CHEMICAL CHRONICLES OF IMMUNOASSAYS

BY MARIAM HUSAIN 12B

Abstract

This project delves into the world of immunoassays from a chemical standpoint, focusing on Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assays (ELISA). The project includes an experiment to demonstrate the biological and chemical principles behind immunoassays, with detailed observations and inferences. The underlying principles of immunoassays, such as antigen-antibody interactions and enzyme catalysis, are explored through chemical explanations and diagrams. The research project concludes with a summary of findings and potential applications.

Introduction

Immunoassays are biochemical tests that utilize the highly specific binding properties of the antigen-antibody interaction to detect and quantify substances such as proteins, hormones, or antibodies in a complex mixture like blood, saliva, or urine. Since the development of the radioimmunoassay (RIA) by Solomon Berson and Rosalyn Yalow in the 1950s (Yalow, 1978), immunoassays have evolved into various types and formats, serving crucial roles in diagnostics and research.

Key Components and principle

Antigens: These are molecules recognized by the immune system, often proteins or polysaccharides. Antigens can bind specifically to antibodies, which are proteins produced by the immune system.

Antibodies: These are immunoglobulins that recognize specific regions (epitopes) on antigens. Their Y-shaped structure includes two identical sites that can bind to the corresponding epitopes on the antigen.

The basis of an immunoassay is the formation of an antigen-antibody complex. The assay typically involves labelling either the antigen or the antibody with a detectable marker, such as a radioactive isotope, enzyme, or fluorescent dye. Antibodies bind to the specific structure of a particular antigen, making immunoassays highly specific: the antibody will only bind to a specific structure of a particular antigen. This makes antibodies effective reagents for detecting target molecules. The interaction between the antigen and antibody is then measured using various techniques, depending on the type of immunoassay. Immunoassays are a fundamental tool for hospitals, life science research and industry laboratories.

Role and Application of Immunoassays in Various Fields

1. Diagnostics

Immunoassays are instrumental in clinical diagnostics, especially in the detection of infectious diseases, hormones, and cancer markers. For example, the ELISA method is widely used to screen for HIV (Engvall and Perlmann, 1971). In the COVID-19 pandemic, immunoassays were essential for detecting antibodies to SARS-CoV-2 (Amanat et al., 2020).

2. Research

In research settings, immunoassays help in the study of proteins and other biomolecules. Their applications range from studying protein-protein interactions to identifying biomarkers for various diseases (Wild, 2013).

3. Pharmaceuticals

Immunoassays are used in drug discovery and quality control of biopharmaceuticals. For example, they are employed to detect potential drug candidates and to ensure the absence of contaminants such as host-cell proteins (Wang et al., 2009).

4. Early Detection of Diseases

Immunoassays enable the early detection of diseases by identifying specific antigens or antibodies. For example, the PSA test based on immunoassay techniques is used for early detection of prostate cancer (Lilja et al., 2008).

5. Therapeutic Monitoring

They are also vital in therapeutic monitoring, where the levels of drugs, hormones, or other substances in the patient's blood are monitored to guide treatment. Immunoassays for therapeutic drug monitoring are critical for managing diseases such as epilepsy and organ transplantations (Dasgupta and Wahed, 2014).

Types of Immunoassays

Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA)

Enzyme immunoassays (EIAs) use the catalytic properties of enzymes to detect and quantify immunologic reactions. ELISAs are performed in polystyrene plates, typically 96-well plates coated to bind protein strongly

There are four main general steps to completing an ELISA immunoassay. These steps are:

1. Coating (with either antigen or antibody)
2. Blocking (typically with the addition of bovine serum albumin [BSA])
3. Detection
4. Final read

During coating, an antigen or antibody is fixed onto the surface of 96-well polystyrene plates. Blocking is carried out with bovine serum albumin (BSA) to minimize nonspecific binding.

Detection is carried out by adding a substrate that can generate a color. There are many substrates available for use in ELISA detection. However, the substrates most commonly used are horseradish peroxidase (HRP) and alkaline phosphatase (AP).

If horseradish peroxide (HRP) is utilised, the relevant equations are:

$HRP + H_2O_2$ -> HRP* +$2H_2O$

HRP* + Chromogen -> HRP + Oxidised Chromogen

The ‘Oxidised Chromogen’ is the product of the reaction between the activated enzyme HRP* and the chromogenic substrate. This oxidised form of the chromogen exhibits a distinct colour, usually blue, allowing for easy identification and quantification.

If alkaline phosphatase (AP) is utilised:

AP + pNPP -> AP* + PO_4^{3-} + p-Nitrophenol

AP reacts with p-Nitrophenyl-phosphate (pNPP) to form p-Nitrophenol, producing a yellow colour.

A standard curve is plotted based on a series of known concentrations, allowing for precise antigen quantification in the sample.

Major types of ELISA

1. Direct ELISA: Uses antigen-coated plates to directly detect the presence of specific antibodies in a sample.

2. Indirect ELISA: Also uses antigen-coated plates but is designed to detect either antigens or antibodies, requiring a secondary, enzyme-linked antibody for detection.
3. Sandwich ELISA: Features an antibody-coated plate and is specialized for detecting specific antigens using a second, enzyme-linked antibody to form a "sandwich."
4. Competitive ELISA: Designed to quantify antibodies by competing with a known, labeled antigen for binding sites, offering an inverse relationship between signal and target concentration.

Radioimmunoassay (RIA)

Radioimmunoassays (RIAs) use antibodies to detect and quantitate the amount of antigen (analyte) in a sample. These assays are typically very sensitive and specific. It is possible to detect picomolar concentrations of analyte in the experimental tube when using antibodies of high affinity. Radioimmunoassays (RIAs) employ radioactive isotopes as the labeling agent for antibodies or antigens. The basic principle of radioimmunoassay is competitive binding, where a radioactive antigen ("tracer") competes with a non-radioactive antigen for a fixed number of antibody or receptor binding sites. When unlabeled antigen from standards or samples and a fixed amount of tracer (labeled antigen) are allowed to react with a constant and limiting amount of antibody, decreasing amounts of tracer are bound to the antibody as the amount of unlabeled antigen is increased.The radioactive emissions serve as the quantifiable signal, revealing the amount of bound target molecule. However, the use of radioisotopes presents storage, disposal, and safety concerns. As such, RIAs are generally confined to specialized labs and are decreasing in popularity due to the emergence of non-radioactive alternatives.

General steps to completing an RIA:

1. Tracer Preparation: A known antigen or antibody is radioactively labeled, typically with isotopes like iodine-125 or carbon-14, to act as a "tracer."

2. Incubation: Sample and tracer are mixed and incubated, allowing specific binding between the antibody and antigen.

3. Separation: Bound from free antigens or antibodies are separated. This is often achieved using a secondary antibody bound to a solid phase, like a bead, or through precipitation methods.

4. Detection: Radioactivity of the bound fraction is measured using a gamma counter or scintillation counter.

The relevant equations for an RIA could involve radioactive decay kinetics, such as:

$A_{radioactive}$ -> A_{stable} + radiation

$A_{radioactive}$ in the labeled antigen or antibody and A_{stable} is the decay product, while ‘radiation’ represents the emitted radioactive particles that are counted.

The emitted radiation is directly proportional to the amount of bound antigen or antibody, allowing for quantification. RIAs are highly sensitive but come with the challenges of radioactive waste management and stricter safety protocols. A standard curve, similar to that in ELISA, is constructed based on known concentrations for accurate sample analysis.

Fluoroimmnoassay (FIA)

Fluoroimmunoassays (FIAs) use the luminous properties of fluorophores as labels to detect and quantify antigens or antibodies. Like ELISAs, these assays are carried out in multi-well plates, often 96-well formats, suitable for high-throughput screening. The four fundamental steps of an FIA are akin to ELISAs:

Coating: Antigens or antibodies are immobilized on the surface of the wells.

Blocking: Non-specific sites are blocked, often using proteins like BSA, to minimize false signals.

Detection: Fluorophore-labeled antibodies or antigens are added, binding to their respective targets.

Final read: The fluorescence is measured, often using a fluorescence plate reader.

The two main categories of FIAs are homogeneous and heterogeneous assays. In homogeneous FIAs, no washing step is required because the fluorescence properties of the fluorophore are altered upon binding, simplifying and speeding up the procedure. In contrast, heterogeneous FIAs require washing steps to remove unbound fluorophores, as their fluorescence remains constant whether or not they are bound.

Commonly used fluorophores include fluorescein and rhodamine, and the choice often depends on the required sensitivity and the equipment available for detection. FIAs offer advantages such as high sensitivity, broad dynamic range, and the capacity for multiplexing, making them suitable for applications in clinical diagnostics, food safety, and environmental monitoring.

Chemiluminescence immunoassay (CLIA)

Chemiluminescence Immunoassays (CLIAs) involve the use of chemiluminescent labels, which emit light as a result of a chemical reaction. CLIAs are notable for their exceedingly high sensitivity and low background signal, facilitating the detection of trace amounts of substances. The assays are often automated and are particularly useful in high-throughput screening. Unlike fluorescence, chemiluminescence does not require an external light source for excitation, reducing background interference and thereby increasing assay specificity.

Magnetically localized and wash-free fluorescence immuno-assay (MLFIA)

The Magnetically Localized and Wash-Free Fluorescence Immunoassay (MLFIA) represents a novel immunoassay technology that employs functionalized magnetic nanoparticles (MNPs), micro-magnets, and localized fluorescence detection. By eliminating washing steps, this technology achieves enhanced analytical sensitivity with a Limit of Detection (LOD) of 15 ng mL^{-1} in PBS. (Phosphate-Buffered Saline, a water-based salt solution containing sodium chloride and sodium phosphate, is used as a buffer in biological research and medical applications, serving as a diluent or solvent for drugs, specimens, and reagents. PBS helps to maintain a constant pH and osmotic balance, providing a stable environment for cells and biological molecules. In immunoassays like MLFIA, PBS can be used as a sample matrix for testing). It also shows rapid 15-minute detection times and minimized sample and reagent volumes. Comparative analysis with standard healthcare lab analyzers revealed concordances of 87.2% for HCV, 94.3% for HBsAg, and 82.5% for HIV across various sample matrices such as serum and plasma.

MLFIA utilizes highly diffusive superparamagnetic nanoparticles for surface reactions and striped micro-magnets as effective traps. This design optimizes the differential measurement of specific and background signals. Unlike existing commercial assays, MLFIA offers a compact, cost-effective, and expedient solution, ideally suited for smaller labs and point-of-care (POC) settings.

Although the technology demonstrates robust diagnostic sensitivity and specificity, it does face reproducibility challenges stemming from factors like cartridge misalignment and optical focusing. Strategies for addressing these limitations include automated fabrication processes, tighter optical module alignment, and integrated mixing steps. Overall, MLFIA not only meets but exceeds the World Health Organization's ASSURED criteria for POC testing, showcasing its versatility and broad applicability in areas ranging from emergency diagnostics to biodefense applications.

Chemical Principles of Immunoassays

Antigen-Antibody Interactions

The antigen-antibody interaction, also known as immunological recognition, is a fundamental biological process where antibodies produced by the immune system recognize and bind to specific antigens (Murphy et al., 2012). Understanding this interaction is vital for various applications in medicine, diagnostics, and therapeutic interventions.

Binding Sites and Specificity

Binding Sites: The antigen-antibody interaction occurs at the specific binding sites on both the antigen (epitope) and the antibody (paratope). These sites are complementary in shape and chemistry, allowing for a precise fit (Figure 1) (Schroeder & Cavacini, 2010).

Specificity: The specificity of the interaction arises from the unique structural complementarity between the epitope and paratope. This ensures that antibodies selectively bind to their corresponding antigens (Kuby, 2012).

Affinity: This refers to the strength of a single antigen-antibody interaction. Higher affinity means stronger binding, often related to a better fit between the epitope and paratope (Myszka, 1999).

Avidity: In multivalent interactions, where there are multiple binding sites, the overall strength of binding is referred to as avidity. It depends on both affinity and the valency of the interaction (Morton et al., 1996).

Formation of Antibody-Antigen Complexes

Introduction

The antigen-antibody interaction is a crucial biochemical event that plays a fundamental role in the immune response. The formation of antigen-antibody complexes involves non-covalent interactions between an antigen—a molecule capable of inducing an immune response—and an antibody, a protein produced by the immune system to neutralize pathogens. Understanding the intricacies of these interactions is critical for the fields of immunology, diagnostics, and therapeutics.

Details on How Antigen-Antibody Complexes Are Formed

Specificity and Binding Sites

Antibodies, or immunoglobulins, possess unique regions known as antigen-binding sites or paratopes, which recognize specific areas on the antigen called epitopes. The binding is highly specific, akin to a lock-and-key mechanism, ensuring that antibodies interact only with their corresponding antigens (Janeway et al., 2001).

Molecular Interactions

The interaction between the antigen and antibody is facilitated through various types of non-covalent bonds, including:

1. Hydrogen Bonds
2. Van der Waals Forces
3. Ionic Bonds
4. Hydrophobic Interactions

These bonds collectively contribute to the overall affinity between the antigen and antibody (Sharon and Lis, 2004).

Discussion of the Strength and Nature of These Bonds

Affinity and Avidity

- **Affinity**: Affinity refers to the strength of the interaction between a single antigenic determinant (epitope) and a single antigen-binding site (paratope) on the antibody. High-affinity interactions involve stronger and more numerous non-covalent bonds.
- **Avidity**: In multivalent interactions, where multiple epitopes and paratopes are involved, the overall strength is termed avidity. Avidity is generally higher than affinity because of the cumulative effect of multiple bonds (Takayama, 2013).

Thermodynamics of Binding

The formation of the antigen-antibody complex is a reversible reaction governed by the law of mass action. The equilibrium constant, known as the association constant (K_a), quantifies the strength of the antigen-antibody interaction. Higher K_a values indicate stronger binding (Murphy et al., 2012).

Factors Influencing Bond Strength

1. **pH and Ionic Strength**: The ionic conditions and pH can significantly affect the strength of the ionic bonds and hydrogen bonds.
2. **Temperature**: Higher temperatures may weaken non-covalent interactions, thus affecting the strength of the complex.

Types of Immunoassays: Competitive and Non-Competitive

Immunoassays are biochemical tests that measure the presence or concentration of a substance in a solution through the use of an antibody or an antigen. They are widely used in diagnostics, research, and therapeutics. Immunoassays can be primarily categorized into two types: Competitive and Non-Competitive. Both have unique mechanisms and applications, and a comparative understanding of these assays is essential for their appropriate use.

Definition and Explanation: Competitive Immunoassays

Mechanism

In a competitive immunoassay, both the unknown sample and a known antigen (or hapten) compete for a limited number of antibody binding sites. The intensity of the signal is inversely proportional to the concentration of the analyte in the sample.

Current Research

Recent advances in competitive immunoassays have led to the development of ultra-sensitive methods such as fluorescence polarization immunoassay (FPIA) and time-resolved fluorescence (TRF), enabling better sensitivity and specificity (Smith & Eremin, 2008).

Non-Competitive Immunoassays

Mechanism

Also known as sandwich assays, these involve the use of two antibodies. The first antibody captures the antigen from the sample, and the second antibody, typically labelled with an enzyme or fluorescent molecule, binds to a different epitope on the antigen to generate a signal.

Current Research

Multiplex immunoassays, a current research focus, allow the simultaneous detection of multiple analytes in a single sample, using advanced techniques like Luminex xMAP technology (Juncker et al., 2010).

Features	**Competitive Immunoassays**	**Non-Competitive Immunoassays**
Sensitivity	High sensitivity for small molecules	Generally, less sensitive for small molecules
Specificity	Can suffer from cross-reactivity	Higher specificity due to two antibodies
Complexity	Simpler, often requiring a single antibody	More complex, requiring two antibodies
Time	Generally faster	May require more time for multiple binding steps
Quantitative	Typically, semi-quantitative	More readily quantitative
Cost	Often cheaper due to fewer reagents	Typically, more expensive

Chemical Equations Describing Immunoassay Reactions

Competitive Immunoassays

The general chemical equation for a competitive immunoassay can be represented as follows:

Ag+Ab⇌Ag-AbAg+Ab⇌Ag-Ab

- AgAg is the antigen (analyte) in the sample.
- AbAb is the antibody.
- Ag-AbAg-Ab is the antigen-antibody complex.

Here, both labelled antigen (Ag*Ag*) and unlabelled antigen (AgAg) compete for antibody binding sites:

Ag*+Ab⇌Ag-Ab*Ag*+Ab⇌Ag-Ab*

Ag+Ab⇌Ag-AbAg+Ab⇌Ag-Ab

Non-Competitive Immunoassays

For non-competitive or sandwich immunoassays, the chemical equation can be represented as follows:

Ab1+Ag→Ab1-AgAb1+Ag→Ab1-Ag
Ab1-Ag+Ab2*→Ab1-Ag-Ab2*Ab1-Ag+Ab2*→Ab1-Ag-Ab2*

- Ab1Ab1 is the capture antibody.
- Ab2*Ab2* is the detection antibody, usually labelled.
- Ab1-Ag-Ab2*Ab1-Ag-Ab2* represents the sandwich complex.

Explanation of Underlying Chemical Principles

Thermodynamics

The formation and disintegration of antigen-antibody complexes are reversible processes governed by the law of mass action. The association (*Ka*) and dissociation (*Kd*) constants describe the affinity between the interacting partners. Higher *Ka* or lower *Kd* values signify stronger interactions.

Kinetics

The rates at which these reactions proceed, often described by first-order or pseudo-first-order kinetics, are crucial for immunoassay optimization. Recent studies suggest that surface plasmon resonance (SPR) can be used to assess these kinetic parameters in real-time (Karlsson, 2004).

Stoichiometry

In most immunoassays, the stoichiometry is often 1:1 between antigen and antibody, especially in competitive assays. However, in sandwich assays, the stoichiometry may involve multiple binding sites and antibodies, making the situation more complex.

Influence of Environmental Conditions

The pH, temperature, and ionic strength can significantly affect the interactions. For instance, it is found that non-ideal conditions can cause conformational changes in antibodies, affecting their binding capabilities (Myszka & Rich, 2009).

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

Immunoassays serve as indispensable tools for bioanalytical detection, leveraging antibody-antigen interactions to offer high specificity and sensitivity. These assays have diversified applications spanning from medical diagnostics to environmental monitoring and food safety. Classified broadly into homogeneous and heterogeneous types, immunoassays vary in their procedural complexity and sensitivity. Homogeneous assays are efficient but may lack the extreme sensitivity of heterogeneous assays, which involve antibody immobilization on solid surfaces.

Methodological Evolution: Conventional to Microscale

Conventional immunoassays, while accurate, are often cumbersome, requiring multiple steps such as incubation and washing, resulting in high costs and time inefficiencies. The advent of microfluidic immunoassays has disrupted this status quo by miniaturizing the assay platforms. These microscale assays mitigate many of the conventional limitations by using reduced volumes of reagents and offering higher throughput, making them particularly beneficial for point-of-care applications.

Substrate Paradigms in Immunoassays

Material choice for substrate in immunoassays is critical for its performance. Traditional materials like silicon and glass are gradually being overtaken by polymers and paper, each offering unique advantages and disadvantages. Silicon, although precise and thermally stable, is often cost-prohibitive. Glass offers optical transparency but shares fabrication complexities with silicon. Polymers like polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS) have emerged as flexible, cost-effective options. Paper-based substrates, on the other hand, provide a cheap, biodegradable option and have shown potential for point-of-care applications.

By optimizing these components—type of immunoassay, scaling, and substrate materials—we are on the cusp of revolutionizing not just diagnostics but an array of fields that benefit from rapid, sensitive detection methods.

Fluid Transport Mechanisms

Fluid transport mechanisms in microfluidic systems for immunoassays can be categorized into active and passive methods. Active mechanisms rely on externally applied forces and are subdivided into mechanical and non-mechanical methods. Mechanical systems utilize miniaturized components like micropumps and microvalves for precise fluid handling, as demonstrated in insulin detection and human immunoglobulin G assays. Non-mechanical methods, often electrically driven, employ electro kinetics, including electrophoresis and electroosmosis, to manipulate fluid flow and biomolecular transport. These offer higher reliability and lower maintenance.

Passive mechanisms capitalize on capillary action and are particularly useful in point-of-care testing devices. They eliminate the need for external pumping accessories and are often constructed from paper or polymers. Innovations in passive systems have led to signal enhancements and improved limits of detection, as seen in assays for malaria antigens and C-reactive protein.

The choice between active and passive systems hinges on factors such as reliability, maintenance, and the specific requirements of the assay, including limits of detection and automation needs.

Detection Methodologies

Colorimetric

Colorimetric methods rely on colour change, easily quantified by spectrophotometers, colorimeters, or even by eye. Popular in point-of-care devices, this approach is simple and cost-effective but sometimes lacks signal intensity.

Fluorescence

Fluorescence-based techniques employ fluorochrome-labelled biomolecules excited by specific wavelengths, detected by photodetectors. Offering high sensitivity and multiplexing capabilities, these assays are well-suited for detecting multiple analytes.

Surface Plasmon Resonance (SPR)

SPR provides label-free, real-time monitoring of biomolecular interactions via shifts in light resonance. High sensitivity at picomolar levels can be achieved, often used in microfluidic platforms for real-time analytics.

Electrochemical

Electrochemical assays generate electrical signals—current, voltage, resistance, or capacitance changes—upon antigen-antibody interaction. Label-free direct and label-dependent indirect methods exist, suitable for portable, high-sensitivity detection.

Mechanical

Mechanical detection involves physical changes, such as deformation, upon biomolecule binding. Microcantilevers and acoustic wave sensors have been developed for this method, requiring high specificity due to the absence of labelling.

By focusing on key attributes such as sensitivity, specificity, and adaptability, these methods provide versatile platforms for immunoassays in clinical diagnostics and research.

Implications and Future Directions

The landscape of immunoassay applications has undergone a seismic transformation, no longer tethered to any singular scientific discipline. Its metamorphosis owes much to the cross-pollination of expertise across material science, microfabrication, nanotechnology, optics, electronics, and fluid dynamics. Such a synergistic fusion has endowed researchers—from biochemists to environmental scientists—with a veritable toolkit to refine key metrics like throughput, precision, and selectivity. Concurrently, these advancements also hold the promise of elevating various facets such as automation and economic viability.

As we peer into the future, an even more nuanced sophistication in immunoassay technology seems imminent. Innovations like lab-on-a-chip technologies and biosensors are likely to play pivotal roles, some of which have earned their inventors, such as Frances Arnold, Nobel Prizes in Chemistry for directed evolution of enzymes. These technologies stand at the confluence of myriad fields, further bolstering the accuracy, specificity, and multifunctional capabilities of immunoassays.

In light of frequent global pandemics and emergent diseases, this advancement assumes critical importance. It necessitates a collective recalibration of the healthcare industry towards equitable dissemination of technology. Tailoring these innovations to be techno-economically accessible forms the linchpin for broader societal impacts. There is an acute urgency to evolve immunoassays for point-of-care testing (POCT) that meet the ASSURED criteria delineated by the World Health Organization: affordability, sensitivity, specificity, user-friendliness, rapidity, robustness, equipment-free operation, and deliverability. Enabling such platforms can be transformative, particularly for regions marred by resource constraints, acting as a linchpin in timely healthcare interventions.

As we continue to journey through this exciting trajectory of chemical innovations, it's crucial to marshal interdisciplinary efforts to meet the variegated healthcare challenges head-on, thus setting the stage for an epoch of accessible and precise diagnostics.

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