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Thermally and pH-responsive Hydrogels for Enhanced Protein Capture and Release

Underhill Ponsaerts*

Department of Immunologylogy, University of Fukui, 23-3 Matsuoka-Shimoaizuki, Eiheiji, Fukui 910-1193, Japan

Introduction

In the realm of biomaterials, gels have gained considerable attention due to their unique ability to undergo reversible transitions in response to external stimuli, such as temperature and pH. These stimuli-responsive gels, also known as smart gels, are particularly attractive for applications in biotechnology, drug delivery, biosensors, and protein purification. Among these, thermo- and pH-responsive gels have shown great potential in enabling efficient protein adsorption and desorption, making them indispensable in various bioengineering processes [1]. The interaction between proteins and these responsive gels is governed by the dynamic changes in the gel's structure and properties, which are triggered by environmental factors like temperature and pH. By fine-tuning these external conditions, it becomes possible to control the protein binding and release, offering numerous advantages in the areas of protein purification, therapeutic protein delivery, and enzyme immobilization. This article explores the development, mechanisms, and applications of thermo- and pH-responsive gels in protein adsorption and desorption processes [2].

Description

Thermo-responsive gels are materials that undergo reversible phase transitions in response to temperature changes. Typically, these gels are composed of polymers that exhibit Lower Critical Solution Temperatures (LCST) or Upper Critical Solution Temperatures (UCST). At the LCST, the polymer undergoes a transition from a swollen, hydrated state to a collapsed, dehydrated state, whereas at the UCST, the reverse transition occurs. The thermoresponsive behavior of gels is often based on the presence of hydrophilic and hydrophobic groups within the polymer structure, which govern the gel's solubility and swelling behavior in different temperature environments. Commonly used thermo-responsive polymers include poly(N-isopropylacrylamide) (PNIPAm), poly (ethylene glycol) (PEG), and poly(vinyl caprolactam). These polymers are capable of undergoing reversible transitions between the swollen state (where the polymer chains are hydrated and extended) and the collapsed state (where the polymer chains become hydrophobic and contract). This transition is highly sensitive to temperature changes, which can be exploited for controlling protein adsorption and desorption [3].

pH-responsive gels, also known as polyelectrolyte gels, respond to changes in the pH of their surrounding environment. The pH sensitivity arises from the presence of ionizable groups such as carboxyl, amino, or sulfonate groups in the polymer structure. These functional groups can become protonated or deprotonated depending on the pH, which results in changes in the gel's swelling behavior, charge density, and hydrophilicity. At low pH, protonation of the acidic groups (e.g., carboxyl groups) leads to a more swollen, hydrated state, while at high pH, deprotonation occurs, leading to a more compact, dehydrated state. This change in the gel structure affects the protein adsorption capacity, as proteins can be attracted or repelled based on the surface charge and electrostatic interactions between the gel and the protein molecules. The use of pH-responsive gels for protein adsorption and desorption is particularly advantageous for systems where the protein's stability and activity are sensitive to pH variations. These gels can be used to selectively adsorb proteins under certain pH conditions and then release them under different pH conditions, offering a mechanism for controlled protein separation, purification, and delivery [4].

In some cases, gels can be engineered to respond to both temperature and pH simultaneously, resulting in dual-responsive gels. These materials exhibit more complex and customizable behavior, where both the temperature and pH changes can be used to regulate protein adsorption and desorption. Dual-responsive gels combine the features of both thermo-responsive and pH-responsive systems, allowing for more precise control over protein behavior. For example, a dual-responsive gel might swell at low temperature and low pH, but collapse and release proteins when exposed to a higher temperature or higher pH. This dual responsiveness is advantageous in applications where both temperature and pH fluctuate, such as in the body or in industrial bioprocesses. Dual-responsive gels provide greater flexibility in tuning the release profiles of biomolecules and proteins and can be used to improve the efficiency of separation and purification processes. The efficiency of protein adsorption and desorption from thermo- and pH-responsive gels depends on several factors, including the nature of the gel, the type of protein, and the environmental conditions. The underlying mechanisms of protein adsorption and desorption involve various interactions such as electrostatic forces, hydrophobic interactions, hydrogen bonding, and van der Waals forces [5].

Conclusion

Thermo- and pH-responsive gels represent a versatile and promising class of materials for controlling protein adsorption and desorption. These gels respond to environmental changes such as temperature and pH, allowing for reversible protein binding and release. The mechanisms governing protein adsorption and desorption include electrostatic, hydrophobic, and van der Waals interactions, and the efficiency of these processes can be tuned by adjusting the gel's properties and external conditions. The unique features of thermo- and pH-responsive gels have led to numerous applications in biotechnology, including protein purification, drug delivery, and enzyme immobilization. As research continues to develop, the potential for these smart materials in advanced biomedical and industrial processes remains vast. With the ability to fine-tune protein behavior through temperature and pH control, these gels are poised to become indispensable tools in a wide array of applications, from personalized medicine to sustainable industrial biocatalysis.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

***Address for Correspondence:** Underhill Ponsaerts, Department of Immunologylogy, University of Fukui, 23-3 Matsuoka-Shimoaizuki, Eiheiji, Fukui 910-1193, Japan, E-mail: ponsaertsundershill@il.jp*

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