A protein-dye hybrid system as narrow range tunable intracellular pH sensor

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# Table of Contents

1. Experimental section

   1.1. Description of experimental techniques

2. Supplementary figures

   2.1. pH dependent stability of Sq dye

   2.2. CD spectra of BSA protein at different pH conditions

   2.3. Reversible interaction of protein-dye hybrid

   2.4. Noncovalent interaction of Sq dye with BSA protein under acidic pH

   2.5. DLS analysis of SqNPs in the presence and absence of BSA protein

   2.6. DLS analysis of BSA-SqNPs in the presence and absence of DNSA

   2.7. Selectivity studies

   2.8. Confocal fluorescence images of HeLa cells incubated with SqNPs alone

   2.9. Cell viability test

   2.10. Confocal fluorescence images of HeLa cells incubated with BSA-SqNPs

   2.11. Fluorescence intensity plots from wells incubated with BSA-SqNPs hybrids at different pH

   2.12. Disassembly of the SqNPs by the protein at different pH values

   2.13. Interaction of various amino acids with Sq dye in the monomeric state at different pH

3. References
1. Experimental section

1.1. Description of experimental techniques

**UV-vis absorption and emission spectral measurements**

Electronic absorption spectra were recorded on a Shimadzu UV-3101 PC NIR scanning spectrophotometer and emission spectra were recorded on a SPEX-Flurolog F112X spectrofluorimeter with a 1cm quartz cuvette. All experiments were carried out at 298 K.

**Circular dichroism spectroscopy (CD)**

CD spectra were recorded on JASCO-J-810 spectropolarimeter by appropriately choosing sensitivity, response time and scanning speed. CD spectra were recorded as $\theta$ in millidegrees. pH dependent chiroptical studies of BSA protein were carried using 2 $\mu$M solutions in water.

**Dynamic light scattering (DLS) measurements**

DLS analyses were carried out with a Zetasizer Nano S from Malvern Instruments at 25 °C. Average of at least five measurements were taken. The samples were prepared in phosphate buffer (25 mM NaH$_2$PO$_4$, 10 mM NaCl). 15 $\mu$L of Sq dye from a 1.2 $\times$ 10$^{-3}$ M stock solution in acetonitrile was injected to 3 mL phosphate buffer in quartz cuvette with constant stirring, the solution was kept for 10 min at room temperature before measurement. The average hydrodynamic radii were calculated from Stork-Einstein equation ($R_h = \frac{k_B T}{6\pi \eta D}$). All solutions used to detect hydrodynamic diameter by DLS were passed through Millipore filters with a pore size of 0.22 $\mu$m to remove dust.
2. Supplementary figures

2.1. pH dependent stability of Sq dye

![Graph showing absorbance and emission spectral changes of Sq dye](image)

**Fig. S1** Absorption and emission ($\lambda_{ex} @ 640$ nm) spectral changes of Sq dye (2 µM) in 30% ACN/25 mM phosphate buffer in different pH solutions.

2.2. CD spectra of BSA protein at different pH conditions

![Graph showing CD spectra](image)

**Fig. S2** Circular dichroism spectra of BSA protein (2 µM, water) at different pH conditions.
2.3. Reversible interaction of protein-dye hybrid

![Graph showing time dependent fluorescence responses of 16:1 BSA-SqNPs at 480 (λex @ 380 nm) and 700 nm (λex @ 640 nm) regions to acid/base cycles.]

Fig. S3 Time dependent fluorescence responses of 16:1 BSA-SqNPs at 480 (λex @ 380 nm) and 700 nm (λex @ 640 nm) regions to acid/base cycles.

2.4. Noncovalent interaction of Sq dye with BSA protein under acidic pH

![Graphs showing UV-Vis absorption spectral changes and fluorescence changes of SqNPs upon addition of BSA.]

Fig. S4 (a) UV-Vis absorption spectral changes and (b) fluorescence changes of SqNPs upon addition of BSA. All experiments were performed using 6 μM SqNPs solution and 96 μM BSA in 25 mM phosphate buffer at pH 4.0.
2.5. DLS analysis of SqNPs in the presence and absence of BSA protein

![Graph showing DLS analysis of SqNPs in the presence and absence of BSA protein](image)

**Fig. S5** DLS analysis of SqNPs (6 µM, 25 mM phosphate buffer, pH 4.0) in the presence and absence of BSA protein (96 µM). DLS data of BSA protein alone (6 µM) are also shown.

2.6. DLS analysis of BSA-SqNPs in the presence and absence of DNSA

![Graph showing DLS analysis of BSA-SqNPs in the presence and absence of DNSA](image)

**Fig. S6** DLS analysis of 16:1 BSA-SqNPs (25 mM phosphate buffer, pH 4.0) in the presence and absence of DNSA (120 µM).
2.7. Selectivity studies

![Fluorescence spectra](image)

**Fig. S7** (a) and (b) Fluorescence spectra of 6:1 BSA-SqNPs in the presence of 20 μM of metal ions (Na⁺, K⁺, Ca²⁺, Zn²⁺, Mg²⁺, Mn²⁺, Cu²⁺, Fe²⁺, Fe³⁺, GSH, Cys, Hcy, H₂O₂), 1 mM of thiols (GSH, Cys, Hcy), and 100 μM of H₂O₂ in 25 mM phosphate buffer. All data were obtained with 1 μM SqNPs in 25 mM phosphate buffer, λ<sub>ex</sub> @ 640 nm (a) and λ<sub>ex</sub> @ 380 nm (b).

2.8. Confocal fluorescence images of HeLa cells incubated with SqNPs alone

![Confocal images](image)

**Fig. S8** Confocal fluorescence images of HeLa cells before (a) and after (b) incubation with SqNPs. The three panels represent the green channel (A), red channel (B) and the
bright field (C) images respectively. Green and red images obtained by exciting at 405 and 640 nm, respectively.

2.9. Cell viability test

![Bar chart showing cell viability test results for SqNPs and BSA-SqNPs complex](image)

**Fig. S9** Cytotoxicity of SqNPs and BSA-SqNPs complex (6:1) in HeLa cells evaluated by MTT assay. The cells were incubated with different concentrations of SqNPs and SqNPs-BSA complex (0-100 μM) for 24 h.

2.10. Confocal fluorescence images of HeLa cells incubated with BSA-SqNPs
Fig. S10 Confocal fluorescence images of HeLa cells maintained at pH 7.0 incubated with 6:1 BSA-SqNPs for 30 min at 37 °C.

2.11. Fluorescence intensity plots from wells incubated with BSA-SqNPs hybrids at different pH

![Fluorescence intensity plots](image)

Fig. S11 (a) and (b) Fluorescence intensity plots obtained from different wells treated with BSA-SqNPs conjugates of different ratios at pH 6.5, 7.0 and 7.5.
2.12. Disassembly of the SqNPs by the protein at different pH values

![Graph showing disassembly of SqNPs by protein at different pH values.]

**Fig. S12** Volume-weighted hydrodynamic radii of SqNPs (6 µM, in 25 mM phosphate buffer) vs BSA protein of different equiv. at different pH.

2.13. Interaction of various amino acids with Sq dye in the monomeric state at different pH

![Graph showing fluorescence response of Sq dye at 510 nm.]

**Fig. S13** Fluorescence response of Sq dye (6 µM, in 30% ACN/25 mM phosphate buffer) at 510 nm ($\lambda_{ex}$ @ 380 nm) monitored against 10 equiv. of different amino acids.

3. References