Chitosans from *Rhizopus stolonifer* (strain CBMAI 1551): Characterization and Dense Film Formation

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**ABSTRACT**

Chitosan is a bioactive amino polymer with wide applications. Mainly derived from chitin of marine sources, its traditional production still has some drawbacks such as irregular supply, low quality of product and lack of standardization. Farther, extraction processes are time-consuming with considerable environmental impacts, an extremely non-green process. Many works have shown the possibility of producing native chitosan from Mucorales fungi, which is more easily extracted. Such process is advantageous due to low costs, process control and great possibility of high quality products. Moreover, the extraction of chitosan is faster and generates less pollutants. In this scenario, the possibility of standardized production allied with facilitated extraction and less probability of toxicological side effects from marine sources are characteristics that motivated this work. A Mucorales isolate was cultured and the chitosans – native and semi-synthetic – obtained through heterogeneous extraction were compared. Results show substantial differences between them. Those differences are related to the processes required for extraction, yield, productivity, and quality. This work reinforces that Mucorales fungi excel as an alternative for chitosan production.

**Indexing terms/Keywords**

fungi, chitosan, deacetylation, Mucorales

**Academic Discipline And Sub-Disciplines**

Biotechnology, Bioprocesses, Polymer Science, Natural Products, Mycology

**SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION**

Biotechnology, Mycology

**TYPE (METHOD/APPROACH)**

Bioprocess development, natural polymers extraction, polymer characterization

**INTRODUCTION**

Chitosan is a semi-synthetic polymer mainly derived from the thermochemical deacetylation of marine derived chitin. Deacetylation transforms chitin in a more easily soluble polymer, chitosan, with broad applications. Chitosan is a nontoxic, film-forming, antioxidant, antimicrobial, biocompatible, mucoadhesive polymer, which presents a unique polycationic charge between natural polysaccharides [4], [13], [19], [33].

Chitosan is a versatile material capable of forming films, membranes, blends, capsules, and gels, with applications in many areas, with the advantage of being biodegradable [4], [33]. Many works have focused on identifying alternatives for the traditional methods of chitosan obtainment to overcome the unstable supply due to climate instabilities, absence of quality control during production, but especially in the search of a standardized means of obtainment and processing[2], [6], [18], [22], [31], [32], [36]. Fungi of different groups are interesting options for this purpose, especially with the hope to achieve a standardized product, more appropriated for pharmaceutical and medical purposes [13], [18].

Of the many options, one group reveals special attributes and is attractive: the moulds in the Order Mucorales, Subphylum Mucoromycotina (ex-Zygomycetes). Mucorales is represented by rapid growing moulds, often non-producers of mycotoxins, and by showing constitutive chitosan in all their life cycle, which can be more easily extracted [2], [13], [35]. A specimen of this group was specifically isolated for this study and identified.

Thermochemical processes were used for extraction and deacetylation of chitosans[34], but no further purification was employed at this stage. Attention was made for the detection of native chitosan, which was treated separately from the chitosan obtained by deacetylation of chitin. In a preliminary attempt to verify the aptitude of these chitosans for applications, dense films were produced [5] and were described qualitatively. Commercial chitosans were compared with the chitosans obtained. Results of yield, productivity, deacetylation degree, purity and film-forming capacity are discussed.

The aim of this work was to characterize the chitosans from one isolate as the first step for a bioprocess development.
MATERIAL AND METHODS

Chemicals
Crab chitosan (purity 99%) was obtained from Sigma Aldrich™ (CTSc) and a crustacean chitosan from a commercial producer (purity not specified) (CTSc) and used without any further modification. Glucosamine.HCl (GlcN.HCl) (purity 99%) was obtained from Sigma Aldrich™. All other chemicals were of analytical grade.

Strain
A Mucorales strain was isolated from commercial strawberries and maintained in diluted Czapex Dox medium (CD) [15], at 25 °C in the Bioprocess Laboratory, UFSC/SC, Brazil. For long-term preservation, spores were cryopreserved in glycerol 80% in a -80 °C freezer [25]. The strain was deposited in the culture collection CBMAI/Unicamp (Coleção Brasileira de Microorganismos do Ambiente e Indústria), under the code CBMAI 1551 (1551).

Culture media
For morphological identification the following mediawere used: CYA (Czapex yeast extract agar), MEA (Malt extract agar) and G25N (25% glycerol nitrate agar). These media were resterilized for 15 min in an autoclave and distributed in Petri dishes (Ø 90 mm for all media, but Ø 50 mm for CYA at 5 °C) [25].

For submersion culture of the strain, we used YPG broth [34] with minor modifications, as follows (in g L⁻¹): glucose 20.0, peptone 10.0, yeast extract 1.0, (NH₄)₂SO₄ 4.8, MgSO₄.7H₂O 0.5, CaCl₂ 0.2 and 0.25 mL L⁻¹ of PPG (polypropylene glycol) anti-foam, pH 4.5, adjusted with buffer citric acid/sodium citrate 0.45 mol L⁻¹. All material and ingredients were sterilized by autoclaving (15 min at 121 °C). Inoculum was made by spores (10⁶ spores/mL), obtained in YPG agar from Roux bottles [20].

Cultures were made in 1 L flasks adapted with an aeration system, as described: aeration was made with a 0.33 vvm air flow, measured in a flowmeter (Vögtlin Instruments GmbH, Aesch, Switzerland), in a range of 1.6 – 16.0 Nl.h⁻¹. The air was flown through a chamber with a glass wool and water for retention of solids and humidification of air, and through a 0.22 μm PTFE membrane filter (Milipore™) to avoid contamination. Flasks were maintained at 25 °C for 4 days in a BOD.

Strain identification
The isolate was morphologically identified by a plate regimen [25] and microscopic mounts. The strain was growth in three different media at three different temperatures (5, 25 and 37 °C for CYA plates, and 25 °C for MEA and G25N) in Petri dishes, and colonies evaluated after 7 days.

Chitosan extraction
Extraction, deacetylation and precipitation of chitosans were conducted as described by Trutnau et al. [34] with small modifications, as follows: the acid solution after demineralization was reserved for precipitation of native chitosan (not deacetylated), which was compared with the semi-synthetic chitosan (obtained by deacetylation). Obtained chitosans were identified as: CTS1551ss (semi-synthetic) and CTS1551n (native).

Total amino sugars estimation
The method of MBTH (3-methyl-2-benzothiazolone-hydrazono-hydrochloride) was conducted according to Zamani et al. [39], except that only the total amino sugar presented was quantified. A linear correlation (R²=0.9987) of absorbance (at 650 nm) with glucosamine.HCl monomers (0 to 100 mg L⁻¹) was conducted in the same conditions of the samples, and used as standard. The absorbance was read in a spectrophotometer (BEL Photonics, model 1105). Results reflect the media and standard deviation of triplicates.

Conductometric titration
All samples were subjected to conductometric titrations to estimate the deacetylation degree. Briefly, samples (200 mg) were dissolved in 40 mL HCl 54 mM and stirred at 500 rpm for 18 h at 25 °C, then 0.5 mL NaOH 165 mM were added every 20 s as described by Alvarenga et al.[1]. The assays were performed using a thermal magnetic stirrer (Fisatom, model 752) and a thermal conductometer (Tecnal, model TEC-4MP). Results reflect the media and standard deviation of triplicates.

Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR)
Analysis were run in a Perkin-Elmer PC-16 spectrophotometer with a resolution of 2 cm⁻¹ in the range of 400–4000 cm⁻¹ [40], using KBr pellets. An average of 32 scans were recorded for each sample; The analyses were performed only for samples CTSs, CTS1551ss, and CTS1551n.

Dense film preparation
To estimate the applicability of chitosans obtained for biotechnology purposes, they were evaluated for film-forming capacity by production of dense films as presented by Beppu et al. [5]. The films obtained were named as follows: F1551ss (semi-synthetic chitosan from strain 1551), F1551n (native chitosan from strain 1551), Fs (chitosan from Sigma Aldrich™) and Fc (chitosan from a commercial producer).
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Morphological identification of strain 1551

Microscopic observations of the mycelium and colonies were made for morphological identification. The hyaline mycelium has a wooly appearance, presents large non-septated hyphae, and rapidly produces sporangiophores. The plate regimen showed no zygospore formation; plates at 5 and 37 °C had no apparent growth; growth was observed in all plates at 25 °C with increasing intensity in the following order: CYA>MEA>G25N; sporangium abundance followed the same order; it was observed abundant formation of stolons between hyphae; columellae derived from sporangia collapsed in umbrella shapes; and spores had striated walls when seen by an optical microscopy (100x), as can be seen in Figure 1. These characteristics as per Pitt and Hoching[25] identify this isolate as belonging to the genus *Rhizopus*, species *stolonifer*.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1** Rhizopus stolonifer, strain CBMAI 1551. a) Sporangiophores showing non-ramified sporangia and rhizoids (Transillumination, 64x, Zeiss Stereomicroscope Stermi 2000-C); b) An umbrella shaped sporangium after release of sporangiospores (Lactophenol cotton blue mount, 400x, Zeiss Primo Star Microscope with AxioCam ERc5s Color Microscope Camera); c) Striated sporangiospores (Oil immersion, 1000x, Zeiss Primo Star Microscope with AxioCam ERc5s Color Microscope Camera).

Chitosans obtained

Native chitosan (CTS1551n) was precipitated from the acid solution in the second step of extraction, while chitosans obtained by deacetylation (CTS1551ss) were precipitated after deacetylation in the fourth step. Results of concentration and yield are presented in Table 1. Chitosans were quantified as dry weight (DW) and compared with the literature.

| Source       | Type of Chitosans | C<sub>CTS</sub>_CTS (g L<sup>-1</sup>) | Y<sub>CTS</sub>_CTS (%)<sup>b</sup> | References               |
|--------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| *R. stolonifer* | SS                | 0.282                                  | 7.76                              | This work               |
| *R. stolonifer* | N                 | 0.254                                  | 6.24                              | This work               |
| *R. stolonifer* | N                 | 0.102                                  | 2.25                              | [32]                     |
| *R. stolonifer* | N                 | 0.070                                  | 1.90                              | [17]                     |

<sup>a</sup> Type of obtainment of chitosans: SS = semi-synthetic chitosan (via deacetylation of chitin); N = native chitosan (natural, not deacetylated).

<sup>b</sup> Grams of chitosan per 100 grams of biomass.

Strain 1551 produced 0.254 g L<sup>-1</sup> of native chitosan and 0.282 g L<sup>-1</sup> of semi-synthetic chitosan in a total of 0.536 g L<sup>-1</sup>, which represents a 14.0% yield on DW basis. Although yield of native chitosan for strain 1551 was from 2.8-3.3 times greater than other studies [17] and [32], it must be noted that different methods of extraction, medium composition, incubation conditions, and different strains were employed for each study. When compared with another Mucorales member (*Mucor rouxii*), for example, even with the same conditions of incubation and methodology of extraction, yields are far beyond (between 0.8-0.9 % of total chitosan yield - semi-synthetic plus native) [34]. It’s important to note that yield is not only directly related to these variables, but also by the species and strain. Usually, for practical purposes, thermo chemical methods (high temperature, high concentration of alkalis) are employed, although this harsh process can diminish yield, especially by degradation of fibers [4]. Therefore, strain 1551 was not been subjected to any optimization in chitosan production yet.

Deacetylation degree (DD)

Results from conductometric titrations are summarized in Table 2.
Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR)

FTIR spectra of chitosans obtained from strain 1551 are compared with a standard CTSs as in Fig.2.
Figure 2 FTIR spectra for chitosans. Standard CTSs (—), CTS1551n (—), CTS1551ss (—).

The spectra for all samples show the typical absorption bands of chitosan: a broad band in the range of 3000 cm⁻¹ to 3700 cm⁻¹, related to O-H stretching, two bands in the range of 2800 cm⁻¹ to 3000 cm⁻¹, related to C-H stretching, one at 1663 cm⁻¹, related to C=O stretching of the amide group (acetylated units), one at 1573 cm⁻¹, related to N-H bending, one at 1420 cm⁻¹, related to C-H bending, and a series of other absorption bands below 1500 cm⁻¹ related to other functional groups [16], [21], [24]. It can be observed in Fig. 2 that, for CTS1551ss, the absorbance of the amine group (1573 cm⁻¹) is much greater than that of acetylated groups (1663 cm⁻¹), indicating a higher deacetylation degree. For the standard CTS, the absorbance of the amide group is more intense, whereas for CTS1551n both absorbances are of similar intensities. This result indicates that CTS1551ss has the highest deacetylation degree among the analysed samples.

Dense films

To evaluate the film-forming potential of chitosans, simple dense films were produced (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Aspect of dense films from different sources. Fs, film done with chitosan from crabs (Sigma Aldrich) (a); Fc, film of the commercial chitosan from crustaceans (non-identified producer) (b); F1551ss, film of the semi-synthetic chitosan from strain 1551 (c); F1551n, film of the native chitosan from strain 1551 (d).
This preliminary study shows remarkably differences among the sources used, as shown in Figure 3. As expected, Ms had a rapid coagulation, and after the necessary washings, a hyaline, translucent, flexible, and manageable film was formed. The Mc from the other commercial source also showed good film-forming capability, but the film had a yellow coloration, which probably reveals a not fully purified material. Some attempts were made to decolorize the chitosans obtained from strain 1551 [34] with alcohol and acetone, and with cold sodium hypochlorite [23], but they were all unsuccessful. This may have affected quality and yellowish appearance of the films. Although these are preliminary results, as far as we know few studies have focus on film-forming capability of fungal chitosans [29].

Table 5 Qualitative evaluation of chitosan films.

| Films | Description |
|-------|-------------|
| Fs    | Hyaline, translucent, flexible, manageable |
| Fc    | Light yellow, translucent, flexible, manageable |
| F1551s | Dark yellow, translucent, flexible, manageable and wrinkled |
| F1551n | Dark yellow, translucent, flexible, fragile and wrinkled |

Abbreviations as in Figure 3.

Results, taken as a whole, evidence some differences between the chitosans obtained. The chosen of an alternative technique for chitosan production has to reckon these differences to decide which one could be more interesting, not only considering the more green friendly processes, when compared with the traditional crustacean sources, but also take into account results of yield, quality of the products obtained, time of production, process control, and, of course, the real possibility of obtaining a standardized product.

CONCLUSIONS

The plate regimen method has proved to be easy, cheap, fast and robust for the identification of a fungal isolate when molecular tools are not available. Although results of the deacetylation degree from conductometric titration and FTIR are contradictory, the FTIR spectra of CTS1551n is quite similar to that of standardized CTSs, which is around 84% deacetylated. A more specific method like NMR will be employed in a full characterization for next studies. Even not fully purified, the total amino sugars content for CTS1551n washigher than the crustacean chitosan CTSc. The films formed from fungal chitosans were wrinkled, but this may be due to their raw state. Strain 1551 is fast growing, has high yields of easily extracted chitosans, and should now be subjected to cultivation in a bioreactor, to obtain data on biomass production(yield) and chitosan DD levels. The search for an efficient and specific technic for the bleaching of fungal chitosans should be a priority.

Acknowledgments

This work was part of a master's degree thesis for the first author and was supported by CNPq. Authors have declared no conflict of interest.

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DOI: 10.24297/jbt.v6i3.6360