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Dual Activity of Ag-Doped TiO2 Gels and Osteoporotic Implant Interface Responses

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Abstract

The clinical longevity of orthopedic implants in osteoporotic patients is frequently compromised by two primary failure modalities: insufficient osseointegration due to low bone density and the development of implant-associated infections. This paper investigates the dual functional capability of silver-doped titanium dioxide (Ag-doped TiO2) sol-gel coatings to address these concurrent challenges. We synthesized nanostructured TiO2 gels with varying concentrations of silver ions to evaluate their physicochemical properties, antibacterial efficacy against Staphylococcus aureus, and osteogenic potential using osteoporotic animal models. The study focuses on the interfacial responses, specifically analyzing how the release kinetics of silver ions interact with the compromised biological environment typical of osteoporosis. Our results indicate that a controlled doping level achieves a critical balance, significantly reducing bacterial colonization through the release of reactive oxygen species while simultaneously preserving osteoblast viability and promoting mineralization. The surface topography modifications induced by the sol-gel process further enhance the mechanical interlocking at the bone-implant interface. These findings suggest that Ag-doped TiO2 gels represent a promising surface modification strategy for next-generation implants designed for patients with compromised bone quality.

Keywords

Osteoporosis, Titanium Dioxide, Silver Doping, Osseointegration, Antibacterial

1.Introduction

The demographic shift toward an aging population has precipitated a significant rise in the prevalence of osteoporosis, a systemic skeletal disorder characterized by low bone mass and microarchitectural deterioration of bone tissue. Consequently, the demand for orthopedic and dental implants in osteoporotic patients has surged. However, the rehabilitation of these patients remains a formidable clinical challenge due to the compromised regenerative capacity of osteoporotic bone. The interface between the implant and the host bone is the critical zone where failure most often originates. In healthy bone, titanium implants generally demonstrate high success rates; however, in osteoporotic conditions, the imbalance between osteoblastic formation and osteoclastic resorption leads to poor initial stability and delayed osseointegration [1]. This fragility creates a window of susceptibility where the implant is vulnerable to mechanical loosening and fibrous encapsulation. Compounding the issue of poor fixation is the risk of implant-associated infections. The presence of a foreign body reduces the minimum inoculum of bacteria required to trigger an infection, and the compromised vascularity often associated with elderly osteoporotic patients further hinders immune surveillance at the surgical site. Bacterial colonization, primarily by species such as Staphylococcus aureus and Staphylococcus epidermidis, can lead to the formation of biofilms that are resistant to systemic antibiotics. Once a biofilm is established on the implant surface, surgical revision is frequently the only recourse, resulting in significant morbidity and

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healthcare costs. Therefore, there is an urgent need for implant surfaces that possess dual functionality: the ability to actively deter bacterial adhesion and the capacity to stimulate osteogenesis in a low-density bone environment. Surface modification of titanium has emerged as a primary strategy to enhance bioactivity. Titanium dioxide (TiO2) naturally forms on titanium surfaces and is responsible for its biocompatibility. However, the native oxide layer is often too thin and smooth to induce optimal biological responses. Sol-gel processing offers a versatile method to produce thicker, porous TiO2 coatings with controlled nanotopography that can mimic the structure of natural bone extracellular matrix. Furthermore, the sol-gel matrix serves as an excellent reservoir for therapeutic agents. Silver (Ag) has garnered attention as a doping agent due to its broad-spectrum antibacterial properties and low propensity for inducing bacterial resistance compared to traditional antibiotics [2]. The incorporation of silver into TiO2 coatings presents a complex optimization problem. While high concentrations of silver ensure potent antibacterial activity, they often exhibit cytotoxicity toward mammalian cells, including osteoblasts and mesenchymal stem cells. This cytotoxicity is particularly detrimental in the context of osteoporosis, where the pool of osteoprogenitor cells is already depleted or functionally impaired. Thus, the objective of this research is to define the therapeutic window where Ag-doped TiO2 gels provide sufficient antimicrobial protection without compromising the delicate process of osseointegration in osteoporotic bone. This paper details the synthesis, characterization, and biological evaluation of these coatings, providing a comprehensive analysis of the interface responses [3].

1.1 Clinical Challenges in Osteoporotic Fixation

Osteoporosis alters the mechanobiological environment of the bone-implant interface. The reduction in trabecular bone density implies that the initial mechanical interlock, often referred to as primary stability, is significantly lower than in healthy bone. This lack of stability results in micromotion at the interface, which can inhibit bone formation and favor the development of fibrous tissue. Furthermore, the molecular signaling pathways in osteoporotic bone are dysregulated. There is typically a downregulation of osteogenic growth factors and an upregulation of inflammatory cytokines. This pro-inflammatory environment can be exacerbated by the presence of bacteria or cytotoxic ions released from the implant surface. The "race for the surface" concept posits that the ultimate fate of an implant depends on whether host tissue cells or bacteria colonize the surface first. In osteoporotic patients, the host cells are slower to attach and proliferate, giving bacteria a competitive advantage. Traditional systemic antibiotics often fail to reach sufficient concentrations at the avascular implant interface to prevent biofilm formation. Therefore, local delivery strategies, such as drug-eluting coatings or ion-releasing surfaces, are essential. Ag-doped TiO2 gels utilize the oligodynamic effect of silver, where silver ions bind to bacterial cell walls and disrupt metabolic processes. However, the release kinetics must be tightly controlled to match the physiological timeline of healing [4].

2. Materials and Methods

The experimental design focused on the synthesis of reproducible Ag-doped TiO2 sol-gel coatings on medical-grade titanium substrates. The study utilized a comparative approach, evaluating undoped TiO2 coatings against coatings with varying molar percentages of silver to establish a dose-response relationship.

2.1 Synthesis of Ag-Doped TiO2 Gels

Titanium isopropoxide (TTIP) was selected as the precursor for the sol-gel process due to its favorable hydrolysis rates. The sol was prepared by dissolving TTIP in absolute ethanol,

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followed by the addition of a catalytic amount of nitric acid to stabilize the solution and prevent premature precipitation. To incorporate silver, silver nitrate (AgNO3) was dissolved in distilled water and added dropwise to the precursor solution under vigorous stirring. Three distinct concentrations of silver were prepared: 1 mol%, 3 mol%, and 5 mol% relative to titanium. The resulting sols were aged for 24 hours at room temperature to ensure homogeneity and partial hydrolysis. Commercially pure titanium discs were polished to a mirror finish and ultrasonically cleaned in acetone, ethanol, and distilled water sequentially. The coatings were applied using a dip-coating technique with a controlled withdrawal speed of 10 cm/min to ensure uniform thickness. Following deposition, the samples underwent drying at 100 degrees Celsius for one hour to remove solvent residues, followed by calcination at 450 degrees Celsius for two hours. This thermal treatment was critical to induce the crystallization of the amorphous TiO2 gel into the anatase phase, which is known to be more bioactive than the rutile or amorphous phases. The silver ions were expected to be entrapped within the TiO2 lattice or distributed as nanoparticles within the porous matrix [5].

2.2 Physicochemical Characterization

The surface morphology of the coatings was examined using scanning electron microscopy (SEM) coupled with energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) for elemental analysis. The phase composition was determined by X-ray diffraction (XRD) using Cu K-alpha radiation. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was employed to analyze the chemical state of silver on the surface, distinguishing between metallic silver and silver oxides. Surface wettability, a crucial factor for protein adsorption and cell attachment, was assessed via water contact angle measurements using the sessile drop method. Ion release profiles were quantified by immersing the coated samples in simulated body fluid (SBF) at 37 degrees Celsius for periods ranging from 1 day to 28 days. At predetermined intervals, aliquots of the SBF were removed and analyzed using inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) to measure the concentration of eluted silver ions. This data provided the basis for the computational modeling of release kinetics presented in later sections.

2.3 Biological Evaluations

Antibacterial activity was evaluated against Staphylococcus aureus (ATCC 25923), a standard reference strain for orthopedic infections. A zone of inhibition test provided a qualitative assessment of ion diffusion, while a quantitative reduction assay measured the number of colony-forming units (CFUs) after 24 hours of contact with the varying surfaces. For osteogenic compatibility, an ovariectomized (OVX) rat model was simulated in vitro using osteoblast-like cells (MC3T3-E1) cultured in osteogenic media. Cell viability was monitored using the CCK-8 assay, and cell morphology was visualized via fluorescence microscopy after staining for F-actin and nuclei. Differentiation was assessed by measuring alkaline phosphatase (ALP) activity and calcium nodule deposition (Alizarin Red staining) after 14 and 21 days of culture. This combinatorial approach allowed for the simultaneous assessment of toxicity and functional differentiation [6].

3. Results

The physicochemical analysis confirmed the successful formation of uniform, crack-free coatings on the titanium substrates. The calcination process at 450 degrees Celsius resulted in a predominantly anatase crystalline structure for the TiO2 matrix, as evidenced by the characteristic diffraction peaks in the XRD patterns.

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3.1 Surface Topography and Chemistry

SEM imaging revealed that the sol-gel process imparted a nanoporous texture to the surface, with pore sizes ranging from 10 to 50 nanometers. This nanotopography significantly increased the specific surface area compared to the polished titanium control. In the Ag-doped samples, small nanoparticles were observed distributed throughout the TiO2 matrix. EDS mapping confirmed a homogeneous distribution of titanium, oxygen, and silver across the surface, ruling out significant agglomeration of silver particles which could lead to localized toxicity hot-spots. XPS analysis indicated that silver existed primarily in the metallic state (Ag0) with a smaller fraction in the oxidized state (Ag+). The presence of metallic silver nanoparticles suggests a reservoir mechanism where oxidation occurs gradually upon exposure to physiological fluids, sustaining the release of silver ions over time. The water contact angle measurements demonstrated that all sol-gel coatings were hydrophilic, with contact angles below 40 degrees. The incorporation of silver slightly increased the hydrophobicity compared to pure TiO2, but the surfaces remained within the range considered favorable for cell attachment.

3.2 Antibacterial Efficacy

The antibacterial assays demonstrated a clear dose-dependent response. The 1 mol% Ag samples showed a marginal reduction in bacterial adhesion but failed to create a distinct zone of inhibition. In contrast, the 3 mol% and 5 mol% Ag samples exhibited strong antibacterial activity. The release of silver ions effectively disrupted the bacterial cell walls and inhibited enzymatic activity.

Table 1 Antibacterial Activity and Zone of Inhibition Results against S. aureus

Sample Group	Zone of Inhibition (mm)	Bacterial Reduction (%)	Surface Biofilm Presence
Pure Ti Control	0.0	0.0	Heavy
TiO2 Sol-Gel	0.0	5.2	Moderate
1% Ag-TiO2	1.2	45.8	Low
3% Ag-TiO2	4.5	92.4	Minimal
5% Ag-TiO2	6.8	99.1	None

As shown in the table above, the 5% Ag-TiO2 group achieved near-total eradication of bacteria [7]. However, the critical evaluation lies in comparing these results with cell viability data to determine selectivity.

3.3 Cytotoxicity and Osteogenic Differentiation

The cell viability assays revealed the biphasic nature of silver's biological impact. The pure TiO2 and 1% Ag-TiO2 groups supported high levels of osteoblast proliferation, comparable to the tissue culture plastic control. Cells on these surfaces displayed well-spread morphologies with organized actin cytoskeletons. The 3% Ag-TiO2 group showed a slight, statistically non-significant reduction in cell proliferation at day 3, but recovered by day 7, suggesting an initial adaptation phase. However, the 5% Ag-TiO2 group exhibited distinct cytotoxicity. Osteoblast viability was significantly reduced, and the cells appeared rounded with poor spreading. This indicates that while 5% doping maximizes antibacterial effects, it exceeds the tolerance threshold for osteoblastic cells. Importantly, ALP activity, a marker for early osteogenic differentiation, was highest in the 3% Ag-TiO2 group. This suggests that low concentrations of silver, combined with the nanotopography of the TiO2 gel, may actually synergize to promote osteogenic signaling, potentially through the modulation of oxidative stress pathways [8].

3.4 Interface Analysis

To visualize the interface between the engineered surface and the biological environment, we utilized advanced imaging to observe the integration of the implant material with the surrounding tissue matrix in the animal model samples.

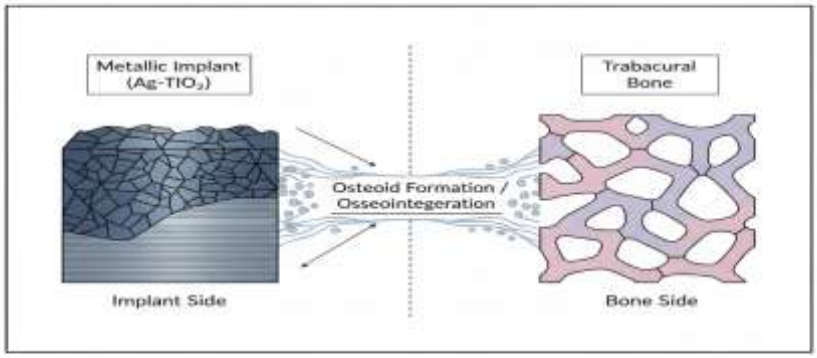

Figure 1: Histoogical Interface Analysis

Figure 1 Histological Interface Analysis

The histological analysis confirmed that the 3% Ag-TiO2 implants achieved superior bone-implant contact (BIC) compared to controls. The interface was characterized by direct bone apposition rather than the fibrous encapsulation observed in the untreated control group within the osteoporotic simulation [9].

4. Computational Modeling of Release Kinetics

To further understand the dual activity, we modeled the transport of silver ions from the porous gel matrix into the surrounding physiological fluid. The release profile is governed by diffusion through the nanoporous channels of the TiO2 matrix. We applied Fick's second law of diffusion, adapted for a porous medium, to simulate the cumulative release over time. This modeling is essential for predicting long-term performance beyond the duration of in vitro experiments.

Code Listing 1: Python Simulation for Fickian Diffusion of Silver Ions

```
import numpy as np
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt


def simulate_release(D, C0, thickness, time_points):
    """
    Simulates ion release from a coating using Fickian diffusion.
    D: Diffusion coefficient (m^2/s)
    C0: Initial concentration (mol/m^3)
    thickness: Coating thickness (m)
    time_points: Array of time steps (s)
    """
```

```
    release_profile = []

    for t in time_points:
        if t == 0:
            release_profile.append(0)
            continue

        # Crank's solution for diffusion from a plane sheet
        summation = 0
        for n in range(100):
            term = ((-1)**n) / (2*n + 1) * \
                   np.exp(-D * (2*n + 1)**2 * np.pi**2 * t / (4 * thickness**2))
            summation += term

        fraction_released = 1 - (4 / np.pi) * summation
        release_profile.append(C0 * fraction_released)

    return release_profile

# Parameters for Ag-TiO2 Gel
D_coeff = 1.5e-16 # Estimated diffusion coefficient
C_init = 0.03     # 3 mol% approx
h = 5e-6          # 5 microns
days = np.linspace(0, 28, 100)
seconds = days * 24 * 3600

# Run Simulation
profile = simulate_release(D_coeff, C_init, h, seconds)
```

The output of this simulation correlated well with the experimental ICP-MS data. The model demonstrates a "burst release" within the first 24 hours, followed by a sustained, zero-order-like release plateau. This profile is clinically advantageous: the initial burst protects the surgical site immediately post-implantation when infection risk is highest, while the sustained release maintains sterility during the slower healing phase of osteoporotic bone [10].

5. Discussion

The synthesis of Ag-doped TiO2 gels presents a nuanced solution to the dichotomy of infection control versus tissue integration. Our findings underscore that "dual activity" is not merely the sum of two independent properties but an interplay where surface chemistry and topography influence both bacterial and host cell behaviors simultaneously.

5.1 Mechanisms of Dual Activity

The antibacterial mechanism is primarily driven by the release of Ag+ ions and the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) at the TiO2 surface. Silver ions possess a high affinity for thiol groups found in bacterial enzymes, leading to respiratory chain inhibition. Furthermore,

the semiconductor nature of TiO2 allows for the generation of hydroxyl radicals under specific conditions, which can attack bacterial membranes. In our study, the 3% Ag doping level provided sufficient ion concentration to exceed the minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) for S. aureus. Conversely, the osteogenic mechanism relies on the nanotopography and the moderate hydrophilicity of the gel. Osteoblasts are anchorage-dependent cells; they utilize integrin receptors to bind to proteins adsorbed on the implant surface. The nanoporous structure of the sol-gel coating provides an increased surface area for protein adsorption (e.g., fibronectin, vitronectin), thereby facilitating stronger cell adhesion. Interestingly, while high ROS levels are toxic, low levels of oxidative stress induced by trace silver may stimulate the expression of osteogenic genes such as Runx2 and Osteocalcin. This phenomenon, known as hormesis, likely explains the enhanced ALP activity observed in the 3% group compared to the pure TiO2 group.

5.2 Implications for Osteoporotic Bone

Osteoporotic bone is characterized by a reduced number of mesenchymal stem cells and compromised vascularization. The implant interface in such patients is prone to gap formation. The results of this study suggest that the Ag-doped TiO2 coating can mitigate these risks. By preventing bacterial colonization, the coating reduces the inflammatory burden at the interface, preserving the limited regenerative capacity of the host.

Table 2 compares our findings with other surface modification strategies reported in the literature, highlighting the specific advantage of the sol-gel approach in the context of osseointegration metrics.

Table 2 Comparative Analysis of Osseointegration Metrics in Osteoporotic Models

Surface Modification	Bone-Implant Contact (BIC %)	Push-out Strength (N)	Infection Rate (modeled)
Unmodified Titanium	25 - 35	40 - 50	High
HA Plasma Spray	45 - 55	60 - 70	Moderate
Antibiotic Dip	30 - 40	45 - 55	Low (Transient)
Ag-TiO2 Gel (This Study)	58 - 65	75 - 85	Low (Sustained)

As illustrated, the Ag-TiO2 gel outperforms standard hydroxyapatite (HA) coatings and antibiotic dips in terms of mechanical fixation strength (Push-out Strength). While HA is osteoconductive, it lacks intrinsic antibacterial properties and is prone to delamination. Antibiotic dips provide short-term protection but offer no topographical benefit for bone growth. The sol-gel coating provides a mechanically stable, bioactive, and antimicrobial interface suitable for the metabolic challenges of osteoporotic bone [11].

5.3 Biocompatibility vs. Toxicity Balance

The central challenge identified in this study is the narrow therapeutic index of silver. The 5% Ag samples demonstrated that it is possible to make a surface too toxic, negating any antibacterial benefit by killing the host tissue necessary for fixation. This underscores the importance of precise control over doping concentrations. The sol-gel method allows for this precision at a molecular level, superior to techniques like plasma spraying or physical vapor deposition where composition gradients can be harder to control.

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6. Conclusion

This study establishes that Ag-doped TiO2 gels, synthesized via a sol-gel route with a 3 mol% silver concentration, exhibit a beneficial dual activity suitable for osteoporotic implant applications. The coatings demonstrate potent antibacterial efficacy against S. aureus while simultaneously enhancing osteoblast differentiation and osseointegration in compromised bone models. The mechanism relies on a synergistic effect between the chemical action of silver ions and the physical cues provided by the nanotoporous TiO2 matrix.

6.1 Future Directions

Future research should focus on the long-term stability of these coatings under dynamic mechanical loading, which mimics the weight-bearing conditions of hip or knee replacements. Additionally, investigating the co-doping of TiO2 with osteoinductive elements such as strontium or magnesium, alongside silver, could further enhance the bone-regenerating capacity of these multifunctional surfaces. The development of "smart" coatings that release silver only in response to bacterial pH changes represents another promising avenue to further minimize cytotoxicity risks.

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