

3D Biomimetic Constructs Steer Stem Cell Commitment by Synergistic Modulation of Biophysical Cues and Growth Factor Signaling

Simão P. B. Teixeira^{1,2}, Alberto Pardo^{1,2,3}, Syeda M. Bakht,^{1,2} Manuel Gomez-Florit^{1,2}, Rui L. Reis^{1,2},
Manuela E. Gomes^{1,2}, Rui M. A. Domingues^{1,2}

Presenting Author: Simão P. B. Teixeira, simao.teixeira@i3bs.uminho.pt

¹3B's Research Group, I3Bs—Research Institute on Biomaterials, Biodegradables and Biomimetics of University of Minho, Headquarters of the European Institute of Excellence on Tissue Engineering and Regenerative Medicine, AvePark – Parque de Ciência e Tecnologia, Zona Industrial da Gandra, 4805-017 Barco GMR, Portugal.

²ICVS/3B's—PT Government Associate Laboratory, Braga/Guimarães, Portugal.

³Colloids and Polymers Physics Group, Particle Physics Department and Health Research Institute, University of Santiago de Compostela, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

Abstract text (max 300 words plus References and Acknowledgements)

Tendon diseases are prevalent health concerns for which current therapies present limited success, in part due to the intrinsically low regenerative ability of tendons. Therefore, tissue engineering presents a potential to improve this outcome. Here, we hypothesize that a concurrent control over both biophysical and biochemical stimuli will boost the tenogenic commitment of stem cells, thus promoting regeneration. To achieve this, we combine molecularly imprinted nanoparticles (MINPs), which act as artificial amplifiers for endogenous growth factor (GF) activity,¹ with bioinspired anisotropic hydrogels² to manufacture 3D tenogenic constructs.

MINPs were solid phase-imprinted using a TGF- β 3 epitope as template and their affinity for the target was assessed by SPR and dot blot. Magnetically-responsive microfibers were produced by cryosectioning electrospun meshes containing iron oxide nanoparticles. The constructs were prepared by encapsulating adipose tissue-derived stem cells (ASCs), microfibers, and MINPs within gelatin hydrogels, while aligning the microfibers with an external magnetostatic field during gelation. This allows an effective modulation of hydrogel fibrillar topography, mimicking the native tissue's anisotropic architecture. Cell responses were analyzed by multiplex immunoassay, quantitative polymerase chain reaction, and immunocytochemistry.

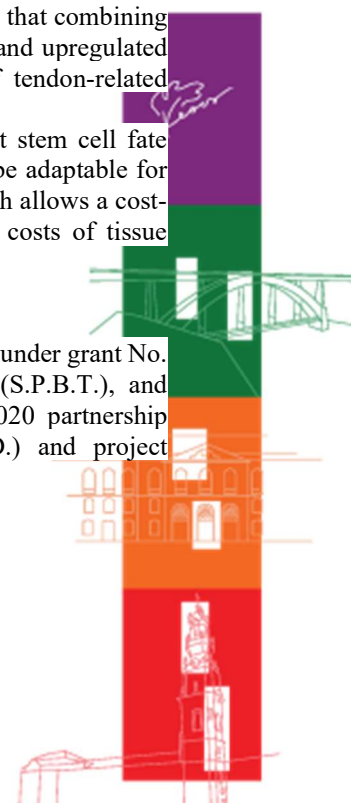
MINPs showed an affinity for the template comparable to monoclonal antibodies. Encapsulated ASCs acquired an elongated shape and predominant orientation along the alignment direction. Cellular studies revealed that combining MINPs with aligned microfibers increased TGF- β signaling via non-canonical Akt/ERK pathways and upregulated tendon-associated gene expression, contrasting with randomly oriented gels. Immunostaining of tendon-related proteins presented analogous outcomes, corroborating our hypothesis.

Our results thus demonstrate that microstructural cues and biological signals synergistically direct stem cell fate commitment, suggesting that this strategy holds potential for improving tendon healing and might be adaptable for other biological tissues. The proposed concept highlights the GF-sequestering ability of MINPs which allows a cost-effective alternative to recombinant GF supplementation, potentially decreasing the translational costs of tissue engineering strategies.

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Name and e-mail address of author for correspondence: Rui M. A. Domingues – rui.domingues@i3bs.uminho.pt

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