthesis of pan-reactive astrocyte markers. The glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP), serine protease inhibitor A3N (SerpinA3N), and lipocalin-2 (Lcn2) protein levels were determined by Western blotting of lysates from primary astrocytes treated with 10 μM of the Early or Late AD oxysterol mixture for up to 24h. The amounts of proteins of interest were normalized to β-actin levels in the same sample and are represented as percentage of average control values. Data are expressed as mean values ± SD of three different experiments (n=9, one-way ANOVA). ****P<0.0001, ***P<0.001, *P<0.05 vs. control.

Fig. 4 Oxysterol treatment increases the release of lipocalin-2 (Lcn2), cytokines and chemokines from astrocytes. Astrocyte cultures were treated with the Early or Late AD oxysterol mixture (10

853 μM) for 24h. **(A)** Lcn2 protein levels in astrocyte conditioned media (ACM) were examined by
854 Western blotting. Data are expressed as mean values ± SD from three different experiments and are
855 shown as percentage change from average control values (n=9, one-way ANOVA). ****P<0.0001
856 vs control. **(B)** Mouse cytokine profiler antibody arrays were used to detect the amounts of 40
857 mediators in ACM. Representative images of array membranes are shown, highlighted some of the
858 cytokines found to be significantly increased in ACM from treated cells. The bar chart shows the
859 cytokines significantly affected by oxysterol mixture treatments as percentage change from control.
860 Data are expressed as mean values ± SD from three different experiments (n=6, one-way ANOVA).
861 ***P<0.001, **P<0.01, and *P<0.05 vs control.

862

863 **Fig. 5 Oxysterol-stimulated astrocytes compromise neuronal health.** Primary neurons (13 DIV)
864 were treated with the Late AD oxysterol mixture (10 μM) for 24h or they were co-cultured for 24h
865 with astrocytes grown on cell culture inserts that had been previously treated with the same oxysterol
866 mixture for 12h. **(A)** Graphical representation of co-culture experiments. **(B)** The protein levels of the
867 postsynaptic density protein 95 (PSD95), synapsin, and cleaved caspase-3 were determined by
868 Western blotting. Data were normalized to the corresponding β-actin levels. Data are expressed as
869 mean values ± SD of three different experiments as percentage change from respective control (n=9,
870 Student's t-test). **P<0.01 and *P<0.05 vs control.

871

872 **Fig. 6 Lipocalin-2 (Lcn2) gene silencing prevents Lcn2 upregulation and release into the**
873 **medium.** Astrocyte cultures were transfected for 6h with Lcn2 or scrambled siRNA and then treated
874 with the Late AD oxysterol mixture 10 μM (Mix) for 12h. After treatment, the medium was changed
875 and astrocytes were incubated with fresh medium for 24h. Transient Lcn2 gene knockdown was
876 evaluated by **(A)** real-time RT-PCR and **(B)** Western blotting of both lysates and astrocyte

877 conditioned media (ACM) samples. Data were normalized to the corresponding β-actin levels. Data
878 are expressed as mean values ± SD from three different experiments as percentage change from
879 control (n=9, one-way ANOVA). ****P<0.0001, ***P<0.001, and *P<0.05 vs control; ####
880 P<0.0001 vs oxysterol treated. **(C)** Astrocyte morphology was examined by immunocytochemistry
881 using a glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) antibody (red) and nuclei were stained with Hoechst
882 33258 (blue). Representative images from three experiments are shown. Cells were imaged using an
883 LSM800 confocal microscope (Zeiss, 40X objective; scale bar: 100 μm).

884

885 **Fig. 7 Lipocalin-2 (Lcn2) secreted by oxysterol-stimulated astrocytes affects neurite complexity**
886 **and decreases dendritic spine density.** Primary neurons were incubated for 24h with conditioned
887 media from astrocytes transfected for 6h with Lcn2 or scrambled siRNA and then treated with the
888 Late AD oxysterol mixture 10 μM for 12h. After treatment, the medium was changed and astrocytes
889 were incubated with fresh medium for 24h. High resolution digital images of live neurons were
890 obtained using an Opera-Phenix microscope (Perkin-Elmer). **(A)** Neurite complexity was analysed
891 using Harmony software. Total and maximum neurite length, number of nodes and extremities were
892 quantified and compared between groups. Representative images are shown (scale bar: 100 μm).
893 Data are expressed as mean values ± SD from three different experiments and were obtained from
894 analysis of 20 neurons/condition (one-way ANOVA). *P<0.05 vs control. **(B)** NeuronStudio software
895 was used for dendritic spine analysis. Spine density was defined as number of spines per micrometer
896 of dendrite length and was obtained from analysis of 20 neurons/condition (one-way ANOVA).
897 Representative images are shown (scale bar: 25 μm). Data are expressed as mean values ± SD from
898 three different experiments. ***P<0.001 vs control.

899

900 **ADDITIONAL FILES**

901 **Additional file 1**

902 TIFF

903 **Supplemental Fig. 1 Evaluation of astrocyte culture purity.** Astrocytic cultures were analysed by
904 **(A)** immunocytochemistry and **(B)** Western blotting using antibodies against glial fibrillary acidic
905 protein (GFAP, astrocytic marker) and ionized calcium binding adaptor molecule 1 (Iba1, microglial
906 marker). Cells were imaged using an LSM800 confocal microscope (Zeiss, 40X objective; scale bar:
907 100 μm).

908

909 **Additional file 2**

910 TIFF

911 **Supplemental Fig. 2 Validation of lipocalin-2 (Lcn2) silencing efficiency.** Astrocyte cultures were
912 transfected for 6h with Lcn2 or scrambled siRNA, then the medium was changed and astrocytes were
913 incubated with fresh medium for 36h. Transient Lcn2 gene knockdown was evaluated by real-time
914 RT-PCR. Data were normalized to the corresponding β-actin levels. Data are expressed as mean
915 values ± SD of three different experiments (n=9, one-way ANOVA). ****P<0.0001 vs control.

916

917 **Additional file 3**

918 TIFF

919 **Supplemental Fig. 3 Oxysterol analyses in astrocyte culture media.** Astrocyte cultures were
920 treated for 1, 3, 12 or 24h with the Early or Late AD oxysterol mixtures (10 μM). Astrocyte
921 conditioned media was collected and the amounts of the seven oxysterols present in the mixtures were
922 determined by gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS). The graph shows the amounts of
923 oxysterol in media expressed as percentage of the original oxysterol concentrations present in each

924 mixture. Data shown are averages of the measurements obtained from treatments with Early and Late

925 AD mixtures. Data are expressed as mean values ± SD from two different experiments (n=6).

926

927 **Additional file 4**

928 TIFF

929 **Supplemental Fig. 4 Oxysterol mixtures do not directly cause neuron death.** Neuronal viability

930 was assessed in neurons treated with the Early or Late AD oxysterol mixture (10 μM) for 24h. The

931 bar graph shows the proportion of lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) released into medium relative to total

932 LDH in lysed cells, normalized to values for control media. Data are expressed as mean values ± SD

933 from three different experiments (n=12, one-way ANOVA).

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