

Glutaraldehyde Cross-Linking of Oligolysines Coating DNA Origami Greatly Reduces Susceptibility to Nuclease Degradation

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ABSTRACT: DNA nanostructures (DNs) have garnered a large amount of interest as a potential therapeutic modality. However, DNAs are prone to nuclease-mediated degradation and are unstable in low Mg^{2+} conditions; this greatly limits their utility in physiological settings. Previously, PEGylated oligolysines were found to protect DNAs against low-salt denaturation and to increase nuclease resistance by up to ~400-fold. Here we demonstrate that glutaraldehyde cross-linking of PEGylated oligolysine-coated DNAs extends survival by up to another ~250-fold to >48 h during incubation with 2600 times the physiological concentration of DNase I. DNA origami with cross-linked oligolysine coats are non-toxic and are internalized into cells more readily than non-cross-linked origami. Our strategy provides an off-the-shelf and generalizable method for protecting DNAs in vivo.

DNA nanostructures (DNs) are highly biocompatible and offer unique advantages that render them attractive candidates for therapeutics or diagnostic applications.^{1–4} DNAs can be programmed and folded into a great diversity of spatial conformations, and their surfaces can be functionalized by distinct guests, e.g., small molecules, proteins, nanoparticles, with nanoscale precision.^{5–9} Furthermore, conformational changes triggered by environmental inputs, such as change of pH or release of specific biomolecules can be engineered into certain DNAs making them responsive to different biological stimuli.¹⁰ As such, many DNAs with diagnostic and/or therapeutic potential have been reported in recent years.^{11–14}

The folding of DNAs requires bringing DNA helices and thus their negatively charged backbones into close proximity. This is thermodynamically unfavorable and requires high concentrations of divalent cations (most commonly, Mg^{2+}) to screen the electrostatic repulsion between anionic phosphate backbones. Typically, concentrations between 6 and 16 mM $MgCl_2$ are included in folding DNAs, where the optimal concentration is structure dependent.^{15,16} Most physiological conditions, where the total divalent cation concentration is <1 mM, represent a denaturing environment for DNAs. The application of DNAs in vivo is also challenged by a susceptibility to nuclease-mediated degradation.^{17–19} In freshly prepared cell culture medium, RPMI with 10% FBS, the half-life of DNAs is ~12 min.²⁰ Furthermore, the renal clearance rate of fluorescently labeled DNAs introduced by intravenous injection is similar to that of control oligonucleotides, suggesting their rapid degradation under in vivo settings. DNAs must first be stabilized against low Mg^{2+} -based denaturation and nuclease degradation before they can be used in biomedical applications.

In recent years, these hurdles have come to the forefront of therapeutically oriented DN research with multiple approaches to improve stability (a comprehensive overview is given by Billa et al.).²¹ However, most of these techniques do not offer the stability usually desired in therapeutic nanoparticles, e.g.,

structural integrity maintained >24 h. Furthermore, they often require specialized design considerations and cannot be applied to different structures without substantial optimization.^{22,23} For example, the Dietz group has shown that cross-linking of deliberately positioned thymidines using ultraviolet irradiation can improve DN stability in low-salt conditions.^{24,25} Cationic polymers and polyamines, in particular, have been shown to stabilize DNAs by substituting for divalent cations.²¹ Ponnuswamy et al. demonstrated that a protective coating composed of a polyamine copolymer, PEGylated oligolysine, afforded DNAs a ~400-fold increase in half-life (to ~36 h) in media supplemented with 10% FBS.^{20,21} While this technique shows a remarkable improvement in survivability, it does not yet extend the lifetime of DNAs to the standards required by some biomedical applications.

PEGylated oligolysine adheres to DNAs through electrostatic attraction. In low $[Mg^{2+}]$ conditions, lysines can substitute for divalent cations and neutralize the DNA-backbone electrostatic repulsions. However, since the binding between oligolysine and DNAs involves a modest number of weak electrostatic interactions, it is highly dynamic and reversible. We hypothesized that covalently cross-linking amines between oligolysines would decrease mobility and/or dissociation, and thereby reduce accessibility to nucleases. Here, we show that when cross-linked with glutaraldehyde (Figure 1), PEGylated oligolysine-coated (XK10P) DNAs are up to 2 orders of magnitude more resistant to nuclease degradation compared with coated DNAs not treated with glutaraldehyde (K10P). This strategy has modest impact on cellular uptake of DNAs and is nontoxic to mammalian cells, and therefore has potential for therapeutic purposes such as DN-based vaccines.

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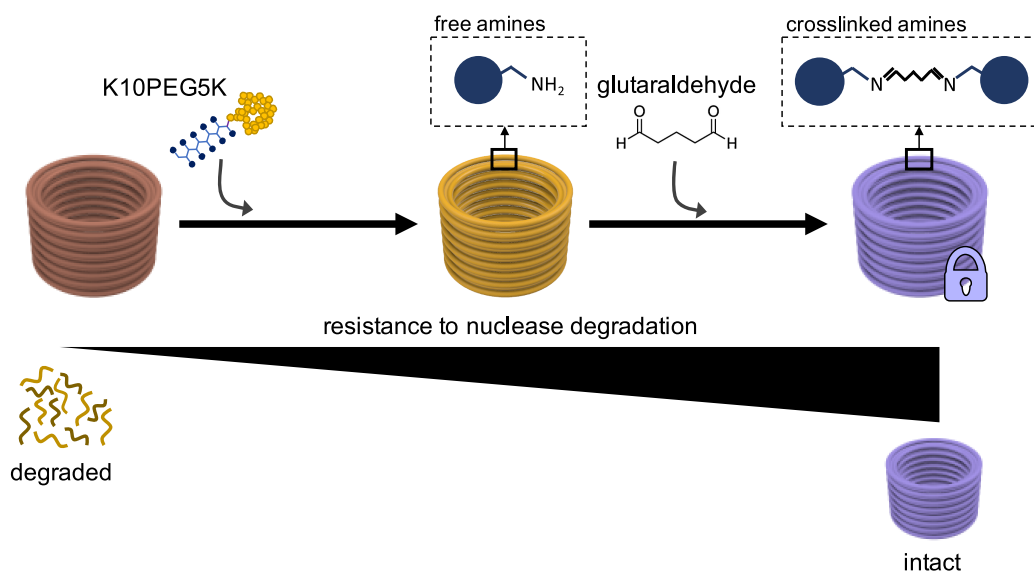


Figure 1. Schematic presenting the DN fabrication process and resultant increase in resistance to nuclease degradation. DNs are first coated with PEGylated oligolysine (K10P-DNs) through electrostatic adhesion. This brings primary amines in the oligolysine and DN into close proximity. This coating has been shown to increase DN resistance to nuclease degradation. Subsequent addition of glutaraldehyde covalently cross-links oligolysine amines and reduces dissociation of the lysine coating. Once cross-linked, XK10P-DNs show up to a 250-fold increase in nuclease resistance compared to un-cross-linked K10P-DNs.

We folded three structurally distinct DNs: a C-shaped DN (DN1) and two barrel-like structures with outside diameters of 90 nm (DN2) and 60 nm (DN3) (Figure 2, Figures S1–3).

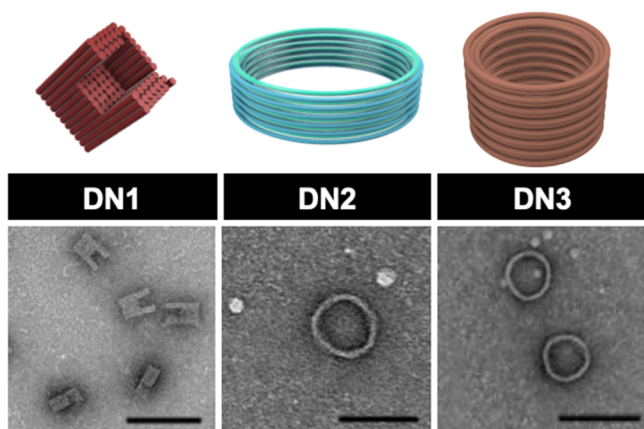


Figure 2. Renderings of DN1–3 and negative stain TEM images of purified structures. Scale bars, 100 nm.

DNs were designed using the software caDNAno and each folded in a one pot annealing over 18–20 h.²⁶ Structures were purified using glycerol gradient purification and evaluated using agarose gel electrophoresis (AGE) and negative-stain transmission electron microscopy (TEM) (Figure 2, Figure S4).

We first tested the ability of chemical cross-linkers to cross-link oligolysine and prevent release of staples from DNs. Among those investigated were known DNA cross-linkers: cisplatin and methoxypsoralen (8-MOP) as well as formaldehyde. We also tested glutaraldehyde, which has been reported not to efficiently modify DNA at moderate temperatures. As shown in Figure S5, the staples band starts to disappear on denaturing polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (PAGE) indicating either a successful cross-linking reaction

between the oligolysine and DNs staples or else cross-linking of oligolysine into networks that prevent dissociation of the staple strands. To determine whether a combination of oligolysine-PEG5K coating and cross-linking could improve the survivability of DNs when challenged with nuclease degradation, we applied the oligolysine-PEG5K coating to afford K10P-DN and then added glutaraldehyde for cross-linking (XK10P-DN) (Figure S6). Of the cross-linkers tested, glutaraldehyde showed the greatest ability to prevent DN denaturation and nuclease degradation (Figure S7).

Glutaraldehyde exists in many monomeric and polymeric forms (Figure S8). In our experiments, monomeric glutaraldehyde forms imine bonds with primary amines in the oligolysine (Figure 1), and polymeric glutaraldehyde likely forms secondary amine bonds with lysines via Michael addition to cross-link oligolysine-PEG5K molecules (Figure S7).²⁷ We hypothesize that this covalent conjugation decreases the mobility and dissociation of the oligolysine-PEG5K coating leading to prolonged protection of DNs. This cross-linking step appears to be generalizable to any DNA origami coated with oligolysine-PEG5K, is scalable, and can be performed without specialized equipment at room temperature. Following a short incubation at room temperature, excess cross-linker was removed using desalting columns (Zeba 7k). TEM was used to verify that no structural deformation of DNs occurs (Figure S9).

The degradation rate of DNs has been reported to be structure dependent.¹⁵ DNase I is the prominent nuclease in blood and can be used to simulate the physiological challenge posed to DNs in an in vitro test.¹⁵ To determine whether oligolysine-PEG5K-coated structures varied in half-life, we titrated DNase I (NEB) with various K10P-DNs and incubated reactions at 37 °C for 1.5 and 12 h. Interestingly, we found that degradation rates varied dramatically (Figure S10). To test the extent to which glutaraldehyde cross-linking of PEGylated-oligolysine coatings improves the survival of DNs, we challenged the origami with a highly strenuous nuclease

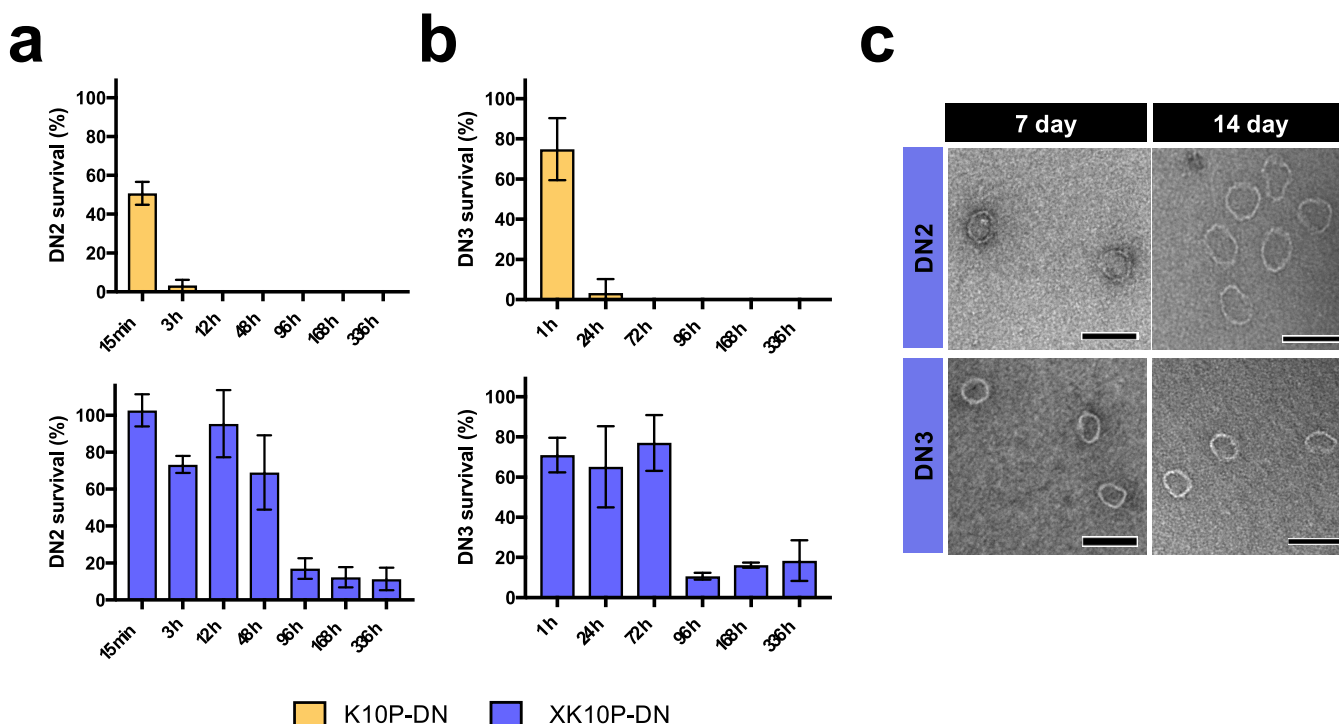


Figure 3. Time course of survival of DN2 and DN3 in strenuous DNase I conditions. Normalized agarose gel intensity vs time using K10P-DN (orange) and XK10P-DN (blue) for (a) DN2 and (b) DN3. Error bars are \pm SD, $n > 3$. (c) TEM images show surviving intact XK10P-DNs after incubation with 1 U/ μ L DNase I at 37 °C over 7 and 14 days (= 168 and 336 h, respectively). Scale bars, 100 nm.

environment of 1 U/ μ L DNase I. As concentrations in the blood are 340–380 U/L,²⁸ our conditions represent at least a 2600-fold increase in DNase I challenge. We confirmed that application of glutaraldehyde alone to DN2s does not afford any protection against DNase I (Figure S11). We further confirmed that cross-linking oligolysine-coated DN2s with both aged and fresh glutaraldehyde offer similar levels of protection from nuclease degradation and similar prevention of staple strand dissociation (Figure S12).

DN2s were incubated with 1 U/ μ L DNase I at 37 °C for different time points up to 336 h (14 days). We evaluated the quantity of surviving intact structure using AGE and TEM. Under these conditions, uncoated, i.e., bare, DN2 survived <1 min with no intact structure observed. We observed that XK10P-DN2s show a substantially increased resistance to nuclease degradation compared to K10P-DN2s (Figure 3a–c). For example, K10P-DN2 showed a half-life of ~16 min with all of the structure being completely degraded by the 3 h time-point (Figure 3a,c). However, XK10P-DN2 showed vastly extended half-lives, ~66 h, with approximately 12% of intact structure remaining even after 14 days of incubation under these conditions. This represents an ~250-fold increase in XK10P-DN2 stabilization against nucleases compared to K10P-DN2, based on half-life extension. We confirmed that this extended half-life could be conferred on other origami by switching to DN3 in a second set of experiments (Figure 3b–c). Additionally, we verified that prolonged incubation with XK10P-DN2 does not affect DNase I activity (Figure S13).

According to previously published results, under physiological conditions with 10% FBS, we expect bare DN2s to have a half-life of ~5 min, and K10P-DN3 to have a half-life of approximately 36 h.²¹ We observed a 250-fold increase in stabilization compared to K10P-DN3, suggesting our strategy may enable XK10P-DN2s to survive in physiological conditions

with 10% FBS for over one year. However, over a long period of time, the imine bonds may hydrolyze. As a preliminary effort toward addressing this concern, we explored sodium cyanoborohydride reduction of the imine bonds formed by glutaraldehyde cross-linking of lysines. Reduction did not affect nuclease resistance in our 1 U/ μ L DNase I test over the course of a week (Figure S14). Future experiments can explore whether reduction impacts the long-term nuclease resistance of XK10P-DN2s.

A key advantage of DN2s over other nanoparticles is the ability to decorate DN2s precisely with diverse cargos. This is often achieved through the Watson–Crick base-pairing of a partially embedded DNA oligonucleotide from the DN2 (handle) with a complementary oligonucleotide (antihandle) covalently conjugated to a cargo. To ensure that XK10P-DN2s could still be loaded with cargo, we evaluated handle accessibility. We found that XK10P-DN1 is able to capture cargo after a short annealing time (Figure S15).

We next studied the interaction of our modified DN2s with mammalian cells. Here, HEK293T cells diluted in standard DMEM + 10%FBS (~0.7 mM MgCl₂) was used as a model system. Previous studies from our lab and others have shown the shape dependence of cellular uptake of DN2s and K10P-DN2s as well as the importance of scavenger-receptor-mediated and caveolin-dependent cellular uptake for DN2 internalization. In this study, we focus on the stability of DN2s upon internalization with the goal of improving their utility as a drug delivery system or biological tool. A necessary feature that drives DNA origami toward that goal is that the system exhibits limited toxicity. We incubated a Cy5 fluorescently labeled DN3 with mammalian cells over 8 and 24 h and at different concentrations. Using flow cytometry for quantitative assessment, we monitored cell viability through membrane permeability using propidium iodide (ThermoFisher Scien-

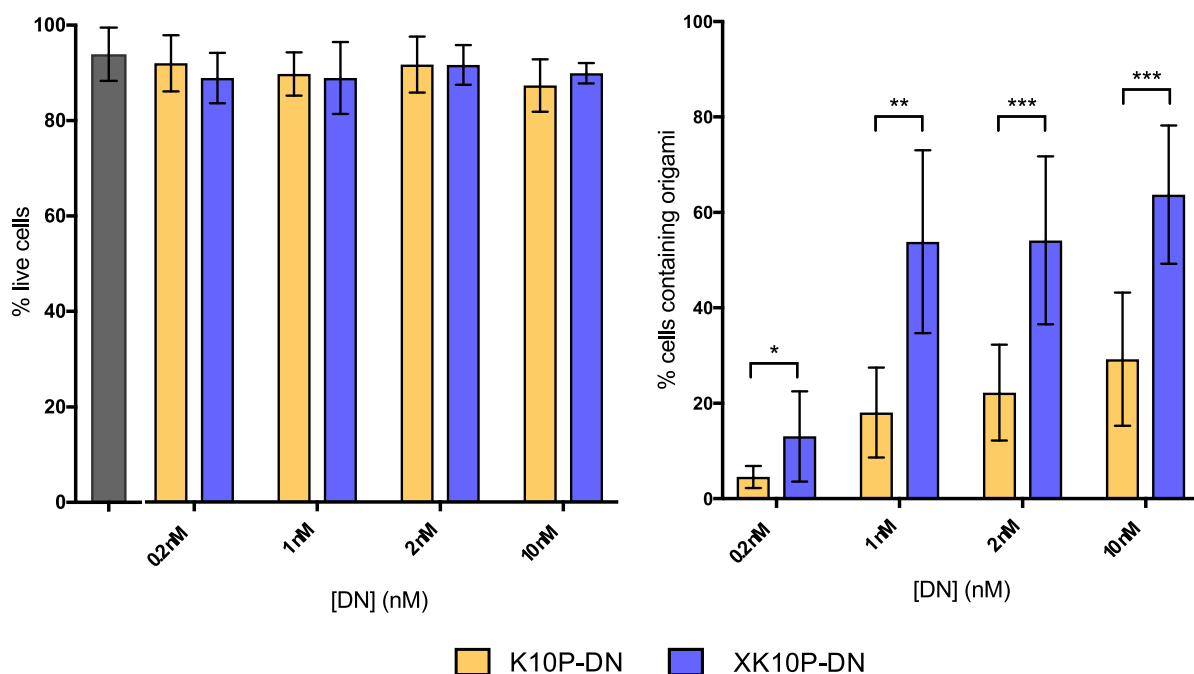


Figure 4. Studies of the interaction between XK10P-DNs and mammalian cells. Flow cytometry was used to study the impact of glutaraldehyde-cross-linking of DN on (a) cell viability through labeling with membrane permeable propidium iodide and (b) cellular uptake after 24 h of HEK293T cells incubation with Cy5-fluorescent DN. Error bars are \pm SD, $n \geq 6$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.005$; *** $p < 0.0005$.

tific). No significant difference in cell viability between addition of vehicle only, K10P-DN3, and XK10P-DN3 was observed (Figure 4a, Figure S16).

Additionally, we studied the impact of the cross-linked coating on the cellular uptake of DN, using DN3 as a model system. We observed greater cellular uptake with increasing DN concentration for both K10P-DNs and XK10P-DNs. XK10P-DN3 displayed, at each concentration, statistically significantly superior uptake compared to K10P-DN3 after 24 h of incubation with HEK293T cells, we observed over twice the uptake for XK10P-DN3 compared to K10P-DN3 ($p < 0.0005$). However, cellular uptake for K10P-DN3 and XK10P-DN3 after 8 h was similar (Figure S18).

A possible explanation for this discrepancy between 8 and 24 h results may be the progressive degradation of K10P-DN3 to form more amorphous structures compared to stable XK10P-DN3. We observed in previous studies that compact DN are more efficiently uptaken by HEK293 cells.²⁹ Over prolonged incubations, such as 24 h incubations, this degradation could be responsible for the decreased uptake observed for K10P-DNs compared to XK10P-DNs. Since higher uptake rates are typically linked to greater biological effects, cross-linking of oligolysine coatings may assist in increasing efficacy of DN-mediated drug delivery to cells.

In conclusion, we have developed an inexpensive, scalable, and generalizable method for protecting DN in vivo that drastically increases the nuclease resistance of DN: Once coated with an oligolysine-PEG copolymer, amines in the oligolysines can be covalently cross-linked to increase the half-life of the underlying DN under attack by nucleases. In particular, we showed that glutaraldehyde-mediated chemical cross-linking of oligolysine-PEG5K-coated DN increases DN resistance to DNase I degradation under strenuous conditions up to 100,000-fold compared to bare DN and over 250-fold

compared to DN coated with oligolysine-PEG5K but not subjected to cross-linking. We also observed a statistically significant increase in cellular uptake for XK10P-DNs compared with K10P-DNs. We believe this method is compatible with therapeutic applications since it is non-toxic and allows for the continued decoration of DN with various surface ligands.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/jacs.9b11698>.

Supporting experimental procedures, caDNAno illustrations of DN designs, and supporting experimental data (PDF)

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Author Contributions

[†]F.M.A. and Z.Z. contributed equally to this study. F.M.A., Z.Z., and W.M.S. designed the study. F.M.A. and Z.Z. produced the DNA nanostructures. Z.Z. performed initial screening of chemical cross-linkers. F.M.A. performed nuclease degradation and cell studies. Y.Z. assisted in flow cytometry and cell studies. F.M.A., Z.Z., and W.M.S. wrote the manuscript.

Notes

The authors declare the following competing financial interest(s): The Harvard University Office of Technology Development has filed a patent application on technologies described herein.

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