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Visualizing Early Effects of Amyloid β , Such as Axonal Growth Cone Collapse, in Mouse Cultured Neurons.

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Corresponding Author:	T Dr. Kuboyama
Corresponding Author's Institution:	
Corresponding Author E-Mail:	kuboyama@inm.u-toyama.ac.jp
Order of Authors:	Tomoharu Kuboyama
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TITLE:

Visualizing Axonal Growth Cone Collapse and Early Amyloid β Effects in Cultured Mouse Neurons

AUTHORS & AFFILIATIONS:

Tomoharu Kuboyama¹

¹Division of Neuromedical Science, Institute of Natural Medicine, University of Toyama, Toyama, Japan

Corresponding Author:

Tomoharu Kuboyama

Tel: +81-76-434-7670

kuboyama@inm.u-toyama.ac.jp

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SUMMARY:

Here a protocol to investigate the early effects of amyloid- β (A β) in the brain is presented. This shows that A β induces clathrin-mediated endocytosis and collapse of axonal growth cones. The protocol is useful in studying early effects of A β on axonal growth cones and may facilitate prevention of Alzheimer's disease.

ABSTRACT:

Amyloid- β (A β) causes memory impairments in Alzheimer's disease (AD). Although therapeutics have been shown to reduce A β levels in the brains of AD patients, these do not improve memory functions. Since A β aggregates in the brain before the appearance of memory impairments, targeting A β may be inefficient for treating AD patients who already exhibit memory deficits. Therefore, downstream signaling due to A β deposition should be blocked before AD development. A β induces axonal degeneration, leading to the disruption of neuronal networks and memory impairments. Although there are many studies on the mechanisms of A β toxicity, the source of A β toxicity remains unknown. To help identify the source, we propose a novel protocol that uses microscopy, gene transfection, and live cell imaging to investigate early changes caused by A β in axonal growth cones of cultured neurons. This protocol revealed that A β induced clathrin-mediated endocytosis in axonal growth cones followed by growth cone collapse, demonstrating that inhibition of endocytosis prevents A β toxicity. This protocol will be useful in studying the early effects of A β and may lead to more efficient and preventative AD treatment.

INTRODUCTION:

Amyloid- β (A β) deposits are found in the brain of patients with Alzheimer's disease (AD) and are considered a critical cause of AD¹ that disrupt neuronal networks, leading to memory impairments²⁻⁴. Many clinical drug candidates have been shown to effectively prevent amyloid- β (A β) production or remove A β deposits. However, none have succeeded in improving memory function in AD patients⁵. A β is already deposited in the brain prior to the onset of memory

impairments⁶; therefore, decreasing A β levels in the brains of patients exhibiting memory impairments may be ineffective. A β deposition is present in preclinical AD patients; however, these patients rarely present with neuronal degeneration and memory deficits⁶. There is a time lag between A β deposition and memory impairments. Therefore, a critical strategy for the prevention of AD is blocking A β toxicity signaling during the early stages of AD, prior to the development of memory deficits. A β deposition induces axon degeneration⁷⁻¹³, which may lead to a disruption of neural networks and permanent impairment of memory function. Many studies have investigated the mechanisms of A β toxicity; for example, the degenerated axons of AD mice brains have been shown to have increased autophagy¹⁴. Calcineurin activation has been reported as a possible mechanism of A β -induced axonal degeneration¹⁵; however, the direct trigger of axonal degeneration remains unknown.

This study focuses on the collapse of axonal endings called growth cones. The collapse of axonal growth cones can be caused by axonal growth repellents, such as semaphorin-3A and ephrin-A5¹⁶⁻²⁰. Collapse-like dystrophic axonal endings have been observed in the brains of AD patients^{21,22}. Additionally, a failure of growth cone functioning can provoke axonal degeneration²³. However, it is unknown whether A β induces growth cone collapse. Therefore, this study presents a novel protocol to observe the early effects of A β in cultured neurons and investigate A β -induced growth cone collapse.

PROTOCOL:

All experiments were conducted in accordance with the Guidelines for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals at the Sugitani Campus of the University of Toyama and were approved by the Committee for Animal Care and Use of Laboratory Animals at the Sugitani Campus of the University of Toyama (A2014INM-1, A2017INM-1).

1. Collapse Assay

1.1. Poly-D-lysine coating

1.1.1. Coat 8-well culture slides with 400 μ L of 5 μ g/mL poly-D-lysine (PDL) in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) and incubate them at 37 °C overnight.

1.1.2. Remove the PDL solution and wash the wells 3 times with distilled water.

1.2. Neuron culture²⁴

1.2.1. Mince freshly isolated cerebral cortices from embryonic day 14 (E14) ddY mice with microscissors in neuron culture medium containing 12% horse serum, 0.6% glucose, and 2 mM L-glutamine (medium A). Do not add antibiotics.

Note: In this protocol, the ddY mouse is used. This is an outbred strain commonly used in Japan. This neuron culture protocol can be also applied for rat cortical neurons^{7,25}.

89 1.2.2. Centrifuge the tissues at 87 x g for 3 min.

90
91 1.2.3. Remove the supernatant. Then to the pellet, add 2 mL of 0.05% trypsin and incubate for
92 15 min at 37°C. Mix by tapping every 5 min.

93
94 1.2.4. Add 4 mL of medium A and mix by tapping.

95
96 1.2.5. Centrifuge the tissues at 178 x g for 3 min.

97
98 1.2.6. Remove the supernatant, and incubate the tissues with 600 U/mL DNase I and 0.3 mg/mL
99 soybean trypsin inhibitor dissolved in PBS for 15 min at 37 °C. Mix by tapping every 5 min.

100
101 1.2.7. After incubation, add 4 mL of medium A and mix by tapping.

102
103 1.2.8. Centrifuge the tissues at 178 x g for 3 min.

104
105 1.2.9. After removing the supernatant, add 4 mL of medium A and triturate the tissues with a
106 polished Pasteur pipette.

107
108 1.2.10. Filter the triturated tissues with a 70-µm pore-size mesh. After filtration, calculate the
109 density of cells with a hemocytometer.

110
111 1.2.11. Culture the cells in the 8-well culture slide at 0.8×10^4 cells/well with medium A and
112 maintain them in a CO₂ incubator with a humidified atmosphere of 10% CO₂ at 37 °C.

113
114 1.2.12. After 4 h of culturing, replace the culture medium to one containing 2% supplement for
115 neuronal culture, 0.6% glucose, and 2 mM L-glutamine (medium B).

116
117 Note: The purity of neurons was approximately 75%, as described previously²⁶.

118 1.3. Collapse assay²⁷

119
120
121 1.3.1. Dissolve commercially obtained full-length amyloid β 1-42 (A β 1-42) in distilled water at a
122 concentration of 0.5 mM and incubate at 37 °C for 7 days. After the incubation, store the
123 aggregated A β 1-42 solution in a -30 °C freezer until use.

124
125 Note: This incubation is necessary for aggregation and toxicity of A β ²⁷⁻³⁰.

126
127 1.3.2. After 4 days of neuronal culture, treat the wells with 100 µL of new medium B, containing
128 0.5 µM aggregated A β 1-42 or vehicle solution (distilled water) for 1 h.

129
130 Note: Effects of A β 1-42 were dose-dependently increased from 0.1 to 5 µM, and peaked at 0.5
131 µM as described previously²⁷. Similar results can be observed when by A β 1-42 treatment for 1 h
132 after 3 days of neuronal culture³¹.

1.3.3. Remove the culture medium and immediately fix the neurons with 4% paraformaldehyde containing 4% sucrose in PBS for 1 h at 37 °C on a hot plate.

1.3.4. After fixation, wash the neurons 3 times with PBS and mount them with an aqueous mounting medium. Dry the mounting medium at 4 °C for 2-4 days.

1.3.5. Capture the entire area (7.8 x 9 mm) of each well with a 20X dry objective lens on an inverted microscope.

1.3.6. Classify the longest neurites of each neuron in stage 3 or 4 as axons, as previously described^{32,33}.

1.3.7. Classify growth cones according to the following criteria: 1) axonal growth cones lacking lamellipodia or 2) possessing fewer than three filopodia are considered collapsed growth cones, as described previously¹⁷.

Note: Healthy growth cones are scored as 0 point; collapsed growth cones are scored as 1 point. Mean collapse scores are calculated for each treatment.

2. Amyloid β Immunostaining

2.1. Culture mouse cortical neurons for 3 days, as described in step 1.2.

2.2. Treat with aggregated A β 1-42 (5 μ M) or vehicle for 4 h at 37 °C in a CO₂ incubator.

2.3. Without removing the medium, add an equal volume of 4% paraformaldehyde containing 4% sucrose in PBS to each well, and maintain the culture at 37 °C on a hot plate for 5 min.

2.4. Replace the solution with 400 μ L of 4% paraformaldehyde containing 4% sucrose in PBS, and maintain at 37 °C on the hot plate for 1 h. This fixation protocol was modified from a previous report³⁴.

2.5. Wash the neurons 3 times with PBS.

2.6. Block with 5% normal goat serum in PBS.

2.7. Incubate the neurons with mouse anti-amyloid β immunoglobulin G (IgG) (1:50) and 1% bovine serum albumin in PBS at 4 °C overnight.

2.8. Wash the neurons 3 times with PBS.

2.9. Incubate the neurons with a fluorescence-conjugated secondary antibody (1:400) and 1% bovine serum albumin in PBS at room temperature for 2 h.

2.10. Wash the neurons 3 times with PBS and mount them with an aqueous mounting medium.

2.11. Capture fluorescence images and bright field images with oblique illumination by using a 40X dry objective lens on inverted microscope B.

3. Axonal Immunostaining²⁷

3.1. Wash the neurons 3 times with PBS after cultured neuron fixation, as described in step 1.3.3.

3.2. Incubate the neurons with mouse anti-tau-1 IgG (1:500), rabbit anti-microtubule associated protein 2 (MAP2) IgG (1:500) in 5% normal goat serum, and 0.3% *t*-octylphenoxypolyethoxyethanol in PBS at 4 °C overnight.

3.3. Wash the neurons 3 times with PBS.

3.4. Incubate the neurons with fluorescence-conjugated secondary antibodies (1:400) and 0.3% *t*-octylphenoxypolyethoxyethanol in PBS at room temperature for 2 h.

3.5. Wash the neurons 3 times with PBS, and mount using an aqueous mounting medium.

3.6. Capture fluorescence and differential interference contrast (DIC) images by using a 20× dry objective lens on inverted microscope A.

4. Live Cell Imaging²⁷

4.1 Coat glass-based dishes with 500 µL of PDL (5 µg/mL), as described in step 1.1.1.

Note: In this protocol, homemade glass-based dishes were used. Commercially available glass-based dishes can also be used for live imaging. Homemade glass-based dishes were prepared as follows: 1) make a hole approximately 1.4 mm in diameter in the center of a 35-mm dish with a hand punch, and 2) attach a glass coverslip (diameter of 22 mm) to the back of the dish with silicone.

4.2. Wash the plates with distilled water, as described in step 1.1.2, and culture the cortical neurons in the glass-based dish at 3×10^4 cells/dish with medium A, as described in step 1.2.

4.3. After 4 days of cell culture, replace the medium with 2 mL of new medium B, and transfer the dish to inverted microscope A. Maintain the culture in a humidified atmosphere of 10% CO₂ at 37 °C.

5. Endocytosis Experiment

5.1. Culture the mouse cortical neurons as described in step 1.2.

5.2. Four days later, replace the medium with 100 μ L of new medium B containing 20 μ M fluorescence membrane probe for 1 min.

5.3. Add 1 μ L of 0.05 mM aggregated A β 1-42 (final 0.5 μ M) or vehicle (distilled water) solution and mix by pipetting. Incubate for 20 min.

5.4. Remove the medium and wash the wells twice with medium B that has been pre-warmed to 37 $^{\circ}$ C.

5.5. Fix, wash, and mount the neurons as described in steps 1.3.3 and 1.3.4.

5.6. Capture fluorescent and DIC images with a 63X oil objective lens on inverted microscope A.

5.7. Quantify the density of the fluorescence membrane probe-positive area in each healthy growth cone by using an image software.

6. Gene Transfection

6.1. Prepare cortical neurons as described in step 1.2. After completing steps 1.2.1 to 1.2.10, centrifuge the neurons at 178 x g for 3 min.

6.2. Remove the supernatant, add 4 mL of Ca $^{2+}$ -free and Mg $^{2+}$ -free Hanks' balanced salt solution (CMF-HBSS), and mix by pipetting.

6.3. Centrifuge the cells at 178 x g for 3 min.

6.4. Remove the supernatant, add 4 mL of CMF-HBSS, and mix by pipetting. Next, calculate the cell density, as described in step 1.2.10.

6.5. Transfer 5 x 10 6 cells to a 1.5 mL tube and centrifuge at 1,677 x g for 1 min.

6.6. Remove the supernatant, add 100 μ L of transfection solution with supplement and 3 μ g of DNA plasmid encoding EGFP or EGFP-AP180 C-terminus, and mix by pipetting.

6.7. Transfer the above solution (step 6.6) to a certified cuvette and transfect with an electroporator, according to the manufacturer's protocol.

6.8. Immediately after transfection, add 500 μ L of medium A into the cuvette and transfer the solution to a 1.5-mL tube with a certified pipette. Next, calculate the cell density, as described in step 1.2.10.

6.9. Culture the cells in an 8-well culture slide at 0.8 x 10 4 cells/well, as described in steps 1.2.11 and 1.2.12.

265
266 6.10. After 4 days of cell culture, perform a collapse assay as described in step 1.3.
267

268 **REPRESENTATIVE RESULTS:**

269 In this protocol, A β 1-42 was incubated at 37 °C for 7 days before use, because incubation of A β 1-
270 42 was needed for producing toxic forms^{27,28,30,35}. After this incubation, aggregated forms of A β
271 were observed (**Figure 1A**). It has been reported that similar incubation of A β 1-42 produced the
272 fibril form of A β ³⁶. After treatment with this aggregated A β 1-42, immunostaining with an
273 antibody for the toxic oligomer of A β ^{35,37} was performed, and positive staining was detected on
274 cultured neurons (**Figure 1B**). Considering the above, this incubation protocol produces the toxic
275 forms of A β .

276
277 Several days were required for the induction of axonal degeneration after A β exposure. The
278 events prior to axonal degeneration remain unclear. Therefore, this protocol has been developed
279 to further understand the mechanisms involved. Using this protocol, the early phenomena
280 induced by A β treatment were analyzed. Cortical neurons were cultured for 4 days. The longest
281 neurites in the cultured neurons were identified as axons; these were confirmed by positive
282 immunostaining for the axonal marker, tau-1, and negative immunostaining for the dendritic
283 marker, MAP2 (**Figure 2**). After 1 h of vehicle treatment, growth cones had spread lamellipodia
284 and processed several filopodia. These were identified as healthy growth cones. Conversely, 1 h
285 of A β 1-42 treatment led to shrunken growth cones, which developed no lamellipodia or
286 filopodia. These were identified as collapsed growth cones. Collapse scores were calculated as
287 described in step 1.3.7. When shapes of growth cones were unclear, they were eliminated from
288 the analysis. A β 1-42 treatment led to a significant increase in collapse score, corresponding to
289 increased axonal growth collapse, when compared to the collapse score of vehicle-treated
290 growth cones²⁷.

291
292 Axonal growth cones were observed before and after treatment with A β 1-42 (**Figure 3**). Cells
293 were maintained in the inverted microscope with a humidified atmosphere of 10% CO₂ at 37 °C.
294 Images were captured every 5 min. As shown in **Figure 3**, growth cones collapsed between 21
295 and 26 min after A β 1-42 treatment. Growth cones were excluded from live cell imaging if they
296 did not retain their healthy shape for 1 h prior to any treatment.

297
298 To visualize the early effects of A β 1-42-treatment, endocytosis was used as the focus of this
299 analysis, because endocytosis inhibitors can block A β 1-42-induced growth-cone collapse²⁷.
300 Endocytosis was visualized with a fluorescence membrane probe (*i.e.*, a fluorescent dye that
301 binds to plasma membranes and is spontaneously endocytosed). A previous study showed that
302 growth cones do not collapse at 20 min after A β 1-42-treatment²⁷; therefore, healthy growth
303 cones were selected by DIC imaging in vehicle- or A β 1-42-treated cells after 20 min. Following
304 A β 1-42-treatment, numerous fluorescent membrane probe-positive puncta were observed in
305 the growth cone (**Figure 4**). The density of fluorescence membrane probe-positive puncta in
306 growth cones was significantly increased²⁷. This suggests that A β 1-42-induced growth cone
307 endocytosis occurs prior to collapse.
308

To confirm the role of endocytosis, a DNA plasmid encoding EGFP-AP180 C-terminus was transfected into cultured cortical neurons. Cells expressing the AP180 C-terminus selectively inhibited clathrin-mediated endocytosis^{38,39}. If EGFP expression was observed at the cell body in the neuron, the AP180 C-terminus was considered to be expressed at the axonal growth cone of the neuron. Transfection of AP180 C-terminus blocked A β 1-42-induced growth cone collapse (Figure 5)²⁷.

FIGURE AND TABLE LEGENDS:

Figure 1: Incubation of A β 1-42 aggregates A β . (A) A β 1-42 was dissolved in distilled water at a concentration of 0.5 mM and incubated at 37 °C for 7 days (after incubation), or stored at -30 °C without incubation (no incubation). Each A β solution was diluted to 0.1 mM; then, 10 μ L of each diluted solution was dropped on glass slides and covered with coverslips. Bright-field images with oblique illumination were captured by using inverted microscope B. Scale bar = 20 μ m. (B) Aggregated A β 1-42 or vehicle treatment on cultured neurons for 4 h. Following treatment, the neurons were fixed and immunostained for toxic A β oligomers. Fluorescence images (red) and bright-field images with oblique illumination (gray) are shown. Scale bar = 20 μ m.

Figure 2: A β 1-42-induced axonal growth cone collapse. After A β 1-42- or vehicle-treatment, neurons were fixed and immunostained for tau-1 (red) and microtubule associated protein 2 (MAP2, green). Fluorescence and differential interference contrast (DIC) images are shown. Magnified views of the regions of interest (ROI, rectangles) are shown below their corresponding images. White scale bars = 50 μ m; black scale bars = 10 μ m. This figure has been modified from Kuboyama et al, 2015²⁷.

Figure 3: Live cell imaging before and after A β 1-42 treatment. After 4 days of culture, cells were transferred to an inverted microscope and DIC images were captured every 5 min. Time-lapse images are shown. The digits represent minutes:seconds after the application of aggregated A β 1-42 (final concentration, 0.5 μ M). Scale bar = 10 μ m.

Figure 4: Twenty minutes of A β 1-42 treatment induced endocytosis. Cortical neurons were cultured for 4 days and treated with a fluorescence membrane probe. Then, neurons were treated for 20 min with A β 1-42 or vehicle. Fluorescence images of the growth cones are shown. The yellow dotted lines represent the outlines of the growth cones. Scale bar = 10 μ m.

Figure 5: Expression of AP180-C terminus blocks A β 1-42-induced collapse. Four days after transfection of EGFP (A, B) or EGFP-AP180 C-terminus (C, D); A β 1-42 (B, D) or vehicle (A, C) was added to cortical neurons for 1 h. DIC (upper panels) and fluorescence (bottom panels) images are shown. Arrows indicate growth cones. Scale bars = 10 μ m.

DISCUSSION:

The protocol described in this study enabled the observation of early phenomena in axonal growth cones after A β 1-42 treatment. A β 1-42 induced endocytosis in axonal growth cones within 20 min, and growth cone collapse was observed within 1 h of treatment. This endocytosis was probably mediated by clathrin. By using this protocol, the inhibition of clathrin-mediated

endocytosis was confirmed to prevent A β 1-42-induced growth cone collapse and axonal degeneration in cultured neurons²⁷. Additionally, the inhibition of clathrin-mediated endocytosis attenuated A β 1-42-induced axonal degeneration and memory deficits *in vivo*²⁷. These results indicate that clathrin-mediated endocytosis is a promising therapeutic avenue for AD prevention.

This protocol was developed from collapse assays for axonal growth repellents, such as semaphorin 3A and ephrin-A5¹⁶⁻²⁰. Collapse assays have been used in studies assessing the development of neuronal networks. I have shown that this protocol can be applied to pathological analyses, particularly those involving mechanisms of AD; however, a limitation may be that approximately 40% of growth cones collapsed in the healthy condition. This percentage is higher than results from cultured dorsal root ganglion neurons, which are more commonly used in collapse assays¹⁶⁻²⁰. Therefore, the difference in cell types might be linked to differences in collapse ratios. The collapse ratios found in this study were consistent with those found in previous studies with normal cultured cortical neurons^{40,41}. Furthermore, A β 1-42 induced similar levels of growth cone collapse when compared with other collapse factors, such as semaphorin 3A and ephrin-A5²⁷. Therefore, this protocol is valid for the quantification of A β 1-42-induced growth cone collapse. This fixation protocol is important to maintain the shape of growth cones. If the cells were conventionally fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde at room temperature, more growth cones may have collapsed due to the fixation procedure (data not shown). Alternatively, glutaraldehyde and fixation buffers are available for rigid fixation, as previously described⁴²; however, glutaraldehyde exhibits autofluorescence, which is a significant impediment for fluorescence imaging.

A recent study with the same protocol showed that the water extract from *Radix Polygalae* (roots of *Polygala tenuifolia*) inhibited A β 1-42-induced endocytosis in cultured neurons, prevented axonal degeneration, and reduced memory deficits in a transgenic mouse model of AD³¹. A novel candidate for AD prevention has been found with this protocol. A combination of gene transfection and live cell imaging in this protocol might show the other cellular events found in axons and their terminals before and after A β treatment, such as Ca²⁺ imaging, microtubule dynamics, and cell adhesion dynamics, which are reportedly related to axonal growth⁴³⁻⁴⁵. This protocol may help reveal more detailed mechanisms of A β toxicity and may help lead to the prevention and/or treatment of AD.

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DISCLOSURES:

The author has nothing to disclose.

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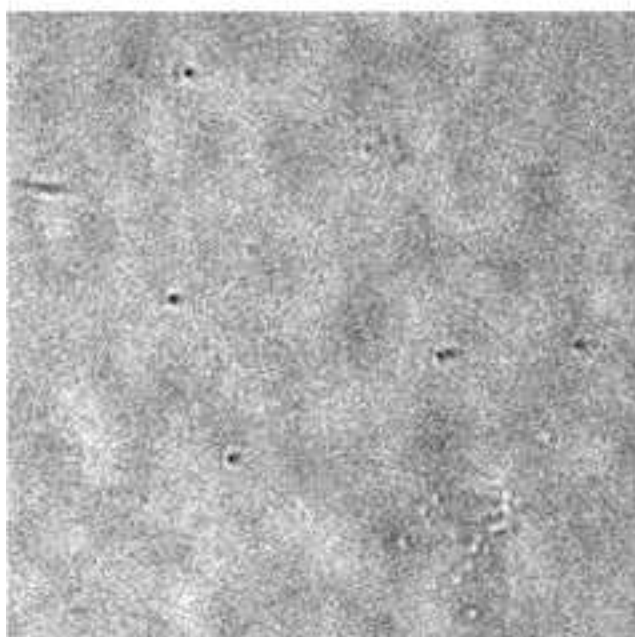
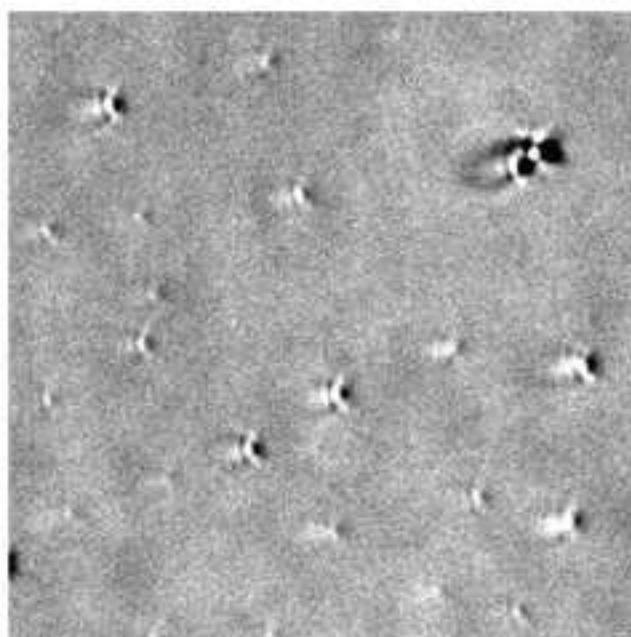
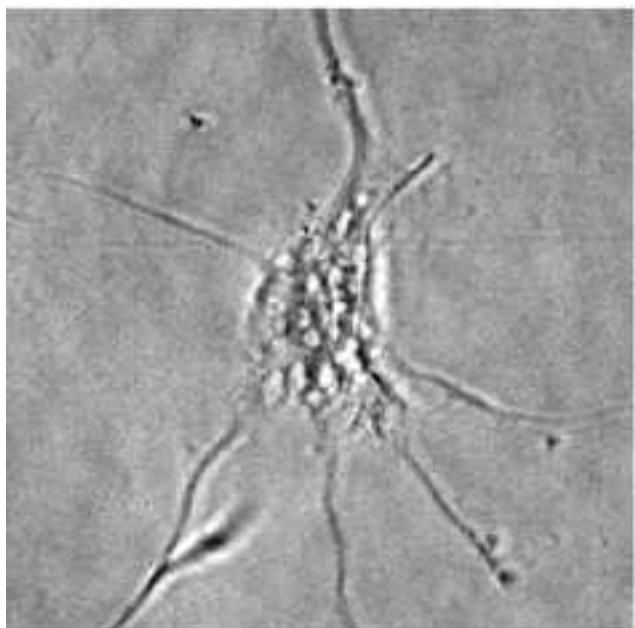
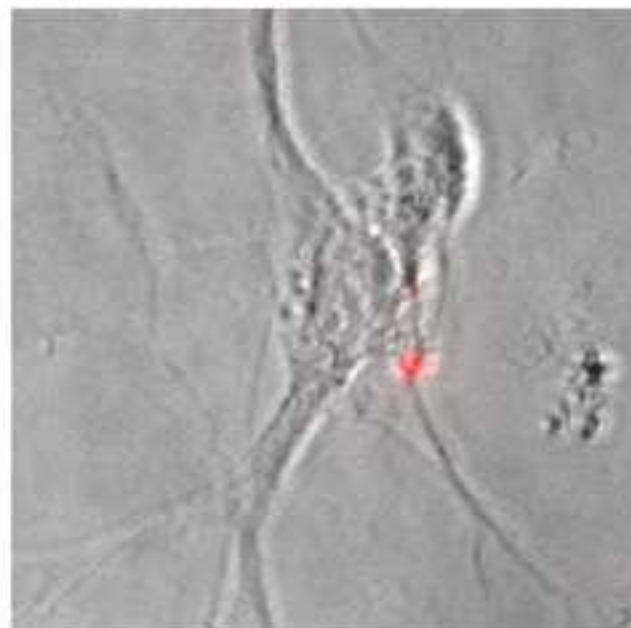
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A**No incubation****After incubation****B****Vehicle****A β 1-42**

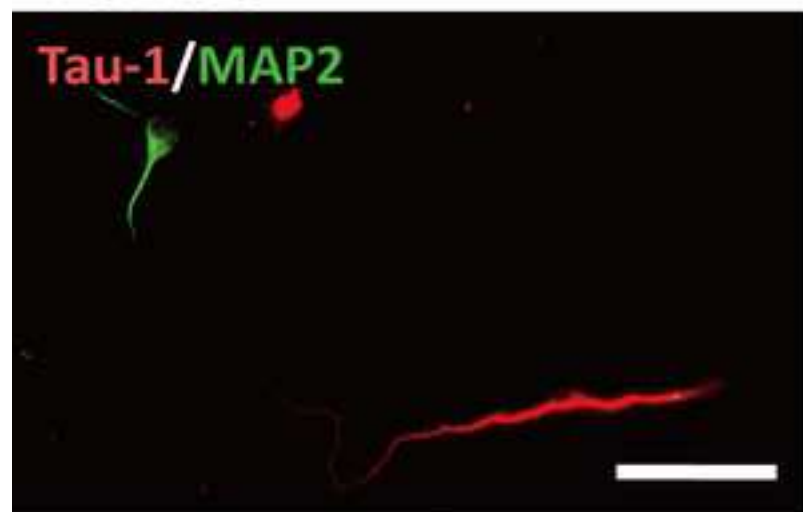
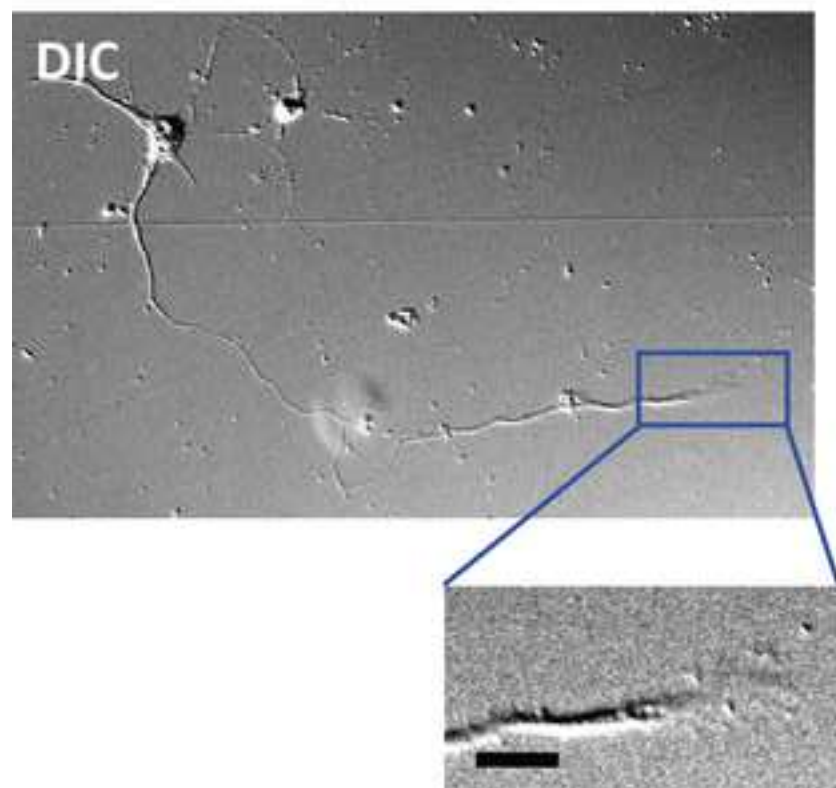
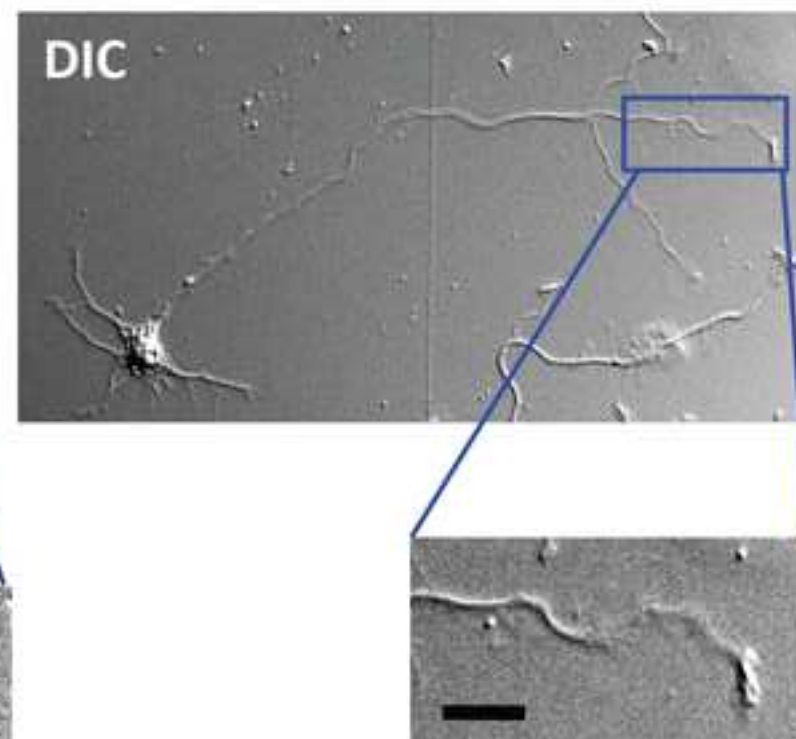
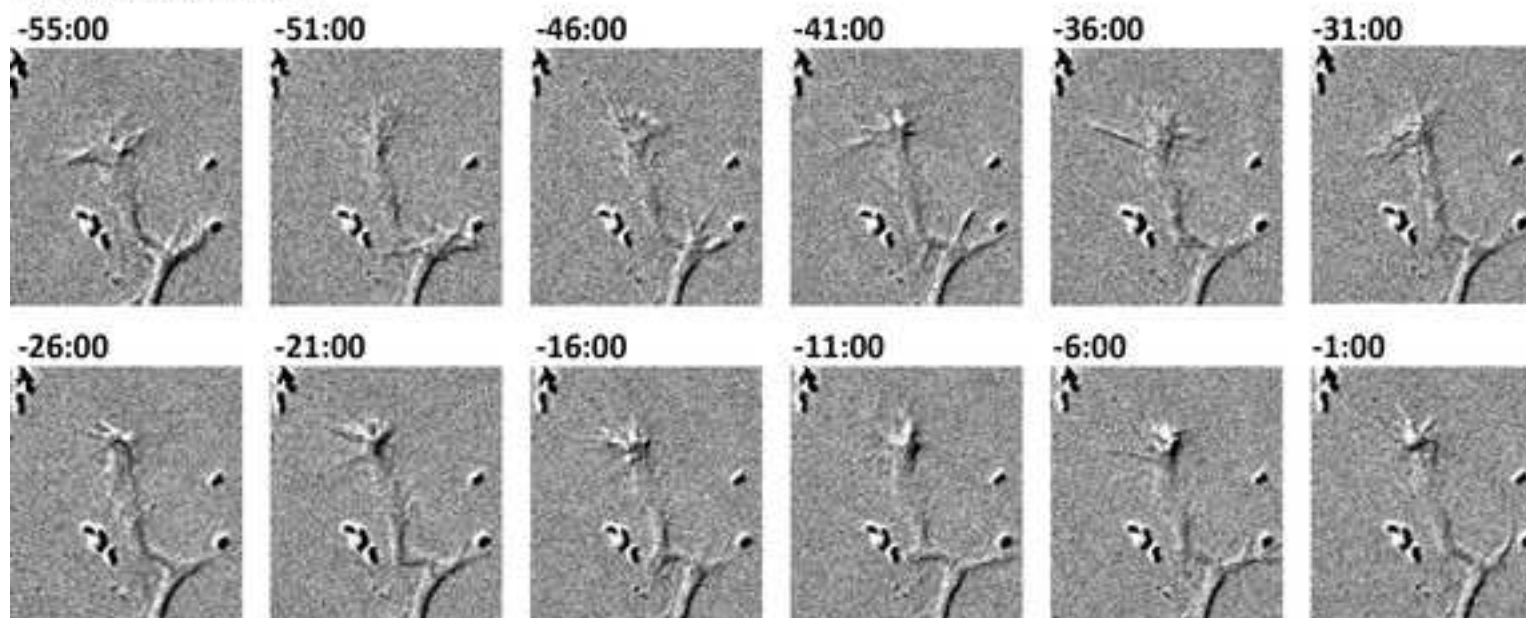
Vehicle**A β 1-42****DIC****DIC**

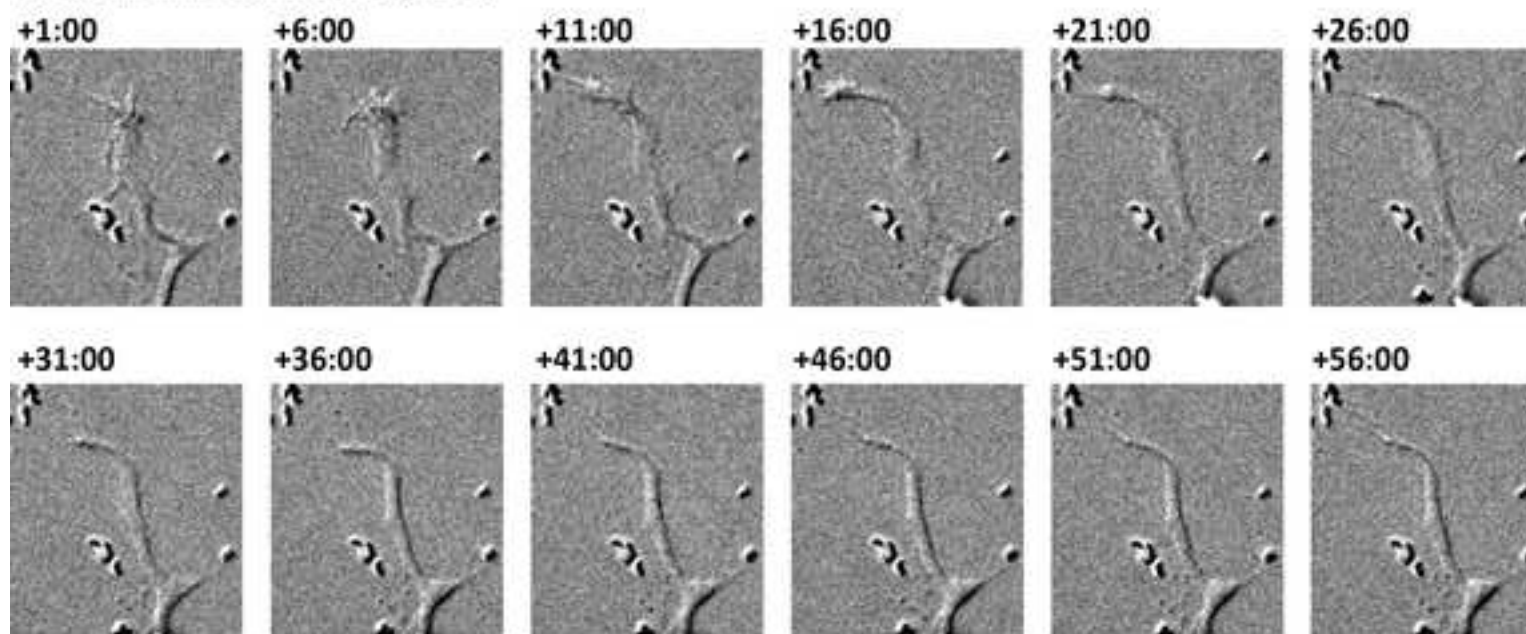
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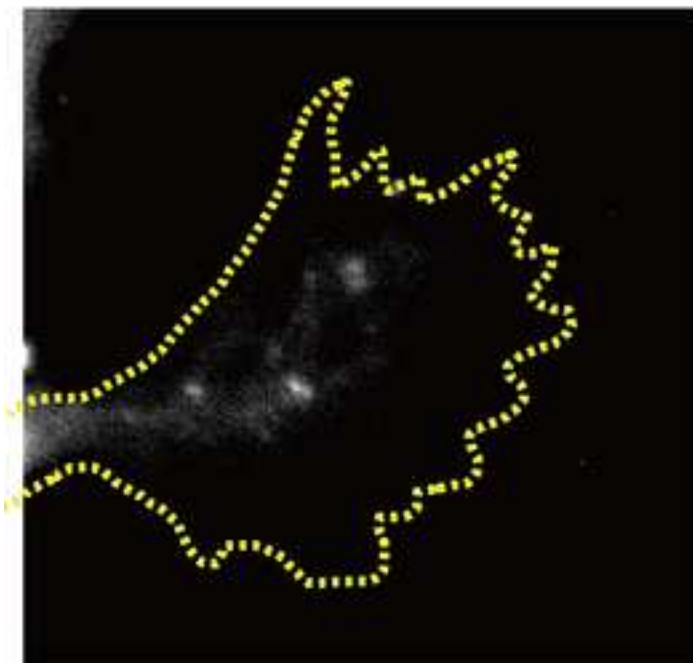
Before treatment



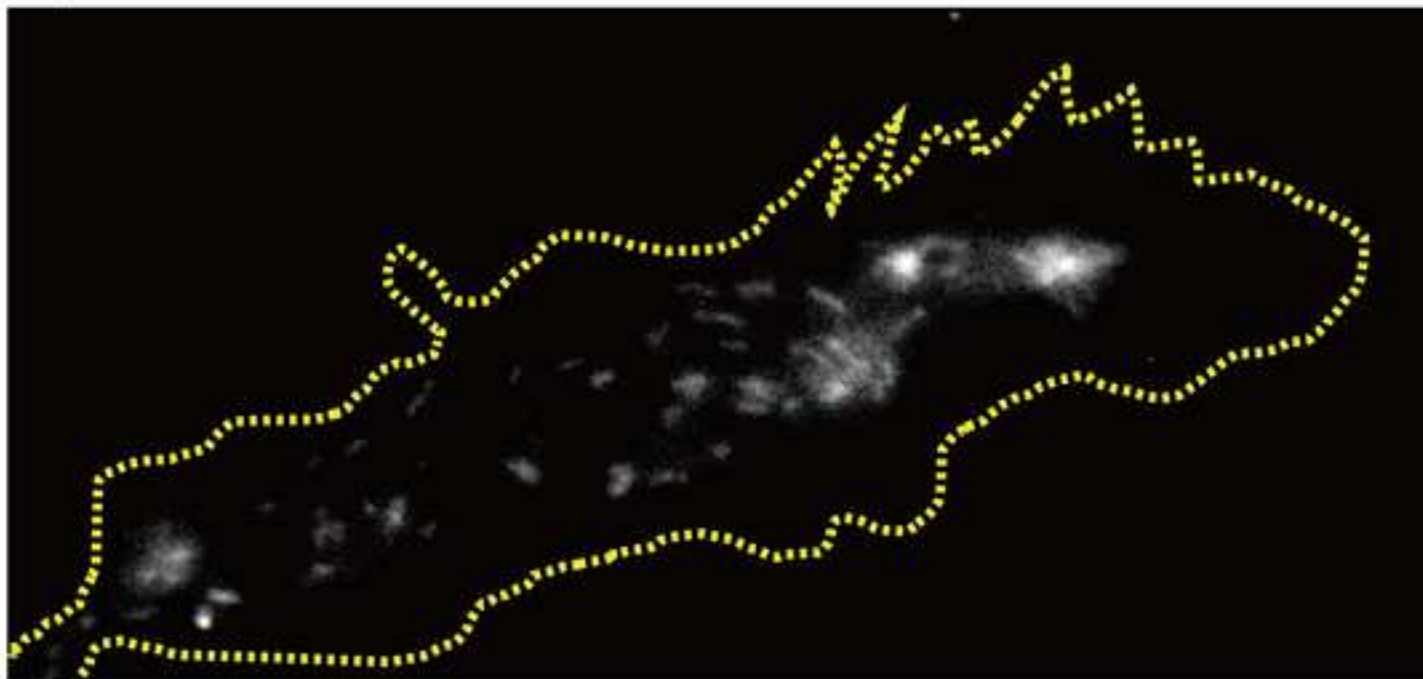
After treatment with A β 1-42

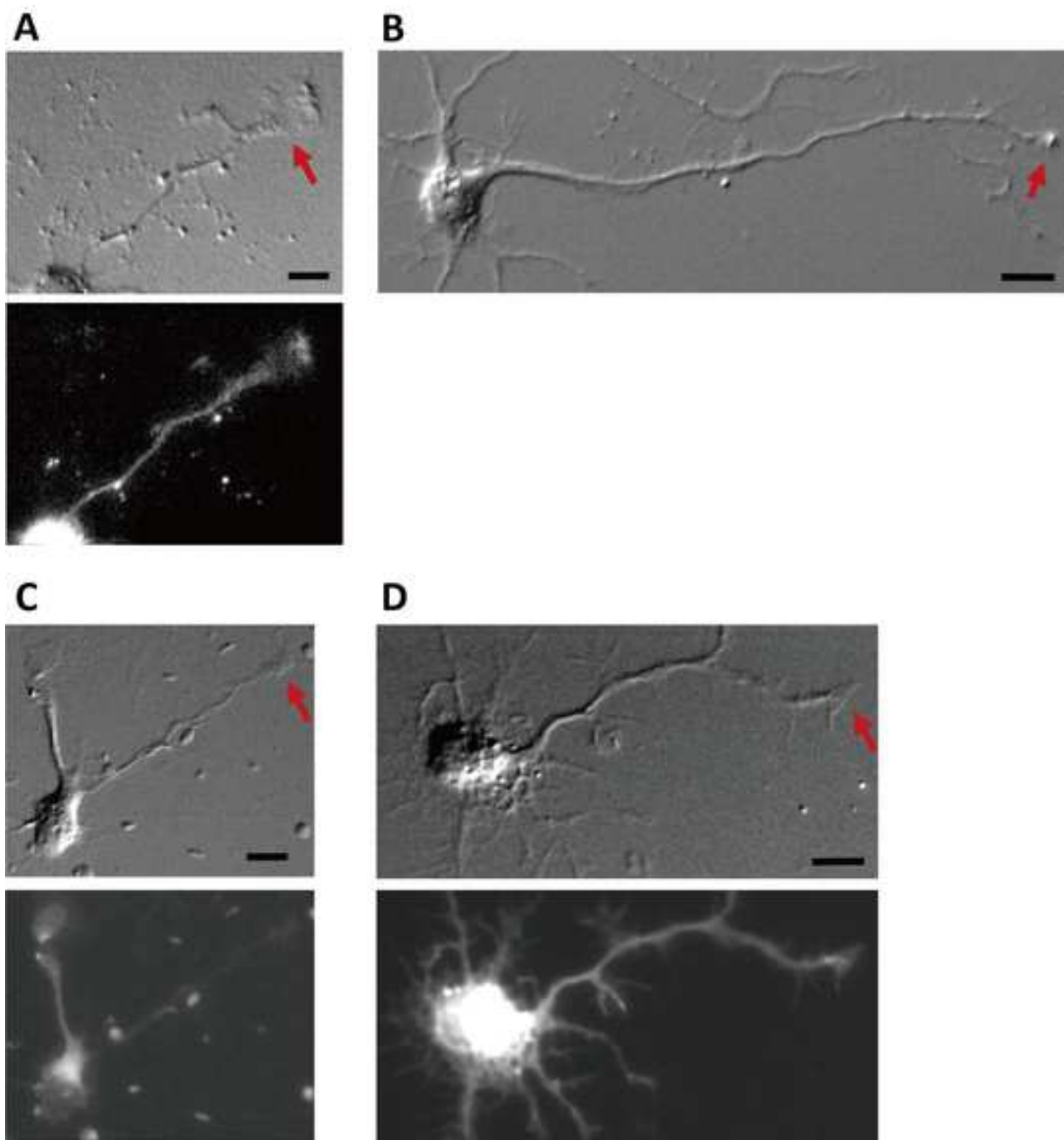


Vehicle



Aβ1-42





Name of Material/ Equipment	Company	Catalog Number
ddY mice	SLC	
Eight-well culture slide	Falcon	354108
poly D lysine	Wako	168-19041
Culture medium, Neurobasal medium	Gibco	21103-049
house serum	Gibco	26050-088
glucose	Wako	049-31165
L-glutamine	Wako	074-00522
0.05% trypsin	Gibco	25300-054
DNase I	Worthington	DP
soybean trypsin inhibitor	Gibco	17075-029
Filter with 70 µm mesh size, cell strainer	Falcon	352350
B-27 supplement	Gibco	17504-044
CO ₂ incubator	Astec	SCA-165DS
Amyloid β1-42	Sigma-Aldrich	A9810
paraformaldehyde	Wako	162-16065
sucrose	Wako	196-00015
Aqueous mounting medium, Aqua-Poly/Mount	polysciences	18606-20
Inverted microscope A	Carl Zeiss	Axio Observer Z1
Objective Plan-Apochromat 20x	Carl Zeiss	420650-9901
Objective Plan-Apochromat 63x	Carl Zeiss	440762-9904
Objective, CFI Plan Apo Lambda 40X	Nikon	
anti-MAP2 IgG	Abcam	ab32454

anti-tau-1 IgG	Chemicon	MAB3420
anti-amyloid β antibody	IBL	10379
normal goat serum	Wako	143-06561
bovine serum albumin	Wako	010-25783
<i>t</i> -octylphenoxypolyethoxyethanol	Wako	169-21105
goat anti-mouse IgG conjugated with AlexaFluor 594	Invitrogen	A11032
goat anti-rabbit IgG conjugated with AlexaFluor 488	Invitrogen	A11029
hot plate	NISSIN	NHP-M30N
cover glass	Fisher Scientific	12-545-85
35 mm dish	IWAKI	1000-035
Silicone RTV	Shin-Etsu	KE42T
hand punch	Roper Whitney	No. XX
Fluorescence membrane probe, FM1-43FX	Invitrogen	F35355
Ca ²⁺ - and Mg ²⁺ -free Hanks' balanced salt solution	Gibco	14175-095
Transfection solution, Nucleofector solution	Lonza	VPG-1001
Electroporator, Nucleofector I	Amara	
Inverted microscope B	Keyence	BZ-X710
Image software, ImageJ	NIH	

Comments/Description

Connected with AxioCam MRm, Heating Unit XL S, CO2 Module S1, and TempModule S1

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Name:	Tomoharu Kuboyama		
Department:	Division of Neuromedical Science		
Institution:	Institute of Natural Medicine, University of Toyama		
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