

Source: Okayama University (JAPAN), Public Relations Division

For immediate release: 31 March 2022

Okayama University research: Controlled cell death by irradiation with light

(Okayama, 31 March) **Researchers at Okayama University report in the *Journal of the American Chemical Society* the light-induced controlled death of targeted cells. The underlying mechanism involves a protein proton pump that alkalizes the intracellular environment when irradiated with light.**

In multicellular organisms, cells that are no longer needed or have become unhealthy are eliminated through a process called apoptosis — a type of programmed cell death. Apoptosis is an essential mechanism for the development and health of organisms. In many human diseases, including cancer and autoimmune disease, inappropriate apoptosis is part of the pathological picture. To better understand apoptotic cell death and devise treatments for diseases where inappropriate apoptosis plays a role, tools to stimulate or prevent cell death by means of external stimuli are nowadays being developed. Professor SUDO Yuki and Associate Professor KOJIMA Keiichi, NAKANO Shin (undergraduate student) at Okayama University has now succeeded in using light as the external stimulus to regulate apoptotic cell death. Their technique exploits the response to light of certain proteins in cell membranes.

The method of Professor SUDO and colleagues is based on the notion that the pH within a cell needs to be within a certain range for the cell to stay alive. The pH of a medium, a number between 0 and 14, is an indication of its acidity or basicity, which in turn is related to the concentration of protons. A neutral medium like water has a pH of 7. An acidic medium has a pH lower than 7; a basic or alkaline medium's pH is higher than 7.

The researchers first performed experiments with a type of human cells called HeLa cells, grown in alkaline and acidic medium. They found that the alkaline medium resulted in an intracellular pH of 8.1 and the subsequent death of the cells, whereas acidification did not. Building on this observation, Professor SUDO and colleagues grew HeLa cells with cell membranes containing proteins (rhodopsins) that can pump protons from the inside to the outside of the cell (AR3 rhodopsin) or vice versa (*RmXeR* rhodopsin). The former process lowers the proton concentration in the cell's interior, resulting in a higher pH, whereas the latter results in a lowering of the pH. Rhodopsin's pumping function is triggered by light; for HeLa cells in alkaline medium, irradiation with light during 5 minutes brought the pH to 8.6 and 7.3 for AR3 and *RmXeR* rhodopsin, respectively — accelerating and decelerating the intracellular alkalization, respectively. Similar experiments with HeLa cells in neutral medium led to similar results, showing that phototriggered alkalization initiates the apoptosis mechanism. The light-activated AR3 induced cell death at a physiologically neutral pH 7.4 and biochemical analysis revealed that the intracellular alkalization caused by AR3 triggered the mitochondrial apoptotic signaling pathway.

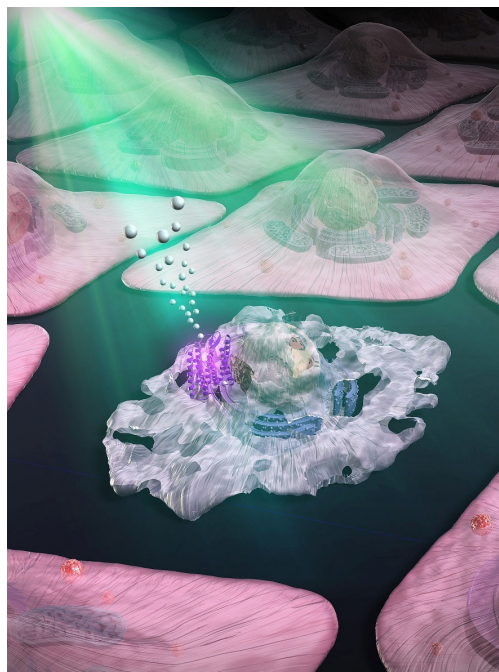
The scientists then checked whether phototriggered apoptosis can happen in a living organism. They irradiated worms that were genetically modified so that they produce AR3 rhodopsin in nerve cells. They found that the targeted nerve cells indeed undergo apoptosis.

The present work shows that it is possible to induce apoptotic cell death by means of irradiation with light, through the mechanism of intracellular alkalization involving the proton pump rhodopsin AR3. Regarding the relevance of this finding for new therapies, Professor SUDO and colleagues plan to “demonstrate the applicability of the phototriggered apoptosis method in tissues and organs in vivo toward therapeutic application.”

## Background

### Microbial rhodopsins

Microbial rhodopsins, also called bacterial rhodopsins, are proteins that perform ion transport functions in bacteria, triggered by irradiation with light. They are located within cell membranes — the ion transport happens through the cell membrane, from the inside of the cell to its outside environment (outward) or vice versa (inward). The family of microbial rhodopsins contains light-driven proton pumps, ion pumps, ion channels, and light sensors. Well-known light-driven proton pumps are bacteriorhodopsin and archaerhodopsin. An archaerhodopsin known as Archaerhodopsin-3 (AR3) was used by Professor SUDO Yuki and colleagues from Okayama University as an optically triggered outward proton pump. They were able to show that AR3, when irradiated with light, causes alkalization of a cell's inside environment, which in turn leads to controlled cell death (apoptosis).



### Figure

A purple-colored rhodopsin, Archaerhodopsin-3, outwardly transports protons in a light-dependent manner. The intracellular alkalization induces a programmed cell death, apoptosis, in animal cells. This photo-triggered apoptosis (PTA) method has a high potential as an optogenetic tool to selectively eliminate target cells with a high spatiotemporal resolution.

## Reference

Shin Nakao, Keiichi Kojima, Yuki Sudo. Phototriggered Apoptotic Cell Death (PTA) Using the Light-Driven Outward Proton Pump Rhodopsin Archærhodopsin 3. *J. Am. Chem. Soc.* 2022, 144, 9, 3771–3775.

DOI : 10.1021/jacs.1c12608

<https://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/jacs.1c12608>

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The whole volume: [OU-MRU \(1-\)](#)

Vol.1 : [Innovative non-invasive 'liquid biopsy' method to capture circulating tumor cells from blood samples for genetic testing](#)

Vol.2 : [Ensuring a cool recovery from cardiac arrest](#)

Vol.3 : [Organ regeneration research leaps forward](#)

Vol.4 : [Cardiac mechanosensitive integrator](#)

- Vol.5 : [Cell injections get to the heart of congenital defects](#)
- Vol.6 : [Fourth key molecule identified in bone development](#)
- Vol.7 : [Anticancer virus solution provides an alternative to surgery](#)
- Vol.8 : [Light-responsive dye stimulates sight in genetically blind patients](#)
- Vol.9 : [Diabetes drug helps towards immunity against cancer](#)
- Vol.10 : [Enzyme-inhibitors treat drug-resistant epilepsy](#)
- Vol.11 : [Compound-protein combination shows promise for arthritis treatment](#)
- Vol.12 : [Molecular features of the circadian clock system in fruit flies](#)
- Vol.13 : [Peptide directs artificial tissue growth](#)
- Vol.14 : [Simplified boron compound may treat brain tumours](#)
- Vol.15 : [Metamaterial absorbers for infrared inspection technologies](#)
- Vol.16 : [Epigenetics research traces how crickets restore lost limbs](#)
- Vol.17 : [Cell research shows pathway for suppressing hepatitis B virus](#)
- Vol.18 : [Therapeutic protein targets liver disease](#)
- Vol.19 : [Study links signalling protein to osteoarthritis](#)
- Vol.20 : [Lack of enzyme promotes fatty liver disease in thin patients](#)
- Vol.21 : [Combined gene transduction and light therapy targets gastric cancer](#)
- Vol.22 : [Medical supportive device for hemodialysis catheter puncture](#)
- Vol.23 : [Development of low cost oral inactivated vaccines for dysentery](#)
- Vol.24 : [Sticky molecules to tackle obesity and diabetes](#)
- Vol.25 : [Self-administered aroma foot massage may reduce symptoms of anxiety](#)
- Vol.26 : [Protein for preventing heart failure](#)
- Vol.27 : [Keeping cells in shape to fight sepsis](#)
- Vol.28 : [Viral-based therapy for bone cancer](#)
- Vol.29 : [Photoreactive compound allows protein synthesis control with light](#)
- Vol.30 : [Cancer stem cells' role in tumor growth revealed](#)
- Vol.31 : [Prevention of RNA virus replication](#)
- Vol.32 : [Enzyme target for slowing bladder cancer invasion](#)
- Vol.33 : [Attacking tumors from the inside](#)
- Vol.34 : [Novel mouse model for studying pancreatic cancer](#)
- Vol.35 : [Potential cause of Lafora disease revealed](#)
- Vol.36 : [Overloading of protein localization triggers cellular defects](#)
- Vol.37 : [Protein dosage compensation mechanism unravelled](#)
- Vol.38 : [Bioengineered tooth restoration in a large mammal](#)
- Vol.39 : [Successful test of retinal prosthesis implanted in rats](#)
- Vol.40 : [Antibodies prolong seizure latency in epileptic mice](#)
- Vol.41 : [Inorganic biomaterials for soft-tissue adhesion](#)
- Vol.42 : [Potential drug for treating chronic pain with few side effects](#)
- Vol.43 : [Potential origin of cancer-associated cells revealed](#)
- Vol.44 : [Protection from plant extracts](#)
- Vol.45 : [Link between biological-clock disturbance and brain dysfunction uncovered](#)
- Vol.46 : [New method for suppressing lung cancer oncogene](#)
- Vol.47 : [Candidate genes for eye misalignment identified](#)
- Vol.48 : [Nanotechnology-based approach to cancer virotherapy](#)

- Vol.49 : [Cell membrane as material for bone formation](#)
- Vol.50 : [Iron removal as a potential cancer therapy](#)
- Vol.51 : [Potential of 3D nanoenvironments for experimental cancer](#)
- Vol.52 : [A protein found on the surface of cells plays an integral role in tumor growth and sustenance](#)
- Vol.53 : [Successful implantation and testing of retinal prosthesis in monkey eyes with retinal degeneration](#)
- Vol.54 : [Measuring ion concentration in solutions for clinical and environmental research](#)
- Vol.55 : [Diabetic kidney disease: new biomarkers improve the prediction of the renal prognosis](#)
- Vol.56 : [New device for assisting accurate hemodialysis catheter placement](#)
- Vol.57 : [Possible link between excess chewing muscle activity and dental disease](#)
- Vol.58 : [Insights into mechanisms governing the resistance to the anti-cancer medication cetuximab](#)
- Vol.59 : [Role of commensal flora in periodontal immune response investigated](#)
- Vol.60 : [Role of commensal microbiota in bone remodeling](#)
- Vol.61 : [Mechanical stress affects normal bone development](#)
- Vol.62 : [3D tissue model offers insights into treating pancreatic cancer](#)
- Vol.63 : [Promising biomarker for vascular disease relapse revealed](#)
- Vol.64 : [Inflammation in the brain enhances the side-effects of hypnotic medication](#)
- Vol.65 : [Game changer: How do bacteria play Tag?](#)
- Vol.66 : [Is too much protein a bad thing?](#)
- Vol.67 : [Technology to rapidly detect cancer markers for cancer diagnosis](#)
- Vol.68 : [Improving the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer](#)
- Vol.69 : [Early gastric cancer endoscopic diagnosis system using artificial intelligence](#)
- Vol.70 : [Prosthetics for Retinal Stimulation](#)
- Vol.71 : [The nervous system can contribute to breast cancer progression](#)
- Vol.72 : [Synthetic compound provides fast screening for potential drugs](#)
- Vol.73 : [Primary intraocular lymphoma does not always spread to the central nervous system](#)
- Vol.74 : [Rising from the ashes—dead brain cells can be regenerated after traumatic injury](#)
- Vol.75 : [More than just daily supplements — herbal medicines can treat stomach disorders](#)
- Vol.76 : [The molecular pathogenesis of muscular dystrophy-associated cardiomyopathy](#)
- Vol.77 : [Green leafy vegetables contain a compound which can fight cancer cells](#)
- Vol.78 : [Disrupting blood supply to tumors as a new strategy to treat oral cancer](#)
- Vol.79 : [Novel blood-based markers to detect Alzheimer’s disease](#)
- Vol.80 : [A novel 3D cell culture model sheds light on the mechanisms driving fibrosis in pancreatic cancer](#)
- Vol.81 : [Innovative method for determining carcinogenicity of chemicals using iPS cells](#)
- Vol.82 : [Making memories — the workings of a neuron revealed](#)
- Vol.83 : [Skipping a beat — a novel method to study heart attacks](#)
- Vol.84 : [Friend to Foe—When Harmless Bacteria Turn Toxic](#)
- Vol.85 : [Promising imaging method for the early detection of dental caries](#)
- Vol.86 : [Plates and belts — a toolkit to prevent accidental falls during invasive vascular procedures](#)

- Vol.87 : [Therapeutic potential of stem cells for treating neurodegenerative disease](#)  
Vol.88 : [Nanotechnology for making cancer drugs more accessible to the brain](#)  
Vol.89 : [Studying Parkinson's disease with face-recognition software](#)  
Vol.90 : [High levels of television exposure affect visual acuity in children](#)  
Vol.91 : [Meeting high demand: Increasing the efficiency of antiviral drug production in bacteria](#)  
Vol.92 : [Numerical modelling to assist the development of a retinal prosthesis](#)  
Vol.93 : [Repurposing cancer drugs: An innovative therapeutic strategy to fight bone cancer](#)  
Vol.94 : [A berry vine found in Asia proves useful in combating lung cancer](#)  
Vol.95 : [A new avenue for detecting cancer in the blood](#)  
Vol.96 : [Automated cell image analysis](#)  
Vol.97 : [Artificial intelligence helps to determine cancer invasion](#)  
Vol.98 : [Okayama University launches clinical trials of a jawbone regeneration therapy using human BMP-2 transgenic protein derived from \*Escherichia coli\*.](#)  
Vol.99 : [A rapid flow process that can convert droplets into multilayer polymeric microcapsules](#)  
Vol.100 : [Understanding insect leg regeneration](#)  
Vol.101 : [Oral tumor progression mechanism identified](#)



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Okayama University is located in the heart of Japan approximately 3 hours west of Tokyo by Shinkansen.

Website: [http://www.okayama-u.ac.jp/index\\_e.html](http://www.okayama-u.ac.jp/index_e.html)



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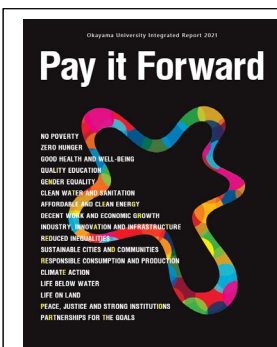
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