Cystine/glutamate antiporter xCT (SLC7A11) facilitates oncogenic RAS transformation by preserving intracellular redox balance

Jonathan K. M. Lim\textsuperscript{b,1}, Alberto Delaidellia\textsuperscript{a,b}, Sean W. Minakera\textsuperscript{a,b,1}, Hai-Feng Zhang\textsuperscript{a,b,1}, Milena Colovic\textsuperscript{c}, Hua Yang\textsuperscript{c}, Gian Luca Negri\textsuperscript{a}, Silvia von Karstedtd,e, William W. Lockwood\textsuperscript{b,f}, Paul Schaffer\textsuperscript{c}, Gabriel Leprivier\textsuperscript{g,2}, and Paul H. Sorensen\textsuperscript{a,b,2}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Molecular Oncology, BC Cancer, Vancouver V5Z 1L3, Canada; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, University of British Columbia, Vancouver V6T 2S5, Canada; \textsuperscript{c}Life Sciences, TRIUMF, Vancouver V6T 2A3, Canada; \textsuperscript{d}Department of Translational Genomics, University Hospital of Cologne, 50931 Cologne, Germany; \textsuperscript{e}Cologne Excellence Cluster on Cellular Stress Response in Aging-Associated Diseases, University of Cologne, 50931 Cologne, Germany; \textsuperscript{f}Integrative Oncology, BC Cancer, Vancouver V5Z 1L3, Canada; and \textsuperscript{g}Clinic for Pediatric Oncology, Hematology and Clinical Immunology, Medical Faculty, Heinrich Heine University, 40225 Düsseldorf, Germany

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The RAS family of proto-oncogenes are among the most commonly mutated genes in human cancers and predict poor clinical outcome. Several mechanisms underlying oncogenic RAS transformation are well documented, including constitutive signaling through the RAF-MEK-ERK proliferative pathway as well as the PI3K-AKT prosurvival pathway. Notably, control of redox balance has also been proposed to contribute to RAS transformation. However, how homeostasis between reactive oxygen species (ROS) and antioxidants, which have opposing effects in the cell, ultimately influence RAS-mediated transformation and tumor progression is still a matter of debate and the mechanisms involved have not been fully elucidated. Here, we show that oncogenic KRAS protects fibroblasts from oxidative stress by enhancing intracellular GSH levels. Using a whole transcriptome approach, we discovered that this is attributable to transcriptional up-regulation of \textit{xCT}, the gene encoding the cystine/glutamate antiporter. This is in line with the function of \textit{xCT}, which mediates the uptake of cystine, a precursor for GSH biosynthesis. Moreover, our results reveal that the ETS-1 transcription factor downstream of the RAS-RAS-MEK-ERK signaling cascade directly transactivates the \textit{xCT} promoter in synergy with the ATF4 endoplasmic reticulum stress-associated transcription factor. Strikingly, \textit{xCT} was found to be essential for oncogenic KRAS-mediated transformation in vitro and in vivo by mitigating oxidative stress, as knockdown of \textit{xCT} strongly impaired growth of tumor xenografts established from KRAS-transformed cells. Overall, this study uncovers a mechanism by which oncogenic RAS preserves intracellular redox balance and identifies an unexpected role for \textit{xCT} in supporting RAS-induced transformation and tumorigenesis.

Significance

\textit{RAS} genes are among the most mutated proto-oncogenes in human cancer. The mechanisms supporting RAS transformation are not fully understood, particularly regarding the relative contributions of oxidant versus antioxidant pathways. Here, we report that the cystine/glutamate transporter \textit{xCT} is essential for RAS-induced tumorigenicity by enhancing antioxidant glutathione synthesis. Our findings uncover that RAS controls \textit{xCT} transcription by downstream activation of ETS-1 to synergize with ATF4. This has clinical relevance since \textit{xCT} expression is upregulated in human cancers exhibiting an activated RAS pathway. Therefore, oncogenic RAS transformation is supported by induction of an antioxidant program, highlighting \textit{xCT} as a potential vulnerability for therapeutic targeting.

The human RAS family of proto-oncogenes is comprised of \textit{HRAS}, \textit{KRAS}, and \textit{NRAS} (1), which are among the most mutated genes in human cancers (2). \textit{RAS} encodes a GTPase that relays signals from growth factor receptors to downstream signaling cascades. Mutations in RAS favor GTP binding, resulting in a constitutively active form of the protein, sufficient to transform cells and induce tumorigenesis in vivo (3). A number of mechanisms underlying RAS transformation have been proposed. These encompass constitutive induction of the proliferative RAS-MEK-ERK pathway (4) and the pleiotropic PI3K-AKT pathway to prevent apoptosis (5). Other proposed mechanisms include increases of extracellular proteases as well as increased calcium signaling (6). Notably, the control of redox balance has also been suggested to support RAS transformation. Initially, reactive oxygen species (ROS) were believed to contribute to RAS transformation as oncogenic \textit{Ras} expression was shown to up-regulate the NADPH oxidase system, causing increased superoxide production (7–9). It was also reported that mitochondrial ROS are required for \textit{K-RasG12D}-induced tumorigenicity (10). More recently, several studies have demonstrated that on the contrary, activation of antioxidant pathways is necessary to support RAS transformation. Indeed, \textit{K-RasG12D}-induced expression of the transcription factor Nrf2, the master regulator of intracellular antioxidant response, to support \textit{K-RasG12D}-driven tumor development (11). In addition, oncogenic RAS cells undergo oncogene-directed metabolic reprogramming, in which glucose and glutamine are rechanneled to maintain cellular redox balance, ultimately contributing to tumor progression (12, 13). Thus, the role of ROS versus antioxidants in RAS transformation is still a matter of debate, and the mechanisms involved are not yet fully resolved.

A critical modulator of intracellular redox balance is the system \textit{xCT}-transporter, which mediates the exchange of intracellular glutamate for extracellular cysteine, an essential precursor for GSH synthesis. This complex consists of \textit{xCT}, a light-chain subunit that confers cystine transport function (14), and the
CD98 heavy-chain subunit, which localizes system xC⁻ to the plasma membrane. *XCT* expression is induced in response to ROS-inducing agents such as hydrogen peroxide and sodium arsenite, leading to enhanced GSH production (15). This is attributed to cis-acting transcriptional regulatory elements present in the *XCT* promoter, including an antioxidant response element (ARE) principally recognized by NRF2 (16), and the amino acid response element (AARE), which is bound by ATF4 (17), a major player in the integrated stress response and oxidative stress response. Expression of *xCT* is deregulated in multiple cancers. Indeed, overexpression of *xCT* has been reported in nonsmall cell lung cancer, breast cancer, and liver cancer and is associated with poor outcomes (18–21). Furthermore, *xCT* has been implicated in promoting tumorigenesis through its antioxidant function, which supports breast cancer cell proliferation (19), matrix invasion of glioma (22), and in vivo tumor growth of gastric cancer (23). These studies and others also demonstrated that genetic or pharmacological inhibition of *xCT*, such as with sulfasalazine and erastin, hold promise as a therapeutic strategy in these model systems (24–26). Significantly, it was recently revealed that *xCT* is involved in tumor initiation as it is directly repressed by p53 or BAP1 as a means to exert tumor suppression (27, 28). Nonetheless, whether *xCT* directly contributes to oncogene-driven tumorigenesis is unknown.

Here, we report that oncogenic KRAS protects fibroblasts against oxidative stress by stimulating *xCT* transcription to enhance GSH levels. Our results reveal that this is mediated downstream of the Ras-Raf-Mek-Erk pathway by the Ets-1 transcription factor. Our results reveal that this is mediated downstream of oncogene-driven tumorigenesis. KRAS-mediated tumorigenesis in vitro and in vivo by maintaining the redox balance. Together, our study provides a mechanism contributing to RAS transformation and link the control of *xCT* expression to the RAS pathway.

**Results**

**Oncogenic Transformation with KRAS Protects Fibroblasts from Oxidative Stress.** To define the impact of oncogenic RAS signaling on the cellular response to oxidative stress and the mechanisms involved, we initially used 3T3 fibroblasts transformed by activated KRAS<sup>G12V</sup> (3T3 KRAS<sup>V12</sup>) or the ETV6-NTRK3 (EN) chimeric tyrosine kinase (3T3 EN) (29). As both oncoproteins constitutively activate Ras-Erk and PI3K-Akt signaling, we used both KRAS<sup>V12</sup> and EN-transformed cell lines to avoid cell line-specific effects (30). Expression of oncogenic KRAS and EN were confirmed in the transformed fibroblasts (Fig. 1.4).

To assess the impact of oncogenic KRAS and EN transformation on the susceptibility of fibroblasts to exogenous oxidative stress, we subjected the cells to increasing concentrations of hydrogen peroxide (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) and quantified cell death. While H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> treatment induced massive cell death in nontransformed control cells (3T3 MSCV), especially at higher concentrations, 3T3 KRAS<sup>V12</sup> and 3T3 EN cells were relatively protected (Fig. 1B), indicating that oncogenic transformation by KRAS and EN provide protection against oxidative stress. Similar effects were observed for mutant KRAS using a second oxidative stress inducer, diethyl maleate (DEM) (SI Appendix, Fig. S1A). These differences in cell death were linked to amounts of intracellular ROS; indeed, while 3T3 MSCV cells displayed higher levels of intracellular ROS under ambient conditions and showed rapid accumulation of ROS following H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> treatment (Fig. 1C) or DEM treatment (SI Appendix, Fig. S1B), 3T3 KRAS<sup>V12</sup> cells maintained lower levels of intracellular ROS throughout these conditions. This is in line with previous work demonstrating that *KRAS<sup>G12D</sup>* expression actively suppresses ROS due to basal activation of the Nrf2 detoxification program (11). Similar effects were also seen with 3T3 EN cells (SI Appendix, Fig. S1C). This was further validated by analyzing levels of protein oxidation, which indicated that following exposure to

![Fig. 1](https://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1821323116)
H₂O₂, 3T3 MSCV cells showed higher levels of protein oxidation relative to 3T3 KRASV₁₂ cells, as measured by dityrosine levels (Fig. 1D). Moreover, together with reduced ROS, 3T3 KRASV₁₂ and EN cells consistently displayed higher reduced glutathione (GSH) levels (SI Appendix, Fig. SID) relative to 3T3 MSCV cells, both under ambient conditions and in response to oxidative stress by H₂O₂ or DEM treatment. Interestingly, while 3T3 KRASV₁₂ and EN cells exhibited a lower GSH/GSSG ratio relative to 3T3 MSCV cells under ambient conditions, these cells had similar GSH/GSSG ratios as 3T3 MSCV cells following H₂O₂ treatment (Fig. 1F). This suggests that in our cellular model, protection of cells against oxidative stress following oncogenic transformation with KRAS or EN may be attributed to enhanced GSH biosynthesis rather than increased GSH-GSSG recycling. Supportive of this, 3T3 KRASV₁₂ and EN cells showed higher total GSH and GSH/GSSG ratios compared with 3T3 MSCV cells when treated with DEM, which conjugates and, therefore, depletes GSH availability (Fig. 1F and SI Appendix, Fig. SID). Together, these results suggest that oncogenic transformation with KRAS or EN protects fibroblasts against endogenous oxidative stress by preserving the redox balance and enhancing intracellular GSH capacity.

**Oncogenic RAS Leads to Enhanced Induction of xCT.** To uncover the mechanisms underlying KRASV₁₂, or EN-mediated oxidative stress resistance, we performed whole-transcriptome microarray analysis of 3T3 KRASV₁₂, EN, and MSCV cells under basal conditions (UT) and H₂O₂ treatment to identify differentially regulated transcripts potentially involved in the response to oxidative stress. When 3T3 KRASV₁₂ and 3T3 EN cells were individually analyzed following H₂O₂ treatment, we found overlap of a core of 90 probesets (corresponding to 67 unique genes) that were significantly up-regulated twofold in both cell lines relative to 3T3 MSCV cells. Gene ontology (GO) overrepresentation analysis of these 67 genes showed significant enrichment for functional categories relating to cellular stress response and cell death, including the GO categories “cellular response to hypoxia,” “endoplasmic reticulum unfolded protein response,” and “apoptotic process” (Fig. 2A, Left). These categories comprised many up-regulated genes of the integrated stress response.

![Venn diagram](image)

**Fig. 2.** Oncogenic KRAS enhances xCT induction. (A, Left) GO biological process categories overrepresented in 67 genes up-regulated in 3T3 KRASV₁₂ and 3T3 EN cells following 200 μM H₂O₂ for 3 h, for all categories with FDR < 0.10. The x axis represents the negative log of the significant score P values generated from DAVID. (A, Right) Venn diagram depicting the overlap of up-regulated genes in 3T3 KRASV₁₂ versus 3T3 MSCV and 3T3 EN cells versus MSCV under 200 μM H₂O₂ for 3 h and basal condition. (B) 3T3 KRASV₁₂ and MSCV cells were treated with 100 μM DEM or 200 μM H₂O₂ for the indicated times, and xCT mRNA levels were determined using qRT-PCR. (n = 3). (C) Expression levels of xCT in human mammary epithelial cells (HMEC) ectopically expressing indicated oncogenes or control GFP. Expression levels are displayed as log₂ of mRNA. (D) xCT activity in 3T3 KRASV₁₂ and MSCV cells treated with 200 μM H₂O₂ or 100 μM DEM for 6 h, with or without 20 μM erastin was determined by FASu uptake. FASu radioactivity was normalized to protein concentration (n = 3). (E) xCT⁺⁺ KRASV₁₂ and xCT⁺⁺ KRASV₁₂ cells were removed from regular media containing 2ME and treated with 200 μM H₂O₂ for 16 h; xCT⁺⁺ KRASV₁₂ was rescued with 50 μM 2ME, 5 mM NAC, 5 mM GSH, or reexpression of xCT (xCT); and cell death was determined by propidium iodide (PI) staining and flow cytometry (n = 3). (F) ROS levels in xCT⁺⁻ KRASV₁₂ and xCT⁺⁺ KRASV₁₂ cells removed from regular media containing 2ME and rescued with 5 mM GSH, 5 mM NAC, or 5 mM NAC and 100 μM BSO, or reexpression of xCT (xCT) were determined by 6-chloromethyl-2',7'- dichlorodihydrofluorescein diacetate, acetyl ester (CM-H₂DCFDA) staining and flow cytometry (n = 3). (G) xCT⁺⁻ KRASV₁₂ and xCT⁺⁻ KRASV₁₂ cells were removed from regular media containing 2ME and rescued with 5 mM NAC or 5 mM NAC and 100 μM BSO, or reexpression of xCT and reduced GSH levels were determined using GSH-Glo assay (Promega) (n = 3). Where shown, data are reported as means ± SD with indicated significance (*P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, and ***P < 0.005).
pathway such as Ppp1r15a, Aft3, Tri6, Chac1, and Delt3 as well as oxidative stress response genes such as Hmxol, Plk3, and Tpr53inp1 (Dataset S1).

To better characterize individual genes uniquely up-regulated by KRASV12 and EN in response to oxidative stress, we subdivided genes to identify those that were differentially up-regulated by KRASV12 and EN transformation relative to control cells only under H2O2 treatment, and not under basal conditions. From this analysis, we identified only 15 genes with overlap across both cell lines (Fig. 2A, Right). Among these, solute carrier family 7 member 11 (Slc7a11; also commonly referred to as xCT) was of interest due to its known role in redox regulation through GSH biosynthesis. Differential expression of xCT mRNA was validated by qRT-PCR, confirming that while xCT expression was induced in all cell lines in response to DEM or H2O2, it was fourfold and twofold higher in 3T3 KRASV12 compared with 3T3 MSCV cells at 6 h treatment with DEM and H2O2, respectively (Fig. 2B). To corroborate these findings in another cell type, we analyzed levels of xCT expression in a publicly available gene expression dataset of human mammary epithelial cells (HMEC) ectopically expressing either activated HRAS or a panel of oncogenes [β-catenin (Bcat), E2F3, MYC, or SPC] (31). In line with our findings, we observed that xCT is significantly up-regulated in HRASV12 and SRC-transformed cells, but not in other oncogene expressing cells, compared with control GFP HMECs (Fig. 2C). Furthermore, xCT induction was not induced in 3T3 cells, as KRASV12 transformation also resulted in enhanced induction of xCT in response to H2O2 (SI Appendix, Fig. S2A). To further corroborate the link between RAS signaling and xCT expression, we used Nras/Hnas double knockout MEFs with 4-OHT–inducible knockout of endogenous Kras (32). As shown in SI Appendix, Fig. S2B, in the presence of 4-OHT, the conditional Kras alleles become fully excised rendering the cells “Rasless.” This complete knockout of Kras led to a dose-dependent decrease in xCT expression, further linking xCT induction to RAS signaling (SI Appendix, Fig. S2B). In contrast, levels of GPX4, another oxidative stress response protein, were unchanged.

Together, these data support the notion that oncogenic RAS pathway activation leads to induction of xCT expression.

We next investigated the impact of oncogenic KRAS on xCT activity to determine whether increased xCT mRNA levels led to enhanced protein activity. We opted for this approach rather than Western blotting since it has been documented that at present, all commercially available antibodies display nonspecific immunoreactivity when used to detect xCT protein in mouse cell lines and tissues (33). We therefore performed in vitro uptake assays of the xCT-specific PET tracer 18F-5-fluoroaraminosuberic acid (FASu), which was developed as a diagnostic tracer of oxidative stress via system x− activity (34, 35). In sharp contrast to nontransformed 3T3 cells, which showed no significant increase of FASu uptake following H2O2 and DEM exposure, 3T3 KRASV12 cells consistently exhibited a five- to sixfold induction of system x− activity in response to these compounds (Fig. 2D), in keeping with higher levels of xCT mRNA detected in transformed cells. FASu uptake was effectively blocked with a known xCT inhibitor, erastin, confirming the specificity of FASu for xCT. Moreover, increased FASu uptake observed in KRASV12 transformed cells was not linked to altered expression of the heavy-chain subunit of system x−, i.e., CD98, as expression of the latter was similar in transformed versus nontransformed cells under basal and H2O2 treatment conditions (SI Appendix, Fig. S2C). This points to a major role for xCT in KRASV12–mediated induction of system x− activity. Together, these results indicate that oncogenic KRASV12 leads to enhanced levels of xCT expression and activity in response to exogenous oxidative stress.

**xCT Mediates Oncogenic KRAS-Induced Resistance to Oxidative Stress by Preserving Redox Balance.** Given that xCT activity is essential to support GSH biosynthesis pathway and therefore to maintain redox balance, we next asked whether xCT promotes the oxidative stress resistance conferred by oncogenic KRAS (15). To address this, we acquired mouse embryonic fibroblasts (MEFs) derived from wild-type (xCT+/+) or xCT−/− mice into which we stably expressed K-RasV12 (36). xCT−/− cells are routinely cultured in the reducing agent 2-mercaptoethanol (2ME), allowing these cells to circumvent the block in cysteine uptake by instead importing its reduced form, cysteine, via neutral amino acid transporters (36). Strikingly, xCT knockout cells transformed with K-RasV12 showed marked cell death following exposure to H2O2 compared with wild-type cells (Fig. 2E). Similarly, knocking down xCT with two nonoverlapping siRNAs in 3T3 KRASV12 cells increased cell death induced by H2O2 (SI Appendix, Fig. S2 D and E). Susceptibility to oxidative stress was reversed in MEFs and 3T3 models either by supplementation with the antioxidants GSH and NAC or with 2ME (specifically in xCT−/− KRASV12) (Fig. 2F and SI Appendix, Fig. S2E). Further, ectopic overexpression of xCT in 3T3 MSCV cells phenocopied effects of oncogenic KRAS on susceptibility to H2O2 by protecting cells against this treatment (SI Appendix, Fig. S2F). Together, these data clearly indicate that xCT mediates oncogenic KRAS-induced cytoprotection against oxidative stress.

This function is linked to antioxidant activity of xCT. 2ME depletion led to a significant increase of ROS in xCT−/− KRASV12 relative to xCT+/+ KRASV12 cells, but this was reversed by expressing xCT (xCT KRASV12) in cancer cell lines, but not in nontransformed cells (2ME, GSH, or NAC, but less so under cotreatment with NAC and 1-buthionine-S,R-sulfoximine (BSO), a glutamate-cysteine ligase (GCL) inhibitor (Fig. 2F)). This suggests that xCT promotes KRAS-mediated oxidative stress resistance by providing cystine intermediates for the synthesis of GSH via GCL. Similarly, knockdown of xCT in 3T3 KRASV12 cells was accompanied by an increase in ROS levels under both basal and H2O2 treatment conditions, which was also reversed by GSH or NAC, but not NAC and BSO together (SI Appendix, Fig. S2G). Consistent with this finding, knockout (Fig. 2G) or knockdown (SI Appendix, Fig. S2H) of xCT led to significant decreases in GSH levels under basal and oxidative stress conditions (2ME for MEFs and H2O2 treatment for 3T3), which could be reversed by either 2ME (specifically in xCT−/− KRASV12) or NAC, but not NAC with BSO. Taken together, these data provide compelling evidence that xCT mediates resistance to oxidative stress conferred by oncogenic KRAS by providing cystine for GSH synthesis.

**xCT Expression and Activity Are Induced by Mutant KRAS in Human Cancer Cells.** To assess regulation of xCT by oncogenic KRAS in human cancer cells, we analyzed various cell lines originating from mutant KRAS-driven human cancers, such as lung adenocarcinoma (LUAD), colorectal adenocarcinoma (COAD), and pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDAC). We surveyed xCT expression in mutant KRAS versus wild-type KRAS cancer cells from LUAD, COAD, and PDAC. Normal epithelial cells HPL1D and HPDE6 from lung and pancreas, respectively, were included as controls. We found that xCT expression is consistently higher in mutant KRAS cancer cell lines compared with wild-type KRAS cell lines originating from the same tumor types and in normal epithelial cells (Fig. 3A), pointing to a correlation between KRAS activation and xCT expression in human cancer cells. To test this, we performed mutant KRAS knockdown, which markedly decreased xCT expression at the mRNA level in the COAD cell line SW620 (Fig. 3B), as well as at the protein level in SW620 and in the LUAD cell line H460 (Fig. 3C). Consistent with this, knockdown of mutant KRAS led to reduction of xCT activity (FASu uptake; Fig. 3D) and reduced GSH (Fig. 3E) in SW620 cells under basal and H2O2 treatment conditions. The decrease in reduced GSH levels following mutant KRAS knockdown under basal conditions was partially rescued by NAC, thereby phenocopying the effect of xCT expression in mutant KRAS cancer cell lines, but not in wild-type KRAS cell lines.
knockdown on reduced GSH levels as observed in 3T3 KRASV12. Consistent with 3T3 KRASV12, knockdown of xCT in SW620 cells (Fig. 3F and SI Appendix, Figs. S2 I and J) and H460 cells (Fig. 3G) led to significant decreases in GSH levels under basal and oxidative stress conditions, which could be reversed by either NAC, but not NAC in the presence of BSO, indicating that these cell lines are also dependent on xCT for GSH synthesis via GCL. Moreover, siRNA-mediated knockdown of xCT led to increased ROS levels under both basal and oxidative stress conditions (SI Appendix, Fig. S2K). Together, these results indicate that oncogenic KRAS promotes xCT expression and activity in human cancer cells to control the redox balance.

**ETS-1 Mediates the Induction of xCT by Oncogenic KRAS via Synergistic Cooperation with ATF4.** To elucidate how oncogenic KRAS regulates xCT expression, we analyzed transcription factor networks by performing gene set enrichment analysis (GSEA) of mRNA expression data obtained in 3T3 KRASV12 versus 3T3 MSCV cells. This revealed significant enrichment of genes controlled by the transcription factor Ets-1 in oncogenic KRAS cells (SI Appendix, Fig. S3A). Ets-1 is a known substrate of ERK, downstream of the Ras-Raf-Mek pathway, but its effects on xCT transcription have not been reported. Confirming a role for the Ras-Raf-Mek pathway in xCT regulation, pharmacological inhibition of Mek (by PD184352), but not of Akt (Akt Inhibitor VIII), attenuated xCT expression in 3T3 KRASV12 cells under both basal and H2O2 treatment conditions (SI Appendix, Fig. S3 B and C). This suggests that Ets-1 mediates KRASV12 induction of xCT downstream of the Ras-Raf-Mek-Erk pathway. Indeed, knockdown of Ets-1 with two nonoverlapping siRNAs in 3T3 KRASV12 cells (SI Appendix, Fig. S3D) significantly restricted xCT induction in response to H2O2 treatment versus control siRNAs (Fig. 4A). Accordingly, Ets-1 knockdown increased ROS levels in KRASV12-transformed cells under basal conditions, which was rescued by xCT overexpression or NAC supplementation, and dramatically increased ROS levels under H2O2 treatment (SI Appendix, Fig. S3E). Moreover, blocking Ets-1 expression increased sensitivity of 3T3 KRASV12 cells to H2O2 (SI Appendix, Fig. S3F). Therefore, Ets-1 confers KRASV12 cytoprotection against oxidative stress, potentially by controlling xCT expression. In human cancer cells harboring KRAS mutations, ETS-1 knockdown similarly decreased xCT expression at both the mRNA and protein level compared with siRNA controls (Fig. 4 B and C). To corroborate this, we ectopically expressed ETS-1 in the DLD-1 colon cancer cell line devoid of ETS-1 expression, which was sufficient to up-regulate xCT expression at both the mRNA and protein level under H2O2 treatment (Fig. 4D), Together, these highlight a role for ETS-1 in mediating KRASV12 induction of xCT expression.

Next, to demonstrate whether ETS-1 controls the activity of xCT promoter, we performed luciferase transactivation assays in HEK293 cells. Notably, one potential ETS-1 binding site (E1BS), 5′-TGAGGAAAGCT-3′ containing the consensus GGAAT core motif at position −15 of the human xCT promoter, was detected in silico (SI Appendix, Fig. S3G). Indeed, exogenous ETS-1 activates a luciferase reporter containing the xCT promoter in a concentration-dependent manner (Fig. 4E). Furthermore, chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP) of 3T3 KRASV12 cells revealed that endogenous Ets-1 occupies the promoter region of the xCT gene under both basal and H2O2 treatment conditions (Fig. 4F). This strongly supports xCT as a target gene of Ets-1. However, we noticed that the levels of total and phosphorylated Ets-1 (p-Ets-1, the active form of Ets-1; ref. 37), are unchanged following H2O2 exposure in 3T3 KRASV12 cells (SI Appendix, Fig. S3H). This implies that while Ets-1 can activate xCT transcription downstream of KRAS signaling, there may be other mechanisms to explain how xCT expression is enhanced in response to oxidative stress. Therefore, to uncover other transcription factors potentially involved in xCT regulation specifically under oxidative stress, we employed GSEA in H2O2-treated versus untreated 3T3 KRASV12 cells. This revealed enrichment of genes regulated by ATF4 under H2O2 treatment (SI Appendix, Fig. S4A) and conversely no enrichment of genes regulated
by Ets-1. This is consistent with the established role of Atf4 as a transcriptional regulator of xCT expression in response to oxidative stress (17). Indeed, knockdown of Atf4 markedly suppressed xCT induction (SI Appendix, Fig. S4B) and xCT protein expression (SI Appendix, Fig. S4C) in response to H2O2 in 3T3 KRASV12 and H460 cells, respectively. Notably, knockdown of Ets-1 together with Atf4 achieved a stronger suppression of xCT induction under oxidative stress conditions than targeting Ets-1 or Atf4 alone (Fig. 4G), suggesting an interplay between these two transcription factors in regulating xCT expression. While total and phosphorylated Ets-1 or Atf4 were not affected by H2O2 treatment, Atf4 expression is conversely strongly induced by H2O2 without any differences between MSCV and KRASV12 cells. These results suggest that both transcription factors may cooperate to regulate xCT expression in response to both oncogenic KRAS and oxidative stress, with Ets-1 being a component of RAS signaling and Atf4 being independently regulated by oxidative stress.

To determine potential cooperativity between Ets-1 and Atf4 in regulating xCT promoter activity, we constructed a series of xCT promoter constructs containing mutations in the putative E1BS at position −15, or in the known Atf4 binding sites (AARE) at position −95 and −78. Ectopically expressed Atf4 and Ets-1 were able to synergistically activate the wild-type xCT promoter compared with the activity induced by each alone (Fig. 4I, see top bars). However, when either the E1BS alone or the Atf4 AAREs alone were mutated, activation of the luciferase reporter was strongly decreased (Fig. 4I). Moreover, association between endogenous Ets-1 and Atf4 in a putative protein–protein complex within 3T3 KRASV12 cells was confirmed by coimmunoprecipitation experiments, and this association was enhanced under oxidative stress (SI Appendix, Fig. S4D). Taken together, these results provide strong evidence that ETS-1 and ATF4 synergistically transactivate the xCT promoter downstream of oncogenic RAS signaling and in response to oxidative stress, possibly as a cotranscriptional activating complex.

The master regulator of the oxidative stress response, Nrf2, has also previously been shown as being induced by oncogenic KRAS (11) and to control xCT promoter activity in response to electrophilic agents in cooperation with Atf4 (38). We therefore investigated the role of Nrf2 in Ets-1 regulation of xCT transcription downstream of oncogenic KRAS. We found that, at least in 3T3 fibroblasts, while Nrf2 was increased following ectopic expression of oncogenic KRAS (or EN), its levels remain unchanged following exposure to H2O2 (SI Appendix, Fig. S4E).
Furthermore, siRNA-mediated knockdown of Ets-1 (upper blots) or Atf4 (lower blots) failed to alter expression of Nrf2 (SI Appendix, Fig. S4F). Conversely, siRNA-mediated Nrf2 knockdown did not alter Ets-1 or Atf4 expression, nor did ATF4 overexpression alter ETS-1 levels (SI Appendix, Fig. S4G). This indicates that Ets-1 and Nrf2 are independently regulated downstream of the Ras-Raf-Mek pathway and, therefore, likely comprise two distinct pathways controlling xCT promoter activity. As expected, Nrf2 knockdown resulted in decreased xCT transcript levels, which interestingly could be at least partially rescued by Atf4 overexpression (SI Appendix, Fig. S4G). These data suggest that while Nrf2 does not regulate Ets-1 or Atf4 to control xCT transcription, it may potentially coregulate xCT promoter together with these transcription factors. Indeed, luciferase transactivation assays reveal that Nrf2 exerts an additive effect with ETS1 or ATF4 or with ETS-1 and ATF4 on xCT promoter activity (SI Appendix, Fig. S4H). However, Nrf2 was unable to act in synergy with these transcription factors, contrasting with the effect observed between ETS1 and ATF4. Together, our studies provide evidence that the Ras-Raf-Mek pathway controls the xCT promoter through Ets-1 in synergy with Atf4, but independently of the Nrf2 pathway.

**xCT Supports Oncogenic KRAS Transformation and Tumorigenicity in Vivo.** We next asked whether xCT contributes to KRAS oncogenic transformation and tumorigenicity. We first performed soft agar colony formation assays and found that siRNA-mediated xCT silencing results in ~70% inhibition of colony formation in 3T3 KRASV12 cells (Fig. 5A). Similarly, xCT knockout cells transformed with K-RasV12 showed markedly reduced colony formation compared with wild-type cells transformed with K-RasV12 (SI Appendix, Fig. S5A). These results were recapitulated in the human cancer cells H460 (Fig. 5B), SW620, and SW480 (SI Appendix, Fig. S5 B and C, respectively) harboring KRAS mutations. Moreover, pharmacological inhibition of xCT using the inhibitor erastin significantly impaired the ability of 3T3 KRASV12 and H460 cells to form colonies (SI Appendix, Fig. S5 D and E). These results strongly indicate that xCT is essential for KRAS-mediated oncogenic transformation and maintenance of tumorigenicity in vitro. To explore the potential mechanism involved, we assessed whether xCT reduces oxidative stress, proposed to be critical for oncogenic transformation (39). Notably, addition of NAC partially restored the ability of xCT-deficient and xCT-targeted cells to form colonies in soft agar (Fig. 5 A and B and SI Appendix, Fig. S5 A–C), consistent with an important role for xCT in supporting oncogenic KRAS-mediated transformation through its antioxidant function. To confirm that ETS-1 and ATF4 also contribute to oncogenic KRAS transformation by regulating xCT transcription, we carried out siRNA-mediated silencing of ETS-1 and ATF4 alone, or in combination. We found these to result in more than 70% inhibition of colony formation of 3T3 KRASV12 cells, compared with siRNA controls, which could be partially rescued with xCT overexpression or supplementation with NAC (SI Appendix, Fig. S5F). This highlights that ETS-1 and ATF4, by regulating xCT transcription, can mediate oncogenic KRAS transformation.

To determine the in vivo relevance of these findings, 3T3 KRASV12 cells stably expressing scr or two individual shRNAs targeting xCT were s.c. implanted in nu/nu immunocompromised mice. Tumor xenografts established from 3T3 KRASV12 cells expressing xCT-specific shRNA were severely impaired in their growth compared with tumors established from control scr cells (Fig. 5C). This data were accompanied by dramatically improved survival of mice bearing tumors with xCT silencing compared with control tumors (Fig. 5D). These highlight that xCT is required for KRAS-mediated tumorigenesis in vivo. To determine whether the impairment of KRAS-driven tumor growth induced by xCT deficiency is associated with oxidative stress, we measured GSH levels and found that tissues from xCT-knockdown tumors exhibited significantly reduced GSH levels compared with control tumors (Fig. 5E). Further, immunoblots performed on xCT knockdown tumor tissues demonstrated an increase in levels of the oxidized protein marker, Dityrosine, relative to controls, providing evidence for increased oxidative stress levels in these tumors (Fig. 5F). These data support a model whereby...
xCT is critical for supporting KRAS oncogenic transformation and tumorigenicity in vitro and in vivo by increasing antioxidant capacity and mitigating oxidative stress.

**High xCT Expression Predicts Poor Outcome in Mutant KRAS-Driven Human Tumors.** We next investigated the relevance of these findings in preclinical and clinical models of RAS-driven cancers. We first interrogated mRNA expression data from genetically engineered mouse models and found that lung tumor specimens from transgenic mice expressing RasG12D mutant display higher levels of xCT mRNA compared with those from oncogenic c-Myc–expressing mice or from normal lung tissue (Fig. 6A). Additionally, elevated levels of xCT mRNA were also found in lung tumor specimens from transgenic mice expressing either EGFR in-frame exon 19 deletion mutant or the EGFR**L858R** mutant, providing evidence that constitutively active RAS signaling in addition to expression of mutant RAS proteins are associated with xCT induction.

These findings were confirmed in clinical cancer specimens by analyzing publicly available gene expression data from lung and colon cancer and glioma patients. This revealed that xCT expression is up-regulated in patient tumors that are positive for KRAS mutations (Fig. 6 B and C). Interestingly, xCT expression is also up-regulated in glioma tumors that are positive for EGFR amplification, further highlighting that constitutive RAS signaling is associated with xCT induction (Fig. 6D). Furthermore, hypergeometric analyses of gene expression datasets from TCGA LUAD, LUSC, and COAD cohorts revealed that the top 1% genes positively coexpressed with xCT are those that are significantly enriched in association with constitutively active MEK (SI Appendix, Fig. S6A). Similar analyses of these gene expression datasets also showed that the top 5% genes positively coexpressed with xCT are significantly enriched for genes controlled by the ETS-1 transcription factor (SI Appendix, Fig. S6B). Altogether, these results suggest that xCT is elevated downstream of overactive RAS-Raf-MEK-ERK-ETS-1 signaling axis in human tumors harboring KRAS mutations.

Finally, we assessed the prognostic value of xCT expression in colon cancer and glioma patients. We observed that high xCT levels correlates with poorer outcomes across all colon cancer subgroups (Fig. 6E) and in glioma patients (Fig. 6F). This is in line with previous reports in triple-negative breast cancer (20) as well as nonsmall cell lung cancer (18), and it suggests that xCT predicts poor prognosis in tumor types associated with increased RAS pathway activation. In summary, these data strongly suggest that xCT expression has prognostic value in KRAS mutant-expressing tumors, further reinforcing the link between oncogenic KRAS and xCT expression.

**Discussion**

Oncogenic RAS is well known to exert cytoprotective effects in tumor cells under diverse stress-inducing conditions (40–44). Here, we demonstrate that oncogenic KRAS directly protects cells against oxidative stress by stimulating xCT transcription to enhance intracellular GSH levels. This is in agreement with the role of xCT as an integral player in the cellular response to oxidative stress. Indeed, xCT is reported to enhance the antioxidant capacity of cancer cells as a means to support tumorigenicity and chemoresistance (25, 26, 45). We show using two models of oncogenic RAS signaling, namely KRAS**G12D** and EN-transformed cell lines, that oncogenic RAS activation promotes the transcription of xCT in response to oxidative stress by a synergistic cooperation between ETS-1 and ATF4. This is in keeping with previous reports that ATF4 is a transcriptional regulator of xCT expression in response to oxidative stress (17). While ATF4 and several other transcription factors including NRF2 and P53 are reported to control xCT expression, ETS-1 downstream of the RAS pathway is a previously unappreciated regulator of xCT. Moreover, our data suggests that while ATF4 is necessary to induce xCT, it is insufficient to elicit full induction of the latter, and that ETS-1 is required for a more complete response to oxidative stress. ETS-1 is known to synergize with other transcription factors to activate downstream targets (46), but to our knowledge, synergy between ETS-1 and ATF4 on promoters of a target gene has not

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**Fig. 6.** Clinical relevance of xCT expression in mutant KRAS-driven tumors. (A) xCT expression in lung tumor specimens of transgenic mice expressing RasG12D, c-Myc, EGFR in-frame exon 19 deletion mutant or EGFR**L858R** mutant, and normal lung tissue. Gene expression data showing xCT levels in lung cancer (B), colon cancer (C), and glioma (D) patient cohorts with positive or negative status for KRAS mutation. Survival analysis by Kaplan–Meier plotting based on xCT expression in colon cancer (E) and glioma (F) patients. (G) Schematic diagram depicting oncogenic RAS activation promoting the transcription of xCT in response to oxidative stress by a synergistic cooperation between ETS-1 downstream of RAS-ERK signaling and ATF4. The induction of xCT leads to enhanced GSH biosynthesis, which is suggested to mitigate oxidative stress arising during transformation/tumorigenicity. Where shown, data are reported as means ± SD with indicated significance (*P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, and ***P < 0.005).
been documented. Given the evidence presented for a physical association between endogenous ETS-1 and ATF4, and for the binding of ETS-1 to the xCT promoter, both of which being enhanced under oxidative stress (SI Appendix, Fig. S4 D and F, respectively), we further speculate that this synergy may involve the direct recruitment of ETS-1 to the xCT promoter by ATF4, or that both transcription factors are necessary to form a functional transcriptional complex under oxidative stress. These findings represent an unanticipated mechanism to link xCT signaling to the cellular oxidative stress response. Interestingly, while oncogenic KRAS-transformed 3T3 fibroblasts show enhanced induction of xCT in response to oxidative stress, RAS-transformed HMECs have elevated xCT expression even in the basal state (Fig. 2C). This may be explained by the observation that while RAS-transformed HMECs exhibit an increase in ATF4 expression under ambient conditions, in comparison with control HMECs (SI Appendix, Fig. S6C), this is not the case for 3T3 fibroblasts. Thus, the regulation of xCT by the RAS-ETS1/ATF4 cascade is observable across multiple cellular models of RAS transformation.

In ovarian carcinoma cells, ETS-1 is a target gene of NRF2 and is up-regulated under oxidative stress (47). In contrast, we did not find evidence to support that ETS-1 expression levels are increased in response to oxidative stress or that it is downstream of NRF2 regulation in RAS-transformed 3T3 fibroblasts, which may be attributed to cell-type-specific differences. Similarly, although a recent study in non-small cell lung cancer found that NRF2 up-regulates ATF4 transcription downstream of the KRAS-Pi3K signaling axis in response to nutrient deprivation (42), we did not find a similar link in our study. Such regulation again may be lung tissue specific, but it may also be explained by differences in the time points investigated or the type of stress stimuli involved, as the regulation of ATF4 by NRF2 was determined at 72 h following glutamine deprivation. However, given that xCT is a target gene of NRF2, and NRF2 itself is transcriptionally up-regulated downstream of RAS (11), RAS-ETS1/ATF4 and RAS-ERK-NRF2 axes may form two independent signaling cascades to ultimately achieve the same output. While seemingly redundant, it is conceivable that RAS utilizes both pathways to mitigate oxidative stress and maximize tumor fitness. Two observations lend support to this idea; first, NRF2 has an additive effect on induction of xCT by ETS-1 and ATF4, suggesting that both the RAS-ETS1/ATF4 and RAS-ERK-NRF2 pathways are independent. Second, ETS-1 is activated by RAS at the posttranslational level, as a known substrate of ERK, while NRF2 is induced at the transcriptional level, providing separate mechanisms to ensure acute and sustained responses to oxidative stress through up-regulation of xCT. The cross-talk between these pathways and how they influence RAS-mediated antioxidant response warrants further investigation.

Our data demonstrates that xCT transcription is directly controlled by oncogenic RAS signaling through ETS-1, itself encoded by a proto-oncogene (48). The only other reported oncogenic mechanism controlling xCT expression involves oncogenic Pi3K, as it was shown that this pathway suppresses xCT transcription and activity (49). Notably, in addition to oncogenic KRASV12, overexpression of HRASt12 or ETV6-NTRK3 also induced xCT expression. In this regard, xCT overexpression may be generalizable to RAS pathway-driven cancers. This may include cancers that do not harbor RAS mutations but exhibit constitutive RAS signaling, such as lung cancer with EGFR mutations, glioblastoma with NF1 mutations or EGFGR amplification, and colon cancer and melanoma with BRAF mutations. Many of these tumors are notable for being highly refractory to standard chemotherapeutic agents (50–52), and therefore targeting xCT with pharmacological inhibitors represents an attractive therapeutic strategy to potentially sensitize RAS-driven cancers to chemotherapy. Indeed, our data lends support to this notion as preclinical models of EGFRR-mutant lung cancer and clinical models of EGFRR-amplified glioma were associated with enhanced xCT overexpression (Fig. 6 A–D). In contrast, there was no evidence that up-regulation of xCT was driven by other oncogenes such as β-catenin, E2F3, or MYC, highlighting the specificity for oncogenic RAS signaling. These findings thus enhance our general understanding of how tumors up-regulate xCT, which is clinically relevant since it is overexpressed in multiple cancers and is a marker of poor prognosis (18–21).

The role of ROS versus antioxidants in RAS transformation is controversial, and the mechanisms involved have not been completely elucidated. We provide further evidence that antioxidants indeed contribute to RAS transformation, as xCT facilitates oncogenic KRAS-mediated tumorigenesis in vitro and in vivo by maintaining the redox balance. Previously proposed mechanisms of antioxidant-mediated RAS transformation include up-regulation of NRF2, the master regulator of intracellular antioxidant response, and rechanneling of glucose and glutamine into GSH and NADPH-generating metabolic pathways (11–13). Furthermore, broad evidence now shows that cancer cells that are able to initiate intrinsic antioxidant responses are selected for during tumor progression to cope with oxidative stress arising in response to oncogene activation, accumulation of genetic instability, aberrant metabolism, and mitochondrial dysfunction (53). For example, it has been observed that a subset of cancer stem cells in human and mouse mammary tumors contain lower levels of ROS and display less DNA damage relative to the rest of the tumorigenic counterparts, due to increased GSH biosynthesis genes such as GCLM and GSS (54). In addition, GSH pathways are critical for tumor initiation, as genetic loss of Gclm resulted in the inability of mice to form mammary tumors (55). More recently, Truitt et al. (39) demonstrated that cancer cells hijack an eIF4E-dependent translation program that is selectively enriched for miRNAs involved in antioxidant responses to support cell survival and fuel oncogenic transformation. Therefore, while cancer cells rely on ROS induction to promote protumorigenic processes such as proliferation, they are also critically dependent on adaptive or intrinsic ROS-scavenging pathways to restrict oxidative damage that can ultimately impede tumor progression. This dependence on ROS-clearing mechanisms thus reveals a vulnerability that represents a tractable therapeutic strategy, such as the use of high-dose vitamin C to exacerbate oxidative stress by depleting GSH, thereby selectively killing KRAS and BRAF-mutated colorectal cancer cells (56). Such a strategy may also extend to targeting other steps of cancer progression, such as metastasis, as a clear role for antioxidants in promoting tumor metastasis has been shown (57–59).

In summary, our work reveals that oncogenic RAS protects tumor cells from oxidative stress by enhancing GSH via xCT up-regulation. We present evidence that ETS-1 synergizes with ATF4 to directly transactivate the xCT promoter downstream of the RAS-ERK pathway in response to oxidative stress (Fig. 6G). As such, xCT supports oncogenic RAS-mediated transformation by maintaining the redox balance, presenting a candidate therapeutic target for this subset of therapy-resistant tumors.

Materials and Methods

Cell Culture. NIH 3T3 cells stably expressing EN or KRASV12 were as described (60). xCT+/- (KO) and xCT-/- (WT) MEFs were a kind gift from Hideyo Sato (Niigata University, Niigata, Japan) and routinely cultured in DMEM supplemented with 10% FBS (36). xCT-/- MEFs were also supplemented with 50 μM 2-mercaptoethanol (Sigma-Aldrich). H460 and SW620 cell lines were purchased from American Type Culture Collection (Rockville, MD) and maintained in RPMI 1640 media supplemented with 10% FBS. NrasHras double knockout MEFS with 4-OHT-inducible knockout of endogenous Kras were kindly provided by Mariano Barbacid, National Centre for Cancer Research, Madrid (32).

Tumorigenicity Assay. Aliquots of 0.5 × 10^6 cells were resuspended in 200 μL of PBS and injected s.c. into the flanks of 5- to 6-week-old female NuNu

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unimmunodeficient mice using standard procedures. Starting from day 13 after injection, mice euthanasia was required when tumors exceeded humane practice guidelines (500 mm³). Mice were evaluated for tumor growth every 2 d until the experimental endpoints. Tumors were measured with a caliper, and volumes were estimated using the following formula: tumor length × (tumor width)² × 0.67 mm³. All animal experiments underwent ethical approval from the Animal Care Committee of the University of British Columbia (A16-0050; A16-0050-A001). Full material and methods are available in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

Gene Expression of Clinical Cancer Specimens. Analyses of gene expression data from human subjects did not require approval from the institutional review board (IRB), as the data were all obtained from publicly available databases in which each study had utilized strict human subjects protection guidelines, informed consent, and respective IRB review of protocols.

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