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Recent Advancements in Alginate Hydrogels: A Comprehensive Review

Shubh Arora*
Email id: arorashubh@gmail.com

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*Corresponding Author

Abstract

Alginate hydrogels have gained significant attention in recent years due to their unique properties, including biocompatibility, biodegradability, and ease of gelation. This review paper provides a comprehensive overview of the recent advancements in alginate hydrogels, focusing on their synthesis methods, structural modifications, and applications in various fields such as tissue engineering, drug delivery, and regenerative medicine. The paper discusses novel strategies for enhancing the mechanical properties, bioactivity, and functionality of alginate hydrogels, along with emerging trends and future directions in this rapidly evolving field.

keywords

Alginate Hydrogels, Biopolymer, Biomaterials. Tissue Engineering, Drug Delivery, Regenerative Medicine, Scaffold Fabrication, Controlled Release, Biomedical Applications, Rheological Analysis, Morphological Characterization, Mechanical Testing, Bioactivity Assessment, Structural Modifications, Nanocomposite, Stimuli-Responsive, Biocompatibility, Bioink, 3D Bioprinting,Emerging,Trends

1.Introduction

Alginate hydrogels have emerged as promising biomaterials in the field of biomedicine, offering unique properties that make them highly attractive for various applications. Derived from brown algae, alginate is a naturally occurring polysaccharide composed of guluronic and mannuronic acid residues. One of the distinctive features of alginate is its ability to form hydrogels through simple and versatile gelation processes, primarily driven by the interaction with divalent cations such as calcium ions.

The importance of alginate hydrogels in biomedical applications stems from their excellent biocompatibility and biodegradability, making them suitable for use in vivo without eliciting adverse immune responses. Moreover, alginate hydrogels can mimic the extracellular matrix (ECM) environment due to their high water content and porous structure, providing an ideal microenvironment for cell growth, proliferation, and tissue regeneration. These characteristics have propelled alginate hydrogels into the forefront of tissue engineering, where they are employed as scaffolds for guiding cell behavior and promoting tissue regeneration in various organs and tissues.

Beyond tissue engineering, alginate hydrogels also hold great potential in drug delivery systems. Their ability to encapsulate and release bioactive molecules in a controlled manner makes them valuable candidates for targeted drug delivery, reducing systemic side effects and improving therapeutic outcomes.

Furthermore, the versatility of alginate hydrogels allows for the incorporation of bioactive agents, including growth factors, cytokines, and drugs, to enhance their functionality and therapeutic efficacy.

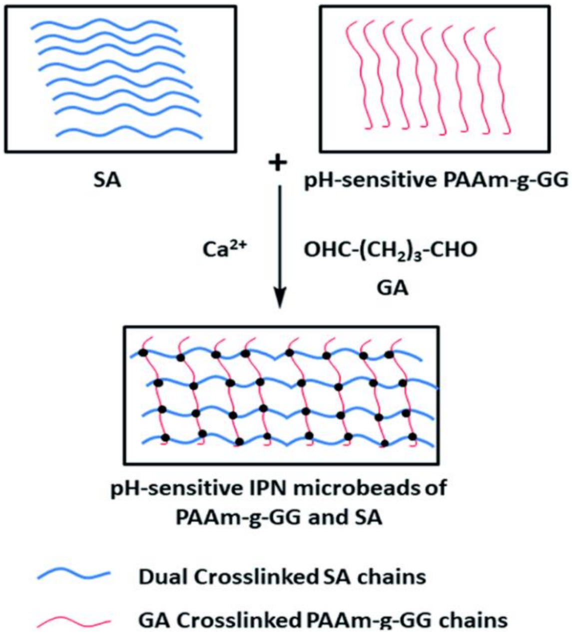
In recent years, significant advancements have been made in the synthesis methods and structural modifications of alginate hydrogels, expanding their versatility and applicability in biomedical research. Novel strategies, such as covalent crosslinking, surface functionalization, and nanocomposite approaches, have enabled the tailoring of alginate hydrogels to meet specific requirements for different applications. These advancements have not only improved the mechanical properties and stability of alginate hydrogels but also endowed them with enhanced bioactivity and functionality, paving the way for innovative solutions in tissue engineering, drug delivery, and regenerative medicine.

Given the rapid progress in alginate hydrogel research and their promising prospects in biomedical applications, there is a growing need for a comprehensive review to synthesize the recent advancements, address existing challenges, and identify future research directions. This review paper aims to fulfill this need by providing a thorough examination of the synthesis methods, structural modifications, characterization techniques, and applications of alginate hydrogels, thereby offering insights into their potential impact on the field of biomedicine and stimulating further innovation in this exciting area of research.

2.Synthesis Methods of Alginate Hydrogels:

2.1 **Ionic Crosslinking Methods:**

Ionic crosslinking is the most common and straightforward method for forming alginate hydrogels, involving the gelation of alginate chains by the addition of divalent cations, typically calcium ions (Ca2+). This process occurs through the exchange of sodium ions (Na+) in the alginate polymer chains with calcium ions, leading to the formation of a three-dimensional network structure.

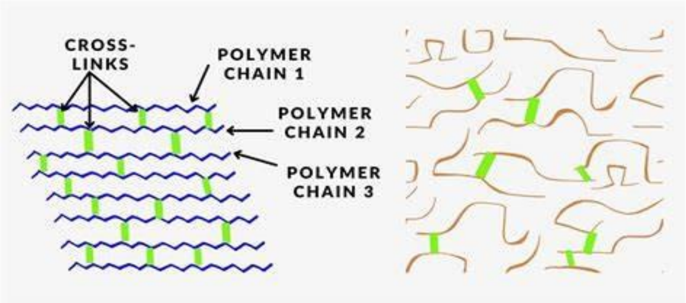


In this method, sodium alginate, a water-soluble polymer, is dissolved in an aqueous solution.Calcium ions are introduced into the solution either by adding a calcium salt, such as calcium chloride (CaCl2), or by using calcium-containing compounds, such as calcium carbonate (CaCO3) or calcium sulfate (CaSO4).

The interaction between the negatively charged carboxyl groups (-COO-) of the alginate chains and the positively charged calcium ions results in the formation of crosslinks, leading to the gelation of the alginate solution. The gelation process can be controlled by varying the concentration of calcium ions, the molecular weight of alginate, and the pH of the solution.The resulting hydrogel exhibits tunable mechanical properties and swelling behavior, depending on the crosslink density and the degree of substitution of guluronic and mannuronic acid residues in the alginate polymer chains.

2.2 **Covalent Crosslinking Methods:**

Covalent crosslinking involves the formation of chemical bonds between alginate chains through covalent linkages, resulting in a more stable and robust hydrogel network compared to ionic crosslinking methods. Covalent crosslinking can be achieved through various chemical reactions, such as Schiff base formation, Michael addition, and click chemistry.



One common approach for covalent crosslinking of alginate is the use of bifunctional crosslinking agents, such as carbodiimides (e.g., EDC/NHS), genipin, and glutaraldehyde, which react with the carboxyl groups of alginate to form stable covalent bonds. The crosslinking reaction can be initiated by mixing alginate with the crosslinking agent in an aqueous solution, followed by incubation under suitable reaction conditions (e.g., pH, temperature).

Covalent crosslinking provides greater control over the mechanical properties and degradation kinetics of alginate hydrogels compared to ionic crosslinking methods. However, excessive crosslinking can lead to cytotoxicity and may compromise the biocompatibility of the resulting hydrogel, necessitating careful optimization of the crosslinking conditions.

2.3 **Hybrid Crosslinking Strategies:**

Hybrid crosslinking methods combine both ionic and covalent crosslinking mechanisms to exploit the advantages of each approach while minimizing their limitations. By incorporating both types of crosslinks, hybrid alginate hydrogels can exhibit improved mechanical properties, stability, and biocompatibility.

In hybrid crosslinking strategies, alginate is first crosslinked using ionic interactions with divalent cations, as described in the ionic crosslinking method. Subsequently, covalent crosslinks are introduced into the hydrogel network through chemical reactions with bifunctional crosslinking agents or by incorporating pre-formed covalently crosslinked components into the alginate matrix.

The combination of ionic and covalent crosslinks enhances the mechanical strength and stability of the hydrogel, making it suitable for applications requiring long-term stability and robustness. Hybrid alginate hydrogels have been utilized in various biomedical applications, including tissue engineering scaffolds, drug delivery systems, and wound dressings, where both mechanical integrity and biocompatibility are crucial requirements.

3.Structural Modifications of Alginate Hydrogels:

structural modifications of alginate hydrogels through the incorporation of bioactive molecules, surface functionalization techniques, nanocomposite approaches, and stimuli-responsive modifications enable the customization of hydrogel properties and functionalities for a wide range of biomedical and biotechnological applications. These tailored alginate hydrogels hold great promise for advancing regenerative medicine, drug delivery, and tissue engineering towards improved therapeutic outcomes and clinical translation

3.1 **Incorporation of Bioactive Molecules:**

Alginate hydrogels can be modified by incorporating bioactive molecules such as growth factors, cytokines, peptides, and drugs to impart specific biological functions.

Bioactive molecules can be physically entrapped within the hydrogel matrix or covalently linked to alginate chains through chemical conjugation techniques.

The controlled release of bioactive molecules from alginate hydrogels can promote cell proliferation, differentiation, and tissue regeneration, making them valuable in regenerative medicine and tissue engineering applications.

Strategies for bioactive molecule incorporation include encapsulation during hydrogel formation, surface immobilization, and layer-by-layer deposition techniques.

3.2 **Surface Functionalization Techniques:**

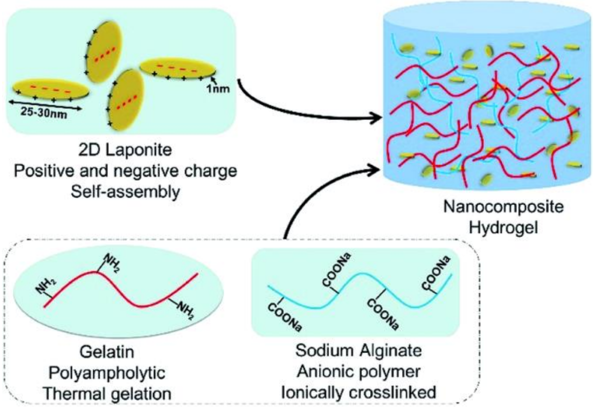
Surface functionalization of alginate hydrogels involves modifying their surface properties to enhance interactions with cells, proteins, and tissues.

Techniques such as plasma treatment, chemical grafting, and self-assembly can be employed to introduce functional groups or ligands onto the hydrogel surface, enabling specific cell adhesion, migration, and signaling.

Surface-modified alginate hydrogels exhibit improved biocompatibility, cell attachment, and bioactivity, facilitating applications in cell culture, tissue engineering scaffolds, and implantable devices.

Functionalized surfaces can also be tailored to promote selective cell adhesion and tissue integration while minimizing non-specific interactions and immune responses.

3.3 **Nanocomposite Approaches:**



Nanocomposite alginate hydrogels are developed by incorporating nanoparticles or nanomaterials (e.g., nanofibers, nanoparticles, carbon nanotubes) into the hydrogel matrix to impart enhanced mechanical, electrical, or biological properties.

Nanocomposite materials offer synergistic effects, such as improved mechanical strength, conductivity, and bioactivity, compared to pure alginate hydrogels.

Nanoparticles can be dispersed homogeneously within the hydrogel matrix or assembled into hierarchical structures to achieve desired functionalities and performance.

Applications of nanocomposite alginate hydrogels include tissue engineering scaffolds, drug delivery carriers, biosensors, and wound dressings, where enhanced properties are required for specific functions.

3.4 **Stimuli-Responsive Modifications:**

Stimuli-responsive alginate hydrogels undergo reversible changes in their structure, properties, or functionality in response to external stimuli such as temperature, pH, light, or magnetic fields.

Smart hydrogel systems can be designed to exhibit stimuli-triggered gelation, swelling, degradation, or drug release behavior, enabling precise control over therapeutic interventions and tissue engineering processes.

Stimuli-responsive alginate hydrogels offer on-demand and localized delivery of bioactive molecules, allowing for spatiotemporal modulation of biological responses and therapeutic outcomes.

Techniques for stimuli-responsive modifications include incorporating responsive polymers, nanoparticles, or chemical moieties into the alginate matrix and engineering specific molecular interactions or conformational changes triggered by external cues.

4. Characterization Techniques for Alginate Hydrogels:

The characterization techniques such as rheological analysis, morphological characterization, mechanical testing, and bioactivity assessment provide comprehensive insights into the structure, properties, and biological performance of alginate hydrogels, facilitating their optimization and customization for specific biomedical and biotechnological applications. These techniques play a crucial role in advancing the development and translation of alginate-based materials for regenerative medicine, drug delivery, and tissue engineering.

4.1 **Rheological Analysis:**

Rheological analysis is crucial for understanding the viscoelastic behavior of alginate hydrogels, including their flow properties, gelation kinetics, and mechanical strength.

Techniques: Rheological measurements such as oscillatory shear, rotational, and creep tests are commonly used to evaluate the storage modulus (G'), loss modulus (G"), viscosity, shear-thinning behavior, and gelation kinetics of alginate hydrogels.

Applications: Rheological analysis provides insights into the gelation process, network structure, and mechanical properties of alginate hydrogels, guiding the optimization of fabrication parameters and formulation strategies for specific applications.

4.2 **Morphological Characterization**:

Morphological characterization techniques assess the internal structure, porosity, and surface morphology of alginate hydrogels, providing information on their microstructure and architecture.

Techniques: Scanning electron microscopy (SEM), transmission electron microscopy (TEM), atomic force microscopy (AFM), and confocal laser scanning microscopy (CLSM) are commonly employed to visualize the morphology, pore size distribution, and surface topography of alginate hydrogels at different length scales.

Applications: Morphological characterization helps elucidate the relationship between hydrogel structure and properties, guiding the design of scaffolds with desired porosity, pore interconnectivity, and surface roughness for tissue engineering and regenerative medicine applications.

4.3 **Mechanical Testing:**

Mechanical testing evaluates the strength, stiffness, and deformation behavior of alginate hydrogels under applied loads, providing insights into their structural integrity and mechanical performance.

Techniques: Tensile testing, compression testing, and indentation testing are commonly used to measure the tensile strength, compressive modulus, elastic modulus, and resilience of alginate hydrogels.

Applications: Mechanical testing assesses the suitability of alginate hydrogels for load-bearing applications, such as tissue engineering scaffolds, wound dressings, and cartilage implants, and guides the optimization of hydrogel composition and crosslinking density to achieve desired mechanical properties.

4.4 **Bioactivity Assessment:**

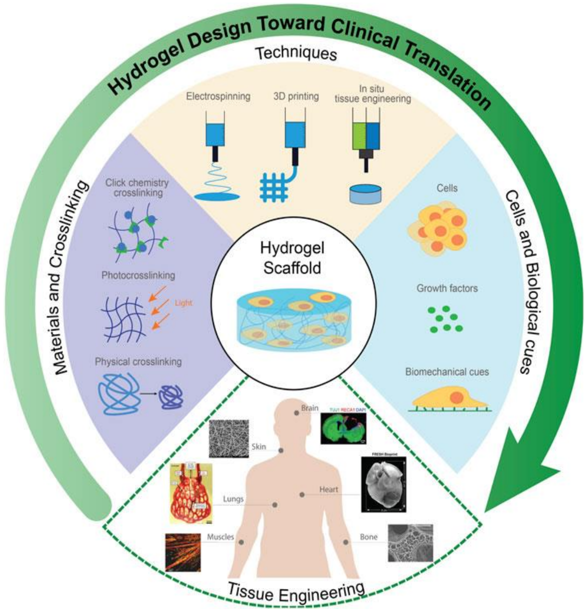
Bioactivity assessment evaluates the biological response of cells and tissues to alginate hydrogels, including cell viability, proliferation, migration, differentiation, and extracellular matrix (ECM) deposition.

Techniques: Cell-based assays, such as cell viability assays (e.g., MTT assay, Live/Dead staining), cell adhesion assays (e.g., cell spreading, focal adhesion analysis), and immunostaining techniques (e.g., immunofluorescence staining, histological analysis), are used to assess the biocompatibility and bioactivity of alginate hydrogels in vitro and in vivo.

Applications: Bioactivity assessment elucidates the interactions between cells and alginate hydrogels, guiding the development of biomimetic scaffolds and therapeutic delivery systems for tissue regeneration, drug delivery, and controlled release applications.

5. Applications of alginate hydrogels

5.1 **Tissue Engineering:**

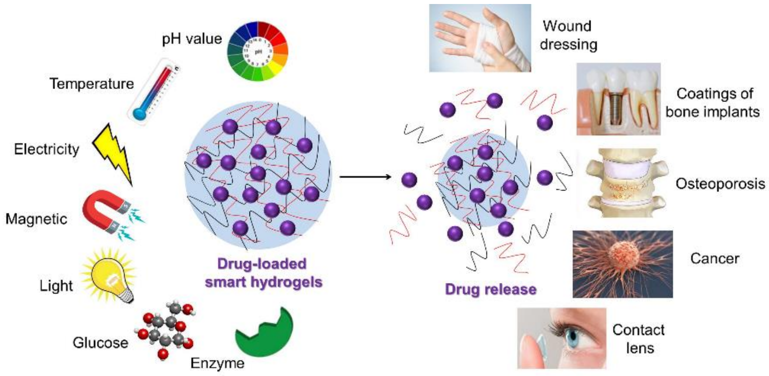


Scaffold fabrication for tissue regeneration: Alginate hydrogels are widely used to create scaffolds that mimic the extracellular matrix (ECM) of tissues. These scaffolds provide structural support and a conducive environment for cells to grow, proliferate, and differentiate, facilitating tissue regeneration.

Cell encapsulation and delivery systems: Alginate hydrogels are employed to encapsulate cells and protect them from the host immune system while allowing nutrients and waste exchange. These cell-laden hydrogels can be implanted into damaged tissues or organs to promote regeneration and repair.

3D bioprinting applications: Alginate hydrogels are utilized as bioinks in 3D bioprinting technology to create complex tissue constructs layer by layer. They enable precise deposition of cells and biomaterials, facilitating the fabrication of anatomically accurate tissues and organs for transplantation and research purposes.

5.2 **Drug Delivery:**



Controlled release formulations: Alginate hydrogels can be loaded with therapeutic agents such as drugs, growth factors, or nanoparticles and formulated into controlled-release systems. They release the encapsulated cargo in a sustained manner over time, providing prolonged therapeutic effects and reducing the frequency of drug administration.

Targeted drug delivery systems: Alginate hydrogels can be functionalized with targeting ligands or responsive moieties to selectively deliver drugs to specific tissues or cells. These targeted delivery systems enhance drug efficacy, minimize off-target effects, and reduce systemic toxicity.

Theranostic platforms: Alginate hydrogels can integrate therapeutic and diagnostic functionalities into a single platform, known as theranostic systems. These systems enable simultaneous drug delivery and monitoring of therapeutic responses, facilitating personalized medicine approaches and disease management.

5.3 **Regenerative Medicine:**

Wound healing dressings: Alginate hydrogels are utilized as wound dressings due to their moisture-retaining properties, biocompatibility, and hemostatic effects. They create a moist environment that promotes wound healing, accelerates tissue regeneration, and reduces the risk of infection.

Cartilage and bone regeneration: Alginate hydrogels serve as scaffolds for cartilage and bone tissue engineering, providing mechanical support and guiding the growth of chondrocytes and osteoblasts. They promote the formation of new cartilage and bone tissue, making them valuable in orthopedic and dental applications.

Neural tissue engineering: Alginate hydrogels support the growth and differentiation of neural cells, making them suitable for neural tissue engineering applications. They can be used to create neural tissue constructs for studying neural development, modeling neurological disorders, and developing neural implants for therapeutic purposes.

5.4 **Food and Beverage Industry:**

Alginate hydrogels are used as thickening agents, stabilizers, and gelling agents in food products such as sauces, dressings, desserts, and beverages.

They can encapsulate flavors, nutrients, and active ingredients, enhancing shelf life and improving product texture and appearance.

5.5 **Dental Materials:**

Alginate hydrogels are employed in dentistry for making impressions of dental structures, prosthetic devices, and orthodontic appliances.They offer high biocompatibility, easy handling, and accurate replication of dental anatomy, making them widely used in dental clinics and laboratories.

5.6 **Biomedical Research:**

Alginate hydrogels serve as versatile platforms for in vitro cell culture studies, organoid generation, and disease modeling.They mimic the extracellular matrix (ECM) environment, providing a supportive and biologically relevant substrate for cell growth, differentiation, and functional assays.

5.7 **Cosmetics and Personal Care Products:**

Alginate hydrogels are incorporated into cosmetic formulations such as masks, creams, and serums for their moisturizing, soothing, and skin-nourishing properties.They provide hydration, improve skin texture, and deliver active ingredients, enhancing the efficacy and sensory attributes of skincare products.

5.8 **Textile Industry:**

Alginate hydrogels are used as binders, coatings, and finishes in textile manufacturing for their flame-retardant, antimicrobial, and moisture-absorbing properties.They impart functional properties to textiles, enhancing durability, comfort, and performance in apparel, upholstery, and technical textiles.

5.9 **Veterinary Medicine:**

Alginate hydrogels find applications in veterinary medicine for wound management, tissue repair, and drug delivery in animals.They offer non-toxic, biocompatible solutions for addressing various veterinary healthcare needs, including wound dressings, surgical implants, and controlled-release formulations.

These diverse applications highlight the versatility and potential of alginate hydrogels across different industries and research fields, showcasing their importance in addressing various technological, medical, and societal challenges.

5.10 **Other Emerging Applications:**

Bioinks for organ-on-a-chip devices: Alginate hydrogels are employed as bioinks in organ-on-a-chip devices, which replicate the physiological functions of human organs on microfluidic platforms. These devices enable the study of organ-level responses to drugs, toxins, and disease mechanisms in a controlled and reproducible manner.

Alginate-based sensors and actuators: Alginate hydrogels are utilized in the fabrication of sensors and actuators for various applications, including biosensing, environmental monitoring, and soft robotics. They can undergo reversible swelling and deswelling in response to environmental stimuli, enabling the design of responsive materials with tunable properties.

Environmental remediation applications: Alginate hydrogels are explored for environmental remediation purposes, such as wastewater treatment, heavy metal ion removal, and soil stabilization. They can immobilize pollutants, enhance bioremediation processes, and mitigate environmental contamination, contributing to sustainable remediation strategies.

6.challenges and future perspectives

6.1 **Challenges:**

6.1.1 Poor Mechanical Properties and Fast Degradation:

One of the significant challenges in alginate hydrogel research is their inherent poor mechanical properties, including low strength and brittleness. These properties can limit their application in load-bearing tissues or environments requiring long-term stability.

Additionally, alginate hydrogels often exhibit fast degradation kinetics, which may not align with the desired release profile or tissue regeneration timeline. Controlling degradation rates while maintaining mechanical integrity is a key challenge.

6.1.2 Integration of Alginate Hydrogels with Other Biomaterials:

Alginate hydrogels may need to be combined with other biomaterials to enhance their mechanical properties, bioactivity, or functionality for specific applications. However, achieving optimal compatibility, synergy, and stability between different materials poses challenges in material design and processing.

6.1.3 Clinical Translation and Regulatory Considerations:

Despite promising preclinical results, the clinical translation of alginate hydrogel-based therapies faces regulatory hurdles and safety concerns. Ensuring product quality, consistency, and safety for human use, along with navigating regulatory pathways, is essential but challenging.

Standardization of manufacturing processes, characterization techniques, and preclinical testing protocols is necessary to meet regulatory requirements and obtain approval for clinical trials and commercialization.

6.2 **Future Perspectives:**

6.2.1 Advancements in Material Engineering:

Future research efforts will focus on developing innovative strategies to enhance the mechanical properties, stability, and functionality of alginate hydrogels. This may involve the design of hybrid materials, nanocomposites, or bioinspired architectures to address specific application requirements.

Incorporating reinforcing agents, crosslinking methods, or structural modifications can improve the mechanical strength, toughness, and resilience of alginate hydrogels, expanding their utility in diverse biomedical and industrial applications.

6.2.2 Tailored Biomaterial Combinations:

The integration of alginate hydrogels with other biomaterials, such as natural polymers, synthetic polymers, or inorganic nanoparticles, will continue to be explored to create multifunctional materials with synergistic properties.

Rational design approaches, including molecular engineering, surface modification, and self-assembly techniques, will enable the development of tailored biomaterial combinations optimized for specific biomedical applications.

6.2.3 Clinical Translation and Commercialization:

Efforts will be directed towards advancing the clinical translation of alginate hydrogel-based therapies through rigorous preclinical evaluation, optimization of formulation parameters, and compliance with regulatory standards.

Collaborative initiatives involving academia, industry, and regulatory agencies will facilitate the development, validation, and commercialization of alginate hydrogel-based products for clinical use, driving innovation and addressing unmet medical needs.

6.2.4 Emerging Trends and Future Directions:

Emerging trends in alginate hydrogel research include the integration of advanced fabrication techniques, such as 3D bioprinting, microfluidics, and electrospinning, to create complex structures and functional architectures with precise control over composition and geometry.

The exploration of novel applications, such as organ-on-a-chip devices, personalized medicine platforms, and bioelectronics, will expand the scope of alginate hydrogel-based technologies and open new avenues for interdisciplinary research and innovation.

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