

1 **Facile and scalable expression and purification of Transcription**
2 **factor IIH (TFIIH) Core complex**

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9 **HIGHLIGHTS**

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- 11 • Auto-cleavable 2A-like sequences effectively simplify the cloning of multi-subunit
12 complexes.
- 13 • A versatile 6xHis-V5 epitope-TEV cleavable tag facilitates streamlined purification.
- 14 • 7-subunit, ~350 kDa sub-complex cloned using the MutiBac™ system.
- 15 • Pure sub-complex obtained in mg quantities using High Five™ insect cells as an
16 expression system.

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18

19 **ABSTRACT**

20

21 Transcription factor IIH (TFIIH) plays essential roles in both the initiation of RNA Polymerase
22 II-mediated transcription and the Nucleotide Excision Repair (NER) pathway in eukaryotes. In
23 NER, the 7-subunit TFIIH Core sub-complex is responsible for the opening and extension of
24 the DNA bubble created at the lesion site, utilizing the molecular motors XPB and XPD.
25 Mutations in Core subunits are associated with a series of severe autosomal recessive
26 disorders characterised by symptoms such as mild-to-extreme photosensitivity, premature
27 ageing, physical and neurological anomalies, and in some cases an increased susceptibility
28 to cancer. Although TFIIH Core has been successfully obtained in the past, the process has
29 always remained challenging and laborious, involving many steps that severely hindered the
30 amount of pure, active complex obtained. This has limited biochemical and functional studies
31 of the NER process. Here we describe improved and simplified processes for the cloning,

32 expression and purification of the 7-subunit TFIIH Core sub-complex. The combined use of
33 auto-cleavable 2A-like sequences derived from the Foot-and-Mouth Disease Virus (FMDV)
34 and the MultiBac™ cloning system, a powerful baculoviral expression vector specifically
35 conceived for the obtaining of multi-subunit eukaryotic complexes, allowed us to obtain a
36 single, 7-gene plasmid in a short time using regular restriction cloning strategies. Additionally,
37 expression of the construct in High Five™ insect cells paired with a simple 5-step purification
38 protocol allowed the extraction of a pure, active TFIIH Core sub-complex in milligram
39 quantities.

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42 **KEYWORDS**

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44 TFIIH Core, 2A-Sequences, MultiBac™, S9, High Five™, immobilised metal ion affinity
45 chromatography, heparin chromatography, TEV cleaving, size exclusion chromatography.

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48 **INTRODUCTION**

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50 The integrity of DNA is constantly threatened by internal and external factors, with the genome
51 of a human cell typically suffering more than 10^5 lesions in a single day (Tomkinson *et al.*,
52 2006). In eukaryotes, the nucleotide excision repair (NER) pathway protects cells from
53 mutagenic and carcinogenic processes by removing an extensive range of bulky adducts and
54 lesions that introduce a significant distortion in the double helix. This pathway is characterized
55 by its three defining steps of damage recognition, unwinding of the DNA duplex around the
56 distortion and removal of the lesion (Compe & Egly, 2012). The NER process involves the
57 coordinated action of more than 20 proteins in a complex, dynamic process that is still not fully
58 understood at a molecular level.

59

60 TFIIH is a 10-subunit complex of about 500 kDa that plays important roles not only in NER,
61 but also in transcription (Flores *et al.*, 1992) (Feaver *et al.*, 1993). The first published structures
62 of TFIIH revealed a complex with two characteristic regions: a Core sub-complex that included
63 subunits XPB, p62, p52, p44, p34 and p8, and a cyclin-dependent kinase (CDK)-activating
64 kinase (CAK) sub-complex comprising subunits cyclin-dependent kinase 7 (cdk7), cyclin H

65 and ménage-à-trois 1 (MAT1), with subunit XPD acting as a structural bridge between both
66 sub-complexes (Schultz *et al.*, 2000) (Abdulrahman *et al.*, 2013) (Giglia-Mari *et al.*, 2004). The
67 recent high resolution electron cryomicroscopy structures of yeast and human TFIIH
68 confirmed the unmistakable position of every Core subunit within the horseshoe-shaped
69 arranged sub-complex, with the CAK sub-complex protruding from it (Greber *et al.*, 2017)
70 (Kokic *et al.*, 2019). The roles carried out by TFIIH in NER and transcription require different
71 structural arrangements of the complex, with the intact 10-subunit complex participating in the
72 latter, while only the Core sub-complex is needed to complete the repair reaction (Svejstrup
73 *et al.*, 1995) (Tirode *et al.*, 1999). This Core sub-complex presents two enzymatic subunits:
74 the ATP-dependent molecular motors XPB and XPD, which are both essential for NER (Coin
75 *et al.*, 1998) (Oksenyich *et al.*, 2009), as their coordinated actions will open and extend the
76 DNA bubble to allow the completion of the repair process.

77

78 Subunits XPB, XPD and p8 can be affected by different mutations which are the cause behind
79 a number of severe and sometimes even lethal genetic syndromes that show an exceptional
80 diversity in their genetic make-up and clinical manifestations. Patients affected by xeroderma
81 pigmentosum (XP) display a characteristic photosensitivity and a higher predisposition to
82 suffer from cancer as a result of an impaired NER pathway (Peng *et al.*, 2011). By contrast,
83 Cockayne syndrome (CS) and trichothiodystrophy (TTD) patients exhibit a remarkable
84 heterogeneity of physical and mental defects that severely hinder their development
85 (Lehmann, 2003), but do not present a higher frequency of cancer, consistent with defects in
86 transcription rather than impairment of the repair process (Dubaele *et al.*, 2003) (Bootsma &
87 Hoeijmakers, 1993).

88

89 For a long time, the purification of eukaryotic multi-protein complexes has remained a
90 challenge due to the limitations of the available cloning and expression tools. The biochemical
91 and structural analyses of these complexes has therefore been restricted due to the high
92 quality and quantity of the sample required for these studies, rarely achievable with the
93 technologies available until recently (Bieniossek *et al.*, 2012). The routine use of baculoviral
94 expression vectors (BEVs) for overexpression of recombinant proteins in laboratories has
95 helped overcome this problem, especially with the development of production tools specifically
96 conceived to obtain eukaryotic multi-protein complexes, such as the MultiBac™ system
97 (Berger *et al.*, 2004). The use of BEVs for expression of heterologous proteins offers a number
98 of advantages over the more traditional bacterial expression systems, whose protein
99 production machinery frequently cannot synthesise many eukaryotic complexes presenting

100 subunits of large size. This doesn't pose a problem for insect cells, which in addition offer post-
101 translational modifications and a folding apparatus similar to mammalian cells, and while
102 expression of heterologous protein requires shorter times using the *E. coli* system, the sample
103 obtained from insect cells frequently offers a considerably higher yield and improved quality
104 (Bieniossek *et al.*, 2012) (Assenberg *et al.*, 2013).

105

106 The first reported purification of TFIIH, from HeLa cell extracts, included three fractionation
107 procedures, four chromatography columns and four dialysis steps (Flores *et al.*, 1992). The
108 purification of active TFIIH stills remains a challenging and arduous process. Our lab has
109 simplified substantially both the cloning and expression processes for the TFIIH Core sub-
110 complex by using the MultiBac™ expression system, further aided by the introduction of short,
111 multi-purpose purification tags designed by our group into specific Core subunits (Rouillon *et*
112 *al.*, 2019) and the combination of pairs of genes into a single unit by linking their sequences
113 through a 2A-like auto-cleavable peptide (Luke *et al.*, 2009). The cloned 7-gene construct was
114 transposed into a baculoviral genome engineered for improved protein expression (Bieniossek
115 *et al.*, 2012) (Berger *et al.*, 2004), and this bacmid was purified and transfected into a
116 monolayer of *Sf9* insect cells. The recombinant viral stock obtained was finally used to infect
117 a High Five™ suspension culture (Bieniossek *et al.*, 2012) that ultimately yielded ~ 1mg of
118 active, purified TFIIH Core sub-complex for every 1 L of culture following a five-step
119 purification process that can be completed in 2 days. This procedure opens the door to much-
120 needed functional and biochemical studies of the NER pathway *in vitro*.

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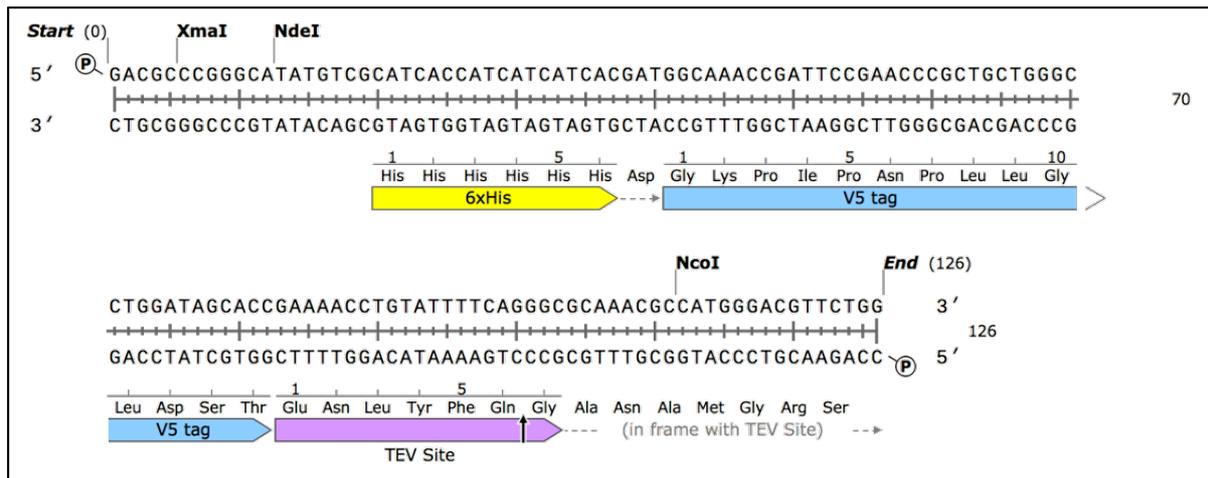
123 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

124

125 **TFIIH Core engineered genes and self-cleaving 2A sequences**

126 Synthetic genes (not codon-optimized) for all seven *Homo sapiens* TFIIH Core subunits were
127 ordered from Integrated DNA Technologies (IDT). A six-residue polyhistidine tag was
128 designed to be attached to different TFIIH Core subunits for purification purposes. The tag
129 also included a TEV cleaving site for removal of the tag, and a V5 epitope for protein detection
130 in a western blot (Rouillon *et al.*, 2019) (figure 1).

131



132

133 **Figure 1: 6xHis-V5-TEV purification tag.**

134 We designed this 6xHis-V5-TEV multi-purpose tag with several functions in mind: (1) purification of our
 135 proteins in an IMAC by means of the 6-residue His tag, (2) Western blot detection and potential
 136 immunoprecipitation of the complex through the V5 epitope, and (3) removal of the tag from the purified
 137 protein if necessary thorough cleaving at the TEV site.

138

139 The genes for Core subunits p44/p34 and p52/p8 were designed as a single unit. The p44/p34
 140 genes were separated by the 2A-like sequence T2A (EGRGSLTTCGDVEENPGP) and the
 141 p52/p8 genes by the sequence F2A (GKPIPPLLGLDSTQTLNFDLLKLAGDVESNPGP)
 142 (figure 2A).The 2A auto-cleavable sequence from which these F2A and T2A peptides were
 143 derived was originally observed in the genome of the Foot-and-Mouth Disease Virus (FMDV).
 144 During translation, the ribosome becomes stalled upon encountering this sequence, and the
 145 nascent protein is released by self-cleaving at the NPG'P site before resuming translation by
 146 translocation of the ribosome to the next in-frame starting point. The cleaved site remains
 147 attached to the C-terminal end of the newly translated protein without generally affecting its
 148 function or expression (Luke *et al.*, 2009).

149

150 **Cloning using the MultiBac™ multiplication module**

151 The 7-subunit TFIIH Core sub-complex was cloned using the MultiBac™ baculovirus
 152 expression system (Geneva Biotech). As we cloned all of our genes using the homing
 153 endonuclease / *BstXI* multiplication module, only the acceptor plasmids pACEBac1 (2904bp)
 154 and pACEBac2 (2761bp) were used (Bieniossek *et al.*, 2013).

155

156 In a first step each TFIIH Core gene was cloned into either pACEBac1 or pACEBac2 using
 157 restriction enzymes *BamHI/SalI* and *NcoI/KpnI* (Fermentas), respectively, following the

158 manufacturer's instructions. Afterwards all seven genes were cloned, one gene at a time, into
 159 a single plasmid using the multiplication module I-Ceul/BstXI (New England Biolabs) as
 160 indicated by MultiBac™'s manufacturer, until a single recombinant plasmid containing XPD,
 161 XPB, p62, p52/F2A/p8 and p44/T2A/p34 was achieved (Bieniossek *et al.*, 2009). All constructs
 162 were expressed in DH5a cells.

163

164 Intermediate constructs were verified by restriction with the appropriate combinations of
 165 different enzymes (*NcoI*, *KpnI*, *BamHI*, *HindIII*, etc.) (Fermentas) following the manufacturer's
 166 instructions. The final TFIIH Core construct was further analysed by PCR using the MyTaq™
 167 DNA Polymerase (Bioline) and the primers listed in table 1. The presence of all seven genes
 168 was ultimately verified by sequencing (GATC Biotech).

169

170 **Table 1: TFIIH Core sub-complex PCR primers**

Oligonucleotide	Sequence 5' to 3'
XPD Fwd	TACATGCGGGAGCTCAAACGC
XPD Rev	TCTGCTCTATCCTCTTCAGC
XPB Fwd	GGCCATATCTTCTTGAAGC
XPB Rev	GCCAGGACTTTCTGTAAGAGC
p62 Fwd	CCTCATCTGAAGTTTTGC
p62 Rev	CGTTTTCTTCATCAGACGCCG
p52/p8 Fwd	GGATCTGGCACACACAGCTGC
p52/p8 Rev	CTTGAATGATGAACTTCTTCC
p44/p34 Fwd	TTAGAGTATCTGTTATTGG
p44/p34 Rev	GACCCTTTATGTCACTTTTGG

171

172

173 **Tn7 Transposition and bacmid purification**

174 The recombinant plasmid carrying the TFIIH Core genes was transposed into chemically
 175 competent DH10 MultiBac™ cells (provided with the MultiBac™ kit) containing an engineered
 176 baculoviral genome derived from the *Autographa californica* multiple nucleopolyhedrovirus

177 (AcMNPV) (Bieniossek *et al.*, 2012) and a helper plasmid containing a Tn7 transposase, as
178 per manufacturer's instructions.

179

180 A minimum of two recombinant white colonies per construct were picked and re-streaked to
181 confirm their white phenotype. At the same time, these colonies were used to start 3 ml Luria-
182 Bertani (LB) broth cultures containing kanamycin 50 $\mu\text{g/ml}$ and gentamycin 7 $\mu\text{g/ml}$. The
183 cultures were incubated at 37 °C, 200 rpm overnight, then centrifuged at 15000 rpm for 1 min
184 at room temperature (centrifuge 5424, Eppendorf). Pellet was resuspended in buffer P1, then
185 buffer P2 and finally buffer N3 from a QIAprep Spin Miniprep Kit (Qiagen). The suspension
186 was centrifuged at 15000 rpm for 10 min at room temperature, and supernatant was
187 transferred to a fresh tube. The baculoviral DNA present in the supernatant was precipitated
188 with isopropanol and washed twice with ethanol 70%. All work following the second washing
189 step was performed in a sterile S@feFlow 1.2 hood (Bioair Instruments). Ethanol was removed
190 from the tube, and sterile bacmids were finally resuspended in 30 μl deionized water and kept
191 at 4 °C until transfected.

192

193 The transposition protocol was adapted for each construct according to its size: (1) incubation
194 on ice varied from 30 min for smaller constructs to 2 h for the 7-gene Core construct; (2) heat
195 shock went from 60 to 90 s for the bigger constructs; (3) chilling on ice was extended from 5
196 min up to 20 min; (4) the recovery step was extended from 6 to 24 h at 37 °C with shaking as
197 the construct grew bigger. Each culture was then plated into LB agar containing kanamycin
198 50 $\mu\text{g/ml}$, gentamycin 7 $\mu\text{g/ml}$, tetracycline 10 $\mu\text{g/ml}$, ampicillin 100 $\mu\text{g/ml}$, isopropyl β -D-1-
199 thiogalactopyranoside (IPTG) 40 $\mu\text{g/ml}$ and X- gal 20 $\mu\text{g/ml}$ and incubated at 37 °C for 2-3
200 days.

201

202 **Insect cell transfection**

203 Recombinant bacmids were transfected into a monolayer of *Spodoptera frugiperda* (Sf9) cells
204 (Thermo Scientific) using X-tremeGENE HP DNA Transfection Reagent (Roche). 1×10^6 cells
205 were seeded to each well in a 6-well plate (Greiner Bio-One), and volume was topped up to 3
206 ml with fresh Sf900™ III SFM medium (Thermo Scientific). The plate was incubated at 27 °C
207 for a minimum of 2 h to allow cells to attach to the surface of the well. Meanwhile, each bacmid
208 to be transfected was resuspended in 200 μl Sf900™ III SFM medium. A mixture of 100 μl
209 Sf900™ III SFM medium and 10 μl transfection™ reagent was added to each bacmid, and tubes
210 were incubated at room temperature for 30 min. Afterwards, the bacmid/transfection reagent

211 mixture was added to the *Sf9* cell monolayer (2 wells for every bacmid to be transfected), and
212 plates were incubated at 27 °C for 60 h before recovering a P0 viral stock.

213

214 **TFIIH Extraction and expression tests**

215 Cell pellet from a 50 ml *Sf9* suspension culture infected with 1 ml P1 virus and incubated at
216 27 °C for 72 h was harvested by centrifugation and resuspended in 5 ml lysis buffer phosphate-
217 buffered saline (PBS) 163 mM NaCl plus a protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche) per gram of
218 pellet. The resuspended cells were subsequently lysed with a douce homogenizer (Fisher
219 Scientific) (20 strokes with a tight pestle, performed on ice) and centrifuged at 13000 rpm for
220 30 min at 4 °C (centrifuge 5415, Eppendorf). The cleared supernatant was then transferred to
221 a fresh tube and analysed in a BioSprint station (Qiagen): 500 µl supernatant and 10 µl
222 magnetic Ni beads (Promega) were loaded into the first column of the BioSprint sample tray.
223 After binding, the beads were washed twice with 500 µl buffer PBS 163 mM NaCl 30 mM
224 imidazole, and bound proteins were eluted in 50 µl buffer PBS 163 mM NaCl 500 mM
225 imidazole. The eluted fraction was further analysed in an SDS-PAGE gel to determine TFIIH
226 Core expression levels.

227

228 **Insect cell infection**

229 Virus amplification was carried out in *Sf9* suspension cultures. Infections were carried out in
230 High Five™ suspension cultures with a starting cell density of 8x10⁵ cells/ml in a total volume
231 of 250 ml Express Five® Serum-Free Media (ThermoFisher Scientific). Each 250 ml
232 suspension was infected with 3 ml of a P1 – P2 viral stock and incubated for 48 h in a sterile
233 shaker flask (Corning) at 27 °C with 110 rpm orbital shaking. Afterwards, cell pellet and
234 medium containing viral stock were collected by centrifugation (CF20 centrifuge, Awel) at 1000
235 rpm for 5 min and kept at -80 °C until tested. Viral stocks were kept at 4 °C for a maximum of
236 4 months.

237

238 **Immobilised metal ion affinity chromatography - Talon® Superflow™ cobalt** 239 **resin**

240 A Talon® Superflow™ cobalt resin (GE Healthcare), which was prepared for purification
241 following the manufacturer's indications, was used to maximize the contact between the sub-
242 complex and the metal ion affinity matrix. Cleared supernatant extracted as previously
243 described was added to 5 ml resin and incubated at 4 °C for 1 h with rotation. Resin and
244 supernatant were then transferred into an empty 10 ml gravity-flow column previously

245 prepared as indicated by the manufacturer (Thermo Scientific). Resin was allowed to settle
246 for 15-30 min, and after that time the supernatant was eluted. This step was repeated until all
247 of the resin had been packed and all the supernatant had been eluted. A washing step was
248 performed twice using ten times resin bed volume of buffer A (PBS pH 7.5 163 mM NaCl 30
249 mM imidazole 10% glycerol); the buffer was incubated at room temperature for 10 min in the
250 column, then slowly eluted. The TFIIH Core sub-complex was eluted with 5-10 times resin bed
251 volume of buffer B (PBS pH 7.5 163 mM NaCl 300 mM imidazole 10% glycerol): first 1 ml
252 buffer was eluted and collected. The rest of the volume was incubated with the resin at room
253 temperature for 10 min, then eluted and collected in 1 ml fractions. The different fractions were
254 analysed by SDS-PAGE.

255

256 **Heparin chromatography**

257 Fractions of interest collected after IMAC were first concentrated, then diluted with buffer PBS
258 pH 7.5 to reduce the amount of NaCl in the sample down to approximately 200 mM before
259 loading it into a HiTrap™ Heparin HP column (GE Healthcare). The column was washed with
260 buffer A (PBS pH 7.5 5% glycerol), before eluting bound proteins in a gradient of salt created
261 by combining buffer A and buffer B (PBS pH 7.5 863 mM NaCl 5% glycerol) in different
262 proportions. The purification was carried out using a BioLogic DuoFlow™ system (Bio-Rad).

263

264 **TEV Cleavage**

265 Fractions containing the TFIIH Core sub-complex collected after the heparin chromatography
266 were pooled together and an excess (500 μ l) of 1 mg / ml TEV protease was added to the
267 sample. Cleaving was allowed overnight at room temperature, with gentle rolling.

268

269 **Immobilised metal ion affinity chromatography - HisTrap™ FF column**

270 The TEV-cleaved sample was subsequently loaded into a 1 ml HisTrap™ Fast Flow (FF)
271 column (GE Healthcare) and purified using a BioLogic DuoFlow™ system (Bio-Rad). After
272 washing the column with buffer A (PBS pH 7.5 163 mM NaCl 30 mM imidazole), bound
273 proteins were eluted in an imidazole gradient created by buffer B (PBS pH 7.5 163 mM NaCl
274 300 mM imidazole). Purified fractions containing the TFIIH Core sub-complex were pooled
275 together and concentrated using an Amicon® concentrator with a 30K cutoff (Millipore).

276

277

278 **Size exclusion chromatography – Superose® 6 column**

279 The concentrated sample obtained in the previous IMAC step was loaded into a size exclusion
280 Superose® 6 HR 10/30 column (GE Healthcare) and eluted with PBS pH 7.5 63 mM NaCl.
281 The purification was carried out using an Äkta system (GE Healthcare). Fractions containing
282 the TFIIH Core sub-complex were pooled together, concentrated and stored at – 80 °C.

283

284 **DNA substrate preparation**

285 Oligonucleotides were purchased from IDT and resuspended in 50 mM Tris pH 7.5 to a final
286 concentration of 500 μ M. The sequences used were as follows:

287 5'-AGCTACCATGCCTGCACGAATTAAGCAATTCGTAATCATGGTCATAGCT/Dabcyl/-3'
288 and 5'-Cy3/AGCTATGACCATGATTACGAATTGCTTGGAAATCCTGACGAACTGTAG-3'

289

290 A double stranded substrate was generated by annealing in a 50 μ l reaction containing buffer
291 50 mM Tris pH 7.5 100 mM NaCl and the two single strands to a final concentration of 20 μ M.
292 The mixture was heated in a water bath at 90 °C for 5 min and left to slowly cool down
293 overnight. A final concentration of 3% ficoll was added to the reaction now containing the
294 double-stranded substrate, which was subsequently purified in a 10% polyacrylamide native
295 gel, run in Tris – Borate – Ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) (TBE) buffer 10 mM NaCl
296 at 4 °C, 120 V for 3-4 h, protected from light. The band of interest was cut, placed in an
297 Eppendorf tube and slightly crushed, then covered with buffer 50 mM Tris buffer pH 7.5 50
298 mM NaCl. The tube was incubated at 4 °C overnight with rocking to promote diffusion of the
299 substrate from the acrylamide towards the buffer. Afterwards, the buffer was separated from
300 the acrylamide and the double-stranded substrate was precipitated with 10% volume sodium
301 acetate 3 M pH 5.2 and 250% volume chilled EtOH 100% and incubated at -20 °C overnight.
302 Finally, the reaction was centrifuged at 15000 rpm at 4 °C for 30 min (centrifuge 5424,
303 Eppendorf), the supernatant was immediately removed, and the pelleted DNA substrate was
304 resuspended in an appropriate volume of 50 mM Tris pH 7.5 50 mM NaCl buffer.

305

306 **Fluorescence-based helicase assays**

307 The unwinding activity of TFIIH Core was evaluated in a fluorescence helicase assay using a
308 splayed duplex substrate carrying both a Cy3 fluorophore and a quencher strategically placed
309 to suppress the dye. The quencher will be removed upon unwinding by the sub-complex, thus
310 permitting the detection of the fluorescence emitted by Cy3 (Kuper *et al.*, 2012). The helicase
311 activity assay was carried out in buffer 20 mM HEPES pH 7.0 50 mM NaCl containing 0.1

312 mg/ml BSA, 1 mM MgCl₂, 25 nM splayed duplex substrate and 200 nM TFIIH Core sub-
313 complex, performed at 25 °C. The reaction mixture was then incubated at room temperature
314 for 10 min before being added to a cuvette containing 1 mM ATP, previously incubated at
315 room temperature for 10 min, too. Activity was measured for 15 min in a Varian Cary Eclipse
316 fluorescence spectrophotometer using the Kinetics application included in the software
317 package provided with the instrument. The Cy3 dye was excited at a wavelength of 547 nm,
318 and emitted fluorescence was collected at a wavelength of 565 nm. The obtained fluorescence
319 emission intensity values were plotted against TFIIH Core concentration.

320

321 **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

322 **Initial efforts at TFIIH Core cloning and expression**

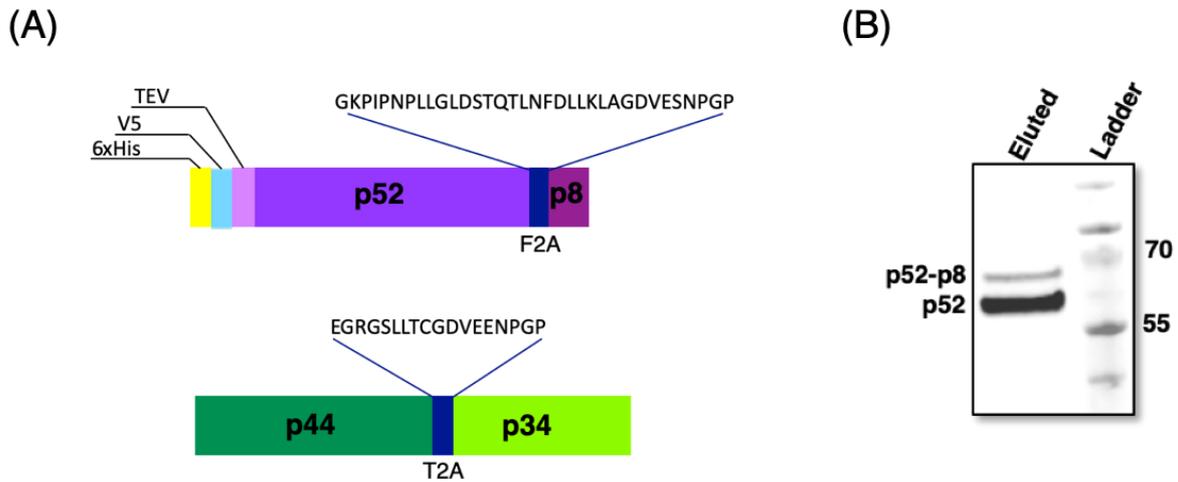
323 The first consideration we took into account when we first approached the cloning of the TFIIH
324 Core sub-complex was the number and position of the purification tags. We designed a multi-
325 purpose tag consisting of 6xHis-V5-TEV that would allow us to purify our proteins in an IMAC
326 (6xHis), to perform Western blot detection and immunoprecipitation of the complex, if required,
327 through the V5 epitope, and to remove the tag from the purified protein by cleaving at the TEV
328 site.

329

330 For our first attempt we opted for placing this tag at the N-terminal end of subunit p52, due to
331 its strategic position at the base of the ring, and another tag at the N-terminal end of the XPD
332 helicase which, as the bridge between the Core and CAK sub-complexes (Schultz *et al.*, 2000)
333 (Greber *et al.*, 2017), is the most flexible subunit within TFIIH. To facilitate the cloning of the
334 sub-complex the genes for subunits p52 and p8, and p44 and p34, were designed as a single
335 unit, with each pair of genes separated by a 2A-like auto-cleavable peptide (figure 2 (A)) (Luke
336 *et al.*, 2009), meaning that only five cloning reactions were needed to obtain the 7-gene
337 construct. Unfortunately, this construct did not offer the expected results, showing low
338 expression levels and a worrying loss of subunit XPD, whose coordinated action with subunit
339 XPB is responsible for the opening and extension of the repair bubble to allow the following
340 repair factors access to the damaged site. A Western blot analysis performed with a V5
341 primary antibody and an IRDye® 800CW goat anti-mouse IgG secondary antibody (Li-COR)
342 showed an acceptable cleavage efficiency for the F2A auto-cleavable peptide, with 87% of
343 the *p52/F2A/p8* gene actively translated into independent subunits p52 and p8 (figure 2B).

344 Our experiments showed no evidence of uncleaved construct p44/T2A/p34.

345



346

347

348 **Figure 2: Cleaving efficiency of the F2A auto-cleavable sequence is close to 90%.**

349 Cartoon representation showing TFIIH Core constructs p52/V5/F2A/p8 and p44/T2A/p34 (A). Each pair
350 of genes was cloned as a single unit thanks to the F2A and T2A auto-cleavable peptides joining the
351 two selected genes. These 2A-like sequences later allowed the translation of all four genes as individual
352 proteins. (B) Western blot performed with an anti-V5 primary antibody showing a BioSprint purification
353 test for an infection with a P0 recombinant virus containing construct TFIIH Core. Although a small
354 amount of the p52/F2A/p8 construct remains (13%), cleaving efficiency of the F2A sequence is 87%.
355 Ladder sizes are indicated in kDa.

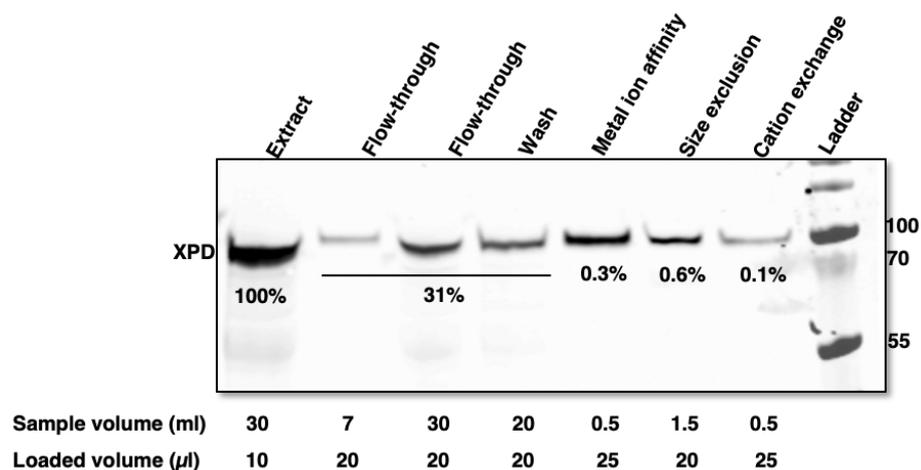
356

357 Scaling-up and optimisation of the protocol for the purification of this TFIIH Core construct
358 finally resulted in a procedure that included an IMAC step, followed by size-exclusion
359 chromatography and finally cation exchange chromatography, but the impossibility of retaining
360 sufficient amounts of subunit XPD in our sample led us to reconsider our strategy regarding
361 the position of the purification tags, and several other constructs were produced, always
362 maintaining a tag at subunit p52 due to its central position at the base of the ring, while varying
363 the position of the second tag. Many of the intermediate constructs required for the cloning of
364 these new TFIIH Core sub-complexes had already been obtained during the cloning process
365 of our original 7-gene plasmid. The characteristics of the MultiBac™ system allow the use of
366 these intermediate multi-gene plasmids (Bieniossek *et al.*, 2012), which meant that each new
367 7-gene construct was obtained in only two or three cloning steps. This advantage considerably
368 reduced the time scale necessary to obtain a new full TFIIH Core sub-complex.

369

370 Steps towards the purification of an intact TFIIH Complex

371 A common characteristic to our first TFIIH Core constructs was their inability to retain subunit
372 XPD as part of the sub-complex. A Western blot performed with a human/rat/mouse XPD
373 (R&D Systems) primary antibody and an IRDye® 800CW donkey anti-goat IgG (Li-COR)
374 secondary antibody proved that XPD was present in our cell extract, while also confirming that
375 major losses occurred at every step, finally recovering a mere 0.1% XPD by the end of the
376 purification process (figure 3). These results lead us to think that XPD was more susceptible
377 to dissociation from the sub-complex after extraction, and this was further aggravated by the
378 fact that binding to the three different chromatography columns employed in the purification
379 process was not as strong for the helicase as it was for the rest of the TFIIH Core subunits.
380



381

382

383 Figure 3: Subunit XPD is lost in the purification of TFIIH Core.

384 Western blot performed with an anti-XPD primary antibody showing XPD after every purification stage
385 included in our initial protocol. A considerable amount (31%) of the helicase was lost due to inefficient
386 binding at the initial stages (flow-through, washing), and the losses continued through the three different
387 chromatographic steps, to finally retrieve only 0.1% of the initial XPD available in the extract. Ladder
388 sizes are indicated in kDa.

389

390 Several different strategies were approached to try to solve this problem, including: 1)
391 extraction and purification of the sub-complex under anaerobic conditions that would prevent
392 the iron-sulfur (4FeS) cluster present in XPD (Rudolf *et al.*, 2006) (Liu *et al.*, 2008) (Fan *et al.*,
393 *et al.*, 2008) (Wolski *et al.*, 2008) from being oxidized; 2) incorporation of a series of detergents
394 to our extraction buffer (Pullara *et al.*, 2013); 3) expression and purification of XPD as an
395 individual protein to later perform a co-infection with a virus containing a 6-subunit TFIIH Core,

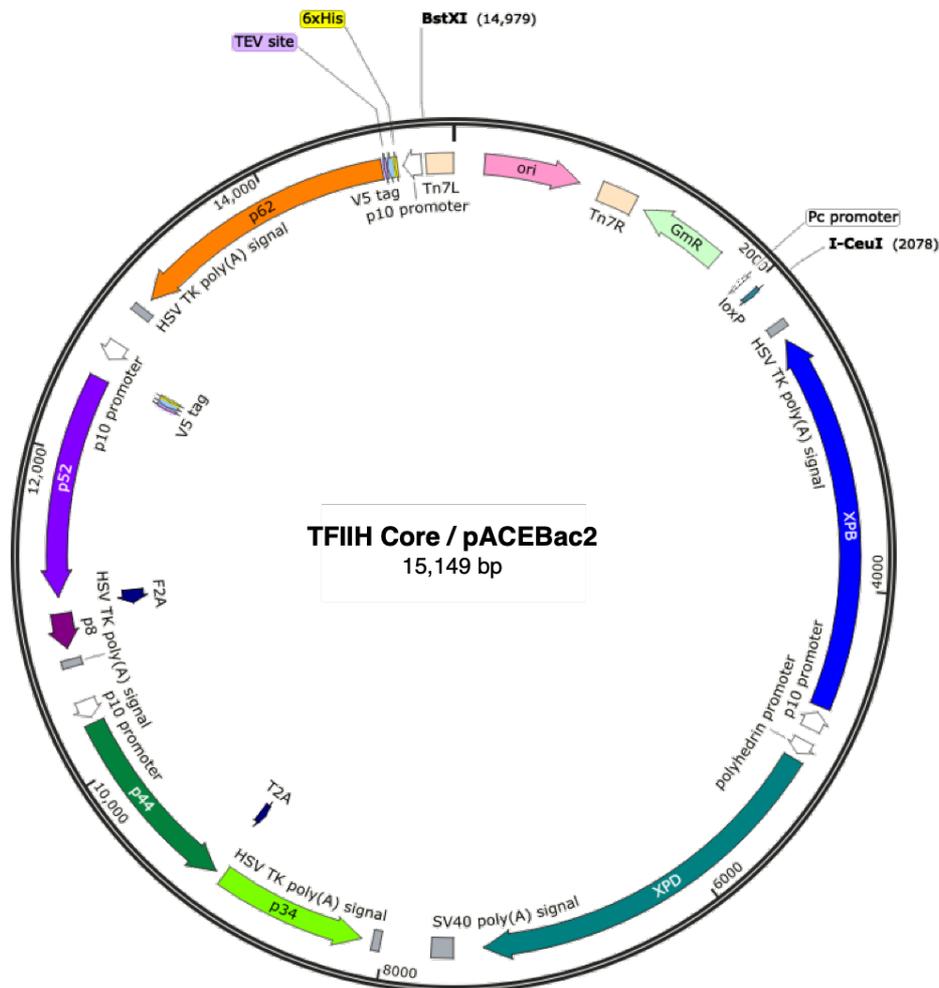
396 thus obtaining the complete 7-subunit sub-complex; and 4) cloning, expression and
 397 purification of a 7-subunit TFIIH Core with the p52 subunit carrying our 6xHis-V5 epitope-TEV
 398 tag and XPD carrying a Twin-Strep-tag®, with a reported affinity in the pM range for the Strep-
 399 Tactin®XT Superflow® purification resin. However, none of these approaches offered an
 400 acceptable improvement of XPD yield in our purifications, and although the construct carrying
 401 the Twin-Strep-tag® finally allowed us to obtain helicase XPD in similar amounts as TFIIH Core
 402 subunits XPB, p62, p52, p44, p34 and p8 (confirmed by MS, data not shown), the tag on XPD
 403 tended to separate the XPD protein from the rest of the Core complex.

404

405 Cloning and expression of the final TFIIH Core construct

406 A 7-gene TFIIH Core construct carrying our 6xHis-V5-TEV tag at the N-terminal end of
 407 subunits p52 and p62 (chosen for its central position within the ring-like structure) finally
 408 offered encouraging expression levels for all seven subunits, helicase XPD included (figure
 409 4).

410



411

412

413 **Figure 4: Cartoon representation of the TFIIH Core / pACEBac2 construct, with subunits p52**
414 **and p62 carrying a 6xHis-V5-TEV purification tag at their N-terminal ends.**

415 The 15,149bp plasmid contains genes *XPB*, *p62*, *p52/F2A/p8* and *p44/T2A/p34*, each one of them
416 under the control of a p10 promoter, and gene *XPD* under the control of a polyhedrin promoter. The
417 plasmid also contains a *I-CeuI/BstXI* multiplication module, the Tn7L/Tn7R transposition elements for
418 later transposition of the 7-gene cassette into the baculoviral genome, and a gentamicin (GmR)
419 antibiotic resistance marker.

420

421 The seven TFIIH Core genes had originally been cloned into individual pACEBac2 or
422 pACEBac1 plasmids, to subsequently be cloned one by one into growing multi-gene
423 constructs using the *I-CeuI/BstXI* multiplication module as previously described (figure 5, step
424 1). These intermediate constructs were verified by restriction with different combinations of
425 several enzymes, comparing the band pattern offered by the restricted plasmid in a 1%
426 agarose gel with the one predicted *in silico* by the NEBcutter® tool (New England Biolabs).
427 The final 7-gene construct was further analysed by PCR and ultimately, all TFIIH Core genes
428 were sequenced (GATC Biotech) using the primers listed in table 1.

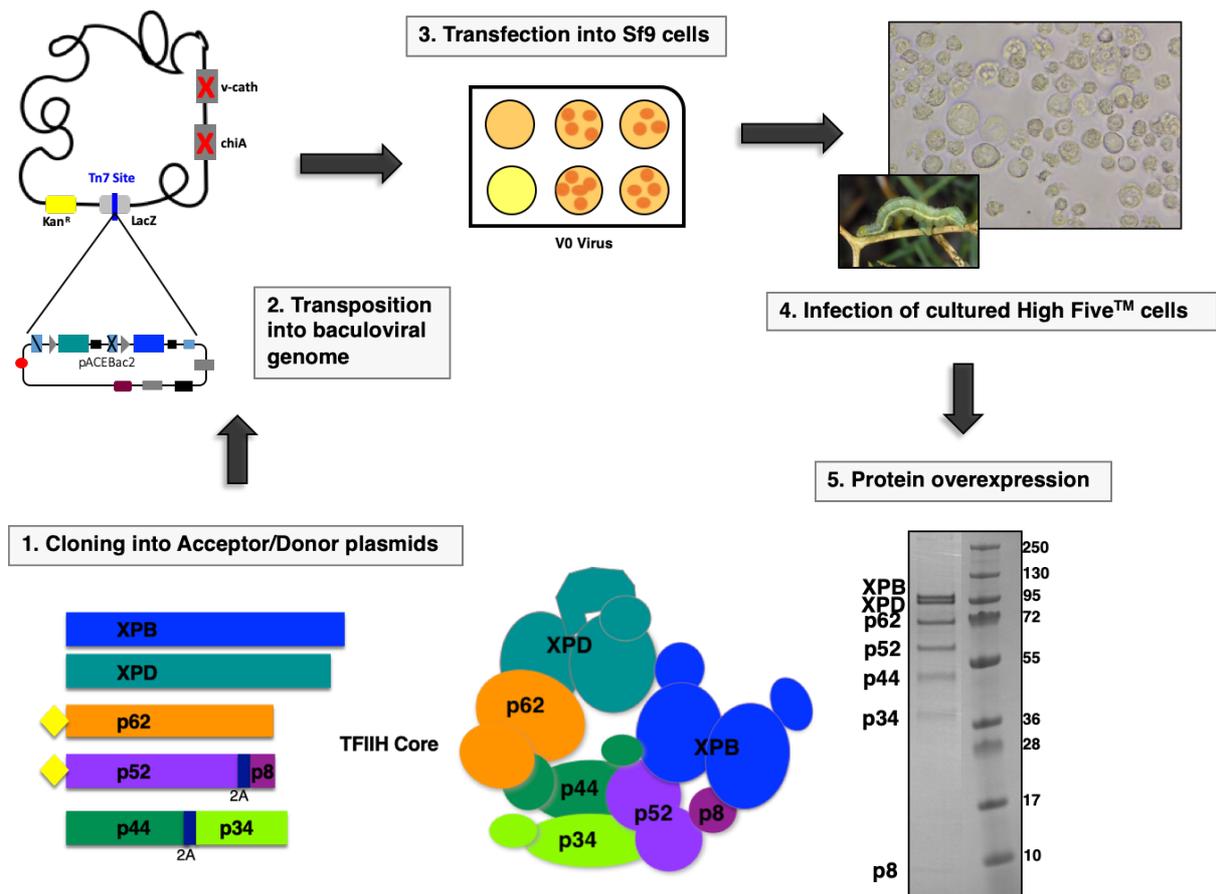
429

430 The recombinant plasmid containing all seven TFIIH Core genes was next transposed into the
431 baculoviral genome as previously described (figure 5, step 2). The transposition procedure
432 became less and less efficient as the transposed constructs grew bigger, and our protocol had
433 to be adapted accordingly, increasing both the incubation and recovery times and using freshly
434 made chemically competent cells for each reaction. Even so, the number of white colonies
435 obtained per reaction was frequently still lower than five.

436

437 The successfully transposed recombinant plasmid, or bacmid, was purified and transfected
438 into a monolayer of *Sf9* cells (figure 5, step 3). The P0 virus recovered from this transfection
439 was used to infect a 50 ml suspension culture, which was harvested and tested for TFIIH Core
440 expression after 60 hours of incubation. Large-scale infections for over-expression of the sub-
441 complex were initially performed in *Sf9* cells but our protocol was later adapted to perform the
442 infections in High Five™ cells, which offered a considerably increased yield (figure 5, steps 4
443 and 5).

444



445

446

447 **Figure 5: Overview of the cloning and expression process for the TFIIH Core sub-complex.**

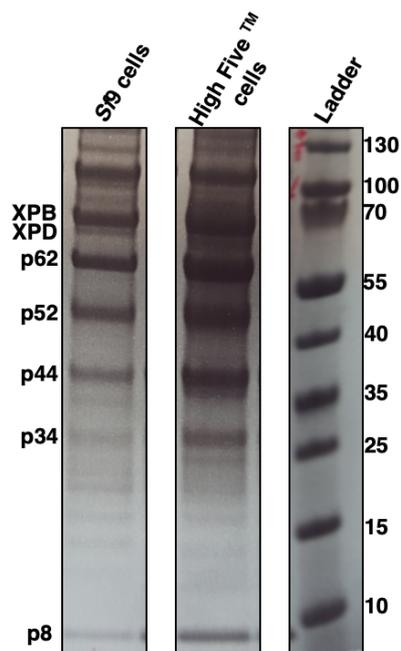
448 Summary of all the steps required for the cloning and expression of the TFIIH complex using the
 449 MultiBac™ system. The 6xHis-V5-TEV purification tag is represented by a yellow diamond. In step 5,
 450 the size of the protein markers are indicated in kDa.

451

452

453 Purification of TFIIH Core

454 Initial expression levels for every TFIIH Core sub-complex construct were verified in a 50 ml
 455 BioSprint purification test (see Materials and Methods). This quick and simple purification
 456 method allowed us to evaluate the suitability of each one of our constructs, discarding those
 457 that did not offer the expected results, before moving forward with the large-scale purification
 458 process, thus saving us a considerable time and effort. This method also permitted us to
 459 compare the expression efficiency of *Sf9* cells vs High Five™ cells (figure 6), which led us to
 460 change our large-scale expression system to the latter. This change doubled the yield of our
 461 purifications from ~ 1 mg TFIIH Core sub-complex per 2 L culture to ~ 1 mg per every litre of
 462 culture.



463

464

465 **Figure 6: TFIID Core extraction from S9 cells vs High Five™ cells.**

466 Coomassie-stained gels showing two BioSprint purification tests (50 ml, infected with a P1 virus) for the
 467 TFIID Core sub-complex extracted from S9 cells and High Five™ cells. Expression levels from High
 468 Five™ cells are significantly higher than those from S9 cells and performing our large-scale infections
 469 in High Five™ instead of S9 cells doubled our TFIID Core yield. Ladder sizes are indicated in kDa.

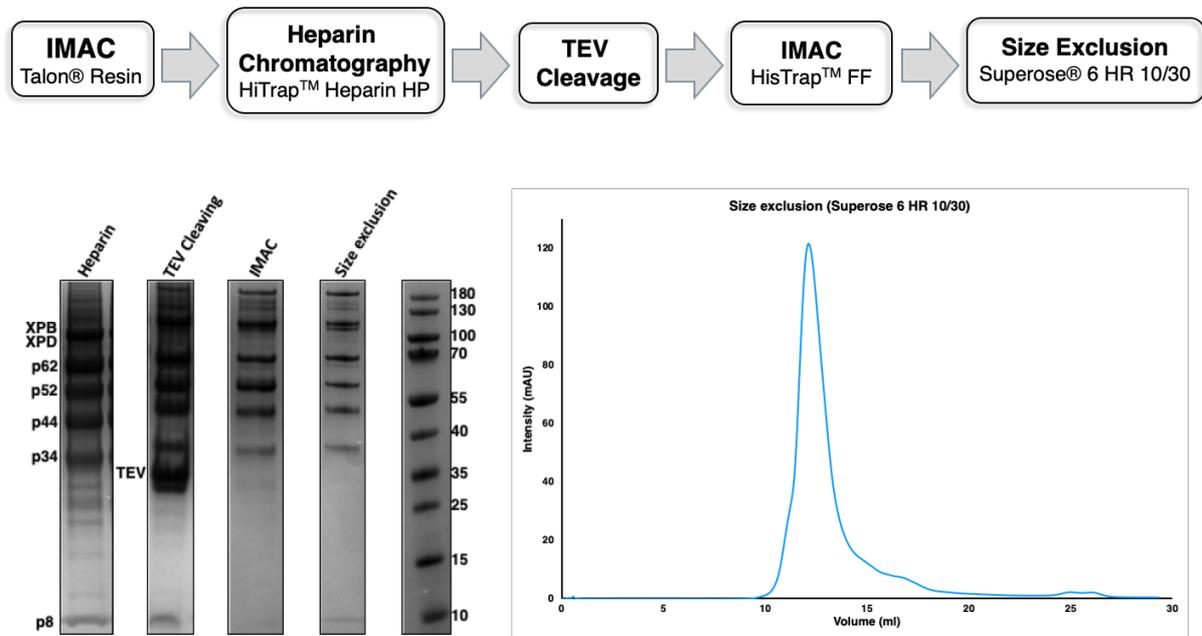
470

471 The scaling up of our infections in High Five™ cells for the sub-complex carrying two 6xHis-
 472 V5-TEV tags at the N-terminal end of subunits p52 and p62 and the troubleshooting of our
 473 initial purification protocol in aerobic conditions further helped to solve the issues affecting
 474 XPD. Substitution of the nickel column originally employed for a Talon® Superflow™ cobalt
 475 resin in the first IMAC step resulted in a higher recovery of the sub-complex, as purification
 476 with a loose resin instead of the pre-packed matrix present in the HisTrap™ FF column we
 477 had been using so far allowed us to increase the binding time.

478

479 Afterwards, the sample was further cleaned through a HiTrap™ Heparin HP column, and
 480 fractions of interest obtained from this step were pooled together for overnight TEV-cleaving
 481 of the two 6xHis-V5-TEV tags. The TEV protease was removed from the sample through a
 482 HisTrap™ FF column, and the TEV-free fractions containing the Core sub-complex were finally
 483 loaded into a Superose™ 6 HR 10/30 column. Fractions of interest were analysed in a SDS-
 484 PAGE gel after every purification step, showing a pure complex containing stoichiometric
 485 amounts of subunits XPD, XPB, p62, p52, p44, p34 and p8 (figure 7). The scaling up and

486 optimisation of the expression and purification procedures finally allowed us to obtain a yield
 487 to 1 mg of pure sub-complex for every 1 L culture. We consistently observe in our purification
 488 gels a band of approximately 180 kDa which was identified by mass spectrometry analysis as
 489 the FACT complex subunit SPT16, a chaperone originating from our insect cell expression
 490 system. This protein is not expected to interfere in biochemical assays of the TFIIH complex.
 491



492
 493

494 **Figure 7: Purification of TFIIH Core with 6xHis-V5-TEV-tagged p62 and p52.**

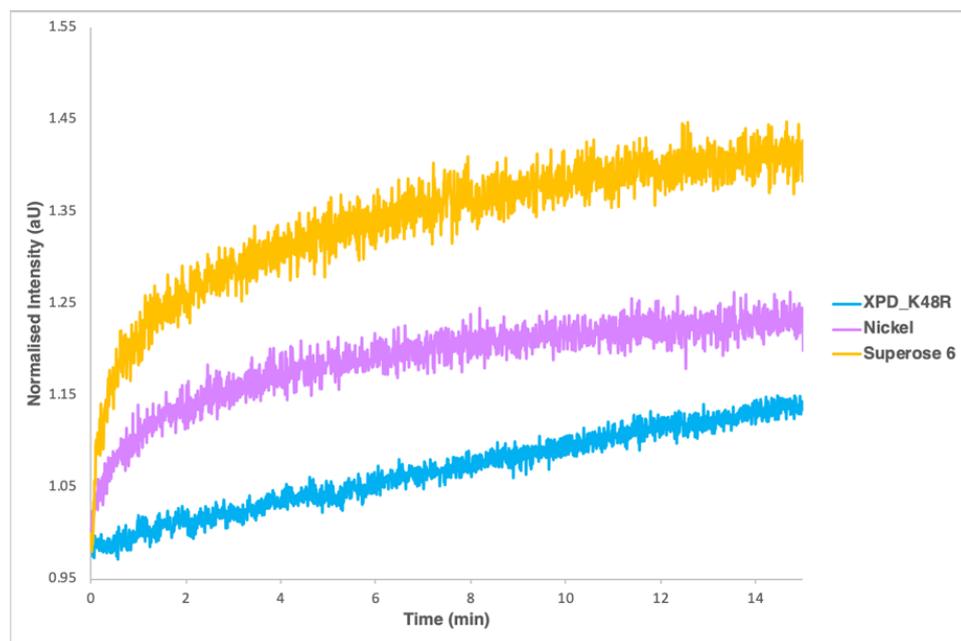
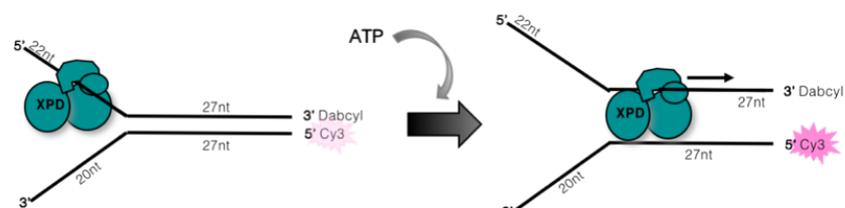
495 Coomassie-stained gels showing peak fractions for the different chromatographic steps followed in the
 496 optimised purification of the TFIIH Core sub-complex with subunits p52 and p62 tagged at their N-
 497 terminal end with 6xHis-V5-TEV: heparin chromatography (HiTrap™ Heparin HP column), followed by
 498 overnight TEV-cleaving of the sample, then ion affinity (HisTrap™ FF column), and finally a size
 499 exclusion chromatography (Superose® 6 HR 10/30 column). Ladder sizes are indicated in kDa.

500

501 **The purified TFIIH Core sub-complex shows 5' unwinding activity in a**
 502 **fluorescence-based helicase assay**

503 The TFIIH Core sub-complex possesses two helicases of opposite polarities: XPB (3' to 5')
 504 and XPD (5' to 3'). However, XPB has recently been redefined as a translocase rather than a
 505 helicase in the canonical sense of the classification (Fishburn *et al.*, 2015) (He *et al.*, 2016)
 506 (Schilbach *et al.*, 2017). We demonstrated the 5' to 3' helicase activity of the sub-complex in
 507 a fluorescence-based unwinding assay with a splayed duplex substrate that includes a Cy3
 508 dye, whose fluorescence is suppressed by a quencher in the duplex (figure 8) (Kuper *et al.*,

509 2012). Upon binding of the TFIID Core sub-complex, the XPD helicase will unwind the
 510 substrate in an ATP-dependent reaction, effectively removing the quencher and allowing the
 511 detection of the fluorescence emitted by the Cy3 dye. Unwinding of the substrate was
 512 increased by nearly 50% after the final size exclusion chromatography compared to unwinding
 513 of the sub-complex after the previous IMAC step, presumably due to the increased purity of
 514 the sample and a more accurate estimation of the TFIID Core concentration. A TFIID Core
 515 sub-complex with XPD carrying a K48R mutation, which nearly abolishes the unwinding
 516 capacity of the sub-complex, shows only background activity, potentially caused by the
 517 opening of the substrate due to XPB translocation.
 518



519
 520

521 **Figure 8: Unwinding of a splayed duplex substrate proves TFIID Core 5' helicase activity.**

522 Fluorescence helicase assay showing unwinding of a splayed duplex substrate SD (25 nM) by the TFIID
 523 Core sub-complex (250 nM). A more thorough elimination of contaminants and more exact
 524 determination of the TFIID Core concentration probably caused the considerable increase of the
 525 unwinding capacity of the sample after the Superose 6 column (orange line), compared to the level of
 526 activity observed for the sample after the nickel column (purple line). The 5' to 3' unwinding capacity of
 527 our TFIID Core sub-complex was further verified in a helicase assay performed with a TFIID Core sub-

528 complex with XPD carrying a K48R mutation, which only showed a residual activity potentially
529 attributable to XPB (blue line).

530
531
532

533 **CONCLUSIONS**

534
535 We have cloned and expressed the ~ 350 kDa, 7-subunit TFIIH Core sub-complex using the
536 MultiBac™ system, a BEV specifically designed for the production of eukaryotic multi-protein
537 complexes that allows the expression of every subunit in equimolar amounts (Berger *et al.*,
538 2004), as opposed to infection with several different viral stocks as it has been traditionally
539 done. The cloning of the sub-complex was simplified by the introduction of 2A-like sequences
540 (Luke *et al.*, 2009), designing the synthetic genes for subunits p52/p8 and p44/p34 as a single
541 unit, with each pair of genes separated by these auto-cleavable peptides – hence reducing
542 the number of cloning steps necessary to obtain the multi-gene construct. Cleaving efficiency
543 was shown to be close to 90%. This approach is easily adaptable and might be highly
544 beneficial in the cloning of many different multi-gene constructs.

545
546 Purification of the sub-complex was achieved after establishing a simple and efficient 5-step
547 IMAC – heparin – TEV cleaving – IMAC - size exclusion chromatography as a standardized
548 protocol that allows the extraction of up to 1 mg of pure sub-complex from a 2 L culture. The
549 purification process was aided by the introduction of a 6xHis-V5-TEV tag at the N-terminal
550 end of subunits p52 and p62. This small, versatile tag designed by our lab has a triple purpose:
551 purification of the desired peptide through its His tail, Western blot detection by means of its
552 V5 epitope and removal of the tag by cleaving at its TEV site. Taken as a whole, the method
553 described here permits the obtaining of a high-yield, pure and active multi-subunit complex,
554 suitable for both biochemical and structural studies.

555
556

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558
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675 **SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL**

676

677 **TFIIH Core / pACEBAC2 plasmid sequence (15,149 bp)**

678 accggttgactgggtcaactgtcagaccaagttactcatatatacttagattgattaaaacttcattttaatttaaaggatctagg
 679 tgaagatccttttgataatctcatgaccaaataccctaacgtgagtttctgctccactgagcgtcagaccccgtagaaaagatcaa
 680 aggatcttctgagatcctttttctgcgcgtaatctgctgctgcaaacaaaaaaaccaccgctaccagcggtggtttgttgcgg
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 687 aaaacgccagcaacgcggccttttacggtcctggcctttgctggcctttgctcacatgttcttctgcttatcccctgattgactg
 688 ggtcgtcttctgtggatgcgagatgccctgcgtaagcgggtgtggggcggacaataaagtcttaaaactgaacaaaatagatct
 689 aaactatgacaataaagtcttaaaactagacagaatagttgaaactgaaatcagtccagttatgctgtgaaaaagcactactggact
 690 ttgttatggctaaagcaaactcttctttctgaagtgcaaattgcccgtcgattaaagaggggctggccaagggcatgtaaag
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