

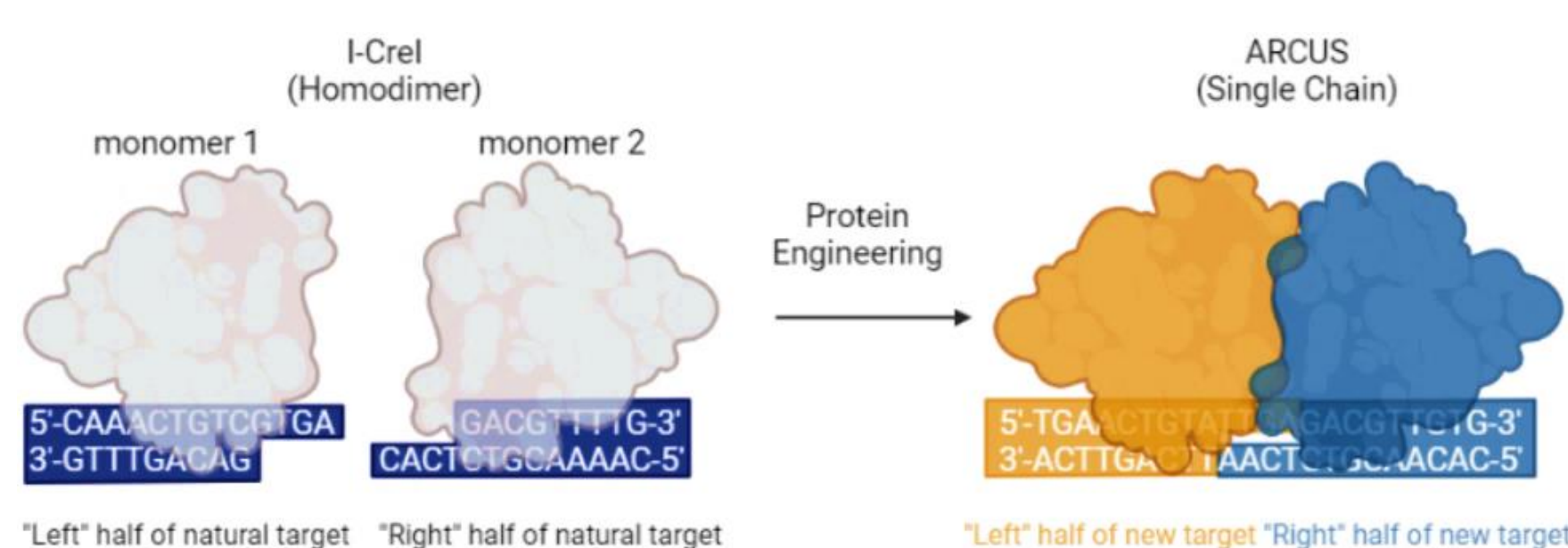
Specific elimination of m.3243A>G mutant mitochondrial DNA using mitoARCUS

Wendy Shoop^{1,2}, Cassandra Gorsuch¹, Emma Sevigny¹, Sandra Bacman², Janel Lape¹, Jeff Smith¹, Derek Jantz¹, Carlos T. Moraes²

¹Precision BioSciences, Durham, NC ²University of Miami, Miami, FL

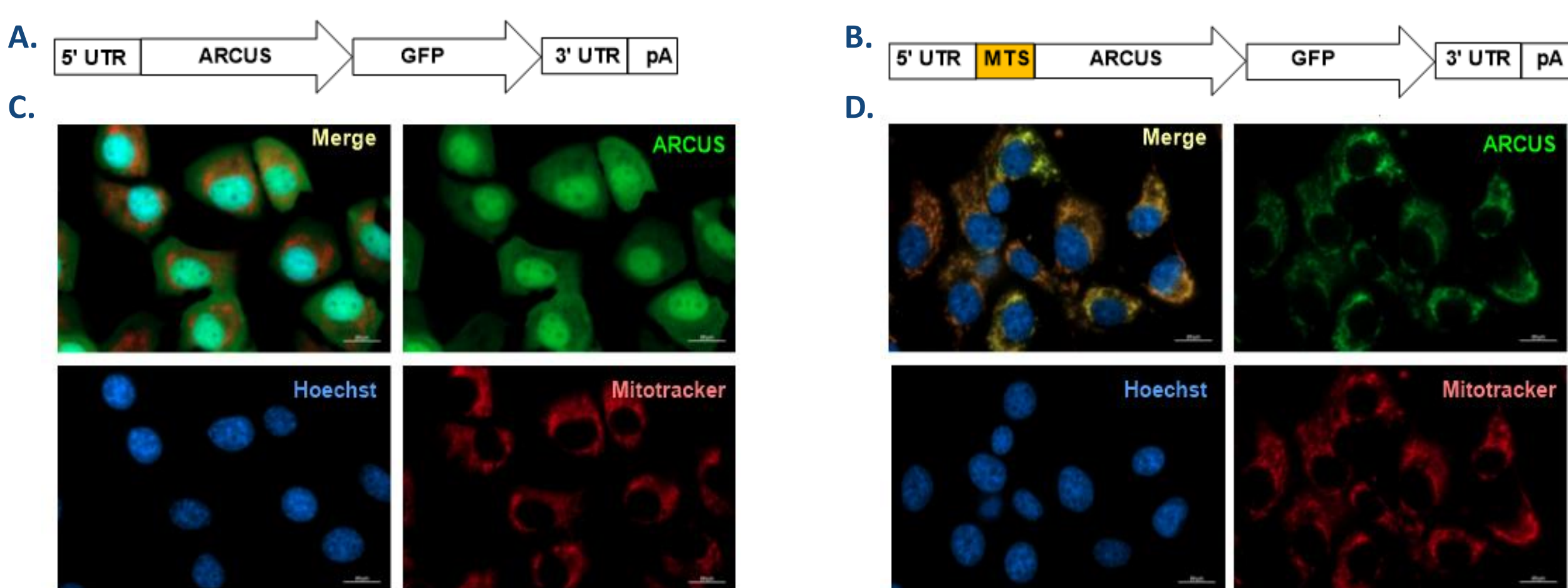
INTRODUCTION

- Mitochondria contain their own multi-copy, double-stranded circular genome that encodes 37 genes critical for oxidative phosphorylation.
- Pathogenic mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) mutations are commonly heteroplasmic, where both wild-type (WT) and mutant genomes co-exist in the same cell.
- Clinical symptoms manifest once the percentage of mutant mtDNA exceeds a particular threshold.
- Diseases resulting from mtDNA mutations are multi-system, complex disorders with no available cures.
- A point mutation in mt-tRNA^{Leu(UUR)} (m.3243A>G) is one of the most common pathogenic mtDNA mutations and impairs the enzymatic activity of the mitochondrial respiratory chain. This mutation is associated with a variety of phenotypes including MELAS, mitochondrial myopathy, diabetes, hearing loss, and CPEO.
- ARCUS is derived from I-CreI, a homing endonuclease that recognizes and cleaves a semi-palindromic 22 base pair DNA target sequence in the chloroplast genome of *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii*.
- ARCUS is a small, monomeric protein that does not require a guide RNA to edit DNA and can be engineered to optimize activity and specificity.



RESULTS

FIGURE 2. mitoARCUS is efficiently trafficked to the mitochondria using an N-terminal MTS



- Two ARCUS constructs were transfected into cells: ARCUS lacking a subcellular targeting sequence (**2A**) or ARCUS with a mitochondrial targeting sequence (MTS) fused at the N-terminus (**2B**). The cells were stained at 24 hours for Hoechst 33342 and Mitotracker.
- Without a targeting sequence, ARCUS exhibits diffuse, cytoplasmic/nuclear localization (**2C**). With an MTS, ARCUS co-localizes with Mitotracker showing efficient mitochondrial delivery (**2D**) without evidence of nuclear off-target editing (data not shown).

FIGURE 4. mitoARCUS3.1 shifts heteroplasmy and improves mitochondrial function in 96% mutant m.3243G cybrid cells without deleterious impacts to respiration during transient mtDNA depletion

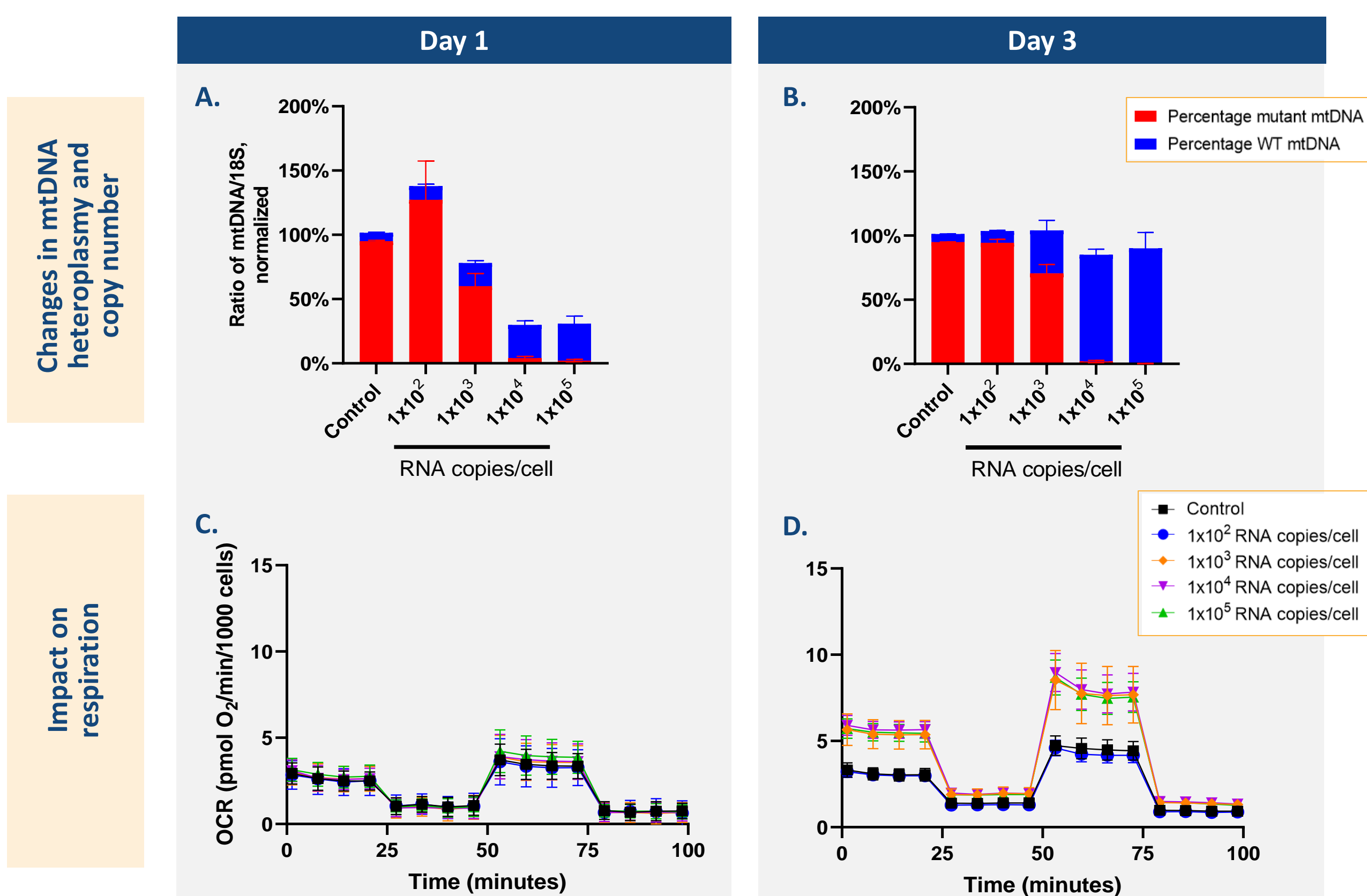


TABLE 1. Statistical significance, day 1^a

Condition	mtDNA copy number	% mutant mtDNA	% WT mtDNA	Basal OCR	Maximal OCR
Control	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
1x10 ² RNA copies/cell	ns	****	****	ns	ns
1x10 ³ RNA copies/cell	**	****	****	ns	ns
1x10 ⁴ RNA copies/cell	**	****	****	ns	ns
1x10 ⁵ RNA copies/cell	ns	****	****	ns	ns

TABLE 2. Statistical significance, day 3^a

Condition	mtDNA copy number	% mutant mtDNA	% WT mtDNA	Basal OCR	Maximal OCR
Control	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
1x10 ² RNA copies/cell	ns	****	****	****	****
1x10 ³ RNA copies/cell	ns	****	****	****	****
1x10 ⁴ RNA copies/cell	ns	****	****	****	****
1x10 ⁵ RNA copies/cell	ns	****	****	****	****

- 96% mutant m.3243G cells were transfected with mitoARCUS3.1 mRNA at 10-fold dilutions. At days 1 and 3 post-transfection, gDNA was isolated and analyzed for heteroplasmy and mtDNA copy number (**4A, 4B**) and the live cells were evaluated for respiratory changes using the Seahorse Cell Mito Stress Test (**4C, 4D**).
- At day 1, a dose-dependent mtDNA depletion was observed that was significant for the two highest mRNA doses. This depletion corresponded to the selective cleavage of mutant mtDNA. Despite the mtDNA depletion, respiration was unaffected (**Table 1**).
- At day 3, mtDNA copy number was restored to statistically insignificant levels. The cells treated with the three highest mRNA doses exhibited a significant decrease in mutant mtDNA and a significant increase in WT mtDNA. The dose-dependent shifts in heteroplasmy resulted in concomitant improvements in basal and maximal respiration (**Table 2**). Notably, small shifts in heteroplasmy (66.5% mutant \pm 3.4%, achieved with a dose of 1x10³ RNA copies/cell) conferred a similar functional benefit to a complete shift.

^aStatistics were calculated using an ordinary one-way ANOVA, Dunnett's multiple comparisons test (ns: P>0.05, *: P<0.05, **: P<0.01, ***: P<0.001, ****: P<0.0001).

OBJECTIVE

- Mitochondria lack an efficient double-strand break repair mechanism and instead rapidly degrade any linearized mtDNA molecules.
- There is a tightly controlled mechanism for maintaining mtDNA copy number that results in the replication of any genomes remaining following mtDNA degradation.
- Therapeutic approach:** deliver mitochondrial-targeted ARCUS (mitoARCUS) to affected cells to selectively cleave and eliminate mutant mtDNA while leaving WT mtDNA to repopulate the cell, resulting in a shift in heteroplasmy and improvement in mitochondrial function.
- Nuclease specificity is paramount, as the WT and mutant mtDNA sequences only differ by a single nucleotide.

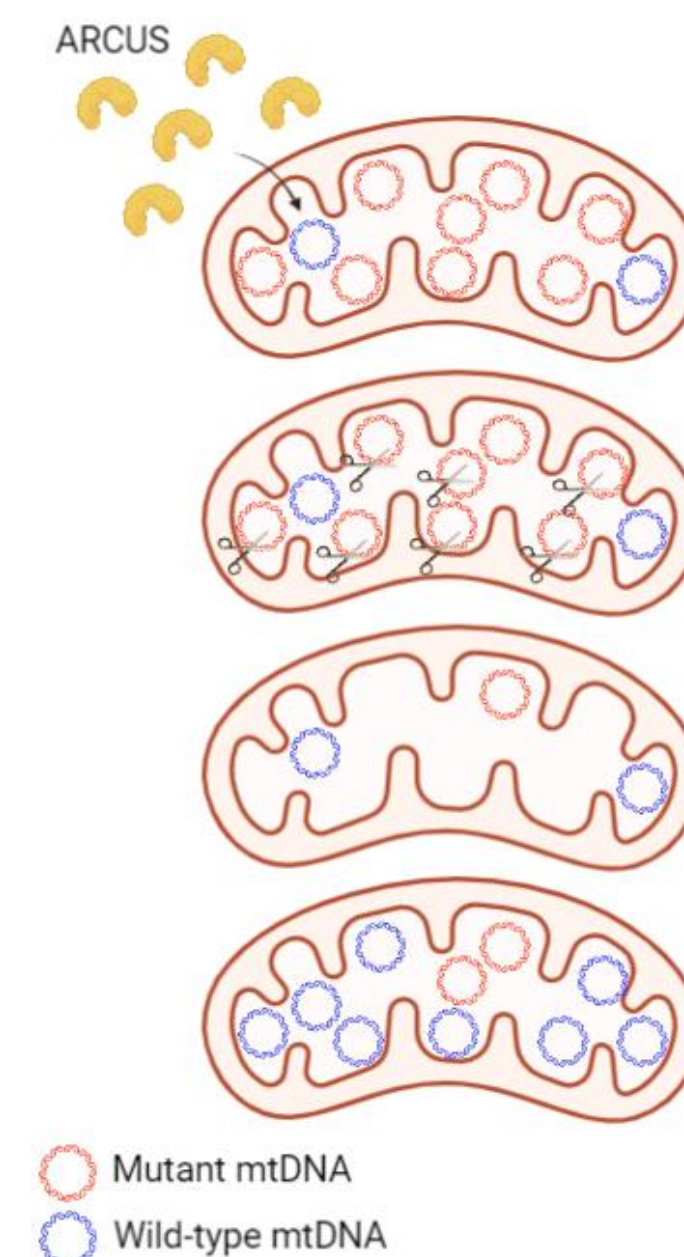
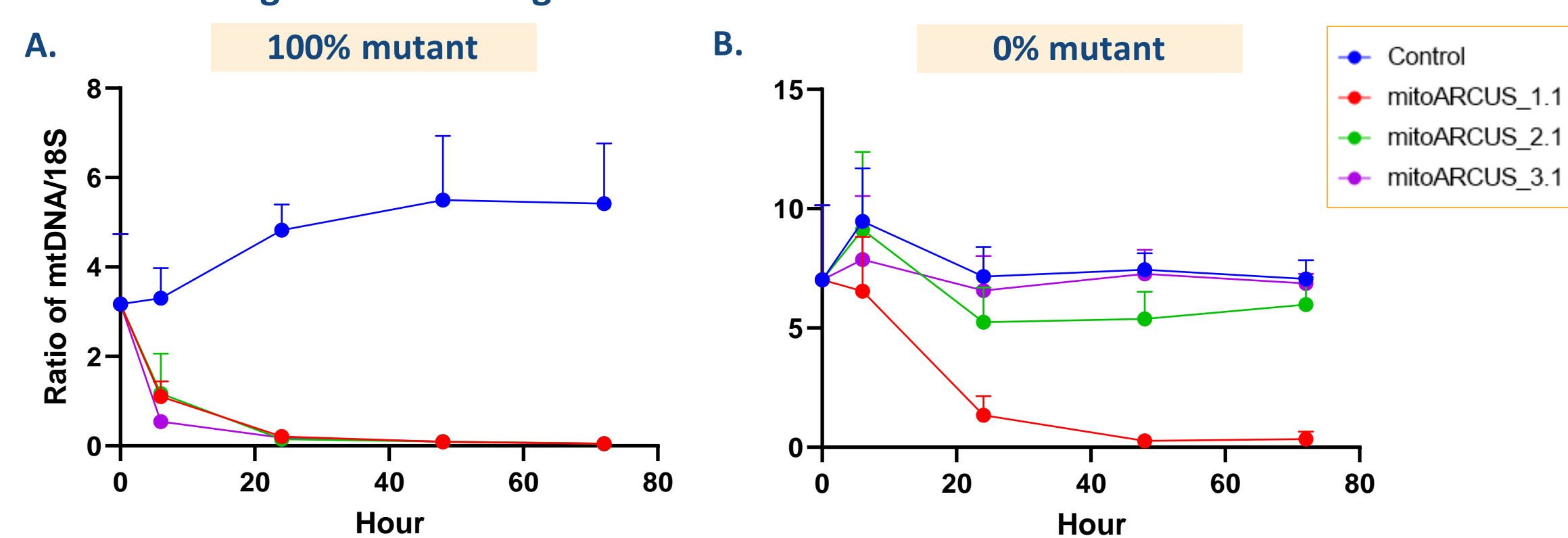


FIGURE 1. mitoARCUS 22 base pair binding site and corresponding WT sequence

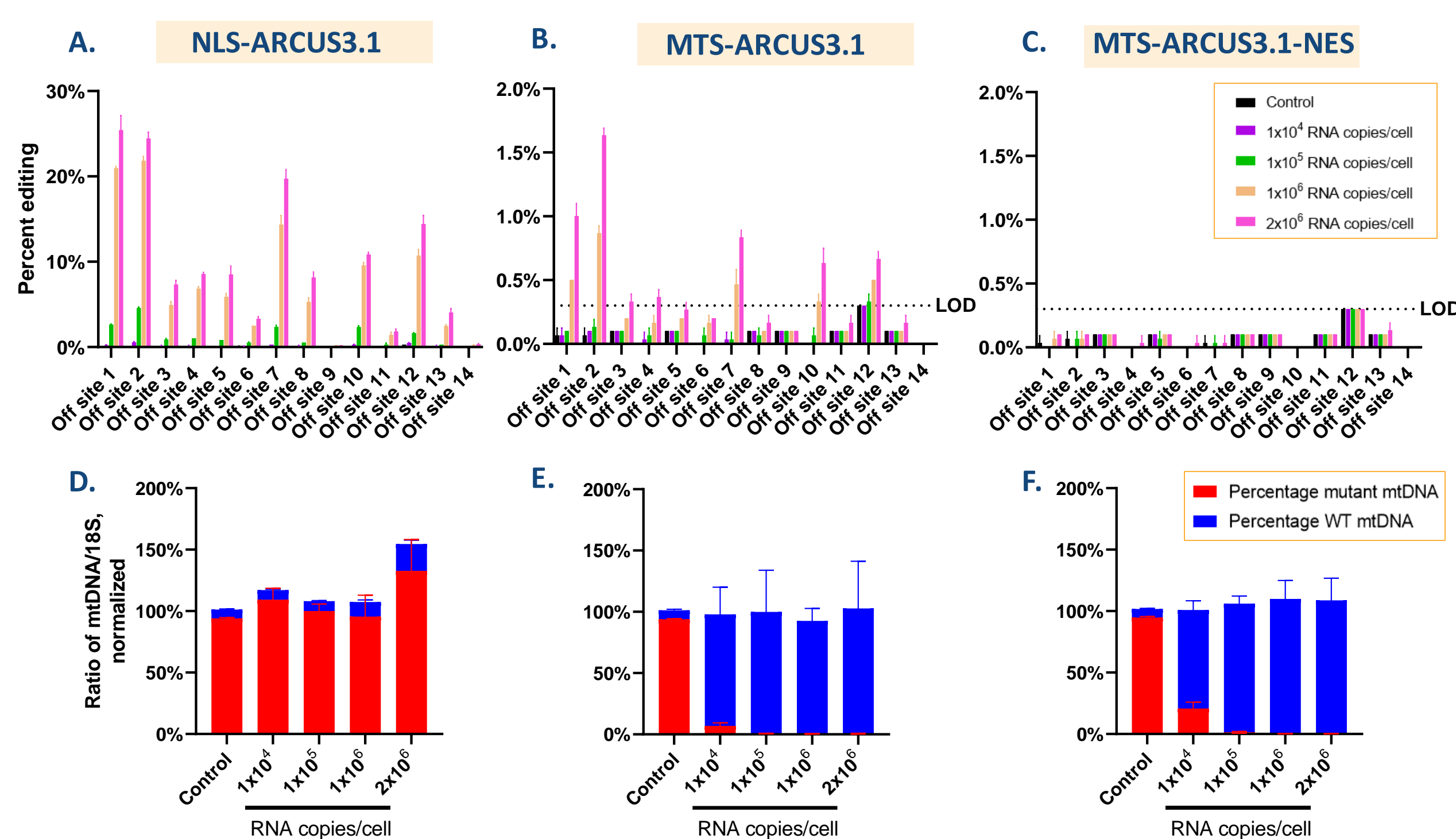
Mutant mtDNA: 5'-CAG G G C C C G G T A A T C G C A T A A A-3'
Wild-type mtDNA: 5'-C A G A G C C C G G T A A T C G C A T A A A-3'

FIGURE 3. Protein optimization generates a nuclease that efficiently eliminates mutant mtDNA without significant cleavage of WT mtDNA



- Two homoplasmic cell lines (100% or 0% mutant) were used to evaluate three generations of mitoARCUS nucleases for on-target (mutant mtDNA) and off-target (WT mtDNA) activity. Activity at each site was measured in terms of mtDNA depletion.
- All three generations of nucleases exhibited high on-target activity, as evidenced by the robust elimination of mutant m.3243G mtDNA (**3A**). However, the nucleases varied in their ability to discriminate against WT m.3243A mtDNA and exhibited improved specificity with each subsequent generation (**3B**). mitoARCUS3.1 was statistically insignificant from the control at all measured timepoints, indicating a high degree of specificity.

FIGURE 5. Incorporation of an MTS and NES to ARCUS3.1 eliminates nuclear off-target editing



- In addition to specificity in the context of the mtDNA, we characterized mitoARCUS3.1 for its potential to cleave unintended sequences within the nuclear DNA. 14 potential nuclear off-target sites were identified in an unbiased cell-based assay (data not shown).
- 96% mutant m.3243G cells were transfected with different versions of ARCUS3.1 – either containing a nuclear localization signal (NLS), MTS, or MTS and nuclear export signal (NES). gDNA was isolated and analyzed for editing at each of the identified off-target sites (**5A, 5B, 5C**) as well as heteroplasmy and mtDNA copy number changes (**5D, 5E, 5F**).
- Nuclear off-target editing was observed with NLS-ARCUS3.1 (**5A**) and MTS-ARCUS3.1 (**5B**) but was undetectable with MTS-ARCUS3.1-NES (**5C**). The on-target mtDNA heteroplasmy shift was not impacted by the addition to the NES (**5F**).

CONCLUSIONS

- mitoARCUS can successfully be trafficked to the mitochondria where it can specifically cleave and eliminate m.3243G mutant mtDNA, resulting in a shift in heteroplasmy and improvement in mitochondrial function.
- The ARCUS protein engineering and optimization platform allows for the generation of highly specific nucleases that can accurately discriminate a single nucleotide difference.
- Nuclear off-target editing is eliminated through the incorporation of an NES.
- Together, these data support the development of mitoARCUS as an *in vivo* gene editing therapeutic for the treatment of disease-causing heteroplasmic mtDNA mutations.