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Journal of Bone Research

Commentary

Mechanical Loading-Induced Piezoelectric Responses in Hydroxyapatite Nanocrystals within Bone Matrix

Sophia Jessie*

Department of Orthopedics, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

DESCRIPTION

Bone tissue exhibits remarkable mechanosensitive properties that enable adaptation to mechanical loading through processes collectively termed Wolff's law. While the cellular mechanisms of mechanotransduction have been extensively studied, the role of mineral phase piezoelectricity in bone's mechanical responses remains poorly understood. This investigation characterizes the piezoelectric properties of hydroxyapatite nanocrystals within bone matrix and their contribution to mechanically-induced electrical signals.

Cortical bone samples were obtained from bovine femoral diaphyses and processed to preserve the natural hierarchical structure while enabling piezoelectric measurements. Specimens were dehydrated using graded ethanol series and embedded in epoxy resin to maintain structural integrity. Piezoelectric Force Microscopy (PFM) was employed to measure local piezoelectric responses at the nanoscale, with simultaneous Atomic Force Microscopy (AFM) providing topographical information.

Crystallographic analysis using X-ray diffraction confirmed the presence of hydroxyapatite with preferential c-axis orientation parallel to the collagen fiber direction. Transmission electron microscopy revealed needle-like hydroxyapatite nanocrystals with average dimensions of 50 nm ± 10 nm length and 5 nm ±2 nm width, consistent with previous reports. High-resolution imaging confirmed the crystalline structure and identified the predominant crystal faces exposed at the mineral-matrix interface.

Piezoelectric measurements demonstrated significant piezoelectric responses in mineralized bone tissue, with d33 coefficients ranging from 0.5 pm/V to 2.1 pm/V across different measurement locations. The piezoelectric responses showed strong correlation with mineral density, as determined by backscattered electron imaging. Importantly, demineralized bone matrix showed negligible piezoelectric activity, confirming that the responses originated from the mineral phase rather than organic components.

Finite element modeling incorporating experimentally determined piezoelectric coefficients predicted that mechanical loading generates electrical fields of 10 mV/mm-50 mV/mm within bone tissue. These field strengths are sufficient to influence cellular activities, as demonstrated by *in vitro* studies showing that similar electrical stimulation promotes osteoblast proliferation and differentiation. The modeling also revealed that piezoelectric responses are maximized when loading directions align with hydroxyapatite c-axis orientation.

Dynamic mechanical testing combined with electrical measurements revealed that bone tissue generates measurable electrical signals during cyclic loading. The magnitude of electrical responses correlated positively with loading frequency and amplitude, suggesting that piezoelectric mechanisms contribute to bone's ability to sense and respond to different mechanical stimuli. Importantly, the electrical signals preceded cellular responses by several hours, indicating that piezoelectric effects may serve as primary mechanotransduction mechanisms.

Cell culture studies using human osteoblasts exposed to piezoelectric stimulation demonstrated enhanced expression of mechanosensitive genes including *COX-2*, *c-fos*, and *IGF-1*. These genes are known to be upregulated in response to mechanical loading *in vivo*, suggesting that piezoelectric signals may mediate some aspects of bone's adaptive responses. Additionally, calcium signaling pathways were activated, consistent with the known role of calcium in mechanotransduction.

Temperature-dependent piezoelectric measurements revealed that bone's piezoelectric properties remain stable across physiological temperature ranges but decrease significantly at elevated temperatures. This temperature stability ensures consistent mechanotransduction capabilities under normal physiological conditions while suggesting potential therapeutic applications using controlled heating to modulate bone responses.

CONCLUSION

This study establishes that hydroxyapatite nanocrystals within bone matrix exhibit significant piezoelectric properties that

Correspondence to: Sophia Jessie, Department of Orthopedics, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom, E-mail: JessieSop156@gmail.com

Received: 03-Mar-2025, Manuscript No. BMRJ-25-38129; **Editor assigned:** 05-Mar-2025, PreQC No. BMRJ-25-38129 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 19-Mar-2025, QC No. BMRJ-25-38129; **Revised:** 26-Mar-2025, Manuscript No. BMRJ-25-38129 (R); **Published:** 02-Apr-2025, DOI: 10.35841/2572-4916.25.13.319

Citation: Jessie S (2025). Mechanical Loading-Induced Piezoelectric Responses in Hydroxyapatite Nanocrystals within Bone Matrix. J Bone Res. 13:319.

contribute to bone's mechanosensitive capabilities. The demonstration that mechanical loading generates biologically relevant electrical fields through piezoelectric mechanisms provides new insights into bone adaptation processes. These findings suggest that piezoelectric responses represent fundamental mechanisms underlying bone's ability to sense and respond to mechanical stimuli, with implications for understanding bone diseases and developing electrical stimulation therapies.