

Polydopamine-PEG–Folic Acid Conjugate Film Engineered TiO₂ Nanotube Arrays for Photoelectrochemical Sensing of Folate Binding Protein

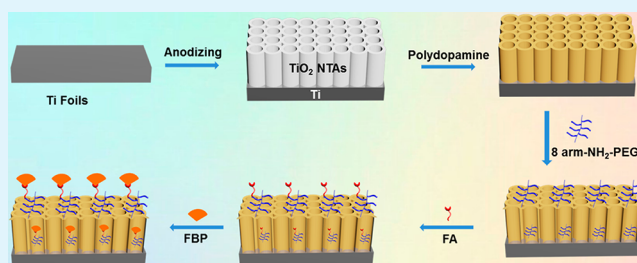
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S Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Serum-soluble folate binding protein (FBP) is an important tumor marker, and the development of a simple biosensing method is highly needed. In this work, a photoelectrochemical (PEC) biosensor for the detection of FBP was proposed based on the construction of an antifouling interface and the unique ligand–protein recognition. The PEC sensing platform was prepared by the biomimetic polydopamine (PDA) coating on TiO₂ nanotubes arrays (NTAs). A significant PEC enhancement effect was obtained due to the macroporous structures. Excellent antifouling performance was achieved by conjugation of amino-group-terminated 8-arm poly(ethylene glycol) (PEG). The incorporation of folic acid (FA) retains the antifouling property and shows recognition abilities toward FBP. The fabricated PEC biosensor shows good analytical performance. The combination of ligand–protein recognition and a PEC antifouling interface provides a good consideration for the development of FBP biosensors.

KEYWORDS: folate binding protein, TiO₂ nanotubes arrays, folic acid, polydopamine, poly(ethylene glycol)



1. INTRODUCTION

Folate binding protein (FBP), also called folate receptor (FR), is a membrane glycoprotein with a glycosyl-phosphatidylinositol tail. The membrane-associated FBP can be converted to a soluble form by metalloproteases.¹ Both the membrane-associated and the soluble forms of FBP show very high affinity with folic acid (FA).² FBP has been identified as a useful tumor marker because not only the overexpression on tissues and cells but also the elevated levels in serum are associated with several epithelial malignancies.^{3–5} FA-mediated drug targeting has been well exploited for in vivo imaging and therapy of cancers and other diseases.^{6–8} The unique ligand–protein interaction between FA and FBP has also been used in the field of in vitro diagnostics (IVD) for the detection of both free FBP and tumor cells in bodily fluids.^{9,10} Ligand as a recognition element shows several advantages over traditional antibody–antigen interaction,¹¹ such as low cost and high stability. The easy conjugation of FA to materials or surfaces enables the development of various biosensing methods, including electrochemical,^{12–14} electrochemiluminescence,^{15,16} fluorescence,^{17–19} colorimetric,^{20,21} resonance Rayleigh scattering,²² and photoelectrochemical (PEC)²³ methods. In spite of these achievements, a simple and robust biosensor for FBP with good performance is still needed in liquid biopsy of cancer.

PEC bioanalysis is promising and attractive because it inherits the high sensitivity, simple instrumentation, label-free response, and other advantages of the electrochemical method.²⁴ The easy availability of various semiconductor materials as PEC transducing elements enables the facile construction of sensing platforms with different performances.^{25–27} TiO₂ nanotube arrays (NTAs) can be easily prepared by anodic oxidation of titanium and have been widely investigated in photocatalysis, solar cells, and water splitting.²⁸ TiO₂ NTAs have also been used for the construction of biosensing platforms due to the high porosity and large surface areas, which are favorable for the immobilization of recognition elements.²⁹ To improve the visible light response and conversion efficiency, semiconductor nanomaterials with narrow band gaps were usually used to form hybrids with TiO₂ NTAs.^{30,31} Another issue for application in biosensing is the bioconjugation of TiO₂ NTAs with bimolecular recognition elements. Molecules with functional groups or metal nanoparticles should be used to modify TiO₂ NTAs before the immobilization of recognition molecules.³² Previously we adopted the well-developed polydopamine (PDA) surface coating method for the construction of biosensing inter-

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8 arm-NH₂-PEG

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{H}_2\text{N}-(\text{OH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{C})_n\text{O} \\ \text{H}_2\text{N}-(\text{OH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{C})_n\text{O} \\ \text{H}_2\text{N}-(\text{OH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{C})_n\text{O} \\ \text{H}_2\text{N}-(\text{OH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{C})_n\text{O} \end{array} \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{H}_2\text{N}-(\text{OH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{C})_n\text{O} \\ \text{H}_2\text{N}-(\text{OH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{C})_n\text{O} \end{array} \right] \text{CH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{O} \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{O}-(\text{CH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{O})_n\text{NH}_2 \\ \text{O}-(\text{CH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{O})_n\text{NH}_2 \end{array} \right]$$

FA

$$\text{O}=\text{C}(\text{OH})\text{CH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{NH}-\text{C}(\text{OH})=\text{O}$$

$$\text{NH}-\text{C}_6\text{H}_4-\text{NH}-\text{CH}_2-\text{N}=\text{N}-\text{C}_5\text{H}_3\text{N}_2$$

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Tris-HCl buffer solution, the TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG electrode was immersed in the FA solution. Thirty minutes later, the TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode was rinsed by the PBS buffer solution, and then the TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode was immersed in the FBP solution for 0.5 h at 4 °C for further use.

2.5. Investigation of the Antifouling Property of PEC Biosensor. To evaluate the antifouling property of the PEC biosensor, EIS and photocurrent changes of TiO_2 NTAs/PDA, TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG, and TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrodes before and after BSA fouling were recorded, respectively. The EIS and PEC base responses of the electrodes immersed in the electrolyte solution (2.5 mM $\text{K}_3\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6$ and 0.1 M KCl for EIS, 0.1 M PBS with AA for PEC) were recorded, and then the EIS and photoelectric responses of the electrodes after soaking in PBS (pH = 7.4, 0.1 M) with 5×10^2 ng/mL BSA for 0.5 h were recorded. The same method was used to record the EIS and photoelectric responses of the TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG electrodes after soaking in other interfering substances (IgG, Hb, and complex human serum) solutions. In order to further verify the antifouling ability of the TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrodes, the electrodes were immersed in BSA solutions of different concentrations (0, 0.05, 0.5, 5, 50, 5×10^2 ng/mL). To investigate the selectivity of the PEC biosensor for FBP, the TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrodes were immersed in FBP solution (1 ng/mL) and a mixed solution of FBP (1 ng/mL) and BSA (5×10^2 ng/mL), respectively. After 0.5 h, the electrode was rinsed with PBS, and then the PEC responses of the PEC biosensor were recorded. The frequency range of the EIS is from 0.1 Hz to 100 kHz. The wavelength of the excitation light source is 450 nm with a bias potential of 0.0 V.

2.6. Examination of PEC Biosensor for FBP Quantization Capability and Performance. Optimization of the experimental conditions, including the voltage and time of anodization and the concentration of the AA, DA, and PEG, is performed to give the PEC biosensor the best performance.

The TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrodes were immersed in the FBP solution with different concentrations (0.001–500 ng/mL) for 0.5 h. The PEC biosensor washed by PBS was tested three times, and the average was used to plot the working curve.

The photocurrent signal stability of the PEC biosensor was assessed by measuring the photocurrent of 12 consecutive switching lamps of the TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrodes modified with FBP (1 ng/mL). The PEC biosensor was then stored at 4 °C for 7 days to test its photocurrent response again to assess the storage stability of the PEC biosensor. The reproducibility of the PEC biosensor was investigated by measuring the photocurrent of five electrodes modified with FBP (1 ng/mL).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Formation of PDA Coatings on TiO_2 NTAs. TiO_2 NTAs can be easily prepared by the anodizing method. However, the well-ordered TiO_2 NTAs are fragile and easily detached from the electrode (Figure S3A). Thus, the anodizing time and voltage were controlled to guarantee the stability of the prepared porous structures on electrodes. Under these conditions, TiO_2 NTAs are partially formed (Figure 1 A and 1C). The XRD characterization proves that the prepared TiO_2 NTAs are of anatase form (Figure S3B). The formation of PDA coating on TiO_2 NTAs can be confirmed by the color change of the electrodes from gray to yellow (Figure S2F). After the PDA coating, the skeletons of the porous structure become more smooth and protruding (Figure 1 B and 1D). As shown in Figure S3 C, the average thickness of the PDA film in the electrode is about 592.47 nm.

3.2. Enhancement Effect of PDA Coatings on the PEC Response of TiO_2 NTAs. We have previously shown that the PDA coating and the postprepared epinephrine-melanin can enhance the PEC response of the TiO_2 platform.³³

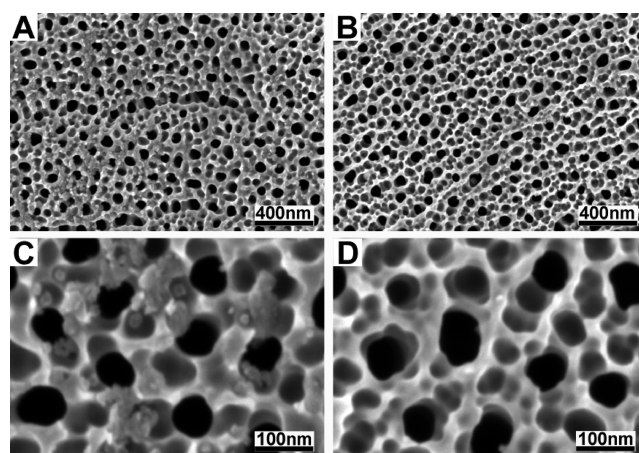


Figure 1. SEM images of TiO_2 NTAs (A and C) and TiO_2 NTAs/PDA (B and D).

Considering the macroporous structures of TiO_2 NTAs, better enhancement effects of PDA coatings are expected. To confirm this, TiO_2 NPs films on ITO were prepared (Figure S4) and were used as control electrodes for TiO_2 NTAs. Enhancement effects on PEC response are achieved for both TiO_2 NPs films and NTAs after the PDA coatings (Figure 2). Larger photocurrents are obtained due to the porous structures of TiO_2 NTAs over TiO_2 NPs films. The largest photocurrents are obtained at a coating time of 60 min. Under this coating time, about 3 times photocurrent increase (from 9.83 to 28.45 μA) is obtained for TiO_2 NPs films while nearly 6 times photocurrent increase (from 97.36 to 558.95 μA) is obtained for TiO_2 NTAs (Figure 2C). Obviously the enhancement effects of PDA coatings on PEC response are more significant in the case of TiO_2 NTAs. The larger photocurrent is beneficial for the development of sensing platforms with wide response ranges.

3.3. Grafting of PEG-FA Conjugates to PDA Coatings. The quinone structures in PDA films enable the facile grafting of molecules with amino groups through the Michael addition or Schiff base reaction.⁴² The amino-group-terminated 8-arm PEG was first grafted to PDA film to construct an antifouling layer. The residual amino groups were designed as binding sites for further conjugation of FA as recognition elements. The successful incorporation of PEG and FA can be confirmed by the change of static water contact angles on the successively modified electrodes (Figure 3). The static water contact angle of titanium pieces was about $(57.2 \pm 1.92)^\circ$ (Figure S7). TiO_2 NTAs obtained by anodic oxidation showed good hydrophilicity,⁴³ and its static water contact angle was about $(10.6 \pm 1.17)^\circ$ (Figure 3A). The static water contact angle of the TiO_2 NTAs/PDA electrode interface was approximately $(38.4 \pm 1.45)^\circ$ (Figure 3B). With the modification of PEG with good hydrophilicity on the electrode, the static water contact angle of the TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG electrode interface decreased to about $(18.1 \pm 1.85)^\circ$ (Figure 3C). When FA is modified on the TiO_2 NTAs/PDA-PEG electrode, the static water contact angle of the PEC biosensor interface is $(25.7 \pm 1.24)^\circ$ (Figure 3D). The presence of FTIR signals of the stretching vibration peak of the N-H bond at 3100–3200 cm^{-1} and the characteristic absorption peak of the carboxyl group appeared at 2786–2924 cm^{-1} further confirmed the incorporation of PEG and FA (Figure S10).

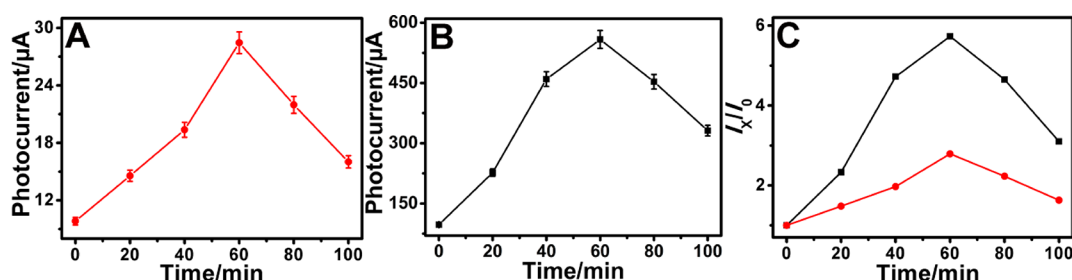


Figure 2. Photocurrents of TiO₂ NPs films on ITO (A) and TiO₂ NTAs (B) with different coating times of PDA. (C) Photocurrent ratio of TiO₂ (black curve, TiO₂ NTA; red curve, TiO₂ NPs) with different coating times (I_x) of PDA and TiO₂ modified without PDA (I_0).

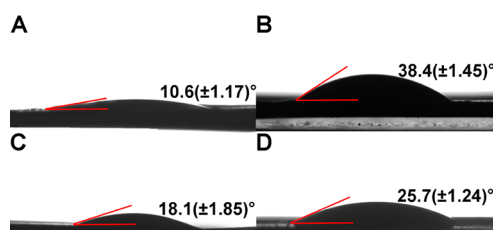


Figure 3. Static water contact angle of different electrode surface: TiO₂ NTAs (A), TiO₂ NTAs/PDA (B), TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG (C), and TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA (D).

3.4. Antifouling Properties of the Fabricated PEC Sensing Interfaces. The antifouling ability of the PEC biosensor was investigated by comparing the EIS and photocurrent changes before and after BSA contamination. As shown in Figure 4A, the impedance spectrum includes the linear range with lower frequency and the semicircle with higher frequency equivalent to the electron transfer resistance (R_{et}). After the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA electrode is soaked in BSA solution, the R_{et} of the electrode increases greatly. This is because of the strong adhesion of PDA, which adsorbs BSA to the surface of the electrode and greatly hinders the electron transfer. However, as expected, there was little change in the R_{et} of the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG electrode before and after immersion in the BSA solution (Figure 4B). This is due to the strong hydrophilicity and steric repulsion effect of PEG, which makes it extremely difficult for BSA to be adsorbed on the

surface of the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG electrode, so that the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG electrode has good antifouling ability. As can be seen from Figure 4C, after the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode was soaked by BSA solution, the R_{et} hardly changed. The results showed that the coupling of FA and PEG did not affect the antifouling ability of PEG, and the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode also had excellent antifouling ability.

Due to the attachment of the protein inhibiting the photocurrent of the PEC biosensor, changes in photocurrent can also be used to verify the antifouling ability of the electrode. As expected, the photocurrent was significantly reduced after the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA electrodes were soaked in the BSA solution (Figure 4D). The decrease in photocurrent at the electrode suggests that large amounts of BSA are adsorbed to the surface of the electrode. The photocurrent of the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG electrode (Figure 4E) and TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode (Figure 4F) hardly changes after being soaked in BSA solution. This is because the PEC biosensor has good antifouling ability, and almost no BSA is adsorbed to the surface of the electrode. EIS and photocurrent have proved that the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode has excellent antifouling ability.

The antifouling performance of the PEC biosensor was further evaluated with the other common proteins (IgG and Hb) and human serum. The results based on EIS and photocurrent prove that the PEC biosensor has excellent antifouling ability for IgG (Figure S11A and S11D) and Hb

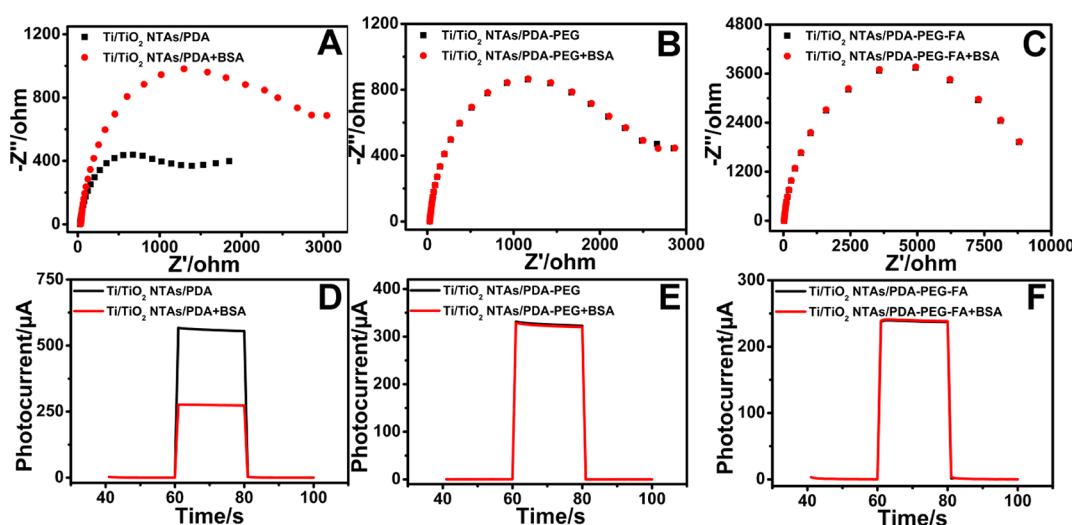


Figure 4. EIS and photocurrent responses of the different electrodes before (black curve) and after (red curve) soaking in BSA solution (5×10^2 ng/mL): TiO₂ NTAs/PDA (A and D), TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG (B and E), and TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA (C and F).

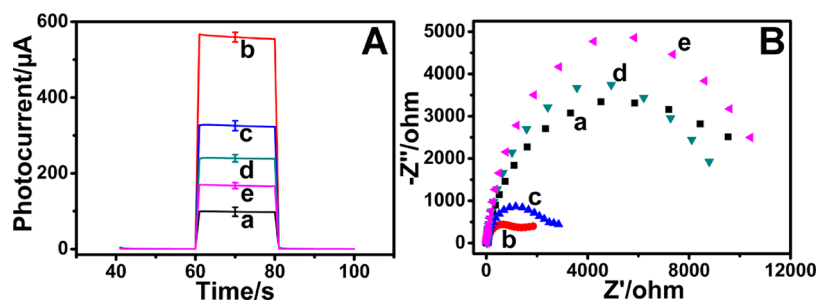


Figure 5. Photocurrent responses (A) and Nyquist plots of EIS (B) of the different modified electrodes: TiO₂ NTAs (a), TiO₂ NTAs/PDA (b), TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG (c), TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA (d), and TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA/FBP (e).

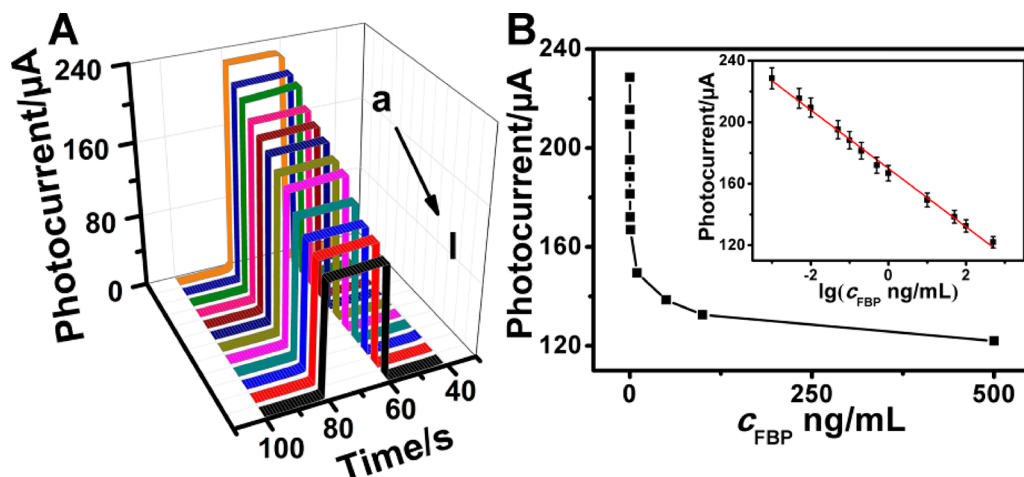


Figure 6. (A) Photocurrent of biosensors modified with different concentrations of FBP (a-l): 1×10^{-3} , 5×10^{-3} , 1×10^{-2} , 5×10^{-2} , 0.1, 0.2, 0.5, 1, 10, 50, 1×10^2 , and 5×10^2 ng/mL. (B) Change in photocurrent with increasing FBP concentration from 1×10^{-3} to 5×10^2 ng/mL. (Inset) Linear relationship between the photocurrent and the logarithm of the FBP concentration.

(Figure S11B and S11E). After the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode was soaked in undiluted serum (Figure S11C and S11F), R_{et} increased by only 8.16% and photocurrent decreased by 4.21%. The results show that the PEC biosensor has good antifouling ability for complex system.

As shown in Figure S12, after soaking in different concentrations of BSA solutions (0, 0.05, 0.5, 5, 50, and 5×10^2 ng/mL), the photocurrent of the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode is almost the same, which proves that the biosensor has good antifouling ability.

3.5. PEC Response Based on the Ligand-Protein Interaction. In order to verify the feasibility of the PEC biosensor for FBP detection photocurrent was measured and compared during the construction of the PEC biosensor (Figure 5A). Due to the excellent photoelectric properties of TiO₂ NTAs, the photocurrent of THE TiO₂ NTAs electrode (curve a) is about 97.36 μ A. The photocurrent of the electrode increased significantly after the PDA coating (curve b). When PEG (curve c) and FA (curve d) were successively modified to the electrodes, the photocurrent of the electrodes gradually decreases. This is because the introduction of PEG and FA hindered the reaction between AA and the photoinduced holes. When FBP is specifically bound to the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode by FA, the photocurrent of the electrode is further reduced (curve e).

In order to further verify the possibility of successful PEC biosensor construction, the process of PEC biosensor construction was further studied through EIS. As shown in Figure 5B, the TiO₂ NTAs electrode (curve a) has a large R_{et}

due to the properties of semiconductor materials. When PDA is modified on the surface of the TiO₂ NTAs electrode, R_{et} of the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA electrode (curve b) decreases greatly compared to that of the TiO₂ NTAs electrode, which is related to the charge transfer of the PDA.⁴⁴ As PEG (curve c) and FA (curve d) are coated one by one on the electrode surface, the R_{et} gradually increases due to their weak conductivity. When FBP is adsorbed to the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode through the recognition of FA, the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA/FBP electrode (curve e) has a relatively large R_{et} due to the poor conductivity of the FBP. The above results prove that the design scheme of the PEC biosensor construction proposed by us is feasible.

3.6. Quantitative Determination of FBP. Under optimal experimental conditions, the established PEC biosensor was used to quantitatively detect FBP at different concentrations (from 1×10^{-3} to 5×10^2 ng/mL). As shown in Figure 6A, as the concentration of modified FBP increases, the photocurrent of the PEC biosensor decreases gradually. This shows that the PEC biosensor we built can quantify FBP. As shown in Figure 6B, there is a good linear relationship between the photocurrent of the PEC biosensor and the logarithm of the FBP concentration at a FBP concentration from 1×10^{-3} to 5×10^2 ng/mL. The linear equation is $I = -18.99 \lg c + 169.96$ ($R^2 = 0.996$, c equals the concentration of FBP), and the detection limit ($S/N = 3$) is 2×10^{-4} ng/mL.

3.7. Selectivity, Stability, and Reproducibility of the PEC Biosensor. The selectivity, stability, and reproducibility are three important factors that affect the PEC biosensor

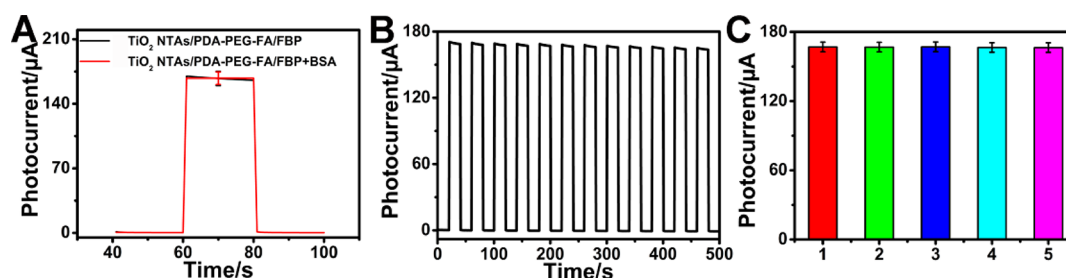


Figure 7. (A) Photocurrent of the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrodes soaking in FBP solution (1 ng/mL) (black curve) and mixed solution (red curve) of FBP (1 ng/mL) and BSA (5×10^2 ng/mL). (B) Photocurrent of the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode modified with FBP (10 ng/mL) within 500 s. (C) Five photocurrents of the TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA electrode modified with FBP (1 ng/mL).

performance. The selectivity of the PEC biosensor to FBP was studied by comparing the photocurrent of the PEC biosensor in the FBP solution and the mixed solution. As shown in Figure 7A, the photocurrent of the PEC immersed in the single solution and the mixed solution is almost the same, which indicates that the PEC biosensor has good selectivity. It can be seen from Figure 7B that the PEC biosensor has good output signal stability, the photocurrent is relatively stable, and the relative standard deviation (RSD) of the photocurrent within 500 s is 1.13%. The photocurrent from the PEC biosensor after 1 week of storage was about 96.17% of the initial photocurrent. The RSD of the photocurrent of the five different PEC biosensors is 0.16% (Figure 7C). The results show that the PEC biosensor has good performance.

3.8. Real Sample Analysis. The recovery of FBP in serum samples was tested to investigate the ability of PEC biosensors to analyze actual samples. As shown in Table S3, the recovery rates of FBP with different concentrations were 99.33–101.03% and RSD was 2.04–3.10.

4. CONCLUSIONS

TiO₂ NTAs was obtained by anodic oxidation, and PDA-PEG-FA conjugate film was engineered onto TiO₂ NTAs. Compared with TiO₂ NPs, PDA can sensitize TiO₂ NTAs to a greater extent and increase TiO₂ NTAs photocurrent to improve the sensitivity of the PEC biosensor. PEG and FA greatly improve the specificity of the PEC biosensor. Therefore, the PEC biosensor we built has a wide detection range (from 1×10^{-3} to 5×10^2 ng/mL) and a low detection limit (2×10^{-4} ng/mL). This PEC biosensor construction method based on signal amplification strategy, ligand, and biomarker relationship provides a new idea for the method of PEC biosensor construction. At the same time, the PEC biosensor has excellent specificity and sensitivity, which makes it have broad prospects in clinical application.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acsami.9b17630>.

Optimization of PEC biosensor construction conditions and detection conditions, photographs of TiO₂ NTAs and TiO₂ NTAs/PDA electrode, XRD pattern of the TiO₂ NTAs, static water contact angle of Ti piece, FTIR spectra of PEG-FA and TiO₂ NTAs/PDA-PEG-FA, EIS and photocurrent of the antifouling tests with IgG, Hb, and serum as interferers, static water contact angles values of different electrodes, photocurrent and R_{et}

values of different electrodes, and comparison of this method with other methods (PDF)

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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