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**EFFECTS OF PRENATAL DIETARY METHYL DONOR
DEFICIENCY ON DEVELOPMENT AND EPIGENETIC
MECHANISMS IN OFFSPRING – STUDIES IN THE RAT**

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

Human epidemiological and animal studies suggest that unbalanced maternal diet during pregnancy leads to low birth weight and predisposes offspring to the development of a number of pathological conditions like metabolic and cardiovascular diseases. This effect is referred to as fetal or developmental programming, however the underlying mechanism is yet unknown. An epigenetic mechanism of gene regulation, DNA methylation, has been suggested as a strong candidate for the underlying mechanism of developmental programming due to the fact that establishment of DNA methylation patterns begins during early development and requires a constant supply of methyl donors. The main purpose of the present study was to determine whether a deficiency of methyl donors in the maternal diet during prenatal development would result in phenotypic changes and abnormal epigenetic gene regulation in the offspring. The study was designed to help understand whether DNA methylation provides an epigenetic basis to developmental programming.

A new rat model of prenatal dietary methyl donor deficiency was established, whereby female rats were fed a diet deficient in methyl donors choline, folate and methionine two weeks prior to mating and throughout pregnancy. The effect of prenatal exposure to methyl donor deficiency on developmental programming was investigated by measuring systolic blood pressure, glucose metabolism, endocrine pancreas structure and behavioral changes in the adult offspring. To investigate immediate and delayed effects of maternal methyl donor deficiency on molecular processes in the offspring, liver, pancreas, kidney, lung and hippocampus tissues were being used for specific DNA methylation measurements by means of Matrix assisted laser desorption/ionization time-of-flight mass spectrometry. Expression of target genes, suggested to be regulated by DNA methylation, was tested using a real time PCR-based technique.

The offspring of methyl deficient mothers (MD) had low weight at birth. Young adult MD males had a transient increase in systolic blood pressure and altered pancreatic structure, but no changes in glucose metabolism. Aged female and male MD offspring demonstrated traits of anxiety-like behavior. MD females had improved learning abilities. At the molecular level, the offspring of MD mothers showed age, DNA region and tissue-specific changes in DNA methylation. The MD offspring also demonstrated differences in gene expression, which were not associated with changes in DNA methylation.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrated that maternal methyl donor deficiency had a mild selective effect on development of phenotypic changes associated with developmental programming in the adult offspring. This study indicated that prenatal deficiency in methyl donors programmed changes in DNA methylation in the adult offspring, but its' effect was rather complex and largely unrelated to the observed changes in gene expression.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful husband, Sergei, who has been with me every step of the way, through good times and bad. Thank you for all the unconditional love and support that you have always given me.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	I
DEDICATION	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	VI
LIST OF TABLES	XIII
LIST OF FIGURES.....	XVII
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	XXII
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. DEVELOPMENTAL ORIGINS OF HEALTH AND DISEASE.....	1
1.1.1. <i>Epidemiological studies</i>	1
1.1.2. <i>Animal models of developmental origins of health and disease</i>	5
1.1.2.1. Overview of animal models of DOHaD.....	5
1.1.2.2. Rodent models of developmental origins of cardiovascular disorders.....	6
1.1.2.3. Animal models of developmental origins of abnormal glucose homeostasis	10
1.1.2.4. Animal models of developmental origins of obesity and the Metabolic syndrome X.....	14
1.1.2.5. Animal models of developmental origins of behavioral and neuropsychiatric disorders	16
1.2. BIOLOGICAL MECHANISMS UNDERLYING DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMMING	17
1.2.1. <i>Tissue remodeling</i>	17
1.2.2. <i>Endocrine changes</i>	19
1.2.3. <i>Changes in gene expression</i>	21
1.3. DNA METHYLATION AS AN EPIGENETIC MECHANISMS OF GENE REGULATION	24
1.3.1. <i>DNA methylation overview</i>	24
1.3.2. <i>SAM methylation pathway</i>	24
1.3.3. <i>Evidence for the effect of maternal methyl donor status on the offspring DNA methylation</i>	26
1.3.4. <i>Evidence for involvement of DNA methylation in normal development and programming effects of abnormal intrauterine environment</i>	27
1.3.5. <i>Evidence for involvement of DNA methylation in pathological conditions</i>	29
1.4. SCOPE OF THESIS.....	31
CHAPTER 2. ESTABLISHMENT AND CHARACTERIZATION OF A PRENATAL METHYL-DEFICIENT NUTRITIONAL RAT MODEL	34
2.1. INTRODUCTION	34
2.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS	38

2.2.1.	<i>Animals</i>	38
2.2.2.	<i>Generation of a rat model of prenatal methyl donor deficiency</i>	38
2.2.2.1.	Tissue collection	40
2.2.2.2.	Blood collection	40
2.2.3.	<i>Biochemical measurements</i>	41
2.2.3.1.	Homocysteine measurements assay	41
2.2.3.2.	S-adenosylhomocysteine and S-adenosylmethionine measurements assay.....	42
2.2.3.3.	Intraperitoneal glucose tolerance test	43
2.2.3.4.	Insulin secretion.....	43
2.2.4.	<i>Pancreas histology</i>	44
2.2.5.	<i>Blood pressure measurements</i>	45
2.2.6.	<i>Data analysis</i>	45
2.3.	RESULTS	46
2.3.1.	<i>Effects of prenatal methyl donor deficiency on maternal food intake and body weight</i>	46
2.3.2.	<i>Effects of prenatal methyl donor deficiency on outcomes of pregnancy</i>	48
2.3.3.	<i>Effects of prenatal methyl donor deficiency on indicators of methyl donor status</i>	50
2.3.3.1.	Maternal plasma total homocysteine concentration	50
2.3.3.2.	Hepatic S-adenosylmethionine and S-adenosylhomocysteine concentrations in mothers, fetuses and newborn	51
2.3.4.	<i>Effects of maternal methyl donor deficient diet on adult offspring growth and phenotype</i>	54
2.3.4.1.	Effects of the prenatal MD diet on growth of the offspring.....	54
2.3.4.2.	Effects of the prenatal MD diet on the structure of the pancreas	55
2.3.4.3.	Effects of the prenatal MD diet on glucose metabolism	56
2.3.4.4.	Effects of the prenatal MD diet on blood pressure	58
2.4.	DISCUSSION.....	59
2.4.1.	<i>Model generation</i>	59
2.4.1.1.	Food consumption	59
2.4.1.2.	Attenuated weight gain in MD dams.....	60
2.4.1.3.	Effects of the MD diet on indicators of methyl donor status	61
2.4.2.	<i>Reproductive capacity and pregnancy outcome</i>	64
2.4.2.1.	Pregnancy length, newborn mortality and litter size	64
2.4.2.2.	Effects of the MD diet on weight and size of the offspring.....	67
2.4.3.	<i>Effects of the maternal diet on offspring phenotype during postnatal development</i>	69
2.4.3.1.	Growth of the offspring.....	69
2.4.3.2.	Pancreas morphology and glucose metabolism.....	71
2.4.3.3.	Blood pressure.....	74
2.4.4.	<i>Summary</i>	76
CHAPTER 3. ANALYSIS OF METHYLATION AND EXPRESSION OF TARGET GENES IN THE LIVER OF CON AND MD OFFSPRING DURING POSTNATAL DEVELOPMENT		78

3.1.	<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	78
3.2.	<i>MATERIALS AND METHODS</i>	81
3.2.1.	<i>Tissue collection</i>	81
3.2.2.	<i>Genomic DNA extraction</i>	81
3.2.3.	<i>Global DNA methylation analysis</i>	82
3.2.4.	<i>Sodium bisulfite DNA conversion</i>	83
3.2.5.	<i>Quantitative DNA methylation analysis using base-specific cleavage and Matrix-Assisted Laser Desorption/Ionization Time-of-Flight Mass Spectrometry (MALDI-TOF MS)</i>	84
3.2.5.1.	Brief overview of the method.....	84
3.2.5.2.	Gene-specific DNA methylation analysis protocol.....	86
3.2.6.	<i>RNA extraction</i>	89
3.2.7.	<i>Complementary DNA synthesis</i>	90
3.2.8.	<i>Real Time PCR analysis</i>	90
3.2.8.1.	PCR primers and probes.....	90
3.2.8.2.	PCR setup.....	92
3.2.8.3.	PCR run.....	92
3.2.8.4.	Real Time quantitative PCR data analysis.....	93
3.2.9.	<i>Statistical analysis</i>	94
3.3.	<i>RESULTS</i>	95
3.3.1.	<i>Effects of the maternal methyl donor deficiency on global DNA methylation in the liver</i>	95
3.3.2.	<i>Effects of the maternal methyl donor deficiency on methylation of regulatory regions of target genes in the liver</i>	96
3.3.3.	<i>Age-specific changes in global DNA methylation levels in the liver</i>	99
3.3.4.	<i>Age-specific methylation patterns of target genes in normal liver tissue</i>	99
3.3.5.	<i>Effects of the maternal diet on relative expression of mRNA of target genes in the liver of the CON and MD offspring</i>	110
3.3.6.	<i>Effects of age on relative expression of mRNA of target genes in the liver of the CON offspring</i>	112
3.3.7.	<i>Correlation analysis between DNA methylation levels and relative expression of target genes</i>	114
3.4.	<i>DISCUSSION</i>	119
3.4.1.	<i>Effects of the maternal methyl donor deficiency on methylation and expression of target genes</i>	119
3.4.1.1.	Glucocorticoid signaling.....	119
3.4.1.2.	Lipid metabolism.....	122
3.4.1.3.	Status of glucocorticoid and lipid metabolism pathways in connection to the MD offspring phenotype.....	123
3.4.1.4.	Cell cycle and cell survival regulation (tumor-suppressor genes).....	124
3.4.2.	<i>Age-specific methylation and expression patterns of target genes</i>	128
3.4.2.1.	Corticosterone signaling.....	128
3.4.2.2.	Lipid metabolism.....	130
3.4.2.3.	Cell cycle and cell survival regulation (tumor-suppressor genes).....	131

3.4.3. Summary.....	134
CHAPTER 4. EFFECTS OF MATERNAL METHYL DONOR DEFICIENCY ON EPIGENETIC REGULATION OF IMPRINTED GENES <i>IGF2</i> AND <i>H19</i>.....	137
4.1. INTRODUCTION	137
4.2. MATERIAL AND METHODS	141
4.2.1. <i>Animals</i>	141
4.2.2. <i>Genomic DNA extraction</i>	141
4.2.3. <i>Sequence alignment and sequencing of rat <i>Igf2</i> DMR1</i>	141
4.2.4. <i>Sodium bisulfite DNA conversion</i>	143
4.2.5. <i>Quantitative DNA methylation analysis using base-specific cleavage and Matrix-Assisted Laser Desorption/Ionization Time-of-Flight Mass Spectrometry (MALDI-TOF MS)</i>	143
4.2.6. <i>Total RNA extraction from tissues</i>	144
4.2.7. <i>cDNA synthesis</i>	144
4.2.8. <i>Real Time PCR analysis</i>	146
4.2.9. <i>Allelic discrimination assay</i>	146
4.2.9.1. Allelic discrimination assay design information	147
4.2.9.2. Allelic discrimination assay PCR run	147
4.2.9.3. Allelic discrimination assay data processing and analysis.....	149
4.2.10. <i>Statistical analysis</i>	150
4.3. RESULTS	151
4.3.1. <i>Description of rat <i>Igf2</i> DMR1</i>	151
4.3.2. <i>Patterns of methylation of <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 in normal tissues of different origins at five different ages.</i> 151	
4.3.2.1. Tissue-specific <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 methylation patterns.....	151
4.3.2.2. Age-specific <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 methylation patterns	153
4.3.3. <i>Patterns of methylation of <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 in normal tissues of different origins at five different ages.</i> 162	
4.3.3.1. Tissue-specific <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 methylation patterns.....	162
4.3.3.2. Age-specific <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 methylation patterns	164
4.3.4. <i>Patterns of methylation of <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF binding sites 1 and 2 in normal tissues of different origins at five different ages.</i>	172
4.3.4.1. Tissue-specific <i>H19</i> DMR 1-2 methylation patterns	172
4.3.4.2. Age-specific methylation patterns of <i>H19</i> DMR fragment containing CTCF binding sites 1 and 2.....	174
4.3.5. <i>Patterns of methylation of <i>H19</i> DMR fragment containing CTCF binding site 4 in normal tissues of different origins at five different ages.</i>	182
4.3.5.1. Tissue-specific <i>H19</i> DMR 4 methylation patterns	182
4.3.5.2. Age-specific methylation patterns of <i>H19</i> DMR fragment containing CTCF binding site 4	184
4.3.6. <i>Maternal diet effects on methylation of <i>Igf2</i> and <i>H19</i> DMRs</i>	191
4.3.6.1. Maternal diet effects on methylation of <i>Igf2</i> DMR1.....	191
4.3.6.2. Maternal diet effects on methylation of <i>Igf2</i> DMR2.....	196

4.3.6.3.	Maternal diet effects on methylation of H19 DMR CTCF binding sites 1 and 2.....	202
4.3.6.4.	Maternal diet effects on methylation patterns of H19 DMR CTCF binding site 4.....	208
4.3.7.	<i>Expression of Igf2 paternal and maternal alleles in normal tissues of different origins at five different ages.</i>	214
4.3.7.1.	Tissue-specific expression of Igf2 paternal and maternal alleles	214
4.3.7.2.	Age-specific expression of Igf2 paternal and maternal alleles	215
4.3.8.	<i>Expression of H19 paternal and maternal alleles in normal tissues of different origins at five different ages.</i>	219
4.3.8.1.	Tissue-specific expression of H19 paternal and maternal alleles	219
4.3.8.2.	Age-specific expression of H19 paternal and maternal alleles.....	220
4.3.9.	<i>Effects of the maternal methyl donor deficient diet on expression of Igf2 and H19 paternal and maternal alleles in tissues of different origins at five different ages.</i>	224
4.3.9.1.	Effects of the maternal diet on allelic expression of the Igf2 gene	224
4.3.9.2.	Effects of the maternal diet on allelic expression of the H19 gene	229
4.3.10.	<i>Age effects and maternal diet effects on expression of Igf2 and H19 mRNA in pancreas and lung tissues of CON and MD offspring</i>	232
4.3.11.	<i>Correlations of expression of the Igf2 and H19 genes with methylation of individual CpG units in the pancreas</i>	235
4.3.12.	<i>Correlations of expression of the Igf2 and H19 genes with methylation of individual CpG units in the lung</i>	240
4.4.	DISCUSSION.....	246
4.4.1.	<i>Developmental and tissue-specific effects on methylation and expression of the Igf2 and H19 genes in normal tissues</i>	246
4.4.1.1.	Tissue-specific and age-specific methylation and expression of target genes	246
4.4.1.2.	Developmental effects on methylation of the Igf2 DMR2 and expression of the H19 gene in the liver .	247
4.4.1.3.	A relationship between patterns of methylation of DMRs and allelic expression of the Igf2 and H19 genes in liver, pancreas, kidney and lung	249
4.4.1.4.	A relationship between patterns of methylation of DMRs and total expression of the Igf2 and H19 genes in the pancreas and lung	254
4.4.2.	<i>Effects of prenatal methyl donor deficiency on epigenetic regulation of the Igf2 and H19 genes in the offspring</i>	255
4.4.2.1.	Effects of the maternal diet on methylation of Igf2 and H19 DMRs and expression of Igf2 and H19 genes.	255
4.4.2.2.	Expression of Igf2 and H19 genes and phenotype of the MD offspring.....	260
4.4.3.	<i>Summary</i>	262
CHAPTER 5. STUDIES OF BEHAVIOR AND EPIGENETIC MECHANISMS IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS IN THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING.....		264
5.1.	INTRODUCTION	264

5.2.	MATERIALS AND METHODS	270
5.2.1.	<i>Behavioral tests</i>	270
5.2.1.1.	Elevated plus maze	270
5.2.1.2.	Restraint stress	271
5.2.1.3.	Operant conditioning test	271
5.2.2.	<i>Biochemical measurements</i>	274
5.2.2.1.	Plasma preparation.....	274
5.2.2.2.	Peripheral blood glucose measurements	274
5.2.2.3.	Plasma corticosterone measurements.....	274
5.2.3.	<i>Direct sequencing</i>	275
5.2.4.	<i>DNA methylation and gene expression analysis</i>	276
5.2.4.1.	Tissue preparation	276
5.2.4.2.	Specific DNA methylation analysis	276
5.2.4.3.	Gene expression analysis.....	278
5.2.5.	<i>Statistical analysis</i>	279
5.3.	RESULTS	279
5.3.1.	<i>Effects of the maternal diet on anxiety levels in the offspring</i>	279
5.3.1.1.	Elevated plus maze test.....	279
5.3.1.2.	Plasma corticosterone and blood glucose levels measurements in response to stress.....	281
5.3.2.	<i>Effects of the maternal diet on learning behavior of the offspring</i>	283
5.3.3.	<i>Effects of the maternal MD diet on DNA methylation of target genes</i>	284
5.3.3.1.	Gcr	284
5.3.3.2.	Hsd11 β 2.....	285
5.3.3.3.	Nnat	288
5.3.3.4.	Reelin	290
5.3.4.	<i>Effects of the maternal MD diet on mRNA expression of target genes</i>	292
5.4.	DISCUSSION.....	295
5.4.1.	<i>Effects of the maternal MD diet on anxiety-related behavior in old female and male offspring</i>	295
5.4.2.	<i>Effects of the maternal MD diet on response of old males to restraint stress</i>	296
5.4.3.	<i>A possible link between performances on elevated plus maze and restraint stress test results</i>	299
5.4.4.	<i>Possible pathways affected in the adult offspring by maternal MD deficient diet</i>	299
5.4.5.	<i>Effects of the maternal MD diet on glucocorticoid metabolism in the hippocampus</i>	300
5.4.5.1.	Gcr expression and methylation	300
5.4.5.2.	Hsd11 β 2 expression and methylation	301
5.4.5.3.	A possible link between observed changes in expression of Gcr and Hsd11 β 2 in hippocampi of MD males and anxiety	303
5.4.6.	<i>Effects of the maternal MD diet on Nnat expression and methylation in hippocampi of the offspring and links to anxiety</i>	304
5.4.7.	<i>Effects of the maternal MD diet on learning in females</i>	306

5.4.8.	<i>A potential involvement of glucocorticoid metabolism in learning and memory processes</i>	307
5.4.9.	<i>A potential involvement of Nnat in learning and memory processes</i>	307
5.4.10.	<i>Effects of the maternal MD diet on the reelin gene expression and methylation and its potential involvement in learning and memory processes</i>	308
5.4.11.	<i>Possible links between learning and stress</i>	310
5.4.12.	<i>Summary</i>	312
CHAPTER 6.	FINAL CONCLUSIONS	314
6.1.	FINAL SUMMARY	314
6.2.	LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	318
6.3.	FUTURE DIRECTIONS	320
APPENDIX I		323
APPENDIX II		324
APPENDIX III		331
APPENDIX IV		338
REFERENCES		339

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1.1 ADULT DISEASES ASSOCIATED WITH SUBOPTIMAL INTRAUTERINE ENVIRONMENT IN HUMANS.....	3
TABLE 1.2 RODENT MODELS OF DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMMING THAT DEMONSTRATED CARDIOVASCULAR ABNORMALITIES.	8
TABLE 1.3 RODENT MODELS OF DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMMING THAT DEMONSTRATED GLUCOSE HOMEOSTASIS ABNORMALITIES.....	12
TABLE 1.4 RODENT MODELS OF DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMMING THAT DEMONSTRATED OBESITY.	15
TABLE 1.5 RODENT MODELS OF PERINATAL DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMMING THAT DEMONSTRATED BEHAVIORAL ABNORMALITIES.	17
TABLE 2.1 THE DIET COMPOSITION AND TIMING OF DIET ADMINISTRATION DURING THE COURSE OF THE STUDY.	39
TABLE 2.2 GRADIENT ELUTION CONDITIONS AND MOBILE PHASE COMPOSITION FOR SAM AND SAH MEASUREMENTS ASSAY.	43
TABLE 2.3 PREGNANCY OUTCOMES IN THE CON AND MD FEMALES.....	49
TABLE 2.4 RESULTS FROM THE HISTOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PANCREAS IN THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING.	56
TABLE 2.5 INSULIN SENSITIVITY INDEX QUICKI IN THE D110 CON AND MD MALE OFFSPRING.	57
TABLE 3.1 PCR CYCLING CONDITIONS USED IN SEQUENOM’S QUANTITATIVE METHYLATION ASSAY FOR AMPLIFICATION OF SODIUM BISULFITE-CONVERTED DNA.	87
TABLE 3.2 INFORMATION ABOUT PRIMERS USED FOR SEQUENOM’S QUANTITATIVE METHYLATION ASSAY.	88
TABLE 3.3 REAL TIME PCR PRIMER SEQUENCE INFORMATION.	91
TABLE 3.4 PCR AMPLIFICATION EFFICIENCY OF PRIMERS DESIGNED FOR THE REAL TIME PCR ASSAY.	91
TABLE 3.5 REAL TIME PCR CYCLING CONDITIONS.	93
TABLE 3.6 AGE-SPECIFIC CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>P53</i> EXON 6 REGION EXPRESSED AS A PERCENTAGE.	101
TABLE 3.7 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RELATIVE EXPRESSION OF THE <i>GCR</i> mRNA AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE ALTERNATIVE PROMOTER EXON 1 ₁₀ OF THE <i>GCR</i> GENE.	114
TABLE 3.8 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RELATIVE EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Hsd11b2</i> mRNA AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN ITS PROMOTER REGION.	115
TABLE 3.9 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RELATIVE EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Ppara</i> mRNA AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN ITS PROMOTER REGION.	115
TABLE 3.10 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RELATIVE EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Pparα</i> mRNA AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN ITS PROMOTER REGION.	116
TABLE 3.11 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RELATIVE EXPRESSION OF THE <i>p53</i> mRNA AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE P53 EXON6.	116
TABLE 3.12 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RELATIVE EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Cdkn1a</i> mRNA AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>CDKN1A</i> PROMOTER REGION.	117
TABLE 3.13 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RELATIVE EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Dusp5</i> mRNA AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>Dusp5</i> EXON 2.	118
TABLE 3.14 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RELATIVE EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Cdkn2a</i> mRNA AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>CDKN2A</i> PROMOTER REGION.	118
TABLE 4.1 INFORMATION ABOUT PRIMERS USED FOR AMPLIFICATION OF THE RAT <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 gDNA.....	141

TABLE 4.2 PCR CYCLING CONDITIONS USED FOR AMPLIFICATION OF THE RAT <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 gDNA.....	142
TABLE 4.3 SEQUENCING REACTION CYCLING CONDITIONS.....	142
TABLE 4.4 INFORMATION ABOUT PRIMERS USED FOR QUANTITATIVE METHYLATION ANALYSIS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> DMRs.....	145
TABLE 4.5 INFORMATION ABOUT PRIMERS USED FOR <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> EXPRESSION ANALYSIS IN REAL TIME PCR.....	146
TABLE 4.6 PCR AMPLIFICATION EFFICIENCY OF THE INTERNAL CONTROL AND TARGET GENES.....	146
TABLE 4.7 <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> ALLELIC DISCRIMINATION ASSAY PRIMER AND PROBE INFORMATION.....	147
TABLE 4.8 PCR CONDITIONS FOR THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> ALLELIC DISCRIMINATION ASSAYS.....	148
TABLE 4.9 LEWIS TO WISTAR gDNA RATIO FOR THE <i>Igf2</i> AD ASSAY AND WISTAR TO LEWIS gDNA RATIO FOR <i>H19</i> AD ASSAY.....	148
TABLE 4.10 APPLIED BIOSYSTEMS 7900HT FAST REAL TIME PCR SYSTEM CYCLING CONDITIONS FOR THE ALLELIC DISCRIMINATION ASSAY.	149
TABLE 4.11 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE LIVER OF THE CON OFFSPRING.....	155
TABLE 4.12 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON OFFSPRING. ..	157
TABLE 4.13 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON OFFSPRING.	159
TABLE 4.14 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE LUNG OF THE CON OFFSPRING.	161
TABLE 4.15 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE LIVER OF THE CON OFFSPRING.....	165
TABLE 4.16 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON OFFSPRING. ..	167
TABLE 4.17 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON OFFSPRING.	169
TABLE 4.18 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE LUNG OF THE CON OFFSPRING.	171
TABLE 4.19 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR FRAGMENT CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 IN THE LIVER OF THE CON OFFSPRING.....	175
TABLE 4.20 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF <i>H19</i> DMR FRAGMENT CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON OFFSPRING.	177
TABLE 4.21 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR FRAGMENT CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON OFFSPRING.	179
TABLE 4.22 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR FRAGMENT CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 IN THE LUNG OF THE CON OFFSPRING.	181
TABLE 4.23 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR FRAGMENT CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE LIVER OF THE CON OFFSPRING.	185
TABLE 4.24 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR FRAGMENT CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON OFFSPRING.....	187
TABLE 4.25 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR FRAGMENT CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON OFFSPRING.....	188
TABLE 4.26 CHANGES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR FRAGMENT CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE LUNG OF THE CON OFFSPRING.....	190
TABLE 4.27 SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 BETWEEN THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING IN THE LIVER, PANCREAS, KIDNEY AND LUNG AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF LIFE.	191

TABLE 4.28 SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN METHYLATION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 BETWEEN THE CON AND THE MD GROUPS AT FIVE DIFFERENT STAGES OF LIFE IN FOUR TISSUES.	197
TABLE 4.29 SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 BETWEEN THE CON AND THE MD GROUPS AT FIVE DIFFERENT STAGES OF LIFE IN FOUR TISSUES.	203
TABLE 4.30 SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITE 4 BETWEEN THE CON AND THE MD GROUPS AT FIVE DIFFERENT STAGES OF LIFE IN FOUR TISSUES	209
TABLE 4.31 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN METHYLATION LEVELS OF EACH CpG UNIT IN THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 AND EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> GENES IN THE PANCREAS.	235
TABLE 4.32 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN METHYLATION LEVELS OF EACH CpG UNIT IN THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 AND EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> GENES IN THE PANCREAS.	237
TABLE 4.33 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN METHYLATION LEVELS OF EACH CpG UNIT IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 REGION AND EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> GENES IN THE PANCREAS.	238
TABLE 4.34 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN METHYLATION LEVELS OF EACH CpG UNIT IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITE 4 REGION AND EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> GENES IN THE PANCREAS.	239
TABLE 4.35 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN METHYLATION LEVELS OF EACH CpG UNIT IN THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 AND EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> GENES IN THE LUNG.	240
TABLE 4.36 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN METHYLATION LEVELS OF EACH CpG UNIT IN THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 AND EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> GENES IN THE LUNG.	242
TABLE 4.37 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN METHYLATION LEVELS OF EACH CpG UNIT IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITE 1 AND 2 AND EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> GENES IN THE LUNG.	243
TABLE 4.38 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN METHYLATION LEVELS OF EACH CpG UNIT IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITE 4 AND EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> GENES IN THE LUNG.	245
TABLE 5.1 PCR CYCLING CONDITIONS USED FOR AMPLIFICATION OF THE MISSING SEQUENCE IN THE PROMOTER REGION OF THE <i>REELIN</i> GENE.	275
TABLE 5.2 INFORMATION ABOUT PRIMERS USED TO AMPLIFY TARGET GENES IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS FOR QUANTITATIVE METHYLATION ASSAY.	277
TABLE 5.3 INFORMATION ABOUT PRIMERS USED TO AMPLIFY TARGET GENES IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS FOR THE REAL TIME PCR ASSAY.	278
TABLE 5.4 PCR AMPLIFICATION EFFICIENCIES OF PRIMERS DESIGNED FOR AMPLIFICATION OF TARGET GENES IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS.	279
TABLE 5.5 ELEVATED PLUS MAZE RESULTS.	281
TABLE 5.6 EFFECTS OF PRENATAL METHYL DONOR DEFICIENCY ON GENE EXPRESSION IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS OF FEMALE MD OFFSPRING. ...	292
TABLE 5.7 EFFECTS OF PRENATAL METHYL DONOR DEFICIENCY ON GENE EXPRESSION IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS OF MALE MD OFFSPRING. .	293
TABLE Ai.1 COMPOSITION OF THE CONTROL L-AMINO ACID RODENT DIET AND THE MD DIET WITHOUT ADDED METHIONINE, FOLATE OR CHOLINE (RESEARCH DIETS).	323
TABLE Aii.1 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN GLOBAL DNA METHYLATION LEVELS IN THE LIVER AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>GCR</i> ALTERNATIVE PROMOTER EXON 1 ₁₀	326

TABLE AII.3 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN GLOBAL DNA METHYLATION LEVELS IN THE LIVER AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>PPARA</i> PROMOTER.	327
TABLE AII.4 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN GLOBAL DNA METHYLATION LEVELS IN THE LIVER AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>PPARG</i> PROMOTER.	327
TABLE AII.5 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN GLOBAL DNA METHYLATION LEVELS IN THE LIVER AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN <i>P53</i> EXON 6.....	328
TABLE AII.6 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN GLOBAL DNA METHYLATION LEVELS IN THE LIVER AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN <i>CDKN1A</i> PROMOTER REGION.....	328
TABLE AII.7 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN GLOBAL DNA METHYLATION LEVELS IN THE LIVER AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN <i>DUSP5</i> EXON 2.	329
TABLE AII.8 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN GLOBAL DNA METHYLATION LEVELS IN THE LIVER AND METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN <i>CDKN2A</i> PROMOTER REGION.....	330

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1.1 SAM METABOLISM PATHWAY.	26
FIGURE 1.2 DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES IN GENOME METHYLATION.	28
FIGURE 1.3 GRAPHICAL OVERVIEW OF MAJOR COMPONENTS OF THE PRESENT STUDY.	32
FIGURE 2.1 DYNAMICS OF WEIGHT CHANGES AND FOOD CONSUMPTION IN CON AND MD FEMALES FROM THE FIRST DAY OF DIETS ADMINISTRATION UNTIL MATING.	47
FIGURE 2.2 DYNAMICS OF WEIGHT CHANGES AND FOOD CONSUMPTION IN THE CON AND MD FEMALES THROUGHOUT GESTATION.	48
FIGURE 2.3 PLASMA HOMOCYSTEINE CONCENTRATION DETERMINED BEFORE DIET ADMINISTRATION (BASELINE), DURING THE COURSE OF PREGNANCY (CONCEPTION, E15, E20 AND BIRTH), AND POSTPARTUM IN THE CON AND MD FEMALES.	51
FIGURE 2.4 MATERNAL, FETAL AND NEWBORN LEVELS OF SAM, SAH AND SAM/SAH RATIO IN THE LIVER.	53
FIGURE 2.5 MD GROUP WEIGHTS RELATIVE TO THE CON GROUP WEIGHTS AT FIVE DIFFERENT STAGES OF LIFE.	55
FIGURE 2.6 RESULTS FROM THE GLUCOSE TOLERANCE TESTS PERFORMED ON THE D110 CON AND MD MALE OFFSPRING.	57
FIGURE 2.7 SYSTOLIC BLOOD PRESSURE MEASUREMENTS IN THE CON AND MD MALE OFFSPRING.	58
FIGURE 3.1 OVERVIEW OF SEQUENOM'S QUANTITATIVE METHYLATION ASSAY.	86
FIGURE 3.2 GLOBAL DNA METHYLATION LEVELS IN THE LIVER OF D1 AND D110 CON AND MD OFFSPRING.	96
FIGURE 3.3 METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>GCR</i> ALTERNATIVE PROMOTER EXON 1 ₁₀ IN THE LIVER OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D1 AND D110.	102
FIGURE 3.4 METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>Hsd11b2</i> PROMOTER REGION IN THE LIVER OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D1 AND D110.	103
FIGURE 3.5 METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>Ppara</i> PROMOTER REGION IN THE LIVER OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D1 AND D110.	104
FIGURE 3.6 METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>Ppart</i> PROMOTER REGION IN THE LIVER OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D1 AND D110.	105
FIGURE 3.7 METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>p53</i> EXON 6 REGION IN THE LIVER OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D1 AND D110.	106
FIGURE 3.8 METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>Cdkn1a</i> PROMOTER REGION IN THE LIVER OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D1 AND D110.	107
FIGURE 3.9 METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>Dusp5</i> EXON 2 REGION IN THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D1 AND D110.	108
FIGURE 3.10 METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>Cdkn2a</i> PROMOTER REGION IN THE LIVER OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D1 AND D110.	109
FIGURE 3.11 EFFECT OF THE PRENATAL METHYL DONOR DEFICIENCY ON EXPRESSION OF TARGET GENES IN THE LIVER OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING.	111
FIGURE 3.12 AGE-SPECIFIC CHANGES IN RELATIVE mRNA EXPRESSION OF TARGET GENES IN LIVER TISSUE OF THE CON OFFSPRING.	113
FIGURE 4.1 A HYPOTHETICAL MODEL OF REGULATION OF IMPRINTING OF THE <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> GENES ON THE MATERNAL ALLELE IN THE LIVER.	138

FIGURE 4.2 REPRESENTATION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 AVERAGE METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN FOUR DIFFERENT TISSUES OF THE CON E20 AND D365 OFFSPRING.	153
FIGURE 4.3 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE LIVER OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUPS.	155
FIGURE 4.4 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	157
FIGURE 4.5 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	159
FIGURE 4.6 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE LUNG OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	161
FIGURE 4.7 REPRESENTATION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 AVERAGE METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE LIVER, PANCREAS, KIDNEY AND LUNG OF THE CON E20 AND D365 OFFSPRING.	163
FIGURE 4.8 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUPS IN THE LIVER.	165
FIGURE 4.9 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	167
FIGURE 4.10 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	169
FIGURE 4.11 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE LUNG OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	171
FIGURE 4.12 METHYLATION LEVELS OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 IN FOUR DIFFERENT TISSUES OF THE CON OFFSPRING AT E20 AND D365 STAGES	173
FIGURE 4.13 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITES 1-2 IN THE LIVER OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	175
FIGURE 4.14 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITES 1-2 IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	177
FIGURE 4.15 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITES 1-2 IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	179
FIGURE 4.16 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITES 1-2 IN THE LUNG OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	181
FIGURE 4.17 METHYLATION OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE LIVER, PANCREAS, KIDNEY AND LUNG AT E20 STAGE AND AT D365 IN THE CON OFFSPRING.	183
FIGURE 4.18 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE LIVER OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	185
FIGURE 4.19 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	187

FIGURE 4.20 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	188
FIGURE 4.21 LEVELS OF METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS IN THE <i>H19</i> DMR CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE LUNG OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	190
FIGURE 4.22 METHYLATION PATTERNS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE LIVER TISSUE OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	192
FIGURE 4.23 METHYLATION PATTERNS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	193
FIGURE 4.24 METHYLATION PATTERNS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES....	194
FIGURE 4.25 METHYLATION PATTERNS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR1 IN THE LUNG OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	195
FIGURE 4.26 METHYLATION PATTERNS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE LIVER OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	198
FIGURE 4.27 METHYLATION PATTERNS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	199
FIGURE 4.28 METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	200
FIGURE 4.29 METHYLATION OF INDIVIDUAL CpG UNITS OF THE <i>Igf2</i> DMR2 IN THE LUNG OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	201
FIGURE 4.30 METHYLATION PATTERN OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 IN THE LIVER TISSUE OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	204
FIGURE 4.31 METHYLATION PATTERN OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 IN THE PANCREAS TISSUE OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	205
FIGURE 4.32 METHYLATION PATTERN OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 IN THE KIDNEY TISSUE OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	206
FIGURE 4.33 METHYLATION PATTERN OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITES 1 AND 2 IN THE LUNG TISSUE OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	207
FIGURE 4.34 METHYLATION PATTERN OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE LIVER TISSUE OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	210
FIGURE 4.35 METHYLATION PATTERN OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE PANCREAS TISSUE OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	211
FIGURE 4.36 METHYLATION PATTERN OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE KIDNEY TISSUE OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	212
FIGURE 4.37 METHYLATION PATTERN OF THE <i>H19</i> DMR CONTAINING CTCF BINDING SITE 4 IN THE LUNG TISSUE OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	213
FIGURE 4.38 REPRESENTATION OF PATTERNS OF ALLELIC EXPRESSION OF THE <i>Igf2</i> GENE IN THE LIVER, PANCREAS, KIDNEY AND LUNG OF THE CON OFFSPRING AT THE PERINATAL STAGES (E20 AND D1) AND ADULT STAGE (D365).....	215

FIGURE 4.39 PROPORTION OF THE MATERNAL ALLELE EXPRESSION (RELAXATION OF IMPRINTING) IN THE TOTAL POOL OF <i>Igf2</i> mRNA IN LIVER TISSUE OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	216
FIGURE 4.40 PROPORTION OF THE MATERNAL ALLELE EXPRESSION (RELAXATION OF IMPRINTING) IN THE TOTAL POOL OF <i>Igf2</i> mRNA IN PANCREAS TISSUE OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	217
FIGURE 4.41 PROPORTION OF THE MATERNAL ALLELE EXPRESSION (RELAXATION OF IMPRINTING) IN THE TOTAL POOL OF <i>Igf2</i> mRNA IN KIDNEY TISSUE OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	217
FIGURE 4.42 PROPORTION OF THE MATERNAL ALLELE EXPRESSION (RELAXATION OF IMPRINTING) IN THE TOTAL POOL OF <i>Igf2</i> mRNA IN LUNG TISSUE OF THE CON FEMALE AND MALE GROUP.	218
FIGURE 4.43 REPRESENTATION OF PATTERNS OF ALLELIC EXPRESSION OF THE <i>H19</i> GENE IN THE LIVER, PANCREAS, KIDNEY AND LUNG OF THE CON OFFSPRING AT THE PERINATAL STAGES (E20 AND D1) AND ADULT STAGE (D365).....	219
FIGURE 4.44 EXPRESSION OF MATERNAL AND PATERNAL ALLELES OF <i>H19</i> IN THE LIVER OF THE CON FEMALES AND MALES AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.....	221
FIGURE 4.45 EXPRESSION OF MATERNAL AND PATERNAL ALLELES OF <i>H19</i> IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON FEMALES AND MALES AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.....	222
FIGURE 4.46 EXPRESSION OF MATERNAL AND PATERNAL ALLELES OF <i>H19</i> IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON FEMALES AND MALES AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.....	223
FIGURE 4.47 EXPRESSION OF MATERNAL AND PATERNAL ALLELES OF <i>H19</i> IN THE LUNG OF THE CON FEMALES AND MALES AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.....	224
FIGURE 4.48 A COMPARISON OF THE MATERNAL ALLELE EXPRESSION (RELAXATION OF IMPRINTING) IN THE TOTAL POOL OF <i>Igf2</i> mRNA IN LIVER TISSUE BETWEEN THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING.	225
FIGURE 4.49 A COMPARISON OF THE MATERNAL ALLELE EXPRESSION (RELAXATION OF IMPRINTING) IN THE TOTAL POOL OF <i>Igf2</i> mRNA IN PANCREAS TISSUE BETWEEN THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING.....	226
FIGURE 4.50 A COMPARISON OF THE MATERNAL ALLELE EXPRESSION (RELAXATION OF IMPRINTING) IN THE TOTAL POOL OF <i>Igf2</i> mRNA IN KIDNEY TISSUE BETWEEN THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING.....	227
FIGURE 4.51 A COMPARISON OF THE MATERNAL ALLELE EXPRESSION (RELAXATION OF IMPRINTING) IN THE TOTAL POOL OF <i>Igf2</i> mRNA IN LUNG TISSUE BETWEEN THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING.....	228
FIGURE 4.52 EXPRESSION OF MATERNAL AND PATERNAL ALLELES OF <i>H19</i> IN FOUR TISSUES OF THE CON AND MD FEMALES AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.....	230
FIGURE 4.53 EXPRESSION OF THE <i>H19</i> AND <i>Igf2</i> GENES IN THE CON AND MD GROUPS ACROSS DIFFERENT AGES IN LUNG AND PANCREAS TISSUES.	233
FIGURE 4.54 FOLD-CHANGE IN EXPRESSION OF <i>Igf2</i> AND <i>H19</i> mRNA IN THE PANCREAS AND IN THE LUNG OF THE MD GROUP RELATIVE TO THE CON GROUP AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	234
FIGURE 5.1 A SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE ELEVATED PLUS MAZE.	270
FIGURE 5.2 A SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF POSITION OF THE MAIN COMPONENTS OF THE OPERANT CHAMBER.....	272
FIGURE 5.3 INITIAL PLASMA CORTICOSTERONE CONCENTRATION IN RELATION TO THE ORDER IN WHICH RATS WERE TAKEN OUT OF A CAGE.	282

FIGURE 5.4 PLASMA CORTICOSTERONE CONCENTRATION AND BLOOD GLUCOSE CONCENTRATION BEFORE, DURING AND FOLLOWING ACUTE RESTRAINT STRESS.	283
FIGURE 5.5 OPERANT CONDITIONING TEST RESULTS.	284
FIGURE 5.6 METHYLATION PATTERNS OF THE <i>GCR</i> EXON 1 ₇ IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D110 AND D365.	285
FIGURE 5.7 METHYLATION PATTERNS OF THE <i>HSD11B2</i> PROMOTER IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D110 AND D365.	287
FIGURE 5.8 METHYLATION PATTERNS OF THE <i>Nnat</i> DMR IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D110 AND D365.	289
FIGURE 5.9 METHYLATION PATTERNS OF THE <i>REELIN</i> PROMOTER IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT D110 AND D365.	291
FIGURE 5.10 FEMALE AND MALE MD GROUP TARGET GENE EXPRESSION IN THE HIPPOCAMPUS RELATIVE TO THE RESPECTIVE CON GROUP.	294
FIGURE 6.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF THE PRESENT STUDY.	318
FIGURE AIII.1. RAT <i>IGF2</i> DMR1 FULL SEQUENCE.	331
FIGURE AIII.2 <i>IGF2</i> ALLELIC EXPRESSION IN THE LIVER OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	332
FIGURE AIII.3 <i>IGF2</i> ALLELIC EXPRESSION IN THE PANCREAS OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	333
FIGURE AIII.4 <i>IGF2</i> ALLELIC EXPRESSION IN THE KIDNEY OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	334
FIGURE AIII.5 <i>IGF2</i> ALLELIC EXPRESSION IN THE LUNG OF THE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	335
FIGURE AIII.6 <i>H19</i> ALLELIC EXPRESSION IN THE LIVER OF THE MALE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	336
FIGURE AIII.7 <i>H19</i> ALLELIC EXPRESSION IN THE PANCREAS OF THE MALE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	336
FIGURE AIII.8 <i>H19</i> ALLELIC EXPRESSION IN THE KIDNEY OF THE MALE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	337
FIGURE AIII.9 <i>H19</i> ALLELIC EXPRESSION IN THE LUNG OF THE MALE CON AND MD OFFSPRING AT FIVE DIFFERENT AGES.	337
FIGURE AIV.1 SEQUENCE OF THE <i>REELIN</i> PROMOTER REGION CONTAINING MISSING SEQUENCE.	338

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACTH	adrenocorticotrophic hormone
A ^{vy}	viable yellow agouti allele
BP	blood pressure
Cdkn1a	cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 1a
Cdkn2a	cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 2a
cDNA	complementary DNA
CHD	coronary heart disease
CNS	central nervous system
CON	control group
CR	calorie restriction
CREB	cyclic AMP responsive element
CRH	corticotropin-releasing hormone
C _t	cycle threshold
CTCF	CCTC-binding factor
DBP	diastolic blood pressure
DMR	differentially methylated region
DNA	deoxyribonucleic acid
DNMT1	DNA methyl transferase 1
DNMT3a	DNA methyl transferase 3a
DNMT3b	DNA methyl transferase 3b
DOHaD	developmental origins of health and disease

Dusp5	dual specificity phosphatase 5
En	endodermal enhancer
EPM	elevated plus maze
Erk	extracellular signal-regulated kinase
Gcr	glucocorticoid receptor
HBW	high birth weight
hMC	homogenous MassCLEAVE base-specific cleavage
HPA	hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal
Hprt	hypoxanthine guanine phosphoribosyl transferase
Hsd11 β 1	11 β -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type 1
Hsd11 β 2	11 β -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type 2
Igf2	insulin-like growth factor 2
IPGTT	intraperitoneal glucose tolerance test
IUGR	intrauterine growth restriction
LBW	low birth weight
LC	liquid chromatography
LDP	long term depression
LPD	low protein diet
LTP	long term potentiation
MALDI TOF	matrix assisted laser desorption/ionization time-of-flight
MAPK	mitogen-activated protein kinase
MAR3	matrix attachment region 3

MD	methyl deficient
MLP	maternal low protein
mRNA	messenger RNA
MS	mass spectrometry
NBW	normal birth weight
ncRNA	non-coding RNA
Nnat	neuronatin
PCR	polymerase chain reaction
PPAR- α	peroxisome proliferator activated receptor- α
PPAR- γ	peroxisome proliferator activated receptor- γ
QGE	quantitative gene expression
QPCR	quantitative reverse transcriptase real-time PCR
RAS	renin-angiotensin-system
RELN	reelin
RNA	ribonucleic acid
RT	room temperature
SAH	S-adenosylhomocysteine
SAM	S-adenosylmethionine
SBP	systolic blood pressure
SGA	small for gestational age
TFEB	transcription factor EB