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1 **Exposure to polyethylene microplastics alters immature gut microbiome in**
2 **an infant *in vitro* gut model**

3
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AhR: aryl hydrocarbon receptor; ASV: amplicon sequence variant; DSC: differential scanning calorimetry; GAPDH: glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase; GC-MS: gas chromatography-mass spectrometry; HRP: horseradish peroxidase; HPLC: high-performance liquid chromatography; LDPE: low density polyethylene; LY: lucifer yellow; MP: microplastic; MUC2: mucin 2 ; MUC5AC: mucin 5AC; M-ARCOL: mucosal artificial colon; OCLN: occludin; Papp: apparent permeability coefficient; PE: polyethylene; PET: polyethylene terephthalate; PS: polystyrene; qPCR: quantitative polymerase chain reaction; SCFA: short chain fatty acid; SPME: solid-phase microextraction; TEER: trans-epithelial electrical resistance; TGA: thermogravimetric analysis; TJ: tight junction; Tm-ARCOL: toddler mucosal artificial colon; VOC: volatile organic compound; ZO-1: zonula occludens-1

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23

24 **Abstract**

25 Infants are characterized by an immaturity of the gut ecosystem and a high exposure to
26 microplastics (MPs) through diet, dust and suckling. However, the bidirectional interactions
27 between MPs and immature infant intestinal microbiota remain unknown. Our study aims to
28 investigate the impact of chronic exposure to polyethylene (PE) MPs on the gut microbiota and
29 intestinal barrier of infants, using the new Toddler mucosal Artificial Colon coupled with a co-
30 culture of epithelial and mucus-secreting cells. Gut microbiota composition was determined by
31 16S metabarcoding and microbial activities were evaluated by gas, short chain fatty acid and
32 volatolomics analyses. Gut barrier integrity was assessed *via* evaluation of intestinal
33 permeability, inflammation and mucus synthesis. Exposure to PE MPs induced gut microbial
34 shifts increasing α -diversity and abundance of potentially harmful pathobionts, such as
35 *Dethiosulfovibrionaceae* and *Enterobacteriaceae*. Those changes were associated to butyrate
36 production decrease and major changes in volatile organic compounds profiles. In contrast, no
37 significant impact of PE MPs on the gut barrier, as mediated by microbial metabolites, was
38 reported. For the first time, this study indicates that ingestion of PE MPs can induce
39 perturbations in the gut microbiome of infants. Next step would be to further investigate the
40 potential vector effect of MPs.

41

42 **Environmental implication**

43 Plastic production has exploded the last half-century, resulting in environmental pollution and
44 microplastics (MPs) contamination throughout the food chain. This raised concerns for human
45 health, particularly in the highly exposed and at-risk infant population. We investigated for the
46 first time the effects of a chronic exposure to polyethylene MPs on immature infant gut
47 microbiome and intestinal barrier, using a novel approach combining a newly developed infant
48 colon model with co-cultures of enterocytes and goblet cells. This work provides useful data

49 on MP interactions with infant microbiota and mucus, considering inter-individualities,
50 increasing our knowledge on the health impact of MP pollution.

51

52 **Keywords**

53 Microplastics, infant, gut microbiota, *in vitro* gut models, cellular models

54

55 1. Introduction

56 Plastic is a multifunctional material, easy to process, cheap and resistant. These valuable
57 properties have led to massive plastic production, which began in the 1950's and reaching 367
58 million tons in 2020 [1]. Various types of plastic are produced around the world, but the most
59 widely manufactured polymer is polyethylene (PE) [1]. Plastic materials are gradually
60 accumulating in all ecological environments, which leads to major environmental threats [2–
61 4]. Subject to weathering and (bio)degradation in the environment, plastic waste releases large
62 amounts of smaller particles that could be sorted by size. Frias and Nash (2019) defined
63 microplastics (MPs) as “any synthetic solid particles or polymeric matrices, with regular or
64 irregular shape and with size ranging from 1 μm to 5 mm, of either primary -voluntarily
65 manufactured- or secondary -released from plastic debris weathering- manufacturing origin,
66 which are insoluble in water” [5].

67 The ubiquity of MPs throughout the food chain has raised concerns about their potential health
68 effects following ingestion in humans [6–9]. MPs have been detected in air, water and many
69 food and beverage [10], as well as in human blood [11], colon [12] and stools [13–15]. Already
70 in the mother's womb, the fetus seems to be exposed to MPs as they have detected in the
71 placenta and meconium of newborns [16,17]. After birth, infants are highly exposed through
72 breathing and ingesting dust during roaming [18], but also during breastfeeding [19] or bottle
73 feeding, since milk [20,21] and baby bottles [22,23] are contaminated with MPs. In addition,
74 the suckling of silicone rubber represents a source of exposure as steam sterilization leads to
75 the release of MPs [24].

76 Despite this critical exposure, toxicological studies investigating the potential impact of MPs
77 on infant health remain rare [25,26]. While the embryotoxic effect of polystyrene (PS) nano- or
78 micro-sized plastics seems to vary depending on the model used [27–30], a high dose of PS
79 MPs injected intraperitoneally into pregnant mice resulted in immune disturbance and

80 spontaneous abortion [31]. Oral exposure to PS MPs also induced fecal microbiota dysbiosis
81 and gut barrier dysfunction in dams while offspring showed a higher risk of metabolic disorders
82 [32,33]. Importantly, no studies to date have investigated the bidirectional interactions between
83 ingested MPs and the immature and developing infant microbiome, despite its key role in gut
84 homeostasis. Indeed, during the first 1000 days of life, while the digestive physiology is still
85 under development, the infant intestinal microbiota (which mainly colonizes the colonic
86 compartment) simultaneously undergoes significant maturation in terms of composition and
87 metabolic activity [34–36]. The gut microbiome acts primarily in the degradation of undigested
88 food, resulting in the production of secondary metabolites such as gases, short-chain fatty acids
89 (SCFAs) [37,38], volatile organic compounds (VOCs) [39] and aryl hydrocarbon receptor
90 (AhR) ligands [40]. SCFAs (i.e., butyrate, propionate and acetate) are byproducts of the
91 fermentation of nondigestible dietary fibers under the action of intestinal bacteria, whereas AhR
92 ligands are primarily derived from the metabolism of tryptophan. Both groups of metabolites
93 are involved in maintaining the integrity of intercellular tight junction in the intestinal
94 epithelium, thus linking gut microbial activity to the maintenance of effective intestinal barrier
95 function. In addition, the gut microbiota plays an important role in the formation of host
96 immunity, in the regulation of gut endocrine and neurological functions, and together with the
97 intestinal mucus and epithelium, it forms a protective barrier against exogenous threats such as
98 pathogens and foreign particles [41–43].

99 In this context, as an extension of a previous study by us on adult microbiota [44], we
100 investigated for the first time the impact of oral exposure to PE MPs on the infant microbiome
101 and the intestinal epithelium/mucus barrier. Due to major ethical constraints linked to clinical
102 studies on young populations, but also the striking differences between human and rodent
103 digestive physiology -including microbiota- [45], these experiments were carried out using an
104 innovative *in vitro* approach, combining the Toddler mucosal Artificial Colon (Tm-ARCOL,

105 [46]) simulating the colonic ecosystem specific to infants (6 months to 3 years) and a co-culture
106 of intestinal epithelial and mucus-secreting goblet cells (Caco-2 and HT29-MTX cells,
107 respectively). After a 2-week daily exposure to PE MPs, the structure and metabolic activities
108 of the infant microbiome were determined by 16S metabarcoding and measurements of
109 gas/SCFAs/VOCs/AhR activity, respectively. Fecal water was then applied to intestinal cell co-
110 cultures to assess the impact of gut microbe metabolites on cell-related inflammatory pathways,
111 mucin synthesis and barrier function.

112 **2. Materials and methods**

113 **2.1 Microplastics characterization**

114 PE MPs (CPMS-0.96, 1-10 μm – 0.2 g; non-fluorescent particles) were purchased from
115 Cospheric (CA, USA). The initial powder was suspended (2.625 mg/mL) in a solution of sterile
116 deionized water with 0.01% (w/v) Tween 80 before use. Particle size was determined using the
117 smileview software from scanning electron microscopy images captured with the JSM 6060LV
118 microscope (Jeol, Japan). In order to determine the polymeric composition, the powder was
119 analyzed by differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) and by thermogravimetric analysis (TGA).
120 DSC measurements were performed on a Mettler DSC3⁺ device (N.V. Mettler-Toledo S.A.,
121 Belgium). The equipment is calibrated with Indium. A few mg of material were placed in an
122 aluminum pan and then subjected to a temperature cycle ranging from 25°C to 200°C under a
123 flow of nitrogen gas. A rate of 10°C/min was applied to heat and cool the material during the
124 experiment. TGA measurements were performed on a Mettler TGA2 device (N.V. Mettler-
125 Toledo S.A., Belgium). The analysis was performed at a heating rate of 10°C/min under a flow
126 of a nitrogen gas up to 800°C.

127 **2.2 Fecal sample collection and treatment**

128 Fecal samples were collected from four healthy infants (two boys aged 30 and 20 months -
129 Toddlers 1 and 3, and two girls aged 25 and 22 months -Toddlers 2 and 4-) were collected. All

130 donors had no history of antibiotic treatment or probiotic consumption during the month prior
131 sample collection. Immediately after defecation, the fecal samples (or diapers) were transferred
132 to a sterile container placed in an airtight anaerobic box (GENbag anaer gas pack systems,
133 Biomerieux, France), transported at ambient temperature and processed in the laboratory within
134 6 h. In an anaerobic chamber (COY laboratories, USA), 11 g of each fresh stool sample were
135 suspended into 110 mL of 30 mM sterile sodium phosphate buffer and filtered (500 μ m stainless
136 steel sieve).

137 **2.3 Description and set-up of the colonic Tm-ARCOL model**

138 The Tm-ARCOL is a one-stage fermentation system (MiniBio, Applikon, The Netherlands),
139 operated under continuous conditions, which simulates both physicochemical (pH, retention
140 time, ileal effluents supply and anaerobiosis) and microbial conditions (lumen and mucus
141 associated microbiota) encountered in the colon of young infant [46]. This model is composed
142 of a main bioreactor (luminal compartment) connected to an external glass compartment
143 (mucosal compartment) containing mucin-alginate beads (**Fig. 1a**). These beads were prepared
144 with type II porcine stomach mucin (Sigma-Aldrich, USA) and sodium alginate (Sigma-
145 Aldrich, USA), as previously described [47]. The mucin-alginate beads were stored at 4°C
146 before introduction into the hermetically sealed glass compartment (total beads area of 556 cm²)
147 connected to the bioreactor. Tm-ARCOL was set-up, based on *in vivo* data, to reproduce the
148 average conditions found in the colon of a healthy toddler, as previously described [46]. Briefly,
149 the composition of the ileal effluents was adjusted to reflect the specificities of the infant diet
150 (**Fig. 1a**). The temperature of the main bioreactor and mucin-alginate bead compartment was
151 maintained at 37°C, the average retention time was set at 19 h and the pH was maintained at a
152 constant value of 6.1 by addition of 2M NaOH. After an initial N₂ flush upon introduction of
153 the fecal inoculum, anaerobiosis was maintained inside the bioreactor by the activity of the
154 resident microbiota alone, in order to faithfully reproduce the *in vivo* situation. The mucin-

155 alginate beads were renewed every two days while maintaining the external compartment in
156 anaerobiosis thanks to a constant flow of CO₂.

157 **2.4 Experimental design and sampling during *in vitro* fermentations**

158 The experimental design and sampling are summarized in **Fig. 1b**. Four Tm-ARCOL
159 bioreactors were inoculated with fecal samples from the four infant donors and operated in
160 parallel. Fermentations were carried out under continuous conditions for 22 days, after a 24-h
161 batch microbial amplification. An eight-day microbiota stabilization phase was applied and the
162 three last days of this period (days 6, 7 and 8) were chosen as control. Then, fourteen days of
163 daily exposure to PE MPs (21 mg of MPs in 8 mL of a solution of deionized water containing
164 0.01% (w/v) Tween 80) were carried out and the three last days (days 20, 21 and 22) were
165 chosen as exposure days. Samples from the main bioreactors, termed luminal microbiota, were
166 collected daily for microbiome characterization (storage at -80°C) and SCFA analysis (storage
167 at -20°C). Additional samples from the mucin-alginate bead compartment, termed mucosal
168 microbiota, were collected every other day (when mucin-alginate beads were replaced) for
169 microbiota characterization. Beads were washed twice in sterile phosphate buffer saline -PBS-
170 (pH 7.1) and stored at -80°C before downstream analyses. The medium surrounding mucin-
171 alginate beads was also collected at the same times in case of insufficient amounts of DNA on
172 the mucin-alginate beads. Additional luminal fermentation media were collected on day 8
173 (control) and day 22 (exposure) for cell culture experiments, AhR activity measurement,
174 scanning electron microscopy, Raman spectroscopy and volatolomic analysis. Samples were
175 also collected daily from the atmospheric phase of the bioreactors to verify anaerobic conditions
176 and determine gas composition. The daily extra volume of gas produced by microbial
177 fermentation was also measured using a syringe connected to the gas bag.

178 **2.5 DNA extraction**

179 Genomic DNA was extracted from luminal samples and mucin-alginate beads (or surrounding
180 medium) using the QIAamp Fast DNA Stool Mini Kit (12830-50, Qiagen, Germany) following
181 the manufacturer's instructions with minor adjustments. Prior to DNA extraction, luminal
182 samples were centrifuged (2000 g, 10 min, 4°C) and the pellet was mechanically disrupted
183 using a bead beater (5 min, 20 beat/sec) with 300 mg of sterile glass beads (diameter ranging
184 from 0.1 to 0.6 mm), incubated (70°C, 5 min) and centrifuged (12000 g, 1 min, 4°C). Mucin-
185 alginate beads were subjected to the following modifications prior to DNA extraction: 10 min
186 of incubation with citrate buffer (37°C), as previously described [48], before vortexing
187 (maximal speed, 3 min) and centrifugation (8000 g, 1 min). DNA integrity was verified by
188 agarose gel electrophoresis and Nanodrop 2000 analysis (Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA).
189 DNA quantity was assessed using the Qubit dsDNA Broad Range Assay Kit (Q32851,
190 Invitrogen, USA) with a Qubit 2.0 Fluorometer (Invitrogen, USA). Samples were stored at -
191 20°C before gut microbiota analysis (qPCR and 16S metabarcoding).

192 **2.6 Total bacteria quantification by qPCR**

193 Total bacteria were quantified by qPCR using primers BAC338R and BAC516F with an
194 hybridization temperature set at 58°C [49] (**Table 1**). Real-time PCR assays were performed
195 on a Biorad CFX96™ Real-Time System (Bio-Rad Laboratories, USA) using the Takyon™
196 Low Rox SYBR® 2X MasterMix blue dTTP kit (B0701, Eurogentec, Belgium). Each reaction
197 was performed in duplicate in a final volume of 10 µL with 5 µL of Master Mix, 0.45 µL of
198 each primer (10 µM), 1 µL of DNA sample (10 ng/µL) and 3.1 µL of ultra-pure water. The
199 amplifications were performed as follows: 1 cycle at 95°C for 5 min, followed by 40 cycles at
200 95°C for 30 s and 60°C for 1 min. A melting step was added to ensure the specificity of the
201 primers. The standard curve was generated from 10-fold dilutions of bacterial DNA as
202 described in [47].

203 **2.7 16S metabarcoding and data analysis**

204 The bacterial V3-V4 region of the 16S ribosomal DNA (rDNA) was amplified using primers
205 V3_F357_N and V4_R805 for bacterial fraction and Arch349F and Arch806R for
206 methanogenic Archaea. Amplicons were generated using a Fluidigm Access Array followed by
207 high-throughput sequencing on an Illumina MiSeq system performed at the Carver
208 Biotechnology Center of the University of Illinois (Urbana, USA).

209 Bioinformatics analysis was performed by GeT-Biopuces platform (INSA/Toulouse
210 Biotechnology Institute, Toulouse, France) with R software version 4.1.1 (2021-08-10) and
211 rANOMALY package [50]. The demultiplexed raw sequence data were filtered by quality and
212 the denoising process performed using DADA2 version 1.20.0 [51]. Reads with N bases or low
213 phred quality score (under 2) were eliminated and reads under 100 pb length removed.
214 Decontamination steps were carried out to filter out sequences corresponding to PhiX DNA
215 used as a spike-in control for MiSeq runs and chimeric sequences were filtered out. Taxonomic
216 affiliation of all amplicon sequence variants (ASVs) was performed with idtaxa function from
217 DECIPHER package version 2.20.0 [52] using SILVA release 138 [53] and GTDB
218 bac120_arc122 [54] databases (60% bootstrap cut-off). To improve completeness of taxonomic
219 affiliation, alignments were carried out using BLAST [55] (98% identity and coverage) on
220 representative sequences of unassigned ASVs or assigned with incomplete taxonomy. A
221 phylogenetic tree was constructed based on the representative ASVs sequences using functions
222 from phangorn package version 2.7.1 [56]. α - and β -diversity indexes were calculated using the
223 diversity_alpha_fun function from rANOMALY package [50]. The across-sample microbiota
224 diversity was described using redundancy analysis (RDA) based on Bray-Curtis dissimilarities
225 using vegan R-package version 2.5-7 [57]. The impact of the different parameters analyzed
226 (total gas and SCFA production, gas and SCFA composition, luminal or mucosal sample types,

227 time and sex of donors) on dissimilarities among groups was evaluated using PERMANOVA
228 permutation tests (999 permutations).

229 **2.8 Gas analysis**

230 The analysis of O₂, N₂, CO₂, CH₄ and H₂ gases produced during the fermentation process in the
231 atmospheric phase of the main bioreactor was performed using a HP 6890 gas chromatograph
232 (Agilent Technologies, USA) coupled to a micro-TCD detector (Agilent Technologies, USA).
233 Two series of columns, Molecular Sieve 5A and Porapack Q (Agilent Technologies, USA) were
234 used. The composition of the gases was determined using calibration curves produced from
235 ambient air (78.09 % N₂, 20.95 % O₂, 0.04 % CO₂) and 3 gas mixtures A (5 % CO₂, 5 % H₂,
236 90 % N₂), B (19.98 % CO₂, 80.02 % H₂) and C (19.89 % CO₂, 19.88 % CH₄, 20 % H₂, 40.23
237 % N₂).

238 **2.9 Analysis of short chain fatty acid composition**

239 2 mL of each luminal sample was centrifuged (5000 g, 15 min, 4°C) and 900 µL of the
240 supernatant was diluted at 1/10 in 0.04 M H₂SO₄ mobile phase, vortexed and filtered (pore size
241 0.22 µm). The three major SCFAs (acetate, propionate and butyrate) were quantified by high-
242 performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) (Elite LaChrom, Merck HITACHI, USA) coupled
243 to a DAD diode. The HPLC column (150 x 7.8 mm) contained a negatively charged sulfonic-
244 grafted polystyrene divinylbenzene stationary phase and carried an eluent containing acidified
245 water. Data were obtained and analyzed by the EZChrom Elite software at 204 and 205 nm.
246 SCFA concentrations were calculated from calibration curves established from solutions of
247 known increasing concentration of acetate, propionate and butyrate (0, 10, 25 and 40 mM).

248 **2.10 Measurement of AhR activity**

249 The AhR activity of Tm-ARCOL luminal supernatants after exposure to PE MPs (day 22)
250 relative to control conditions (day 8) was measured using a luciferase reporter assay method,
251 as previously described [58]. H1L1.1c2 mouse hepatocellular carcinoma cells, containing a

252 stably integrated dioxin response element-driven firefly luciferase reporter plasmid
253 pGudLuc1.1, were seeded in 96-well plates at 10^5 cells/well in Minimum Essential Medium
254 Eagle Alpha Modification (MEM- α) medium (with 10% (v/v) heat-inactivated fetal calf serum
255 -FCS, 1% (v/v) penicillin/streptomycin, 1% (v/v) Geneticin G418) and cultured (37°C, 5%
256 CO₂) 24 h before stimulation with the Tm-ARCOL supernatants for 24 h. After incubation, the
257 wells were washed with 100 μ L PBS (pH 7), and 50 μ L of Promega lysis buffer (pH 7.8) was
258 added to each well. The plates were shaken for 1 h for cell lysis. After addition of 100 μ L of
259 luciferase reagent (Promega, France), the luciferase activity was measured using a luminometer
260 (Tecan, Switzerland). The experiments were performed in triplicate. All values were
261 normalized for sample cytotoxicity using the Lactate Dehydrogenase Activity Assay (Promega,
262 USA).

263 **2.11 Volatolomic analysis**

264 Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) from control (day 8) and exposed (day 22) luminal
265 samples were analyzed by solid-phase microextraction (SPME) coupled with gas
266 chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS), as previously described [59,60]. Briefly, the day
267 before analysis, 2.2 mL of saturated NaCl solution (360 g/L) was added to each sample (0.8
268 mL). The mixing vials were closed under a N₂ flow, vortexed for homogenization and thawed
269 for 24 h at 4°C. The following steps were then performed with an automated sampler (AOC-
270 5000 Shimadzu, Japan): (i) preheating of the sample to 40°C for 10 min in the shaker (500 rpm),
271 (ii) SPME trapping (75 μ m carboxen/polydimethylsiloxane, 23-gauge needle, Supelco, USA)
272 of the VOCs for 30 min at 40°C, and (iii) thermal desorption at 250°C for 2 min in splitless
273 mode in the GC inlet. Further analysis of VOCs was performed by GC/MS-full scan (GC2010,
274 QP2010+, Shimadzu, Japan). VOCs were injected in a DB-5MS capillary column (60 m \times 0.32
275 mm \times 1 μ m, Agilent, USA) according to the GC-MS parameters used by Defois and
276 collaborators [59,60]. Provisional identification of VOCs was performed on the basis of mass

277 spectra, by comparison with mass spectra libraries (Wiley Registry 12th Edition / NIST 2020),
278 and of retention indices (RI), by comparison with published RI values and with those of our in-
279 house database. The peak area of the tentatively identified compounds was determined for each
280 of the targeted molecules using a mass fragment selected for its specificity and lack from co-
281 elution.

282 **2.12 Scanning electron microscopy analysis**

283 The luminal and mucosal samples of the Toddlers 2 and 3, one girl and one boy, were deposited
284 on SEMPore filters (Jeol, Japan) and fixed for 12 h at 4°C in 0.2 M sodium cacodylate buffer
285 at pH 7.4 containing 4% (w/v) paraformaldehyde and 2.5% (v/v) glutaraldehyde. The filters
286 were washed for 10 min in sodium cacodylate buffer (0.2 M, pH 7.4) and post-fixed for 1 h
287 with 1% (w/v) osmium tetroxide in the same buffer. The filters were then washed 20 min in
288 distilled water. Gradual ethanol dehydration was performed from 25° to 100° (10 min each) and
289 completed in hexamethyldisilazane (HMDS) for 10 min. The samples were mounted on stubs
290 using adhesive carbon tabs and sputter-coated with gold-palladium (JFC-1300, Jeol, Japan).
291 The analysis was carried out using a scanning electron microscope JSM-6060LV (Jeol, Japan)
292 at 5kV in high vacuum mode.

293 **2.13 Raman spectroscopy mapping**

294 Mapping by Raman spectroscopy was carried out using a Raman spectrometer (Alpha300R
295 Apyron, Witec, Germany) equipped with a confocal microscope. Exposed luminal samples (day
296 22, Toddler 3) were vacuum filtered using an Anodisc filter (pore size 0.2 µm, diameter 25
297 mm). The filters were excited with a Coherent sapphire laser (532 nm, laser power: 10 mW)
298 and Raman spectra were recorded in backscattering configuration using a 50X objective (Zeiss,
299 Germany) with a numerical aperture of 0.55 to achieve a theoretical spatial resolution of 590
300 nm in the focal plane. Individual Raman spectra were recorded 10 times with an integration
301 time of 1 s. For each filter, maps between 900 and 2500 spectra were recorded with a step of

302 1.33 μm and 2 μm , respectively. For each mapping, the recorded signal (Raman signal plus
303 background) was integrated over a 20 cm^{-1} spectral range of centered at 1294 cm^{-1}
304 corresponding to the CH_2 twisting vibration band of PE. The signal value was then
305 automatically transformed by the software in a color scale (from black to bright yellow).

306 **2.14 Intestinal cell lines and cell culture conditions**

307 The human colon adenocarcinoma Caco-2 cell line was obtained from the European Collection
308 of Cell Cultures (ECACC, UK) and used at passage 58-62. The mucus-secreting colon
309 adenocarcinoma HT29-MTX cell line was kindly provided by Dr. Thécla Lesuffleur (INSERM
310 Lille, France) and used at passage 10-16. Both cell lines were maintained in cell culture medium
311 (Dulbecco/Vogt modified Eagle's minimal essential medium -DMEM- without phenol red and
312 4.5 g/L glucose), supplemented with 1% (v/v) penicillin/streptomycin, 1% (v/v) Non-Essential
313 Amino Acids -NEAA-, 1% (v/v) Glutamax, and 10% (v/v) heat-inactivated fetal bovine serum
314 -FBS- at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO_2 /95% air. The medium was changed every
315 two to three days and cells were split at 80% of confluence using Tryple express. The intestinal
316 cells (90% Caco-2/10% HT29-MTX) were seeded in 24-well inserts with 1- μm pore size
317 (Millipore, Merck Millipore SAS, France) and maintained in the culture medium. From day 17,
318 FBS of the culture medium was replaced by 1% (v/v) Insulin Transferrin Selenium (ITS) in
319 order to limit any interference with the samples to be tested. After 18 days, Caco-2/HT29-MTX
320 co-cultures were incubated apically for 24 h with Tm-ARCOL luminal samples taken on day 8
321 (control) and day 22 (exposed), centrifuged (5000 g, 15 min, 4°C) and diluted 20-fold in cell
322 culture medium (**Fig. 1c**). Experiments were performed with 2 biological replicates and 5
323 technical replicates for each donor.

324 **2.15 Cell viability**

325 In order to determine the potential cytotoxic effect of Tm-ARCOL luminal supernatants on
326 Caco-2/HT29-MTX cells and to establish subtoxic conditions for testing on inserts, different

327 dilutions (1/2, 1/5, 1/10, 1/20, 1/30 and 1/50 in cell culture medium) were evaluated. Cell
328 viability was measured in triplicate with CytoTox 96® non-radioactive cytotoxicity test
329 (Promega, France) after 24 h of exposure. In 96-well plates, 25 µL of apical cell culture
330 supernatants were diluted in 25 µL of 1% (v/v) ITS culture medium and mixed with 50 µL of
331 substrate. The plates were then incubated for 15 min at room temperature in the dark. The
332 reaction was stopped with 50 µL of stop solution (1M CH₃COOH) and absorbance at 490 nm
333 was measured with a Spark spectrophotometer (Tecan, Switzerland).

334 **2.16 Intestinal permeability**

335 Starting on day 12, trans-epithelial electrical resistance (TEER) was continuously monitored in
336 real time using the CellZScope2 device (NanoAnalytics, Germany). In addition, after a 24-h
337 contact time with the 20-fold diluted luminal supernatants of Tm-ARCOL, the inserts were
338 transferred to a new 24-well plate containing 1 mL of Hank's balanced salt solution -HBSS.
339 Lucifer yellow -LY- (0.4 mg/mL, molecular weight 457 g/mol) and horseradish peroxydase -
340 HRP- (0.4 mg/mL, molecular weight 44,000 g/mol) were dissolved in HBSS and added to the
341 apical compartment. After 2 h at 37°C under an atmosphere of 5% CO₂/95% air, samples were
342 taken from the apical and basolateral compartments. For LY measurement, samples were
343 analyzed in duplicate using a Spark multimode plate reader (Tecan, Switzerland). Excitation
344 and emission wavelengths were 405 nm and 535 nm, respectively. Total HRP was determined
345 by an ELISA assay. Briefly, 96-well black flat-bottom plates (Greiner, Dutcher, France) were
346 coated overnight at 4°C with 50 µL of 10 µg/mL HRP mouse polyclonal (Abcam, France) in
347 PBS. Plates were blocked with PBS-1% bovine serum albumin (BSA) before incubation with
348 apical and basolateral samples collected from inserts. Rabbit polyclonal anti-HRP biotin
349 (Abcam, France) was added at a concentration of 10 µg/mL before adding Fluorescein-5-
350 isothiocyanate -FITC- conjugated streptavidin (Becton Dickinson, France) for 20 min and
351 fluorescence intensity was measured at 485 nm/525 nm using a Spark microplate reader (Tecan,

352 Switzerland). The apparent permeability coefficient (P_{app} in cm/s) was determined by the
353 following equation: $P_{app} = C_b / (S \times C_0)$, where C_b represents the level of accumulation of LY or
354 HRP in the basolateral compartment after 2 h, S represents the surface of the membrane (0.33
355 cm²) and C_0 is the initial concentration of the marker (0.4 mg/mL -LY- or -HRP-) in the apical
356 compartment.

357 **2.17 Interleukin-8 level measurement**

358 The apical and basolateral media of the co-cultures were collected after the contact time of 24
359 h with the 20-fold diluted luminal supernatants of Tm-ARCOL and stored at -20°C until
360 analysis. Interleukin-8 (IL-8) levels were measured using the Quantikine Human IL-8 ELISA
361 kit (DY208-05, R&D Systems, USA) following the manufacturer's instructions. Briefly, in
362 Maxisorp 96-well plates (Nunc, France), biotinylated Goat polyclonal anti IL-8 was added at a
363 concentration of 10 ng/mL before adding HRP-conjugated streptavidin (Becton Dickinson,
364 France) for 20 min. Absorbance intensity was measured at 450 nm and 540 nm using a Spark
365 microplate reader (Tecan, Switzerland).

366 **2.18 Intestinal cell gene expression**

367 Total RNAs were extracted from cells for each insert using the AllPrep RNA Mini kit (Qiagen,
368 France) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Quantity and quality of extracted RNA
369 samples were evaluated using Nanodrop (Nanophotometer Implen-Dutscher, France) and
370 Bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies, USA), respectively. RNAs were reverse transcribed using
371 enzyme IScript reverse transcription supermix (Biorad, France). Sample concentration was
372 adjusted to 50 ng/μL. 384-well plates were filled by an Agilent Bravo Automated Liquid
373 Handling Platform (Agilent Technologies, France). All wells contained 5 μL of the following
374 mix: 2.5 μL of IQ SYBR green Supermix (Biorad, France), 1.5 μL of each primer set and 1 μL
375 of cDNA sample. Amplification was performed using a ViiA7 Real-Time PCR System
376 (Applied Biosystems-ThermoFisher Scientific, France). Thermal cycling conditions were as

377 follows: 3 min denaturation at 95°C followed by 40 cycles at 95°C for 15 s and 45 s at 60°C,
378 and a melting curve step. The primer sequences of the targeted genes (genes encoding tight
379 junction (TJ) proteins (*ZO-1*, *OCN*) and genes involved in mucus synthesis (*MUC2*,
380 *MUC5AC*) are listed in **Table 1**. Raw data that passed quality control were analyzed with
381 LinRegPCR (version 2021.2) and then normalized against the expression of glyceraldehyde-3-
382 phosphate dehydrogenase (*GAPDH*), a reference housekeeping gene.

383 **2.19 Statistical analysis**

384 Statistical analyses on gut microbiota activity (gas, SCFAs, AhR activity), α -diversity indexes
385 (number of observed ASVs and Shannon index) from metabarcoding data, as well as results
386 from cell culture experiments, obtained in control and exposed groups, were performed using
387 GraphPad Prism software version 9.3.1 for Windows (GraphPad Software, USA). Data normal
388 distribution was verified by combining Anderson-Darling, D'Agostino & Pearson, Shapiro-
389 Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests and homoscedasticity was checked using the Fisher test.
390 Then, appropriate statistical analysis was applied (either one-way ANOVA, Kruskal-Wallis or
391 Welch's tests) and significance was considered for $p < 0.05$. For gut microbiota results,
392 differential analyses (DESeq2, metagenomeSeq, metacoder) were performed on
393 ExploreMetabar software using rANOMALY package [50,61]. Principal coordinate analysis
394 (PCoA) of unweight UniFrac distances was performed and significance between groups was
395 assessed with a permutational multivariate analysis of variance (PERMANOVA) using
396 ADONIS (999 permutations) with non-parametric tests. Volatolomics data were processed
397 using the Statistica Software (v.13) (StatSoft, France). Student's t-tests ($p < 0.05$) were carried
398 out for the VOC abundances determined in control (day 8) and exposed (day 22) groups and
399 principal component analyses (PCA) were performed on the discriminant VOCs selected to
400 visualize the structure of the data.

401 3. Results

402 3.1 Characteristics of PE MPs and interactions with the infant gut microbiota

403 DSC and TGA analysis of PE MPs showed the purity of the PE powder and characterized it as
404 low-density PE. PE MP microscopy count indicated a size between 1 and 2 μm for 50% of 156
405 beads analysed [44]. Scanning electron microscopy of samples collected in the luminal phase
406 and mucosal beads in Tm-ARCOL (**Fig. 2a**) showed colonization of the surface of PE MPs by
407 various bacteria. In addition, Raman spectroscopy mapping of PE MPs in the luminal medium
408 (**Fig. 2b**) after exposure provided the same spectrum as that obtained for the initial PE particles,
409 indicating the absence of physicochemical changes to the MP surface during fermentation in
410 Tm-ARCOL.

411 3.2 Impact of exposure to PE MPs on the infant gut microbiota composition

412 The stool microbiota of toddlers used for Tm-ARCOL inoculation was characterized by 16S
413 metabarcoding (**Fig.S1**) and showed an absence of methanogenic Archaea and bacterial profiles
414 highly donor-dependent, particularly at the family level. Notably, the stool of Toddler 1 was
415 characterized by a high abundance of *Tannerellaceae*, while *Enterobacteriaceae* and
416 *Akkermansiaceae* were found mainly in Toddler 2 and *Sutterellaceae* and *Oscillospiraceae* in
417 Toddler 4. α -diversity was also donor-dependent (data not shown), with the highest values for
418 Toddlers 1 and 4 (107 and 145 ASVs, respectively) and the lowest for Toddlers 2 and 3 (54 and
419 70, respectively). Some of these stool individual specificities was captured in Tm-ARCOL,
420 such as *Tannerellaceae* in Toddler 1 and *Enterobacteriaceae* in Toddler 2 (**Fig. 3a**) and a
421 clearly higher number of ASVs under control conditions of Toddler 4 relative to other toddlers
422 (**Fig. 4a**). At the end of the stabilization phase in Tm-ARCOL (control), the bacterial abundance
423 profiles at the family (**Fig. 3a**) and phylum (**Fig. S2a**) levels clearly indicated that the inter-
424 individual variability observed in the initial donor stools was retained in the *in vitro* model, with
425 the donor effect being the most important factor explaining luminal and mucosal β -diversity

426 (Fig. S2b). These data also highlighted clear differences between lumen and mucus-associated
427 microbiota and, as expected, their stability at the end of the stabilization phase. After 14 days
428 of daily exposure to PE MPs, clear shifts in bacterial populations were observed both in the
429 luminal and mucosal compartments, and both at the phylum (Fig. S2a) and family (Fig. 3a)
430 levels. Those changes were again donor-dependent. For instance, exposure to PE MPs resulted
431 in disappearance of *Verrucomicrobia* (*Akkermansiaceae*) in Toddler 2 whereas opposite trends
432 were seen in Toddler 4 and *Synergistetes* (*Dethiosulfovibrionaceae*) increased only in Toddler
433 3. Exposure to PE MPs also induced in the luminal phase a loss in *Ruminococcaceae* in Toddlers
434 1 and 2 while *Rikenellaceae* and *Sutterellaceae* decreased in Toddlers 2 and 4. In addition, the
435 population of *Tannerellaceae* population, which was only present in Toddler 1, disappeared
436 from the mucosal phase after exposure to MPs whereas *Enterobacteriaceae* increased in mucus-
437 associated bacteria from Toddlers 2 and 4. Differential analysis of gut microbiota composition
438 in all donors confirmed significant changes in bacterial populations. In the luminal phase,
439 abundance of *Dethiosulfovibrionaceae*, *Planococcaceae*, *Enterobacteriaceae*, *Moraxellaceae*,
440 *Acidaminococcaceae* and *Oscillospiraceae* increased significantly ($p < 0.05$, $n = 4$) after exposure
441 to PE MPs, while the proportion of *Tannerellaceae*, *Rikenellaceae* and *Monoglobaceae*
442 decreased (Fig. 3b).

443 Fewer populations were affected in the mucosal compartment, with an increased abundance of
444 *Dethiosulfovibrionaceae*, *Planococcaceae*, *Acidaminococcaceae* and *Oscillospiraceae* but a
445 loss in *Lachnospiraceae* and *Monoglobaceae* after exposure to PE MPs. The impact of such
446 exposure on microbiota structure was confirmed by β -diversity analysis, which showed
447 clustering between control and exposed samples (Fig. 4c), with a greater impact in Toddlers 1,
448 2 and 3 compared to Toddler 4. Accordingly, MP treatment also resulted in a significant
449 increase in observed ASVs ($p < 0.01$) in the luminal microbiota only for Toddlers 1, 2 and 3.
450 Similarly, in mucosal samples, the number of observed ASVs tended to increase in Toddlers 1

451 and 2, and significance was reached in Toddler 3 ($p<0.05$). Finally, RDA analysis of bacterial
452 β -diversity, based on both 16S metabarcoding and metabolic activity data (see 3.3), indicated
453 that exposure to PE MPs remained the most important parameter explaining variabilities.

454 **3.3 Impact of exposure to PE MPs on the metabolic activities of human infant** 455 **microbiota**

456 In parallel to microbiota composition, the impact of exposure to PE MPs was also monitored
457 *via* gut microbial activities, first by monitoring fermentation gas and SCFAs daily (**Fig. S3**).
458 Similarly to the microbiota composition described above, this analysis showed stable gas and
459 SCFA profiles for each donor at the end of the stabilization period, with the exception of
460 Toddler 3 due to technical problems. Exposure to PE MPs had very limited impact on total gas
461 and SCFA production (**Fig. 5a** and **5b**). Regarding the production of major SCFAs (**Fig. 5c**),
462 acetate tended to increase after exposure to PE MPs for Toddler 1, 2 and 3, while the opposite
463 trend was observed for propionate. Butyrate production dropped after exposure to PE MPs for
464 all donors with significance reached only for Toddlers 1 ($p<0.0001$) and 4 ($p<0.05$), and when
465 data were averaged ($p<0.0001$, $n=4$). The ability of the gut microbiota to produce ligands
466 capable to activate AhR was also determined in Tm-ARCOL supernatants after exposure to PE
467 MPs (day 22) compared to control conditions (day 8) (**Fig. 6**). After exposure to PE MPs,
468 luminal contents tended to have a lower ability to activate AhR in all donors except Toddler 2,
469 suggesting a potential defect in the microbiota to produce metabolites known to activate this
470 receptor involved in the regulation of intestinal homeostasis [40,62]. Finally, an additional
471 analysis was performed on the microbial volatolome from the luminal phase (**Fig. 7**). 184 VOCs
472 were detected in control and exposed samples (data not shown). The 26 discriminating VOCs
473 between the two groups (**Table 2**) are hydrocarbons and oxygenated compounds (alcohols,
474 aldehydes, ketones and esters). Volatolomic profiles based on these VOCs indicated a profound
475 effect of exposure to PE MPs (**Fig. 7a**). The abundances of the 8 most discriminant VOCs (p

476 0.001) are shown in **Table 2** and in **Fig. 7b**. In particular, the 6 hydrocarbon compounds
477 (pentane, 3-methyl-; cyclopentane, 1,1,3-trimethyl-; 1-heptene, 2,4-dimethyl-; heptane, 2,3-
478 dimethyl-; methyl C9-alkane - RI 814, methyl C9-alkane - RI 821 and methyl C9-alkane - RI
479 861), two heptanone (2-heptanone and 2-heptanone, 4-methyl-), two alcohols (1-hexanol and
480 1-heptanol) and two aldehydes (heptanal and octanal) were overproduced while 8 out of 12
481 esters (among which propanoic acid, ethyl ester and butanoic acid) were underproduced after
482 exposure to PE MPs.

483 **3.4 Impact of exposure to PE MPs on intestinal epithelium inflammation, permeability** 484 **and mucin synthesis as mediated by gut microbiota metabolites**

485 In order to explore whether alterations in the metabolic activities of the gut microbiota induced
486 by exposure to PE MPs have consequences on the intestinal barrier, we determined the impact
487 of Tm-ARCOL luminal supernatants on Caco2/HT29-MTX cells. The preliminary toxicity
488 assay on intestinal cells with diluted Tm-ARCOL luminal supernatants showed no cytotoxicity
489 for 1/20 and 1/50 dilutions (data not shown). Therefore, in the following cell experiments, the
490 1/20 (v/v) dilution was used. Various parameters were measured to assess the impact of Tm-
491 ARCOL luminal supernatants on trans- and para-cellular permeability. Gene expression of tight
492 junction proteins, *OCN* and *ZO-1*, was not significantly altered by Tm-ARCOL luminal
493 supernatants of the exposed microbiota in Toddler 1, although a clear decreasing trend was
494 observed for both genes in Toddler 1 (**Fig. S4a**). Trans-epithelial electric resistance (Δ TEER)
495 (**Fig. 8a**) as well as the translocation of Lucifer yellow (LY) (**Fig. 8b**) and horseradish
496 peroxidase (HRP) (**Fig. 8b**), as indicators of para- and trans-cellular permeability, respectively,
497 were unaffected by Tm-ARCOL luminal supernatants of the exposed microbiota. Interestingly,
498 however, HRP and LY translocation tended to increase in Toddler 1, consistent with decreased
499 *ZO-1* and *OCN* gene expression. Finally, the expression of mucin-related genes, *MUC2* and
500 *MUC5AC*, was measured without demonstrating any significant effect of Tm-ARCOL luminal

501 supernatants of the exposed microbiota (**Fig. S4b**). Nevertheless, *MUC2* gene expression
502 tended to increase in 3 of the 4 donors (not detected in Toddler 4), while *MUC5AC* gene
503 expression appeared to be slightly overexpressed in Toddlers 1 and 3 only. The inflammatory
504 marker IL-8 (**Fig. 8c**) was also measured and the levels (70-100 pg/mL), detected in the apical
505 and basolateral compartments, were not significantly impacted by the Tm-ARCOL luminal
506 supernatants of the exposed microbiota.

507 **4. Discussion**

508 Ingestion of MPs is increasingly recognized as a threat for human health. However, to date
509 available data on the behavior of MPs throughout the human digestive tract are very limited,
510 especially in the infant population. In this study, we showed for the first time, using an *in vitro*
511 colonic model of toddler, that oral exposure to PE MPs alters the composition of gut microbiota
512 by increasing potentially pathogenic populations of *Dethiosulfovibrionaceae*,
513 *Enterobacteriaceae*, *Oscillospiraceae* and *Moraxellaceae* while decreasing *Monoglobaceae*.
514 These changes in microbial populations have been associated with alterations in metabolic
515 activity, as shown by altered VOC profiles and decreased butyrate production.

516 As an alternative to clinical trials, most of the few studies on the fate of MPs under human
517 simulated digestive conditions have been conducted in *in vitro* models of the upper
518 gastrointestinal tract, i.e. in gastric and small intestinal systems [63–66]. These studies
519 demonstrated that artificial digestive fluids were not able to degrade MPs of five different
520 polymers types (including PE) into smaller fragments or change their shape, size or texture, but
521 described the formation of a biomolecular corona onto the surface of the particle surface
522 [63,64]. Given this lack of physicochemical degradation of MPs in the upper gastrointestinal
523 tract, in the present study we focused on interactions in the lower gut between PE MPs and
524 microbiota, another major component of human gut homeostasis. Yet, only Tamargo and
525 colleagues have studied interactions between human-derived gut microbiota and MPs, but using

526 polyethylene terephthalate -PET- and not PE, also of different size and shape ($160 \pm 110 \mu\text{m}$,
527 irregular morphology) [66]. We also recently performed a study in the Mucosal Artificial Colon
528 (M-ARCOL) where we assessed the impact of repeated exposure to PE MPs on the composition
529 and activity of the adult gut microbiota [44]. Here, as an extension of this work and in order to
530 be as close as possible to the human situation, we have chosen to evaluate in Tm-ARCOL the
531 effect of a physiological dose of MPs at 21 mg/day according to recent exposure data [67]. PE
532 MPs were administrated daily for 14 days to reproduce chronic exposure, while Tamargo and
533 colleagues evaluated the effect of a single dose of 166 mg PET MPs for 72 h. Finally, their
534 study was carried out in adult digestive conditions whereas we have focused here on toddlers,
535 due to the specificities of their digestive physiology and gut microbiota, which makes them a
536 high-risk population regarding the ingestion of xenobiotics [13,26,68]. During the critical
537 period of the first 1000 days, the gut microbiota of infants remains immature in terms of
538 composition and functionalities [35]. This microbiota immaturity has been successfully
539 reproduced in the Tm-ARCOL model [46], with lower microbial diversity, higher abundance
540 of infant-related microbial populations (e.g. *Bifidobacteriaceae*, *Enterobacteriaceae*), higher
541 acetate production and lower butyrate production in toddlers than in adults, consistent with *in*
542 *vivo* data [69–71]. Repeated addition of PE MPs resulted in an increased α -diversity in Tm-
543 ARCOL, as previously reported in mouse fecal microbiota by Li and colleagues after 5-week
544 exposure to MP PEs of 10-150 μm in size [72]. This could be explained by the fact that PE MPs
545 can provide a surface for the formation of biofilm-like microbial communities, as observed here
546 by scanning electron microscopy and previously described with PET MPs in another human
547 colon model [66]. The presence of MPs as providers of adhesion sites but also new carbon
548 sources for microbes has been already described in an environmental context [73–75]. The
549 second option does not seem feasible here since no degradation of MPs was observed using
550 Raman spectroscopy analysis. In contrast to our results, Tamargo and colleagues reported a loss

551 of observed ASVs in the transverse and descending colonic compartments following a single
552 addition of PET MPs [66], suggesting that the effect of MPs on human gut microbiota diversity
553 would be, in addition to the exposure scenario, plastic-dependent (i.e. polymer type, size,
554 shape). In our previous study of the adult microbiota, no change in bacterial diversity was
555 observed after exposure to PE MPs, suggesting that the immature infant gut microbiota may be
556 more sensitive to MPs than the mature microbiota [44]. When mice were exposed to PE MPs,
557 the microbial shifts observed in fecal samples were study-dependent and not comparable to the
558 changes observed in Tm-ARCOL [72,76], certainly due to the large discrepancies between
559 human and rodent digestion and microbiome [45]. Interestingly, the human *in vitro* study by
560 Tamargo and colleagues [66] on the exposure to PET MPs showed an increase in
561 *Proteobacteria* and *Synergistetes* (phylum of *Dethiosulfovibrionaceae*) as observed in our
562 study, suggesting that these populations could be considered as markers of exposure to MPs in
563 the human gut microbiota. This hypothesis is reinforced by our recent results on the effect of
564 PE MPs on the adult gut microbiota showing an increase, both in the lumen and mucus-
565 associated microbiota, of *Enterobacteriaceae* and *Dethiosulfovibrionaceae* [44]. For the first
566 time, we also showed in Tm-ARCOL that the impact of MPs can be different between the lumen
567 and mucus-associated microbiota. This is particularly interesting as mucosal microbes appear
568 to play an increasing role in human health and disease [77]. In addition, the size of the MPs
569 seems to have a major role on gut microbiota shifts. The use of beads of the same size as in our
570 study (1 to 10 μm) but coming from a different polymer (PS and polyvinyl chloride –PVC-)
571 [78–80] induced more similar effects on mouse fecal microbes (e.g. increase in
572 *Enterobacteriaceae*) than larger PE particles [72,76]. Among the aforementioned cited
573 populations associated to MP exposure, some families, such as *Dethiosulfovibrionaceae* and
574 *Enterobacteriaceae*, are considered as pathobionts. The *Dethiosulfovibrionaceae* population
575 has been linked to colorectal cancer [81], while *Enterobacteriaceae* containing well known

576 enteric pathogens, such as *Escherichia*, *Shigella*, *Campylobacter* or *Salmonella*, may be
577 increased in irritable bowel syndrome -IBS- [82] and intestinal inflammatory diseases in
578 humans [83]. Obviously, not all species in these families are pathogenic but most of them are
579 commensal, highlighting the critical need to better characterize their potential pathogenic
580 characteristics at a lower taxonomic level. It should be noted that the *Enterobacteriaceae*
581 population appears to have a particular affinity for PE MPs. Indeed, *Escherichia coli* adheres
582 to the surface of PE MPs within 30 s [84]. Similarly, in seawater, *Alpha* and
583 *Gammaproteobacteria* have been identified as the core microbiome of biofilms associated with
584 PE MPs [85].

585 Concerning the impact of exposure to PE MPs on the activity of the gut microbiota, apart from
586 our recent study on the adult microbiota in M-ARCOL [44], no *in vitro* or *in vivo* study
587 involving MPs has been conducted to date. Here, a decrease in butyrate production was notably
588 observed following exposure to PE MPs. This has not been previously shown under adult
589 colonic conditions [44], suggesting an infant-specific effect, which may be associated in this
590 at-risk population with deleterious effects. In particular, the increase in butyrate production
591 during infancy has been described as a key health milestone [69] as the effect of high
592 concentrations of fecal butyrate in one-year old child has been shown to protect against allergies
593 and asthma [86,87]. Of note, AhR activity also tended to be reduced following exposure to PE
594 MPs, suggesting less production of AhR receptor ligands by the gut microbiota. This could be
595 related to the decrease in abundance of some *Tannarellaceae*, like *Parabacteroides distasonis*,
596 which are known to be producers of AhR ligands [88]. The ability of the gut microbiota to
597 produce tryptophan-based AhR ligands influences the integrity of the gut epithelium as well as
598 the development, function, production, and maintenance of several key mucosal immune cells
599 and mediators [40,62,89,90]. A deficit in the production of AhR ligands by the microbiota has
600 been reported in inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), celiac disease and obese patients compared

601 to healthy subjects [58,91,92]. As a novel approach, the activity of the gut microbiota was
602 finally investigated in the present study by measuring VOCs. These compounds have important
603 roles in biological interactions between organisms and are currently used as biomarkers of
604 various human diseases, including cancer and gastrointestinal metabolic disorders [93,94].
605 Marked differences between the abundances of VOCs before and after exposure to PE MPs
606 were highlighted, characterized in particular by an underproduction of 8 ester compounds and
607 an overproduction of 7 hydrocarbons. Again, the shifts in VOC profiles under infant colonic
608 conditions were markedly different from those previously obtained under adult conditions [44].
609 An increase in fecal esters has been observed in obese patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver
610 disease [39], in IBS patients [95], but also after acute exposure *in vitro* of human faecal
611 microbiota to benzo[*a*]pyrene [59]. This suggests that overproduction of esters could be an
612 indicator of disturbances in the gut microbiota. Moreover, when detected in the breath, the
613 formation of hydrocarbons/alkanes has advocated as a non-invasive marker of alcoholic
614 hepatitis but also as a measure of lipid peroxidation observed repeatedly in the pathophysiology
615 of IBD [96]. Our study also showed that among other modified VOCs, heptanone (2-heptanone
616 and 2-heptanone, 4-methyl), two alcohols (1-hexanol and 1-heptanol) and two aldehydes
617 (heptanal and octanal) were overproduced after exposure to PE MPs. These compounds were
618 identified during low-density PE photodegradation in the environment [97], suggesting the
619 possibility of PE degradation during our Tm-ARCOL fermentations, but again not consistent
620 with Raman spectroscopy results. In light of these findings, the potential degradation of PE
621 MPs by the human gut microbiota merits further investigation, although the restricted contact
622 time in the human gut during gastrointestinal transit certainly does not promote plastic
623 degradation, compared to longer exposure to soil or water microorganisms in the environment
624 [98–100].

625 Considering the host response to exposure to PE MPs, we finally combined our *in vitro* colon
626 model with co-cultured intestinal epithelial cells. Such a coupling has already been carried out
627 to evaluate the cellular toxicity of virgin or digested PS or PE MPs [44,64] in adult but never
628 in infant digestive conditions. Previous studies in mice orally exposed to PE MPs have reported
629 deleterious effects on the intestinal barrier characterized by a low-grade inflammatory state
630 [72,101] and conflicting results regarding the production of mucus [76,101]. This negative
631 impact of MPs on the intestinal barrier was confirmed *in vitro*. Direct exposure of human
632 intestinal Caco-2 cells to MPs led to oxidative stress for PE MPs [102] and increased epithelial
633 permeability for PS MPs [64]. Here, for the first time under infant conditions, we investigated
634 the potential indirect effect of exposure to PE MPs on human intestinal Caco-2/HT29-MTX
635 cells, i.e. mediated by the metabolites of gut microbes. No significant effect was demonstrated,
636 since we only observed for some toddlers a trend towards an increase in the expression of mucin
637 genes as well as a non-significant decrease in the expression of genes encoding for tight junction
638 proteins (occludin and ZO-1). Overall, this absence of significant deleterious effects suggests a
639 mucus-protective effect of our co-culture model [103] and/or a loss of the putative response
640 triggered by gut microbial metabolites on inflammation and disruption of the intestinal barrier
641 due to the dilution of the Tm-ARCOL luminal supernatants.

642 Taken together, our results suggest that chronic exposure to PE MPs induced significant
643 perturbations in the composition and activity of toddlergut microbiota that may be related to a
644 “dysbiotic” state of the microbiota, even though increased bacterial diversity does not fit the
645 accepted definition of dysbiosis [104]. This study also highlighted that the impact of PE MPs
646 on the gut microbiota and the intestinal barrier *in vitro* was highly dependent on the donor. For
647 example, exposure to MPs had no significant effect on the microbial diversity of Toddler 4 and
648 induced greater deleterious effects on intestinal permeability in Toddler 1 than in the others.
649 Such data could help to define which infants are high and low “responders” to ingesting MPs.

650 Our *in vitro* approach can definitively help for a better mechanistic understanding of the
651 interactions between ingested micro- or even nano-sized plastics, the gut microbiota and mucus,
652 considering inter-individual specificities. Further studies are needed to better investigate the
653 effects of different plastic types, surface properties and sizes [105–108] on the structure and
654 functions of the gut microbiota. The potential of the Tm-ARCOL model should be also
655 extended to the simulation of other specific at-risk populations, such as neonates or pathological
656 situations associated with gut microbial dysbiosis, such as obesity in infants [109]. Finally,
657 since MPs may be the carrier of various chemical pollutants, heavy metals, antibiotics or
658 pathogens [110–112], their bioavailability and/or their survival and biological effects could be
659 studied using our *in vitro* approach, as well as their interactions with the human gut microbiota.

660

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675

676 **Financial interests**

677 The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or
678 financial relationships that could be considered as a potential conflict of interest.

679

680 **Data Availability Statement**

681 Raw data are available at NCBI under the Sequence Read Archive database in the BioProject
682 n° PRJNA831093.

683

684 **Ethics approval**

685 This study is a non-interventional study with no additions to usual clinical cares. The protocol
686 does not require approval from an ethics committee according to the French Public Health Law
687 (CSP Art L 1121-1.1).

688

689

690

691 **Tables**

692

693 **Table 1. Primers used for qPCR for total bacteria load, Illumina sequencing for bacteria**
 694 **and Archaeal populations and RT-qPCR to monitor intestinal gene expression**

695

Gene	Primer sequence 5'-3'	Target	Annealing temperature (°C)	References
Primers qPCR				
<i>16S</i>	F-GTATTACCGCGGCTGCTG R-ACTCCTACGGGAGGCAG	Total bacteria	58	Yu et al. 2005-
Primers 16S for Illumina sequencing				
<i>16S</i>	F-CCTACGGGNGGCWGCAG R-GACTACHVGGGTATCTAATCC	Bacteria		Klindworth et al. 2013
<i>16S archaea</i>	F-GYGCASCAGKCGMGAAW R-GGACTACVSGGTATCTAAT	Archaea	-	Takai et Horikoshi, 2000
Primers RT qPCR				
Gene	Primer sequence 5'-3'		Annealing temperature (°C)	References
<i>GAPDH</i>	F-GTGGAAAGACTCATGACCACAG R-GCAGGGATGATGTTCTGGAGAG	Housekeeping gene	60	This study
<i>OCN</i>	F-CTGAAGCAAGTGAAGGGATCTG R-CCAACCATCTTCTTGATGTGTGA	Occludin	60	This study
<i>ZO-1</i>	F-AGCACAGTGCCTAAAGCTATTCC R-AAGATGGTCATACTGTGGTGGC	Zonula occludens 1	60	This study
<i>MUC2</i>	F-CAGTGCAGCATCCTCAAA R-GCAGAAGCACTCACAGTC	Mucin 2	60	This study
<i>MUC5AC</i>	F-CACACATGGGAAGCTGAG R-TCGGCAGTCAAAGAACAC	Mucin 5AC	60	This study

696

697 **Table 2. Volatile organic compounds significantly altered by chronic exposure to PE MPs**
 698 **in Tm-ARCOL**
 699 Values are the mean of abundances ($\times 10^5$) of each candidate marker with its standard deviation
 700 (in brackets).

Candidate markers	Tentatively identification ^a	m/z ^b	Exp. RI ^c	Ref. RI ^d	CAS number	p value	Control	Exposed	Under/over production compared to the control
Hydrocarbons									
Pentane, 3-methyl-	MS+RI	71	561	578	96-14-0	***	0.2 (74%)	3.9 (29%)	↗
Cyclopentane, 1,1,3-trimethyl-	MS	97	728	NA	4516-69-2	***	0.2 (51%)	3.3 (34%)	↗
Methyl C9-alkane - RI 814	MS	85	814	NA		***	0.5 (49%)	4.8 (22%)	↗
Methyl C9-alkane - RI 821	MS	71	821	NA		***	3.3 (42%)	17.6 (15%)	↗
1-heptene, 2,4-dimethyl-	MS+RI	70	841	855	19549-87-2	***	5.7 (34%)	23.9 (9%)	↗
Heptane, 2,3-dimethyl-	MS+RI	84	856	850	3074-71-3	***	0.7 (44%)	2.1 (17%)	↗
Methyl C9-alkane - RI 861	MS	71	861	NA		*	1.5 (59%)	5.1 (35%)	↗
Esters									
Propanoic acid, ethyl ester	MS+RI	57	710	708	105-37-3	***	1310.7 (26%)	278.9 (57%)	↘
Propanoic acid, 2-methyl-, ethyl ester	MS+RI	71	757	754	97-62-1	*	15.9 (45%)	4.9 (44%)	↘
Butanoic acid, ethyl ester	MS+RI	88	799	802	105-54-4	***	88.4 (15%)	20.1 (59%)	↘
Propanoic acid, propyl ester	MS+RI	57	807	804	106-36-5	**	203.7 (31%)	42.9 (55%)	↘
Butanoic acid, 3-methyl, ethyl ester	MS+RI	88	851	854	108-64-5	**	1.9 (36%)	0.6 (32%)	↘
Butanoic acid, propyl ester	MS+RI	89	892	899	105-66-8	**	31.4 (37%)	8.7 (30%)	↘
Propanoic acid, butyl ester	MS+RI	75	903	908	590-01-2	**	6.0 (3%)	3.7 (29%)	↘
Hexanoic acid, methyl ester	MS+RI	74	923	924	106-70-7	*	3.3 (63%)	26.1 (64%)	↗
Pentanoic acid, propyl ester	MS	71	1006	NA	141-06-0	**	6.2 (17%)	2.5 (41%)	↘
Heptanoic acid, methyl ester	MS+RI	74	1031	1021	106-73-0	*	0.3 (44%)	10.6 (65%)	↗
Heptanoic acid, ethyl ester	MS+RI	88	1093	1097	106-30-9	*	0.5 (67%)	15.1 (74%)	↗
Butanoic acid, hexyl ester	MS+RI	71	1193	1192	2639-63-6	**	0.8 (28%)	1.6 (23%)	↗
Alcohols									
1-hexanol	MS+RI	69	866	867	111-27-3	*	759.7 (27%)	2425.3 (50%)	↗
1-heptanol	MS+RI	70	979	970	111-70-6	**	127.8 (47%)	1644.9 (36%)	↗
Aldehydes									
Heptanal	MS+RI	81	900	899	111-71-7	**	6.0 (31%)	14.0 (26%)	↗
Octanal	MS+RI	84	1017	1003	124-13-0	**	4.0 (25%)	9.1 (25%)	↗
Ketones									
2-heptanone	MS+RI	58	887	891	110-43-0	*	17.5 (51%)	75.7 (59%)	↗
2-heptanone, 4-methyl-	MS+RI	58	942	936	6137-06-0	*	2.5 (35%)	4.4 (26%)	↗
2-decanone	MS+RI	58	1197	1192	693-54-9	**	5.6 (16%)	2.5 (28%)	↘

701
702

703 ^a MS + RI, mass spectrum and RI agree with literature data; MS, mass spectrum agrees with literature
 704 data; ^b Mass fragment used for area determination; (^{c,d}) Retention indices on a DB5 capillary column
 705 from experimental run (^c) or bibliographic data (^d); NA: Non-available; ↘: underproduction compared
 706 to the control; ↗: overproduction compared to the control; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < Bonferroni
 707 corrected values

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709 **Figure captions**

710 **Fig. 1. Outline of *in vitro* fermentations and cell culture experiments**

711 a) Schematic representation of the Tm-ARCOL gut model and the parameters used to reproduce
712 the toddler colonic conditions. b) Tm-ARCOL experimental design and analysis. Four
713 bioreactors inoculated with fecal samples from four different toddlers were run in parallel. After
714 a stabilization phase, PE MPs were added daily into the bioreactor at a dose of 21 mg for 14
715 days. The last three days of the stabilization period (days 6, 7, 8) were chosen as the control
716 while the last three days of the treatment period (days 20, 21, 22) were selected as exposed
717 days. Atmospheric and luminal fermentation media were sampled daily while mucin-alginate
718 beads were collected every other day for further analysis of microbiota structure or activity. c)
719 Cell culture experimental design and analysis. Caco-2 and HT29-MTX intestinal cells in co-
720 culture were seeded using inserts. After an 18-day growth period, cells were exposed during 24
721 h to day 8 or day 22 luminal supernatants of Tm-ARCOL and cytotoxicity, inflammation, mucin
722 gene expression and intestinal permeability were evaluated.

723 *AhR*: Aryl Hydrocarbon Receptor; *ELISA*: Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay; *GC*: Gas
724 Chromatography; *HRP*: Horse Radish Peroxidase; *HPLC*: High-Performance Liquid
725 Chromatography; *LDH*: Lactate Dehydrogenase; *LY*: Lucifer Yellow; *MP*: Microplastic;
726 *MUC2*: Mucin 2; *MUC5AC*: Mucin 5AC; *OCN*: Occludin; *PE*: Polyethylene; *SCFA*: Short
727 Chain Fatty Acid; *TEER*: Trans-Epithelial Electrical Resistance; *ZO-1*: Zonula Occludens-1

728

729 **Fig 2. Scanning electron microscopy observations of PE MPs/microbiota interactions in**
730 **Tm-ARCOL and Raman spectroscopy analysis of PE MPs at the end of exposed period**

731 a) Representative scanning electron microscopy images of luminal samples and mucin-alginate
732 beads from Toddlers 2 and 3 before and after exposure to PE MPs. For the mucin-alginate
733 beads, the analysis was performed after 48 h of colonization in the mucosal external
734 compartment. The right panel shows a typical mucin-alginate bead and its colonization by gut
735 microbiota (day 8). b) Example of Raman spectroscopy mapping of the surface of PE MP (the
736 PE MP appears in yellow in the left image) in the day 22 luminal sample of Toddler 3; the
737 Raman spectrum is compared with that obtained with the initial suspension of PE MPs.

738 *PE*: Polyethylene

739

740 **Fig 3. Effect of chronic exposure to PE MPs on luminal and mucosal bacteria in Tm-**
741 **ARCOL**

742 a) Relative abundance of the 20 main bacterial populations at the family level during the control
743 and exposed periods for each donor. M represents the medium surrounding the mucin-alginate
744 beads. b) Differential Analysis (DESeq2, metagenomeSeq, metacoder, $p < 0.05$) at the family
745 level between control and exposed days (n=4).

746

747 **Fig 4. Effect of chronic exposure to PE MPs on α - and β -diversity indexes of bacterial**
748 **communities in Tm-ARCOL**

749 Observed ASVs (a) and Shannon (b) indexes for each donor and on average (n=4), expressed
750 as means \pm SEM. Bacterial β -diversity (c) was also represented using a two-dimensional PCoA
751 plot, based on the unweighted UniFrac distance matrix on luminal and mucosal samples (left)
752 and a distance-based redundancy analysis (RDA), based on both 16S rDNA gene
753 metabarcoding and metabolic activity data, applied to luminal samples and excluding the donor
754 effect (right). Statistical differences were tested by one-way ANOVA with * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$,
755 *** $p < 0.001$, **** $p < 0.0001$.

756 *CONT: Control, EXP: Exposed*

757 **Fig 5. Impact of chronic exposure to PE MPs on gas and short chain fatty acid production**
758 **in Tm-ARCOL**

759 a) Mean \pm SEM daily gas production in mL and (b) mean \pm SEM total SCFA production in
760 mM, for each donor and in average (n=4). c) Mean \pm SEM daily acetate, propionate and butyrate
761 production in mM for each donor and on average (n=4). Statistical differences were tested by
762 one-way ANOVA with * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, **** $p < 0.0001$.

763 *CONT: Control; EXP: Exposed; SCFA: Short Chain Fatty Acid*

764

765 **Fig 6. Impact of chronic exposure to PE MPs on the capacity of Tm-ARCOL luminal**
766 **supernatants to activate Aryl Hydrocarbon receptor**

767 AhR activity is expressed as fold changes relative to the luciferase activity of the control period
768 and after normalisation based on sample cytotoxicity (lactate dehydrogenase activity assay).
769 All results are given for each donor and on average (n=4) and expressed as means \pm SEM.

770 *AhR: Aryl Hydrocarbon Receptor; CONT: Control; EXP: Exposed*

771

772 **Fig 7. Impact of chronic exposure to PE MPs on volatile organic compounds in the luminal**
773 **compartment of Tm-ARCOL**

774 a) Principal component analysis (PCA) of the control and exposed days including the 26
775 discriminant VOCs. b) Mean of abundance of the eight VOCs with the highest discriminating
776 power. Abundances of selected VOCs are expressed in arbitrary units. *** $p < 0.01$ Bonferroni
777 corrected value.

778

779 **Fig 8. Impact of Tm-ARCOL luminal supernatants before and after chronic exposure to**
780 **PE MPs on inflammation and intestinal barrier integrity using a Caco-2/HT29-MTX co-**
781 **culture**

782 a) The difference between the average TEER before and after 24-h exposure to Tm-ARCOL
783 luminal supernatants was calculated and termed Δ TEER ($\Omega \cdot \text{cm}^2$) as an indicator of paracellular
784 permeability of the co-culture before and after exposure to MPs. b) LY transport (Papp in cm/s)
785 and HRP Papp (in cm/s) as an indicator of paracellular and transcellular permeability,
786 respectively. c) Mean IL-8 concentration (in pg/mL) in the apical and basolateral media of the
787 cell co-culture. All results were given by donors, also on average (n=4) and expressed as means
788 \pm SEM.

789 *CONT: Control; EXP: Exposed; HRP: Horse Radish Peroxidase; IL-8: Interleukin-8; LY:*
790 *Lucifer Yellow; Papp: Apparent Permeability coefficient; TEER: Trans-Epithelial Electrical*
791 *Resistance*

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