



Contribution ID: 773

Type: **Poster (+) Presentation**

Under pressure: Hydrogel swelling in a granular medium

Monday, 31 May 2021 19:35 (1 hour)

Hydrogels hold promise in agriculture as reservoirs of water in dry soil, potentially alleviating the burden of irrigation. However, confinement in soil can markedly reduce the ability of hydrogels to absorb water and swell, limiting their widespread adoption. Unfortunately, the underlying reason remains unknown. Here, we report the first direct visualization of hydrogel swelling within a model three-dimensional (3D) granular medium with tunable confining stresses and grain sizes. Our experiments enable us to measure, *in situ*, two key quantities that were previously inaccessible: the extent of hydrogel swelling and medium restructuring. Unlike an imposed osmotic or hydrostatic pressure, confinement in a granular medium subjects the surface of a hydrogel to a spatially nonuniform stress. We therefore extend the classic Flory-Rehner theory of hydrogel swelling by coupling it to Hertzian contact mechanics that explicitly treats the stresses exerted by the medium at the hydrogel-grain contacts. Using this approach, we show that the extent of hydrogel swelling is determined by the balance between the osmotic swelling force exerted by the hydrogel and the confining force transmitted by the surrounding grains. Furthermore, we demonstrate that a balance of the same forces, also including intergrain friction, determines the onset of restructuring of the surrounding medium. Our work therefore reveals the physical principles that describe how hydrogel swelling in and restructuring of a granular medium both depend on the properties of the hydrogel, the properties of the medium, and confining stress. We show that our theoretical framework not only describes our measurements but also helps to rationalize previous measurements of hydrogel water absorption in soil. Together, our results provide quantitative principles to predict how hydrogels behave in confinement, potentially improving their use in agriculture as well as informing other applications such as oil recovery, construction, mechanobiology, and filtration.

Time Block Preference

Time Block C (18:00-21:00 CET)

References

Under pressure: Hydrogel swelling in a granular medium
J-F Louf, N. B. Lu, M. G. O'Connell, H. J. Cho, S. S. Datta, *Science Advances*, 7, eabd2711 (2021)
DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.abd2711

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Session Classification: Poster +

Track Classification: (MS4) Swelling and shrinking porous media