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Femtosecond Pulsed Laser Microscopy

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1 Biocompatible Label-free Detection of Carbon
2 Black Particles by Femtosecond Pulsed Laser
3 Microscopy

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20 KEYWORDS: Carbon black particles, label-free detection in aqueous environments, white
21 light emission, femtosecond pulsed laser illumination, human lung fibroblasts.

22 ABSTRACT While adverse health effects of carbon black (CB) exposure are generally
23 accepted, a direct, label-free approach for detecting CB particles in fluids and at the cellular
24 level is still lacking. Here, we report non-incandescence related white-light (WL) generation
25 by dry and suspended carbon black particles under illumination with femtosecond (fs) pulsed
26 near-infrared light as a powerful tool for the detection of these carbonaceous materials. This
27 observation is done for four different CB species with diameters ranging from 13 to 500 nm,
28 suggesting this WL emission under fs near-infrared illumination is a general property of CB
29 particles. As the emitted radiation spreads over the whole visible spectrum, detection is
30 straightforward and flexible. The unique property of the described WL emission allows
31 optical detection and unequivocal localization of CB particles in fluids and in cellular
32 environments while simultaneously co-localizing different cellular components using various
33 specific fluorophores as shown here using human lung fibroblasts. The experiments are
34 performed on a typical multiphoton laser-scanning microscopy platform, widely available in
35 research laboratories.

36

37 TEXT Carbon black (CB) consists of aciniform aggregates of primary particles with an
38 elemental carbon content greater than 97 %.^{1, 2} It is produced through well controlled
39 incomplete combustion of organics like heavy petroleum or vegetable oil. This distinguishes
40 CB from soot or black carbon, the unwanted by-product released during incomplete
41 combustion processes such as in the exhausts of diesel engines and one of the main
42 contributing factors to atmospheric particulate pollution.^{2, 3} Nonetheless, due to the
43 (physico)chemical similarity CB is widely used as a model compound for soot.^{4, 5} The total
44 global black carbon emission was estimated to be approximately 8.5 million tons after having
45 constantly increased throughout the preceding decade.⁶⁻⁸ As a consequence of the increasing

46 environmental and occupational exposure to these carbonaceous particles, deeper insight into
47 the (eco-) toxicological impact of these materials is of critical importance.

48

49 So far however, no experimental methods have been reported that enable direct detection of
50 carbon black/black carbon in relevant samples such as polluted water and consumer products
51 as well as exposed cells and body fluids. To date, only measurements⁹⁻¹¹ in polluted air (see
52 reference 9 for an overview) such as absorption photometry and laser induced incandescence
53 (LII) have been used to determine particle concentrations or alternatively labeling methods¹²⁻
54 ¹⁴ have been explored such as the technetium-99-m radionuclide labeling in epidemiological
55 studies and toxicology research.

56

57 In LII, the emission from carbonaceous materials has been linked to black-body radiation
58 from the severely heated CB particles,¹⁵ *i.e.* incandescence. Already various models have
59 been proposed to explain the origin of incandescence and its dependence on illumination
60 power and pulse duration.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Recently, substantial scientific efforts have focused on white
61 light (WL) emission from carbonaceous materials including graphene¹⁹, fullerenes²⁰ and
62 carbon nanotubes²¹. Also for these materials the emitted radiation has been linked to
63 incandescence. However, visible emission from CB particles in solution and biological matter
64 has so far not been sufficiently explored, despite reports of CB suspensions serving as optical
65 limiters and nonlinear scatterers due to their broadband and flat absorption.^{16, 17} The
66 interpretation of these effects is not straightforward as they strongly depend on the
67 experimental conditions.²² Recently, luminescence of carbon particles has been described but
68 this phenomenon seems to be limited to carbon nano-dots, *i.e.* carbon nanoparticles with sizes
69 below 10 nm.^{23, 24}

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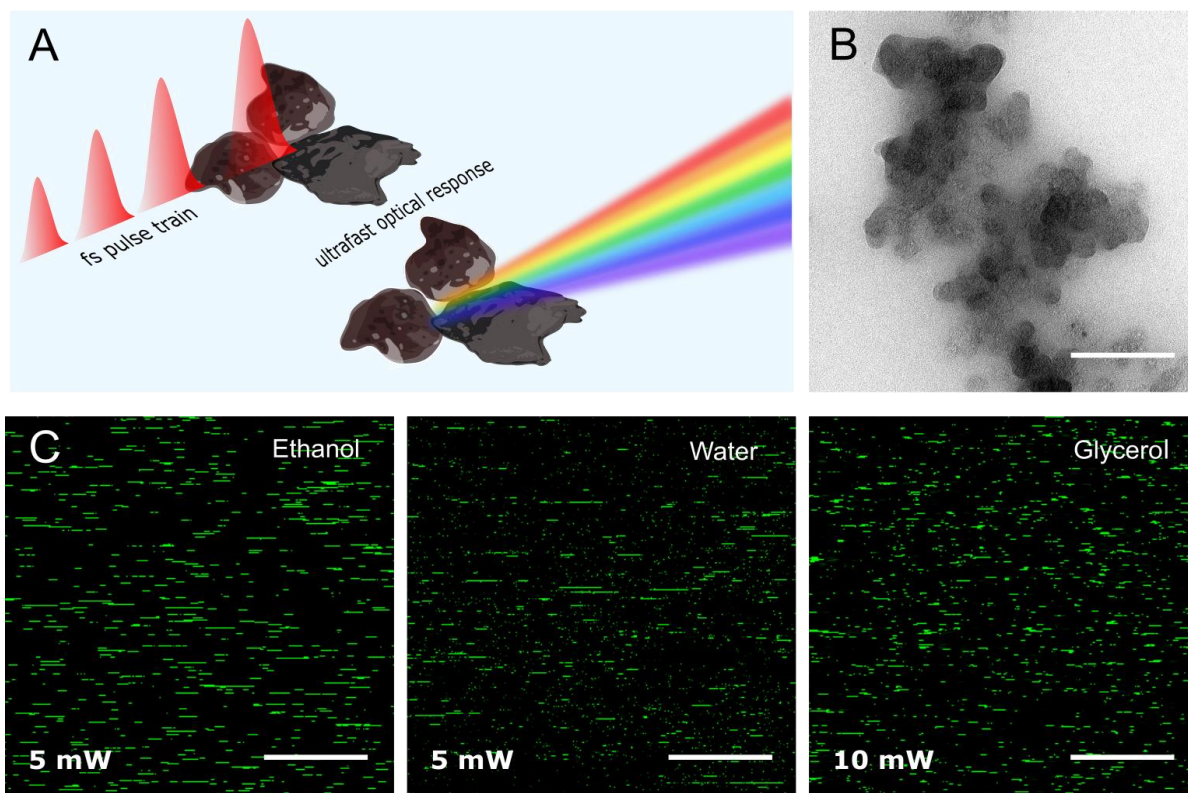
71 To the best of our knowledge, we report here for the first time non-incandescence related WL
72 emission of CB particles in aqueous environments under femtosecond pulsed illumination
73 using a multiphoton laser-scanning microscope and demonstrate its potential in a biological
74 context. This label-free approach to directly visualize CB offers additional advantages
75 (schematic representation in Figure 1A) such as inherent 3D sectioning and high imaging
76 depths owing to the multiphoton approach. We anticipate that this method will play an
77 important role in health related studies where the impact and role of CB particles is to be
78 assessed at the organism, tissue, cellular and subcellular level.

79

80 In this study a variety of carbonaceous particles, representative for those to which humans are
81 typically exposed, is used ranging from powders used in copy machines to materials that are
82 typically employed as model for soot. Information on the physico-chemical characteristics of
83 these different commercial CB materials (ufPL, ufP90, CCB and fCB) can be found in Table
84 S1 in the supplementary information (SI). According to manufacturer's data, the aerodynamic
85 diameter of the particles varies between 13 and 500 nm. Transmission electron microscopy
86 (TEM) images (Figure 1B and S1) show the typical appearance of CB consisting of aciniform
87 aggregates of primary carbon particles with arbitrary shape. These TEM images and the
88 results from dynamic light scattering summarized in Table S1 show that CB particles
89 aggregate when suspended in aqueous solutions, and absorb corona proteins from the
90 complete medium onto their surface resulting in an increased hydrodynamic diameter and a
91 zeta-potential corresponding to approximately -20 mV regardless of their native potential. In
92 conclusion, the physico-chemical characteristics of the different CB particles in suspension
93 are similar although when selecting the particles we aimed for as much difference as possible.

94

95



96

97 **Figure 1.** (A) Schematic representation of the illumination and emission process of CB
 98 particles for the presented detection method. (B) TEM image of an ufPL aggregate. Scale bar:
 99 300 nm. (C) CCB (600 $\mu\text{g}/\text{mL}$) imaging in ultrapure water, ethanol and glycerol at room
 100 temperature upon illumination with 5 or 10 mW average laser power at the sample (excitation
 101 810 nm, 80 MHz). Scale bars: 15 μm . Emission band: 450 – 650 nm.

102

103 Figure 1C displays CB suspended in ultrapure water, ethanol and glycerol illuminated with a
 104 femtosecond laser at 810 nm (150 fs, 80 MHz) and recorded using a commercial multiphoton
 105 laser-scanning microscope (detailed information on sample preparation and microscopy
 106 modalities can be found in SI). Intense signals were detected with an emission band pass
 107 filter of 450 to 650 nm in front of the detector. Depending on the suspension medium, the
 108 laser power needs to be adjusted to generate similar emission intensity: in glycerol and
 109 immersion oil the illumination power was about twice that of the experiment in ethanol or
 110 water (SI, Figure S2). Note the horizontal smearing of the CB particles in Figure 1C (pixel

111 dwell time of 1.60 μ s, pixel size of 220 nm). This phenomenon is observed at all
112 combinations of scan speeds and zooms (data not shown), suggesting susceptibility of the
113 particles to optical trapping under these conditions. This hypothesis is further supported by
114 the absence of this smearing when CB particles are embedded in polydimethylsiloxane
115 (Figure S3). Trapping by femtosecond laser pulses has already been shown for other types of
116 nanoparticles.^{25, 26}

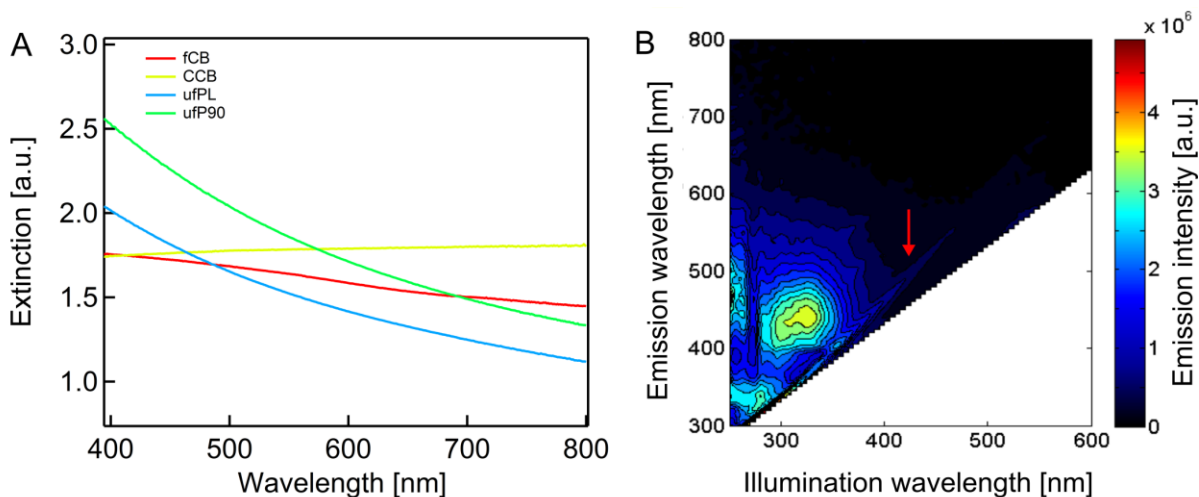
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118 Additional spectroscopic measurements were performed to investigate the observed visible
119 light emission under femtosecond near-infrared illumination.

120

121 Firstly, we rule out photoluminescence (PL) reported for very small carbonaceous particles
122 (below 10 nanometer)^{23, 24, 27} as a cause of the observed emission. Carbonaceous particles, in
123 particular soot, consist of aggregated particles that are heterogeneous in nature²⁸ and
124 therefore contain multiple absorbing species possibly responsible for radiative transitions.
125 The extinction spectra of aqueous suspensions of the CB particles considered here cover the
126 whole visible range (Figure 2A), presumably due to a continuum of electronic states in the
127 amorphous carbon. The slight increase of the extinction towards lower wavelengths for the
128 two smaller particles (ufPL and ufP90) is likely due to increased light scattering.

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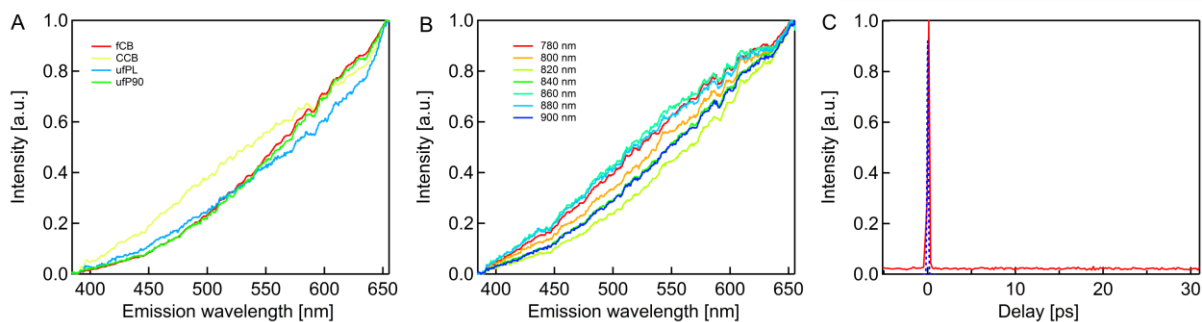
131 **Figure 2.** (A) Extinction spectra of aqueous CB suspensions. (B) Two-dimensional
 132 excitation-emission plot of ufPL particles in water under single photon excitation with a false
 133 color map based on the emission intensity in arbitrary units. The red arrow points towards the
 134 Raman line of water.

135

136 Two-dimensional single photon excitation-emission plots (Figure 2B) of ufPL (similar plot
 137 for fCB: SI, Figure S4) however, show only weak emission; note in comparison the weak
 138 Raman line (red arrow) of water, the suspension medium. The luminescence under excitation
 139 in the ultraviolet (UV) region (280 – 380 nm) looks similar to the observations described by
 140 Kwon *et al.* for carbon nano-dots^{29, 30} and hints towards micro-crystalline graphite exhibiting
 141 only a low number of tetrahedral sp^3 -sites³⁰⁻³² which is also confirmed by Raman spectra (SI,
 142 Figure S5 and Table S2).

143

144



145

146 **Figure 3.** (A) Normalized WL emission spectra of aqueous CB particle suspensions using
 147 femtosecond 810 nm laser illumination (8 mW, 150 fs, 80 MHz). (B) Normalized WL
 148 emission spectra of aqueous ufP90 suspensions recorded at different femtosecond
 149 illumination wavelengths. (C) Temporal response of aqueous carbon suspension measured by
 150 femtosecond photoluminescence up-conversion experiments. Also shown is the instrument
 151 response function (dashed line).

152

153 In contrast to single photon excitation, illumination with femtosecond pulsed near-infrared
 154 light (810 nm, 150 fs, 80 MHz) generates a strong, feature-less white light emission
 155 stretching the whole visible spectrum (Figure 3A and B). This observation was made for all
 156 four types of aqueous CB suspensions used in this study and even for dry particles (SI, Figure
 157 S6). This WL emission is independent of the illumination wavelength within the range of 780
 158 to 900 nm for a constant average power of 8 mW at the sample (Figure 3B, see also SI,
 159 Figure S7).

160

161 While PL as visible in Figure 2B cannot explain the strong WL emission observed under
 162 femtosecond illumination (Figure 1C, 3A and B), time-resolved investigations are indicative.
 163 Using time correlated single photon equipment, an instantaneous nature of the WL radiation
 164 is noticed when looking at the picosecond timescale (SI, Figure S8). Also in femtosecond up-
 165 conversion experiments with a higher temporal resolution the emitted signal of the CB

166 particles is witnessed to be instantaneous (Figure 3C). On further note, illumination with 7 ps
167 pulses results in a strongly reduced luminescence intensity (SI, Figure S9). The WL emission
168 from the suspended CB particles is therefore only efficiently triggered by femtosecond
169 illumination with high peak electromagnetic fields and once the femtosecond illumination
170 pulse ceases, the WL emission terminates immediately.

171
172 The instantaneous nature of the observed signal confirms that we are not dealing with
173 incandescence despite using laser illumination with fluences of about 0.05 J/cm² at 0.1 nJ
174 pulse energy, similar to previous experiments. In those reports, the observed incandescence
175 showed clear decay times in the microsecond time scale regime³¹ due to the cooling down of
176 the lattice at these time scales. In fact, heating of the particle lattice, which is required for
177 incandescence, only occurs on a picosecond time scale when remaining non-emitted energy
178 will be converted into lattice vibrations.³²⁻³⁴ The femtosecond illumination employed here is
179 too fast.

180
181 The observed instantaneous WL emission is also not related to local refractive index changes
182 in the CB nanoparticle environment upon pulse arrival. Gold nanoparticles are for example
183 known to form nanometer-sized bubbles when illuminated with pulsed lasers at laser
184 fluencies similar to those applied here.^{31, 35} and those have been observed leading to broad
185 featureless WL emission.³⁵⁻³⁸ If a related principle would be underlying the observed WL
186 emission in CB suspension, the emission spectra would be strongly influenced by the
187 surrounding refractive index. However, even dry particles show the same spectral profile as
188 those suspended in water (SI, Figure S6).

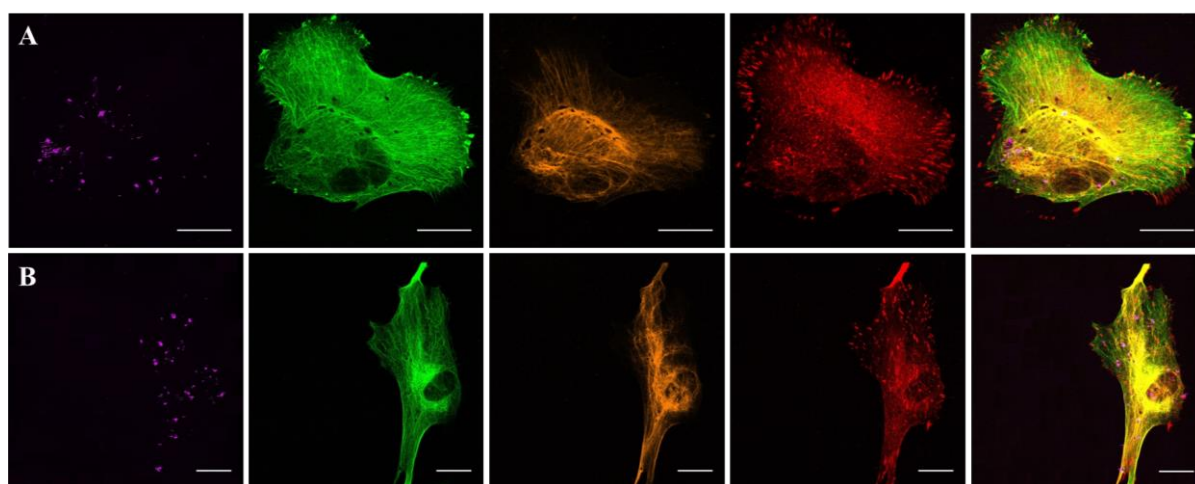
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190 We believe that the observed visible light emission under femtosecond near-infrared
191 illumination is related to the broad anti-Stokes emission with non-linear power dependence
192 that was previously observed by other groups for noble metal nanoparticles. In those
193 experiments, the emission arose from femtosecond illumination of gold and silver particles or
194 nanostructures.³⁹⁻⁴² We can confirm that also the WL emission of CB displays a nonlinear,
195 second order response with respect to the incident power (SI, Figure S10). The WL emission
196 of gold was recently succinctly investigated by Haug *et al.*⁴³ Here, plasmonic confinement of
197 electric fields in metal along with the small dimensions of the emitting particle can
198 presumably relax symmetry selection and momentum conservation rules to allow for
199 (continuous) intraband dipole transitions, which would otherwise be impossible. The
200 observed emission is independent of the type of metal and the preparation conditions. Even
201 though carbon particles are not metallic in nature and do not show plasmonic modes in the
202 visible or near UV spectral range (see Figure 2A), an electron gas could emerge on arrival of
203 a femtosecond pulse. At very high energies, even plasmons or plasmon-like effects have been
204 discovered with electron energy loss spectroscopy in carbon nanotubes and its parent material
205 graphene⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶ or in graphitic spheres⁴⁷. Buckminsterfullerene⁴⁸ and other carbonaceous
206 materials⁴⁹ show strong multiphoton ionization. The intense and spectrally broad absorption
207 of the particles could give rise to this phenomenon, promoting resonant multiphoton
208 transitions leading to ionizations.⁵⁰ Therefore, consecutive intraband transitions similar to
209 those noticed in plasmonically active metals could be a valid explanation for the observed
210 results.

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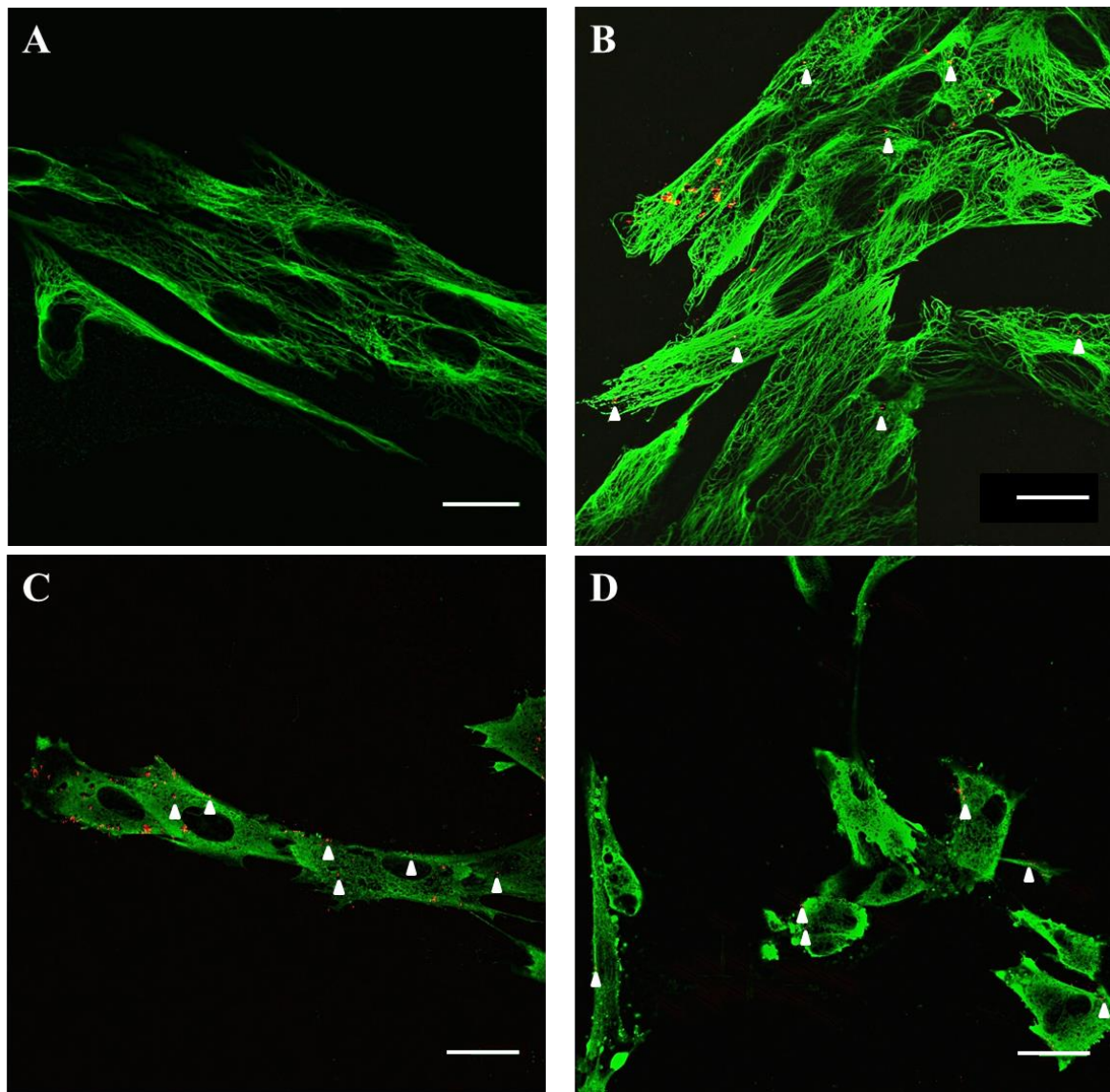
212 As a result of visible WL generation by carbon black particles under femtosecond pulsed
213 near-infrared illumination, the signal of the particles can easily be combined with various
214 conventional contrast-enhancing fluorophores used to visualize biological features. As shown

215 in Figure 4, the emitted WL can be probed at different wavelengths at laser powers
216 compatible with life cell imaging. Hence, CB detection can be combined with the imaging of
217 cellular compartments stained by different color-label fluorophores (labeling strategy can be
218 found in SI). This simultaneous detection enables unequivocally localization of the particles
219 inside the cells and puts the CB location directly into its biological context.
220



221
222 **Figure 4.** Imaging of cellular compartments of fixed MRC-5 cells stained with commonly
223 utilized fluorophores and in combination with the detection of CCB particles (4 h incubation
224 of $5 \mu\text{g}/\text{cm}^2$ CCB at 37°C prior to imaging). Emission of the carbonaceous particles can be
225 probed at different wavelengths, here shown at (A) 400 – 410 nm in the non-descanned mode
226 and (B) 650 – 710 nm in descanned mode (4 mW average laser power at the stage). From left
227 to right: CCB particles, tubulin cytoskeleton (Ex/Em 495/519 nm, $\sim 3 \mu\text{W}$ radiant power at
228 the sample), vimentin which is an intermediate filament protein of the cytoskeleton (Ex/Em
229 555/565 nm, $\sim 3 \mu\text{W}$ radiant power at the sample), paxillin expressed at focal adhesions
230 (Ex/Em 650/665 nm, $\sim 3 \mu\text{W}$ radiant power at the sample), and overlay image. Scale bars:
231 25 μm .
232

233 To further illustrate the versatility of the technique in a biological setting, a co-localization
234 study of the tubulin cytoskeleton of MRC-5 lung fibroblasts and engulfed carbon particles
235 was performed (Figure 5). The images show a clear impact of CCB on the architecture of the
236 tubulin cytoskeleton of the cells for an incubation that exceeds four hours at 37 °C. More
237 specifically, the supporting cytoskeleton network evolves from the commonly observed fiber-
238 like structure to a partial diffuse and holey configuration. The cytoskeletal alteration is also
239 reflected in the overall morphology of the cells. Their appearance changed from the normal
240 bipolar and stretched morphology to a smaller and more irregular shaped one, which is an
241 indication of apoptosis (these biological findings are also true for the other smaller CB
242 particles, for an additional example with uFP90, see SI, Figure S11).⁵¹⁻⁵³ These images do not
243 only pinpoint the versatility in biological settings but also immediately indicate the social
244 relevance and significance of this detection technique. Potential advantageous information
245 arising from this simultaneous detection comprise the correlations that can be made between
246 the location of the particles and the altered cellular structure (*e.g.*, cytoskeleton and focal
247 adhesions). This makes the observed WL emission an extremely interesting label-free
248 detection mechanism for biomedical research including toxicology and epidemiology.
249



250

251 **Figure 5.** Tubulin cytoskeleton (green, Ex/Em 495/519 nm, $\sim 3 \mu\text{W}$ radiant power at the
 252 sample) of normal human lung fibroblasts incubated with $5 \mu\text{g}/\text{cm}^2$ CCB particles (red, 4 mW
 253 average laser power at the sample, emission detection: 400 – 410 nm in non-descanned
 254 mode) at 37°C . (A) Control cells. (B) 4 h incubation. (C) 8 h incubation. (D) 24 h incubation.
 255 Scale bars: 30 μm . Arrow heads: some locations of very small, engulfed CCB particles.

256 To conclude, femtosecond pulsed illumination of CB followed by detection of emitted WL is
 257 a straightforward approach without the need of particular sample pretreatment and which can
 258 easily be implemented in multiphoton imaging experiments. The nature of the signal makes it
 259 very versatile in terms of choice of additional fluorophores. The ease of the reported

260 approach broadens the potential applicability in the fast growing field of nanotechnology.
261 Additionally, it will advance epidemiological and toxicological studies since this is the first
262 time a technique is described to directly detect carbon black in a biological setting without
263 any additional treatment or labeling required. We anticipate that this technology will make it
264 possible to screen human tissues and body fluids for the presence of CB owing to the
265 multiphoton approach which results in inherent 3D sectioning and high imaging depths. This
266 may eventually lead to valuable information about, for example, the actual uptake and
267 clearance of CB particles by the human body.

268 ASSOCIATED CONTENT

269 **Supporting Information**

270 Detailed methods and supplemental figures. This material is available free of charge via the
271 Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

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276 **Author Contributions**

277 ‡These authors contributed equally in the performance of the experiments. H.B., C.S., M.R.
278 and M.A. jointly designed and analyzed the experiments. H.B. and C.S. performed most of
279 the experiments. E.F. performed the femtosecond fluorescence up-conversion experiments.
280 E.S. assisted with the time correlated single photon counting. J.D. made the transmission
281 electron microscopy images. H.U. and Y.F. gave their technical support during spectral data
282 collection. M.V. gave theoretical support. The manuscript was written through contributions
283 of all authors. All authors have given approval to the final version of the manuscript.

284 **Notes**

285 The authors declare no competing financial interests. Patent application about the described
286 findings was filed on 12/01/2016 in the UK [patent application number 1600564.7].

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