

Research Article



BIODEGRADABLE PLASTICS: NEW MATERIALS AND THEIR ROLE IN COMBATING ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION

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Abstract

Plastic pollution has emerged as a significant environmental challenge, impacting ecosystems and human health globally. Traditional petroleum-based plastics, due to their slow biodegradation rates, contribute to persistent pollution in landfills and oceans. Biodegradable plastics, derived from renewable resources and capable of breaking down into harmless substances, offer a promising alternative. This article explores the various types of biodegradable plastics, including polylactic acid (PLA), polyhydroxyalkanoates (PHAs), starch blends, and others, focusing on their production methods, properties, and applications. Further, it investigates the role of these materials in mitigating plastic pollution, considering their environmental impact across their lifecycle. While presenting the potential benefits of biodegradable plastics, this paper also acknowledges the challenges associated with their widespread adoption, including standardization, infrastructure limitations, and the potential for unintended consequences. Ultimately, this article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the field of biodegradable plastics, highlighting their importance in achieving a more sustainable future.

Keywords: biodegradable plastics

Introduction

Plastic has revolutionized various aspects of modern life, offering a versatile and affordable material for packaging, manufacturing, and numerous other applications. However, the widespread use of conventional, petroleum-based plastics has led to a global environmental crisis, characterized by persistent plastic pollution in landfills, oceans, and ecosystems. The slow biodegradation rates of these plastics, coupled with their durability and resistance to environmental breakdown, have resulted in the accumulation of plastic waste, posing significant threats to biodiversity, human health, and the overall environment (Thompson et al., 2009).

Recognizing the urgent need for sustainable alternatives, the scientific community has focused on developing biodegradable plastics, which offer a promising solution to the plastic pollution problem. These materials are derived from renewable resources, such as plant-based polymers, and are engineered to decompose into harmless substances under specific environmental conditions. Biodegradable plastics have the potential to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, minimize landfill waste, and curb the detrimental impacts of plastic pollution on the environment.

Types of Biodegradable Plastics

Biodegradable plastics encompass a diverse range of materials,

each with unique characteristics and applications. The most prominent types include:

- 1. Polylactic Acid (PLA):** PLA is a widely used biodegradable plastic derived from renewable resources like corn starch or sugarcane. It is produced through the fermentation of sugars followed by polymerization. PLA exhibits good mechanical properties, transparency, and biocompatibility, making it suitable for packaging, disposable cutlery, and 3D printing applications (Auras et al., 2012).
- 2. Polyhydroxyalkanoates (PHAs):** PHAs are a class of biodegradable polyesters synthesized by microorganisms as intracellular carbon and energy storage compounds. They exhibit excellent biocompatibility and biodegradability, making them ideal for medical implants, drug delivery systems, and packaging applications (Sudesh et al., 2000).
- 3. Starch Blends:** Starch-based plastics are produced by blending starch from various sources, such as corn, potato, or tapioca, with other biodegradable polymers or plasticizers. These materials offer good biodegradability and are cost-effective, making them suitable for packaging, films, and disposable products (Ojumu et al., 2009).
- 4. Polybutylene Succinate (PBS):** PBS is a biodegradable

polyester synthesized from succinic acid and butanediol. It exhibits good flexibility, heat resistance, and biodegradability, finding applications in packaging, mulch films, and disposable products (Nakayama et al., 2004).

5. Cellulose-Based Plastics: Cellulose, a natural polymer found in plant cell walls, can be processed into biodegradable plastics. These materials are often blended with other polymers to improve their mechanical properties and processability, finding applications in packaging, films, and composites (Klemm et al., 2005).

Production Methods and Properties

The production of biodegradable plastics utilizes a variety of processes, drawing upon both traditional chemical methods and innovative bio-based approaches.

Fermentation: PLA and PHA production often rely on microbial fermentation of renewable resources, such as sugars derived from corn starch or other plant materials. This process involves utilizing microorganisms to convert sugars into the desired polymer precursors, which are then further processed into the final plastic form.

Polymerization: The synthesis of many biodegradable plastics, including PLA, PBS, and some PHAs, involves polymerization reactions. These reactions combine monomer units to form long chains of polymer molecules, resulting in the desired plastic material.

Blending and Compounding: Starch blends and cellulose-based plastics are often produced through blending processes, where starch or cellulose is combined with other polymers or plasticizers to tailor the material properties.

The properties of biodegradable plastics vary significantly depending on the type of polymer and the specific production process. Some of the key properties influencing their application include:

Biodegradability: The rate and extent of biodegradation are crucial factors in determining the suitability of a biodegradable plastic for specific applications. Factors like environmental conditions, including temperature, humidity, and microbial populations, influence the degradation process.

Mechanical Properties: The strength, flexibility, and stiffness of biodegradable plastics are critical for various applications. These properties are influenced by the type of polymer, molecular weight, and additives used during production.

Thermal Properties: The melting point and degradation temperature of biodegradable plastics are essential considerations for processing and end-use applications.

Water Resistance: The ability of a biodegradable plastic to resist water absorption and degradation in humid environments is crucial for certain applications, like packaging food products.

Role in Combating Environmental Pollution

Biodegradable plastics play a significant role in addressing the pressing issue of plastic pollution by offering a multitude of benefits:

Reduced Reliance on Fossil Fuels: By utilizing renewable resources like plant-based materials, biodegradable plastics

reduce the dependence on fossil fuels, contributing to a more sustainable resource management approach.

Minimized Landfill Waste: Biodegradable plastics decompose under specific environmental conditions, reducing the accumulation of plastic waste in landfills, thereby conserving land resources and minimizing potential environmental contamination.

Reduced Ocean Plastic Pollution: The biodegradability of these plastics can help mitigate the growing problem of plastic debris in marine environments, thus protecting marine ecosystems and wildlife.

Improved Waste Management: The use of biodegradable plastics can facilitate better waste management practices, including composting and anaerobic digestion, leading to the generation of valuable byproducts like compost or biogas.

Potential for Carbon Sequestration: Some biodegradable plastics, like PHAs, can be produced using carbon dioxide as a feedstock, leading to a reduction in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite the promising potential of biodegradable plastics, their widespread adoption faces several challenges:

Standardization and Certification: Lack of standardized testing protocols and certification schemes for biodegradability can lead to confusion and mislabeling of products. This can hinder consumer trust and effective implementation of waste management strategies.

Infrastructure Limitations: The existing waste management infrastructure is often not optimized for the effective collection and processing of biodegradable plastics. Implementing appropriate composting and anaerobic digestion facilities is crucial for realizing the environmental benefits of these materials.

Cost Competitiveness: In many cases, biodegradable plastics are more expensive to produce compared to traditional plastics. This cost differential can hinder their widespread adoption, particularly in price-sensitive markets.

Environmental Impact of Production: While utilizing renewable resources, the production of biodegradable plastics can still have environmental consequences, including land use changes, water usage, and energy consumption. A holistic life cycle assessment is necessary to evaluate the overall environmental impacts of these materials.

Potential for Unintended Consequences: Under certain conditions, biodegradable plastics may not fully degrade within a reasonable timeframe, leading to microplastic formation and potential environmental harm. Furthermore, some biodegradable plastics can contaminate conventional recycling streams, disrupting recycling processes and generating challenges in waste sorting.

Future Perspectives

The field of biodegradable plastics is continuously evolving, with ongoing research and development efforts focused on enhancing their properties, expanding their applications, and addressing the challenges associated with their adoption. Future research directions include:

Developing New Biodegradable Polymers: Researchers are

actively exploring novel bio-based polymers with improved mechanical properties, biodegradability, and processability.

Improving Biodegradability: Enhancing the biodegradation rates of existing biodegradable plastics under various environmental conditions is crucial for their wider application.

Optimizing Production Processes: Developing more sustainable and efficient production methods for biodegradable plastics, including reducing energy consumption and minimizing waste generation, is paramount.

Developing Bio-based Additives and Fillers: Utilizing bio-based additives and fillers can enhance the properties of biodegradable plastics while minimizing the use of petroleum-based counterparts.

Promoting Infrastructure Development: Supporting the development of robust infrastructure for the collection, sorting, and processing of biodegradable plastics is crucial for their effective implementation.

Conclusion

Biodegradable plastics represent a promising solution to the pressing challenge of plastic pollution. Their ability to decompose into harmless substances, coupled with their potential to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and minimize waste, offers a more sustainable approach to plastic production and utilization. While acknowledging the challenges associated with their widespread adoption, including standardization, infrastructure limitations, and potential environmental consequences, the ongoing research and development efforts in this field provide optimism for the future. By fostering innovation, investing in infrastructure, and

promoting consumer awareness, biodegradable plastics can play a crucial role in fostering a more sustainable and environmentally conscious future.

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