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Synthesis of Water Well-dispersed PEGylated Iron Oxide Nanoparticle for MR/Optical Lymph Node Imaging

Kyung Mo Yang, Hong Il Cho, Hyuck Jae Choi, and Yuanzhe Piao*

We reported the synthesis of highly water-stable iron oxide nanoparticles by a simple one-pot reaction. Non-toxic polyethylene glycol MW 600 (PEG) acted as a solvent, capping agent and reducing agent in the synthesis of iron oxide nanoparticles. As a result of the synthesis, PEGylated small-size (4.2 ± 0.39 nm average diameter and 7.2 ± 1.9 nm hydrodynamic sizes measuring by DLS) iron oxide nanoparticles were obtained (USPIO), which show great colloidal stability in water and tolerate high salt concentration (0.75 M sodium chloride) and a wide pH range of 4 to 12. Oxidation of PEG was observed during the synthesis of iron oxide nanoparticles, which makes USPIO easy to functionalize with other molecules. Functionalization of the USPIO surface with Fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) was conducted for investigating the possibility to multimodal imaging. Also cytotoxicity test and lymph node imaging were performed by using the FITC labelled USPIO (FITC@USPIO). According to these results, the stable water dispersed USPIO and FITC@USPIO are expected to apply for multimodal in vivo imaging.

Introduction

With the advance of nanotechnology, the use of nanoparticles for biomedical applications has received much attention. Especially, magnetic iron oxide nanoparticles attracted great research interests in the development of multifunctional imaging agents since magnetic iron oxide nanoparticles are considered nontoxic, and can be used as MR contrast agents naturally through the production of spin-spin relaxation effects inducing T1 and T2 relaxation time changes. There are many routes for synthesizing iron oxide nanoparticles. Among them, co-precipitation method is one of the most important and widely used method, which represented by Feridex® as commercialized iron oxide based MR imaging contrast agents. Although co-precipitation method has many advantages like easy to synthesis and functionalize, the synthesized iron oxide nanoparticles using this method have irregular morphology and broad size distribution. To solve these problems, many research groups have developed other synthetic methods such as micro emulsion process, sol-gel process including hydrolytic routes and non-hydrolytic routes. Nowadays, thermal decomposition method has been taking center stage in the synthesis of monodisperse iron oxide nanoparticles. The produced iron oxide nanoparticles using this powerful method have regular shape, high uniformity, and high crystallinity.

However, since the synthesis of iron oxide nanoparticles using thermal decomposition method is performed in the presence of long-chain surfactants such as fatty acid or fatty amine, the synthesized nanoparticles have hydrophobic surface inevitably and cannot be used for biomedical application directly. Most approaches to solve this problem are rely on ligand exchange process which include exchange of absorbed surfactant with biocompatible hydrophilic molecules having higher affinity groups (phosphate group or multidentate catechol) for iron oxide surface than pre-chemisorbed long-chain organic surfactants. A major difficulty encountered in the ligand exchange process is hydrodynamic size increase problem and it limits the long term stability when dispersed in physiological medium. Since the stability of iron oxide nanoparticles dispersed in physiological medium is influenced dominantly by molecules absorbed on the surface of nanoparticles, the selection of the surface molecules for iron oxide nanoparticles is important for biological uses whether the ligand exchange process is necessary or not. Hence the surface molecules must fulfill several things including good stability in physiological buffer, biocompatibility, and preventing the nonspecific interaction with a cell in biomedical applications. Various types of organic or inorganic materials can be utilized for the surface
molecules of iron oxide nanoparticles. In particular, low molecular weight PEG has been paid a lot of attention as a candidate organic surface molecule in biomedical perspective. PEG modification of the surface of nanoparticles leads to reduce nonspecific binding with a cell and improve viability and stability by retaining a helical conformation of the crystalline state in water. This for reason, synthesis of PEGylated monodisperse iron oxide nanoparticles has important meaning for real biomedical application. Hence, there are already a lot of research papers about PEGylation of the iron oxide nanoparticles. However, most works were relying on the post-synthetic treatment after synthesis of iron oxide nanoparticles, which were time consuming complex processes. There is need to develop simple and efficient way for synthesizing PEGylated iron oxide nanoparticles, since the route that allows for the synthesis PEGylated iron oxide nanoparticles in a single step has not so far been devised.

In this study, ultra small PEGylated iron oxide nanoparticles (USPIO) were synthesized in a simple one-pot reaction using iron nitrate as iron precursor in the presence of PEG. During the synthesis, oxidation of PEG was occurred in the synthesis. As a result of the oxidation of PEG, carboxylic acid group are arisen, consequently control the particle growth and prevent aggregation effectively, which was confirmed by using FT-IR. The morphology of the iron oxide nanoparticles was studied using TEM. DLS measurements show that particles were well-dispersed in water. The stability tests of the USPIO show high stability of the USPIO even at high salt concentration and broad range of pH. Encouraged by the evolution of surface functional group and high stability in water, we try to develop multimodal imaging agents using the USPIO. The USPIO were amine functionalized using dicyclohexylcarbodiimide / N3imine group and high stability in water, we try to develop simple and efficient way for synthesizing PEGylated iron oxide nanoparticles, since the route that allows for the synthesis PEGylated iron oxide nanoparticles in a single step has not so far been devised.

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Confirmation of R2 relaxation rate at higher concentrations of FITC@USPIO was achieved with TE times between 8 milliseconds and 256. Considering a mono-exponential decay, the signal intensity S (TE) is related to the TE according to the following equation.

\[ S(TE) = A_1 \cdot \exp(-R_2 \cdot TE) + A_2 \]

In this regression, A1 refers to the equilibrium magnetization prior to sequence repetition, whereas A2 refers to the level of the noise. The transverse relaxation rate was determined by extrapolating the relaxation rate values of the measured samples.

Fluorescence imaging

In vivo fluorescence images were obtained with a fluorescence imaging system at an excitation wavelength of 480 nm (OptixMX3 / Optical Molecular Imaging System, Advanced Research Technologies, Canada) after injection of FITC@USPIO for 20 min.

In Vivo MR imaging

In vivo animal images were obtained using a 9.4T / 160mm animal MRI system (Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA, USA). Radiofrequency excitation and signal detection were accomplished with a 40 mm millipede volume coil. The coronal imaging protocol included a Spoiled Gradient Re-Example

Synthesis of USPIO

We prepared iron oxide nanoparticles using ferric nitrate as precursor in PEG medium. To prepare 4.2 ± 0.39 nm iron oxide nanoparticles (TEM observation), 0.404 g (1 mmol) of ferric nitrate nonahydrate were mixed with 12 g (20 mmol) of PEG to get transparent red solution. The resulting mixture was heated to 80 °C with a constant heating rate of 10 °C / min and kept at that temperature for 0.5 hr. Subsequently, the mixture was heated to 265 °C with a constant heating rate of 3 °C / min and held at that temperature for 0.5 hr. Synthesis was proceeded under low pressure (~76 cmHg) to remove generated H2O vapour as presented in PEG and precursor until 160 °C using shrink line. Then, nitrogen was purged into reactor until the reaction was ended. During this process, the transparent red solution was gradually changed to brown when the temperature was above 140 °C. Brownish black solution was obtained at the end of the reaction, indicating the formation of iron oxide nanoparticles. Subsequently, the resulting solution was cooled to room temperature with removal of the heat source. 1:5 ethanol / ether mixture was added to the solution and the nanoparticles were separated by centrifugation.

Synthesis of FITC@USPIO

The USPIO were functionalized with 1, 2-ethylenediamine. To prepare amine functionalized USPIO, 6.0 g of the as-synthesized nanoparticles were washed with ethanol, diethyl ether mixture twice by centrifugation and re-disperse in 15 mL of DMF. Then, 300 µL of DCC (10 mg in 1 mL DMF) and NHS (5.5 mg in 1 mL DMF) solutions were added and stirred at R.T for another 10 min. Then, 50 µL of 1, 2-ethylenediamine was dropped into the solution. After stirring for 6 hr, 1:5 ethanol / ether mixture was added to the solution and the nanoparticles were separated by centrifugation at 8000 rpm to remove unreacted molecules and DCU (dicyclohexylurea). The washing process was repeated for several times. The amine functionalized iron oxide nanoparticles were re-dispersed in 15 mL of 0.01M sodium bicarbonate buffer solutions with pH 9.5 for further reaction with fluorescent dye. Then, FITC@USPIO was synthesized by adding FITC (5 mg in 1 mL DMSO) to the solutions. After stirring for 6 hr, the nanoparticles were washed by the same process. The separated nanoparticles were re-disperse in 0.01 M PBS pH 7.4 buffer, then the product was further purified by dialysis against 0.01 M PBS pH 7.4 buffer using with a 12,000-14,000 MW cut-off (Zellu Trans, Roth (Germany)).

Results and discussion

Synthesis of iron oxide nanoparticles

In this study, ultra small PEGylated Iron oxide nanoparticles (USPIO) were synthesized using ferric nitrate as precursor in the presence of PEG as described in Scheme 1. The shape and size of the USPIO were observed by using TEM. Representative TEM images of USPIO were shown in Fig 1 (A, B). Fig 1C is a size distribution histogram of the randomly selected 100 nanoparticles. From the TEM observation, USPIO have an average diameter of 4.2 ± 0.39 nm. Hydrodynamic size and size distribution of the USPIO were measured by using DLS. Hydrodynamic size of the USPIO dispersed in water was measured to be 7.2 ± 1.9 nm as shown in Fig 1D. The TEM and DLS measurements suggest the USPIO have narrow size distribution and well-dispersed in water.
Because the formation of iron oxide nanoparticles in our synthesis was based on the hydrolysis and thermal decomposition of iron nitrate nonahydrate,\textsuperscript{29} generated H\textsubscript{2}O as by-products would be expected to influence the growth of the iron oxide nanoparticles. To investigate the effect of H\textsubscript{2}O generated in reaction, synthesis of iron oxide nanoparticles was performed under normal pressure. Increases of the hydrodynamic size was observed and eventually significant agglomeration was occurred as a result of the accelerating the hydrolysis of the iron nitrate by H\textsubscript{2}O (Fig 2B).\textsuperscript{10}

Furthermore, we tried to control the size of the iron oxide nanoparticles by varying the heating rates and aging temperature. There are no significant changes in size and shape, when varying the heating rates (Fig 3A, B). Slight size changes of nanoparticles were carried out by varying the aging...
temperature (Fig 3 C, D). TEM image shows that the size of the iron oxide nanoparticles is significantly decreased with an aging temperature of 210 °C. The nanoparticles show low stability and crystallinity (Fig S1). In an aging temperature of 320 °C, increasing of the nanoparticle size was observed in TEM images. From experimental results, 265 °C was chosen as optimized aging temperature.

Crystal structure study of the USPIO

XRD measurements were conducted to confirm the crystal structure of USPIO. XRD Patterns of the USPIO are summarized in Fig 4. The peaks were indexed with (JCPDS # 00-019-0629), (200), (311), (400), (422), (511) and (440) were revealed in the XRD pattern, though the (111) peak could not be distinguishable because of the overlap pattern of surface organic molecule, PEG. The crystalline size of the USPIO was calculated by fitting the data to a Gaussian distribution and applying Debye-Scherrer equation on the (440) diffraction peak. In this study, we used the value K=0.9, λ=1.54 Å. The calculated crystal size is 4.09 nm and that is slightly smaller than TEM observation, which corroborate with Fig S2. The Fig S2 is image of HRTEM and the inset of Fig S2 is fast Fourier transform (FFT) pattern of the selected region of HRTEM image indicating crystal structure of the USPIO. FT-IR measurement was conducted for more accurate investigation of crystal structure, because it is hard to distinguish between magnetite and maghemite in XRD patterns. The lattice adsorption band from FT-IR spectra of the USPIO is appeared one peak at about 570 cm$^{-1}$ with broad shoulder up to 750 cm$^{-1}$ shown in inset of the Fig 4 indicate that the USPIO are predominately magnetite although they have a little oxidized layer. From the crystal structure of the USPIO, we confirmed that the reduction of ferric ions to ferrous ions is existed in the reaction. Polyoil reduction at high temperature may be a possible route, although the mechanism leading to magnetite under this reaction condition is not clear. Furthermore, the oxidation of PEG could be expected, in this perspective. This assumption is corroborated with the explanation given in FT-IR study.

Surface studies of the USPIO

There are early studies of the interaction between polymer and surface of iron oxide nanoparticles. Zhang et al reported the chemisorption of polymethacrylic acid to the surface of Fe$_3$O$_4$ nanoparticles via coordination linkages between the carboxyl groups and Fe. To study the interaction between PEG and iron oxide, we conducted TGA and FT-IR study. TGA measurement of the USPIO was carried out from 25 °C to 700 °C with a heating rate of 10 °C / min in air condition. Thermal degradation of the USPIO is derived from the thermal degradation of the surface organic molecules, which densely cover USPIO with 41.5 weight percentage (Fig 5). The surface density of the conjugated PEG was calculated to be 2.6 ± 0.2 (ea. / nm$^2$) based on the TGA result with basic assumption. Detailed calculations of USPIO were shown in Table S1. To investigate a better understanding the covered organic molecules, we conducted FT-IR study since FT-IR study is an appropriate technique to establish the attachment of polymer onto the surface of the USPIO. In FT-IR study, we could confirm the surface of the USPIO covered by the oxidized PEG. The FT-IR spectra of PEG and USPIO are shown in Fig 6A and B. Characteristic peaks were assigned, associated with PEG. The peaks at 1100 and 2860 cm$^{-1}$ were corresponded to stretching vibration of C-O-C and symmetric stretching vibration of sp$^3$ C-H. Stretching vibration of hydrogen bonded OH$^-$ was ascribed at 3460 cm$^{-1}$, although small peak shift of the hydroxyl group to lower wavenumber and broadening of peak were observed in the case of the USPIO. The peak at 1420 cm$^{-1}$ is corresponded to the symmetric stretching vibrations of C-O-
O, which hidden by the bending vibration of CH$_2$. Furthermore, peaks were related with carbonyl group observed in the spectra by applying the Gaussian fitting in 1450-1800 cm$^{-1}$ ranges of the USPIO as shown in Fig 6C. The peak at 1555 cm$^{-1}$ was corresponded to asymmetric stretching vibration of the C=O-O. The two peaks at 1724 and 1635 cm$^{-1}$ were identified as corresponding to two distinct stretching vibration of C=O. The peak appeared at 1635 cm$^{-1}$, is corresponded to the carboxylate group interacts with the iron on the SPION surface, while the peak appeared at 1724 cm$^{-1}$ is related to the free carboxylic acid. The result suggests the presence of small portion of free carboxyl groups in the USPIO. Oxidation of PEG can be considered based on the evolution of nitric acid during the synthesis. The oxidation of PEG was demonstrated by S. Joshi et al. They suggested possible mechanism of the oxidation of any glycol on heating. Any glycol on heating, terminal hydroxyl group of PEG is converted into aldehyde group. As a result of the chelation of cationic ion with two aldehydeic oxygen atoms and etheric oxygen atom, they forms intermediate complex. Further oxidation of aldehyde groups to carboxylic acid groups occurred by increasing temperature in the presence of intermediated formed nitric acid. To quantifying the carboxylic acid groups conjugated onto USPIO as a result of oxidation of PEG, we used the base-acid back-titration methods. The 100 mg of washed USPIO was dispersed in 10 ml of 0.1 M NaOH solution to ensure that the entire carboxylic acid group was reacted with NaOH. In order to complete the base-acid reaction, the solutions were sonicated for 30 min. To avoid the confusion in color change, 2 L of distilled water was added to the prepared solution, and then 3 drops of 1% phenolphthalein solution was added to the solution as pH-indicator. The back-titration was complete by titrating the unreacted base in solutions with standardized 0.1 M HCl to the solutions. The percentage of the oxidized PEG was calculated to be 18.7%. The result was summarized in Table S2.

**Stability test of the USPIO**

Stability of the nanoparticles is the most important property for biological and medical applications. Moreover stability of the nanoparticles can be related to surface’s molecules directly as we mentioned above. Especially, PEG is attracted much attention as surface molecules from there biocompatibility with colloidal stability enhancement properties due to steric

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**Fig 5** FT-IR spectra of PEG (A) and USPIO (B). (C) is a Gaussian fitted spectra of the as-synthesized USPIO in 1450 - 1800 cm$^{-1}$ ranges.
repulsion of the PEG chains on the particle surface. In this study, the surface of USPIO is covered by the oxidized PEG in synthetic procedure as we confirmed, so it could be expected a good colloidal stabilities. The colloidal stability of the as-synthesized USPIO was tested in 0.01 M PBS pH 7.4 buffer containing 0.05 M to 0.75 M NaCl solutions at final Fe concentrations of 150 µg / ml. There are no precipitations or aggregations observed over 4 month (Fig 7A). This high stability of the USPIO came from the PEG, which were densely covered the iron oxide nanoparticle surface. The stability of the dispersed nanoparticles is strongly depends on the net surface charge which is affected by pH. Zeta potential in 0.01M PBS media at broad ranges of pH of the USPIO were plotted in Fig S3. The USPIO were well dispersed in broad ranges of pH (from pH 4 to 12) solution over 4 month while USPIO dispersed in pH 2.5 solution were tended to form a turbid dispersion and completely precipitated over 4 days, USPIO dispersed in pH 3.3 solution were precipitated completely over 4 month as shown in Fig 7B. Furthermore, the as-synthesized USPIO could also be well dispersed in some organic solvents as shown in Fig S4. From the results mentioned above, we confirmed that the USPIO are very stable over broad ranges pH and salt concentration because of steric stabilization and electrostatic repulsion of PEG on the surface of the USPIO.

Functionalization of the USPIO

Especially, multimodal imaging techniques based on the multimodal imaging agents have attracted much attention nowadays. In this work, functionalization of the USPIO was conducted for multimodal imaging, thanks to the generation of surface free carboxylic acid group of PEG on the surface of USPIO as we described above. Functionalization steps were divided into two steps (Scheme 2). First, amine functionalization of the terminal carboxylic acid group was conducted via DCC coupling (Scheme 2A). Second, FITC were attached to the amine functionalized iron oxide nanoparticle surface via reaction of isothiocyanate groups with surface’s amine groups (Scheme 2B). Amine functionalization of the surface of USPIO was confirmed by FT-IR spectra shown in Fig S4. There are decreasing of the stretching vibration peak intensity of OH, that was appeared at 3460 cm⁻¹ and arising of a broad peak located in 2900-3600 cm⁻¹ ranges, which may be contributed by the stretching vibration of primary, secondary NH group and OH. The peak of 1022 cm⁻¹ was corresponded to the stretching vibration of C=N group. The Gaussian fitted FT-IR spectra in 1450-1700 cm⁻¹ ranges, show two peaks of 1592 cm⁻¹ and 1645 cm⁻¹ were correspond to the bending vibration of primary NH group and stretching vibration of C=O group.

Emission and excitation spectra of FITC@USPIO are shown in Fig 8. The fluorescent spectra indicated that FITC molecules were attached to the iron oxide nanoparticles successfully. Also DLS data show that aggregation was not occurred during the functionalization of the USPIO (Fig S6). The concentration of FITC on the surface of USPIO was calculated by substituting the standard curve of FITC. The calculated amount of FITC molecules is 20.7 ± 0.70 ea. for each USPIO. Standard curve of FITC at 493 nm, and absorbance of FITC@USPIO in various concentrations in 400 ~ 500 nm ranges were plotted in Fig S7. Detailed calculations were summarized in Table S3. From these FT-IR and PL spectra, we confirmed that the functionalization of the USPIO with FITC was done successfully.

Cytotoxicity and in vitro Study

Prior to adopt the FITC@USPIO in lymph node imaging, the cytotoxicity, relaxivity and biodistribution study of FITC@USPIO were conducted. The cytotoxicity of the FITC@USPIO was measured using SKOV3 cell by MTT analysis at different concentrations (from 0 to 100 µg Fe / ml). MTT assay revealed that cell viability of SKOV3 cell was not hindered after 24 hr incubation with FITC@USPIO up to concentration of 100 µg Fe / ml as shown in Fig 9.
Fig 10A show T2-weighted images with various concentration of Fe (from 0.358 to 2.686 mM). The Fe concentrations of USPIO dispersed in solutions were quantified by ICP. More specifically, dispersions of USPIO in various concentrations were treated with concentrated HCl to complete the dissolving USPIO and quantified by ICP. The R2 relaxation rates of normal saline plotted against concentration of the FITC@USPIO are shown in Fig 10B. Higher concentrations of the FITC@USPIO resulted in higher R2 relaxation rates. To evaluate the contrast enhancement efficiency, specific relaxivity value (r2) was calculated. The calculated r2 was 27.5 mM$^{-1}$s$^{-1}$, which small r2 was derived from the small size of the iron oxide core with the organic molecules (FITC and oxidized PEG) of FITC@USPIO.

**Biodistribution study**

We conducted the biodistribution study in the body to see main root of excretion of FITC@USPIO and dynamic change of FITC@USPIO in organs after venous injection. The FITC@USPIO dispersion (0.23 mg Fe /kg) was injected to tail vein of mouse after anesthesia. Serial coronal MR images were obtained prior to injection of FITC@USPIO and up to 1 day after injection (immediate, 1 hour, 3 hours, and 1 day after injection). After intravenous injection of FITC@USPIO into the tail vein of mouse, enhancement was continued until 3 hours and the nanoparticles were accumulated in the liver, spleen, and kidney. After 24 h of injection, no contrast material was visualized in the kidney but contrast still remained in the liver and spleen as shown in Fig 11.

**In vivo lymph node imaging**

For lymph node imaging, 100 µL solution of FITC@USPIO solution (4.5 mg Fe /ml) was intradermally injected into the tops of the feet of right hind legs. Twenty minutes after injection, the location of popliteal and inguinal lymph nodes were well visualized in optical imaging as shown in Fig 12A, which indicated by filled triangle and non-filled triangle. Furthermore, MR images were acquired 30 minutes after injection of FITC@USPIO. The location of the inguinal lymph node was determined by MR imaging (Fig 12B). After mice were euthanized by inhalation of pure CO$_2$, right inguinal lymph nodes were harvested. Transverse sections 4 µm in thickness were obtained and stained with Prussian blue to detect intracellular iron. In dissected lymph nodes, the FITC@USPIO was observed (Fig 12C). These areas corresponded to the location of hypo-intense regions on MR T2* images. Furthermore, a series of in vivo coronal and axial T2* MR images 30 min after injection of FITC@USPIO were taken for accurate confirmation of uptake of the FITC@USPIO in inguinal lymph node (Fig S8). The transportation of the FITC@USPIO to the lymph node was derived from the small size of the FITC@USPIO which was enough to drain into the lymphatic vessels and consequently flow into lymph node.
From these results, FITC@USPIO show high possibilities to use for multimodal in vivo lymph node imaging.

**Fig. 12** (A) in vivo optical images of a mouse 20 minutes and back after FITC@USPIO injection to the top of right hind leg. (B) Irregular and punctual lymph nodes were indicated by filled and non-filled triangle. (B) in vivo T2* coronal MR imaging 30 minute after injection of FITC@USPIO. The white arrow indicates inguinal lymph node. (C) Prussian blue stained section of dissected lymph node. The blue area in the circle indicated FITC@USPIO

**Conclusions**

In this study, the water well-dispersible USPIO were synthesized in PEG solution without additional surfactant, through simple one-pot polyol process. PEG was oxidized during the synthesis of the USPIO. As a result, adsorption of the oxidized PEG to iron oxide nanoparticles surface is observed with small portion of surface free carboxylic acid group, which allow easy functionalization with the optical imaging agents. 1, 2-ethylenediamine was introduced to the surface of iron oxide nanoparticles via DCC coupling. The resulting amine functionalized USPIO were conjugated with FITC through the reaction of isothiocyanate group with amine group at R.T. From the results of biological experiments including lymph node imaging using FITC@USPIO, the simply synthesized USPIO show great potentials to use for in vivo multimodal imaging.

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**Notes and references**

graphical abstract
318x120mm (96 x 96 DPI)