

three-dimensional (3D) diamond and graphite. Graphene has been discussed in theory for about 60 years. In 2004, graphene was first isolated by Novoselov and Geim.¹³ Since then, graphene has attracted much interest from various scientists, and its discovery won the 2010 Nobel Prize in physics.

Graphene is a one-atom-thick sheet of carbon atoms arranged in a 2D honeycomb structure. The strong carbon-carbon bonding in the plane, the aromatic structure, the presence of free p electrons, and reactive sites for surface reactions make graphene a unique material with excellent properties: the thinnest material ever measured; a large specific surface area ($2600 \text{ m}^2 \text{ g}^{-1}$)¹⁵; a Young's modulus of 1 TPa and intrinsic strength of 130 GPa, which is close to that predicted by theory^{16,17}; a high room temperature electron mobility of 2.5

Table 1. The Cell Behaviors on Graphene and Its Derivatives

Graphene types	Preparation methods	Application modes	Cell types	Outcomes	Possible mechanisms	Reference
G	CVD	Sheet	Human OB, hMSCs	The cells on G adhered and proliferated better than on an SiO ₂ substrate	The electrical conductivity of G is of particular importance, because electricity as well as cocktails of growth factors and substrate properties is able to stimulate cell growth and differentiation. Surface morphology; lateral stress	Kalbacova et al. ⁵¹
G	CVD	Sheet	hMSCs	G provides a promising biocompatible scaffold that does not curb the proliferation of hMSCs. The osteogenic differentiation rate induced by G is comparable to BMP-2.		Nayak et al. ⁴
G, GO	CVD	Sheet	hMSCs	The strong noncovalent binding abilities of G enable it to act as a preconcentration platform for osteogenic inducers, which accelerate the osteogenesis of MSCs. However, G suppresses adipogenesis of MSCs. GO does not interfere with adipogenesis of MSCs.	G has the ability to bind dexamethasone and b-glycerolphosphate, which is good for osteogenesis. Insulin is denatured on adsorption of G through a strong p-p interaction. GO does not interfere with adipogenesis due to electrostatic binding with insulin.	Lee et al. ⁵

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Table 1. (Continued)

Graphene types	Preparation methods	Application modes	Cell types	Outcomes	Possible mechanisms	Reference
GO	Modified Hummers method	Nanosheets	hASCs	The GO proved to be a suitable environment for the time-dependent viability of hASCs. The enhanced differentiation of hASCs included osteogenesis, adipogenesis, and epithelial genesis; while the chondrogenic differentiation of hASCs was decreased, compared tissue culture polystyrene as a control substrate.	It is hypothesized that a combination of factors, including nanoscale structure, strong stiffness, roughness, reactive oxygen functional groups, and adsorption of biomolecules on GO, affects the hASCs behaviors.	Kim et al. ⁶
rGO	Modified Hummers method; Spin coating	Film	hFOB	rGO is biocompatible with hFOB, whereas single-walled carbon nanotube network is inhibitory to the proliferation of hFOB.	The distinct nanotopographic features of these two kinds of nanocarbon substrates cause the difference.	Agarwal et al. ⁵⁴
GO-CaCO ₃ G-CaCO ₃ GO-HA G-HA	Modified Hummers method	Film	Mouse OB	Compared with bare GO and G, GO/G-CaCO ₃ composites exhibited remarkably enhanced HA formation when incubated in a simulated body solution. The GO/G-HA composites supported high viability of OB with an elongated morphology.	GO/G-HA hybrid materials induce a 3D matrix adhesion of OB with high cell viability and provide a similar microenvironment to that found in vivo	Kim et al. ⁵²

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Table 1. (Continued)

Graphene types	Preparation methods	Application modes	Cell types	Outcomes	Possible mechanisms	Reference
FRGO	Hummer's method; low-temperature thermal reduction method	Film	OB	The surface oxygen content of FRGO significantly increases the cellular behaviors, with the best performance for cell attachment, proliferation, calcium deposition, and collagen secretion being obtained in moderately reduced FRGO. Cell performance significantly decreased as the FRGO was highly reduced. Moderate performance was found in nonreduced pure GO and control glass slides.	Enhancement of cell adhesion and proliferation may be induced by enhanced extracellular matrix protein adsorption in moderately reduced FRGO by noncovalent interactions.	Shi et al. ⁷
Nylon 6, 6-GO hybrid	Hybrid Nylon 6,6 with 0.25 wt% graphene oxide.	Film	Mouse pre-OB	The cell attachment and proliferation on Nylon 6, 6-GO hybrid polymer greatly exceed those of Nylon 6,6.	The incorporation of GO in Nylon 6,6 matrix modifies the physiochemical properties of the surface, including chemistry and wettability, favoring attachment, cell-substrate interactions, and biological response required for cell attachment and proliferation. Furthermore, the negative polarity of G is instrumental in favorably inducing biological function.	Misra and Chaudhari ⁵³

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Table 1. (Continued)

Graphene types	Preparation methods	Application modes	Cell types	Outcomes	Possible mechanisms	Reference
Chitosan-GO scaffolds	Covalent linking of the carboxyl groups of GO with the amino groups of CS	Nanosheets	Mouse pre-OB	The covalent incorporation of GO into a chitosan network favorably modulated the biological response of osteoblasts, such that cell attachment, proliferation, and formation of extracellular matrix are significantly enhanced.	The significant enhancement of biological function is related to a combination of a number of physico-chemical factors, including a large surface area, nanoscale roughness, the presence of pendant groups, a hydrophilic nature, and a high water retention ability.	Depan et al. ⁸
GO-modified CS scaffold	The carboxyl groups of GO are covalently attached with the amine group of CS.	Nanosheets	Mouse pre-OB	Biological functions of the pre-OB including cell attachment, proliferation, growth and mineralization, are significantly enhanced in the presence of GO, compared with unmodified chitosan.	The difference of cell behavior is related to the degree and topography of protein adsorption on the scaffolds. BSA is widely spread on CS-GO as small globules, whereas the globules are large and randomly distributed on pure CS. This subtle but important difference in the adsorption of protein is responsible for the observed differences in cellular interactions.	Depan and Misra ⁹
rGO-CS substrata	Hummers method; hydrazine treatment; spin-coating	Nanosheets; hMSCs	hMSCs	G-incorporated CS substrate promotes adhesion and differentiation of hMSCs.	rGO-CS substrata with asymmetrical nanotopology and its secondary effects such as stiffness and roughness provided a suitable environment for adhesion and proliferation of hMSCs as well as enhanced cell-substrata interactions and cell-cell contacts.	Kim et al. ¹⁰

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Table 1. (Continued)

Graphene types	Preparation methods	Application modes	Cell types	Outcomes	Possible mechanisms	Reference
3D GFs	Growing graphene on 3D Nickel scaffolds	Film	hMSCs	3D GFs can maintain hMSCs viability and promote osteogenic differentiation without the need for extrinsic biochemical manipulation.	The mechanism driving spontaneous differentiation remains unclear, but is suspected to be an intrinsic cellular response to the stress derived from the interaction with a high stiffness material.	Crowder et al. ¹¹
GO-ac	Hummer method; self-assemblies on water	Film	hMSCs	hMSCs show spontaneous osteogenic differentiation on rough GO-ac without the use of any chemical inducers. The extent of mineralization increases with increasing roughness of the GO-ac.	The rough topology of the cross-linked creates increased cytoskeletal tension to grow and differentiate. The rough surface topology provides more anchoring points for the adhesion and proliferation of hMSCs.	Tang et al. ¹²

G, graphene; GO, graphene oxide; rGO, reduced graphene oxide; OB, osteoblasts; BSA, bovine serum albumin; HA, hydroxyapatite; CS, chitosan; BMP-2, bone morphogenetic protein-2; CVD, chemical vapor deposition; FRGO, few-layer rGO; GO-ac, acrylated GO; hASCs, human adipose-derived stem cells; hMSCs, human mesenchymal stem cells; hFOB, human fetal OB; MSC, mesenchymal stem cells; 3D, three-dimensional; 3D GFs, 3D graphene foams.

the surface charge of graphene have a large impact on the biological and toxicological response to red blood cells. At the smallest size, GO showed the greatest hemolytic activity, whereas aggregated graphene sheets exhibited the lowest hemolytic activity. Their study also demonstrated that compacted graphene sheets are more damaging to

FIG. 1. Schematic diagram depicting the possible mechanisms of the biological effects of graphenes on mesenchymal stem cells or osteoblastic cells in vitro. ? Means inconclusive results. Arrow, promotion; bar, inhibition. G, graphene; Dex, dexamethasone; b-GP, b-glycerophosphate. Color images available online at www.liebertpub.com/teb

concentration above 50 mg/L.⁸⁸ In another study by Kim et al., the proliferation rate of hMSCs decreased with the incorporation of higher amounts of rGO into the rGO-chitosan substrata.¹⁰ On the other hand, G and GO exhibited negligible in vitro toxicity to BMMSCs, ASCs, or osteoblasts when they were used as coating materials, as mentioned earlier. Thus, further systemic studies are required to wholly understand the potential biological effects and to address concerns over health hazards before any practical application.

The differentiation of MSCs into osteogenic lineages on graphene

A study by Kim et al. showed that GO/graphene-CaCO₃ hybrid materials exhibited remarkably enhanced hydroxyapatite formation when incubated in a simulated body fluid solution compared with bare GO and graphene.⁵² Later, other studies indicated that the formation of extracellular matrix of osteoblasts or preosteoblasts on CS-GO and FRGO was significantly enhanced.^{7?}

In addition, positive results for the osteogenic differentiation of MSCs on graphene have been obtained.^{4?,12} Nayak et al. cultured BMMSCs in osteogenic medium without bone morphogenetic protein-2 (BMP-2), which did not lead to osteogenic differentiation over the whole duration of the experiment (15 days). However, once the substrates (PDMS, PET, glass slide, and silicon wafer) were coated with CVD-grown graphene, BMMSCs successfully differentiated into osteoblasts, which was confirmed by quantitative alizarin red staining. Interestingly, both BMP-2-treated and CVD-grown graphene-coated substrates induced cell differentiation at the same rate, suggesting that graphene might be a driving force of bone cell formation.⁴ In another study, after

12 days of osteogenic induction, there was a sevenfold increase in the extent of mineralization in BMMSCs cultured on CVD-grown graphene compared with those on PDMS.⁵ Tang et al. reported spontaneous osteogenic differentiation of MSCs on a cross-linked GO,⁶ without the use of any chemical inducers. Furthermore, the extent of mineralization increased with an increase in the roughness of the GO.⁶ Thus, the GO⁶ may represent a chemical-free method of inducing osteoblastic differentiation.¹² The enhanced differentiation of ASCs, including osteogenesis and adipogenesis, on GO⁶ has also been reported.⁶ In addition, Alizarin Red S staining and western blot analysis by Kim et al. showed up-regulation of the osteogenic differentiation of hMSCs in the rGO-chitosan substrata compared with the chitosan substrata and tissue culture polystyrene, in both the proliferative and osteogenic induction media.¹⁰ These recent investigations indicate an active or potential pro-osteodifferentiation capability of G or GO.

Cell behavior of MSCs on 3D graphene

All the reports mentioned earlier investigated stem cell behavior on 2D graphene sheets. Crowder et al. employed 3D graphene foams (3D GFs) as culture substrates for BMMSCs for the first time. GFs were fabricated by growing graphene on 3D nickel scaffolds, and the nickel was subsequently removed by FeCl₃ etching. GFs were shown to maintain BMMSCs viability and to stimulate changes in morphology. When cultured on GFs for 7 days, BMMSCs exhibited spindle-shaped, elongated morphology with thin, aligned nuclei and strongly expressed both osteocalcin and osteopontin, indicating spontaneous osteogenic differentiation of BMMSCs without the need for extrinsic biochemical manipulation.¹¹

Mechanism of Graphene Positive Effects on the Proliferation and Osteogenic Differentiation of MSCs

The ability of graphene to promote the proliferation and osteogenic differentiation of BMMSCs and ASCs has been demonstrated (Fig. 1). It has been reported that topography, chemistry, and physical properties of biomaterials are critical parameters for directing cell fates.⁸¹ In recent years, the mechanism has been explored from different aspects (Table 1).

Adhesion mechanism

FAs are large protein complexes that indicate the connections between cells and the extracellular matrix. FAs play a key role in the mediation of adhesion and migration of cells.⁸⁹ Several studies have suggested that nanoscale structures of substrates may regulate FAs. Kim et al. hypothesized that the unique nanotopography of the GO would induce the formation of FAs.⁶

Cell morphology mechanism

Micromorphology regulates multiple biological processes, including adhesion,⁹⁰ proliferation,⁹¹ and differentiation.⁹² Moreover, studies suggest that cell shape is a key

with regard to graphene effects on the adhesion, proliferation, and differentiation of MSCs, and its potential to promote osteodifferentiation, which point to its future use in surface modification of implants or scaffold materials. To date, studies on graphene contribution to bone tissue engineering are still quite new, and knowledge on the effects of graphene is limited. Within the limitation of the present investigation, we believe that graphene may have a promising future, and further research will realize its potential. In spite of the significant progress mentioned earlier, there are still some important challenges. First, the potential long-term toxicity and the nonbiodegradable nature of graphene should be further investigated. Second, our understanding of graphene-cell interactions and its internal mechanisms are incomplete, and many hypotheses remain to be tested. Third, a comparison of the osteogenic effects of graphene with those of current successful implants or scaffold materials should be performed before we can conclude whether graphene is a promising nano-material for promoting surface modification of implants or scaffold materials. Lastly, the exact effects of graphene on cells, tissues, or organs, and their metabolic pathway in vivo remain unclear and require further studies.

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Disclosure Statement

The authors indicated no potential conflicts of interest.

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