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Self-Healing Hydrogels as Smart Drug Delivery Platforms: Design Strategies, Therapeutic Applications and Future Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Hydrogels have emerged as promising biomaterials for pharmaceutical and biomedical applications because of their high water content, biocompatibility, structural similarity to the extracellular matrix, and ability to encapsulate therapeutic agents. However, conventional hydrogels may undergo structural damage under mechanical stress, which can compromise their integrity and therapeutic performance. Self-healing hydrogels represent an advanced class of smart materials capable of restoring their structural and functional properties after damage through reversible physical interactions or dynamic covalent bonds. The incorporation of self-healing properties can improve the durability, adaptability, and functionality of hydrogel-based drug delivery systems. These materials can be engineered using non-covalent interactions, including hydrogen bonding, ionic interactions, hydrophobic associations, and host–guest interactions, as well as dynamic covalent linkages such as Schiff base, disulfide, and boronate ester bonds. Furthermore, the integration of stimuli-responsive mechanisms enables controlled drug release in response to physiological or pathological signals, including changes in pH, temperature, redox conditions, and enzymatic activity. Self-healing hydrogels have demonstrated considerable potential in localized and sustained drug delivery, injectable formulations, cancer therapy, wound healing, and regenerative medicine. Despite their promising properties, challenges related to mechanical strength, reproducibility, sterilization, large-scale manufacturing, long-term biocompatibility, and clinical translation remain. This review discusses the design strategies, self-healing mechanisms, material selection, drug loading and release approaches, therapeutic applications, and current limitations of self-healing hydrogels. Future developments in multifunctional, stimuli-responsive, and personalized hydrogel systems may further strengthen their role as next-generation smart drug delivery platforms.

Keywords: Self-healing hydrogels; Smart drug delivery; Injectable hydrogels; Controlled drug release; Stimuli-responsive systems; Biomaterials.

1. Introduction

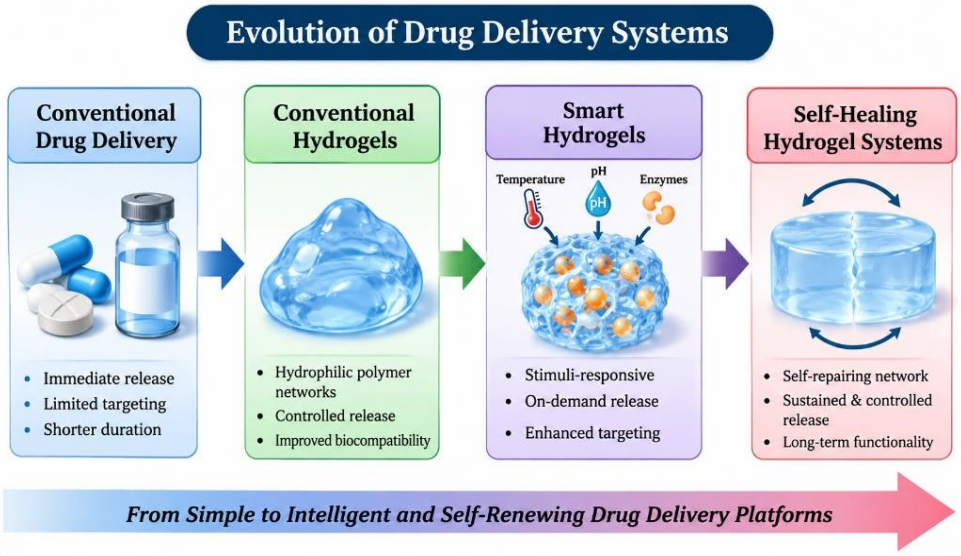
The development of effective drug delivery systems remains a major focus of pharmaceutical research, as conventional dosage forms often face limitations related to poor drug stability, rapid elimination, non-specific distribution, frequent dosing, and inadequate drug concentrations at the target site. Advanced drug delivery systems are therefore being developed to improve therapeutic efficacy by providing controlled, sustained, and site-specific drug release. Among the various biomaterials investigated for this purpose, hydrogels have attracted considerable attention because of their three-dimensional polymeric networks, high water content, biocompatibility, and ability to encapsulate a wide range of therapeutic agents. [1,2]

Hydrogels can mimic certain characteristics of the natural extracellular matrix and provide a hydrated environment suitable for the incorporation and controlled release of small-molecule drugs, proteins, peptides, nucleic acids, and other bioactive molecules. Their physicochemical properties, including swelling behavior, porosity, biodegradability, and mechanical strength, can be modified by altering the polymer composition and cross-linking strategy. Consequently, hydrogel-based systems have been widely investigated for localized, injectable, transdermal, and implantable drug delivery applications. [2,3]However, conventional hydrogels may undergo irreversible structural damage when exposed to mechanical stress, deformation, or repeated movement. Such damage can compromise the integrity of the delivery system and may alter its drug release behavior, particularly in dynamic biological environments. [1,4]

To overcome these limitations, self-healing hydrogels have emerged as a promising class of smart biomaterials capable of restoring their structural integrity after physical damage. Their self-repairing ability is generally attributed to reversible physical interactions or dynamic covalent bonds within the polymeric network. Non-covalent interactions such as hydrogen bonding, ionic interactions, hydrophobic associations, and host–guest interactions can facilitate reversible network formation, whereas dynamic covalent linkages, including Schiff base, disulfide, and boronate ester bonds, provide alternative mechanisms for structural recover.[1,4,5] In addition to self-healing behavior, these hydrogels can be designed to exhibit injectability and responsiveness to specific physiological or pathological stimuli. Changes in pH, temperature, redox conditions, enzymatic activity, and other environmental factors can be utilized to regulate hydrogel behavior and drug release. Such multifunctional systems have the potential to provide controlled and localized delivery while minimizing systemic drug exposure and associated adverse effects.[3,5].Self-healing hydrogels have consequently been explored for a variety of therapeutic applications, including cancer therapy, wound healing, antimicrobial delivery, tissue regeneration, and sustained

release of therapeutic agents. Despite significant progress, several challenges remain in translating self-healing hydrogels from laboratory research to clinical application. Achieving an appropriate balance between mechanical strength, rapid self-healing ability, biocompatibility, biodegradability, and predictable drug release remains a major formulation challenge. Additional concerns include formulation reproducibility, sterilization, large-scale manufacturing, long-term safety, and regulatory requirements. [4,5]

Therefore, this review aims to provide an overview of self-healing hydrogels as smart drug delivery platforms, with particular emphasis on their design strategies, mechanisms of self-healing, materials and cross-linking approaches, drug loading and release mechanisms, stimuli-responsive properties, and therapeutic applications. The current challenges and future perspectives associated with their clinical translation are also discussed.



2. Fundamentals of Hydrogels and Self-Healing Behavior

2.1 Hydrogels: Definition and Basic Characteristics

Hydrogels are three-dimensional polymeric networks composed of hydrophilic polymers that are capable of absorbing and retaining substantial amounts of water while maintaining their structural integrity. Depending on the nature of the polymer network and cross-linking method, hydrogels may be classified as physically or chemically cross-linked systems. Their high water content and soft, flexible nature provide characteristics that resemble certain aspects of the natural extracellular matrix, making them attractive materials for biomedical and pharmaceutical applications. [1,2]

The physicochemical properties of hydrogels can be tailored by modifying the polymer composition, molecular weight, cross-linking density, and type of intermolecular interaction. These factors influence important characteristics such as swelling behavior, porosity, mechanical strength, biodegradability, and drug diffusion. Consequently, hydrogels can be designed to accommodate a variety of therapeutic agents, including small-molecule drugs, proteins, peptides, and nucleic acids. [2] Their ability to provide a hydrated environment and regulate the diffusion of incorporated therapeutic agents has made them valuable platforms for controlled and localized drug delivery.

However, conventional hydrogels may experience structural damage when subjected to repeated deformation, mechanical stress, or physical disruption. Such damage can affect the integrity of the polymeric network and potentially alter the performance of the drug delivery system. Therefore, the development of hydrogels capable of restoring their structure after damage has emerged as an important strategy for improving the durability and functionality of hydrogel-based biomaterials. [4,5]

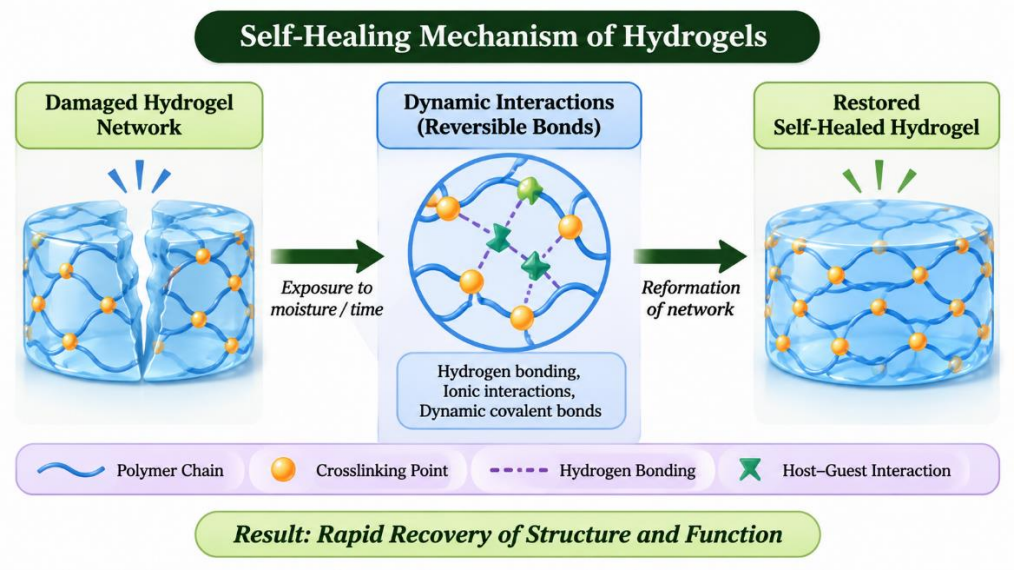
2.2 Concept of Self-Healing Hydrogels

Self-healing hydrogels are a class of smart polymeric materials that can partially or completely restore their structural integrity after physical damage. This property is primarily achieved through the presence of reversible interactions within the polymer network, which allow disrupted cross-links to reform after the damaged surfaces are brought into contact. [6,7] The self-healing process may occur autonomously under physiological conditions or may be promoted by external stimuli, depending on the design of the hydrogel system.

The ability to repair structural damage offers several advantages for biomedical applications. Self-healing hydrogels can maintain their functionality in dynamic biological environments, tolerate mechanical deformation, and potentially prolong the useful life of the delivery system. In addition, many self-healing hydrogels exhibit shear-thinning and injectable properties, enabling minimally invasive administration through a syringe or needle followed by reconstruction of the hydrogel network at the target site .[6,8]

2.3 Mechanism of Self-Healing

The self-healing ability of hydrogels is generally based on reversible physical interactions or dynamic covalent bonds. When the hydrogel undergoes mechanical damage, some of the interactions responsible for maintaining the polymeric network are disrupted. The polymer chains can subsequently rearrange and diffuse across the damaged interface, allowing the reversible interactions or bonds to reform and restore



2.2 Chemically Cross-Linked Self-Healing Hydrogels

Chemically cross-linked self-healing hydrogels utilize dynamic covalent bonds that can reversibly break and reform under suitable conditions. Compared with conventional permanent covalent cross-links, dynamic covalent bonds provide a balance between structural stability and reversibility. Common mechanisms include Schiff base reactions, disulfide bond exchange, boronate ester formation, and reversible Diels–Alder reactions. [10,11]

2.2.1 Schiff Base Bonds

Schiff base reactions involve the reversible formation of imine or related bonds through reactions between functional groups such as amines and aldehydes or ketones. These reactions have been widely employed for the preparation of injectable self-healing hydrogels because the polymeric components can often form a hydrogel under relatively mild conditions. The reversible nature of Schiff base bonds enables recovery of the network after mechanical disruption, while the properties of the resulting hydrogel can be tailored by modifying the polymer composition and reactive groups. [11]

2.2.2 Disulfide Bonds

Disulfide bonds are dynamic covalent linkages that can undergo reversible exchange reactions under appropriate redox conditions. Their responsiveness to the redox environment makes them particularly interesting for biomedical applications in which variations in oxidative or reductive conditions can be utilized to regulate hydrogel behavior. Disulfide-based self-healing hydrogels have been investigated for controlled drug and gene delivery, although their performance depends on the chemical environment and the design of the polymer network. [9,10]

2.2.3 Boronate Ester Bonds

Boronate ester bonds are formed through reversible interactions between boronic acid groups and molecules containing suitable diol groups. These dynamic bonds can provide self-healing properties and environmental responsiveness, particularly to changes in pH and the presence of certain biological molecules. Boronate ester-based hydrogels have therefore attracted interest for controlled drug delivery and other responsive biomedical applications. However, their stability may be influenced by the surrounding pH and the specific chemical composition of the system. [9,10]

2.2.4 Diels–Alder Reactions

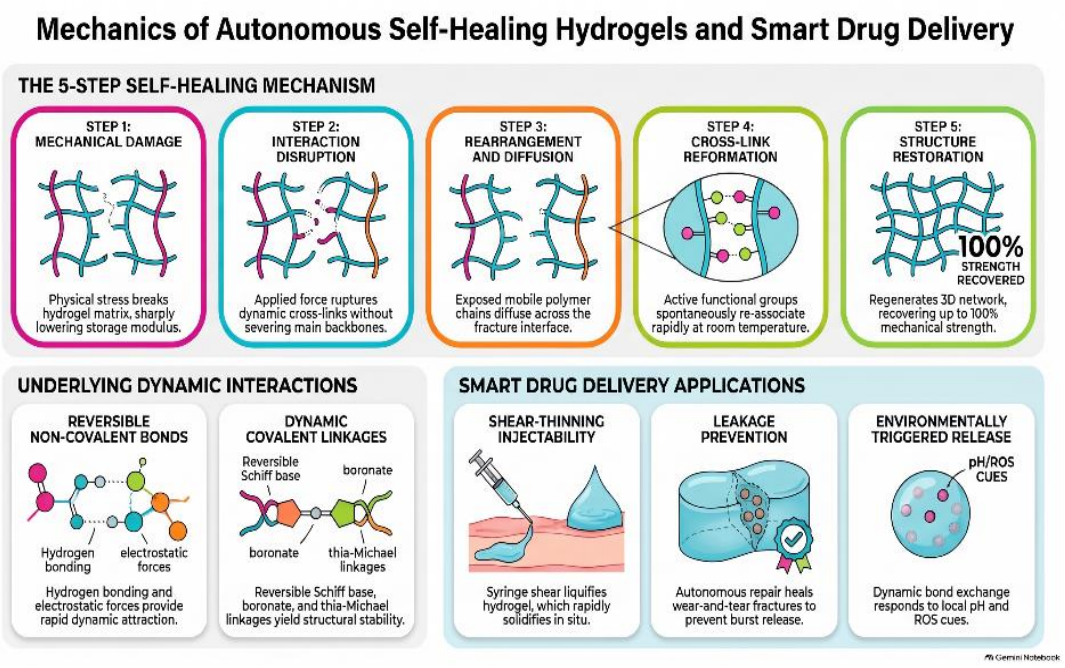
Reversible Diels–Alder reactions represent another dynamic covalent strategy for constructing self-healing hydrogels. These reactions can provide reversible cross-linking and may offer good structural stability and biocompatibility. However, the conditions required for efficient bond formation and reversibility must be carefully considered when designing systems for pharmaceutical and biomedical applications. [9,12]

2.3 Hybrid and Multi-Mechanism Self-Healing Hydrogels

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to hybrid self-healing hydrogels that combine two or more reversible interactions within a single polymeric network. For example, dynamic covalent bonds may be combined with hydrogen bonding, ionic interactions, or hydrophobic associations. Such multi-mechanism designs aim to improve both mechanical strength and healing efficiency, addressing the limitations of systems based on a single interaction. [10,11]

Hybrid systems are particularly relevant to smart drug delivery because their properties can be tailored according to the intended therapeutic application. By combining complementary cross-linking mechanisms, it may be possible to develop hydrogels with improved injectability, structural stability, responsiveness, and controlled drug release. The rational design of these multifunctional systems is therefore an important direction in the development of next-generation self-healing drug delivery platforms. [11]

The self-healing process can be broadly represented as:



Self-healing mechanisms are commonly classified into two major categories: **non-covalent interactions** and **dynamic covalent interactions**. Non-covalent mechanisms include hydrogen bonding, ionic interactions, hydrophobic associations, and host–guest interactions. These reversible interactions can readily dissociate and reform, contributing to flexibility and self-repairing ability. Dynamic covalent mechanisms involve reversible chemical bonds, including imine or Schiff base bonds, disulfide bonds, boronate ester bonds, and Diels–Alder linkages. [6,7]

The healing efficiency of a self-healing hydrogel depends on several factors, including the mobility of polymer chains, the density and reversibility of cross-links, environmental conditions, and the time allowed for recovery. A major challenge in the design of these systems is achieving an appropriate balance between rapid self-healing and adequate mechanical strength, as highly dynamic networks may provide efficient healing but insufficient structural robustness [4,7]

Table 1. Classification of Self-Healing Hydrogels

Type	**Self-healing mechanism**	**Major advantages**	**Limitations**	**Potential drug delivery application**
Physical	Hydrogen bonding	Simple and reversible	May have low mechanical strength	Localized delivery
Physical	Ionic interactions	Biocompatible and responsive	Sensitive to ionic environment	Injectable delivery
Physical	Hydrophobic interactions	Reversible and tunable	May require combination with other interactions	Controlled release
Physical	Host–guest interactions	Specific and highly dynamic	Complex formulation	Injectable drug depots

Type	Self-healing mechanism	Major advantages	Limitations	Potential drug delivery application
Chemical	Schiff base bonds	Injectable and rapidly formed	Properties may depend on pH	Localized drug delivery
Chemical	Disulfide bonds	Redox-responsive	Environment-dependent	Controlled drug delivery
Chemical	Boronate ester bonds	Dynamic and stimuli-responsive	pH-sensitive	Smart drug delivery
Chemical	Diels–Alder reactions	Stable and reversible	May require specific reaction conditions	Sustained delivery
Hybrid	Multiple reversible interactions	Improved strength and healing	Greater formulation complexity	Multifunctional drug delivery

3. Materials Used for Self-Healing Hydrogels

The selection of appropriate polymeric materials is a critical factor in the design and performance of self-healing hydrogels. The materials used influence the mechanical properties, biocompatibility, biodegradability, self-healing efficiency, drug-loading capacity, and release behavior of the hydrogel system. Both natural and synthetic polymers have been extensively investigated for the preparation of self-healing hydrogels. In addition, hybrid systems combining natural and synthetic polymers have emerged as promising platforms for overcoming the limitations associated with individual materials. [13,15]

Table 2: Materials Used in Self-Healing Hydrogels

Material	Type	Important properties	Role in self-healing hydrogel systems	Drug delivery potential
Chitosan	Natural	Biocompatible, mucoadhesive	Schiff base formation and hydrogen bonding	Injectable and sustained delivery
Hyaluronic acid	Natural	Biocompatible, highly hydrated	Dynamic cross-linking after modification	Localized and targeted delivery
Alginate	Natural	Biodegradable, gel-forming	Ionic interactions	Controlled release
Gelatin	Natural	Biocompatible, bioactive	Physical and chemical cross-linking	Drug and growth-factor delivery
Dextran	Natural	Hydrophilic and modifiable	Dynamic covalent interactions	Localized delivery
PVA	Synthetic	Good mechanical properties	Hydrogen bonding and hybrid networks	Controlled release
PEG	Synthetic	Hydrophilic and tunable	Functionalized dynamic networks	Injectable delivery
Polyacrylamide	Synthetic	Mechanically robust	Hybrid and double-network systems	Sustained delivery

4. Drug Loading and Release Mechanisms in Self-Healing Hydrogels

The ability to efficiently incorporate therapeutic agents and control their release is a key feature of self-healing hydrogels as smart drug delivery platforms. Their three-dimensional polymeric networks provide a hydrated environment suitable for encapsulating a wide range of therapeutic agents, including small-molecule drugs, proteins, peptides, nucleic acids, and nanocarriers. The drug-loading capacity and release profile are influenced by polymer composition, cross-linking density, pore size, swelling behavior, degradation rate, and interactions between the drug and the polymeric network. [14,16]

An ideal self-healing hydrogel should protect the incorporated therapeutic agent, maintain its stability, and provide predictable and sustained drug release. In addition, the ability of the hydrogel network to recover after mechanical damage may help maintain the structural integrity and functionality of the drug delivery system in dynamic physiological environments. [15,16]

4.1 Drug Loading Strategies

Different strategies can be employed to incorporate therapeutic agents into self-healing hydrogels. The choice of loading method depends on the physicochemical properties of the drug, the polymer system, and the intended therapeutic application.

Table 3. Drug Loading and Release Mechanisms in Self-Healing Hydrogels

Strategy/Mechanism	**Principle**	**Major advantage**	**Limitation**
Physical entrapment	Drug is retained within the polymeric network	Simple and versatile	Initial burst release may occur
Chemical conjugation	Drug is covalently linked to the polymer	Better control over release	May affect drug activity
Nanocarrier incorporation	Drug-loaded nanocarriers are embedded in the hydrogel	Improved drug protection	Increased formulation complexity
Diffusion-controlled release	Drug diffuses through the polymer network	Predictable release	May lead to rapid release
Swelling-controlled release	Water uptake increases mesh size	Tunable release	Dependent on environmental conditions
Degradation-controlled release	Polymer network gradually breaks down	Suitable for sustained delivery	Release may vary with degradation rate
Stimuli-responsive release	Specific stimuli trigger drug release	Potential for site-specific delivery	Complex system design

4.2 Factors Affecting Drug Release

The drug release behavior of self-healing hydrogels is influenced by several formulation-related and physiological factors. Important factors include:

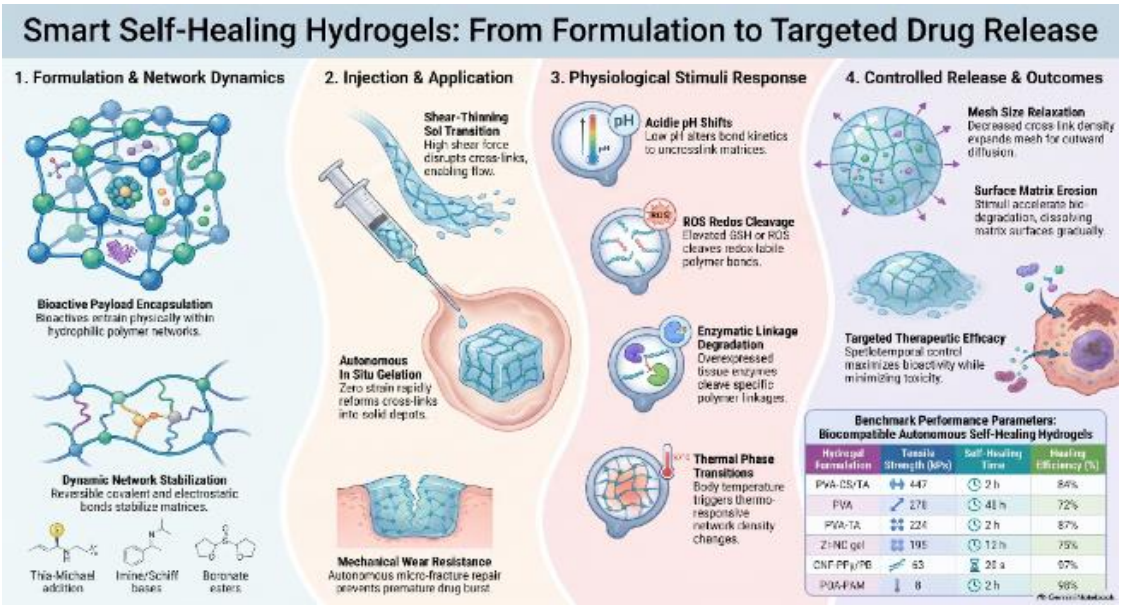
- Type and concentration of polymer
- Cross-linking density
- Hydrogel porosity and mesh size
- Swelling behavior
- Polymer degradation rate
- Molecular size and solubility of the drug
- Drug–polymer interactions
- Environmental conditions, including pH and temperature

The rational control of these factors is essential for achieving predictable and sustained drug release. In self-healing systems, the cross-linking mechanism is particularly important because it influences both the ability of the hydrogel to repair itself and the movement of drug molecules within the polymeric network. [15,16]

4.3 Significance of Self-Healing Properties in Drug Delivery

The self-healing ability of hydrogels provides an important advantage over conventional hydrogel-based drug delivery systems. Mechanical stress or physical damage during administration or at the site of application may compromise the structural integrity of conventional hydrogels. Self-healing hydrogels, however, can restore their polymeric networks through reversible interactions, potentially maintaining their structural and functional performance after damage. [8,15]

Furthermore, many self-healing hydrogels exhibit shear-thinning behavior, enabling them to flow during injection and subsequently reconstruct their network after administration. This property supports minimally invasive and localized drug delivery applications. The combination of injectability, structural recovery, and controlled drug release makes self-healing hydrogels promising candidates for next-generation smart drug delivery systems .[15,18]



5. Stimuli-Responsive Self-Healing Hydrogels

Stimuli-responsive hydrogels represent an advanced class of smart biomaterials capable of undergoing reversible changes in their physical or chemical properties in response to specific environmental signals. When stimuli-responsive behavior is combined with self-healing ability, hydrogels can provide improved adaptability, structural recovery, and controlled drug release. These multifunctional systems can respond to internal physiological or pathological signals, such as changes in pH, temperature, redox conditions, and enzyme activity, as well as external stimuli, including light, electric fields, and magnetic fields. [18,19]

The incorporation of stimuli-responsive components into self-healing hydrogel networks provides an opportunity to achieve more precise control over therapeutic delivery. Depending on the design of the polymeric system, exposure to a specific stimulus can alter the swelling behavior, degradation rate, cross-linking density, or permeability of the hydrogel, thereby regulating the release of incorporated therapeutic agents. [16,19]

Table 4. Types of Stimuli-Responsive Self-Healing Hydrogels

Type of stimulus	**Mechanism of response**	**Potential application**	**Major advantage**
pH	Protonation/deprotonation and changes in swelling	Targeted and gastrointestinal delivery	Responds to local pH changes
Temperature	Sol–gel transition or changes in polymer structure	Injectable drug depots	In situ gel formation
Redox	Cleavage or exchange of redox-sensitive bonds	Targeted drug delivery	Responds to pathological environments
Enzymes	Enzyme-mediated degradation or structural changes	Cancer and inflammatory therapy	Biological specificity
Light	Photo-induced structural changes	Controlled on-demand release	Temporal control
Electric field	Changes in polymer conformation or ion movement	Controlled release	Externally regulated
Magnetic field	Response of magnetic components	Localized and triggered delivery	Remote activation
Multi-stimuli	Combination of two or more mechanisms	Advanced targeted therapy	Improved control and specificity

5.1 Significance in Smart Drug Delivery

The integration of stimuli responsiveness and self-healing behavior creates multifunctional drug delivery platforms capable of adapting to changing physiological conditions. Self-healing mechanisms help maintain the structural integrity of the hydrogel following mechanical damage, while stimuli-responsive components can regulate the timing and location of drug release. [18,19]

Such systems are particularly relevant to the development of personalized and site-specific therapies. By designing hydrogels that respond to disease-associated conditions, it may be possible to improve local drug concentrations while reducing systemic exposure. However, successful clinical translation will require further research to improve the reproducibility, long-term safety, biodegradability, and manufacturing feasibility of these complex smart hydrogel systems. [19,21]

6. Therapeutic Applications of Self-Healing Hydrogels

The unique combination of self-healing ability, biocompatibility, injectability, and controlled drug release has expanded the therapeutic applications of self-healing hydrogels. These smart biomaterials can adapt to irregular tissue surfaces, recover from mechanical damage, and provide localized or sustained delivery of therapeutic agents. Depending on their composition and cross-linking mechanism, self-healing hydrogels have been investigated for applications in cancer therapy, wound healing, antimicrobial treatment, tissue regeneration, and localized injectable drug delivery. [22,23]

The ability to incorporate different classes of therapeutic agents, including small-molecule drugs, proteins, peptides, nucleic acids, and nanocarriers, makes these systems highly versatile. Furthermore, the integration of stimuli-responsive properties can provide additional control over the timing and site of drug release, thereby improving therapeutic efficacy and potentially reducing systemic adverse effects. [18,21,22]

6.1 Cancer Drug Delivery

Cancer therapy often requires the administration of potent therapeutic agents that may produce significant systemic toxicity and adverse effects. Localized drug delivery using self-healing hydrogels offers a potential strategy for maintaining therapeutic drug concentrations at the tumor site while reducing exposure to healthy tissues. [22,24]

Self-healing hydrogels can function as localized drug depots and may be administered through minimally invasive injection. Following administration, the hydrogel can reform its polymeric network and retain the incorporated therapeutic agent at the desired site. Drug release can occur through diffusion, degradation, or response to tumor-associated stimuli such as acidic pH, altered redox conditions, and enzyme activity. [21,24]

The incorporation of nanoparticles or other nanocarriers into self-healing hydrogel matrices has further expanded their potential in cancer therapy. Such hybrid systems can provide additional protection to therapeutic agents and offer multiple mechanisms for controlling drug release. Although these systems show considerable promise, further studies are required to establish their long-term safety, biodegradation, and clinical effectiveness. [22,24]

6.2 Wound Healing and Localized Drug Delivery

Wound healing is one of the most widely investigated applications of self-healing hydrogels. An ideal wound dressing should maintain a moist environment, conform to the wound surface, protect the injured tissue, and support the healing process. Self-healing hydrogels are particularly suitable for this application because they can adapt to irregular wound surfaces and restore their structural integrity following mechanical damage.[23,25]

Drug-loaded self-healing hydrogels can serve as localized carriers for antimicrobial agents, anti-inflammatory drugs, growth factors, and other therapeutic molecules. The hydrogel matrix can provide sustained release of these agents while reducing the need for frequent administration. In addition, the self-healing property may improve the durability of the dressing in areas exposed to movement or mechanical stress. [23,25]

Stimuli-responsive wound hydrogels may provide additional advantages by responding to changes in the wound microenvironment, such as pH, enzyme activity, or oxidative stress. These systems have the potential to provide more controlled and responsive therapeutic delivery during different stages of wound healing. [21,25]

6.3 Antimicrobial Drug Delivery

The increasing challenge of microbial infections and antimicrobial resistance has created a need for advanced localized drug delivery systems. Self-healing hydrogels can be used to encapsulate and release antimicrobial drugs at the site of infection. Localized delivery may help maintain an effective drug concentration at the target site while potentially reducing systemic exposure. [23,26]

Antimicrobial self-healing hydrogels may incorporate conventional antibiotics, antimicrobial peptides, metal-based nanoparticles, or naturally derived antimicrobial agents. The choice of therapeutic agent and hydrogel composition can be tailored according to the intended application. For example, antimicrobial hydrogels have been investigated for infected wounds and other localized infections where prolonged contact between the therapeutic agent and the affected tissue is beneficial. [25,26] However, the safety and long-term effects of some antimicrobial components, particularly certain nanoparticles,

should be carefully evaluated. Optimizing drug release while maintaining antimicrobial activity remains an important consideration in the development of these systems. [26]

6.4 Tissue Regeneration and Regenerative Medicine

Self-healing hydrogels have significant potential in regenerative medicine because their soft and hydrated structure can mimic certain properties of the extracellular matrix. These materials can provide a supportive environment for cells and may be used to deliver growth factors, proteins, and other bioactive molecules involved in tissue repair. [22,27]

Injectable self-healing hydrogels are particularly attractive for tissue regeneration because they can be administered using minimally invasive techniques and conform to irregular defects. After injection, the hydrogel network can reconstruct and provide a localized environment for therapeutic agents or cells. Applications have been investigated in the regeneration of bone, cartilage, skin, and other tissues. [23,27]

The ability to combine self-healing properties with controlled release can improve the sustained availability of growth factors and other regenerative molecules. Nevertheless, achieving appropriate mechanical strength, degradation behavior, and biological compatibility remains essential for successful tissue engineering applications. [27]

6.5 Injectable and Localized Drug Delivery

Injectable self-healing hydrogels are among the most promising applications of these materials in pharmaceutics. Many systems exhibit shear-thinning behavior, allowing them to flow through a syringe or needle during administration. Once the mechanical stress is removed, reversible interactions can reform, enabling reconstruction of the hydrogel network at the target site. [22,23]

This property makes injectable self-healing hydrogels suitable for localized and sustained drug delivery. The hydrogel can act as an in situ depot that gradually releases the incorporated therapeutic agent over a predetermined period. Injectable systems may reduce the need for surgical implantation and allow treatment to be delivered directly to difficult-to-access or irregular anatomical sites. [18,22]

6.6 Emerging Applications

Beyond the major therapeutic areas described above, self-healing hydrogels are being investigated for applications in ocular drug delivery, transdermal therapy, gastrointestinal delivery, and gene delivery. Their adaptable structure and ability to protect sensitive therapeutic agents make them promising candidates for these specialized applications. [22,24]

The incorporation of advanced technologies, including nanoparticles, biologics, and stimuli-responsive components, may further expand the clinical potential of self-healing hydrogels. However, the complexity of these multifunctional systems also presents challenges related to reproducibility, manufacturing, sterilization, regulatory evaluation, and clinical translation. [23,27]

Table 5. Therapeutic Applications of Self-Healing Hydrogels

Therapeutic application	**Therapeutic agents**	**Role of the self-healing hydrogel**	**Major advantage**
Cancer therapy	Anticancer drugs, nucleic acids, nanocarriers	Localized drug depot	Reduced systemic exposure
Wound healing	Antimicrobials, anti-inflammatory drugs, growth factors	Protective and adaptive dressing	Sustained local therapy
Antimicrobial delivery	Antibiotics, peptides, antimicrobial agents	Controlled release at infection site	Prolonged therapeutic action
Tissue regeneration	Growth factors, proteins, cells	Supportive matrix and delivery platform	Mimics hydrated tissue environment
Injectable delivery	Various therapeutic agents	In situ drug depot	Minimally invasive administration
Emerging applications	Biologics and specialized therapeutics	Adaptive carrier system	Potential for site-specific delivery

7. Advantages and Limitations of Self-Healing Hydrogels

Self-healing hydrogels have emerged as promising smart drug delivery platforms because they combine the advantages of conventional hydrogels with the ability to restore their structure after mechanical damage. Their dynamic polymeric networks can provide controlled drug release, adaptability to biological environments, and improved functionality in applications where conventional materials may lose their structural integrity. Despite these advantages, several scientific, technological, and translational limitations must be addressed before the widespread clinical use of self-healing hydrogel-based drug delivery systems. [28,29]

7.1 Advantages of Self-Healing Hydrogels

7.1.1 Ability to Restore Structural Integrity

The most distinctive advantage of self-healing hydrogels is their ability to recover from mechanical damage. Reversible non-covalent interactions and dynamic covalent bonds allow disrupted polymer networks to reform after the removal of mechanical stress. This property can improve the durability and functional lifespan of the hydrogel in dynamic biological environments. [28]

For drug delivery applications, structural recovery may help maintain the integrity of the drug-loaded matrix following deformation or physical disruption. This is particularly relevant for injectable systems and applications involving tissues that experience repeated movement or mechanical stress. [22,28]

7.1.2 Injectable and Minimally Invasive Administration

Many self-healing hydrogels exhibit shear-thinning behavior, allowing them to flow under mechanical stress during injection and subsequently reform their polymeric networks after administration. This property enables minimally invasive delivery and allows the hydrogel to conform to irregular anatomical spaces.[28,30] Injectable self-healing systems can function as localized drug depots, providing sustained therapeutic delivery without the need for surgical implantation. This approach may improve patient comfort and allow therapeutic agents to be administered directly at the desired site of action. [23,30]

7.1.3 Controlled and Sustained Drug Release

The three-dimensional polymeric network of self-healing hydrogels can regulate the diffusion and release of incorporated therapeutic agents. By modifying polymer composition, cross-linking density, and drug–polymer interactions, the release profile can be tailored to provide prolonged or controlled drug delivery. [29,30] The incorporation of stimuli-responsive components can provide an additional level of control. Hydrogels may be designed to respond to specific physiological or pathological conditions, thereby enabling more selective drug release and reducing premature exposure of the therapeutic agent. [19,21]

7.1.4 Adaptability and Conformability

Self-healing hydrogels possess a soft and hydrated structure that enables them to adapt to irregular tissue surfaces and cavities. This characteristic is particularly useful for wound healing, tissue regeneration, and localized drug delivery applications .[28,29]

Their ability to conform to the target site can improve contact with biological tissues and enhance local retention. The combination of conformability and self-healing behavior makes these systems suitable for dynamic environments where conventional rigid drug delivery systems may be less effective. [22]

7.1.5 Potential for Multifunctional Drug Delivery

Self-healing hydrogels can be engineered to incorporate multiple functions within a single delivery platform. In addition to carrying therapeutic agents, they can possess stimuli-responsive, antimicrobial, adhesive, conductive, or antioxidant properties.[23,29] This multifunctionality provides opportunities for developing advanced therapeutic systems capable of addressing multiple aspects of a disease or tissue condition. For example, a wound dressing may combine self-healing properties with antimicrobial activity and sustained release of therapeutic agents. [25,26]

7.2 Limitations and Challenges

7.2.1 Balance Between Mechanical Strength and Self-Healing Ability

One of the major challenges in designing self-healing hydrogels is achieving an appropriate balance between mechanical strength and healing efficiency. Highly dynamic and reversible interactions may facilitate rapid self-repair but can result in weak mechanical properties. Conversely, strongly cross-linked networks may provide greater structural strength but limit polymer chain mobility and reduce the ability of the material to heal. [28,29] The development of hybrid and multi-network hydrogels is one approach being explored to overcome this limitation. However, increasing the complexity of the network may introduce additional challenges related to formulation and reproducibility. [29]

7.2.2 Limited Drug-Loading Capacity

The high water content and porous structure of many hydrogels can limit their ability to retain certain therapeutic agents, particularly hydrophobic drugs. Poor drug–polymer interactions may result in low loading efficiency or rapid initial release. [30]

The incorporation of nanocarriers, micelles, or other secondary delivery systems may improve the loading of poorly soluble drugs. However, these approaches can increase formulation complexity and introduce additional challenges in characterization and manufacturing. [18,29]

7.2.3 Control of Degradation and Drug Release

Achieving a predictable relationship between hydrogel degradation and drug release remains a significant challenge. The degradation behavior of a hydrogel may be influenced by factors such as pH, enzyme activity, and the physiological environment, which can vary between patients and disease conditions. [29,30]

Variability in degradation can lead to inconsistent drug release and therapeutic performance. Therefore, a detailed understanding of the relationship between polymer composition, cross-linking mechanisms, and in vivo degradation is necessary for the rational design of clinically useful systems .[28]

7.2.4 Biocompatibility and Safety Concerns

Although many natural and synthetic polymers used in self-healing hydrogels are considered biocompatible, the safety of the complete formulation must be carefully evaluated. Potential concerns include the toxicity of cross-linking agents, degradation products, nanoparticles, and unreacted chemical components. [28,29]

Long-term biocompatibility, immunological responses, and biodegradation must be thoroughly assessed before clinical application. The safety of the hydrogel should be evaluated in relation to its intended route of administration and duration of contact with biological tissues.

7.2.5 Manufacturing and Sterilization Challenges

The translation of self-healing hydrogels from laboratory research to large-scale pharmaceutical production presents several challenges. The complexity of multifunctional polymer networks can make it difficult to achieve consistent batch-to-batch quality. [29]

Sterilization is another important concern because conventional methods such as heat or irradiation may alter the polymer structure, cross-linking interactions, or drug stability. Therefore, suitable manufacturing and sterilization strategies must be developed without compromising the self-healing and drug delivery properties of the hydrogel. [30]

7.3 Strategies to Address Current Limitations

Several approaches are being investigated to improve the clinical potential of self-healing hydrogels. These include the development of hybrid polymer networks, incorporation of nanocarriers to improve drug loading, and the use of biocompatible dynamic cross-linking mechanisms.[28–30] Advanced manufacturing technologies and standardized characterization methods may also improve the reproducibility of these systems. Future research should focus on developing simpler, scalable, and clinically relevant formulations while maintaining the multifunctional advantages of self-healing hydrogels.

Table 6. Advantages and Limitations of Self-Healing Hydrogels

Aspect	**Advantages**	**Limitations/Challenges**
Structural properties	Ability to recover after mechanical damage	May have limited mechanical strength
.	Injectable and minimally invasive	Requires optimization of injectability
Drug delivery	Controlled and sustained release	Burst release may occur
Adaptability	Conforms to irregular tissues	Long-term stability may vary
Functionality	Can combine multiple therapeutic functions	Increased formulation complexity
Drug loading	Can carry various therapeutic agents	Limited loading of some hydrophobic drugs
Safety	Can use biocompatible polymers	Cross-linkers and degradation products require evaluation

Aspect	Advantages	Limitations/Challenges
Manufacturing	Potential for personalized formulations	Scale-up and batch reproducibility remain challenging
Clinical translation	Promising therapeutic potential	Regulatory pathways and standardization are still evolving

8. Future Perspectives and Conclusion[31-34]

Table 7. Future Directions for Self-Healing Hydrogels

Future direction	Potential contribution	Major challenge
Personalized drug delivery	Patient-specific dose and release profiles	Complex formulation optimization
3D printing	Customized hydrogel structures	Printability and mechanical stability
Nanotechnology integration	Improved drug protection and targeting	Increased formulation complexity
Multi-stimuli systems	Greater control and specificity	Reproducibility
Biodegradable materials	Eliminates the need for removal	Controlling degradation rate
Artificial intelligence	Faster formulation optimization	Limited predictive datasets
Clinical translation	Improved therapeutic applications	Safety, scale-up, and regulatory approval

9. Characterization and Evaluation of Self-Healing Hydrogels

The successful development of self-healing hydrogels as smart drug delivery platforms requires comprehensive characterization of their physicochemical, mechanical, self-healing, and drug release properties. Appropriate evaluation methods are essential to establish whether a hydrogel possesses suitable characteristics for its intended pharmaceutical or biomedical application. The selection of characterization techniques depends on the polymer composition, cross-linking mechanism, route of administration, and type of therapeutic agent incorporated into the hydrogel. [35,36]

Table 8. Important Evaluation Parameters for Self-Healing Hydrogels

Parameter	Method/Technique	Importance
Chemical structure	FTIR, NMR	Confirms functional groups and cross-linking
Morphology	SEM	Evaluates internal structure and porosity
Swelling behavior	Gravimetric method	Influences drug diffusion and release
Rheological properties	Oscillatory rheology	Determines gel-like behavior and recovery
Mechanical strength	Compression/tensile testing	Evaluates structural stability
Self-healing efficiency	Mechanical/rheological recovery	Measures restoration after damage
Injectability	Syringe extrusion/rheology	Determines suitability for injection
Drug loading	UV–Vis or HPLC	Determines drug incorporation
Drug release	In vitro dissolution/release studies	Evaluates release behavior
Biocompatibility	Cell viability and biological studies	Assesses safety

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