Mesoscopic cortical network reorganization during recovery of optic nerve injury in GCaMP6s mice

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As the residual vision following a traumatic optic nerve injury can spontaneously recover over time, we explored the spontaneous plasticity of cortical networks during the early post-optic nerve crush (ONC) phase. Using in vivo wide-field calcium imaging on awake Thy1-GCaMP6s mice, we characterized resting state and evoked cortical activity before, during, and 31 days after ONC. The recovery of monocular visual acuity and depth perception was evaluated in parallel. Cortical responses to an LED flash decreased in the contralateral hemisphere in the primary visual cortex and in the secondary visual areas following the ONC, but was partially rescued between 3 and 5 days post-ONC, remaining stable thereafter. The connectivity between visual and non-visual regions was disorganized after the crush, as shown by a decorrelation, but correlated activity was restored 31 days after the injury. The number of surviving retinal ganglion cells dramatically dropped and remained low. At the behavioral level, the ONC resulted in visual acuity loss on the injured side and an increase in visual acuity with the non-injured eye. In conclusion, our results show a reorganization of connectivity between visual and associative cortical areas after an ONC, which is indicative of spontaneous cortical plasticity.

Recovery of vision after damage to the visual pathway in adults can happen both spontaneously and following a visual training, as long as there is still some residual vision\textsuperscript{1-3}. After an optic nerve injury, for example, when retinal ganglion cells or their axons degenerate, some residual optic nerve fibers still connect to the superior colliculus and lateral geniculate nucleus of the thalamus\textsuperscript{4-6}. The optic nerve crush (ONC) in adult rodents can be used as a model to simulate the visual deficits of diseases such as traumatic optic neuropathy, glaucoma, optic neuritis or immune-mediated CNS demyelination\textsuperscript{7}, and its intensity (controlled by pressure, time of duration or space left between the forceps) determines the degree of vision loss. Spontaneous visual recovery occurs in partial ONC with up to 20\% gain of function, as shown in a contrast discrimination task or visually guided behavior in rats and mice\textsuperscript{5,8-10}. The extent of residual vision depends on the number of surviving retinal cells and their axons, as well as cortical plasticity mechanisms, including functional connectivity reorganization\textsuperscript{5,11}.

The dynamics of cortical network reorganization in central visual system structures are important mechanisms of visual recovery via both functional reconnection of lateral and recurrent circuits, and learning mechanisms, such as synaptic consolidation and synaptogenesis. Electrophysiological recording of individual neuronal activity, optical imaging of dendritic spines dynamics, or immunostaining methods, provided evidence for structural and functional changes in the lesion projection zone in the visual cortex, emerging a few hours/days after a retinal lesion or monocular enucleation\textsuperscript{12,13,15}. However, it is still unclear how the visual pathways beyond the primary visual cortex (V1) respond to the loss of retinal input.

In the present study, we longitudinally monitored the residual cortical function and plasticity following an ONC over time in adult mice to characterize the spontaneous recovery of vision. To this end, we used wide-field
**Figure 1.**

**A**. Diagram showing the brain regions and ONC (onchocerciasis) location.

**B**. Images showing the ONC infection.

**C**. Grid representing the ONC affected area.

**D**. Timeline showing the time points (d-4, d-2, 1h, d1, d3, d5, d7, d14, d23, d31). The timeline is divided into Baseline Cal and Post-ONC Cal.

**E**. Series of images showing the effect of ONC on brain activity over time (d-2, d1, d5).

**F**. Graphs showing changes in V1 activity over time (days from ONC).

**G**. Graphs comparing Control V1 and ONC V1 response amplitudes over time (days from ONC).
The experiment ended. The same tendency was observed in area A (p = 0.012), where a decrease was observed at 1 day (p = 0.011), in PM (p = 0.000) at 1 h (p = 0.012) and 1 day (p = 0.000), in AM (p = 0.001) at 1 h (p = 0.026) and cingulate cortices, as well as in the visual areas of the ipsilateral cortex, the latter probably being due to trans-callosoal connections or retinal projections to the ipsilateral hemisphere.

Partial cortical recovery of the amplitude of the response in the contralateral hemisphere following ONC. A Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted to examine the effect of an ONC on the amplitude of calcium responses, followed by a multiple comparisons test. The cortical response to a flash stimulation administered to the crushed eye was immediately decreased in the contralateral V1, A, AM, PM, and RS, cortical regions related to the visual pathway (n = 9, Fig. 3). In V1 (p = 0.000), the calcium response was lower at 1 h (p = 0.000), 1 day (p = 0.000), and 3 days post-ONC (p = 0.034) compared to pre-ONC values (Fig. 2A). However, some cortical activity was recovered between 3 and 5 days post-ONC and remained stable thereafter until one month, when the experiment ended. The same tendency was observed in area A (p = 0.012), where a decrease was observed at 1 day (p = 0.011), in PM (p = 0.000) at 1 h (p = 0.012) and 1 day (p = 0.000), in AM (p = 0.001) at 1 h (p = 0.026) and 1 day (p = 0.001) and in RS (p = 0.006). No change was observed in areas AC (p = 0.263), HL (p = 0.397), and M1 (p = 0.389) or in the ipsilateral hemisphere (Fig. 2B).

The peak cortical response to the visual stimulation of the intact eye was not significantly affected by the crush of the opposite optic nerve in any regions, either hemisphere (p > 0.05 for each region, compared to baseline, Suppl. Figure 1).
Figure 2. Cortical responses following optic nerve injury. Upper panel for amplitude and lower panel for peak response. (A) Cortical peak response (ΔF/F₀ × 100) in the contralateral hemisphere to the flash stimulation in the injured eye. (B) Cortical peak response (ΔF/F₀ × 100) in the ipsilateral hemisphere to the flash stimulation in the healthy eye. (C) Peak latency in the contralateral hemisphere to the flash stimulation in the injured eye. (D) Peak latency in the ipsilateral hemisphere to the flash stimulation in the healthy eye. (*) Indicates Kruskal Wallis test, which provided p values under 0.05. V1 primary visual cortex; A, AM, PM anterior, anteromedial, and posteromedial regions of the secondary visual cortex; AC anterior cingulate cortex; RS retrosplenial cortex.
Rapid compensation in the efficiency of the response (peak latency) in both hemispheres. Further analysis response rapidity was conducted by comparing the latency of the maximal Ca²⁺ response to the onset of the flash using a Kruskal–Wallis test (Fig. 2C,D). The peak latency was delayed, subsequent to optic nerve injury, within V1 (p = 0.005) and secondary visual areas A (p = 0.004) and PM (p = 0.024) of the contralateral hemisphere during the first day after the ONC. However, 3 days after injury, the response in V1 was significantly more rapid over time and returned to pre-injury values in V2 of the ipsilateral hemisphere. No changes were seen in the upstream areas AM (p = 0.072), AC (p = 0.232), and RS (p = 0.490). In the ipsilateral V1 (p = 0.014), an increased latency of the visual stimulus response occurred at day 1, returning to baseline values thereafter, given the shortest latency of the peak response after the flash. No changes were observed in ipsilateral areas A (p = 0.084), PM (p = 0.390), AM (p = 0.107), AC (p = 0.485), and RS (p = 0.283), or in any of the other non-visual cortical areas observed. The peak response time to the stimulation in the intact eye was not affected in either of the two hemispheres. The efficiency of cortical activation (peak duration) was not affected by the ONC at any time points.

Comparison of the response in V1 of both hemispheres. Before the ONC, the calcium signal in response to a flash in the opposite eye was similar in the two hemispheres before the ONC. There was a signifi-
Figure 4. Functional connectivity matrix. (A) Left panel: Schematic of connectivity information provided by the correlation matrix. L- and R- indicates left and right hemispheres respectively. Yellow and green zones: correlation values between regions of the same hemisphere (left and right respectively). Purple zone: correlation values between regions of both hemispheres. Dotted white line: correlation between homotopic regions from the two hemispheres. Right panel: Correlation matrix (averaged from n = 9 mice and Fisher Z-transformed) at d-2 with 3 representative connections used in panel C (black boxes). (B) First line: Seed Pixel Correlation matrix averaged from n = 9 mice for 4 selected days (for sake of clarity) before and after ONC. White diamonds indicate the statistical difference (p < 0.05). Second line: Differential correlation matrix (difference in correlation between each day and the baseline). (C) Evolution of the correlation for 30 days (9 measures) in three representative connections (right areas AM and PM, right areas V1 and bilateral areas PM, as shown in panel (A) having the deepest change and significance. (*) Indicates Wilcoxon test, between baseline and current day and which provided p values under 0.05.
Resting state spontaneous activity before and after the ONC. Spontaneous resting-state activity was used to map the functional connectivity of the whole dorsal cortex (Fig. 3). As previously described16–18, during the baseline (d-2 before the crush), seed pixel correlation maps showed a specific pattern of local and long-range connections between different visual areas and other visual regions (Fig. 3B). Strong ipsilateral interconnections were also established between M1 and BC (reciprocally, Fig. 3C). In addition, strong interhemispheric connections were also observed between bilateral RS, as well as M1 and HL homotopic areas.

One day after the ONC, a strong transient reduction of the overall connectivity was observed between all visual regions contralateral to the ONC, as well as some within the ipsilateral cortex (Fig. 4A,B). A strong and long-term reduction of interhemispheric connections was observed between visual regions after 30 days, particularly between homotopic AM or PM areas (Fig. 4C), but not in control regions such as homotopic HL, BC and M1. A strong decrease in local correlations (surrounding each seed) was also observed for the majority of visual regions in the contralateral cortex to the injured eye, but less in ipsilateral visual regions and other bilateral reference regions. This was particularly obvious between areas V1 and A, as well as between areas AM and PM. Additionally, we noted no increase of connectivity in any of the explored seeds.

The ONC altered visual function at the behavioral level. At day 1 post-unilateral ONC, a significant decrease in visual acuity in the lesioned eye (Wilcoxon, p = 0.012) was observed and remained stable up to 1 month following the injury. We found no recovery of visual acuity with the behavioural test over time following the ONC (Fig. 5A). However, an unexpected compensatory mechanism seems to occur in the intact eye, as evident by an increase in visual acuity over time after the ONC (Friedman $\chi^2 = 20.454$ p = 0.002) as of day 1 (Wilcoxon, p = 0.012) that remained up to 28 days (p < 0.05).

A complementary behavioral test evaluating visual depth discrimination, a cortical function, was also performed (using the bilateral ONC). Prior to the ONC, the mice had a significant preference for the shallow end during the visual cliff test (Wilcoxon, p = 0.018), demonstrating hesitancy and avoidance behaviors toward the deep end (Fig. 5B). The preference for the "shallow end" did not return in the following 28 days (Friedman, $\chi^2 = 1.143$, p = 0.565).

Survival of retinal ganglion cells after ONC. For the unilateral ONC, RGC loss was significant in the damaged eye compared to the non-injured eye in both proximal and distal regions (Mann–Whitney, p = 0.000). One month after the ONC, a survival rate of approximately 10% of RGCs was found in the injured eye (Fig. 5C). This indicates that, despite the low survival of RGCs at one month following the lesion, the survival rate is higher than what is found in an axotomized retina. In the bilateral ONC group, the RGC survival was about 17%, with no significant difference between proximal and distal distributions (Mann–Whitney, p = 0.008). The variability between the number of surviving cells is probably due to two distinct experimenters, rather than unilateral vs bilateral crush.

Figure 5. Effect of ONC on visual acuity and retinal cell loss. (A) Following the optic nerve injury in the left eye (day 1 -28), there was a significant decrease in visual acuity of the injured eye and a slight increase of visual acuity of the intact eye when compared to the baseline values. (B) Following the optic nerve injury (day 1 -28), there was a significant decrease in depth perception, which induced a decrease in time spent in the shallow end with no significant recovery. (C) The ONC induced a severe loss of retinal ganglion cells (83–90%) both in central (proximal, dark green) and peripheral (distal, light green) regions of the retina. Insert: microphotographs of flat mount retinas stained with RBPMS, showing the 17% survival of the RGC (after bilateral ONC). (*) Indicates Wilcoxon test, between condition (A,C) or between shallow and deep end (B) and which provided p values under 0.05. (#) Indicates Friedman test, between baseline and current day and which provided p values under 0.05. ONC optic nerve crush, OD right eye (oculus dexter), OS left eye (oculus sinister).
Discussion

Our study was designed to gain a better understanding of how the cortex reorganizes itself over time, following an ONC using mesoscopic mapping, and how this relates to the recovery of vision. The nerve injury was severe but not total, as 10–17% of the RGC survived. A significant and widespread impairment of the response to a unilateral flash was observed in all cortical areas, which was followed by a partial restoration of the cortical visual activity as soon as the fifth day and some acuity change of the opposite eye. The effects were limited to the visual cortical areas (V1 and adjacent secondary areas) and RS. Moreover, the response latency of V1 was enhanced post-injury compared to pre-ONC, suggesting a reduction of input processing complexity in V1. The connectivity between visual and non-visual regions was disorganized after the crush, as shown by a decorrelation, but correlated activity was restored 30 days after the injury.

The ONC induces a visual impairment followed by a gradual recovery of cortical activity.

A partial recovery of the cortical activity was observed post-ONC, subsequent to an initial drop of the cortical functioning, in terms of amplitude, reactivity, and co-activation. The visual cortex is at first inactivated by the lack of retinal input and related impairment due to the decrease in brain function following optic neuritis, which is proportional to the extent of the damage of the optic nerve. These results are in line with recent findings showing cortical plasticity in V1 after an ONC in rats or mice, followed by a recovery of cortical activity. This recovery is in agreement with previous autoradiographic studies after an ONC in rats. Other studies were unable to observe an improvement in cortical activity following an ONC using visual evoked potential (VEP) recordings in anesthetized rats. The calcium signal of GCAMP6s mice mainly arises from the Thy-1 long-projecting excitatory neurons and is not detected in GABAergic cells. Due to the density of the cortical tissue, the fluorescent signal from the superficial layers would have a stronger influence on the acquired signal compared to the signal from deeper layers, which would be more diffuse. This signal might be stronger than VEP recordings from layer 4 in terms of cortical response following an ONC. A layer-specific response to sensory stimulation has been confirmed by 3-photon calcium imaging. This suggests that the hyperactivity in layer 4 due to reduced visual inputs that impair VEPs may be compensated in layers 2/3 by corticocortical connections and recurrent circuits. Moreover, synaptic plasticity or dendritic spine density has also been shown to be involved in the recovery of activity in V1. However, it is not known whether this recovered activity is enough to trigger spiking activity, although the response amplitude in other cortical areas was not affected by the visual differentiation. It is interesting to note that ocular dominance might also be affected by the crush, as the response in the non-affected cortex increased compared to the opposite cortex, which agrees with a recent study showing change in the ocular dominance index in the binocular cortex.

Recovery of function has also been demonstrated by optical imaging after a retinal lesion. It was found that a focal retinal lesion produces an anatomically defined lesion projection zone, which is rapidly and functionally restored due to long-range horizontal fibers projecting to the borders and center of the lesion projection zone. In contrast, our ONC model causes a degeneration of ganglion cells, which is randomly distributed with approximately 10% retinal ganglion cell survival, i.e. it is a reduction of visual input that is randomly distributed throughout the entire extent of V1. Spontaneous recovery of the calcium signal in V1 most likely results from a combination of residual inputs from the surviving cells and cortical plasticity arising from strengthened cortico-cortical or local lateral connections, including cross-modal innervation. Cortical reorganization after optic nerve or retinal lesions might be altered at the level of long-range lateral connections, as well as the global functional connectivity network. This would be in line with human studies where patients with optic nerve injuries had not only functionally disturbed connectivity networks, but also subtle deficits in the presumably “intact” areas of the visual field.

Plasticity of the functional connections after ONC.

To determine whether long-range corticocortical or local connections were involved in the recovery of function, or if other cortical structures would compensate for the reduced functioning in V1, we used seed pixel correlation mapping based on resting state spontaneous activity. We observed a strong transient reduction of the overall connectivity within the bilateral visual cortex shortly after the ONC. These acute side effects of the ONC surgery should have a minimal effect on transient loss of connection at Day 0 because some were preserved within the somatosensory and motor cortices. This short-term effect was followed by a clear long-term reduction of the connections between homotopic extra striate areas, as well as between area V1 and some extra striate areas of contralateral hemisphere to the ONC. Long-term changes between extra striate areas were also observed. Surprisingly, no increase in connections was observed among other regions to compensate for the loss of these connections. Overall, these results showed that most of visual areas decrease their long-range connections and establish more local computations. This local cortical effect and local reorganization of sensory deprivation is distinctly in contrast to other losses of function such as a transient focal stroke that globally depresses cortical activity, followed by a circuit reorganization and functional remapping within the entire network. Hind limb ligation also resulted in large-scale reductions in functional connectivity that were not restricted to the hind limb primary somatosensory region. Our results suggest that the V1 is the main permissive gating area for visual input processing.

The ONC induces visual behavioral alterations.

Visual function decreased substantially following the ONC, as measured by the optomotor reflex and visual cliff tests. The ability to track moving sinusoidal gratings was no longer observed via the optomotor reflex test after ONC. Similarly, our mice did not appear to detect the cliff as indicated by the loss of avoidance behaviors during the visual cliff test. Previous rat studies showed a disconnection between behavior and anatomical or electrophysiological changes following damage to the optic nerve. In these studies, it was shown that even with only 10% of functional retinal ganglion cells, the animals...
were able to perform close to normal in behavioral visual tasks. In our study, it took approximately 5 days to observe a partial recovery of cortical activity following the ONC using the calcium imaging technique, but no recovery of visual perception was noted in the lesioned side. This might be due to the intensity of the crush, which was stronger than what was used in the Schmitt and Sautter studies. As their lower ONC intensity allowed for greater recovery. Similarly, in another study, a residual cell number of 30% supported the recovery of visual acuity and discrimination performance three weeks after the ONC (data not shown). It is also possible that our tests measure finer visual capacities compared to light discrimination tests used in the previous studies mentioned above. The discrepancy between the recovery of visual acuity in the non-deprived eye and the absence of apparent cortical activity on the ipsilateral cortex is also puzzling, suggesting that the recovery of visual acuity measured by the optomotor reflex mostly relies on subcortical circuits. It has already been proposed that this test depends on the integrity of the superior colliculus, which is involved in the control of saccades and head movements. The present experiment suggests that the recovered cortical activities do not influence further superior colliculus activity to improve the task performance.

Possible mechanisms of recovery. Functional recovery relies on cortical circuit reorganization and cortical synaptic plasticity, as well as the activity of surviving RGC. RGC axons may also regenerate, but function gain related to this regeneration is negligible at the time frame we used in this study. It has been shown that dRGC preferentially survive optic nerve injury. These dRGC may initiate and take part in the recovery of function, although they have poor direction selectivity and a weak antagonistic surround, which cannot account for optomotor task improvement. Their fast response to light stimulation and projection to both superior colliculus and geniculate nucleus might however activate cortical visual processing. Improved non-injured eye performance also may result from both cortical and retinal mechanisms. The most common cortical mechanisms would be an ocular dominance shift towards the non-injured eye and synaptic plasticity. To the other hand, RGC reactivity and gene transcription might be affected in the contralateral retina to the injury, possibly primed by glial cells.

Limitations. It is possible that a limitation of our model was the use a high intensity ONC, which was close to a full damage of the optic nerve, whereas a lower intensity would promote better perceptual recovery as well as increased amplitude of the response. Accordingly, a low intensity ONC in mice in which a space of 0.152 mm at closed-position was left between forceps allowed for partial recovery of both optomotor and visual cliff performance (data not shown). This would fit with a correlation between the extent of recovery and the sensory lesion size and correlation between the decrease of brain function in humans following optic neuritis and the extent of the damage occurring in the optic nerve. Nevertheless, our study underlines a partial recovery of neuronal activity with a severe optic nerve injury which is promising for visual rehabilitation.

Conclusion
In conclusion, our results show a reorganization of the local connectivity between visual cortical areas following a traumatic optic nerve injury. This is indicative of visual cortical plasticity, though it does not extend to the higher order cortical areas investigated during the short recovery period.

Methods
Animal preparation. All procedures were carried out in accordance with the guidelines of the Canadian Council for the Protection of Animals and were approved by Animal Welfare Committee of the University of Lethbridge and the Ethics Committee of the Université de Montréal (protocol CDEA 17-010). A total of 9 C57BL/6J-Tg(Thy1-GCaMP6s)GP4.3Dkim/J adult mice (IMSR Cat# JAX:024275; RRID:IMSR_JAX:024275; three females, six males) were used for the imaging in this study. Moreover, nine C57BL/6NCRL males (IMSR Cat# CRL:027, RRID:IMSR_CRL:027) from Charles River Laboratories (RRID:SCC_003792) were used for the optomotor reflex and visual cliff testing for the bilateral ONC. All animals were maintained in a 12 h light/dark normal daylight cycle with ad libitum access to food and water.

Imaging chamber implantation. Mice were anesthetized with isoflurane (3.5% induction, 1.5% maintenance). After a subcutaneous (s.c.) injection of 300 μL of glucose buffers, the scalp was disinfected with iodine, and then lidocaine was injected subcutaneously. Core body temperature was maintained at 37 °C using a feedback-controlled heating pad. The skin covering the skull was entirely removed and the skull was allowed to dry. A cover slip was placed over both hemispheres and was secured with transparent dental cement (C&B Metabond, Parkell, Edgewood, NY, USA). A custom-made round imaging chamber with two arms (titanium; 10 mm diameter) was also fixed to the skull.

Optic nerve crush (ONC) surgery. A left partial optic nerve crush was performed under isoflurane anesthesia for the calcium imaging. For complementary behavioral experiments with the visual cliff, an ONC was performed on both eyes since in case of an unilateral ONC, the mouse could discriminate the gratings using the uninjured eye. Briefly, the optic nerve was exposed from the lateral side of the eye by an opening in the conjunctiva and then crushed with calibrated self-clamping forceps (Martin Instruments, Tuttlingen, Germany) at 1–2 mm from the eye for 3 s. In this case, no space between forceps was calibrated, but a total injury was prevented by reducing the time of pressure to 3 s instead of 10 s, which provided a severe but not total nerve
Clockwise directions at a speed of 12.0 d/s. Each eye was tested independently according to the direction of the detected spatial frequency. We presented full contrast spatial frequencies moving in both clockwise and counterclockwise directions, each mouse was placed in the apparatus and presented with a 0.050 cpd sinusoidal grating for 3 s. We used alternating gray screen and moving gratings. The apparatus was cleaned with water following each test. Once the animal's behavior was stable, we introduced the OptoMotry HD 2.0.0 software, which allowed for the manipulation of stimuli and observation of the animal's behavior. First, the mice were habituated to the apparatus over the course of three days (5, 10, 15 min), to the visual stimulation of 15 min/day for one week, so that they were not stressed and relatively quiescent during imaging. During head fixation, animals were placed in a plastic tube to limit motion and guide relaxation.

Visual acuity related to the retina-superior colliculus pathway (Optomotor reflex). Two behavioral tasks were used to assess visual processing (i.e., retina-superior colliculus pathway, lateral geniculate-V1 pathway, accessory optic areas, higher cognitive areas, etc.). The rate of vision recovery and how it relates to metabolic changes at various cortical levels of the visual system was of particular interest.

Calcium imaging. The neuronal activity was measured by calcium imaging according to two paradigms: during the resting state and during visual stimulation with a flash at different time points before and after ONC.
grating movement. Spatial frequencies were incrementally increased (from 0.05 to 0.7 cpd) in an adaptive staircase procedure until no tracking activity was observed, which determined visual acuity thresholds.

**Visual cliff.** Depth avoidance was evaluated in an open field (transparent box) to assess depth perception based on visual discrimination cue. The method was adapted from that described by Lima et al. Specifically, a plexiglass box (40 cm L × 10 cm W) was positioned on a table so that half of the box was positioned directly over a 60 cm-long, 2 cm × 2 cm checkerboard pattern, while the other half was suspended 70 cm above an identical checkerboard. For each test, the mouse was placed in the back of the “shallow end” and movements were recorded for two minutes. Since the floor was level, the mice had to rely on visual cues to distinguish the “shallow end” from the “deep end” (as they tend to naturally avoid cliffs). The total time in the “shallow end” was noted, and the box was cleaned with water between each assessment. This cliff test was performed once prior to the ONC, and 1, 14, and 28 days thereafter.

**Estimation of RGC survival after ONC.** Whole-mounted retinas were prepared for immunostaining. At the end of the experiment, mice were perfused with 4% paraformaldehyde in 0.1 M phosphate buffer sodium at room temperature under deep anesthesia (pentobarbital, 52 mg/kg, i.p.). Two small holes were made in the cornea and the eyes were post-fixated in 4% formaldehyde overnight. The cornea and lens were removed, and the retina was dissected ex vivo in four quadrants. Sections were pre-incubated overnight at 4 °C in phosphates buffer with 0.5% triton (PBS, 0.1 M, pH 7.4) containing 10% goat serum and 1% BSA. The tissue was incubated for 48 h at 4 °C with anti-RBPMS primary antibodies (1:500, Phosphosolutions; Cat# 1832-RBPMS, RRID:AB_2492226) in PBS-triton-0.5% with 3% goat serum and 1% bovine serum albumin. This was followed by a 48 h incubation in goat anti-rabbit IgG H&L (Alexa Fluor 555) antibody (1:500, Abcam, Abcam Cat# ab150078, RRID:AB_2722519) and then placed for 1 h in a Hoescht:PBS (1:10,000) solution. Quantitative examination of RBPMS immunoreactivity was used for ganglion cell counting in 1 mm² squares at four proximal and four distal positions to the optic nerve region.

**Statistics.** Statistical analysis of the calcium signal and latency was performed using non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis tests with a significance level of p < 0.05. Pairwise comparisons were performed between the amplitude and peak time of the values of the different days and the baseline values.

**Data availability** The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on a reasonable request.

Received: 24 June 2020; Accepted: 28 October 2020
Published online: 08 December 2020

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**Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to the Canadian Institute of Health Research (Grant No. MOP-111003 to EV), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (Grant No. 238835-2011 to EV), and FRQS Vision Health Research Network (RNI grant to EV, BAS, MV and MHM).

**Author contributions**

M.G., M.N., J.L.H., A.S.V.B., M.V.: contributed to the acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of the data in this study. M.G., E.V., M.V., B.A.S. and M.H.M.: contributed to design of this study and interpretation of the data; M.G., J.L.H.: drafted the first version of the manuscript, E.V., M.V.: wrote the last version of the manuscript. All authors have approved the final version of the manuscript; agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved; designated as authors qualify for authorship and who qualify for authorship are listed.

**Competing interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

**Additional information**

**Supplementary Information** The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-78491-z.

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