



Covalently modified enzymatic 3D-printed bioelectrode

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Abstract

Three-dimensional (3D) printing has showed great potential for the construction of electrochemical sensor devices. However, reported 3D-printed biosensors are usually constructed by physical adsorption and needed immobilizing reagents on the surface of functional materials. To construct the 3D-printed biosensors, the simple modification of the 3D-printed device by non-expert is mandatory to take advantage of the remote, distributed 3D printing manufacturing. Here, a 3D-printed electrode was prepared by fused deposition modeling (FDM) 3D printing technique and activated by chemical and electrochemical methods. A glucose oxidase-based 3D-printed nanocarbon electrode was prepared by covalent linkage method to an enzyme on the surface of the 3D-printed electrode to enable biosensing. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy and scanning electron microscopy were used to characterize the glucose oxidase-based biosensor. Direct electrochemistry glucose oxidase-based biosensor with higher stability was then chosen to detect the two biomarkers, hydrogen peroxide and glucose by chronoamperometry. The prepared glucose oxidase-based biosensor was further used for the detection of glucose in samples of apple cider. The covalently linked glucose oxidase 3D-printed nanocarbon electrode as a biosensor showed excellent stability. This work can open new doors for the covalent modification of 3D-printed electrodes in other electrochemistry fields such as biosensors, energy, and biocatalysis.

Keywords 3D-printed electrode · Electrochemical detection · Covalent modification · Hydrogen peroxide · Glucose

Introduction

Three-dimensional (3D) printing, also known as “additive manufacturing,” is booming as an advanced manufacturing method for the fabrication of devices in various areas, such as

medicine, biotechnology, electronics, engineering, and chemistry [1–3]. For the special area of electrochemistry, 3D printing has attracted great attention in energy storage, energy conversion, batteries, sensors, *etc.* [4, 5]. 3D printing techniques in electrochemistry mainly focus on the construction of desired electrodes and devices with merits of low-cost, fast prototyping and fabrication, and minimal waste [6–8]. Nowadays, various techniques have emerged to manufacture these electrochemical parts, including fused deposition modeling (FDM), inkjet printing, select laser melting (SLM), and stereolithography (SLA) [9–11]. Among these techniques, FDM is considered the most common method for the manufacture of desired electrodes [12, 13].

Materials for FDM 3D printing are usually constituted by thermoplastic materials, typically as polylactic acid (PLA) or acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS), with other conducting materials such as graphene or carbon black [14–17]. Among them, a commercial graphene/PLA filament called “nanocarbon” using for printing 3D electrodes has become extremely popular in the academic research realm due to the low-cost materials and printers, which shows a great potential for replacement of the conventional electrodes [18, 19]. However, these as-printed electrodes are usually covered by large amounts of insulating materials; thus, a pre-treatment method is needed to remove these

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non-conductive materials and expose the conductive sites. Many activated techniques have been reported to improve the electrochemical performance of these as-printed electrodes. Chemical activation using solvents is one of the common strategies to remove surface PLA [20–23]. Previously, our group first demonstrated that as-printed 3D nanocarbon electrodes can be activated by simply dimethylformamide (DMF) immersion, which can remove large amounts of PLA from the electrode's surface [13]. Then, our group demonstrated that the combination of DMF and electrochemical activation methods can further improve the activity of 3D-printed electrodes than DMF activation alone [24]. Mechanical polishing can also remove excess PLA and expose the conductive graphene materials [25, 26]. Other methods, such as proteinase digestion and sodium borohydride reduction, can also be used to improve the electrochemical activity of 3D-printed nanocarbon electrodes [27].

Besides the activation procedure for nanocarbon electrode described above, post-modification is considered as an important way to expand the application range of activated electrodes. Drop casting is used as a basic method to construct 3D-printed electrochemical sensors or biosensors. Janegitz and Muñoz et al. used drop casting technique to modify enzyme on the 3D-printed electrode for the construction of biosensor platform [26, 28]. Physical adsorption by immersing an activated 3D-printed electrode into the target-containing solution is another common method to prepare an enzyme-based biosensor. Our group has utilized the method to construct a direct electron transfer enzyme-based biosensor for the detection of hydrogen peroxide [29]. As proved by our previous work, the electrochemically activated nanocarbon electrode possesses carboxyl active groups [24]. Hence, it is possible to modify the enzyme on the 3D-printed nanocarbon electrode by covalent reaction between carboxyl and amino group in order to obtain a highly stable biosensor.

In this context, the combination of DMF and electrochemical methods was used for the activation of an as-printed 3D nanocarbon electrode. Then, a glucose oxidase-modified 3D-printed nanocarbon electrode was first synthesized by the covalent method using *N*-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)-*N'*-ethylcarbodiimide hydrochloride (EDC) and *N*-hydroxysuccinimide (NHS) as carboxyl-activated reagents. The prepared biosensor platform can be used for the detection of hydrogen peroxide and glucose by chronoamperometry. It shows excellent stability for the sensing of hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2) and glucose, and opens the door for the covalent modification of 3D-printed electrodes in other fields of electrochemistry.

Experimental section

Materials and reagents

Commercially available Carbon Black 3D raw material filaments composed of graphene and PLA were obtained from

Graphene Supermarket (New York, USA). Glucose, glucose oxidase (GOx), acetone, H_2O_2 solution, EDC, NHS, and DMF were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO, USA). Apple cider with 4.5% ethanol was purchased from a grocery store (Brno, Czech Republic). All the solutions for electrochemical analysis were prepared in pH 7.2 phosphate-buffered saline (PBS). All other reagents were at least analytical grade and provided by Sigma-Aldrich. All experiments were carried out at our laboratory's ambient temperature.

Instruments

3D-printed nanocarbon electrodes were printed by FDM technique using a Prusa i3 MK3 3D-printer (Prusa Research, Czech Republic). Electrochemical experiments were carried out by methods of chronoamperometry and cyclic voltammetry (CV) on an Autolab PGSTAT 204 potentiostat (Metrohm, Switzerland). Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) was performed on a Verios 460 L (FEI, USA) to characterize surface morphologies of electrodes. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was performed to detect the chemical bonds and surface element composition on an AXIS Supra instrument (Kratos Analytical, UK) using a monochromatic Al $\text{K}\alpha$ (1486.7 eV) and X-ray excitation source with 225 W power.

Preparation and activation of 3D-printed nanocarbon electrode

Firstly, the 3D-printed electrode prototype (6 mm diameter, 0.5 mm thickness) was designed by computer using Autodesk Fusion 360 software. Then, 12 electrodes were printed using the Prusa i3 MK3 printer at the same time with 230 °C nozzle temperature and 60 °C bed temperature. Then, these as-printed 3D nanocarbon electrodes were activated by DMF immersion and electrochemical treatment according to our reported method with slight modification; the activated electrode is named DMF-EC [24]. Specifically, as shown in Fig. 1, 3D-printed electrodes were activated in DMF solution for 3 h in order to remove the insulating PLA polymer and expose the conductive graphene nanofiber. These activated electrodes were further washed with acetone and ethanol to remove surface PLA, and then dried in the oven at 50 °C for the following electrochemical activation. Next, the electrochemical condition of 2.5 V potential for 300 s in PBS was chosen for further executing the electrochemical activation.

Covalent modification for the construction of a biosensor platform

After the activation procedure, the nanocarbon electrode was firstly reacted with EDC (0.4 mM) and NHS (0.4 mM) solution for 2 h to activate the surface carboxyl, and then washed with PBS. Afterward, the activated electrode was incubated in

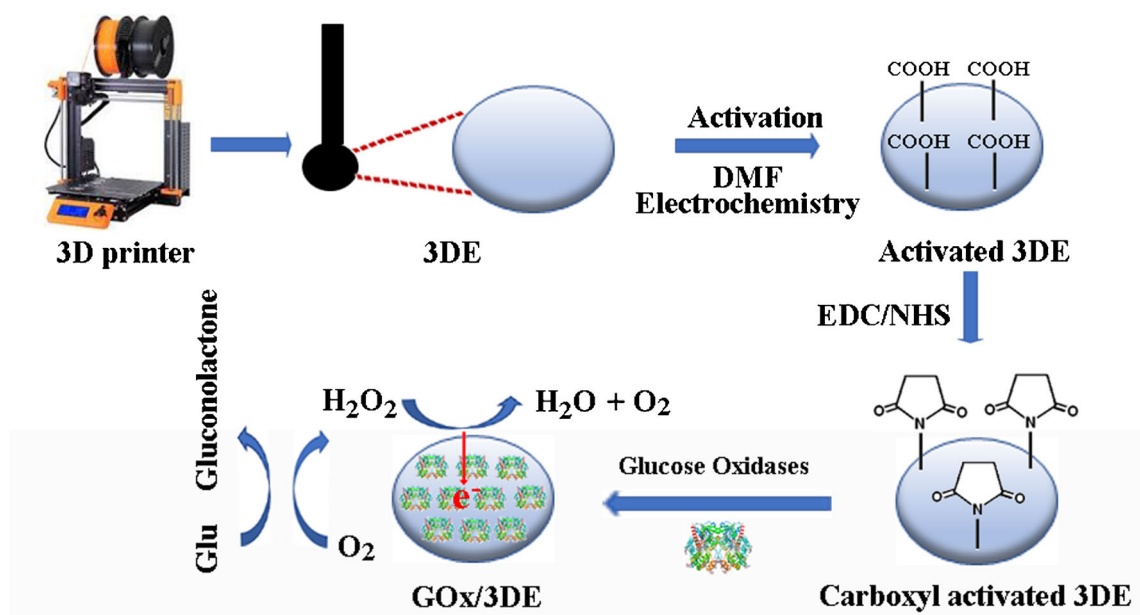


Fig. 1 Scheme for the construction of covalent modified glucose oxidase-based 3D-printed nanocarbon electrode and the corresponding mechanism for the detection of H_2O_2 and glucose

5 mg/mL GOx solution to carry out the condensation reaction with stirring at 7 °C for 24 h followed by washing in the PBS for several times to remove unreacted GOx (Fig. 1). The GOx-modified 3D-printed electrode, named as GOx/3DE, was stored in PBS at 4 °C for next use.

Electrochemical measurements

The main biosensing mechanism of our device is the use of glucose oxidase as substrate (glucose), converted selectively to gluconic acid and hydrogen peroxide, which is detected on

the electrode surface. Therefore, the electrochemical property and the determination of hydrogen peroxide were first studied by CV and chronoamperometry, and the glucose was detected by chronoamperometry. Electrochemical measurements were carried out using GOx/3DE as working electrodes; a platinum wire and an Ag/AgCl electrode were chosen as counter and reference electrodes, respectively. CVs were performed at a scan rate of 25 mV s^{-1} from 0 to 1.0 V in the PBS pH 7.2 solution. Chronoamperometric measurements were carried out with a constant potential of 0.85 V in 5 mL PBS pH 7.2 solution. 2.5 μL of 100 mM H_2O_2 solution was added during

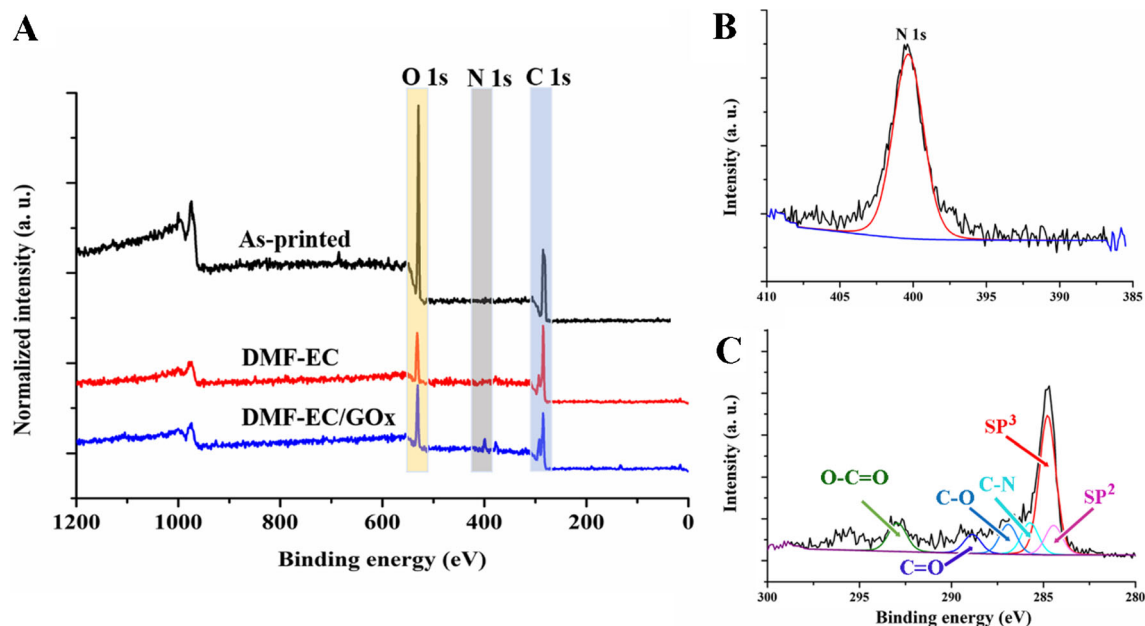
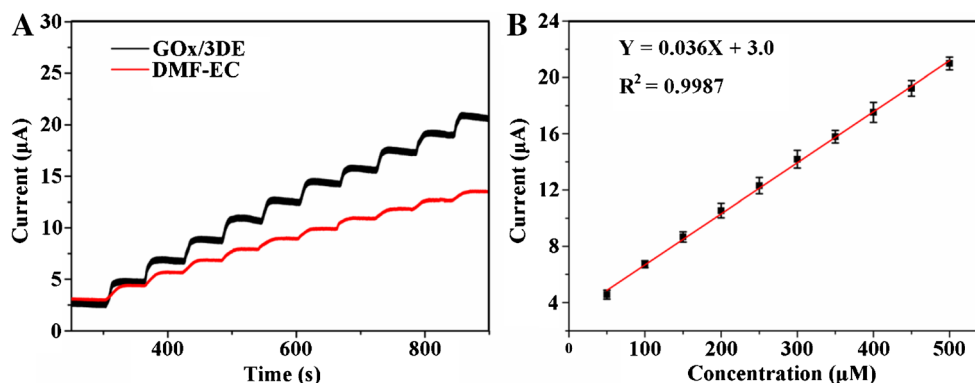


Fig. 2 (A) XPS survey of different electrodes: As-printed, DMF-EC, and GOx/3DE. High-resolution XPS spectra of (B) N 1s and (C) C 1s of GOx/3DE

Fig. 3 (A) Chronoamperometry responses under successive additions of 50 μM H_2O_2 in PBS (pH 7.2) with an applied potential of 0.85 V vs Ag/AgCl. (B) Linear plot of calibration curve of current response versus H_2O_2 concentration of GOx/3DE biosensor



each 60 s under slight stirring to obtain H_2O_2 concentrations in the range of 50–500 μM . Aliquots of 2.5 μL of 1000 mM glucose were added in the working solution to get the glucose concentrations in the range of 0.5–10 mM. The repeatability for H_2O_2 and glucose detection on the GOx/3DE biosensor using chronoamperometry was under the concentration of 50 μM and 500 μM , respectively.

Results and discussion

Characterizations of 3D-printed and enzyme-modified nanocarbon electrodes

The final GOx-modified 3D-printed biosensor was prepared by the covalent modification of GOx on the activated nanocarbon electrode using EDC and NHS reagents [30, 31]. Then, XPS measurements were first used to analyze the chemical compositions and structures of different synthetic nanocarbon electrodes. Figure 2A shows the survey spectra of as-printed, DMF-EC, and GOx/3DE electrodes. Table S1 presents the detailed elemental composition of these prepared nanocarbon electrodes; respectively, the compositions of C, O, and N of GOx/3DE electrodes are 78.52%, 16.63%, and 4.85%. From the survey spectra and elemental table, C and O peaks at ~ 284.2 and 253.6 eV, respectively, are the two main elements presenting in as-printed, DMF-EC, and GOx/3DE electrodes. N 1 s peak at ~ 400.4 eV is observed on the survey spectra of GOx/3DE, which indicates GOx is modified on the surface of activated electrode. High-resolution XPS was further used to obtain information of nitrogen and carbon functional groups on the GOx/3DE surface (Fig. 2B and Fig. 2C).

N 1 s at ~ 400.4 eV corresponds to the peak of $-\text{O}=\text{C}-\text{N}-$ from the covalent reaction between amino and carboxyl groups. C 1 s spectrum of GOx/3DE displays its three components of C-C/C-H (sp^3 , ~ 284.6 eV), C-O (~ 286.9 eV), and C=O (~ 288.9 eV) from PLA polymer, and three components of C=C (sp^2 , ~ 284.3 eV), C-N (~ 285.7 eV), and O-C=O (~ 292.7 eV) from graphene and GOx. C 1 s spectra of different electrodes (Fig. S1) show that the C-O and C=O groups from the PLA polymer decreased from as-printed electrode to activated electrode; the C-N group appeared after the modification of GOx on the activated electrode. Detailed information of nitrogen and carbon functional groups also indicates that GOx has been modified on the surface of the DMF-EC.

In addition, the surface morphologies of as-printed, DMF-EC, and GOx/3DE were characterized by SEM. As shown in Fig. S2A, the surface of the as-printed electrode is covered by non-conducting PLA polymer. After activation by the methods of DMF and EC, smooth graphene nanofibers are exposed on the electrode surface and the surface area can be increased after the activation procedure (Fig. S2B). Then, the surface morphology of graphene is changed from smooth to rough due to the modification of GOx on the surface of the graphene fibers (Fig. S2C). These results also indicate the successful synthesis of GOx/3DE.

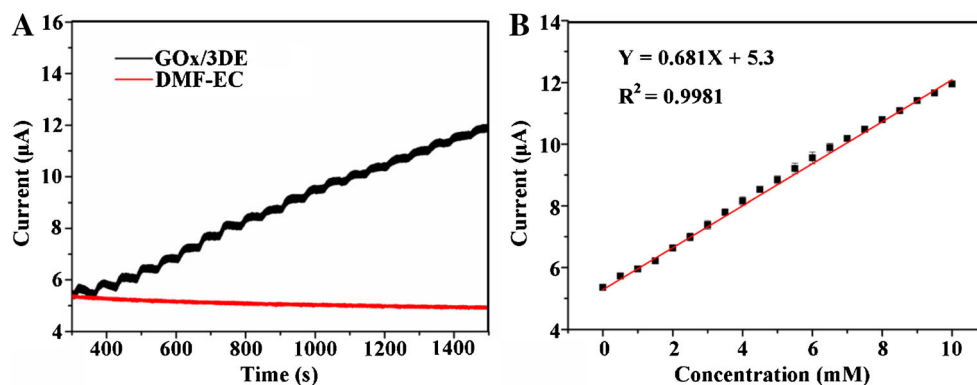
Determination of hydrogen peroxide

Optimization of glucose oxidase concentration (Fig. S3A and Fig. S3B) and detection condition of glucose (Fig. S3C and Fig. S3D) can be found in the support information. Finally, 5 mg mL^{-1} GOx-modified 3D-printed biosensor and PBS of pH 7.2 were chosen for the sensor of H_2O_2 and glucose.

Table 1 Analytical performance of GOx/3DE biosensor

Biosensor	Analytes	Analytical Range	Linearity	LOD	LOQ	RSD
GOx/3DE	H_2O_2	50–500 μM	0.9987	2.97 μM	8.91 μM	7.0%
	Glucose	0.5–10 mM	0.9979	158 μM	473 μM	1.4%

Fig. 4 (A) Chronoamperometry responses under successive additions of 500 μM glucose in PBS (pH 7.2) with an applied potential of 0.85 V vs Ag/AgCl for the DMF-EC (red line) and GOx/3DE (black line). (B) Linear plot of calibration curve of current response versus glucose concentration of GOx/3DE biosensor



H_2O_2 is considered a significant component in life factors [32, 33]. The main biosensing mechanism of our device uses glucose oxidase as substrate (glucose) converted selectively to gluconic acid and hydrogen peroxide, which is detected on the electrode surface. Therefore, the electrochemical property of GOx/3DE for the oxidation of H_2O_2 was first studied by CV. Specifically, CVs of GOx/3DE biosensor in PBS pH 7.2 containing different concentrations of H_2O_2 are displayed in Fig. S4A. The CV results indicate that electro-oxidation of H_2O_2 appears at potential greater than 0.7 V on GOx/3DE biosensor; i.e., current responsiveness increases with the increase of H_2O_2 concentration. The mechanism for the detection of H_2O_2 can be explained as the oxidizing reaction Eq. (1) and the corresponding scheme shown in Fig. 1. As shown in Fig. S4B, the calibration curve of different H_2O_2 concentrations versus current responsiveness of GOx/3DE is obtained at the potential of 0.85 V, which shows good linear with the H_2O_2 concentration range of 1–10 mM ($R^2 = 0.9947$).



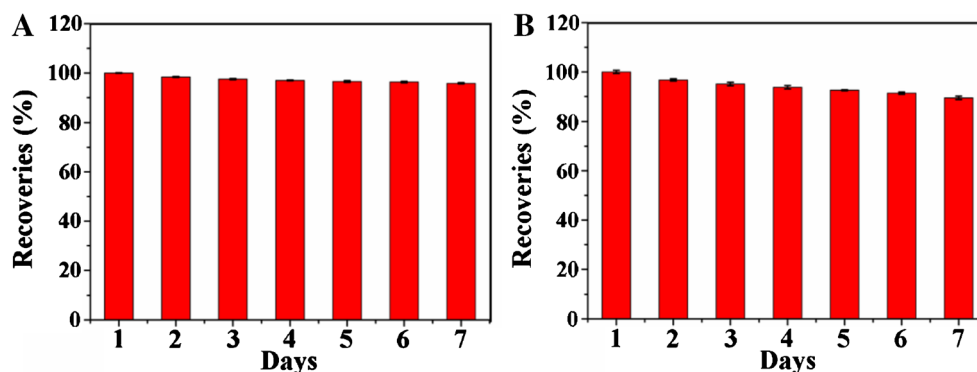
From the CV results, current responsiveness increases linearly with the increase of H_2O_2 concentration at the oxidation potential of 0.85 V. Hence, the 0.85 V potential was further chosen for the detection of H_2O_2 using chronoamperometry on electrodes of DMF-EC and GOx/3DE. As shown in Fig. 3A, both 3D-printed nanocarbon electrodes of DMF-EC

and GOx/3DE show very good current responsiveness after each H_2O_2 addition. These results demonstrate that both DMF-EC and GOx/3DE biosensors are good platforms for the oxidation of H_2O_2 . The detection of H_2O_2 on the GOx/3DE biosensor is not affected by the enzyme activity of GOx. This can be ascribed to graphene being an excellent electron medium that can increase electron transfer on the electrode surface [34]. However, the GOx/3DE biosensor shows slightly stronger current responsiveness than DMF-EC, which may be ascribed to the increase of affinity between GOx/3DE and H_2O_2 analyte [35]. Figure 3B shows straight linearity ($R^2 = 0.9987$) between H_2O_2 concentration and current responsiveness using the chronoamperometry on the GOx/3DE-based biosensor. The limit of detection (LOD) and limit of quantitation (LOQ) for the detection of H_2O_2 on GOx/3DE are 2.97 μM and 8.91 μM , respectively. The values of LOD and lineal range can compare with other reported H_2O_2 biosensor systems (Table S2). In addition, the biosensor displays good repeatability ($\text{RSD} = 7.0\%$) for independent assays on three different GOx/3DE. More details for these analytical parameters can be found in Table 1.

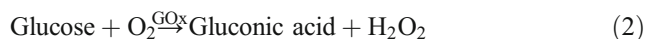
Determination of glucose

Glucose is considered an important biomarker for the detection of diabetes and is widely used as a food additive to control

Fig. 5 Long-term stability experiments of chronoamperometric responses on GOx/3DE for 50 μM H_2O_2 (A) and 500 μM glucose (B) in pH 7.2 PBS



taste [36–39]. As reported, glucose can react with GOx and produce H_2O_2 following reaction (2); then, H_2O_2 can be detected by the GOx/3DE biosensor [40–43].



Based on the mechanism and the importance of glucose sensing, the GOx/3DE biosensor was further used for the indirect determination of glucose using chronoamperometric measurements. As shown from Fig. 4A, a good gradient of current responsiveness appeared after each addition of glucose. 3D-printed electrode of DMF-EC without GOx was chosen to execute the control experiment. However, no increased current signal was observed on the DMF-EC biosensor. These results indicate that the current response for the detection of glucose comes from the indirect detection of H_2O_2 . It also shows straight linearity ($R^2 = 0.9979$) for the detection of glucose, with concentration ranging from 0.5 to 10 mM based on the GOx/3DE biosensor (Fig. 4B and Table 1). The LOD and LOQ for the detection of glucose on the GOx/3DE biosensor are 158 μM and 473 μM , respectively. The biosensor shows good repeatability for the detection of glucose with RSD about 1.4% by three independent experiments.

The selectivity and real sample analysis of GOx/3DE

The sugar content of apple cider has an important effect on its sweetness, overall taste, and nutritional value [44]. Hence, the detection of individual sugars, such as glucose, in a sample of apple cider is significant. Hence, the biosensor was finally chosen for the determination of glucose in apple cider. As shown in Fig. S5, 1% apple cider shows significant current responsiveness and the content of glucose in apple cider is calculated as 4.5 ± 0.3 g/L. The interference of 1% ethanol shows a slight current signal on the GOx/3DE sensor, which can be considered negligible. Hence, the prepared sensor has good selectivity for the detection of glucose in apple cider. In addition, concentrations of 500 μM , 2 mM, and 4 mM glucose were prepared by 4.5% ethanol PBS. The recoveries were calculated based on the linear equation between current response (y , μA) and glucose concentration (x , mM): $y = 0.681x + 5.3$, which was described in the part of determination of glucose. The recoveries for these three standard solutions were calculated as $97.6\% \pm 1.0\%$, $98.5\% \pm 1.4\%$, and $96.3\% \pm 1.5\%$, respectively. Every measurement was detected three times on the GOx/3DE sensor. These results indicate that the GOx/3DE sensor can be used for the detection of glucose in practical samples.

The long-term stability of GOx/3DE biosensor

As can be seen in Fig. 5, the long-term stability experiments on GOx/3DE for the chronoamperometric responses of 50 μM

H_2O_2 and 500 μM glucose up to 7 days were studied. The detection of H_2O_2 on GOx/3DE can retain about 96% initial current responsiveness after 7 days. The high stability for the detection of H_2O_2 mainly ascribes to the non-enzymatic activity dependent. After 7 days, the percentage of recovery for the detection of glucose decreases to about 90% of initial current responsiveness. The result can be ascribed to the slight loss of the enzyme activity of GOx. The GOx/3DE-based biosensor exhibits comparable and even higher stability for determination of glucose compared to previous reported works (Table S3), and the common immobilized reagent nafion is not required in this work. These results indicate that covalent immobilization of the enzyme on the electrode can improve the sensor stability more than simply physical adsorption.

Conclusion

In this work, we activated as-printed 3D nanocarbon electrodes by the combined methods of chemical and electrochemical treatments, and then constructed a GOx-modified 3D-printed nanocarbon electrode by covalent reaction using activated reagents of EDC and NHS. The enzyme-immobilized 3D-printed nanocarbon electrode shows efficient abilities for the detection of H_2O_2 and glucose. The prepared GOx/3DE biosensor can maintain enzyme activity and exhibits excellent stability for the determination of H_2O_2 and glucose, this can compare with other reported biosensors. The GOx/3DE further shows potency for practical application by the detection of glucose in apple cider. We can foresee the using of 3D printing technique for constructing of various portable electrochemical glucose sensor using in practical samples. This work opens new avenues not only for the covalent immobilization of enzymes on 3D-printed nanocarbon electrodes for (bio)sensing but also other fields of electrochemistry including batteries, energy storage, and catalysis.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00604-021-05006-6>.

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Author contribution Lujun Wang: conceptualization, methodology, data curation, investigation, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing. Martin Pumera: conceptualization, funding acquisition, project administration, resources, supervision, writing—review & editing.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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