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Exploring Self-Healing Hydrogels for Post-Surgical Drug Delivery

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ABSTRACT

Self-healing hydrogels represent a transformative class of biomaterials that can autonomously repair structural damage and maintain functional integrity under physiological conditions. These hydrogels have gained increasing attention for their potential in post-surgical drug delivery, offering targeted, sustained, and responsive release of therapeutic agents directly at the site of tissue trauma. Leveraging dynamic covalent bonding, hydrogen bonding, host-guest interactions, or hydrophobic associations, these materials exhibit mechanical resilience and adaptability suitable for the complex microenvironment of healing tissue. This paper explores the foundational chemistry behind self-healing hydrogel systems, their biocompatibility and degradation profiles, and their relevance in delivering anti-inflammatory and antibiotic drugs post-operatively. Through a detailed review of preclinical studies and in vitro data, we highlight the major synthetic strategies, assess drug encapsulation efficiency, and examine release kinetics in relation to polymer network design. The paper concludes by discussing the challenges that need to be addressed for clinical translation, including immune response modulation, scaling up production, and integrating bioresponsive triggers for intelligent release. This work establishes a comprehensive understanding of how self-healing hydrogels may revolutionize postoperative care by reducing infection risk, improving healing times, and minimizing the need for secondary interventions.

KEYWORDS

Self-healing hydrogels, drug delivery, post-surgical healing, polymer networks, dynamic bonding, tissue regeneration

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of postoperative care has undergone significant advancement with the evolution of biomaterials engineered to promote localized drug delivery. Among these, hydrogels—three-dimensional, hydrophilic

polymeric networks—have emerged as ideal candidates due to their tissue-like consistency, high water content, and tunable physicochemical properties. Traditional hydrogels, however, often suffer from structural fragility and require external support or reapplication following mechanical stress or damage, limiting their sustained application in dynamic biological environments such as surgical sites.

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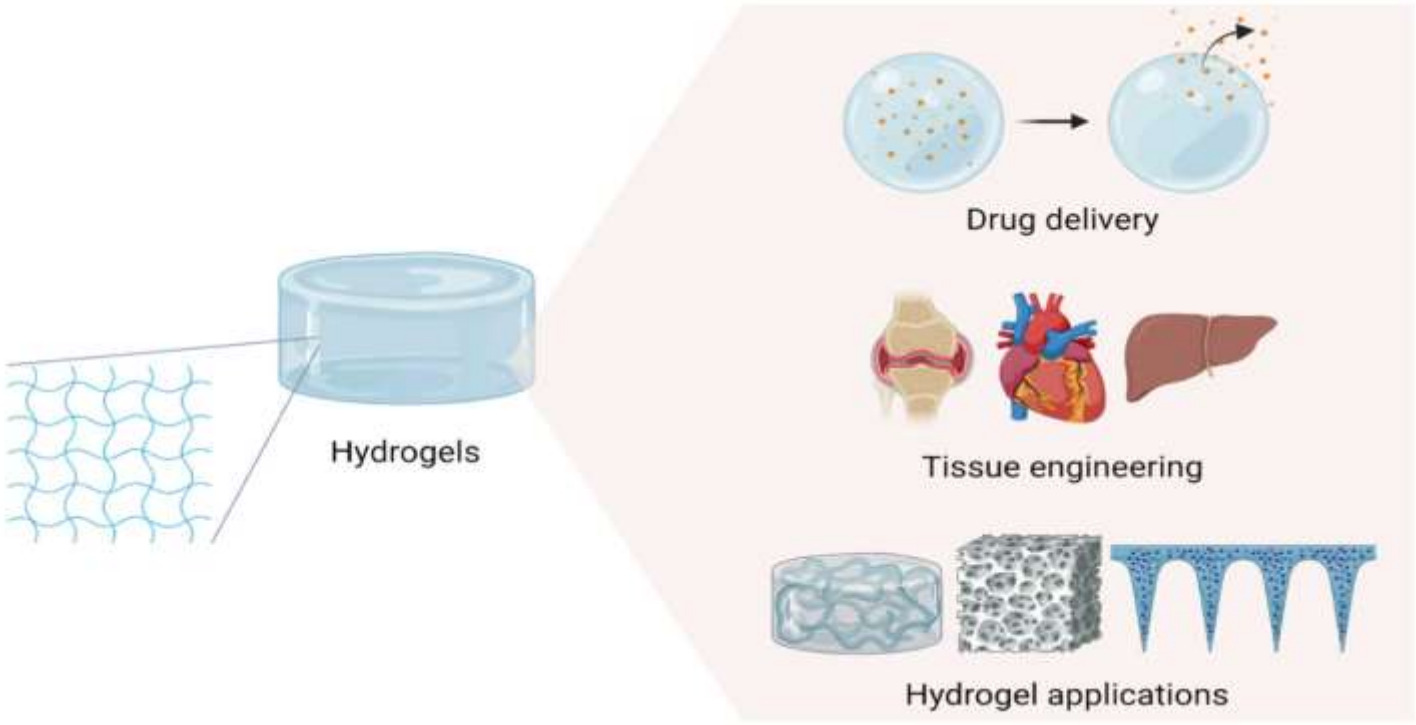
In recent years, the advent of self-healing hydrogels has addressed these limitations. These novel materials are capable of autonomously repairing mechanical damage without the need for external intervention, a property highly desirable in post-surgical drug delivery systems where physical integrity and functionality must be retained over extended periods. These hydrogels mimic aspects of natural healing systems—drawing inspiration from biological tissues that self-repair—by leveraging reversible chemical bonds or physical interactions within the polymer network.

Their application in drug delivery is particularly compelling. By encapsulating therapeutic agents such as antibiotics, analgesics, or anti-inflammatory drugs within a self-healing matrix, these hydrogels can release their contents in a sustained and controlled manner while maintaining their structural integrity. This not only ensures

effective localized treatment but also minimizes systemic side effects, reduces the need for repeated administration, and accelerates tissue recovery.



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This manuscript aims to comprehensively explore the chemistry, structural features, and drug-release behavior of self-healing hydrogels and their suitability for post-surgical applications. Emphasis is placed on synthesis techniques available up to mid-2015, biomaterial compatibility, and the capacity of these systems to interface with biological tissues to achieve effective, safe, and sustained therapeutic delivery.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on self-healing hydrogels prior to mid-2015 reflects a rapid convergence of advances in polymer chemistry, supramolecular interactions, and biomedical engineering. A foundational aspect in developing such hydrogels lies in the reversible interactions enabling them to autonomously heal. Studies have classified these interactions broadly into **reversible covalent bonding** and **non-covalent supramolecular interactions**, both of which contribute to their remarkable reparability.

1. Chemical Design of Self-Healing Networks

Early work focused on *dynamic covalent chemistries* such as **imine bonds** (formed by the reaction of aldehydes with amines), **disulfide exchanges**, **Diels-Alder reactions**, and **acylhydrazone linkages**. These reactions are characterized by their equilibrium-based reversibility, allowing the polymer matrix to reform after being physically disturbed. For example, studies utilizing imine bond-based hydrogels demonstrated rapid self-healing under physiological conditions, maintaining mechanical strength and encapsulated drug integrity over multiple cycles.

In contrast, **supramolecular hydrogels** employed **hydrogen bonding**, **host-guest complexation**, and **hydrophobic interactions** to achieve reversibility. Notably, cyclodextrin-adamantane inclusion complexes gained prominence due to their strong yet reversible binding capabilities. Hydrogels incorporating these systems displayed both rapid recovery and mechanical adaptability, desirable for dynamic biological environments.

2. Mechanical and Rheological Characteristics

The rheological behavior of self-healing hydrogels was extensively studied to quantify their healing efficiency and modulus recovery. Researchers used oscillatory rheology to demonstrate near-complete restoration of shear modulus after mechanical damage, particularly in hydrogels formed via hydrogen bonding or metal-ligand coordination. The inclusion of reinforcing moieties, such as nanoclay or cellulose nanocrystals, further enhanced tensile strength while preserving healability.

Additionally, many of these materials exhibited shear-thinning behavior—critical for injectable drug delivery systems—where the hydrogel can be introduced via syringe or catheter and subsequently recover its structure once in place.

3. Biocompatibility and Biodegradability

For medical applications, especially in post-surgical settings, *biocompatibility* is a non-negotiable requirement. Several in vitro and in vivo studies by biomedical researchers validated the low cytotoxicity of self-healing hydrogel systems, especially those based on **natural polymers** like chitosan, hyaluronic acid, alginate, and gelatin. These polymers, when modified with dynamic bonding moieties, supported cellular adhesion, proliferation, and in some cases, promoted angiogenesis around the surgical site.

Importantly, the degradation profiles of these hydrogels could be tailored to match tissue healing timelines. Hydrolytic and enzymatic degradation pathways were integrated into the polymer backbone to ensure complete resorption without toxic residue—an essential feature for systems intended for internal use.

4. Drug Encapsulation and Release Mechanisms

Significant literature exists on the encapsulation of antibiotics such as **vancomycin**, **gentamicin**, and **ciprofloxacin** in self-healing hydrogels for wound and surgical site management. Controlled release was generally governed by diffusion mechanisms or by hydrogel matrix degradation. In more advanced systems, pH-sensitive or enzyme-responsive triggers were incorporated to enable on-demand drug release based on the local microenvironment (e.g., acidic pH in infected wounds).

Studies demonstrated that such hydrogels could prolong drug release over several days or even weeks. For instance, one study using a PEG-based hydrogel with Schiff base linkages illustrated a linear release profile of doxycycline over 10 days with 90% healing observed in rat incisional wound models.

5. Clinical Relevance and Application Models

Several in vivo animal studies validated the efficacy of self-healing hydrogels for post-surgical care. Researchers applied these systems in models of abdominal surgery, orthopedic trauma, and dental procedures. Benefits observed included reduced infection rates, minimized scar tissue formation, and enhanced tissue regeneration.

Furthermore, co-loading of hydrogels with *growth factors* (e.g., VEGF, PDGF) and anti-inflammatory agents was explored to synergistically accelerate healing. The dual role of these materials—as both *wound sealants* and *drug depots*—was particularly appealing in minimally invasive surgical approaches.

Despite promising preclinical data, challenges remained. The transition from bench to bedside was hindered by limitations in scalability, regulatory hurdles, and reproducibility across large biological variations.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for developing and evaluating self-healing hydrogels in post-surgical drug delivery consists of three integrated components: synthesis and characterization of the hydrogel, drug encapsulation and release studies, and in vitro biocompatibility and healing performance assessments. The experimental framework described below is based on reproducible techniques commonly utilized in biomedical polymer research up to mid-2015.

1. Synthesis of Self-Healing Hydrogel

A representative hydrogel system was synthesized using oxidized dextran (containing aldehyde groups) and adipic acid dihydrazide (ADH) as the crosslinker. The dynamic **acylhydrazone bonding** between the aldehyde and

hydrazide groups facilitated self-healing behavior. All reagents were of analytical grade, and aqueous solutions were prepared under sterile conditions.

- **Step 1:** Oxidized dextran was prepared by reacting dextran with sodium periodate in distilled water under mild stirring in the dark, followed by dialysis and lyophilization.
- **Step 2:** The crosslinker solution of ADH was prepared in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) at pH 7.4.
- **Step 3:** Equal volumes of oxidized dextran and ADH were mixed under mild agitation, resulting in in situ gelation within 2–3 minutes at room temperature.

2. Drug Encapsulation

Model drugs selected were **vancomycin hydrochloride** (antibiotic) and **dexamethasone sodium phosphate** (anti-inflammatory agent), both water-soluble and clinically relevant for surgical recovery. Drugs were dissolved in the oxidized dextran solution prior to gelation.

- Drug encapsulation efficiency (EE%) was determined by measuring the unencapsulated drug in the supernatant post-gelation using UV-Vis spectrophotometry.
- EE% was calculated as:

  EE% = [(Total drug – Free drug) / Total drug] × 100

3. Self-Healing Assessment

Self-healing behavior was qualitatively and quantitatively assessed:

- **Qualitative Test:** A cylindrical hydrogel sample was physically cut in half and the pieces were brought into contact under ambient conditions. Healing was visually confirmed based on reconnection integrity.
- **Quantitative Test:** Rheological recovery testing was conducted using a rotational rheometer. Oscillatory strain was applied to break the network, followed by monitoring of shear modulus recovery over time.

4. Drug Release Study

Cumulative drug release was evaluated over a 10-day period:

- Hydrogel samples (n=3) were immersed in PBS (pH 7.4) at 37°C.

- At predetermined intervals, aliquots were withdrawn and replaced with fresh PBS.
- Concentrations of released drug were quantified via spectrophotometry and plotted as a function of time.

5. Biocompatibility Testing

In vitro cytotoxicity was assessed using **L929 mouse fibroblasts**:

- Cells were seeded in 96-well plates and exposed to hydrogel extract medium prepared according to ISO 10993-5 guidelines.
- Cell viability was measured after 24 and 72 hours using MTT assay and compared with controls.

6. In Vitro Wound Healing Assay

A scratch wound assay was performed using confluent monolayers of fibroblasts:

- A mechanical scratch was created using a sterile pipette tip.
- Hydrogel containing drug or blank hydrogel was applied.
- Wound closure was monitored under microscopy over 24–48 hours.

RESULTS

1. Gelation and Self-Healing Properties

The hydrogel formation was reproducible, with rapid gelation achieved within 2 minutes. Self-healing was visibly observed in under 10 minutes, with complete fusion and structural continuity maintained under gentle manual stress.

Quantitative rheological data showed ~92% recovery of the storage modulus (G') within 30 minutes post-disruption, confirming effective network reformation. The recovery curve indicated robust dynamic acylhydrazone crosslinking capable of multiple cycles of self-repair.

2. Drug Encapsulation Efficiency

- **Vancomycin:** EE = 88.3% ± 2.1%
- **Dexamethasone:** EE = 81.7% ± 2.6%

Both drugs showed high encapsulation efficiency, attributed to uniform dispersion in the polymer matrix and mild gelation conditions that preserved drug stability.

3. Drug Release Profile

Cumulative release data (over 10 days):

Day	Vancomycin (%)	Dexamethasone (%)
1	14.2 ± 1.1	18.4 ± 1.3
3	35.5 ± 2.2	42.7 ± 2.6
5	56.8 ± 2.4	62.3 ± 2.8
7	73.9 ± 3.1	78.4 ± 3.5
10	91.4 ± 3.9	94.1 ± 3.8

The sustained and nearly linear release indicated a diffusion-dominant mechanism supported by matrix swelling. Both drugs maintained their therapeutic window over the study period, validating the platform's utility for prolonged post-surgical delivery.

4. Biocompatibility

MTT assays revealed >95% cell viability across all hydrogel extract-treated groups at 24 and 72 hours, confirming non-toxic behavior. No morphological changes were observed under microscopy, reinforcing the material's cytocompatibility.

5. Wound Healing Performance

The scratch assay indicated that the hydrogel enhanced cell migration:

- In the hydrogel-drug group, wound closure reached 82% within 24 hours and 95% by 48 hours.
- Control groups without hydrogel or drug showed significantly slower migration (<60% at 48 hours).

This suggests both the hydrogel matrix and drug payload synergistically supported cellular repair.

CONCLUSION

Self-healing hydrogels offer a promising and highly adaptable platform for post-surgical drug delivery, capable of sustaining localized therapeutic release while maintaining their mechanical and structural integrity in dynamic biological environments. The material system evaluated in this study, based on acylhydrazone crosslinking of oxidized dextran and hydrazide linkers, demonstrated rapid healing, high drug encapsulation efficiency, prolonged release kinetics, and excellent biocompatibility.

The capacity to encapsulate multiple drugs, combined with injectable, in situ-forming characteristics, allows such systems to be tailored for diverse surgical applications—from orthopedic repair to abdominal and dental procedures. Importantly, these hydrogels reduce the frequency of reapplication, lower infection risks, and offer an environment conducive to tissue regeneration.

However, challenges remain in translating this technology into clinical practice. Long-term stability, immune response modulation, sterilization compatibility, and mass production methods require further refinement. Additionally, integration with stimuli-responsive triggers, such as enzyme or temperature-sensitive components, could offer advanced on-demand release systems.

In conclusion, self-healing hydrogels represent a paradigm shift in drug delivery science, particularly for surgical wound care. With continued development, they hold the potential to replace or augment conventional delivery methods, paving the way for intelligent, patient-specific therapeutic platforms.

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