

# 1    **Protein misfolding and ER stress**

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24   **Abstract**

25   The endoplasmic reticulum (ER) is a major site of protein synthesis, most strikingly in  
26   the specialised secretory cells of metazoans, which can produce their own weight in  
27   proteins daily. Cells possess a diverse machinery to ensure correct folding, assembly  
28   and secretion of proteins from the ER. When this machinery is overwhelmed, the cell  
29   is said to experience ER stress, a result of the accumulation of unfolded or misfolded  
30   proteins in the lumen of the organelle. Here we discuss the causes of ER stress and  
31   the mechanisms by which cells elicit a response, with an emphasis on recent  
32   discoveries.

## 33    **Introduction**

34    The biogenesis of secretory and cell surface proteins begins at the endoplasmic  
35    reticulum (ER). Newly synthesized polypeptides enter the ER via a  
36    proteinaceous pore called the translocon (33, 46, 55, 151). ER-resident enzymes  
37    guide protein folding towards the native state by chaperoning and post-  
38    translational modification. Proteins that fail to adopt their native conformation  
39    are retained in the ER and eventually targeted for ER-associated degradation  
40    (ERAD) (Figure 1). The processes governing protein production, quality control  
41    and degradation help to maintain protein homeostasis (proteostasis).

42

43    Efficient protein folding within the ER requires tight matching of the load of new  
44    proteins entering the organelle with the capacity of its folding machinery. When  
45    the load of client proteins outweighs the capacity, the cell is said to experience  
46    ‘ER stress’ , which represents a threat to accumulate unfolded aggregation-  
47    prone species. In the face of ER stress, an unfolded protein response (UPR) is  
48    employed to restore proteostasis. In metazoans, three UPR signal transducers,  
49    IRE1, PERK and ATF6, govern distinct but overlapping transcriptional programs  
50    to increase folding capacity, while measures to attenuate the rate of secretory  
51    protein translation simultaneously reduce the protein load (Figure 1). In this  
52    review we will highlight recent advances in the field of ER stress.

53

## 54    **Protein folding in the ER**

55    Whilst some denatured proteins can refold *in vitro* without auxiliary factors, in  
56    the crowded molecular environment of the cell a folding machinery is required.

57 Protein folding in the ER is supported by a variety of chaperones and folding  
58 factors. These include enzymes that facilitate post-translational modifications,  
59 such as N-linked glycosylation and disulfide bond formation (141, 164) (14).

60

61 Chaperones of the heat shock protein 70 (HSP70) and HSP90 families are  
62 present in abundance within the ER. BiP (also known as GRP78) is the major  
63 HSP70, binding to short stretches of hydrophobic residues exposed by non-  
64 native proteins. It functions to reduce the effective concentration of aggregation  
65 prone sequences. The process of aggregation is highly concentration-dependent  
66 and so by shielding aggregation prone sequences BiP discourages aggregation  
67 and promotes native folding, i.e. its so-called holdase function. In order to allow  
68 the progression of folding, BiP cycles through release and rebinding to its  
69 substrates, whilst consuming ATP in the process. With each release cycle the  
70 client protein has the opportunity to fold. In this sense, folding competes with  
71 chaperone binding, both processes offering thermodynamic stability. Whether  
72 BiP and other HSP70s actively catalyze the folding process (a foldase function)  
73 remains unclear.

74

75 Two classes of auxiliary proteins contribute to the HSP70 chaperone cycle. J-  
76 domain proteins (J-DP), which contain a conserved domain from the ancestral  
77 DnaJ co-chaperone of bacteria, play two major roles in the HSP70 chaperone  
78 cycle (68). Firstly, some J-DPs can interact with unfolded substrates, which they  
79 deliver to the ATP-bound, substrate-receptive conformation of the HSP70.  
80 Secondly, interaction with both substrate and J-domain induces the HSP70 to  
81 hydrolyze its bound ATP to promote a tight substrate binding conformation.

82 This latter function is conserved amongst all J-DPs and is essential for HSP70  
83 chaperoning. Following J-DP dissociation, a nucleotide exchange factor (NEF)  
84 associates with the HSP70 to facilitate ADP release. Subsequent rebinding of  
85 ATP induces substrate release and a return to the 'open' substrate-receptive  
86 conformation (94). In humans there are at least 41 J-DPs, of which 7 are thought  
87 to have J-domains in the ER lumen (68). Different J-DPs display a variety of  
88 substrate specificities and interact with their partner HSP70 through specific  
89 contact residues (159) and both the identity of the interacting J-DP and NEF  
90 determine HSP70 chaperone activity *in vitro* (128). It has been estimated that  
91 BiP clients may constitute up to 50% of protein within the ER lumen (34) and  
92 consequently BiP is essential for embryonic growth (139). In addition to BiP,  
93 non-classical HSP70s, such as GRP170, are also present within the ER, but are  
94 less well characterised. While GRP170 binds to unfolded client proteins in a  
95 classical chaperone fashion, it lacks the expected requirement for nucleotide  
96 binding (123). This may relate to a large unstructured loop in its putative  
97 substrate binding site that may destabilize substrate interaction and facilitate  
98 client exchange (4).

99

100 Following their interaction with HSP70s, a subset of ER client proteins requires  
101 interaction with an HSP90 called GRP94. Within the cytosol, HSP90 client  
102 proteins are frequently kinases involved in mitogenic signalling and so are  
103 currently being targeted by novel anti-cancer agents (92, 99, 127, 146). Within  
104 the ER, the clients of GRP94 are less easy to classify including, for example,  
105 insulin-like growth factors,  $\alpha_1$ -antitrypsin and apoprotein B (91). However, the  
106 existing inhibitors of HSP90 are relatively non-selective, also inhibiting GRP94,

107 and so it is unclear to what extent their effects are mediated by altered protein  
108 folding within the ER.

109

110 The ability to increase the availability of chaperones to match the demand of  
111 client proteins is critical for an effective UPR. Classically, this is achieved by  
112 transcriptional reprogramming of the cell triggered during ER stress (29, 52,  
113 172) (Figure 1). Whilst it is clear that insufficient chaperone activity would be  
114 toxic, it is less well appreciated that excessive chaperoning would have  
115 deleterious effects through limiting protein secretion (39, 169). Consequently,  
116 the mechanisms by which chaperone availability is reduced with declining stress  
117 have, until recently, been neglected. The chaperone BiP has a half-life of between  
118 6 and 48 hours and does not appear to be rapidly degraded when ER stress  
119 subsides (56, 64). Instead, its activity has recently been shown to be regulated  
120 by ADP-ribosylation of its substrate-binding domain (17, 56, 74, 80). This  
121 reversible modification reduces interaction with client proteins and thus enables  
122 rapid down-regulation of chaperone activity (19) (Figure 2). To date, the ADP-  
123 ribosylation of BiP has only been observed in vertebrates, which may reflect the  
124 complex secretory requirements and longer lifespans of higher organisms.

125

126 Efficient protein folding during ER stress is further promoted by increasing the  
127 volume of the ER (7). Accordingly, components of the membrane lipid  
128 biogenesis machinery are induced as targets of the UPR (28). In yeast, this  
129 process requires the transcription factors Ino2 and Ino4, which induce  
130 expression of lipid synthetic enzymes in response to ER stress, causing the  
131 expansion of the ER membrane (138). In mammalian cells, overexpression of

132 spliced XBP1 is sufficient to promote ER expansion and leads to increased  
133 production of the membrane precursor lipids phosphatidylcholine and  
134 phosphatidylethanolamine (140, 149). ATF6 $\alpha$  signalling is thought to elicit a  
135 distinct but complementary mechanism involving up-regulation of choline kinase  
136 to promote production of phosphatidylcholine via the cytidine diphosphocholine  
137 pathway (13, 88). In addition, maturation of sterol regulatory element binding  
138 protein 1 (SREBP1), a transcription factor that controls lipogenic enzyme  
139 expression, has been found to be compromised in *Perk* knockout fibroblasts, and  
140 is completely blocked by mutating eIF2 $\alpha$  to a non-phosphorylatable form (10).

141

142 Ablation of the lipid synthetic response to ER stress in yeast can be compensated  
143 for by up-regulation of chaperones, but equally, expansion of the ER can protect  
144 cells unable to induce ER chaperones, suggesting that reduced protein crowding  
145 is sufficient to relieve ER stress (138). In pancreatic  $\beta$ -cells the volume of the  
146 rough ER can increase by 3-fold in response to glucose infusion and the resultant  
147 increased synthesis of insulin (150). It is likely that reduced protein crowding  
148 may promote correct folding over aggregation simply by reducing client  
149 concentration within the lumen. The morphology of the newly synthesised ER  
150 membranes seems unimportant, since in the yeast model the promotion of  
151 lamellar or reticular structures does not impact on the benefits of membrane  
152 expansion (138). Interestingly, during the expansion of the ER, the UPR  
153 simultaneously induces a number of autophagy genes which promote autophagic  
154 degradation of the ER (7). While this may appear counter intuitive, this may  
155 assist in the removal of luminal aggregates of misfolded proteins

156

## 157    **Oxidative protein folding**

158    A characteristic feature of protein folding in the ER is the ability to generate  
159    disulfide bonds. These bonds promote proper folding and stabilize native  
160    protein conformations; consequently, perturbations of oxidative folding leads to  
161    ER stress (41). The formation of disulfide bonds is driven by an oxidative folding  
162    machinery and in contrast to the reducing environment of the cytosol, is  
163    supported by an oxidizing glutathione buffer system within the ER lumen (66).  
164    For many years, the ER oxidase 1 proteins, ER01 $\alpha$  and the pancreatic isoform  
165    ER01 $\beta$ , were presumed to drive the generation of disulfide bonds, since yeast  
166    Ero1p is an essential protein (41, 126). ER01 forms an inter-molecular disulfide  
167    bond with protein disulfide isomerase (PDI) with molecular oxygen as the  
168    ultimate electron acceptor. This bond is rearranged and subsequently used to  
169    oxidized ER client proteins (42). The pancreatic  $\beta$ -cell is dependent upon  
170    efficient oxidative protein folding, since its primary secretory protein insulin  
171    possesses three disulfide bonds per molecule. Unexpectedly, deletion of both  
172    *Ero1 $\alpha$*  and *Ero1 $\beta$*  within the whole animal causes only a mild diabetic phenotype  
173    (176). This observation led to the identification of peroxiredoxin 4 (PRDX4) as  
174    an alternative source of disulfide bonds; PRDX4 utilizes hydrogen peroxide as  
175    the source of oxidizing equivalents (47, 152, 178). Remarkably, when a mouse  
176    lacking PRDX4 and both ER01 isoforms was generated, it was able to form  
177    disulfide bonds albeit with abnormalities of collagen folding (177). This result  
178    points to the existence of yet more unidentified components of the oxidizing  
179    machinery within the mammalian ER.

180



181 In mammalian cells it appears that the redox balance of the ER is well buffered  
182 during physiological fluctuations in protein load (2), although fluctuations in ER  
183 calcium concentration can cause dramatic changes in the redox state (2, 9). Since  
184 the ER is the major store for calcium within the cell and many signalling and  
185 metabolic pathways can trigger calcium release, such a link between ER calcium  
186 and redox state may have far reaching implications. The inositol 1,4,5  
187 triphosphate receptors (IP3R) and ryanodine receptor (RyR) are ER membrane  
188 protein channels that control the efflux of calcium ions from the ER in response  
189 to physiological stimuli; this efflux of calcium ions functions as a second  
190 messenger. The activity of both channels can be modulated by protein thiol  
191 redox state, suggesting the intriguing possibility that fluctuations in ER redox  
192 could potentially help to define the intensity and duration of cellular calcium  
193 signalling (1, 40, 69, 98). Further research in this area is eagerly awaited.

194

### 195 **Pathology of ER protein folding**

196 Perturbations of ER protein folding manifest as disease through a variety of  
197 mechanisms. In their simplest form, such perturbations arise from loss-of-  
198 function mutations of the folding machinery or toxic gain-of-function mutations  
199 of the client protein. For example, mutants of the ER client protein collagen or of  
200 its selective ER chaperone HSP47 each lead to the connective tissue disorder  
201 osteogenesis imperfecta (22). Similarly, failure to fold the epithelial chloride  
202 conductance CFTR within the ER underlies the human disease cystic fibrosis  
203 (165). Many of the pathogenic mutants of CFTR fail to fold sufficiently well to  
204 exit the ER and instead are degraded (20, 165). But not all mutated ER proteins

205 can be degraded as efficiently. The P23H and K296E mutants of rhodopsin are  
206 extracted from the ER but subsequently form ubiquitinated aggregates in the  
207 cytosol (135). These may inhibit normal functioning of the proteasome leading  
208 to cell death, which has been suggested as the pathogenic mechanism for P23H  
209 autosomal dominant retinitis pigmentosa (67). Accordingly, in P23H-expressing  
210 rats, viral delivery of BiP reduced UPR signalling and photoreceptor apoptosis  
211 without affecting rhodopsin localisation, supporting a for ER dysfunction in the  
212 pathogenesis of the disease (45). However, even without genetic defects, protein  
213 translation is sufficiently error-prone to permit a missense mutation of the  
214 protein every 1,000 to 10,000 amino acid, resulting in defects in between 4% to  
215 36% of all new proteins made (15, 108). This can be tolerated if these proteins  
216 can be degraded, but when the load is excessive, as occurs during  $\beta$ -cell  
217 exhaustion in type II diabetes, cell death can ensue (65, 75).

218

219 In contrast to diseases caused by aberrant protein folding and ER stress, many  
220 patients who are homozygous for the Z variant of  $\alpha_1$ -antitrypsin accumulate large  
221 quantities of ordered protein polymers within the lumen of their hepatocytes  
222 without high levels of ER stress (59, 60, 114). These patients typically develop  
223 pulmonary emphysema at an accelerated rate owing to the loss of circulating  $\alpha_1$ -  
224 antitrypsin, which normally functions as an inhibitor of neutrophil elastase.  
225 When unopposed, elastase degrades the extracellular matrix causing alveolar  
226 destruction (95). Moreover, the failure of airway epithelial cells to secrete  $\alpha_1$ -  
227 antitrypsin appears also to deprive them of an important autocrine anti-  
228 inflammatory signal, leading to elevated ERK signalling and cytokine secretion  
229 (158). In addition, the accumulation of Z  $\alpha_1$ -antitrypsin as large protein

230 polymers within the ER of hepatocytes, while failing to trigger ER stress directly,  
231 increases the sensitivity of these cells to activation of the UPR when faced with a  
232 second insult (59, 60, 114). This may explain the apparently stochastic nature of  
233 liver failure observed in some paediatric cases of  $\alpha_1$ -antitrypsin.

234

### 235 **Quality control and ER associated Degradation (ERAD)**

236 In addition to expanding the folding capacity of the ER, the UPR increases the  
237 cell's ability to dispose of terminally misfolded proteins (49, 112). One  
238 mechanism takes advantage of the N-linked glycosylation found on many ER  
239 client proteins (37). Calnexin and calreticulin are lectin-like ER chaperones that  
240 interact periodically with glycosylated clients. This is governed by the removal  
241 and re-addition of glucose moieties to the glycans of their substrates. Clients  
242 that continue to cycle for prolonged periods without achieving their native state  
243 are eventually targeted for ERAD. This involves the time-dependent trimming of  
244 a mannose residue from the glycan, which is monitored by ER degradation  
245 enhancer alpha-mannosidase-like protein 1 (EDEM1) (27, 63). The difference in  
246 the kinetics of glucose vs mannose trimming is believed to determine the time  
247 allotted to folding a protein before it is deemed terminally misfolded. Data  
248 suggest that variation in the efficiency of this machinery may impact on the  
249 pathogenesis of protein folding related disease states. A single nucleotide  
250 polymorphism was identified in ER mannosidase I (ERManI), an enzyme  
251 responsible for mannose trimming in ERAD (3), was suggested to increase the  
252 likelihood of fulminant liver disease in children homozygous for Z  $\alpha_1$ -antitrypsin  
253 (121).

254

255 Both calnexin and calreticulin associate with ERp57, a PDI family member that  
256 isomerizes non-native disulfides during the folding process. Recent work in  
257 *C. elegans* suggests that for many substrates N-glycosylation may be rate-limiting  
258 in their quality control (32). Gain of function mutants in the *gfat-1* gene, a  
259 component of the hexosamine synthetic pathway required for production of N-  
260 linked glycans, enhance ERAD, reduce ER stress, and extend lifespan. Similarly,  
261 supplementation of growth medium with the glycan precursor N-  
262 acetylglucosamine had similar beneficial effects, implicating glycan-dependent  
263 quality control as a crucial determinant of proteostasis and aging (32).

264

265 Proteins destined for ERAD are removed from the lumen of the ER in a process  
266 that results in their ubiquitination by membrane-associated E3 ligases that  
267 include HRD1 and GP78. The substrate is ubiquitinated on the cytosolic side of  
268 the ER membrane before its complete extraction and proteasomal degradation  
269 (18, 23). Many components have been implicated in the retrotranslocation and  
270 ubiquitination events with evidence for significant substrate specificity (25).  
271 Disulfide bonded proteins require the reductase activity of the PDI family  
272 member ERdj5 prior to their retrotranslocation (156). This enzyme is not  
273 dedicated solely to ERAD as it also facilitates native disulfide bond formation in  
274 low-density lipoprotein receptor (LDLR) (110). In a manner analogous to the  
275 interaction between ERp57 and the lectin-chaperones, ERdj5 requires BiP for  
276 substrate selection. Thus, in addition to its role in preventing aggregation, BiP  
277 delivers terminally misfolded proteins to the ERAD machinery (54). Unlike the

278 lectin chaperones, however, there is no obvious mechanism by which BiP can  
279 distinguish partially folded intermediates from terminally misfolded species.

280

281 The ERAD of a number of non-glycosylated substrates of BiP has been shown  
282 also to utilise the E3-ligase HRD1 and HERP, which interacts both with the  
283 proteasome and ubiquitinated ERAD substrates (113). Although glycosylated  
284 mutants of  $\alpha_1$ -antitrypsin have been suggested not to require HERP during  
285 ERAD (113), it has been suggested more recently that HERP is required for the  
286 degradation of both glycosylated and non-glycosylated transmembrane proteins  
287 (79). Similarly, EDEM1 was shown recently to interact with non-glycosylated  
288 ERAD substrates as well as misfolded glycoproteins (143). This suggests  
289 significant overlap between glycan-dependent and independent ERAD pathways.

290

291 ER quality control and ERAD ensure that newly synthesised proteins are  
292 afforded sufficient opportunity to achieve their native conformation whilst  
293 preventing the accumulation of unstable folding intermediates. Indeed, the  
294 removal of unfolded proteins by ERAD appears to be essential for maintaining  
295 the synthetic output of professional secretory cells (38). Processes that cause a  
296 dramatic increase in secretion, for example glucose stimulation of insulin  
297 production or differentiation of B lymphocytes into more secretory plasma cells,  
298 can briefly overwhelm quality control leading to activation of the UPR as part of  
299 normal cellular homeostasis (51, 129). Conversely, destabilising mutations and  
300 stressful insults can saturate ERAD leading to pathological ER stress and cell  
301 death (104, 116, 148). Thus, during short-term 'physiological' stress, UPR  
302 signalling acts to promote efficient protein folding through enlargement of the ER,

303 increased synthesis of chaperones and more effective ERAD, but during chronic  
304 ER stress, through mechanisms that are yet to be fully understood, the UPR can  
305 activate cell death pathways and contribute to pathogenesis, The mechanisms  
306 by which cells detect and respond to ER stress will now be discussed.

307

## 308 **ER stress signal transduction**

### 309 **IRE1**

310 IRE1 governs the most evolutionary conserved arm of the UPR, being found in all  
311 eukaryotes. In the absence of stress, IRE1 is thought to be held inactive by the  
312 binding of BiP to its luminal domain. Current models suggest that during ER  
313 stress, BiP is titrated away by increased levels of unfolded proteins leading to  
314 UPR signalling (8, 142). However, structural studies have suggested that the  
315 luminal domain of yeast Ire1p might be capable of interacting directly with  
316 unfolded polypeptides by forming a peptide-binding groove reminiscent of that  
317 found in MHC class I molecules (30), although the equivalent structure of  
318 mammalian IRE1 does not appear to support this model (175). More recent  
319 work suggests that these models are not mutually exclusive, whereby BiP  
320 binding desensitizes Ire1 to activation by the direct binding of unfolded proteins  
321 in the absence of stress. During stress, BiP dissociation then lowers the energy  
322 barrier of Ire1 activation by unfolded proteins (125).

323

324 Detection of ER stress by the luminal domain of Ire1p leads to trans-  
325 autophosphorylation of its cytosolic kinase domain, promoting back-to-back  
326 dimer stabilising salt bridges (72, 78). The resulting conformational changes

327 lead to a rearrangement of the RNase domain of Ire1p to promote binding and  
328 cleavage of a single mRNA substrate, XBP1 in mammals or HAC1 in yeast, to  
329 initiate an unconventional splicing event. For XBP1, splicing causes a shift in  
330 reading frame resulting in a change in the sequence of the C-terminal portion of  
331 the protein. For HAC1, by contrast, splicing leads to the removal of a  
332 translational repression structure (131). When spliced mRNA is translated and  
333 an active transcription factor is generated, downstream targets mediate  
334 increased ER folding capacity, membrane biogenesis and autophagy (76, 107).

335

336 In recent years, an additional role for the endonuclease domain of IRE1 has  
337 emerged in the form of ‘regulated IRE1 dependent decay’ (RIDD) (61, 62, 93).  
338 Under conditions of ER stress, IRE1 cleaves a subset of mRNAs. This appears to  
339 be a non-random process, with a degree of transcript sequence specificity (93,  
340 109) and preferential degradation of mRNAs localised to the ER membrane (62,  
341 109). In this manner, the cell can reduce the number of mRNA transcripts being  
342 translated at the surface of ER and thus reduce the rate of secretory protein  
343 biosynthesis. Engineered variants of Ire1 such as the Shokat mutant have been  
344 designed to allow activation of XBP1 splicing by the addition of an exogenous  
345 ligand (122). Remarkably, activation of XBP1-directed nuclease activity in this  
346 way appears to be insufficient to trigger RIDD. Instead, *bona fide* ER stress was  
347 required to enable IRE1 to degrade mRNAs, suggesting a more complex  
348 mechanism for the activation of IRE1 than was first anticipated (61). Moreover,  
349 evidence suggests that basal RIDD may also occur under conditions in which  
350 XBP1 splicing is not activated (recently reviewed in (93)). In addition to back-to-  
351 back dimers, higher order oligomers of IRE1 have also been observed in both

352 yeast and mammalian cells during ER stress (72, 82). It is tempting to speculate  
353 that the different degrees of oligomerisation, for example single dimers vs higher  
354 order oligomers, of active IRE1 might differ in their functional output, but further  
355 evidence is required.

356

357 Recent studies have begun to clarify the physiological and pathological relevance  
358 of RIDD. If unchecked, RIDD can impair the synthesis of secreted and membrane  
359 proteins that impact on immune function. Deletion of XBP1 in murine  
360 B lymphocytes leads to hyperactivation of IRE1 and degradation of mRNA  
361 encoding  $\mu$  heavy chains. This appears to be mediated by RIDD, since the  
362 deficiency of IgM can be rescued partially by also ablating IRE1 (5). The  
363 incompleteness of this rescue reflects the requirement for XBP1 in the efficient  
364 maturation of plasma cells. Silencing of either XBP1 or IRE1 impairs the  
365 production of immunoglobulin through de-commitment from full plasma cell  
366 differentiation (81). Interestingly, loss of XBP1 and its target genes have been  
367 observed in bortezomib-resistant myeloma cells (81). Bortezomib is  
368 chemotherapeutic agent that kills myeloma cells by blocking ERAD and thereby  
369 worsening ER stress. The loss of XBP1 in this setting may protect these cells by  
370 reverting them to a less secretory, and consequently ER stress-resistant,  
371 phenotype.

372

373 RIDD appears to play a role in innate immunity, specifically through the  
374 initiation of inflammation. Binding of cholera toxin to the luminal portion of  
375 IRE1 induces an inflammatory response in a manner dependent upon the  
376 nuclease activity of IRE1 but independent of XBP1 (21). Fragments of cleaved



377 mRNA generated by RIDD appear to activate RIG-I, which in turn induces  
378 effectors of the innate immune response. Since RNase-L activates RIG-I by the  
379 production of chemically similar fragments of mRNA during viral infection, this  
380 may hint at a common evolutionary ancestry for these responses.

381

382 The RIDD component of the UPR has been implicated in modulating lipid  
383 metabolism. Ablation of XBP1 in the liver was previously shown to impair  
384 hepatic lipid metabolism leading to hypocholesterolemia and  
385 hypotriglyceridemia (77). Although it was initially thought that ER stress due to  
386 the deficiency of XBP1 might impair the secretion of very low-density lipoprotein  
387 (VLDL), it is now believed that increased RIDD observed in XBP1-ablated cells  
388 degrades transcripts encoding components of lipid metabolic pathways (145).  
389 Indeed, ablation of XBP1 in leptin-deficient *ob/ob* obese mice reduces the  
390 accumulation of hepatic triglycerides, while XBP1-deficient animals are  
391 protected against developing hypercholesterolemia when fed a high fat diet  
392 (145).

393

394 The failure to observe RIDD in the budding yeast *S. cerevisiae* led to a  
395 presumption that RIDD was a metazoan innovation, but now similar activities  
396 have been reported in plants and fission yeast. In plants, IRE1 cleaves mRNA  
397 encoding bZIP60 to generate an active transcription factor and initiate the plant  
398 UPR (102). But when ER stress is induced in bZIP60 deficient *Arabidopsis*, the  
399 degradation of secretory protein mRNAs has been observed in an IRE1-  
400 dependent manner (97). Moreover, in fission yeast IRE1 initiates an ER stress  
401 response related to RIDD. The UPR in *S. pombe* has long presented a paradox

402 because although it possesses IRE1, no mRNA substrate encoding a transcription  
403 factor could be detected. Recently, RIDD-like IRE1-dependent reduction of  
404 secretory pathway mRNAs was observed during ER stress in fission yeast (71).  
405 Strikingly, IRE1 was observed to cleave the mRNA of *Bip1*, the major ER HSP70 of  
406 this organism, at a conserved RIDD target sequence; however, unlike all other  
407 known RIDD substrates, which are destabilized when cleaved by IRE1, the *Bip1*  
408 transcript was stabilized leading to its increased expression. Thus, in *S. pombe*  
409 this UPR target mRNA is regulated post-transcriptionally. It is tempting to  
410 speculate that such RIDD-like processing may be an ancient mechanism acquired  
411 from the ancestral IRE1, but it was subverted in budding yeast to process HAC1  
412 transcripts and persists both as degradation and selective processing in  
413 multicellular organisms.

414

#### 415 **PERK (protein kinase RNA-like endoplasmic reticulum kinase)**

416 PERK regulates a younger arm of the UPR, which evolved in metazoans. Whilst  
417 simple eukaryotes maintain ER proteostasis through transcriptional  
418 programming and depleting the mRNAs of secretory proteins by RIDD, animals  
419 directly regulate the rate of protein translation during ER stress (Figure 1). The  
420 accumulation of unfolded proteins in the ER triggers the dimerization of the  
421 luminal domains of two PERK protomers due to the dissociation of BiP, similar to  
422 the activation of IRE1. The PERK dimer undergoes *trans*-autophosphorylation to  
423 activate its cytosolic kinase domain, which phosphorylates the  $\alpha$  subunit of  
424 eukaryotic initiation factor 2 (eIF2). Unusually for kinases, activated PERK binds  
425 its substrate avidly via a heavily phosphorylated insert-loop domain, but has

426 much less affinity for the phosphorylated product which is subsequently  
427 released (89). During the initiation of protein translation, eIF2 $\alpha$  participates in  
428 the recruitment of the initiator methionine-tRNA forming a ternary complex of  
429 eIF2:GTP:Met-tRNA that binds to the ribosome. During this process GTP is  
430 hydrolyzed and subsequent cycles require exchange of GDP for GTP catalysed by  
431 the guanine nucleotide exchange factor (GEF) eIF2B. Phosphorylated eIF2 $\alpha$   
432 forms a non-productive complex with eIF2B, blocking its GEF activity and  
433 attenuating cap-dependent translation (120). The resultant downturn in global  
434 translation reduces the load of new proteins entering the ER. In addition, a small  
435 subset of transcripts is translated more efficiently, most notably that of  
436 activating transcription factor 4 (ATF4) (Figure 3). ATF4 induces another  
437 transcription factor, CCAAT/Enhancer-Binding Protein Homologous Protein  
438 (CHOP), and in combination these transcription factors lead to the up-regulation  
439 of a regulatory subunit of protein phosphatase 1 (PP1) named GADD34 (or  
440 PPP1R15a). GADD34 directs PP1 specificity to dephosphorylate eIF2 $\alpha$  allowing  
441 the recovery of translation (90). Other targets of ATF4 and CHOP contribute to a  
442 number of cytoprotective mechanisms, including amino acid import and  
443 synthesis. CHOP additionally promotes disulfide bond formation in the ER  
444 through induction of ERO1 $\alpha$ . Whilst ERO1 $\alpha$  generates disulfide bonds required  
445 for ER protein folding, it is also a source of reactive oxygen species (ROS) that  
446 contribute to cytotoxicity in prolonged stress. The effects of these ROS are in  
447 part ameliorated by ATF4-driven induction of enzymes that combat oxidative  
448 stress.

449

450 In addition to RIDD and the phosphorylation of eIF2 $\alpha$ , other mechanisms enable  
451 the cell to regulate protein translation during ER stress. The initiation factor  
452 eIF4E forms another control point, both by regulation of its expression and  
453 phosphorylation of its inhibitory binding partner 4E-BP by mammalian target of  
454 rapamycin (mTOR) complex 1 (6, 86, 124). Induction of ATF4 driven by PERK  
455 has been shown to induce 4E-BP in a number of cell types and promotes  
456 pancreatic  $\beta$ -cell survival during ER stress (166). The long half-life of 4E-BP may  
457 afford protective inhibition of translation long after GADD34-mediated  
458 dephosphorylation of eIF2 $\alpha$ .

459

460 The durations of IRE1 and PERK signalling are important in determining the fate  
461 of cells during prolonged stress (84, 85). While the mechanisms governing these  
462 processes are still unclear, in prolonged stress the UPR switches from a  
463 protective mechanism to cytotoxicity. For example,  $\beta$ -cell death in type 2  
464 diabetes results at least in part from the downstream effects of PERK signalling  
465 in response to prolonged ER stress (115). Conversely, the highly secretory  
466 nature of many tumors makes them potential targets for therapeutics that  
467 sensitize cells to ER stress and exaggerate the cytotoxic effects of the UPR. Cell  
468 type and disease context must be key considerations in such strategies,  
469 exemplified by the differential effects of GADD34 induction. Although the  
470 downstream effects of GADD34 are considered to be toxic in the face of  
471 prolonged stress (and its antagonism has been shown to be cytoprotective)  
472 (155), in the context of prion disease GADD34 overexpression leads to increased  
473 survival of hippocampal neurons by the virtue of increased translation rates  
474 (100).

475

476 Research now points towards additional roles for PERK outside of the classical  
477 UPR. Cross talk between the ER and mitochondria is generating much interest  
478 and PERK has been implicated as a potential facilitator of this. Mitofusin 2  
479 (Mfn2) is a small GTPase that resides in the outer mitochondrial membrane. It  
480 participates in mitochondrial fusion and was recently shown to bind directly to  
481 PERK (101). Ablation of Mfn2 led to induction of all three arms of the UPR as  
482 well as to mitochondrial calcium overload. This suggested that the interaction  
483 with PERK is potentially important for ER-mitochondrial signalling. Indeed, the  
484 deletion of PERK ameliorated mitochondrial dysfunction and ROS production in  
485 Mfn2-deficient cells, while PERK overexpression induced mitochondrial  
486 fragmentation. In a separate study, PERK-mediated interactions were shown to  
487 be important for ROS-driven mitochondrial apoptotic mechanisms (160). ROS  
488 production in both the ER and mitochondria contribute to ER stress, and the  
489 interplay between these compartments deserves further study.

490

#### 491 **ATF6**

492 ATF6 performs dual roles as both a sensor and a direct effector of the UPR. Upon  
493 ER stress, BiP dissociates from the luminal domain of ATF6, allowing it to exit the  
494 ER and traffic to the Golgi apparatus (Figure 1). Within the Golgi, ATF6 is  
495 cleaved by site-1 and site-2 proteases (S1P and S2P) to yield a soluble cytosolic  
496 fragment that functions as a transcription factor. This migrates to the nucleus  
497 where it up-regulates factors involved in protein folding, lipid biogenesis and  
498 ERAD (171). The transcriptional targets of ATF6 overlap only partially with

499 those of XBP1 (76, 111, 168). A recent study employed artificial activation of  
500 either XBP1 or ATF6 in the absence of stress to define these targets further (144).  
501 This identified three groups of genes that were specific either to XBP1 and ATF6  
502 or common to both; thirty-one genes displaying cooperative regulation by these  
503 two arms of the UPR.

504

505 Experimental evidence has linked ATF6 functionality to the susceptibility to  
506 diabetes.  $\beta$ -cells harvested from Akita mice show higher levels of ATF6  
507 activation and enhanced expression of ATF6 target genes compared with  
508 controls consistent with the heightened levels of ER stress found in this model of  
509 diabetes (105). ATF6, in fact, exists as two isoforms, ATF6 $\alpha$  and ATF6 $\beta$  (157,  
510 173) of which ATF6 $\alpha$  is 200-times more active than ATF6 $\beta$  (154). Whilst  
511 individual loss of either isoform is tolerated, ATF6 $\alpha$ /ATF6 $\beta$  double knockout in a  
512 mouse model caused embryonic lethality (167), likely due to enfeebled induction  
513 of BiP (87). *Atf6 $\alpha$* <sup>-/-</sup> mice are euglycaemic and have normal levels of circulating  
514 insulin, but when made obese by feeding with a high-fat diet are more prone to  
515 hyperinsulinaemia than wildtype controls (157). This suggests that impaired  
516 function of ATF6 $\alpha$  might increase an animal's vulnerability to diabetes, perhaps  
517 through increased ER stress-induced insulin resistance. In humans, genetic  
518 evidence also implicates ATF6 in the susceptibility to diabetes. Polymorphisms  
519 of the *ATF6* gene have been shown to associate with type 2 diabetes in different  
520 ethnic (24, 96, 153). Three of these variants of *ATF6* display complete linkage  
521 disequilibrium with type 2 diabetes in Pima Indians and have a marginal impact  
522 on insulin levels (153).

523

524 A number of other ATF6-like members of the CREB/ATF family have been  
525 identified. One such protein, BBF2H7/CREB3L2, is preferentially expressed in  
526 chondrocytes of developing cartilage and was recently shown to possess a novel  
527 function in addition to its role as a transcription factor (132). Upon ER stress,  
528 the luminal domain of BB2H7 is released from the membrane and subsequently  
529 secreted by the cell. It appears to function as an activator of hedgehog signaling,  
530 promoting chondrocyte proliferation and inhibiting hypertrophic differentiation  
531 (133). While ATF6-like proteins share significant N-terminal homology, their  
532 luminal C-terminal domains vary greatly, with the potential to support a wide  
533 variety of hitherto unknown functions if others are shown to generate secreted  
534 factors.

535

#### 536 **The role of ER stress in disease**

537 While the UPR is cytoprotective in the face of acute ER stress, chronic UPR  
538 signalling promotes cell death (90). As a result, both insufficient and hyperactive  
539 UPR signalling is pathogenic. PERK signalling is necessary for  $\beta$ -cell function and  
540 development, with *Perk* knockout mice developing diabetes mellitus due to loss  
541 of  $\beta$ -cell mass (51, 174). These animals mirror the disease seen in humans with  
542 Wolcott-Rallison syndrome, a recessive genetic disorder caused by loss-of-  
543 function mutations of the *PERK* gene, which results in the failure to  
544 phosphorylate eIF2 $\alpha$  during physiological levels of ER stress (31). Indeed, in  
545 cultured cells, inhibition of PERK leads to increased proinsulin synthesis and its  
546 rapid accumulation in the ER (53). It has been suggested that the toxicity  
547 associated with loss of PERK function may not be driven by uncontrolled protein

548 synthesis, as translation rates of wild-type and *Perk*<sup>-/-</sup> mice were comparable  
549 (48). Instead, *Perk*<sup>-/-</sup> mice displayed reduced ER to Golgi transport and  
550 impaired protein retrotranslocation in ERAD, leading to accumulation of  
551 proinsulin in the ER lumen. Moreover, loss of PERK led to constitutive ATF6  
552 signalling and a concomitant up-regulation of a number of ER folding factors.  
553 Intriguingly, the onset of the diabetic phenotype in mice carrying the pathogenic  
554 Akita *Ins2* mutation was delayed in response to *Perk* haploinsufficiency and was  
555 hastened by over-expression of PERK (48). Somewhat surprisingly, Akita *Ins2*  
556 mice showed an expanded  $\beta$ -cell mass and islet size at the time of progression to  
557 frank diabetes. Another study has attributed reduced glucose-stimulated insulin  
558 secretion in cultured PERK-deficient  $\beta$ -cells to aberrations in calcium signalling.  
559 PERK was implicated as a positive regulator of the SERCA pump, which  
560 maintains the high concentration calcium stores of the ER. Inhibition of PERK led  
561 to reduced exocytosis of insulin in a manner dependent both on ER calcium and  
562 the calcium-dependent protein phosphatase calcineurin (163), which has  
563 previously been shown to interact with PERK (12). These data suggest  
564 additional layers of complexity in the role of PERK signalling in the diabetic  
565 phenotype.

566

567 By contrast, type 2 diabetes (T2D) is associated early in the disease with  
568 elevated levels of insulin production in response to peripheral insulin resistance,  
569 which results in  $\beta$ -cell exhaustion and apoptosis mediated by chronic PERK  
570 activation (115, 147). Ablation of the downstream PERK effector CHOP was  
571 shown to be protective in mouse models of T2D, leading to increased  $\beta$ -cell mass  
572 and improved glycemic control (147). ER stress has been implicated in the



573 peripheral resistance to insulin seen in T2D, particularly that of adipose tissue in  
574 obesity (11, 118), while ER stress in the liver is a hallmark of T2D (103, 119).  
575 The causative mechanisms of ER stress in obesity are incompletely understood,  
576 but recent work revealed impaired autophagy in the livers of *ob/ob* mice due to  
577 reduced expression of ATG7, leading to ER stress and hepatic insulin resistance  
578 (170). Restoration of ATG7 to levels of lean controls ameliorated the ER stress  
579 and rescued the defect in insulin signalling thus reducing the expression of genes  
580 involved in gluconeogenesis. Disruption of ER calcium signalling within the liver  
581 of obese mice appears also to induce ER stress via an additional mechanism (43).  
582 Obese mice express some genes involved in lipid biosynthesis more strongly  
583 than lean controls, which increases the ratio of phosphatidylcholine (PC) to  
584 phosphatidylethanolamine (PE). Aberrant ER stress signalling could be corrected  
585 by increasing the capacity for ER-calcium uptake through overexpression of the  
586 sarco/endoplasmic reticulum calcium ATPase (SERCA) pump, or by redressing  
587 the altered PC to PE ratio (43). Previous studies have demonstrated that SERCA  
588 activity is sensitive to the lipid composition of the ER membrane. For example,  
589 cholesterol loading of the ER membrane impairs SERCA activity (83). However,  
590 the precise mechanism by which PC/PE ratio alters SERCA activity remains  
591 unclear.

592

593 ER stress has also been linked to the metabolic syndrome through its  
594 hypothalamic effects. In mice with diet-induced obesity, elevated ER stress in  
595 hypothalamic neurons impairs the response to the anorexigenic hormone leptin,  
596 contributing further to obesity (117). Recently, diet-induced obesity was shown  
597 to decrease Mfn2-mediated mitochondrial to ER contacts in anorexigenic pro-

598 opiomelanocortin (POMC) neurons of the hypothalamus (137). Mice lacking  
599 *Mfn2* in POMC neurons developed early onset leptin resistance with elevated ER  
600 stress and mitochondrial ROS production. Intriguingly, the obese phenotype of  
601 these animals could be reversed by ER stress-ameliorating chemical chaperones,  
602 suggesting a potential for therapeutic intervention in leptin resistance (137).

603

604 Many neurodegenerative diseases are associated with aberrant protein folding  
605 and the formation of insoluble protein aggregates. Often the proteins involved  
606 are located in compartments other than the ER, but disturb proteostasis  
607 throughout the cell to cause ER stress leading to induction of the UPR (recently  
608 reviewed in (36, 57, 130). The accumulation of protein aggregates within  
609 neurons appears to overload the proteasomal and autophagic degradation  
610 machinery to cause ER stress (36, 50). Pathogenic mutations in the superoxide  
611 dismutase 1 gene (*SOD1*) are causative in some inherited cases of familial  
612 amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (FALS). Although *SOD1* is primarily expressed in  
613 the cytosol, in some cell types it is secreted, requiring its maturation in the ER.  
614 Pathogenic mutations lead to the ER accumulation of misfolded *SOD1* causing ER  
615 stress by saturation of the ERAD pathway (104). A *Perk*<sup>+/-</sup> mouse expressing  
616 the pathogenic G85R mutant of *SOD1* showed more rapid loss of motor neurons  
617 (162). This likely reflects the loss of cytoprotective ER stress-induced  
618 translational repression and failure to induce ATF4 and CHOP in the *Perk*  
619 haploinsufficient animals (162). This suggests that phosphorylation of eIF2 $\alpha$  is  
620 protective in this disorder. Accordingly, treatment with the drug salubrinal,  
621 which promotes eIF2 $\alpha$  phosphorylation, delayed the onset of FALS in a separate  
622 study (136) and inactivating mutations of *Gadd34*, one of the eIF2 $\alpha$  phosphatases,

623 also ameliorated this disease (161). Intriguingly, loss of XBP-1 or IRE1 was  
624 protective against mutant SOD1 (58). However, this appeared to be mediated by  
625 increased autophagy that helped clear aggregates of SOD1. This finding is  
626 surprising given that autophagy is believed to be induced by ER stress (107).  
627 Mechanisms have been described for both IRE1 and PERK-mediated induction of  
628 autophagy (35, 73, 107, 134), however, in the context of FALS, it seems likely  
629 that the downstream effects of PERK signalling form the dominant mechanism.

630

631 Our understanding of the role of ER stress in cancer is far from complete, but has  
632 now reached a level where it has produced viable drug targets and therapeutic  
633 strategies (26). These studies are also uncovering exciting new concepts in the  
634 field, such as the potential for transmissible ER stress between cells. The pro-  
635 apoptotic factor Par-4 was recently shown to be secreted into the extracellular  
636 milieu in response to ER stress, where it caused apoptosis of surrounding cells  
637 (16). Somewhat surprisingly, the authors of this study showed that the ER  
638 chaperone BiP acted as the pro-apoptotic receptor for prostate apoptosis  
639 response-4 (Par-4) at the cell surface. Other studies have also suggested  
640 secretion of ER factors, including BiP, in response to ER stress (44, 70, 106),  
641 making this an attractive subject for future research.

642

## 643 **Concluding Comments**

644 Current understanding of ER stress and the resultant cellular response  
645 mechanisms are providing a gateway for drug discovery and therapeutic  
646 strategies in human disease. However, a number of long standing questions

647 regarding the basic biology of ER stress still remain unanswered. For example,  
648 how are non-glycosylated targets of ERAD recognized and what is the precise  
649 mechanism by which chronic ER stress brings about toxicity? In addition, many  
650 of the recent advances in this field have raised new questions, such as what is the  
651 physiological role of RIDD and what are the implications of ER-mitochondrial  
652 communication for cellular physiology? Our growing understanding of these  
653 concepts will no doubt continue to inform translational medicine.  
654

655 Figure 1

656 **Proteostasis in the endoplasmic reticulum**

657 Polypeptide chains enter the ER co-translationally (white arrow) and rapidly  
658 associate with ER chaperones and resident factors that promote folding such as  
659 BiP, PDI and calreticulin (CRT). Upon adopting the native state, proteins are  
660 released from the ER to pass down the secretory pathway via the Golgi (blue  
661 arrow). Proteins which fail to adopt their native conformation are retained in  
662 the ER and eventually targeted for retro-translocation and proteasomal  
663 degradation by ERAD (yellow arrow). Accumulation of unfolded proteins in the  
664 lumen leads to activation of the unfolded protein response (UPR) signalling  
665 molecules IRE1, ATF6, and PERK (red arrows). IRE1 activation up-regulates UPR  
666 target genes by unconventional splicing of the transcription factor XBP1,  
667 whereas ATF6 activation causes it to traffic to the Golgi where proteolytic  
668 processing releases a nuclear targeted transcription factor domain. Both XBP1  
669 and cleaved ATF6 up-regulate components of the ER folding and degradation  
670 machineries. PERK activation phosphorylates eIF2 $\alpha$ , leading to translational  
671 attenuation that prevents further accumulation of unfolded proteins.  
672 Phosphorylation of eIF2 $\alpha$  paradoxically induces translation of the transcription  
673 factor ATF4, promoting oxidative folding, amino acid synthesis, and recovery of  
674 normal translation rates. XBP1 is also thought to reduce translation during  
675 stress, by degrading ER-localized mRNA transcripts in a process termed  
676 regulated IRE1-dependent decay (RIDD).

677

678 Figure 2

679 **ADP-ribosylation of BiP modulates the size of the active chaperone pool in**  
680 **line with ER client load.**

681 The amount of active BiP in the ER is tightly coupled to the load of unfolded  
682 proteins. BiP chaperone activity is driven by rounds of ATP binding and  
683 hydrolysis in the nucleotide binding domain (light blue), which cycles the  
684 substrate binding domain (dark blue) between high and low substrate affinity  
685 conformations. An increase in ER unfolded protein load (as seen in ER stress)  
686 leads to up-regulation of BiP through the transcriptional reprogramming by the  
687 unfolded protein response (UPR). A reduction in unfolded protein load leads to  
688 deactivation of BiP by ADP-ribosylation of its substrate-binding domain. This  
689 modification converts both the ATP and ADP bound forms of BiP to a low  
690 substrate affinity conformation, creating a latent chaperone pool. This  
691 modification is thought to be catalysed by an ADP-ribosyl transfease and  
692 removed by an ADP-ribosyl hydrolase. The identities of these enzymes and the  
693 exact mechanism of their regulation are currently unknown.

694

695

696 Figure 3

697 **Translation of ATF4 is up-regulated by ER stress induced**  
698 **eIF2 $\alpha$  phosphorylation.**

699 (a) The ATF4 transcript contains two upstream open reading frames (uORFs),  
700 the most 3' uORF (uORF2) overlaps out of frame with the ATF4 open reading  
701 frame. (b) The GTP loaded 43S pre-initiation complex (43S-PIC) scans along the  
702 transcript until it reaches uORF1, where the 60S ribosomal subunit is recruited  
703 and translation is initiated. After uORF1 translation is complete, the ribosome  
704 disassembles and the 40S ribosomal subunit continues to scan the transcript for  
705 subsequent ORFs. Prior to a second round of translation, GTP-loaded eIF2 must  
706 bind the 40S subunit. In the absence of stress, the relative abundance of eIF2-  
707 GTP promotes this interaction before the scanning subunit reaches uORF2,  
708 resulting in uORF2 translation, which prohibits translation of ATF4. (c) During  
709 ER stress, phosphorylation of eIF2 $\alpha$  phosphorylation leads to a relative depletion  
710 of eIF2-GTP. This reduces the probability of eIF2-GTP interaction with the  
711 scanning 40S subunit prior to uORF2 and increases the likelihood of initiation at  
712 the ATF4 ORF, thus increasing ATF4 expression.

713

714

715

716

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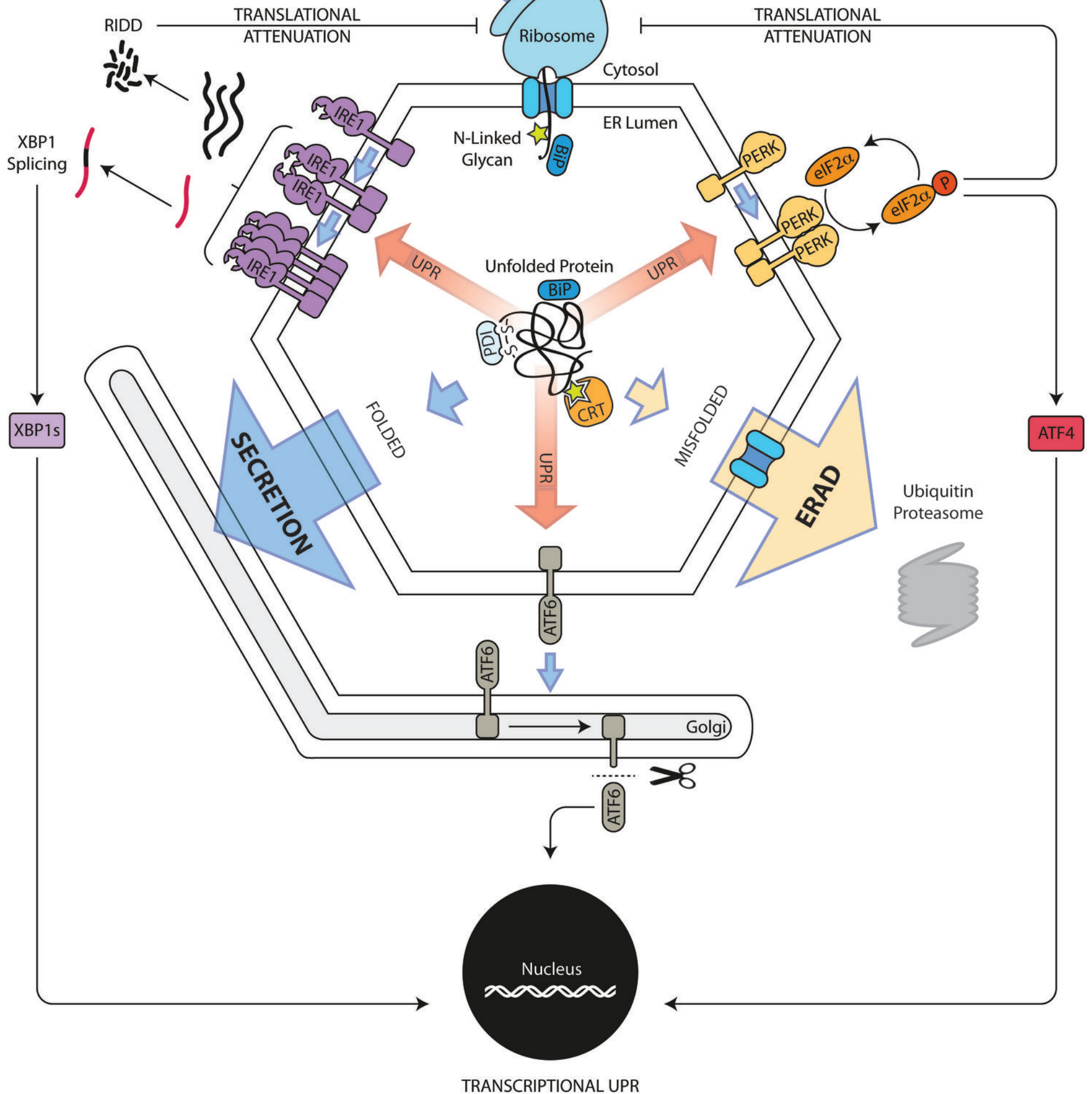
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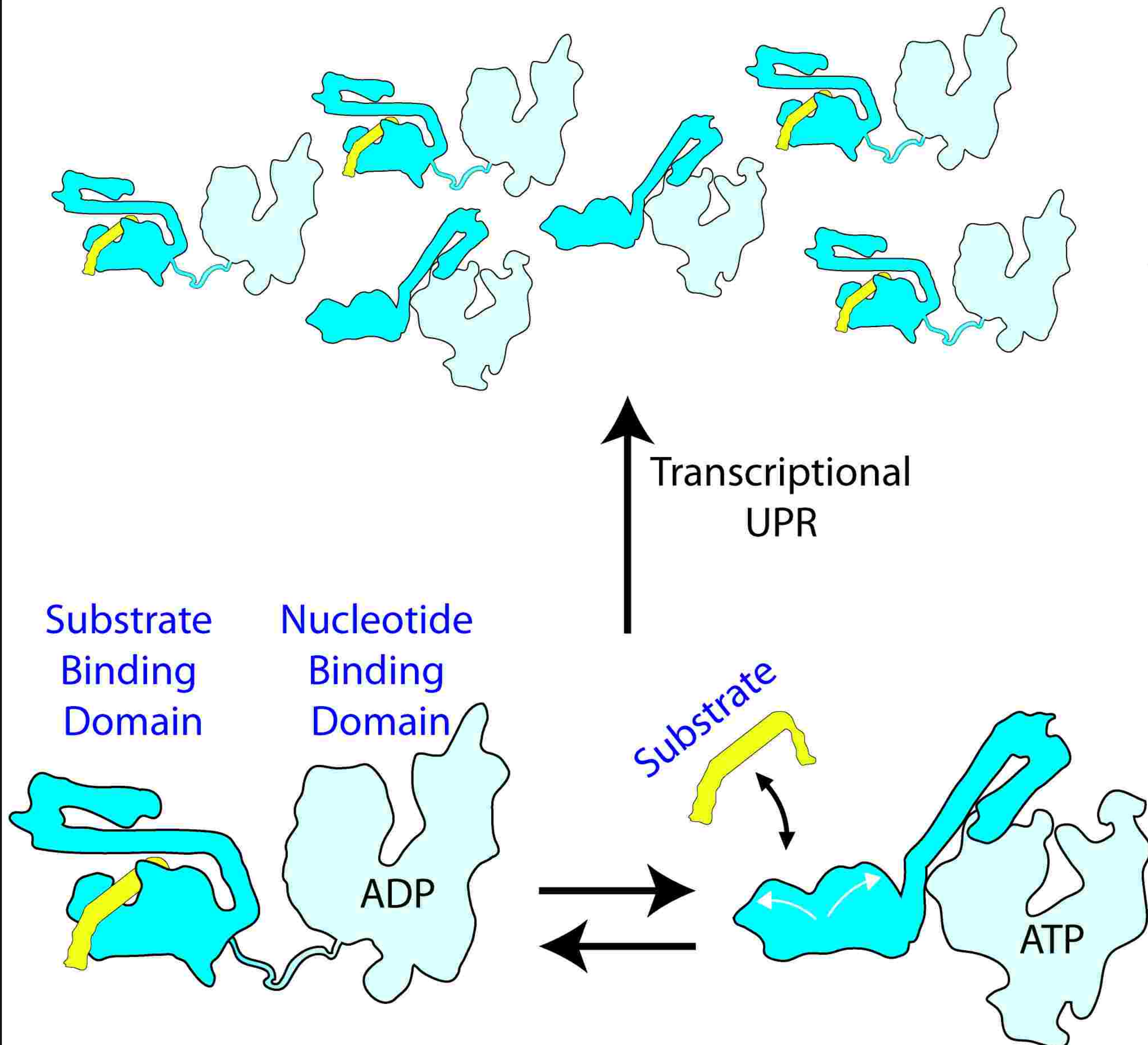
# PROTEIN SYNTHESIS



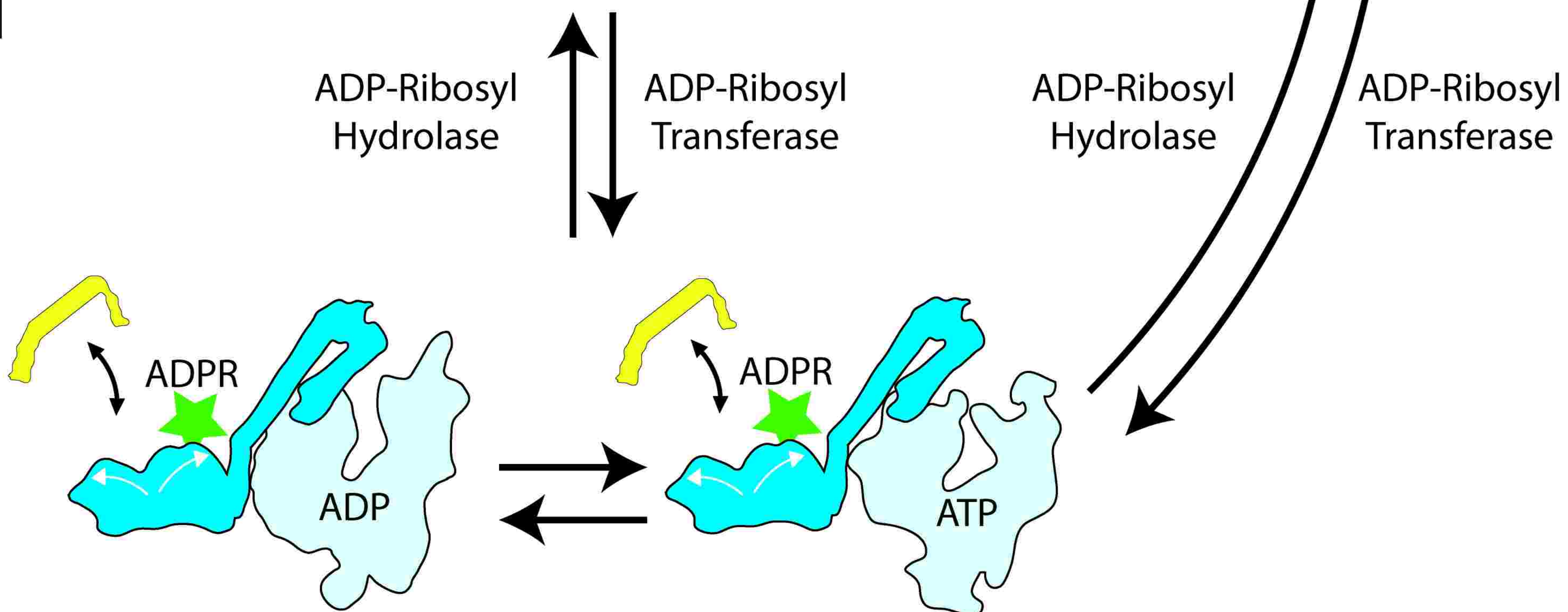


UNFOLDED PROTEIN LOAD

ACTIVE CHAPERONE POOL

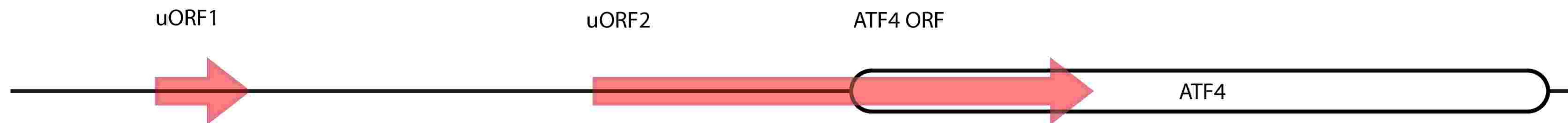


LATENT CHAPERONE POOL



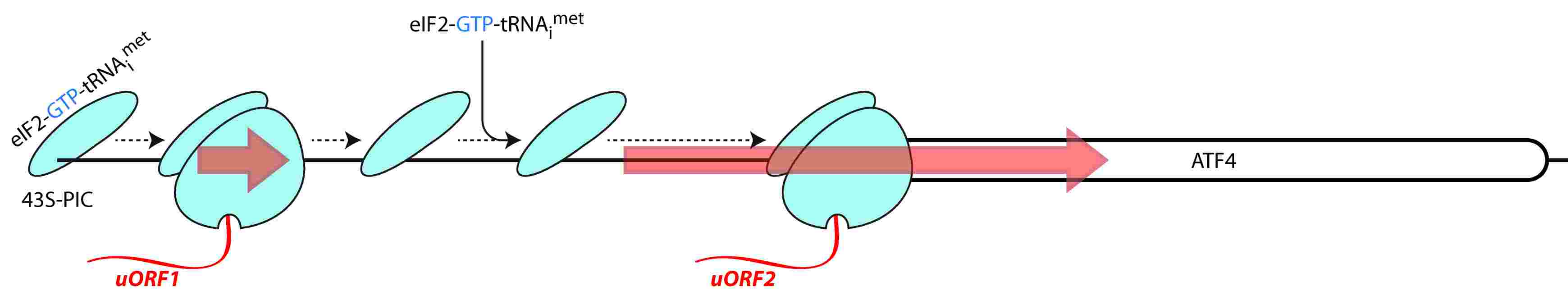


A.



B.

Unstressed  $\longrightarrow$  Low eIF2a-P  $\longrightarrow$  **eIF2-GTP**  
eIF2-GDP



C.

Stressed  $\longrightarrow$  High eIF2a-P  $\longrightarrow$  **eIF2-GDP**  
eIF2-GTP

