

Reporting Summary

Nature Research wishes to improve the reproducibility of the work that we publish. This form provides structure for consistency and transparency in reporting. For further information on Nature Research policies, see [Authors & Referees](#) and the [Editorial Policy Checklist](#).

Statistical parameters

When statistical analyses are reported, confirm that the following items are present in the relevant location (e.g. figure legend, table legend, main text, or Methods section).

n/a Confirmed

- The exact sample size (n) for each experimental group/condition, given as a discrete number and unit of measurement
- An indication of whether measurements were taken from distinct samples or whether the same sample was measured repeatedly
- The statistical test(s) used AND whether they are one- or two-sided
Only common tests should be described solely by name; describe more complex techniques in the Methods section.
- A description of all covariates tested
- A description of any assumptions or corrections, such as tests of normality and adjustment for multiple comparisons
- A full description of the statistics including central tendency (e.g. means) or other basic estimates (e.g. regression coefficient) AND variation (e.g. standard deviation) or associated estimates of uncertainty (e.g. confidence intervals)
- For null hypothesis testing, the test statistic (e.g. F , t , r) with confidence intervals, effect sizes, degrees of freedom and P value noted
Give P values as exact values whenever suitable.
- For Bayesian analysis, information on the choice of priors and Markov chain Monte Carlo settings
- For hierarchical and complex designs, identification of the appropriate level for tests and full reporting of outcomes
- Estimates of effect sizes (e.g. Cohen's d , Pearson's r), indicating how they were calculated
- Clearly defined error bars
State explicitly what error bars represent (e.g. SD, SE, CI)

Our web collection on [statistics for biologists](#) may be useful.

Software and code

Policy information about [availability of computer code](#)

Data collection

Labview Version 11.0.1 (National Instruments, Inc.)

Data analysis

Matlab R2017b with Curve Fitting Toolbox Version 9.3 and Statistics and Machine Learning Toolbox Version 11.2 (Mathworks, Inc.)

For manuscripts utilizing custom algorithms or software that are central to the research but not yet described in published literature, software must be made available to editors/reviewers upon request. We strongly encourage code deposition in a community repository (e.g. GitHub). See the Nature Research [guidelines for submitting code & software](#) for further information.

Data

Policy information about [availability of data](#)

All manuscripts must include a [data availability statement](#). This statement should provide the following information, where applicable:

- Accession codes, unique identifiers, or web links for publicly available datasets
- A list of figures that have associated raw data
- A description of any restrictions on data availability

The datasets analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Field-specific reporting

Please select the best fit for your research. If you are not sure, read the appropriate sections before making your selection.

Life sciences Behavioural & social sciences Ecological, evolutionary & environmental sciences

For a reference copy of the document with all sections, see [nature.com/authors/policies/ReportingSummary-flat.pdf](https://www.nature.com/authors/policies/ReportingSummary-flat.pdf)

Life sciences study design

All studies must disclose on these points even when the disclosure is negative.

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Sample size | No calculations were performed to predetermine sample sizes. Sample sizes were judged to be sufficient to distinguish the different behaviors observed in the different conditions based on highly significant observed differences in measured mean quantities and their standard deviations. |
| Data exclusions | According to pre-established criteria, some data was excluded from analysis if the instrument was found to be miscalibrated, if more than one DNA molecule was found to be tethered, or if debris entered the optical traps. |
| Replication | For each condition the measurements were repeated with multiple complexes and all findings were found to be reproducible. |
| Randomization | not applicable |
| Blinding | not applicable |

Reporting for specific materials, systems and methods

Materials & experimental systems

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| n/a | Included in the study |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unique biological materials |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Antibodies |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Eukaryotic cell lines |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Palaeontology |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Animals and other organisms |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Human research participants |

Methods

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| n/a | Included in the study |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> ChIP-seq |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Flow cytometry |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> MRI-based neuroimaging |

Unique biological materials

Policy information about [availability of materials](#)

Obtaining unique materials Bacteriophage T4 heads and gp17 protein or materials needed for their preparation are readily available from the authors.

Antibodies

Antibodies used Polyclonal rabbit antibodies against the bacteriophage T4 capsid

Validation *Describe the validation of each primary antibody for the species and application, noting any validation statements on the manufacturer's website, relevant citations, antibody profiles in online databases, or data provided in the manuscript.*