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Identification of Sox9-Dependent Acinar-to-Ductal Reprogramming as the Principal Mechanism for Initiation of Pancreatic Ductal Adenocarcinoma

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SUMMARY

Tumors are largely classified by histologic appearance, yet morphologic features do not necessarily predict cellular origin. To determine the origin of pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDA), we labeled and traced pancreatic cell populations after induction of a PDA-initiating Kras mutation. Our studies reveal that ductal and stem-like centroacinar cells are surprisingly refractory to oncogenic transformation, whereas acinar cells readily form PDA precursor lesions with ductal features. We show that formation of acinar-derived premalignant lesions depends on ectopic induction of the ductal gene *Sox9*. Moreover, when concomitantly expressed with oncogenic Kras, *Sox9* accelerates formation of premalignant lesions. These results provide insight into the cellular origin of PDA and suggest that its precursors arise via induction of a duct-like state in acinar cells.

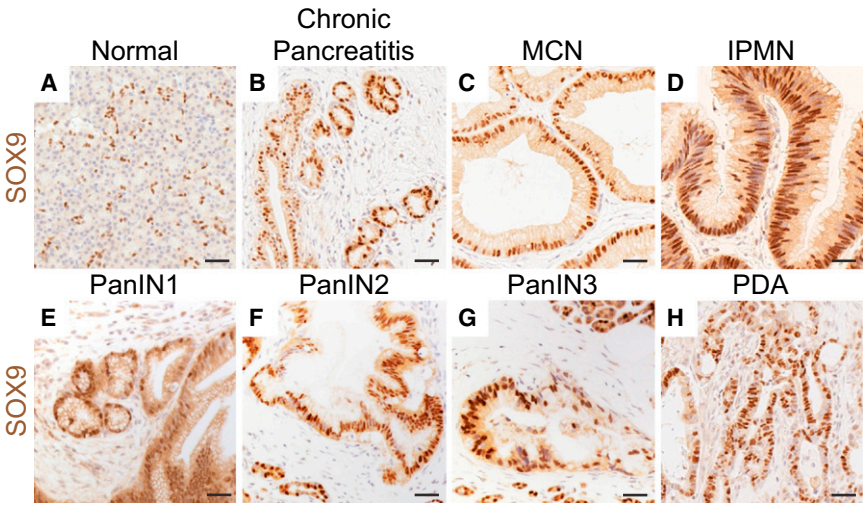
INTRODUCTION

Defining tumor-initiating events is critically important for developing early cancer detection methods and effective treatments. In the past, the cell type responsible for tumor initiation has often been inferred based on the histologic appearance of the tumor. However, morphologic features do not necessarily predict a lineage relationship (Goldstein et al., 2010), which can only be determined by lineage tracing studies.

Invasive pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDA) is believed to arise from a spectrum of preneoplastic mucinous lesions with ductal morphology, namely pancreatic intraepithelial neoplasias (PanINs), the most common precursor lesions observed in humans, as well as mucinous cystic neoplasias (MCNs) and intraductal papillary mucinous neoplasias (IPMNs) (Hezel et al., 2006). During disease progression, accumulation of genetic mutations in these lesions leads to an increasing degree of atypia and ultimately PDA (Feldmann et al., 2007). The earliest detectable mutations found in preneoplastic lesions are activating mutations of the *KRAS* gene (Kanda et al., 2012). The significance of *Kras* mutations for disease initiation has been demonstrated in mice, where expression of the constitutively active $Kras^{G12D}$ allele induces PanINs and after a significant latency period also PDA (Hingorani et al., 2003). In $Kras^{G12D}$-expressing mice, PanIN formation coincides with, or is preceded by, acinar-to-ductal metaplasia (ADM), characterized by replacement of acinar cells with cells expressing ductal markers, such as *CK19* and the ductal fate determinant *Sox9* (Morris et al., 2010; Zhu et al.,

Significance

PDA has a dismal prognosis, largely because it is mostly diagnosed at an advanced stage. For developing early detection methods and treatments, it is essential to understand the primary events leading to tumor initiation. By tracing specific cell populations in the presence and absence of tissue injury in mice, we demonstrate that oncogenic Kras can readily induce PDA precursor lesions from adult pancreatic acinar cells, but not from ductal or centroacinar cells. Moreover, using loss- and gain-of-function approaches we identify the ductal fate determinant *Sox9* as a critical mediator of Kras-induced premalignant acinar cell reprogramming. Our findings demonstrate a key role for acinar cells in PDA initiation and reveal Sox9 as a potential target for preventing early tumor-initiating events.



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Category	Intensity of SOX9 expression		
	Negative	Weak	Strong
Normal	0/16 [0%]	16/16 [100%]	0/16 [0%]
Pancreatitis	2/16 [13%]	13/16 [81%]	1/16 [6%]
MCN	4/22 [18%]	13/22 [59%]	5/22 [23%]
IPMN	1/20 [5%]	13/20 [65%]	6/20 [30%]
PanIN 1-2	1/26 [4%]	12/26 [46%]	13/26 [50%]
PanIN 2-3	2/7 [29%]	2/7 [29%]	3/7 [43%]
PDA	6/19 [32%]	7/19 [37%]	6/19 [32%]

Figure 1. SOX9 Is Expressed in Human Premalignant and Malignant Pancreatic Lesions

(A–H) Immunohistochemistry for SOX9 and hematoxylin counterstain on a tissue microarray spotted with human pancreatic tissue cores. Representative images showing SOX9 expression in normal pancreatic ducts (A), chronic pancreatitis (B), MCN (C), IPMN (D), pancreatic intraepithelial neoplasia 1 (PanIN1) (E), PanIN2 (F), PanIN3 (G), and PDA (H).

(I) Number of tissue cores within each phenotypic category displaying no, weak, or strong SOX9 staining intensity. Scale bars: 100 μm.

2007). ADM is also observed in pancreatitis, which is a significant risk factor for PDA in humans (Lowenfels et al., 1993) and accelerates $Kras^{G12D}$-mediated PanIN and PDA formation in mice (Carrière et al., 2009; Guerra et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2010). These findings imply that oncogenic *Kras* mutations induce ADM, PanINs and ultimately PDA. However, it is still unclear whether ADM and PanINs primarily arise by expansion of ductal cells and secondary replacement of acinar cells or by direct reprogramming of acinar cells into cells with ductal morphology.

Because previous studies have modeled PDA initiation mostly by expressing oncogenic Kras in all cell types of the pancreas (Aguirre et al., 2003; Hingorani et al., 2003, 2005), little is known about its cell of origin. In mice deficient for the tumor suppressor *Pten*, the formation of invasive pancreatic cancer is associated with increased proliferation of centroacinar cells (CACs) (Stanger et al., 2005), which reside at the tips of the ductal tree. CACs express some markers of embryonic pancreatic progenitors and exhibit features of tissue stem cells in vitro (Miyamoto et al., 2003; Rovira et al., 2010). Since numerous tumors have been shown to originate from tissue stem cells (Visvader, 2011), it has been proposed that CACs are the cell of origin for PanINs and PDA (Miyamoto et al., 2003; Stanger et al., 2005). However, this contention has not been directly tested, largely because genetic tools to target ductal and CACs have only recently been generated (Kopp et al., 2011; Solar et al., 2009). Genetic studies, using *CK19* promoter-based alleles to activate oncogenic *Kras* in ductal cells, suggest that PanINs rarely arise from ducts (Brembeck et al., 2003; Ray et al., 2011). Yet, the rather exclusive targeting of larger ducts in these studies precluded assessing susceptibility of CACs to $Kras^{G12D}$-mediated PanIN induction.

Previous studies have shown that oncogenic *Kras* can convert acinar cells into duct-like cells and PanINs (Carrière et al., 2007; De La O et al., 2008; Guerra et al., 2007; Habbe et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2010). While these studies suggest acinar-to-ductal reprogramming (ADR) as a possible mechanism for initiating PanINs, it is unclear whether PanINs are more readily induced after direct oncogenic transformation of ductal or CACs. Moreover, it is unknown whether inducers of ductal cell identity, such as *Sox9* (Delous et al., 2012; Shih et al., 2012), play a role in the induction of PanINs from acinar cells.

In this study, we directly compared the propensity of ductal/CACs and acinar cells to form PanINs and investigated the molecular mechanisms that underlie PanIN formation.

RESULTS

SOX9 Is Expressed in Human Premalignant and Malignant Pancreatic Lesions

Under normal conditions, the transcription factor Sox9 is expressed in ductal and CACs, but not acinar cells (Seymour et al., 2007). In addition, Sox9 is induced during ADM and expressed in PanINs and PDA (Morris et al., 2010; Prevot et al., 2012). To comprehensively examine SOX9 expression in the human pancreas, we used a tissue microarray for immunohistochemical analysis of SOX9 expression in different pancreatic lesions (Figures 1A–1H). SOX9 was expressed in chronic pancreatitis, as well as premalignant and malignant lesions, including MCNs, IPMNs, PanINs, and PDA. Low-grade PanINs were uniformly $SOX9^+$, whereas higher-grade PanIN2/3 lesions and PDA displayed heterogeneous SOX9 expression (Figure 1L; 72% of PanIN2/3 and 69% of PDA were $SOX9^+$). These findings suggest that a $SOX9^+$ state is associated with PDA initiation.

$Kras^{G12D}$-Induced PanINs Predominantly Arise from Acinar but Not Ductal/Centroacinar Cells

To determine whether PanINs arise from Sox9-expressing ductal/CACs or from acinar-derived duct-like cells ectopically

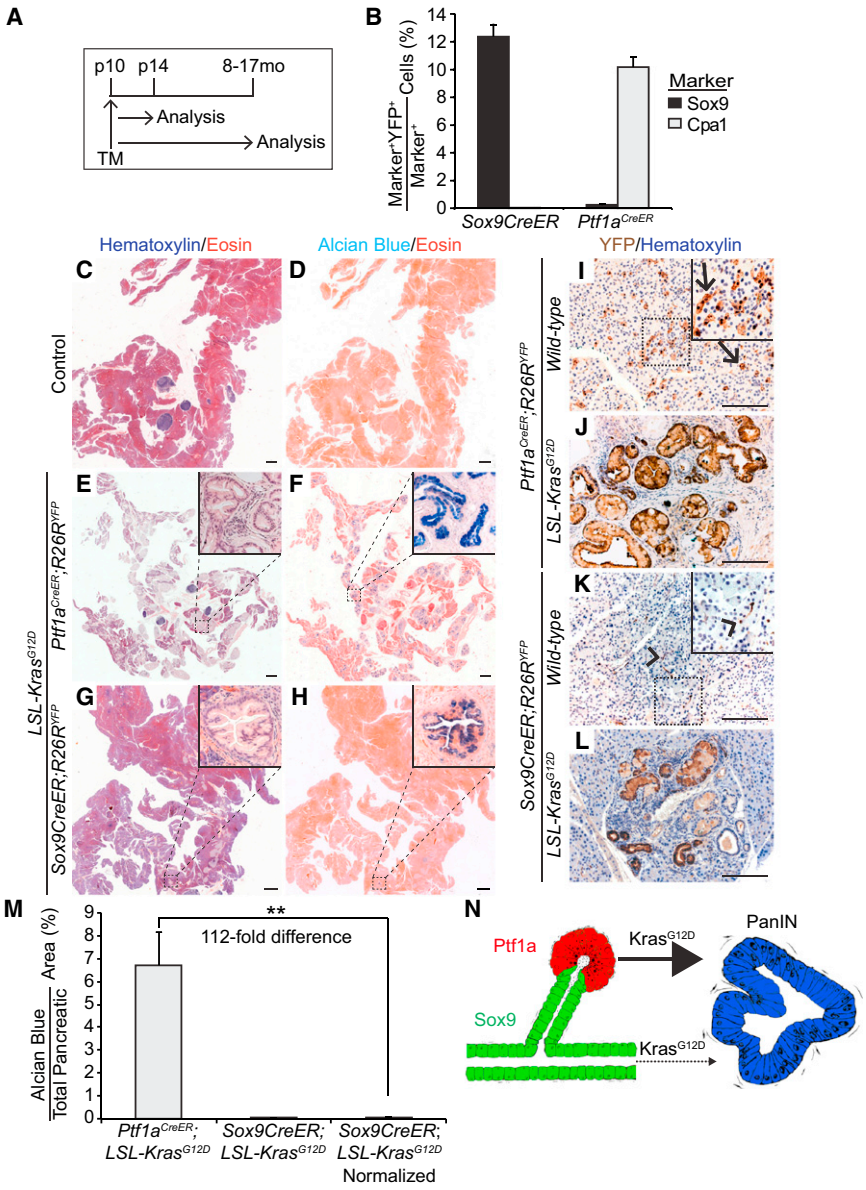

Figure 2. *Kras*^{G12D} Expression in Acinar, but not in Ductal/Centroacinar Cells, readily Induces PanIN Formation

(A) *Sox9CreER;R26R*^{YFP} and *Ptf1a*^{CreER}*;R26R*^{YFP} mice were injected once with tamoxifen (TM) at postnatal day (p) 10 and analyzed at p14 or at 8 to 17 months (mo) of age.

(B–H) Quantification of Sox9^{+} or Cpa1^{+} cells expressing YFP at p14 (n = 4; B). H&E (C, E, and G) or Alcian blue and eosin (D, F, and H) staining of pancreatic sections from 8- to 17-month-old control (C and D), *Ptf1a*^{CreER}*;LSL-Kras*^{G12D}*; R26R*^{YFP} (E and F), or *Sox9CreER;LSL-Kras*^{G12D}*; R26R*^{YFP} (G and H) mice reveals abundant Alcian blue^{+} PanINs only in *Ptf1a*^{CreER}*;LSL-Kras*^{G12D}*; R26R*^{YFP} mice.

(I–L) Immunohistochemistry of YFP in 8- to 17-month-old mice shows expression of YFP in acinar cells in *Ptf1a*^{CreER}*;R26R*^{YFP} mice (I), arrows) and ductal/CACs in *Sox9CreER;R26R*^{YFP} mice (K), arrowheads). PanINs in *Ptf1a*^{CreER}*;LSL-Kras*^{G12D}*; R26R*^{YFP} (J) and *Sox9CreER;LSL-Kras*^{G12D}*; R26R*^{YFP} (L) mice are YFP^{+}, indicating an acinar or ductal/CAC origin, respectively.

(M) Quantification of Alcian blue^{+} pancreatic area in 8- to 17-month-old mice (n = 9 in *Ptf1a*^{CreER}*; LSL-Kras*^{G12D} mice; n = 6 in *Sox9CreER; LSL-Kras*^{G12D} mice). The Alcian blue^{+} area in *Sox9CreER;LSL-Kras*^{G12D}*;R26R*^{YFP} mice was multiplied by 4.6 (normalized) to account for the greater total number of recombined cells in *Ptf1a*^{CreER}*;R26R*^{YFP} mice (see Figure S1L).

(N) Schematic showing the predominantly acinar origin of PanINs after expression of oncogenic Kras. Values are shown as mean ± SEM. **p < 0.01. Scale bars: 1 mm (C–H) and 100 μm (I–L). See also Figure S1.

expressing Sox9, we directly compared the propensity of ductal/CACs and acinar cells to form PanINs in response to oncogenic Kras. To inducibly recombine the *LSL-Kras*^{G12D} allele (hereafter referred to as the *Kras*^{G12D} allele) in ductal/CAC or acinar cells, we used *Sox9CreER* or *Ptf1a*^{CreER} mice, respectively. The Cre-dependent *R26R*^{YFP} reporter allele was included to assess recombination efficiency and map the fate of Kras-active cells. Four days after induction of recombination by tamoxifen at postnatal day 10 (p10), we analyzed pancreatic labeling specificity and efficiency by quantifying the percentage of ductal and acinar cells expressing YFP (Figure 2A; Figure S1A available online). As previously reported (Kopp et al., 2011), the *Sox9CreER* transgene labeled cells throughout the entire ductal tree, including CACs (Figures S1B and S1C; data not shown). On average, we labeled 12% of all Sox9^{+} cells with the *Sox9CreER* transgene and 10% of Cpa1^{+} acinar cells with the *Ptf1a*^{CreER} allele (Figures 2B, S1D, and S1E). Quantification of nonlineage-specific recombination events revealed *R26R*^{YFP} recombination in 0.02% of acinar cells by *Sox9CreER* and 0.23% of Sox9^{+} cells by *Ptf1a*^{CreER} (Figure 2B). A similar pattern of YFP expression was observed after 8 months or longer (Figures 2I and 2K), confirming that acinar and ductal cells do not spontaneously convert into other pancreatic cell types (Desai et al., 2007; Kopp et al., 2011; Solar et al., 2009; Strobel et al., 2007). Overall, this analysis shows that the *Sox9CreER* transgene and *Ptf1a*^{CreER} allele specifically target the ductal/CAC and acinar cell compartments, respectively. Moreover, the *Kras*^{G12D} allele was effectively recombined by both *Ptf1a*^{CreER} and *Sox9CreER* (Figure S1F).

To assess the frequency of PanINs arising from acinar or ductal/CACs after Kras activation, we examined pancreata from *Ptf1a*^{CreER}*;Kras*^{G12D}*;R26R*^{YFP} and *Sox9CreER;Kras*^{G12D}*; R26R*^{YFP} mice 8 to 17 months after *Kras*^{G12D} induction (Figure 2A). Corroborating previous studies, showing that Kras activation in acinar cells can induce PanINs (Carrière et al., 2007; De La O et al., 2008; Gidekel Friedlander et al., 2009; Guerra et al., 2007; Habbe et al., 2008), all *Ptf1a*^{CreER}*; Kras*^{G12D}*;R26R*^{YFP} mice displayed abundant lesions with histologic and molecular characteristics of PanINs, including high

Table 1. Quantification of PanIN Frequency in *Ptf1a^{CreER};LSL-Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* and *Sox9CreER;LSL-Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* Mice

Genotype	n	Tamoxifen Injection Age (days)	Analysis Age (months)	Additional Treatment	Number of Mice with PanINs (% of Total Mice)
Ptf1a^{CreER}; LSL-Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}	12	10	8–17	None	12 (100)
Sox9CreER; LSL- Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}	14	10	8–16	None	8 (57)
Ptf1a^{CreER}; LSL-Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}	4	10	2	Caerulein	4 (100)
Ptf1a^{CreER}; LSL-Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}	4	10	2	Saline	4 (100)
Sox9CreER; LSL-Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}	5	10	2	Caerulein	3 (40)
Sox9CreER; LSL-Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}	9	10	2	Saline	1 (11)

See also Table S1.

acidic mucin content, indicated by Alcian blue staining, and expression of Muc5AC and Claudin18 (Figures 2C–2F, S1G, and S1H; Table 1). Expression of YFP further confirmed that the PanINs originated from acinar cells (Figure 2J).

In contrast to *Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* mice, pancreatic histology was largely normal in *Sox9CreER;Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* mice and PanINs were rarely observed (Figures 2C and 2G). Of 14 mice, no PanINs were detected in six mice and the remaining mice had no more than ten PanINs per mouse (Tables 1 and S1). As seen in PanINs originating from acinar cells (Figures 2F, S1G, and S1H), the duct-derived lesions were Alcian blue$^+$ (Figure 2H, inset), and expressed Muc5AC and Claudin18 (Figures S1I and S1J) and the lineage marker YFP (Figure 2L). However, unlike acinar-derived PanINs, the duct-derived lesions were not randomly distributed throughout the pancreas, but were more often associated with large ducts (Figure S1J, arrow).

To thoroughly compare the extent of PanIN formation from acinar and ductal/CACs, we quantified the Alcian blue$^+$ area in *Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* and *Sox9CreER;Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* mice on sections spaced every 140 μm throughout the entire pancreas (Figure 2M). Notably, Alcian blue staining can be present in duct-like lesions devoid of neoplastic features and conversely, can be absent from high-grade PanIN lesions (Cornish and Hruban, 2011; Strobel et al., 2007). Since the majority of Alcian blue$^+$ lesions in *Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* and *Sox9CreER;Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* mice exhibited neoplastic characteristics of PanINs and Alcian blue$^-$ PanINs were rarely observed (Figure S1K and data not shown), Alcian blue staining appeared to be an accurate measure of PanIN frequency in these models. In *Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* mice, on average 6.7 ± 1.5% of the pancreas was Alcian blue$^+$. In contrast, only 0.013 ± 0.004% of the pancreas exhibited Alcian blue staining in *Sox9CreER;Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* mice (Figure 2M). While this result suggests a striking difference in the propensity of acinar and ductal/CACs to give rise to PanINs, this quantification likely overestimates the difference, because acinar cells are more abundant than ductal cells and therefore a larger overall number of cells will express *Kras^{G12D}* in *Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* than in *Sox9CreER;Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* mice. To account for this difference, we quantified the total number of recombined YFP$^+$ cells in *Sox9CreER;R26R^{YFP}* and *Ptf1a^{CreER};R26R^{YFP}* mice 4 days after tamoxifen injection. After accounting for the 4.6-fold difference (Figure S1L), *Ptf1a^{CreER}*-induced Kras activation still resulted in a 112-fold higher frequency of PanINs than *Sox9CreER*-mediated Kras activation (Figure 2M). These data show that acinar cells have a much greater propensity than ductal/CACs to form PanINs in response to oncogenic Kras (Figure 2N).

Acute Pancreatitis Promotes *Kras^{G12D}*-Mediated PanIN Formation from Acinar, but Not Ductal Cells

Previous studies have shown that caerulein-induced acute or chronic pancreatitis accelerates *Kras^{G12D}*-mediated PanIN and PDA formation (Carrière et al., 2009; Gidekel Friedlander et al., 2009; Guerra et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2010). In the absence of oncogenic Kras, acute pancreatitis induces transient ADM followed by reversion to normal acinar cell morphology (Jensen et al., 2005; Morris et al., 2010). By contrast, acute pancreatitis in the presence of oncogenic Kras leads to persistent ADR and accelerated PanIN formation (De La O and Murtaugh, 2009; Morris et al., 2010). To compare how pancreatitis affects PanIN formation after ductal or acinar cell-specific Kras activation, we induced caerulein-mediated acute pancreatitis in 6-week-old *Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}*, *Sox9CreER;Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* and control mice and analyzed pancreatic tissue 2 or 21 days later (Figures 3A and S2A). As reported (Morris et al., 2010), 2-day post-caerulein treatment control mice exhibited widespread ADM with characteristic degranulation of acinar cells and appearance of cuboidal to columnar duct-like structures with enlarged lumens (Figures 3B and 3C), which were replaced by normal acini within 21 days (Figures 3D and 3E). In *Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}* mice treated with saline, pancreas morphology was largely normal, although small areas of ADM and occasional PanINs were already evident by 9 weeks of age (Figure 3F, inset). Similar to control mice, caerulein induced widespread ADM within 2 days (Figures 3F and 3G). However, these changes were not transient and duct-like structures were replaced by PanINs after 21 days (Figures 3H and 3I). These

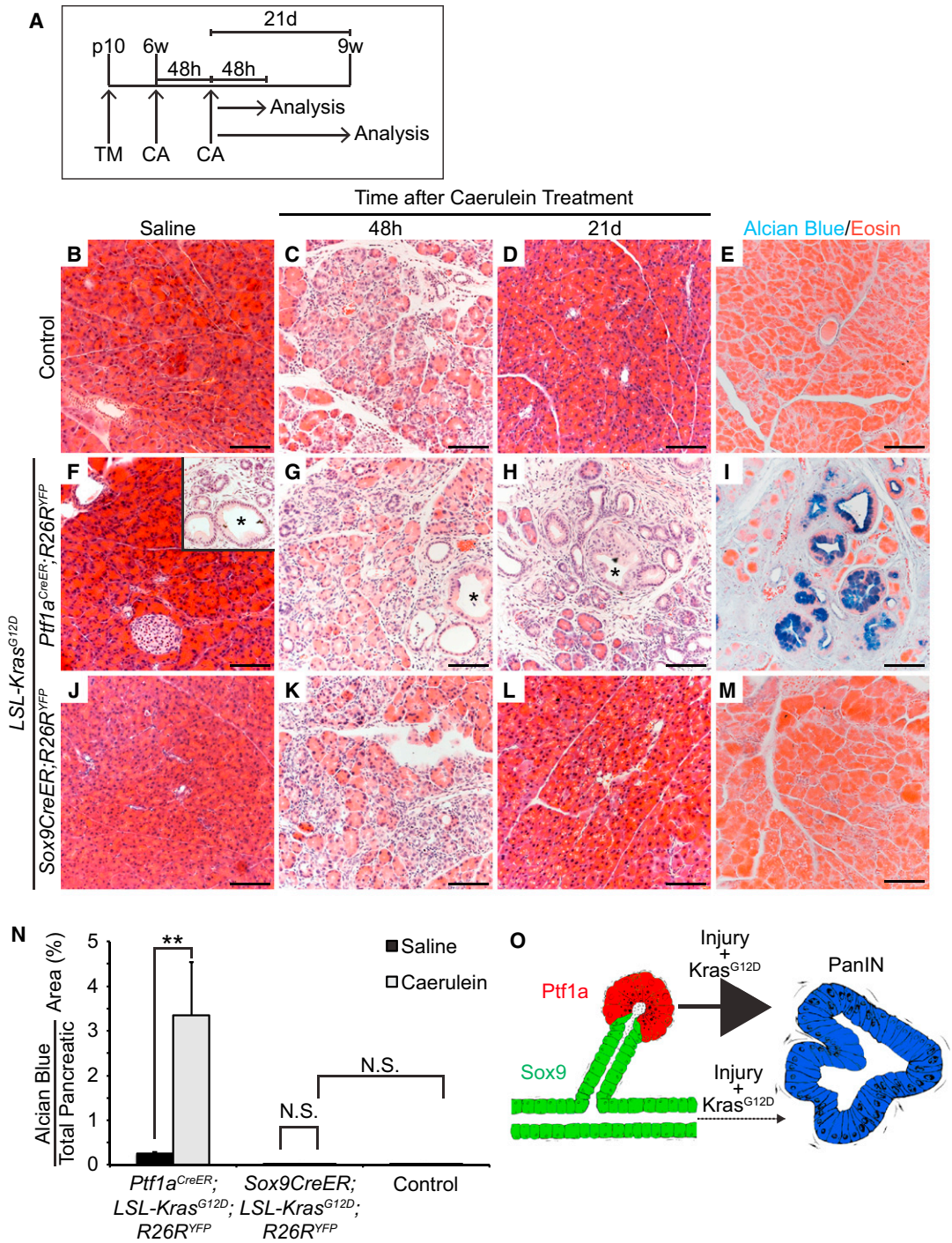

Figure 3. Acute Pancreatitis Promotes PanIN Formation from *Kras*^{G12D}-Expressing Acinar Cells, but not Ductal/Centroacinar Cells

(A) *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*R26R*^{YFP}, *Sox9CreER;LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*R26R*^{YFP} and control mice were injected once with tamoxifen (TM) at postnatal day (p) 10. At 6 weeks (w) of age, mice were treated with two sets of caerulein (CA) or saline injections on alternating days and analyzed 48 hr (h) or 21 days (d) later.

(B–D, F–H, and J–L) H&E staining reveals occasional PanINs in 9-week-old *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*R26R*^{YFP} mice (F, inset) and persistent ADM and PanINs 21d after CA (H), but normal pancreas morphology in *Sox9CreER;LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*R26R*^{YFP} and control mice (D and L). Asterisks denote PanINs.

(E, I, and M) Alcian blue and eosin staining of pancreatic sections from mice 21 days after CA treatment.

(N) Quantification of Alcian blue^{+} pancreatic area reveals a significant increase in PanINs after CA in *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*R26R*^{YFP} (n = 4), but not in *Sox9CreER;LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*R26R*^{YFP} mice (n = 5).

(O) Schematic showing that pancreatic injury promotes PanIN formation from *Kras*^{G12D}-expressing acinar, but not ductal/centroacinar cells. N.S., not significant. Values are shown as mean ± SEM. **p < 0.01. Scale bars: 100 μm.

See also Figure S2.

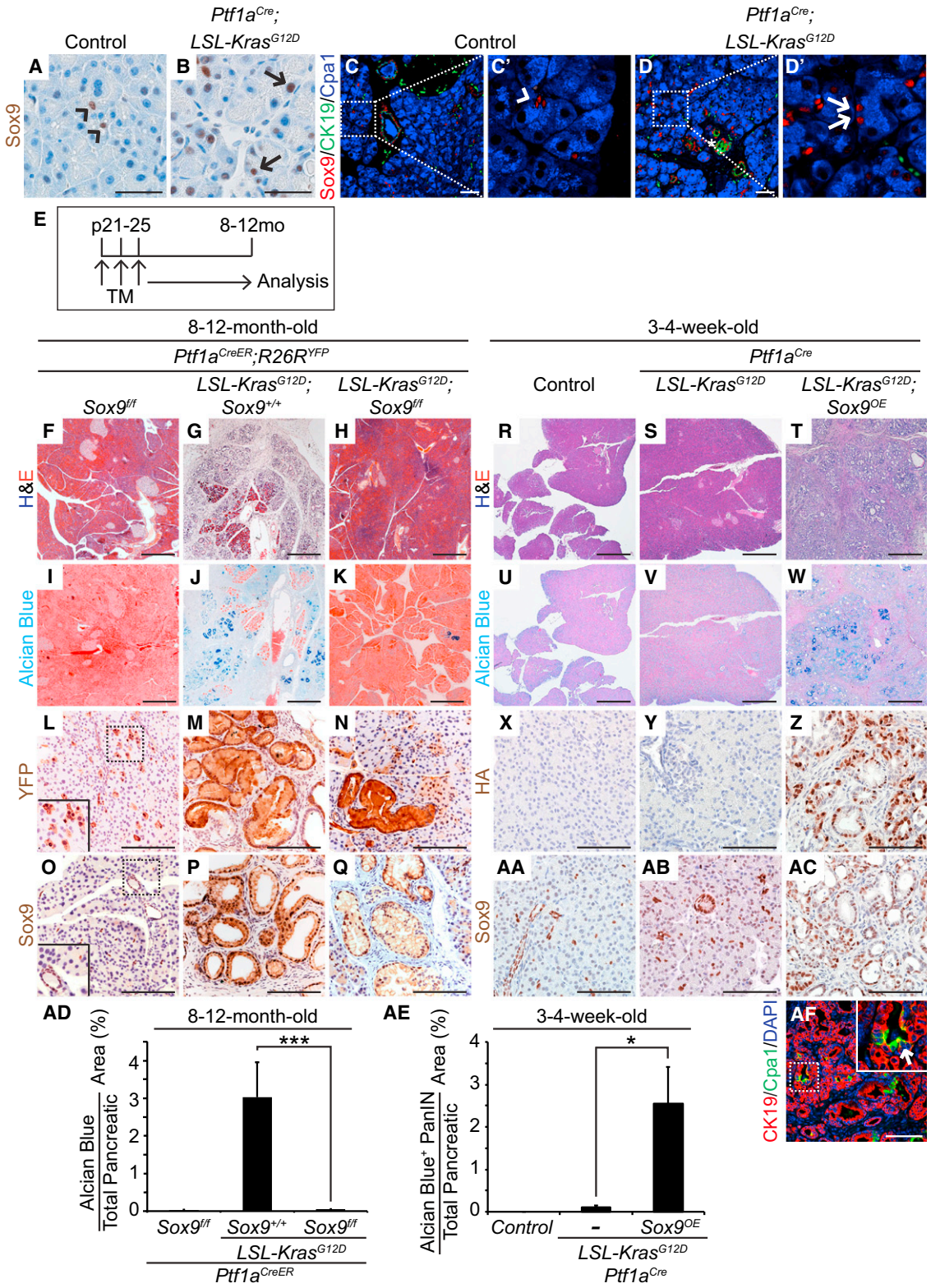

Figure 4. *Sox9* Is Necessary for and Accelerates *Kras*^{G12D}-Induced PanIN Formation

(A and B) Immunohistochemistry shows Sox9 expression in ductal/centroacinar (CAC) (A, arrowheads), but not acinar cells in control mice. In 2-month-old *Ptf1a*^{Cre};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D} mice, Sox9 is also detected in some acinar cells (B, arrows).

(C and D) Co-immunofluorescence staining for Sox9, CK19 and Cpa1 confirms Sox9 expression in ductal/CACs (C', arrowhead points to CAC) in control mice and shows Sox9^{+}Cpa1^{+}CK19^{-} acinar cells in *Ptf1a*^{Cre};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D} mice (D', arrowheads).

observations are consistent with previous findings (Morris et al., 2010) and confirm that acute pancreatitis promotes PanIN formation from $Kras^{G12D}$-expressing acinar cells. In contrast to $Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};R26R^{YFP}$ mice, virtually no PanINs were observed 21 days after caerulein treatment of *Sox9CreER; $Kras^{G12D}$;$R26R^{YFP}$* mice (Figures 3J–3M; Tables 1 and S1) and pancreas morphology was similar to control mice not expressing oncogenic Kras (Figures 3D and 3E). These results suggest that $Kras^{G12D}$-expressing ductal cells have a low propensity to form PanINs even when exposed to pro-neoplastic insults, such as acute pancreatitis.

To directly compare how pancreatitis affects PanIN formation from $Kras^{G12D}$-expressing acinar and ductal/CACs, we quantified the Alcian blue$^+$ area, which was predominately composed of PanIN lesions (data not shown and Figure S2B), in *Sox9CreER;$Kras^{G12D}$;$R26R^{YFP}$* and *$Ptf1a^{CreER}$;$Kras^{G12D}$; $R26R^{YFP}$* mice 21 days after caerulein treatment (Figure 3N). In mice expressing $Kras^{G12D}$ in acinar cells, caerulein induced a significant 20.9-fold increase in Alcian blue$^+$ area. By contrast, no significant increase was observed in *Sox9CreER;$Kras^{G12D}$; $R26R^{YFP}$* mice. Examination of individual mice revealed an increase in the overall number of mice exhibiting Alcian blue$^+$ PanINs in caerulein-treated compared to saline-treated *Sox9CreER;$Kras^{G12D}$;$R26R^{YFP}$* mice (Table 1; three of five mice had PanINs after caerulein treatment versus one of nine mice after saline treatment). However, in mice with PanINs a total of only one to two PanINs were found per pancreas (Table S1). Overall, the Alcian blue$^+$ area in caerulein-treated *Sox9CreER; $Kras^{G12D}$;$R26R^{YFP}$* mice was similar to controls not expressing the *Kras* oncogene (Figure 3N). Together, these data demonstrate that acute pancreatitis potentiates PanIN formation from $Kras^{G12D}$-expressing acinar cells, but not from $Kras^{G12D}$-expressing ductal/CACs (Figure 3O).

Sox9 Is Necessary for $Kras^{G12D}$-Mediated PanIN Induction

Given that ADM and early PanINs are Sox9$^+$ (Figure 1; Morris et al., 2010; Prevot et al., 2012), but Sox9$^+$ ductal cells are not the predominant source of PanINs, we examined whether Sox9 is induced in $Kras^{G12D}$-expressing acinar cells prior to ADM. In control mice, Sox9 expression was restricted to ductal and CACs (Figures 4A and 4C, arrowheads). In $Ptf1a^{Cre};Kras^{G12D}$ mice, Sox9 was additionally detected in a subset of cells with acinar morphology, expressing the acinar marker Cpa1, but not the ductal marker CK19 (Figures 4B and 4D, arrows). These data indicate that Sox9 expression is initiated before Kras-active acinar cells progress to a duct-like state and become PanINs.

Since *Sox9* is important for ductal cell development and regulates critical ductal genes (Shih et al., 2012), we examined whether *Sox9* plays a role in the transformation of acinar cells into ductal structures and premalignant lesions. To test if *Sox9* is required for PanIN formation, we concomitantly induced $Kras^{G12D}$ expression and deleted *Sox9* in acinar cells in 3-week-old $Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{f/f};R26R^{YFP}$ mice (Figures 4E and S3A). Consistent with the lack of Sox9 expression in normal acinar cells, acinar cell-specific *Sox9* deletion did not affect gross acinar cell morphology or the pattern of pancreatic Sox9 expression (Figures 4F, 4I, 4L, and 4O). Next, we analyzed 8- to 12-month-old $Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{+/+};R26R^{YFP}$ and $Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{f/f};R26R^{YFP}$ mice for the presence of PanINs. Confirming our previous findings (Figures 2E and 2F), pancreata from $Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{+/+};R26R^{YFP}$ mice contained widespread Alcian blue$^+$ PanIN lesions, expressing the YFP lineage label and Sox9 (Figures 4G, 4J, 4M, and 4P). In striking contrast, pancreas morphology was virtually normal in *Sox9*-deleted mice and very few PanINs were observed (Figures 4F, 4H, 4I, and 4K). Quantification of Alcian blue staining revealed a 153-fold reduction in the Alcian blue$^+$ area in *Sox9*-deleted $Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D}$ mice compared to mice with two functional *Sox9* alleles (Figure 4AD). Notably, PanINs that still formed in $Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{f/f};R26R^{YFP}$ mice were YFP$^+$ and Sox9$^+$ (Figures 4N and 4Q), indicating that these PanINs arose from acinar cells that recombined the $R26R^{YFP}$ and $Kras^{G12D}$ alleles, but not the $Sox9^{flox}$ allele. Together, these findings demonstrate that PanIN formation from Kras-active acinar cells requires Sox9 activity (Figure S3R).

Sox9 Promotes $Kras^{G12D}$-Mediated Induction of PanINs

Given the critical role of *Sox9* in PanIN formation and its early induction in Kras-active acinar cells, we next examined whether forced expression of *Sox9* potentiates $Kras^{G12D}$-mediated PanIN formation. To test this idea, we crossed the well-characterized $Ptf1a^{Cre};Kras^{G12D}$ model of PanIN formation (Hingorani et al., 2003) with mice harboring a Cre-inducible *Sox9* transgene (*CAG-Sox9,* hereafter referred to as $Sox9^{OE}$). In $Sox9^{OE}$ mice, *RFP* is ubiquitously expressed in all cells unless Cre-mediated excision removes the *RFP* sequence and induces heritable expression of a bicistronic transcript encoding *GFP* and HA-tagged *Sox9* (Figure S3B). Consistent with the propensity of $Ptf1a^{Cre}$ to mostly target acinar cells (Heiser et al., 2008),

(E–K) Tamoxifen (TM) was administered to $Ptf1a^{CreER};Sox9^{f/f};R26R^{YFP}$, $Ptf1a^{CreER};LSL\text{-}Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{+/+};R26R^{YFP}$ and $Ptf1a^{CreER};LSL\text{-}Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{f/f};R26R^{YFP}$ mice at postnatal day (p) 21, 23, and 25 to simultaneously ablate *Sox9* and induce $Kras^{G12D}$ in acinar cells. Mice were analyzed at 8–12 months (mo) of age. (F–H) H&E and Alcian blue staining (I–K) shows almost no PanINs after *Sox9* deletion.

(L–Q) Immunohistochemistry reveals expression of YFP in PanINs in both $Ptf1a^{CreER};Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{+/+};R26R^{YFP}$ and $Ptf1a^{CreER};LSL\text{-}Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{f/f};R26R^{YFP}$ mice (M,N). Sox9 expression in PanINs in the $Sox9^{f/f}$ background indicates lack of $Sox9^{f}$ recombination (Q).

(R–AC) H&E (R–T) and Alcian blue staining (U–W) reveals abundant ADM and PanINs in $Ptf1a^{Cre};LSL\text{-}Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{OE}$, but not in $Ptf1a^{Cre};LSL\text{-}Kras^{G12D}$ or control mice at 3–4 weeks of age. Immunohistochemistry for HA (X–Z) and Sox9 (AA–AC) shows Sox9$^+$ PanINs originating from cells that recombined the $Sox9^{OE}$ transgene.

(AD and AE) Quantification of Alcian blue$^+$ pancreatic area reveals a significant reduction of PanINs after *Sox9* deletion (n = 9) and conversely, an increase after *Sox9* misexpression (n = 5).

(AF) Immunofluorescence staining shows abundant CK19 and little Cpa1 expression in 4-week-old $Ptf1a^{Cre};LSL\text{-}Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{OE}$ mice. Arrow points to CK19$^+$Cpa1$^+$ cell.

Values are shown as mean ± SEM. *$p < 0.05$ and ***$p < 0.001$. Scale bars: 25 μm (A and B), 50 μm (C and D), 100 μm (L–Q, X–AC, and AF), and 500 μm (F–K and R–W). See also Figure S3.

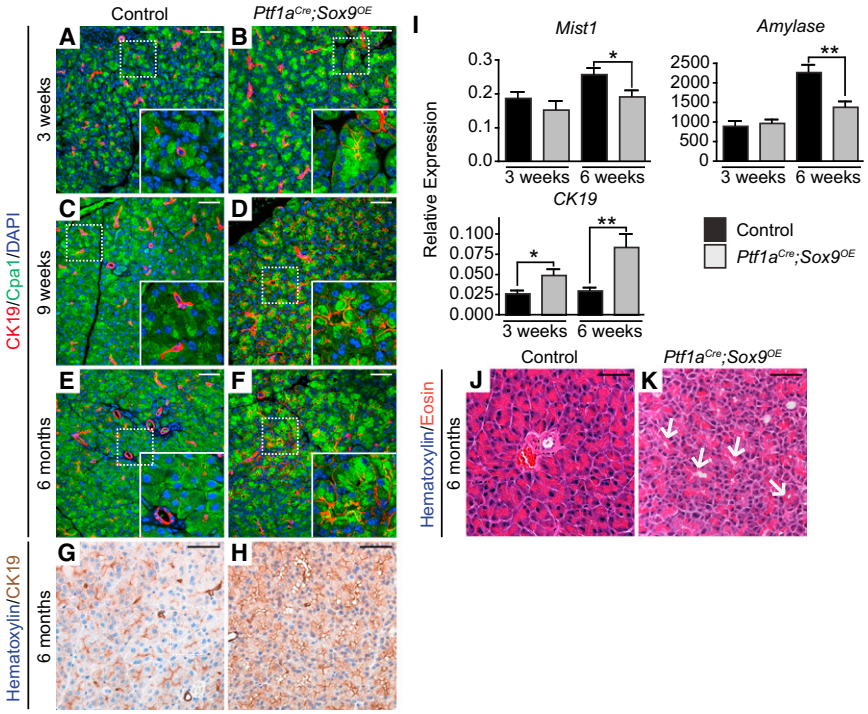

Figure 5. *Sox9* Misexpression Induces Ductal Genes

(A–F) Co-immunofluorescence staining for Cpa1 and CK19 shows CK19$^+$Cpa$^+$ cells in *Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE}* mice (B, D, and F), but not in controls (A, C, and E).

(G and H) Immunohistochemistry for CK19 reveals greater staining intensity in 6-month-old *Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE}* than in control mice.

(I) QRT-PCR analysis of *Mist1*, *amylase*, and *CK19* in whole pancreas RNA from *Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE}* and control mice (n = 5).

(J and K) H&E staining shows acinar clusters with dilated lumens in 6-month-old *Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE}* mice (K, arrows). Values are shown as mean ± SEM. *p < 0.05 and **p < 0.01. Scale bars: 50 μm.

Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE} mice expressed the HA-tag and Sox9 predominantly in acinar cells, whereas ducts and endocrine clusters remained largely unrecombined and retained RFP (Figures S3E–S3G and S3J–S3L). In 3-week-old *Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE}* mice, pancreatic weight, overall tissue morphology and blood glucose levels were similar to control mice (Figures S3C, S3D, S3H, S3I, S3M, and S3N), suggesting that *Ptf1a^{Cre}*-mediated *Sox9* misexpression has no overt effect on pancreatic development.

Similar to *Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE}* mice, *Ptf1a^{Cre};Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{OE}* mice also developed normally until 3 weeks of age (data not shown), but thereafter began to exhibit signs of exocrine insufficiency and changes in gross pancreatic morphology not seen in *Ptf1a^{Cre};Kras^{G12D}* or *Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE}* mice (Figures S3O–S3Q; data not shown). Synergy between *Sox9* and *Kras^{G12D}* was also observed at a microscopic level, as evidenced by replacement of normal pancreas parenchyma by large areas of Sox9$^+$ ADM and Alcian blue$^+$ PanINs in *Ptf1a^{Cre};Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{OE}* mice (Figures 4T, 4W, and 4AC); a phenotype not seen in age-matched *Ptf1a^{Cre};Kras^{G12D}* or control mice (Figures 4R, 4S, 4U, 4V, 4X, 4Y, 4AA, and 4AB). The pancreatic area occupied specifically by Alcian blue$^+$ PanIN lesions was 17-fold greater in *Ptf1a^{Cre};Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{OE}* than in *Ptf1a^{Cre};Kras^{G12D}* mice (Figure 4AE). Detection of the HA-tag in both ADM and PanIN lesions further demonstrated that they arose from cells expressing the *Sox9^{OE}* transgene (Figure 4Z). Because *Ptf1a^{Cre}* predominantly targets acinar cells (Figures S3K and S3L), these findings suggest that concomitant misexpression of *Sox9* and *Kras^{G12D}* rapidly induces transformation of acinar cells into duct-like cells and subsequent PanIN formation. Consistent with this notion, very few cells retained Cpa1 in *Ptf1a^{Cre};Kras^{G12D};Sox9^{OE}* mice and CK19$^+$ ductal structures were predominant (Figure 4AF). Within these structures, few CK19$^+$ cells coexpressed Cpa1 (Figure 4AF, arrows), indicating that most cells had already transitioned from a CK19$^+$Cpa1$^+$ into a CK19$^+$Cpa1$^-$ state characteristic of ADR (De La O et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2010). Together, these results suggest that *Sox9* accelerates *Kras^{G12D}*-mediated PanIN formation by suppressing a mature acinar cell program and/or promoting a duct-like state (Figure S3R).

Sox9 Induces Ductal Genes in Acinar Cells

To determine whether forced expression of *Sox9* in acinar cells induces a duct-like state in the absence of oncogenic Kras, we examined *Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE}* mice for coexpression of CK19 with Cpa1. In *Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE}* mice at 3 weeks of age or older, Cpa1 colocalized with CK19, whereas the two domains remained separate in control mice (Figures 5A–5F). QRT-PCR confirmed the increase in *CK19* and also revealed a decrease in acinar cell-specific genes (Figure 5I). While these molecular changes are indicative of acinar cell de-differentiation, the CK19$^+$Cpa1$^+$ cells largely retained acinar morphology and did not form duct-like structures (Figures 5E–5H, 5J, and 5K). This suggests that *Sox9* expression in acinar cells destabilizes the acinar cell state and promotes expression of ductal genes, but is not sufficient to induce complete ductal reprogramming.

Sox9 Promotes Acinar-to-Ductal Reprogramming and Induces Mucinous Metaplasia after Pancreatic Injury

Although Kras activation induces ADM and PanINs, it does so with considerable latency, which is significantly shortened in the presence of pancreatitis (De La O and Murtaugh, 2009; Guerra et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2010). To test whether Sox9, like oncogenic Kras, requires inflammatory cues to initiate widespread ADM, we induced acute pancreatitis in *Ptf1a^{Cre};Sox9^{OE}* mice. Injection with caerulein on consecutive days (Figure 6A) resulted in loss of acinar morphology and induction of Sox9 and CK19 in a subset of Cpa1$^+$ cells 2 days after treatment (Figures 6C, 6I, and 6O). In control mice, normal pancreatic morphology was restored after 7 days and CK19 and Sox9 expression was again restricted to ductal cells (Figures 6B, 6D, 6H, 6J, 6N, and

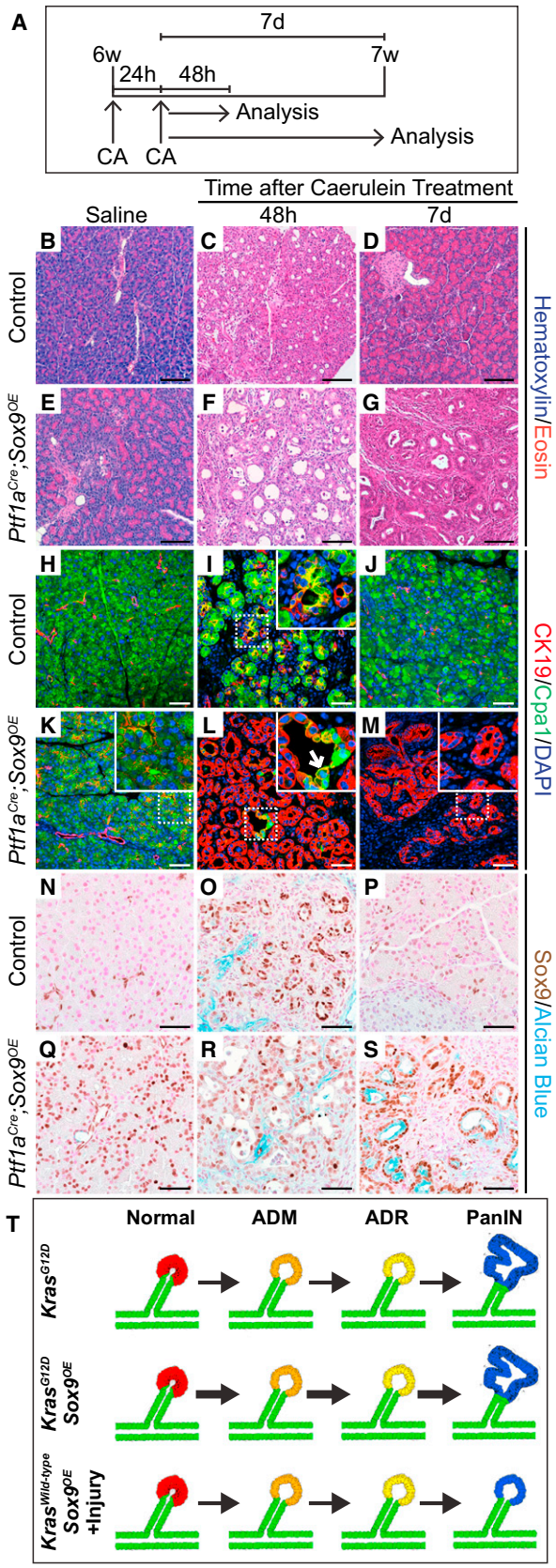

Figure 6. *Sox9* Promotes Persistent ADR and Formation of Mucinous Metaplastic Lesions after Acute Pancreatitis

(A) Six-week-old *Ptf1a*^{Cre};*Sox9*^{OE} and control mice were treated with two sets of caerulein (CA) or saline injections on consecutive days and analyzed 48 hr (h) or 7 days (d) later. Saline-treated mice were analyzed at 21 days.

(B–G) H&E staining reveals persistent ADM in *Ptf1a*^{Cre};*Sox9*^{OE} mice (G).

(H–M) Co-immunofluorescence staining for CK19 and Cpa1 shows a few CK19^{+}Cpa1^{+} (L, arrow) 48 hr after CA and mainly CK19^{+}Cpa1^{-} cells after 7 days (M) in *Ptf1a*^{Cre};*Sox9*^{OE} mice.

(N–S) Immunohistochemistry for Sox9 and Alcian blue staining shows Sox9^{+}Alcian blue^{+} mucinous metaplastic lesions in *Ptf1a*^{Cre};*Sox9*^{OE} mice (S) but not in control mice (P) 7 days after CA.

(T) Schematic summarizing the phenotypes of *Sox9* misexpressing mice in the presence and absence of *Kras*^{G12D} or acute pancreatitis. w, weeks. Scale bars: 100 μm (B–G) and 50 μm (H–S).

See also Figure S4.

6P). Two days after caerulein administration, *Ptf1a*^{Cre};*Sox9*^{OE} mice displayed more severe ductal metaplasia than control mice (Figures 6C and 6F) with numerous CK19^{+}Cpa1^{-} and Sox9^{+} cell clusters (Figures 6L and 6R). After 7 days, acinar morphology was not restored and CK19^{+}Cpa1^{-} ductal structures characteristic of ADR persisted (Figures 6E–6G, 6K–6M, and 6Q–6S). These findings show that *Sox9* misexpression is sufficient to promote reprogramming of acinar cells into a persistent duct-like state after pancreatic injury. Interestingly, a subset of the persistent ductal structures that arose from cells expressing the *Sox9*^{OE} transgene were Sox9^{+}Alcian blue^{+} (Figures S4A–S4G and 6S). These lesions displayed morphologic similarity to mucinous lesions observed in a chronic pancreatitis model (Strobel et al., 2007) with little cellular atypia and low amounts of acidic mucins compared to Kras^{G12D}-induced PanINs. Since acute pancreatitis alone is not sufficient to induce mucinous duct-like lesions, our data suggest that persistent expression of Sox9 in acinar cells in the context of tissue injury can initiate a cell state with some characteristics of mucinous PDA precursor lesions (Figure 6T).

Sox9 Is Not Absolutely Required for Injury-Induced Acinar-to-Ductal Metaplasia but Is Necessary for Further Progression into PanINs

Deletion of *Sox9* in the presence of oncogenic *Kras* completely blocked *Kras*^{G12D}-mediated changes in pancreas morphology, including the development of ADM and PanINs (Figures 4E–4Q). However, it remains unclear whether pancreatic injury can still induce ADM and premalignant lesions in the absence of *Sox9*. To address this question, we deleted *Sox9* in acinar cells and examined pancreata for ADM after caerulein treatment (Figure S4H). As expected, control mice exhibited transient ADM characterized by ectopic Sox9 and CK19 expression in acinar cells 2 days after caerulein treatment (Figures S4J, S4P, and S4V, arrows). Similar lesions devoid of Sox9 were found in caerulein-treated *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*Sox9*$^{f/f}$ mice (Figures 4M, 4S, and 4Y, arrows), suggesting that Sox9 activity is not absolutely required to initiate ADM. In both control and *Sox9*-deleted mice, areas of ADM were replaced by normal acinar tissue after 7 days (Figures S4I, S4K, S4L, S4N, S4O, S4Q, S4R, S4T, S4U, S4W, S4X, and S4Z). These data suggest that pancreatic injury can induce ADM-initiating cues independent of *Sox9*.

The finding that pancreatitis causes ADM even in the absence of *Sox9* raises the question of whether *Sox9*-deleted acinar cells can undergo ADR and form PanINs if expression of oncogenic

Kras is combined with pancreatic injury. To first examine whether *Sox9* is necessary for $Kras^{G12D}$-mediated ADR, we deleted *Sox9* and activated $Kras^{G12D}$ expression in $Ptf1a^{CreER}$;$Kras^{G12D}$;$Sox9^{f/f}$ mice at 3 weeks of age and induced acute pancreatitis 3 weeks later (Figures 7A and S5A). Because Kras had only been active for 6 weeks, PanINs were still rare in $Ptf1a^{CreER}$;$Kras^{G12D}$;$Sox9^{+/+}$ mice in the absence of caerulein (Figure 7G). Caerulein induced widespread formation of $Sox9^{+}$ ADM in $Ptf1a^{CreER}$;$Sox9^{+/+}$ and $Ptf1a^{CreER}$;$Kras^{G12D}$;$Sox9^{+/+}$ mice within 2 days after treatment (Figures 7B, 7C, 7G, 7H, S5B, S5C, S5E, and S5F). Notably, in *Sox9*-deleted $Ptf1a^{CreER}$;$Kras^{G12D}$;$Sox9^{f/f}$ pancreata, $Sox9^{-}$ duct-like structures were still present (Figures 7L, 7M, S5H, and S5I, arrows), confirming our previous observation that *Sox9* is not absolutely required for injury-induced ADM. As expected, ADM was transient in the absence of $Kras^{G12D}$ and the ductal structures were replaced by $Cpa1^{+}$ acini after 21 days (Figures 7B, 7D, 7E, S5B, and S5D). In contrast, Kras-active $Ptf1a^{CreER}$;$Kras^{G12D}$;$Sox9^{+/+}$ mice displayed persistent $Sox9^{+}$ ADM (Figures 7I and S5G, arrows), $CK19^{+}Cpa1^{-}$ duct-like structures (Figure 7J, arrow), as well as numerous $Sox9^{+}$ lesions with morphologic characteristics of PanINs (Figures 7J, 7K, and S5G, arrowheads). Significantly, *Sox9* deletion in the presence of oncogenic Kras abrogated caerulein-induced PanIN formation, while some $Sox9^{-}CK19^{+}Cpa1^{-}$ duct-like lesions persisted (Figures 7N, 7O, and S5J, arrows). Consistent with these findings, numerous Alcian $blue^{+}$ cells were detected in $Ptf1a^{CreER}$;$Kras^{G12D}$;$Sox9^{+/+}$ mice, but virtually none in $Ptf1a^{CreER}$;$Kras^{G12D}$;$Sox9^{f/f}$ mice (Figures 7F, 7K, 7P, and 7Q). Remaining Alcian $blue^{+}$ lesions in $Ptf1a^{CreER}$;$Kras^{G12D}$;$Sox9^{f/f}$ mice were $Sox9^{+}$ (Figures S5K–S5M) and therefore escaped recombination. Together, these findings show that pancreatic injury can, at least partially, overcome the block in ADM caused by *Sox9* inactivation in Kras-active acinar cells, but cannot induce PanINs in the absence of *Sox9* (Figure 7R). Thus, *Sox9* is critically required for reprogramming of acini into PanINs.

DISCUSSION

The Cellular Origin of PanINs

Our study demonstrates that acinar cells exhibit a much higher propensity to form PanINs after oncogenic mutation of *Kras* than ductal or CACs. This finding was surprising, because PDA has been suggested to originate from CACs due to shared molecular features between PanINs and CACs. Notably, although exceedingly low in frequency, PanINs were observed after *Sox9CreER*-mediated $Kras^{G12D}$ activation. Since the *Sox9CreER* transgene also induces recombination in a small number of acinar cells, one possibility is that these rare PanINs originated from acinar cells that recombined the $Kras^{G12D}$ allele. However, we observed that the PanINs were predominantly associated with large pancreatic ducts, which argues against an acinar origin. A similar association of PanINs with large ducts has been described in $CK19^{CreER}$;$Kras^{G12D}$ mice, a model in which recombination is mainly induced in large ducts and not in small ducts or CACs (Ray et al., 2011). Together, these observations suggest that large pancreatic ducts, but not CACs, can give rise to PanINs, albeit at an extremely low frequency.

The location of PanINs close to large ducts points to a possible involvement of pancreatic duct glands in PanIN formation. Pancreatic duct glands are small blind-ended pouches within the larger pancreatic ducts that express embryonic progenitor markers, proliferate in response to pancreatitis, and display some metaplastic features similar to PanINs even in the absence of oncogenic mutations (Strobel et al., 2010). These features may render pancreatic duct glands susceptible to transformation by oncogenic Kras. The scarcity of pancreatic duct glands within the organ could explain why despite targeting of duct glands by the *Sox9CreER* transgene (Kopp et al., 2011), PanIN frequency was extremely low in *Sox9CreER*;$Kras^{G12D}$ mice. Of note, because recombination was only induced in 12% of all $Sox9^{+}$ cells by our tamoxifen regimen, the duct glands may not have been targeted in every mouse, which is consistent with the absence of PanINs in a subset of *Sox9CreER*;$Kras^{G12D}$ mice. At present, very little is known about the biological role of pancreatic duct glands, but their possible involvement in PDA initiation warrants further investigation.

Our finding that ductal and CACs do not readily form PanINs in response to oncogenic Kras raises the question of whether the ductal/CAC compartment is generally refractory to oncogenic transformation. In addition to activating mutations in *KRAS*, loss-of-function mutations in the tumor suppressors TP53, CDKN2A, or PTEN have also been found in PDA (Feldmann et al., 2007; Kanda et al., 2012; Ying et al., 2011). Notably, *Pten* loss results in rapid formation of invasive carcinoma, which is preceded by significant expansion of CACs (Stanger et al., 2005). This suggests that CACs, ductal cells and acinar cells may have the potential to initiate invasive carcinoma, but that each cellular context may require a different repertoire of genetic alterations for tumor initiation. Cell-specific induction of different oncogenic mutations in mice may define morphologically and molecularly distinct tumors, which may help identify human PDA subtypes that respond differently to therapeutic intervention.

Duct-Associated Genes Orchestrate the Emergence of Premalignant Lesions from Acinar Cells

Our cell tracing studies show that the predominant mechanism by which $Kras^{G12D}$ induces PanINs is to initiate a gene expression program similar to pancreatic ducts in acinar cells. We further show that the transcription factor Sox9 promotes, and is required for, PanIN formation from the acinar cell compartment. Recent studies have revealed a role for *Sox9* in maintaining ductal cell morphology and regulating duct-specific genes (Delous et al., 2012; Manfroid et al., 2012; Shih et al., 2012), suggesting that Sox9 might have a similar function during acinar cell conversion into PanINs. Consistent with this notion, we found that Sox9 induces *CK19* expression and promotes ADR in the presence of $Kras^{G12D}$ or pancreatic injury. Furthermore, a role for *Sox9* in conferring certain ductal characteristics to cells has recently been demonstrated in a model of surgically-induced pancreatitis (Prevot et al., 2012). While *Sox9* promotes ADM and ADR in gain-of-function experiments, our results show that tissue injury can still, to some extent, induce ADM from *Sox9*-deficient acinar cells. This suggests that other factors can compensate for Sox9 during injury-induced ADM. One candidate is the duct-specific transcription factor Hnf6, which is

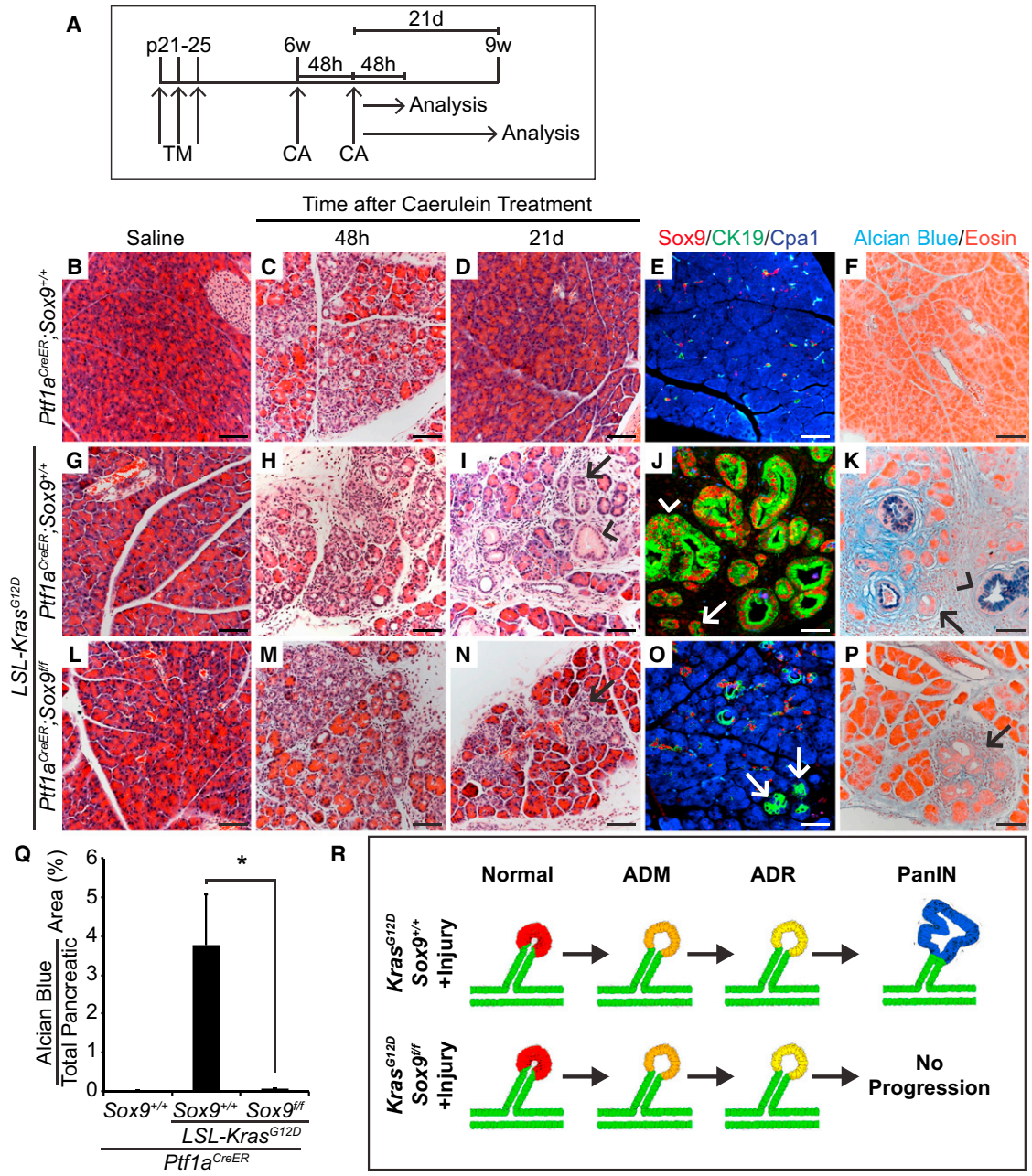

Figure 7. *Sox9*-Deficient Acinar Cells Expressing Kras^{G12D} Can Undergo Persistent ADR after Acute Pancreatitis, but Do Not Progress into PanINs

(A) *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*Sox9*$^{+/+}$, *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*Sox9*$^{+/+}$ and *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*Sox9*$^{f/f}$ mice were injected with tamoxifen (TM) at postnatal day (p) 21, 23, and 25. At 6 weeks (w) of age, mice were treated with two sets of caerulein (CA) or saline injections on alternating days and analyzed 48 hr (h) or 21 days (d) later.

(B–D, G–I, and L–N) H&E staining shows persistent ADM in *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*Sox9*$^{+/+}$ and to a lesser extent also in *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*Sox9*$^{f/f}$ mice (I and N, arrows). PanINs are only present in *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*Sox9*$^{+/+}$ mice (I), arrowhead).

(E, J, and O) Co-immunofluorescence staining for CK19, Cpa1, and Sox9 reveals CK19^{+}Cpa1^{-} duct-like cell clusters in *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D} mice in the presence and absence of *Sox9* (J and O, arrows).

(F, K, and P) Alcian blue and eosin staining shows PanINs in *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*Sox9*$^{+/+}$ mice (K), but not in *Ptf1a*^{CreER};*LSL-Kras*^{G12D};*Sox9*$^{f/f}$ mice (P). Arrows in K and P point to ADM and arrowheads in J and K to PanINs.

(Q) Quantification of Alcian blue^{+} pancreatic area 21 days after CA (n = 4–5).

(R) Schematic summarizing the phenotype observed in *Sox9* loss-of-function experiments in the presence of *Kras*^{G12D} and acute pancreatitis. Values are shown as mean ± SEM. *p < 0.05. Scale bars: 50 μm.

See also Figure S5.

induced in acinar cells by pancreatic injury and is both necessary and sufficient for ADM (Prevot et al., 2012). In the absence of *Sox9*, however, Hnf6 is less efficient in inducing CK19 (Prevot et al., 2012), suggesting synergy between Hnf6 and Sox9 during ductal conversion of acinar cells. Different from Sox9, Hnf6 expression is not maintained in PanINs and PDA (Prevot et al., 2012). Therefore, only Sox9 expression is sustained in PanINs, providing a possible explanation for why Sox9 is absolutely required for PanIN formation.

Acinar-derived duct-like lesions and pancreatic ducts display similar molecular and morphological features, yet PanINs emerge more readily from acinar-derived duct-like cells than ductal cells. This implies that duct-like lesions differ from native pancreatic ducts. The transcription factors Sox9, Hnf6, and Hes1 are not only markers for pancreatic ductal cells, but are also expressed in multipotent progenitors of the developing pancreas (Jacquemin et al., 2003; Miyamoto et al., 2003; Seymour et al., 2007), raising the question of whether ADM is truly ductal in nature or more closely resembles embryonic progenitors. Previous studies have suggested that ADM lesions are similar to immature embryonic progenitor-like cells because they express Pdx1, Nestin, and Hes1 (Jensen et al., 2005; Miyamoto et al., 2003; Shi et al., 2012; Song et al., 1999). However, multipotent progenitor markers, such as Hnf1b and Nkx6.1 (Schaffer et al., 2010; Solar et al., 2009), are not present in acinar-derived duct-like cells (Jensen et al., 2005; Prevot et al., 2012) indicating that these cells may resemble an acinar-committed yet still immature Nestin-positive progenitor cell (Carrière et al., 2007; Esni et al., 2004). Comparative transcriptome analysis of these different native and transformed cell populations will shed light on the molecular differences between these populations and could provide clues as to why PanINs readily emerge from acinar cells, but not ducts, in response to oncogenic Kras.

The Role of Acinar-to-Ductal Metaplasia in the Initiation of Pancreatic Neoplasia

Our finding that PanINs predominantly originate from acinar cells identifies the transition of acinar cells into a duct-like state as an important early event in tumor initiation. In addition to induction of ductal genes, destabilization of the acinar cell phenotype appears to also promote ADM and PanINs, as evidenced by an acceleration in $Kras^{G12D}$-mediated ADM and PanIN formation after deletion of the acinar-restricted transcription factor *Mist1* (Shi et al., 2009, 2012). This suggests that the observed synergy between oncogenic Kras and *Sox9* misexpression or pancreatic injury in PanIN initiation might be a result of each condition increasing acinar cell plasticity. Therefore, known risk factors for PDA, such as chronic pancreatitis or genetic variants of acinar-specific genes (Li et al., 2012; Lowenfels et al., 1993, 1997), may increase PDA risk by rendering acinar cells more plastic and reducing the threshold for ADM. It is important to note that a direct lineage relationship between ADM and PanINs has yet to be formally demonstrated and the possibility remains that ADM lesions do not directly transition into PanINs. However, it is clear that both ADM and PanIN lesions arise from acinar cells (Guerra et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2010) and that reducing ADM formation through inhibition of the EGFR pathway or overexpression of pro-acinar genes reduces $Kras^{G12D}$-induced PanINs (Ardito et al., 2012; Navas et al., 2012; Shi et al., 2012). This suggests that pathways critical for ADM are also necessary for PanIN formation.

Our results imply that therapeutic targeting of signaling pathways involved in ductal reprogramming of acinar cells could prevent PDA initiation. Previous studies have demonstrated that the EGFR, Hedgehog and Notch signaling pathways promote ADM and PanIN formation (De La O et al., 2008; Fendrich et al., 2008; Miyamoto et al., 2003; Pasca di Magliano et al., 2006; Rajurkar et al., 2012; Siveke et al., 2007). Interestingly, these pathways are known to be upstream regulators of *Sox9* expression in multiple organs (Bien-Willner et al., 2007; Haller et al., 2012; Ling et al., 2010; Meier-Stiegen et al., 2010; Muto et al., 2009; Zong et al., 2009). Moreover, Notch signaling has recently been shown to control *Sox9* expression and induce ductal genes in the pancreas (Delous et al., 2012; Manfroid et al., 2012; Shih et al., 2012). Therefore, it is possible that Sox9 is the critical effector of Notch during PanIN induction. Consistent with this notion, inhibition of Notch signaling in the presence of oncogenic Kras reduced PanIN formation (Plentz et al., 2009), similar to *Sox9* inactivation in our current study. However, it remains to be examined how inputs from different signaling pathways converge on Sox9 to promote PanIN initiation. Our findings now pave the way for future studies exploring whether the inhibition of acinar cell plasticity could have therapeutic applications in the prophylaxis of PDA in high-risk individuals.

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

Mouse Procedures

All animal experiments described herein were approved by the University of California, San Diego and San Francisco Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees. The sources for mouse strains as well as genotyping and glucose measurement strategies are described in the Supplemental Experimental Procedures. Tamoxifen (Sigma-Aldrich) was dissolved in corn oil and administered subcutaneously at 5 mg/40 g per injection. Mice were injected with caerulein (50 μg/kg diluted in saline; Sigma-Aldrich) or saline on two alternating days once every hour for 6 hours each day (used in experiments with $Kras^{G12D}$ mice) or on two consecutive days once every hour for 8 hours each day (used in experiments in absence of $Kras^{G12D}$ allele) (Morris et al., 2010).

Histology, Immunohistochemical and Immunofluorescence Analysis

Paraffin-embedded or frozen sections were subjected to hematoxylin (Mayers or Harris formulations), eosin, Alcian blue, nuclear fast red (Vector Labs), immunohistochemical or immunofluorescence staining as described (Morris et al., 2010; Seymour et al., 2007, 2008). Detailed procedures for histologic and morphometric analyses, as well as a list of primary and secondary antibodies can be found in the Supplemental Experimental Procedures.

Statistical Analysis

P values were calculated using the two-tailed Student's t test with the GraphPad Prism or Excel software.

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Supplemental Information includes five figures, one table, and Supplemental Experimental Procedures and can be found with this article online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ccr.2012.10.025.

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