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Lubrication and Wear Protection of Micro-Structured Hydrogels Using Bioinspired Fluids

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► **To cite this version:**

Jimmy Faivre, Alexandra Montembault, Guillaume Sudre, Buddha Ratna Shrestha, Guojun Xie, et al.. Lubrication and Wear Protection of Micro-Structured Hydrogels Using Bioinspired Fluids. *Biomacromolecules*, 2018, 20 (1), pp.326-335. 10.1021/acs.biomac.8b01311 . hal-02337389

HAL Id: hal-02337389

<https://hal.science/hal-02337389v1>

Submitted on 31 Oct 2024

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3 Lubrication and Wear Protection of Micro-Structured Hydrogels using
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6 Bioinspired Fluids
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Abstract

We report the fabrication and the use of a bioinspired synovial fluid acting as a lubricant fluid and anti-wear agent at soft and porous chitosan hydrogel tribopairs. This synthetic synovial fluid is composed of sodium hyaluronate (HA) and a bottle-brush polymer (BB) having a polycationic attachment group and polyzwitterionic pendant chains. 2.5 %_{w/w} chitosan hydrogel plugs are organized in a bilayered structure exposing a thin and dense superficial zone (SZ), covering a porous deep zone (DZ) and exhibiting microchannels perpendicularly aligned to the SZ. Using a low-load tribometer, the addition of HA lubricating solution at the hydrogel-hydrogel rubbing contact drastically decreased the coefficient of friction (CoF) from $\mu = 0.20 \pm 0.01$ to $\mu = 0.04 \pm 0.01$ on the DZ configuration and from $\mu = 0.31 \pm 0.01$ to $\mu = 0.08 \pm 0.01$ on the SZ surface when increasing HA concentration from 0 to 1000 $\mu\text{g/mL}$ and its molecular mass from 10 to 1500 kDa, similar to what was found when using BB polymer alone. When combining the BB polymer and the 1500 kDa HA, the CoF remained stable at $\mu = 0.04 \pm 0.01$ for both studied contact configurations, highlighting the synergistic interaction of the two macromolecules. Hydrogel wear was characterized by assessing the final gel surface roughness by the means of an interferometer. Increasing HA concentration and molecular weight plus the addition of BB polymer lead to a dramatic surface wear protection with a final gel surface roughness of the hydrogels similar to the untested gels. In brief, BB polymer in combination with high molecular weight HA is a potential lubricating fluid as well as a wear resistant agent for soft materials lubrication and wear protection.

Keywords: hydrogel lubrication, wear resistance, chitosan, bottlebrush polymer, hyaluronic acid

1. Introduction

Hydrogels are of growing interest for tissue engineering as scaffolds since they can structurally and mechanically mimic the tissues and embed growth factors as well as chondrocytes to support joint regeneration¹⁻³. However, few *in vivo* studies have characterized the potential lubrication properties and wear protection abilities of hydrogels despite its paramount importance for tissue engineering sustainability. For instance, in healthy diarthrodial joints, the cartilage and the synovial fluid act in synergy to provide low coefficient of friction (CoF) and excellent wear protection⁴⁻⁸. This synergy leads to efficient multiple modes of lubrication, depending on the spatio-temporal configuration of the joint during the motion process⁹. The excellent wear resistance is due to the fluid pressurization within the cartilage¹⁰ and the presence of aggrecan (Agg)-hyaluronic acid complexes which increase the osmotic pressure within the collagen matrix which helps supporting the load¹¹⁻¹². Moreover, the formation of a thin macromolecular layer on the cartilage surface under load avoids the cartilage surfaces from rubbing on each other. To ameliorate lubrication and alleviate mechanical erosion of soft synthetic materials used as *in vivo* tissue substitutes, different bio-inspired strategies have been described in the literature. Indeed, the friction forces of hydrogels surfaces can be modulated *via* their surface porosity¹³, topography¹⁴⁻¹⁵ or the presence of highly hydrated moieties on polymer groups¹⁶⁻¹⁷. For instance, Lin *et al.* showed a CoF of $\mu = 0.15$ by using bilayered hydrogels made of a mixture of acrylamide, acrylic acid and diacrylamide exposing a highly porous superficial layer compared to a denser structure with a CoF of $\mu = 0.35$ ¹³. The insertion of hydrophilic [2-(methacryloyloxy)ethyl] trimethylammonium chloride as part of the gel matrix drastically reduced the CoF to 0.05 thanks to the higher water trapping capability of the charged polyelectrolyte. The design of vertical pores or fibers at hydrogel surfaces is another technique to allow better lubrication

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3 due to water exudation upon compression and thus the formation of a lubricating
4 hydrodynamic film^{15, 18}, a technique which can be combined with highly hydrophilic
5 monomers¹⁹. To drastically decrease CoF, another method is to directly graft polyelectrolyte
6 brushes at the gel surface. For example, poly(sodium 4-styrene sulfonate) grafted to
7 poly(hydroxyethyl methacrylate) (p(HEMA)) lowered by almost an order of magnitude the
8 CoF of p(HEMA) hydrogels²⁰. The friction can also be decreased upon addition of a
9 lubricating fluid either composed of surfactants²¹, lipids, or naturally-occurring or bioinspired
10 proteoglycans²², which are known to be responsible for the lubrication and wear protection of
11 eyes, joints or mucous membranes. Nevertheless, the tools used for the tribological
12 measurement such as tribometers or rheometers, the geometry of the probe (pin or ball on
13 disc), the contact area or the nature and roughness of opposing geometry (glass, metal or
14 hydrogel), highly affects the results and hence should be meticulously described in order to be
15 comparable to other studies.
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34 On the other hand, the interest on wear protection of soft materials is growing since it is
35 essential to ensure the integrity of the hydrogels scaffolds to fully sustain the physiological
36 conditions (pressure, shear, inflammation). The main route to limit wear initiation to
37 hydrogels is to strengthen the scaffold *via* crosslinking²³ or interpenetrated networks²⁴⁻²⁵. An
38 interesting alternative is called the "sacrificial bond principle"²⁶ which is based on the
39 insertion of weak bonds inside the initial gel matrix. When a crack propagates in the gel, the
40 weaker bonds break first and dissipate a large amount of energy²⁷. Finally, the total energy
41 needed to damage the hydrogels is drastically increased by several orders of magnitude
42 compared to their counterparts without any sacrificial bonds.
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55 In the present study, we emphasize on the design of lubricating fluids which are able to
56 lubricate *and* reduce wear at soft multilayered chitosan hydrogels. These lubricating fluids
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3 were previously proven to reduce both friction and wear of stiff and non porous mica surfaces
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5 with CoF of $\mu \sim 0.02$ up to pressures of several megaspascals²⁸, matching physiological
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7 conditions. Contrary to mica surfaces, poroelastic chitosan hydrogels more closely mimic soft
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9 tissues, but ~~and~~ suffer from frictional abrasion at low stresses impeding their uses *in vivo*¹⁸.
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11 By using a low-load tribometer and light interferometry, we show that the addition of high
12
13 molecular weight hyaluronic acid (HA) and bottlebrush (BB), polymer at the interface
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15 between the two sliding chitosan gel tribopairs significantly lowered both the CoF and wear
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17 for both studied surface topographies. BB polymers represent novel polymeric architecture
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19 with very densely grafted side chains²⁹ which are typically prepared by atom transfer radical
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21 polymerization³⁰. This unique architecture resembles the proteoglycan lubricin structure
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23 which is involved in the lubrication of the synovial joints. Since the synovial fluid also
24
25 contains hyaluronic acid and phospholipids (DPPC)³¹ the combination of HA with a synthetic
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27 BB polymer composed of pendant phospholipids moieties³² mimics the macromolecular
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29 structure and composition of synovial fluid. This leads to the concept of bioinspired synovial
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31 fluids. This work demonstrates the potentiality of this lubricant and anti-wear fluid to help
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33 hydrate physiological surfaces such as in the case of dry eye syndrome or tissue substitutes
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35 such as contact lenses or cartilage substitutes to keep and extend their tribological properties
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37 *in vivo*.
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2. Experimental Section

2.1. Materials

Chitosan ($M_w = 6.04 \cdot 10^5$, M_w/M_n 1.6, DA 4.5%, from squid pen chitin) was purchased from Mahtani Chitosan Pvt. Ltd (batch type 114). Sodium hyaluronates of different molecular weights were obtained from Lifecore Biomedical (Minneapolis, USA). Acetic acid, ammoniac hydroxide, and HEPES were supplied by Sigma-Aldrich. NaOH pellets, NaCl, and absolute anhydrous ethanol were obtained from Carlo Erba Reagents. Methyl methacrylate (MMA, 99%, Sigma-Aldrich), 2-(trimethylsilyloxy)ethyl methacrylate (HEMA-TMS, 96%, Sigma-Aldrich) and 2-(dimethylamino)ethyl methacrylate (DMAEMA, 98%, Sigma-Aldrich) were passed through a column filled with basic alumina prior to use. 2-Methacryloyloxyethyl phosphorylcholine (MPC, 97%, Aldrich) was recrystallized from acetonitrile and dried under vacuum overnight at room temperature before polymerization. Copper(I) bromide ($Cu^I Br$, 99.999%, Sigma-Aldrich), copper(II) bromide ($Cu^{II} Br_2$, 99.999%, Sigma-Aldrich), copper(I) chloride ($Cu^I Cl$, $\geq 99.999\%$ trace metals basis, Alfa Aesar), copper(II) chloride ($Cu^{II} Cl_2$, $\geq 99.999\%$ trace metals basis, Sigma-Aldrich), 2,2'-bipyridyl (bpy, 99%, Sigma-Aldrich), 4,4'-Dinonyl-2,2'-dipyridyl (dNbpy, 97%, Sigma-Aldrich), potassium fluoride (KF, 99%, Sigma-Aldrich), tetrabutylammonium fluoride (TBAF, 1M solution in THF, Sigma-Aldrich), bromoisobutyl bromide (BBiB, 98%, Sigma-Aldrich), α -bromoisobutyl bromide (98%, Sigma-Aldrich), bromoethane (98%, Alfa Aesar), tris(2-pyridylmethyl)amine (TPMA) (98%, Sigma-Aldrich), and tributyltin hydride (97%, Sigma-Aldrich) were used without any additional purification. Solvents were used as received.

2.2. Chitosan hydrogels fabrication

Prior to gel fabrication, chitosan was purified by filtration on Millipore membranes of decreasing porosity (membrane porosities of successively 3, 0.8, and 0.45 μ m). 2.5 % $_{w/w}$

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3 multilayered chitosan physical hydrogels were fabricated according to previously published
4 procedure¹⁸. In short, 2.5%_{w/w} solution was prepared by dissolving chitosan purified powder
5 with a stoichiometric amount of acetic acid in water. The chitosan solution was then
6 centrifuged at 5000 rpm for 10 min to remove air bubbles. The solution was then extruded and
7 deposited on a plastic foil and pressed with a metal plate with 1.5 mm wedges to maintain the
8 same thickness in all gels (i.e. 1.5 mm). The viscous chitosan film was then placed in a NaOH
9 coagulation bath at 1 mol/L until the completion of the gelation process. The resulting gel
10 disks were cut with a punch to final diameters of 11 and 21mm. The gel disks were washed in
11 pure water to reach neutral pH. The nano and micro structure of physical 2.5%_{w/w} chitosan
12 hydrogel were assessed by confocal microscopy (CLSM) and Scanning Electron Microscopy
13 (SEM).
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29 **2.3. BB Polymer synthesis**

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32 In the following section, we describe the synthesis of the BB polymer of final composition
33 [(PBiBEM_{552-g}-PMPC₄₅)-*stat*-MMA₃₃₈]-*b*-(PqDMAEMA₉₃-*stat*-PMMA₁₅₃) whose
34 structure is inspired by our previously published references³²⁻³⁴.
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40 **Synthesis of P(HEMA-TMS)-*stat*-PMMA (A block (Fig. 1A)):** A dried round bottom flask
41 was charged with BBiB (3.4 μ L, 0.023 mmol), dNbpy (112.8 mg, 0.276 mmol), HEMA-TMS
42 (10.0 mL, 45.9 mmol), MMA (4.9 mL, 45.9 mmol) and anisole (3.0 mL). The solution was
43 bubbled with argon for 30'. Cu^IBr (0.0158 g, 0.110 mmol), and Cu^{II}Br₂ (0.0061 g, 0.028
44 mmol) were charged in a dried 50 mL round bottom flask and 3 argon-vacuum cycles were
45 performed to remove oxygen. The flask was sealed, and then immersed in an oil bath at 40
46 °C. After bubbling, the monomer solution was injected into the catalyst solution. Reaction
47 was stopped after 14 h via exposure to air, reaching the degree of polymerization of the
48 product 500. The monomers consumption was calculated from ¹H NMR spectra by the
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3 integration of MMA and HEMA-TMS vinyl groups signal ($CHH=C-CH_3$, 6.11 ppm or 5.56
4 ppm) against the internal standard (anisole, *o,p*-Ar-H, 6.91 ppm). The product **A** was purified
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6 by three precipitations from methanol, dried under vacuum overnight at room temperature,
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8 and analyzed by GPC and 1H NMR spectroscopy. The ratio of PMMA (*s*, broad, $CO-O-CH_3$,
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10 3.54-3.68 ppm) to P(HEMA-TMS) (*s*, broad, $OCO-CH_2$, 3.90-4.17 ppm) signals gave the
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12 polymer composition.
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18 **Synthesis of (PDMAEMA-*stat*-PMMA)-*b*-[P(HEMA-TMS-*stat*-PMMA)] (BA diblock**
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20 **(Fig. 1A)):** A dried round bottom flask was charged with **A block** (1.0 g, 0.0094 mmol),
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22 dNbpy (70 mg, 0.17 mmol), DMAEMA (1.2 mL, 7.0mmol), MMA (0.75 mL, 7.0 mmol) and
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24 anisole (4.0 mL). The solution was bubbled with argon for 30'. $Cu^I Cl$ (0.0074 g, 0.0752
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26 mmol), and $Cu^{II} Cl_2$ (0.0010 g, 7.46 μ mol) were charged in a dried 25 mL round bottom flask
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28 and 3 argon-vacuum cycles were performed to remove oxygen. The flask was sealed, and then
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30 immersed in an oil bath at 60 °C. After bubbling, the monomer solution was injected into the
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32 catalyst solution. Reaction was stopped after 48 h via exposure to air. The product was diluted
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34 in dichloromethane, passed through a neutral alumina column, concentrated under vacuum
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36 and precipitated twice from hexanes and water. The solvent was removed under vacuum and
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38 the product was dried overnight under vacuum at room temperature. The structure of the
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40 polymer was determined by 1H NMR from the ratio of selected polymer signals: PMMA (*s*,
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42 broad, $CO-O-CH_3$, 3.54-3.68 ppm), P(HEMA-TMS) (*s*, broad, $O-Si(CH_3)_3$, 0.11-0.21 ppm)
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44 and PDMAEMA (*m*, CH_2-NMe_2 , 2.55-2.65 ppm).
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51 **Synthesis of [PBiBEM-*stat*-PMMA]-*b*-(PqDMAEMA-*stat*-PMMA) (BA-Macroinitiator**
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53 **(BA-MI)):** **BA diblock** (0.1840 g), potassium fluoride (0.030 g, 0.52 mmol) and 2,6-di-*tert*-
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55 butylphenol (0.0090 g, 0.0439 mmol) were placed in a 20 ml round bottom flask. The flask
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57 was sealed, flushed with argon, and finally anhydrous THF (7 mL) was added. The mixture
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3 was cooled in an ice bath to 0 °C, tetrabutylammonium fluoride solution in THF (1M, 0.44
4 mL, 0.44mmol) was injected into the flask, followed by a drop-wise addition of
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6 2-bromoisobutyryl bromide (0.121 g, 65 μL, 0.526mmol). After the addition, the reaction
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8 mixture was allowed to reach room temperature and stirring was continued for 24 h. The
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10 solution was passed through a short column filled with basic alumina, precipitated into
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12 hexanes and then methanol:water (70:30, v/v%) three times. The filtrate was dried under
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15 vacuum overnight at room temperature.
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20 **Synthesis of [(PBiBEM-*g*-PMPC)-*stat*-MMA]-*b*-(PDMAEMA-*stat*-PMMA) (BAC**
21 **polymer (Fig. 1A)):** A dry 10 mL round bottom flask was charged with polymer **BA-MI**
22 (2mg), 2-methacryloyloxyethyl phosphorylcholine (MPC)(0.2540 g, 0.860mmol), 2,2'-
23 bipyridyl (bpy) (22 mg, 14.23 μmol), Cu^ICl (6 mg, 60 μmol), and copper (II) chloride
24 (Cu^{II}Cl₂) (1 mg, 7.40 μmol). A dry 10 mL round bottom flask was charged with methanol (3.0
25 mL) and anisole (500 μL). The solution was bubbled with argon for 15 min. The flask was
26 sealed, and then immersed in an oil bath at 50 °C. After bubbling, the solvent solution was
27 injected into the catalyst/monomer solution. Time of reaction was determined thanks to MPC
28 conversion measurement by ¹H NMR to reach a DP of 45. Reaction was then stopped via
29 exposure to air achieving PMPC diblock brush. The resulting brush was purified by
30 ultrafiltration against MeOH under pressure using regenerated cellulose membrane
31 (Millipore) with a pore size molar mass cut-off of 30,000 Da. Molecular weights were not
32 determined as polymer was neither soluble in THF nor in DMF.
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50 **Synthesis of [(PBiBEM-*g*-PMPC)-*stat*-MMA]-*b*-(PqDMAEMA-*stat*-PMMA) (BB**
51 **polymer)):** BAC was placed in 20 mL vial and dissolved in methanol (10 mL). The solution
52 was cooled in an ice bath to 0 °C, followed by a slow addition of bromoethane (0.5mL, 6.7
53 mmol). The reaction was stirred at room temperature for the next 48 h. The solvent and the
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3 unreacted bromoethane were evaporated under gentle pressure and solvent was exchanged for
4 water by ultrafiltration. The polymer was freeze-dried and stored at -20°C in a dark container.
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7 The quantitative quaternization of -NMe₂ groups of **BB polymer** was determined by ¹H
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10 NMR.
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13 **2.4. Equipment and Analysis**

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16 Proton nuclear magnetic resonance (¹H NMR) spectroscopy was performed using Variant 400
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18 MHz spectrometer. In all cases, deuterated chloroform (CDCl₃) was used as a solvent, except
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20 for PMPC ABA which was analyzed using deuterated water (D₂O). ¹H chemical shifts are
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22 reported in ppm downfield from tetramethylsilane (TMS) in deuterated chloroform and from
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24 3-(trimethylsilyl) propane sulfonate sodium salts in deuterated water. Apparent molecular
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26 weights and molecular weight distributions measurements of polymers were measured by gel
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28 permeation chromatography (GPC, Waters 1525 system 35°) using Phenogel columns (guard,
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30 10⁵, 10⁴, and 10³ Å), with THF or DMF as eluent at 35 °C at a constant flow rate of 1.00
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32 mL/min, and differential refractive index (RI) detector (Waters, 2414). The apparent number-
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34 average molecular weights (*M_n*) and molecular weight distribution (*M_w/M_n*) were determined
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36 with a calibration based on linear poly(styrene) (PS) standards (Polyscience).
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42 AFM measurements were collected using a multimode Atomic Force Microscopy (AFM) with
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44 a NanoScope V controller (Bruker) in PeakForce QNM mode. Silicon tips (on nitride
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46 cantilever) with resonance frequency of 50-90 kHz and spring constant of ~0.4 N/m were
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48 used. The samples were dissolved in water and deposited on freshly cleaved mica.
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52 **2.5. Formulation of synthetic synovial fluids**

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55 10.0 mg of different molecular mass HA (10, 60, 500, and 1500 kDa) were dissolved with
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57 magnetic stirring in 10 mL 0.1M HEPES buffer pH 7.4 in a glass vial. The solution was then
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3 immediately poured in the tribometer bath immersing chitosan hydrogels during wear test. For
4 tests with B-B polymer, 100 or 400 $\mu\text{g/mL}$ solutions of B-B polymer were prepared in the
5 same buffer with or without HA. Solutions were homogenized with a vortex for 1 min.
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7 Surfaces were then let to equilibrate for 1 h prior to the measurements.
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13 **2.6. Tribology tests on hydrogel tribopairs**

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15 A low load tribometer was used to assess frictional properties of chitosan gels in presence of
16 artificial synovial fluids. The 11 mm gel disk was glued on the top mobile part on an
17 aluminum pin and was able to rotate and be adjusted *via* a ball joint to obtain a flat contact
18 between both gels. The 21 mm gel disk was glued on a metallic immobile metal surface.
19 Typically, the two gel disks were pressed against each other reaching the set load and the
20 mobile part was driven to oscillate at a frequency of 1 Hz with an amplitude of 5 mm from
21 500 to 1000 cycles. Normal and tangential forces were recorded and analyzed using a home-
22 made labview software. Gels were glued on the mobile top part and immobile bottom part
23 with Loctite Super Glue 3 power flex gel (from Loctite, waterproof and suited for porous
24 materials). Two different configurations of the gel disks were characterized: 1) SZ on SZ flat
25 contact and 2) DZ on DZ flat contact. During the experiments, the disks were fully immersed
26 in the synthesized synovial fluid. Friction force (F_t) measurements were firstly performed as a
27 function of the sliding velocity (v) with a constant load ($F_n = 0.3 \text{ N}$) (0.3 N corresponding to a
28 stress of 3 kPa which represents 10 % of elastic shear modulus of the gel G' determined at a
29 frequency of 1Hz) and at an amplitude of 5 mm. This normal load was chosen to avoid the
30 destruction of the gel under shearing at the DZ/DZ configuration which was systematically
31 noticed at a pressure close to the shear modulus¹⁸. The number of cycles was increased to
32 adapt the length of the experiments throughout the friction experiments as a function of
33 sliding velocity since we covered three decades of velocities from 0.1 to 100 mm/s. In a
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3 second step, the effect of normal force was assessed at a sliding frequency of 1 Hz and an
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5 amplitude of 5 mm for 250 cycles. The range of applied normal forces was between 0.05 N
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7 and 5 N. Finally, wear of the gel disks was evaluated after shearing the surfaces for 10^4 cycles
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9 (at $F_n = 3$ N, $P = 30$ kPa, and $v = 5$ mm/s). Wear was visualized using a digital microscope
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11 (VHX-1000, Keyence) for optical micrographs and an interferometric microscope (Contour
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13 GT-K 3D Bruker). Surface roughness was characterized by the arithmetical mean height (S_a)
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15 of the surface and was quantified using vision 64 software (Bruker). The surface analyzed for
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17 the roughness measurements represented 20% of the total contact area. Prior to wear
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19 visualization, samples were dried by blowing compressed air to improve imaging contrast.
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23 **2.7. Correlation with physiological conditions**

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25 All experimental setups and parameters were adjusted to match physiological conditions as
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27 often as possible. pH was adjusted to 7.4 as in human fluids. The sliding frequency was in the
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29 range of 0.01 to 100 mm/s, similar to normal knee, eyelid or airways cilium motion speed³⁵⁻³⁹,
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31 with a displacement of 5 mm. The gel on gel plate geometry was placed in a bath filled with
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33 synthetic fluids in order to match natural synovial joints (i.e. cartilage on cartilage contact
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35 within synovial fluid) or eyes/eyelids/contact lenses function. Finally, the physical chitosan
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37 gel layered-structure composed of a thin superficial zone supported by a network of channels
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39 of few micrometers in diameter and perpendicularly orientated to the superficial zone was
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41 previously mechanically studied⁴⁰ and was proven to be an interesting tribological surface
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43 model to mimic natural tissues.
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3. Results & Discussions

3.1. Experiment Design

The bioinspired synovial fluid was formulated using a BB polymer and HA in a buffered solution. The BB polymer is composed of three different blocks: a A block which is the polymer backbone bearing lateral chains, a polycationic B block - linked to the backbone - which provides attachment to negatively charged surfaces and the lateral C blocks - constituted of phosphoryl choline moieties acting as hydrophilic pendant chains (Fig. 1A). The different constituents of the synthetic synovial fluids were introduced at concentrations close to natural joints for proteoglycans and HA. BB polymer concentration was 400 $\mu\text{g/mL}$ whereas HA was used at concentrations ranging from 10 to 1000 $\mu\text{g/mL}$ ⁴¹⁻⁴³. HA molecular mass was selected from 1.5 MDa, representing near physiological HA molecular mass, to 10 kDa which is close to degraded HA molecular weight⁴⁴. The substrates used as tribopairs were 2.5 %_{w/w} chitosan hydrogels whose structure and mechanical behavior were previously characterized^{18, 45-47}. The hydrogels were analyzed using confocal microscopy and SEM imaging (Fig. 1B). They exhibited a bilayer structure with a first $\sim 100 \mu\text{m}$ dense layer membrane called superficial zone (SZ). The SZ covered a deep zone (DZ) forming the majority of the gel disks composed of microchannels of $\sim 10 \mu\text{m}$ in diameter, perpendicularly aligned to the SZ. These channels crossed the bottom of the gel as seen in the Fig. 1B and were one millimeter long, reaching the bottom surface of the hydrogel plug.

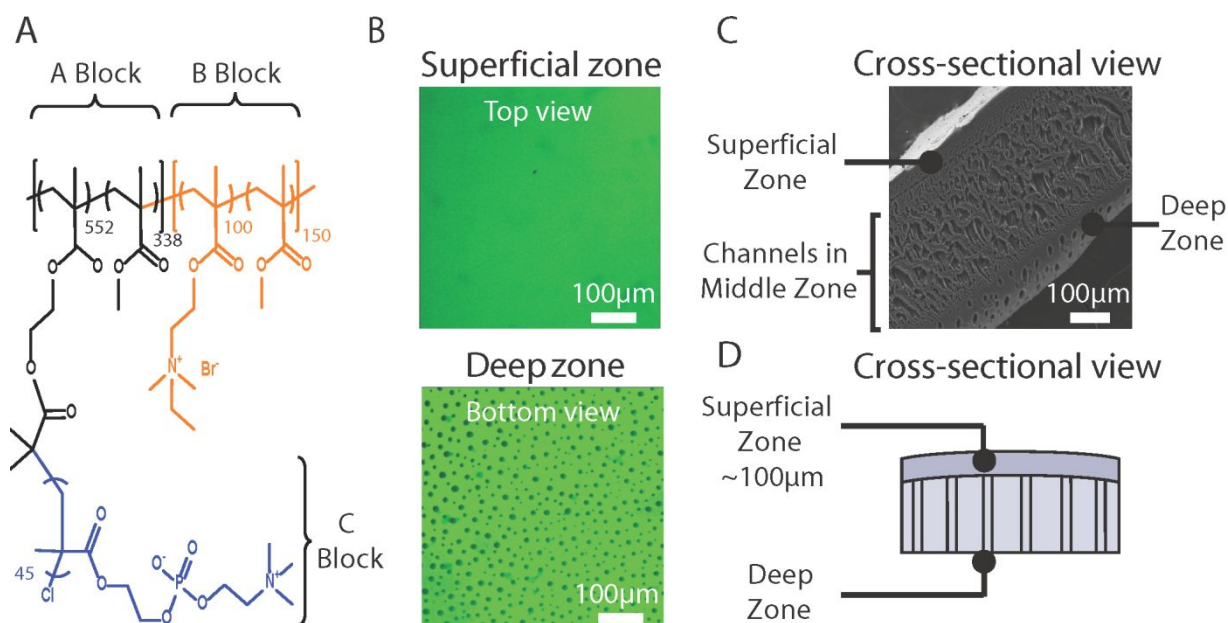


Figure 1. (A) BB polymer structure showing the three different blocks used to build the polymer, and (B) confocal microscopy imaging of the top (superficial zone) and bottom (basal zone) of the hydrogel plug (C) scanning electron microscopy micrographs of the hydrogel cross-section showing the arrangement of the different layers and structures and (D) schematic of the chitosan hydrogel plugs structure used in this study.

3.2. Tribology of gel/gel contacts in HEPES buffer

The gel friction in an aqueous buffer was assessed in two different configurations: SZ/SZ and DZ/DZ configurations (Fig. 2A). The gel disks were placed into a home-made low-load tribometer and fully immersed in a 0.1 M HEPES, 150 mM NaCl at pH 7.4. Buffered conditions were privileged since pH is known to impact the chitosan gel mechanical properties and consequently its tribological properties. In particular, a decrease of pH below or close to the pKa of amine groups of chitosan ($pK_{a \text{ chitosan}} = 6.2$) could trigger the chitosan chains dissolution and gel weakening. Friction forces, F_t , as a function of normal forces, F_N , were measured at a constant sliding velocity $v = 5 \text{ mm/s}$ (Fig. 2B) and as a function of sliding velocity, v , at a constant normal pressure of $P = 3 \text{ kPa}$ (Fig. 2C). To assess the speed effect, the normal pressure was set constant at 3 kPa, of the chitosan gel since it has been previously

shown that our chitosan hydrogels at a concentration of 2.5%w/w were structurally altered at normal stresses close to 30 kPa.¹⁸

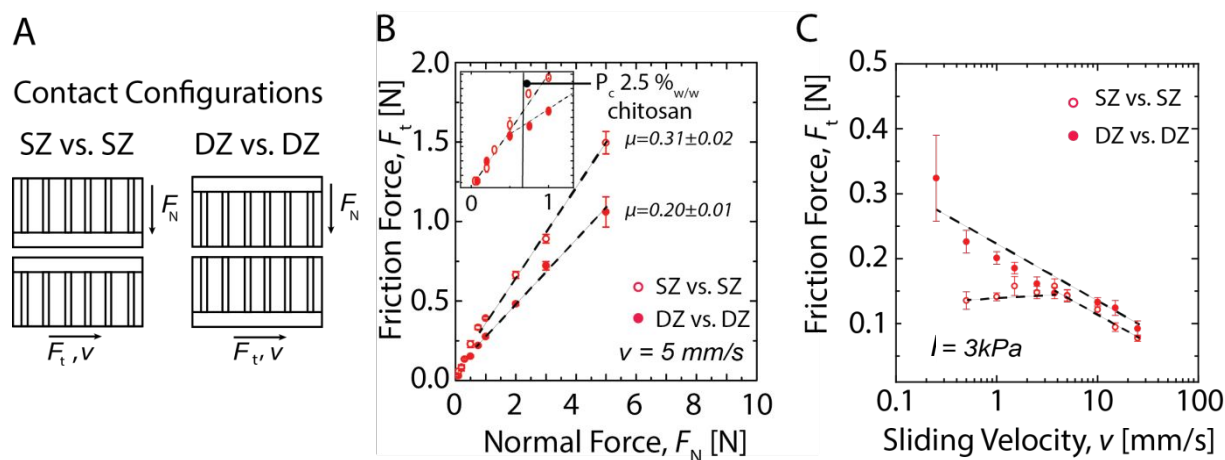


Figure 2. Tribological characterization of gel on gel flat contact in 0.1 M HEPES buffer at pH 7.4. (A) Schematic of the configurations tested (B) Friction force, F_t , as a function of applied normal force, F_N , at $v = 5$ mm/s for both configurations, inset is an expanded view between 0 to 1 N in order to highlight the transition between DZ and SZ configurations at the critical pressure P_c and (C) Friction force, F_t , as a function of sliding velocity, v , at $P = 3$ kPa for both configurations.

The CoF, also denominated μ and defined as $\mu = F_t/F_N$, was higher for the SZ/SZ configuration ($\mu = 0.31 \pm 0.02$) compared to the DZ/DZ configuration ($\mu = 0.20 \pm 0.01$, Fig. 2B) in the high normal force range. No stick-slip behavior was observed in the present study as already reported for multilayered chitosan hydrogels tribopairs¹⁸. Such difference was observed at an applied normal pressure $P_c > 6$ kPa (~ 0.6 N) (see inset Fig. 2B) while at $P < P_c$, both configurations exhibited similar CoF. We previously demonstrated that the gelation process allowed the formation of a dense gel layer in the SZ characterized by a low permeability to water exudation, while the deeper zone, DZ, is composed of micron-sized channels perpendicularly aligned to the SZ¹⁸. The low permeability of the SZ limits the formation of a hydrodynamic water film at the rubbing contact leading to a high CoF. On contrary, at the DZ/DZ contact, the CoF was initially similar to the SZ/SZ configuration for a pressure lower

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3 than a critical pressure ($P < P_c$). At $P > P_c$, the slope deviated to achieve a lower CoF which
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5 was due to the water exudation due to the microchannels closure into the contact from the
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7 more permeable DZ gel side.¹⁸ This exudation was responsible for the creation of a
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9 sustainable fluid film throughout the experiment and thus improved lubrication.
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13 Figure 2C presents the friction force as a function of the sliding velocity between two chitosan
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15 hydrogels. Both configurations exhibited different behavior when increasing the sliding
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17 velocity. Indeed, the friction force on the DZ/DZ configuration decreased monotonously with
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19 the velocity possibly indicating the presence of a mixed lubrication regime⁹ since hydrogels
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21 are rough and deformable materials whereas, for the SZ/SZ configuration, the friction force
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23 was constant at $v < 5 \text{ mm/s}^{-1}$ and then decreased monotonically at $v > 5 \text{ mm/s}$, merging
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25 toward the friction force of the DZ/DZ configuration. The behavior of the SZ/SZ
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27 configuration friction is explained by the transition from the boundary lubrication at low
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29 velocity to the mixed lubrication regime at higher velocity⁴⁸.
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34 35 **3.3. Lubrication with synthetic synovial fluids - Effect of the applied normal force F_N**

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37 In order to elucidate the role of the synthetic synovial fluid on the hydrogels lubrication, we
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39 firstly immersed the chitosan gels in solutions of 1 mg/mL HA of different molecular mass
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41 (10, 60, 500, and 1500 kDa) during 1 h and then tested them on the tribometer (Fig. 3 A-C).
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43 HA was used as a comparative lubricating fluid for two reasons. First, HA has a key role in
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45 the joint lubrication since it binds Agg to form a Agg/HA complexes within the cartilage,
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47 osmotically increasing the compressive modulus of cartilage as well with synovial fluid's
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49 lubricin and phospholipids to immobilize these molecules onto the shearing contact^{5, 22, 49-54}.
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51 Secondly, HA is commercially used as a viscosupplement fluid for patient suffering from
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53 painful joints such as in the case osteoarthritis or directly in the eye for patients suffering from
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55 dry eye syndrom or wearing contact lenses⁵⁵⁻⁵⁹.
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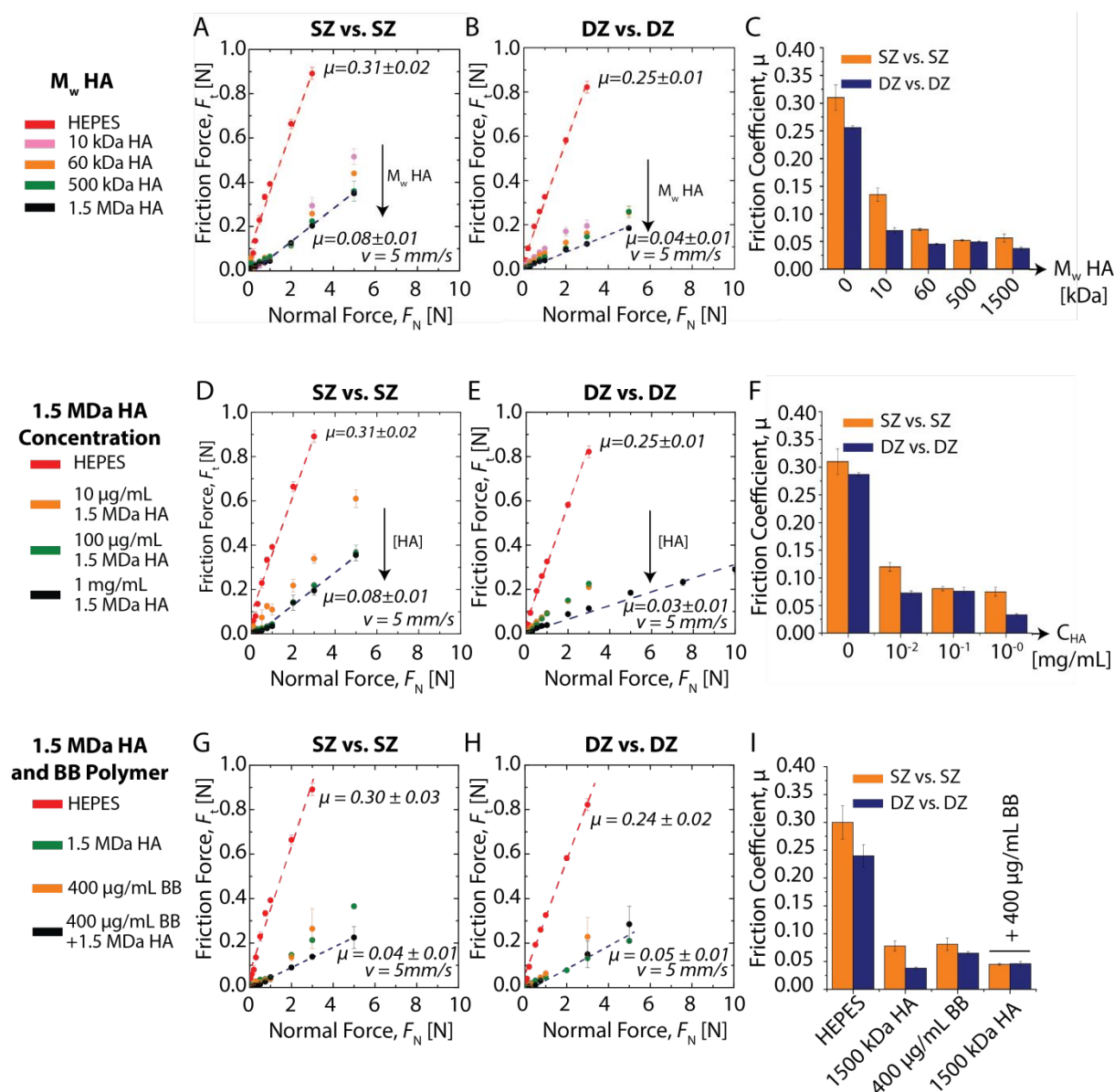


Figure 3. Measurement of the friction force, F_t , as a function of normal force, F_N , between two hydrogel plugs in presence of solutions of different molecular weights HA in the (A) SZ/SZ configuration and (B) DZ/DZ configuration. (C) Evolution of the coefficient of friction μ as a function of HA molecular weights for SZ/SZ and DZ/DZ configurations. (D) F_t as a function of F_N at different HA concentrations in the SZ/SZ configuration and the (E) DZ/DZ configuration. (F) The resulting CoF as a function of HA concentration for SZ/SZ and DZ/DZ configurations. (G) Impact of BB and HA mixtures on the friction force F_t between two hydrogel plugs in the SZ/SZ configuration and (H) DZ/DZ configuration. (I) Corresponding CoF as a function of the lubricant composition.

In both SZ/SZ and DZ/DZ configurations, the presence of HA led to a drastic decrease of the CoF compared to pure HEPES buffer (Fig. 3A and B). Once again, the DZ/DZ configuration

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3 exhibited a slightly lower CoF, $\mu = 0.04 \pm 0.01$ for 1.5 MDa HA at $P > P_c \sim 6$ kPa in
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5 comparison with the SZ/SZ configuration exhibiting $\mu = 0.08 \pm 0.01$. The lowest HA
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7 molecular mass (10 and 60 kDa) had significantly higher CoF than the highest molecular
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9 weights in both configurations (Fig. 3C).

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13 We then investigated the effect of high molecular weight HA concentration on the frictional
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15 behavior of chitosan gels. The gels were immersed in 1.5 MDa HA solutions of different
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17 concentrations (0, 10, 100, and 1000 $\mu\text{g/mL}$) for 1 h prior to tribo-experimentation. As seen in
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19 Fig. 3D-F, increasing HA concentration tended to decrease the CoF by one order of
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21 magnitude in both hydrogels configurations. On the SZ/SZ configuration, the CoF reached,
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23 once again a higher value ($\mu = 0.08 \pm 0.01$) than the DZ/DZ configuration, slightly merging
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25 toward gel/gel rubbing in HEPES alone for the lowest HA concentrations suggesting that low
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27 Mw HA is depleted from the contact during shearing. On the DZ/DZ configuration, the CoF
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29 remained low at $\mu = 0.04 \pm 0.01$ for $P > P_c$. These observations can be rationalized using the
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31 trapping mechanism recently reported in natural articular cartilage.⁷ This mechanism
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33 considers that high molecular weight HA molecules are partially traps in cartilage collagen
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35 network under high compression which transiently immobilizes them at the interface, right
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37 where they are needed for lubrication and wear protection. A similar behavior was observed
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39 in the present system. In the DZ/DZ configuration, high molecular weight HA was effectively
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41 trapped in the pores of the interface, allowing higher lubrication compared to low molecular
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43 weight HA or to the SZ/SZ configuration. This mechanism is facilitated by the relative size of
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45 the hydrogel channels diameter (10 microns) protruding at the interface in the DZ/DZ
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47 configuration and the radius of gyration of HA molecules ($R_g = 154 \pm 12$ nm at 1.5 MDa
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49 buffered saline).

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3 The BB polymer alone presented a similar behavior to high molecular HA, which is not
4 surprising since BB is also a high molecular weight polymer ($M_w \approx 10^7$ g/mol, Fig. 3G and
5 H). At a concentration of 400 $\mu\text{g/mL}$, the CoF of the BB polymer solution was $\mu = 0.08 \pm$
6 0.01 in the SZ/SZ configuration compared to 0.05 ± 0.01 in the DZ/DZ configuration.(Fig
7 3G-I). Finally, the BB polymer at 400 $\mu\text{g/mL}$ was mixed to the 1.5 MDa HA solution and
8 tribologically tested on both hydrogel configurations. To increase interaction with 1.5 MDa HA,
9 a small polycationic attachment group (Fig. 1A, B block) was grafted on a linear domain to
10 mimic proteoglycan attachment groups onto HA. Figure 3G shows that the CoF in SZ/SZ
11 configuration (which was systematically the highest, independently of the HA used) was
12 lowered using the macromolecules mixture ($\mu = 0.04 \pm 0.01$), reaching values similar to those
13 observed for the DZ/DZ configuration (Fig 3H) with the 1.5 MDa HA at 1 mg/mL. In
14 contrast, the effect of the mixture was unnoticeable in the DZ/DZ configuration since no
15 significant differences in CoF were observed compared to 1.5 MDa HA at 1 mg/mL alone.
16 Therefore, the BB polymer combined with high molecular weight HA allows to obtain a CoF
17 that is independent of the hydrogel configuration, smearing out the effect of the interface
18 structure.
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41 The last observation indicates that the synergistic interaction between HA and the BB
42 polymer allows the lubricant to remain in the shear contact even in the absence of any surface
43 pores. We previously showed that BB polymers without any polycationic side block could
44 entangle with HA macromolecules under confinement creating a strongly cohesive lubricating
45 interfacial film.³³ The presence of a polycationic side block in the BB polymer we used in this
46 study drastically enhances the interaction between both polymers even under low applied load
47 which helps maintaining them in the interfacial contact even under high shear conditions.
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58 **3.4. Lubrication with synthetic synovial fluids - Effect of the sliding velocity, v**

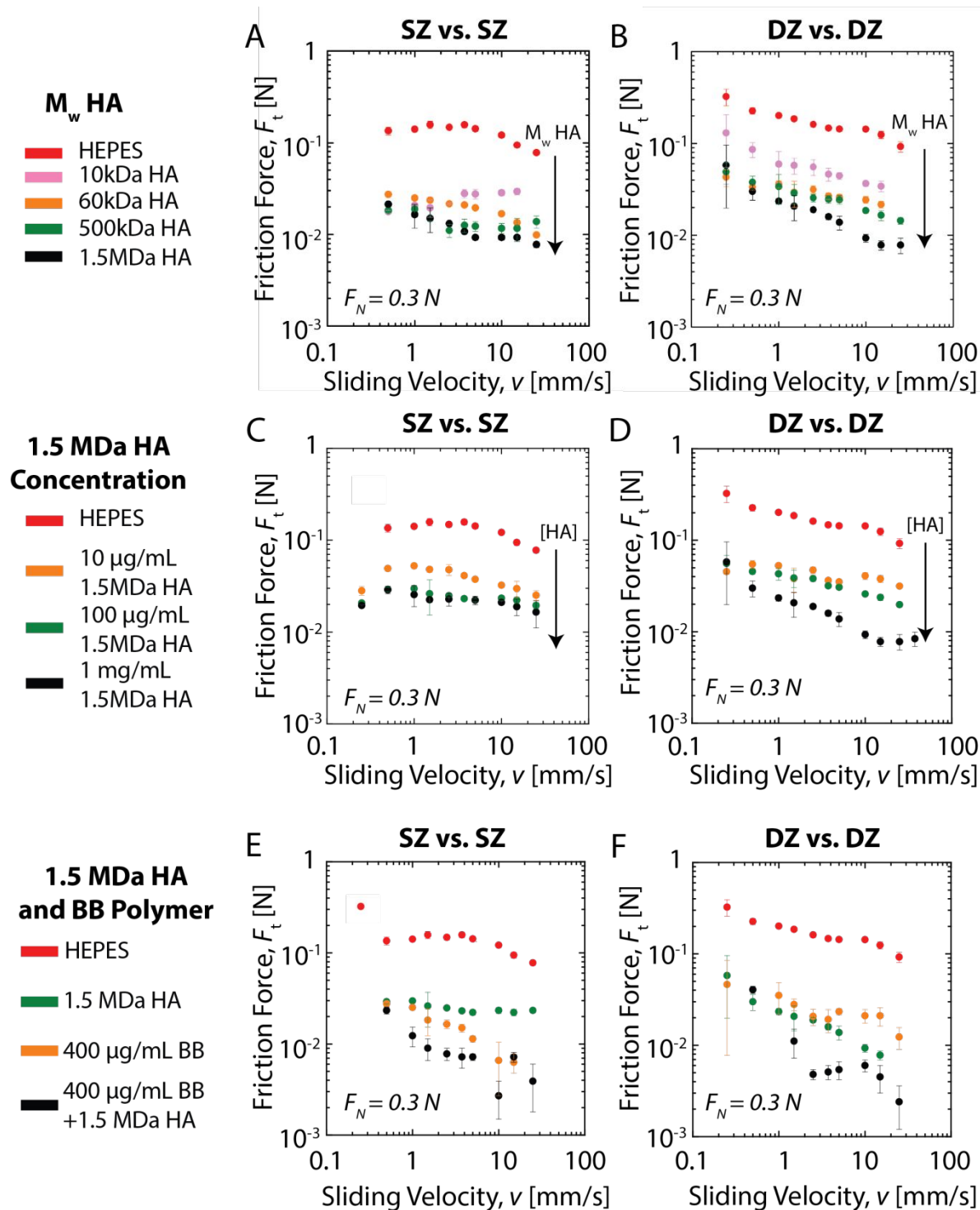


Figure 4. Measurement of the friction force, F_t , as a function of the sliding velocity, v , to assess the effect of HA molecular mass (10, 60, 500 and 1500 kDa) at a fixed concentration of 1 mg/mL for the (A) SZ/SZ configuration and (B) DZ/DZ configuration. Measurement of F_t vs. v to assess the effect of HA concentration for the (C) SZ/SZ configuration and (D) DZ/DZ configuration. Measurement of F_t vs. v to assess the effect of 1.5 MDa HA at 1 mg/mL in combination with BB polymer for the (E) SZ/SZ configuration and (F) DZ/DZ configuration. Gels were immersed for 1 h in the synthetic synovial fluids prior to start the tribotests.

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3 The effect of the sliding velocity on the friction forces for the chitosan hydrogels plugs in the
4 SZ/SZ and DZ/DZ configurations using different lubricating fluids is presented in Fig. 4. In
5 these experiments, the applied normal load was set constant at $P = 3 \text{ kPa} < P_c$. In both
6 configurations and for each lubricating system, the friction force was decreased by one order
7 of magnitude when HA, BB or HA and BB mixture were used compared to HEPES buffer
8 only, suggesting a substantial role of these polymers on the lubrication at the gel/gel interface.
9
10 Concerning the effect of HA molecular weight (Fig. 4A-B), both configurations showed
11 different behaviors upon increasing the sliding velocity. The SZ/SZ configuration exhibited a
12 friction force almost independent of the velocity for low sliding velocities⁶⁰⁻⁶¹, indicating the
13 mechanism of boundary lubrication regime, since the friction forces did not depend on the
14 physical properties of the gel nor on the lubricant viscosity, but only on the chemical
15 composition of the surface/adsorbed molecules (Fig. 4A). The DZ/DZ configuration exhibited
16 a monotonous decrease of the friction force suggesting a mixed lubrication mechanism due to
17 the mixed load support by the lubricating film and local asperities on the hydrogels contact⁴⁸.
18
19 At low velocity, the friction force was slightly lower on the SZ/SZ configuration than the
20 DZ/DZ configuration for low molecular weight HA. This might be due to the larger roughness
21 of the DZ surface (see latter in the wear study section) which could lead to a higher friction⁴⁸.
22
23 This difference readily vanished upon increasing the sliding velocity and the friction force
24 became even lower on the DZ/DZ configuration at $v > 10 \text{ mm/s}$ (Fig. 4B). Increase of HA
25 concentration tended to dramatically decrease the friction force (Fig. 4 C-D) independently of
26 the hydrogel configuration used. The evolution of the friction force with the sliding speed
27 measured at different HA concentrations of 1.5 MDa HA shows that boundary lubrication is
28 the dominating regime in the SZ/SZ configuration while a mixed lubrication is possibly
29 occurring in the DZ/DZ configuration.
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3 The effect of the sliding velocity in presence of BB polymer alone is presented in Fig. 4 E-F.
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5 On both configurations, the frictions forces decreased monotonously with the increase of the
6
7 sliding velocity and where lower in the SZ/SZ configuration than in the DZ/DZ configuration.
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9 This behavior has been reported for similar systems composed of grafted pMPC brushes⁶².
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11 This monotonous behavior was conserved when BB polymer was mixed with high molecular
12
13 weight HA. However, the friction forces of the mixture were systematically lower than HA or
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15 BB alone at sliding speed greater than 1 mm/s which indicates a synergy between both
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17 polymers (Fig. 4 E-F). At low sliding speed, it appears that the friction forces of HA, BB
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19 polymer and their mixture converge toward a high value friction force that depends on the
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21 testing configurations.
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27 **3.5. Hydrogel wear protection with synthetic synovial fluids - visualization and** 28 29 **characterization** 30

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32 The structural integrity of the chitosan hydrogels surfaces was systematically monitored to
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34 highlight the role of the bioinspired synovial fluid on wear protection. The evaluation of wear
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36 debris volume was not possible in set up configuration we used, therefore wear damage was
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38 first qualitatively analyzed by the means of a digital microscope and quantitatively analyzed
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40 after tribotesting using interferometric microscopy. For wear experiments, hydrogels were
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42 mounted in the same SZ/SZ and DZ/DZ configurations as in the lubrication study. Imaging of
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44 the hydrogel plugs was performed after 10000 cycles of back and forth motion at an applied
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46 pressure $P = 30$ kPa in an aqueous solution fixed at pH 7.4 with a constant sliding speed of 5
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48 mm/s at a frequency of 1 Hz. It was previously shown that multilayered chitosan hydrogels
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50 under shearing suffered from destruction at a pressure close to their shear modulus at the
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52 DZ/DZ configurations. Images of the 21 mm hydrogel plugs are shown in Fig. 5. The 11 mm
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54 hydrogel plugs displayed similar surface features after wear tests and were not presented for
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3 clarity. These images show that without any lubricant macromolecules, the chitosan gels
4 displayed severe surface damage when tested in the DZ/DZ configuration and showed surface
5 polishing / abrasion in the SZ/SZ configuration. Interferometric images on damaged surfaces
6 presented large dark areas indicating the presence of deep crevices far too high to be
7 measurable by this technique. Lubricating fluids containing HA at 1 mg/mL, exhibited M_w -
8 dependent wear protection in the DZ/DZ configuration. High molecular mass HA solution
9 ($M_w = 1.5$ MDa) protected the hydrogel plugs significantly more than low molecular mass HA
10 ($M_w = 10$ kDa) in the DZ/DZ configuration while differences in wear protection in the SZ/SZ
11 configuration were much less significant. These observations highlight the important role of
12 the hydrogel interfacial structure in controlling wear initiation and propagation in presence of
13 linear polymer lubricants. As seen in Fig. 5, the BB polymer alone was able to protect the
14 hydrogel plugs very similarly to high molecular weight HA solutions with only few defects
15 appearing on both tested configurations. The mixture of BB polymer along with high
16 molecular mass HA ($M_w = 1.5$ MDa) showed very little wear on both SZ and DZ surfaces
17 compared to the initial surfaces.
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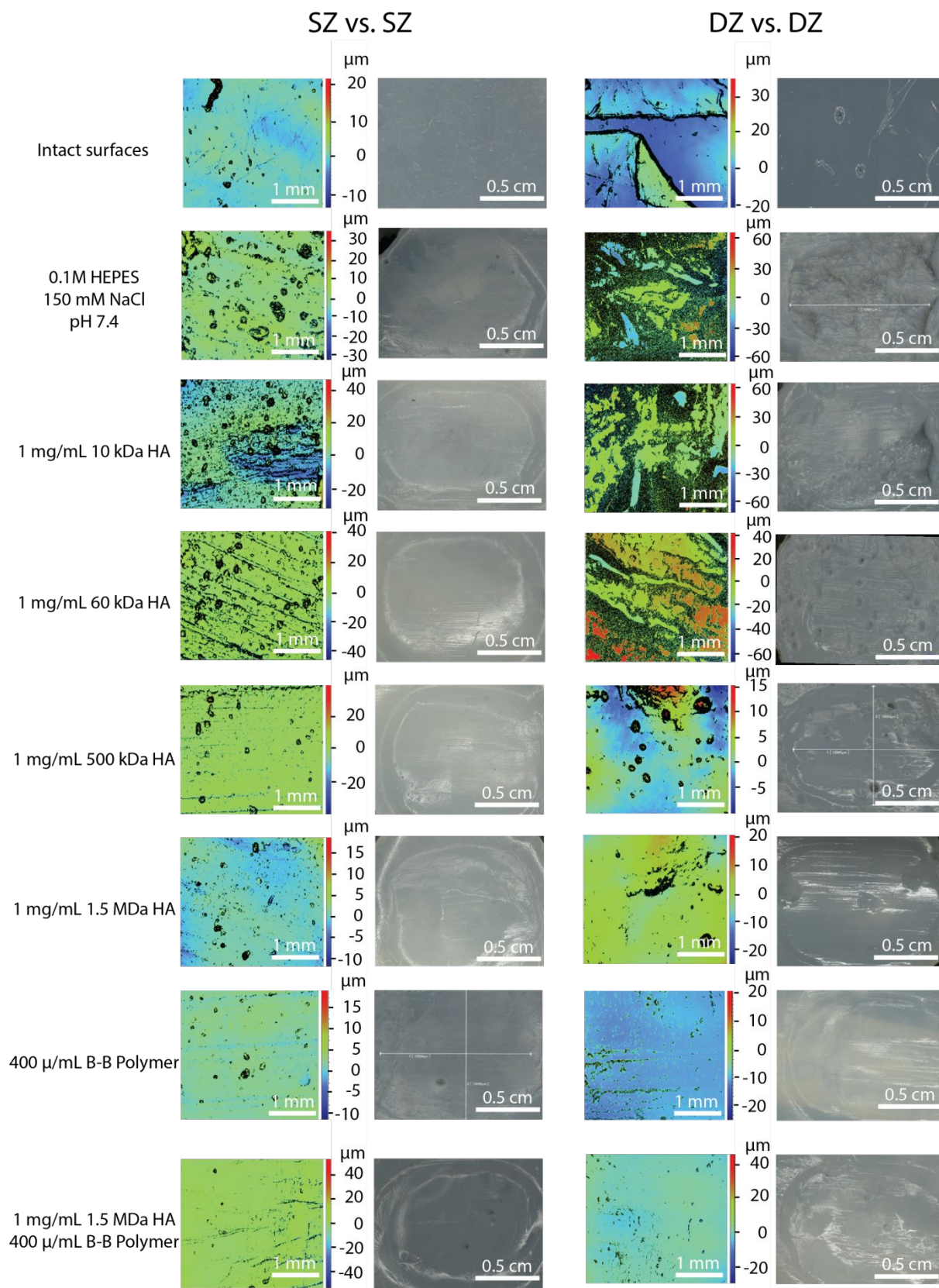


Figure 5. Interferometric and digital imaging of chitosan hydrogel plugs after 10^4 cycles at $P = 30$ kPa, $v = 5$ mm/s and a frequency of 1 Hz using different fluid compositions and hydrogels configurations. Certain panels are reproduced from Ref. 18 with permission from the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Using optical interferometry, the roughness in the wear tracks was evaluated after tribotesting (Fig. 6). The arithmetical mean height of the whole gel surfaces, S_a , was used as the parameter characterizing the roughness before and after wear tests. This parameter corresponds to the absolute difference of the height of each point of a surface to the arithmetical mean of the gel surface. Before wear tests, the initial roughness of the chitosan hydrogel plugs (Intact surfaces in Fig. 6) was higher on the DZ side ($S_a = 4 \mu\text{m}$) than on the SZ side ($S_a = 0.8 \mu\text{m}$). When using only HEPES as a lubricating fluid, the final roughness of the chitosan hydrogels was significantly higher on both configurations since S_a increased to $2.5 \mu\text{m}$ on the SZ side and was impossible to measure on the DZ side due to strong damage of the gel ($S_a \gg 16 \mu\text{m}$). When using HA-based fluids, the final gel roughness was significantly smaller than HEPES and decreased with HA molecular weight. Upon the addition of the BB polymer to the high molecular weight HA solution, the final roughness was finally equal to the initial value for the SZ/SZ configuration and lower than the initial value for the DZ/DZ configuration, possibly due to surface heterogeneities leveling upon gel rubbing.

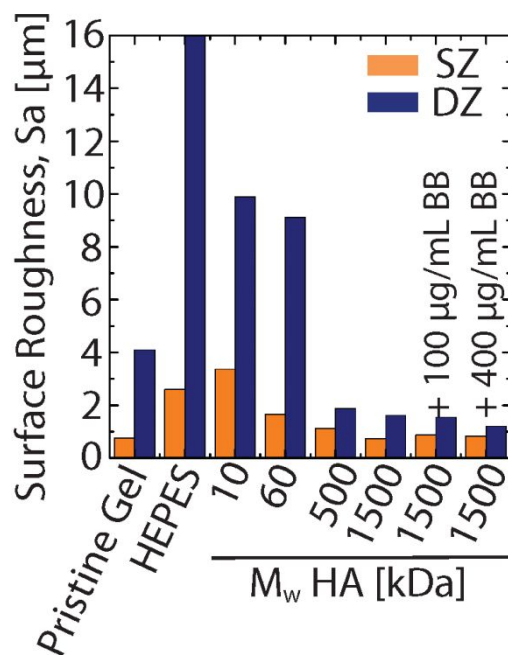


Figure 6. Quantitative wear assessment by the means of surface roughness, S_a , of gel sample after wear experiment as a function of immersion bath composition for both contact

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3 configuration measured by interferometry
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4. Conclusions

The present study shows that a lubricating fluid composed of BB polymer and high molecular weight HA is able to efficiently provide concomitantly wear protection of soft and porous materials and decrease the CoF, for different surface topographies or structures. These results anticipate the potential use of such lubricating fluid for various biomedical applications such as joints viscosupplementation or eyes and contact lenses hydration and lubrication.

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

Acknowledgements

JF is grateful to the Arthritis Society, the Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales from the Université de Montréal and the French Embassy (Frontenac scholarship) for financial supports. BRS thanks the financial support of GRUM. XB acknowledges the financial support from the Canada research chair program and NSERC (Discovery grant). XB and GS are grateful for the financial support of the FRQNT-CFQCU (Samuel de Champlain grant). KM Acknowledges support from NSF (DMR 1501324). We thank Agnes Crépet (IMP) and Pierre Alcouffe (IMP) for their technical assistance in size exclusion chromatography and scanning electron microscopy, respectively. The help of Matthieu Guibert (LTDS) for the low-load tribometer design and fabrication, Thomas Malhomme (LTDS) for wear analysis by interferometry, and Béatrice Burdin (Centre Technologique des Microstructures) for CLSM study implementation is also acknowledged.

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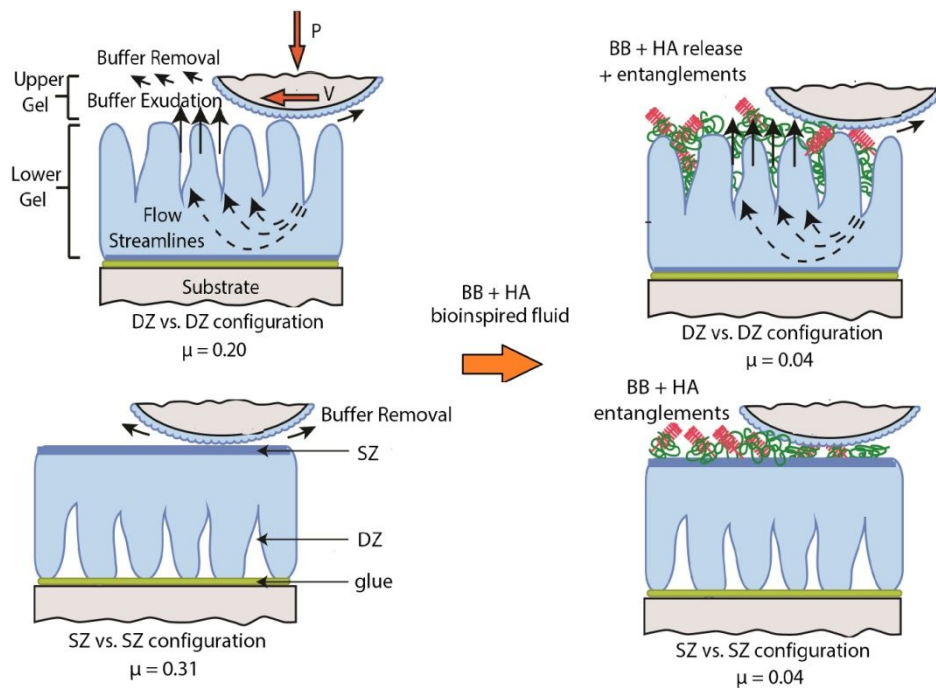
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