

18.9: Quaternary Protein Structure

Learning Objectives

- Objective 1
- Objective 2

When a protein contains more than one polypeptide chain, each chain is called a *subunit*. The arrangement of multiple subunits represents a fourth level of structure, the **quaternary structure** of a protein. Hemoglobin, with four polypeptide chains or subunits, is the most frequently cited example of a protein having quaternary structure (Figure 18.9.1). The quaternary structure of a protein is produced and stabilized by the same kinds of interactions that produce and maintain the tertiary structure. A schematic representation of the four levels of protein structure is in Figure 18.9.2

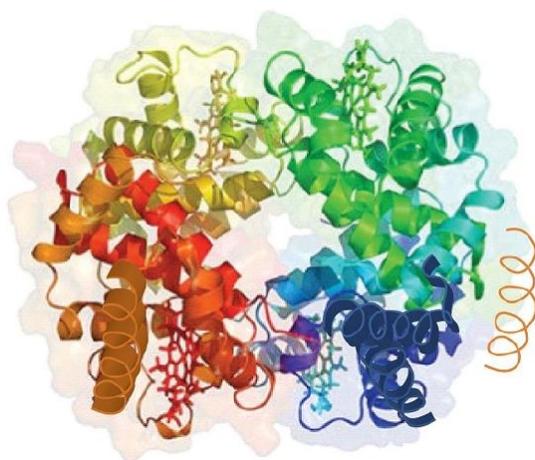


Figure 18.9.1 The Quaternary Structure of Hemoglobin. Hemoglobin is a protein that transports oxygen throughout the body.

Source: Image from the RCSB PDB (www.pdb.org) of PDB ID 1I3D (R.D. Kidd, H.M. Baker, A.J. Mathews, T. Brittain, E.N. Baker (2001) Oligomerization and ligand binding in a homotetrameric hemoglobin: two high-resolution crystal structures of hemoglobin Bart's (gamma(4)), a marker for alpha-thalassemia. *Protein Sci.* 1739–1749).

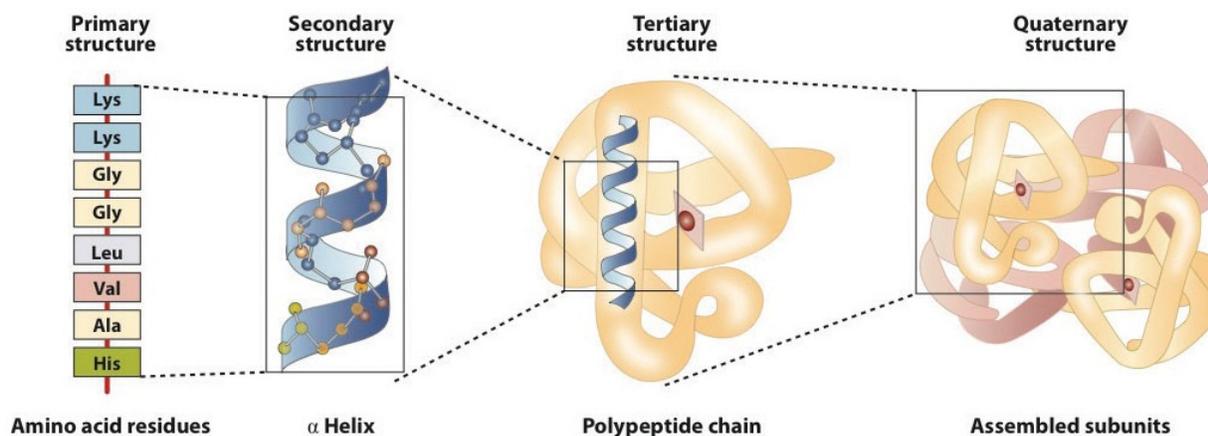


Figure 18.9.2: Levels of Structure in Proteins

The *primary structure* consists of the specific amino acid sequence. The resulting peptide chain can twist into an α -helix, which is one type of *secondary structure*. This helical segment is incorporated into the *tertiary structure* of the folded polypeptide chain. The single polypeptide chain is a subunit that constitutes the *quaternary structure* of a protein, such as hemoglobin that has four polypeptide chains.

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