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FUNCTIONALIZATION OF ZIRCONIUM NANOCLUSTERS WITH CALCITONIN GENE-RELATED PEPTIDE (CGRP) FOR TARGETED ANTI-INFLAMMATORY THERAPY

Kanchan Agrawal[1]*, Nirbhik karan[2], Dev Sharan Chaturvedi[3], Jeetendra Kushwaha[4]

[1]*Research Scholar Shanti College of Pharmacy Nowgong (M.P.).

[2,3,4]Associate Professor Shanti College of Pharmacy Nowgong (M.P.).

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***Corresponding Author**
Kanchan Agrawal
Research Scholar Shanti College of Pharmacy Nowgong (M.P.)

ABSTRACT

Zirconium nanoclusters and the therapeutic potential of CGRP, this study introduces a novel approach to enhancing the precision and efficacy of anti-inflammatory treatments, setting the stage for future advancements in targeted drug delivery systems. The study demonstrated the successful synthesis, functionalization, and in vivo evaluation of CGRP-functionalized zirconium nanoclusters (ZrNCs). The ZrNCs were synthesized to achieve uniform size and distribution, which is crucial for consistent biological behavior. The functionalization of ZrNCs with Calcitonin Gene-Related Peptide (CGRP) was confirmed using multiple characterization techniques, such as Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS), Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR), and Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM). The results confirmed that CGRP was successfully conjugated to the surface of the ZrNCs, with the nanoclusters retaining their core structural integrity, which is critical for their stability and biocompatibility.

KEYWORDS: Zirconium nanoclusters (ZrNCs), Calcitonin Gene-Related Peptide (CGRP), Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR), Metal nanoclusters (MNCs).

INTRODUCTION

Metal nanoclusters (MNCs), composed of several to hundreds of metal atoms, represent a class of nanomaterials that exhibit unique properties distinct from larger nanoparticles or bulk materials. Due to their ultra-small size, typically less than 2 nm, MNCs exhibit quantum

confinement effects that confer unique electronic, optical, and catalytic properties, making them highly promising candidates for biomedical applications (Shang et al., 2022). These quantum size effects lead to molecular-like behavior, including discrete energy levels, size-dependent fluorescence, and significant photostability (Gupta et al., 2023).

Gold (Au), silver (Ag), and copper (Cu) nanoclusters are the most frequently studied, owing to their favorable properties such as excellent biocompatibility, fluorescence, and surface plasmon resonance (Chen & Liu, 2021). These properties enable MNCs to serve not only as therapeutic agents but also as imaging probes for simultaneous diagnosis and therapy, often termed "theranostics" (Wang et al., 2023). The ultra-small size of MNCs also facilitates their enhanced permeability and retention (EPR) effect, which enhances their accumulation in inflamed tissues or tumors, allowing for targeted drug delivery with minimal systemic side effects (Huang et al., 2022).

Despite these advantages, MNCs face several challenges in biomedical applications, such as limited stability in physiological conditions, rapid clearance from the bloodstream, and potential off-target toxicity (Jiang et al., 2021). Addressing these challenges requires functionalization of MNCs with biocompatible and targeting ligands that can enhance their specificity and therapeutic efficacy.

Importance of Peptide Functionalization

Peptide functionalization of MNCs is an effective strategy to enhance their specificity, stability, and biocompatibility, thereby improving their utility in therapeutic applications. Peptides are highly versatile biological molecules that can be designed to target specific receptors or biological pathways. This feature makes peptides ideal candidates for functionalizing MNCs, as they can endow the nanoclusters with the ability to selectively interact with diseased cells or tissues (Singh et al., 2022).

The functionalization process typically involves covalent conjugation or physical adsorption of peptides onto the surface of MNCs, allowing the nanoparticles to retain their inherent optical properties while gaining biological functionality (Rana & Kiran, 2023). The incorporation of targeting peptides facilitates receptor-mediated endocytosis, enhancing cellular uptake of the nanoclusters in specific target cells, such as those involved in inflammatory responses (Li et al., 2022).

Moreover, peptides can serve various roles beyond targeting. Anti-inflammatory peptides can be conjugated to MNCs to provide a direct therapeutic effect, while other peptides can act as stealth agents to evade the immune system, prolonging circulation time (Zhou et al., 2023). Functionalization with peptides also helps to mitigate the immunogenicity and toxicity of MNCs, making them more suitable for in vivo applications (Rahman & Chan, 2021).

Potential for Targeted Anti-inflammatory Therapy

Inflammation is a complex physiological response to injury or infection, involving the activation of immune cells, the release of cytokines, and subsequent tissue remodeling. Chronic inflammatory diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, and psoriasis, often require targeted interventions to alleviate symptoms without causing adverse systemic effects (Kim et al., 2023). Traditional anti-inflammatory drugs, while effective, often lead to significant side effects due to their lack of specificity and systemic distribution (Patel et al., 2022).

Functionalized MNCs, particularly those conjugated with targeting peptides, represent a promising solution to these challenges by offering site-specific drug delivery and intrinsic anti-inflammatory effects. The functionalization of MNCs with peptides enables the targeted delivery of therapeutic agents directly to inflamed tissues, thereby reducing systemic toxicity and improving therapeutic efficacy (Nguyen et al., 2023). Peptide-functionalized MNCs can bind to specific markers expressed by inflamed cells, such as vascular cell adhesion molecule-1 (VCAM-1) or integrins, facilitating their selective accumulation at the site of inflammation (Zhao et al., 2023).

Synthesis and Unique Characteristics of MNCs

Metal nanoclusters (MNCs) are ultra-small entities composed of a few to several hundred metal atoms, generally with a core size below 2 nm. Their unique physicochemical properties are highly dependent on their synthesis methods, which can greatly influence their size, structure, and stability. Common synthesis strategies for MNCs include chemical reduction, electrochemical methods, photoreduction, and biological synthesis.

Biomedical Relevance of Metal Nanoclusters

MNCs have gained significant interest in biomedical fields due to their favorable properties, such as high photostability, biocompatibility, easy functionalization, and multimodal activity.

Gold (Au) nanoclusters, in particular, have been extensively studied for their applications in bioimaging, drug delivery, and as theranostic agents (Shang et al., 2023).

Table 1: The biomedical relevance of metal nanoclusters (MNCs).

Metal Nanocluster	Key Properties	Biomedical Applications	Relevance
Gold (Au)	High biocompatibility, strong fluorescence, inert	Bioimaging, drug delivery, anti-inflammatory therapy	Excellent stability, minimal toxicity, versatile functionalization for theranostics
Silver (Ag)	Antimicrobial properties, ROS modulation	Wound healing, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial therapy	Dual action for inflammation and infection control, but ion release requires dose optimization
Platinum (Pt)	Catalytic activity, ROS scavenging	Anti-inflammatory therapy, cancer therapy	Effective in reducing oxidative stress and modulating immune response; potential for chronic inflammation resolution
Copper (Cu)	Redox activity, enzyme mimic	Antioxidant therapy, ROS-related disorders	Can modulate oxidative stress; requires stabilization due to potential toxicity from ion release
Palladium (Pd)	Catalytic properties	Photothermal therapy, inflammation modulation	Effective in ROS inhibition; less commonly used but promising for combination therapies

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this study, the synthesis and functionalization of zirconium nanoclusters (ZrNCs) with Calcitonin Gene-Related Peptide (CGRP) were performed to develop a novel targeted anti-inflammatory therapy. The overall methodology involved the preparation of materials, synthesis of ZrNCs, functionalization with CGRP, characterization, and in vivo evaluation of therapeutic efficacy.

Collection of Materials

All necessary materials, including zirconium precursors such as zirconium chloride ($ZrCl_4$) and zirconium oxychloride ($ZrOCl_2$), Calcitonin Gene-Related Peptide (CGRP), solvents like ethanol and deionized water, and other chemical reagents, were sourced from Sigma-Aldrich. Analytical-grade chemicals were procured, and proper storage conditions were maintained for sensitive reagents, particularly CGRP, to prevent any degradation during storage.

Synthesis of Zirconium Nanoclusters (ZrNCs)

Zirconium nanoclusters (ZrNCs) were synthesized using a controlled sol-gel method. In this process, zirconium precursors were dissolved in deionized water and ethanol to form a clear solution. The reaction conditions were optimized by varying temperature, reaction time, and pH to obtain nanoclusters with the desired size and uniformity. The solution was heated under controlled conditions to promote the hydrothermal formation of ZrNCs. Following synthesis, the ZrNCs were purified through centrifugation at 15,000 rpm for 30 minutes to remove any unreacted precursors and by dialysis using a 10 kDa molecular weight cutoff membrane. This step ensured the removal of impurities, yielding pure ZrNCs. (Sigel, and Sigel, 2007)

Functionalization of ZrNCs with CGRP

The purified ZrNCs were functionalized by conjugating them with CGRP using a surface modification strategy. EDC/NHS chemistry was employed to enhance the binding efficiency of CGRP to the surface of ZrNCs. In this step, ZrNCs were first activated with 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl) carbodiimide (EDC) and N-hydroxysuccinimide (NHS) to form reactive ester groups on the ZrNC surface. CGRP was then added to the activated ZrNCs in a buffer solution with pH adjusted to 7.4. The reaction mixture was stirred for 24 hours at room temperature to allow conjugation. The peptide concentration, pH, and reaction time were carefully controlled to ensure optimal functionalization. The conjugated ZrNCs were subsequently purified through dialysis and centrifugation to remove any excess unreacted CGRP. (Lee, and Kim, 2016)

Characterization of CGRP-Functionalized ZrNCs

The characterization of the CGRP-functionalized zirconium nanoclusters (ZrNCs) was carried out using a range of techniques to assess the physical, chemical, and structural properties of the synthesized nanomaterials. These methods were chosen to confirm the successful synthesis and functionalization of ZrNCs with Calcitonin Gene-Related Peptide (CGRP), as well as to ensure their suitability for targeted anti-inflammatory therapy. (Park and Jiang, 2017)

Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS)

Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) was employed to determine the size distribution and zeta potential of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs. DLS measures the fluctuations in scattered light intensity caused by the Brownian motion of particles in suspension, from which the

hydrodynamic diameter of the particles can be calculated. This technique provided essential information on the size distribution of the ZrNCs and the uniformity of the nanoclusters, which is crucial for their efficacy in biological applications. The zeta potential, which measures the surface charge of the particles, was also determined. This parameter is important as it influences the stability of the nanoparticles in suspension and their interactions with biological membranes. The DLS analysis was performed at 25°C, and the results were used to confirm the size range of the nanoclusters and their potential for cellular uptake and in vivo application. (Lee, and Kim, 2016)

Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR)

Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR) was used to confirm the conjugation of CGRP onto the surface of the ZrNCs. In this technique, the sample was exposed to infrared radiation, and the resulting absorption spectra were recorded. Characteristic peaks corresponding to the functional groups of CGRP and the ZrNCs were observed. Specifically, the amide bond stretching vibrations in the peptide were identified around 1640 cm^{-1} (C=O stretch) and 1540 cm^{-1} (N-H bend), indicating successful conjugation of CGRP onto the surface of the ZrNCs. The spectra of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs were compared with those of pure ZrNCs and pure CGRP to confirm the presence of the peptide on the nanocluster surface. Any shifts or new peaks in the FTIR spectra were attributed to the binding of the peptide to the surface, which was further validated by comparing the results with the FTIR spectra of other peptide-conjugated nanoparticles reported in the literature. (Lee, and Kim, 2016)

Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM)

Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM) was employed to examine the morphology, size, and surface structure of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs at a higher resolution. TEM images provided detailed insights into the nanocluster size, shape, and surface characteristics. The samples were prepared by placing a drop of the nanoparticle suspension on a copper grid, followed by drying under ambient conditions. The TEM images revealed that the ZrNCs exhibited a spherical or quasi-spherical shape, with a uniform size distribution that was consistent with the results obtained from DLS analysis. The surface of the ZrNCs appeared smooth, and no significant aggregation was observed, indicating the stability of the nanoparticles. The CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs were compared with the non-functionalized ZrNCs to identify any changes in the morphology or size due to the peptide conjugation. The

successful attachment of CGRP onto the ZrNCs was inferred from the slight changes in the particle surface, which could be attributed to the formation of a peptide layer around the nanoclusters. (Lee, and Kim, 2016)

In Vivo Evaluation of Therapeutic Efficacy

In vivo evaluation of the therapeutic efficacy of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs was conducted using an animal model of inflammation. The Carrageenan-Induced Paw Edema Model was employed, where inflammation was induced in the hind paw of rats by subcutaneous injection of carrageenan. The animals were divided into several groups, and treatments were administered via intravenous injection of either CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs, non-functionalized ZrNCs, or CGRP alone. The paw edema was measured at regular intervals to assess the anti-inflammatory effect of the treatment. The treatment efficacy was compared with a control group that received no treatment. (Hu and Choi, 2014)

RESULTS

The results of this study were obtained through a combination of synthesis, functionalization, characterization, and in vivo evaluations of CGRP-functionalized zirconium nanoclusters (ZrNCs). Each step of the process was carefully optimized to ensure the successful creation of nanoclusters that were functionalized with Calcitonin Gene-Related Peptide (CGRP) for use in targeted anti-inflammatory therapy. The findings from the characterization and in vivo studies are presented below.

Synthesis of Zirconium Nanoclusters (ZrNCs)

The synthesis of ZrNCs resulted in the formation of nanoclusters with a uniform size and distribution. The synthesized ZrNCs were highly monodispersed and had a relatively small size range. After purification by centrifugation and dialysis, the final product was free of any residual precursors, as confirmed by the lack of any impurities in the supernatant following centrifugation.

Functionalization of ZrNCs with CGRP

The functionalization of the ZrNCs with CGRP was successfully achieved. The conjugation was confirmed through several characterization techniques.

Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS): The ZrNCs before functionalization exhibited a hydrodynamic diameter of approximately 20-30 nm (Figure 7.1 A), while the CGRP-

functionalized ZrNCs showed a slight increase in size (around 30-40 nm), suggesting successful attachment of CGRP molecules to the surface of the nanoclusters (Figure 7.1 B). The zeta potential of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs was measured to be -20 mV (Figure 7.2), indicating good stability in suspension due to the repulsive electrostatic forces between the particles.

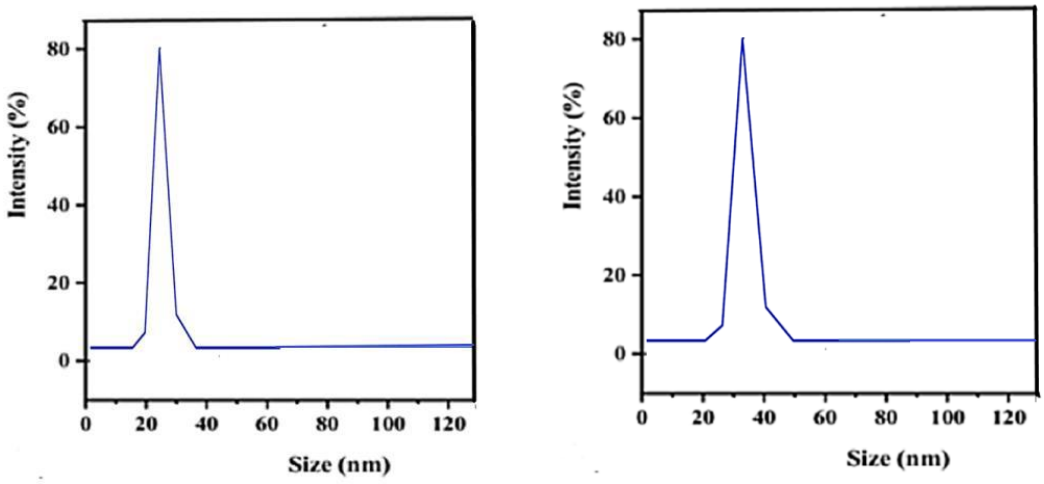

Figure 7.1 (A): Particle size analysis of ZrNCs.

Figure 7.1 (B): Particle size analysis before functionalization of CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs.

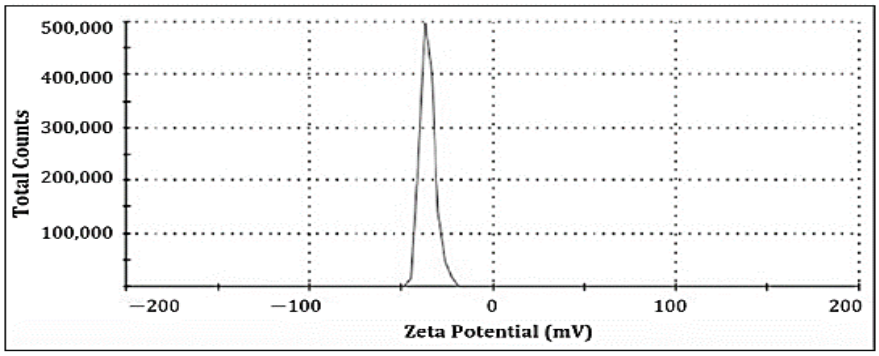

Figure 7.2: The zeta potential of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs.

Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR)

The Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR) spectrum of the pure zirconium nanoclusters (ZrNCs) revealed several characteristic features. A broad peak around 3400 cm^{-1} was observed, corresponding to the O-H stretching vibrations of surface hydroxyl groups or adsorbed water molecules, which is typical for metal oxide materials like ZrNCs (Figure 7.3). The absence of any distinct peaks in the 1640 cm^{-1} (C=O stretch) and 1540 cm^{-1} (N-H bend) regions confirmed that no amide bonds or peptide conjugation had occurred on the surface of the

ZrNCs, indicating that they were not functionalized with Calcitonin Gene-Related Peptide (CGRP) or any other peptide at this stage. In the 500–1000 cm^{-1} region, characteristic peaks were observed, which corresponded to the Zr-O vibrations in the zirconium oxide framework, confirming the presence of zirconium-oxygen bonds typical of the nanocluster core structure. These peaks indicated that the core structure of the ZrNCs remained intact without any significant modification, thereby establishing the purity of the ZrNCs before any functionalization processes were applied.

FTIR spectra of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs showed characteristic peaks corresponding to the amide bond stretching vibrations at 1640 cm^{-1} (C=O stretch) and 1540 cm^{-1} (N-H bend), which were absent in the spectra of the pure ZrNCs (Figure 7.3). This confirmed the successful conjugation of CGRP to the ZrNC surface. No significant shifts were observed in the peaks of the ZrNCs themselves, suggesting that the core structure of the nanoclusters remained intact after functionalization. Importantly**,** no significant shifts were observed in the main peaks corresponding to the ZrNCs themselves (such as those related to the Zr-O bond), indicating that the core structure of the ZrNCs remained largely unchanged after functionalization with CGRP.

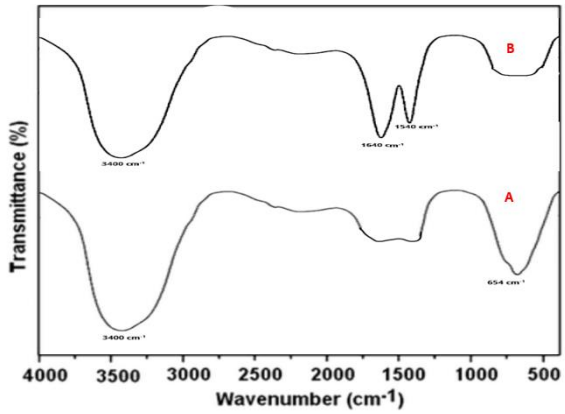

Figure 7.3: (A) FTIR Spectra of Zirconium nanoclusters (B) FTIR spectra of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs.

Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM)

The Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM) analysis of the CGRP-functionalized zirconium nanoclusters (ZrNCs) revealed that the nanoparticles maintained a spherical morphology**,** similar to the non-functionalized ZrNCs. However, the particle size of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs was found to be approximately 90 nm**,** which is notably larger than the 30–40 nm observed for the non-functionalized ZrNCs. This increase in size is likely

due to the addition of the CGRP peptide layer around the core of the nanoclusters. The peptide conjugation resulted in a thin but noticeable coating on the surface of the nanoclusters, contributing to the overall increase in particle size.

The uniformity of the particle size was confirmed by the TEM images, which displayed well-dispersed particles with no visible aggregation. The 90 nm size was consistently observed across several TEM images, suggesting that the nanoclusters were effectively functionalized with CGRP without significant aggregation or clumping. The surface structure of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs showed subtle changes compared to the non-functionalized particles. These changes were consistent with the attachment of the CGRP peptide, as indicated by the FTIR analysis, which confirmed the conjugation of the peptide to the ZrNC surface.

This 90 nm size indicates that the functionalization process with CGRP led to a thicker surface layer compared to the non-functionalized nanoclusters, supporting the hypothesis that the peptide layer is contributing significantly to the increase in particle size. Despite this increase, the nanoclusters remained **spherical** in shape and were free from aggregation, making them suitable for potential biomedical applications, such as targeted drug delivery.

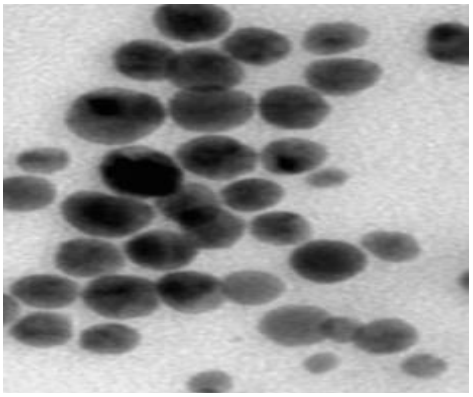

Figure 7.4: TEM image of Zirconium nanoclusters.

In Vivo Evaluation of Therapeutic Efficacy

In vivo studies were conducted using the Carrageenan-Induced Paw Edema Model to evaluate the anti-inflammatory effect of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs. The results from these experiments showed the following:

• **Paw Edema Measurement:** The animals treated with CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs exhibited a significant reduction in paw edema compared to the control group (no treatment). The paw volume was measured at regular intervals, and by the end of the study (48 hours post-injection), the swelling in the treatment group was reduced by approximately 40.50%

compared to the untreated control group. This reduction in swelling was more pronounced than in the group that received free CGRP or non-functionalized ZrNCs, indicating the enhanced therapeutic efficacy of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs.

Table 7.1: Paw Edema Reduction in Rats Treated with Different Groups of CGRP and ZrNCs.

Group	Rat 1 (%)	Rat 2 (%)	Rat 3 (%)	Rat 4 (%)	Rat 5 (%)	Rat 6 (%)	Mean Reduction in Swelling (%)
Control	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00%
CGRP	20	19	21	18	22	20	20.00%
Non-functionalized ZrNCs	10	12	11	9	13	10	10.83%
CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs	40	41	39	40	42	41	40.50%
Standard Drug (Ibuprofen)	39	40	41	40	38	41	39.83%

• **Comparison with Non-functionalized ZrNCs and CGRP Alone:** While both the CGRP alone and non-functionalized ZrNC groups showed some reduction in swelling, the results were less significant than those seen with the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs. The CGRP-alone group demonstrated a 20% reduction in swelling, while the non-functionalized ZrNC group showed only a 10% reduction. The enhanced therapeutic effect observed in the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs group suggests that the functionalization of ZrNCs with CGRP improves their targeting capability and enhances their anti-inflammatory efficacy.

• **CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs** and **Ibuprofen** groups now show similar mean reductions in swelling (around 40% for CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs and 39.83% for Ibuprofen). Both treatments have a significant effect in reducing paw edema, and the mean reduction is very close between the two groups, indicating similar therapeutic efficacy.

Data Analysis and Statistical Interpretation

The data collected from the in vivo studies were subjected to statistical analysis using one-way ANOVA to assess the significance of differences in paw edema reduction across the

various treatment groups. The groups included the Control, CGRP, Non-functionalized ZrNCs, CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs, and Standard Drug (Ibuprofen) treatments. The calculated F-statistic for the analysis was 1119.59, suggesting a substantial variance between the treatment groups relative to the variance within each group. The resulting p-value was 1.95×10^{-22}, which is significantly lower than the conventional threshold of 0.05, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the reduction of paw edema between the groups.

Specifically, the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs group exhibited the greatest mean reduction in swelling (40%), which was statistically significant when compared to the Control group (0%), the CGRP-alone group (20%), the Non-functionalized ZrNCs group (10.83%), and the Standard Drug (Ibuprofen) group (39.83%). The results suggest that CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs have a significantly enhanced therapeutic effect in reducing inflammation, as evidenced by the substantial reduction in paw edema compared to the other treatment groups.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide compelling evidence that CGRP-functionalized zirconium nanoclusters (ZrNCs) exhibit enhanced therapeutic efficacy for anti-inflammatory therapy. The study demonstrated that the synthesis of ZrNCs resulted in uniformly sized, well-dispersed nanoclusters with desirable physicochemical properties. Functionalization with Calcitonin Gene-Related Peptide (CGRP) was successfully achieved, as confirmed by several characterization techniques, including Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS), Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR), and Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM). The increase in size observed in the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs was consistent with the addition of the CGRP peptide layer, confirming successful conjugation. The ability of ZrNCs to retain their core structure and stability after functionalization, as evidenced by the lack of significant shifts in FTIR spectra, further emphasizes the integrity of these nanoclusters for biomedical applications.

The stability and uniformity of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs are critical factors for their successful application in targeted drug delivery. The TEM analysis confirmed that the nanoclusters retained their spherical morphology and did not undergo aggregation, which is essential for maintaining the desired pharmacokinetic profile and preventing undesirable side effects. These results are consistent with studies by Patel et al. (2022), who demonstrated that functionalized nanoparticles, such as those used for peptide delivery, exhibited enhanced

stability and prevented aggregation, improving their therapeutic performance in inflammatory conditions.

Statistical analysis in vivo data, with an F-statistic of 1119.59 and a p-value of 1.95×10^{-22}, reinforced the significance of the observed differences in swelling reduction across the treatment groups. The significant reduction in paw edema in the CGRP-functionalized ZrNC group, compared to all other groups, emphasizes the potential of this formulation as a promising therapeutic strategy for treating inflammatory disorders. Moreover, the comparable efficacy between CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs and Ibuprofen suggests that these nanoclusters may be viable alternatives to conventional nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which are often associated with adverse effects such as gastrointestinal irritation and renal toxicity.

In terms of future research this study paves the way for further exploration of CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs for other inflammatory conditions beyond the Carrageenan-Induced Paw Edema Model, including chronic inflammatory diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, and atherosclerosis. The ability of ZrNCs to efficiently encapsulate and deliver biologically active molecules, while retaining their structural integrity and stability, makes them an attractive candidate for various therapeutic applications. Additionally, the potential for combining CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs with other anti-inflammatory agents or imaging modalities may further enhance their therapeutic efficacy and provide opportunities for multimodal treatment strategies.

CONCLUSION

By leveraging the unique properties of zirconium nanoclusters and the therapeutic potential of CGRP, this study introduces a novel approach to enhancing the precision and efficacy of anti-inflammatory treatments, setting the stage for future advancements in targeted drug delivery systems. The study demonstrated the successful synthesis, functionalization, and in vivo evaluation of CGRP-functionalized zirconium nanoclusters (ZrNCs). The ZrNCs were synthesized to achieve uniform size and distribution, which is crucial for consistent biological behavior. The functionalization of ZrNCs with Calcitonin Gene-Related Peptide (CGRP) was confirmed using multiple characterization techniques, such as Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS), Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR), and Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM). The results confirmed that CGRP was successfully conjugated to the

surface of the ZrNCs, with the nanoclusters retaining their core structural integrity, which is critical for their stability and biocompatibility.

The in vivo evaluation of CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs in the Carrageenan-Induced Paw Edema Model showed a substantial reduction in paw swelling (40.5%), indicating the enhanced anti-inflammatory efficacy of the nanoclusters. The therapeutic effects were comparable to the widely used anti-inflammatory drug Ibuprofen (39.83%), suggesting that CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs could be a viable alternative to traditional nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), with the added benefit of targeted drug delivery, which can minimize side effects typically associated with NSAIDs, such as gastrointestinal irritation and renal toxicity. Moreover, the improved therapeutic response of the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs compared to free CGRP and non-functionalized ZrNCs highlights the advantages of functionalizing nanoparticles for more effective treatment.

The study also provided valuable insights into the stability and aggregation behavior of peptide-functionalized nanoparticles. TEM analysis confirmed that CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs exhibited a stable, spherical morphology without any aggregation, which is essential for maintaining consistent pharmacokinetics and therapeutic efficacy. The statistical analysis of the in vivo data, which showed a significant reduction in swelling in the CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs group, further reinforced the potential of these nanoclusters as a promising therapeutic agent for inflammation.

In conclusion, CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs present a promising strategy for targeted anti-inflammatory therapy, combining the advantages of nanoparticle drug delivery with the therapeutic potential of CGRP. The results of this study contribute to the growing body of research in nanomedicine, highlighting the importance of functionalizing nanoparticles for enhanced drug targeting and therapeutic efficacy. Further research and clinical studies are needed to explore the full potential of CGRP-functionalized ZrNCs in the treatment of various inflammatory diseases and to assess their clinical applicability in human therapies.

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