

Phase Separation at the Nerve Terminal

Dragomir Milovanovic

Departments of Neuroscience and Cell Biology, Program in Cellular Neuroscience, Neurodegeneration and Repair, Kavli Institute for Neuroscience, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, CT, USA

Neuronal transmission relies on the sustained release of neurotransmitters from synaptic vesicles (SVs) upon depolarization of neurons. Nerve terminals contain hundreds of SVs that form tight clusters. Despite being held together, vesicles are highly mobile within these clusters, so that they can be randomly recruited to the surface of the cell to release their content upon activation of the neuron. How this compact, yet the dynamic organization is achieved remained elusive. Several studies in the past decade showed that macromolecules may assemble into distinct liquid compartments not-limited by a membrane, a process known as liquid-liquid phase separation.

Recently we have discussed (Milovanovic and De Camilli, *Neuron*, 2017) how several features of SV clusters suggest that they may be part of a distinct liquid phase in the cytosol. For example, SV clusters have sharp boundaries, exclude other organelles, vesicles in these clusters are mobile, and SVs can be exchanged with vesicles outside the cluster. Thus, SV cluster may represent a distinct liquid phase in which one component of the phase are synaptic vesicles and the other component are proteins of the intervening matrix.

In our latest study, we show that synapsin 1, a highly abundant synaptic protein, forms a distinct liquid phase in an aqueous environment. Synapsin 1 exchanges readily between the phase where is enriched and the surrounding medium. Additional synapsin 1 binding scaffolding proteins further modulate this phase but are not necessary for its formation. Importantly, synapsin 1 can capture small lipid vesicles into its phase. The phase of synapsin 1 rapidly disassembles upon phosphorylation by CaMKII, mimicking the dispersion of synapsin 1 that occurs at presynaptic boutons upon stimulation. Thus, a minimal system of synapsin (with or without its binding partners) may sequester lipid vesicles, forming a distinct liquid phase.

Referenced articles:

Milovanovic D and De Camilli P. Synaptic vesicle clusters at synapses: a distinct liquid phase? (2017) *Neuron*, 93: 995

Milovanovic D, Wu Y, Bian X, De Camilli P. A liquid phase of synapsin and lipid vesicles. *Science* in press DOI: 10.1126/science.aat5671