

18.10: Chemical Properties of Proteins

Learning Objectives

- Objective 1
- Objective 2

Protein Hydrolysis

Protein Denaturation

The highly organized structures of proteins are truly masterworks of chemical architecture. But highly organized structures tend to have a certain delicacy, and this is true of proteins. Denaturation is the term used for any change in the three-dimensional structure of a protein that renders it incapable of performing its assigned function. A denatured protein cannot do its job. (Sometimes denaturation is equated with the precipitation or coagulation of a protein; our definition is a bit broader.) A wide variety of reagents and conditions, such as heat, organic compounds, pH changes, and heavy metal ions can cause protein denaturation (Figure 18.10.1).

Figure 18.10.1: Protein Denaturation Methods

Method	Effect on Protein Structure
Heat above 50°C or ultraviolet (UV) radiation	Heat or UV radiation supplies kinetic energy to protein molecules, causing their atoms to vibrate more rapidly and disrupting relatively weak hydrogen bonding and dispersion forces.
Use of organic compounds, such as ethyl alcohol	These compounds are capable of engaging in intermolecular hydrogen bonding with protein molecules, disrupting intramolecular hydrogen bonding within the protein.
Salts of heavy metal ions, such as mercury, silver, and lead	These ions form strong bonds with the carboxylate anions of the acidic amino acids or SH groups of cysteine, disrupting ionic bonds and disulfide linkages.
Alkaloid reagents, such as tannic acid (used in tanning leather)	These reagents combine with positively charged amino groups in proteins to disrupt ionic bonds.

Anyone who has fried an egg has observed denaturation. The clear egg white turns opaque as the albumin denatures and coagulates. No one has yet reversed that process. However, given the proper circumstances and enough time, a protein that has unfolded under sufficiently gentle conditions can refold and may again exhibit biological activity (Figure 18.10.8). Such evidence suggests that, at least for these proteins, the primary structure determines the secondary and tertiary structure. A given sequence of amino acids seems to adopt its particular three-dimensional arrangement naturally if conditions are right.

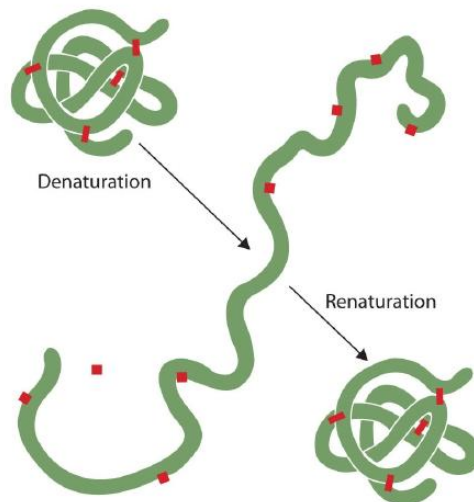


Figure 18.10.8: Denaturation and Renaturation of a Protein. The denaturation (unfolding) and renaturation (refolding) of a protein is depicted. The red boxes represent stabilizing interactions, such as disulfide linkages, hydrogen bonding, and/or ionic bonds.

The primary structures of proteins are quite sturdy. In general, fairly vigorous conditions are needed to hydrolyze peptide bonds. At the secondary through quaternary levels, however, proteins are quite vulnerable to attack, though they vary in their vulnerability to denaturation. The delicately folded globular proteins are much easier to denature than are the tough, fibrous proteins of hair and skin.

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