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Chemical Design and Synthetic Research Progress of Photocaging Strategies

Ge Yin

College of Pharmaceutical Sciences, North China University of Science and Technology, Tangshan, China
2417924507@qq.com

Abstract. Photocaging converts a functional molecule into a latent derivative by installing a photoremovable protecting group that can be cleaved by irradiation. The strategy links molecular synthesis with optical control, allowing chemical reactivity, biological activity, and material function to be initiated at defined positions and times. Its development has moved from ultraviolet responsive o-nitrobenzyl systems toward chromophores that absorb visible or near-infrared light, release diverse cargoes, and tolerate aqueous or cellular environments. This review summarizes the chemical principles that govern photocage design, including excited-state pathways, bond scission mechanisms, photophysical parameters, wavelength selectivity, and synthetic methods for conjugating cage structures to alcohols, phenols, amines, thiols, carboxylates, phosphates, and coordinating heteroatoms. Emphasis is placed on how chromophore engineering, leaving-group control, solubilizing substituents, and metal-complex platforms have improved uncaging efficiency and application scope. Representative uses in small-molecule release and biological spatiotemporal regulation are discussed to connect molecular design with performance validation.

Keywords: Photocaging, photoremovable protecting groups, uncaging, chromophore engineering, visible-light photochemistry

1. Introduction

Photocaging is a chemical strategy in which a biologically or chemically active functional group is masked by a photoremovable protecting group. Irradiation converts the protected precursor into the parent molecule and a cage-derived photoproduct, so the reagent remains inactive until light supplies the triggering event. The method was established through early photosensitive protecting groups in organic synthesis and gained biological relevance when photolabile cyclic AMP and ATP derivatives enabled concentration jumps in enzymatic and cellular systems [1, 2]. The term caged compound describes this latent state, although the protected substrate is usually linked through a conventional covalent bond rather than enclosed by a physical container.

The value of the strategy comes from the separation of chemical installation and optical activation. A substrate can be synthesized, purified, delivered, and allowed to equilibrate before photolysis starts the desired process. In comparison with reagent addition or bulk mixing, irradiation

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can be confined by beam geometry, pulse duration, wavelength, and two-photon excitation volume. These features explain the use of photocages in kinetic enzymology, neurophysiology, developmental biology, polymer chemistry, drug release, and wavelength-selective materials chemistry [3, 4]. The same features also impose strict design constraints. A useful photocage must absorb at a wavelength compatible with the sample, undergo clean and sufficiently fast release, generate photoproducts with limited interference, remain stable in the dark, and be introduced through a practical synthetic route.

Research over the past two decades has changed the definition of a high-performance photocage. Classical o-nitrobenzyl and coumarinylmethyl groups remain important because they are synthetically accessible and mechanistically well characterized, but many applications require longer excitation wavelengths, higher uncaging cross sections, better water solubility, lower background fluorescence, or compatibility with functional groups that organic cages do not readily protect. New designs based on p-hydroxyphenacyl, nitroindolinyl, nitrodibenzofuran, xanthene, BODIPY, cyanine, and Ru(II) polypyridyl scaffolds address different parts of this design space [5, 6]. This review follows the provided framework and discusses the chemical design, construction, and validation of photocaging strategies with emphasis on synthesis and structure-property relationships.

2. Fundamental principles and design basis of photocaging strategies

2.1. Photoresponsive mechanisms and uncaging processes

Uncaging begins with photon absorption by the cage chromophore rather than by the cargo. Excitation creates a singlet or triplet state with altered acidity, redox potential, or bonding pattern. Bond cleavage then occurs through heterolysis, homolysis, photoinduced electron transfer, intramolecular rearrangement, ligand dissociation, or oxygen-mediated oxidation, depending on the scaffold. The apparent rate of cargo appearance may be governed by the first photochemical bond scission step or by a subsequent dark reaction. This distinction is important for biological experiments because a cage with strong absorption can still produce slow functional activation if release requires hydrolysis or fragmentation after the primary photochemical event [7].

o-Nitrobenzyl derivatives illustrate the role of dark intermediates. Irradiation promotes intramolecular hydrogen transfer to the nitro group and generates aci-nitro intermediates, followed by fragmentation that releases the protected alcohol, phosphate, carboxylate, or amine-containing cargo. The resulting nitroso or carbonyl photoproducts may absorb incident light and complicate repeated photolysis. Coumarinylmethyl cages operate through excited-state heterolysis and formation of a benzylic cationic intermediate whose behavior depends on solvent, substituents, and leaving group. p-Hydroxyphenacyl cages follow a different route involving excited-state rearrangement and rapid release of phosphates and carboxylates, a property that made them suitable for time-resolved biochemical studies [8, 9]. Metal-based cages add another mechanistic class, in which metal-to-ligand charge-transfer excitation weakens a coordinative bond and releases a bound nitrile or heteroaromatic ligand [10, 11].

2.2. Structural features and performance parameters of photocage molecules

The performance of a photocage is usually judged by absorption wavelength, molar absorption coefficient, quantum yield of release, uncaging cross section, dark stability, release rate, chemical yield, solubility, and photoproduct compatibility. The product of molar absorption coefficient and

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quantum yield gives a direct measure of how efficiently absorbed light produces release under one-photon excitation. For two-photon uncaging, the relevant action cross section combines the two-photon absorption cross section with the release quantum yield. These parameters cannot be optimized independently because increasing conjugation, donor-acceptor character, or heavy-atom substitution may red shift absorption but also increase nonproductive internal conversion, intersystem crossing, or photobleaching.

The bond that connects cage and cargo is as decisive as the chromophore. Carbonates, carbamates, esters, ethers, phosphates, sulfonates, and thioethers differ in leaving-group ability and in the chemical stability of the caged precursor. A phenol or carboxylate may be released efficiently from one scaffold, whereas an aliphatic amine may require carbamate formation and a slower decarboxylation step. Thiol caging has its own constraints because the protected residue may oxidize, exchange, or alter peptide folding. The success of nitrodibenzofuran and related cages for cysteine protection reflects this need for a scaffold that can be incorporated into solid-phase peptide synthesis and still release the native thiol under biologically compatible irradiation [12, 13].

Photoproduct behavior also belongs to molecular design rather than to a late safety check. A cage-derived aldehyde, nitroso compound, dye fragment, or metal residue may absorb the same irradiation, quench fluorescence, react with nucleophiles, or perturb cells independently of the released cargo. For this reason, analytical studies commonly monitor both substrate depletion and product formation by high-performance liquid chromatography, liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry, nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy, or calibrated fluorescence. Quantitative actinometry remains necessary when different lamps, lasers, filters, and objective lenses are compared, because nominal wavelength alone does not describe the photon dose that reaches the sample.

2.3. Application-oriented design requirements

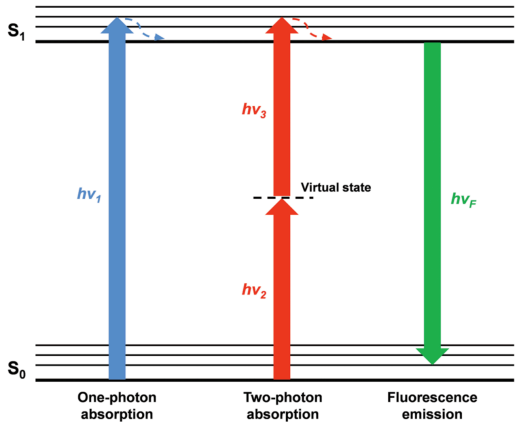


Figure 1. Schematic comparison of the energy-level pathways involved in one-photon and two-photon excitation [6]

Application-oriented design begins with the optical window of the system. Synthetic transformations in transparent solution can use near-ultraviolet light if the substrate and solvent tolerate it. Cellular and tissue experiments usually require visible or near-infrared excitation to reduce phototoxicity, autofluorescence, and scattering. Two-photon excitation addresses spatial confinement by the nearly simultaneous absorption of two lower-energy photons through a virtual intermediate state. Because excitation occurs predominantly within the high-photon-density focal

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volume, this approach enables three-dimensional optical confinement while reducing out-of-focus photodamage (Fig. 1). Coumarin derivatives, nitroindolinyl cages, and nitrodibenzofuran structures were developed partly to meet this requirement in neuronal and cellular experiments [14].

Molecular delivery adds another layer of design. Hydrophobic cages often improve membrane permeability but reduce aqueous solubility and may accumulate in membranes or organelles. Charged sulfonates, quaternary ammonium groups, polyethylene glycol chains, and zwitterionic substituents improve formulation and can restrict localization to extracellular targets. Water-soluble BODIPY photocages show how peripheral sulfonation can tune cellular permeability without destroying visible-light photorelease, whereas direct sulfonation at positions electronically coupled to the meso center can suppress the desired reaction [15, 16]. For drug-release designs, the cage must also avoid premature hydrolysis, serum protein trapping, and photoproduct toxicity. These constraints make photocaging a molecular engineering problem rather than a simple protecting-group substitution.

3. Chemical design and construction strategies of photocage molecules

3.1. Chromophore design and photophysical regulation

Chromophore design controls the first event in photocaging, namely light capture. Early o-nitrobenzyl cages absorb mainly in the ultraviolet and near-ultraviolet region, and substitution on the aromatic ring can change both absorption and the efficiency of aci-nitro formation. Nitroindolinyl and dinitroindolinyl systems were developed to improve uncaging of neurotransmitters by combining higher extinction coefficients with faster release and better compatibility with brain-slice experiments [17]. Nitrodibenzofuran extended the fused nitroaromatic concept and produced efficient one-photon and two-photon uncaging of calcium chelators and thiol-containing peptides [18].

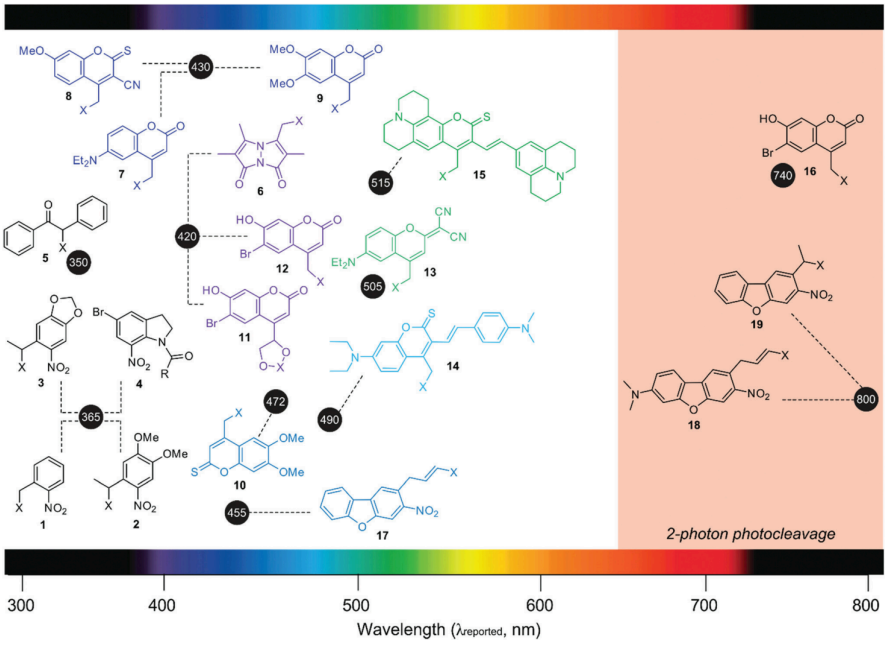


Figure 2. Representative photocaging scaffolds and their reported one-photon or two-photon photocleavage wavelengths [12]

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Coumarinylmethyl systems represent a modular scaffold for photophysical regulation. Electron-donating substituents at the 7-position, halogenation, pi extension, and donor-acceptor engineering shift absorption and increase two-photon response. The brominated 7-hydroxycoumarinylmethyl group introduced by Furuta and co-workers produced biologically useful two-photon cross sections, which helped establish chemical two-photon uncaging in intact tissue. Later coumarin designs added styryl or other electron-rich extensions to increase absorption beyond 450 nm and to improve two-photon action. Green-light activatable water-soluble coumarin photocages show that red-shifted absorption can coexist with practical synthesis and aqueous operation when conjugation and solubilizing substituents are balanced.

The xanthene and fluorescein families offer another route to visible-light absorption. Fluorescein analogues contain extended conjugation and high oscillator strength around the green region, and appropriate substitution can turn a fluorescent scaffold into a release platform for carboxylates or related groups. Their design illustrates a recurring tension in photocage chemistry. A chromophore optimized as a fluorophore dissipates energy by emission, whereas a photocage must direct excitation into bond breaking. Productive structures often reduce fluorescence or introduce a reactive benzylic position, and the resulting molecule must be evaluated as a photochemical reagent rather than as a dye with an attached payload.

Collectively, representative photocaging scaffolds span ultraviolet-responsive nitroaromatic and benzoin derivatives, visible-light-responsive coumarin and related chromophores, and structures capable of two-photon photocleavage in the near-infrared region (Fig. 2). Their reported activation wavelengths demonstrate that spectral red shifting is closely associated with the extension of π-conjugation, donor–acceptor regulation, and modification of the photolabile linkage.

3.2. Long-wavelength response regulation strategies

Long-wavelength activation is not achieved by red shifting absorption alone. Lower-energy excited states often have shorter lifetimes or insufficient driving force for bond cleavage, so the structure must preserve a productive dissociation pathway. BODIPY photocages provide a clear example. The BODIPY chromophore offers high molar absorption coefficients and tunable visible-to-near-infrared absorption. Peterson and co-workers showed that meso-methyl BODIPY derivatives bearing styryl groups can undergo single-photon release at wavelengths above 700 nm, and boron alkylation can improve release quantum yield without requiring ultraviolet excitation. This design connected dye chemistry with photocage reactivity and expanded the wavelength range available for direct photorelease.

Cyanine-based photocages use a different solution to the long-wavelength problem. Heptamethine cyanines absorb strongly in the near-infrared and can undergo photooxidative or phototruncation processes that initiate release. Gorka, Nani, and co-workers used C4 prime dialkylamine-substituted heptamethine cyanines to release phenolic cargoes under low-intensity 690 nm light and later applied related chemistry to near-infrared activation of duocarmycin-antibody conjugates in vivo [19, 20]. These systems demonstrate that long-wavelength uncaging can be coupled to imaging and targeted delivery, although dependence on oxygen, photobleaching pathways, and complex photoproduct mixtures must be considered in mechanism and safety evaluation.

Transition-metal photocages expand wavelength control through ligand-field and charge-transfer excited states. Ru(II) polypyridyl complexes can release coordinating ligands such as nitriles and aromatic heterocycles after visible-light excitation, covering cargo classes that are difficult to mask with organic cages. Tetradentate ancillary ligands increase rigidity and modify ligand exchange,

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giving a synthetic handle for improving selectivity and photoreactivity. The limitation is that the cage is no longer a small organic protecting group. Molecular weight, charge, stereochemistry, and metal-associated biological effects become part of the design equation.

3.3. Optimization of uncaging efficiency and selectivity

Uncaging efficiency depends on the competition between productive bond cleavage and all other excited-state decay channels. Heavy atoms may promote intersystem crossing and assist certain release pathways, but they can also increase triplet-mediated side reactions or sensitized oxygen chemistry. Donor-acceptor substitution can increase long-wavelength absorption while changing excited-state charge distribution at the scissile bond. In BODIPY cages, the leaving group exerts a strong effect because better leaving groups produce higher release yields, and electronic changes at boron and the meso position are not equivalent. In coumarin cages, substituent effects influence cation stabilization, hydrolysis, fluorescence, and photobleaching, so the same structural modification may improve one metric while reducing another.

Selectivity has at least three meanings in photocaging. Chemoselectivity describes installation at one functional group in a polyfunctional molecule. Wavelength selectivity describes independent activation of different cages in the same system. Biological selectivity describes release at the intended cell, organelle, or tissue site. Wavelength-selective systems require sufficient separation of absorption bands and irradiation conditions that avoid partial activation of the second cage. Orthogonal two-color uncaging with visible light has been advanced by spectral tuning of nitroaromatic and related chromophores, but spectral overlap and unequal quantum yields make quantitative calibration essential. Biological selectivity is usually obtained by adding targeting groups, controlling charge, or conjugating the caged payload to antibodies or polymers, as shown by near-infrared cyanine-drug conjugates [21].

Efficiency optimization also requires attention to the irradiation protocol. High light intensity can increase apparent release but may also heat the sample, accelerate photobleaching, or create reactive oxygen species. Low-intensity activation is preferable for living systems, yet it demands higher action cross sections and low background hydrolysis. Reported quantum yields should be interpreted together with concentration, optical path length, light flux, solvent, oxygenation, and analytical time point. A cage that performs well in degassed organic solvent may behave differently in buffered saline or in a protein-rich medium. Comparable reporting of these conditions is needed for rational selection among scaffolds.

3.4. Construction and synthetic methods of photocage molecules

The synthesis of a photocaged compound starts from a cage precursor that contains an electrophilic or activated handle at the benzylic, meso, carbonyl, phosphate, or metal-coordination site. Alcohols and phenols are commonly caged as ethers, carbonates, or carbamates through reaction with chloromethyl, bromomethyl, chloroformate, carbonate, or activated ester derivatives of the cage. Carboxylates and phosphates are often introduced through esterification or phosphoramidite chemistry. Amines are usually caged through carbamates, although release can be slowed by the need for post-photolysis decarboxylation. Thiols can be protected by thioethers or mixed acetal-type linkages, and peptide substrates often require compatibility with Fmoc solid-phase peptide synthesis.

Synthetic practicality is a recurring limitation. A chromophore with excellent photophysics may be unattractive if the final caged product requires long sequences, unstable intermediates, low-yielding late-stage coupling, or difficult purification of regioisomers. Red-shifted coumarin and

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BODIPY cages have benefited from modular aromatic functionalization, Knoevenagel or styryl extension, remote sulfonation, and late-stage activation of the caging handle. Ru(II) cages are assembled by ligand synthesis, metal complexation, and exchange or coordination of the cargo ligand, with stereochemical and counterion considerations that differ from organic protecting-group chemistry. Across these classes, the most useful synthetic route preserves the native cargo, avoids harsh deprotection steps after cage installation, and allows photophysical characterization of the exact final compound rather than of a simplified model.

Late-stage photocaging of complex molecules often relies on temporary protection of competing nucleophiles, careful base selection, and purification under light-excluding conditions. Nucleotides and phosphorylated metabolites require control of charge state and counterions, while phenolic drugs and peptide side chains may need orthogonal protecting groups to avoid mixed products. For macromolecules, site-selective cysteine alkylation, lysine carbamate formation, and genetically encoded caged amino acids provide complementary routes. Each route changes the verification burden. The final compound should be examined for identity, isomeric purity, dark stability, and release stoichiometry before functional assays are interpreted.

4. Applications and performance validation of photocaging strategies

4.1. Photocontrolled release of small molecules and bioactive molecules

Small-molecule uncaging remains the primary test bed for photocage performance. Caged ATP and cyclic AMP established that photolysis can create rapid concentration jumps and initiate enzyme or transporter responses. Caged calcium chelators, neurotransmitters, second messengers, kinase inhibitors, and receptor ligands later made the same principle applicable to fast cell signaling. In these systems, performance validation requires more than measuring disappearance of the caged precursor. The released molecule must be quantified, its bioactivity must match the native standard, and the cage photoproduct must be shown not to dominate the observed response. BODIPY-based photocages provide representative examples of how a common chromophore platform can be adapted for the release of chemically distinct bioactive cargoes. Light irradiation has been used to release dopamine and gasotransmitters such as NO, H_2S and CO, although the detailed pathways may differ from direct SN1-type bond cleavage to photoinduced electron-transfer and intersystem-crossing processes (Fig. 3).

Neurotransmitter release illustrates the demand for time resolution and localization. Chemical two-photon uncaging of glutamate improved spatial confinement compared with wide-field ultraviolet photolysis, and later caged glutamate designs were optimized for brain slices where diffusion, solubility, and receptor kinetics are severe constraints. Peptide and protein photocaging adds the problem of site-specific installation. Cysteine, lysine, tyrosine, serine, and backbone amide sites can be masked chemically or through genetically encoded unnatural amino acids, but protein folding and residual activity must be assessed after cage attachment [22]. A caged inhibitor, hormone, or peptide cannot be judged only by photolysis yield because partial activity before irradiation may invalidate the experiment.

Materials and chemical synthesis provide a second validation context. Photocaged acids, bases, radicals, thiols, and catalysts can start polymerization, crosslinking, degradation, or self-assembly after local irradiation. In these cases the released species is judged by conversion, mechanical response, pattern fidelity, or downstream product distribution rather than by a cellular phenotype. The same principles apply to prodrug chemistry, where release of a cytotoxin or signaling agent must be separated from nonspecific dye toxicity and from light exposure alone. Near-infrared

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cyanine-drug conjugates show how a photocage can be integrated with targeting and imaging, but they also show why pharmacokinetics and photochemistry cannot be evaluated separately.

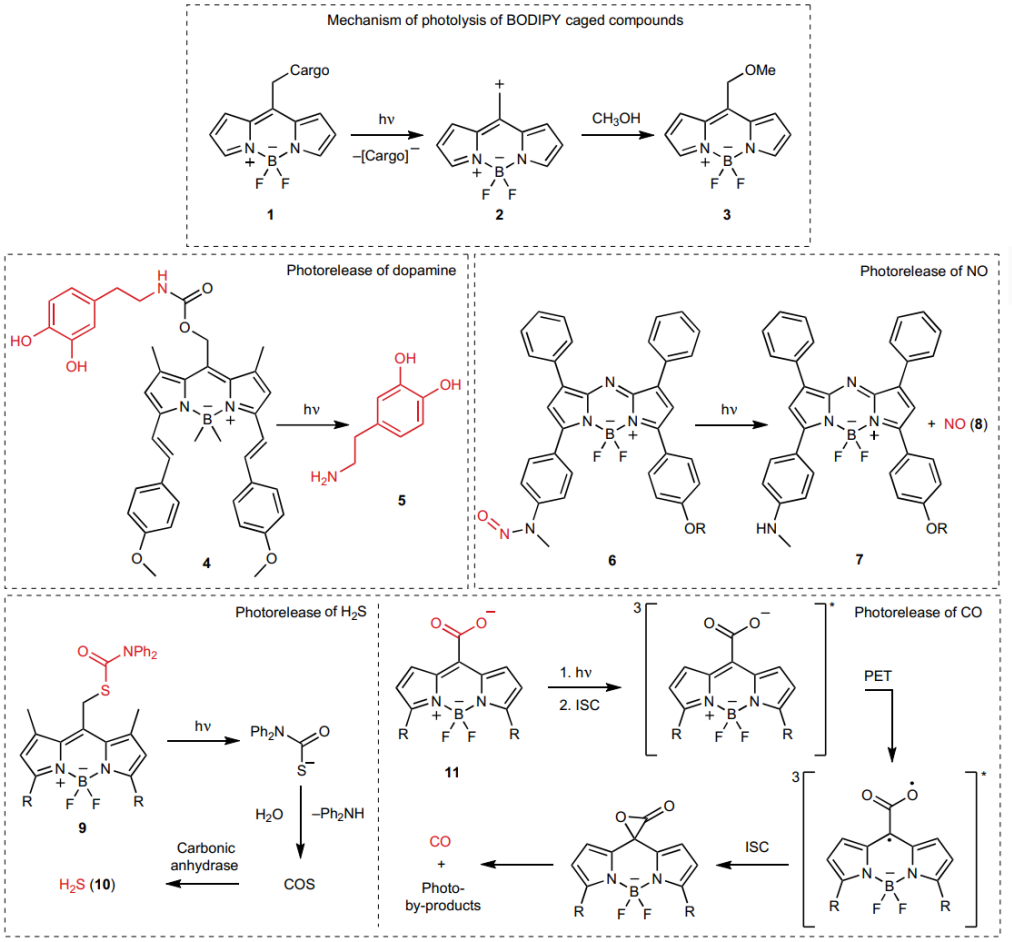


Figure 3. Representative BODIPY photocaging pathways for the light-triggered release of dopamineand gaseous signaling molecules [21]

4.2. Spatiotemporal regulation in biological systems

Biological use converts photocage chemistry into an optical perturbation method. Irradiation can be focused on subcellular regions, single cells, tissue layers, or whole organisms depending on wavelength and instrumentation. One-photon ultraviolet activation offers high energy but limited penetration and higher photodamage. Visible-light cages reduce this burden and permit combinations with fluorescence imaging. Two-photon uncaging confines activation to a femtoliter-scale focal volume, allowing three-dimensional mapping in scattering specimens when the action cross section is sufficient.

The chemical behavior of the cage must be measured under the same conditions used for the biological experiment. Buffer composition, oxygen level, protein concentration, pH, light dose, and local viscosity can alter uncaging efficiency. Cyanine systems may depend on oxygen-mediated photochemistry, BODIPY systems may change localization with sulfonation state, and Ru(II) cages may interact with biomolecules through charge and coordination chemistry. For this reason, rigorous validation usually combines analytical photolysis, dark-stability testing, cell-viability assays,

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uncaged-product controls, and dose-response comparison with direct addition of the active cargo. Such controls define whether the observed biological phenotype arises from the intended release event rather than from light exposure, dye phototoxicity, or secondary photoproduct chemistry.

5. Conclusions and outlook

Photocaging has developed from a small set of ultraviolet protecting groups into a family of molecular platforms that can be selected according to wavelength, cargo, medium, and biological target. The central chemical problem remains the same. A chromophore must absorb light and direct the resulting excited-state energy into selective bond cleavage faster than nonproductive decay and side reactions. The most successful recent designs do not optimize wavelength in isolation. They combine photophysical tuning with leaving-group control, aqueous compatibility, dark stability, and synthetic accessibility.

Several problems still limit broader use. Red and near-infrared cages often trade photon compatibility for lower excited-state energy or more complex photochemistry. Water-soluble visible-light cages can lose cell permeability, whereas membrane-permeant cages can aggregate or bind nonspecifically. Protein and peptide photocaging still requires better site selectivity and milder late-stage installation. Metal-based cages solve difficult ligand-release problems but introduce questions of charge, stereochemistry, and metal-associated biological effects. Progress will likely come from paired development of scaffold synthesis and quantitative photochemical assays. A useful future photocage will be judged not by a single impressive wavelength or quantum yield, but by reproducible release of a defined cargo in the actual chemical or biological environment for which it was designed.

A practical development path can be stated in chemical terms. New scaffolds should report absorption spectra, extinction coefficients, release quantum yields, photoproduct identities, dark hydrolysis rates, and release kinetics for representative cargo classes. Synthetic studies should include late-stage examples on structurally complex substrates rather than only on simple alcohols or phenols. Biological studies should place uncaged-product controls beside irradiation controls and should state the delivered photon dose. Such reporting would make the field less dependent on scaffold-specific precedent and more capable of matching a photocage to a defined experimental task.

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