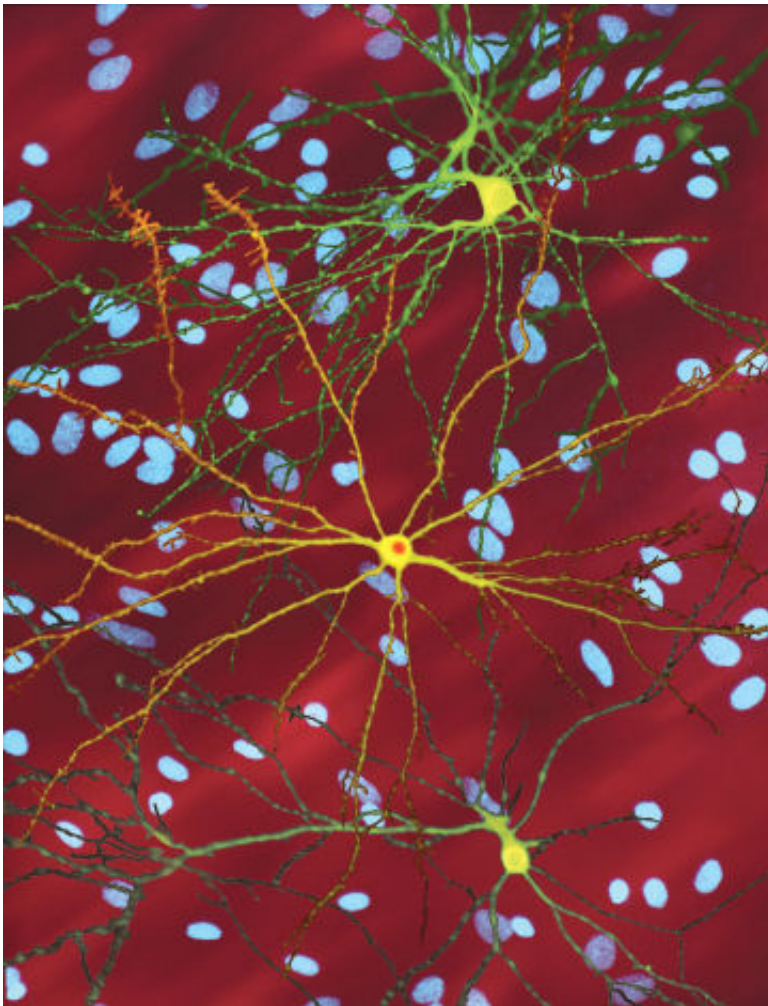


Protein subunit found to rescue afflicted neurons in Huntington's disease

September 5 2016



A montage of three images of single striatal neurons transfected with a disease-associated version of huntingtin, the protein that causes Huntington's disease. Nuclei of untransfected neurons are seen in the background (blue). The neuron in the center (yellow) contains an abnormal intracellular accumulation of huntingtin called an inclusion body (orange). Credit: Wikipedia/ Creative

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Using an experimental co-culture approach in which two different types of neurons from a mouse model of Huntington's disease (HD) are grown side-by-side, connecting to form critically impacted circuits, researchers at University of California San Diego School of Medicine have identified a subunit of a protein that, when expressed, reverse the mutated gene effects responsible for HD.

The findings are published online September 5 in the journal *PNAS*.

"Our experimental design provides an invaluable system for studying important cellular and molecular events underlying Huntington's disease," said first author Xiaobei Zhao, PhD, a post-doctoral scientist in the Department of Neurosciences at UC San Diego School of Medicine.

"Atrophy of the corticostriatal pathway, which connects neurons in the cortex with those in the striatum, is a pathological hallmark of Huntington's disease. We've shown in this HD cellular model that dysfunction in cortical neurons drives dysfunction in striatal neurons because the gene mutation responsible for Huntington disease causes deficits in the production, transport and release of a growth factor called BDNF.

"Importantly, using this model provided evidence that expression of a single subunit of the TRiC protein, which inhibits the aggregation of mutant huntingtin proteins, rescued atrophy of striatal neurons. The next step is to test this in vivo. If the phenotype of the HD mouse model can be rescued, it's possible that TRiC could be used to treat Huntington's disease."

The corticostriatal pathway is a neuronal circuit connecting two parts of the brain: the outer, folded cerebral cortex where memory, thought, language and consciousness occur, and the underlying striatum—a region responsible for, among other things, behavior and voluntary movement in response to social stimuli. Corticostriatal decline is a telltale indicator of HD, a fatal genetic disorder characterized by progressive deterioration of physical and mental abilities.

In their study, Zhao, with senior author William Mobley, MD, PhD, chair and Distinguished Professor in the Department of Neurosciences, and colleagues cultured cortical and striatal neurons from an HD transgenic [mouse model](#) that expresses the human mutant huntingtin gene in a microfluidic chamber that allowed the cortical [neurons](#) to connect via axons to [striatal neurons](#).

They found that the resulting circuits recapitulated several salient features of HD pathology, including reduced synaptic density and BDNF. Zhao stated "The new model and the ability to recreate the abnormal circuit is more physiologically relevant than many other models. Most important, it facilitates study of disease mechanisms and possible new disease-modifying treatments."

More information: TRiC subunits enhance BDNF axonal transport and rescue striatal atrophy in Huntington's disease, *PNAS*, www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1603020113

Provided by University of California - San Diego

Citation: Protein subunit found to rescue afflicted neurons in Huntington's disease (2016, September 5) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-09-protein-subunit-afflicted-neurons-huntington.html>

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