Determining the Toxicity of Nanomaterials

SmartNanoTox

Scientia
The term nanomaterial describes a material, which is formed of individual units or particles that measure on the scale of $10^{-7}$–$10^{-9}$ metres in length. Each particle may be spherical, rod-shaped or fibrous with a relatively large surface area, depending on the fabrication methods and experimental conditions employed. At such dimensions, materials display unique optical, electronic and mechanical properties, often in remarkable contrast to their bulk counterparts. Although these materials are extensively used across the healthcare, environmental and automotive industries, questions about the potential effects that nanomaterials may have on human health, and how severe these effects may be, remain unanswered. This grey area of understanding has led to controversy over the safety of nanomaterials, creating a public perception of fear surrounding these critical functional materials.

The specific mechanisms within living organisms that lead to adverse health effects after exposure to nanomaterials remain poorly understood. While some common industrial materials such as asbestos or quartz nanodust can cause a direct damage to animal or human lungs when inhaled, the effects of the many other nanomaterials can be indirect, delayed and complicated. Nanomaterials can accumulate within tissues and cause a chronic inflammation or distortion of the normal biochemical environment by producing reactive oxygen species or interacting with key biomolecules.

There is a current inability to accurately predict, based on their structure and activity, if a particular nanomaterial will display long-term toxicity effects in human cells and tissues.

Nanomaterials can also enter a cell through its membrane receptors and cause adverse effects, such as the deregulation of cellular pathways. Deregulation and deformation of receptors and protein enzymes that participate in regulatory pathways can lead to the formation of neurodegenerative diseases, cancers, fibrosis and diabetes. Hence, a material that interferes with the regulation and function of these pathways in cells is also deemed as toxic. Although these networks have been extensively studied in numerous disease and DNA studies, there remains a distinct lack of understanding of the intrinsic mechanisms that lead to cell deregulation in the presence of nanomaterials.

**SmartNanoTox: Smart Tools for Gauging Nano Hazards**

Dr Vladimir Lobaskin at the School of Physics, University College Dublin, Ireland, coordinates the SmartNanoTox project, which is funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The SmartNanoTox team is a collaboration between academics and industrial professionals with extensive experience in the field of in-vivo nanotoxicity, biophysics, materials science, and industrial

Lung alveolar macrophages containing carbon nanotubes (CNTs). Rats were exposed to nanotube aerosols (NM-401 and NM403).

Wetting of TiO$_2$ nanoparticles. Ab-initio molecular dynamics reveals details of water structure and reactions at TiO$_2$ nanosurface with atomistic resolution.
of characterisation and data generation in toxicology that have been developed in the recent years. This will finally lead to a new paradigm in the toxicology – a mechanism-aware nanomaterial toxicity screening.

Using a combination of in-vivo, in-vitro and in-silico approaches, the SmartNanoTox team will identify the mechanisms associated with the interactions between the nanomaterials and living organisms. At the systemic level, the team will use transcriptomics and proteomics data from in-vivo experiments, complemented by statistical modelling to identify the activated biological pathways and their corresponding molecular initiating and key events. At the molecular level, this will be achieved by analysing the state of the nanomaterial after the uptake, including their biomolecular corona and aggregation state, through both experiments and computational simulations. After this information has been gathered for a subset of nanomaterials, a sufficient set of data will be available, allowing for the identification of interactions leading to the activation of different toxicity pathways.

The SmartNanoTox team also intends to resolve all essential molecular interactions that can occur at the interfaces between biomolecules and nanomaterials, in a complete resolution of the structural deformation that a nanomaterial can cause when inhaled into the pulmonary system. The connection between different adverse outcome pathways and nanomaterial properties will be established through intelligent quantitative structure-activity relationships (QSARs), which will help to identify the properties of concern that should be avoided. The nanomaterials can then be grouped, according to their ability to participate in certain interactions and trigger specific adverse outcome pathways or disturb the normal function of the cells by interference in the key events of the pathways. Thus, an accurate scale of the in-vivo toxicity of nanomaterials can be defined and predicted without the need for extensive long-term testing.

The overall outcome of the SmartNanoTox project, if successful, will be the definitive ability to predict the in-vivo toxicity of a nanomaterial in an accurate and time- and cost-efficient manner, through the use of QSARs. As a consequence, the need for blanket toxicity testing and animal experiments will be reduced.

The SmartNanoTox team have made substantial progress in achieving the goals in their grant programme, several examples of which will now be detailed.
Wetting TiO$_2$ nanoparticles

Titanium dioxide (TiO$_2$) is a common nanomaterial used in solar cells, self-cleaning materials and photocatalysis. The surface reactivity of TiO$_2$ nanoparticles can be tuned by varying the amount of water that is adsorbed to the surface of the material. Understanding the mechanisms that underly the modulation of this surface reactivity is crucial for unveiling the mechanisms that give rise to the toxicity of TiO$_2$ nanoparticles in the body.

In one particular study, the SmartNanoTox team reported computational simulations predicting the surface reactivity of TiO$_2$ nanoparticles. Using molecular dynamics modelling, the reaction of TiO$_2$ nanoparticles with differing concentrations of water can be simulated as a function of time. Simulations were run over a given time frame, and a comparison of initial and final structures were made to analyse the reactivity of the systems. Surface defects, such as missing and displaced atoms, are common in TiO$_2$. The team found that missing oxygen atoms promote water dissociation at the nanoparticle surface, and therefore increase reactivity. Furthermore, the concentration of water coverage that gives rise to the highest reactivity of water and the strongest interaction at the nanoparticle surface was identified for each naturally occurring crystal structure of TiO$_2$.

This work has demonstrated computational modelling to be a powerful tool for understanding the intricate mechanisms associated with nanoparticle reactivity.

Affinity of TiO$_2$: Nanosurfaces Towards Lipids

A large number of controversial cell viability tests has been reported for various TiO$_2$ nanomaterials. Focusing on the specific interaction between the nanomaterial and various plasma proteins and receptors, the Imperial College team has shown that a strong affinity exists between TiO$_2$ nanosurface and lipids.

With the affinity towards lipids being much stronger than that of silicon dioxide (SiO$_2$), the team discovered that at least certain morphological forms of TiO$_2$ nanoparticles can pull lipids out of membranes despite the free energy penalty arising from hydrophobic interaction and the curvature of the nanoparticles. This result has been proven using several physical methods, including fluorescence microspectroscopy and cross-correlation spectroscopy, super-resolution stimulated-emission depletion (STED) microscopy, and electron paramagnetic resonance spectroscopy (EPR). The team hope that understanding the mechanisms of the interaction between metal-oxide nanoparticles and lipids can predict the molecular initiating events in nanoparticle-exposed lungs, where various lipid structures are abundant. Their work reminds us that even an unspecific interaction between the nanoparticles and biologically relevant molecules can trigger adverse outcomes.

Modelling the Interface Between Cell Membranes and Nanomaterials

Nanomaterials can enter a cell in two different ways, either by active transportation through the receptors in the cell membrane, or passively by adhering to the cell membrane and causing it to bend and wrap around the foreign particle. Passive entry into the cell is only possible if the adhesion energy between particle and membrane is sufficient to compensate for the energy required to bend and deform the membrane.

Using molecular dynamic simulations, the SmartNanoTox team has derived a novel method to predict adhesion energies between soft lipid bilayers (which make up the cell membrane) and the solid surfaces of nanomaterials. Their approach involves fixing the two end points of the membrane bilayer being modelled in the simulation, and including a restraining force to allow realistic surface relaxation of the membrane, particularly at a curved interface. To increase the accuracy of the model, the mathematical descriptions of the interactions between the atoms were calibrated with experimental data. The final calculated adhesion energies could then be used to model the process of nanomaterials passively entering into a cell and predict if this process is energetically favourable.

Modelling the Nanomaterial Protein Corona

It is now well accepted that foreign surfaces are modified by the adsorption of biomolecules such as proteins or lipids in a biological environment, and that cellular responses to materials in a biological medium might reflect the adsorbed biomolecule layer, rather
than the material itself. The composition of nanoparticle protein corona is flexible and is determined by many affinity constants and concentrations of the components of the biological fluids such as the blood plasma or the lung lining fluid.

The SmartNanoTox team developed a framework for coarse-grained modelling of interfaces between nanomaterials and biological fluids and membranes. Their model includes united-atom presentations of membrane lipids and proteins, which are based on all-atom structures of the corresponding molecules and are parameterised using experimental data or atomistic simulation results. The nanoparticles are modelled by two-layer objects, where the nanoparticle shell reflects the interaction between the material and the biomolecule in the corresponding fluid, while the core interacts with the biomolecule through van der Waals forces.

The proposed methodology can be used to predict the adsorption energies for dozens of common human blood plasma proteins on nanoparticles of different sizes, as well as the preferred orientation of the molecules upon adsorption. With these energies, scientists will be able to rank the proteins by their binding affinity to nanomaterials, and predict the composition of the nanoparticle protein corona for the corresponding material. Finally, these data will be used to construct a bio-nano interactions database and QSARs for the selected adverse outcome pathways.

Inhibiting the Dynamics of Cell Fate Decisions

Changing the dynamics of protein activation in cellular networked pathways, such as the pathway between RTK/RAS/RAF/MEK/MAPK protein kinases, can lead to protein mutation and disease formation.

On this topic, the SmartNanoTox team reported a review of methods that regulate the dynamics of the MPK kinase, which is associated with cell fate decisions and drug resistance. In particular, the review highlighted that physiological factors can control and modulate cell decisions. Mechanisms within the protein networks can be probed using new techniques such as biosensors and microfluidics, while biochemical responses and their associated timescales under applied external stimulus can also be measured. Mathematical models can also shed light on the expected time scales for each mechanism, thus further resolving the intricate chemical mechanisms associated with cellular protein networks.

Hyperactivation of the RAS/MAPK pathway is reported to be the cause for over 30% of human cancers. Inhibitor drugs act to deactivate such hyperactivated pathways, but a serious problem associated with their use is drug resistance. The origin of this resistance is the formation of chemical bonds between two protein kinase complexes, and the SmartNanoTox team has shown that kinase dimerisation is thermodynamically favourable, once an inhibitor molecule is bound to a kinase protein. It is therefore the binding affinity of the inhibitor for the kinase protein that will dictate if drug resistance to pathway inhibitors is thermodynamically favourable.

Summary

- The measurement of the long-term effects of nanomaterial toxicity on human health is expensive and time consuming, requiring extensive animal testing and verification experiments.
- The SmartNanoTox team, coordinated by Dr Lobaskin at University College Dublin, is funded by a 2020 Horizon European grant to resolve the underlying mechanisms and biochemical pathways that regulate in-vivo toxicity of nanomaterials.
- The main focus of the SmartNanoTox team is to provide a mechanism-aware method to predict nanomaterial toxicity based on the generation of quantitative structure-activity relationships between the nanomaterial properties and their ability to trigger adverse outcome pathways.
Meet the researchers

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Dr Vladimir Lobaskin is Head of the SmartNanoTox team and is an Associate Professor in the School of Physics at the University College Dublin, Ireland. Throughout his academic research career, Dr Lobaskin has made significant contributions to the field of theory and modelling of nanostructured biosystems, including the development of computational approaches and software (MOLSIM and ESPResSo) for modelling soft-matter systems.
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Professor Luc Ferrari is a Professor of Toxicology at Lorraine University, France, belonging to the Therapeutic targets, Formulation, and Preclinical Expertise of Medicines group (CITHEFOR). Professor Ferrari is also a member of the poison control centre of Nancy, France, and a member of the High Council of Public Health. The research focus of Professor Ferrari is actually on nano toxicology, but also includes studying the effects of inflammation on drug metabolising enzymes, and conducting in-vivo and in-vitro experiments, which evaluate the effects of exposure to genotoxic compounds.
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