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Étude des propriétés de transport dans les hydrogels de curdlan

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Résumé

Les hydrogels de polysaccharide sont des biomatériaux utilisés comme matrices à libération contrôlée de médicaments et comme structures modèles pour l'étude de nombreux systèmes biologiques dont les biofilms bactériens et les mucus. Dans tous les cas, le transport de médicaments ou de nutriments à l'intérieur d'une matrice d'hydrogel joue un rôle de premier plan. Ainsi, l'étude des propriétés de transport dans les hydrogels s'avère un enjeu très important au niveau de plusieurs applications.

Dans cet ouvrage, le curdlan, un polysaccharide neutre d'origine bactérienne et formé d'unités répétitives β -D-(1→3) glucose, est utilisé comme hydrogel modèle. Le curdlan a la propriété de former des thermogels de différentes conformations selon la température à laquelle une suspension aqueuse est incubée. La caractérisation *in situ* de la formation des hydrogels de curdlan thermoréversibles et thermo-irréversibles a tout d'abord été réalisée par spectroscopie infrarouge à transformée de Fourier (FT-IR) en mode réflexion totale atténuée à température variable. Les résultats ont permis d'optimiser les conditions de gélation, menant ainsi à la formation reproductible des hydrogels.

Les caractérisations structurales des hydrogels hydratés, réalisées par imagerie FT-IR, par microscopie électronique à balayage en mode environnemental (eSEM) et par microscopie à force atomique (AFM), ont permis de visualiser les différentes morphologies susceptibles d'influencer la diffusion d'analytes dans les gels. Nos résultats montrent que les deux types d'hydrogels de curdlan ont des architectures distinctes à l'échelle microscopique.

La combinaison de la spectroscopie de résonance magnétique nucléaire (RMN) à gradients pulsés et de l'imagerie RMN a permis d'étudier l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle sur un même système dans des conditions expérimentales similaires. Nous avons observé que la diffusion des molécules dans les gels est ralentie par rapport à celle mesurée en solution aqueuse. Les mesures d'autodiffusion, effectuées sur une série d'analytes de diverses tailles dans les deux types d'hydrogels de curdlan, montrent que le coefficient d'autodiffusion relatif décroît en fonction de la taille de l'analyte. De plus, nos résultats suggèrent que l'équivalence entre les coefficients d'autodiffusion et de

diffusion mutuelle dans les hydrogels de curdlan thermo-irréversibles est principalement due au fait que l'environnement sondé par les analytes durant une expérience d'autodiffusion est représentatif de celui exploré durant une expérience de diffusion mutuelle. Dans de telles conditions, nos résultats montrent que la RMN à gradients pulsés peut s'avérer une approche très avantageuse afin de caractériser des systèmes à libération contrôlée de médicaments. D'autres expériences de diffusion mutuelle, menées sur une macromolécule de dextran, montrent un coefficient de diffusion mutuelle inférieur au coefficient d'autodiffusion sur un même gel de curdlan. L'écart mesuré entre les deux modes de transport est attribué au volume différent de l'environnement sondé durant les deux mesures.

Les coefficients d'autodiffusion et de diffusion mutuelle similaires, mesurés dans les deux types de gels de curdlan pour les différents analytes étudiés, suggèrent une influence limitée de l'architecture microscopique de ces gels sur leurs propriétés de transport. Il est conclu que les interactions affectant la diffusion des analytes étudiés dans les hydrogels de curdlan se situent à l'échelle moléculaire.

Mots-clés : Curdlan, hydrogel, autodiffusion, diffusion mutuelle, RMN à gradients pulsés, profilage RMN, infrarouge à transformée de Fourier, réflexion totale atténuée, imagerie infrarouge.

Abstract

Polysaccharide hydrogels are biomaterials used as controlled drug delivery matrices and serve as model scaffolds for the study of many biological systems like bacterial biofilms and mucus. In every case, the transport of drugs or nutriments across a hydrogel matrix is of prime importance. Therefore, the study of transport properties in hydrogels is an important issue for many fields of application.

In this work, curdlan, a neutral bacterial polysaccharide made of β -D-(1 \rightarrow 3) glucose repeating units, is used as a model hydrogel. Aqueous suspensions of curdlan can form thermogels of different conformations depending on the incubation temperature. *In situ* characterization of the preparation of thermo-reversible (low-set) and thermo-irreversible (high-set) curdlan hydrogels was first carried out using variable temperature attenuated total reflection (ATR) Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FT-IR). The results allowed optimization of the gelling conditions leading to reproducible gel samples.

Structural characterization of fully hydrated hydrogels, carried out by FT-IR imaging, environmental scanning electron microscopy (eSEM) and atomic force microscopy (AFM), allowed visualization of the different gel morphologies susceptible of influencing the diffusion of analytes in hydrogels. Our results show that both types of curdlan hydrogels have distinct microscopic architectures.

The combination of pulsed field gradient (PFG) nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy and NMR profiling allowed the study of self-diffusion and mutual diffusion on the same hydrogel system in similar experimental conditions. We showed that the diffusion of analytes in the gels is slower than in the aqueous solution. The diffusion experiments, carried out on a series of analytes of various sizes in both types of curdlan gels, show a decrease of the relative self-diffusion coefficient as a function of the analyte size. In addition, our results suggest that the equivalence between the self-diffusion and mutual-diffusion coefficients measured in the high-set curdlan gels is mainly due to the fact that the environment probed by the analytes during a self-diffusion experiment is representative of the one probed during a mutual-diffusion experiment. In such conditions, our results show that PFG NMR may present a valuable

approach for the characterization of controlled drug release systems. Additional experiments show that the mutual-diffusion coefficient of dextran macromolecules is smaller than its self-diffusion coefficient in the same curdlan hydrogel. The difference between both transport rates is attributed to the different environment volumes probed by the analytes during the measurements.

The similarities observed between the self-diffusion and mutual-diffusion coefficients, measured in both types of curdlan gels for all investigated analytes, suggest a limited influence of the microscopic gel architecture on its transport properties. It is therefore concluded that the interactions affecting the diffusion of the investigated analytes in the curdlan hydrogels lie at the molecular scale.

Keywords : Curdlan, hydrogel, self-diffusion, mutual diffusion, pulsed field gradient (PFG) NMR, NMR profiling, Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FT-IR), attenuated total reflection (ATR), FT-IR imaging.

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Liste des abréviations et symboles

a	Rayon d'un disque de gel
ADN	Acide désoxyribonucléique
AFM	<i>Atomic force microscopy</i>
ATR	<i>Attenuated total reflection</i>
B_0	Champ magnétique statique
B_1	Champ magnétique perturbateur
C	Concentration
C_0	Concentration initiale
C_{gel}	Concentration en analyte dans le gel
C_{int}	Concentration en analyte à l'interface
DSC	<i>Differential scanning calorimetry</i>
d_p	Profondeur de pénétration de l'onde évanescante
D_s	Coefficient d'autodiffusion
D_s^{app}	Coefficient d'autodiffusion apparent
D_s^{gel}	Coefficient d'autodiffusion dans le gel
\bar{D}_s	Coefficient d'autodiffusion moyen d'une distribution
D_s^{sln}	Coefficient d'autodiffusion en solution
D^{gel}	Coefficient de diffusion dans le gel
D_m	Coefficient de diffusion mutuelle
D_m^{gel}	Coefficient de diffusion mutuelle dans le gel
DXRB70k	Dextran 70 000 Da marqué à la rhodamine B
erf	Fonction d'erreur
eSEM	<i>Environmental scanning electron microscopy</i>

F	Flux
FCS	<i>Fluorescence correlation spectroscopy</i>
FID	<i>Free induction decay</i>
FPA	<i>Focal plane array</i>
FRAP	<i>Fluorescence recovery after photobleaching</i>
FT-IR	<i>Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy</i>
G	Amplitude du gradient de champ magnétique
G6P	D-glucose-6-phosphate
k_B	Constante de Boltzmann
l	Épaisseur d'un disque de gel
M	Aimantation nette
M_t	Quantité d'analyte libérée à un temps donné
M_w	Masse molaire
M_∞	Quantité d'analyte libérée à un temps infini
n	Indice de réfraction
NSE	<i>Neutron spin echo</i>
$\bar{P}(Z, \Delta)$	Propagateur de déplacement moyen
PEG	Polyéthylène glycol
PEG10k	Polyéthylène glycol 10 000 g/mol
PEG20k	Polyéthylène glycol 20 000 g/mol
PFG	<i>Pulsed field gradient</i>
PolyPO ₄	Polyphosphate
PVA	Polyvinylalcool
$\langle r \rangle^{1/2}$	Distance moyenne quadratique tridimensionnelle
RF	<i>Radio frequency</i>

R_f	Rayon d'une fibre
R_h	Rayon hydrodynamique
RMN	Résonance magnétique nucléaire
R_p	Rayon d'un pore
S	Intensité de l'écho
SANS	<i>Small angle neutron scattering</i>
SEM	<i>Scanning electron microscopy</i>
STMP	Trimétaphosphate de sodium
t	Temps
T	Température
T_1	Temps de relaxation longitudinal
T_2	Temps de relaxation transversal
t_r	Temps de répétition
Tris	Trishydroxyméthylaminométhane
UV-VIS	Spectroscopie ultraviolet-visible
w_L	Fréquence de Larmor
x	Position selon l'axe x
y	Position selon l'axe y
z	Position selon l'axe z
$\langle z \rangle^{1/2}$	Distance moyenne quadratique 1D selon l'axe z

α_n	Racines positives d'une fonction de Bessel d'ordre 0
β	Exposant d'étirement
γ	Ratio gyromagnétique
Φ	Coefficient de partage
Γ	Fonction gamma
δ	Durée d'une impulsion de gradient
Δ	Délais entre 2 impulsions de gradients
η	Viscosité
θ	Angle d'incidence
λ	Longueur d'onde
σ	Facteur de retardation
τ	Temps d'écho
φ	Volume exclu occupé par le gel
$\rho(z)$	Densité de spin

*À mes parents, Luce, amis et tous ceux qui
ont su m'entourer*

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Chapitre 1

Introduction

1.1 Mise en contexte

L'étude des propriétés de transport dans les hydrogels s'avère un enjeu très important tant au niveau fondamental de la chimie que sur le plan de leurs applications pratiques. Les hydrogels de polysaccharide sont des biomatériaux de grande valeur puisqu'ils sont hautement biocompatibles, biodégradables et constituent une matière renouvelable.^{1,2} De plus, ils sont facilement modifiables chimiquement, permettant ainsi de varier leur fonctionnalité.^{3,4} On retrouve les hydrogels dans plusieurs secteurs d'application très variés. Le plus commun d'entre eux est probablement le secteur alimentaire où les hydrogels jouent principalement les rôles d'épaississants et d'agents de texture.⁵ En chimie analytique, la chromatographie et l'électrophorèse sur gel sont des techniques d'utilisation courante dans bon nombre de laboratoires. De plus, les hydrogels occupent une part grandissante du secteur pharmaceutique dans lequel ils sont de plus en plus utilisés comme systèmes à libération contrôlée de médicaments.^{6,7} La présence d'une structure hydrogel joue un rôle de premier plan dans plusieurs systèmes biologiques, tels que les biofilms bactériens,⁸ les différents types de mucus⁹ ainsi que la matrice extracellulaire.^{10,11} Pour réduire la complexité de ces systèmes, leurs études exploitent régulièrement des hydrogels comme modèles. Ainsi, le transport de médicaments et de nutriments à l'intérieur d'une matrice d'hydrogel occupe un rôle prépondérant dans bon nombre de systèmes. La relation entre les propriétés de transport des hydrogels et leurs caractéristiques structurales est encore mal comprise. Ceci vient en partie du fait que les hydrogels sont des matériaux difficiles à caractériser en raison de leur haute teneur en eau. En recherche fondamentale, les études de diffusion dans les hydrogels visent à rationaliser, par des modèles théoriques, les liens existant entre les propriétés de transport et les caractéristiques physico-chimiques du système.¹²⁻¹⁴ La relation entre les différents modes de transport dans les hydrogels est également un enjeu faisant appel à la nature même des phénomènes impliqués. Tant au niveau de

l'optimisation de leurs applications que de la compréhension de principes fondamentaux, une meilleure connaissance des propriétés de transport dans les hydrogels est requise.

Les objectifs de cette thèse sont de mettre en perspective deux modes de transport, soit l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle, dans les hydrogels de curdlan ainsi que d'identifier les facteurs influençant ces mécanismes de diffusion. L'optimisation des conditions expérimentales menant à la préparation des différents gels est tout d'abord réalisée par spectroscopie infrarouge à transformée de Fourier (FT-IR). Une caractérisation structurale des hydrogels est réalisée via diverses techniques de microscopie afin de pouvoir visualiser les architectures rencontrées par les molécules diffusant dans les gels. La spectroscopie de résonance magnétique (RMN) à gradients pulsés, l'imagerie RMN 1D, la spectroscopie d'absorption UV-VIS et la spectroscopie de fluorescence sont utilisées afin de caractériser l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle de diverses molécules dans les hydrogels de curdlan. La propriété du curdlan d'adopter différentes conformations est également mise à profit afin d'étudier l'influence de l'architecture du gel sur ses propriétés de transport.

1.2 Les hydrogels

Les hydrogels sont des réseaux de chaînes polymères hydrophiles réticulées entre-elles via des interactions physiques et/ou chimiques.¹²⁻¹⁴ Cette structure tridimensionnelle les distingue notamment des solutions de polymères concentrées. Les hydrogels ont généralement la capacité de gonfler et d'emmagasiner une très grande quantité d'eau par rapport à leur masse ce qui en fait d'excellents absorbants. Les matériaux ayant la capacité de former des hydrogels sont d'origine naturelle ou synthétique. Parmi ceux-ci, les polysaccharides, des biopolymères principalement d'origine végétale ou bactérienne, offrent de nombreux avantages face aux hydrogels synthétiques, car ils sont pour la plupart non-toxiques, biocompatibles, biodégradables et très polyvalents.^{1,2}

1.3 La diffusion

Par définition, la diffusion est le transport d'une molécule d'un endroit d'un système à un autre via collisions intermoléculaires.¹⁵ Dans cet ouvrage, nous concentrerons nos études sur deux mécanismes de diffusion différents soient l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle.

1.3.1 L'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle

L'autodiffusion décrit la diffusion d'une molécule de composé «A» dans le composé «A» pur. Dans de telles conditions, il y absence de gradient de concentration ou, plus précisément, de potentiel chimique. Le déplacement des molécules est uniquement dû au mouvement Brownien et s'exprime sous la forme d'un coefficient d'autodiffusion (D_s).¹⁶ La diffusion mutuelle survient en présence d'un gradient de concentration en analyte. Si le composé «A» est mis en présence du composé «B», le transfert de «A» vers «B» (ou de «B» vers «A») est décrit par un seul coefficient de diffusion mutuelle (D_m).¹⁶ Selon la première loi de Fick (équation 1.1), le flux de molécules par section d'aire (F) est proportionnel au gradient de concentration ($\frac{\partial C}{\partial x}$) selon l'axe normal à cette section¹⁵

Équation 1.1

$$F = -D_m \frac{\partial C}{\partial x}$$

où x représente la position le long de cet axe et C la concentration en analyte. L'équation 1.1 est valide pour un milieu isotrope où D_m est également indépendant de la concentration. Les coefficients d'autodiffusion et de diffusion mutuelle s'expriment typiquement en unités de m^2/s . La première loi de Fick présentée ci-haut ne prend pas en charge l'évolution du gradient de concentration en fonction du temps. La deuxième loi de Fick décrit l'évolution de la concentration d'un analyte à l'intérieur d'un élément de volume en fonction du temps (t). En outre, le taux de variation instantanée de la concentration en analyte ($\frac{\delta C}{\delta t}$) à un endroit donné du système est proportionnel au gradient de concentration à cet endroit selon la relation exprimée par l'équation 1.2.¹⁵

Équation 1.2

$$\frac{\partial C}{\partial t} = D_m \frac{\partial^2 C}{\partial x^2}$$

Des formes intégrées de cette équation différentielle, évaluées aux conditions frontières des systèmes étudiés, sont utilisées dans le cadre de cette thèse.

1.3.2 Terminologie concernant la diffusion dans les hydrogels

Les phénomènes d'autodiffusion et de diffusion mutuelle dans les hydrogels diffèrent légèrement des définitions formelles décrites à la section précédente. Néanmoins, les conditions distinguant les deux phénomènes y sont respectées. D'une part, le coefficient d'autodiffusion d'un analyte dans un gel (D_s^{gel}) correspond à la diffusion de ce dernier alors qu'il se retrouve à concentration homogène dans le gel. D'autre part, le coefficient de diffusion mutuelle dans un hydrogel (D_m^{gel}) décrit le comportement observé en présence d'un gradient de concentration en analyte à travers la matrice polymère. Les deux phénomènes sont schématisés à la figure 1.1.

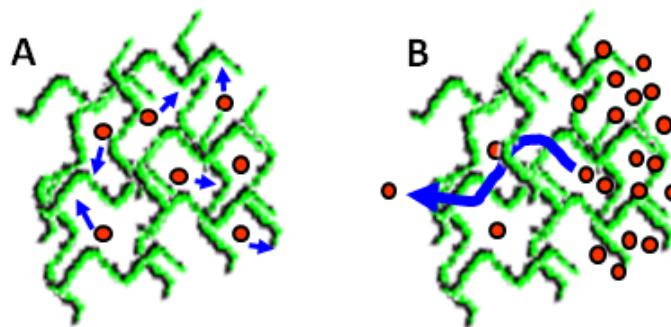


Figure 1.1 L'autodiffusion (A) et la diffusion mutuelle (B) dans les hydrogels. Les molécules sont symbolisées par les cercles rouges.

De façon analogue aux gels, la diffusion d'un analyte en solution à concentration homogène s'exprime par un coefficient d'autodiffusion (D_s^{soln}). Dans l'approximation d'une solution très diluée où les molécules sont sphériques, le coefficient de diffusion est fonction de la température (T), de la viscosité du solvant (η) ainsi que de la taille du diffusant, exprimée par le rayon hydrodynamique (R_h) dans l'équation de Stokes-Einstein

Équation 1.3

$$D_s^{sln} = \frac{k_B T}{6\pi\eta R_h}$$

où k_B est la constante de Boltzmann. Cette relation est utilisée afin d'évaluer la taille des analytes utilisés dans les études de diffusion.

1.4 Les facteurs influençant la diffusion dans les hydrogels

En plus des facteurs hydrodynamiques présentés à l'équation 1.3, les principaux facteurs de retardation identifiés dans les hydrogels sont décrits ci-dessous.¹²

L'obstruction : les chaînes polymères sont des barrières impénétrables et leur présence augmente la longueur du trajet des diffusants au sein de l'hydrogel.

La résistance hydrodynamique : un gradient de viscosité est causé par les molécules diffusant plus lentement à proximité de chaînes polymères peu mobiles.

L'implication du polymère : les chaînes polymères d'un gel sont, selon le cas, plus ou moins flexibles. Les mouvements de chaînes peuvent créer un cisaillement dans les régions occupées par le solvant, modifiant les propriétés rhéologiques de ce dernier, et/ou emprisonner les analytes (effet de cage). Les interactions chimiques gel-soluté sont également dues à une implication du polymère.

Un changement des propriétés du solvant : la présence du polymère modifie les interactions physico-chimiques entre le solvant et le diffusant.

1.4.1 Les modèles théoriques de la diffusion dans les hydrogels

La diminution du transport de masse, causée par la présence d'un hydrogel, s'exprime par un facteur de retardation (σ), défini comme le rapport des coefficients de diffusion mesurés dans le gel (D^{gel}) et en solution.

Équation 1.4

$$\frac{D^{gel}}{D_s^{sln}} = \sigma$$

Les modèles théoriques de diffusion sont principalement basés sur la théorie de l’obstruction, la théorie hydrodynamique ou une combinaison des deux. D’une part, la théorie de l’obstruction définit les chaînes polymères de l’hydrogel comme des obstacles impénétrables. Ainsi, le transport s’effectue seulement si les molécules peuvent passer au travers des ouvertures entre les chaînes polymères qui composent le réseau hydrogel. D’autre part, la théorie hydrodynamique, dérivée de l’équation de Stokes-Einstein (équation 1.3), stipule que les phénomènes de friction sont responsables de la réduction de la vitesse de transport dans les hydrogels.

Les différents modèles hydrodynamiques et d’obstruction visent à rationaliser le comportement des diffusants en exprimant le facteur de retardation en fonction de différents paramètres physico-chimiques associés au système du gel-diffusant. À titre d’exemple, un des plus simples modèles de diffusion, basé sur la théorie de l’obstruction, est celui d’Ogston et al.¹⁷ où le transport s’effectue à l’intérieur d’une dispersion homogène de longues fibres rigides simulant les chaînes polymères du gel. Ce modèle exprime l’idée que la diffusion des molécules dans un hydrogel est reliée à la probabilité de trouver un espace dont la taille minimale correspond à la somme des rayons du soluté (R_h) et d’une fibre (R_f).

Équation 1.5

$$\sigma = \exp\left(-\frac{(R_f + R_h)}{R_f} \varphi^{1/2}\right)$$

Dans ce modèle comme dans plusieurs autres, le facteur de retardation est fonction de la concentration en polymère dans le gel, exprimée par la fraction volumique exclue (φ). Certains résultats de diffusion présentés dans cet ouvrage seront discutés à l’aide du modèle d’Ogston et al. Jusqu’à présent, il existe plusieurs modèles de diffusion dans la littérature.¹²⁻¹⁴ Ce constat traduit le fait qu’aucun d’eux n’est valide pour toutes les conditions qui peuvent exister. Certains modèles, comme celui d’Ogston et al., ont de la difficulté à reproduire le comportement de plus grosses molécules. D’autres introduisent des paramètres dont la signification physique n’est pas clairement établie et sont de nature plutôt empirique. De plus, comme on le verra dans ce travail, il est difficile, voire impossible, de réduire l’architecture complexe des hydrogels à seulement quelques paramètres.

1.4.2 La concentration de polymère dans le gel

Une augmentation de la concentration en polymère dans le gel provoque un plus grand encombrement stérique par l'ajout de nouvelles barrières dans le parcours des diffusants. De plus, une résistance hydrodynamique supplémentaire est inévitablement engendrée par l'ajout d'obstacles peu mobiles dans l'environnement des diffusants. La fraction volumique exclue dans le réseau hydrogel est inaccessible aux diffusants en plus d'être indépendante de la nature chimique de l'hydrogel. Les exemples illustrant l'effet de φ sur la diffusion dans les hydrogels sont très nombreux dans la littérature. En général, le facteur de retardation augmente de façon exponentielle en fonction de φ tel qu'exprimé par la grande majorité des modèles théoriques de diffusion dans les gels.¹²⁻¹⁴

1.4.3 La taille des diffusants

En général, le facteur de retardation évolue en fonction de la taille des diffusants. Du point de vue de la théorie de l'obstruction, ce paramètre influence le rapport entre la taille du diffusant et l'espacement entre les chaînes polymères qui composent le réseau de l'hydrogel. D'un point de vue hydrodynamique, la force de friction est directement proportionnelle à la taille de la molécule telle que décrite par la relation de Stokes-Einstein. La dépendance entre le facteur de retardation et la taille du diffusant a été observée expérimentalement pour plusieurs systèmes gel-diffusant. De plus, ce paramètre est pris en compte dans la majorité des modèles de diffusion. À titre d'exemple, la diffusion d'une série de poly(éthylène glycol) (PEG) de différentes masses molaires a été rapportée dans des hydrogels de κ -carrageenan,¹⁸ agarose,¹⁹ alginate,^{20,21} polyvinylalcool (PVA)²² et de lactosérum.²³ Dans tous les cas, il a été observé que les coefficients de diffusion mesurés dans les hydrogels diminuaient en fonction de la taille du PEG étudié.

1.4.4 La taille des pores

Une notion fondamentale concernant l'étude de la structure des hydrogels est celle d'un pore. Il s'agit d'une cavité remplie d'eau (solvant) créée par les espaces entre les chaînes polymères. Le rayon d'un pore (R_p) correspond à celui d'une sphère imaginaire localisée dans l'interstice entre chaînes polymères avoisinantes. Les

mécanismes de transport dans les hydrogels sont fréquemment expliqués en termes de transfert de masse entre pores interconnectés.¹⁴ Les hydrogels sont des structures complexes possédant généralement plusieurs niveaux d'organisation. La distribution de taille des pores est souvent très large au sein d'un même échantillon et peut même être très irrégulière (plusieurs populations). Bien que la définition formelle d'un pore ne semble pas pouvoir s'appliquer à tous les systèmes hydrogels, on en distingue typiquement deux types soient les nanopores et les macropores. Les nanopores représentent les cavités entre les chaînes polymères ou chaînes polymères agglomérées (nanofibres), tandis que les macropores constituent les espaces séparant les agglomérations de fibres et leurs jonctions.

La taille des cavités à l'intérieur des hydrogels peut affecter la diffusion d'analytes de façon significative. Fatin-Rouge et al.²⁴ ainsi que Petit et al.²⁵ ont démontré l'importance de ce facteur en mesurant l'autodiffusion d'une grande variété de molécules de tailles inférieures et supérieures à celle des pores d'hydrogels d'agarose et de Laponite, respectivement. Lorsque les diffusants sont très petits par rapport à la taille des pores, le facteur de retardation est unitaire alors qu'il décroît de façon importante lorsque la taille de diffusants avoisine celle des pores. Il est possible de varier la taille des pores de plusieurs façons, notamment par une augmentation de la concentration du polymère dans le gel. La redistribution du volume occupé par l'ajout de chaînes polymères peut conduire à une réduction de l'espace entre les fibres composant le gel. À titre d'exemple, Lorén et al. ont démontré une relation entre la concentration en κ -carrageenan, la taille des pores et les coefficients de diffusion de dendrimères dans leurs gels.²⁶

1.4.5 La diffusion de macromolécules dans les gels

La diffusion de macromolécules flexibles dans les hydrogels est typiquement séparée en deux régimes selon la taille relative entre la longueur de la chaîne polymère (proportionnelle à R_h) et celle des pores du gel. Dans un régime dilué (aussi appelé Rouse-Zimm), les macromolécules diffusent sous une forme globulaire, car les restrictions stériques causées par la matrice hydrogel sont faibles. Dans un régime concentré, les chaînes polymères doivent se déplier afin de pouvoir se déplacer au sein des ouvertures de tailles restreintes de l'hydrogel. On désigne ce régime comme étant

celui de la reptation, car le mouvement des chaînes polymères au sein du réseau hydrogel est analogue à celui d'un serpent ce déplaçant au travers d'un tube. La dépendance entre le coefficient d'autodiffusion du polymère diffusant dans le gel et sa masse molaire (M_w), proportionnelle à la longueur de la chaîne polymère, s'exprime sous la forme d'une fonction de puissance de la forme suivante :

Équation 1.6

$$D_s^{gel} \approx Cst \times M_w^{-\alpha}$$

où α est un exposant variant entre 0.5 et 2 selon le régime de diffusion. Dans un régime dilué, la valeur de α est de 0.5²⁷ alors que celle-ci augmente progressivement jusqu'à 2 pour un régime concentré.²⁸ Pluen et al.²⁹ ont mesuré l'autodiffusion de macromolécules de PEG et d'acide désoxyribonucléiques (ADN) de plusieurs tailles dans des hydrogels d'agarose. Leurs résultats illustrent bien la transition entre le régime de diffusion dilué et celui par reptation lorsque la taille de la macromolécule avoisine celle des pores du gel.

1.4.6 La charge

Le transport de molécules chargées peut être influencé de façon très significative par la présence et/ou la nature de groupements chargés dans le réseau de l'hydrogel. La somme des interactions électrostatiques (et/ou chimiques s'il y a lieu) entre le diffusant et le gel est généralement quantifiée par un coefficient de partage (Φ), défini comme étant le ratio entre la concentration à l'équilibre dans le gel et celle en solution. Johnson et al.³⁰ ont mesuré l'autodiffusion ainsi que le coefficient de partage de diverses protéines globulaires à différentes forces ioniques dans des gels d'agarose faiblement chargés. Les conclusions de leurs études rapportent que la retardation mesurée dans le gel est d'avantage influencée par une variation de Φ que par une variation du coefficient de diffusion, pratiquement constant dans tous les cas. D'autre part, Hirota et al.³¹ ont mesuré la diffusion mutuelle de myoglobine, une protéine globulaire, dans des hydrogels d'agarose (neutre) et de λ -carrageenan (anionique) à des pH de part et d'autre du point isoélectrique de la protéine. Dans les hydrogels de λ -carrageenan, la diffusion mutuelle de la myoglobine chargée négativement est ralentie par rapport à celle mesurée pour la protéine neutre en raison des répulsions électrostatiques. D'autre part, une augmentation

de la vitesse de diffusion, causée par les attractions électrostatiques, est mesurée pour la myoglobine chargée positivement. Les mêmes expériences réalisées dans des hydrogels d'agarose mènent à des coefficients de diffusion mutuelle similaires dans tous les cas. Par conséquent, la charge du diffusant par rapport à celle de l'hydrogel peut avoir un effet non-négligeable sur le transport de molécules chargées dans les gels.

1.5 La relation entre l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle dans les hydrogels

Les études destinées à mieux comprendre l'effet de différents paramètres sur le facteur de retardation sont généralement réalisées par des mesures de coefficients d'autodiffusion **ou** de diffusion mutuelle. Malheureusement, les résultats obtenus sont souvent confondus les uns avec les autres, assumant une équivalence entre les deux mécanismes de transport. Pourtant, très peu d'études portent sur la relation entre ces deux phénomènes.³²⁻³⁶ De plus, les conditions menant à une équivalence entre l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle dans les hydrogels sont plus ou moins bien identifiées. Un des obstacles majeurs à l'étude de cette problématique réside dans la difficulté d'étudier les deux phénomènes sur un même système dans des conditions expérimentales similaires. Les deux types de diffusion sont généralement étudiés sur des échelles de temps et de distance très différentes. Typiquement, les mesures d'autodiffusion sont réalisées sur des échelles de temps qui s'étalent de quelques millisecondes à quelques secondes. Les distances parcourues par les diffusants durant la mesure sont habituellement de l'ordre de quelques micromètres. La diffusion mutuelle se mesure sur de plus longues périodes de temps (minutes, heures, jours). Les distances parcourues par les molécules durant cette période de temps atteignent l'échelle macroscopique. Il est donc raisonnable de penser que les coefficients de diffusion peuvent dépendre de l'échelle de mesure sur laquelle ils sont caractérisés. Dans une expérience de diffusion mutuelle, les molécules ont d'avantage la chance d'explorer l'environnement dans lequel elles diffusent que durant une expérience d'autodiffusion. Par conséquent, il est possible que les deux mécanismes de transport diffèrent selon l'échelle de grandeur étudiée.

Jusqu'à présent, les quelques études³²⁻³⁶ portant sur la relation entre l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle ont été réalisée sur des systèmes passablement différents les uns des autres, tant au niveau de la nature chimique des hydrogels qu'au niveau de celle des analytes. Le paramètre varié dans chacune de ces études est la taille du diffusant. L'eau, le phosphate, une gamme de protéines globulaires ainsi que diverses macromolécules font partie des analytes ayant été étudiés. Dans tous les cas, la taille des diffusants était significativement plus petite que la dimension des pores des hydrogels. Pour certains systèmes, des coefficients de diffusion mutuelle inférieurs aux coefficients d'autodiffusion sont rapportés.^{32,34} À titre d'exemple, la valeur du coefficient de diffusion mutuelle du phosphate dans les gels de dextran est rapportée comme étant 3 fois plus faible que celle de l'autodiffusion³² alors qu'un phénomène similaire a été observé pour des macromolécules d'acide humiques dans un gel d'agarose.³⁴ Pour les autres systèmes étudiés,³²⁻³⁶ des valeurs comparables entre les deux mécanismes de transport sont rapportées. Une étude de la comparaison entre l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle de petites molécules dans un système hydrogel est présentée au chapitre 3 de cette thèse et la comparaison avec les résultats provenant des études antérieures y est discutée.

1.6 Le curdlan

Les travaux de cette thèse sont réalisés sur les hydrogels de curdlan, un polysaccharide d'origine bactérienne produit par une souche mutante *alcaligenes faecalis var. myxogenes*.³⁷ Les chaînes polysaccharides du curdlan sont essentiellement composées d'unités répétitives de β -D-(1→3) glucose.³⁸ Les chaînes sont linéaires, c'est-à-dire sans aucune ramifications, et ont un degré de polymérisation moyen d'environ 500 unités, menant à une masse molaire d'environ 50 000 g/mol.

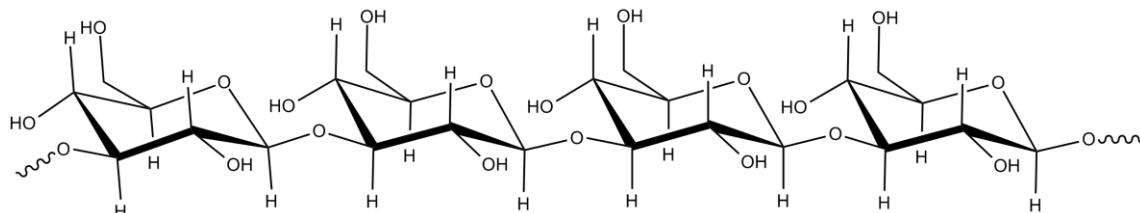


Figure 1.2 Structure chimique du curdlan.

Le curdlan est neutre et insoluble dans l'eau. Il est toutefois possible de former un thermogel à partir d'une suspension aqueuse de curdlan chauffée à une température supérieure à 55 °C.³⁷ Les thermogels sont formés durant le chauffage et non suite au refroidissement de la suspension. La structure obtenue pendant le chauffage est maintenue lorsque le gel est refroidi à la température de la pièce. Les contraintes stériques imposées par les liaisons β -(1→3) entre chaque unité monomère (figure 1.2) forcent les chaînes de curdlan à adopter une structure hélicoïdale. Une des propriétés intéressantes des hydrogels de curdlan, qui est exploitée au cours des travaux de cette thèse, est la capacité à former des hydrogels où les chaînes de polysaccharide adoptent des conformations différentes selon la température à laquelle les gels sont préparés. En effet, lorsqu'une suspension aqueuse est incubée entre 55 et 80 °C, un gel thermoréversible (*low-set gel*), où les chaînes sont majoritairement sous la forme de simples hélices agglomérées,³⁹ est formé.^{40,41} Le gel est blanchâtre, visqueux et se brise facilement sous l'application de contraintes mécaniques.³⁷ Lorsque la suspension est incubée entre 80 et 130 °C, un gel thermo-irréversible (*high-set gel*) est formé^{40,41} où les chaînes adoptent principalement une conformation de triples hélices interconnectées.⁴² Le gel thermo-irréversible est translucide et possède de bonne élasticité ainsi qu'une bonne résistance aux contraintes mécaniques dont notamment la compression.³⁷ La nomenclature thermoréversible et thermo-irréversible provient du comportement calorimétrique des gels lorsqu'ils sont chauffés de nouveau.^{40,41} Pour les gels thermoréversibles, une transition endothermique, aux environs de 55 °C, est détectée et attribuée à une réorganisation des liaisons hydrogènes responsables de la formation de ce type de gel.^{43,44} Aucune transition n'est détectée pour les gels thermo-irréversibles en raison de la très faible proportion de simples hélices résiduelles dans la structure de cet hydrogel.^{40,41,45}

1.7 Les techniques de caractérisation

Les principales techniques de caractérisation structurale et de mesure de diffusion dans les hydrogels utilisées durant les travaux de cette thèse sont décrites.

1.7.1 La caractérisation structurale des hydrogels

Bien que les concepts décrivant la diffusion dans les gels soient souvent exprimés en termes de paramètres structuraux, les hydrogels demeurent des matériaux difficiles à caractériser en raison de leur haute teneur en eau ($> 90\%$). Parmi les méthodes de caractérisation pouvant atteindre des résolutions spatiales de l'ordre de la taille des chaînes polymères, la microscopie électronique à balayage (SEM, *scanning electron microscopy*) est probablement la technique ayant été la plus utilisée pour étudier la structure des hydrogels.⁴⁶ Par contre, la structure de ces derniers étant intimement liée à la grande présence d'eau, il est difficile d'éviter les artefacts causés par la déshydratation.⁴⁷ La microscopie électronique à balayage en mode environnemental (eSEM, *environmental scanning electron microscopy*) présente un net avantage alors qu'elle permet d'étudier des matériaux biologiques⁴⁷ ainsi que des hydrogels⁴⁸ en présence d'eau. De moins bonnes résolutions spatiales, de l'ordre de quelques centaines de nanomètres, sont par contre associées à cette technique. La microscopie à force atomique (AFM, *atomic force microscopy*) est une technique pouvant également être utilisée afin de caractériser les gels. Elle a notamment permis d'illustrer la réduction de la taille des pores en fonction de la concentration en polysaccharide dans les hydrogels d'agarose.⁴⁹ La diffraction des neutrons aux petits angles (SANS, *small angle neutron scattering*) est une autre alternative,⁵⁰ mais l'accessibilité limitée de cette technique empêche son utilisation sur une base régulière. Les méthodes indirectes, basées sur des modèles théoriques de diffusion,¹²⁻¹⁴ permettent notamment des approximations quant à la taille des pores des gels. On note cependant une certaine variabilité entre les résultats obtenus par les différentes approches sur un même hydrogel.²⁹ Les techniques SEM, eSEM, AFM sont utilisées aux chapitres 3 et 4 de cette thèse afin de caractériser les différents hydrogels de curdlan. En plus de ces techniques courantes, l'imagerie infrarouge, telle qu'expliquée à la section 1.7.3, est utilisée afin d'étudier la distribution du curdlan au sein des hydrogels au chapitre 4.

1.7.2 La spectroscopie infrarouge (ATR) à température variable

La spectroscopie FT-IR est sensible aux changements de moment dipolaire net survenant durant les vibrations interatomiques. Les liens covalents polarisés tels que les liaisons O-H ($3700\text{-}3200\text{ cm}^{-1}$), C-H ($3000\text{-}2800\text{ cm}^{-1}$) et C-O ($1200\text{-}800\text{ cm}^{-1}$) présents dans les polysaccharides sont des modes de vibration actifs dans l'infrarouge moyen ($4000\text{-}400\text{ cm}^{-1}$). Les hydrogels ont une haute teneur en eau qui absorbe fortement la radiation infrarouge sur une large gamme de nombres d'ondes. La figure 1.3 illustre le recouvrement entre les bandes d'absorption infrarouge d'un hydrogel de curdlan et celles de l'eau.

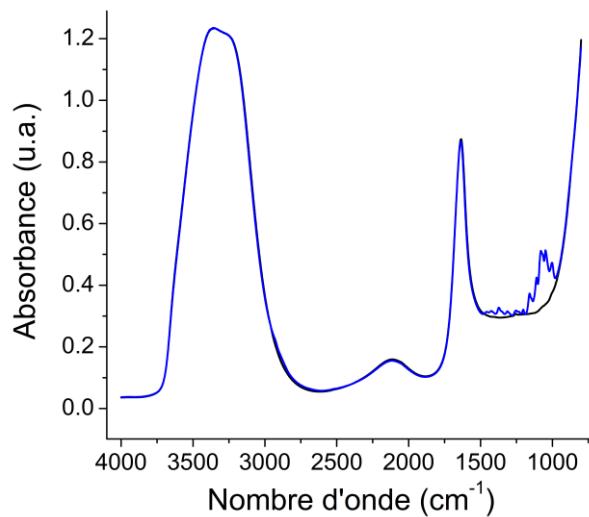


Figure 1.3 Spectre FT-IR(ATR) d'un hydrogel de curdlan thermo-irréversible 10% (m/v) à $30\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ (—) préparé dans un tampon Tris/HCl 10 mM pH=7.2 (—).

À partir de la figure 1.3, il est clair que la zone C-O entre 1200 et 800 cm^{-1} est la région du spectre infrarouge la plus accessible pour une analyse plus approfondie du polysaccharide. Le mode d'échantillonnage de prédilection pour les hydrogels est la réflexion totale atténuée (ATR, *attenuated total reflection*). Cette technique consiste à faire passer le faisceau infrarouge à l'intérieur d'un matériau d'indice de réfraction élevé qui n'absorbe pas dans le domaine de l'infrarouge moyen, soit le ZnSe dans notre étude. Lorsque le faisceau atteint l'interface du cristal au-delà d'un angle critique, il y a réflexion totale interne tel que schématisé à la figure 1.4.

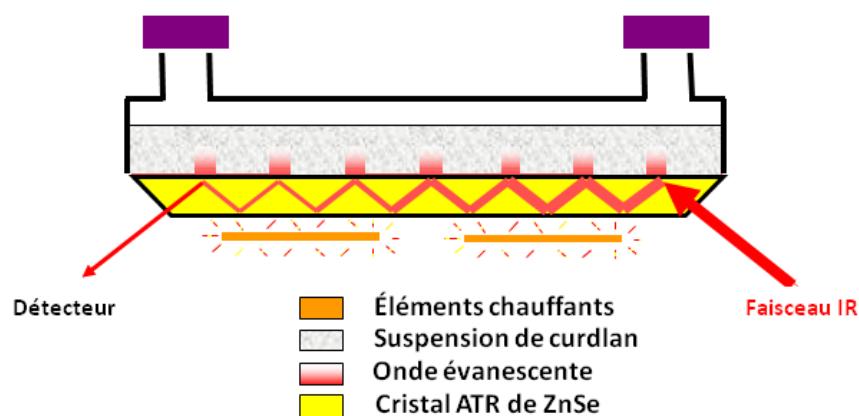


Figure 1.4 Schéma du montage ATR à température variable.

À chaque réflexion interne dans le cristal, une onde évanescante, orthogonale à la surface du cristal, est créée. Lorsqu'un échantillon est à proximité du cristal, dans la région sondée par l'onde évanescante, il peut absorber une partie de la radiation infrarouge provoquant ainsi une réflexion totale (interne) atténuée. La profondeur de pénétration de l'onde évanescante (d_p) dans l'échantillon est décrite par l'équation suivante

Équation 1.7

$$d_p = \frac{\lambda}{2\pi(n_1^2 \sin^2 \theta - n_2^2)^{1/2}}$$

où λ est la longueur d'onde de la radiation infrarouge, θ l'angle d'incidence du faisceau infrarouge par rapport à la normale, n_1 l'indice de réfraction du cristal ATR ($n_1 = 2.4$ pour le ZnSe) et n_2 celui de l'échantillon ($n_2 \cong 1.33$ pour l'eau, aussi utilisé pour les hydrogels). Dans le cas particulier d'un hydrogel de polysaccharide sur un cristal de ZnSe avec le faisceau infrarouge y pénétrant à 45° , l'onde évanescante a une profondeur de pénétration variant de 1.3 à $2.0 \mu\text{m}$ pour la gamme de nombres d'ondes entre 750 et 1200 cm^{-1} . Ce parcours optique permet l'analyse directe d'un hydrogel sans aucune préparation additionnelle. L'ajout d'éléments chauffants, couplés à un contrôleur de température, sous la cellule ATR, permet de préparer et de caractériser les hydrogels de curdlan *in situ* tel que présenté au chapitre 2.

1.7.3 L'imagerie FT-IR (FPA)

L'imagerie infrarouge est réalisée en couplant un spectromètre infrarouge et un microscope. Dans nos analyses, une mince tranche de gel ($5\ \mu\text{m}$) est placée dans le trajet optique du microscope afin d'obtenir des spectres par transmission. Dans notre système, plutôt que de collecter le faisceau infrarouge sur un seul détecteur, celui-ci est fractionné sur une matrice à plan focal (FPA, *focal plane array*) de 32×32 détecteurs. Il est ainsi possible d'enregistrer simultanément 1024 spectres résolus spatialement. On peut alors créer des images infrarouges basées sur les différentes composantes spectrales telles que l'aire d'une bande, son intensité, sa largeur ou sa position.

1.7.4 Techniques de caractérisation de la diffusion

Diverses techniques peuvent servir à mesurer l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle de molécules dans les hydrogels.⁵¹ Un bref aperçu des méthodes les plus couramment utilisées de nos jours est suivi d'une description plus approfondie des techniques utilisées au cours de cette thèse.

1.7.4.1 Mesure de l'autodiffusion dans les hydrogels

Recouvrement de la fluorescence après photoblanchiment (FRAP, *fluorescence recovery after photobleaching*) : Cette technique, utilisée en microscopie de fluorescence, consiste à inhiber de manière irréversible la luminescence des molécules d'une région localisée de l'échantillon grâce à une brève impulsion laser de forte intensité. Suite au photoblanchiment, l'intensité de la fluorescence est mesurée en fonction du temps à ce même endroit. Les molécules se trouvant initialement à l'extérieur de la zone de photoblanchiment migrent, par diffusion, dans cette région et participent ainsi à la luminescence détectée. Ce recouvrement de la fluorescence en fonction du temps est modélisé afin de déterminer le coefficient de diffusion des fluorophores.

Spectroscopie de corrélation de fluorescence (FCS, *fluorescence correlation spectroscopy*) : Cette technique, généralement réalisée par microscopie de fluorescence en mode confocal, consiste à mesurer les fluctuations de luminescence dans un élément de volume en fonction du temps. La diffusion de molécules fluorescentes qui entrent et

sont sortent du voxel cause des fluctuations de luminescence qui peuvent être modélisées par une fonction d'autocorrélation afin d'en déterminer un coefficient d'autodiffusion.

Spectroscopie de résonance magnétique nucléaire (RMN) à gradients pulsés (PFG NMR, *pulsed field gradient nuclear magnetic resonance*) : Cette technique sera décrite de façon plus détaillée à la section 1.7.6.

1.7.4.2 Mesure de la diffusion mutuelle dans les hydrogels

Cellule à diaphragme : Un réservoir contenant l'analyte d'intérêt est séparé d'un autre réservoir, exempt d'analyte, par un mince diaphragme de gel. En raison du gradient de concentration, les analytes traversent le gel afin de rejoindre le 2^e réservoir. La concentration en analyte dans le réservoir est déterminée en fonction du temps afin de déterminer le coefficient de diffusion mutuelle.

La méthode source/drain : Cette technique sera décrite de façon plus détaillée à la section 1.7.8.

Profilage de la concentration : La méthode consiste à placer un gel en contact avec une solution contenant l'analyte d'intérêt (expérience de pénétration) ou, à l'opposé, un gel contenant un analyte en contact avec une solution sans analyte (expérience de libération). L'analyte diffuse dans le gel ou hors de celui-ci selon le sens du gradient de concentration créé. Le profil de la concentration en analyte en fonction de la distance le long du gel, pour un temps donné, est simulé avec le modèle de diffusion adéquat afin de déterminer le coefficient de diffusion mutuelle. Il existe des méthodes destructives et non-destructives de profilage de la concentration. Dans le cas de l'approche destructive, le gel est coupé en plusieurs sections, après un temps de diffusion donné, et le profil spatial de concentration en analyte est déterminé à partir de chacune d'elles.⁵² Les méthodes non-destructives, basées sur diverses techniques spectroscopiques telles que la microscopie de fluorescence,³³ Raman,⁵³ UV-VIS⁵⁴ et l'imagerie RMN,^{32,55} consistent à mesurer la concentration en analyte à un endroit déterminé en fonction du temps ou le profil complet en concentration à différents temps. La technique d'imagerie RMN 1D est utilisée dans nos études (chapitres 3 et 5) et sera expliquée en détail à la section 1.7.7.

1.7.5 La résonance magnétique nucléaire à transformée de Fourier

La RMN utilise les propriétés magnétiques des noyaux atomiques possédant un spin non-nul tels que les atomes de ^1H et de ^{31}P qui possèdent tous deux un spin $\frac{1}{2}$. En l'absence d'un champ magnétique, les moments magnétiques des noyaux peuvent adopter n'importe quelle orientation. Lorsque soumis à un champ magnétique externe, statique et homogène (B_0), il y a levée de la dégénérescence entre les différents niveaux énergétiques. Pour des noyaux de spin $\frac{1}{2}$, les moments magnétiques adoptent une orientation alignée ou opposée au champ B_0 . À la température de la pièce, la population de spins alignés avec le champ excède légèrement la population d'orientation opposée, car cet état est plus bas en énergie. En présence du champ magnétique, les dipôles effectuent un mouvement de précession autour de l'axe du champ principal. Cette fréquence de précession, appelée fréquence de Larmor (ω_L), est proportionnelle au champ magnétique ainsi qu'au ratio gyromagnétique (γ), une constante propre à chaque noyau atomique.

Équation 1.8

$$\omega_L = \gamma B_0$$

Ainsi, si l'on applique un champ RF (*radio frequency*) perpendiculaire au champ principal et de fréquence ω_L , le système de spins entrera en résonance. On appelle ce 2^e champ magnétique B_1 . En variant la durée d'application du champ B_1 , il est possible de basculer l'aimantation nette du système de spin (M) sur le plan transversal xy : il s'agit d'une impulsion de 90° tel que schématisé à la figure 1.5.

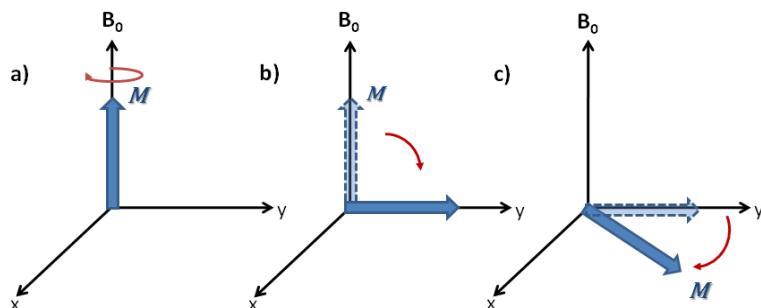


Figure 1.5 Impulsion de 90° sur un système de spins illustrant l'orientation de la magnétisation nette (M) en présence d'un champ B_0 (a), l'application d'un champ B_1 (b) et la précession en phase sur le plan xy (c).

Dans une telle situation, il est beaucoup plus facile de visualiser le phénomène de précession ainsi que de le détecter. La détection s'effectue par induction magnétique où l'intensité du courant est enregistrée en fonction du temps dans une bobine entourant l'échantillon. Éventuellement, la magnétisation transversale retournera à son état d'équilibre, via différents mécanismes de relaxation, et le signal détecté s'atténuerà de façon exponentielle. Le terme utilisé dans le domaine de la RMN pour décrire cette décroissance du signal est FID (*free induction decay*). Le signal RMN enregistré en fonction du temps sera traduit dans un domaine de fréquence par une transformée de Fourier tel que schématisé à la Figure 1.6.

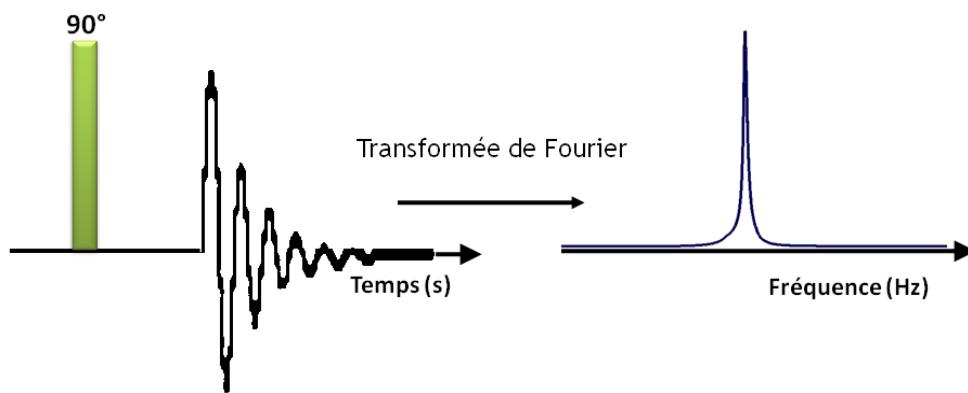


Figure 1.6 FID résultant d'une impulsion de 90° suivie d'une transformée de Fourier.

1.7.6 La RMN à gradients pulsés

La spectroscopie RMN à gradients pulsés est une technique utilisée pour mesurer l'autodiffusion de molécules en solution ainsi que dans les gels. La technique consiste à relier le déplacement moyen des spins au coefficient d'autodiffusion. La position des spins est encodée à l'aide d'impulsions de gradients de champ magnétique.

La RMN à gradients pulsés utilise des gradients de champ magnétique linéaires afin de créer une dépendance entre le champ magnétique effectif ressenti par les noyaux et leur position selon un axe donné (x , y ou z). L'amplitude du gradient de champ magnétique (G) s'exprime typiquement en Gauss/cm. En appliquant un gradient selon l'axe parallèle au champ principal (G_z), le phénomène engendré entraîne une

modification de l'équation 1.8 créant ainsi une dépendance entre la fréquence de précession d'un spin et sa position le long de l'axe (z).

Équation 1.9

$$\omega_L(z) = \gamma(B_0 + G_z z)$$

Durant une courte (typiquement quelques ms) impulsion de gradient de champ magnétique, les spins se retrouvent «momentanément» dans un champ magnétique d'amplitude différente et leur fréquence de résonance en est affectée. Avant l'impulsion, la précession de tous les vecteurs de moments magnétiques, correspondant aux différents spins, s'effectuait en phase. Une fois le gradient éteint, tous les spins sont de nouveau soumis au champ B_0 uniquement et leur ω_L est identique. Par contre, l'impulsion de gradient a provoqué un déphasage entre les différentes magnétisations qui est fonction de leur position dans l'échantillon. C'est précisément ce phénomène qui est exploité afin d'encoder le déplacement des spins.

Les mesures de d'autodiffusion en solution et dans les hydrogels de curdlan sont réalisées en utilisant la séquence de l'écho stimulée développée par J.E. Tanner dans les années 70.⁵⁶ Cette séquence, schématisée aux figures 1.7 et 1.8, est composée de quatre étapes distinctes soient : l'encodage, l'entreposage, la lecture et la détection. Afin de faciliter la compréhension, ces différentes étapes sont d'abord expliquées pour un système de spins sans diffusion (figure 1.7), puis avec diffusion (figure 1.8). Les deux figures sont réalisées dans un référentiel tournant à la vitesse de précession des spins (*plan x'y'*) de sorte qu'un vecteur en résonance apparaisse immobile. La première étape consiste à appliquer une impulsion de 90° (figure 1.7a) afin de placer le système de spins en résonance. Par la suite, une courte impulsion de gradient de champ magnétique est appliquée afin d'encoder les spins en leur attribuant une phase différente selon la position à laquelle ils se trouvent (figure 1.7b). Une seconde impulsion de 90° bascule la magnétisation selon l'axe $-z$ (figure 1.7c). Dans cet état, les spins sont dit «entreposés». Cette période d'attente, variant typiquement de quelques millisecondes à quelques secondes, est destinée à laisser le système évoluer. L'application d'une troisième impulsion de 90° a pour effet de retourner la magnétisation dans le plan $x'y'$ (figure 1.7d). Cependant, l'addition de la 2^e et de la 3^e impulsion de 90° a pour effet de renverser le sens de la précession (équivalent à une impulsion de 180°). La lecture du

système de spins s'effectue via l'application d'une deuxième impulsion de gradient, identique à la première, qui a pour objectif de contrebalancer le déphasage initialement induit par la première impulsion de gradient. Le retour en phase des différents spins formera un écho (figure 1.7e). Comme les molécules ne bougent pas, la refocalisation est complète étant donné que les molécules subissent deux déphasages identiques, mais opposés. Dans le cas où les molécules diffusent, les deux impulsions de gradient ressentis ne sont pas identiques, car les diffusants migrent durant l'intervalle de temps Δ (figure 1.8c). La refocalisation incomplète, engendrée par les spins s'étant déplacés, diminue leur contribution au signal RMN et par le fait même atténue l'intensité de l'écho mesuré (figure 1.8e). L'atténuation de l'écho est donc reliée au déplacement moyen des molécules selon l'axe du gradient appliqué. Le coefficient de diffusion mesuré par RMN à gradients pulsés est par le fait même une **moyenne** de la mobilité du système de spins dans tout l'échantillon et non la mobilité des molécules dans un endroit spécifique du système tel que mesuré par les techniques de FRAP et FCS.

Dans nos systèmes, l'utilisation de la séquence de l'écho stimulé a été privilégiée, car elle permet la mesure de coefficients d'autodiffusion sur de relativement longues échelles de temps. Durant, la période Δ au cours de laquelle les spins sont appelés à diffuser, la magnétisation nette (M) se retrouve selon l'axe $-z$. Par conséquent, l'utilisation de l'écho stimulé est limitée par la relaxation longitudinale, typiquement quantifiée par T_1 , de l'analyte. De plus, T_1 est significativement plus grand que le temps de relaxation T_2 dans le cas des macromolécules.⁵⁷

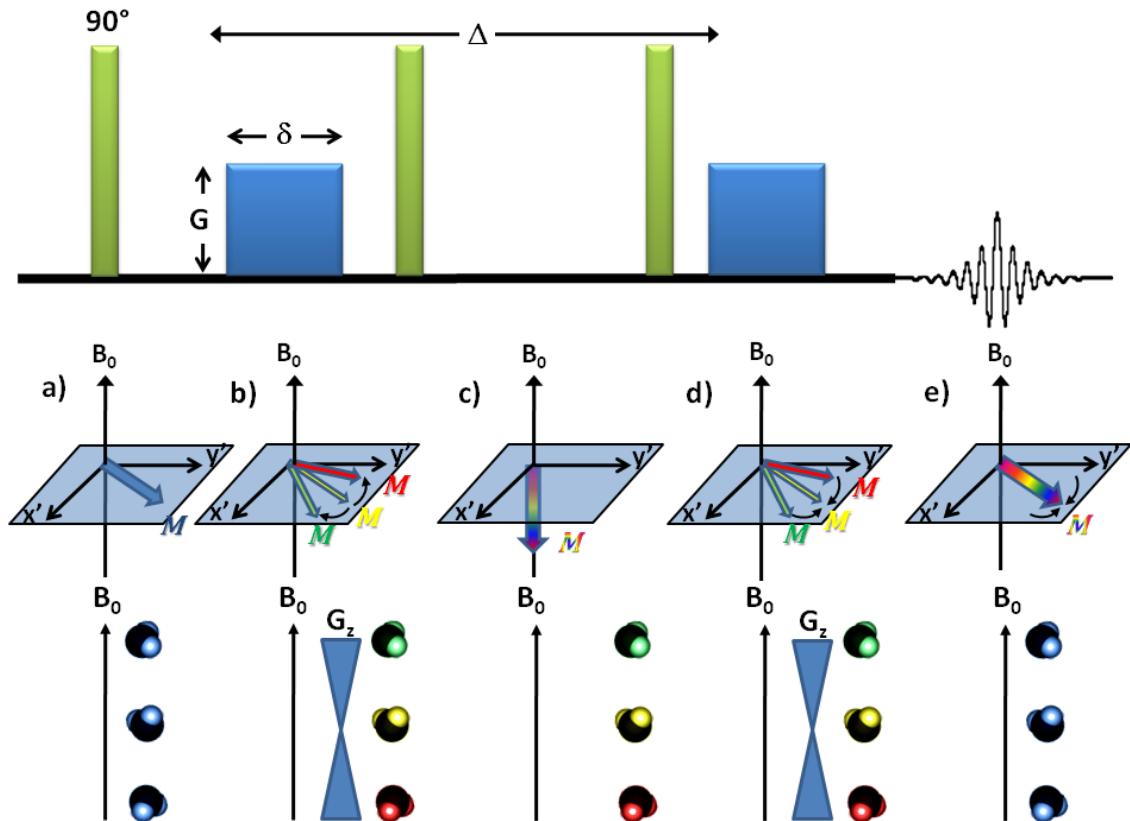


Figure 1.7 Séquence de l'écho stimulé dans un système sans diffusion. L'impulsion de 90° (a) est suivie d'une impulsion de gradient servant à l'encodage des spins (b), d'une période d'évolution (c), d'une deuxième impulsion de gradient destinée à la lecture du système de spins (d) et de la formation d'un écho (e).

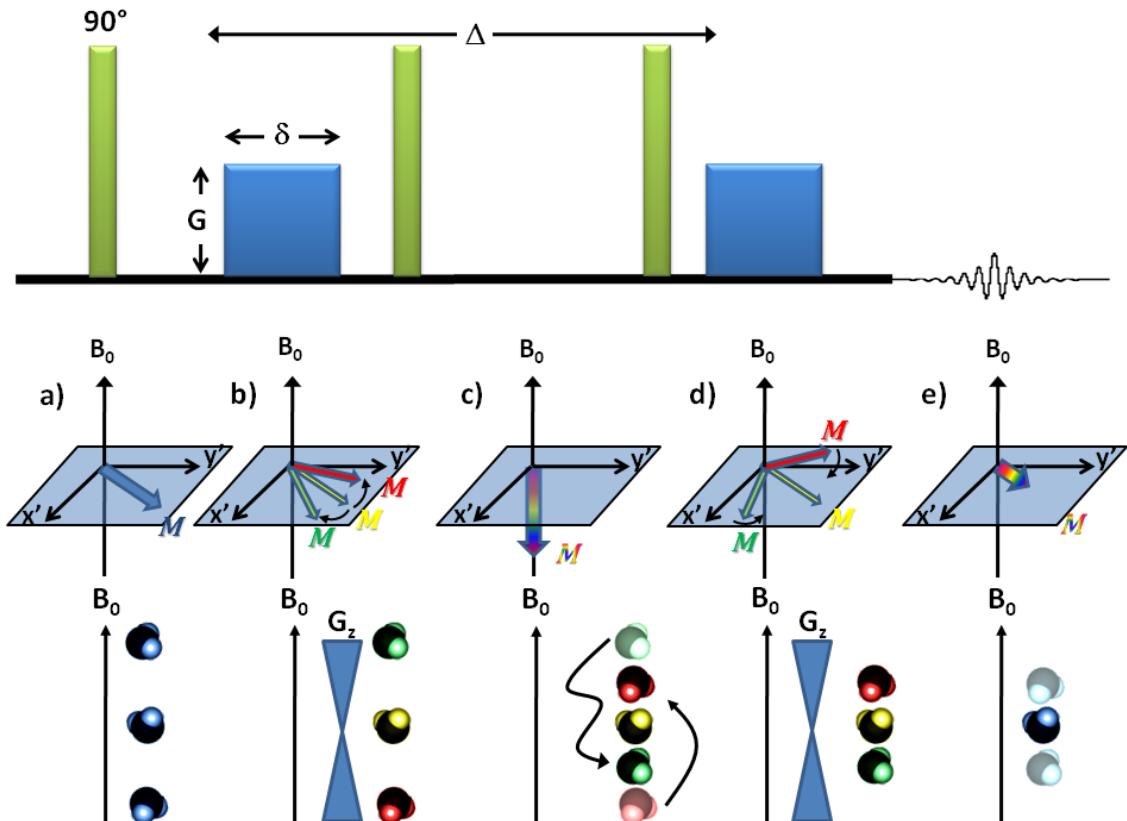


Figure 1.8 Séquence de l'écho stimulé dans un système avec diffusion. L'impulsion de 90° (a) est suivie d'une impulsion de gradient servant à l'encodage des spins (b). Durant la période d'évolution (c), les molécules diffusent d'un endroit du système à un autre. Lors de la deuxième impulsion de gradient (d), le système de spins n'est pas soumis au même déphasage et il y a formation d'un écho de plus faible intensité (e).

1.7.6.1 Le propagateur de déplacement moyen

L'amplitude de l'écho (S) mesurée en fonction de l'application d'impulsions de gradients de champ magnétique est définie comme suit⁵⁸

Équation 1.10

$$S(G, \Delta) = \int \rho(r) \int P((\vec{r}|\vec{r}'), \Delta) \exp[i2\pi\vec{q} \cdot (\vec{r}' - \vec{r})] d\vec{r} d\vec{r}'$$

où $q = (2\pi)^{-1}\gamma\delta G$, γ est le ratio gyromagnétique du noyau, δ la durée de l'impulsion de gradient, $\rho(r)$ la densité de spins à la position r et $P((\vec{r}|\vec{r}'), \Delta)$ une fonction d'autocorrélation. L'ensemble de termes $\int \rho(r) \int P((\vec{r}|\vec{r}'), \Delta) d\vec{r} d\vec{r}'$ définit le propagateur de déplacement moyen $\bar{P}(\vec{R}, \Delta)$ qui exprime la probabilité qu'une molécule se déplace d'une distance $\vec{R} = \vec{r}' - \vec{r}$ durant un intervalle de temps Δ . On peut donc réécrire l'équation 1.10 de la façon suivante.

Équation 1.11

$$S(\vec{q}, \Delta) = \int \rho(r) \int \bar{P}(\vec{R}, \Delta) \exp[i2\pi\vec{q} \cdot \vec{R}] d\vec{R}$$

Les expériences d'autodiffusion par RMN à gradients pulsés sont typiquement réalisées en mesurent le déplacement des spins le long d'un axe (ex : z). On peut donc redéfinir la distance parcourue par les diffusants comme étant la projection de leur déplacement selon \vec{q} comme suit : $Z = \vec{R} \cdot \vec{q}$. Pour une diffusion tridimensionnelle, dans un environnement homogène et où la diffusion n'est pas restreinte (voir section 1.7.6.3), le propagateur de déplacement moyen ($\bar{P}(Z, \Delta)$) d'une population de spins est une fonction gaussienne.

Équation 1.12

$$\bar{P}(Z, \Delta) = (4\pi D_s \Delta)^{-3/2} \exp\left(-\frac{Z^2}{4D_s \Delta}\right)$$

En substituant l'équation 1.11 dans l'équation 1.10, l'amplitude de l'écho s'exprime comme suit :

Équation 1.13

$$S(q, \Delta) = \exp[-4\pi^2 q^2 D_s (\Delta - \delta/3)]$$

Le terme $-\delta/3$ dans l'exponentiel de l'équation 1.13 est un facteur de correction visant à contrebalancer la diffusion des spins survenant durant l'impulsion de gradient. En portant en graphique $\ln(S/S_0)$ en fonction de $4\pi^2 q^2 (\Delta - \delta/3)$, où S_0 est l'amplitude de l'écho en l'absence de gradients, la pente de la droite obtenue correspond à D_s (voir figure 1.9).

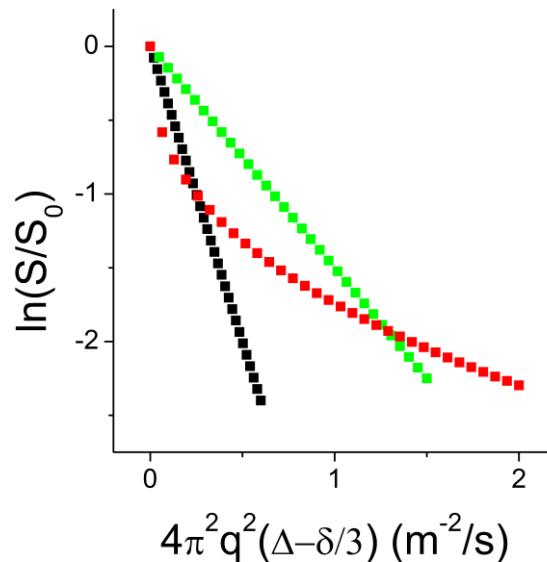


Figure 1.9 Simulation d'une expérience d'autodiffusion réalisée sur une population monodisperse ($\beta = 1$) de diffusants avec un coefficient d'autodiffusion de $4 \times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ (■) et $1.5 \times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ (■). L'atténuation de l'écho d'une distribution de coefficients d'autodiffusion dans un gel (■) où \bar{D}_s est $1.5 \times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ et $\beta = 0.4$ est également illustrée à titre de comparaison.

Dans le cas d'analytes diffusant dans une structure poreuse telle un hydrogel, $\bar{P}(Z, \Delta)$ représente une moyenne de toute la gamme de structures rencontrées par les analytes sur la distance Z durant l'intervalle de temps Δ .⁵⁷ Il se peut que la complexité

de la structure sondée durant la mesure de diffusion mène à un propagateur qui n'est pas gaussien. Le cas de structures périodiques, formées de parois agissant comme des barrières hermétiques, ainsi que d'environnement anisotropes sont des exemples typiques où le déplacement moyen des analytes n'augmente pas de façon linéaire en fonction de Δ .⁵⁸ Expérimentalement, cela se traduit par une déviation du comportement linéaire sur le graphique de l'atténuation de l'écho.

1.7.6.2 Distribution de coefficients d'autodiffusion

Dans le cas d'échantillons polydisperses comme des polymères, les différentes molécules du système diffusent à un rythme proportionnel à leur taille, causant l'apparition d'une distribution de coefficients d'autodiffusion. Tel qu'illustré à la figure 1.9, ce phénomène se traduit par une déviation du comportement linéaire de l'atténuation de l'écho. La forme de la courbe obtenue est le résultat de la superposition de plusieurs atténuations monoexponentielles provenant de la contribution des différentes espèces de la population de diffusants. Le phénomène fut d'abord souligné par Williams et Watts dans le cas de phénomènes de relaxation diélectriques de polymères.⁵⁹ Walderhaug et Nyström⁶⁰ ont par la suite appliqué le même concept à une distribution de coefficients d'autodiffusion provenant d'échantillons polydisperses. Dans cette situation, l'atténuation de l'écho peut s'exprimer sous la forme d'une fonction exponentielle étirée (*stretched exponential function*)

Équation 1.14

$$\frac{S}{S_0} = \exp \left[- (4\pi^2 q^2 (\Delta - \delta/3) D_s^{app})^\beta \right]$$

où D_s^{app} est le coefficient d'autodiffusion apparent et β un paramètre reflétant la largeur de la distribution de coefficients d'autodiffusion. Pour une population monodisperse, $\beta = 1$ ce qui revient alors à l'équation 1.13. Dans le cas d'une polydispersité non-négligeable, la valeur de β décroît et tend vers 0 à mesure que la distribution de D_s s'élargit ($0 < \beta < 1$). Le coefficient d'autodiffusion moyen de la distribution (\bar{D}_s) est exprimé par l'équation 1.15

Équation 1.15

$$\bar{D}_s = \frac{D_s^{app}}{\frac{1}{\beta} \Gamma\left(\frac{1}{\beta}\right)}$$

où Γ est la fonction gamma.

Au cours de travaux subséquents, Walderhaug et Nyström ont mesuré l'autodiffusion de macromolécules thermo-associatives durant une transition solution-gel.^{61,62} La polydispersité mesurée dans les gels étant beaucoup plus importante qu'en solution, les effets ont été attribués à la formation d'agrégats de différentes tailles dans la structure du gel. Dans leurs systèmes respectifs, Nydén et al⁶³ ainsi que de Le Feunteun et Mariette⁶⁴ ont associé l'augmentation de la polydispersité des coefficients d'autodiffusion à la formation d'une structure hydrogel hétérogène. Dans le premier cas, une déviation plus prononcée de l'atténuation monoexponentielle a également été observée en fonction de la taille croissante des diffusants,⁶³ alors que dans le second, elle était affectée par une variation de la concentration en gel.⁶⁴ Une approche similaire, basée sur la présence d'une distribution de coefficients d'autodiffusion, est adoptée au chapitre 4 afin d'analyser les résultats d'autodiffusion d'une série de molécules en solution et dans les hydrogels de curdlan. L'analyse de nos données à l'aide de cette approche permet notamment la comparaison entre la moyenne de la distribution de coefficients d'autodiffusion et le coefficient de diffusion mutuelle.

1.7.6.3 Diffusion restreinte et présence d'hétérogénéités macroscopiques

Il est possible de varier l'échelle de distance sur laquelle l'autodiffusion est mesurée en variant le temps d'observation Δ de la séquence de l'écho stimulé. La distance moyenne quadratique ($\langle z^2 \rangle^{1/2}$) parcourue par les diffusants, le long de l'axe z (selon lequel la mesure de diffusion est réalisée) s'exprime selon l'équation 1.16.⁶⁵

Équation 1.16

$$\langle z^2 \rangle^{1/2} = 2D_s^{gel} \Delta$$

En solution, $\langle z^2 \rangle^{1/2}$ varie linéairement en fonction de Δ . Le coefficient d'autodiffusion est donc indépendant de l'échelle de temps (et de distance) sur lequel il est mesuré.

Dans les milieux poreux tels les hydrogels, il est possible que la distance parcourue par les analytes durant la mesure RMN soit fonction Δ tel que schématisé à la figure 1.10.

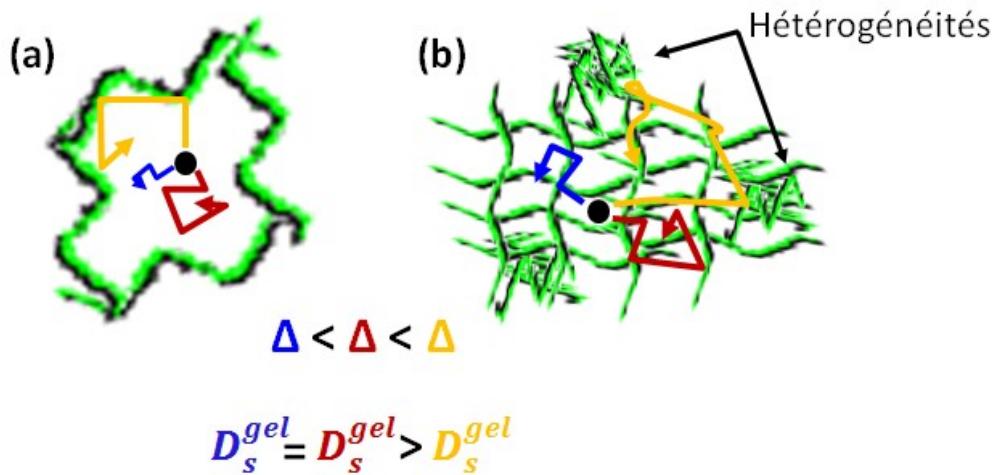


Figure 1.10 Diffusion restreinte dans les hydrogels (a) et présence d'hétérogénéités macroscopiques (b).

Dans un premier cas, considérons que $\langle z \rangle^{1/2}$ soit significativement plus petit que la dimension des pores du gel (figure 1.10a). Pour de petites valeurs de Δ , la distance que parcourt l'analyte est trop petite pour interagir avec le gel. Ainsi, le coefficient de diffusion sera le même que celui mesuré en solution. Sur de plus grandes distances, l'analyte entre en contact avec les chaînes polymères du gel qui agissent comme des barrières hermétiques sur son parcours. On dit alors que la diffusion est restreinte. Au-delà de ce point, $\langle z \rangle^{1/2}$ est fonction de Δ et le coefficient de diffusion mesuré décroît, car la présence de ces obstacles a pour effet de réduire le déplacement net parcouru par l'analyte durant la mesure RMN.⁶⁵ Dans un deuxième cas, considérons que le $\langle z^2 \rangle^{1/2}$ aux petites valeurs de Δ est déjà plus grand que la taille des pores du gel (figure 1.10b). Dans une telle situation, le coefficient de diffusion mesuré est représentatif de la moyenne des divers environnements sondés durant la mesure RMN. Néanmoins, une diminution de D_s^{gel} en fonction de Δ (donc de la distance parcourue) est possible s'il existe des hétérogénéités macroscopiques.⁶⁶

1.7.7 L'imagerie RMN 1D

L'imagerie RMN en une dimension (1D) consiste à effectuer une projection de la densité de spins dans un échantillon selon un axe donné. Les expériences de diffusion mutuelle dans les gels présentées aux chapitres 3 et 5 sont réalisées à l'aide de la séquence d'imagerie spin écho 1D illustrée ci-dessous.

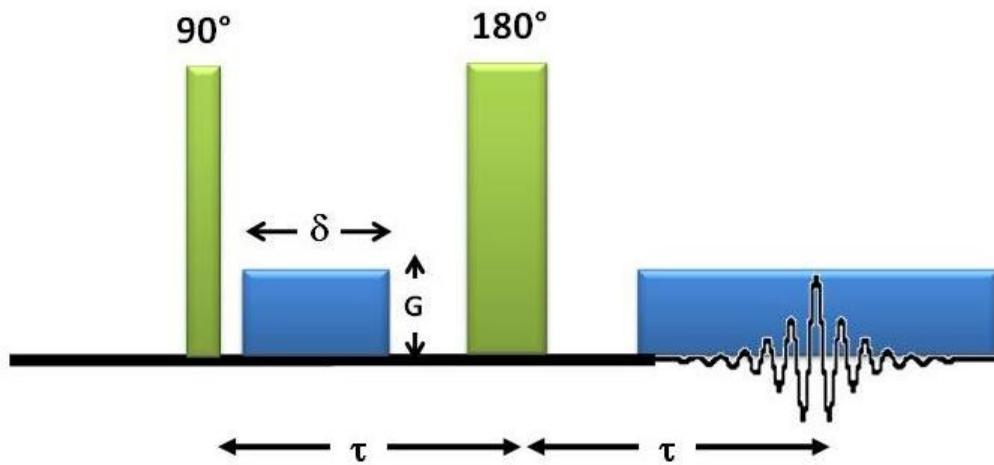


Figure 1.11 Séquence RMN de l'imagerie spin écho 1D.

Dans cette séquence, la combinaison d'une impulsion de 90° suivie d'une impulsion de 180° mène à la formation d'un écho dont l'amplitude maximale survient après le temps τ . L'application d'un faible gradient linéaire de champ magnétique **pendant** l'acquisition provoque une dépendance entre la fréquence de résonance des spins et leur position le long de l'axe du gradient (z) tel qu'exprimé par l'équation 1.9. Cette technique est appelée «encodage par la fréquence». La transformée de Fourier de l'écho correspond donc à un spectre dont l'intensité à chaque fréquence de résonance ($S(z)$) est proportionnelle à la densité de spins ($\rho(z)$) tel qu'exprimé par l'équation suivante⁶⁷

Équation 1.17

$$S(z) = [\rho(z)(1 - \exp(-t_r/T_1))](\exp(-\tau/T_2))$$

où t_r est le temps de répétition entre deux mesures. Bien entendu, chaque expérience est réalisée en utilisant une valeur de t_r suffisamment longue, supérieure ou égale à 5 fois le temps de relaxation longitudinal (T_1) de l'analyte préalablement mesuré dans le gel. D'autre part, le paramètre τ de la séquence d'imagerie doit être maintenu le plus court

possible afin de minimiser l'atténuation du signal causée par la relaxation transversale de la magnétisation (T_2). Dans nos systèmes, le temps d'écho est significativement plus court (5 ms) que le temps de relaxation T_2 de chaque analyte, préalablement mesuré dans le gel. Dans ces conditions, l'intensité du signal RMN sur les images 1D peut être considérée comme directement proportionnelle à la densité de spins, donc à la concentration en analyte à chaque position.

Les coefficients de diffusion mutuelle mesurés dans les hydrogels sont mesurés à partir d'expériences de libération dans un milieu exempt d'analyte. La quantité d'analyte présent dans le gel évolue en fonction du temps. La figure 1.12 illustre des profils de concentration typiques, enregistrés à différents temps d'une expérience de diffusion mutuelle dans un hydrogel.

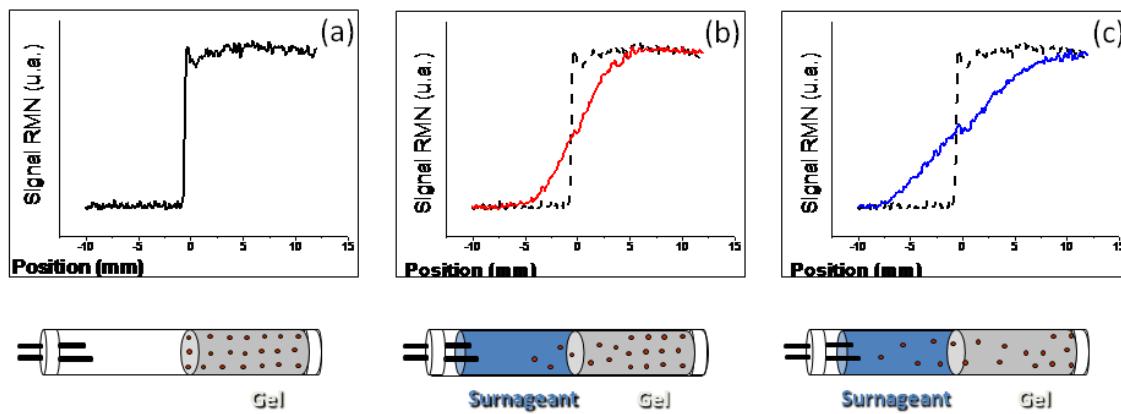


Figure 1.12 Imagerie RMN ^{31}P 1D d'un hydrogel chargé en analyte avant une expérience de diffusion mutuelle (a). Profils de la concentration en analyte 2 h (b) et 8 h (c) après l'ajout du surnageant. Le profil initial est reproduit pour fins de référence.

La simulation des profils de la concentration en analyte dans le gel (C_{gel}) en fonction de la position (z) à différents temps (t) est effectuée avec le modèle de diffusion dérivé pour deux milieux semi-infinis (gel et solution) ayant des coefficients de diffusion différents.¹⁵

Équation 1.18

$$\frac{C_{gel}}{C_0} = \left(\frac{1}{1 + k \left(\frac{D_m^{sln}}{D_m^{gel}} \right)^{1/2}} \right) \left[1 + \left(k \left(\frac{D_m^{sln}}{D_m^{gel}} \right)^{1/2} \right) \operatorname{erf} \left(\frac{z}{2(D_m^{gel} t)^{1/2}} \right) \right]$$

où

$$k = \frac{(C_0/C_{int}) - 1}{\left(D_m^{sln} / D_m^{gel} \right)^{1/2}}$$

C_{int} et C_0 représentent la concentration à l'interface gel/surnageant et la concentration initiale dans le gel respectivement.

Les sondes d'imageries RMN sont typiquement équipées de bobines ayant la capacité de produire des gradients de champ magnétique linéaires selon trois axes orthogonaux. Tel que vu à la section précédente, ces gradients peuvent également servir à mesurer les coefficients d'autodiffusion. C'est pourquoi la combinaison unique de la spectroscopie RMN à gradients pulsés et de l'imagerie RMN permet l'étude des phénomènes d'autodiffusion et de diffusion mutuelle sur un même système dans des conditions expérimentales très similaires. Le montage expérimental utilisé lors de ces expériences est représenté à la figure 1.13.

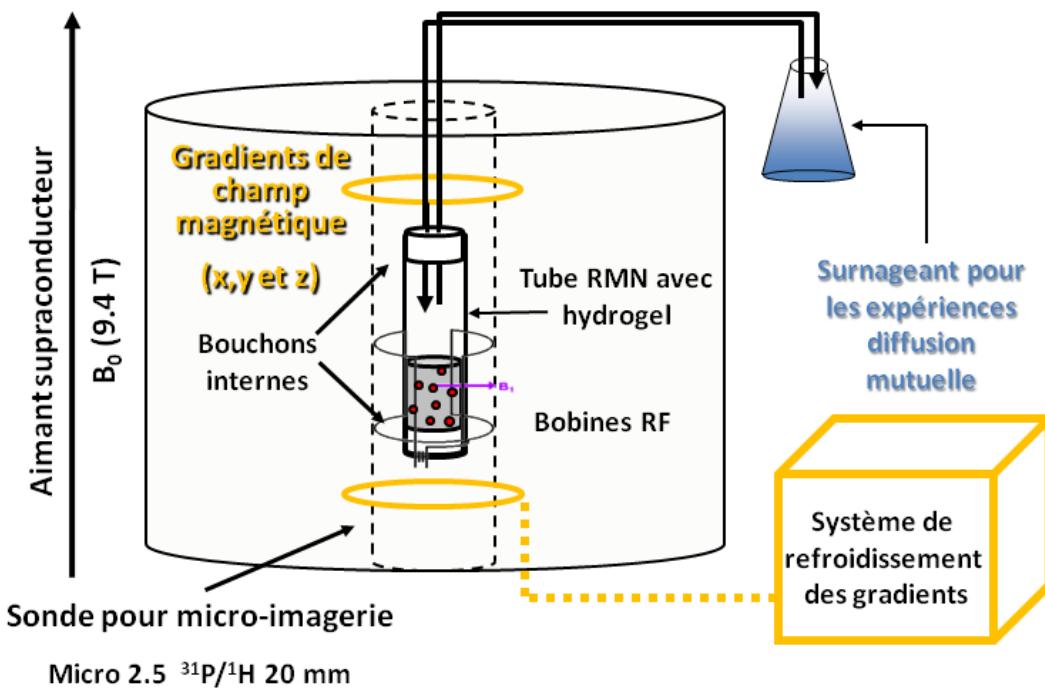


Figure 1.13 Montage RMN pour l'étude combinée de l'autodiffusion et de la diffusion mutuelle sur un même système hydrogel. Suite aux expériences d'autodiffusion, il est possible de créer un gradient de concentration en introduisant un surnageant à l'échantillon situé à l'intérieur de l'aimant RMN via des tubes connectés à un réservoir externe tempéré.

1.7.7.1 Limitations de la méthode

L'imagerie RMN 1D possède certaines limitations quant à l'étude de la diffusion mutuelle dans les hydrogels. Bien que la majorité des analytes possède au moins un noyau actif en RMN, il est possible que certains facteurs nuisent à l'acquisition voire la rendre impossible. L'utilisation de techniques d'imageries basées sur des noyaux comme le ^{31}P , ^{23}Na et ^{19}F simplifie généralement la situation puisque les contributions au signal RMN proviennent souvent exclusivement des diffusants.^{32,68,69} Des contributions significatives au signal RMN ^1H peuvent provenir de l'hydrogel ainsi que de l'eau non-deutérée résiduelle (HOD). Les hydrogels étant peu mobiles, ils possèdent un temps de relaxation T_2 généralement très court. Dans le cas d'une interférence avec le signal d'intérêt, il est possible d'éliminer le signal provenant du gel via diverses

stratégies, notamment par l'augmentation du temps d'écho dans la séquence d'imagerie.⁵⁷ Pour ce qui est des analytes, si leurs résonances se trouvent trop près de celle de l'eau, il n'est généralement pas possible d'effectuer d'imagerie RMN de façon selective sur ces dernières. Dans la situation où les pics des différents composants sont suffisamment résolus, l'utilisation d'impulsions sélectives permet généralement de contourner ce problème. Néanmoins, il est possible qu'une telle stratégie échoue en raison du temps de relaxation trop court de l'analyte par rapport au temps nécessaire à une bonne sélection de fréquence.⁷⁰ Afin d'obtenir un signal RMN raisonnable, il faut utiliser une quantité menant à un rapport signal sur bruit appréciable. Il n'est parfois pas possible ou souhaitable de travailler dans un régime de concentration élevée en analytes (matériaux dispendieux ou de solubilité limitée) sans compter que les interactions intermoléculaires entre diffusants peuvent devenir non-négligeables au-delà d'une certaine concentration.⁷¹ Ce phénomène pouvant compliquer les analyses, toutes nos études ont été réalisées dans un régime dilué où le coefficient de diffusion est indépendant de la concentration.

Dans le cadre des travaux de cette thèse, l'étude de la diffusion mutuelle de macromolécules dans les hydrogels n'a pu être réalisée par la technique d'imagerie RMN 1D en raison de multiples limites de nature expérimentale. Les résonances des analytes sont très près de celle de HOD, sont superposées aux signaux provenant de l'hydrogel et possèdent des temps de relaxation T_2 très courts. Il n'a donc pas été possible d'effectuer d'imagerie selective avec un rapport signal sur bruit appréciable dans des délais de temps raisonnable par rapport au phénomène de diffusion observé. Par conséquent, une technique plus rudimentaire, la méthode source/drain, fut utilisée pour mesurer la diffusion mutuelle dans les hydrogels chargés en macromolécules.

1.7.8 La méthode source/drain

La méthode source/drain consiste à placer un hydrogel chargé en analytes dans un grand volume de solution sous agitation constante. La libération doit avoir lieu dans un réservoir contenant un grand volume de liquide afin que la concentration de l'analyte en solution puisse être considérée comme négligeable par rapport à celle initialement présente dans le gel. L'agitation constante a pour but de drainer toute accumulation de diffusant à l'interface gel/solution afin de pouvoir considérer la concentration à

l'interface comme nulle en tous temps. La quantification peut s'effectuer en prélevant des aliquots à intervalles fixes ou en temps réel par le biais d'un montage expérimental plus sophistiqué. La simulation du profil de libération, tracé à partir de la quantité de diffusant libérée (M_t) en fonction du temps (t), permet de déterminer le coefficient de diffusion mutuelle dans le gel. Dans le cas présent, le modèle développé par Fu et al pour la diffusion à partir d'un disque de gel de rayon (a) et d'épaisseur (l) données fut utilisé.⁷²

Équation 1.19

$$\frac{M_t}{M_\infty} = 1 - \sum_{n=1}^{10} \frac{4}{a^2 \alpha_n} \exp(-D_m^{gel} \alpha_n^2 t) \times \sum_{m=0}^{10} \frac{8}{l^2 \beta_m^2} \exp(-D_m^{gel} \beta_m^2 t)$$

où

$$\beta = \frac{(2m+1)\pi}{l}$$

M_∞ est la quantité libérée après un temps infini et α_n sont les racines positives d'une fonction de Bessel d'ordre 0 ($J_0(a\alpha_n) = 0$). Une simulation de l'équation 1.19, représentative d'une expérience source/drain typique, est illustrée à la figure suivante.

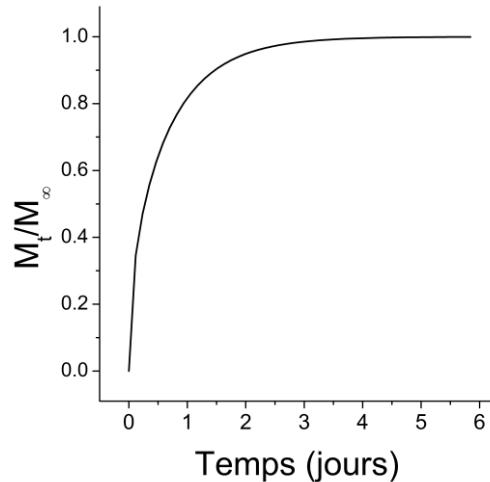


Figure 1.14 Simulation du profil de libération d'un analyte à partir d'un disque de 4 mm de rayon et 2 mm d'épaisseur par la méthode source/drain.
 $D_m^{gel} = 5 \times 10^{-12} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$.

La technique source/drain fut utilisée pour mesurer la diffusion mutuelle dans les hydrogels chargés en dextran 70 kDa marqués à la rhodamine B (DXRB70k). Le dextran est un polysaccharide composé d'unités répétitives α -D-(1→6) glucose. La chaîne polymère du dextran est majoritairement linéaire, mais des ramifications α -(1→4) sont également présentes.

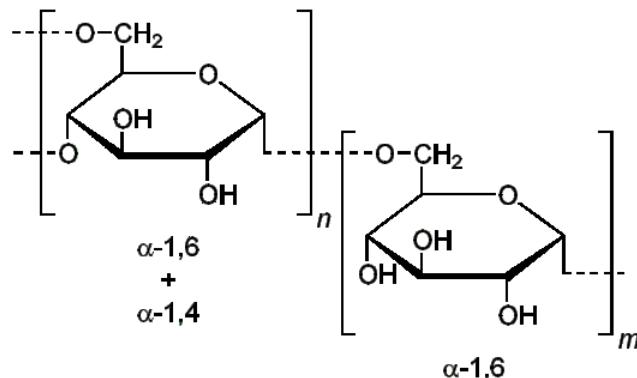


Figure 1.15 Structure chimique du dextran.

Le marquage du dextran à la rhodamine B, un fluorophore commun, rend sa quantification beaucoup plus facile. La figure 1.16 montre les spectres d'excitation et d'émission du DXRB70k en solution.

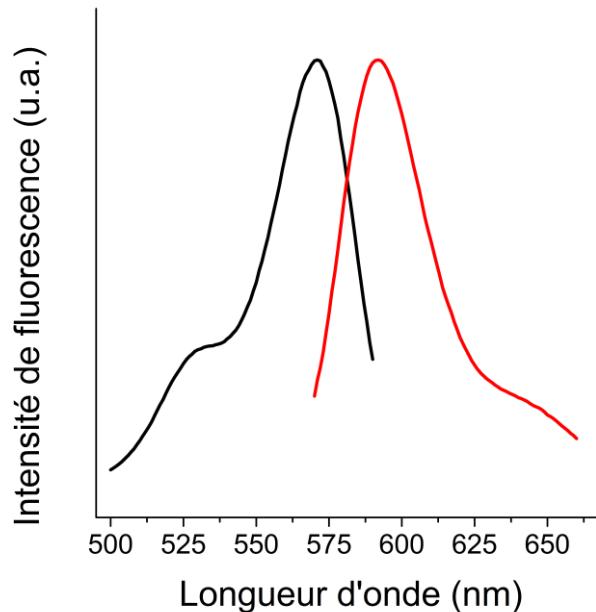


Figure 1.16 Spectre d'excitation ($\lambda_{em}=592$ nm, noir) et d'émission ($\lambda_{ex}=551$ nm, rouge) du DXRB70k en solution aqueuse à 25 °C.

1.8 Description des travaux effectués

Dans cette thèse, la formation des hydrogels de curdlan thermo-réversibles et thermo-irréversibles ainsi que leur architecture ont été caractérisées par la combinaison de diverses techniques de microscopie. L'étude de l'autodiffusion et de la diffusion mutuelle de petites molécules et de macromolécules, comprenant le phosphate de potassium (PO_4),^{*} le trimetaphosphate de sodium (STMP),^{*} l'alendronate,^{*} le D-glucose-6-phosphate de sodium (G6P),^{*} le polyphosphate de sodium (PolyPO₄),^{*} polyéthylène glycol 2000 g/mol (PEG) et le dextran 70 000 g/mol marqué à la rhodamine B (DXRB70k) a permis d'acquérir une meilleure connaissance quant à l'influence de la taille des diffusants ainsi celle de l'architecture microscopique des gels de curdlan sur la relation entre ces deux mécanismes de diffusion.

Au chapitre 2, la caractérisation *in situ* de la formation des différents hydrogels de curdlan par spectroscopie FT-IR (ATR) à température variable est décrite. L'identification de composantes spectroscopiques caractéristiques à chacune des conformations des chaînes polysaccharides du curdlan a permis d'optimiser les conditions expérimentales afin de préparer les différents gels de façon reproductible.

Au chapitre 3, l'étude de la relation entre l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle de petites molécules dans les gels de curdlan thermo-irréversibles a été réalisée grâce à la combinaison unique de la spectroscopie RMN ^{31}P à gradients pulsés et l'imagerie RMN ^{31}P 1D. Les études réalisées entre 15 et 37 °C ont permis de déterminer l'énergie d'activation associée à chaque phénomène. Les similitudes observées entre les deux mécanismes de diffusion sont expliquées en termes de la structure des hydrogels, caractérisée par microscopie eSEM.

Au chapitre 4, des expériences de diffusion réalisées sur des hydrogels de curdlan thermoréversibles et thermo-irréversibles, préparés à partir d'une même concentration en polysaccharide, ont permis d'étudier l'influence de l'architecture du gel sur ses propriétés de transport. Les hydrogels, préalablement caractérisés par imagerie FT-IR (FPA), eSEM et par microscopie AFM adoptent des architectures différentes tant aux niveaux microscopique que nanoscopique. Les coefficients d'autodiffusion

* Les analytes sont chargés dans les conditions de pH utilisées. La notation sans les charges résiduelles est utilisée à des fins de simplification.

d'analytes de différentes tailles ont été déterminés dans les deux gels ainsi que le coefficient de diffusion mutuelle du dextran. Les similitudes observées entre les propriétés de transport des deux types de gels illustrent la complexité d'établir des relations entre les structures observées et les coefficients de diffusion mesurés.

Au chapitre 5, l'imagerie RMN 1D a été appliquée à un système modèle de libération contrôlée de médicament. La comparaison entre les résultats obtenus avec des techniques de caractérisation plus conventionnelles vise à démontrer le potentiel de l'imagerie RMN 1D dans le domaine pharmaceutique, cette technique performante étant sous-utilisée dans ce domaine.

Au chapitre 6, les conclusions générales des travaux effectués dans cette thèse sont discutées.

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Chapitre 2

From Curdlan Powder to the Triple Helix Gel Structure: An Attenuated Total Reflection-Infrared Study of the Gelation Process

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2.1 Abstract

Infrared spectroscopy was used to probe the hydration and gelation of curdlan, a linear polysaccharide built from repeating units of (1→3)- β -D-glucose. The spectra have been recorded using a temperature-controlled attenuated total reflection (ATR) device. Thermal gelation of curdlan could therefore be followed *in situ* and in real time. The transformation of the low-set gel, mainly formed with single helices, into a high-set gel, associated with a triple helix structure, could be directly observed. The relative intensities and positions of characteristic absorption bands in the C-O region (1200 – 850 cm⁻¹) were found to be representative of the gel structure, as they are believed to be sensitive to the helical conformation of the polymer chains. Infrared (IR) spectroscopy is shown to be a useful tool for rapid and efficient characterization of curdlan gels.

2.2 Introduction

Among all polysaccharides coming from natural source, β -glucans are generating more and more attention due to their health benefits.¹ Curdlan is a neutral β -glucan polymer composed of repeating units of linear (1 \rightarrow 3)- β -D-glucose,² produced by *alcaligenes faecalis* var. *myxogenes*. Curdlan is one of the few food additives from bacterial sources approved by the Food and Drug Administration.³ This polysaccharide can form gels that have a high potential for food and pharmaceutical applications. For example, curdlan gels can be used as fat substitutes⁴ because they are colorless, tasteless, and non-digestible.¹ The use of curdlan gels as controlled drug delivery devices has also been investigated.⁵ Curdlan has also found recent applications in the nanoscience field where the combination of curdlan gels and single-walled carbon nanotubes was reported to provide novel supernanostructures.⁶

Curdlan chains can adopt two helical conformations: the single⁷ and the triple helix.⁸ A disordered random coil conformation may also be encountered in some gel and non-gel states.⁹ Curdlan powder is believed to be a mixture of aggregated single helices with few triple helices.¹⁰⁻¹² Curdlan coming from industrial manufacturing is purified by dissolution in strong alkali and precipitation by spray drying. The resulting powder is then washed several times with water to provide neutrality of the final product.¹³ It was previously shown that the dissolution of the polysaccharide in strong alkali can modulate its helical conformation.^{9,14} Therefore, the purification process may affect the final structure of the supplied curdlan powder and a careful characterization must be performed to ensure reproducible materials. Curdlan is insoluble in water at ambient temperature; nevertheless, contact with water leads to the formation of curdlan hydrate.¹⁵ Aqueous suspensions of curdlan may form thermo-gels by heating. Low-set gels, prepared in the temperature range from 60 to 80 °C, are referred to as thermo-reversible since a transition is still observed upon a second heating of these gels.¹⁶ High-set gels, prepared between 80 and 120 °C, are referred to as thermo-irreversible. In this later case, no gelation transition is observed upon subsequent heating.^{17,18} It is believed that the gelation at low temperature is induced by a reorganization of the hydrogen bond network and may involve hydrophobic interactions.^{2,12,19-21} The dominant conformation in these low-set gels is the single helix structure as demonstrated

by solid-state ^{13}C nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy.⁷ High-set gels are associated with the formation of the triple helix conformation. Some cross-links are believed to be formed by partially unwound triple helices.²² Despite the fact that curdlan gelation has been studied by calorimetry,^{16,21} rheology,^{17,21} and NMR spectroscopy,^{21,23} its mechanism is still not fully understood.

In this work, we report the use of temperature-controlled infrared (IR) spectroscopy to obtain insight into the hydration and gelation of curdlan as well as the thermal behavior of the resulting gels. Infrared spectroscopy coupled with attenuated total reflection (ATR) sampling is a technique providing real time and *in situ* observation of gel formation and behavior, at thermal and mechanical equilibrium. This approach was found to successfully characterize the thermo-gelation of a few polymer systems: cellulose ethers,²⁴ starch,²⁵ and poly(N-isopropylacrylamide).²⁶ In the present study, we examine the hydration and gelation of 10 % (w/v) curdlan suspensions at controlled temperature, pH, and ionic strength. Curdlan gels with different helical conformations were prepared at two different gelation temperatures. The ATR-IR spectra of both curdlan gels were recorded as a function of time and temperature. The evolution of the positions and the intensity ratios of selected bands between 1200 and 850 cm^{-1} assigned to C-O stretching modes was found particularly sensitive to the helical conformation of curdlan. Therefore we propose an ATR-IR spectroscopic approach to probe *in situ* and in real time the gelation of curdlan, a suitable and efficient tool for the development of novel applications and the quality control of these gels.

2.3 Experimental

2.3.1 Materials

Curdlan was purchased from Wako Pure Chemical Industries (Osaka, Japan) and used without further purification. All the analyses were performed using the same curdlan batch (lot# RWM9474). TRIS (Tris[hydroxymethyl]aminomethane), sodium azide (NaN_3) and EDTA (ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid) with a minimum purity of 99 %, were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St-Louis, MO). Hydrochloric acid (ACS purity grade) was purchased from Anachemia (Montreal, QC, Canada). Milli-Q water was used for all preparations.

2.3.2 Methods

The IR measurements of the powders were performed on a Digilab FTS-7000e spectrometer combined with a UMA 600 microscope and a mercury cadmium tellurium (MCT) detector. A few milligrams of the powder were placed on a microscope glass slide and pressed against a single reflection slide-on germanium ATR crystal. An accumulation of 128 scans at a rate of 1 scan/s and a nominal resolution of 2 cm^{-1} was performed to obtain a spectrum with a good signal-to-noise ratio. Ambient air was used to record the background spectra. Curdlan powder samples were freeze-dried for at least 12 hours prior to their analysis to ensure the absence of water.

The IR spectra of the suspensions and hydrogels were recorded as a function of time and temperature on a Nicolet 4700 spectrometer equipped with a MCT detector. For each spectrum, 128 scans were accumulated at a rate of 1 scan/s and a nominal resolution of 2 cm^{-1} . The time resolution for the kinetic experiments was 2 minutes. The samples were placed in a jacketed horizontal ATR (45° , ZnSe) cell coupled with an Auto Pro temperature controller (Pike Technologies, Madison, WI). High temperatures were reached with heating elements incorporated in the ATR cell, while cooling was achieved by circulating cool air through the cell lid jacket. The ATR cell was sealed to prevent evaporation. Background spectra were recorded with a clean and dry ATR crystal. The spectra as a function of temperature were obtained using a background recorded at the corresponding temperature.

Hydration A 10 % (w/v) suspension was prepared in a 10 mM TRIS/HCl buffer, pH 7.2, containing 1 mM NaN_3 , and 100 μM EDTA. A TRIS/HCl buffer was used instead of pure water to ensure the control of pH and the ionic strength of the systems. The suspension was kept in a closed flask at $30\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ with constant stirring (magnetic stirrer) for 96 hours. One-mL aliquots of the suspension were placed on the ATR crystal, previously equilibrated at $30\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, to probe the hydration process by IR spectroscopy.

Thermal gelation A 10% (w/v) curdlan hydrate suspension was placed on the ATR crystal at $30\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$. For the temperature scans (see Figure 2.2B below), the temperature was set and the spectrum was recorded after a 5-minute incubation period. The temperature was varied from low to high. During the transition, this corresponded to a heating rate (step wise) of $\sim 1\text{ }^\circ\text{C}/7\text{ min}$. For the gel formation at a fixed temperature

(see Figure 2.3 below), the temperature was quickly raised and maintained for 60 minutes at the gelation temperature; low-set and high-set gels were prepared at 58 and 95 °C, respectively. The time was set to 0 when the sample heating started. It took 6 minutes for the temperature cell to reach 58 °C and 10 minutes to reach 95 °C. During these gelations, spectra were acquired every 2 minutes. After 60 minutes at the gelation temperature, the cell was slowly (20 minutes) cooled back to 30 °C. The resulting gels were stored at 4 °C for at least 7 days to obtain equilibrated gels (i.e., to provide sufficient time for syneresis to occur). The spectra of these equilibrated gels were also measured.

Spectrum treatments were performed using OMNIC and GRAMS software. An ATR correction was applied, assuming that the refractive index of curdlan gels was similar to that of water (1.33) while a value of 1.50 was used for the curdlan powder. Buffer subtraction was achieved using an interactive water subtraction algorithm. For each gel spectrum, the spectrum of the buffer at the same temperature was subtracted to provide a linear baseline between 1190 and 860 cm⁻¹. This linear baseline was then set horizontal and offset to 0. The band positions reported here correspond to the center of gravity of the 5 % top of the peaks.²⁷ Band narrowing using Fourier self-deconvolution was carried out before measurement of the band position at ~1110 cm⁻¹.²⁸ The second-derivative method was used to determine the position of the strongly overlapping bands at 1065, and 1000 cm⁻¹.

Differential scanning calorimetric (DSC) analysis Thermograms were recorded using a MicroCal VP-DSC. A few milligrams of the hydrated curdlan suspension was introduced in a glass capillary. It was inserted in the water-filled sample cell, and the excess water was wiped out. The reference cell was filled with pure water. The cells were sealed and a 2-atmosphere pressure was applied to prevent water vaporization from the capillary. The samples were equilibrated 10 minutes prior to the analysis. The heating rate was set to 40 °C/h. The heat capacity (Cp) of the glass capillary was found to be constant over the working temperature range. All experiments were carried out in triplicate. The average values are reported and the uncertainties correspond to the standard deviations.

2.4 Results

2.4.1 Hydration

Several bands were found between 1200 and 850 cm⁻¹ in the spectrum of curdlan (Table 2.1). The C-O stretching modes are found in this region. Despite the fact that the infrared spectrum of curdlan has been reported earlier,^{29,30} the attribution of the absorption bands to specific vibrations has not been reported yet. Nevertheless, on the basis of the literature regarding β-glucose³¹ and β-glucans,³² the weak band at ~890 cm⁻¹ can be assigned to the C₁-H deformation of a β-D-glucose residue. The absorption band at ~1160 cm⁻¹ is also tentatively attributed to the glycosidic link (C₁-O-C₃) as previously inferred for analogue polysaccharides.³³⁻³⁶

A 10 % (w/v) curdlan suspension kept at 30 °C under constant stirring led eventually to a thick white paste. Aliquots of this suspension at different stages of the hydration process have been analyzed using temperature-controlled ATR-IR spectroscopy. As seen in Figure 2.1, poorly hydrated curdlan particles yield to weak absorption bands. Initially the powder particles were stiff and their diameter, estimated to ~50 µm, was much larger than the penetration depth of the evanescent wave (ca. 1.9 µm at 1000 cm⁻¹). The intensity of the bands increased with time as the hydration proceeded. For example, the absorbance at 1080 cm⁻¹ increased from 0.002 to 0.017 during a 48-h hydration period. It is believed that the swelling of the polysaccharide particles led to a softer material that created a better contact with the ATR crystal. This phenomenon would increase the absolute amount of polysaccharide in the volume scanned by the evanescent wave and lead to increased absorbance. No evolution in the IR spectra of the suspension was detected after 48 hours of sustained agitation at 30 °C. Curdlan aqueous suspensions were found to be stable for long periods of time (months) without detectable sedimentation of the curdlan particles.

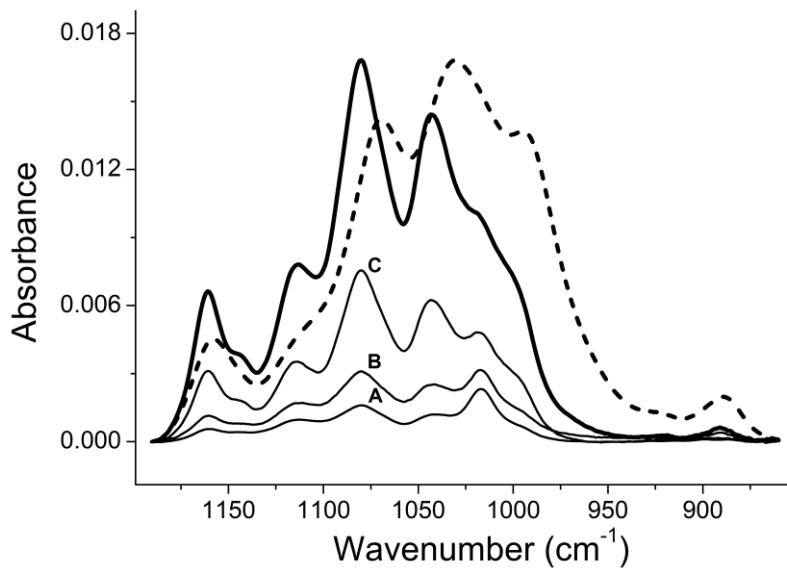


Figure 2.1 Changes in ATR-IR spectrum during hydration of the curdlan powder. Curdlan powder (dashed line). Incubation time: A) 5 minutes, B) 6 hours and c) 24 hours (thin lines) and curdlan hydrate after 96 hours (thick line). The powder spectrum was normalized so its maximum intensity corresponded to that of curdlan hydrate. Its maximum intensity corresponded to 0.7 absorbance unit.

The hydration of the polysaccharide led to significant band shifts and relative intensity changes in the 1200-850 cm^{-1} region as the C-OH bonds of the sugar groups underwent an extensive reorganization that included the hydrogen bonding with the aqueous media. Even after a short hydration time (5 minutes), the spectra of curdlan aqueous suspensions greatly differed from those of dry curdlan powder. All the spectral changes associated with the hydration of curdlan powder were fully reversible when curdlan hydrate was freeze-dried (data not shown). This reversibility is in agreement with a previous observation obtained from ^{13}C NMR spectroscopy.¹⁵

2.4.2 Thermal gelation

We have carried out differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) analyses of suspensions with a 10 % (w/v) concentration, at pH 7.2 as a control. This analysis had not been carried out in the literature in the very same conditions used in our IR investigation. The thermograms displayed a small endotherm (Figure 2.2A) generally

associated with the distortion and/or breaking of intramolecular bonds leading to gelation.^{16,17,21,37} The gelation temperature, T_{gel} , measured at the maximum intensity of the endothermic peak was 57.9 ± 0.1 °C, while the gelation enthalpy, ΔH_{gel} , was 13 ± 2 J/g of curdlan. The width at half-height of the endothermic peak was 8.0 ± 0.5 °C. Curdlan gelation in pure water has already been investigated by DSC,^{16,17,21,37} and the values reported here are in good agreement with the previous results where T_{gel} was found to be between 56 and 60 °C and ΔH_{gel} varied from 10 to 12.5 J/g curdlan.

Temperature-scanning IR spectroscopy was performed using an ATR cell filled with curdlan hydrate. The data analysis revealed that several spectral features were sensitive to the gelation. In order to probe the gelation transition, the position of the band at ~ 1110 cm⁻¹ was found to be a convenient and reliable probe. As seen in Figure 2.2B, the band shifted from 1115 to 1009 cm⁻¹ between 52 and 62 °C. The gelation temperature obtained from the maximum of the first derivative of the variation of the band position as a function of temperature was 55.9 ± 0.7 °C, and the width at half-height was 8 ± 2 °C. These values agreed very well with our DSC results.

High-set gels were prepared at a fixed temperature of 95 °C. A high degree of thermo-irreversibility (~90 %) was expected.¹⁷ The ratio of the band intensities at 1080 and 1045 cm⁻¹ (I_{1080}/I_{1045}) was found to be a good probe of the thermal evolution of curdlan gels because it varied significantly during the gelation and it provided distinct values for the low-set and high-set gels. The initial curdlan suspension was characterized by a ratio of 1.16 ± 0.01 at 30 °C. Upon heating, the intensity ratio increased significantly up to a value of 1.35 ± 0.01 during the first 6 minutes (Figure 2.3). Subsequently it decreased to reach a plateau at 1.10 ± 0.05 , after approximately 45 minutes at 95 °C.

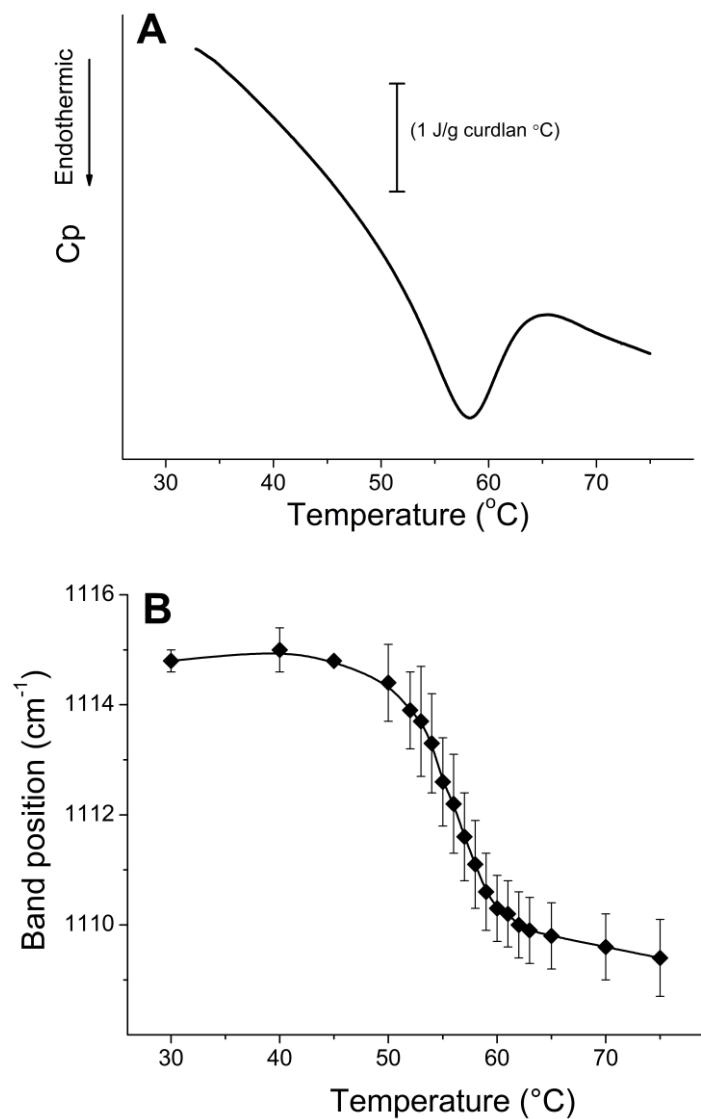


Figure 2.2 A) DSC thermogram of a 10 % (w/v) curdlan hydrate in a TRIS buffer at pH 7.2 (Raw data). B) Band position at 1110 cm^{-1} , measured by temperature-scanning IR spectroscopy during gelation.

When the gels were cooled down to 30 °C, and after syneresis, the IR spectra were similar to those observed at the gelation temperature, indicating the thermal irreversibility of the gels prepared in these conditions, as previously described.^{17,20} For example, the I_{1080}/I_{1045} ratio remained at 1.1. The resulting gels were resilient and translucent. The spectra of these high-set gels, at 30 °C, were different from those of the initial curdlan suspensions (Figure 2.4A). Significant shifts of the bands at 1110 and 1045 cm⁻¹ were observed. In addition, a shoulder at ~1065 cm⁻¹ appeared, and the resolution of the band at ~1000 cm⁻¹ was considerably improved (Figure 2.4A and Table 2.1).

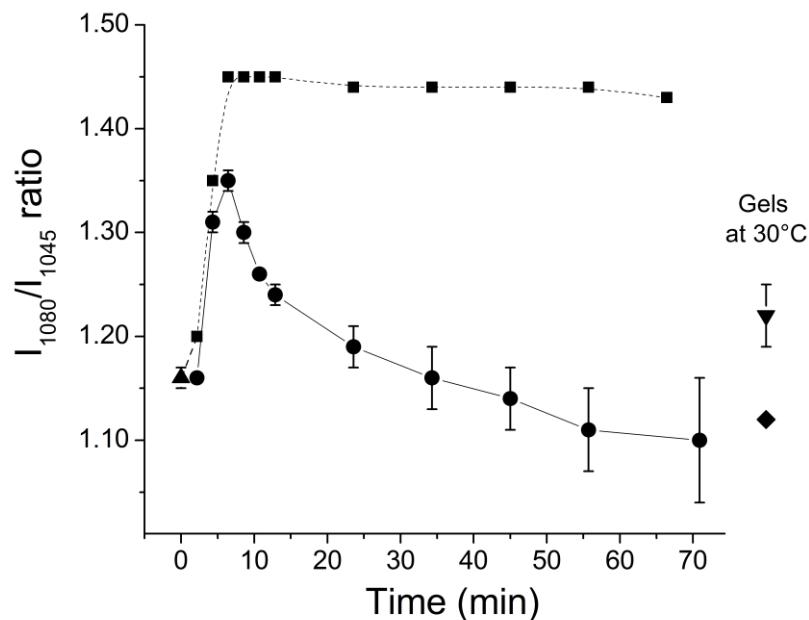


Figure 2.3 Variation of the I_{1080}/I_{1045} intensity ratio during curdlan gelation. Curdlan hydrate (\blacktriangle), low-set gel (\blacktriangledown) and high-set gel (\blacklozenge), at 30 °C. Low-set gelation at 58 °C (\blacksquare /dashed line) and high-set gelation at 95 °C (\bullet /solid line). Some data points were omitted for clarity and error bars were omitted when they were smaller than the symbols.

The real-time observation (data not shown) of high-set gels heated for a second incubation period at 95 °C did not lead to significant changes upon time, as inferred from the ATR-IR spectra. Cooled back to 30 °C, the spectral features of the gel after the 2nd heating at 95 °C were similar to those measured on the spectra after the first

incubation at 95 °C (Table 2.1). This similarity indicated that the conditions of the first incubation led to irreversible gel formation, in agreement with previous studies.^{17,18}

Low-set gels were prepared by incubating curdlan suspensions at 58 °C. Curdlan suspensions heated below that temperature yielded to gels that were extremely soft and could not practically be manipulated. These experimental conditions are similar to those used by Saitô et al. which led to the formation of a single helix conformation.⁷ The I_{1080}/I_{1045} ratio could directly probe the low-set gelation process (Figure 2.3). It increased rapidly from 1.16 ± 0.01 to 1.45 ± 0.01 , during the first 6 minutes. This period corresponded to the time normally required for the temperature controller to reach its set point (58 °C). After these first 6 minutes, no further variation of the I_{1080}/I_{1045} ratio was observed, suggesting that the low-set gelation was completed. The evolution of other sensitive bands (position and intensity ratios) led to the same conclusion.

When they were cooled down to 30 °C, and equilibrated for syneresis, the resulting samples were soft white gels. Their I_{1080}/I_{1045} ratio greatly differed from that measured at 58 °C, the gelation temperature, a behavior that is in contrast to that of high-set gels. This observation reflects the thermoreversibility of low-set gels.¹⁶ The spectral profiles of the low-set gels, between 1200 and 850 cm⁻¹, were, at 30 °C, similar to those recorded from curdlan aqueous suspensions (Figure 2.4B). This observation is consistent with a large portion of single helix in both curdlan hydrate and low-set gels, as indicated by NMR spectroscopy.⁷

Because of their heat sensitive character,¹⁶ reheating the low-set gels at a temperature higher than their gelation temperature is expected to lead to additional conformational changes. Fully equilibrated low-set gels were reheated at 95 °C for 60 minutes. After the second heating, the I_{1080}/I_{1045} ratio was measured at 30 °C. Its value had decreased to 1.11 ± 0.03 , a change indicative of the transformation of the low-set gel into a high-set gel. Once cooled back to 30 °C, resilient and translucent gels were obtained and their spectra were very similar to those obtained from a direct thermal gelation at 95 °C (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 ATR-IR Spectral Features of Different States of Curdlan, at 30 °C

		Band positions (cm ⁻¹)			Intensities ratios	
		1110	1065	1045	I ₁₀₈₀ /I ₁₀₄₅	I ₁₁₆₀ /I ₁₁₁₀
Dry powder	1114.1 ±0.1*	1072.5±0.1†	1032.6 ±0.1†	NO	0.95 ±0.01	
	1114.8 ±0.1	NO	1042.5 ±0.1	1.16 ±0.01	0.85 ±0.03	
Low-set gel	Equilibrated gel	1111.3 ±0.1	NO	1043.8 ±0.1	1.22 ±0.03	0.73 ±0.04
	Equilibrated gel after second heating, at 95 °C	1109.7 ±0.2	1064.8 ±0.2*	1046.5 ±0.2	1.11 ±0.03	0.59 ±0.03
High-set gel	Equilibrated gel	1109.8 ±0.1	1064.5 ±0.2*	1046.8 ±0.2	1.12 ±0.01	0.59 ±0.01
	Equilibrated gel after second heating, at 95 °C	1109.6 ±0.1	1064.6 ±0.4*	1047.0 ±0.1	1.06 ±0.04	0.60 ±0.03

* Value obtained from the 2nd derivative.

† The absorption band position differed greatly from those measured in the presence of water. Its assignment may be different.

NO: Not observed

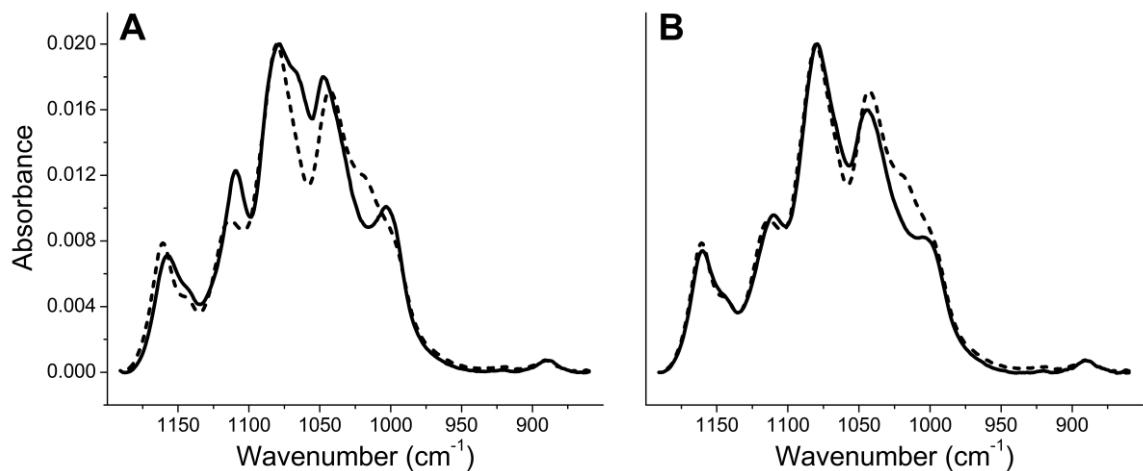


Figure 2.4 ATR-IR spectra of curdlan gels prepared *in situ* in the temperature-controlled ATR cell. A) High-set gel at 30 °C. B) Low-set gel at 30 °C. Curdlan hydrate spectrum (dashes) was reproduced for comparison purposes. The spectra are normalized, using their most intense band in this region.

2.5 Discussion

Attenuated total reflection-infrared spectroscopy is a technique capable of *in situ* and real time measurements of the gelation process of curdlan. The great sensitivity and stability of infrared spectroscopy made possible the observation of changes in the vibrational spectra of curdlan in different states. A strict control of the conditions during the hydration and gelation was absolutely required in order to obtain desired and reproducible gels. The ATR-IR spectra were used to define the incubation time providing fully hydrated curdlan suspensions at 30 °C. The determination of the incubation time is critical because weak gels are obtained from poorly hydrated curdlan. Thermal gelation at different temperatures led to the formation of curdlan gels having different conformations that could be clearly distinguished from their IR spectra. On this basis, some bands are proposed to be sensitive to curdlan helical conformation. In our experimental conditions, an I_{1080}/I_{1045} ratio of 1.22 ± 0.03 was found to be characteristic of low-set gels (single helix) while a value of 1.12 ± 0.01 was obtained for high-set gels (triple helix). The gelation transition temperature determined from the variation of the position of the band at $\sim 1110\text{ cm}^{-1}$ agreed with the DSC results (this study and references 16, 17, 21, and 37), suggesting that the value obtained in the

controlled pH and low ionic strength conditions used here is very similar to that obtained in pure water. The band at $\sim 1065\text{ cm}^{-1}$ was also found to be a unique feature of the high-set gel prepared from direct gelation or reheating to 95 °C. Other sensitive bands were also identified. As seen in Table 2.1, the I_{1160}/I_{1110} ratio, and the position of the band at $\sim 1045\text{ cm}^{-1}$ were empirically found to be sensitive to curdlan helical conformation and could also be used to probe curdlan structures.

The ATR-IR study also provides insights into the gelation mechanism. The spectra recorded during the first minutes of the gelation process demonstrated that the structure of low-set gels is an intermediate in the formation of the triple helix conformation since both processes initially follow the same pathway, as probed by the I_{1080}/I_{1045} ratios. These findings are consistent with previous atomic force microscopy (AFM) and X-ray diffraction studies suggesting that the formation of the triple helix conformation is a two-step process in which aggregated single helices must first dissociate before re-associating into triple helices.^{12,38}

Temperature controlled ATR-IR spectroscopy is shown to be a powerful tool for the investigation of curdlan gel conformation. This technique can probe efficiently every step of the gel formation, including the hydration of the powder and the thermal behaviour. This approach is very useful to identify the conditions leading to reproducible gels and provides also a quality control test during processes involving curdlan gels. It also offers an attractive method to investigate the impact of solutes trapped in the curdlan matrices on the gel formation, an aspect that is particularly helpful in the development of these materials for controlled drug release.^{5,37} Despite the fact that the present paper focuses on curdlan, and that analogous applications are sparse in the literature,²⁴⁻²⁶ it is very likely that this ATR-IR spectroscopy approach can be widely and successfully applied to characterize other polysaccharide hydrogels.

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Chapitre 3

Self-Diffusion and Mutual Diffusion of Small Molecules in High-Set Curdlan Hydrogels Studied by ^{31}P NMR

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3.1 Abstract

Self-diffusion and mutual diffusion are two different transport mechanisms experimentally characterized on different length and time scales. Nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy is a highly suitable technique to characterize these two phenomena as both mechanisms can be studied on the same system and in the same experimental conditions. Pulsed field gradient (PFG) NMR was used to measure the self-diffusion whereas ^{31}P NMR profiling provided an approach to determine the mutual diffusion coefficients. We have characterized the diffusion of phosphate, trimetaphosphate, alendronate and D-glucose-6-phosphate in hydrogels prepared with 10% (w/v) curdlan, a bacterial polysaccharide built of linear ($1\rightarrow3$)- β -D-glucose repeating units. These solutes are small compared to the average pore size of the hydrogel, as inferred from environmental scanning electron microscopy (eSEM). Our results show that the self- and mutual-diffusion coefficients of small molecules in curdlan hydrogels are similar and are reduced by 30% compared to those measured in aqueous solutions. These observations are validated for the complete series of investigated analytes. It is therefore concluded that, for this system, the analyte diffusion in the gel is essentially reduced because of interactions at the molecular level and that the open structure of this gel has a very limited influence at the mesoscopic length scale. A literature survey indicates that these conditions prevail for the large majority of the systems that have been investigated up to now.

3.2 Introduction

It is fundamental to characterize and to understand transport mechanisms in biomaterials in order to rationally design new applications of them. For example, as biomaterials, polysaccharide hydrogels are gaining more and more interest since they are renewable, biocompatible, and biodegradable and form easily tuneable systems.^{1,2} Diffusion studies in hydrogels lead to valuable information, especially in the field of controlled drug release, since diffusion is usually considered as one of the main involved phenomena.^{3,4} Diffusion coefficients can be used to quantify and to predict the release rates of entrapped drugs from given matrices; this information is essential to optimize the delivery of active agents in the therapeutic window. In addition, the diffusion studies can provide structural information about the hydrogel network. Many diffusion models have developed relationships between the hydrogel structure and the transport properties.⁵⁻⁷

There are mainly two types of diffusion taking place in hydrogels: self-diffusion and mutual diffusion. On one hand, self-diffusion occurs in the absence of any concentration (i.e., chemical potential) gradient.⁸ The transport of molecules is essentially caused by intermolecular collisions (Brownian motions) and is described by a self-diffusion coefficient (D_s). Self-diffusion coefficients in hydrogels (D_s^{gel}) can be measured using pulsed-field gradient (PFG) nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy (NMR),⁹ fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS)¹⁰ and fluorescence recovery after photobleaching (FRAP).¹¹ These measurements are typically performed on a millisecond to second time scale; during the measurement periods, the molecules travel distances that can reach a few micrometers. Self-diffusion in hydrogels has been found to be sensitive to the several parameters including the solute size,¹² its shape,¹³ the polymer concentration, and the structure of the hydrogels at the mesoscopic lengths (described by parameters such as porosity, tortuosity, the fibre radius, etc.).⁵⁻⁷ On the other hand, mutual diffusion occurs in the presence of a concentration gradient.⁸ Mutual diffusion phenomena can often be described by Fick's laws.¹⁴ In binary systems, where two diffusing molecules are initially unmixed, the overall transport rate of both compounds can be described by a single mutual diffusion coefficient (D_m). Mutual-diffusion coefficients of solutes in hydrogels (D_m^{gel}) can be calculated from

concentration profiles in the material, following a release or a penetration experiment. The local analyte concentration in the material can be determined using several techniques, including non-invasive methods such as NMR imaging,¹⁵ and fluorescence microscopy.¹⁶ Alternatively, D_m^{gel} can be determined from the quantity of diffusing molecules released from a gel sample in which they were initially dispersed (release experiments), or crossing a gel slab (diaphragm cell experiments).¹⁷ D_m^{gel} measurements are typically performed on time scales ranging from minutes to hours and even days. During these periods, the diffusing molecules travel average distances that can reach several millimeters. The mutual diffusion in gels was shown to be affected by the various parameters including the solute size¹⁸ and the polysaccharide and/or diffusing species charge,¹⁹ as well as by the gel concentration and its effective pore size.²⁰ The mesoscopic architecture of the gel network may also influence the mutual diffusion since the molecules probe their environment on a longer length scale.

Self-diffusion and mutual diffusion are two distinct transport mechanisms that are experimentally characterized on different time and length scales. The relationship between both analyte transport mechanisms in hydrogel is still unclear. A similar question regarding this relationship has already been addressed for polymer-solvent systems. For these systems, the self-diffusion of the solvent is generally much faster than the polymer self-diffusion. Over the years, models have been developed to relate the solvent and polymer self-diffusion coefficients to their mutual-diffusion coefficient.²¹⁻²³ In the case of hydrogels, the analyte D_s are measured in homogeneously loaded hydrogels while D_m are determined from concentration gradients in gels, pictured as insoluble and flexible polymer networks. The meaning of the parameters used in this context differs to some extent from the strictly speaking self- and mutual diffusion definitions, but is widely used because the two transport mechanisms are distinguished by the absence or the presence of an analyte concentration gradient. The three dimensional network created by the cross-linked polymer chains brings the problem to another level of complexity in hydrogels. Similar to a polymer solution, the diffusion of small analytes in hydrogels may be hindered because of the presence of impenetrable barriers created by the polymer chains, and by the hydrodynamic drag associated with slow molecular motions of the water molecules near the polymer-water interface. The

impact of the gel architecture may be dependent on the spatial scale of the measurements because gels display typically different levels of organization. Moreover, mutual diffusion associated with the release or uptake involves the crossing of the solution/hydrogel interface, a phenomenon not experienced by the analyte during the self-diffusion measurements. Therefore, it is critical to gain a detailed understanding of the relationship between D_s^{gel} and D_m^{gel} . For example, the quantitative description of a drug release from a hydrogel matrix (mainly associated with mutual diffusion) is often inferred from D_s^{gel} , which is generally more rapid to measure. This extrapolation is carried out on the basis of the equivalence of D_s^{gel} and D_m^{gel} . Despite the fundamental aspect of this premise, the contributions assessing its validity are rather sparse in the literature.^{16,24-27} Moreover, these few studies do not reach any consensus. For some systems,^{16,24-27} it was found that D_s^{gel} and D_m^{gel} were equivalent, whereas for others,^{26,27} D_s^{gel} were estimated to be significantly smaller than D_m^{gel} .

In this work, we present a comparison of the self-diffusion and mutual diffusion of a series of small analytes in curdlan hydrogels in order to provide additional details about the relationship between the 2 phenomena. Curdlan, built of linear repeating (1→3)- β -D-glucose units, was selected because it is a neutral polysaccharide,²⁸ excluding strong electrostatic interactions with the diffusing analytes. It is insoluble in water and curdlan aqueous suspensions form high-set gels when heated between 80 and 130 °C.^{29,30} In these hydrogels, the polysaccharide chains adopt a triple helix conformation.³¹ For practical interest, curdlan is an FDA approved food additive³² and its potential as a controlled drug release device has already been reported in the literature.³³ We have examined the diffusion properties of phosphate (PO_4), sodium trimetaphosphate (STMP), alendronate, and glucose-6-phosphate (G6P), using ^{31}P NMR. The self-diffusion was characterized using PFG NMR experiments while mutual diffusion coefficients were measured using ^{31}P NMR profiling. The ^{31}P NMR simplified the experimental conditions since the only contribution to the NMR signal came from the diffusing molecules. In addition, this approach allowed us to perform the measurements of both diffusion coefficients on the very same samples, in the very same conditions,²⁶ a distinct advantage when comparing the resulting parameters. The analytes, basically selected because of the presence of ^{31}P , provide a considerable

diversity of functional groups. It should be noted that alendronate is a drug belonging to the bisphosphonate family that acts as an inhibitor of bone resorption, in the cases of osteoporosis.³⁴ Environmental scanning electron microscopy (eSEM) was also carried out on the gels, allowing the visualization of the hydrogel in conditions where it is swollen and fully hydrated. The diffusion results can then be discussed in term of the gel architecture.

3.3 Experimental

3.3.1 Materials

Curdlan was purchased from Wako Pure Chemical Industries (Osaka, Japan) and used without further purification. TRIS (tris[hydroxymethyl]aminomethane), sodium azide, sodium chloride, potassium dihydrogen phosphate, potassium chloride, ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA), D-glucose and sodium trimetaphosphate (STMP), with a minimum purity of 99 %, and sodium D-glucose-6-phosphate (G6P), with a purity of 98.0%, were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St-Louis, MO). Hydrochloric acid (ACS purity grade) was purchased from Anachemia (Montréal, QC, Canada). Sodium hydroxide (ACS purity grade) was purchased from BDH (Toronto, ON, Canada). Potassium hydroxide (ACS purity grade) was purchased from J.T. Baker (Phillipsburg, NJ). Alendronate sodium trihydrate was a generous gift from Technodrugs & Intermediates Pvt Ltd. (Andheri, Mumbai, India). Milli-Q water was used for all preparations.

3.3.2 Methods

Curdlan hydrogel A 10 % (w/v) curdlan suspension was prepared in a 10 mM TRIS/HCl buffer, pH 7.2, containing 1 mM NaN₃ and 100 µM EDTA. The suspension was kept in a closed flask at room temperature with constant agitation (magnetic stirrer) for 5 days. The fully hydrated curdlan suspension was then incubated in a sealed flask at 95 °C for 8 h. The freshly prepared gel was slowly cooled down to room temperature and kept at 4 °C for 5 days. The preparation of a 10% (w/v) high-set curdlan gel was confirmed by recording its infrared spectrum.³⁰ The gels were then incubated at least 5 days in a large volume of one of the following solutions, each of them including

different phosphorus containing molecules: PO₄ (100 mM), STMP (40 mM), alendronate (25 mM) or G6P (50 mM).[†] All solutions contained 1 mM NaN₃ and 100 μM EDTA and their pH was set to 7.2 using a Tris/HCl buffer (10 mM) except for the PO₄ solution where a phosphate buffer (KH₂PO₄/K₂HPO₄, 100 mM) was used. It was possible to reversibly wash out the analytes from the gels using a large amount of phosphate-free solution. Diffusion measurements of different analytes could then be successively performed using the same curdlan gel.

eSEM Gel samples were examined by environmental scanning electron microscopy using a Quanta 200 FEG microscope (FEI Company Hillsboro, OR), equipped with Peltier elements to control the sample temperature. First, a small piece of hydrogel was inserted into the microscope chamber and the pressure and temperature were set to 4.6 Torr and 1 °C respectively, to provide a relative humidity of 100%.³⁵ In order to emphasize the gel microstructure, the pressure was decreased to 2.4 Torr, leading to a relative humidity of 50%. Images were recorded with an accelerating voltage of 20 kV and working distances of 8–10 mm, using a gaseous secondary electron detector. In order to avoid sample damage by the electron beam, the acquisitions were kept as short as possible (typically 10 s). Second, a freeze-dried sample was prepared by quickly freezing a piece of fully hydrated gel in liquid nitrogen and then drying it under vacuum. A small piece of the freeze-dried sample was inserted into the microscope chamber and the temperature was set to 0 °C, under high vacuum conditions (3×10^{-6} Torr). Images were subsequently recorded with an accelerating voltage of 20 kV and a working distance of 8 mm, using an Everhart-Thornley secondary electron detector.

PFG NMR Each hydrogel was shaped into a cylinder (18 mm of diameter and 20 mm high) using a homemade cutter, and was then inserted into a 20 mm NMR tube (inside diameter of 18 mm and a length of 80 mm). The tube was sealed at both ends using homemade Teflon stoppers. The sample was then placed into the magnet of a Bruker AV400 NMR spectrometer operating at 161 MHz for ³¹P. The temperature (T) of the sample was set using the gradient coil cooling unit (BCU20). This temperature control strategy provided a homogeneous temperature across the whole sample which could not be reached using a flow of dry air. The sample temperature was calibrated using

[†] Although these analytes are charged species in the pH conditions used in this work, the current notation will be used for simplification purposes.

ethylene glycol.³⁶ The self-diffusion measurements were carried out using a Bruker microimaging probe Micro 2.5 (³¹P/¹H 20 mm), equipped with three perpendicular gradient coils capable of delivering magnetic field gradients up to 100 G/cm. The gradient strengths were calibrated from imaging an object of known dimensions immersed in a 100 mM KH₂PO₄ solution.

The self-diffusion coefficients in solution (D_s^{sln}) were measured using the stimulated-echo³⁷ (STE), and the double-stimulated-echo³⁸ (DSTE) pulse sequences. The former leads to a better signal-to-noise ratio whereas the latter compensates for putative convection. Typically, D_s^{sln} was measured using both sequences and if corresponding values were obtained, the additional measurements were carried out using the STE pulse sequence. In fact, the only conditions for which convection was found not negligible were in solution, at 37 °C; in this case, the reported D_s^{sln} were obtained strictly from DSTE measurements. In gels, D_s^{gel} were measured using the STE sequence since the convection was found negligible at all temperatures. Trapezoidal gradient pulses (δ) of 2 ms and interpulse delays (Δ) of 200 or 300 ms were used. Pre-emphasis was used to reduce the effect of eddy current during the NMR sequence and main field (B_0) compensations were used to prevent B_0 drifts[†] created by strong gradient pulses. Spoiler gradients were also used to remove any unwanted magnetization caused by inhomogeneous radio frequency (rf) pulses. The self-diffusion coefficients were obtained by fitting the variation of the echo intensity as a function of the gradient strength (G) using the following equation:

Equation 3.1³⁷

$$\ln(S/S_0) = -(G\gamma\delta)^2 D_s (\Delta - \delta/3)$$

for the STE sequence, or

Equation 3.2³⁸

$$\ln(S/S_0) = -(G\gamma\delta)^2 D_s (\Delta + 2\tau - 4\delta/3)$$

for the DSTE sequence, where S and S_0 are the integrated echo intensities with and without a field gradient, τ the gradient stabilisation time (1 ms) and γ the gyromagnetic

[†] shifts

ratio of the nucleus. Typically, 16 scans were co-added for a given gradient strength and 16 gradient magnitudes were used for each attenuation curve. Independent measurements were carried out along the x, y and z axis. The reported D_s are the average of those measured along the 3 axis and the associated uncertainties represent their standard deviations.

NMR profiling Mutual-diffusion experiments were subsequently performed on the same analyte-loaded gels used for determining D_s^{gel} . At time equal to 0, a phosphorus-free supernatant (10 mM Tris/HCl buffer, pH 7.2, containing 1 mM NaN₃, 100 μM EDTA and the correct amount of NaCl, KCl, or glucose to be in iso-osmotic conditions), preheated at the sample temperature, was introduced on top of the analyte-loaded hydrogel, via plastic tubes coming out of the magnet, to create an analyte concentration gradient. The osmolalities were measured from the freezing point depression method, using a DigiMatic Osmometer (model 3D2, from Advanced Instruments). Following the addition of the buffer on the top of the gel, ³¹P one-dimension (1D) profiles were acquired along the z axis using a spin-echo imaging sequence.³⁹ The echo time was fixed to 6 ms. T₂'s, measured for all the samples, were on the order of hundreds of milliseconds and therefore had negligible effect of the signal intensity. One dimension imaging was used to increase the NMR signal of the release profiles. A field of view of 50 mm, split into 512 data points (98 μm/pixel),[§] was recorded over a 50 kHz spectral window. The relaxation delay was set to ~5 times the longitudinal relaxation time (T₁) of the analyte in the gels. For example, at 25 °C, T₁ was 4.7, 3.8, 4.4, and 2.6 s for STMP, alendronate, G6P, and phosphate, respectively. The probe tuning, field shimming, rf pulses and offset frequency were adjusted within the first 30 minutes of each release experiment. Scans were then coadded during 2 h periods. Typically, six release profiles were recorded over a total period of 12 h.

The release experiments were designed to meet the conditions of the diffusion model derived for two semi-infinite media having different mutual diffusion coefficients¹⁴ i.e. the one in the solution (D_m^{sln}) and the one in the gel (D_m^{gel}). In our experimental setup, the gel and the supernatant had lengths (20, and 35 mm respectively)

[§] The spatial resolution of the concentration profiles is worse than the reported nominal resolution due to the limited signal-to-noise ratio of the images.

much larger than the region where the concentration gradients took place (typically 10 mm). Consequently, both could be considered as semi-infinite media. At time (t) equal 0, the concentration through the gel (C_{gel}) was uniform and denoted C_0 while the concentration in the solution was 0. The concentration gradient profile of the analyte in the gel could be described as a function of time and position (x) using eq 3.3, developed by J. Crank.¹⁴

Equation 3.3

$$\frac{C_{gel}}{C_0} = \left(\frac{1}{1 + k \left(\frac{D_m^{sln}}{D_m^{gel}} \right)^{1/2}} \right) \left[1 + \left(k \left(\frac{D_m^{sln}}{D_m^{gel}} \right)^{1/2} \right) \operatorname{erf} \left(\frac{x}{2(tD_m^{gel})^{1/2}} \right) \right]$$

where

$$k = \frac{(C_0/C_{int}) - 1}{(D_m^{sln}/D_m^{gel})^{1/2}}$$

C_{int} being the analyte concentration at the interface (i.e., at $x = 0$). In our case, the intensity of the ^{31}P -NMR signal was considered to be directly proportional to the concentration at each position, where $x > 0$ corresponded to the gel and $x < 0$, to the supernatant. Typical concentration profiles are represented in Figure 3.2. In order to eliminate background signal, each profile was offset to zero using a region outside the detection limits. Subsequently, each profile was divided by the average value of the NMR signal in the last millimeters ($9 < x < 12$ mm) of the first profile to obtain C_{gel}/C_0 . The concentration profiles in the gel (i.e., $x > 0$), obtained at a different times during a release experiment (generally five profiles), were simultaneously fitted using the nonlinear curve fitting routine of Origin (Microcal Origin, version 5) where D_m^{gel} was the single floating parameter. The mutual diffusion of the diffusing molecule in the supernatant (D_m^{sln}) was considered equal to its D_s^{sln} .⁴⁰ The time associated with each profile was considered to be the middle of its recording period. In the diffusion model involving two semi-infinite media, C_{int} should remain constant during the whole release experiment. The gel/supernatant interface was located at the point where all

concentration profiles merged. This merge of all the profiles at $x = 0$ reinforced the idea that the analyte transport was essentially associated with Fickian diffusion, and was properly described by the selected model. The average analyte concentration at the interface, calculated from all the profiles, was used in the fits. The identification of the exact location of the gel/solution interface could be influenced by the presence of noise, and probably the actual thickness of the interface. In order to account for this uncertainty, simulations were performed using different interface locations. Reasonable fits were obtained for the interface location varying over a range of 3-4 pixels, corresponding to 300 or 400 μm . The diffusion coefficient uncertainties included these variations.

3.4 Results

eSEM micrographs of fully hydrated high-set curdlan gels are shown in Figure 3.1. The gel network had a homogeneous sponge-like architecture that included many macropores (Figure 3.1A,B). Their average size was approximately 5 μm but the size distribution was relatively wide. Unfortunately, it was not possible to achieve higher resolution imaging of the fully hydrated curdlan hydrogel without damaging the sample. High-resolution images of a freeze-dried gel sample are shown in Figure 3.1C,D. The freeze-dried gel displayed a mesh-like architecture (Figure 3.1C). This structure is reminiscent of that observed for the fully hydrated hydrogels, the mesh likely corresponding to highly swollen polysaccharide-rich regions. During the freeze-drying process, the whole sample volume was reduced by ~30% and this would likely lead to the collapse of the macro-porous structure. On Figure 3.1D, it can be seen that the mesh was composed of interconnected nanofibrils with a mean diameter of 30 nm. This value is in good agreement with previous reports.^{41,42} The mean mesh size estimated from these images is about 270 ± 80 nm. Taking into account that the volume of the freeze-dried samples was reduced by ~30% relative to the hydrated gels, it could be estimated that the nanopore size of the fully hydrated gel is ~390 nm.

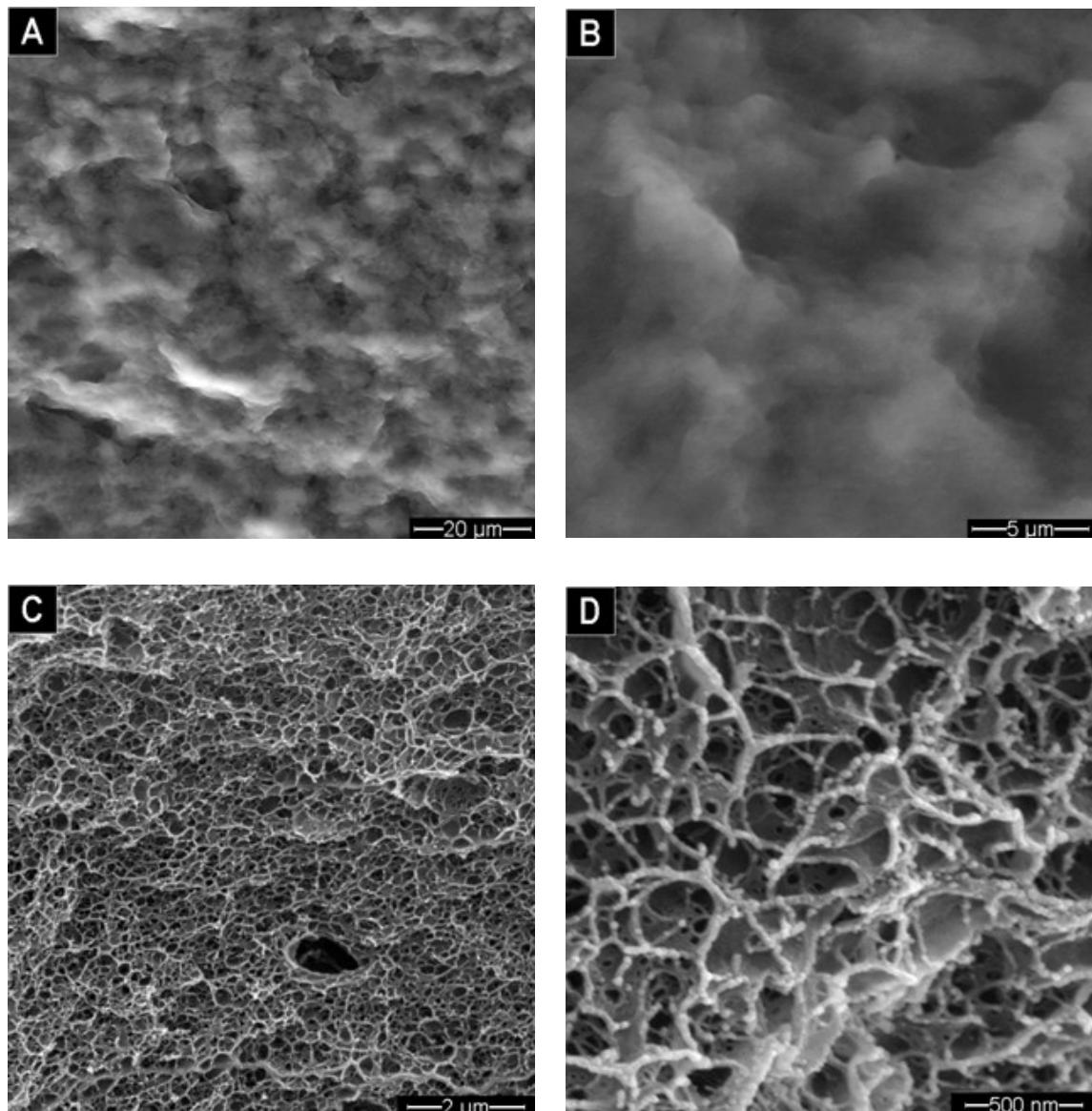


Figure 3.1 eSEM images of a fully hydrated 10% (w/v) high-set curdlan gel at a relative humidity of 50% and a magnification of (A) 2000 \times and (B) 8000 \times . Images (C) and (D) were recorded on a freeze-dried sample under high-vacuum conditions at 20 000 \times and 80 000 \times respectively.

PFG NMR was used to measure the self-diffusion coefficients of the investigated analytes in solution at different temperatures (Table 3.1). These values were found to be independent of the analyte concentration from our working concentration to that corresponding to a 10-fold dilution. Consequently, the measured D_s^{sln} were representative of the one at infinite dilution. This conclusion reinforced the validity of the estimation of D_m^{sln} by D_s^{sln} in eq 3.3.⁴⁰ The hydrodynamic radii of the analytes were determined using the Stoke-Einstein equation. For the investigated analytes, D_s^{sln} increased as a function of temperature, an expected behavior associated with the increased thermal Brownian motions. An activation energy ($E_a^{s,sln}$) could be calculated from an Arrhenius-type plot of $\ln D_m^{gel}$ as a function of $1/T$. It was estimated to 18-19 kJ/mol. To our knowledge, phosphate ions are the only species investigated in the present work for which data on their self-diffusion could be found in the literature²⁶ and the reported values of D_s^{sln} and $E_a^{s,sln}$ are in good agreement with those presented in this work.

Self-diffusion of the solutes in 10% (w/v) high-set curdlan hydrogels was also characterized (Table 3.1). Self-diffusion was found to be isotropic since D_s^{gel} measured along the x, y and z axis were identical. For a given temperature, the D_s^{gel} values were systematically reduced by a factor of ~30 % relative to D_s^{sln} . Self-diffusion experiments in curdlan gels were carried out at three different temperatures between 15 and 37 °C. Since no thermal transition has been reported for high-set curdlan gels in this temperature range,²⁹ the hydrogel structure should remain unchanged and therefore an activation energy could be extracted from the self-diffusion experiments in the gel ($E_a^{s,gel}$). It was estimated to be 20-22 kJ/mol for the various analytes. These values are typical of those obtained for small analytes in polysaccharide hydrogels.^{26,43-45} The $E_a^{s,gel}$ values are similar, within experimental errors, to those measured in solution. Such equivalence between $E_a^{s,gel}$ and $E_a^{s,sln}$ was also obtained for other hydrogel systems^{43,44} and suggests that, in both cases, similar mechanisms are involved in order to create new voids for the analytes to diffuse into.

Table 3.1 Self-Diffusion of the Investigated Solutes in Solution and in 10% (w/v)
High-Set Curdlan Gels

Solute (R_h)	Temp	D_s^{sln}	$E_a^{s,sln}$	D_s^{gel}	D_s^{gel}/D_s^{sln}	$E_a^{s,gel}$
--	(°C)	($\times 10^{-10}$ m ² /s)	kJ/mol	($\times 10^{-10}$ m ² /s)	--	kJ/mol
PO ₄ (3.3 Å)	15	5.6 ± 0.1	19 ± 1	4.0 ± 0.2 **	0.71 ± 0.04	21 ± 1
	25	7.5 ± 0.4 **		5.3 ± 0.2 **	0.72 ± 0.05	
	37	9.9 ± 0.1		7.4 ± 0.3 **	0.74 ± 0.03	
STMP (4.0 Å)	15	4.63 ± 0.02	18 ± 1	3.41 ± 0.04 **	0.74 ± 0.01	20 ± 1
	25	6.1 ± 0.1		4.58 ± 0.06 **	0.75 ± 0.02	
	37	8.0 ± 0.1		6.22 ± 0.09 **	0.78 ± 0.02	
alendronate (4.5 Å)	15	4.0 ± 0.1	19 ± 2	2.77 ± 0.05 **	0.69 ± 0.01	22 ± 1
	25	5.4 ± 0.2		3.79 ± 0.01 **	0.70 ± 0.03	
	37	7.06 ± 0.01		5.3 ± 0.1 ***	0.75 ± 0.02	
G6P (4.9 Å)	15	3.7 ± 0.2	19 ± 2	2.49 ± 0.02	0.67 ± 0.04	21 ± 2
	25	5.0 ± 0.3		3.43 ± 0.05	0.68 ± 0.04	
	37	6.46 ± 0.09		4.6 ± 0.1	0.71 ± 0.02	

Numbers in parenthesis are the hydrodynamic radii (R_h) in solution at 25 °C, determined from the Stoke-Einstein equation. The reported values were obtained from one sample or from 2 (**) or 3 (***) independent samples. Uncertainties on $E_a^{s,sln}$ and $E_a^{s,gel}$ were determined from the 95% confidence interval of the slope.

It is possible to vary the interpulse delay (Δ) of the STE sequence, providing more time for the molecules to diffuse during the D_s measurements. As this parameter becomes larger, the diffusion is measured on a longer length scale and may provide further information about the gel porous network. In the self-diffusion experiments reported in Table 3.1, the diffusing molecules traveled typical three dimensional root-mean-square distances ($\langle r^2 \rangle^{1/2}$)^{**} of ~20 μm . Additional self-diffusion experiments were carried out where Δ was increased up to T_1 of the diffusing molecules in the gel (between 1.5 and 6 s depending on the analyte). The analytes then traveled considerably longer distances (e.g., $\langle r^2 \rangle^{1/2}\dagger\dagger = 150 \mu\text{m}$ for STMP at 37.0 °C) but no effect on D_s^{gel} was observed (data not shown). In all these conditions, the sampled distances were larger than the mean pore size estimated from the eSEM images. On the basis of previous diffusion work in porous media,⁴⁶ our results suggest that the curdlan gel network is relatively homogeneous at a length scale greater than 20 μm , a conclusion in agreement with the structure displayed on the eSEM images (Figure 3.1A was recorded on a scale representative of the space explored during the PFG NMR experiments).

A typical set of concentration profiles recorded during a mutual diffusion experiment is represented in Figure 3.2. The first profile (Figure 3.2a) was recorded from the analyte-loaded gel without any supernatant. The left side, where there was no NMR signal, corresponded to ambient air. The sharp signal increase corresponded to the gel/air interface while the right side corresponded to the analyte-loaded hydrogel. The small distortion of the interface on this first profile was likely caused by the actual interface roughness and by a small amount (~200 μL) of excess buffer solution left on top of the gel to prevent drying during the self-diffusion measurement. It can be seen that the concentration in the gel was uniform since the NMR signal was constant up to 12 mm in the gel. Once the supernatant was added on top of the gel, the system was allowed to evolve freely without any agitation and the molecules diffused out from the gel in the supernatant. This mass transport was readily observable on the 1D profiles (Figure 3.2b-d) where depletion could be observed in the gel region while enrichment took place in the supernatant region. It can also be clearly seen that the concentrations at

^{**} $\langle r^2 \rangle^{1/2}$
^{\dagger\dagger} idem

the gel/supernatant interface remained practically constant with time, in agreement with the expected behavior for the selected diffusion model. A concentration discontinuity was observed at the gel/supernatant interface where the analyte signal was systematically smaller than expected in the gel. This was likely caused by the excluded volume occupied by the polysaccharide.

The concentration profiles recorded in the gel region as a function of time were simultaneously fitted using eq 3.3. Depending on the system, 4 or 5 profiles were used for the determination of D_m^{gel} ; profiles where the semi-infinite conditions were no longer fulfilled (after 9.5 or 11.5 h) were discarded. Typically, more than 500 data points were used in each simulation to provide a single D_m^{gel} value. As seen in Figure 3.2, the fitted curves agreed well with the experimental values. The good simulation of the experimental profiles using a single D_m^{gel} value strengthened the hypothesis that this parameter was practically constant over time and space in our experimental conditions. In addition, it validated the approach associating each profile to a snapshot of the concentration gradient at the mid time of its acquisition. On this regard, the first profile (1.5 h) was discarded for the determination of D_m^{gel} as this approximation was not suitably respected.

The D_m^{gel} values obtained from NMR profiling on the various systems are reported in Table 3.2. As expected, the mutual diffusion coefficients of the investigated analytes increased as a function of temperature. $E_a^{m,gel}$, obtained from an Arrhenius-type plot were calculated for PO₄, STMP, and alendronate. For these solutes, the $E_a^{m,gel}$ were similar, within experimental errors, to $E_a^{s,gel}$. Such result was also reported for the mutual diffusion of phosphate in dextran gels.²⁶ In addition, D_m^{gel} calculated for the investigated systems at various temperatures were similar to D_s^{gel} . This similarity is illustrated in Figure 3.3 where the relationship appears to be valid over the whole diffusion constant range from $2.8 \times 10^{-10} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$.

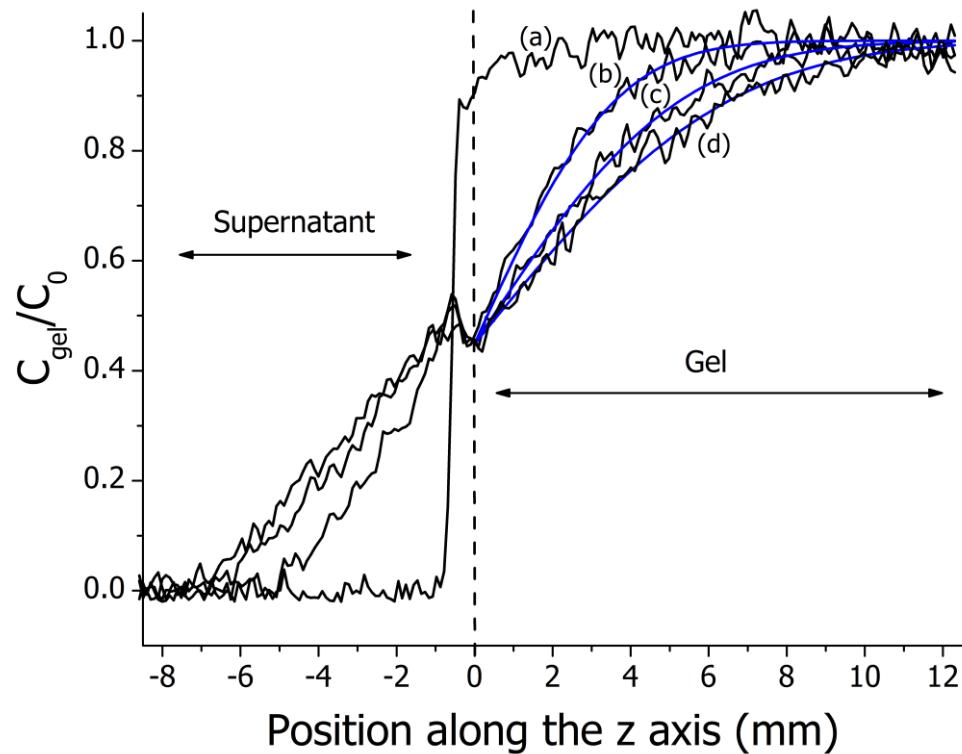


Figure 3.2 Concentration profiles measured by ^{31}P NMR profiling for alendronate in curdlan gel at 15.0 °C (a) without supernatant, and after the addition of a phosphorus-free supernatant (b) 3.5 h, (c) 7.5 h and (d) 11.5 h. The blue curves are the results of the least square analysis, using eq 3.3.

Table 3.2 Mutual Diffusion of the Investigated Solutes in 10% (w/v) High-Set Curdlan Gels

Solute	Temp	D_m^{gel}	D_m^{gel}/D_s^{gel}	$E_a^{m,gel}$
--	(°C)	($\times 10^{-10} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$)	--	kJ/mol
PO ₄	15	4.1 ± 0.1	1.0 ± 0.1	22 ± 1
	25	5.6 ± 0.1	1.0 ± 0.1	
	37	7.8 ± 0.1	1.1 ± 0.1	
STMP	15	4.4 ± 0.1	1.3 ± 0.1	17 ± 4
	25	$5.3 \pm 0.2^{**}$	1.1 ± 0.1	
	37	7.3 ± 0.1	1.2 ± 0.1	
Alendronate	15	3.1 ± 0.1	1.1 ± 0.1	20 ± 7
	25	$4.6 \pm 0.1^{**}$	1.2 ± 0.1	
	37	$5.6 \pm 0.3^{***}$	1.1 ± 0.1	
G6P	25	3.5 ± 0.2	1.0 ± 0.1	NA

The reported values were obtained from one sample or from 2 (**) or 3 (***) independent samples. Uncertainties on $E_a^{m,gel}$ were determined from the 95% confidence interval of the slope. NA: Not available

3.5 Discussion

In our systems, D_s^{gel}/D_s^{sln} ratios of ~0.7 were systematically obtained for the investigated diffusing molecules. Self-diffusion coefficients of small molecules have been shown to be affected by the presence a hydrogel matrix even at relatively low gel concentrations.⁵⁻⁷ Despite the fact that the investigated analytes bear different functional groups and different polarity, the similar D_s^{gel}/D_s^{sln} ratios indicate the absence of specific intermolecular interactions between the analytes and curdlan. Curdlan is a neutral polysaccharide and therefore should not be involved in electrostatic interactions, as previously shown for agarose gels.¹⁹ The fact that the analytes could be completely washed out from the gels also indicates the absence of any strong or irreversible binding of the solute molecules to curdlan gels. In the presence of solute-gel interactions significantly stronger than solute-solvent interactions, activation energies measured in the gels should be higher than the one in solution. The equivalence obtained between $E_a^{s,sln}$ and $E_a^{s,gel}$ (and $E_a^{m,gel}$) in our systems also points to an absence of specific interactions between the selected analytes and the curdlan gels. The decrease of D_s^{gel} relative to D_s^{sln} could be explained by general phenomena such as an obstruction effect and/or an increased hydrodynamic drag on the diffusing molecules caused by the presence of the polymer chains.⁵ Several models have been developed to describe quantitatively the influence of these contributions on the diffusion coefficients.⁵⁻⁷ It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed report of the description inferred from these models, but the differences observed between D_s^{sln} and D_s^{gel} are certainly compatible with the predictions of several of them. For example, Ogston et al⁴⁷ proposed a simple obstruction model describing the self-diffusion of molecules in porous media. In this model, the medium is assumed to be made of a random network of long and straight fibers. The relative diffusion rates, D_s^{gel}/D_s^{sln} , are expressed as a function of the volume fraction occupied by the polysaccharide (ϕ), the radius of the diffusing molecule (R_h) and the radius of the polymer fiber (R_f) (eq 3.4).

Equation 3.4⁴⁷

$$\frac{D_s^{gel}}{D_s^{sln}} = \exp \left[-\frac{(R_f + R_h)}{R_f} \varphi^{1/2} \right]$$

All the parameters in the Ogston's model are reasonably defined for the high-set curdlan gel systems. φ could be readily determined from the ratio between the NMR signal of the analyte in the gel and in the solution, assuming that the analyte concentration in the accessible volume of the hydrogel was similar to that in solution. A mean φ value of 0.13 ± 0.02 was obtained. Alternatively, φ could be estimated from the specific volume of a hydrated curdlan triple helix, calculated from crystallographic data,⁴⁸ leading to $\varphi = 0.07$. Both approaches lead to similar φ values, with the NMR approach potentially overestimating the excluded volume because of restricted access of phosphate ions in some gel regions. Using an average value of 15 nm for R_f and the R_h values from Table 3.1, the D_s^{gel}/D_s^{sln} calculated from Eq. 3.4 are, at 25 °C, between 0.70 and 0.75. The calculated values are in good agreement with the experimental results and such agreement supports the hypothesis that steric phenomena may explain the decrease of the self-diffusion in the curdlan hydrogels.

The combination of PFG NMR and NMR profiling provides a very convenient approach to compare the self-diffusion and mutual diffusion in hydrogels. For our series of analytes, D_s^{gel} and D_m^{gel} were practically equal in 10% (w/v) high-set curdlan hydrogels despite the relatively high polysaccharide concentration. Moreover, the influence of temperature was similar for both transport mechanisms as the associated activation energies were also found to be comparable. These results suggest that the time and space sampled during PFG experiments are sufficient to describe adequately the mutual diffusion of the investigated systems. The distance traveled by the analytes during the self-diffusion measurements enables them to probe the various environments that are representative of the whole sample, leading to the correlation observed between D_s^{gel} and D_m^{gel} . The independence of D_s^{gel} toward longer traveled path, up to 150 μm, reinforces this hypothesis.

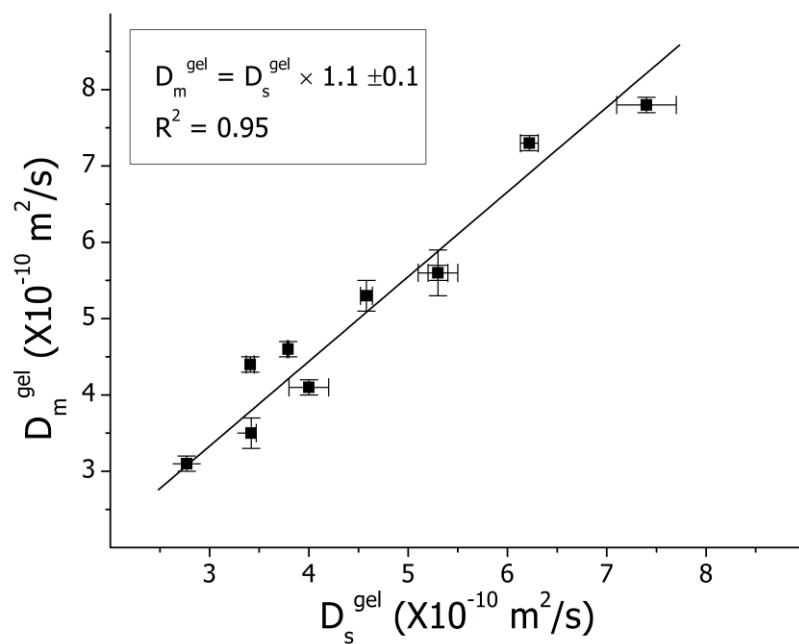


Figure 3.3 Correlation between self-diffusion and mutual diffusion of the investigated analytes in 10% (w/v) high-set curdlan gels. The solid line represents the best fit for the error-weighted linear regression.

As indicated in the Introduction, there are only a few studies assessing the relationship between the mutual diffusion and self-diffusion. If one compiles the data available in the literature, the majority of the results show the similarity of D_s^{gel} and D_m^{gel} (Figure 3.4). This series groups relatively different hydrogel-analyte systems of different chemical nature and polymer concentrations. It includes phosphate, insulin, and lysozyme in 20% (w/v) dextran gels,^{24,26} humic substances and nanosolutes in 1.5% (w/v) agarose gels,^{16,27} and water in 5% (w/w) Laponite gels.²⁵ It is striking that, despite the considerable diversity of the systems, most D_m^{gel}/D_s^{gel} values are, within experimental errors, close to unity. In fact, few systems show some considerable differences between D_s^{gel} and D_m^{gel} . For systems discussed in ref 27, the association between the diffusing molecules and the gels was proposed as the likely origin of the reduced D_m^{gel} . In addition, in that case, interfacial effects may have played a role in the measurements as they were carried out on gel slabs of limited thicknesses. Subsequent work¹⁶ suggested that an increased polymer interfacial concentration may lead to a reduced D_m^{gel} , for thin gel slabs. This interfacial contribution was shown to be negligible

when D_m^{gel} were measured on a scale 10 times larger than the interface thickness, a situation likely prevailing in our work. In the study of the phosphate diffusion in ionically cross-linked dextran gels,²⁶ the similarity of D_s^{gel} and D_m^{gel} was observed when the latter was obtained from release experiments. D_m^{gel}/D_s^{gel} values of about 0.5 were calculated when D_m^{gel} were inferred from penetration experiments (i.e., the analyte was initially in solution and penetrated in the gel as a function of time). As discussed in that paper, it is possible that the initial absence of phosphate ions in the gels led to differences in gel structure that could affect the diffusion, and therefore, the comparison with D_s^{gel} (clearly measured on phosphate-loaded gels) should be considered with caution. These reports appear to be associated with specific characteristics of the systems and, on the basis of the majority of the studies, it appears that there is a close correspondence between D_s^{gel} and D_m^{gel} when the size of the analyte is considerably smaller than the gel pore size. This assumption is consistent with molecular dynamic simulations predicting that no anomalous or trapped diffusion should occur on any length scale in systems where the solutes are much smaller than the mean gel pore size.⁴⁹ The present investigated systems meet this condition because, from the eSEM study, the actual nanopore size of the 10% (w/v) high-set curdlan hydrogel was found to be ~1000 times larger than the size of the diffusing molecules. The restricting geometry of the gel on the motions of the species is likely defined at a spatial scale that is much smaller than that probed by the PFG measurements and, therefore, is well averaged out by the measurements.

It is concluded that the impact of hydrogels on the diffusion process can be defined at a length scale shorter than the self-diffusion correlation length for several systems and it can be extrapolated to longer scales. This conclusion appears to apply when analytes are small compared to the gel pore size, not interacting with the hydrogel, and that the gel architecture is homogeneous on the self-diffusion length scale. On the basis of the present existing data, these conditions often happen to be reasonably respected. Geometries restricting motions in gels can have, as a matter of fact, different length scales, and the comparison between self-diffusion and mutual diffusion is a compelling approach to highlight such level of complexity for gels where such phenomenon prevails.

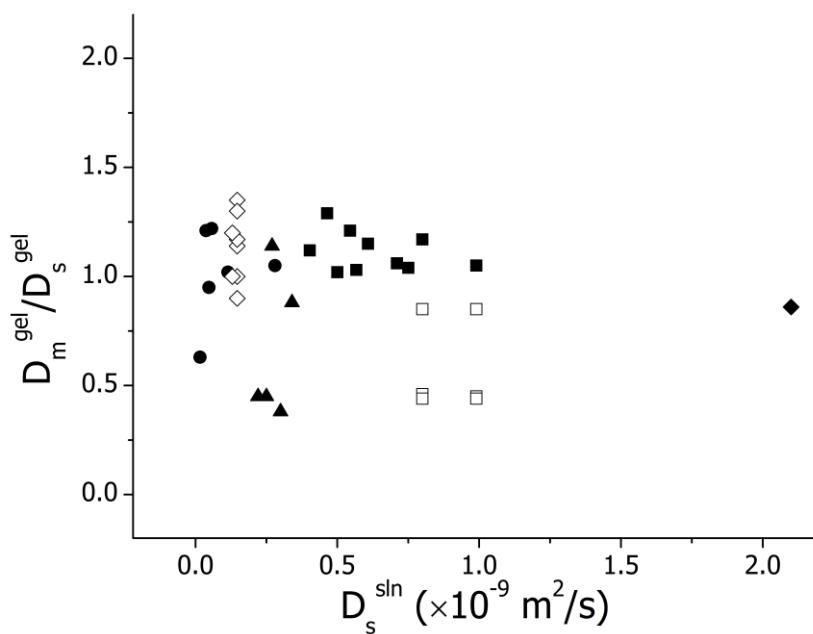


Figure 3.4 Relative self-diffusion and mutual-diffusion rates of various analyte/hydrogel systems. (□) Phosphate in ionically cross-linked dextran gels,²⁶ (●) nanosize solutes in agarose gel,¹⁶ (▲) humic acids in agarose gels,²⁷ (◊) insulin and lysosyme in chemically cross-linked dextran gels,²⁴ (◆) water in Laponite clay gels,²⁵ and (■) this work.

3.6 Acknowledgments

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Chapitre 4

The Limited Influence of the Microscopic Curdlan Gel Architecture on Its Transport Properties

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4.1 Abstract

In order to study the influence of the gel architecture on its transport properties, diffusion experiments were carried out on 10% (w/v) low-set and high-set curdlan hydrogels at 25 °C. Aqueous suspensions of curdlan, a bacterial polysaccharide, can form thermogels with different conformations depending on the incubation temperature. The microscopic architecture of the two types of hydrogels, in their fully hydrated state, was characterized by Fourier transform infrared (FT-IR) imaging, environmental scanning electron microscopy (eSEM), and atomic force microscopy (AFM) imaging. The self-diffusion coefficients of a series of analytes of different sizes were measured in aqueous solution (D_s^{sln}) and in both types of curdlan gels (D_s^{gel}) by ^1H and ^{31}P pulsed field gradient nuclear magnetic resonance (PFG NMR) spectroscopy. The diffusion results were analysed using an approach based on a normal distribution of self-diffusion coefficients. In the hydrogels, broadening of the self-diffusion coefficient distribution increased as a function of the analyte size. The mutual-diffusion coefficients (D_m^{gel}) of dextran in the curdlan gels were also determined from release experiments. The D_m^{gel} were similar, in both types of curdlan gels, but smaller than the corresponding D_s^{gel} . It was found that the microscopic architecture of the curdlan gel has a very limited impact on its transport properties and that the heterogeneities of the gel networks, probed by the analytes during the self-diffusion experiments, are well average-out over the time and space explored during mutual-diffusion experiments.

4.2 Introduction

The diffusion of solutes in polysaccharide hydrogels is of prime importance in many fields of applications. Hydrogels can be used as controlled drug delivery devices¹⁻³ and as model scaffolds for the study of biological systems like mucus⁴ and bacterial biofilms.⁵ In general, the diffusion coefficients in gels (D^{gel}) are smaller than those measured in solution. The presence of a polymer network limits the volume available for free diffusion and hinders solute transport. In addition, the hydrodynamic drag caused by the slow motion of water molecules near these polymer chains may also affect the diffusion. Several parameters have been shown to affect the diffusion of molecules in gels as reviewed elsewhere.⁶⁻⁸ Among them, the effective gel concentration was shown to affect the transport rate in hydrogels as the amount of obstacles affect the length of the diffusion path of analytes between two arbitrary points in the gel network. The size of the analyte, typically described in terms of its hydrodynamic radius (R_h), was also shown to affect the diffusion in hydrogel systems. The diffusion restrictions can be particularly severe when the size of the analyte is non-negligible compared to the dimensions of the openings between the polymer fibres composing a gel network, a parameter generally termed as pore size (R_p).⁹⁻¹¹ In the case of flexible polymer chains diffusing in gels, the diffusion can usually be described by the dilute (Rouse-Zimm)¹² or the reptation regimes¹³ depending on the relative size of the analyte and the gel pore size. In the dilute regime, the macromolecules diffuse in a globular conformation as they encounter steric restrictions through the gel network. In more crowded environments, the chain must unravel, causing a reptation movement, in order to move through the openings of the gel network.

In the present manuscript, we have examined the influence of the architecture of the gel network on the gel transport properties. Previous studies have shown that the transport properties in hydrogels could be influenced by their morphology. For example, κ -carrageenan hydrogels are ionic gels that can present, for a given amount of polymer, different morphologies depending on the nature and the concentration of the crosslinking salt. In these gels, the diffusion of a series of polyethylene glycol¹⁴ (PEG) with molecular weights (M_w) below 62 400 g/mol and dendrimers¹⁵ with M_w varying between 12 000, and 200 000 g/mol was found to be mainly determined by the

aggregation state of the gel polymer chains. Slow diffusion coefficients were measured in homogeneous gel networks while faster diffusion coefficients were measured in gels that were more heterogeneous, characterized by large voids between the aggregates. The distinction between the gels with different structures was found to be more pronounced as the size of the diffusing analyte increased. Analogous conclusions were inferred from the diffusion of large polyethylene oxide (PEO) and ($M_w=24\,000$ - $750\,000$ g/mol) in 2% (w/v) alginate hydrogels where fragmentation of the polymer network caused by irradiation led to more open gel structures, thereby enhancing the diffusion rate of analytes in the gel matrices.¹⁶ Diffusion of PEGs was also shown to be sensitive to the microstructure of casein gels. For large analytes ($M_w > 8\,000$ g/mol), diffusion coefficients measured in heterogeneous and porous casein gels were larger than those in homogeneous gels.¹⁷ These effects were enhanced as the concentration of polymer in the gel was increased (in a concentration range of 5 to 15%). In these systems, the diffusion of smaller analytes ($M_w < 1\,020$ g/mol) was however found insensitive to the gel microstructures. Structural rearrangements of the gel microstructure after renneting, the gelation step in cheesemaking, could also be probed by large diffusing PEGs.¹⁸ Larger diffusion coefficients were measured when the gel porosity was increased by varying the gel's water content. In order to gain additional insights into the impact of gel architecture on their transport properties, we have characterized the diffusion of a series of solutes of different nature (including size and charge) in two types of curdlan hydrogels, prepared with the same polysaccharide at the same concentration, but having different polymer chain conformations. Curdlan, a bacterial polysaccharide made of repeating units of β -(1→3)-D-glucose,¹⁹ is insoluble in water but can form thermogels with different polymer organization depending on its gelation temperature. When heated between 55 and 80 °C, aqueous suspensions of curdlan form low-set gels²⁰ for which the polymer chains adopt a single helix conformation.²¹ When the gelation temperature is between 80 and 130 °C, high-set gels are obtained²⁰ where the polymer chains adopt mainly a triple helix conformation.²² In both cases, the thermogels retained their structure once cooled down at room temperature. These two gel types, prepared from curdlan suspensions at the same polysaccharide concentration, involve most likely similar excluded volumes and similar chemical interactions between the analytes and the gels. In addition, because curdlan is

a neutral polysaccharide, no significant electrostatic interactions with charged diffusing species are expected.²³

We have prepared and characterized 10% (w/v) low-set and high-set curdlan hydrogels in an attempt to establish correlations between the structural parameters of the gels and their transport properties. First, a characterization of the gel architecture at different length scales was carried out to highlight the (dis)similarity of the structural features of the hydrogel types. Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FT-IR) imaging can provide details about the spatial distribution of polymers in hydrogels at the microscopic scale.²⁴ Scanning electron microscopy in the environmental mode (eSEM) can provide structural information about fully hydrated hydrogels with a resolution as high as hundreds of nanometers.²⁵ Atomic force microscopy (AFM) imaging can provide topographic description of gel interfaces at nanometer scale resolutions.^{26,27} The techniques used in this study present the distinct advantage of being carried out on fully hydrated hydrogels, providing representative descriptions of the environments encountered by the analytes during diffusion experiments. Second, we have characterized the self-diffusion coefficients in the two curdlan hydrogel types of a series of analytes of various sizes including water (HOD), phosphate (PO₄),* glucose-6-phosphate (G6P),* polyphosphate (PolyPO₄),* polyethylene glycol (PEG) and dextran labelled with rhodamine B (DXRB70k). The self-diffusion coefficient in the gel (D_s^{gel}) reflects the transport rate of molecules as a result of intermolecular collisions in a hydrogel with a homogenous concentration of analyte.²⁸ The self-diffusion was characterized using ¹H and ³¹P pulsed field gradient nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy (PFG NMR). This parameter is susceptible to be sensitive to the gel architecture since small distances (few microns) are typically travelled by the analytes during the measurements. We have also characterized the mutual-diffusion coefficient of DXRB70k in both types of curdlan gels using a source/sink approach. The mutual-diffusion coefficient in the gel (D_m^{gel}) describes the transport rate across a gel matrix in the presence of a concentration gradient,²⁸ generally described by Fick laws.²⁹ In these measurements, the molecules travel macroscopic distances through the gel network and probe effectively the entire gel structure. We have examined whether this analyte

* Although these analytes are charged species in the pH conditions used in this work, the current notation will be used for simplification purposes.

transport over longer length scales was influenced by the curdlan gel architecture. The self-diffusion and mutual-diffusion coefficients of small molecules in high-set curdlan hydrogels were previously shown to be equivalent.³⁰ In this work, the comparison between self-diffusion and mutual diffusion was extended to DXRB70k, in order to provide a wider range of molecular size of analytes. The self-diffusion coefficients of PO₄ and G6P in high-set curdlan gels were reported elsewhere³⁰ and will be discussed along with the measurements carried out on a wider range of solutes size as well as in low-set curdlan gels.

4.3 Experimental

4.3.1 Materials

Curdlan was purchased from Wako Pure Chemical Industries (Osaka, Japan). Potassium dihydrogen phosphate (PO₄), sodium D-glucose-6-phosphate (G6P), sodium azide, lithium chloride (LiCl), methanol, dithranol, tetrahydrofuran (THF), polyethylene glycol (PEG), deuterium oxide, with a minimum purity of 98%, and sodium polyphosphate (PolyPO₄), a blend of linear phosphate oligomers (6-15 repeating units) with a purity of 96%, were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO). The exact mass distribution of PEG was characterized by MALDI-TOF spectrometry as described below. Dextran with an average molecular weight of 70 kDa and labelled with isothiocyanate rhodamine (DXRB70k) (6.2 dyes/mole), was purchased from Molecular Probes (Eugene, OR). Potassium hydroxide (ACS purity grade) was purchased from J.T. Baker (Phillipsburg, NJ). Hydrochloric acid (ACS purity grade) was purchased from Anachemia (Montréal, Qc, Canada). Deuterium oxide (D₂O, 99.9 atom % D), was purchased from CDN Isotopes (Pointe-Claire, Qc, Canada). All products were used without further purification. Milli-Q water was used for all preparations.

4.3.2 Methods

MALDI-TOF spectrometry The PEG powder was dissolved in THF at a concentration of 6 mg/mL. An aliquot of 20 µL of this solution was mixed with 20 µL of a dithranol solution (10 mg/mL) prepared in THF and 10 µL of a LiCl solution (2 mg/mL) prepared in methanol. Aliquots of this mixture were evaporated on the sample holder and ionized

using a nitrogen laser operating at 337 nm. The positive ions were analysed in a reflector mode using an Autoflex MALDI-TOF spectrometer from Bruker Daltonics. The instrument was operated with an accelerating voltage of 20 kV and 200 shots were collected for each spectrum. Weight average (M_w) and number average (M_n) molecular masses of 1971 and 1913 Da were measured, respectively, leading to a polydispersity index (PI) of 1.03.

Curdlan gels preparation Solute-loaded curdlan hydrogels were prepared using two approaches. First, the analyte was incorporated in the gel during its formation. A 10% (w/v) curdlan suspension was prepared in a D₂O-based 10 mM potassium phosphate buffer (pH 7.2) containing 0.05% (w/v) of DXRB70k, or 0.1% (w/v) of PEG. The residual HOD in the samples was sufficient to carry out the diffusion measurements of water. The suspension was kept in a closed flask at room temperature with constant agitation (magnetic stirrer) for 3 days. The fully hydrated curdlan suspension was then incubated for 3 h in sealed glass tubes at 58 or 95 °C for the low-set and the high-set gels, respectively. The freshly prepared gels were slowly cooled down to room temperature and kept at 4 °C for 5 days. Second, analytes were added to preformed gels using a procedure described elsewhere.³⁰ Briefly, a 10% (w/v) curdlan suspension was prepared in a 10 mM Tris/HCl buffer (pH 7.2) containing 1 mM NaN₃ and 100 µM EDTA or in a D₂O-based 10 mM KH₂PO₄/K₂HPO₄ buffer (pH 7.2). The hydrated suspension was incubated at 58 °C for the low-set gels and at 95 °C for the high-set gels. Analytes were subsequently loaded into the gels by incubating the gels at room temperature in a large volume of the analyte solution. The gels used for the ³¹P NMR experiments were incubated 5 days in a G6P solution (50 mM) or 0.1% (w/v) PolyPO₄ solution, both in the Tris/HCl buffer, or, for the experiments on phosphate, in a KH₂PO₄/K₂HPO₄ solution (100 mM), pH 7.2, containing 1 mM NaN₃ and 100 µM EDTA. The gels used for the ¹H NMR experiments were incubated 3 months in a D₂O-based 10 mM potassium phosphate buffer (pH 7.2) containing 0.05% (w/v) of DXRB70k.

FT-IR spectroscopy (FPA) A thick gel slab, prepared in the Tris/HCl buffer, was placed on a sample holder covered with optimal cutting temperature (OCT) compound. The sample holder was quickly cooled to -60 °C using Peltier elements, causing the

OCT compound to solidify and the gel to freeze. The sample was then equilibrated at -20 °C and 5 μm -thick gel slices (~ 10 mm diameter) were prepared using a Leica CM1850 cryostat. A slice was quickly transferred on a BaF₂ window (2 mm thick \times 40 mm diameter) and removed from the cryostat chamber. A small amount (3 μL) of Tris/HCl buffer was promptly added directly on the gel slice to prevent drying. A 5 μm -thick Teflon gasket was placed around the gel slice and the sample cell was sealed with another BaF₂ window. Infrared imaging of the hydrated gel slices was performed at room temperature on a Digilab FTS-7000e spectrometer coupled to a UMA 600 microscope equipped with a Lancer 32 \times 32 focal plane array (FPA) detector. For each image, 256 scans were coadded at a nominal resolution of 4 cm^{-1} and with a mirror speed of 5 kHz. A total of 16 images (4×4) were recorded in a mosaic mode for each map ($698 \mu\text{m} \times 698 \mu\text{m}$), leading to 16 384 spectra per map. Ambient air was used as the background. The bands between 1200 and 900 cm^{-1} , which are assigned to the C-OH, C-O and C-C stretching vibrations of polysaccharides,³¹ were used to assess the curdlan spatial distribution. First, in order to highlight the gel heterogeneities, the average spectrum calculated from the spectra over a whole map was subtracted from the spectrum of each pixel. In addition to removing the average contribution from curdlan, this procedure provided a reasonably flat baseline in the investigated region. The resulting difference spectra were then smoothed over 5 points using the Savinsky-Golay algorithm and their areas between 1200 and 900 cm^{-1} (A_{diff}) were determined. Second, in order to compare the different maps on the same scale, the average contribution of curdlan in each map (A_{average}) was used as a normalization factor. To determine this value, the average spectrum of the whole map was baseline corrected by subtracting the buffer spectrum and the region between 1200 and 900 cm^{-1} was integrated. The curdlan spatial distributions are described using maps created from the relative variation of the polysaccharide IR signal, $A_{\text{diff}} / A_{\text{average}}$. The data treatment was carried out using WiRE 1.0 (Renishaw) software.

eSEM Gel samples were examined by environmental scanning electron microscopy using a Quanta 200 FEG microscope (FEI Company Hillsboro, OR), equipped with Peltier elements to control the sample temperature. A small piece of hydrogel was inserted into the microscope chamber and the pressure and temperature were set to

4.6 Torr and 1 °C, respectively, providing a relative humidity of 100%.³² In order to emphasize the gel microstructure, the pressure was decreased to 2.4 Torr, leading to a relative humidity of 50%. Images were acquired at the highest resolution that could be reached without damaging the samples with the strong electron beam, using an accelerating voltage of 20 kV, working distances of 8-10 mm, and a gaseous secondary electron detector. In order to avoid sample damage by the electron beam, the acquisitions were kept as short as possible (typically 10 s).

AFM A thin gel slab (~4 mm), prepared in a phosphate buffer without any diffusing probe, was fixed to the bottom of a Teflon liquid cell. Buffer was added in order to cover the whole gel slab. The AFM images of the immersed gels were recorded in tapping mode with an extended Dimension 3100 scanning probe microscope coupled to a Nanoscope IIIa controller (Digital Instruments, Veeco, Santa Barbara, CA) and using a silicon nitride, oxide sharpened gold coated microlever (MLCT, Veeco, Santa Barbara, CA) having a spring constant of 0.1 N/m. The tapping mode was preferred to record the topographic images in order to prevent alterations previously reported for hydrogels AFM imaging in contact mode.²⁶ Topographic images of 1 μm × 1 μm regions of the gels were recorded at a scan rate of 0.8 Hz and a resolution of 512 × 512 pixels.

PFG NMR A hydrogel block was shaped into a cylinder using a homemade cutter. Large cylinders (18 mm of diameter and 20 mm high) were prepared for hydrogels loaded with phosphorus-containing analytes (PO₄, PolyPO₄ and G6P) while small ones (7.5 mm of diameter and 12 mm high) were prepared for hydrogels loaded with PEG and DXRB70k. The gels were inserted into 20 mm (inside diameter of 18 mm), or 8 mm (inside diameter of 7.5 mm) NMR tubes depending of their size. Each tube was sealed at the bottom end using a homemade Teflon stopper. The sample was then placed into the magnet of a Bruker AV400 NMR spectrometer operating at 400.26 MHz for ¹H and 162.05 MHz for ³¹P. The sample temperature was set to 25.0 ± 0.5 °C using the gradient coil cooling unit (BCU20). The sample temperature was calibrated using ethylene glycol.³³ The self-diffusion measurements of phosphorus-containing molecules were carried out using a 20 mm ³¹P/¹H Bruker micro-imaging probe Micro 2.5 equipped with 3 perpendicular gradient coils capable of delivering magnetic field gradients up to 100 G/cm. The self-diffusion measurements of HOD, PEG, and DXRB70k, were

carried-out using a 10 mm ^1H Bruker diffusion probe DIFF60 equipped with a gradient coil along the z-axis capable of delivering magnetic field gradients up to 3 000 G/cm. The gradient strengths were calibrated from the known diffusion coefficient of water doped with CuSO₄.³⁴ The self-diffusion coefficients in the gel and in solution (D_s^{sln}) were measured using the stimulated-echo pulse sequence (STE).³⁵ Sinusoidal or trapezoidal gradient pulses (δ) of 1-3 ms and diffusion times (Δ) of 20-500 ms were used. Pre-emphasis was used to reduce the effect of eddy current during the NMR sequence and main field (B_0) compensations were used to prevent B_0 shifts created by strong gradient pulses. Spoiler gradients were also used to remove any unwanted magnetization caused by inhomogeneous radio frequency pulses. In the simplest cases, the self-diffusion coefficients were obtained by fitting the variation of the echo intensity as a function of the pulsed-gradient strength (G_i) using the following equation:

Equation 4.1

$$\frac{S}{S_0} = \exp[-qD_s]$$

where S and S_0 are the echo intensities with and without a field gradient, γ the gyromagnetic ratio of the nucleus and $q = (G_i\delta\gamma)^2(\Delta - \delta/3)$. As opposed to HOD, PO₄ and G6P, the curves representing the variations of $\ln(S/S_0)$ as a function of q obtained with PolyPO₄, PEG and DXRB70k were not linear. These self-diffusion measurements were analysed using a stretched exponential function as described in eq 4.2

Equation 4.2

$$\frac{S}{S_0} = \exp[-(qD_s^{app})^\beta]$$

where D_s^{app} is the apparent self-diffusion coefficient and β the «stretching» exponent.³⁶ This equation describes the variations of the echo intensity for analytes associated with a distribution of self-diffusion coefficients. The parameter β describes the width of the self-diffusion coefficients distribution ($0 < \beta \leq 1$). β equals unity for a monodisperse systems and decreases from unity as the distribution becomes broader. The mean self-diffusion coefficient of the distribution (\bar{D}_s) is given by eq 4.3

Equation 4.3

$$\bar{D}_s = \frac{D_s^{app}}{\frac{1}{\beta} \Gamma \left(\frac{1}{\beta} \right)}$$

where Γ is the gamma function. For the PFG NMR experiments, 128 to 256 scans were coadded for a given gradient strength and 16 to 32 gradient magnitudes were used for each attenuation curve. The self-diffusion coefficients of PolyPO₄, PEG and DXRB70k reported in this paper correspond to the mean self-diffusion coefficients of the distribution. As a control, self-diffusion experiments using different echo-times were carried out to account for the T₂ relaxation issues. Similar results were obtained under all these conditions. In addition, the D_s^{sln} and β values were found to be independent of the analyte concentration from our working concentration to that corresponding to a 10-fold dilution, excluding inter-analyte interactions. In the ¹H PFG experiments, the first few points (between 1 and 3) of each curve were discarded because the NMR signal of residual non-deuterated water was interfering significantly with the diffusing analyte resonances. The protons of the curdlan gels have short T₂ relaxation times and their signals were greatly attenuated during the STE sequence and did not contribute to the measurements. The curves were fitted using the non-linear curve fitting routine of OriginPro 8.0 (OriginLab Corporation, Northampton, MA). The experiments were carried out in triplicate unless otherwise mentioned. Since some experiments were carried out in D₂O and others in H₂O, a correction factor ($D_s^{H_2O} \approx 1.23 D_s^{D_2O}$) was applied to account for the isotopic effect.³⁷ The self-diffusion coefficients reported in the manuscript correspond to those measured in H₂O.

Mutual diffusion The experimental setup was designed to fulfill the conditions of a three dimensional release from a disk whose surfaces were maintained at zero concentration (i.e., perfect sink conditions). The gels loaded with the fluorescent DXRB70k were shaped into thick disks (~8 mm diameter and ~2.5 mm high) using a sharp blade. The exact dimensions of each sample were measured using a digital micrometer with a precision of ±0.05 mm. At $t = 0$, a hydrogel disk was transferred into a reservoir containing 70 mL of phosphate buffer. It was suspended in the solution using a cage made of thin plastic sticks, to allow a uniform drug release from its entire

surface. The solution was stirred to meet good sink conditions. The whole experimental setup was maintained at 25.0 ± 0.5 °C. Aliquots of 2 mL were withdrawn every hour for the first 12 hours and then every 24 hours, over a total release period of 6 days. The fluorescence intensity of each aliquot was recorded using a spectrofluorimeter (Photon Technology Inc., Birmingham, NJ) with excitation and emission wavelengths of 571 and 592 nm, respectively. Immediately after the measurement, the aliquots were put back into the reservoir to minimize the perturbations. The fluorescence intensities were normalized with a calibration curve measured for each time point. The amount of release material could be described as a function of time using the relation expressed by eq 4.4, derived by Fu et al.³⁸

Equation 4.4

$$\frac{M_t}{M_\infty} = 1 - \sum_{n=1}^{10} \frac{4}{a^2 \alpha_n} \exp(-D_m^{gel} \alpha_n^2 t) \times \sum_{m=0}^{10} \frac{8}{l^2 \beta_m^2} \exp(-D_m^{gel} \beta_m^2 t)$$

where

$$\beta = \frac{(2m+1)\pi}{l}$$

M_t is the amount of released material at a given time (t), M_∞ is the amount of released material after an infinite time, a the disk radius, l the disk height and α_n are the positive roots of zero-order Bessel function ($J_0(a\alpha_n) = 0$). M_∞ was determined by the average concentration measured during the last 2 days of each release experiment, conditions for which M_t was found constant. D_m^{gel} was the only fitting parameter in eq 4.4. In the simulation, the statistical weight of the data points recorded during the first 12 hours was reduced to 1/12 as more points were recorded during this time interval. The reported D_m^{gel} values are the averages of independent triplicates and the associated uncertainties are the standard deviations.

4.4 Results

4.4.1 Microscopic and Nanoscopic Architecture of Curdlan Gels

The curdlan gels were characterized in their fully hydrated state using FT-IR (FPA) imaging, which provided pictures of the gel architecture based on chemical imaging. Figure 4.1 represents the low wavenumber region of the FT-IR (FPA) spectrum of a high-set curdlan gel recorded at room temperature. Because the water content of the hydrogels is ~90%, strong infrared absorption bands associated with water are observed at 2100 (association band) and 1640 (H_2O bending) cm^{-1} . The shaded area located between 1200 and 900 cm^{-1} corresponds to a region typically associated with the C-OH, C-O and C-C stretching vibrations of polysaccharides.³¹

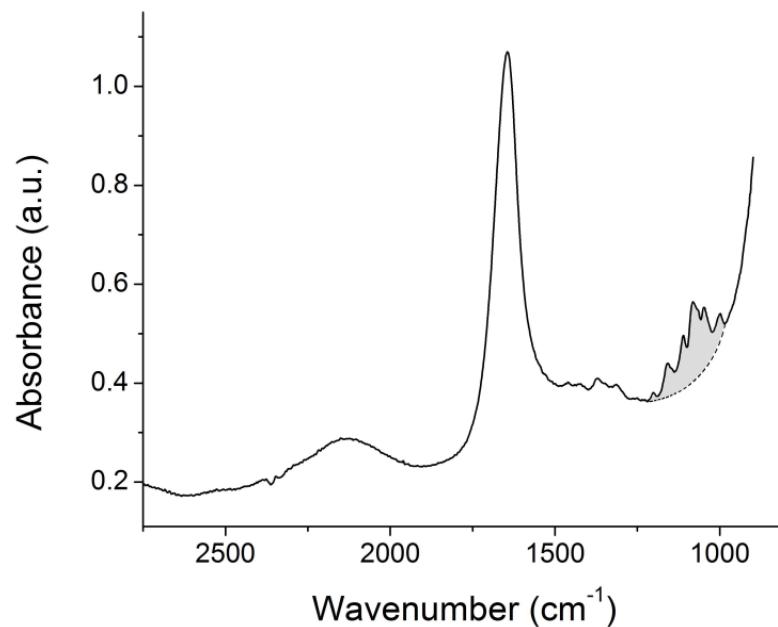


Figure 4.1 FT-IR (FPA) average spectrum of a 10% (w/v) high-set curdlan hydrogel.

The band profile in this region was significantly different for the low-set and high-set gels and these changes were previously associated with the helical conformation of the polysaccharide chain.³⁹ The similarity between the spectra obtained from the thinly sliced gel sections and those previously obtained from gel slabs, using attenuated total reflection sampling, indicates that the sample preparation used for FT-IR (FPA) imaging

had little or no effect on the gels at the molecular level. In addition, the amounts of gel in the samples, represented by the $A_{average}$ values, were similar for the different gel slices, indicating that sample preparation was reproducible and that the investigated areas provided sufficient sampling. The FT-IR (FPA) images shown in Figure 4.2 truly represent different spatial distributions of the polysaccharide in gels prepared at the same concentration. The curdlan spatial distributions in the 10% (w/v) low-set and high-set gels are shown on the $A_{diff}/A_{average}$ maps represented in Figure 4.2A,C. The structure displayed in the case of the low-set gel is heterogeneous as polymer-enriched (dark colors) and polymer-depleted (light colors) regions are well localised in space. The size of these regions can reach dimensions of tens of microns. The corresponding $A_{diff}/A_{average}$ value distribution is illustrated by the histogram in Figure 4.2B. Because this parameter represents relative deviations from the average, the distribution is indeed centered at 0. The distributions can be fitted with a Gaussian function and the width at half-height ($w_{1/2}$) of the distribution is found to be 0.28 ± 0.05 . Because the average polysaccharide concentration is 10% (w/v), this relative deviation corresponds to concentration varying between 8.6 and 11.4% (w/v). Even though polysaccharide-depleted regions are found, there are no water-filled microscopic cavities in the gels as such pixels would have a $A_{diff}/A_{average}$ value of -1. The FT-IR (FPA) image of the high-set gel (Figure 4.2C) reveals that the polysaccharide distribution is more homogenous through the whole sample. The distribution of the pixel values of the FT-IR (FPA) image of the high-set gel is shown in Figure 4.2D. It is clearly narrower than that obtained for low-set gels, with a $w_{1/2}$ of 0.087 ± 0.009 . As from their FT-IR spectra,³⁹ both curdlan gel types can be readily distinguished from their FT-IR (FPA) images.

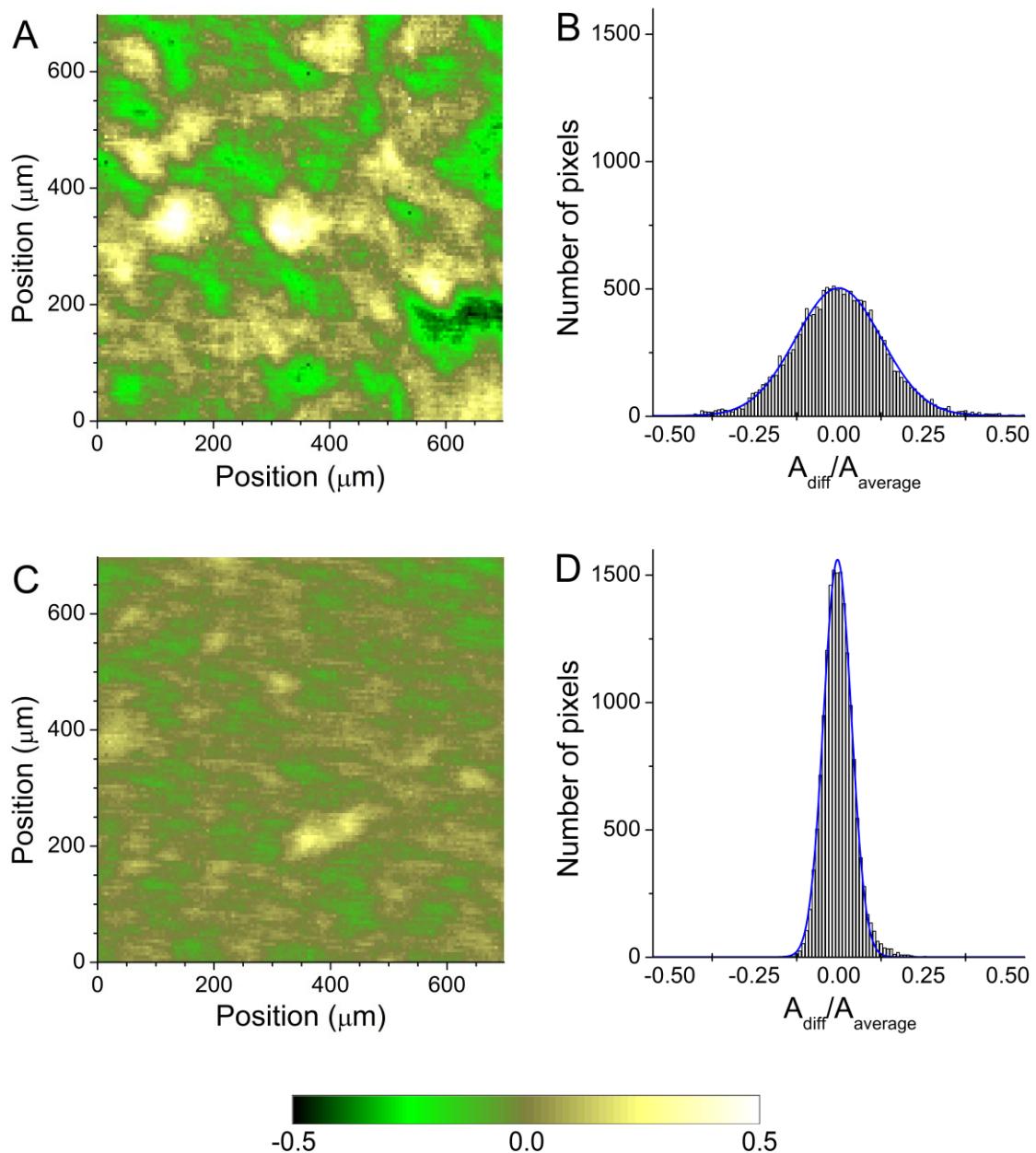


Figure 4.2 FT-IR (FPA) image of the relative variation of the CO area from a $5 \mu\text{m}$ thick slice of a 10% (w/v) low-set (A) and high-set gel (C) curdlan gel. The corresponding histograms of the pixel distribution (B and D) are represented next to each image. The blue curves represent the best Gaussian fit of each distribution.

The curdlan hydrogels were examined under humid atmospheres using environmental scanning electron microscopy (eSEM) (Figure 4.3). The high-set and low-set curdlan gels exhibit different architectures at the microscopic scale. The low-set gel (Figure 4.3 A,B) displays a heterogeneous sponge-like architecture where regions rich in polysaccharide are separated by cavities with a size up to tens of microns. Whether these areas are cavities or collapsed polysaccharide-depleted regions of the gel, caused by partial dehydration of the gel surface, is still not clear. However, the size of these regions is consistent with the polymer-depleted regions observed on the FT-IR (FPA) images recorded on a similar length scale (see Figure 4.2A). Figure 4.3B reveals that the surface of the polysaccharide-rich regions are not smooth but include small cavities that can reach sizes as small as $\sim 1 \mu\text{m}$. On the microscopic scale (Figure 4.3C), the high-set gel looks fairly homogenous, in agreement with the observations of the FT-IR (FPA) images. Imaging the high-set gel at a higher resolution (Figure 4.3D) reveals the presence of cavities with an average diameter of $\sim 5 \mu\text{m}$ as previously reported.³⁰ The eSEM images clearly show that the two types of hydrogels prepared from a similar 10% (w/v) curdlan aqueous suspension exhibit complex and different architecture at the microscopic level. Additional eSEM images of both types of curdlan gels are provided in the Supporting Information section to illustrate the great variety of morphologies encountered in these gels.

In order to provide higher resolution images, AFM imaging was carried out on small areas on the surface of the fully hydrated gels. A typical $1 \mu\text{m} \times 1 \mu\text{m}$ AFM image of a low-set curdlan gel is presented in Figure 4.4A. The AFM topographic images reveal another level of complexity in the low-set gel architecture as they display an irregular surface that includes cavities and bumps. Additional AFM images are provided in the Supporting Information section to illustrate the great variety of morphologies observed at the low-set gel surface. The section analysis (Figure 4.4B) indicates that these cavities have a width of $\sim 120 \text{ nm}$ and a depth of $\sim 20 \text{ nm}$. Unfortunately, the micromechanical properties of the high-set gels prevented us from obtaining acceptable AFM images.

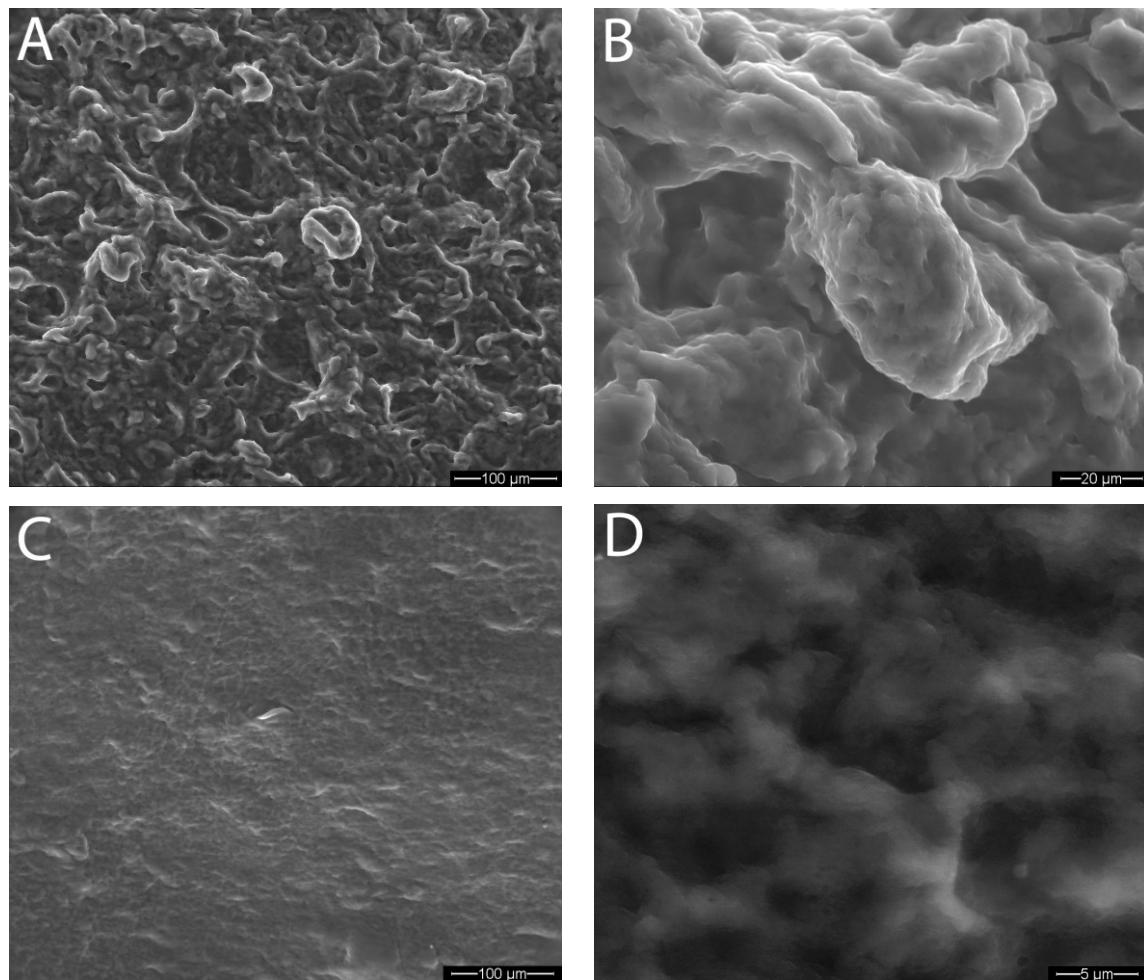


Figure 4.3 eSEM image of a 10% (w/v) low-set (A,B) and high-set (C,D) curdlan gel.

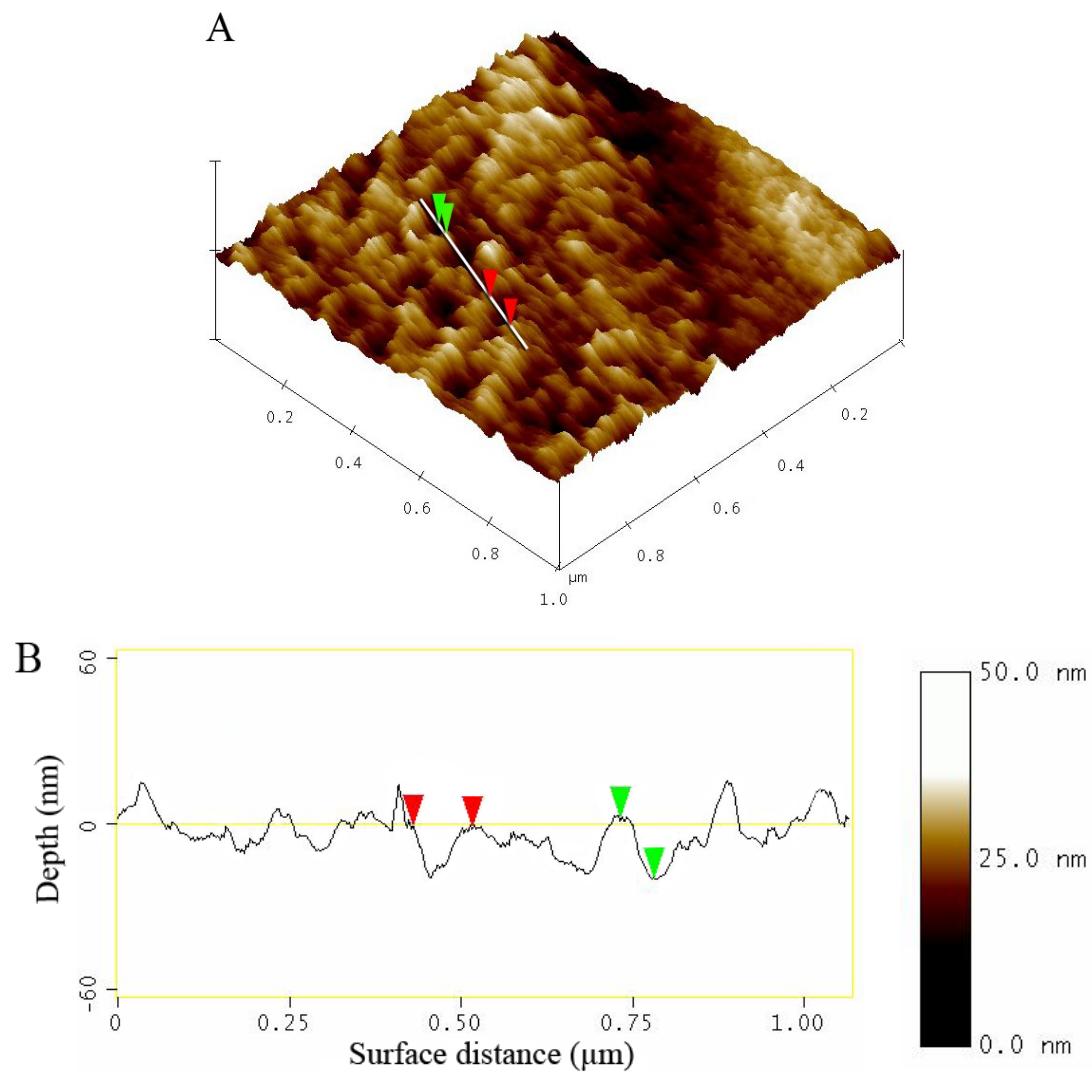


Figure 4.4 Topographic AFM image of a 10% (w/v) low-set curdlan gel in a tapping mode (A) and a cross-section analysis of the depth profile (B)

4.4.2 Self-Diffusion in Curdlan Hydrogels

Figure 4.5 illustrates typical echo-attenuation curves of various analytes obtained from PFG NMR experiments carried out in solution and in low-set curdlan hydrogels. The self-diffusion experiments carried out on HOD, PO₄ and G6P lead to monoexponential echo-attenuation decays from which diffusion coefficients are inferred (Table 4.1). Small deviations from the linear behaviour are observed in the case of the macromolecule analytes (PolyPO₄, PEG and DXRB70k) in solution. The deviations are considerably more pronounced for the decays recorded from gels. The echo-attenuation curves of the macromolecules in solution and in the gels are then analysed using eq 4.3 and the resulting self-diffusion coefficients and β values are presented in Table 4.1. As seen in Figure 4.6, the relative self-diffusion coefficient (D_s^{gel} / D_s^{sln}) decreases as a function of the analyte size in a similar fashion for both types of curdlan gels. The relative self-diffusion coefficient of HOD, the smallest investigated analyte, is ~0.9. A D_s^{gel} / D_s^{sln} of 0.7 is measured for PO₄ and G6P whereas it is 0.4 for DXRB70k, the largest investigated analyte. The D_s^{sln} of PEG and DXRB70k are in good agreement with values previously reported in the literature.^{40,41} To the best of our knowledge, no value has been reported for PolyPO₄. The polydispersity of the self-diffusion coefficients in the gels, represented by the β value, is also found to vary as a function of the analyte size. β values correspond to 1 for HOD, PO₄ and G6P as monoexponential decays are obtained. They are significantly lower than 1 for the larger analytes diffusing in the gels. Moreover, they are lower than those measured for these molecules in solution. A reduction by ~10 to 15% is observed for PolyPO₄ and PEG whereas it reaches a ~50% decrease for DXRB70k. These reductions are clearly associated with the influence of the curdlan gels.

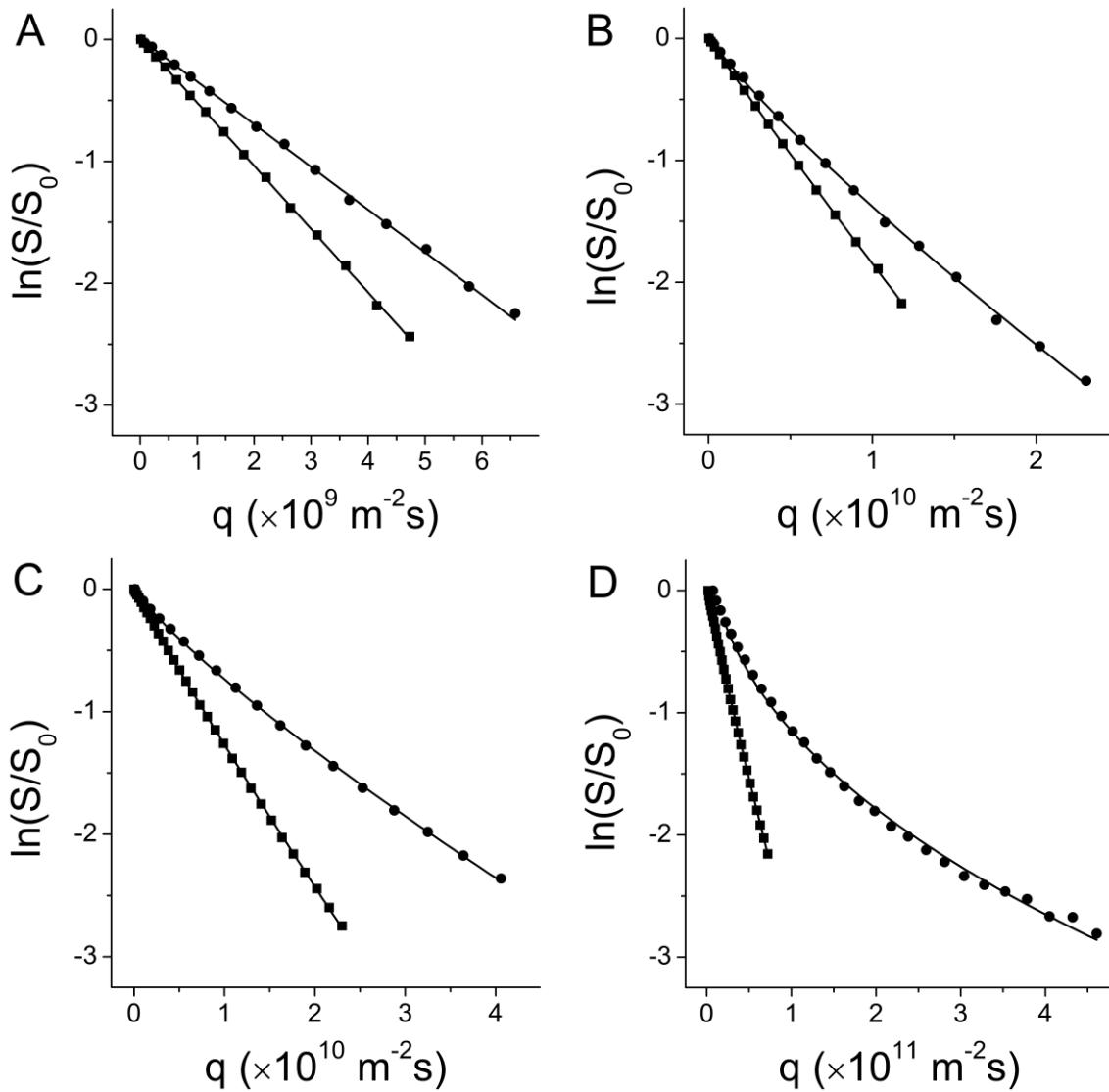


Figure 4.5 Echo-attenuation curves of G6P (A), PolyPO₄ (B), PEG10k (C) and DXRB70k (D) in solution (■) and in a 10% (w/v) low-set curdlan gel (●) at 25 °C. The solid lines represent the best fit of eq 4.1 (A) or eq 4.2 (B-D).

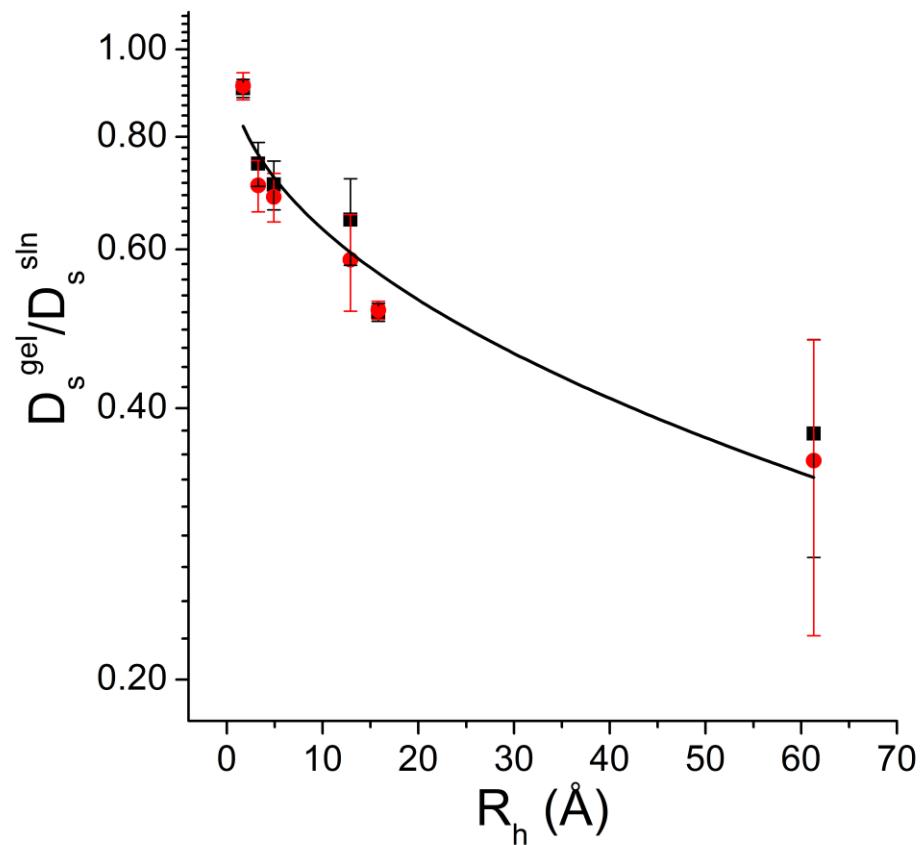


Figure 4.6 A semi-log plot of the relative self-diffusion coefficients of the investigated analytes measured in 10% (w/v) low-set curdlan gels (■) and high-set gels (●) at 25 °C.

In order to assess the possibility of restricted diffusion of solutes in the gels, the diffusion time (Δ) in the PFG pulse sequence was increased up to their longitudinal relaxation time (T_1) measured in the gels. For example, the diffusion time of the DXRB70k was varied from 20 to 1000 ms (graph shown in the Supporting Information section). As a consequence, the root mean square distance travelled by this solute along the field gradient ($\langle z^2 \rangle^{1/2}$) was increased from 0.8 to 5.5 μm . For all investigated diffusion times, similar D_s^{gel} and β are obtained. Since $\langle z^2 \rangle^{1/2}$ appears to scale linearly as a function of Δ for the whole self-diffusion coefficient distribution, the results suggest the absence of restricted diffusion on these scales. In addition, these self-diffusion experiments were carried out at 15 and 37 °C for PO₄ and G6P in the low-set gel (results not shown). The activation energy (E_a^{gel}) calculated from an Arrhenius-type plot of $\ln D_s^{gel}$ as a function of $1/\text{temperature}$ is 20.5 ± 0.6 and 21.0 ± 0.7 kJ/mol for PO₄ and G6P, respectively. These values are similar to those previously reported in the high-set gel.³⁰ We also verified that the method for solute loading did not influence the self-diffusion measurements. DXRB70k was incorporated during the gelation process or, alternatively, externally loaded to preformed gels. Comparable D_s^{gel} and β values are obtained for both loading approaches.

Table 4.1 Self-Diffusion in 10% (w/v) Curdlan Gels at 25 °C

Solute	In solution			Low-set gel			High-set gel		
	D_s^{sln}	β	R_h^a	D_s^{gel}	β	$\frac{D_s^{gel}}{D_s^{sln}}$	D_s^{gel}	β	$\frac{D_s^{gel}}{D_s^{sln}}$
	$\times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$	a.u.	Å	$\times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$	a.u.		$\times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$	a.u.	
HOD	190 ^b	-	1.7 ^c	172 ± 4	-	0.92 ± 0.02	173 ± 6	-	0.91 ± 0.03
PO ₄	75 ± 4 ³⁰	-	3.3	56 ± 1	-	0.75 ± 0.04	53 ± 2 ³⁰	-	0.72 ± 0.05
G6P ^d	50 ± 3 ³⁰	-	4.9	35.4 ± 0.6	-	0.71 ± 0.04	34.3 ± 0.5 ³⁰	-	0.69 ± 0.04
PolyPO ₄	19 ± 2	0.96 ± 0.02	13	12.3 ± 0.4	0.86 ± 0.01	0.65 ± 0.07	11.1 ± 0.7	0.86 ± 0.05	0.58 ± 0.04
PEG ^d	15.5 ± 0.3	0.93 ± 0.01	16	7.9 ± 0.1	0.83 ± 0.01	0.51 ± 0.01	8.0 ± 0.1	0.83 ± 0.01	0.51 ± 0.01
DXRB70k	4.0 ± 0.2	0.92 ± 0.02	61	1.5 ± 0.4	0.5 ± 0.1	0.4 ± 0.1	1.4 ± 0.5	0.40 ± 0.09	0.4 ± 0.1

^a In solution at 25 °C, determined from the Stokes-Einstein equation

^b Self-diffusion coefficient of a trace amount of HOD in D₂O³⁴

^c Van der Waals radius⁴²

^d Single experiment

4.4.3 Mutual Diffusion in Curdlan Hydrogels

Mutual-diffusion experiments were carried out for DXRB70k in both types of curdlan gels using the source/sink technique. Figure 4.7 illustrates a typical time-release profile recorded at 25 °C. Each release curve could be simulated using eq 4.4, assuming a single D_m^{gel} value, and the extracted D_m^{gel} values are summarized in Table 4.2. The mutual-diffusion coefficients measured in the gels are ~50% lower than the corresponding D_s^{gel} . No significant difference can be observed between the high-set and low-set gels.

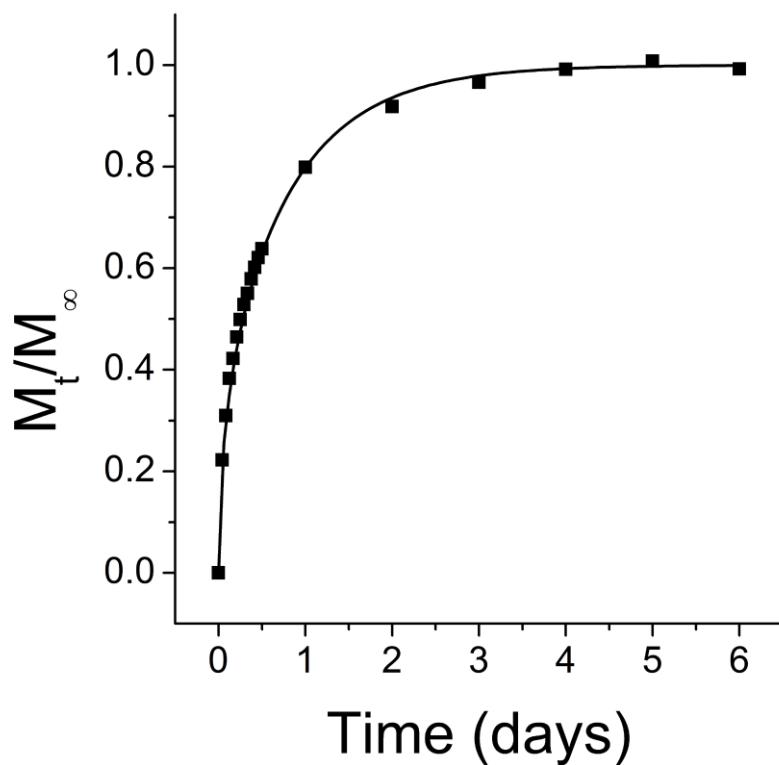


Figure 4.7 Release profile of DXRB70k from a 10% (w/v) low-set curdlan hydrogel at 25 °C. The solid line represents the best fit of eq 4.4.

Table 4.2 Mutual Diffusion of DXRB70k in 10% (w/v) Curdlan Gels at 25 °C

Solute	Low-set gel		High-set gel	
	D_m^{gel}	$\frac{D_m^{gel}}{D_s^{gel}}$	D_m^{gel}	$\frac{D_m^{gel}}{D_s^{gel}}$
	$\times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$		$\times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$	
DXRB70k	0.9 ± 0.1	0.6 ± 0.2	0.7 ± 0.2	0.5 ± 0.2

4.5 Discussion

The structural characterization of the fully hydrated curdlan hydrogels, carried out by FT-IR (FPA), eSEM and AFM imaging, provides a good description of the architecture of each type of hydrogel at different length scales. Low-set gels display multiple levels of architecture. The curdlan concentration varies at the microscopic level as an irregular pattern of large areas of polysaccharide-depleted and polysaccharide-enriched regions is observed. The size of these regions can reach up to one hundred microns. In addition, these gels include nanoscopic cavities. The architecture of the high-set gel is much more homogeneous than that of the low-set gel as the curdlan spatial distribution through the gel network is found fairly homogenous down to a length scale of 100 μm. At the micrometer scale, sponge-like heterogeneous structures with complex shapes are observed through the gels. Unfortunately, further details about the nanoscopic structure of the fully hydrated high-set gel could not be obtained by the imaging techniques used in this work for technical reasons. However, previous characterisation of the high-set curdlan gel by scanning electron microscopy (SEM) suggested the presence of nanopores with an average diameter of ~390 nm in the gel structure.³⁰ Previous SEM studies reported that the low-set gel is formed of dispersed fibrils whereas the high-set gel is composed of interconnected aggregated microfibrils.⁴³ Our work shows that differences at higher length scales are also seen in the architecture of these hydrated gels.

A significant decrease of the relative self-diffusion coefficient is measured in both types of curdlan gels, even for the small analytes like PO₄ and G6P. The reduction obtained for the small analytes is similar to previous findings reported for other hydrogel systems.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶ When D_s^{gel} is plotted as a function of M_w (graph shown in the Supporting

Information section), the relationship can be described by a power law ($D_s^{gel} \propto M_w^{-n}$) function with a scaling exponent (n) of 0.58 ± 0.02 and 0.60 ± 0.01 for the low-set and high-set gel respectively. Although molecules of different chemical natures and charges were investigated, it appears that the decrease of the diffusion coefficient can be essentially described in terms of the size of the diffusing molecules. The scaling exponent corresponds to 0.5, a value associated with the dilute regime;¹² such a situation also exists for analytes of similar size in different hydrogels.^{9,45,47-51} The D_s^{gel}/D_s^{sln} ratio varies as a function of the analyte size as shown in Figure 4.6. A single stretched exponential function ($D_s^{gel}/D_s^{sln} \propto \exp(-R_h^{0.48 \pm 0.05})$) could be used to describes the size dependence of all investigated analytes in both systems. Such relationship has been previously proposed by the empirical equation of Phillies.⁵² This equation has been shown to provide a good description for the diffusion of a series of analytes of various sizes in other polymer gel systems^{53,54} and seems to be also appropriate for the systems investigated here. The other parameters of the diffusion model, i.e. the polymer concentration and its molecular weight, are the same in both types of curdlan gels which is consistent with the similar D_s^{gel}/D_s^{sln} decrease observed in both cases.

In parallel with the decrease of the relative self-diffusion, an increase in the polydispersity of the distribution of self-diffusion coefficients in the gels is observed as a function of the analyte size. The PFG NMR measurements carried out on HOD, PO₄ and G6P lead to linear echo-attenuation curves in solution and in gels. In solution, the β values, associated with the width of the distribution of PolyPO₄, PEG and DXRB70k, are found close to unity and reflect the limited polydispersity of these samples. The β value close to 1 obtained for PEG is consistent with the low PI (1.03) determined from mass spectrometry and is in good agreement with a similar result previously reported for a PEG sample with a PI of 1.06.¹⁷ Similar or higher β values are obtained for PolyPO₄ and DXRB70k, consistent with a low PI. The distributions of the self-diffusion coefficients of these macromolecule samples are broader in hydrogels than in solution; a phenomenon likely caused by heterogeneities in the gel network. In the work of Nydén et al,⁴⁵ the self-diffusion coefficient polydispersity of a series of PEO diffusing in an ethyl(hydroxyethyl)cellulose (EHEC) matrix was also shown to be affected by a gel

structure as, for a given concentration, the distributions measured in the gels were wider than that measured in solution. A more pronounced deviation from the monoexponential decay was observed as a function of increasing the macromolecule size. Le Feunteun and Mariette¹⁷ have also reported similar polydispersity effects for large PEG molecules in casein gels. In their work, the β value was also found to decrease as a function of the gel concentration as it led to a more heterogeneous environment. For our series of analytes, the dependence of β upon the analyte size may be rationalized in terms of the gel volume probed during a self-diffusion experiment, as previously proposed by Nydén et al.⁴⁵ The diffusion coefficient polydispersity could be caused by the heterogeneous nature of the gel sampled by the various molecules during PFG NMR measurements. As the size of the diffusing molecules increases, the path travelled by the analytes during the PFG NMR experiments becomes smaller. On shorter length scales, the self-diffusion coefficient of individual molecule becomes more sensitive to its local environment and is no longer representative of the whole gel network. Therefore, the contribution of individual molecule to the self-diffusion measurements over the whole sample leads to a distribution of D_s^{gel} . In our systems, HOD, PO₄ and G6P typically travel a $\langle z^2 \rangle^{1/2}$ of 25 μm or more during the PFG NMR experiments. The $\langle z^2 \rangle^{1/2}$ travelled by the DXRB70k molecules is $\sim 0.8 \mu\text{m}$, which is proposed to be smaller than the scale length of the relevant structural heterogeneities of the gels. Consequently, the environment sampled by individual molecule is not representative of the whole gel architecture, leading to a broad self-diffusion coefficient distribution. Alternatively other phenomenon may contribute to the dependence of β upon the analyte size. It is possible that large analytes experience some local restrictions that are not sensed by small ones, an explanation that would be consistent with the increased sensitivity of larger analytes toward microstructure as reported earlier.¹⁴⁻¹⁸

During the mutual-diffusion experiments, most molecules travel macroscopic distances through the gel network and these conditions allow them to probe efficiently the whole types of environments existing by the hydrogel architecture. The self-diffusion and mutual-diffusion coefficients in high-set curdlan gels of small molecules such as PO₄ and G6P were shown to be equivalent.³⁰ In this work, we examined whether this similarity holds for DXRB70k, which is considerably larger. Despite the

relatively broad self-diffusion coefficient distributions measured in the gels for DXRB70k, the time-release profiles can be fitted reasonably well with a Fickian model that includes a single D_m^{gel} . This outcome likely reflects the averaged diffusion associated with the various restrictions in these gels. For this large molecule, D_m^{gel} is smaller than D_s^{gel} , a finding observed on both types of curdlan gels. It is proposed that this observation is linked to the width of the self-diffusion coefficient distribution. When all the molecules experience diffusion in the different environments of the gel during the self-diffusion experiments, the self-diffusion coefficient distribution is narrow. In the systems for which the self-diffusion coefficient distribution is relatively wide, individual molecule is strictly representative of its more or less surrounding environment. On longer length scales, as those probed during mutual-diffusion experiments, the effective diffusion coefficient should then be representative of the whole diversity of environments of the gels. In these cases, the regions of the gel causing the strongest diffusion restrictions appear to act like rate limiting steps for the overall transport rate through the gels as D_m^{gel} is smaller than D_s^{gel} .

In this work, the low-set and high-set curdlan gels were prepared at the same polysaccharide concentration in order to create the same amount of impenetrable barrier to the diffusing molecules. The transport properties measured in the 10% (w/v) low-set and high-set curdlan gels do not reflect the microscopic architectural differences observed between the two gels nor their different polysaccharide chain conformations. Similar self-diffusion and mutual-diffusion coefficients were systematically measured in both types of curdlan gels for the whole series of investigated analytes. In addition, similar E_a^{gel} were determined for PO₄ and G6P in both types of curdlan gels. We must then conclude that the microscopic architecture of these hydrogels has a very limited impact on their transport properties. The interactions responsible for the decrease of the diffusion rate in the gels must lie at a length scale smaller than those characterized by the imaging techniques used in this work. Such conclusion is in agreement with previous works that indicated that for κ -carrageenan,^{14,15} alginate¹⁶ and casein^{17,18} hydrogels, the correlations between the structure modifications and the transport properties were established at the nanoscopic length scale.

4.6 Acknowledgments

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4.8 Supporting Information

In order to provide a more detail picture of each type of curdlan gel structure to the reader, additional eSEM and AFM images are presented in sections 4.8.1 and 4.8.2.

4.8.1 eSEM Imaging of the Curdlan Gels

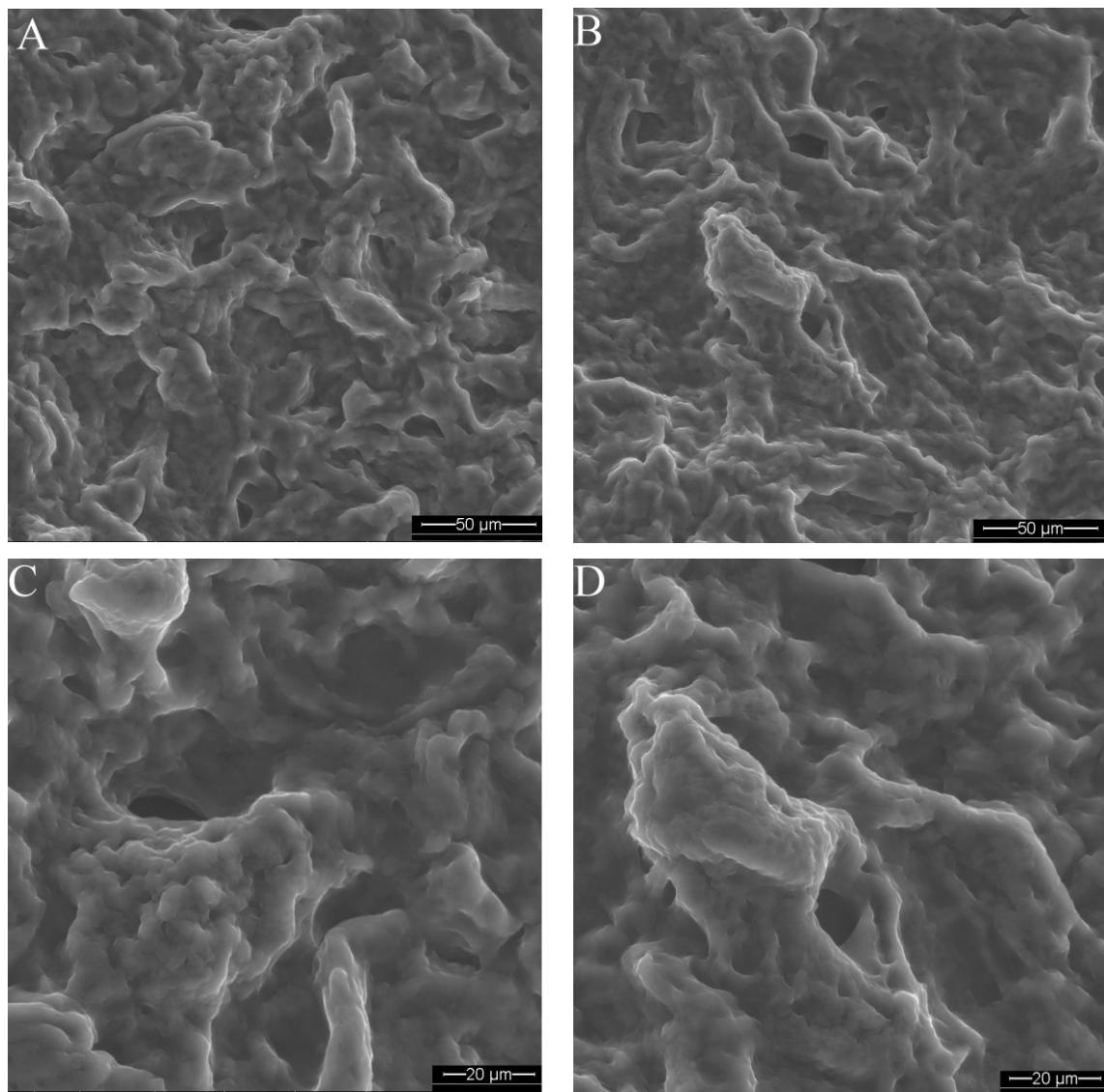


Figure SI4.1 eSEM image of a 10% (w/v) low-set curdlan gel at (A,B) 1000 \times and (C,D) 2000 \times .

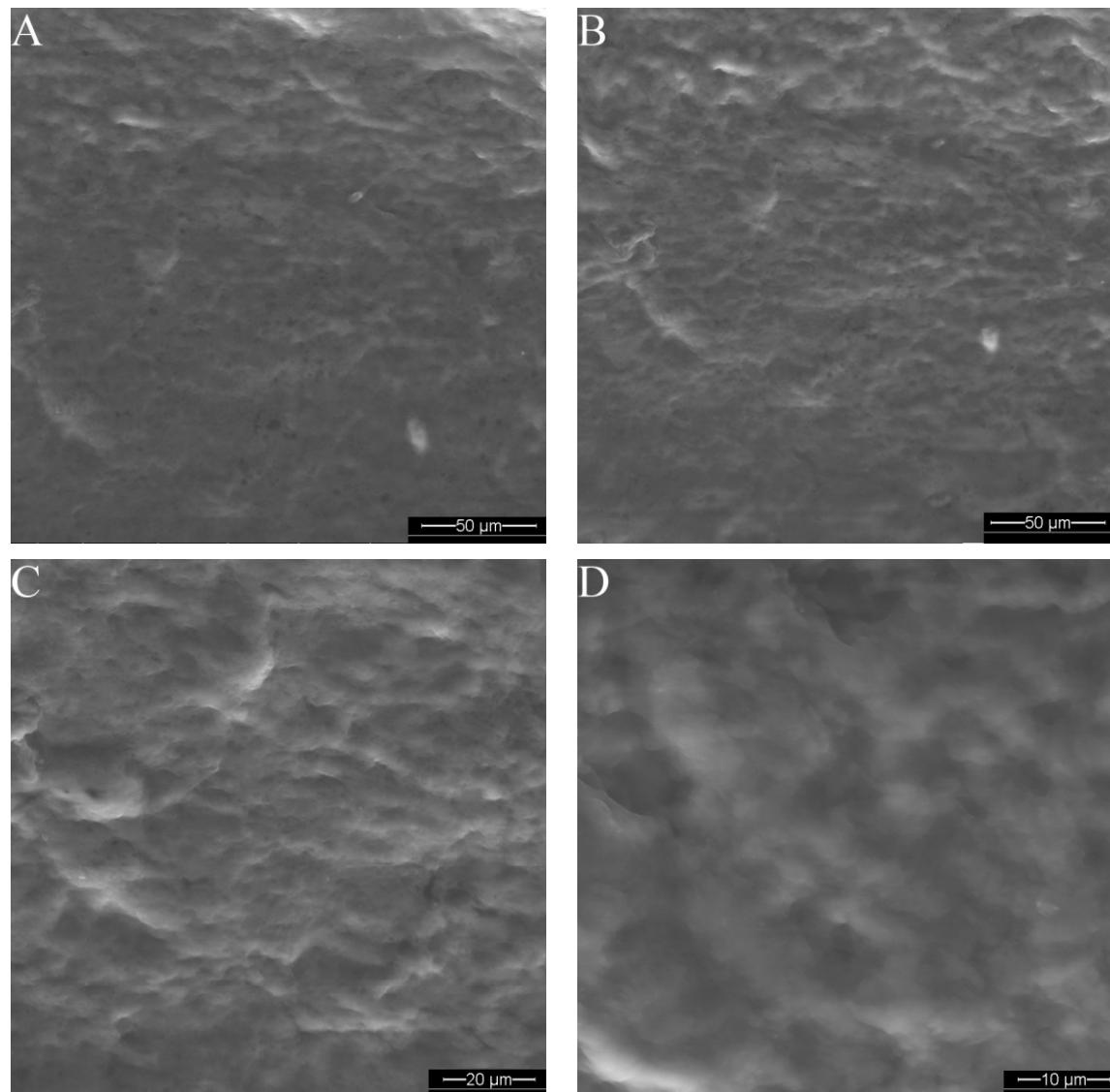


Figure SI4.2 eSEM image of a 10% (w/v) high-set curdlan gel at (A,B) 1000 \times , (C) 2000 \times , and (D) 4000 \times .

4.8.2 AFM Imaging of the Low-Set Gel

A wide range of different topographies (cavities, smooth areas, lumps...) can be seen from AFM imaging performed at different locations on the gel surface.

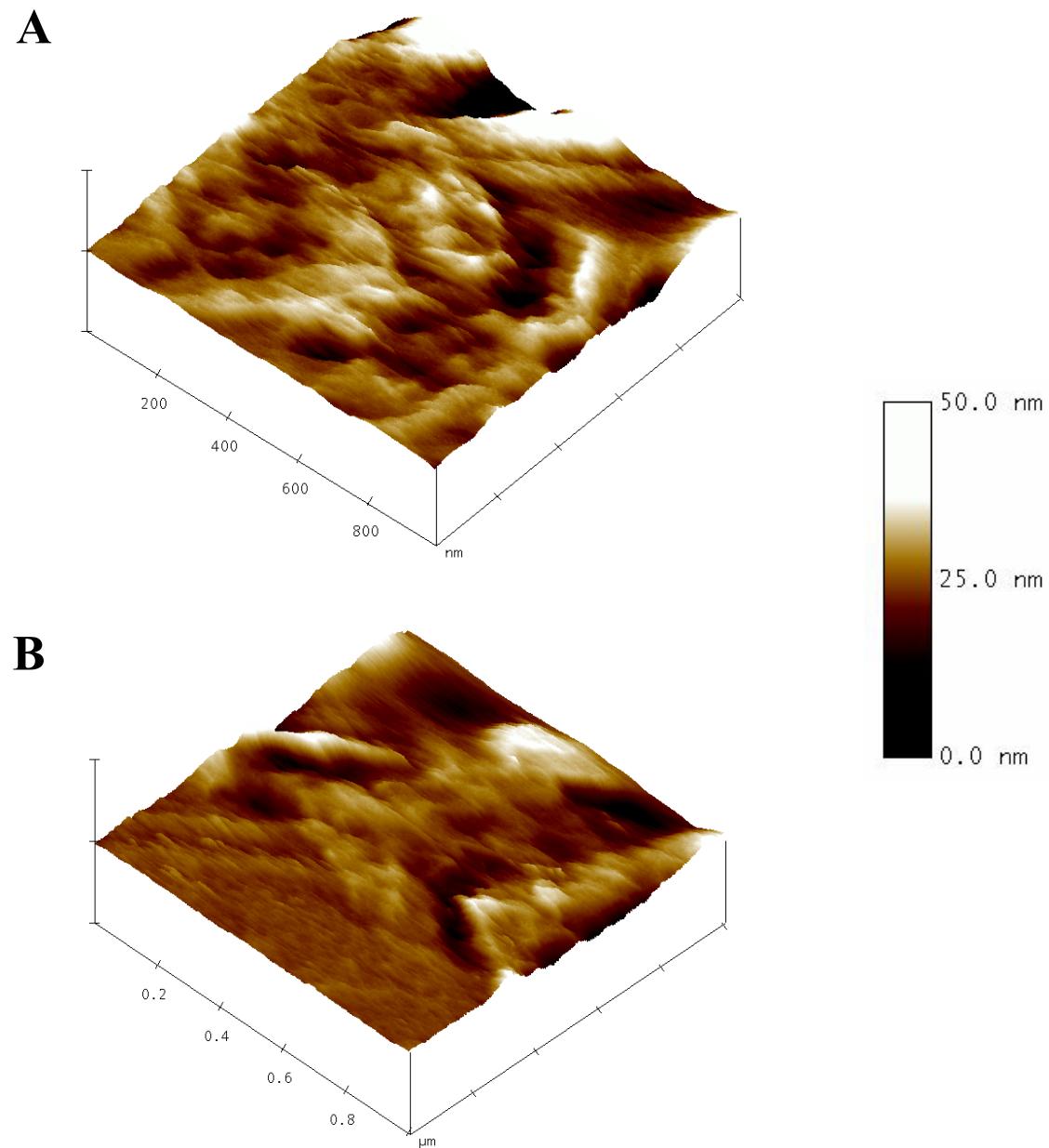


Figure SI4.3 1×1 μm topographic AFM images of a 10% (w/v) low-set curdlan gel in a tapping mode.

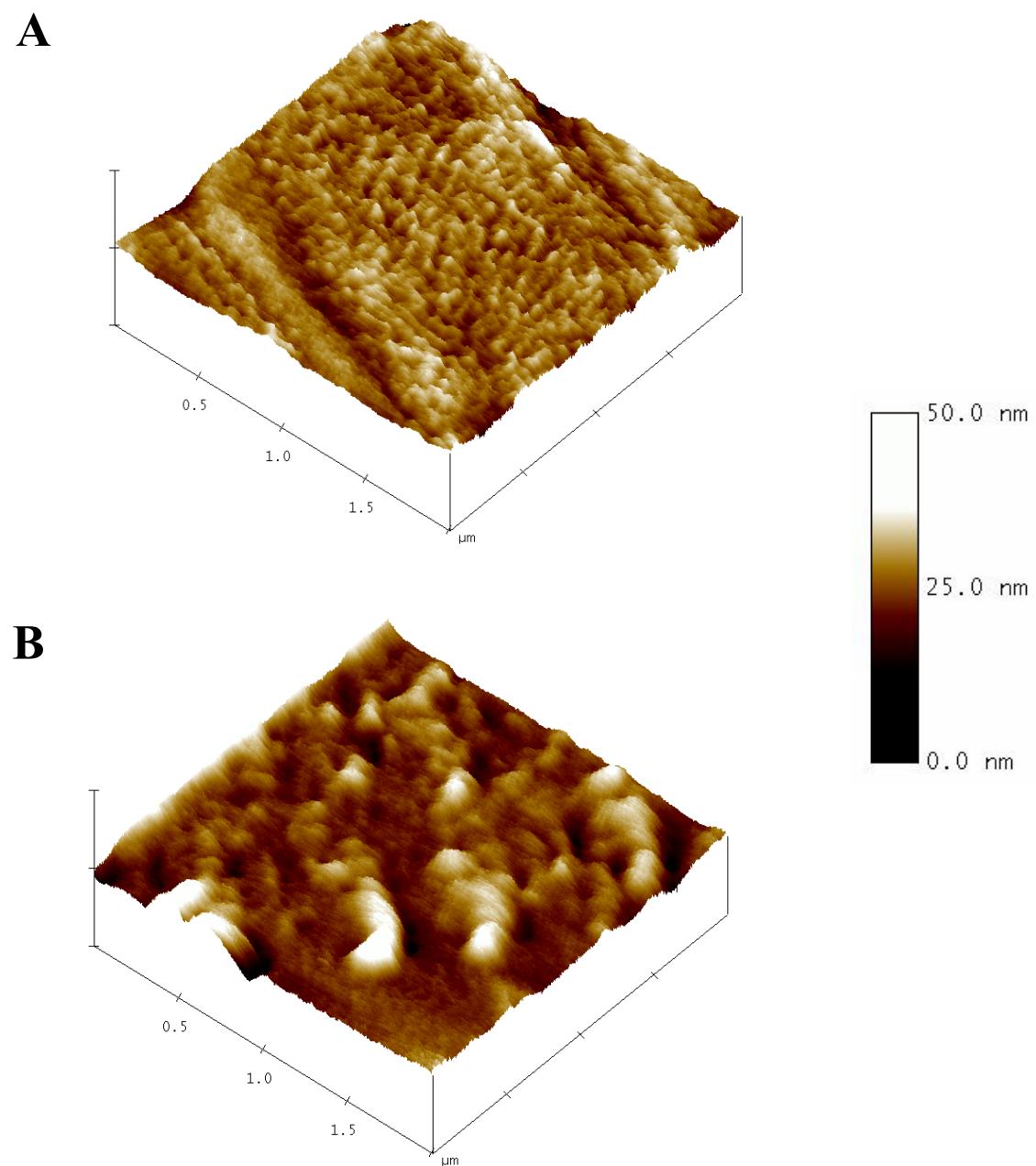


Figure SI4.4 2x2 μm topographic AFM images of a 10% (w/v) low-set curdlan gel in a tapping mode.

4.8.3 Evaluation of the Diffusion Regime in Solution and in the Curdlan Gels

The evaluation of the diffusion regime, based on the value of the diffusion exponent, was carried out for the investigated analytes in both types of the curdlan gels. The diffusion in both gels as well as in solution is in good agreement with the so called Rouse-Zimm regime in which the molecules diffuse in a random coil conformation as in a diluted solution.

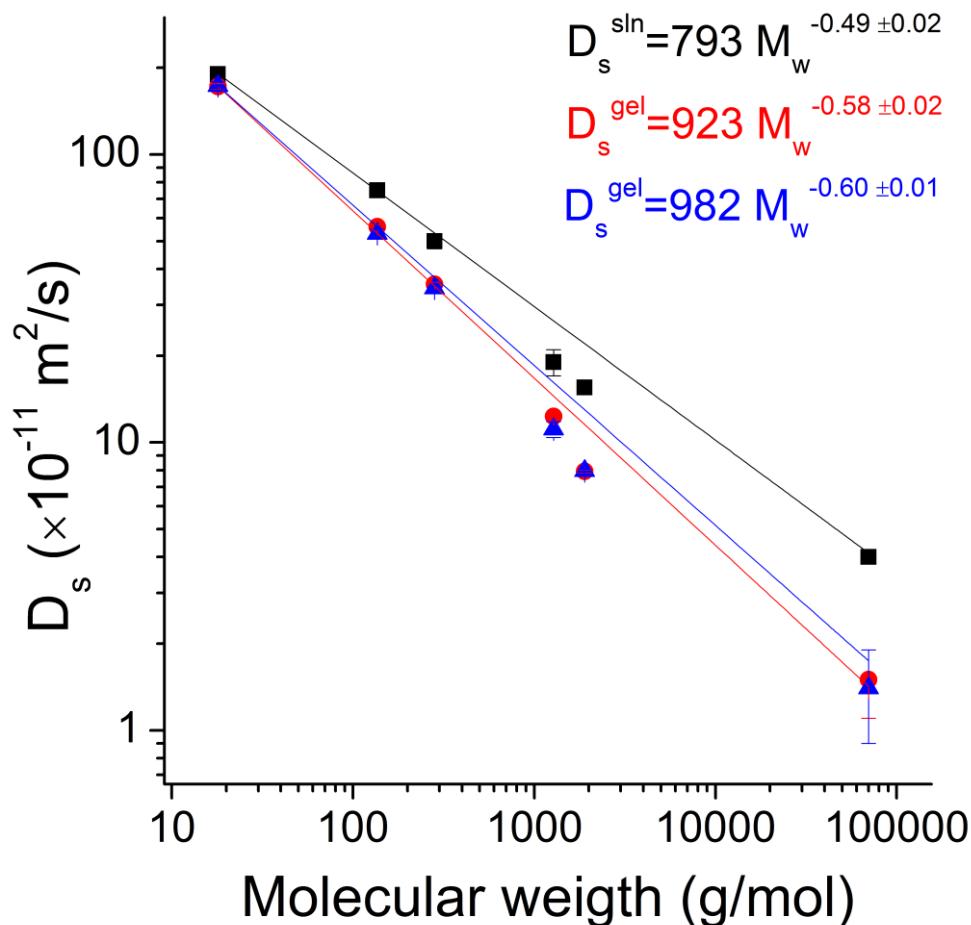


Figure SI4.5 Log-log plot of the self-diffusion in (■) aqueous solution, in the 10% (w/v) (●) low-set, and (▲) high-set curdlan gel of the investigated analytes at 25 °C. Each solid line represents the best fit of the power law $D_s = Cst \times M_w^{-n}$.

4.8.4 Self-Diffusion of DXRB70k at Various Observation Times

Self-diffusion experiments in the gels were carried out at different observation times in order to assess the possibility of restricted diffusion. As illustrated below, similar echo attenuation curves were obtained at all length scales probed by PFG NMR.

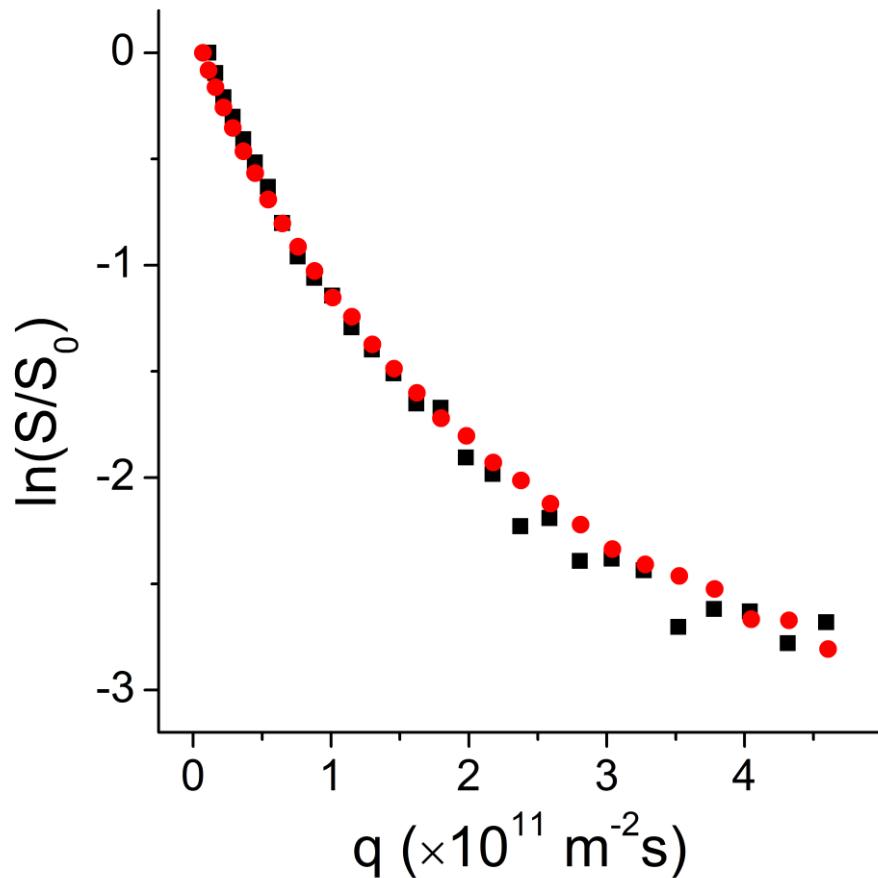


Figure SI4.6 Self-diffusion of DXRB70k in a 10% (w/v) low-set curdlan gel at 25 °C with an observation time (Δ) of 20 ms (●) and 1000 ms (■).

Chapitre 5

Comparison between Nuclear Magnetic Resonance Profiling and the Source/Sink Approach for Characterizing Drug Diffusion in Hydrogel Matrices

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Submitted

5.1 Abstract

The characterization of transport properties is an essential step toward the development of new materials for controlled drug delivery. The drug diffusion coefficient in a given matrix is a key factor for predicting its release rate. In this work, we compare ^{31}P nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) profiling for obtaining the mutual-diffusion coefficient (D_m^{gel}) of a drug in hydrogel with results obtained from conventional source/sink experiments. Despite the fact that NMR profiling is a powerful approach for measuring the transport properties, it is rarely used for characterizing drug diffusion in gel matrices in pharmaceutical sciences. This work provides an illustration of the applicability of this technique and highlights its advantages for a drug release system. The comparison with the results obtained from the source/sink experiment clearly establishes the validity of the NMR profiling approach. Alendronate was used as a model drug while curdlan, a gel-forming bacterial polysaccharide, served as a model biomaterial. The determined D_m^{gel} value ($5.6 \pm 0.3 \times 10^{-10} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$) agrees with the one obtained from a conventional source/sink experiment ($5.4 \pm 0.5 \times 10^{-10} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$). In addition, the alendronate self-diffusion coefficient in solution (D_s^{soln}) and in the hydrogel (D_s^{gel}) was measured on the same system using pulsed field gradient (PFG) ^{31}P NMR.

These supplementary parameters provided a more detailed characterization of the drug transport properties in the gel matrix.

5.2 Introduction

The determination of drug release kinetics is fundamental in the development of new materials used for controlled drug delivery. Diffusion is usually considered as the main transport mechanism involved in the release of an entrapped drug from a given matrix.^{1,2} The mutual diffusion, which takes place in the presence of an analyte concentration gradient,³ is associated with the *in vivo* drug release. The determination of the solute mutual-diffusion coefficient (D_m) is a general way to quantify its release rate. Mutual diffusion is well described by Fick's laws⁴ and the knowledge of a drug mutual-diffusion coefficient in a given material allows the prediction of its release from matrices with various geometries. There are different approaches for measuring the mutual-diffusion coefficients of drugs in hydrogels (D_m^{gel}) as reviewed elsewhere.⁵ The most common method is probably the source/sink experiment in which a drug-loaded hydrogel is immersed in a drug-free environment. The amount of drug released as a function of time is monitored online or via aliquots taken at different time intervals. Alternatively, concentration profiling leads to the characterization of D_m^{gel} . In these experiments, the drug is released from a drug-loaded material (or penetrates into a drug-free material) for a given period of time and then the drug concentration profile in the material is determined. D_m^{gel} is calculated by fitting the reconstructed concentration profile using the appropriate mathematical diffusion model.⁴ The concentration profile can be determined by slicing the gel followed by the quantification of the solute concentration in each slice.⁶ Alternatively, drug concentration profiles in hydrogels can be obtained by non-destructive and non-invasive concentration profiling techniques based on various spectroscopic approaches like fluorescence microscopy,⁷ refractive index imaging⁸ and UV-VIS imaging.⁹ Despite its great potential, NMR profiling has been very rarely used for characterizing the drug release from soft materials. Analogous profiling/imaging NMR techniques have been commonly used in other areas to characterize, for example, the diffusion in sand,¹⁰ zeolites,¹¹ gels,¹²⁻¹⁴ rocks,¹⁵ food, and cement.¹⁶ However its use has been very limited for drug delivery from soft materials, a

situation likely associated with the lack of relevant examples and comparisons with conventional methods. To the best of our knowledge, the characterization of drug diffusion in a hydrogel by NMR profiling has only been investigated for trifluoroacetamide in poloxamer and N-isopropylacrylamide/acrylamide copolymer hydrogels.^{17,18} In these experiments, the setups were actually significantly different from those typically used for source/sink experiments: the release experiments were carried out on a drug-loaded hydrogel in contact with a drug-free hydrogel in order to simplify the data simulation. The reported values were not validated by conventional techniques, preventing a direct comparison between the different approaches.

In the present manuscript, we present a comparison of drug release experiments carried out by NMR profiling with conventional source/sink measurements in order to illustrate the applicability and the strength of the NMR approach for the characterization of controlled drug release materials. Alendronate, used as a model drug, belongs to the bisphosphonate family and is currently used in the treatment of osteoporosis and Paget disease.¹⁹ It was selected because it contains phosphorus atoms, allowing the use of ³¹P NMR, which simplified the experimental conditions. Curdlan was used to prepare non-swellable hydrogel matrices. This Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved bacterial polysaccharide²⁰ is essentially composed of repeating units of β -(1-3)-D-glucose.²¹ It forms a thermogel upon heating to 80-130 °C^{22,23} and its potential as a suitable soft material for controlled drug release has already been reported.²⁴ In order to provide a detailed description of the investigated system, the results are compared with the self-diffusion coefficient (D_s^{gel}) of alendronate in the curdlan hydrogels, measured by pulsed-field gradient (PFG) NMR, using the very same experimental setup. PFG NMR is a technique that has been used to characterize self-diffusion of drugs in hydrogels.⁵ Self-diffusion is a transport mechanism essentially associated with intermolecular collisions caused by the Brownian motions and takes place in media with a homogenous solute concentration.³ Despite the different conditions associated with the measurements of self-diffusion and mutual diffusion,^{13,14} D_s^{gel} values are believed to carry useful information for predicting drug release profiles from hydrogel matrices. For this reason, these two kinds of diffusion are compared and their usefulness for predicting drug release is discussed. The diffusion coefficients of

alendronate in curdlan gels have been incorporated into a series of analytes that was discussed in terms of the relationship between D_s^{gel} and D_m^{gel} .¹⁴ In the present manuscript, these values are provided as a relevant example for pharmaceutical systems and the comparison with the results obtained from well established source/sink experiments substantiates the approach and provide a familiar reference frame.

5.3 Experimental

5.3.1 Materials

Curdlan was purchased from Wako Pure Chemical Industries (Osaka, Japan) and used without further purification. Tris [hydroxymethyl]aminomethane (Tris), sodium azide, sodium chloride, potassium dihydrogen phosphate, copper sulphate and ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA), with a minimum purity of 99 %, were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St-Louis, MO). Hydrochloric acid (ACS purity grade) was purchased from Anachemia (Montréal, QC, Canada). Alendronate sodium trihydrate was a generous gift from Technodrugs & Intermediates Pvt Ltd. (Andheri, Mumbai, India). Milli-Q water was used for all preparations.

5.3.2 Methods

^{31}P -NMR Profiling The gel preparation, NMR profiling and PFG NMR protocols are similar to the one reported earlier.¹⁴ Briefly, the gel was prepared by incubating a 10 % (w/v) hydrated curdlan suspension, prepared in a 10 mM Tris/HCl buffer, pH 7.2, containing 1 mM NaN_3 and 100 μM EDTA, at 95 °C for 8 hours. After cooling, the gel was incubated in a large volume of Tris/HCl buffer containing 25 mM alendronate. The drug-loaded hydrogel was shaped into a cylinder (18 mm of diameter and 20 mm high) using a homemade cutter, and was then inserted into a 20 mm NMR tube (inside diameter of 18 mm and a length of 80 mm). The tube was sealed at both ends with homemade Teflon stoppers. The sample was then placed into the microimaging probe Micro 2.5 ($^{31}\text{P}/^1\text{H}$ 20 mm). A Bruker AV400 NMR spectrometer operating at 161 MHz for ^{31}P was used for the measurements. The temperature (T) of the sample was set to 37 °C using the gradient coil cooling unit (BCU20).²⁵ At time equal to 0, an iso-osmotic phosphorus-free supernatant (10 mM Tris/HCl buffer, pH 7.2, containing 1 mM NaN_3 ,

100 μM EDTA and 29 mM of NaCl) pre-heated at 37 °C was introduced on top of the hydrogel to create an alendronate concentration gradient. Following this addition, ^{31}P one-dimension (1D) profiles were acquired, in an automated mode, along the z axis using a spin-echo imaging sequence²⁶ over a field of view of 50 mm, split into 512 data points (98 $\mu\text{m}/\text{pixel}$). 288 scans were coadded for each profile (2 h) over a total period of 12 h.

The release experiments were designed to meet the conditions of the diffusion model derived for two semi-infinite media having different mutual-diffusion coefficients⁴ i.e. the one in the solution (D_m^{sln}) and the one in the gel (D_m^{gel}). In our experimental setup, the gel and the supernatant had lengths (20, and 35 mm respectively) much larger than the region where the concentration gradients took place (typically 10 mm) and could both be considered as semi-infinite media. At time (t) equal 0, the concentration through the gel (C_{gel}) was uniform and denoted C_0 while the concentration in the solution was 0. The concentration gradient profiles of the analyte in the gel could be described as a function of time and position (x) using eq 5.1, developed by J. Crank⁴

Equation 5.1

$$\frac{C_{\text{gel}}}{C_0} = \left(\frac{1}{1 + k \left(\frac{D_m^{\text{sln}}}{D_m^{\text{gel}}} \right)^{1/2}} \right) \left[1 + \left(k \left(\frac{D_m^{\text{sln}}}{D_m^{\text{gel}}} \right)^{1/2} \right) \operatorname{erf} \left(\frac{x}{2(D_m^{\text{gel}} t)^{1/2}} \right) \right]$$

where

$$k = \frac{(C_0/C_{\text{int}}) - 1}{(D_m^{\text{sln}}/D_m^{\text{gel}})^{1/2}}$$

and C_{int} is the analyte concentration at the gel/supernatant interface (i.e., at $x = 0$). In our case, the intensity of the ^{31}P -NMR signal was considered to be directly proportional to the concentration at each position, where $x > 0$ corresponded to the gel and $x < 0$, to the supernatant. Typical concentration profiles are represented in Figure 5.1.

The detailed processing of the concentration profiles is described elsewhere.¹⁴ Briefly, each profile was offset to zero and divided by the average value of the NMR

signal in the last millimetres of the first profile to obtain C_{gel}/C_0 . All the concentration profiles in the gel (i.e $x > 0$), obtained at a different times during a release experiment (generally five profiles, representing more than 400 data points), were simultaneously fitted using the nonlinear curve fitting routine of Origin (OriginLab, version 8) where D_m^{gel} was the single floating parameter. The mutual-diffusion coefficient of the diffusing molecules in the supernatant (D_m^{sln}) was considered equal to its D_s^{sln} .²⁷ The time associated with each profile corresponded to the middle of its recording period. C_{int} was located at the point where all concentration profiles merged. The reported diffusion coefficient uncertainties include the uncertainty associated with the interface location.

Source/Sink Release The experimental setup was designed to fulfill the conditions of a three dimensional (3D) drug release from a disk whose surfaces are maintained at zero concentration (i.e., perfect sink conditions). The drug-loaded gel was shaped into a thick disk (16 mm diameter and 6 mm high) using a homemade cutter. The drug-loaded gel was then equilibrated at 37 °C in a Tris/HCl buffer solution containing alendronate (25 mM). At $t = 0$, the drug-loaded gel disk, carefully patted to wipe off the alendronate-containing buffer on its surface, was transferred into a reservoir containing 35 mL of preheated iso-osmotic drug-free buffer. The drug-loaded hydrogel was suspended in the solution using a cage made of thin plastic sticks, to allow a uniform drug release from its entire surface. The solution was stirred to meet good sink conditions. The whole experimental setup was maintained at 37 ± 1 °C. Aliquots of 50 µL were withdrawn every 15 min for the first 3 h and then every hour, over a total release period of 8 h. The withdrawn volumes were replaced by a corresponding amount of drug-free buffer. The alendronate concentration was determined using a colorimetric method described elsewhere.²⁸ Briefly 50 µL of a CuSO₄ solution (5 mM) was added to each aliquot and the absorbance of the alendronate-Cu complex was recorded at 240 nm, using a Cary UV-VIS spectrophotometer (Varian). The alendronate release profile was described as a function of time using eq 5.2, derived by Fu et al²⁹

Equation 5.2

$$\frac{M_t}{M_\infty} = 1 - \sum_{n=1}^{10} \frac{4}{a^2 \alpha_n} \exp(-D_m^{gel} \alpha_n^2 t) \times \sum_{m=0}^{10} \frac{8}{l^2 \beta_m^2} \exp(-D_m^{gel} \beta_m^2 t)$$

where

$$\beta = \frac{(2m+1)\pi}{l}$$

and M_t is the amount of released drug at a given time (t), M_∞ is the amount of released drug at an infinite time, α_n are the positive roots of zero-order Bessel function ($J_0(a\alpha_n) = 0$), a the radius of the disk and l its thickness. The alendronate concentration measured during the last 2 h of each experiment was relatively constant and was considered to correspond to M_∞ . D_m^{gel} was the only fitting parameter in eq 5.2. The reported value is the average of independent triplicates and the associated uncertainty is the standard deviation.

Self-diffusion measurements using PFG NMR The self-diffusion coefficient of alendronate in solution (D_s^{sol}) was measured using the double-stimulated-echo³⁰ pulse sequence which compensates for putative convection. In gels, D_s^{gel} were measured using the stimulated-echo³¹ sequence since the convection was found negligible and a better signal-to-noise ratio was obtained.¹⁴ In both cases, trapezoidal gradient pulses of 2 ms and interpulse delays of 300 ms were used. The self-diffusion coefficients were obtained by fitting the variation of the echo intensity as a function of the gradient strength. Typically, 16 scans were co-added for a given gradient strength and 16 gradient magnitudes were used for each attenuation curve. Independent measurements were carried out along the x, y and z axis. The reported D_s values are obtained from the average of these measurements along different directions and the associated uncertainties represent the standard deviations.

5.4 Results and Discussion

Figure 5.1 presents the alendronate concentration profiles obtained in the curdlan hydrogels, as measured by ^{31}P -NMR. The initial profile (Figure 5.1a) was recorded in the absence of supernatant. The left side of the 1D image corresponds to ambient air and the ^{31}P NMR signal is 0. The sharp signal increase corresponds to the gel interface while the right side of the profile represents the drug-loaded hydrogel. Small distortions were sometimes observed at the gel/air interface of the first profile (Figure 5.1a). They are likely caused by the interface roughness and the small amount (approx 200 μL) of excess liquid left on top of the gel to prevent any drying before the release experiment. The flat NMR signal between $0 \text{ mm} < x < 10 \text{ mm}$ establishes the uniform alendronate concentration through the whole gel. This validation confirms the fulfilment of the required initial conditions of the diffusion model. The next profiles (Figure 5.1b-e) are typical 1D images recorded during a release experiment. In the first millimeters of the gel region, the alendronate concentration decreases as a function of time: a consequence of the drug release. This depletion is counterbalanced by alendronate enrichment in the supernatant region. It can be observed that the alendronate concentration at the gel/supernatant interface remained constant with time, in agreement with the diffusion model used for the data analysis. A concentration discontinuity was observed at the gel/supernatant interfaces since the alendronate signal is slightly smaller than expected in the gel; this is likely associated with the excluded volume occupied by the polysaccharide. This has, however, no impact on our diffusion characterization since the D_m^{gel} values were determined from the simulation of the alendronate concentration profiles in the gel region only. A mean D_m^{gel} value of $5.6 \pm 0.3 \times 10^{-10} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ was obtained. As seen in Figure 5.1, the fitted curves reproduce well the entire dataset. This result confirms that Fickian diffusion is the main phenomenon responsible for alendronate release from the curdlan gel and validates the selected diffusion model, including the assumption that D_m^{gel} is constant as a function of time and space.

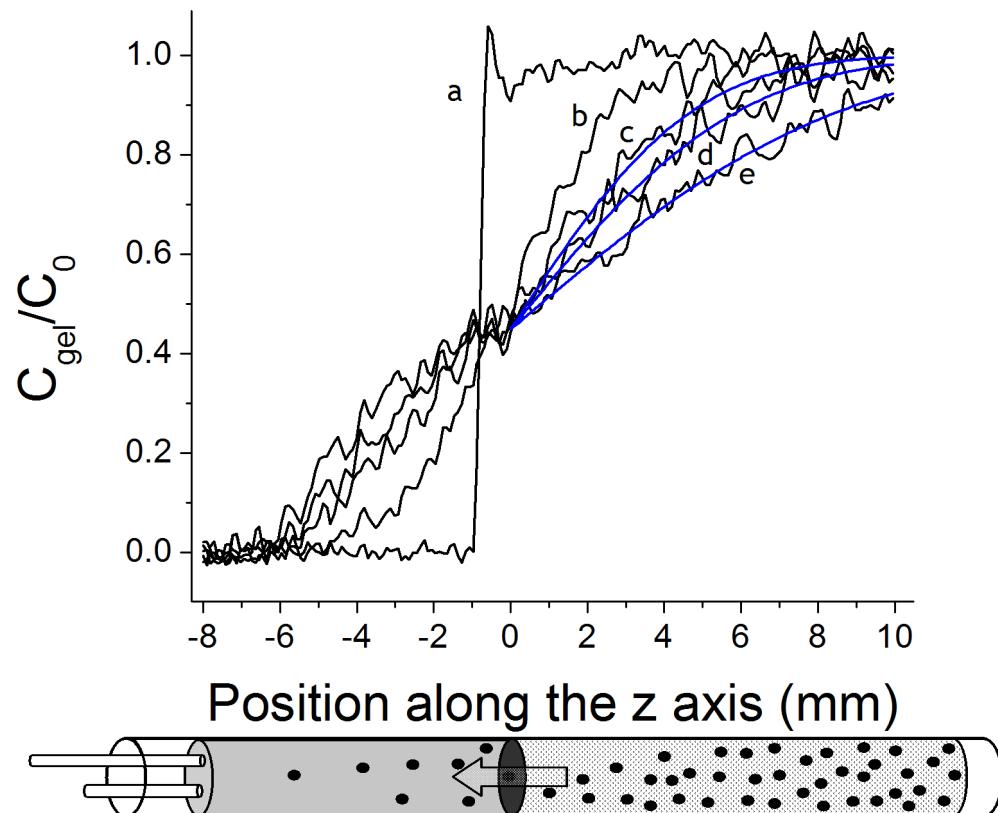


Figure 5.1 Concentration profiling using 1D ^{31}P NMR imaging. The drug-loaded hydrogel (a) before the release experiment. The release profiles after (b) 1.5, (c) 3.5, (d) 5.5, and (e) 11.5 hours. Profiles at intermediate time were omitted for clarity. The best fit of eq 5.1 is shown in blue.

The release of alendronate was, for comparison purposes, characterized using the source/sink approach. Figure 5.2 shows the time-release profile of alendronate from curdlan hydrogel and the best fit obtained with eq 5.2. A mean D_m^{gel} value of $5.4 \pm 0.5 \times 10^{-10} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ was inferred. This result agrees well, within experimental errors, with the value obtained by NMR profiling.

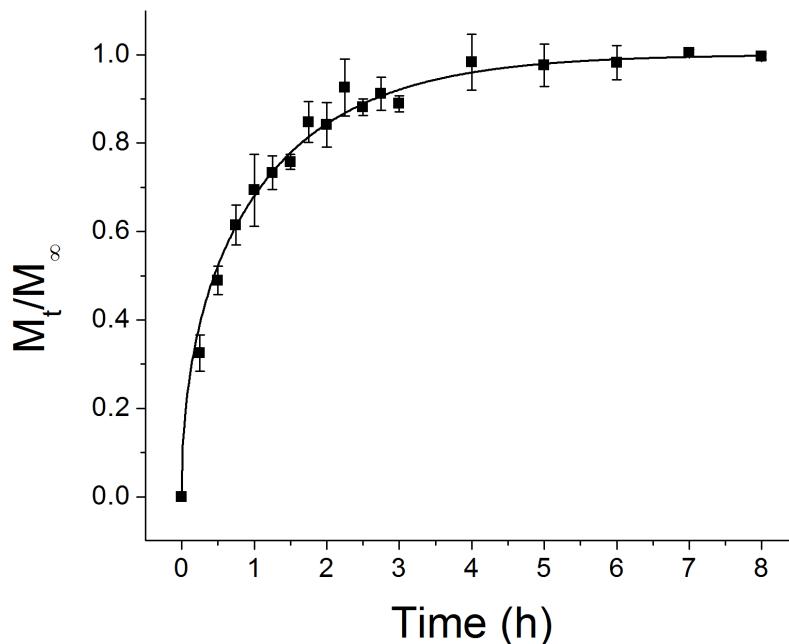


Figure 5.2 The alendronate release profile from a gel disk at 37 °C using the source/sink method. The solid line represents the best fit of eq 5.2.

In the literature, the characterization of the drug release mechanism is often carried out using the well-known Peppas function described by eq 5.3³²

Equation 5.3

$$\frac{M_t}{M_\infty} = kt^n$$

where k is a constant specific to the drug-hydrogel system and n the diffusion exponent which is characteristic of the drug-release mechanism. The alendronate release curves were also simulated using eq 5.3 (fit not shown). For the source/sink experiment, a n value of 0.44 ± 0.01 was obtained, a result in good agreement with the expected value of 0.43 for pure Fickian diffusion in a gel disk.³² Peppas function could also be used to analyse the NMR profiles. The amount of released drug at a given time (M_t) was

estimated by the difference between the initial integrated signal in the gel, and that obtained after a time t . The n value resulting from the fit of eq 5.3 was 0.57 ± 0.06 , a results also in good agreement with the expected value of 0.50 for Fickian diffusion from a gel slab.³² Despite the fact that the diffusion exponent is believed to carry useful information about the drug-release mechanism, recent work suggested that this parameter is time-dependent and, consequently, not always reliable.³³ The NMR profiling allowed validating in a more convincing manner that the alendronate release was essentially Fickian by the fact that several profiles, obtained at different time, could be adequately reproduced by eq 5.1, inferred from Fick's laws.

Finally, PFG NMR was used to measure the self-diffusion coefficient of alendronate in solution and in the curdlan hydrogel. In solution, D_s^{sln} was $7.06 \pm 0.01 \times 10^{-10} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ and this value was independent of the alendronate concentration in our working range (from 2.5 to 25 mM). As summarized in Table 5.1, D_s^{gel} of alendronate in a 10% (w/v) high-set curdlan hydrogel was $5.3 \pm 0.1 \times 10^{-10} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$, a value similar to the D_m^{gel} obtained from both NMR profiling and source/sink experiments. The decrease of the self diffusion coefficient of alendronate in curdlan gel relative to that measured in solution could be explained by general phenomena such as an obstruction effect and/or an increased hydrodynamic drag on alendronate molecules caused by the presence of the curdlan chains. D_s^{gel} was found to be isotropic since values measured along the x, y and z axis all led to similar results.

Table 5.1 Alendronate Diffusion Coefficients at 37 °C

Method	Diffusion coefficient ($\times 10^{-10} \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$)	
NMR profiling	D_m^{gel}	5.6 ± 0.3
Source/Sink experiment	D_m^{gel}	5.4 ± 0.5
PFG NMR	D_s^{sln}	7.06 ± 0.01
	D_s^{gel}	5.3 ± 0.1

5.5 Concluding Remarks

NMR profiling is shown to be a powerful method for the determination of mutual-diffusion coefficients of drugs in hydrogel matrices. NMR profiling approach is a non-invasive technique which does not involve any perturbation of the system including aliquot collection. The drug quantification is obtained *in situ* as the NMR active nuclei constitute intrinsic concentration probes. In this work, we used ^{31}P NMR while the previous studies, proposing a reminiscent approach, were based on ^{19}F NMR.^{17,18} These contributions show that the NMR profiling approach could be extended to other drug-hydrogel systems as most drugs have NMR active nuclei. The NMR profiling presents the advantages linked to the visualisation of the whole concentration-distance profile at different times. It is, for example, possible to validate required initial conditions such as a homogeneous drug concentration through the whole sample. The correct simulation of all the data points, as in our cases, confidently assesses the possibility of describing the transport using a single diffusion coefficient for which the spatial and temporal variations appear to be negligible. Peculiar behaviours such as the presence of trapped molecules in the hydrogel matrix or a restricted transport across the hydrogel/solution interface would be readily detected by significant deviations from the predicted profiles. Moreover the diffusion coefficient extracted from NMR profiling along a gel slab does not depend on the exact gel dimensions because semi-infinite conditions are used. The concentration-distance profiles, obtained from a non-invasive approach, can be measured with great spatial resolutions as tens of microns/pixel are typically obtained. These aspects can lead to marked advantages for the characterization of drug release from novel materials compared to simpler source/sink experiments.

For the investigated systems, D_s^{gel} was found to be a good approximation of D_m^{gel} . At this point, the knowledge relative to the relationship between D_m^{gel} and D_s^{gel} is limited but is likely associated with the size of the diffusing molecules relative to the gel pore size.^{7,14} As suggested in a recent work,¹⁴ D_s^{gel} is a good approximation of D_m^{gel} when the path traveled by the diffusing molecules during a self-diffusion experiment is sufficiently long to allow them to efficiently probe the various environments in the gel.

In such conditions, PFG NMR measurements present significant advantages as they are quick, require relatively small amounts and are independent of the sample geometry.

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Chapitre 6

Conclusion

Les résultats de cette thèse ont permis de mieux comprendre les facteurs influençant l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle de divers analytes dans des hydrogels de curdlan de différentes architectures. Les caractérisations spectroscopiques effectuées sur les hydrogels de curdlan thermo-réversibles et thermo-irréversibles ont notamment permis d'optimiser les conditions expérimentales menant à la formation d'échantillons reproductibles. Les diverses caractérisations structurales ont permis de visualiser les architectures complexes et distinctes adoptées par les différents types d'hydrogels de curdlan ainsi que les morphologies susceptibles d'influencer le transport d'analytes dans ces gels. Les mesures de coefficients d'autodiffusion et de diffusion mutuelle déterminées pour une série de molécules présentant une gamme de taille relativement grande ont permis de déterminer que l'architecture microscopique des hydrogels de curdlan a une influence très limitée sur leurs propriétés de transport. Nous avons montré que les rapports D_s^{gel}/D_s^{sln} et D_m^{gel}/D_s^{gel} dépendaient de la taille de l'analyte étudié. Nos mesures suggèrent également que la distribution de coefficients d'autodiffusion mesurés dans le gel s'élargit en fonction de la taille croissante des analytes.

6.1 L'optimisation des conditions de gélification

Afin d'assurer une très bonne reproductibilité dans la préparation des hydrogels destinés aux expériences de diffusion, une étude par spectroscopie FT-IR (ATR) a permis de caractériser étape par étape la formation de ces derniers à partir de leur produit de départ. Les protocoles menant à la formation des hydrogels de curdlan thermo-réversibles et thermo-irréversibles s'inspirent de ceux trouvés dans la littérature.^{1,2} Initialement, la distinction entre les deux types de gels reposait sur la base d'analyses DSC.¹⁻³ Par la suite, des différences au niveau des structures hélicoïdales des chaînes polysaccharide ont été révélées entre les deux gels grâce aux techniques de diffraction

des rayons X⁴ et de spectroscopie ¹³C RMN.⁵ Notre étude montre qu'il est également possible d'attribuer les différences observées sur les spectres FT-IR (ATR) aux différentes conformations hélicoïdales adoptées par les chaînes polymères composant les gels. Ainsi, il est possible de distinguer les différents types de gels de curdlan d'après leur spectre FT-IR (ATR) et d'obtenir une assurance quant à la reproductibilité des gels préparés en laboratoire. Il a notamment été possible de suivre la transition suspension/gel et d'optimiser *in situ* la formation des différents gels directement sur le cristal ATR. Nos mesures ont révélé que la formation du gel thermo-irréversible implique la formation d'une structure simple hélice, un intermédiaire probable dans la formation d'une structure triple hélices. Nos expériences à température variable ont également permis d'illustrer le caractère thermo-réversible et thermo-irréversible des hydrogels de curdlan. La caractérisation *in situ* de la formation de thermogels par spectroscopie FT-IR (ATR) à température variable est une technique puissante ayant été appliquée à très peu de systèmes hydrogels jusqu'à ce jour.⁶⁻⁸ L'approche développée dans le cadre de nos travaux pourrait apporter des informations sur le processus de gélification de d'autres thermogels.

6.2 La caractérisation structurale des gels

Les caractérisations structurales réalisées à des échelles microscopiques et nanoscopiques ont permis de révéler la complexité des structures des hydrogels en jeu. Dans le cadre de cette thèse, l'accent a été mis sur la caractérisation d'hydrogels dans leur état hydraté. Dans une telle situation, les différentes morphologies observées sont représentatives des celles rencontrées par les molécules durant les expériences de diffusion. La combinaison de l'imagerie FT-IR (FPA), eSEM et AFM a permis d'établir que les deux types de gels de curdlan adoptent des architectures distinctes. À l'échelle microscopique, la distribution du curdlan au sein du gel thermo-réversible est hétérogène. Le réseau hydrogel est formé de régions irrégulières, pouvant atteindre des dimensions d'environ 100 µm de diamètre, enrichies ou appauvries en curdlan où la concentration varie majoritairement entre 8 et 12 % (m/v). À l'échelle nanoscopique, un autre niveau d'architecture est caractérisé par des surfaces irrégulières comportant des nanocavités. La distribution du curdlan au sein du gel thermo-irréversible est beaucoup plus homogène. Des cavités de tailles variables d'en moyenne 5 µm de diamètre sont

imbriquées dans une structure diffuse de polysaccharide. Les études effectuées par microscopie électronique à balayage suggèrent que ces zones sont formées d'un réseau complexe de nanofibres séparées les unes des autres par une distance moyenne d'environ 390 nm. Les architectures distinctes observées entre les hydrogels de curdlan 10% (m/v) thermo-réversible et thermo-irréversibles suggèrent que les analytes étudiés rencontrent des environnements différents lors qu'ils diffusent dans ces gels.

6.3 L'influence de la taille des diffusants sur la diffusion dans les gels

Les mesures d'autodiffusion dans les gels montrent un effet marqué de la taille de l'analyte sur le coefficient d'autodiffusion relatif. Des facteurs de retardation importants ont été mesurés pour la grande majorité des analytes étudiés, allant même jusqu'à 60% dans le cas du DXRB70k. La dépendance du coefficient d'autodiffusion relatif par rapport à R_h peut être décrite par l'équation empirique proposée par Phillies.⁹ En parallèle, une augmentation de la polydispersité des coefficients d'autodiffusion dans les gels a également été observée en fonction de la taille des diffusants. Pour de petites molécules où $R_h < 5 \text{ \AA}$, une population monodisperse, est observée. Par la suite, une décroissance du paramètre β en fonction de la taille de l'analyte est observée. Nos expériences ont permis d'attribuer l'effet de dispersion des D_s^{gel} à la présence d'hétérogénéités dans la structure des gels. Il est proposé que cet effet soit associé au volume de gel sondé par les analytes durant les mesures RMN à gradients pulsés. Ce volume est lié à la taille de l'analyte. Ainsi, les plus gros analytes n'échantillonneraient pas suffisamment les divers environnements du gel pour mener à une valeur de D_s^{gel} moyenne, représentative de tout le gel, pour chacune des molécules.

Les coefficients de diffusion mutuelle déterminés dans les hydrogels de curdlan thermo-irréversibles sont également proportionnels à la taille des analytes étudiés. Par contre, la majorité des expériences de diffusion ayant été réalisées sur des molécules d'une taille de l'ordre de 3 à 5 \AA , il est impossible de décrire en détail cette dépendance.

6.4 La relation entre l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle dans les hydrogels

Une des raisons ayant motivées les travaux sur la relation entre l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle de molécules dans les hydrogels réside dans l'absence de consensus quant à la relation entre les deux modes de transport. Dans certains systèmes, les deux mécanismes de diffusion étaient rapportés comme équivalents¹⁰⁻¹⁴ alors que pour d'autres,^{10,11} des coefficients de diffusion mutuelle significativement inférieurs aux coefficients d'autodiffusion étaient rapportés. Nous avons examiné l'autodiffusion et la diffusion mutuelle d'une série de petites molécules dans les hydrogels de curdlan. La combinaison de la spectroscopie RMN à gradients pulsés et de l'imagerie RMN 1D a permis d'étudier et de quantifier les deux mécanismes de diffusion de façon non-invasive, sur un même système diffusant/hydrogel, dans des conditions expérimentales très similaires; ceci constitue un important avantage de cette méthode. Pour la macromolécule de dextran, le coefficient d'autodiffusion mesuré par RMN à gradients pulsés a dû être comparé au coefficient de diffusion mutuelle obtenu par la méthode source/drain. Nos résultats suggèrent que le rapport D_m^{gel}/D_s^{gel} est influencé par la taille des diffusants. Pour de petites molécules comme le PO₄, STMP, l'alendronate et le G6P, un rapport D_m^{gel}/D_s^{gel} de 1.1 ± 0.1 est obtenu alors que ce rapport chute à 0.5 ± 0.2 pour une macromolécule de dextran (DXRB70k). Pour de petites molécules, nos résultats montrent une équivalence entre les deux modes de transport. Ceci suggère que l'environnement sondé au cours d'une expérience d'autodiffusion est représentatif de celui sondé durant une expérience de diffusion mutuelle. Cette conclusion, qui est renforcée par les énergies d'activation similaires mesurées pour le transport par autodiffusion et par diffusion mutuelle, suggère que les mêmes types d'interactions sont impliqués dans les deux cas. Dans de telles conditions, nous avons montré que la RMN à gradients pulsés peut s'avérer une alternative beaucoup plus rapide et moins coûteuse afin d'évaluer l'allure du profil de libération d'un médicament en fonction du temps. Par ailleurs, l'indépendance de la valeur du coefficient de diffusion vis-à-vis la distance parcourue par les analytes suggère que les interactions responsables de la diminution du taux de transport dans les gels se situent sur une échelle de grandeur plus petite que celle d'une expérience d'autodiffusion.

Le dextran (DXRB70k) est la seule macromolécule ($R_h = 61 \text{ \AA}$) pour laquelle la diffusion mutuelle a été étudiée. En dépit de la distribution relativement large ($\beta = 0.5 \pm 0.1$) de coefficients d'autodiffusion dans les gels, les profils de libération ont pu être simulés adéquatement à l'aide d'un modèle de diffusion fickienne défini par un seul coefficient de diffusion mutuelle. Durant de telles expériences, la majorité des molécules parcourent une distance macroscopique à l'intérieur de la structure hydrogel. Le coefficient de diffusion mutuelle est donc représentatif de la moyenne des interactions localisées pouvant survenir dans le gel. Dans le cas des macromolécules de dextran, le coefficient de diffusion mutuelle s'avère être environ 50% inférieur au coefficient d'autodiffusion moyen correspondant. Ce résultat suggère que les endroits du gel engendrant les plus fortes restrictions agissent comme des étapes lentes qui limitent le taux de transport moyen mesuré dans le gel.

Une des explications possibles quant à l'origine de cette observation réside dans la fraction limitée de l'environnement sondée durant une expérience d'autodiffusion.¹⁵ En raison d'un libre parcours moyen ($\langle z^2 \rangle^{1/2}$) trop petit par rapport aux hétérogénéités dans le gel, le volume de l'environnement sondé par les analytes durant le lapse de temps de la séquence RMN est non-représentatif de la structure globale de l'hydrogel. La valeur du $\langle z^2 \rangle^{1/2}$ étant typiquement inversement proportionnelle à la taille de la molécule, le trajet est limité pour la macromolécule de dextran. D'une part, nous avons observé une valeur de β considérablement plus petite que 1, phénomène pouvant aussi être attribué à un échantillonnage incomplet du gel durant le temps de la mesure RMN. D'autre part, il est envisageable que les plus grosses molécules soient plus sensibles à l'environnement dans lequel elles diffusent,¹⁶ particulièrement si elles se retrouvent dans un environnement où les restrictions sont causées par des obstacles du même ordre de grandeur que leur taille.^{17,18}

6.5 L'influence de l'architecture microscopique des gels sur leurs propriétés de transport

Nos mesures de diffusion effectuées sur différentes échelles de grandeurs dans les hydrogels de curdlan thermo-réversibles et thermo-irréversibles suggèrent que l'architecture microscopique des gels a une influence très limitée sur ses propriétés de

transport en raison des facteurs de retardation similaires obtenus dans les environnements pourtant distincts. De plus, des énergies d'activation similaires ont été mesurées dans les deux types de gels pour le transport de petites molécules par autodiffusion. Ces résultats suggèrent que les interactions impliquées se situent à des échelles de grandeur plus petites que celles observées par nos techniques de caractérisation.

6.6 Les modèles de diffusion

L'utilisation du modèle de diffusion d'Ogston et al.¹⁹ a permis de fournir une explication raisonnable des résultats de diffusion obtenus dans le cas de petites molécules diffusant dans les hydrogels de curdlan thermo-irréversibles. Par contre, la même analyse réalisée sur une plus grande gamme de tailles de molécules (voir Annexe 1) révèle que ce modèle sous-estime nos résultats expérimentaux. Par conséquent, une description plus nuancée de l'obstruction et/ou la contribution de d'autres facteurs, tels que la résistance hydrodynamique, doivent intervenir pour généraliser la dépendance du coefficient d'autodiffusion relatif à la taille des analytes. À la lumière de ces résultats, force est d'admettre que ce modèle de diffusion a une applicabilité limitée. Bien qu'il existe une grande variété de modèles de diffusion développés à ce jour,²⁰⁻²² il est difficile d'associer les paramètres pris en charge par ces derniers à la vaste gamme de morphologies (variations de concentration, bosses, creux, tunnels...) observées dans les hydrogels. La complexité des architectures observées remet également en question la pertinence de la notion de pore de réseaux aussi complexes.

6.7 Travaux futurs

Les hydrogels sont des matériaux couramment utilisés dans plusieurs domaines. L'optimisation ainsi que le développement de nouvelles applications basées sur ces derniers passent par une meilleure compréhension de leurs propriétés de transport. La diffusion est le mécanisme de transport le plus simple et est en grande partie responsable du transport d'analytes au sein de ces structures complexes. Les paramètres pouvant affecter la diffusion dans les gels sont nombreux, et ne sont probablement pas tous identifiés à ce jour. Il est donc difficile de proposer une approche universelle qui couvre

la totalité des conditions pouvant être rencontrées dans ces systèmes. Afin d'examiner cette problématique, le transport par diffusion a été étudié dans un hydrogel modèle, plutôt simple, formé d'un polysaccharide neutre et dont l'architecture microscopique peut être modulée sans en affecter la nature chimique. Nos mesures ont permis une meilleure connaissance des hydrogels de curdlan ainsi que des facteurs influençant leurs propriétés de transport. Il serait donc avantageux de poursuivre l'étude de ces systèmes en étudiant l'influence d'autres paramètres. Par exemple, il serait intéressant de tenter des expériences à l'aide de gels préparés à de plus faibles concentrations ($< 2\% \text{ (m/v)}$) en polysaccharide. De plus, l'usage de plus grosses molécules ($R_h \gg 61 \text{ \AA}$) permettrait d'avantage d'interactions avec les diverses structures rencontrées dans ces réseaux polymériques d'architectures complexes. De plus, des mesures de diffusion effectuées à différentes températures apporteraient d'avantage de renseignements sur l'énergie d'activation de macromolécules diffusant dans les gels. Finalement, l'étude de la relation sur les différents mécanismes de diffusion dans les gels a notamment permis d'illustrer l'importance de l'échelle de temps de la mesure. Ce paramètre, principalement dicté par la taille des diffusants, doit être pris en compte afin de comparer adéquatement les différents résultats obtenus à l'aide des diverses techniques.

Les caractérisations structurales réalisées sur les différents types de gels de curdlan ont permis d'obtenir un portrait global des environnements rencontrés par les analytes durant les expériences de diffusion. Or, nos résultats suggèrent que les interactions responsables du ralentissement de la diffusion dans les gels se situent à l'échelle moléculaire. Par conséquent, il serait envisageable que des caractérisations structurales ainsi que les mesures de coefficients d'autodiffusion soient réalisées à de plus petites échelles afin de correspondre à celle des interactions en jeu. Les techniques de diffraction des neutrons aux petits angles²³ et de spectroscopie spin écho des neutrons²⁴ sont des approches qui vont dans ce sens, car elles permettent de caractériser la structure des hydrogels ainsi que la diffusion d'analytes sur une échelle de distance de l'ordre du nanomètre. Par ailleurs, certaines simulations mathématiques de phénomènes de diffusion dans les milieux hétérogènes portent à croire que l'architecture du gel a une influence sur la diffusion de macromolécules à ces échelles.^{25,26} De plus, des informations sur les processus dynamiques tels que les effets hydrodynamiques et la

mobilité des chaînes polymères permettrait d'obtenir un portrait plus complet des facteurs pouvant influencer les propriétés de transport dans les gels.

La description de la relation entre la structure et les propriétés de transport ne pouvant émerger que de l'étude de plusieurs systèmes, nos résultats viennent donc enrichir les connaissances dans ce domaine et contribuent à dégager les paramètres ainsi que les difficultés associés à cette problématique.

6.8 Références

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Annexe 1

Évaluation des données d'autodiffusion avec le model d'Ogston et al.

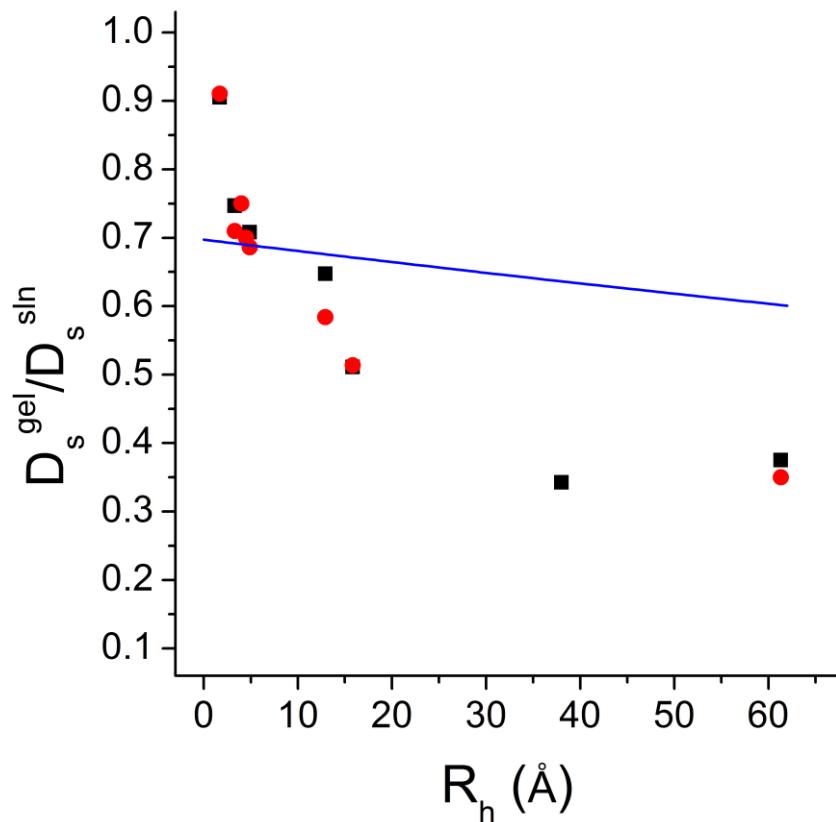


Figure A-1 Coefficients d'autodiffusion relatifs de HOD (1.7 Å), PO₄ (3.3 Å), STMP (4.0 Å), alendronate (4.5 Å), G6P (4.9 Å), PEG10k (13 Å), PolyPO₄ (16 Å), PEG20k (38 Å) et DXRB70k (62 Å) mesurés dans les gels de curdlan 10% (m/v) (■) thermo-réversibles et (●) thermo-irréversibles à 25 °C. La simulation à l'aide du modèle de diffusion d'Ogston et al (voir équation 1.4) avec $\varphi = 0.13$ et $R_f = 150$ Å est représentée par la courbe bleue (—).