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Wang, Yiming; Wang, Jie; Yuan, Zhenyu; Han, Haoya; Li, Tao; Li, Li; Guo, Xuhong

**DOI**

[10.1016/j.colsurfb.2017.01.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.colsurfb.2017.01.008)

**Publication date**

2017

**Document Version**

Accepted author manuscript

**Published in**

Colloids and Surfaces B: Biointerfaces

**Citation (APA)**

Wang, Y., Wang, J., Yuan, Z., Han, H., Li, T., Li, L., & Guo, X. (2017). Chitosan cross-linked poly(acrylic acid) hydrogels: drug release control and mechanism. *Colloids and Surfaces B: Biointerfaces*, 152, 252-259. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.colsurfb.2017.01.008>

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# 1 Chitosan Cross-linked Poly(acrylic acid) Hydrogels: 2 Drug Release Control and Mechanism

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4 Yiming Wang<sup>a,b</sup>, Jie Wang<sup>\*,a</sup>, Zhenyu Yuan<sup>a</sup>, Haoya Han<sup>a,c</sup>, Tao Li<sup>a</sup>, Li Li<sup>a</sup>, and

5 Xuhong Guo<sup>\*,a,d</sup>

6  
7  
8 <sup>a</sup> State Key Laboratory of Chemical Engineering, East China University of Science  
9 and Technology, Meilong Road 130, 200237 Shanghai, China

10 <sup>b</sup> Advanced Soft Matter Group, Department of Chemical Engineering, Delft  
11 University of Technology, van der Maasweg, 2629 HZ Delft, The Netherlands

12 <sup>c</sup> Stranski-Laboratorium für Physikalische und Theoretische Chemie, Technische  
13 Universität Berlin, Strasse des 17. Juni 124, D-10623 Berlin, Germany

14 <sup>d</sup> Engineering Research Center of Materials Chemical Engineering of Xinjiang  
15 Bingtuan, Shihezi University, Xinjiang 832000, China

16  
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18  
19  
20 \*To whom correspondence should be addressed. Tel: +86 021 64253789, Fax: +86  
21 021 64253159. E-mail: jiewang2010@ecust.edu.cn (Jie Wang), or  
22 guoxuhong@ecust.edu.cn (Xuhong Guo).

23 **Abstract:** Chitosan has been used to cross-link poly(acrylic acid) to give three  
24 pH-sensitive hydrogels designed to control the release of the drugs amoxicillin and  
25 meloxicam. The extent of cross-linking and solution pH was found to dominate the  
26 swelling behavior of these hydrogels as shown by scanning electron microscopy and  
27 swelling time dependencies. The rates of release of amoxicillin and meloxicam from  
28 the loaded hydrogels increased with increase in pH consistent with the extent of  
29 hydrogen bonding between hydrogel components and between the hydrogel and the  
30 drugs being important determinants of release rate. Both the Korsmeyer-Peppas and  
31 Weibull models fitted release data consistent with drug release occurred through a  
32 combination of drug diffusion and hydrogel relaxation processes. These hydrogels  
33 appear to provide an ideal basis for controlled drug delivery systems.

34

35 **Keywords:** Chitosan, pH sensitive hydrogel, Drug delivery, Release mechanism

36

37

### 38 **1. Introduction**

39 Hydrogels are generally composed of hydrophilic organic networks which  
40 incorporate large amounts of water into their structures. This renders them both soft  
41 and elastic properties which are compatible with human physiology. Many hydrogels  
42 are also able to load a wide variety of drugs into their structures and substantially  
43 protect them from physiological conditions, particularly those of the stomach where pH  
44 is low and enzyme concentrations are high; conditions under which many drugs are

45 unstable. In addition to this protective characteristic, hydrogels may potentially be  
46 designed to selectively release drugs under the physiological conditions at the disease  
47 site in the body, and thereby achieve a targeted drug release. Consequently, hydrogels  
48 have found wide application in drug delivery studies [1-4]. In addition to these  
49 characteristics, the introduction of stimuli dependent phase changes into hydrogels  
50 offers the possibility of developing sophisticated controlled drug release systems.  
51 Examples of such stimuli are light [5], temperature [6] and pH change [7].

52       Apart from being physically compatible with human physiology, hydrogels must  
53 also be biocompatible with body chemistry if they are to be viable as drug delivery  
54 systems. Fortunately, there is range of biocompatible polymers which may be  
55 converted to hydrogel networks through chemically cross-linking them. However, it  
56 must be ensured that such cross-linking entities are not toxic [8-10]. While  
57 cross-linking through physical interactions such as hydrogen bonding or hydrophobic  
58 interactions has been proposed to avoid toxicity problems [11-13], such cross-linking  
59 may be not be strong enough to produce a sufficiently stable hydrogel for effective  
60 drug loading. Fortunately, polysaccharides may be used as chemical cross-linkers to  
61 produce biocompatible hydrogels which present attractive applications in drug  
62 delivery [14-17].

63       The naturally occurring polysaccharide chitosan (CS) has been shown to be  
64 amenable to functionalization to produce a range of versatile materials with  
65 substantial potential for biomedical applications [18-22]. In this work, a chitosan  
66 derivative is used to cross-link poly(acrylic acid) (PAA) to give three pH sensitive

67 poly(acrylic acid)/chitosan hydrogels (PAACS-I, PAACS-II and PAACS-III) in which  
68 the extent of chitosan cross-linking progressively increases, and which are designed to  
69 control the release of the drugs amoxicillin and meloxicam (Scheme 1). These drug  
70 releases are analyzed through the Korsmeyer-Peppas and Weibull drug release  
71 models [23,24] to gain insight into the drug release mechanism and thereby improved  
72 understanding for the design of more advanced and reliable hydrogel drug delivery  
73 systems.

74

75 **Scheme 1.** Molecular structures of amoxicillin and meloxicam.

76

## 77 **2. Experimental**

### 78 **2.1 Materials:**

79 Chitosan (CS, degree of *N*-deacetylation = 95%, Mw = 200 kDa) was purchased  
80 from Aoxing Biotechnology Co. Ltd., China. Maleic anhydride (MAH, 99%) was  
81 purchased from Acros Co. Ltd. Ammonium persulfate (APS, 99%) and acrylic acid  
82 (AA, 99%, distilled under vacuum pressure prior to use) were provided by Sigma  
83 Aldrich. Amoxicillin and meloxicam were supplied by TCI, Japan. The water used in  
84 all experiments was purified by reverse osmosis (Shanghai RO Micro Q). All other  
85 reagents and solvents were used directly.

86

### 87 **2.2 Synthesis of chitosan-g-(maleic anhydride) (CSMAH)**

88 An aqueous solution of chitosan was prepared by dissolving 0.5 g of chitosan in

89 40 mL of 2.5 wt% acetic acid aqueous solution under vigorous stirring. Subsequently,  
90 2.5 g maleic anhydride in 1 mL acetone were added slowly into the pre-prepared  
91 chitosan solution under ice cooling within 10 min. The reaction mixture was allowed  
92 to warm to room temperature and stand for 8 h. Finally, the viscous solution was  
93 poured into 500 mL of acetone to precipitate the product. The solid product was  
94 purified by extraction with acetone three times and subsequent drying under vacuum  
95 at 50 °C for 48 h.

96

### 97 **2.3 Preparation of PAACS hydrogels**

98 The three hydrogels, PAACS-I, PAACS-II and PAACS-III, were prepared  
99 through free radical polymerization, using APS as an initiator and the synthesized  
100 CSMAH as a cross-linker. Briefly, to a solution of 1.4 g NaOH in 40 mL water at  
101 room temperature, either 0.05, 0.10 or 0.15 g of CSMAH were added (for PAACS-I,  
102 PAACS-II and PAACS-III, respectively) with stirring until a transparent solution was  
103 obtained, whereupon 0.01 g APS was added (Table 1). These mixtures were each  
104 transferred into a reaction vessel and a N<sub>2</sub> stream was passed through for 30 min to  
105 eliminate dissolved oxygen. The copolymerizations were carried out at 70 °C for 2 h.  
106 The gained hydrogels were placed in 500 mL of methanol/water (v/v = 7/3) for 24 h  
107 to remove the residual reactants. Finally, the purified hydrogels were cut into thin  
108 cylinders and dried to constant weight in an oven at 60 °C (hydrogel samples with 60  
109 mg in weight, 2.5 mm in diameter, and 20 mm in length).

110

111

**Table 1.** Reactants amounts for the preparation of PAACS hydrogels.

<b>Hydrogel</b>	<b>AA (g)</b>	<b>CSMAH (g)</b>	<b>APS (g)</b>	<b>NaOH (g)</b>	<b>Deionized Water (mL)</b>
PAACS-I	2.8	0.05	0.01	1.4	40
PAACS-II	2.8	0.10	0.01	1.4	40
PAACS-III	2.8	0.15	0.01	1.4	40

112

#### 113 **2.4 Determination of the hydrogel swelling ratios (*SR*)**

114 The dried hydrogel (0.5 g) was immersed in the 100 mL of aqueous phosphate  
 115 buffer solutions at pH 1.2, 6.8, and 7.4. The hydrogels were taken out of solution and  
 116 weighed after removing the residual solutions on the surface at a pre-determined time  
 117 interval. The hydrogels were then returned to solution and the process was repeated  
 118 until a constant *SR* was obtained as calculated through Equation (1), in which  $m_s$  and  
 119  $m_d$  are the weight of the hydrogel in the swollen and dry states, respectively.

$$120 \quad SR = \frac{m_s - m_d}{m_d} \quad (1)$$

#### 121 **2.5 Rheological measurements**

122 The dynamic frequency sweep measurements were performed on a MCR501  
 123 rheometer (Anton-Paar Physical Company). A parallel-plate made of stainless steel  
 124 with a diameter of 25 mm was used. During all rheological measurements, the upper  
 125 plate was set at a distance of 1 mm from the down plate. All the hydrogel samples  
 126 were cut into a cylindrical shape with a thickness of 1 mm and a diameter of 25 mm  
 127 for the measurement. The elastic modulus ( $G'$ ) and viscous modulus ( $G''$ ) over a  
 128 frequency range of 0.1 to 10 Hz were recorded at a constant strain of 1%, which was

129 in the linear range of the viscoelasticity. All measurements were performed at 37 °C.

130

## 131 **2.6 Drug loading**

132 Amoxicillin and meloxicam were loaded into the PAACS hydrogels by soaking  
133 and swelling the dried hydrogels in solutions of drugs according to a reported method  
134 [25]. This is exemplified by the loading of amoxicillin for which 60 mg of the dry  
135 cylindrical hydrogels were immersed into 50 mL of 200 µg mL<sup>-1</sup> amoxicillin solutions  
136 under moderate stirring for 24 h at 37 °C. Thereafter, the drug-loaded hydrogels were  
137 taken out and rinsed with deionized water to remove any residual drugs from the  
138 surface. It should be noticed that meloxicam is poorly water soluble and accordingly a  
139 small amount of methanol was added to improve solubility; otherwise the procedure  
140 was as for that of amoxicillin. The loaded drug amounts were determined by UV-vis  
141 spectroscopy (SHIMADZU UV-2550 UV-vis) based on the decrease of the  
142 concentration of drug loading solutions determined from UV-vis calibration curves for  
143 amoxicillin and meloxicam at 228 nm and 361 nm, respectively. The encapsulation  
144 efficiency (*EE*) and loading content (*LC*) of the drugs were calculated through  
145 Equations (2) and (3) where  $m_e$  is the amount of encapsulated drug,  $m_o$  is the total  
146 amount of added drug, and  $m_d$  is the amount of the dried hydrogel. The *EE* and *LC*  
147 determined are listed in Table S1.

$$148 \quad EE(\%) = \frac{m_e}{m_o} \times 100 \quad (2)$$

$$149 \quad LC(\%) = \frac{m_e}{m_d} \times 100 \quad (3)$$



## 150 **2.7 drug release study**

151 The release of amoxicillin and meloxicam from PAACS hydrogels was carried  
152 out in aqueous phosphate buffer solutions at pH 1.2, 6.8, and 7.4 at 37 °C. Basically,  
153 either amoxicillin or meloxicam loaded hydrogel was placed into 60 mL of  
154 moderately stirred aqueous buffer solution. At appropriate time intervals, 2.0 mL  
155 samples of the aqueous buffer solutions were withdrawn and replaced by 2.0 mL fresh  
156 aqueous buffer solutions. The amount of the released drugs in the withdrawn sample  
157 was determined by UV-Vis absorbance at 228 nm for amoxicillin and 361 nm for  
158 meloxicam according to the molar absorbance calibration curves of amoxicillin and  
159 meloxicam. All release data were performed in in triplicate and averaged.

160

## 161 **2.8 Characterization**

162 All infrared spectra were obtained from dried samples in KBr pellets using a  
163 Nicolet 6700 FTIR spectrophotometer. <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectra was taken by a 500 MHz  
164 Bruker DRX500 spectrometer at 25 °C using D<sub>2</sub>O as the solvent. The SEM was  
165 performed using a Nova Nano SEM 50 field emission scanning electron microscope  
166 (FE-SEM) at an acceleration voltage of 3 kV.

167

## 168 **3. Results and discussion**

169 As shown in scheme 2, CSMAH was synthesized by grafting MAH onto the main  
170 chain of CS. Subsequently, CSMAH was employed to copolymerize with AA to create  
171 the three hydrogels in which the extent of CS cross-linking increase in the sequence

172 PAACS-I < PAACS-II < PAACS-III as a consequence of the three-fold increase in  
173 CSMAH concentration used in their respective preparations (Table 1).

174

175 **(Scheme 2 here)**

176

### 177 **Structure characterization**

178 Fig. 1A shows the <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectrum of CSMAH. The broad peaks at 3.2-4.2  
179 ppm arise from the hydrogens of the pyranose units of CS (H3, H4, H5, and H6), the  
180 peak at 3.05 ppm arises from H2, and the peak of methyl hydrogen of the *N*-acetyl  
181 groups is located at 2.12 ppm. The two peaks at 5.85 and 6.32 ppm which are referred  
182 to H7 and H8 of the grafted MAH. Thus, the <sup>1</sup>H NMR characterization indicates that  
183 MAH modified CS was successfully synthesized. The averaging grafting degree (*GD*)  
184 of MAH onto CS in CSMAH, defined as the number of grafted MAH per 100  
185 pyranose units, was determined to be 27.3 ± 0.1 % based on the proton integration (Eq.  
186 4), where  $I_{6.32ppm}$  and  $I_{3.2-4.2ppm}$  are the integrated peak area ratios of protons of the  
187 MAH and CS components, respectively. It is anticipated that that *GD* varies over a  
188 small range between individual chains.

$$189 \quad GD = \frac{5 \times I_{6.32ppm}}{I_{3.2-4.2ppm}} \times 100\% \quad (4)$$

190 FTIR spectra of PAA, CS, CSMAH, and PAACS hydrogels are displayed in Fig.  
191 1B. For PAA, a broad absorption band from 3000 to 3600 cm<sup>-1</sup> is stemmed from the  
192 O-H stretching vibration. The peaks appeared at 1637 and 1151 cm<sup>-1</sup> are contributed  
193 by the stretching vibration of C=O and C-O of the carboxylic group. Another two

194 peaks appeared at 1454 and 1409  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  are caused by the O-H bending vibration of  
195 PAA. The characteristic peaks of CS located at 3346  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (O-H and N-H stretching),  
196 2921 and 2854  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (C-H stretching), and 1654  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (NH-CO (I) stretching) can be  
197 observed clearly in the FT-IR spectrum. In the CSMAH spectrum, the new peaks  
198 appeared at 1658 and 1564  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  are attributed to C-O groups of the opened MAH, it  
199 further approves the successful modification of CS. The peak at 1700  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  is caused  
200 by the carboxyl stretching vibration of carboxylic acid. With regard to the spectrum of  
201 PAACS hydrogel, some absorption peaks are changed by comparing with CSMAH  
202 and PAA. A broad peak at the range of 3000-3500  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  arises from the overlapping of  
203 the O-H stretching vibrations of PAA and N-H stretching vibrations of CSMAH. The  
204 characteristic stretching absorption band of C=O in PAA presents at 1637  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ . In  
205 particular, the characteristic absorption bands of CS at 2921 and 2854  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  consistent  
206 with the participation of CSMAH in the polymerization to for PAACS hydrogels.

207

208 **(Fig. 1 here)**

209

### 210 **X-Ray powder diffraction (XRD)**

211 XRD was employed to reveal the crystallinity of CS, CSMAH, PAA, PAACS-I,  
212 PAACS-II and PAACS-III. As shown in Fig. 1C, the XRD pattern of CS shows two  
213 major peaks at 10° and 19° which transforms into a single broad peak at 20° in the  
214 XRD pattern of CSMAH caused by the grafting of MAH onto CS. Upon  
215 polymerization with AA, a substantial decrease in intensity occurs in the region

216 centered at 10° where both CS and CSMAH absorb, and the broad peaks of PAA  
217 appear in the range 15°-40°. This is consistent with the copolymerization of CSMAH  
218 and AA progressing in a random way and a consequent decrease in crystallinity by  
219 comparison with that of CS, and also a decrease in inter- and intra-molecular  
220 hydrogen bonding.

221

## 222 **Rheology**

223 The rheological properties are important indicators of soft materials performances  
224 [26]. As shown in Fig. 1D, for each of the three hydrogels, PAACS-I, PAACS-II and  
225 PAACS-III, the elastic modulus,  $G'$ , was higher than their viscous modulus,  $G''$ , over  
226 the measured frequency range. This is consistent with the hydrogels being present as  
227 solids under the measuring conditions; thereby constituting a stable structure for drug  
228 loading. It is also observed that  $G'$  increases in the sequence PAACS-I < PAACS-II <  
229 PAACS-III coincident with the increasing CS cross-linker content. Additionally, the  
230 reacted ratio of MAH groups in CSMAH was estimated by Eq. 5, where  $\rho$  is the  
231 density of PAA,  $R$  is the ideal gas constant,  $T$  is temperature, and  $\bar{M}_c$  is the average  
232 molecular weight of PAA between two adjacent cross-linking points [27], here we  
233 hypothesize a complete copolymerization is achieved.

$$234 \quad G = \frac{\rho RT}{\bar{M}_c} \quad (5)$$

235 The calculation results demonstrated that the cross-linking efficiency is not very  
236 high which might stem from the big molecular volume of chitosan, for instance, only  
237 ~0.5% MAH groups in CSMAH was presented in cross-linking PAA chains (Fig. 1D).

238 This is also responsible for the low elastic modulus of these hydrogels.

239

#### 240 **Morphology of PAACS hydrogels**

241 The micro-morphologies of the freeze-dried PAACS hydrogels were shown to  
242 possess well-defined network structures by SEM (Fig. 2). A statistical analyses of the  
243 pore size of these hydrogels indicated that increase in the extent of CS cross-linking  
244 significantly decreased pore size. The average pore size of PAACS-I is around ~126  
245  $\mu\text{m}$ , while those of PAACS-II and PAACS-III are smaller, ~86 and ~51  $\mu\text{m}$ ,  
246 respectively. While it has been proposed that the pore size of the hydrogel depends on  
247 the size of the ice crystals which are formed during the freeze-drying treatment of the  
248 samples [28], the greater the extent of CS cross-linking the greater will be the restraint  
249 on the capacity of the hydrogel to swell with water absorption. As a result, the size of  
250 the ice crystals and hydrogel pores will decrease with increase in CS cross-linking [29,  
251 30].

252

(Fig. 2 here)

254

#### 255 **Swelling behavior**

256 The swelling properties of PAACS hydrogels were investigated by soaking the  
257 freeze-dried hydrogels in aqueous buffer solutions at pH 1.2, 6.8 and 7.7 and  
258 recording the weight changes with time at 37 °C. It is seen from Fig. 3 that PAACS-I,  
259 PAACS-II and PAACS-III each exhibits an increase in swelling ratio (*SR*) as pH

260 increases. It is also seen that at a given pH *SR* decreases in the sequence PAACS-I >  
261 PAACS-II > PAACS-III as the extent of CS cross-linking increases. At pH 1.2, the  
262 carboxylic acid groups in PAA chains are almost protonated and substantial  
263 hydrogen-bonding occurs between them and the repulsion force between polymer  
264 chains in the networks is reduced so that the water diffusion into the hydrogel is  
265 impeded and swelling is reduced [31-34]. However, at pH 7.4, the carboxylic groups  
266 were deprotonated and hydrogen-bonding between them is absent while their negative  
267 charges cause electrostatic repulsion between the PAA chains [35]. The overall effect  
268 is that the hydrogel network has a looser structure at pH 7.4 than that at pH 1.2 which  
269 permits an increased diffusion of water into the hydrogel and an increased swelling.

270 The effect of pH change on hydrogel swelling superimposes on the increase in the  
271 extent CS of cross-linking in the sequence: PAACS-I < PAACS-II < PAACS-III and  
272 the corresponding decrease in *SR* in the sequence: PAACS-I > PAACS-II >  
273 PAACS-III at the three pH conditions studied. Thus, an increase in CS cross-linking  
274 tightens the hydrogel network thereby impeding diffusion of water into it and  
275 decreasing the *SR*.

276

277 **(Fig. 3 here)**

278

### 279 **Study of pH triggered drug release**

280 The release curves for amoxicillin and meloxicam are displayed in Fig. 4. It  
281 demonstrated drug release rate decreases in the hydrogel sequence PAACS-I >

282 PAACS-II > PAACS-III and that for each hydrogel the release rate increases with  
283 increase in pH. This pattern bears a striking similarity to that for the hydrogel *SR*  
284 shown in Fig. 3 and suggests that the increase in drug mobility is directly related the  
285 increase in hydrogel pore size as pH increases [36].

286 For PAACS-I, ~30%, ~60% and ~80% of amoxicillin is released after 800 min at  
287 pH 1.2, 6.8 and 7.4, respectively (Fig. 4). The analogous values for meloxicam are  
288 ~20%, ~70% and ~90% at pH 1.2, 6.8 and 7.4, respectively. Both drugs are released  
289 more slowly from PAACS-II and PAACS-III, and release from both hydrogels shows  
290 an increase in rate with increase in pH. It has been suggested that many drugs are  
291 released from hydrogels through a diffusion process which is dominated by the  
292 swelling behavior of the hydrogel [36]. Thus, the lower release rate of amoxicillin and  
293 meloxicam at pH 1.2 is probably largely contributed by the pore size decrease (Fig.  
294 S1) due to greater hydrogen bonding between the PAA and CS chains in hydrogel  
295 networks (Scheme 1) and a consequent decrease in hydrogel flexibility and an  
296 inhibition of both drug and water diffusion. The hydrogel flexibility is further  
297 decreased as cross-linking increases with the consequence that drug release is further  
298 slowed as seen from Fig. 4.

299 It has been revealed that the chemical structure of both the drug and the hydrogel  
300 determine the nature and extent of interactions between them and that this impinges  
301 on the magnitude of drug release rates [37]. From the release curves for amoxicillin  
302 and meloxicam (Fig. 4), we can see obviously that the release rate of amoxicillin is  
303 higher than that of meloxicam at pH 1.2 whereas the reverse is the case at pH 6.8 and

304 7.4. This reflects the variation of the effects of hydrogen bonding between the  
305 hydrogel PAA and CS chains and probably between them and the two drugs.  
306 Amoxicillin is more hydrophilic than is meloxicam as assessed on the basis of the  
307 higher water solubility of amoxicillin. This is likely to differentiate the behaviour of the  
308 two drugs within the hydrogel but a more detailed analysis is not possible on the basis  
309 of the currently available data.

310

311 **(Fig. 4 here)**

312

### 313 **Mechanism of drug release from hydrogels**

314 The mechanism of drug released from hydrogels may be envisaged as occurring  
315 in three main steps as shown in Fig. 5. In the initial step, a), the drug-loaded hydrogel  
316 contains a minimum amount of water, the hydrogel exhibits its minimum flexibility,  
317 pore size is small and drug mobility is limited. In the second step, b), water diffuses  
318 into the hydrogel which undergoes relaxation to become more flexible, pore size  
319 grows and drug mobility increases with increased hydration. In the final stage, c), the  
320 hydrogel is fully relaxed and hydrated and pore size is at a maximum, as is the rate of  
321 drug diffusion from the hydrogel [38, 39].

322

323 **(Fig. 5 here)**

324

325 The mathematical modeling of drug release from hydrogel is a facile and an



326 important approach to understand the elusive release mechanism [24, 39-44].  
327 Accordingly, We have employed both Korsmeyer-Peppas [39-42] and Weibull [24]  
328 models to elucidate the release mechanism of amoxicillin and meloxicam. The widely  
329 used Korsmeyer-Peppas model expresses the rate of drug release up to the stage  
330 where 60% of the drug is released through Eq. 5 where  $M_t$  and  $M_\infty$  are the amounts of  
331 drug released at time  $t$  and when equilibrium is reached, respectively;  $k$  is a kinetic  
332 constant, and  $n$  is an exponent typifying the release mechanism.

$$333 \quad \frac{M_t}{M_\infty} = kt^n \quad (5)$$

334 The release data for both amoxicillin and meloxicam is well-fitted by Eq. 5 for up  
335 to 60 % of drug release as shown in Fig. S1a and c). These fittings correspond to  $n$   
336 values in the range between 0.51 and 0.85 for amoxicillin and between 0.63 and 0.87  
337 for meloxicam (Table S2) consistent with the drugs being released through so-called  
338 anomalous diffusion, in which the effects of drug diffusion and hydrogel relaxation  
339 are comparable. [36, 39-42]. It can also be seen clearly that at a given pH value, the  $n$   
340 values more closely approach 0.89 at which only the relaxation of hydrogel governs  
341 the drug release as the extent of cross-linking increases in the sequence PAACS-I <  
342 PAACS-II < PAACS-III in the hydrogels [39-42]. That is because increases in  
343 cross-linking decrease the hydrogel flexibility such that the hydrogel relaxation  
344 process becomes the controlling factor for drug release. The  $n$  values characterizing  
345 amoxicillin release are smaller than those for meloxicam release which may indicate  
346 that amoxicillin interacts more strongly with the hydrogels and is therefore less  
347 dependent upon hydrogel relaxation for release. This can also be seen from the

348 diffusion coefficients of amoxicillin ( $D_1$ ) and meloxicam ( $D_2$ ) in the hydrogels (Fig.  
349 S3 and Table S3). At higher pH (pH 6.8 and 7.4), we found that the hydrogels relaxed  
350 completely within  $\sim 300$  min, after which the drugs were released in a stable diffusion  
351 process. By estimating the diffusion coefficient, we found that  $D_1$  was smaller than  $D_2$   
352 demonstrating the higher interaction between amoxicillin and hydrogel. Consequently,  
353 the  $n$  values for amoxicillin release more closely approach 0.45 (at which only  
354 diffusion controls drug release) than is the case for meloxicam. However, the overall  
355 conclusion is that both amoxicillin and meloxicam are released from the hydrogels  
356 through a combination of diffusion and hydrogel relaxation under the conditions of  
357 this study.

358 As we mentioned previously, Korsmeyer-Peppas equation is only valid for the  
359 first 60% of the release curve. In order to give a more reliable mechanism revealing,  
360 another model, Weibull model, which covers the entire drug release process, is  
361 described through Eq. 6, where  $a$  is a constant, and  $b$  is an exponent which reflects the  
362 underlying release mechanism. A value of  $b$  in the range of 0.35  $\sim$  0.75 signifies a  
363 diffusion dominated drug release process and a  $b$  value in the range 0.75  $\sim$  1.0  
364 indicates a combined diffusion and hydrogel relaxation mechanism [24].

365 
$$\frac{M_t}{M_\infty} = 1 - \exp(-at^b) \quad (6)$$

366 It can be seen from Fig. S2b and d that Eq. 6 can fit the drug release data very  
367 well. From the fitting results (Table S2), we can see that most of the  $b$  values fall in  
368 the range of 0.75 $\sim$ 1.0, indicating a combination release process of diffusion and  
369 hydrogel relaxation which is in good consistent with the results derived from

370 Korsemeier-Peppas model. Thus, it is concluded that both amoxicillin and meloxicam  
371 are released from the hydrogels through a combination of diffusion and hydrogel  
372 relaxation as was also deduced from the Korsemeier-Peppas model.

373

#### 374 **Conclusions**

375 A series of chitosan cross-linked PAACS hydrogels with different degrees of  
376 cross-linking were prepared and found an increase in swelling and pore size as pH  
377 was increased and as the extent of cross-linking decreased. The drugs amoxicillin and  
378 meloxicam were readily loaded into the hydrogels, and their release rates were found  
379 to increase with increase in pH and to decrease with increase in cross-linking. Fitting  
380 of two models for drug release to the experimental release data indicated that the rates  
381 of drug release are controlled to varying extents by a combination of diffusion and  
382 hydrogel relaxation.

383

#### 384 **Acknowledgement**

385 We gratefully acknowledge NSFC Grants (51403062, 21476143 and 51273063),  
386 the China Scholarship Council (CSC), China Postdoctoral Science Foundation  
387 (2013M541485), 111 Project Grant (B08021), the Fundamental Research Funds for  
388 the Central Universities and the Open Project of Engineering Research Center of  
389 Materials-Oriented Chemical Engineering of Xinjiang Bingtuan (2015BTRC001) for  
390 support of this work.

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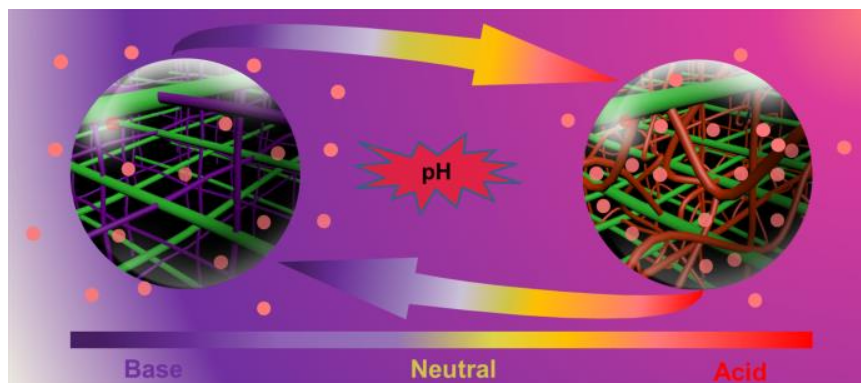
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527

528 **Graphical abstract:**

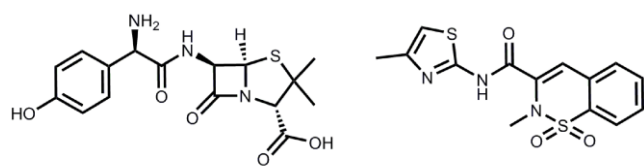
529 Drug loaded chitosan cross-linked poly(acrylate) hydrogels exhibit pH-dependent  
530 drug release through a mechanism involving drug diffusion and hydrogel relaxation.

531



537

### Figure Captions



**Amoxicillin**

**Meloxicam**

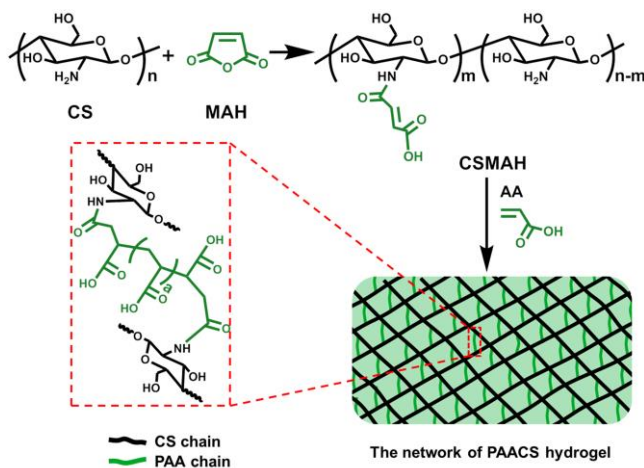
538

539 **Scheme 1.** Molecular structures of amoxicillin and meloxicam.

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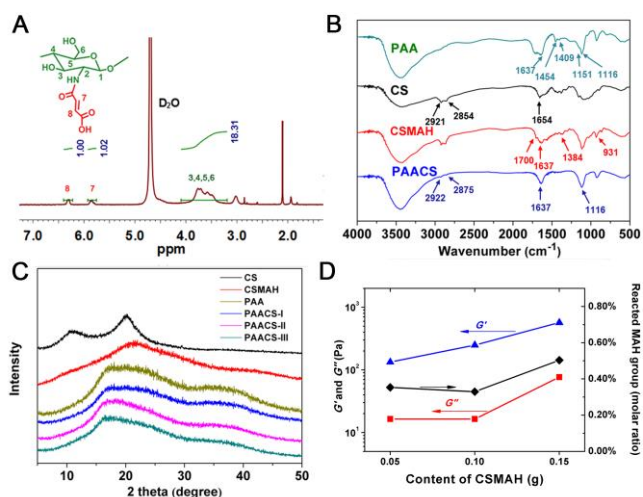
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544 **Scheme 2.** Preparation of PAACS hydrogels.

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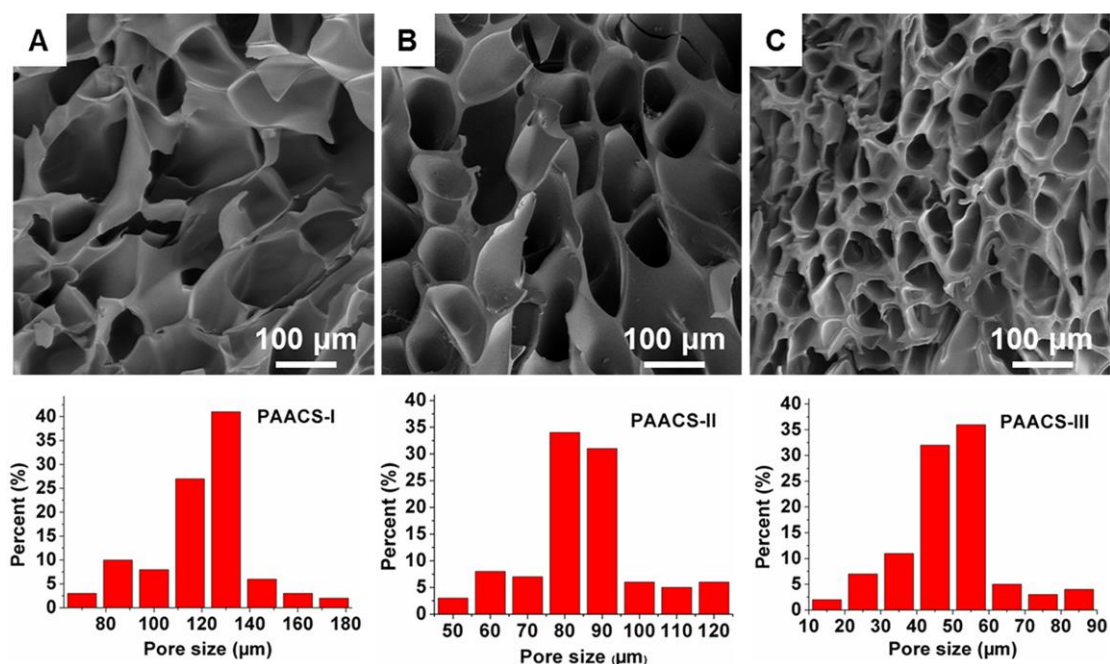
549 **Fig. 1.** <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectrum of CSMAH (A); FTIR spectra (B) and XRD patterns (C) of

550 CS, CSMAH, PAA and PAACS hydrogels; Elastic modulus  $G'$  and viscous modulus

551  $G''$  of PAACS hydrogels as a function of frequency (D).

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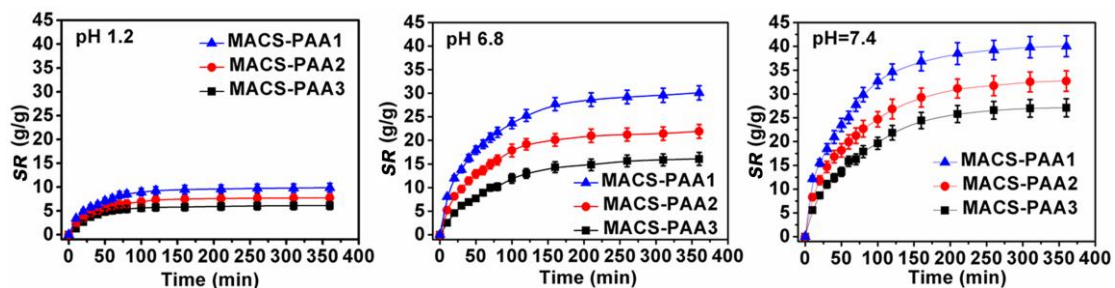
555 **Fig. 2.** The network structures and the pore size distributions of the hydrogels: A)

556 PAACS-I; B) PAACS-II; C) PAACS-III (each statistical result was obtained by

557 counting 100 pores from the SEM image).

558

559



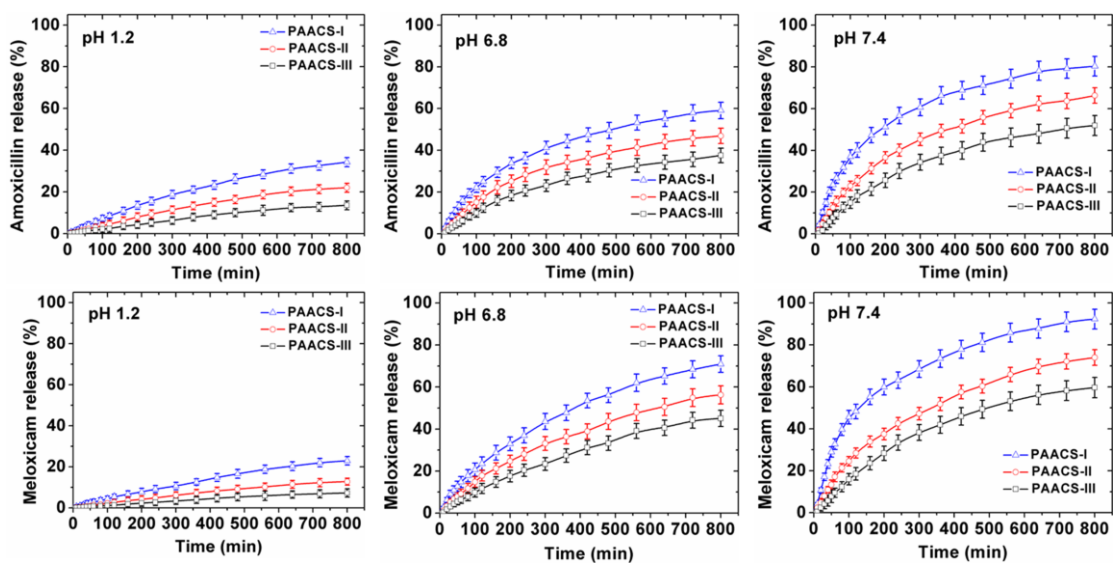
560

561 **Fig. 3.** Swelling kinetics of PAACS hydrogels at different pH, error bars are the

562 standard error of the mean taken from three samples.

563

564



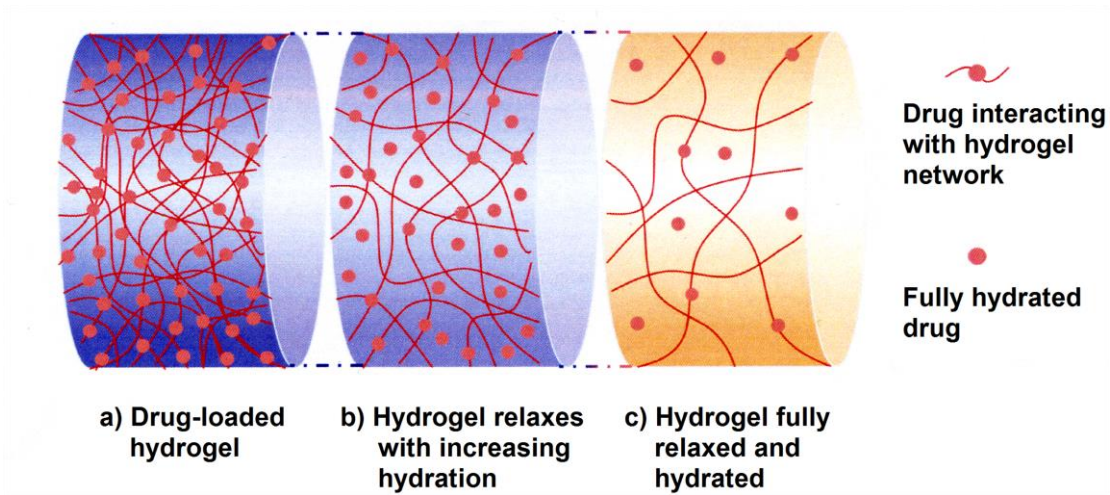
565

566 **Fig. 4.** The release curves of amoxicillin and meloxicam at different pH, error bars are

567 the standard error of the mean taken from three samples.

568

569



570

571 **Fig. 5.** Schematic illustration of the process of drug release from hydrogel.