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# Hormesis effects of phosphorus on the viability of *Chlorella regularis* cells under nitrogen limitation

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## Abstract

**Background:** Phosphorus (P) is an essential element of microalgae, which is either required for anabolism or for energy metabolism. When employing a nitrogen limitation strategy to trigger microalgal intracellular lipid accumulation, P supplementation was always simultaneously applied to compensate for the accompanied growth inhibition.

**Results:** This study identified that P exerts hormesis effects on microalgae. Slight excess of P ( $\leq 45 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ ) under nitrogen limitation condition stimulated the cell growth of *Chlorella regularis* and achieved a 10.2% biomass production increase. This also improved mitochondrial activity by 25.0% compared to control ( $P = 5.4 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ ). The lipid productivity reached  $354.38 \text{ mg (L d)}^{-1}$ , which increased by 39.3% compared to control. Such an improvement was caused by the intracellularly stored polyphosphate energy pool. However, large excess of P ( $250 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ ) inhibited the cell growth by 38.8% and mitochondrial activity decreased by 71.3%. *C. regularis* cells showed obvious poisoning status, such as enlarged size, plasmolysis, deformation of cell walls, and disorganization of organelles. This is probably because the over-accumulated P protonated the amide-N and disrupted membrane permeability.

**Conclusions:** These results provide new insight into the roles of P in microalgae lipid production: P does not always play a positive role under nitrogen limitation conditions.

**Keywords:** Microalgae, Phosphorus, Hormesis, Nitrogen limitation, Toxic

## Background

Microalgae are a promising feedstock for biodiesel [1, 2]. In their studies on microalgae bioenergy technologies in the past 40 years, researchers have endeavored to explore strategies for enhancing biomass production and lipid accumulation [3, 4], which taken together, determines microalgal lipid production. Nitrogen limitation is the most popular approach to increase the microalgal lipid content, because it is able to up-regulate the key enzymes on the lipid biosynthesis pathways: malic enzymes become more activated for catalyzing pyruvate synthesis and NADPH (reduced nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate) formation and both acetyl-CoA and ATP

(adenosine triphosphate)-citrate lyase are stimulated for catalyzing acetyl-CoA production [5, 6]. The lipid content could be enhanced by 10–50% when nitrogen was limited [4, 7], and even up to two- to three-fold during nitrogen starvation [8, 9].

Even though nitrogen deprivation/limitation promoted intracellular lipid accumulation, it also decreased biomass production by as much as 80%, and caused the failure of final lipid production improvement [10, 11]. Nitrogen deprivation/limitation could weaken proteins synthesis, and thus induce the depletion of ADP (adenosine diphosphate) and NADP (nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate) and the dysfunction of cell synthesis [12, 13]. Phosphorus (P) supplementation offered an effective strategy to resolve these problems and has thus been employed to enhance microalgae biomass production under nitrogen limitation [14, 15]. Combining nitrogen limitation with P

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supplementation could contribute 10–100% increase on the microalgae biomass production, accompanied by 15–50% improvement of lipid accumulation, and finally achieved 50–160% enhancement of lipid productivity [4, 15, 16]. In a P-repletion condition, P was stored as intracellular polyphosphate (poly-P) by microalgae both in autotrophic and heterotrophic growth [17, 18]. Poly-P, with phosphoanhydride bonds, was rich in energy (e.g., ATP), which could be utilized for biosynthesis when cells were nitrogen deprived [14]. In addition, poly-P can also be metabolized to form DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), RNA (ribonucleic acid), or intermediate products in microalgae [5]. Thus, replete phosphorus has traditionally been suggested to benefit microalgae growth and lipid accumulation [4, 11].

Excess P is advantageous for microalgal lipid production; however, it also increases the cost of cultivation. Agricultural and industrial wastewater are promising P sources. Piggery wastewater, dairy wastewater, brewery wastewater, food processing wastewater, and rubber mill wastewater, are all rich in P [19–22]. The P concentrations in these industrial wastewaters range widely from 3 to 330 mg L<sup>-1</sup>. However, previous studies on P supplementation improved microalgal cultivation, which was limited by the slight excess of P ( $\leq 45$  mg L<sup>-1</sup>). The question remains whether large excess of P can continuously increase the lipid production of microalgae. The answer may be negative. Whether an environmental agent is beneficial or toxic depends on its dosage, which is referred to as hormesis. Hormesis is a biphasic dose–response to an environmental agent, i.e., a low dose stimulation has a beneficial effect and a high dose has inhibitory or toxic effects [23]. Based on this, slight excess of P ( $\leq 45$  mg L<sup>-1</sup>) could stimulate cell growth [4]; however, the effects of large P excess still remain unknown. The results of this study provide new insight for the application of microalgae in P-bearing wastewater treatment.

In this study, the roles of P on *Chlorella regularis* (*C. regularis*, model strain) were investigated in a wide concentration range (5.4–250 mg-P L<sup>-1</sup>) under nitrogen limiting conditions. The effects of P concentration on cell growth (which were determined via cell density changes and substrates consumption), and intracellular lipid accumulation (which was related to the intracellular contents) were studied. In addition, mitochondrial activity assay, ultrastructure morphology of cells, intracellular-P storage forms, and chemical bond analyses were conducted, to identify the potential mechanism underlying P toxicity. Interestingly, hormesis effects of P on microalgae cells were confirmed, which specified the toxic of high P concentration on microalgae for the first time.

## Methods

### Microalgae strain, cultivation, and protocols

As a typical microalga, *C. regularis* var. *minima* (FACHB-729) was used in this study, which was purchased from the Freshwater Algae Culture Collection of the Institute of Hydrobiology in Wuhan, China. Prior to the experiments, *C. regularis* was purified via the streaking plating method and preserved on agar jelly at 4 °C. Before the experiment, *C. regularis* was activated using classic BG11 medium under photoautotrophic condition [24]. As an inoculum of the experiment, the activated *C. regularis* cells were collected at the logarithmic phase (20 days of phototrophic cultivation) via centrifuging (6000×g for 5 min at 4 °C), and then washed and re-suspended three times with 0.9% sterile physiological saline. After the above procedures, *C. regularis* was inoculated into the modified BG11 media, which resulted in an initial cell density of  $1.5 \times 10^7$  cell mL<sup>-1</sup> for further heterotrophic at 28 °C, 160 rpm, in the dark (ZWY-240, Zhicheng Shanghai, China). During the experiments, all sampling operations were accomplished in a clean bench (SW-CJ-1FD, Airtech, Suzhou, China).

Real wastewater with high P concentration also has high levels of organics [21, 25]. Accordingly, glucose was selected to simulate organic carbon for microalgae heterotrophic cultivation [11, 26]. In this study, 10 g L<sup>-1</sup> glucose (sterilized using sterile 0.22 mm filter) was mixed to the BG11 mediums to create heterotrophic cultivation. Nitrogen limitation was controlled by adding 300 mg L<sup>-1</sup> NaNO<sub>3</sub>. The form of nitrogen was identical to the BG11 medium; however, its content was only 20% of the classic BG11 [4]; therefore, this condition was named nitrogen limitation (N<sub>lim</sub>). Furthermore, a series of phosphorus (PO<sub>4</sub><sup>3-</sup>-P) levels were proposed to elaborate the effects of P concentration (mg L<sup>-1</sup>), 5.4, 25, 45, 150, and 250 mg L<sup>-1</sup>. The 5.4 mg-P L<sup>-1</sup> was equal to the P concentration of the classic BG11 medium; therefore, it was used as control protocol (N<sub>lim</sub>P5.4). The others were called N<sub>lim</sub>P25, N<sub>lim</sub>P45, N<sub>lim</sub>P150, and N<sub>lim</sub>P250 in the following. Additionally, MgSO<sub>4</sub>, NaCO<sub>3</sub>, CaCl<sub>2</sub>, citric acid, ammonium ferric citrate, Na<sub>2</sub>EDTA, H<sub>3</sub>BO<sub>3</sub>, MnCl<sub>2</sub>, ZnSO<sub>4</sub>, CuSO<sub>4</sub>, CoCl<sub>2</sub>, and NaMoO<sub>4</sub> were also supplemented as nutrients and trace elements according to a previous study [11]. The medium was autoclaved at 121 °C for 30 min, and the final pH was about 7.1 adjusted with sterile HCl and NaOH solution and no precipitation appeared in the medium.

### Growth profiles and nutrient consumptions

Microalgal growth was evaluated via cell density [10], obtained with an optical microscope (BX53, Olympus, Japan) coupled with a hemocytometer. The results were determined based on the averages of at least three

repetitions. The cell growth rate was calculated according to Eq. (1):

$$\text{Cell growth rate (cell (mL d)}^{-1}) = (X_2 - X_1)/(t_2 - t_1) \quad (1)$$

where  $X_1$  and  $X_2$  (cell mL<sup>-1</sup>) represent the cell density at times  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , respectively;  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  represent the initial and final point within the linear portion of Fig. 1a.

Organics, phosphorus, and nitrogen consumptions were of particular concern, which were represented by the changing of chemical oxygen demand (COD), dissolved inorganic nitrogen (DIN), and dissolved inorganic phosphorus (DIP) in this work. These were determined via spectrophotometry using a water quality analyzer and the provided reagent kits (5B-3C V8, Lian Hua Technology, China) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Prior to measurements, the samples were filtered with 0.45  $\mu\text{m}$  cellulose acetate membranes to remove any suspended residues and biomass.

#### Intracellular storage products: lipid, protein, and starch

The cells were collected on day 4 via centrifugation at 10,610 $\times g$  for 10 min at 4 °C (TGL-16M, Cence, China), and were then freeze-dried (Pilot1-2LD, Boyikang, China) at -80 °C. The achieved lyophilized powder was used for lipid extraction using the chloroform-methanol (2:1 v/v) reagent method [27]. Therefore, the lipid content could be calculated based on the gravimetric ratio of the extract and the powder and the lipid productivity was determined based on the following equation [28]:

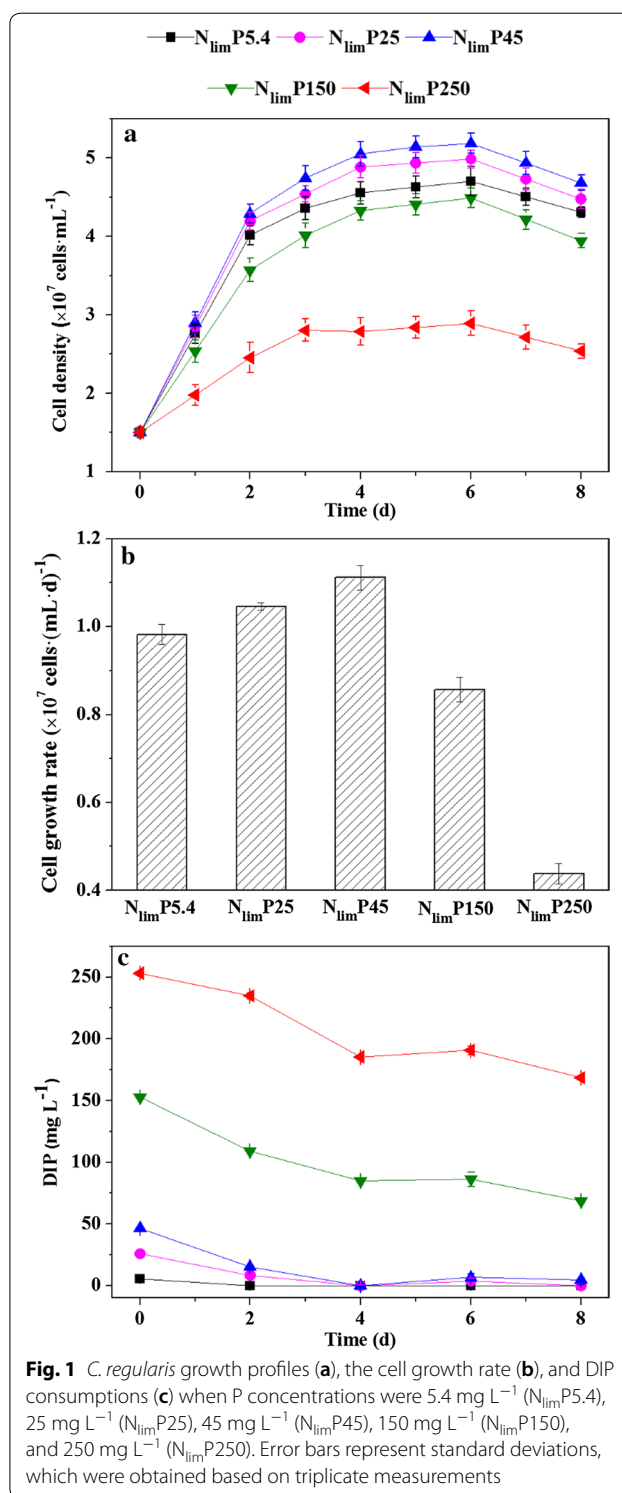
$$\text{Lipid productivity (mg (L d)}^{-1}) = (B_2 \times C_2 - B_1 \times C_1)/(T_2 - T_1) \quad (2)$$

where  $B_1$  and  $B_2$  represent the biomass (mg L<sup>-1</sup>) at the times  $T_1$  and  $T_2$ , respectively;  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  represent the lipid content (%) at times  $T_1$  and  $T_2$ , respectively.  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  represent the sampling time at initial and day 4.

To measure protein and starch, the cells were pre-treated via ultrasound at 1500 W, -4 °C for 30 min to break the cell-walls. Then, the solution was filtered with a 0.45  $\mu\text{m}$  cellulose acetate membrane to remove fragments. The filtrate was ready for intracellular protein and starch evaluation. A folin-phenol assay kit (Dingguo Changsheng Biotechnology, Beijing, China) was employed for protein analysis [29]. For the hydrolysis of starch, 30% perchloric acid was added to the filtrate and stirred at 25 °C for 15 min, the extracts were analyzed with the anthrone method [30].

#### Mitochondrial activity assay

The mitochondrial activity was determined with the 3-(4,5-dimethyl-2-thiazolyl)-2,5-diphenyl-2H-tetrazo-



**Fig. 1** *C. regularis* growth profiles (a), the cell growth rate (b), and DIP consumptions (c) when P concentrations were 5.4 mg L<sup>-1</sup> ( $N_{lim}^{P5.4}$ ), 25 mg L<sup>-1</sup> ( $N_{lim}^{P25}$ ), 45 mg L<sup>-1</sup> ( $N_{lim}^{P45}$ ), 150 mg L<sup>-1</sup> ( $N_{lim}^{P150}$ ), and 250 mg L<sup>-1</sup> ( $N_{lim}^{P250}$ ). Error bars represent standard deviations, which were obtained based on triplicate measurements

lium bromide (MTT) assay kit (Beyotime, Beijing, China) according to a previous publication [31]. Briefly, the cells were seeded to a 96-well plate ( $5 \times 10^5$  cells mL<sup>-1</sup>) and were incubated with fresh air ventilated (5% CO<sub>2</sub>), at

37 °C. After 48 h, 10 µL MTT (5 mg mL<sup>-1</sup>) was added to the wells for another 4 h of incubation. The absorbance of the culture was measured at 570 nm using a microplate reader (RT-6000, Rayto, China).

### Morphology and ultrastructure of cells

Microalgal cell morphology was observed via optical microscopy (BX53, Olympus, Japan) and scanning electron microscopes (SEM) (XL-30 FE-SEM, FEI Co., USA). The ultrastructure of the cell was observed with a transmission electron microscope (TEM) equipped with an energy dispersive X-ray spectrometer (EDX) (JEM 1200EX, JEOL, Japan). Prior to SEM and TEM observation, the cells were pretreated by a series of multiple fixative and dehydrated procedures [32, 33]. Before TEM–EDX analysis, the dehydrated cells should be embedded in epoxy resin (Epon812, Shell Chemical, USA) for cutting (Microtome, Leica UCT, Germany) and ultrathin sections were further stained with uranyl acetate [34].

### <sup>31</sup>P nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy (NMR)

The P-storage compounds in microalgal cells were extracted via the ice-cold HClO<sub>4</sub> method [14, 35], and then 10% D<sub>2</sub>O was added to provide a field-frequency lock. The <sup>31</sup>P NMR spectra were acquired at 400 MHz with a 5 mm probe using an NMR spectrometer (Vnmrs-300, Varian Co., USA). The acquisition time was 16 h at room temperature. MestReNova software 11 was used to analyze the peaks in the spectra, and the P compounds were identified by their chemical shifts based on the previously published spectra [35–37].

### X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS)

The binding energies of N1s and P2p were analyzed to investigate the character of the intracellular compounds via XPS (ESCALAB 250, Thermo, USA). The sample was the lyophilized powder of microalgal cells, which was obtained via the above-mentioned freeze-drying method. The beam source type was Al K Alpha, and it was operating at 250 W, a voltage of 15 kV, a current of 15 mA, an energy of 1486.71 eV; the sampling spot size was 500 µm in diameter and an electron takeoff angle of 50° was used. The binding energy was calibrated with reference to C1s at 284.8 eV in the spectra analysis with XPS Peak 4.1 software [38].

### Statistical analysis

P concentration effects were investigated based on triplicate cultivations, and then the statistical significances were analyzed using one-way ANOVA method. The mean values were compared using a least significant difference (LSD) test. Differences were significant when

$P < 0.05$ . All statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS software package (IBM SPSS statistic 20.0).

## Results and discussion

### Effect of P concentrations on *C. regularis* growth

The cell density of *C. regularis* was  $\sim 4.70 \times 10^7$  cell mL<sup>-1</sup> at the stationary stage when P supply was regular, N<sub>lim</sub>P5.4 (refers to the classic BG11), see Fig. 1a. The cell density was about 76% of that in NP5.4 [18], indicating that nitrogen limitation inhibited cell growth. Microalgal growth was stimulated when P was slightly excessive, i.e., the cell density increased by 10.2% for N<sub>lim</sub>P45 ( $P < 0.05$ ). A considerable number of previous studies reported that such a stimulation was caused by storage of excess P, under either autotrophic or heterotrophic cultivations [4, 14, 39, 40], where nitrogen was either limited or unlimited [41]. Excessive P induced improvements on supplying phospholipid, genetic materials, and energy for cell division [42, 43]. However, further increasing of the P supply could result in microalgal growth inhibition. The cell density decreased for N<sub>lim</sub>P150 and decreased as much as 38.8% for N<sub>lim</sub>P250, compared to the control (N<sub>lim</sub>P5.4) ( $P < 0.05$ ). In addition, the growth rate in Fig. 1b intuitively shows that the effects of P depended on its concentration ( $P < 0.05$ ). These results indicate that *C. regularis* growth was promoted when P was at an appropriate level; however, a large excess of P had a negative impact on the cells. This is a typical manifestation of hormesis [44, 45].

Glucose, nitrogen, and phosphorus uptake profiles were represented by COD, DIN, and DIP changing versus time, respectively, see Additional file 1: Fig. S1 and Fig. 1c. The organic and nutrient consumptions were consistent with the growth profiles: stimulated by low P concentrations ( $P \leq 4.49 \times 10^{-7}$  mg cell mL<sup>-1</sup>) and slowing down at high P levels ( $P \geq 14.97 \times 10^{-7}$  mg cell mL<sup>-1</sup>). It is worth mentioning that P (PO<sub>4</sub><sup>3-</sup>-P) was completely consumed within 4 days when P was in slight excess (less than 45 mg L<sup>-1</sup>); in contrast, a large amount of P (PO<sub>4</sub><sup>3-</sup>-P) remained for both N<sub>lim</sub>P150 and N<sub>lim</sub>P250 (Fig. 1c). These results implied that the capability of P storage reached a threshold, above which, P may cause microalgal cell damage.

### Effects of P concentration on lipid productivity

It seemed that P supply affected the carbon flow of the microalgal glucose metabolism. The lipid content enhanced by 22.9% for slightly excessive P (N<sub>lim</sub>P45) ( $P < 0.05$ ). However, lipid synthesis was significantly suppressed when *C. regularis* cells were inhibited by a large excess of P (N<sub>lim</sub>P250), whereas the lipid content decreased by 15.9% in comparison to the control (N<sub>lim</sub>P5.4) ( $P < 0.05$ ). For the cell density (Fig. 1a),



the highest lipid productivity of  $354.38 \text{ mg (L d)}^{-1}$  was achieved for  $N_{\text{lim}}P45$ , which increased by 39.3% in comparison to the control ( $P < 0.05$ ). However, the lipid productivity of *C. regularis* for  $N_{\text{lim}}P250$  was only 47.3% of  $N_{\text{lim}}P45$  and decreased by 34.2% in comparison to control ( $P < 0.05$ ). Accordingly, the intracellular protein and starch contents both positively correlated with P supply, as shown in Fig. 2a.

It has previously been reported that P enhances both microalgal lipid synthesis and production. P-replete favored the enzymes of the up-regulation of the lipid synthesis pathway [40] and could enhance the biomass production by activating phosphofructokinase and pyruvate kinase related glycolysis [46]. Here, for the first time, the toxicity of a large excess of P was addressed in microalgae. Excessive P dosage does not always increase the lipid production of microalgae under nitrogen limitation.

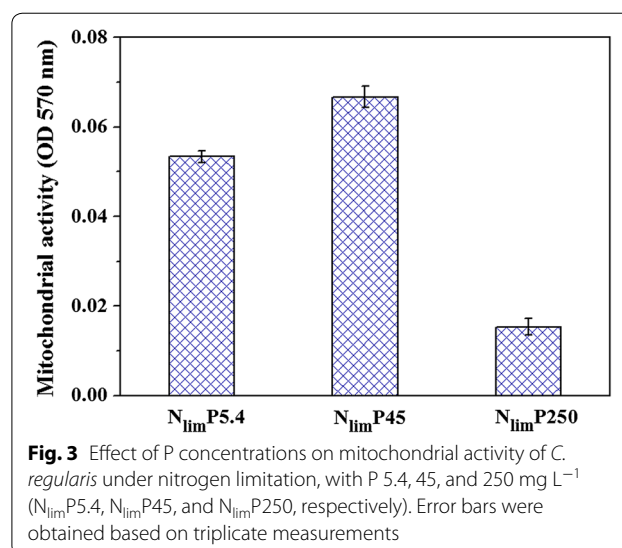
### Hormesis mechanism

#### Effect of P concentration on cell viability

Mitochondrial activity was used to study the microbial viability [31, 47], since more than 95% energy is generated in mitochondria, which are the “powerhouses” of the cell [48]. In this work, the trend of mitochondrial activity again supported P hormesis deduction, as shown in Fig. 3. Mitochondrial activity was stimulated and consequently increased by 25.0% ( $P < 0.05$ ), when P was only slightly excessive ( $N_{\text{lim}}P45$ ). However, it decreased as much as 71.3% for  $N_{\text{lim}}P250$  ( $P < 0.05$ ), indicating dysfunction of mitochondria due to the toxicity of the large excess of P.

#### Cell morphology and ultrastructure

Cell morphology and ultrastructure further corroborated the hormesis mechanism of P. *C. regularis* cells of

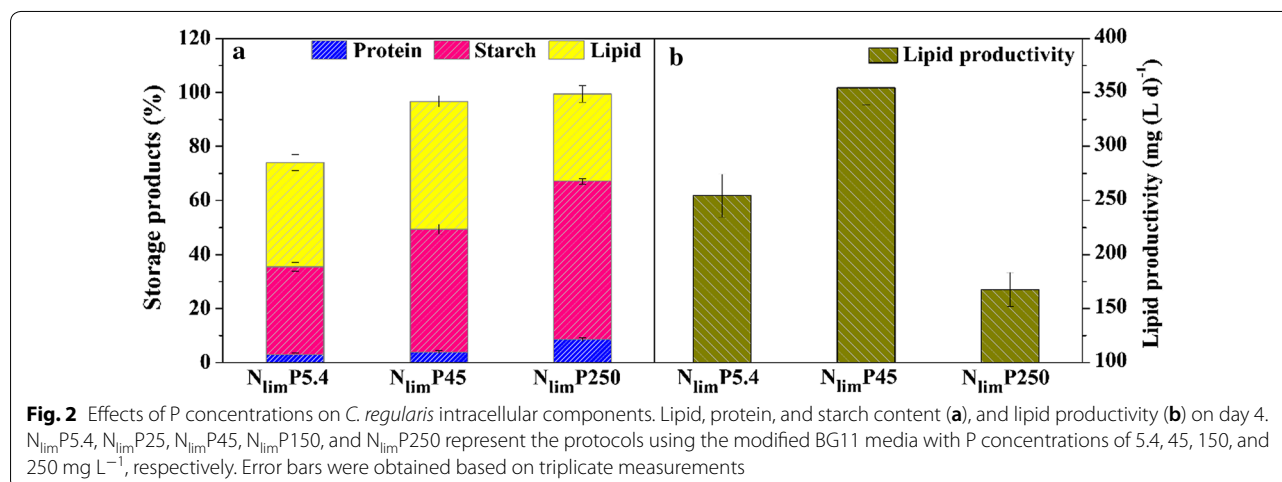


**Fig. 3** Effect of P concentrations on mitochondrial activity of *C. regularis* under nitrogen limitation, with P 5.4, 45, and  $250 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$  ( $N_{\text{lim}}P5.4$ ,  $N_{\text{lim}}P45$ , and  $N_{\text{lim}}P250$ , respectively). Error bars were obtained based on triplicate measurements

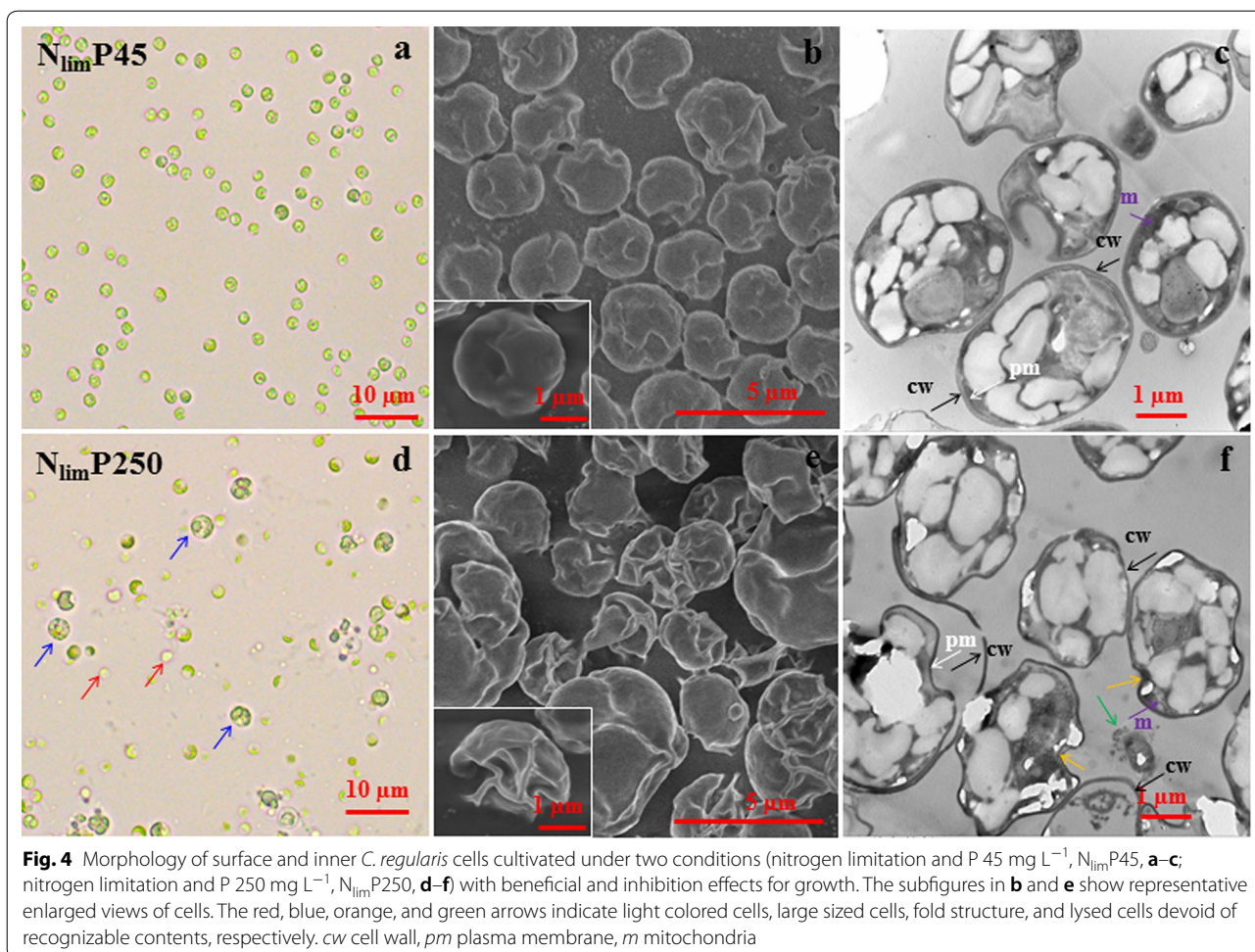
$N_{\text{lim}}P45$  had a round shape, integrated structure, and intact organelles (Fig. 4a–c). All of these characteristics were identical to control cells. In contrast, the cells became folded for  $N_{\text{lim}}P250$ , and several cells enlarged, reaching up to two- to three-fold of the size of the control (Fig. 4d, e). TEM images further showed that the cell walls thinned and even detached. Such damage of the plasma membrane and the following plasmolysis caused the described cell surface folding [49]. In addition, several organelles, such as mitochondria, were disordered when P was in large excess (Fig. 4f). These signs indicate targeted P poisoning of microalgal cells.

#### Intracellular P distribution and the role of polyphosphates

P distributions in *C. regularis* cells were different between stimulated ( $N_{\text{lim}}P45$ ) and inhibited ( $N_{\text{lim}}P250$ ) cell growth. P was mainly found in the intracellular



**Fig. 2** Effects of P concentrations on *C. regularis* intracellular components. Lipid, protein, and starch content (a), and lipid productivity (b) on day 4.  $N_{\text{lim}}P5.4$ ,  $N_{\text{lim}}P25$ ,  $N_{\text{lim}}P45$ ,  $N_{\text{lim}}P150$ , and  $N_{\text{lim}}P250$  represent the protocols using the modified BG11 media with P concentrations of 5.4, 45, 150, and  $250 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ , respectively. Error bars were obtained based on triplicate measurements

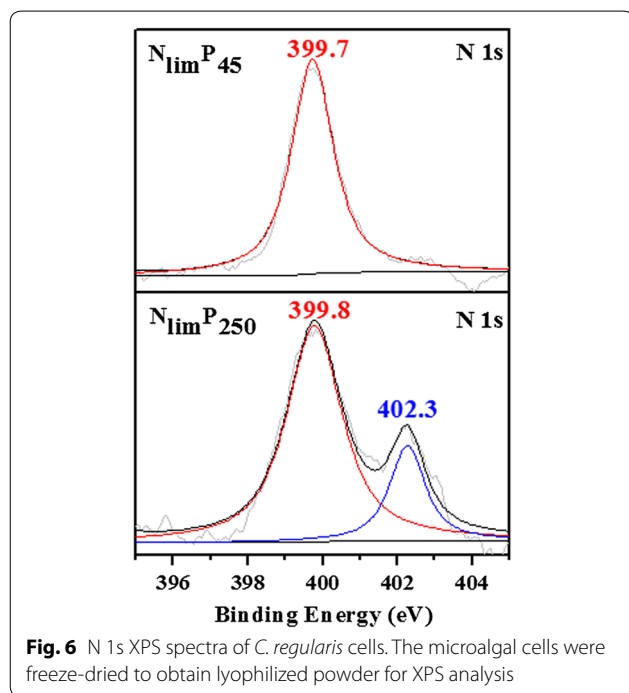
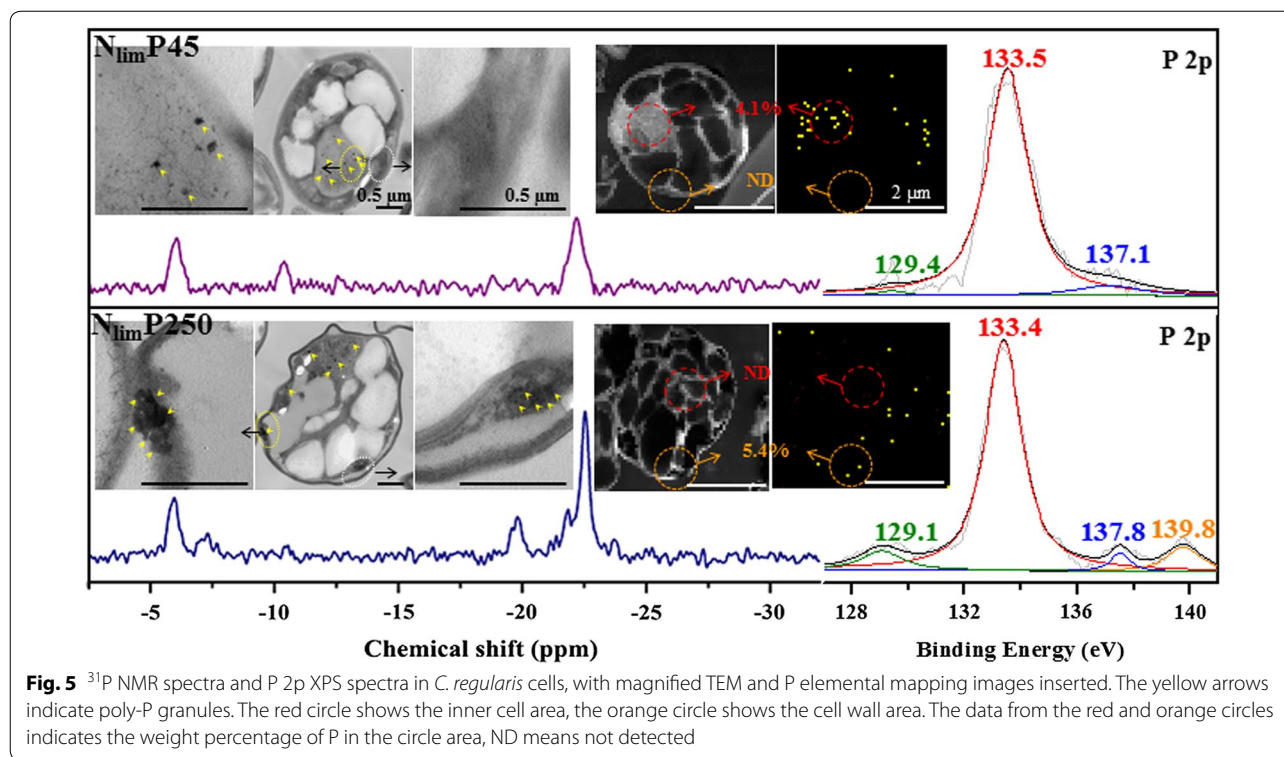


region for N<sub>lim</sub>P45 (4.13% in weight), while it was located at the cell periphery for N<sub>lim</sub>P250 (5.4% in weight), see Fig. 5. P in *C. regularis* formed poly-Ps (small black spots in TEM) in the cells for N<sub>lim</sub>P45, which were at the resonances in -5 to -7 and -17 to -22 ppm [35, 36] in the <sup>31</sup>P NMR spectra (Fig. 5). The poly-Ps also convinced by the peaks at 129.4 eV and 137.1 eV [50] in P 2p XPS spectra (Fig. 5). Poly-P served as an energy pool to stimulate cell division and metabolism [37].

However, the forms of poly-P became different when the excess poly-P was stored for *C. regularis* (N<sub>lim</sub>P250). The poly-Ps located near the cell periphery, which likely damaged both plasma membrane and cell wall (Fig. 5). In addition, mitochondria were disordered, as the peaks (-11.5 ppm) of ATP and NADH [35] almost disappeared in <sup>31</sup>P NMR spectra for N<sub>lim</sub>P250 (Fig. 5). This indicated that excess poly-Ps damaged the energy production process, which was consistent with the results on growth inhibition and mitochondrial activity decrement. Consequently, the excess poly-P accumulation disintegrated the thylakoid membranes and resulted the cell lysis and cell

death at the end [51]. Moreover, excess poly-P was able to form dinucleoside polyphosphates with similar structure to ATP and other essential mononucleotides; therefore, it was also toxic for cells and caused DNA damage in the intra-S phase [52].

Excess poly-P could bind to intracellular components and inhibit cell viability [18]. There were several new peaks at -7.7 ppm and -19.8 ppm in the <sup>31</sup>P NMR spectra, which indicated that the new form of P appeared for N<sub>lim</sub>P250 (Fig. 5). This was also confirmed by the peak at higher binding energy of 139.8 eV in the P 2p XPS spectra (Fig. 5), which represented the binding compounds of poly-P to intracellular components [18]. Furthermore, a new peak of protonated amide-N in protein at 402.3 eV [53, 54] appeared for N<sub>lim</sub>P250 (Fig. 6). It seems that the excess poly-P bonded to the proteins and resulted protonated amide-N, which affected the binding of the protein-ligand [55]. Thus, a major constraint in protein breakage and large cytoplasmic crevices appeared, followed by interfered interactions of protein subunits [55]. The changes on channel and transporter proteins



induced the across membrane process of ions and disordered small molecules [56]. In this way, membrane permeability was damaged and membrane proteins were disrupted [57].

## Conclusions

P presented a hormesis effects for microalgal cultivation. Slightly excessive P levels ( $\leq 45 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ ) stimulated *C. regularis* enhancement of growth (10.2%), lipid accumulation (22.9%), and mitochondrial activity (25.0%) via poly-P storage energy. The total lipid productivity increased by 39.3%. In contrast, large excess of P ( $P \geq 150 \text{ mg/L}$ ) poisoned *C. regularis* cells, which showed enlarged size, plasmolysis, deformation of cell walls, and disorganization of organelles. Both cell density and mitochondrial activity decreased by 38.8% and 71.3%, respectively, followed by a decrease of the final lipid productivity of 34.2%. The poisoning mechanisms are related to intracellular amide-N in protein protonation and the damage of the plasma membrane.

## Additional file

**Additional file 1: Fig. S1.** The COD and DIN consumptions during *C. regularis* growth with different P concentrations. Error bars represent standard deviation values, which were obtained based on triplicate measurements.

## Abbreviations

P: phosphorus; NADPH: reduced nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate; NADP: nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate; ATP: adenosine triphosphate; ADP: adenosine diphosphate; poly-P: polyphosphate; DNA:

deoxyribonucleic acid; RNA: ribonucleic acid; *C. regularis*: *Chlorella regularis*;  $N_{lim}$ : nitrogen limitation; COD: chemical oxygen demand; DIN: dissolved inorganic nitrogen; DIP: dissolved inorganic phosphorus; MTT: 3-(4,5-dimethyl-2-thiazolyl)-2,5-diphenyl-2H-tetrazolium bromide; SEM: scanning electron microscopes; TEM: transmission electron microscope; EDX: energy dispersive X-ray spectrometer; NMR: nuclear magnetic resonance; XPS: X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy.

#### Authors' contributions

DZ conceived of this study, LF analyzed the experiment data and drafted the manuscript, LF and DZ revised the manuscript, QL and GY carried out microalgal cultivation and collected the experiment data, QL performed statistical analysis, JCC provided useful suggestions for this study and manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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#### Availability of data and materials

Not applicable.

#### Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

#### Consent for publication

All the authors consent to publication.

#### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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