Local Dynamic Mechanical Properties of Native Porcine Endplate

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Abstract—Hysitron TribolIndenter™ TI 950 system has been used for studying the local viscoelastic properties of porcine intervertebral disc end plate by means of nanoscale mechanical dynamic analysis. The specimen of an endplate was cut from fresh porcine vertebra dissected from 16 month animal. The lumbar spine motion segments were dissected and 5 millimeter thick plates of vertebral body, endplate and annulus fibrosus were prepared for nanoindentation. The sample was kept in physiological solution during nanoindentation experiment. We obtained mechanical characteristics of different areas of native endplate (endplate middle and vertebra and annulus fibrosus boundary).

Keywords—nanoindentation, DMA, endplate, cartilage

I. INTRODUCTION

Low back pain is one of the major problem in Western industrialized societies. The number of people affected by pain varies between 15% and 35%. Low back pain causes an economic burden on society. Total losses caused by health care costs, by loss of production and by the reimbursement of sickness benefits in Great Britain estimated at 1.1% of gross domestic product and the Netherlands to 1.7% of gross domestic product [1].

Low back pain is closely related with intervertebral disc degeneration. Degeneration of intervertebral disc (IVD) is associated with nervus ischiaticus damage or with prolapsed disc. Degenerative changes of the IVD affect the mechanical behavior of the rest of the spine and thus can affect other spinal structures such as muscles and ligaments. These changes can point to spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal canal) in the longer time horizon, which is the main cause of back pain in elderly population [1].

The nutrition and removal of metabolic products depend largely on diffusion through the cartilaginous endplate (Fig. 1) because IVD does not contain blood vessels. Endplate is a layer of hyaline cartilage between the IVD and vertebral body [3]. The calcification of the endplate (Fig. 2) causes restriction of the IVD nutrition and its failure afterwards. The endplate also prevents a loss of a small proteoglycans from the IVD and provides significant mechanical role of transferring loads between IVD and vertebral body. Information on mechanical properties from different parts of the endplate could help
with indentifying the causes of the failure of IVD. The aim of this work is to characterize the local mechanical viscoelastic characteristic of the native endplate using nanoindentation by dynamic mechanical analysis.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A. Sample preparation

A porcine cartilaginous endplate of lumbar spine L4 was used in our study. The specimen of endplate was cut from fresh porcine vertebra, dissected from 16 month animal. The lumbar spine motion segments were immediately dissected and five millimeter thick plates of vertebral body, end plate and annulus fibrosus were cut and polished under running water condition. Samples were placed into the physiological solution right after. Specimen was glued to the bottom of the Petri dish and surrounded by physiological solution again. The surface was under physiological solution and ready to be indented under a water level [8, 9].

B. Testing condition

Nanoscale dynamic mechanical analysis (nanoDMA) load controlled experiment was performed with Hysitron TribolIndenter system with Berkovich diamond tip at the temperature 22.5 °C. Harmonic loading \( P_0 = \sin(\omega t) \) with dynamic load amplitude \( P_0 = 20 \, \mu N \) was specified for the harmonic frequency range 5-200 Hz. During nanoDMA experiment was applied static load with maximum force \( P_{max} = 800 \, \mu N \). That corresponded to the contact indentation depth approximately \( h_c = 500 \, nm \). Configuration of measurement was assumed from Lukeš et al. (2010) [9]. The amplitude of the displacement oscillation \( X_0 \) and its phase shift of the displacement with respect to the driving force are recorded by the nanoindentation system. The machine compliance \( C_i \) and the stiffness value \( K_i \) were determined during air indent calibration. The procedure was adopted from Asif et al. (1999) [6] as well as the analysis of dynamic data.

C. Theory of nanoDMA

Dynamic driving force \( P_0 \sin(\omega t) \) with amplitude \( P_0 \) and frequency \( f=\omega/2\pi \) is superimposed on quasistatic loading \( P_0 \) and stands for particular term in an equation of motion of the indenter relative to the indenter head:

\[
P_0 \sin(\omega t) = m\ddot{x} + Cx + Kx
\]  

(1)

The solution to the above equation, where compliance \( C = C_i + C_s \) and stiffness \( K = K_i + K_s \) of the system on Fig. 3 are defined respectively, is a steady-state displacement oscillation at the same frequency as the harmonic loading

\[
x = X_0 \sin(\omega t - \phi)
\]  

(2)

where \( X_0 \) is the amplitude of the displacement oscillation and \( \Phi \) is the phase shift of the displacement with respect to the driving force. Both terms in Eq. 2 are recorded by the nanoindentation system.

Fig. 3 Dynamic model of indenter system in contact with the specimen, where \( m \) is the indenter mass, \( C_i \) is the damping coefficient of the air gap in the capacitive displacement sensor, \( C_s \) is the damping coefficient of the specimen, \( K_i \) is the contact stiffness, and \( K_s \) is the spring constant of the leaf springs that hold the indenter shaft. Adopted from Asif et al. [6].

The standard analytical solution for the model on Fig. 3, that assumes that the machine frame stiffness \( K_i \) is infinite, follows.

The amplitude of the displacement signal is \( X_0 \) and the phase shift between force and displacement is \( \Phi \) are given by

\[
X_0 = \frac{P_0}{\sqrt{(K_s + K_i - m\omega^2)^2 + [(C_i + C_s)\omega]^2}}
\]  

(3)

\[
\phi = \tan^{-1} \left( \frac{(C_i + C_s)\omega}{K_s + K_i - m\omega^2} \right)
\]  

(4)

where \( m \) is the indenter mass, \( \omega \) is the frequency in rad/s, \( C_s \) is the damping coefficient of the air gap in the capacitive displacement sensor, \( C_i \) is the damping coefficient of the specimen, \( K_i \) is the spring constant of the leaf springs that hold the indenter shaft and \( K_s \) is the contact stiffness [6].

These calculated values for stiffness and damping of the sample are then used for determination of the viscoelastic properties of reduced storage modulus \( E'_r \), loss modulus \( E''_r \) and \( \tan \delta = E''_r/E'_r \).

\[
E'_r = \frac{K_s \sqrt{\pi}}{2\sqrt{A_c}}
\]  

(5)

\[
E''_r = \frac{\omega C_s \sqrt{\pi}}{2\sqrt{A_c}}
\]  

(6)

\[
\tan \delta = \frac{C_s \omega}{K_s}
\]  

(7)

where \( A_c \) is the contact area based on tip area function related to the contact depth at quasistatic loading [7]. The storage and loss modulus of the sample \( E'_i \) and \( E''_i \) respectively, are related to the reduced storage and loss modulus by

\[
\frac{1}{E'_r} = \frac{\left(1-v^2\right)}{E'_i} + \frac{\left(1-v^2\right)}{E''_i}
\]  

(8)
\[
\frac{1}{E_{s}^i} = \left(1 - \nu_i^2\right) \frac{1}{E_{s}^j} + \left(1 - \nu_i^2\right) \frac{1}{E_{s}^j} \tag{9}
\]

where subscripts \(i\) and \(s\) refer to the indenter and sample materials, respectively, and \(\nu\) is the Poisson’s ratio.

The storage modulus and the loss modulus are related to the complex modulus \(E_{c} = E' + iE''\) and indicate the ability of the sample to store and return energy (recoverable deformation; \(E'\)) and dissipate energy (\(E''\)). The ratio of the loss modulus to the storage modulus (i.e., \(\tan \delta\)) reflects the viscoelastic behavior of the material. It is a material parameter independent of the tip-sample contact area.

III. RESULTS

Nanoscale dynamic mechanical analysis of different areas of native porcine intervertebral L4 disc endplate was performed. We tested three areas of the endplate which were different in vertical position, i.e., first one was very close to annulus fibrosus, second one was in the middle of the endplate and last one was very close to the vertebral body. Fig. 4-6 show measured nanoDMA characteristic of storage \(E'\) and loss moduli \(E''\) vs. frequency. There were approximately the same average values of storage moduli at regions close to annulus fibrosus and in the middle of the endplate for initial frequency 5 Hz (Fig. 4, 5 and 7). There was monitored growth of the storage moduli for the sample at the margin of the endplate but not that rapid growth for middle zone of the endplate. There were measured lowest storage moduli very close to the bone tissue of vertebral body (Fig. 6). Loss moduli followed the same trends for all sample regions.

IV. CONCLUSION

We expected an increasing gradient of moduli cartilaginous endplate being as a transition zone between very soft tissue of annulus fibrosus and hard tissue of vertebral body from marginal region to vertebral body. However, this hypothesis has not been confirmed at all. The highest stiffness and elastic behavior was observed at margin of AF and EP. More likely the local mechanical properties reflect inner structure of endplate, which is still a matter of scientific discussions. Some microstructural studies with finite element analysis needs to be correlated with mechanical responses representing by indentation curves. Nanoscale dynamic mechanical analysis was found to be a very good and sensitive method for an assessment of soft tissue mechanical testing.

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