Facile shape-controlled synthesis of lanthanum oxide with different hierarchical micro/nanostructures for antibacterial activity based on phosphate removal

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In this study, three La2O3 hierarchical micro/nanostructures, nanospindles, nanopolyhedra and nanospheres, were synthesized to remove phosphate from microbial growth media for bacterial inactivation as an antimicrobial strategy. The experiment results showed that the morphology of La2O3 hierarchical micro/nanostructures can be controlled by the concentration of the reactants, reaction temperature and cooling treatment. Meanwhile, the properties of the La2O3 were researched for phosphate removal and antibacterial activity. The results showed that the different morphologies of the La2O3 micro/nanostructures had different removal abilities for phosphate, and can differently inhibit growth of bacteria. Spherical La2O3 possesses the best removal ability and antibacterial activity, which indicates that the smaller the La2O3 hierarchical micro/nanoparticles are, the stronger the phosphate removal capacity. Compared with nanoparticles, the hierarchical micro/nanoparticles have a significant advantage: they not only have the properties of nanoparticles, but also are relatively stable, not easy to aggregate, and are easy to separate after the reaction. Therefore, the La2O3 hierarchical micro/nanomaterials may have very good application prospects for phosphate reduction in open water and to inhibit algae overgrowth.

1 Introduction

Recently, lanthanum compounds have attracted considerable attention in hydrogen storage, electrode and sorbent materials, gate insulators and superconductors due to their versatility and multifunctionality.1–4 Meanwhile, it is known that lanthanum compounds, such as lanthanum carbonate (La2CO3), lanthanum hydroxide (La(OH)3), lanthanum oxide carbonate (La2O4CO3)5–7 and mixtures of lanthanum compounds (La2O3, La2O2CO3 and La2(OH)3),8 can bind to phosphate so strongly that they can form LaPO4 and remove excess phosphate in bacterial or algal growth media,9 and lead to inhibit the growth of microorganisms and algae. As a typical representative, lanthanum carbonate has been developed as a medicine to prevent eutrophication.10–12 Based on the existing reports on bacterial and algal limitation utilizing lanthanum species10–12 we here synthesize three La2O3 hierarchical micro/nanostructures and investigate their phosphate removal ability and antibacterial activity.

It is widely accepted that phosphate is essential for growth of all organisms and serves as the main building block for nucleic acids, proteins, and energy carriers.13 Phosphate is the only form of phosphorus that can be directly assimilated by microorganisms. Firstly, the initial assimilation of inorganic phosphate for microorganisms proceeds via phosphorylation of ADP, which is affected by phosphate limitation in the environment.5 In addition, abundant phosphate is an essential condition to synthesize the cell wall of Gram-positive bacteria and the lipid composition of the membranes of Gram-negative bacteria. It could be affected strikingly within phosphate limitation environment.6 Consequently, the lack of phosphate often limits their growth, and efficient phosphate removal in water is expected to be a green strategy to prevent the growth of microorganisms and algae, which would avoid toxic substances released from antibacterial agents.14–16 On the other hand, reuse of secondary municipal effluent from wastewater treatment plants in water bodies could effectively alleviate freshwater resource shortage.9 During the wastewater treatment, excessive nutrients, e.g. phosphate, must be efficiently removed to prevent eutrophication.17

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Considering the strong combination of lanthanum to phosphate and the valid antimicrobial strategy resulted from nutrient starvation of phosphate removal, it is meaningful to explore a facile, high quality and low cost method to synthesize La$_2$O$_3$ with micro/nanostructure. In the current study, shape-controlled La$_2$O$_3$ hierarchical micro/nanostructures were prepared through the regulation of the concentration of the reactants and the reaction temperature. Three morphologies of La$_2$O$_3$ micro/nanostructures were obtained, and were utilized to compare antimicrobial activity. The results indicated that lanthanum oxide can provide a broadly applicable antimicrobial strategy.

2 Experimental section

Material preparation

Series of morphologies micro-nanostructures of La$_2$O$_3$ were synthesized by a simple urea homogeneous precipitation process. All the chemicals, lanthanum nitrate hexahydrate La(NO$_3$)$_3$·6H$_2$O, and urea were of analytical pure grade. The morphologies of La$_2$O$_3$ were controlled by the adjustment of the concentration of the reactants and the reaction temperature. The synthesis process consists of two steps: synthesis of La(OH)CO$_3$ precursor and La$_2$O$_3$ product. Firstly, spindle La(OH)CO$_3$ was synthesized at 90 °C with the concentration ratio of 1:2 between La(NO$_3$)$_3$ and CO(NH$_2$)$_2$. While polyhedral La(OH)CO$_3$ was prepared at 125 °C with the concentration ratio of 1:6 between La(NO$_3$)$_3$ and CO(NH$_2$)$_2$. In the same manner, when the concentration ratio between La(NO$_3$)$_3$ and CO(NH$_2$)$_2$ is 1:400, spherical La(OH)CO$_3$ was successfully synthesized at 85 °C. Subsequently, the La(OH)CO$_3$ precursor was calcined from room temperature to 800 °C with a heating rate of 1 °C min$^{-1}$ and maintained at this temperature for 4 h. Then spherical micro/nanostructures La$_2$O$_3$ were obtained. Other La$_2$O$_3$ (spindles, polyhedrons) samples were prepared by a similar procedure with different La(OH)CO$_3$ precursors.

Characterization

XRD measurements were determined using a D8 ADVANCE X-ray diffractometer at a scanning rate of 15° min$^{-1}$ in the 2θ range from 10–80°, with graphite monochromatic Cu Ka radiation ($\lambda = 0.15405$ nm). Perking-Elmer 580B infrared spectrophotometer was used to measure Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FT-IR) spectra with the KBr pellet technique. Thermogravimetric and differential thermal analysis (TG-DTA) data were recorded with Thermal Analysis instrument (SDT 2960, TA Instruments, New Castle, DE) with the heating rate of 10 °C min$^{-1}$ in an air flow of 100 mL min$^{-1}$. SEM micrographs were obtained using a field emission scanning electron microscope (FE-SEM, S-4800, Hitachi). Microstructures and morphologies were investigated using scanning electronic microscopy (SEM, JEOL JSM-6390LV), transmission electron microscope (TEM, JEM-2100) and field emission scanning electron microscopy [FESEM, SUPRA40]. All the measurements were performed at room temperature (RT). Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) (Tristar Micromeritics, Norcross, GA, USA) method was used to determine the specific surface area at 77 K. The BET analysis was measured after out gassing for 90 minutes at 250 °C.

Phosphate absorption capacity of lanthanum oxide nanoparticles and antibacterial activity

To evaluate the binding affinity of the nanoparticles to phosphate, PO$_4^{3-}$ was tested by colorimetry assay. Firstly, standard curve was drawn. Secondly, residual PO$_4^{3-}$ was determined. Specifically, 10% ascorbic acid was freshly prepared as follow: 10 g ascorbic acid was dissolved in 100 mL ddH$_2$O. Then molybdate solution were prepared as follows: 13 g of (NH$_4$)$_6$Mo$_7$O$_24$·4H$_2$O was dissolved in 100 mL of double distilled water (ddH$_2$O). Meanwhile, 0.35 g K(SbO)$_3$·12H$_2$O was dissolved in 100 mL of ddH$_2$O. The prepared (NH$_4$)$_6$Mo$_7$O$_24$ and K(SbO)$_3$·12H$_2$O solutions were added to 300 mL of dilute sulfuric acid successively. Whereafter the mixed solution was stirred and stored in 4 °C. Then La$_2$O$_3$ micro/nanoparticles with different morphologies were added to 15, 25, and 50 µg mL$^{-1}$ phosphate solution, respectively. 1 mL of ascorbic acid (10%), 2 mL of molybdate solution and above La$_2$O$_3$ samples were mixed to determine residual PO$_4^{3-}$ according to absorbance at 710 nm by 752 Ultraviolet Spectrophotometer.18

*Escherichia coli* (strain C43) and *Staphylococcus aureus* (strain TM300) were grown in Difco™ LB broth (Chemie Brunschwig) for 4 h at 37 °C and gently agitation to a concentration of about 10$^8$ CFU mL$^{-1}$. This suspension was diluted to the required concentration with physiological saline (0.9 wt% NaCl in water) or where medium free (in particular phosphate free) was needed, repeatedly (5 times) centrifuged for 60 min at RCF = 1300 (Mistral 3000E, 2500 rpm). Subsequently, the supernatant was removed and the bacterial pellet was resuspended in minimal media. Minimal media was produced from 5 g glucose, 1 g NH$_4$Cl, 5.4 g NaCl, 0.1 g MgSO$_4$ and 0.02 g CaCl$_2$ hexahydrate filled up to 1 liter with ddH$_2$O and sterilized by autoclaving at 121 °C for 15 min. To quantify the CFU load in a sample, a dilution row (10$^{-1}$–10$^{-5}$) was plated in duplicate on dextrose agar plates (PDA, VWR BDH Prolabo). The plates were incubated at 37 °C for 24 h before readout.

3 Results and discussion

Phase structure, morphology and formation mechanism of La$_2$O$_3$

Polyhedral, spherical and spindles-like La$_2$O$_3$ micro/nanomaterials with hierarchical micro/nanostructures were synthesized by a simple precipitation method with urea and lanthanum nitrate. The synthesis process consists of two steps: synthesis of La(OH)CO$_3$ and La$_2$O$_3$ (Scheme 1).

The morphology and microstructure of the products were characterized by SEM and TEM (shown in Fig. 1). The SEM images reveal that three different morphologies of La$_2$O$_3$ samples are successfully obtained, including polyhedral, spherical and spindles-like micro-nanostructures. The sizes of the samples are about 1 μm, 10 μm and 12 μm for spherical...
La$_2$O$_3$, polyhedral La$_2$O$_3$ and spindles La$_2$O$_3$ respectively. From Fig. 1 A(b), B(e) and C(h), the HRTEM images reveal that the surfaces of samples are very rough. It can be further observed that the samples consist of many even smaller nanoparticles with the size of 8–15 nm (inset of Fig. 1A(b), 2B(e) and 2C(h)), showing that the three morphologies of La$_2$O$_3$ possess hierarchical micro-nanostructures. The average diameters of the smaller nanoparticles are 8.58 ± 0.08 nm for spherical La$_2$O$_3$ (Fig. 1 A(c)), 15.58 ± 0.08 nm for polyhedral La$_2$O$_3$ (Fig. 1B(f)) and 13.45 ± 0.08 nm for spindles-like La$_2$O$_3$ (Fig. 1C(i)), respectively. In addition, the HRTEM shows that the values of inter planar lattice spacing are 0.29 nm, 0.31 nm and 0.34 nm, respectively, corresponding to the (101), (100) and (110) plane of La$_2$O$_3$. The results further show that the prepared La$_2$O$_3$ nanoparticles belong to cubic crystalline phase, which are in agreement with the XRD results (inset of Fig. 1A(b), 2B(e) and 2C(h)).

In addition, the existence of detectable diffraction rings in the selected-area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern of three hierarchical nano-La$_2$O$_3$ (inset of Fig. 1A(b), 2B(e) and 2C(h)) further reveal the formation of polycrystalline products. These results further confirm the formation of the hierarchical nano-La$_2$O$_3$.

The growth mechanism of the nanostructures is investigated by FESEM and TEM in time-dependent experiments. The results

![Scheme 1 Schematic illustration for preparation of micro/nanostructures La$_2$O$_3$ with a simple precipitation method using urea and lanthanum nitrate.](image-url)
reveal that three different morphologies of La$_2$O$_3$ samples, including polyhedral, spherical and spindles-like, are initially derived from spherical morphology, which show similar growth mechanisms to each other. We take spindles-like La$_2$O$_3$ for example to explain the growth mechanism in details (shown in Fig. 2). Initially, the La(OH)CO$_3$ precursors of spherical morphology are formed within 0.5 hour reaction time (Fig. 2a), similarly to the formations of polyhedral and spherical La$_2$O$_3$ samples. Then, more La(OH)CO$_3$ precursor products of spherical morphology assemble to form spindles-like morphology via oriented attachment within 1–3 hours (Fig. 2b–e). Meanwhile, non hollow structures are observed by characterization of TEM (inset of Fig. 2c). Then, we find spindles-like La(OH)CO$_3$ precursors consist of small particles (inset of Fig. 2e). Finally, the La(OH)CO$_3$ precursors are calcined from room temperature to 800 °C for 4 h to form La$_2$O$_3$ samples with micro/nanostructures (Fig. 2f). The growth mechanisms of polyhedral and spherical products are also researched in time-dependent experiments. The similar growth mechanisms are observed.

XRD patterns of three samples are very similar, one of which is depicted in Fig. 3A as a representation. From Fig. 3A, a strong intensity peak is detected at a diffraction angle of 30°, which is assigned to (101) plane of La$_2$O$_3$. The other five peaks are assigned to (100), (002), (102), (110) and (103) lattice planes belonging to cubic crystalline phase of La$_2$O$_3$ (JCPDS no. 26-0815). The results indicate that the pure La$_2$O$_3$ crystals are successfully prepared by the simple method. Representative FTIR spectra of spherical La$_2$O$_3$ and La(OH)CO$_3$ precursor are shown in Fig. 3B. In the spectrum of La(OH)CO$_3$, the bands at 1486 and 1412 cm$^{-1}$ are attributed to the stretching vibration mode of the C–O bond, and the flexural vibration of CO$_3^{2–}$ appear at 859 cm$^{-1}$, 720 cm$^{-1}$, 695 cm$^{-1}$. In the spectrum of La$_2$O$_3$, the La–O stretching vibration is at about 653 cm$^{-1}$, showing La$_2$O$_3$ is prepared successfully. The thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) and differential temperature analysis (DTA) traces disclosed the formation process of La$_2$O$_3$ from pyrolysis of the La(OH)CO$_3$ precursor. The TGA curves of the as-prepared La(OH)CO$_3$ are shown in Fig. 3C. It can be noticed that there are three weight loss steps around 250 °C to 300 °C, 450 °C to 500 °C and 700 to 790 °C. For La(OH)CO$_3$, the weight loss between 250 °C to 300 °C could be attributed to the removal of water, accompanying the formation of La$_2$O(CO$_3$)$_2$ (see reaction (1)). Then La$_2$O(CO$_3$)$_2$ decomposes to form La$_2$O$_3$ and release CO$_2$, approximately to lose weight 28% (see reaction (2) and (3))

\[
2\text{LaOHCO}_3 \rightarrow \text{La}_2\text{O(CO}_3)_2 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad (1)
\]

\[
\text{La}_2\text{O(CO}_3)_2 \rightarrow \text{La}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3 + \text{CO}_2 \quad (2)
\]
La$_2$O$_2$CO$_3$ → La$_2$O$_3$ + CO$_2$  \hspace{1cm} (3)

Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) gas adsorption measurements were used to characterize pore volume, pore diameter and specific surface area (see Fig. 3E). The N$_2$ adsorption/desorption isotherms of the synthesized La$_2$O$_3$ exhibit typical type-IV hysteresis, indicating the presence of pores (Fig. 3E). The samples are mainly mesoporous (inset of Fig. 3E). The BET surface area is measured to be 18.76 m$^2$ g$^{-1}$ for spherical La$_2$O$_3$, 12.43 m$^2$ g$^{-1}$ for polyhedral La$_2$O$_3$ and 8.14 m$^2$ g$^{-1}$ for poly-hedral La$_2$O$_3$, respectively.

To determine absorption capacity of La$_2$O$_3$ micro-nanostructures for phosphate, ascorbic acid and molybdate...
solution were employed to measure phosphate group. The initial concentrations of phosphate were 15 \( \mu \)g mL\(^{-1}\), 25 \( \mu \)g mL\(^{-1}\) and 50 \( \mu \)g mL\(^{-1}\), respectively. As shown in Fig. 4, the residual phosphate reduce when La\(_2\)O\(_3\) was added. It is worth highlighting that phosphate is absolutely removed by spherical La\(_2\)O\(_3\) for only 12 h (Fig. 4a black wire) when initial phosphate concentration is 15 \( \mu \)g mL\(^{-1}\), while 24 h for spindles-like micro-nano La\(_2\)O\(_3\) (Fig. 4b black wire), 35 h for polyhedral La\(_2\)O\(_3\) (Fig. 4c black wire). Moreover, when initial phosphate concentration is 25 \( \mu \)g mL\(^{-1}\) (red wire), phosphate removal have been accomplished completely by spherical La\(_2\)O\(_3\) after 24 h, but accomplished 68% by spindle-like La\(_2\)O\(_3\) and 78% by polyhedral La\(_2\)O\(_3\) in the meantime. Likewise, superior removal capacity of spherical La\(_2\)O\(_3\) is observed, when initial phosphate concentration is 50 \( \mu \)g mL\(^{-1}\). The results show that spherical La\(_2\)O\(_3\) has best phosphate removal capacity from water, which attributes to that the spherical La\(_2\)O\(_3\) has the smallest particle sizes and the largest BET surface area.

To investigate the effect of phosphate addition and phosphate starvation on microorganism growth, the growth curve of Escherichia coli (a Gram-negative bacteria) and Staphylococcus aureus (a Gram-positive bacteria) were analyzed. Meanwhile, residual phosphate was calculated after microorganism grows for 8 h. As shown in Fig. 5a, the phosphate addition is beneficial to microorganisms growth (both Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria) (Fig. 5a and b). It is about 32 times and 26
times larger than the growth rate of *E. coli* in 2 h when adding phosphate (15 μg mL⁻¹, red line and 50 μg mL⁻¹, blue line), showing that phosphate addition to minimal medium could be beneficial to growth of *Escherichia coli* (Fig. 5a) and *Staphylococcus aureus* (Fig. 5b) when growth less than 5 h. However, the benefit of phosphate is suppressed following the addition of La₂O₃. The growth rates of *Escherichia coli* (Gram-negative bacteria) and *Staphylococcus aureus* (Gram-positive bacteria) were drawn in Fig. 5a–d. From Fig. 5a, it is only 5 and 2.5 times larger than the growth rate of *E. coli* in 2 h when adding La₂O₃ to medium in 4 h although the existence of phosphate (15 μg mL⁻¹ and 50 μg mL⁻¹). The results show that the growth rates of *E. coli* and *S. aureus* are obviously limited within 5 h when La₂O₃ is added, attributed to effective binding of La₂O₃ to phosphate, namely that phosphate starvation results in limited microbial growth. Given this, phosphate removal ability capacity of three morphology micro-nano La₂O₃ could be a key point to compare antimicrobial properties of La₂O₃. Due to superior removal capacity of spherical La₂O₃, spherical La₂O₃ exhibited better antibacterial property than other two morphologies La₂O₃. It means that phosphate absorption capacity of La₂O₃ is consistent with the antibacterial property of La₂O₃.

4 Conclusion

We successfully obtained shape-controlled (spindle, polyhedron, and sphere) micrometer-scaled La₂O₃, hierarchically assembled by nanoparticles, through a facile, high quality and low prices method. Meanwhile, they have strong removal ability for phosphate and excellent antibacterial property, especially for sphere micro-nano structure La₂O₃. These hierarchical La₂O₃ micro-nanomaterials may have very good application prospects in water pollution of eutrophication, or reduce excess phosphorus in human body in biomedical areas.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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