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1                   Influence of antenatal vitamin D status on the  
2 morphometric and mechanical properties of mouse tibia

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28

## 1 **Abstract**

2 There are increasing evidences that a low level of antenatal vitamin D is linked to a  
3 smaller bone size in childhood as well as an increased bone fracture risk later in  
4 adulthood, independently of the later vitamin D status. In this study, the hypothesis  
5 that the antenatal vitamin D depletion results in reduced responses to mechanical  
6 loading and consequently reductions in bone stiffness and strength during both  
7 childhood and adulthood was tested using animal models. C57BL/6J mice were used  
8 to generate the vitamin D replete and deplete dams. Their 8-week-old and  
9 16-week-old offspring were used and the left tibiae were mechanically loaded *in vivo*  
10 for two weeks. Then, both tibiae were dissected and scanned using a  $\mu$ CT imaging  
11 system. The  $\mu$ CT images were used for the calculations of tibial morphometric and  
12 mechanical parameters. It was found that for the 10-week-old offspring, the antenatal  
13 vitamin D replete marked increased the Tb.BV/TV, Tb.Th, Ct.Th, bone stiffness and  
14 failure load, decreased Tb.Sp and Ct.MA in the loaded tibiae, but only markedly  
15 increased Tb.Sp and Ct.MA in the non-loaded tibiae. For the 18-week-old offspring,  
16 the antenatal vitamin D status has a minimal effect on bone morphometric and  
17 mechanical parameters. These data implies that only during the childhood, antenatal  
18 vitamin D repletion results in increased responses to mechanical loading. This study  
19 emphasis the importance of enough vitamin D supply during pregnancy and physical  
20 activities during childhood for increasing the bone quality.

21

## 1 **1. Introduction**

2 Osteoporosis is a skeletal disorder characterized by increased bone fragility and  
3 fracture. Currently 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men aged 50-year-old and over  
4 experience an osteoporotic fracture. Hip fractures are associated with a 36% increased  
5 mortality in the first year after fracture [**Hendricks et al., 2015**]. Bone fragility  
6 fractures account for a significant cause of morbidity and mortality in the elderly  
7 [**Ensrud, 2013**].

8 To minimize the bone fracture risk, physical activity is widely discussed as a  
9 promising noninvasive preventive measure to maintain bone mass and structure in the  
10 elderly [**Kohrt et al., 1997; Kerr et al., 1996**]. In addition, vitamin D plays a  
11 significant role in bone growth and development. Previous studies have demonstrated  
12 that offspring from maternal vitamin D deficient mother has a decreased femur  
13 volume [**Loannou et al., 2012**], a decreased bone mineral content [**Viljakainen et al.,**  
14 **2010**] and a lower bone mass at birth [**Weiler et al., 2005**] compared to normal ones.  
15 Furthermore, the infants, who have reduced bone mineral contents at birth due to the  
16 maternal vitamin D depletion, also has a reduced bone quality in the periods of both  
17 childhood [**Javaid et al., 2006**] and adulthood [**Zhu et al., 2014**]. In contrast, infants  
18 with greater birth weights have higher bone mass and a reduced risk of hip fracture in  
19 the adult life [**Baird et al., 2011; Cooper et al., 2001**]. All these previous findings  
20 imply that the status of antenatal vitamin D has an impact on bone quality of offspring  
21 during childhood, and this effect may subsequently influence the bone quality during  
22 adulthood, the development of osteoporosis and the risk of bone fracture. However,  
23 there are no reported data on the combined effect of maternal vitamin D status and  
24 mechanical loading on the bone quality of offspring at the stages of both childhood  
25 and adulthood.

26 The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of antenatal vitamin D  
27 status on the mechanically loaded and non-loaded mouse tibiae during the periods of  
28 both continuing skeletal growth (childhood) and completed skeletal growth  
29 (adulthood) using *in vivo* mechanical loading,  $\mu$ CT imaging and finite element

1 analysis.

2

## 3 **2. Materials and Method**

### 4 **2.1. Animals, *in vivo* mechanical loading, $\mu$ CT imaging and image processing**

5 C57BL/6J mice were used to generate vitamin D replete and deplete dams, who went  
6 on to deliver litters that remained on the maternal diet until weaning (**Fig.1**),  
7 mimicking the common situation of vitamin D exposure in humans. In brief,  
8 four-week-old C57BL/6J mice were purchased and housed in the same condition  
9 based on the standard procedures, which complied with the UK Animals Act 1986 and  
10 were reviewed and approved by the Local Research Ethics Committee of the  
11 University of Sheffield. The mice were fed with a vitamin D supplemented diet (1000  
12 units/kg) or vitamin D free diet from 4-week-old. At 10-week-old, female mice were  
13 mated with Vitamin D normal adult males. Dams remained on their respective diets  
14 throughout gestation until pup weaning. Offspring (n = 24) remained with their dams  
15 until weaning at day 22 whereupon they were weaned onto the Vitamin D replete diet.

16 A non-invasive method of *in vivo* tibia loading was used to examine the bone  
17 responses to mechanical loading. 8-week-old and 16-week-old offspring from both  
18 vitamin D replete and deplete groups were used (**Fig.1**). The ages were chosen to  
19 reflect the periods of either continuing or completed skeletal growth. Two-week (3  
20 times/week) *in vivo* cyclic compressive loading was performed on the left tibia, while  
21 the contralateral non-loaded limb (right tibia) was served as an internal control for  
22 mechanical loading. A 10.5N dynamic load was superimposed onto a 0.5N preload at  
23 a rate of 160000 N/s. The *in vivo* loading protocol consisted of 40  
24 trapezoidal-waveform load cycles (0.2 second hold at 11N) with a 10 second interval  
25 between each cycle. The peak load of 11N was selected because this is known to  
26 induce an osteogenic response in female C57BL/6J mice [**De Souza et al., 2005;**  
27 **Willie et al., 2013**]. After the mechanical loading, both left and right tibiae were  
28 dissected from the 10-week-old and 18-week-old offspring and were frozen at -20 °C  
29 (**Fig.1**). Based on the age of the offspring and the status of mechanical loading, the

1 tibiae were classified into 4 groups: loaded tibiae from 10-week-old offspring  
2 ('10week+11N'); non-loaded tibiae from 10-week-old offspring ('10week+0N');  
3 loaded tibiae from 18-week-old offspring ('18week+11N'); non-loaded tibiae from  
4 18-week-old offspring ('18week+0N') (**Fig.1**). There are 6 mice in each group.

5 The entire tibiae were scanned using a  $\mu$ CT imaging system (SkyScan desktop  
6 1172) at the resolution of 10.0  $\mu$ m, a voltage of 50 kV and a tube current of 200  $\mu$ A.  
7 The  $\mu$ CT images were prepared for the morphometric and finite element analysis  
8 (**Fig.2**) (Amira 5.4.3). In brief, one left tibia from 10-week-old offspring was selected  
9 as the 'reference'. Its long (proximal-distal) axis was approximately aligned along the  
10 z-axis and the y-z plane passed through the central line of the articular surfaces of the  
11 medical and lateral condyles (**Fig. 2b**). To ensure that all the tibiae were aligned  
12 approximately in the same orientation, other left tibiae were aligned to the 'reference'  
13 tibia through the method of rigid registration. For the right tibiae, they were mirrored  
14 first, and then were aligned to the 'reference' through rigid registration (**Fig. 2d and**  
15 **e**). After transformation, all the image datasets were resampled using the Lanczos  
16 kernel, which is a low-pass filter considered to be the 'best compromise' among  
17 several simple filters [**Turkowski et al., 1990**].

## 18 **2.2. The standard bone morphometric analysis**

19 From the transformed  $\mu$ CT images, standard morphometric analysis on the trabecular  
20 and cortical bone regions were performed. For the analysis of trabecular bone, a  
21 region of 1.0 mm height, which is 0.2 mm below the proximal tibial growth plate, was  
22 chosen (**Fig.2f**). For the analysis of cortical bone, a region of 1.0 mm height in the  
23 tibial midshaft was chosen (**Fig.2f**). From the regions of interest, the following 3D  
24 bone morphometric parameters were generated: trabecular bone volume fraction  
25 (BV/TV), trabecular number (Tb.N), trabecular separation (Tb.Sp) and trabecular  
26 thickness (Tb.Th), cortical thickness (Ct.Th) and cortical marrow area (Ct.MA).

## 27 **2.3. The finite element analysis**

28 Heterogeneous finite element models of mouse tibiae were generated from the  
29 transformed  $\mu$ CT images (**Fig. 2g**). The grayscale image dataset was smoothed with a  
30 Gaussian filter (convolution kernel [3 3 3], standard deviation = 0.65) and then

1 binarised into bone and background using a fixed single level threshold, i.e. 25.5% of  
2 maximal grayscale value (approximately 420 mg HA/ccm) [Klinck et al., 2008]. The  
3 single threshold method cannot completely segment tibia, because the entire lower  
4 limb was imaged and other bones, such as femur, were also present in the images.  
5 Therefore, the tibia and fibula were further manually segmented from other bones  
6 (Amira 5.4.3, FEI Visualization Sciences Group, France). The tibial-fibula joint and  
7 the tibial proximal growth plate region were manually filled to allow the transmission  
8 of loading. From the binarised tibia-fibula images, the  $\mu$ FE model was created by  
9 converting each bone voxel into hexahedron using an in-house developed Matlab  
10 code (Matlab 2015a, The Mathworks, Inc. USA) [Chen et al., 2014] (Fig. 2). The  
11 bone Young's modulus (E) for each bone voxel was calculated from the grayscale  
12 value of that bone voxel. In details, the Hydroxyapatite (HA)-equivalent bone tissue  
13 mineral density was calculated at each  $\mu$ CT image voxel using the relationship  
14 provided by the calibration phantom and then converted into Young's modulus using  
15 the established bone density-modulus relationship. In this study, the following  
16 exponential bone density-modulus relationship [Easley et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2014]  
17 was used:

$$E = \begin{cases} 0.0104, & \rho < 0.4 \\ 1.127 \cdot 10^{-4} (1000 \cdot \rho)^{1.746} & 0.4 \leq \rho \leq 1.2 \\ 1.127 \cdot 10^{-4} 1200^{1.746} & \rho > 1.2 \end{cases}$$

18 where, E is the Young's modulus (unit in GPa) and  $\rho$  is the bone tissue mineral density  
19 (unit in g HA/cm<sup>3</sup>).

20 The calculated image voxel-level moduli were mapped to the FE meshes using  
21 an in-house developed Matlab code. Poisson's ratio for each bone element is set to 0.3.  
22 The boundary condition applied in the FE models was chosen to mimic the  
23 experiment set-up used for the *in vivo* loading of mouse tibia. All nodes on the  
24 concave articular surface of the distal tibia were coupled to a distal RP and all degrees  
25 of freedom were fixed at the distal RP. The FE nodes at the contact surfaces on the  
26 tibial plateau were rigidly coupled to a proximal reference point (RP) and a uniaxial  
27 displacement of 0.05mm was applied (Fig. 2g). Totally, 48 tibial FE models (12 per  
28 group and both left and right tibiae) were generated. The models were solved on a

1 workstation (Intel Xeon E-5-2670. 2.60 GHz, 256 GB RAM). The tibial compressive  
2 stiffness was calculated as the total reaction forces divided by the applied  
3 displacement. The tibial failure load was estimated as the amount of force in order for  
4 the first principal strain to reach 7300  $\mu\epsilon$  or the third principal strain to reach 10300  
5  $\mu\epsilon$  [Bayraktar et al., 2004]. During the calculation, the most proximal 1.2mm region  
6 and the most distal 0.6mm region were excluded to remove the influence of boundary  
7 conditions on the results.

#### 8 **2.4. Statistical analysis**

9 ANOVA test was used to compare the parameters between the Vitamin D replete and  
10 the Vitamin D deficient groups. Analysis was performed using SPSS, and the  
11 probability of type I error was set to  $\alpha=0.05$ , i.e.,  $p < 0.05$  was considered statistically  
12 significant.

13

### 14 **3. Results**

15 The influence of antenatal vitamin D status on bone morphometric parameters is  
16 shown in **Figures 3 and 4**. The antenatal vitamin D depletion significantly reduced  
17 Tb.BV/TV only in the loaded tibiae of 10-week-old offspring, i.e., in the group of  
18 ‘10week+11N’ (**Fig.3a**). The antenatal vitamin D status has minimal effect on Tb.N  
19 (**Fig.3b**). The antenatal vitamin D depletion significantly reduced the Tb.Th only in  
20 the loaded tibiae of 10-week-old offspring (**Fig.3c**). The antenatal vitamin D depletion  
21 significantly increased Tb.Sp only in both mechanical loaded and non-loaded tibiae of  
22 10-week-old offspring (**Fig.3d**). For the cortical bone, the antenatal vitamin D  
23 depletion significantly reduced Ct.Th only in the loaded tibiae of 10-week-old  
24 offspring (**Fig.4a**). The antenatal vitamin D depletion significantly increased Ct.MA  
25 in both mechanical loaded and non-loaded tibiae of 10-week-old offspring and in the  
26 loaded tibiae of 18-week-old offspring (**Fig.4b**).

27 The influence of antenatal vitamin D status on bone mechanical parameters is  
28 shown in **Figure 5**. It is shown that the antenatal vitamin D depletion significantly  
29 reduced tibial stiffness and failure load only in the loaded tibiae of 10-week-old



1 offspring.

2

### 3 **4. Discussion and conclusion**

4 The aim of this study was to test the hypothesis that antenatal vitamin D status may be  
5 responsible for altered bone responses to postnatal mechanical loading, may have a  
6 major influence on bone quality (bone volume ratio, stiffness, strength, etc.), and thus  
7 may act as a determinant for later bone quality.

8 First, in this study, it is revealed that, in response to mechanical loading, the  
9 effect of antenatal vitamin D status on bone parameters is different during the period  
10 of continuing skeletal growth and during the period of completed skeletal growth.  
11 During the period of continuing skeletal growth, in response to mechanical loading,  
12 Tb.BV/TV, Tb.Th, Ct.Th, bone stiffness and failure load were markedly increased,  
13 Tb.Sp and Ct.MA were markedly decreased in the loaded tibia of offspring from  
14 antenatal vitamin D replete dams. During the period of completed skeletal growth, in  
15 response to mechanical loading, only Ct.MA was significantly increased in the loaded  
16 tibiae of offspring from antenatal vitamin D replete dams. This is in agreement with  
17 previous studies that the aged skeleton is less responsive to the mechanical activity  
18 [Birkhold et al., 2014; Holguin et al., 2014; Lynch et al., 2011], but for the first  
19 time, the combined effect of vitamin D status and mechanical loading on bone quality  
20 in young and aged mice was investigated in the present study. The data revealed that  
21 mechanical loading that results in bone gain in younger individuals are not able to  
22 elicit the same beneficial responses in older individuals. Such observation is of  
23 general importance to any preventive training concept that aims at maintaining bone  
24 structure in aged individuals.

25 Second, it is revealed that the influence of antenatal vitamin D status on bone  
26 parameters was different in the mechanically loaded and non-loaded tibiae. In the  
27 mechanically loaded tibiae, Tb.BV/TV, Tb.Th, Ct.Th, bone stiffness and failure load  
28 were increased in the 10-week-old offspring from antenatal vitamin D replete dams.  
29 In the non-loaded tibiae, the antenatal vitamin D status had a minimal influence on

1 bone morphometric and mechanical parameters. These data imply that vitamin D  
2 status alone cannot make alternations to bone quality. Only after the application of  
3 cyclic mechanical loading, more bone appositions were stimulated in the offspring  
4 from antenatal vitamin D replete dams compared to those from the antenatal vitamin  
5 D deficient dams.

6 In summary, it is revealed that the influence of antenatal vitamin D status on the  
7 bone of offspring was only during the period of continuing skeletal growth when the  
8 mechanical loading was applied. These data reveal that for increasing the bone quality  
9 (bone volume ratio, bone strength, etc.), it is important for the dams to have enough  
10 vitamin D during pregnancy and for the offspring to do enough physical exercise  
11 during childhood.

12

### 13 **Conflict of interest statement**

14 The authors declare that there are no financial or personal relationships with  
15 other persons or organizations that might inappropriately influence this work.

16

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23

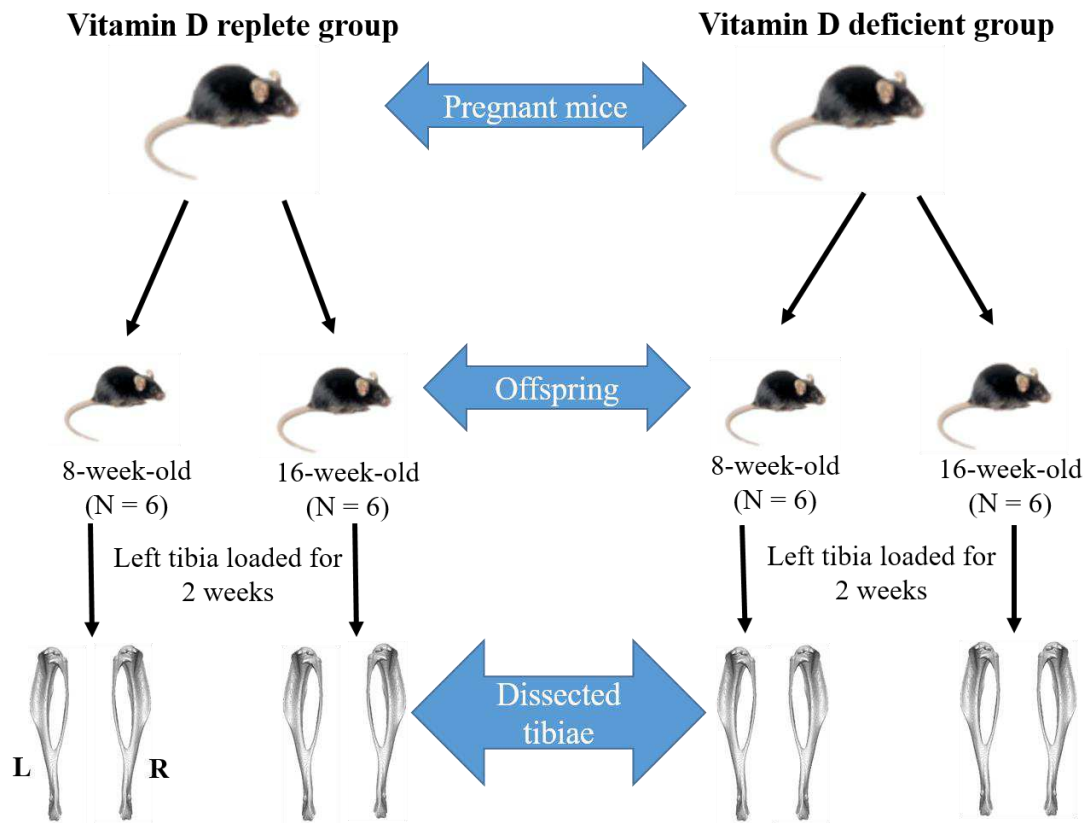
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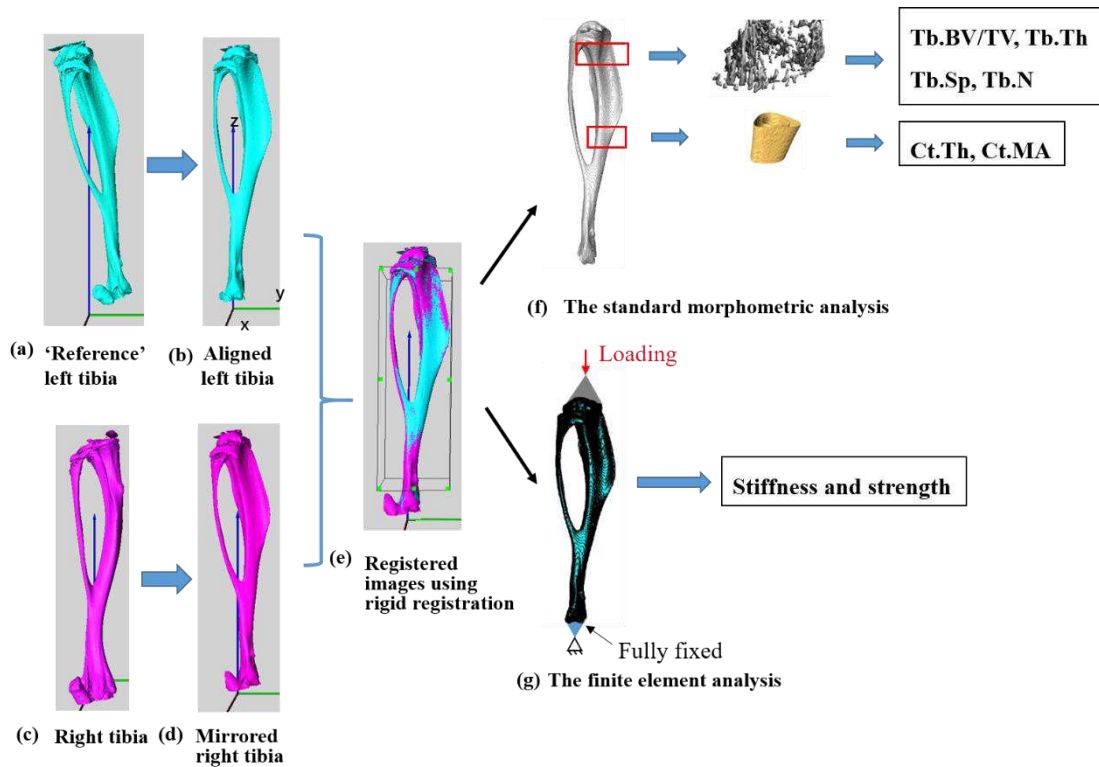
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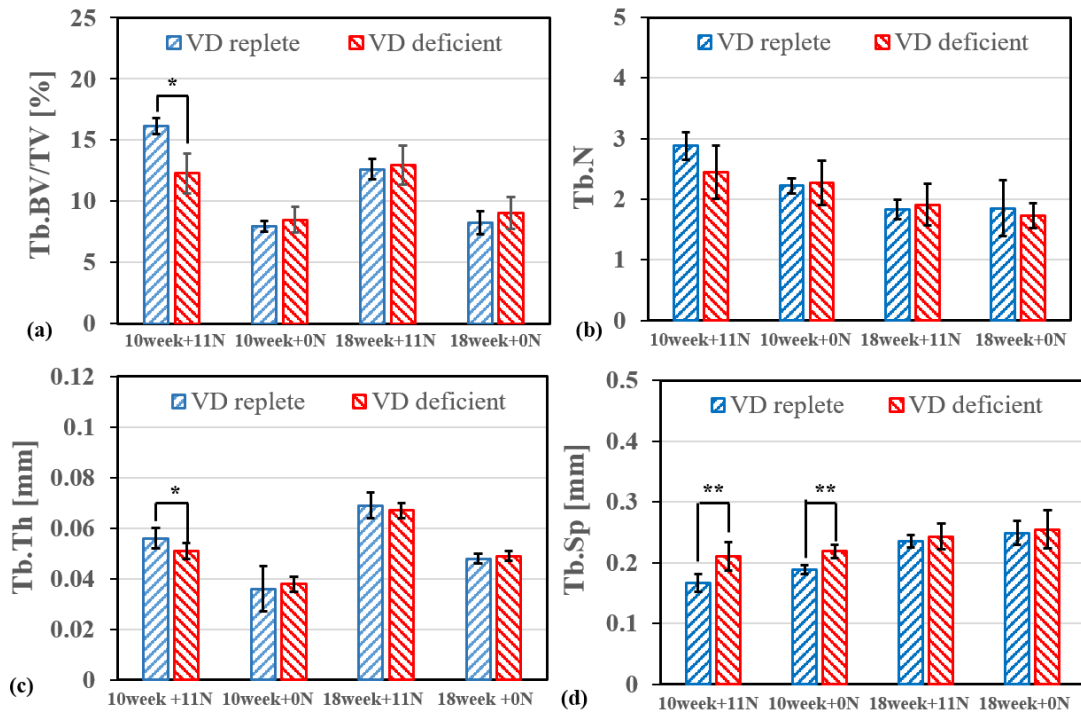
3 **Figure 1.** Experimental design: the offspring of 8-week-old and 16-week-old from  
4 vitamin D replete and deficient mom groups were used for investigations. First, the  
5 left tibiae were mechanically loaded *in vivo* for 2 weeks. Then both tibiae were  
6 dissected and went for bone morphometric and finite element analysis.

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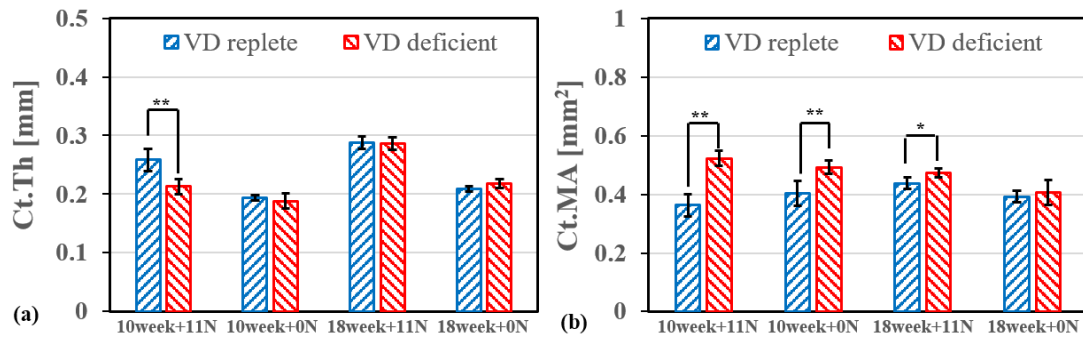
2 **Figure 2.** The schematic procedure for the tibial morphometric and finite element  
 3 analysis. All the tibiae were re-orientated first. The morphometric analysis was  
 4 performed on the proximal trabecular part (trabecular bone volume fraction, thickness,  
 5 separation and number were calculated) and tibial midshaft (cortex thickness and  
 6 marrow area were calculated). The finite element analysis was performed on the entire  
 7 tibia.



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**Figure 3.** Influence of antenatal vitamin D depletion on trabecular bone parameters.

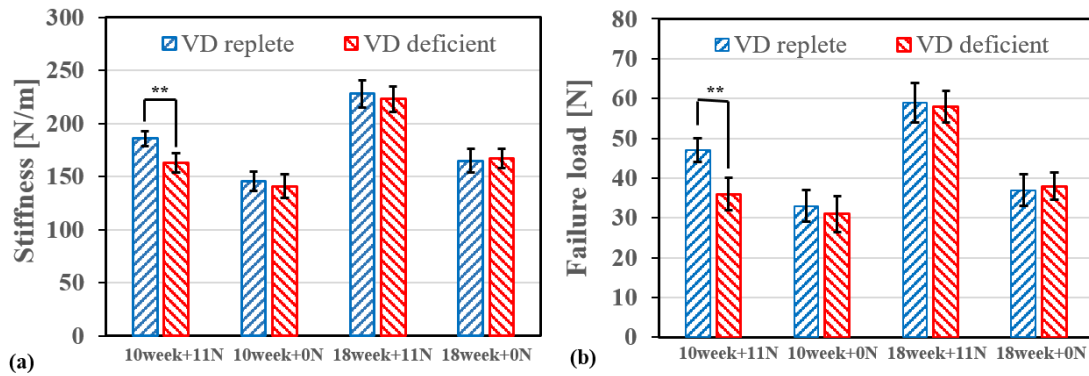
Data are presented as mean values ± standard deviation (\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01).



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**Figure 4.** Influence of antenatal vitamin D depletion on cortical bone parameters.

Data are presented as mean values ± standard deviation (\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01)



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**Figure 5.** Influence of antenatal vitamin D depletion on the mechanical behavior of mouse tibia. Data are presented as mean values  $\pm$  standard deviation (\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ )