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Synthesis and characterization of a novel MPEG–chitosan diblock copolymer and self-assembly of nanoparticles ☆

XiangYe Kong, XingYi Li, XiuHong Wang, TingTing Liu, YingChun Gu, Gang Guo, Feng Luo, Xia Zhao, YuQuan Wei, ZhiYong Qian *

State Key Laboratory of Biotherapy and Cancer Center, West China Hospital, West China Medical School, Sichuan University, Chengdu 610041, China

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, a simple and novel method based on free-radical polymerization initiated by potassium persulfate (KPS) was developed to synthesize the MPEG–chitosan diblock copolymer (MPEG–CS). The obtained MPEG–CS diblock copolymer was characterized by Fourier transform infrared (FTIR), ^{1}H nuclear magnetic resonance (^{1}H NMR), X-ray diffraction (XRD) and differential scanning calorimetry (DSC), respectively. The MPEG–CS copolymer could self-assemble into nanoparticles in aqueous solution. A typical TEM photography indicated that the well-spherical nanoparticles with diameter at about 200 nm were obtained. *In vitro* cell culture assay indicated that MPEG–CS nanoparticles are non-toxic and cell-compatible as the polymer concentration was smaller than 0.6 mg/ml. In conclusion, the obtained MPEG–CS nanoparticles might have great potential application in drug-delivery system.

1. Introduction

Chitosan, the only natural cationic polysaccharide obtained by deacetylation of chitin, has gained considerable attention in pharmaceutical and biomedical field owning to its favorable biological properties, such as low-toxicity, good biocompatibility, biodegradability (Muzzarelli et al., 1988), wound-healing activity (Ueno et al., 1999), antibacterial (Tharanathan & Kittur, 2003), etc. However, chitosan has an apparent pK_a of 5.6, which can only be soluble in few dilute acid solutions such as acetic acid, hydrochloric acid, etc. Poor water solubility had greatly limited its wide applications in pharmaceutical and biomedical field (Ouchi, Nishizawa, & Ohya, 1998). As a result, many attempts have been made in chemical modification of chitosan, aiming at improving its water solubility as well as obtaining water soluble derivatives. Among these derivatives, *N*,*N*,*N*-trimethyl chitosan (Muzzarelli & Tanfani, 1985), *N*-acyl chitosan, *N*-carboxyalkyl chitosan, *O*-carboxyalkyl and *N*-carboxyacyl chitosan are very important examples of successful water solubility modification of chitosan that have hold prominent places in research (Ravi Kumar, 2000). Chemical modification changes the fundamental skeleton of chitosan as well as original physicochemical and biochemical activities (Tanigawa, Tanaka, Sashiwa, Saimoto, & Shigemasa, 1992). However, graft copolymerization of hydrophilic polymer onto chitosan chain has gained considerable attraction due to it is not only could improve the water solubility of chitosan but also maintain the fundamental skeleton of chitosan intact. Although the grafting of chitosan could change its some properties especially in the physical properties such as solubility, crystalline state, etc., it is possible to maintain some interesting inherent characteristics. Recent studies have shown that after primary deviation followed by graft modification, chitosan would obtain much improved water solubility and bioactivities such as antibacterial and antioxidant properties (Xie, Xu, Wang, & Liu, 2002). Many other attempts have also been performed on the graft copolymerization of chitosan in view of preparing polysaccharide-based advanced materials with unique bioactivities and thus widening their applications in biomedicine and environmental fields.

Amphiphilic poly(ethylene glycol) (PEG) can be easily dissolved into aqueous and organic solvents. And PEG could effectively reduce reticuloendothelial system (RES) clearance, and has been approved by Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for human intravenous, oral, and dermal applications (Chan, Kurisawa, Chung, & Yang, 2007). Due to its favorable hydrophilicity and biocompatibility, PEG has been extensively adopted as a soluble polymeric modifier in organic synthesis. Harris et al., (1984) first reported the PEGylation of chitosan with a PEG-aldehyde to yield an imine (Schiff base) that was subsequently reduced with sodium cyanoborohydride ($NaCNBH_3$). Though high degree of PEGylation could be gained, the $NaCNBH_3$ introduced into the

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 28 85164063; fax: +86 28 85164060.
E-mail address: anderson-qian@163.com (Z. Qian).

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product was hard to be removed thoroughly. Recently, carbodiimide as a cross-linking agent has been used to conjugate PEG-carboxylic with amino groups of chitosan chain to obtain the PEGlation of chitosan (Aktas et al., 2005; Prego et al., 2006; Rafat et al., 2008). But with the use of carbodiimide, the PEG-grafted chitosan were found to aggregate spontaneously in aqueous solution (Ouchi et al., 1998). Here, we report a novel PEGylation of chitosan via the graft copolymerization based on the MPEG macromonomer and chitosan. Compared with previous reports, the advantage of this method was attributed to the mild condition without the application of harmful organic solvent in the synthesis procedure. The obtained MPEG–CS was a diblock copolymer and could self-assembly into nanoparticles, which could be served as a controlled drug-delivery system.

2. Experimental

2.1. Materials

Chitosan (medium molecular weight) with deacetylation of 92%, acryloyl chloride, potassium persulfate (KPS) and monomethoxy poly(ethylene glycol) (MPEG, Mn = 2000) were purchased from Sigma–Aldrich (USA). Triethylamine and pre-dried 1,2-dichloromethane were obtained from Chengdu KeLong Chemicals (Chengdu, China). All other chemicals used in this work were analytical grade. Ultrapure water from Milli-Q water system was used to prepare the aqueous solutions.

2.2. Synthesis of MPEG–Chitosan diblock copolymer

The MPEG–chitosan diblock copolymer was prepared at two steps, which were shown as follows.

2.2.1. Preparation of MPEG macromonomer

Briefly, 20 g of MPEG was first dissolved in 50 ml of pre-dried dichloromethane (CH_2Cl_2) with continuous stirring. And 2–3 drops of triethylamine (TEA) were added to the above MPEG solution. Subsequently, acryloyl chloride (0.5 ml) was added dropwisely to the reaction system with continuous stirring, and the mixture was refluxed for 4 h at 40 °C. Finally, the system was evaporated to remove the solvent. After dried under vacuum, white powder product was obtained. The purified MPEG macromonomer was kept in air-tight bags prior to use.

2.2.2. Synthesis of MPEG–CS diblock copolymer

First, 1 g of chitosan was dissolved in 1% of aqueous acetic acid (100 ml) under nitrogen atmosphere. Then, 0.25 g of potassium persulfate (KPS) was added to the chitosan acetic aqueous solution and the mixture was stirred at 50 °C for 4 h under nitrogen atmosphere. Finally, the whole mixture was poured into 300 ml of acetone, and the precipitate was separated by centrifugation. The obtained precipitate was re-dissolved in distilled water and dialyzed with a dialysis membrane (MWCO = 8000–14,000) against distilled water for 3 days. The final products were obtained by freeze–drying and stored in desiccator for further use. The obtained product of MPEG–CS diblock copolymer in this paper was named MPEG–CS.

2.3. Characterization of the diblock copolymer

2.3.1. Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) measurements

The Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectra were detected on a NICOLET 200SXV Infrared Spectrophotometer (USA) at room temperature. All samples were cast on KBr pallet before the measurement.

2.3.2. ^{1}H Nuclear magnetic resonance analysis (^{1}H NMR)

The ^{1}H nuclear magnetic resonance (^{1}H NMR) spectra were determined on Varian 400 spectrometer (Varian, USA) at 400 MHz using D_2O as solvent. Chemical shifts (δ) were given in ppm using tetramethylsilane (TMS) as an internal reference.

2.3.3. Crystallographic assay

X-ray diffraction spectrometry was obtained by using X-ray Diffractometer (DX-2000, DanDong Fangyuan Instrument Company, China) using Cu Kα radiation.

2.3.4. Thermal properties

The thermal properties of MPEG–CS and CS were characterized on a differential scanning calorimeter (DSC, NETSCZ 200, Germany). The purified and dried samples were used for DSC test. Sample was first heated from 20 to 200 °C under nitrogen atmosphere at a heating rate of 10 °C /min, and reheated to 200 °C at the same rate after quenched to 20 °C, at last sample was cooled to 20 °C again at the cooling rate of 10 °C/min.

2.4. Preparation of MPEG–CS nanoparticles by self-assembly

A calculated amount of MPEG–CS copolymer was dispersed into water under gentle agitation at 50 °C until a clear solution was obtained. The solution of self-aggregates was passed through membrane filter (pore size: 0.45 μm, Millipore) and stored at room temperature before further characterization.

2.5. Morphology study of the self-assembled nanoparticles

The morphology of self-assembled nanoparticles was observed on a transmission electron microscopy (TEM) (H-6009IV, Hitachi, Japan) as following: sample was diluted with distilled water and placed on a copper grid covered with nitrocellulose. The sample was negatively stained with phosphotungstic acid and dried at room temperature before observation.

2.6. In vitro cell toxicity

The cytotoxicity of MPEG–CS nanoparticles and F127 solution was determined by MTT assay. Cells were seeded in 96-well plates at a density of 1×10^4 (HEK 293) cells/well in 0.1 ml of growth medium and incubated overnight, and then added 0.1 ml of fresh DMEM growth medium containing a series of concentrations of MPEG–CS nanoparticles or F127 solution to each well. Untreated cells in growth media were used as the blank control. Cells were incubated for 48 h and then followed by addition of 20 μl of 3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide (MTT) solution (5 mg/ml). After further incubation for 2–4 h, the MTT solution (0.5 mg/ml) was carefully removed from each well, and 150 μl of DMSO was added to dissolve the MTT formazan crystals. The absorbance was recorded at 570 nm by an ELISA microplate reader (Bio-Rad). The cell activity (%) was related to the control wells containing untreated cells with fresh cell culture medium and was calculated according to the following: Cell activity (%) = absorption test/absorption control × 100%. All data are presented as the mean of six measurements (±SD).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Characterization of MPEG–chitosan diblock copolymer

MPEG–chitosan was synthesized by the free-radical reaction from MPEG macromonomer and chitosan as shown in Scheme 1. PEG was introduced into chitosan main chain to improve its hydro-