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Concentration and Purification of Viruses by using Ultrafiltration, Incl. Coronavirus – a Short Review

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Abstract

This short review highlights concentration and purification steps of various viruses in the context of different research applications. The discussed methods find application in medical research, marine biology as well as in research concerning drinking water and food quality. You will find a guidance for the selection of an ideal performing ultrafiltration device with the optimum molecular weight cut-off (MWCO) for typical concentration applications.

With the emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the large Coronavirus family of viruses has come to the forefront of immunology, epidemiology and vaccinology studies. Investigations into general Coronavirus virology, Coronavirus spike proteins, capture of Coronavirus virions and free RNA from water streams, are three core examples of focus points for study in the scientific community, as such we provide some examples of concentration and purification steps in these Coronavirus research workflows also (found in tables 5 and 6).

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Introduction

Evolutionary, viruses developed various mechanisms to interact and manipulate the genetic material of their target cells. Based on this, modern molecular biology utilizes viruses in a constantly growing number of applications¹ They range from controlled genetic transfection of cells to a variety of different basic studies in medical science.² In medical studies the strategic focus is on recombinant vaccines and on the development of potential vectors for gene therapy.^{3,4}

Besides the great relevance of viruses for medical applications, the assessment of virus type and content is important for the risk assessment of food and drinking water.⁵ Also, the classification of virus content is often of high relevance for the quality control of aquatic biotopes.⁶

During the preparation, handling, or analysis of viruses or virus-like particles (VLPs), a concentration and/or purification step is frequently required.⁵ Typical viruses have a size within the range of about 20 nm up to several hundred nanometers.⁷ Therefore they are ideally suited for the retention on ultrafiltration membrane systems and such ultrafilters are widely used in basic virus research. The specifications of such ultrafiltration devices depend on the particular type of virus and the purpose of the subsequent application.

This short review highlights methods for the purification of various mammalian viruses for basic medical research. Also, the concentration of pathogenic viruses from water and food samples and the purification of marine bacteriophages (virio plankton) are highlighted. It will also give guidance for the selection of an ideal performing device with the optimum molecular weight cut-off (MWCO) for the user specified ultrafiltration process.

Concentration of mammalian viruses in medical research.

In medical research viruses and VLPs are of major interest, particularly for investigations on infectious viral diseases and for the development of vaccines or antiviral drugs. Moreover, certain VLPs can manipulate genetic material in a directed manner and are used broadly in the development of genetic therapy approaches. Additionally, viral vectors are well established as a transfection method for gene transfer to cell lines e. g. to manipulate mammalian cells in vivo and in vitro.

An overview of thematically linked publications using Sartorius ultrafiltration devices for the purification and concentration of viruses and VLPs in the medical context is given in Table 1. Among other applications, Vivaspin® devices were employed for the concentration of adeno-associated virus (AAV) and lentiviral vectors after purification via ion

exchange chromatography⁸⁻¹⁰ on blood sera to prepare blank samples from hepatitis C virus (HCV)-positive blood sera,¹¹ for the development of a vaccine against human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and of an antiviral drug against Chikungunya virus.^{12,13}

Concentration of viruses from drinking water and food samples

The guidelines for drinking-water quality by the world health organization describe safety plans to reduce potential risks from various virus infections.¹⁶ It states that, due to the increased resistance of viruses to disinfection methods, an absence of bacterial contamination after disinfection cannot be used as a reliable indicator of the presence | absence of pathogenic viral species in drinking water supplies. Considering this, ultrafiltration can play a vital role in detecting such viral contaminations for the research on drinking water quality and food safety.

For an ultrafiltration step, the water sample does not have to be pre-conditioned and its efficacy in concentrating the virus is virtually independent of the chemical properties and the structure of the virus.¹⁷ Thus ultrafiltration is very well suited to isolate and concentrate virus particles from water samples and is a valuable aid during the assessment of water quality. Most of the viruses which are found in water and also food samples are of fecal origin. Screening for these viruses is crucial to prevent infections. The most frequent ones are hepatitis A, hepatitis E and norovirus.¹⁸ Ultrafiltration has been described as the most appropriate method for the recovery of hepatitis A virus from vegetables and other food items.¹⁹ Detection of infectious viruses is mainly done by propagation in cell culture (plaque assay) or the detection of the viral genomes by molecular amplification techniques such as quantitative reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR).²⁰

Table 1

Summarized examples of applications with Vivaspin® and Vivaflow® for viruses in medical research

Goal of Research (Type of virus, Host Organism)	Purpose of Filtration (Buffer System)	Sartorius Ultrafiltration Device (MWCO)	Subsequent Step	Ref.
Gene therapy (Adenovirus type 5, VLP, human)	Diafiltration (20 mM Tris saline buffer)	Vivaflow® (100 kDa)	Storage, chromatography on Sartobind STIC membrane absorber (FPLC)	14
Reduction of HCV-induced fibrosis (Hepatitis C Virus; human)	Removal of HCV from human blood serum (Blood serum)	Vivaspin® (30 kDa)	Preparation of negative control (from positive sample) for immunofluorescence assay, fibrosis induction assays	11
Development of a viral entry inhibitor for HIV (HIV, human)	Removal of protein fraction from virus (PBS)	Vivaspin® 20 (1,000 kDa)	Virus inactivation	12
Gene therapy for cancer treatment (adeno-associated virus; rAAV-2, human)	Concentration and purification after expression, Buffer exchange after His tag (FreeStyle 293 Expression Medium (Gibco), serum-free)	Vivaspin® 20 (1,000 kDa)	Titer, ELISA, cell binding assay, apoptosis cell cycle assay	8
System for controlled gene expression in mice brain (Adeno-associated virus, mice)	Concentration of eluate after anion exchange chromatography (elution buffer)	Vivaspin® 20 (100 kDa)	Transduction of mice neurons	9
Efficient gene transfer into the CNS (Lentivirus, human)	Concentration after ion exchange chromatography (PBS)	Vivaspin® (100 kDa)	Quantification via real-time PCR and end-point dilution. Transduction of murine neuronal and glial cells <i>in vivo</i>	10
Identification of effective chikungunya antiviral drugs (Chikungunya-Virus, human)	Concentration	Vivaspin® 20 (100 kDa)	Quantification by TCID ₅₀	13
Gene therapy of achromatopsia in mice (Recombinant adeno-associated virus, human virus used in mice)	Concentration (Anion exchange chromatography elution buffer)	Vivaspin® 4 (10 kDa)	Titer determination by dot-blot analysis, subretinal injections	15

Table 2:

Summarized examples of ultrafiltration application with Vivaspin® and Vivaflow® with viruses from drinking water and food samples

Goal of Research (Type of virus, Host Organism)	Purpose of Filtration (Buffer System)	Sartorius Ultrafiltration Device (MWCO)	Subsequent Step	Ref.
Method for the detection of norovirus genogroup I (Norovirus, human)	Concentration (PBS processed food samples)	Vivaspin® (5 kDa)	RNA extraction for real-time RT-PCR	22
Analysis of viral content in groundwater (A set of pathogenic viruses, potentially human)	Concentration of drinking water sample (Drinking water)	Vivaflow® 200 (10 kDa)	Qualitative analysis (enterovirus) by RT-nested PCR and microtiter neutralization test	21
Comparative Analysis of Viral Concentration Methods (Hepatitis A virus, human)	Concentration (0.25 M threonine, 0.3 M NaCl, pH 9.5)	Vivaspin® 20 (100 kDa)	RNA extraction for real-time RT-PCR	19
Analysis of regional outbreak of gastroenteritis due to drinking water contamination (Norovirus, Astrovirus, Rotavirus, Enterovirus, Hepatitis A virus; human)	Concentration (50 mmol/L glycine buffer, 1% beef extract)	Vivaspin® 2	Nucleic acid extraction	23

Concentration of viruses and bacteriophages from marine biological samples

In marine biology, the concentration and subsequent analysis of marine bacteriophages (virioplankton) is of major interest. They outnumber the bacterioplankton (their host organisms) by an order of magnitude and thus have an important influence on the whole marine biosphere.²⁴

As described by Wyn-Jones & Sellwood (ref. 17) ultrafiltration can be used to concentrate virus particles in water samples without any prior pretreatment of the sample and it is also

practically independent from the chemical and structural properties of the viruses. Thus, it finds wide use for the analysis of aquatic viruses. For instance, Schroeder et al. (ref. 26) were able to determine the diversity and monitor population dynamics of viruses that infect *Emiliana huxleyi*, a globally important form of photosynthetic plankton. In this study a reusable Vivaflow® 50 unit equipped with a polyethersulfone (PES) membrane with MWCO of 50 kDa was used to concentrate viruses in sea water samples prior to storage and analysis. For further examples of virus concentration from marine biological samples see table 3.

Table 3

Summarized examples of ultrafiltration applications with Sartorius Vivaflow® and Vivaspin® of samples from marine biology

Goal of Research (Type of virus, Host Organism)	Purpose of Filtration (Buffer System)	Sartorius Ultrafiltration Device (MWCO)	Subsequent Step	Ref.
Assessment of virioplankton diversity (Virioplankton, Plankton)	0.2 µm filtration for clarification, filtrate subjected to 3 kDa filter for concentration (Sea water)	Vivaflow® 200 (0.2 µm and 30 kDa)	Subsequent analysis by DNA separation on Agarose gel	25
Classification of virus (MpRNAV-01B, <i>Micromonas pusilla</i>)	Vivaflow 200: harvest and concentration of whole cell lysate; Vivaspin: washing (removal of CsCl)	Vivaflow® 200, Vivaspin® (30 kDa)	Classification of new virus: genome, proteins, stability, etc.	28
Assessment of genetic diversity in virioplankton (<i>Emiliana huxleyi</i> Bloom virus, Eukaryotic phytoplankton - alga)	After 0.45 µm filtration, concentration 1l to 20 ml (Sea water)	Vivaflow® 50 (50 kDa)	PCR and Denaturing gradient gel electrophoresis	26
Investigation of gene expression during infection (<i>Emiliana huxleyi</i> virus strain 86, Eukaryotic phytoplankton - alga)	Concentration from 5 L to 20 ml (f/2 medium)	Vivaflow® 50 (50 kDa)	CsCl-gradient	27
Study on host genome integration (<i>virophage mavirus</i> , <i>Cafeteria roenbergensis</i>)	Clarification with 0.2 µm filter and concentration with 100 kDa filter (<i>Cafeteria roenbergensis</i> , f/2 medium)	Vivaflow® 200 (0.2 µm and 100 kDa)	CsCl gradients, electron microscopy	29

Concentration of Coronavirus for general research and protein research (spike protein)

Coronaviruses are spherical, enveloped, RNA based viruses that are typically 80-120 nm in diameter, but in many cases have a diameter outside of this range. Coronavirus genomes are the largest of all RNA viruses which offers a relatively large area of study. Correlatingly the potential for future mutations in this large genome may lead to future human diseases that may evolve into epidemics and pandemics, such as the previous Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV), and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 1 (SARS-CoV-1) and 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Hence further research into the replication, transmission, genome and structure will continue with greater investment of time and funding in the years to come.

A key component to the infection cycle is the coronavirus spike (S) protein, that mediates entry into host cells, through both attachment and membrane fusion. As such,

it is a primary target for the development of novel antiviral drugs and vaccines.

The concentration and purification of both the virions and the spike proteins from cell culture and supernatants is often a key requirement to isolate the respective target, prior to structural, functional analysis and binding assays, etc.

Table 4 highlights several applications where Vivaspin® centrifugal concentrators, or Vivaflow® tangential flow filtration cassettes have been used for the concentration or Coronavirus proteins, including the spike protein. References are also provided to direct readers for detailed reading.

Table 5 provides examples of concentration of intact virions, or Coronavirus virus like particles (VLPs), with the same devices.

Table 4

Summarized examples of ultrafiltration applications with Sartorius Vivaflow® and Vivaspin® of coronavirus protein samples.

Goal of Research (Type of virus, Host Organism)	Purpose of Filtration (Buffer System)	Sartorius Ultrafiltration Device (MWCO)	Subsequent Step	Ref.
Neutralization of a SARS-CoV-2 antibody to a functionally conserved receptor binding domain (RBD) on the trimeric spike (S) protein	Buffer exchange of a SARS-CoV-2 RBD protein	Vivaspin 20®, PES (10 kDa)	Protein concentration by UV/Vis and binding affinity by Streptavidin BLI (Sartorius Octet)	30
Investigation of neutralising antibody response on a SARS-CoV-2 spike glycoprotein RBD-SpyVLP (virus-like particle) platform	Concentration of SpyTag-RBD protein construct	Vivaspin® 20PES (10 kDa)	Purification by SEC	31
Investigation of exosome based vaccines containing coronavirus spike (S) protein, for SARS-CoV-1	Concentration of solubilized spike protein in supernatant	Vivaspin®, PES (10 kDa)	Western blot analysis	32
Analyze of the ability to redirect the functionality of the Mouse Hepatitis Coronavirus spike (S) protein to infect human cancer cells	Concentration of cellular receptor protein constructs	Vivaspin®, PES	Western blot analysis	33
Structure determination of Coronavirus SARS-CoV-1 non-structural protein 1 (nsp1)	Concentration of coronavirus nsp1 during purification process	Vivaspin®, PES	Crystalization screening	34
Structure determination of the ADRP domain of Feline Coronavirus (FCoV) non-structural protein 3 (nsp3)	concentration of coronavirus nsp3 during purification process	Vivaspin®, PES (10 kDa)	Crystalization screening	35
Investigation into the role of three transmembrane proteases in the activation of SARS-CoV-1 spike (S) protein	Concentration of VLPs from HEK 293T cell culture supernatant	Vivaspin®, PES	Cell-cell fusion assay	36
Cryo-electron microscopy of Human Coronavirus HCoV-NL63 spike glycoprotein trimer that is a potential target for neutralizing antibodies during infection	Concentration of recombinant HCoV-NL63 viruses from clarified Drosophila S2 cell culture supernatant	Vivaflow®, PES (10 kDa)	Affinity purification	37

Table 5

Summarized examples of ultrafiltration applications with Sartorius Vivaflow® and Vivaspin® of coronavirus viron and VLP samples

Goal of Research (Type of virus, Host Organism)	Purpose of Filtration (Buffer System)	Sartorius Ultrafiltration Device (MWCO)	Sartorius Ultrafiltration Device (MWCO)	Subsequent Step	Ref.
Characterisation of phenotypic changes in virus isolates, such as MERS-CoV, that could relate to pandemic potential	Concentration of MERS-CoV virus isolates	Vivaspin®, PES (100 kDa)	Vivaspin®, PES (100 kDa)	Quantification using plaque titration Viral RNA sequencing analysis	38
Investigation of antiviral potential of Echinacea purpurea (Echinaforce®) against human coronaviruses; SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV	Concentration of MERS-CoV and SARS-CoV virus dilutions	Vivaspin® 20, PES	Vivaspin® 20, PES	Limiting dilution assay (TCID ₅₀)	39
Investigation into inactivation of SARS-CoV-2 through heating and chemical protocols	Concentration and separation of deactivated SARS-CoV-2 from lysis buffer	Vivaspin® 500, PES	Vivaspin® 500, PES	Inoculation onto Vero-E6 monolayer	40
Investigation of viral and cellular determinants governing hCoV-EMC entry into host cells	Concentration of SARS-CoV and hCoV-EMC virus like particles (VLPs)	Vivaspin®, PES	Vivaspin®, PES	Western blot analysis	41, 42

Concentration and capture of virions and / or viral RNA in wastewater

In humans and birds Coronaviruses may inflict mild to fatal respiratory tract infections, but in other animal groups a range of other diseases may also occur, such as hepatitis and neurological illness⁴². SARS-CoV-2 is the most recent among a string of Coronavirus epidemics, which early indications suggest that due to its high infectivity, rates of asymptomatic infection, significant incubation time, our relatively limited knowledge of transmission dynamics and overall lack of global pandemic preparation, has evolved into a true global pandemic and has caused significant impact on global health, society and economy.

The severity of this pandemic is driving increased research and funding in all associated areas. One area is on the

tracking and epidemiological studies of SARS-CoV-2 infections. One area of focus is in the use of regional wastewater systems, where the compartmentalisation of these systems offers distinct tracking in real time, without the lag for symptom appearance and clinical diagnosis⁴³. In addition, the data collected can be used as a supplemental and low-cost surveillance indicator on the circulation of the virus in a community without the need to screen individuals. Further, it contributes to the tracking of infection prevalence, by adding another epidemic indicator⁴⁴.

RT-PCR is the standard method to test for SARS-CoV-2, but samples typically require concentration and removal of non-Coronavirus material prior to testing to ensure optimal results. Ultrafiltration is a successful method for this⁴³, and some examples have been given in Table 6.

Table 6

Summarized examples of ultrafiltration applications with Sartorius Vivaflow® and Vivaspin® of virus and viral RNA in wastewater samples

Goal of Research (Type of virus, Host Organism)	Purpose of Filtration (Buffer System)	Sartorius Ultrafiltration Device (MWCO)	Subsequent Step	Ref.
Measurement of SARS-CoV-2 RNA in sewage	Concentration of viral RNA	Vivaspin®, PES (50 kDa)	Viral RNA extraction and purification RT-qPCR quantification	43, 44, 45
Benchmarking virus concentration methods for quantification of SARS-CoV-2 in raw wastewater	Concentration of viral RNA	Vivacell®, PES (10 kDa)	Viral RNA extraction and purification RT-qPCR quantification	46
Evaluation of two methods to concentrate SARS-CoV-2 from untreated wastewater	Concentration of viral RNA from 40 ml (total) to 700-1000 µl	Vivaspin® (10 kDa)	Viral RNA extraction and RT-qPCR and ddPCR quantification	47
Virus detection in full scale membrane bioreactor (MBR) plant by virus concentration monitoring, inc. Norovirus, Sapovirus and Rotavirus	Concentration of viral particles in effluent	Vivaflow® 50, PES	PEG precipitation Viral RNA quantification	48
Evaluation of membrane bioreactor wastewater virus removal, inc. Norovirus, Sapovirus, Adenovirus	Concentration of effluent from 1L to 40mL	Vivaflow® 50, PES	Nucleic acid extraction RT-PCR quantification	49
Evaluation of membrane bioreactor wastewater Norovirus removal	Concentration of viruses in effluent	Vivaflow® 50, PES	Nucleic acid extraction RT-PCR quantification	50
Evaluation of the association between number of hepatitis E cases in the community and concentration in local sewage	Concentration of viruses in effluent	Vivaflow® 50, PES	Nucleic acid extraction RT-qPCR quantification	51

Conclusion

The purification of virus by ultrafiltration is virtually independent of the chemical properties and the structure of the virus particles. As viruses have a size within the range of about 20 nm up to several hundred nanometers, they are typically several orders of magnitude bigger than even the biggest protein complexes.⁷ Therefore, most viruses are unfailingly retained on membranes with large MWCOs of up to 1,000 kDa. The exact specifications of the ideal ultrafiltration membranes depend on the purpose of the subsequent application.

Ultrafiltration for the concentration of Coronavirus species plays an important role in a range of workflows. Perhaps due to the size distribution of viruses and VLPs, the exact MWCO used is not standard across each study. Although typically, for 80-120 nm particles the 100 kDa MWCO would provide the optimal balance between recovery, removal of interfering substances, speed and shear stresses. Whereas for the recovery of RNA material, lower MWCOs (10-50 kDa) are recommended to capture a greater range of RNA chain lengths. However, until further standardisation is confirmed for each application, it is prudent to test specific devices before implementing into procedures.

During the preparation of viral vectors for medical studies, a buffer exchange after column purification can be performed with various MWCOs of all sizes.^{8,9,10,15} To separate virus particles from small proteins, a 1,000 kDa cut off has been shown to work.¹² For the complete removal of HCV from blood serum a 30 kDa MWCO has been utilized.¹¹ When the assessment of whole virus content is crucial (e.g. food, drinking water or marine water samples) smaller MWCOs (5 – 100 kDa) are used to ensure full recovery of virus particles.^{19,21,22,25-29}

Abbreviations

AAV	Adeno-associated virus
CNS	Central nervous system DNA Deoxyribonucleic acid
CoV	Coronavirus
ELISA	Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay
FPLC	Fast protein liquid chromatography
fCoV	Feline Coronavirus
hCoV	Human Coronavirus
HCV	Hepatitis C virus
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
kDa	Kilodalton (1000 g per mole)
M	Molarity (mole per litre)
MERS	Middle east respiratory syndrome
mol	Mole
MWCO	Molecular weight cut-off
nsp	Nonstructural protein
PBS	Phosphate buffered saline
PCR	Polymerase chain reaction
PEG	Polyethylene Glycol
PES	Polyethersulfone
RNA	Ribonucleic acid
SARS	Severe acute respiratory syndrome
RBD	Receptor binding domain
BLI	Bio-Layer Interferometry
RT-PCR	Reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction
ddPCR	Droplet digital polymerase chain reaction
TCIDP50	50% Tissue culture infective dose
VLP	Virus-like particle

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