Dendritic excitability primarily controls overdispersion

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A neuron's input-output function is commonly understood in terms of the fluctuation-driven and mean-driven regimes. Here we investigate how active dendrites falling in either regime shape the input-output function and find that dendritic input primarily controls interspike interval dispersion, a prediction that is validated with dual patch clamp recordings. This phenomenon can be understood by considering that neurons display not two, but three fundamental operating regimes, depending on whether dendritic spikes or the somatic input reach threshold.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding computation within neuronal networks relies crucially on grasping how the inputs to a neuron affect its output [1–6]. The input-output function is assumed to produce i) firing-frequency increasing monotonically with input intensity and ii) concomitantly decreasing interspike interval dispersion as measured through the coefficient of variation (CV) [7–9]. These properties arise from a transition between two fundamentally different regimes: the fluctuation-driven regime where CV is high but firing frequency is modest and the mean-driven regime where firing frequency is high but the CV is low [7–9]. Yet, this view of the input-output function remains an assumption, one that is based on the predominance of the integrative properties of the cell body [10, 11].

Nonlinear properties of dendrites are expected to profoundly influence the input-output function [12, 13]. Calcium or NMDA spikes are widespread mechanisms that implement such nonlinear properties in both excitatory and inhibitory neurons [14–20]. These dendritic spikes can be triggered by synaptic inputs and cause a plateau-like depolarization at the soma. The role of these dendritic spikes is thought to be in modulating the gain of the soma-based input-output function [21]. Other efforts have established an additive modulation by dendritic inputs that have been transformed nonlinearly as in an artificial neural network [22–26] (with possibly non-monotonic activation functions [27, 28]). However, both the additive and gain modulations are thought to be weak in the presence of background fluctuations [21, 24]. Alternatively, dendrites may alter the input-output function less in terms of the firing frequency (the f-I curve), and more in terms of the patterns of interspike intervals (that is, the CV-I curve). Consistently, large calcium spikes in the apical dendrites of layer 5 thick tufted pyramidal cells control the generation of burst of action potentials [15, 29], which shapes the dispersion of intervals. The ability of dendritic inputs to shape the dispersion of interspike intervals is thought to be pivotal to biological solutions of the credit-assignment problem, but limited to a specific cell type [30–33].

To determine if more widespread types of dendritic activity may also alter CV-I curve, we study the integrative properties of dendrites and the soma in the presence of noise by extending cable theory [34] with features of generalized integrate and fire models [35–38]. We find that dendritic excitability readily and profoundly influences output dispersion. Contrary to dendrite-less models, we find that input intensity to both the dendrites and the soma can increase the CV. This phenomenon arises for a wide range of dendritic excitability parameters. Unlike the effect on firing frequency, the effects on dispersion occur at low inputs. These observations can be understood by considering whether dendritic spikes in the soma lie in the mean- or in the fluctuation-driven regime. As a consequence, we separate three fundamental regimes: i) the Cox-process regime where dendritic spikes make on average subthreshold depolarizations in the soma, ii) the burst-like regime where dendritic spikes systematically cross the threshold for somatic action potentials, iii) the mean-driven regime where the mean somatic input lies above threshold. To test the prediction that dendritic control of CV does occur in dendrites, we re-analyze previously published experimental data [21]. This comprehensive perspective of neuronal input-output functions has implications for the credit-assignment problem [31, 32], for the control trial-to-trial variability [39, 40], pairwise correlations [41] and how attractor networks can reach highly dispersed firing states [8, 42].

RESULTS

We consider a ball-and-stick model consisting of a cell body connected to a uniform dendrite. Dendritic spikes could affect the soma and the soma can generate back-propagating action potentials in the dendrite (Fig. 1a, see Methods). We focus on dendritic input that are electrotonically distant from the cell body so that it does

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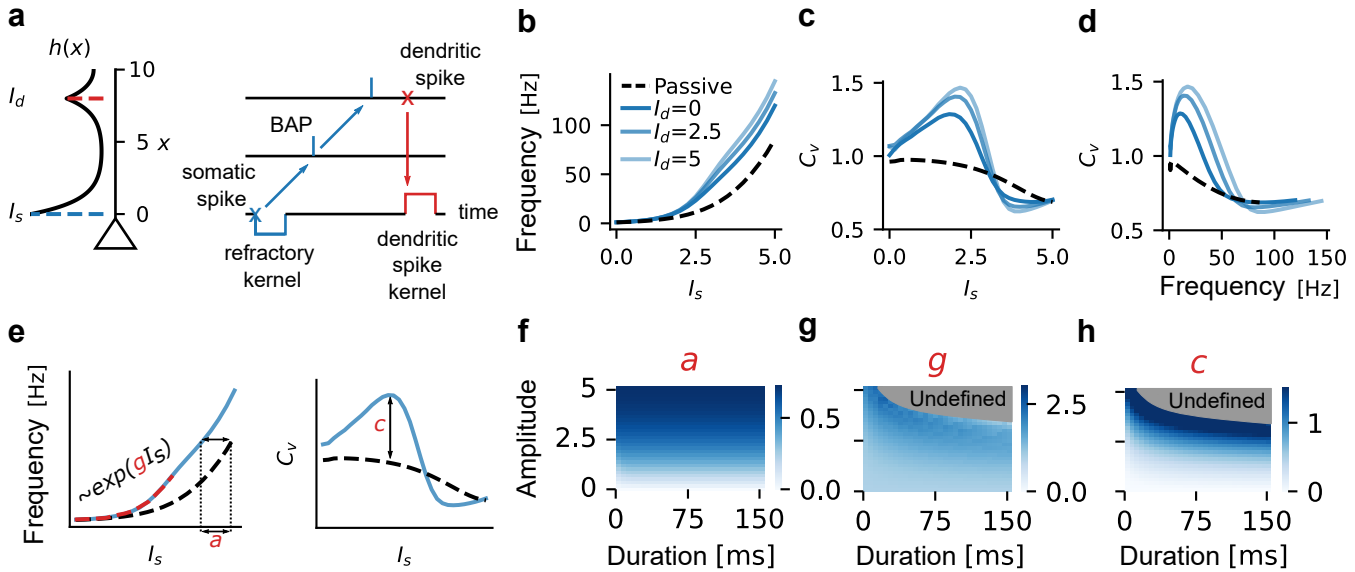

FIG. 1. Dendritic input controls overdispersion. **a** Left: Stationary input potential resulting from the Green's function of a ball-and-stick model receiving localized input currents at the soma ($x = 0, I_s = 5$) and in the dendrite ($x = 8, I_d = 5$). Right: Schematic illustration of spike-triggered effects. A somatic spike causes a refractory period in the soma and a backpropagating action potential (BAP) along the dendrite. A dendritic spike creates a short-lived depolarization in the soma. **b** Firing rate and **c** coefficient of variation against somatic input current for three dendritic input strengths. The black dashed line shows corresponds to the absence of dendritic spikes. **d** CV against firing frequency for three dendritic input strengths. **e** Schematic of the parametrization of dendritic input modulation in terms of the shift (a) and gain (g) of the f-I curve, as well as overdispersion (c). **f-h** Heatmaps of the effect on shift (f), gain (g) and overdispersion (h) for different amplitude and duration of the dendritic spikes. The undefined region in (g) and (c), corresponds to a region where our definitions of gain and dispersion break down (see Methods).

not affect the cell body directly. We compute the firing rate for stationary inputs in the presence of noise. Input intensity is varied independently at the soma and in the dendrite (Fig. 1b). The resulting f-I curves are modulated by the strength of dendritic inputs in two fundamental ways. Firstly, the f-I curves may shift by an amount that scales with dendritic input strength, consistent with dendrites acting additively such as in hierarchical neural network [13, 24, 26]. Secondly, the gain of the f-I curve may increase slightly with dendritic input, consistent with a role of dendritic spikes in gain modulation [21, 43].

The coefficient of variation (CV) is routinely used to summarize the degree of dispersion of the interspike interval distribution. Two factors contribute to this dispersion: 1) noise, which disperses intervals to reach CV=1, and 2) switching between states of high and low frequency, which can at times appear as sporadic bursting and allows CV to reach overdispersed regimes (CV>1 [44]). In a point neuron [7, 8], the absence of excitability in the dendrites produces CVs that are smaller or equal to one, that monotonically decrease with the strength of somatic input, and that remain independent of the strength of distant inputs (Fig. 1c-d). In the presence dendritic excitability, however, the CV shows overdispersion in a manner controlled by the strength of dendritic and somatic inputs. The CV-I relationship becomes non-monotonic as increases in somatic input strength increase dispersion. Strikingly, the most salient part of the CV modulation occurs for more moderate somatic inputs than both gain and additive modulation.

To establish if this phenomenon is expected to be widespread, we perform extensive sweeps over the parameters regulating dendritic excitability. We focused on the amplitude and duration of dendritic spikes as seen in the soma (Fig. 1e-h). For each set of parameters, we compute the additive modulation, the gain modulation, and the CV modulation (see Methods). CV modulation occurs on a wide range of parameters, and is stronger for moderately large dendritic spike amplitudes and durations. CV modulation co-occurs with gain modulation. Additive modulation is solely controlled by dendritic spike amplitude. Overall, we find that CV modulation by dendritic inputs occurs for a large range of parameters, and is thus expected to take place whenever dendrites can perform additive or gain modulation.

How can we understand the non-monotonic relationship between CV and I? In point neuron models, the transition between high and low degrees of dispersion is understood in terms of the transition between fluctuation- and mean-driven regimes. In the fluctuation-driven regime, the mean input is below threshold and firing arises from fluctuations. In the mean-driven regime, a regular interval is imposed by the mean of the input.

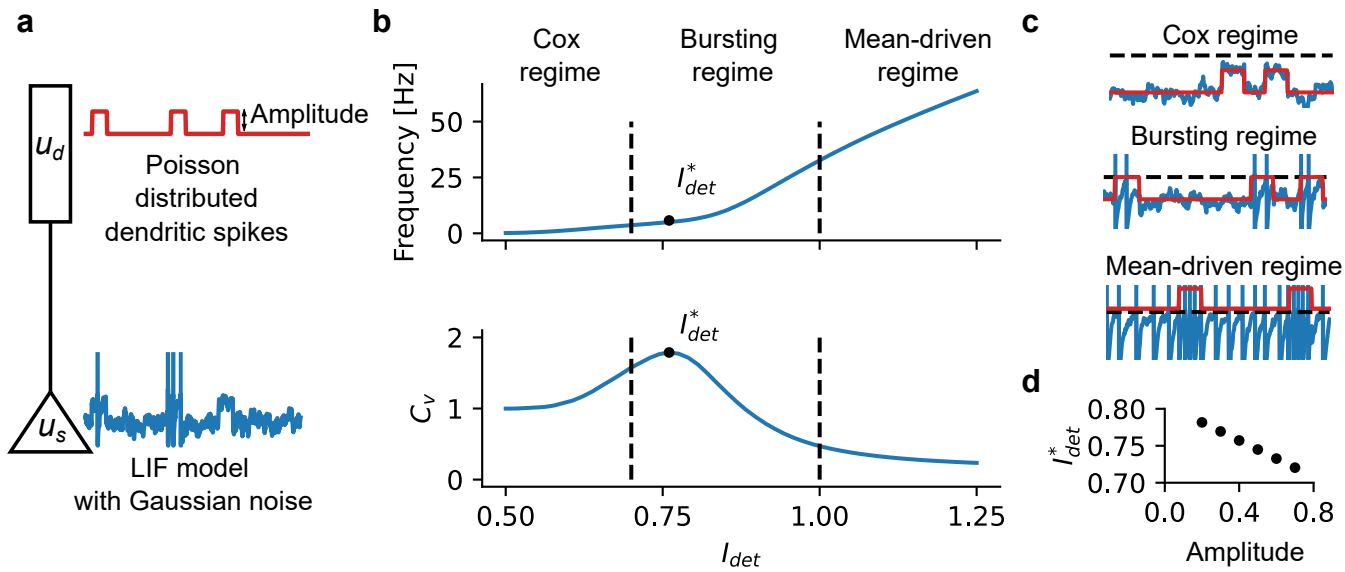

FIG. 2. Three operational regimes. **a** Schematic of two-compartment model with noisy input injections. **b** f-I and CV-I curves highlighting the transition between three operational regimes: Cox regime where mean input plus dendritic spike amplitude is below threshold, Bursting regime where mean input plus dendritic spike amplitude is above threshold, Mean-driven where average input alone is above threshold. **c** Voltage traces corresponding to the three regimes.**d** The strength of the somatic input associated with the peak CV (I^*_{det}) shown against amplitude of the dendritic spike.

Dendritic spikes, perceived as sustained depolarizations, can similarly either reach the threshold or not, depending on the mean somatic input and the amplitude of dendritic spikes. To illustrate this in a simple model, we simulate a two-compartment model with leaky integrate and fire dynamics (Fig. 2a-b). When the mean somatic input was low such that dendritic spikes remain subthreshold, an increase of the dispersion was achieved by switching between two states having high variability of interspike intervals (a Cox process; Fig. 2c). When the somatic input was sufficiently strong, dendritic spikes will often cross the threshold leading to more regular intervals in one of the two states (inducing burst-like events; Fig. 2d). As the mean somatic input increases, it forces the dendritic spikes to cross threshold and thus switches the Cox-process to a burst-like process. Higher somatic input continues to decrease the CV by entering the mean-driven regime (Fig. 2e). According to this theory, the transition between the Cox-process regime and the burst-like regime depends on the amplitude of the dendritic spike as seen from the soma. We verified that increasing the amplitude of dendritic spikes decreases the somatic current for which CV is maximum (Fig. 2f). Thus, the input-output function of a neuron can be separated in three fundamentally distinct regimes with distinct dependence on somatic and dendritic inputs (Fig. 2c): i) a Cox-process regime where neither dendritic spikes nor the mean input reach threshold in the absence of fluctuations, ii) a burst-like regime where dendritic spikes reach threshold in the absence of fluctuations but the mean somatic input does not, and iii) a mean-driven regime where the mean is above threshold.

There arise one core prediction: CV of interspike intervals should increase when mean input to dendrites is increased. This effect is likely to be observed more strongly at lower firing rates. To test this prediction, we use previously published dual patch clamp experiments with noisy current injection simultaneously in the soma and the apical dendrite [21]. Fig. 3 shows both the f-I curves and the CV-I curves for increasing mean dendritic inputs. While a combination of gain and additive modulation is visible from the f-I curves, the CV-I curves show that increasing dendritic inputs increases the CV at low firing rates, verifying this core prediction. Another prediction is that for a neuron in vivo, synaptic input to the dendrite should reach higher dispersion than current injection to the cell body. This has been observed in visual cortex [39] where current stimulation in vivo has been compared with sensory stimulation. Together, the dendritic control of overdispersion is an experimentally observed phenomenon that is likely to take place whenever plateau-like dendritic spikes affect the cell body.

DISCUSSION

We have shown that a primary role of dendritic excitability of distal segment of dendrite is to induce and control the interval dispersion of responses. We found that the fluctuation-driven regime can be separated into two distinct regimes. In the Cox-process regime, the somatic input controls interval dispersion, increasing dispersion with increasing input strength with little or no change in the firing frequency. In the burst-like regime,

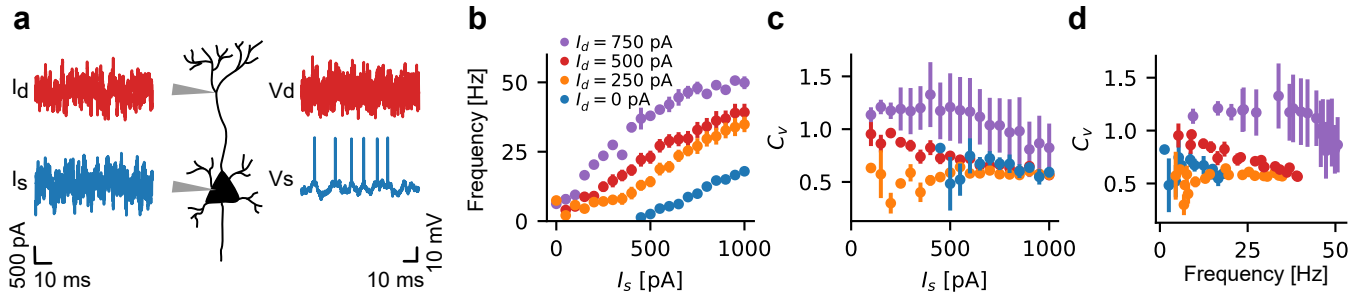

FIG. 3. Experimental validation. **a** Schematic of experiment [21]: dual patch clamp was performed and noisy current current were injected in the soma and the apiccal dendrite. **b** Time-averaged firing rate is shown against the mean strength of the somatic input for four levels (0, 250, 500, 750 pA) of dendritic input (blue, orange, red, purple, respectively). **c** CV as a function of somatic and dendritic input strength (same color code as a). **d** CV against mean activity for the four levels of dendritic input. Error bars represent the standard error.

interval dispersion is mostly controlled by the strength of dendritic inputs.

Multiplexing, whereby somatic and dendritic inputs are both encoded in the response features of the neuron [30], is expected to be more reliable in the burst-like regime than the Cox-process regime, as dendritic spikes being closer to threshold increases the probability of a producing a burst. This suggests that the principle of multiplexing as a solution to the credit-assignment problem [31] can be extended to cell subtypes not only with large-amplitude calcium spikes, but with small-amplitude NMDA-spikes as well. However, because multiplexing is expected to be less reliable in this regime, larger ensemble sizes or additional mechanisms may be required to accurately decode the noisier multiplexed signals.

Overdispersion is widely observed in cortex [39, 45], even in conditions of sustained firing [46]. A barrage of Poisson inputs that balances excitation and inhibition can generate overdispersion but this yields an input noise that is excessively large [9]. A similar problem is known to occur when attempting to explain the high dispersion of intervals in the attractor state: network dynamics can produce high interval dispersion for persistent activity, but it requires unrealistic parameter tuning [3, 42]. Further work is required to determine the extent to which dendritic excitability leads to a new phenomenology of attractor states. The effects described in this article also suggest a potent effect on metrics related to CV: trial-to-trial variability as quantified with the Fano factor [40] and noise correlations [41].

METHODS

A stochastic spatio-temporal model with active dendrites. We consider a spatio-temporal membrane potential, $V(x,t)$, arising from a combination three different processes: 1) membrane potential resulting from passive integration of inputs $h(x)$, 2) spatio-temporal effects of a somatic action potential at time $\hat{t}$, and 3) of a dendritic action potential at time t' and location x'. These three processes are added linearly to give,

$$V(x,t) = h(x) + \eta_s(x, t-\hat{t}) + \eta_d(x-x', t-t'). \quad (1)$$

In general, the input potential along a passive dendrite $h(x,t)$ is given by the cable equation,

$$\frac{\partial h(x,t)}{\partial t} = \frac{\partial^2}{\partial x^2} h(x,t) - h(x,t) + I(x,t). \quad (2)$$

Where x and t are dimensionless variables for space and time respectively. The scaling from variables $(\tilde{x}, \tilde{t})$ with proper dimensions is given by, $x = \frac{\tilde{x}}{\lambda}$, and $t = \frac{\tilde{t}}{\tau}$. Where $\lambda = \frac{r_T}{r_L}$ is the characteristic electronic length scale given by the ratio between the transversal current per unit length r_T and the longitudinal current per unit length r_L. The characteristic time scale, τ, is given by the product of r_T and the capacitance per unit length c, $\tau = r_T c$. In eq. (2), the external input current $I(x,t)$ has been scaled to have the same units as $h(x,t)$, with the scaling from proper units $\tilde{I}$ given by $I = r_T \tilde{I}$.

For a spatially detailed but temporally stationary input $I(x)$, the solution to equation (2) is given by the convolution,

$$h(x) = \int_0^L G_{0,L}(x_0; x) I(x_0) dx_0, \quad (3)$$

where $G_{0,L}(x_0; x)$ is called the Green's function. For a passive cable of length L it can be found explicitly [34],

$$G_{0,L}(x_0; x) = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{n=-\infty}^{\infty} e^{-|x-2nL-x_0|} + e^{-|x-2nL+x_0|}. \quad (4)$$

Therefore, given an arbitrary input current $I(x)$, we can determine the input potential $h(x)$ for equation (1) using equations (3) and (4). In Fig. 1a, $h(x)$ is shown for an input of $I(x) = I_s\delta(x) + I_d\delta(x-8)$, where $\delta(x)$ is the Dirac delta function.

The kernel $\eta_s(x,t)$ in equation (1) captures the stereotypical effects of refractoriness and adaptation [35, 37] at the soma, and the effect of the backpropagating action

potential in the dendrites [15, 47, 48]. We let the somatic kernel correspond to a simple rectangular refractory period combined with a back-propagating action potential modelled as a traveling depolarizing pulse. Specifically, a somatic spike at time $\hat{t}$ changes the membrane potential by,

$$\eta_s(x, t-\hat{t}) = \begin{cases} -R\Theta(\Delta_R - (t-\hat{t})) & x = 0 \\ B\delta(v_B(t-\hat{t}) - x) & x > 0, \end{cases} \tag{5}$$

where $\Theta(x)$ is the Heaviside step function, R is the amplitude of the refractory period, Δ_R is the refractory period duration, B is the amplitude of the backpropagating action potential, and v_B is the speed of the backpropagating action potential.

Similarly, the kernel $\eta_d(x,t)$ in equation (1) captures the stereotypical effects of having emitted a dendritic spike. We note that most of the dendritic spikes do not have a stereotypical spatio-temporal effect on the neuron, since both calcium and NMDA spikes display variable durations [14, 18, 49]. This formulation is, therefore, an approximation corresponding to an average time-course and spatial extent. To simplify the dynamics of the neuron model, we assume that influence of the dendritic spike at the soma is instantaneous and independent of the dendritic spike location x' and we neglect the local effects of the dendritic spike. Therefore, we model the influence of the dendritic spike at the soma as a rectangular pulse with amplitude D and duration Δ_D. A dendritic spike at location x' and time t' thus changes the membrane potential by,

$$\eta_d(x, t-t') = \begin{cases} D\Theta(\Delta_D - (t-t')) & x = 0 \\ 0 & x > 0. \end{cases} \tag{6}$$

To be complete, the neuron model requires conditions for the emission of somatic and dendritic action potentials. Although these can be deterministic, we seek a stochastic description in order to take into account the variability of ion channels, synaptic transmission and network activity. As in previous descriptions [11, 35, 37], we take the instantaneous hazard rate for emitting a somatic spike to be an exponential readout of the membrane potential at the soma,

$$\lambda_s(t|x', t', \hat{t}) = \lambda_s e^{\frac{(V(0,t)-\phi)}{\beta}} \tag{7}$$

where λ_s defines the baseline firing rate at threshold ϕ, and β scales the noise of the stochastic emission. For dendritic spike emission, we take the hazard rate at location x and time t to be a rectified linear function of the membrane potential along the dendrite,

$$\lambda_d(x, t|\hat{t}) = \lambda_d[V(x,t)]_+, \tag{8}$$

where $[V]_+ = 0$ if $V) \leq 0$ and $[V]_+ = V$ if $V > 0$.

To simplify the survivor function of our neuron model, which will be derived in the next section, we assume that the soma forgets the effect of the last dendritic spike after each new somatic spike. That is, the somatic hazard function only depends on the last somatic spike $\lambda_s(t|\hat{t})$ if $t' < \hat{t}$, but also depends on the last dendritic spike $\lambda_s(t|x', t', \hat{t})$ if $t' > \hat{t}$. This can be thought of as the effect of the dendritic spike disappearing immediately after each somatic spike because of the reset of the membrane potential. For clarity, from this point forward we differentiate between these hazards by defining the initial somatic hazard rate $\lambda_{s0}(t|\hat{t})$ for $t' < \hat{t}$, and the conditional somatic hazard rate $\lambda_{s0}(t|x', t', \hat{t})$ for $t' > \hat{t}$.

Using equations (3), (5), and (7), we define the initial somatic hazard rate to be,

$$\lambda_{s0}(t|\hat{t}) = \lambda_s e^{\left(h(0) - R\Theta(\Delta_R - (t-\hat{t}))\right)}, \tag{9}$$

where we have absorbed the threshold ϕ into the constant $\lambda_s e^{-\frac{\phi}{\beta}} \to \lambda_s$ and the parameters I_s, I_d, R, and D have been scaled by $\frac{1}{\beta}$, making them dimensionless variables. Similarly, using equations (3), (5), (6), and (7), we define the conditional somatic hazard rate to be,

$$\lambda_s(t|x', t', \hat{t}) = \lambda_s e^{\left(h(0) - R\Theta(\Delta_R - (t-\hat{t})) + D\Theta(\Delta_D - (t-t'))\right)}. \tag{10}$$

Lastly, using equations (3), (5), and (8), we define the dendritic hazard rate to be,

$$\lambda_d(x, t|\hat{t}) = \lambda_d \left[h(x) + B\delta\left(v_B(t-\hat{t}) - x\right)\right]_+. \tag{11}$$

Dendritic renewal theory. To derive the stationary firing rate A_∞ (which we refer to as the frequency in the figures and main text) and coefficient of variation C_v for an ensemble of neurons with active dendrites, we use the firing conditions of the neuron model defined by equations (9), (10), and (11) and adapt renewal theory [38, 50] to a spatio-temporal event generation model.

Given the survivor function of a renewal process, $S(t|\hat{t})$, which gives the probability that the neuron model hasn't fired a spike up and until time t given the last spike occurred at time $\hat{t}$, we can calculate the stationary firing rate,

$$A_\infty = \left[\int_{\hat{t}}^{\infty} S(t|\hat{t})dt\right]^{-1}, \tag{12}$$

and the coefficient of variation of the inter-spike-interval (ISI) distribution,

$$C_v = \frac{\sqrt{2\int_{\hat{t}}^{\infty} tS(t|\hat{t})dt - \left[\int_{\hat{t}}^{\infty} S(t|\hat{t})dt\right]^2}}{\int_{\hat{t}}^{\infty} S(t|\hat{t})dt}. \tag{13}$$

Therefore, our goal is to derive an approximation of $S(t|\hat{t})$ for our neuron model, which we call the marginal

somatic survivor function, as the dependence on dendritic firing will be marginalized out.

To determine $S(t|\hat{t})$, we use the hazard functions from equations (9), (10), and (11) to define three survivor functions. The dendritic survivor function $S_d(t|\hat{t})$, the initial somatic survivor function $S_{s0}(t|\hat{t})$, and the conditional somatic survivor function $S_s(t|x', t', \hat{t})$. Which are given by,

$$S_d(t|\hat{t}) = e^{-\int_{\hat{t}}^{t}\int_0^L \lambda_d(v,s|\hat{t})dvds}, \tag{14}$$

$$S_{s0}(t|\hat{t}) = e^{-\int_{\hat{t}}^{t} \lambda_{s0}(s|\hat{t})ds}, \tag{15}$$

and

$$S_s(t|x', t', \hat{t}) = e^{-\int_{t'}^{t} \lambda_s(s|x',t',\hat{t})ds}. \tag{16}$$

Given the dendrite is free to spike an arbitrary number of times during each somatic ISI and the somatic hazard function is momentarily increased following each dendritic spike, the marginal somatic survivor probability will depend on the probability of all possible future dendritic spikes occurring during the somatic ISI. Therefore, the marginal somatic survivor function can be obtained by path integration. That is, adding up all the possible paths through which the soma survives from $\hat{t}$ up to time t without firing a spike. However, the full path integral is intractable for even simple choices of dendritic and somatic hazard rates, so we consider the case where there is at most one dendritic spike during each somatic ISI. This can be thought of as an approximation where the dendritic firing rate is less than or equal to the somatic firing rate. With this additional assumption, the marginal survivor probability can be written as,

$$S(t) = S_d(t)S_{s0}(t) + \int_{\hat{t}}^{t}\int_0^L P_d(v,s)S_{s0}(s)S_s(t|v,s)dvds. \tag{17}$$

Where we have dropped the dependence on $\hat{t}$ to simplify notation and we have introduced $P_d(x', t')$, which is the spatio-temporal dendritic interval distribution, given by $P_d(x', t') = \lambda_d(x', t')S_d(t')$. The first term $S_d(t)S_{s0}(t)$ can be interpreted as the probability that both the soma and the dendrite independently surviving until time t given the last somatic spike was at $\hat{t}$. The second term $P_d(x', t')S_{s0}(t')S_s(t|x', t')dx'dt'$ is the probability that the soma and the dendrite both survive up until time t', the dendrite fires a spike at (x', t'), and then the soma survives until time t given the dendritic spike occurred at (x', t'). The integral then runs over all possible dendritic spike locations x' and times t'. To include the possibility of more dendritic spike occurring during the somatic ISI, additional terms can be added to equation (17), integrating over all combinations of dendritic spike times.

Leaky integrate-and-fire neuron with dendritic spikes. We model a leaky integrate-and-fire neuron with white noise somatic input and dendritic spikes acting as stochastic increases in membrane potential. The somatic membrane potential is given by the stochastic differential equation,

$$\tau_m \frac{du_s(t)}{dt} = -u_s(t) + I_{det} + \xi(t), \tag{18}$$

where $\xi(t)$ is a white noise input with $< \xi(t) >= 0$ and $< \xi(t)\xi(t') >= \sigma^2\tau_m\delta(t-t')$. I_{det} is a constant deterministic input. Dendritic spikes occurring at times t_d^f were distributed according to a Poisson process with rate λ_d. Each dendritic spike then caused a temporary increase in the membrane potential, $u_d(t) = \sum_f D\left(\Theta(t - t_d^{(f)}) - \Theta(t + \Delta_D - t_d^{(f)})\right)$. Where D is the amplitude and Δ_D is the duration of the dendritic spike. Somatic spike times t_s were recorded whenever $u_s(t_s) + u_d(t_s) \geq 1$. Then $u_s(t)$ was reset to zero the following time step, $u_s(t_s + dt) = 0$.

Numerical methods In Fig. 1b-d, the input is given by $I(x) = I_s\delta(x) + I_d\delta(x-8)$ along a dendrite of length $L = 10$. The somatic input I_s and dendritic input I_d levels were varied and numerical integration was used to find A_∞ and C_v using equations (12) and (13). The membrane time constant was assumed to be $\tau_m = 10$ ms. The other neuron model parameters were fixed to be, $\{R = 1, \Delta_R = 10\text{ms}, \Delta_D = 20\text{ms}, v_B = 2, B = 1, \lambda_s = 0.01, \lambda_d = 0.1\}$. For the case of an active dendrite, the dendritic spike amplitude was set to be $D = 2$, while the amplitude was set to $D = 0$ for the case of a passive dendrite.

In Fig. 1f-h, simulations to obtain the f-I and CV-I curves were repeated with the same parameters, expect the dendritic spike amplitude D and duration Δ_d were also varied and the dendritic current was fixed to be $I_d = 2.5$. The additive component, a, as shown in Fig 1e and Fig 1f, was defined as the absolute change in I_s, between the active and passive condition, required for the f-I curve to reach 80 Hz. As a result of the dendritic spike, the log transformed f-I curve in the active condition could be captured by a piece-wise linear function given by,

$$\ln A_\infty = \begin{cases} g_1 I_s + (\alpha - g_1 I_{s0}) & I_s < I_{s0} \\ g_2 I_s + (\alpha - g_2 I_{s0}) & I_s \geq I_{s0}. \end{cases}$$

The f-I gain, g, was then defined to be the slope of the first linear line, $g = g_1$, during the active condition. During the passive condition, the slope was approximately linear for all values of I_s. As both the amplitude D and duration Δ_D of the dendritic spike increased, the two slopes merged, $g_1 \approx g_2$, causing our definition of g_1 to be undefined in the large amplitude and duration regime (Fig. 1g). The max coefficient of variation modulation, c, was defined as as the maximum difference in C_v between the active and passive conditions. For large amplitude

D and duration Δ_D, the peak C_v in the active condition moves to negative values of the somatic input current I_s, which we did not include in our simulation. Therefore, we label this region as undefined, as we did not measure the peak in this regime.

Experimental methods Electrophysiological data was previously published [21]. Briefly, parasagittal slices of neocortex were prepared from young adult Wistar rats (P26-43). Recordings were performed at 34°C, targeting L5 pyramidal cells of the somtosensory cortex. Cells were chosen if their apical dendrites could be followed far enough to establish that the dendritic tree was intact. Patch electrode (5-10 MΩ for soma, 7-15 MΩ for dendrites) were made with an electrode puller (Sutter, USA, Model P-97). One electrode was always placed on the cell soma while simultaneously placing another electrode on the apical dendrite (445-719 μm from the soma). Pipettes were filled with a solution containing (in mM): potassium gluconate 105, KCl 30, HEPES 10, $MgCl_2$ 2, MgATP 2, Na_2ATP 2, GTP 0.4 at pH 7.3. Naturalistic inputs were generated according to an Ornstein-Uhlenbeck process with correlation length of 3 ms and a noise amplitude of $\sigma = 300$ pA. The mean of the somatic current injection started at $I_s = 0$ pA and was increased in steps of $\Delta I_s = 50$ pA which lasted for a duration of 2 s. With a total number of 20 steps. Experiments with this stepped somatic current injection were repeated with mean dendritic current injections of, $I_d = (0, 250, 500, 750)$ pA.

Data analysis Experimental estimates of the single neuron firing rates and coefficient of variation were obtain by calculating the ISIs for each pair of somatic and dendritic mean input current. Each input level lasted 2s, allowing us to approximate the steady-state distribution. The firing rate of neuron i was then given by,

$$\hat{A}_i = \frac{1}{\mu_{T_i}}, \tag{19}$$

and the coefficient of variation of neuron i was given by,

$$\hat{C}_{vi} = \frac{\sigma_{T_i}}{\mu_{T_i}}. \tag{20}$$

Where μ_{T_i} is the mean of the ISI distribution for for neuron i for a particular input pair, and σ_{T_i} is the standard deviation. In Fig. 3b-d, we reported the average over $\hat{A}_i$ and $\hat{C}_{vi}$, with errors bars representing the standard error in the mean.

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