Soft, tough, and flexible curdlan hydrogels and organogels fabricated by covalent cross-linking

Yukiko Enomoto-Rogers^{1,2}, Satoshi Kimura¹, and Tadahisa Iwata^{1,*}

*1. Science of Polymeric Materials, Department of Biomaterial Sciences,
Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences, The University of Tokyo,
1-1-1 Yayoi, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113-8657, Japan*

*2. National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology (AIST)
Eco-renewable materials group, Structural Materials Research Institute
2266-98 Anagahora, Simoshidami, Moriyama-ku, Nagoya, 463-8560, Japan*

*Corresponding author. Tel: +81-3-5841-5266; Fax: +81-3-5841-1304.

E-mail: atiwata@mail.ecc.u-tokyo.ac.jp

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Abstract

Soft, tough and flexible curdlan (CD) hydrogels were fabricated by covalent cross-linking of CD using ethylene glycol diglycidyl ether (EGDGE) as a cross-linker. The mechanical properties of the gels were investigated by uniaxial compression test. CD hydrogels showed non-linear elastic behavior. The elastic modulus of CD hydrogels was 0.004-0.011 kPa. CD hydrogels were highly tough and did not fracture under compression to 90% strain at the maximum. The gels could retain water during compression, and no water was squeezed out from the gel. In addition, CD hydrogel could recover the original shape and elastic modulus after 90% compression, indicating its high flexibility. Subsequently, hydroxyl groups of CD hydrogels were acetylated in acetic anhydride and pyridine system to give hydrophobic property, and novel CD organogels were obtained. CD organogel were swollen in chloroform and resistant to repeated drying and swelling treatment in chloroform.

1. Introduction

Polysaccharides are attractive material for soft material science due to their biocompatibility, biodegradability, or bio-activities [1]. Many kinds of polysaccharides, such as cellulose [2], agarose [3], gellan gum [4], alginate [5], curdlan [6], are known to form hydrogels. Hydrogels are self-standing soft material that is highly swollen in a liquid water and have been extensively studied for many application areas such as medical, food, or bio-engineering sciences [7-9]. Curdlan (CD) is a polysaccharide composed of (1→

3)- β -D-glucose units which is produced by *Alcaligenes faecalis*. [10-12] CD has high molecular weight more than a couple tens kDa, and attractive bio-based material that can be obtained from nature [1]. CD forms a gel by heating and are used in cosmetics or food industry [13-16]. However, most of hydrogels of polysaccharide are normally very brittle and have low mechanical strength, which has been restricting an application of polysaccharide-based hydrogels as industrial material. Improvement and designing of mechanical properties of hydrogels, such as toughness or elasticity is crucial issue to utilize polysaccharide hydrogels for biomedical or engineering application.

There have been some reports on polysaccharide-based hydrogels with high mechanical properties. Double network gels consisting of gelatin and cellulose are known to have high toughness and high elasticity, and they are expected to be suitable for artificial tendon or cartilage which are categorized as hard tissue [17]. Interpenetrating hydrogels consisting of alginate and polyacrylamide have also been reported as a soft hydrogels with high mechanical properties [18, 19]. Polyacrylamide are widely used as a contact lenses and its further application for biomedical field is expected, but toxicity of acrylamide monomer has been concerned. Regarding the mechanical property of hydrogels, polysaccharide-based gel that has softness, toughness and flexibility at the same time, has not been reported to our knowledge. Such kind of hydrogels would be novel class of bio-based hydrogels and could be applicable for artificial soft tissue in tissue-engineering or regeneration studies.

Chemical crosslinking is an one of the effective way to improve mechanical strength and water retention ability of the gels [19-23]. Ethylene glycol diglycidyl ether (EGDGE) is available as a crosslinking reagent for polysaccharides, and is suitable reagent for biomedical application because it is amphiphilic and can be removed from the human body [22, 24]. Herein, we describe preparation of covalently cross-linked CD hydrogels with soft, tough and flexible properties, and demonstrated their excellent elastic behavior to repeated compressing. Furthermore, CD organogels are obtained by acetylation of CD hydrogels and their unique swelling behavior for repeated drying and swelling treatments are also described.

2. Experimental

2.1. Materials

CD was purchased from Wako Pure Chemical Industries, Ltd (Japan). Ethylene glycol diglycidyl ether (EGDGE) and sodium hydroxide (NaOH) were purchased from Tokyo Chemical Industry Co., Ltd. (Japan), and Kanto Chemical Co., Inc. (Japan), respectively. All reagents were used without further purification.

2.2. Fabrication of CD hydrogels

The representative procedure for fabrication of CD hydrogel (CDg-1) is as follows; To a 4% NaOH aqueous solution (25 mL) of CD (1.0 g), EGDGE (1.0 ml, 1.1 molar equivalent to

anhydroglucose unit (AGU)) was added dropwise. A solution was stirred for 1 min and poured into a glass mold with 10 mm diameter and 10 mm height, and set at room temperature to allow gel formation for 1 day. The obtained cross-linked gels were removed from the mold in distilled water (1 L), and then, acetic acid was added to neutralize NaOH. The gels were further washed for 2 days with distilled water to remove residual reagents. The CDg-2 and -3 were prepared by varying concentration of CD and EGDGE as listed in Table 1. The molar ratio of NaOH to EGDGE was set to 4 molar equivalent.

2.3. Fabrication of agar hydrogel

Agar gels were fabricated as follows: Agar (2 g) was dissolved hot distilled water (98 ml) and poured into a mold with 10 mm diameter and 10 mm height, and set at room temperature for 3 hours to allow gel formation.

2.4. Fabrication of organogels

The hydrogels were immersed in ethanol and the media was subsequently exchanged by acetic anhydride/ pyridine. The gels in acetic anhydride/ pyridine mixed media were heated at 70°C for 3 days. The obtained organogels were washed by chloroform to remove acetic anhydride and pyridine.

2.5. Media composition of the gels

The media composition of the gels was calculated from the weights of the swollen gel and the dried gel; The media composition (wt %) = $(1 - [\text{dried gel}] / [\text{swollen gel}]) \times 100$. Dried hydrogels and organogels were obtained by freeze-drying or vacuuming.

2.6. Compression test

Compressive test was carried using EZ-test (Shimadzu, Japan) to measure mechanical properties of the hydrogels. The hydrogels were compressed perpendicular to the height direction by parallel metal plates connected to a load cell at 1 mm/ min at room temperature. The elastic modulus (E) was determined by the average slope over the strain ratio range of 10-20% in the stress-strain curve which was considered as a linear region. To determine elastic modulus, five specimens were used and the data were averaged for each gel. Strain rates (%) were referenced to the initial height of the gel. For the repeated compressing test, the one specimen was used for five times to obtain strain-stress curves, and the recovery rates (%) were calculated as the relative height of the CD gel after compressing to its original height.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Fabrication of CD hydrogels

The CD was cross-linked using EGDGE in NaOH aq. solution as described in Figure 1. EGDGE is considered to form ether bond between epoxy group and hydroxyl groups of CD in alkaline solution. Three different CD hydrogels, namely, CDg-1, -2, and -3 were obtained by varying the amount of EGDGE as listed in Table 1. As can be seen in the images in Figure 2, the self-standing hydrogels were successfully obtained and the gels prepared with higher EGDGE concentration formed more swollen gel in the order of CDg-1 > -2 > -3. Water composition of CDg-1, -2, and -3 was 97.2, 95.4, and 94.8 % respectively, and decreased in the order of CDg-1 > -2 > -3 with decrease in EGDGE (Table 1). This result is opposite to the common tendency that media composition of a gel decreases with increase in cross-linker [25, 26]. We attribute this result to poor cross-linking efficiency caused by steric hindrance that occurs when more cross-linker was added. The relative molar amount of EGDGE to AGU of CD for CDg-1, -2, and -3 is 1.1, 0.4 and 0.2, respectively. In the case of CDg-1, all AGU is theoretically substituted by at least one epoxy group. There might be steric hindrance for next cross-linking reaction between another epoxy group and hydroxyl group of different CD chain, and as a result, free hydroxyl group was formed by cleavage of epoxy group. This might be one reason for the result that media composition became higher when more cross-linker was loaded.

3.2. Compressive mechanical properties of CD hydrogels

Compressive mechanical property of CD hydrogels was investigated by uniaxial compression test. Figure 3 shows stress-strain curves of CD hydrogels under uniaxial compression to 50% and 90% strain. CD hydrogels showed non-linear elastic behavior. The gels were quite tough and fracture stress could not be determined. The elastic modulus of CD hydrogels is listed in Table 2 with a comparison with other polysaccharide-based gels or gelatin gels. The elastic modulus of CD-1, -2, and -3 hydrogels were 0.004, 0.006, and 0.011 MPa, respectively. Elastic modulus tended to increase in the order of CDg-1 < -2 < -3 with a decrease in EGDGE. This tendency agreed well with the result that water composition of the gels decreased with a decrease in EGDGE, likely because the cross-linking efficiency was low when more EGDGE was added, as discussed above. The elastic modulus values are as low as those of other polysaccharide or gelatin gels, indicating that CD hydrogels were as soft as common polysaccharide-based hydrogels.

Interestingly, CDg-1 was able to sustain a compressive strain of 90% as well as 50% with full strain recovery (Figure 4a). In the case of CDg-2 and CDg-3, these gels were also able to recover original shape from 50% compression (Figures 4b and 4c). CDg-2 and CDg-3 gels did not fracture after 90% compression, although the gels were irreversibly deformed, suffering from hysteresis. It is noteworthy that all CD hydrogels retained water during compression and no water was squeezed out from the gel at 90% strain. Agar hydrogel was compressed for comparison, but it broke easily at 50% compression, as shown in Figure 4d.

It was found that CD hydrogels exhibited high toughness in addition to softness.

3.3. Repeated compression test

The flexibility of CD hydrogels was investigated by repeating compression for five times. The recovery rates of CD hydrogels after compressing to 25, 50 and 90% were plotted as shown in Figure 5. CD hydrogels showed high recovery rate after 25% and 50% compression. The recovery rates were 100% for all gels after 25% compression for five times and the elastic modulus of the gels showed no substantial decrease after five times compression. CDg-1 and -2 showed 100% recovery after one compression to 50% strain, and then showed small decrease in recovery rate after 4 or 3 times compression. In the case of CDg-3, the recovery rate after 50% compression was 97%, which is indicative to hysteresis. Elastic modulus of CDg-3 slightly dropped after one compression, as suggested in its strain-stress curves in Figure 3c. It should be stressed that CDg-1 recovered 90-96% of the original height after repeated compressing to 90% strain (Figure 5a). CDg-1 showed no change in the elastic modulus after repeated 90% compressing for five times, as suggested in Figure 3d. CDg-2 and -3 suffered from hysteresis and irreversibly deformed after 90% compression for one time as discussed in the previous section.

It was revealed that CD hydrogels were soft, tough and flexible gel. CD hydrogels exhibited low elastic modulus of 0.004-0.011 MPa and could sustain 90% strain with 90-100% recovery. To our knowledge, there has been no report on the polysaccharide-based hydrogels that has these three properties at the same time. Generally, polysaccharide-based gels, such as agar, are soft but not tough or flexible. Polysaccharide-based gels have poor mechanical property and fracture at ca. 20-60% strain with low compression force [17]. Bacteria cellulose hydrogel has been reported to exhibit non-linear elastic behavior similar to those of CD hydrogels, but it could not sustain water during compression and suffers from hysteresis after compression [17]. Regarding polysaccharide-based tough and flexible gel, there has been a report on double network gel consisting of gelatin and cellulose [17]. Their elastic modulus was 1-3 MPa and their maximum compressive strain was ca. 40%. CD hydrogels were superior to common polysaccharide-based hydrogels in its toughness and flexibility and different from double network gels in its softness. CD hydrogels would be novel class of polysaccharide-based hydrogel that has softness, toughness, and flexibility at the same time.

3.4. Fabrication of CD organogels

CD has no solubility in most organic solvents such as chloroform. It is reported that hydroxyl groups of CD can be substituted by ester groups and that the properties of CD esters turned to be hydrophobic and organic solvent-soluble [27]. In order to give novel properties to CD-based gels, we have fabricated CD organogels by acetylation of remaining hydroxyl

groups of CD gels as described in Figure 1. After exchanging the media of the hydrogels from water to pyridine, CD gels were treated by acetic anhydride and pyridine. The CD gels kept swollen during acetylation in the media, and remained swollen in pyridine under dry condition at room temperature. The media of the CD organogels could be easily exchanged from pyridine to chloroform. The volume of CD organogel in chloroform was higher compared to the hydrogels and chloroform composition reached ca. 99 % for all CD gels as listed in Table 1. In the IR spectrum of CD organogels, the absorption band of C=O bond derived from acetyl group was observed at 1750 cm^{-1} and no absorption of hydroxyl groups were observed at 3500 cm^{-1} , indicating successful acetylation (Data not shown). It has been reported that polysaccharide hydrogels could not recover to original swollen state completely once they were dried [23]. The CD organogel were resistant to repeated drying and swelling treatment in chloroform. As shown in Figure 6, dried CD organogel could be re-swollen in chloroform, and its media composition recovered original value. CD organogels would be novel material that is stable under dry condition or high temperature.

4. Conclusion

CD hydrogels were fabricated by covalent cross-linking using EGDGE as a cross-linker. The compressive mechanical tests revealed that CD hydrogels were soft, tough and flexible gel. CD hydrogels showed non-linear elastic behavior, and their elastic modulus was 0.004-0.011 MPa. CD hydrogels sustained compressive strain of 90 % at the maximum and showed recovery rate of more than ca.95-100% after compression. CD hydrogels retained water during compression, and no water was squeezed out from the gel. CD hydrogels were subsequently acetylated in acetic anhydride/ pyridine system and the novel CD organogel were successfully obtained. CD organogels were swollen in chloroform and resistant to repeated drying and swelling treatment. CD hydrogels would be applicable for artificial soft tissue in tissue-engineering or regeneration studies. CD organogels could be applied to wide range of soft material science, due to its organic solvent absorbency, heat resistance or dryness resistance properties in future.

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Figure Legend

Figure 1. Fabrication scheme and representative chemical structure of covalently cross-linked curdlan (CD) hydrogel and organogel.

Figure 2. Images of cross-linked CD hydrogels.

Figure 3. Compressive strain-stress curves of (a) (d) CDg-1, (b) (e) CDg-2, and (c) (f) CDg-3 with repeated compression for five times. (a) (b) (c) 50% and (d) (e) (f) 90% strain. Numbers indicate measuring time.

Figure 4. Images of (a) CDg-1, (b) CDg-2, (c) CDg-3, and (d) agar hydrogels during and after compression to 0%, 50% and 90%.

Figure 5. Recovery rate of (a) CDg-1, (b) CDg-2 and (c) CDg-3 after repeated compression to 25% ($\triangle$), 50% ($\square$) and 90% ($\bullet$) strain.

Figure 6. Representative images of CDg-3 organogel.

Table 1. Characteristics of cross-linked CD gels.

Table 2. Compressive properties of hydrogels.

Figure 1. Fabrication scheme and representative chemical structure of covalently cross-linked curdlan (CD) hydrogel and organogel.

CDg-1

CDg-2

CDg-3

Figure 2. Images of cross-linked CD hydrogels.

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Figure 4. Images of (a) CDg-1, (b) CDg-2, (c) CDg-3, and (d) agar hydrogels during and after compression to 0%, 50% and 90%.

Figure 5. Recovery rate of (a) CDg-1, (b) CDg-2 and (c) CDg-3 after repeated compression to 25% (Δ), 50% ($\square$) and 90% ($\bullet$) strain.

CDg-3
organogel

Dried

10 min after
re-swollen in
chloroform

2 h after
re-swollen in
chloroform

3 days after
re-swollen in
chloroform

Figure 6. Representative images of CDg-3 organogel.

Table 1. Characteristics of cross-linked CD gels

Gels	CD (g)	H ₂ O (mL)	EGDGE (mL)	[EGDGE]/[AGU] (mol/mol)	NaOH (g)	Water composition of hydrogels (wt %)	CHCl ₃ composition of organogels (wt %)	CHCl ₃ composition of re-swollen organogels (wt %)
CDg-1	1.0	25	1.0	1.1	1.0	97.2	99.5	99.2
CDg-2	1.0	25	0.4	0.4	0.4	95.4	99.0	99.2
CDg-3	1.0	25	0.2	0.2	0.2	94.8	98.1	98.2

Table 2. Compressive properties of hydrogels

Samples	Elastic modulus (MPa)	Fracture stress (MPa)	Fracture strain (%)
CDg-1	0.004	-	-
CDg-2	0.006	-	-
CDg-3	0.011	-	-
Bacteria cellulose ¹⁷	0.007	-	-
Agarose	0.28	0.013	20
Gellan gum ¹⁷	0.62	0.47	60
Gelatin 15wt% ¹⁷	0.047	0.029	34

***Graphical Abstract**