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Research Article

STRETCHABLE SELF-HEALING MATERIALS: FROM MECHANISMS TO APPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Stretchable self-healing materials have emerged as a groundbreaking innovation in materials science, offering remarkable potential for applications requiring both durability and flexibility. These materials are engineered to repair damage autonomously while maintaining mechanical integrity under significant deformations, a combination of properties critical for next-generation technologies. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the principles, mechanisms, and applications of stretchable self-healing materials, bridging fundamental science and applied engineering.The self-healing behavior of these materials arises from dynamic bonds either reversible covalentor hybrid interactions facilitated by physical or chemical processes. Stretchability, on the other hand, is achieved through structural design, such as entangled polymer networks, soft-hard domain separations, or bioinspired architectures. By synergistically combining these attributes, researchers have developed materials capable of enduring mechanical stresses while repairing micro- and macro-level damages.We explore the mechanisms in these materials, focusing on energy dissipation, chain mobility, and bond reformation. Special attention is given to cutting-edge innovations in material synthesis, including hybrid systems that integrate nanomaterials for enhanced functionality, such as conductivity or thermal responsiveness. This review also discusses how these advances are enabling transformative applications, particularly in wearable electronics, where flexibility and resilience are paramount, and in soft robotics, where self-repairing capabilities can extend operational lifetimes.

Keywords: Self-healing, Materials.

INTRODUCTION

Stretchable self-healing materials represent a transformative innovation at the intersection of material science, engineering, and sustainability, offering a unique blend of elasticity and damage recovery inspired by biological systems. These materials have emerged to address the growing demand for adaptable, durable, and multifunctional materials capable of withstanding mechanical stress and environmental challenges (1-3). Their ability to autonomously or semi-autonomously repair damage, combined with exceptional stretchability, positions them direct solutions for next-generation technologies in wearable electronics (4,5), soft robotics (6), and biomedical devices (7,8). Traditional self-healing materials, though successful in extending material lifespans and reducing maintenance needs, were often limited by their rigidity and inability to accommodate dynamic mechanical deformation. This limitation spurred the development of stretchable variants that bridge flexibility and robustness, enabling their use in applications where large strains are routine. The mechanisms underpinning these materials can be categorized as extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic systems employ microencapsulated healing agents or vascular networks that release repair agents upon damage, while intrinsic systems rely on reversible dynamic bonds such as hydrogen bonding, ionic interactions, or dynamic covalent chemistry (9). Intrinsic approaches, in particular, are gaining traction due to their capacity for repeated healing and resilience under strain. Achieving stretchability in self-healing materials, however, presents significant challenges, requiring innovative molecular designs to balance elasticity and mechanical strength. Advances in material chemistry have led to the integration of dynamic bonds within elastomeric matrices, creating materials that can stretch extensively while autonomously restoring their properties. Moreover, recent developments focus on overcoming limitations such as reliance on expensive and air-sensitive catalysts like Grubbs' catalyst, shifting toward sustainable and cost-effective alternatives including disulfide linkages and supramolecular interactions. These materials are further enhanced by hybrid systems that combine multiple healing mechanisms, optimizing recovery time and mechanical performance under diverse conditions. The application potential of stretchable self-healing materials is vast, particularly in wearable electronics, where they address critical challenges related to durability, comfort, and adaptability. Stretchable sensors, displays, and energy storage devices benefit from their ability to maintain functionality despite repetitive deformation or accidental damage. Similarly, in soft robotics, these materials offer resilience and flexibility essential for robots operating in complex and dynamic environments. In the biomedical field, stretchable self-healing materials have been integrated into artificial skin, tissue scaffolds, and implantable devices, where their biocompatibility and ability to autonomously repair enhance reliability and longevity. Despite these advancements, challenges such as scalability, environmental stability, and cost remain key hurdles to widespread adoption. Addressing these issues requires collaborative efforts across disciplines, leveraging innovations in chemistry, material processing, and advanced manufacturing techniques. As research progresses, the field is shifting focus from fundamental mechanisms to real-world implementation, with an emphasis on developing multifunctional materials that combine self-healing and stretchability with properties such as conductivity, transparency, or antimicrobial functionality. This article reviewthe mechanisms and design driving the development of stretchable self-healing materials, highlights the latest advancements, and examines their potential to redefine

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material design and enable sustainable, high-performance applications across a wide range of fields.

Origin of self-healing materials

Interest in smart materials has grown significantly due to their ability to endure various external stresses, such as impact, moisture, abrasion, oxidation, and more. This has spurred the development of self-healing materials, inspired by the natural healing processes observed in animals and plants. These materials improve sustainability and offer numerous advantages, including enhanced durability, extended lifespan, reduced system failure risks, and lower maintenance requirements and costs.The concept of self-healing materials dates back to the 1970s, with early examples like hard elastic polypropylene, which demonstrated the ability to heal perpendicular stresses due to its balance between damage tolerance and viscous dissipation. However, such materials often required human intervention such as resin injection, patch reinforcement, or welding and even then, the repaired site typically remained weaker than the original material.The ultimate goal of self-healing material research is to develop materials capable of autonomous healing, preventing crack propagation while maintaining their pristine physico-mechanical properties. These materials can be broadly categorized into two types: intrinsic (self-healing without external intervention) and extrinsic (requiring external triggers). Both aim to address microcracks before they lead to catastrophic failure.One commercially available class of self-healing materials involves those with low glass transition temperatures (T_g). T_g is the temperature where the polymer chains have high degree of freedom (Figure 1).

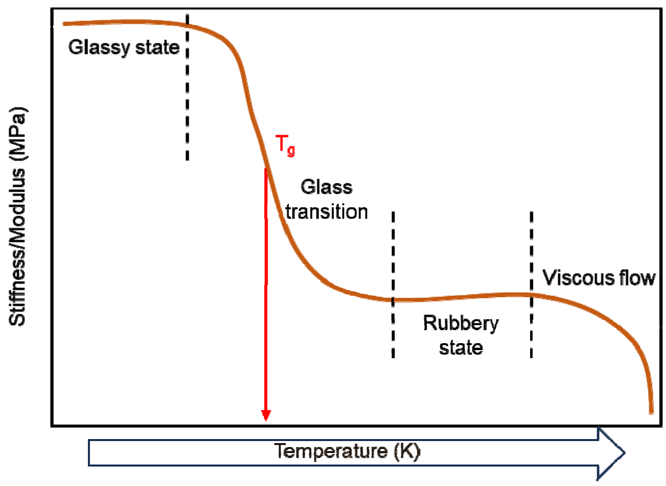

Figure 1. Conceptual graph showing glass transition temperature

When heated above their T_g, these materials repair themselves by filling and sealing microcracks. Regardless of the healing mechanism, all self-healing materials rely on specific triggers for repair. Autonomous triggers, such as mechanical stress or damage, can activate the healing process. Alternatively, materials can be designed to respond to external stimuli, including thermal, electrical, optical, or chemical factors.Several key factors influence the design and success of self-healing materials, including their applicability, healing rate, repeatability at the damaged site, the degree of restoration of their pristine properties, stability under various conditions, and cost-effectiveness.An example of a practical self-healing material is fiber-reinforced concrete, where fibers within the concrete matrix break under stress, allowing a filler material to repair the resulting cracks. Such innovations demonstrate the promise of self-healing materials in addressing real-world challenges across diverse industries.

Diverse mechanism (mechanically, thermally, others)

Mechanically Triggered Healing

Early designs of mechanically triggered self-healing materials included concrete reinforced with cyanoacrylate-filled fibers. These fiber-reinforced polymer (FRP) systems typically fall into two categories: one where adjacent fiber contain separate healing agents such as resin and hardener, and another where one component is embedded in the polymer matrix while the other is incorporated into the fibers.An alternative approach is the microcapsule-based system, which uses microcapsules to encapsulate healing agents, such as catalysts like dicyclopentadiene. These systems have advanced to overcome limitations like air sensitivity and reliance on expensive components. Microcapsule-based systems are particularly attractive due to their ability to enhance toughness and healing efficiency. They are adaptable to various polymers and have potential for quantitative healing, making them ideal for many applications.However, both FRP and microcapsule-based systems share a significant limitation: they provide only a finite amount of healing agents within a given area, restricting their ability to repair repeated damage at the same site. This challenge inspired the development of microvascular network systems, modeled after biological capillaries in animals. These systems feature interconnected channels that deliver healing agents throughout the polymer matrix. Unlike their predecessors, microvascular networks allow repeated healing at the same damage site, with some systems achieving up to 13 healing cycles. The inclusion of vertical conduits further reduces the need for human intervention, as healing agents are transported to damaged areas by capillary forces.

Emerging approaches, such as click-chemistry-based systems and carbon nanotube-enhanced materials, show promise for creating mechanically robust and electroactive self-healing materials.Despite these advancements, the appeal of intrinsically self-healing materials has grown due to their use of dynamic bonding components that enable repeated healing at the same damage sites. Typically, only non-covalent interactions such as hydrogen bonding or metal-ligand complexation offer autonomous healing capabilities. However, industrial applications are limited due to the inherently lower mechanical strength of these materials.Innovations in this space include below,

- **Ambient temperature healing materials**, which can repair themselves without external heat.
- **Titin-mimicking polymers**, inspired by the elasticity of muscle proteins.
- **Mussel tissue-mimicking polymers**, utilizing catechol-iron complexes for enhanced self-healing properties.

While these systems show great potential, further improvements in mechanical strength are needed to fully realize their industrial viability.

Thermally Triggered Healing

Thermally triggered self-healing materials rely on temperature changes to initiate the repair process. These materials are typically designed with polymeric systems that respond to heat by softening, melting, or reorganizing their molecular structure to heal cracks and other damages. One common approach involves materials with a low glass transition temperature (T_g), where heating above T_g allows the polymer chains to regain mobility and fill microcracks (Figure 2). Other systems employ thermally reversible chemical bonds, such as Diels-Alder reactions, that dissociate upon heating and reform during cooling, enabling multiple healing cycles. These materials are particularly attractive due to their efficiency, as heat can be precisely applied to the damaged area using localized techniques like infrared or Joule heating. However, challenges remain in balancing the thermal stability required for long-term usage with the flexibility needed for effective healing. Advances in thermally responsive systems continue to expand their applicability in fields such as aerospace, automotive, and electronics, where durability and self-repair capabilities are critical.

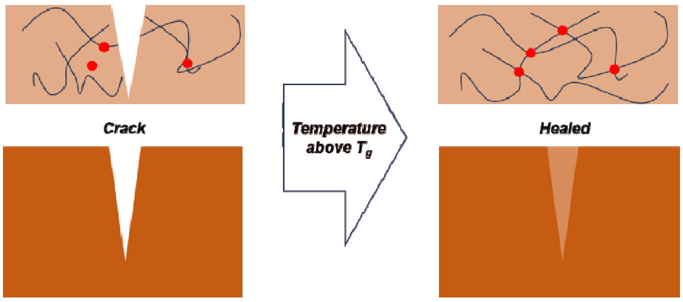

Figure 2. Schematics showing principle of thermally-triggered self-healing

Design of self-repairing materials

The design of self-healing materials represents a paradigm shift in material science, with the potential to reshape industries by enabling materials to repair damage autonomously. This innovation is inspired by biological systems, such as the self-repairing properties of human skin and plant vascular networks, which efficiently restore functionality after injury. Leveraging these principles, engineers have developed materials that exhibit remarkable self-healing capabilities through intrinsic and extrinsic mechanisms. Intrinsic systems, for example, utilize reversible chemical bonds, such as dynamic covalent bonds and hydrogen bonding, to enable the reformation of damaged structures. An example is the development of polymer materials with Diels-Alder bonds, which can heal microcracks when exposed to moderate heat (10). In this previous work, authors claim the applicability of cycloaddition reactions for instilling the self-healing mechanism to the polymers, while focusing mainly on the thermally reversible Diels–Alder reaction. Similarly, thermoplastic elastomers can melt and re-solidify under controlled temperature conditions, effectively sealing cracks and restoring mechanical integrity (11). On the other hand, extrinsic self-healing systems rely on embedded agents like microcapsules or vascular networks. For instance, microcapsule-based systems, such as those used in concrete, contain liquid healing agents like epoxy resins or adhesives that are released upon crack formation, solidifying to seal the damage (12). Another notable example is vascularized composites, inspired by biological circulatory systems, which deliver repair agents through interconnected microchannels (13). These have been successfully employed in aerospace applications to create lightweight, damage-resistant components for aircraft and spacecraft.

Future application

The practical applications of self-healing materials are diverse and transformative as shown in Figure 3.

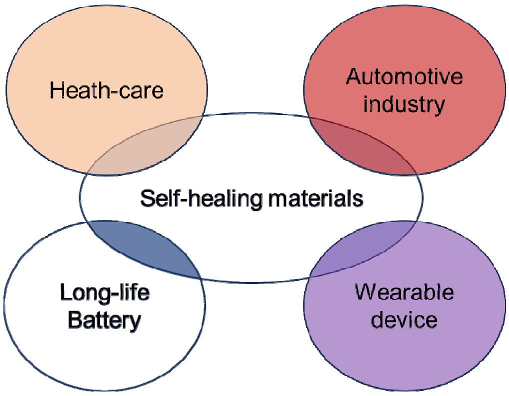

Figure 3. Block diagram showing the future application of self-healing materials

In the automotive industry, self-healing paints have been developed to repair scratches and abrasions using UV light or heat as a trigger. A notable example is Nissan's self-healing car paint, which can restore minor surface damage within minutes under sunlight. In electronics, self-healing polymers have been utilized in flexible circuits and wearable devices. A specific example includes self-healing lithium-ion batteries, where cracks in the electrode material are repaired using polymer binders, extending the battery's lifespan and improving safety. In healthcare, self-healing hydrogels have revolutionized wound care. For instance, hydrogels designed with ionic or covalent crosslinking can repair themselves and maintain moisture, promoting faster healing of wounds. Additionally, self-healing implants made from biodegradable polymers are being developed to extend the durability of medical devices while ensuring biocompatibility.Despite these advances, the design and integration of self-healing materials are not without challenges. Achieving efficient healing at the nanoscale remains complex, and the compatibility of healing agents with host materials often limits their mechanical properties. Furthermore, scalability is an ongoing issue, particularly for complex systems like vascular networks. Nevertheless, emerging research is addressing these issues by exploring bio-inspired designs, such as mimicking the regeneration capabilities of starfish or the healing efficiency of tree bark. Sustainable materials, such as those derived from renewable resources, are also gaining attention to align with environmental goals. The design of self-healing materials is more than a technological innovation—it represents a critical step toward creating materials that are not only more durable and reliable but also more sustainable and resource-efficient. By solving existing challenges and continuing to draw inspiration from nature, self-healing materials hold the promise of transforming industries and driving future advancements in science and technology.

Conclusion

Stretchable self-healing materials are emerging as a groundbreaking class of advanced materials, seamlessly integrating flexibility and autonomous repair capabilities to address the growing demands of modern technology. These materials, inspired by nature's self-repairing mechanisms, have the potential to revolutionize applications in wearable electronics, soft robotics, and biomedical devices, where mechanical durability and adaptability are critical. Their ability to maintain functionality under extreme deformation and self-repair damage provides a sustainable solution to reduce material waste, enhance device longevity, and lower maintenance costs. The mechanisms underlying these materials form the foundation of their performance, broadly categorized into extrinsic and intrinsic systems. Extrinsic systems, which rely on embedded healing agents, offer a straightforward approach but are limited to single-use repairs. Intrinsic systems, on the other hand, capitalize on reversible chemical bonds and dynamic physical interactions, enabling repeated healing without external inputs. Advances in material chemistry, such as dynamic covalent bonds, supramolecular interactions, and hybrid systems, have significantly expanded the scope and efficiency of these materials. These innovations ensure not only effective healing but also compatibility with stretchable matrices, paving the way for applications in diverse and demanding environments.Applications of stretchable self-healing materials are rapidly evolving. In wearable electronics, they enhance durability and user comfort, ensuring devices can withstand repetitive strain and accidental damage. Soft robotics benefit from their ability to endure high deformation while maintaining operational integrity, essential for robots functioning in unpredictable or hazardous settings. In the biomedical field, these materials are poised to transform artificial skin, tissue scaffolds, and implantable devices, offering biocompatibility and reliable performance over extended periods.Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Achieving large-scale production while maintaining cost-effectiveness, ensuring stability under diverse environmental conditions, and integrating multifunctionality such as electrical conductivity or antimicrobial properties remain critical hurdles. Addressing these issues will require interdisciplinary collaboration, leveraging expertise in chemistry, engineering, and materials science to refine fabrication techniques and design principles. Furthermore, sustainability considerations, including environmentally friendly production processes and end-of-life management, must be prioritized to align with global efforts to reduce environmental impact.In conclusion, stretchable self-healing materials are a promising frontier in material science, offering a harmonious blend of functionality, adaptability, and sustainability. While significant progress has been made, continued research is essential to overcome existing limitations and unlock their full potential. As advancements in design, manufacturing, and application integration accelerate, these materials are poised to reshape industries and play a vital role in creating resilient, next-generation technologies. By bridging fundamental innovation with practical implementation, stretchable self-healing materials are set to redefine the boundaries of material performance and sustainability.

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