HCR v3.0 protocol for whole-mount nematode larvae (*Caenorhabditis elegans*)

This protocol has not been optimized for all stages and should only be used as a template.
Technical support: support@molecularinstruments.com
Safety data sheets (SDS): www.molecularinstruments.com/safety
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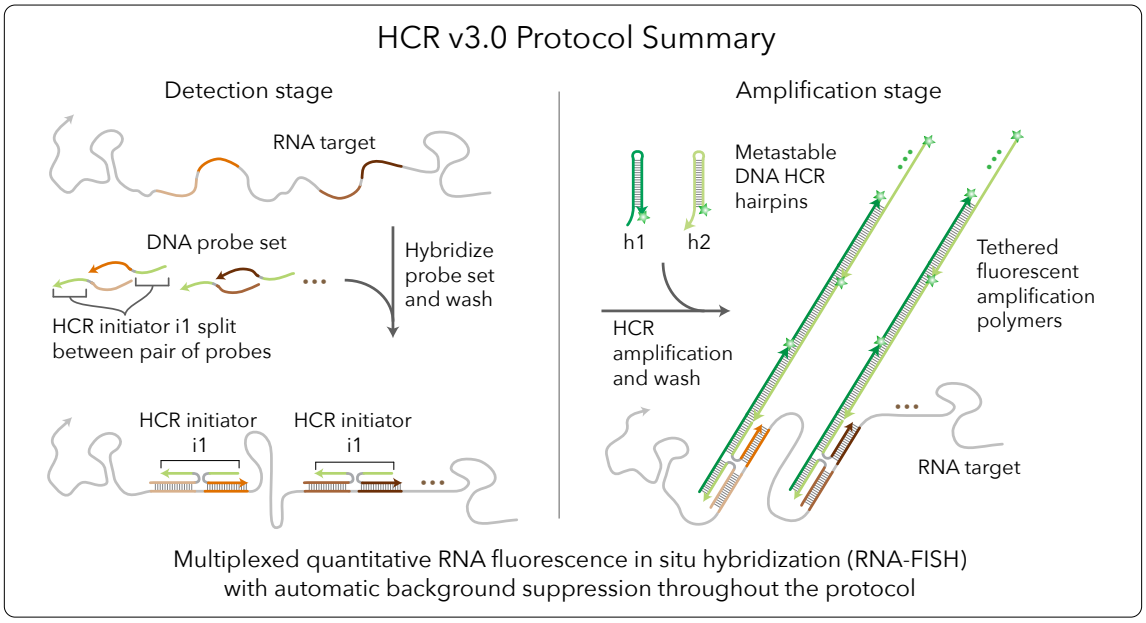
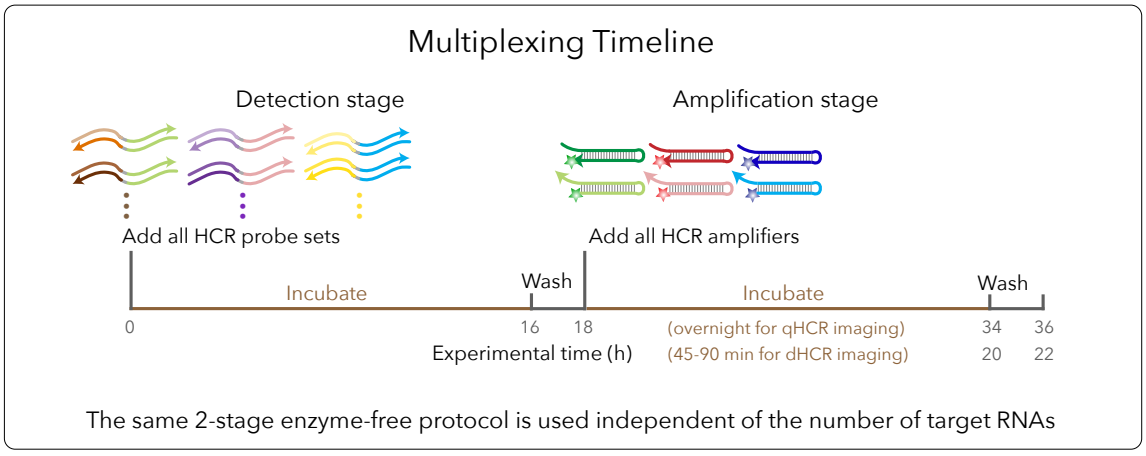
Storage conditions

Store HCR probe sets, HCR amplifiers, HCR probe hybridization buffer, and HCR probe wash buffer at -20 °C. Store HCR amplification buffer at 4 °C. On the bench top, keep stock solutions on ice. Make sure all solutions are well mixed before use.





Preparation of fixed whole-mount nematode larvae

1. Wash nematode larvae off plate with 1 mL of M9 buffer and transfer to a 1.5 mL tube.
2. Centrifuge at 200 × g for 2 min to bring larvae to the bottom of the tube and remove the M9 buffer.
3. Wash larvae 3 times with 1 mL of M9 buffer each. Centrifuge at 200 × g for 2 min between washes.
4. Centrifuge and remove ≈ 800 μL of M9 buffer.
5. Aliquot larvae sufficient for a reaction into 1.5 mL tubes.
6. Add 1 mL of 4% paraformaldehyde (PFA).
   CAUTION: *use PFA with extreme care as it is a hazardous material.*
   NOTE: *use fresh PFA to avoid increased autofluorescence.*
7. Immediately freeze sample at -80 °C overnight before use.
   NOTE: *Larvae could stay in -80 °C freezer for long-term storage.*
8. Fix larvae by thawing at room temperature for 45 min.
9. Wash larvae 2 times with 1 mL of PBST each. Bring larvae to the bottom of the tube with centrifugation at 200 × g for 2 min in between washes.
10. Treat larvae with 1 mL of proteinase K (100 μg/mL) for 10 min at 37 °C.
    NOTE: *Proteinase K concentration and treatment time should be reoptimized for each batch of proteinase K, or for samples at a different developmental stage.*
11. Wash larvae 2 times with 1 mL of PBST each.
12. Incubate in 1 mL of 2 mg/mL of glycine solution for 15 min on ice.
13. Wash larvae 2 times with 1 mL of PBST each.

Buffer recipes for sample preparation

M9 buffer

22 mM KH_2PO_4
42 mM Na_2HPO_4
20.5 mM NaCl
1 mM $MgSO_4$

For 1 L of solution
3 g of KH_2PO_4
6 g of Na_2HPO_4
5 g of NaCl
1 mL of 1 M $MgSO_4$
Fill up to 1 L with ultrapure H_2O
Sterilize by autoclaving
Store buffer at 4 °C before use

4% Paraformaldehyde (PFA)

4% PFA
1× PBS

For 40 mL of solution
10 mL of 16% PFA solution
4 mL of 10× PBS
Fill up to 40 mL with ultrapure H_2O

PBST

1× PBS
0.1% Tween 20

For 50 mL of solution
5 mL of 10× PBS
500 μL of 10% Tween 20
Fill up to 50 mL with ultrapure H_2O

Proteinase K solution

100 μg/mL proteinase K

For 1 mL of solution
5 μL of 20 mg/mL proteinase K
Fill up to 1 mL with PBST

Glycine solution

2 mg/mL glycine
PBST

For 50 mL of solution
100 mg of glycine
Fill up to 50 mL with PBST

NOTE: *avoid using calcium chloride and magnesium chloride in PBS as this leads to increased autofluorescence in the samples.*

Multiplexed HCR v3.0 protocol

Detection stage

1. Incubate larvae in 1 mL of 50% PBST / 50% probe hybridization buffer for 5 min at room temperature.
   CAUTION: *probe hybridization buffer contains formamide, a hazardous material.*
2. Centrifuge at 200 × g for 2 min to remove solution.
3. Pre-hybridize larvae in 300 μL of probe hybridization buffer at 37 °C for 1 h.
4. Prepare probe solution by adding 2 pmol of each probe set (e.g. 2 μL of 1 μM stock) to 200 μL of probe hybridization buffer at 37 °C.
   NOTE: *For dHCR imaging, use higher concentration of probe to improve probe hybridization efficiency.*
5. Add the probe solution to reach a final hybridization volume of 500 μL.
6. Incubate larvae overnight (12–16 h) at 37 °C.
7. Remove excess probes by washing larvae 4 × 15 min with 1 mL of probe wash buffer at 37 °C.
   CAUTION: *probe wash buffer contains formamide, a hazardous material.*
   NOTE: *pre-heat probe wash buffer to 37 °C before use.*
   NOTE: *bring larvae to the bottom of the tube with centrifugation at 500 × g for 2 min for each wash.*
8. Wash larvae 2 × 5 min with 1 mL of 5× SSCT at room temperature.

Amplification stage

1. Pre-amplify larvae with 300 μL of amplification buffer for 30 min at room temperature.
   NOTE: *equilibrate amplification buffer to room temperature before use.*
2. Separately prepare 30 pmol of hairpin h1 and 30 pmol of hairpin h2 by snap cooling 10 μL of 3 μM stock (heat at 95 °C for 90 seconds and cool to room temperature in a dark drawer for 30 min).
   NOTE: *HCR hairpins h1 and h2 are provided in hairpin storage buffer ready for snap cooling. h1 and h2 should be snap cooled in separate tubes.*
3. Prepare hairpin solution by adding snap-cooled h1 hairpins and snap-cooled h2 hairpins to 200 μL of amplification buffer at room temperature.
4. Add the hairpin solution to reach a final amplification volume of 500 μL.
5. Incubate the larvae overnight (12–16 h) in the dark at room temperature.
   NOTE: *For dHCR imaging, amplify for a shorter period of time to ensure single-molecule dots are diffraction-limited.*
6. Remove excess hairpins by washing with 1 mL of 5× SSCT at room temperature:
   (a) 2 × 5 min
   (b) 2 × 30 min
   (c) 1 × 5 min

   NOTE: *bring larvae to the bottom of the tube with centrifugation at 500 × g for 2 min for each wash.*
7. Samples can be stored at 4 °C protected from light before microscopy.

Citation Notes

For citation, please select from the list below as appropriate for your application:

- **HCR v3.0**
  Automatic background suppression for dramatically enhanced performance (signal-to-background, qHCR precision, dHCR fidelity) and ease-of-use (no probe set optimization for new targets and organisms) (Choi *et al.*, 2018). Quantitative analysis modes:

  qHCR imaging: analog mRNA relative quantitation with subcellular resolution in the anatomical context of thick autofluorescent samples.

  qHCR flow cytometry: analog mRNA relative quantitation for high-throughput expression profiling of mammalian and bacterial cells.

  dHCR imaging: digital mRNA absolute quantitation with single-molecule resolution in the anatomical context of thick autofluorescent samples.

  Protocols for v3.0 in diverse organisms are adapted from the Zoo paper.

- **qHCR imaging**
  mRNA relative quantitation with subcellular resolution in the anatomical context of whole-mount vertebrate embryos; read-out/read-in analysis framwork (Trivedi *et al.*, 2018).

- **Zoo paper**
  Protocols for multiplexed mRNA imaging in diverse sample types (Choi *et al.*, 2016):

bacteria in suspension	FFPE human tissue sections
generic sample in suspension	generic sample on slide
whole-mount chicken embryos	whole-mount fruit fly embryos
whole-mount mouse embryos	whole-mount sea urchin embryos
whole-mount worm larvae	whole-mount zebrafish embryos and larvae

- **dHCR imaging**
  Single-molecule mRNA imaging in thick autofluorescent samples (e.g., 0.5 mm adult mouse brain sections) (Shah *et al.*, 2016).

- **qHCR northern blot**
  Simultaneous quantification of RNA target size and abundance for up to 5 target RNAs (Schwarzkopf & Pierce, 2016).

- **HCR v2.0**
  2nd generation in situ HCR technology (v2.0) using DNA HCR probes and DNA HCR amplifiers: 10× increase in signal, 10× reduction in cost, dramatic increase in reagent durability (Choi *et al.*, 2014).

- **HCR v1.0**
  1st generation in situ HCR technology (v1.0) using RNA HCR probes and RNA HCR amplifiers: multiplexed mRNA imaging in whole-mount vertebrate embryos with simultaneous signal amplification for up to 5 target mRNAs (Choi *et al.*, 2010).

- **HCR mechanism**
  Isothermal enzyme-free molecular signal amplification (Dirks & Pierce, 2004).

References

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